

*'Is this what we do?'*

This email conversation between Matts Leiderstam and Susanne Kriemann began in August 2010 and is still continuing. It was conducted in English.

*Edited by Laura Schleussner*

**Matts:** Thinking about approaches we share in our work, I keep coming back to the ideas of Henry Jenkins, an American professor of new media. He has proposed that we are presently leaving what Benjamin called “the age of mechanical reproduction” and are entering a global “convergence culture,” in which we are all involved in “transmedia storytelling” spanning various media, including books, television, and the Internet. A new kind of appropriation process has emerged: I download an Internet image or some sentences of a story from one context to use it for another. This material is then used and uploaded again, and the process continues. It’s like the children’s game of telephone, in which the contents of images and stories are altered during transfer. I think about the first work of yours I saw in this context, *The Future – Ramses Files* (2006), in which various layers of the past are “excavated” and transformed in relation to the present. Do you see your work operating in this way?

**Susanne:** *The Future – Ramses Files* is a compilation of press articles from 1997 to 2006 that takes the form of a newspaper. The articles deal with the removal of a sculpture of Ramses II (circa 3200 B.C.) from Ramses Square in the center of Cairo. The colossal statue was placed at this location in 1956 on the orders of president G. A. Nasser, and it intended to be moved to the Egyptian Museum in Gizeh, which is planned to be completed in 2013. As you mention, the work entails shifts in context. The newspaper focuses on one topic and presents all newspaper articles that have appeared about this issue in non-chronological order, in English and Arabic. Reading all these articles centered on one topic in succession fictionalizes the facts they contain.

The images that I found in different Egyptian archives document the sculpture and its location from 1956 to 2006 in front of Cairo’s central train station. The juxtaposition of these images makes it seem as if Ramses had been moved more often, but in reality this site underwent constant change over the course of the city’s rapid growth. At the time I was interested in documenting these processes.

**Matts:** We both enjoy digging into the past. For me a project often starts with the experience of seeing a painting in the context of an art museum. To understand my desires in relation to this painting I often have to look back. My method is often to research different historical accounts of the painting and its contexts. I am however not so interested in simply accumulating this knowledge but in how I can use it for my own purposes. In my experience, I have often found that while looking for one scrap of evidence during research, I often suddenly stumble onto a contradictory and unpredictable fact that changes everything—leading me to the real story. I am almost destined to unearth something, if I am investigating something I truly wish to know more about. What is your initial starting point or “first clue”? Is your research process triggered by certain images or bits of information?

**Susanne:** It seems to be a mixture of both. I am primarily interested in an exchange between the past and the present. For example, the story of *One Time One Million* began at an auction held at the Military Museum in Stockholm, where I had intended to buy a Hasselblad slide carousel, but instead I came home with a Ross HK7 aerial camera, said to be one of the first Hasselblad cameras (1941). It came with two unopened Kodak black and white films dating from 1958. I was thrilled to be the owner of this media historical “dinosaur,” which was just begging to be revived.

The reciprocity between the aerial camera as a surveillance tool (looking down on the earth from the airplane) and Hasselblad’s interest in photographing birds (looking up from the earth to the sky) fascinated me. In 1935 Hasselblad had published the book *Flyttfågelstråk* (The Flight of Migratory Birds) with Albert Bonniers Publishers. Working from these images and others, I was able to begin developing on a story about migration, modernity, and death.

**Matts:** I agree that an essential part of the search is finding a “leakage point” from the past into the present. I also consider this way of working an artistic practice that is somehow performative in its approach to given materials and historical context. Could you talk about your approach to site and context?

**Susanne:** This performative quality of research is not choreographed; it grows out of encounters and conversations with people and changes depending on a specific time and place. This is why travel, for example, gives you a particularly clear perspective on things, and for me it offers highly efficient working conditions for collecting and detective work. For me, the process of exhibiting my works in a space also has performative aspects.

**Matts:** Many of your projects have a spatial (exhibition) version and a printed one. Could you explain why? Do these variations tend to inform one another, or are they ultimately separate works?

**Susanne:** Traveling inspired me to work with books. I first began to make small books featuring my photographs, in order to be able to take them with me wherever I went. These self-made books then took on a life of their own that was more interesting than what they documented. The books are closely related to my photographs. Usually I find the initial image for a good idea in books.

In attempting to formulate my narratives with all the images taken from other contexts, the clear structure of the book serves as a basis for the associative relationships inherent to my work.

*Ashes and broken brickwork of a logical theory* is a special example in this regard. Here there is a striking difference between the formulation of the work in book form and its realization in the exhibition context. The latter is a transcription of sorts, which is an act of transposing the book into the exhibition space.

*Susanne sends Matts the book Ashes and broken brickwork of a logical theory, which he had not yet seen.*

**Matts:** The Agatha Christie photographs in *Ashes and broken brickwork of a logical theory* are incredible! What an interesting connection! It seems to me that Christie represents the continuation of the 18th-century tradition of the Grand Tour among the British upper classes—even if she seems to act as researcher of sorts. Such travelers not only went to far away places to see the “wonders of the world” but also to find antiquities and bring them home. Without drawing simple conclusions, your project shows the past clashing with the present in very interesting ways, and it reveals the “imperial eye” behind the viewfinder.

It makes me think of one of my visits to the Metropolitan Museum, probably in 2001. On view was a very small exhibition produced by the Egyptian Department: *The Pharaoh's Photographer: Harry Burton, Tutankhamun, and the Metropolitan's Egyptian Expedition*. Just as in your book, the show brought together different kinds of images and ideas related to archaeology. On display were Harry Burton's beautiful photographs of Tutankhamun's Tomb taken before the objects were moved, scrutinized, and put on display. These were juxtaposed with films and photographs showing Egyptian workers excavating, carrying, and packing objects in crates to be shipped to Metropolitan Museum. The order of the pictures on the wall created a multi-layered experience, which revealed a great deal about the role of the museum spectator. When we read, examine something more closely, or survey the presentation we are directed through the display while repeating movements like actors playing our parts in the museum.

Later, Burton's pictures took on another dimension. When looking for these photographs on the Internet a while ago, I suddenly found an image that looked like a copy of his pictures, but perhaps colored by somebody. But taking a closer look, it was obvious that it must be a fake, since all the objects in the new image looked as if they had been made recently. The webpage gave no information on the source of the image, but after more research I came to the conclusion that this photograph could

have been taken in King Tut's Tomb in Las Vegas at the Luxor Hotel. So apparently a weird museum in a hotel in Las Vegas tried to reconstruct the moment of discovery documented by Burton's photographs.

**Susanne:** Your find also makes clear that conservation culture and convergence culture can be closely related. When you talk about your role as a museum visitor, it is interesting for me to hear how the political conditions of the respective representational machine, be it the museum or Las Vegas tourism, determines the reading of the objects for the viewer.

A major inspiration for the work was the book *Digging Up the Past* (1930) by Leonard Woolley.<sup>1</sup> Not only does it have an insightful title, but also the introductory essay contains a compelling passage:

The surprise which a visitor to a Museum expresses at the age of a given object is in exact proportion to his recognition of the object's essential modernity—it is the surprise of one who sees his horizon suddenly opening out.

Woolley relates all his findings to modernity. For example, if we picture a “cup” designed five thousand years ago as placed next to Malevich's tea set, what would we think? How would we *read* it?

When I compare these things, then they largely speak to the context in which their respective meanings are conserved.

**Matts:**

The views of Sir Leonard Woolley (perhaps an early post-modern curator?) on the museum go against classical historians' traditional ideas about the purpose of an antiquities museum, namely to try to track the object back to its original use, culture, and owner. In her fascinating essay *On Show: Inside the Ethnographic Museum*, Dutch art historian Mieke Bal writes about the different narrative codes and modes of displaying objects in the art museum as compared with the ethnographic museum. This is often revealed in the subtleties of presentation and the language used on labels. In her essay she brings up the crucial question “Who is speaking?” and writes that this

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<sup>1</sup> Sir Charles Leonard Woolley (17 April 1880 – 20 February 1960) was a British archaeologist best known for his excavations at Ur in Mesopotamia. He is considered to have been one of the first “modern” archaeologists, and was knighted in 1935 for his contributions to the discipline of archaeology.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leonard\\_Woolley](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leonard_Woolley)

question ... “will not lead to a name, a scapegoat, or a moral judgment; it will, hopefully, lead to insight into cultural processes.”<sup>2</sup>

The idea of Malevich’s tea set poses a very interesting question! Will we read it as being a matter of form, use, or culture? Would this kind of juxtaposition obscure or emphasize the original context?

**Susanne:** When I look at this tea set in a museum, then the labeling of the object dictates how I read it; when it stands in my studio, then it could be viewed as a utilitarian object. Or am I then a collector? And which convergence culture do I then invoke? I think about the readability of different situations beyond the context of the museum. How do we process information, notes, news, stories, academic formulations of corresponding images, objects, and texts? What do we process history? For example, I have often had the impression of having read nothing all day, although I will have taken in all kinds of information: emails, newspaper articles, press releases, fact sheets, etc.

**What** do you read? Do you have some special books that have inspired your work?

**Matts:** At the moment I am rereading two novels, both of them connected to projects I’m working on. The first is *Walden* published in 1854 by Henry David Thoreau, and the second is *The Volcano Lover* by Susan Sontag from 1992. I am reading *Walden* because Thoreau’s thinking about the simple life (in a forest hut by a lake) somehow became important to Social Democratic intellectuals in 20th-century Sweden and provided the basis for an ideology (“romantic modernism”) connected to nature. My grandfather made the illustrations for the Swedish translation when it came out 1947. I try to read how he was reading the book by recording his underlines in his two copies of the book; in the end these became his illustrations. (In his 19th century American copy of the book he underlined a sentence in the third chapter titled “Reading”: “Books must be read as deliberately and reservedly as they were written.” In the Swedish translation he underlines another sentence in the same paragraph “We might as well omit to study Nature because she is old.” He made no illustration for this page.<sup>3</sup> This puzzles me—I cannot understand his thinking.) I am reading the *The Volcano Lover* for its beautiful descriptions of the collector and amateur scientist Sir William Hamilton and his passion for collecting and Mount Vesuvius. Hamilton climbed the volcano to observe its eruptions approximately 70 times during the second half of 18th century. Sontag’s novel remains very important to me, and has influenced my work in many ways. Another book I love for its beautiful descriptions from inside (of the body) of what it means to perceive the world is Maurice Merleau-

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<sup>2</sup> Mieke Bal, *Looking in – the Art of Viewing* (Amsterdam: G+B Arts, 2001), 124.

<sup>3</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1892), 110; Henry David Thoreau, *Skogsliv vid Walden* (Stockholm: Isaak Marcus Boktr.-Aktiebolag, Stockholm, date), 134; Henry David Thoreau, *Skogsliv vid Walden* (Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand, 1947, 1990), 180.

Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*. For example: "Before any contribution by memory, what is seen must at the present moment so organize itself as to present a picture to me in which I can recognize my former experiences."<sup>4</sup>

*Susanne orders Sontag's The Volcano Lover and Thoreau's Walden.*

But I would like to ask you a completely different question. For a catalogue I was recently asked to write about my studio and what it means to me. I came to the conclusion that my studio contains three kinds of spaces. One clean white room where I work hands-on with my art in the space and where I present my work during studio visits. Second, a messy office space with one wall used as notice board. Here I keep crates, documentation, and all my books. The third space, my computer, is maybe the one I use most—a virtual room, which has probably changed my way of reading, thinking, and working to an extent that I still do not fully comprehend.

**Susanne:** The number three seems to fit well into the space called the studio. Here I have three tables. The yellow one is my office table, where I sit most of the time in front of my computer, as a matter of fact. My blue table is my active working space along with the wall next to it, which is hung with many pictures and sketches and now and again is taken over by a great chaos. I also have a light green table where I invite my studio visitors to sit. The view from the window is an added source of inspiration; I look out onto the Natural History Museum of Berlin, a 19th-century building, in front of which there are two immense, very old trees with dark red leaves. When the noise from the street dies down, you can hear that they are inhabited by populations of birds with high-pitched calls. In describing my studio my gaze falls on a book by Gertrude Bell, *Ich war eine Tochter Arabiens*<sup>5</sup>, a publications of letters to her family.

At the moment I am intensely interested in the concept of "transcription." Gertrud Bell's letters have been compiled into a book. They "compose" a story of a particular period in the modern era of Iraq and northern Syria. Today the book has global significance. However, the letters were written with a different motivation. What do you think about the idea of "transcription"? What I primarily mean by that is a shift in conditions within a single work.

**Matts:** As always, when I a bit uncertain as to the meaning of an idea, I Google it. Before this was possible, I always went to a reference book. The first hit was Wikipedia, as usual, and under "Transcription (linguistics)" I found: "A

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<sup>4</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 1962), 22–23.

<sup>5</sup> Gertrude Bell, *Ich war eine Tochter Arabiens*, Dritte Auflage 1994, copyright 1993 Scherz Verlag Bern, München, Wien

transcriptionist is a person who performs transcription.” Is this what you and I do?

Do we bring one language into another language into another language, I wonder? Revealing a fabric woven of languages in space? Could this be transcription as performance? I have mostly been thinking of my process as series of “transformations” from image to text to image again, from painting to physical installation, to virtual space, and back to text again and into image—in a long and transformative process.

When reading about your studio I think about your different tables as stages where these processes are preformed.

I also dislike the word “installation” but I cannot stop using it when describing what I do. Lately I have started to embrace the old term “exhibition” instead. I make exhibitions instead of installations. Installation is for me more of a thing in a space that can be seen as a whole body. Exhibition is like a book with a beginning and an end.

## READING

by David Henry Thoreau

out of ‘Walden and Other Writings’, 188, 189, 191

With a little more deliberation in the choice of their pursuits, all men would perhaps become essentially students and observers, for certainly their nature and destiny are interesting to all alike. In accumulating property for ourselves or for posterity, in founding a family or a state, or acquiring fame even, we are mortal; but in dealing with truth we are immortal, and need fear no change nor accident. The oldest Egyptian or Hindoo philosopher raised a corner of the veil from the statue of divinity; and still the trembling robe remains raised, and I gaze upon as fresh a glory as he did, since it was I in him that was then so bold, and it is he in me that robe; no time has elapsed since that divinity was revealed. That time which we really improve, or which is improvable, is neither past, present, nor future.

My residence was more favourable, not only to thought, but to serious reading, than a university; and though I was beyond the range of the ordinary circulating library, I had more than ever come within the influence of those books which circulate round the world whose sentences were first written on bark, and are now merely copied from time to time on to linen paper.

Says the poet Mir Camaer Uddin Mast, 'Being seated to run through the region of the spiritual world; I have had this advantage in books. To be intoxicated by a single glass of wine; I have experienced this pleasure when I have drunk the liquor of the esoteric doctrines.'

I kept Homer's Iliad on my table through the summer, though I looked at his page only now and then. Incessant labor with my hands, at first, for I had my house to finish and my beans to hoe at the same time, made more study impossible. Yet I sustained myself by the prospect of such reading in future. I read one or two shallow books of travel in the intervals of my work, till that employment made me ashamed of myself, and I asked where it was then that I lived.

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No wonder that Alexander carried the Iliad with him on his expeditions in a precious casket. A written word is the choicest of relics. It is something at once more intimate with us and more universal than any other work of art. It is the work of art nearest to life itself. It may be translated into every language, and not only be read but actually breathed from all human lips; - not be represented on canvas or in marble only, but be carved out of the breath of life itself. The symbol of an ancient man's thought becomes a modern man's speech. Two thousand summers have imparted to the monuments of Grecian literature, as to her marbles, only a maturer golden and autumnal tint, for they have carried their own serene and celestial atmosphere into all lands to protect them against the corrosion of time. Books are the treasured wealth of the world and the fit inheritance of generations and nations. Books, the oldest and the best stand naturally and rightfully on the shelves of every cottage. They have no cause of their own to plead, but while enlighten and sustain the reader his common sense will not refuse them.

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