The reality of fiction – The fiction of fact

Historiographic Approaches to the Present

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In a time out of focus, of lost certainties and the "detachment of the levels of reality" (Oskar Negt), Susanne Kriemann forms her artistic work from focused "particles" that she salvages and assembles after targeted digging and delving followed by discovery imbued with contingencies. Not like shards that fit neatly into place, but rather like frames exposed by a camera, which once assembled, reveal a novel perspective on the world.

In her narrative-based work, Susanne Kriemann works with facts and actions, whose substantiation she has found in a history starting in the 19th century, even when the central objects of her research have a past reaching even further back into history. Her works have a historiographic character.

The historic, scientific and technological interests that drive her research reference phenomena in the public space, focusing on political, urban as well as museological issues. The documentation she compiles find their expression in letters and E-mails, in newspaper articles, essays, book excerpts, in photographs from books and magazines and photographic archives. These she augments with contemporary essays and literary texts as well as photographs she has made or found on the Internet. Kriemann bundles these various components into narratives that she allows to follow specific dramaturgies. She determines the start and finish of the research; during the work process, however, she does allow for would-be chance, as her contacts from around the world – scientists and other experts – bring their own knowledge into the research.

This kind of process implies per se moments of change and transformation. Firstly, there is the documentation, which, according to the respective dates of origin, points to shifts in the reception of the central object as well as to changes in technical conditions and ideological, political, economic and social values and meanings. It might also be that the artist's initial aim changes during the course of the project. This is both desired and calculated, lending particular significance to such moments of change and chance. By the end of the process the perception can change, as well, of the object Susanne Kriemann has placed at the center of her work.

The work process leads to a kind of narrative – in the wider, post-structural sense – that acquires its form from the cross-mapping of the particles of reality Susanne Kriemann discovers in various media. These she appropriates or establishes and then composes into a construct of analogies, relations and associations interacting with today's virulent uncertainties regarding definitions, boundaries and intersections of reality and fiction. The form is also determined by those in the contributing "team," but whom Susanne Kriemann, similar to an "authorial narrator," appoints as well as directs throughout the process.

The narrative's events are formed around objects or material or motifs, whose specific inscribed significance is relevant only through their impact on the work. These include the Willamette meteorite in the USA, the statue of the Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses II, the "Schwerbelastungskörper" in Berlin-Tempelhof, the camera of Victor Hasselblad from

Sweden and excavations by English archaeologists in Syria and Mesopotamia during the first half of the 20th century.

The most important contents of her narratives, however, are the investigations into the scientific and general reception of those events at a certain time in history, as well as their intertextual, or rather inter-media, documentation. The frames of time that Susanne Kriemann thereby opens relentlessly reveal direct and thus evident plots and personal connections in the present, which evoke empathy through their immediate transparency.

In her work, Susanne Kriemann adopts historiographic methods without being absolute. The factual is authentically substantiated. In the format she uses, fictional aspects of her narratives were first made possible through computer technology, which allows for the combination of image and text particles of various provenance to come together on a single plane. This is comparable to quotations of reality within a literary text, or documentary material within a narrative film.

For the differentiation and elucidation of the notions of reality and fiction, these days it is often the case that the image of a curtain is used to represent perceived reality, behind which lies the world that we consider to be fictional, yet which is part of an even larger reality. In light of new technologies the analogy can be expanded to consider tangible reality as the interface of a computer, behind which open programs, utilities and windows to scan new, own and other material, and enabling all this to "melt" together on a single plane as a new narrative whose virtualness complicates, if not eliminates the differentiation of fact from fiction.

The work of Susanne Kriemann consummates in several spaces and forms of expression: in the space of her team creating a global, real as well as virtual network; in the computer, which unifies the collected elements into a narrative; in the public and museum spaces where her narratives are conveyed through installations and exhibitions with their own aesthetic requirements; in the publications accompanying each work, which are not the usual sort of work documentation but rather part of the work, and which thus have more the character of an artist book in the form of newspapers, textbook or documentations; and lastly, in that she unconventionally adapts the usual publication formats, indeed, undermines them. In all of the spaces and forms of expression that she uses, the factual and the fictional aspects of her narratives are so intertwined that their particular tension derives from the ambiguity of their contours and from the uncertainty of their borders.

While developing fictions from factual elements, Susanne Kriemann moves through virtuality. The Camouflage Museum (TCM), a "museum as concept" she established in 2002, existed only in cyberspace. With an intertextuality balanced between physical and fictitious reality, it made ample use of computer technology, the Internet and the digitalization of electronic media. Although TCM was not conceived with an end-date, it actually existed only for four years. It defined itself through the presentation of "displays of

objects and images in situ, video screenings, performances and readings, projects in the museum and in public space as well as on the Internet." TCM had a fictitious founding staff and regular employees, a museum collection and a research department, and explicitly differentiated between facts and fictions. According to the computer principle of "select-copy/cut-paste," the TCM collection was brought out of the TCM depot and into various temporary exhibition architectures. The depot consisted of first and second hand shops, libraries, the Internet, archives and bulk waste.

The issues addressed in the project – concerning the museum and museological, the objects of its research, as well as localization in scientific, technological, urban and social environments, with their documentary forms as bound to history, its interpretation and presentation – form a central, ongoing motif in the work of Susanne Kriemann.

She first defined her current work methods in 2006 with the work "Not Quite Replica – Meteorite." At the center of the work is the "Willamette Meteorite," the largest meteorite ever found in the USA. Kriemann's research here focuses on the site of its impact and its early mythification by Native Americans, followed by its appropriation and reception beginning in 1902 by the whites, who not only had a vested interest in the valorization of this iron-nickel object, but also in its removal from the sacred site of the Native Americans. And finally, she examines the worldwide journey taken by the meteorite and its fragments through museums and scientific institutes, raising problematic questions concerning the ownership of museum objects in general. The various documents shed light onto the politics, history and natural sciences of the times that made this object their pawn.

To this narrative of bundled facts, Susanne Kriemann adds the additional element of the replica, an artifact, which is something she does not use in later works. For this work, she had a bronze cast replica of the meteorite made in a Chinese foundry. Photographs of the original were the only reference for the replica. Thus the reproduction, which was part of an installation at the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen in Rotterdam and which today is installed in the city's public space, greatly departs from the original in dimension, form and material.

The format of the replica emerged in a historiographic context. The replica belongs to the sciences, but also to the capitalist cosmos of commodities with its greed to acquire and own a priceless original, and became a central metaphor of our times. Susanne Kriemann merges reproduction with photography, and thus surface with bodies and times with spaces, and with one fell swoop separates them from their ascribed meanings.

Susanne Kriemann combines documents – which reflect history in the present – into a manifold interlocking creation in her project "Ramses Files" (2006/7). The title incorporates the computer term that describes the form and means of her work. Kriemann conducted her research in Egyptian newspaper archives and museums and interviewed passers-by in Cairo as well. Her research comprises texts and photographs spanning the years between 1940 and 2006. The subject of the work is the route taken from 1950 to 2006 by the monumental statue of Pharaoh Ramses II that was constructed around 1300 B.C.: from the excavation site near Mid Rahina to the center of Cairo, from the plaza in front of the train station that is named for the pharaoh and on to Giza, where the statue is stored while

awaiting its place in another museum yet to be built. The publication accompanying Kriemann's project takes the – faked – format of a newspaper, with headlines, subheads and other "eye catchers" typical of a mass media that owes its success to the mixture of truth and fiction.

The national pride of Egypt as a new Mediterranean power, the exponential growth of the capital city Cairo from 4 million in the 1950s to 20 million inhabitants today as a result of global-economic conditions, the resulting traffic explosion and pollution that destroys the city like a kind of osteoporosis, a dissolution from within; the shift in meaning that the object of art experiences through its circulation… All this belongs to the subtext that Susanne Kriemann conveys with her project on the odyssey of the enormous statue.

The project "12 650 000," that Kriemann developed from 2005 to 2008 concise and concentrated in its factual elements. The focus of the project is the *Schwerbelastungskörper*, [lit. "heavy load body"], a cylindrical mass of concrete weighing 12,650 tons that was constructed in Berlin-Tempelhof in 1941. As part of the gigantic utopian city project "Germania" planned by Adolf Hitler and architect Albert Speer for Berlin, the structure was erected to test the stability of the sandy ground. It was realized in the midst of the war and to this day has remained intact due to its location and related technical difficulties.

In this project, Susanne Kriemann's press research spans the time between 1950 and 2006. Photographs documenting the construction of the concrete mass are augmented by contemporary photographs she made of the site. The press records reveal discrepancies concerning the structure's weight (between 12,000 and 40,000 tons), creation date, ownership and significance, thus obscuring its actual circumstances. Together with the photographs, they are combined into a narrative in which the various testimonies seem to derive from their authors' urge to unearth ever new approaches to better comprehend those aspects of their own history that were unresolved and incomprehensible. Ultimately, these are also expressions of helplessness in appropriately representing and evaluating this strictly functional structure created against the backdrop of an ideology to which a majority of the population had succumbed.

In her following work, Susanne Kriemann expands the focus of her research and gives photography increasingly more room. It is not history, but rather the writing of history that is at the core of her work. Thus her interest lies not in the likeness, but in the essence of photography and the significance of the photographic image as a medium, in which the contemporary discourse concentrates on truth and lies, fact and fiction, reality and appearance.

In the project "One Time One Million" (2006-2009), Kriemann weaves history, photographic history, photography and its reception in a process of multiple feedback. A historic object – a Hasselblad camera from 1942 – as well as several old rolls of unexposed film that Kriemann purchased at an auction in Stockholm are the point of departure for her narrative, which links various source material against a background of diverse direct and associative meanings. She lets her material "roll," literally: the camera she acquired points to the development of Victor Hasselblad's first camera, which in turn was modeled on a

German air reconnaissance camera that landed in the hands of the inventor after a plane crash in 1941. And areal photographs of airplanes from 1939 and 1944 that she found in an archive were made with Swedish Hasselblad cameras. Against the backdrop of Victor Hasselblad's photo historical discovery, Susanne Kriemann links the archival photographs to Hasselblad's ornithological hobby, which is visualized by the photographs of individual birds ("one"), as well the photographs of migratory and flocking birds ("million") that he took between 1970 and 1975. Much earlier, in 1935, Hasselblad published the photo book *Flyttfagelstrak* ["Migratory Bird Trails"], which Susanne Kriemann excerpts. She complements these with variously dated found photographs of flocks of birds and migratory bird formations from books, magazines and the Internet. In Swedish archives, Kriemann further discovered areal photographs from 1947 of Swedish single-family homes ("one"). She made a series of photograms of the corresponding film rolls that she acquired through auction; with the camera she acquired (by auction), she also realized own aerial photographs, of the first Swedish immigrant housing settlements in the suburbs of Stockholm from the 1960s and 1970s that was known as the "million program" as well as a "concentration camp of the social state" due to its construction. These were then complemented by photographs she took in 2006 focusing on the settlement's courtyards and entranceways; her photographs from 2008 of dissected bird skins as objects of observation and stipulation – as they were collected from the 19th century into the 1930s and today rest in the cabinets of natural history museums – determine the associative path of Susanne Kriemann's work process like a *memento mori*.

These focused, photographic particles of reality, which resist definition and allocation in their mix of black & white and color images, of own and foreign material and in the suspension of their chronological order, are nonetheless (or why they are) laden with or suggest meaning in their composition. Kriemann links the photographs according to Hasselblad's dating scheme into an own "encoded" narrative on war, escape, migration and deportation, homeland, nomadism and homelessness, derived from natural and violent systems of order in nature and civilization that are reflected in the individual and in the masses.

In this project, the medium of photography is confronted as an instrument for aerial reconnaissance, cartography and surveillance, as a scientific tool for recording formations and structures, as proof to expose and document social evils. By representing comparable spaces and objects at various times, photography reveals both the changes and the continuities. In this context, one might look to Paul Virilio and his essay "War and Cinema," which interprets the development of photography and film as a result of technical needs and technological issues of modern warfare. In their transformation and dissolution of real dimensions, of space and time – as is always the case in film (or photography) – Virilio sees parallels in the total dimensional transformation of reality by the machinery of war.

If reality does not lie in its photographic representation, but rather, as noted by Bert Brecht, in the functions of its representation, Susanne Kriemann also seeks an approach to reality through photography by connecting it to multifaceted storylines. The accompanying artist book is simultaneously and foremost a photographic picture book whose aesthetic also presents the surface of that which lies behind it.

A wide variety of combinations of photographs and texts define the project "Ashes and Broken Brickwork of a Logical Theory" (2009-2010). Here, Susanne Kriemann delves into a past beginning prior to World War I. Among her findings are photographs and reports of archaeological excavation sites in the Syrian Desert and in former Mesopotamia made in the 1920s, 1930s and 1950s. They revolve around three illustrious Brits, who were closely connected through their profession and in part, their family. The photographs by Agatha Christie and her husband, the archaeologist Max Mallowan, of his excavation sites, which were found in the crime writer's photographic archive, are like those taken at crime scenes. The excavation fields are closely documented in their measurements and spatial dimensions. The workers become witnesses. The relicts and shards are treated like criminological evidence; attached is an excerpt from Agatha Christie's crime thriller *They Came to Baghdad*, published in 1951, as well as an excerpt from the book *Digging up the Past* by archaeologist and journalist Leonard Woolley, first published in 1930. To these Kriemann adds contemporary photographs she made or found on the Internet of the sites and their surroundings along with contemporary images of Bagdad Street in Damascus, a city frequented by Agatha Christie and Max Mallowan; and of buildings constructed in the 1930s and 1950s in Damascus according to western models.

The project tells of the "team work" of British scientists and writers, members of a bourgeoisie that significantly promoted the excavations in the Middle East. In its subtext it also tells of the effects of colonialism based on the advanced technology and economy of the one world and the poverty of the other, indirectly reporting on appropriation and exploitation and exhaustive cultivation.

Furthermore, the narrative reveals parallels to Susanne Kriemann's overall work: photographs and texts are layered like archaeological findings leveled by the desert sand whose contexts and functions must be rediscovered in excavations. If this desert surface were a tangible reality, then resting beneath it would be further realities, without ever revealing which of these realities is truly the first in the chronological hierarchy whose relevance has been lost.

The process of multiple cross-linking that Susanne Kriemann uses becomes clearer in the accompanying artist book, for example by "reading together" its page headers – excerpts from Leonard Woolley's *Digging up the Past*: "Modern man…digging up the past,...a town's destruction...[and at the end:]…team work…for the...building up of history."

In the photographs and texts for which Susanne Kriemann searches throughout her work process and which she unifies in her projects, the facts extend far beyond the visible and legible in the subjectivity of their combination, without disclosing their meaning. But Susanne Kriemann juxtaposes the researched and compiled material of her narrative with their historiographic interpretations, thus simultaneously questioning their truths and certainties.

In her work, she brings together present and future into a common timeframe with hard edits. This new, ambiguous historical space puts both a direct and figurative end to bygone hierarchies and structures. In the new order of the found lies an own authenticity.

Today one is increasingly aware to what degree political power and decisions, ideologies and economic interests are inextricably linked – even in the long spared western

democracies. Yet the search for authenticity and truth has remained a central concern of art, ever since the historian (!) Friedrich Schiller identified art as something that "encompasses, surmounts and reveals historical truth." This search is perhaps more necessary than ever before – in light of the disappearance of all certainties, of a scientific establishment that much too often serves political and economic interests, and of a media driven society and industry that increasingly measure authenticity according to quotas. With her investigations of reality, Susanne Kriemann questions anew the difference between reality and fiction, demanding a unique notion of truth and new forms of perception.

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Aus: Benoit Maire, 'The Aesthetics of the End of Time', aus Meaning Liam Gillick, edited by Monika Szewczyk, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts / London, England, 2009

I can consider the past, the present and the future with ease. In fact, at times, it i sture that none of these terms hold any meaning form e any longer.[1]

Departing from controversies about the end of History[2] since the late 1970s, and its relation to the so-called 'end of utopia,' I will try to focus on the aesthetics (that is to say a mixture of affects and possible arguments) of the question of the end of questions regarding the goal of History. (…)

In 1998 Jocely Benoist and Fabio Merlini edited a book called *Après la fin de l'histoire - temps, monde, historicité* (After the End of History: Time, the World and Historicity). In their introduction, they write: 'In this sense, the particularly serious and important fact expressed fact expressed through the clichéd formula of the 'end of history' might be the following: at some point, we have ceased to believe in history.'[3] In this sense, the postmodern ground for the question of the end of history is no longer laid as a final endpoint, but more as an exhausted narrative or a vanishing belief. Here it seems crucial to note a related notion of belief put forward by Jeremy Millar four years later in reference to the artist Liam Gillick: 'We are able to walk on air, but only as long as our illusion supports us.'[4] Already in *Infancy and History*, Giorgio Agamben conjured the very same notion, recontextualizing it to bring to the fore a waning of experience in contemporary society: 'those cartoon characters of our childhood who can walk on air as long as they don't notice it; once they realize, once they experience this, they are bound to fall.'[5] Wile E. Coyote particularly comes to mind here: he is a most purposeful character but, in his case, the end – to catch the Road Runner – is forever postponed.'

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[1] Liam Gillick, Erasmus is late, (London: Book Works, 1995) 30.

[2] In this essay, 'history' with a small 'h' will refer to a kind of history which is oriented by a telos and can therefore be multiple; while 'History' with a capital 'H' is oriented by a telos, and leads for instance to Judgment Day in Christian eschatology, a strong Western conceptual model that still underlies everyday consciousness.

[3] Jocelyn Benoist and Fabio Merlini, 'Penser l'Histoire après l'Histoire,' in *Après la fin de l'histoire – temps, monde, historicité* (Paris: Vrin, 1998), 9.

[4] Jeremy Millar, 'We are able to walk on air, but only as long as our illusion supports us', The Wood Way (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 2002), 10. Exh. cat.

[5] Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1993), 16.