

## PARALLEL EXCAVATIONS

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If a screen were to slip out of place, what might be revealed underneath? Consider Lake Buchanan, an artificial lake in the middle of the Texas Hill Country, and the year 2011, which was the driest on record there. Due to the drought, Lake Buchanan began to recede, and in so doing, various ghost towns, previously inundated, began to rise from the deep. And while many adventurers paced the then temporarily exposed bed so as to salvage things like 100-year old tombstones and rusted oil tanks, many simply passed by a small and rather unremarkable looking hill... if only they had dug inside.

Known as Barringer Hill, this flooded mound not only contained some of the strangest elements on earth, but is also the setting for a whole host of curious tales—least of which is the one spun by Susanne Kriemann and her work cycle *in girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (date 2011 – 2014).

Barringer Hill's own record begins humbly enough, though, with a prospector who couldn't strike gold. Due to such failures, he (his name is lost to history) was forced to give John Barringer, a young carpenter, some of his own property en lieu of payment for services rendered—the debt was around \$50. And just like his precursor, Barringer came up empty on the site; however, in 1886 he found a strange green-black ore. Special in their own right, these unusual rocks somehow found their way to various mineralogists—who later determined them to be the rare earth element gadolinite. Even though gadolinite was not to be found anywhere else in the United States—in fact, there were only two other known deposits in the world at the time—John Barringer was not impressed; gold was what he wanted. Preciousness aside, W.B. Philips, a photographer, entered the mine around 1904 to do a little experiment with the strange ore.

Unlike gold, gadolinite is radioactive. Taking advantage of such properties, Philips decided to test just what would happen when the mineral came in contact with photosensitive paper. So as to set up a kind of control, Philips placed various objects between the paper and the radioactive material so they would block any particles emitted by the rocks. As it turned out, the ionizing radiation exposed the paper left inside the totally dark mine, while the objects that blocked their cast—such as metal keys in one example—created photonegative shadows on the page. Several of these resultant figure-ground images, which can be considered not only as a form of photography, but as a kind of electromagnetically backlit image, are held today in Harry Ransom Center, a humanities research institute of the University of Texas at Austin. John Barringer probably could care less about a mine that doubled as a camera-less photography apparatus, but such would never become a concern of his.

As fate and fortune would have it, the carpenter was very lucky; the industrialists George Westinghouse and Thomas Edison were both interested in his strange rocks, as well as yttrium, another rare earth element found in the hill. The reason for such: both were trying to perfect a revolutionary new technology, electric lighting, and believed that these elements would prove as a possible medium. Owing to such desires, a bidding war ensued and the site was bought in 1889 for 5,000 dollars—paid out in gold, of course. Just what happened to Mr. Barringer after this point no one knows, but the hill, which took his name, soon became a very prosperous place—though only for a little while.

So as to feed a then hot market, the mine pulled out yttrium, hand over fist—at the time, the material went for about \$144 an ounce. Demand was peaking since yttrium was the key ingredient in one of the first practical electric bulbs, the Nernst Lamp, an invention owned and produced by Westinghouse. Yet this too would not last; Edison later cut his competition by perfecting the modern incandescent bulb, a bulb that used a different and cheaper substance as its filament. Interest in rare earths soon evaporated, and as such, a market crash ensued.

Running beside the now useless mine was a branch of the Colorado River, which, when later dammed in 1938, generated cheap hydroelectric power for the then growing local community and its attendant industries. In a strange, if not cruel twist, the dam, which created Lake Buchanan, supplied power to the very Edison bulbs that doomed the mine. But this situational, and authorless, act of irony would not be the last to encircle the site.

In the years since the intentional flooding, other tech companies toiled at building new forms of light, in particular the LED, and found other ways to power them, such as nuclear reactors. Just as with Edison and Westinghouse, new materials were sought so as to provide the media and fuel for these technologies. Unexpectedly, the once bust market of rare earths came back with a boom; gadolinite, yttrium, and others, such as europium, are now necessary components in not only the aforementioned technologies, but in almost everything ‘tech’ from smartphones to computer monitors. Coming full circle, these heteromorphic histories, themselves tinted with a touch of poetic license, are channeled by Kriemann’s *in girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*.

Although the lake now traps most of the ore, several specimens escaped the mine and were deposited into archives of the Houston Museum of Natural Science, the American Museum of Natural History in New York, Harvard University, and the University of Texas at Austin. Yet, as they lie there, they are in turn buried into dark boxes and cases. Describing a process not unlike prospecting, Kriemann tapped these various holdings and unearthed the material for a new set of investigations. Paying homage to W.B. Philips—whose work the artist also quarried by burrowing into the files of the Harry Ransom Center—Kriemann modified his radiographs by positioning film against the samples without an additional barrier, and left them in

the basement cellars of such institutions to expose on their own. And while it would be easy to read these actions as a kind of mirror, it would be wise to consider this added context as a lens with which to develop a riddle, namely the one hidden in the work's very title.

*In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* is a Latin palindrome that can be roughly translated as 'we wander in the night, and are consumed by fire'. Traditionally, the 'we' of the sentence, its puzzle, is answered with the image of moths circling a flame; however, it is also meant to invoke tragedy, as the life giving warmth of the flame leads to the ultimate self-immolation of each creature—a monomaniacal subtext that is further advanced as the phrase, which reads the same backwards as forwards, is often written in a ring that folds in on itself. And while the story of the rocks might appear to follow various cycles of obscurity and presence and back again, it is human utility—or the lack thereof—that brings them to surface.

Unlike the rocks themselves, or analog photography, the bulbs and computer screens require one thing to make them be seen: electricity. Fittingly, Lake Buchanan and its dam present a clear allusion to Heidegger's notorious hydroelectric plant, the philosopher's symbol of how a science blinded by human desire undoes reason by transforming the earth into an unstable and dangerous commodity. While signs of global warming are present everywhere—such as the drought already mentioned above—few pause to consider their own complacency while ravenously consuming each new technology. Instead of merely gazing at the illusionary images that float on the surface of our ever replicating black mirrors, be they found on smartphones, computer monitors, or flat screen televisions, *in girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* cracks the screen and breaks through the veil to ask: what is hidden just below our very fingertips, and how should we consider these materials when trying to build a more enlightened social landscape. Shrewdly the artist prefigures a way by removing artificial electricity and mediating agents from the equation so as to wander the electromagnetic spectrum through more passive and less anthropocentric means.