

Knowledge is not fixed, but unstable, uncertain and evolving. In his recent book *Plastic Reason* (2016), Tobias Rees anthropologically investigates brain research in twenty-first-century Paris and the 'plasticity' of knowledge. Based on several years of fieldwork with neuronal researchers, he argues that knowledge – like the experimental systems of the natural sciences – is 'contingent on unarticulated conceptual presuppositions' that differ from place to place. Scientific thinking and knowledge production is, therefore, a very regional and relational, but also unstable and inherently uncertain affair. For Rees, this inherent uncertainty and relationality – which he sees as a form of radical openness – is a central aspect of what (laboratory) researchers do when they produce knowledge. He thereby shows that uncertainty is necessary for new knowledge and thinking to emerge, as it 'derail(s) yet another setup, [opens] yet another, unforeseen horizon'.

Whereas Rees takes brain science as an empirical example, his insights have a much wider relevance for understanding how knowledge emerges, evolves and dissolves again, so the working hypothesis behind this workshop. On the occasion of Tobias Rees's sojourn as a ZGW academic guest, this event is designed to capitalize on his expertise and joins junior and senior researchers in the fields of history, anthropology, and philosophy to think about the relevance of his conclusions for knowledge production in medical science. Presenters address how the uncertainty, instability and ambivalences of knowledge that Rees identifies in *Plastic Reason* play out in their own fields of research, by sharing insights from fields ranging from brain science, stem cell research, mental illness, IVF, and surrogacy.

Location: ETH Zurich, Zentrum, Rämistrasse 101, HG F 33.5

Conveners: Janina Kehr and Vanessa Rampton
(Medical Humanities Working Group)

Contact: janina.meillan-kehr@uzh.ch, vanessa.rampton@gess.ethz.ch

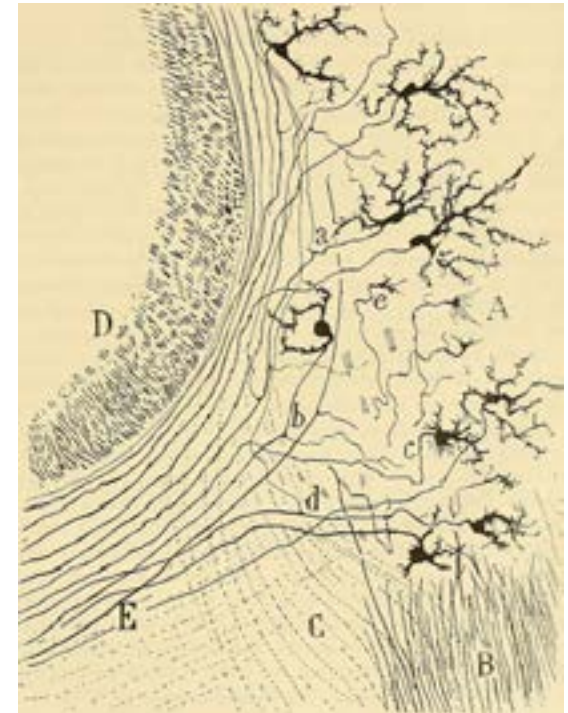
Website: www.zgw.ethz.ch/de/forschung/ag-medical-humanities.html

Participation is by registration only. If you are interested, please contact the conveners before 19 May.

The Emergence and Dissolution of (Medical) Knowledge Uncertainty and Openness

Workshop with
ZGW Guest Professor
Tobias Rees
(McGill University)

31 May 2017
ETH Zurich



Drawing by Spanish histologist Santiago Ramón y Cajal (1896)
Source: Open Knowledge Commons and Harvard Medical School

10.15 – 10.45 Arrival and Coffee

10.45 – 11.00 Introduction
[Vanessa Rampton and Janina Kehr](#)

11.00 – 12.45 Author-meets-Critics discussion of
[Plastic Reason: An Anthropology of Brain Science in Embryogenetic Terms](#)
(University of California Press, 2016)

11.00 – 11.15 Comment: [Cornelius Borck \(University of Lübeck\)](#)

11.15 – 11.30 Comment: [Johannes Quack \(University of Zurich\)](#)

11.30 – 11.45 Response: [Tobias Rees \(McGill University, Montreal\)](#)

11.45 – 12.45 Discussion (recommended reading Chapter 4:
Nocturnal & Vital Concepts, pp. 95-141)

13.00 – 14.00 Lunch: ETH Zurich, Dozentenfoyer (HG K 30.5)

14.15 – 15.15 Session 1: Laboratories and Epistemic Uncertainty
[Leander Diener \(University of Zurich\)](#)
The Emergence of Cinematographic (Medical) Knowledge
in Early Twentieth-Century Brain Research
[Sandra Bärnreuther \(University of Zurich\)](#)
The Interdependence of Movement and Stabilization

15.15 – 16.15 Session 2: Knowledge in Motion and Cellular Structures

[Gabriela Hertig \(IHEID, Geneva\)](#)
Governing the Therapeutic, Commercial and Ethical
Emergence and Dissolution of Stem Cell Research and
Therapeutics in Delhi and Mumbai

[Nolwenn Bühler \(University of Lausanne\)](#)
Productive Uncertainties: Exploring the Circulation of
Knowledge on Reproductive Ageing

16.15 – 16.45 Coffee Break

16.45 – 17.45 Session 3:
Histories of Medicine between Uncertainty and Progress

[Lara Keuck \(Humboldt University, Berlin\)](#)
Expert Uncertainty and Amateur History: The Case of
Alzheimer's Disease

[Vanessa Rampton \(ETH Zurich\)](#)
'But medical science?': Histories of Progress and Medicine's
Exceptionalism

17.45 – 18.15 Final Discussion

19.00 Dinner