# Databases, Documentation and Representation

*Chuck Sillery*

Databases are, in the first instance, a representation of something, whether that is an address book, medical records, fingerprint files, or of genes, weather patterns or widgets. They are a structured collection of data that structures the world in a new way. That structured data is generally organized as a columnar list where the columns represent the fields and the rows represent the individual records or entries. A populated database can be searched to produce different data sets, and these data sets can then be sorted and then used to classify the objects of its entries.

Databases are, then, essentially lists, "grids of specification,"[†] that divide and categorize their data into 'objects of knowledge.' These 'electronic filing cabinets' form a newer, more indexical technique of record keeping and documentation. And, as in the more traditional, analog forms of documentation, they also effect a new mode of representation, and produce a new kind of discursive object.

The work consists of models' statistics compiled from New York model agencies books and model cards. The stats are presented as 'straight' data, nameless and faceless, revealing the capacity, and the proficiency, of a database to categorize and objectify its objects — here women. This straightforward, explanatory presentation also brings to the fore the structure of that data, frustrating the desire for an interpretive 'meaning' of the data. As a database the user/viewer can view the complete data set, or they can perform common database query functions in order to select different data sets. These data sets can also be viewed as standard descriptive statistics and graphed according to statistical category. From the list view an individual record's input data fields (the viewed data) and the parsed data fields (the internal data, which is used to perform the query functions and to calculate the statistical data) can be viewed by selecting it from the list. And other than the aforementioned contentual ideas of the categorization, objectification, and commodification of women, the work illustrates how the discourse of the database acts upon its objects, how that acting upon constitutes its objects, and finally how a representation of those objects is produced by the database.

---

† Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p. 42, Pantheon Books, New York, 1972
"these are the systems according to which the different 'kinds of [objects]' are divided, contrasted, related, regrouped, classified, derived from one another as objects of [a] discourse."