

Reading

The artist's books

By Hans Dickel

translated by Ailsa Kotmair

“People know little of the time and effort it takes to learn to read, and read with understanding.” Goethe’s comment from January 25th 1830 fits well to artist books in particular, for they require a twofold look, at both content and form. Susanne Kriemann has selected the book as a medium for her art to reflect the reading of her contents, the process of intellectual appropriation, through the consideration of its form. The very perception and understanding of the contents – sensually, visually and intellectually – become a main theme in her books. On each occasion, their artistic form conveys a second confrontation with the contents through their media, thus opening up further dimensions of their reading. With this dialectic fusion of content and form, of the represented and its representation, Susanne Kriemann sends readers and viewers of her books on reflection cycles of reading.

12650 (1)

The *Schwerbelastungskörper* [“heavy load body”], located on General-Pape-Street in Berlin, quite evidently embodies the content of this book. The cylinder-like concrete block looks identical from all sides. In Susanne Kriemann’s reader from 2008 entitled *12650*, 22 black & white photographs – 11 on the cover, 11 inside – are neither identical nor do they have similar framing. Each photograph provides but a blurred, partial view of the *Schwerbelastungskörper*, thus documenting more the position of the photographer than the actual object. The massive architectural structure used to test the resilience of Berlin’s ground for Adolf Hitler’s development plans in the capital city of imperial “Germania” resists all attempts to fathom its construction and function. Following the rather monotone series of 11 photographs, which appeared separately in the Berlin press between 1950 and 2005, Susanne Kriemann provides plentiful commentary on the historic object culled from that press and trade journals. Measurements of its weight and opinions on its function disparage widely. The texts are not chronologically ordered in the book, but instead according to their various weight estimates – between 12,000 and 40,000 tons. English translations of select passages as well as two editorials form a second level of reflection on the representation of the Berlin *Schwerbelastungskörper*. On one page, the digits of the object’s estimated weight are printed so largely, that their elegant font spills over, joining the chapters and even affecting the appearance of the cover. The book brings together perspectives, opinions and estimates of the *Schwerbelastungskörper* for comparison, ultimately detaching structure from superstructure. If one were to regard the photographs and the text pages on a wall as a tableau – as was presented at the 5th Berlin Biennial 2008 – the art historical link to the works of Joseph Kosuth (for example his *One and Three Chairs*

from 1965) becomes evident, as well as to the architectural photography of Bernd and Hilla Becher, whose principle is, in a sense, reversed: instead of a uniform presentation of different buildings, here, the same building is arranged in different photographs. Susanne Kriemann not only offers for comparison the constructions of various representations of the object in images and text, but also grounds her research in a concrete situation: the load on Berlin. In her book, the photo and text pages mutually generate meaning. The discourse of the burden of the Nazi regime, represented by the texts, is visualized in the reiterated image of the *Schwerbelastungskörper*, as a burden of the discourse that in Berlin binds the present to history like a leaden ball.

One Time One Million (Migratory Birds / Romantic Capitalism) (2)

Susanne Kriemann's most complex project to date, whose artful book design was made possible by various foundation awards, once again thematically entwines multifaceted contents and forms. Photographs and texts of various origin and quality are brought together in the unity of the book's unique format, resulting in poetic sparks. The book thus becomes both the juncture for disparate contents as well as a nexus for associative conclusions drawn by the viewer and reader. By thematically interweaving the contents through comparable forms of their realization, the book opens up a metalevel for unforeseeable historical connections.

In *One Time One Million (Migratory Birds / Romantic Capitalism) (2009)*, the two most important items – the invention of a photo camera by Victor Hasselblad (“One Time”) and the Swedish social housing program *Miljonprogrammet* [Million Program] – are thematically linked by Hasselblad's bird photographs, whose reproduction would go on to inspire countless other photographs of migrating birds.

The letters at the bottom of the photo pages in Susanne Kriemann's book indicate the year in which the picture was taken. The code used to do this is Hasselblad's own VHPICTURES, which he used to represent the numerals 1234567890. For example, a camera lens produced in 1958 was coded with the letter s CR (58). By adding together all the years in which the included photographs were made, Susanne Kriemann arrived at the “temporal” sum of 1,000,000. Thus a single copy of her book metaphorically embodies the counting of time up to a million, hence: *One Time One Million*.

The cover and the first two image sequences depict a Hasselblad camera –portrayed from all sides in its function as a producer of technical images. The technology of photography is thus used not just as a medium but presented foremost as the subject of the book and subsequently addressed in its many facets. Various airplane images refer to the technical development of photography grounded in the logistics of military surveillance. Hasselblad based his camera on an earlier model found in a German airplane that crashed over Sweden. In the next part of her image/text composition Susanne Kriemann presents her protagonist Hasselblad as enthusiastic observer of migratory birds and their flight routes: the next series of images begins with color photographs of particularly attractive specimens framed and labeled by Hasselblad as in

a museum. The artistic juncture of the three motifs – camera, airplane and birds – reveal figurative meanings at the book’s metalevel: the camera as an external eye, free flying, liberating human perception from the shackles of space and time, a viewing mechanism that inspires the soul, sending thoughts on a voyage like that of the birds. At the same time the camera can also navigate, analogous to the flight formations of the birds that by nature fly the same route every year.

In Victor Hasselblad’s first photographs reproduced here, the birds seem like individuals. Only later do they depict entire formations, flocks of seagulls, storks and geese that the photographer examined in his book *Flyttfågelstråk* [Flight Routes of Migratory Birds] (1935). In these photogenic compositions of entire migratory bird populations, which appear as graphic structures through the “iconic inversion” of photography, Susanne Kriemann found parallels to social housing settlements that appear formally transformed in aerial photographs. In a project known as *Miljonprogrammet*, new residential estates erected in the 1960s and 1970s housed Swedish working class families, then Eastern European economic migrants and finally refugees from war zones such as Iraq and Somalia. Equipped with her own Hasselblad camera, the artist slipped into the role of her protagonist and photographed the housing estates from a helicopter – their urban structures recalling migratory birds formations. With such transfers of content to form and vice versa, Susanne Kriemann succeeds in bringing together motifs in a rhizome-like narrative, opening up a horizon for associations. An essay in the book by Belgian philosopher Dieter Roelstraete on *Romantic Capitalism* links the comparison between the globalized escape routes of the 20th century and the flight behavior of migratory birds with the nomadic life of western intellectuals and contemporary polyglot artists, who freely romanticize and aesthetically interpret existential migration movements of other population groups. His reference to Deleuze/Guattari’s differentiation between “mass” and “multitude” underlines the distinction. The book’s other paratexts, which explain its concept and organization, are on brown paper – optically offset, separately printed. In a handwritten essay, the artist Aleksander Komarov¹ expounds on what it would be like for a person to be a bird. He poetically reflects on the twofold essence of mankind as being both of nature and spirit.

In addition to the texts, the book’s visual rhythm, the photographic sequences, the images’ accelerated shift from location to location and the dissolution of the spatially sculptural motifs of birds and housing blocks into the graphic structures of their images’ surface all inspire further reflection. The starting point of the camera as object leads to the migratory birds and closes with the housing settlements. A series of photographs of dark apartment entranceways, however, establishes yet another context. Here, Susanne Kriemann directs her attention to the television satellite dishes, attached like birds nests to the railings. With this repetitive motif the artist calls attention to the ambivalence of the technical medium of photography (and film). The disembodied camera eye liberated from space and time is a double-edged sword: as signaled by the birds, it can inspire the intellect; yet it might also cripple the imagination – as suggested in this context by the monotony of the building facades.

¹ This text is published as a footnote alongside this text, page xx

The final sequence in the book, derived in turn from a formal analogy, leaves one skeptical: alongside the tenement blocks, Susanne Kriemann presents photographs from the Natural History Museum in Berlin. The depiction of shelves stacked with containers of conserved bird skins bring to mind the clipped wings of imagination, and not far from this the image of a mentally homogenized television viewership. But on the distant courtyard of the Swedish housing settlement one can also see a woman, shrouded in her veil, she sets off on her way, out of the picture.

Ashes and broken brickwork of a logical theory

Even prior to any confrontation with its diverse contents, Susanne Kriemann's book *Ashes and broken brickwork of a logical theory* (2009/2010) confounds through the particular presentation format. Its pages include excerpts from other books and photographic reprints presented in non-chronological order. Unpaginated, they make reference only to the dates of their original. With the help of the legends fig.1 - fig.73, which are deciphered in the appendix with the names of the original sources, the individual pages can be identified as reproductions of earlier representations of their subjects. The reference system ironically cites scientific research methodology – which is itself a topic addressed in the book.

Kriemann's book skillfully brings together complementary aspects variously related to archaeology that, together with their intermedial and intertextual references, comprise the book's theme. Historic texts by four authors, three contemporary texts, photographs by five known and other unknown photographers, as well as the artist's concept – identified as such on the cover by a separate blue surface – are presented equally as representations of the addressed object within the context of the bound book as meta-form. At first, the typographically differentiated system of references might seem confusing to the reader/viewer, but this is exactly how the book aims to reveal "reading" as a tentative form of comprehension, as a membrane between the object and subject of archaeology.

Ashes and broken brickwork of a logical theory literally and metaphorically deals with the reading of fragments with the help of archaeology or criminology. The principal contents are archaeological excavations in Kamishli, in northern Syria. The excavation theory of Leonard Woolley (*Digging up the Past*, 1930) and the excavations of his student Max Mallowan are excerpted from Woolley's book along with photographs of their collaborative work. Both Woolley and Mallowan initially attempted an inductive, not deductive approach to uncovering the traces of settlements from 2 BC, prior to their reconstruction of the settlement structures in a "close reading" (*Ashes and broken brickwork*).

The passages selected by Susanne Kriemann, reproduced against a gray background, reveal the archaeologists' sympathy for outsiders (portrayed here are the more aberrant dwellings of the ruins' former residents) as well as the artist's own sympathy for the archaeologists as outsiders of society: they too, were digging in search of an identity. Prior to the excavation site images, which alternative between close-up and wide-angle perspectives, Susanne Kriemann presents several pages from Agatha Christie's detective novel set in the heart of Baghdad from 1951, *They Came to Baghdad*. As the beloved wife of archaeologist Max Mallowan, Christie accompanied him to the Near East, serving as his photographer. Christie's images play a central role in Kriemann's book, as a private, personal aspect of its thematic comparison of archaeological excavation with forensic investigation, with which the author of *Murder on the Orient Express* sends readers in search of her murder mysteries' perpetrators (*logical theory*).

The book's ambiguous title provokes the question of further methodological parallels between archaeology and criminology. In one essay, Dieter Roelstraete makes an important point regarding Walter Benjamin's *Passagenwerk* [*Arcades Project*], which reveals the heuristic function of fragments in numerous detailed observations of 19th century cultural history: lying dormant herein is history, which can awaken an alert mind with the power of imagination – a form of “reading” upon which Benjamin philosophically expounds in his *Thesen Über den Begriff der Geschichte* [*On the Concept of History*].

After this, the image sequence comprising 90 of the book's 130 pages depicts black & white landscape photographs of archaeological sites in their panorama or at various stages of investigation. The comparison between present-day and historic images (taken by Agatha Christie) is part of the experimental design of *logical theory*. The various sites can be seen in phases of silting or excavation, photographically fixed in their hybrid manifestation between nature and culture: one sees crumbling buildings, traces of foundation walls and aerial views of geological structures where the remains of earlier cultures have once again disappeared. Susanne Kriemann “digs” into her documentation on the relationship between Max Mallowan and Agatha Christie and seeks explanations for today's fascination with foreign cultures. Her own interest and involvement are revealed by photographs she took of the Baghdad Street in Damascus, between modern apartment blocks and cars in traffic: suggestive snapshots reminiscent of surveillance camera images. Delving into the book's contents ultimately returns one to its form and title and the possible interpretations thereof: the fragmentation of a logical theory, the questionability of every theoretical model is addressed, but also reversed. In an exact reading, fragments become the puzzle pieces of a logical theory. For the book's reader/viewer, an implicit subtext questions the discrepancies between actual events and the media's reconstructions of the two wars in Iraq.

The theme of the book – the dubious nature of the reconstruction of a whole from its parts – seems to be visually compressed in the center of the book by the motif of found shards, whose original form as a vase is ironically emphasized here in multiple

variations of its reconstruction. Still, it remains uncertain as to whether or not this is merely a fake made for tourists.

In her books, which unite research with select contents and present them in a variety of formats, Susanne Kriemann overhauls the tradition of the scientific book, in specific alignment with and extension of the artist book as genre. In each she addresses exemplary themes, exposing them through images and texts as media constructs and thereby offering a space for reflection upon this. She especially makes use of a dialectical interleaving of content and form – making form to content and reflecting content in the form of its visualization in the book – in order to address and broaden each of her themes from a variety of perspectives for the attentive reader/viewer. Each book is thus a kind of media-based plateau. Susanne Kriemann's heuristic process diverges from the scientific standards of linear argumentation. Instead, she autopoetically and methodologically integrates self-reflexive moments into her representations, which animate the reader/viewer to critiques of representation. By approaching her contents in a rhizome-like and circular way, revealing each step as such and offering alternative approaches, the artist responds to the scientific claim to objectivity and diverts attention to reading as an individual process of appropriation. In doing so, the finesse of her art book becomes quite evident. In close collaboration with the book designer, variants are set in the page layout, typography, paper and in the meticulous print reproduction of photographs that seldom appear in the history of newer artist books, thereby revealing a marked interest in the book as interface between an object and its reader/viewer. The dialectic of content and form – a characteristic feature of her artist books – forms for both a framework that often goes missing in many books.

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(2)

The Birdwatcher in the Burbs
by Aleksander Komarov

Bird-watching is primarily a 20th century phenomenon; before 1900 most birds had to be shot first before they could be identified.

The popularity of bird-watching grew through the publication of journals and books, in particular the field guides (beginning in 1934). 'Early morning is typically the best time of the day for birding since many birds are active searching for food, and thus are easier to find and observe. Success in locating the more interesting species typically requires detailed knowledge of their appearance, sounds, behaviour, and most likely habitat, in addition to stealth and patience. Birding can be one of the quieter and more relaxing outdoor activities. However, birders, who are keen rarity-seekers, will travel long distances to see a new species to add to the list of birds they have personally observed.'

There are still some places in the world where the roots have not yet been hold and the study of wild nature is yet to come. It is not in the camouflage of a wild landscape, but in the outskirts of our minds, where the unknown is left for the desirable fear of discovery.

To begin birding in my mind, I must find a reference to this place somewhere, to help me to imagine. Sub-consciousness, the term of sociology is the right one to use, but also perhaps schizophrenia... I imagine I imagine being a bird without any knowledge of the human desire to fly or of modernity, but as a warm-blooded body, covered with feathers and forelimbs modified into wings. My weight is reduced by the presence of a horny bill instead of heavy jaws and teeth. Airspaces appear in my bones and as my transformation is completed I imagine experiencing the habitual life of birds in the wild. Never having been to such a place, I decide to visit the suburbs of the big city where multitudes of birds can be observed. My destination is northwest. By leaving my home territory, I hope for a better place to spend the transitional period. Separated from human activities, nature takes over and the cold freezes me, a devastating result of looking for a better place.

At the end of a long and exhausting flight I see an area from above that looks like puzzles of cubes, surrounded by trees, like a saving ring around the body. There are grey buildings, made mainly out of concrete slabs. It doesn't look like a city, since the streets are empty of people and there are only few parked cars. The inhabitants live outside the city centre, and busy themselves hiding from others. My curiosity – or rather pure instinct to find food – brings me to a large open space. It appears beautiful from above with its arrangement of tiles. Numerous species have also come here for food. At first I came across a little sniper but it disappears into one of the tunnels, probably reminded of y cave.

Suddenly the inhabitants of the *Millionprogram* appear everywhere, gathering to buy their food at a vegetable kiosk and a super market. It is where I find many birds of different species, sitting on the edge of the central building and watching the people. After sharing my lunch with a sparrow, my hunger is satisfied and I sit on the opposing building to have some distance from the other birds to observe. While watching, I find more and more similarities between the birds and the people of this place. There is little eye communication but more exchange in the movement of bodies. The black wailed dress of a woman plays with the wind, imitating the elegance of the little blackbird over there. Others are static, standing around without moving. Except in the area where one can buy food, some excitement and feeling of belonging or sharing appears, and my

melancholic mood, probably heavily influenced by the place, allows me to imagine their stories. I can't help but think that their stories are similar, since they too are here as strangers.

Something scares me about the concrete design of the buildings: the windows. Metal bars like cages protect many of them. It tells me that the history of this place is dangerous and gangs frighten the inhabitants. Beneath my feathers comes a cold shiver. While dreamily observing the birds and people my eyes meet those of a man who was probably observing me for a while. It felt like I had been spotted and immediately recognized, just like any other bird waiting to be scared away. Probably because of my loneliness, and longing for the moments where modernity was still a place one could go to, I realize that there is no place to return to, the only thing that remains is my imagination of an unrecoverable past.

Bird