Book Review:
The Infinity of Lists.
New York: Rizzoli

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When the Louvre approached Umberto Eco, the famous Italian semiotician, medievalist, and novelist, to direct a series of exhibitions on any topic he would like, he immediately proposed an exhibit on "the list". The companion volume to that event, The Infinity of Lists, explores the essence of enumeration in a series of twenty-one short essays. Each is supplemented by a selection of famous literary lists and crisp, full-colour photographs of works of art that Eco sees as “figurative lists” or “visual etceteras” (Eco, 2009, p. 7).

Eco’s signature blend of erudition and popular appeal is in full force here; he tempers complex semiotic speculations and criticism with wit and broad allusions. The readings on display range from Homer to Pynchon, from Dante to Rabelais to Tintin, with each example used to elucidate a new facet of our collective obsession with cataloguing.

While the book was written for amateurs and offers few surprises to information professionals, there is still much value both in the concision of Eco’s explanations and his interdisciplinary breadth. He draws not only from information studies and his own background in semiotics, but also classical rhetoric, museum studies, urban planning, theology, and jazz.

Although The Infinity of Lists may be comprehensive of the past, the present and future are conspicuously absent. Only three of the reproduced lists are from works written after 1990, and the only list from the 21st century is a passage from Eco’s own Baudolino. Furthermore, Eco mentions the Internet in the last paragraph of the antepenultimate essay, dubbing it “the Mother of all Lists” but dismissing it offhandedly as “no longer with any distinction between truth and error” (Eco, 2009, p. 360). After a brilliant synthesis of three millennia of cultural history, to so cavalierly discard the last century’s most influential knowledge
management innovation is bizarrely incongruous.

Premature conclusion aside, *The Infinity of Lists* remains an excellent overview and a beautiful objet d’art. As an eloquent love letter to information, it is well-suited for both amateurs seeking a new perspective and professionals who enjoy Eco’s musings on their field.