

RAYS

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Texts have the ability to link narratives—which exist along parallel coordinates—to each other, thereby laying the basis for a certain artistic practice. A radioactive rock, kept in the museum of natural history in Vienna or in Berlin. A mine, submerged in a lake somewhere in the USA, that still radiates with the glow of rare earths. A monolith of red granite from the area around Amarillo Ramp, the final Land Art project of Robert Smithson. Through text, such diverging narrative contexts—which emerge from within a work and the research preceding it—are redistributed into a new form. That does not mean, however, that these contexts become directly readable in the work itself. Rather, texts conduct themselves like a transparent screen that sets itself over a photograph. The picture remains, but its acuity diminishes.

What Roland Barthes called the *studium*, the photograph's access to knowledge, is able to draw imaged conclusions from cultural- and social-historical mentalities. In the course of this cultural perception, it opens the way for the information displayed in a picture to enter the consciousness, forming the starting point for such meandering texts, that in turn are always revealing new cross-references. Such cross references appear in lexicons and encyclopaedias as italicized or highlighted terms, a phenomenon which today is exemplified by hyperlinks on websites that use a word to link to new information. In the digital age, text becomes a literal 'link' to known information. What, then, does a photograph become when it is still ontologically connected with reality, but the sources of its coming into being are veiled, so that in a certain way it keeps silent about its origins? The idea of (analog) photography as possessing the ability to convey information results in its nearness to reality, yet at the same time acts as a reminder of its chemico-physical origin. For Barthes, photography is an "emanation of the referent" that derives its meaning from an "object illuminated by reflected light rays" which can then be captured and recorded.

A sample of the radioactive rare earth mineral fergusonite is stored in the Vienna Museum of Natural History. Susanne Kriemann exposed this mineral to large format film, whereby the mineral reproduced itself as a radiograph after about twenty days of exposure. An object which photographs itself; a 'selfie' in predigital form. Or in other words, a "unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be." This aura, characterized by inaccessibility, verisimilitude and singularity, disappeared for Walter Benjamin with the age of mechanical reproduction. However, here the aura seems to have, in some strange way, returned. Rays, radioactivity, which do not belong to the spectrum of visible light, yet nevertheless have the capacity to produce photographs without the help of a camera. Radioactivity exists always and everywhere, with an intensity that becomes threatening, surrounded by a fear that is fed by fascination. The image does not reveal to us how it came into being (that is the task of this and other texts), yet it leads us back to the early history of photography, when the appearance of the world in a reproduction was a physically explainable process, whose secrets, however, remained shrouded within the aura.

Today, in a time where people view the world more and more through the lenses of their smartphone cameras, and each year more photographs are being taken than ever before, the photographic self-recording of a rare earth mineral becomes a metaphor for a different kind of photography, one that once again takes up the central questions of the real, indexicality, and the relationship between reality and the digital realm. For the invisible rays of the rocks correspond in an asynchronous way to the rays of the LED screens that have come to surround us, and to the things that we believe we see, although we really have no idea what they actually are.