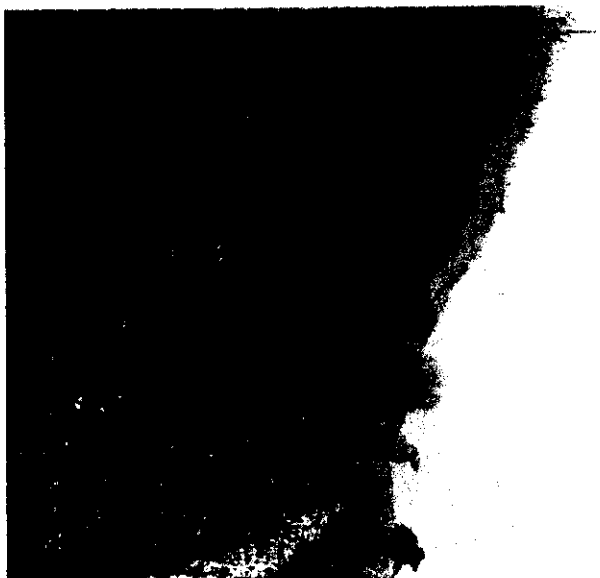


How is the story of life told? What are the principles of organization, the master narratives, employed to construct the tale of nature? What does each set of assumptions, each conceit, promote or conceal? What fantasies or dreary fictions are indulged when one attempts to tell "the truth" about nature? Each museum and every textbook and nature show on television possess a narrative skeleton. One of the most persistent and pernicious of these is the Great Chain of Being, or the *Scala Naturae*. This ancient visual metaphor, rooted in Aristotle's zoological works, dominated natural history thought until well into the nineteenth century. The Great Chain of Being depicts life as a one-dimensional progression from the simplest of forms (sometimes even minerals) to the most complex: almost always to humans, who construct the hierarchy, but sometimes even beyond to the invisible realm of angels, archangels, etc. The imagery of this progression has become such a ubiquitous feature in biological language that even today its tenacity is demonstrated in numerous popular expressions of evolution. The *Scala Naturae* became bound to the Enlightenment development of orthodox hierarchical taxonomy, which remained until the middle of this century the dominant principle of arrangement for most natural history museums. The Great Chain of Being and the early taxonomic arrangements and nomenclature firmly seat humankind on the throne of the animal kingdom. This powerful idea demands particular scrutiny, since the chain of being is a crucial conceptual footprint, which helps to retrace the path of where we have been in order to get a better bearing on where we are and where we are going.

This text was published in Kynaston McShine, *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect*, exh. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 98.

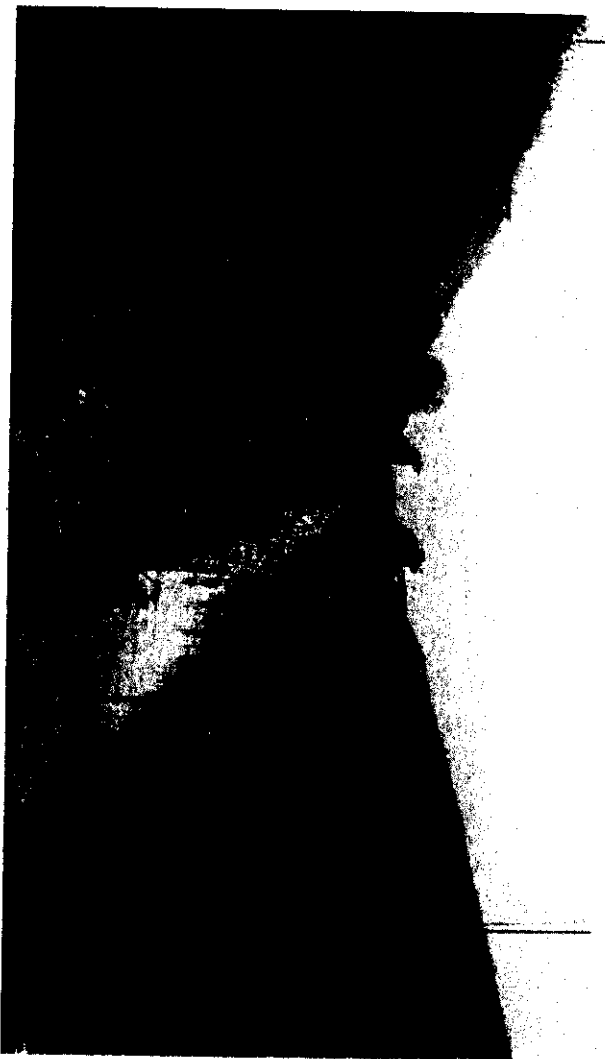


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Christian Philipp Müller, *Green Border*, 1993. Illeg
Principality of Liechtenstein. Courtesy of the artist.

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Christian Philipp Müller, *Green Border*, 1993. Illegal border crossing between Austria and the
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