

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, “Circles” (1841)

“The results of the invention [daguerreotype] cannot, even remotely, be seen—but all experience, in matters of philosophical discovery, teaches us that, in such discovery, it is the unforeseen upon which we must calculate most largely.” Edgar Allan Poe, “The Daguerreotype” (1840)

The circle is that which demarcates and excludes; it is also a figure of enclosure and one of contact. In this sense, the circle resounds, for Emerson, as the “first of forms,” as elemental as it is mystical. Across Kriemann’s photographic and artist book work, the circle also loops playfully and mysteriously. Evoking Emerson here is not gratuitous. Photography arises in 1839 in conjunction with several scientific discoveries/developments (Darwinism and atomic theory) that in turn also influence Emerson’s own experimentation with language. Ideas of circles coincide with theories and practices of consciousness, memory, the atom, light, and individual experience. The atom tells us that our boundaries are porous (between each other and nature) and in constant flux. Insides become outsides. Where, then, is the threshold between subject and object, spectator and image? The oval face of the daguerreotype, reflective and shadowy, was considered as magical as it was scientific. Edgar Allan Poe’s own cryptic remarks above demonstrate how the photographic conjoins so quickly to the philosophical revealing as much about what is unforeseen, and unseen, in the depiction of the real.

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 work 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 many 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 work 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 detached 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 corresponds with her work here 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. Analogous to Poe’s comment on the daguerreotype, circling is another form of descent into the unforeseen or unseen. The old sailor in Poe’s story is a survivor, someone who gets caught in the maelstrom and lives 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.

Her artist book *RAY* narrates in a similar fashion. On the cover, we see a photograph of a large rock, a single piece of gadolinite, and then we encounter another image of a wall of rocks signaling the importance of the threshold to Kriemann’s work here. After the title page, we see an archival photo of keys, the threshold picturing its tool of entrance, or, equally, one of closure. Kriemann foregrounds for us this small descent into the archive, but really her work is focused on the material and mystical limit of knowing and seeing, how a narrative loops through archaeological-like layers without ever finding its source. The last photograph of this small prologue is an image of the manmade lake’s surface that now covers the mouth of the mine. Again, the threshold is pictured and as we dive further into the book it is unclear on what side Kriemann is placing us. The descent into her work, as staged by Kriemann, illustrates how perhaps we were never on the outside in the first place, but rather in a perpetual position of circling, looping. Presently, the Barringer Hill 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. 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.” How can we picture without doubling? The puzzle of Emerson’s line, like the Latin palindrome Kriemann uses for her current

endeavor, are invitations to join in the interpretive act of approaching and noticing 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.

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