

Ways of Looking at Rocks
by Wendy Tronrud

“The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end. It is the highest emblem in the cipher of the world. St Augustine described the nature of God as a circle whose centre was everywhere, and its circumference nowhere. We are all our lifetime reading the copious sense of the first of forms” (Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay “Circles”).

“Dakin sighed, drew a circle on his blotter and wrote under it the word ‘Baghdad’. Then he sketched a camel, an aeroplane, a steamer, a small puffing train, all approaching the circle from different directions. On the corner of his pad he drew a spider’s web. Underneath it, a big question mark. He started at what he had done and murmured; ‘They came to Baghdad...’” (Agatha Christie in *They Came to Baghdad* quoted by Kriemann in her book *Ashes and Broken Brick Work of a Logical Theory*)

Susanne Kriemann’s artist book practice is by and large a literary one. Of her 13 books, many inhabit a literary scale, a book size that allows a reader to easily grasp the book body, flip through the pages, to comfortably sit down and read. To this effect, the scale of Kriemann’s books works more as a clue to the reader that there are stories to encounter not only in her books, but in her work. Thus the artist book functions as a key to Kriemann’s artistic practice on the whole. This is not to say that it solves the mystery, rather it signals to us that Kriemann’s work simultaneously exposes and narrativizes the mysterious intersection existing between criminology, photography, state security, bird watching, the archive, and most recently, radioactive rocks. Kriemann’s work probes this juncture and her artist books tell us that as an artist she is grabbing a previously unseen thread looped several times over and pulling on it. As an artist, Kriemann is Agatha Christie approaching the circle from different directions; she is the mystery fiction writer moonlighting as the photojournalist.

The importance of the circle or loop in Kriemann’s work becomes more even more evident in her artist books. Evoking Emerson here is not gratuitous. Photography develops in 1839 in conjunction with several scientific discoveries/developments (Darwinism and atomic theory) that in turn also influence Emerson’s own experimentation with language. The ideas of circles coincide with theories and practice of consciousness, memory, the atom, light, and individual experience. In other words, circles are everywhere, but their circumferences are nowhere. How do we know in which circle (moment, history, story) we stand if the boundaries, the circumference is mysterious? We can keep going back into this story of atomic particles, waves and the nature of light, but what is most interesting is how the presence of this story gets revealed, how the narrative loop starts forming and this is where Susanne Kriemann’s artistic practice comes in via the form of the artist book. As a part of this looping tautology, the exhibition is a mask for the artist book and the artist book is a mask for the exhibition. Kriemann’s artist books are not documentaries of exhibitions (not unless we think of the term mystic documentary); they are a particular strand of this continuous loop, one that can follow the

viewer home. Kriemann's artist books are perhaps extra-photographic or maybe the exhibition becomes extra-biblio. Really, I think they are both, continually developing and informing each other.

Often developed concurrently with an exhibition, Kriemann's artist book informs and is informed by her process of thinking through exhibition ideas. The artist book also provides a way to move through the circles that are integral to Kriemann's practice as an artist. Kriemann's book *Ashes and Broken Brick Work of a Logical Theory* published by ROMA in 2010 is visually framed by both Leonard Woolley's *Digging Up the Past* (1930) and Agatha Christie's *They Came to Baghdad* (1951). (Christie, it turns out, was married to Max Mallowan, Woolley's assistant and photographed an expedition; she also writes books that are informed by these experiences). The design of this book stages the importance of the practice of visual quotation to Kriemann's work as an artist. We see this through the black frame that encases each page and the photographic quoting of Woolley and Christie's books. While we don't see the front cover of Woolley's book, *Ashes* takes us directly to Woolley's Contents page where select phrasing has been highlighted. The reference to archaeology is clearly important to Kriemann's work here. The archaeological act is what forms an archive; it's the pre-archival impulse. We see not only the narrative of modernity/modernism questioned in the few pages of Woolley's text that Kriemann quotes and highlights for us, but the very archival principles used to organize and distinguish artifacts in museums. Woolley incriminates "subjective criticism based on too partial knowledge" for the confusion that persists in "the history of Near Eastern art" (19).

The pages of Woolley's book transition directly to a few from Christie's *They Came to Baghdad*. How do we read fragments from the past? Similar to the concern posed by Woolley, Kriemann's book itself asks her readers this question as we jump right into the beginning of Chapter III of Christie's mystery novel. What does this Christie fragment tell us about the past? The first two highlighted excerpts from *They Came to Baghdad* detail moments of transit, first in taxis in London and the second is also told from a car, this time seemingly somewhere in or near Baghdad (and this is mirrored in the photographs of cars Kriemann places in *Ashes*). In this latter excerpt, two characters, Richard and Victoria, stop the car in the desert to look through a traveling cinema that two local men set up for them. "Draw near and prepare yourself for much wonder and delight. Prepare to behold the wonders of antiquity" (139), the men are translated as saying to their foreign clients. The rest of the page is unhighlighted by Kriemann, but if one keeps reading the narrator tells us, "An odd and varied collection of pictures followed each other, all completely unrelated and sometimes announced in the strangest of terms."

“Sometimes the picture of the past life that a building gives is extraordinarily vivid” (Woolley 66).

The traveling cinema of this book, with photographs taken from unknown photojournalists, Agatha Christie, and Kriemann herself, counterpoint the various uses/functions of photography to document, to transcribe and to quote. While most of the photographs in *Ashes* are of archaeological digs, found objects and landscapes taken from varying perspectives and archives, a few that Kriemann takes herself are of modernist apartment buildings that face each other on Baghdad street. Placed towards the end of the book, these photos harken back to Ed Ruscha’s artist book *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), a wink to the moment when artist books came to be used as a more democratic form of art making. Kriemann’s work is concerned with monuments and with these few images of buildings, she is complicating the building as picture and moving it more in the direction of archive as it is literally a structure that houses lives, something we can’t fully see from the outside. The artist book in this sense presents an important intervention that attempts to restructure or re-narrativize our ways of looking.

Kriemann’s work often focuses on existing photographic archives as well as complicates the idea of an archive, since the archive for Kriemann is less one of containment than one of affect. Many of her projects, extended also through her artist books, narrate the particular affective relationship between a viewing community and a given archive. Publishing *Ashes* in 2010 at the tailend of the Iraq War slants in towards Iraq without literally evoking the war. Kriemann’s project documents the documentation of Woolley’s excavation of Ur, a burial site of many Sumerian royals, and exposes a historical and photographic counterarchive to the destruction of war; it also gestures towards all that is being lost.

Kriemann’s book *12650* stems from her contribution to the 5th Berlin Biennial of Contemporary Art in 2008. As noted in the book’s preface, 12,650 is the weight of the *Schwerbelastungskörper* or the heavy load bearing body Albert Speer ordered to be built in 1941 to test the ground for Hitler’s unrealized Germania. This cylindrical construction still sits in Berlin and, up until 2008, had been relatively obscured by overgrowth and a surrounding fence. The story of the heavy load bearing body is told in the opening pages of Kriemann’s book through the reproduction of eleven existing newspaper photographs dating from 1950 to 2004. These photographs did not appear in Kriemann’s exhibition which juxtaposed older photos with contemporary ones. The archive in *12650* is primarily an affective one as in each photo we can see the texture differentiation of the original print paper, the almost literal grain of time. This enormous man-made rock stands as a sort of grammar of not only the era in which it was erected, but for what can be seen in and through the compilation of photos, a man’s hand, a strange camera angle, in other words, the extraphotographic. Our line of sight goes only as far as the mammoth sized object’s does. To return to Woolley, “Sometimes the picture of the past life that a

building gives is extraordinarily vivid” (66). More to the point of Kriemann’s work, what is the picture that the building/rock itself gives that we may not see at first?

In *Not Quite Replica: Meteorite* (2005), Kriemann delves into the public archive around the Willamette meteorite. Kriemann intervenes into the history of the meteor by juxtaposing her own research process through found press excerpts and images dating back to the late nineteenth century along with the process of her refabrication of the meteor in China. The meteor’s own story is told through this array of documentation, through its recorded intersections with various communities and individuals over time, Kriemann herself included. However, as Kriemann peels back the layers of history it is in these very fragments and the seemingly endless potential for more to come that her artwork and artist book take form. The enduring monument, so often a rock in Kriemann’s work, provides the occasion for Kriemann to intercept or conjoin seemingly disparate archives together. The stories her artist books begin to tell are in some ways the secret lives of monuments and how these secret lives of a meteorite, Sumerian vase, or a building expose particular insights into human histories and affections as well. The metaphor of exposure here is purposeful--the multiple facets and roles of photography to unfold and further complicate our understanding of a moment in time and place is central to Kriemann’s practice. Rocks, themselves enduring documents, demonstrate the process of photographic exposure. The Willamette meteor’s surface marks thousands of years of interaction with the earth, rain, and with people. The rock is a photograph in other words; it pictures past time.

Kriemann’s most recent project *in girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* turns to a particular radioactive rock discovered in the Barringer Hill Mine in Llano, Texas in the late nineteenth century. (The title is the latin palindrome, also referred to as the devil’s verse, meaning "we wander in the night, and are consumed by fire" or "we enter the circle after dark and are consumed by fire"). The Barringer Hill Mine yielded the discovery of a heavy, greenish-black rock composed primarily of gadolinite, a highly radioactive Rare Earth Element. The *Rare Earth Handbook* online declares, “Disguised as a mild-mannered rare earth, gadolinium is the superman of the elements with superhero properties resulting from its half-full electron shell.” A part of the looping story that Kriemann’s project tells is how this mineral from Llano county, Texas gets used as a filament for Nernst street lamps that illuminate the AEG pavilion in the 1900 World’s Fair in Paris, and continues onward to write a story that forges right into our present moment. Gadolinium is used in MRI scans; Gadolinium-157 is used in nuclear reactor control rods to control the fission process; and Yttrium (processed from gadolinium) is used in iphones. Kriemann takes most of her pictures with her iphone, so the rock participates in the picture in her work. In fact, some of the images of her new project are literally radiograms made through exposure to a rock’s rays.

Etymologically, the word rock stems from the Old English word, stonerock. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines stonerock as “A pointed or projecting rock, a peak, a crag; a detached

mass of rock, a boulder or large stone.” The second entry in the *OED* describes rock as “chiefly alluding to qualities of hardness, durability, or immobility.” Rock is thus something to stand on, to see from, (a peak, a crag) and it is something immobile, so structuring that we must dig down or through to see it. The largest rock of course is our largest circle: the earth. Kriemann’s artist book *Ray* that will correspond with this project features Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Descent into the Maelstrom” (1841). The circling of the maelstrom in this story is seen from the top of a crag as an old sailor guides the nameless narrator within its view. The old sailor of course has a fantastical story of being caught in the maelstrom and living to tell its tale. In many respects, Poe’s story is also a story of circles. The old man is caught within the circumference of the maelstrom and using a barrel, another circle, he is able to use some semblance of scientific reasoning to save himself from its grasp. The reader is also caught in the story’s circle, its narrative arc, that is itself troubling, bizarre and presents an account that of course reads more psychological than it does as factual. (As one of Poe’s first stories translated into French, many of its readers believed that it was in fact a true story). Kriemann transforms the seeming durability of rocks into participating agents in our vertiginous stories. The rock pictures; it takes a central role in our lives and stories in her artwork moving from background to foreground. Presently, the Barringer mine resides at the bottom of Lake Buchanan since its submersion in 1937. The mirrored surface of this lake, as Kriemann noted to me in a conversation, resembles the photographic lens, except in this case, the photographic eye, ours and the rock’s, exists on both sides.

By the end of Poe’s story, the reader finds her/himself in an unexpected place. The narrative thread that s/he followed throughout via the guise of the narrator was actually only the semblance of one. The real story reveals itself each time the reader must clamor back through the story to understand how s/he arrived at such a puzzling place. The thread that Kriemann pulls often reveals the shaky ground of scientific and historical truth or at least reveals their intersection and reliance on the literary and on the imaginary. The artist book is a space in which to delve into and expose these connections, a space for readers to more clearly *read*, to question and engage with stories. What can a rock tell us about history? How can a rock picture for us? What does it mean to document what one cannot literally see? Kriemann’s practice is concerned with these questions whether through her work with birds in flight or the radioactive light emanating from a rock. In his essay “Experience,” Emerson writes, “Life will be imaged, but cannot be divided nor doubled” (218). How can we picture without doubling? The puzzle of Emerson’s line, like the Latin palindrome Kriemann uses for her current project, are invitations to join in the interpretive act of approaching and even entering the circle, revealing to us that it is in this act itself of picking up a book, puzzling through meaning, sifting through historical layers, that we participate in circle making; the moment when we become aware of the circles rather than consumed by them.

Works Cited

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