

The Preserve of the Eye

The Workings of Susanne Kriemann

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Susanne Kriemann's apartment in Berlin—the top floor of a building erected in the waning years of the German Democratic Republic—looks out across the vast expanse of Alexanderplatz. Or at least it used to look out across the vast expanse of Alexanderplatz, before the eyesores of global capital moved in to obstruct a once-glorious panoramic view. Before that, the eyesores of socialist planning—perhaps no less aesthetically painful, but at least far less presumptuous—merely surrounded “Alex,” as this perennial wind-swept building site is affectionately referred to by nouveau Berliners such as Susanne and myself. How long will it take, we wonder out loud, before some lamentable building scheme (a Russian oligarch is apparently already in on the kill, but this may be a pre-credit-crunch rumor only) will eclipse the imposing socialist-realist mural that graces the House of the Teachers just to the right? How long before we lose final sight of the quote from Alfred Döblin's *Berlin, Alexanderplatz* that is written across the façades of a string of anonymous, emptied tower blocks at the far northern edge of the square? Susanne Kriemann has photographed her neighborhood before, most notably the famous “world clock” from 1969, which for much of the late GDR period operated as the square's most popular meeting point. Who knows, perhaps she'll be tempted do so again—should Alex be so lucky.

The semantic triangle of architecture, urbanism, and photography constitutes the basis of Kriemann's practice (not only as a mere method or means of production, but also as a subject unto itself).

Historiography—rather than mere history—is the overarching concern: the daily practice of reading, writing, rereading and rewriting history as it is construed and observed through the lens of the photographic apparatus. The etymology of the term “photography” itself bears witness to the centrality of both writing (tracing) and illuminating (shedding light or “phos” on certain traces of the past) to this project. In her work Kriemann cleverly mines the established (yet nevertheless volatile) relationship between photography and death. She presents a conscientious, discrete unfolding of the “social contract of photography” as enmeshed in a discursive texture comprising such

notions as disappearance, memory (remembrance), reportage, and trauma—the basic ingredients, one might say, of all photography. Any regular visitor to a flea market (and there are many in Berlin; after all, it is the world capital of both forgetting and remembering) understands the lure of stalls whose tables sag heavily under the burden of tin boxes full of black and white (or, still less frequently, fading color) photographs of the deceased. At least we assume they're dead. Why else would their private lives be put up for sale here? Admirers of Eugène Atget are familiar with the master's predilection for empty, lifeless street scenes, which Walter Benjamin, the twentieth-century's foremost "theorist" of photography, famously likened to scenes of an unknowable crime. (Kriemann likewise forgoes photographing people, although this is in no way a conscious guiding principle of her work, and the forensic suspicion that some criminal event has caused the morbid emptiness of her pictures is not entirely unfounded. Some of her pictures relate to actual crimes or criminal regimes; others literally depict death.) And readers of Roland Barthes are well aware of his theory of the "punctum," which is not terribly different from "trauma," in strictly etymological terms (both relate to piercing, to inflicting wounds). Throughout most of its historical development as a modern art form, photography has been mainly aligned with the melancholy business of preservation, that is, the conservation of all things quintessentially fleeting and transient as life itself—traces, signs, shadows, gestures. Preservation is a science, and its scientific dimension evidently informs the research-heavy accent of Kriemann's working method, as well as the rather detached gaze that her camera casts on the life-world. Preservation is certainly at the heart of *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* a series of photographs made inside a former post sorting center in Rotterdam, a sturdy gem of De Stijl-inspired functionalist architecture complete with primary color scheme, just days before its destruction in 2007. (Why this invocation of a bunch of tired essays penned by Rosalind Krauss in the late seventies and early eighties?). Preservation is both the principal impulse and object of photographic scrutiny in Kriemann's project *The Ramses Files* from 2006, the preservation of Egypt's archeological past as symbolized by a giant, legless statue of Ramses II, which maintained its position throughout constantly shifting surroundings, in the disorienting sprawl of contemporary Cairo. Preservation, finally, is quite literally the foremost concern of the Natural History Museum in Berlin, the site of

some of the pictures (of throngs of dead birds) made for her exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam in January this year. For this project, self-explanatorily titled *One Time One Million (Migratory Birds/Romantic Capitalism)*, Kriemann dug deep inside the history of her own medium to reveal photography's historical debt to military technology (that of mapping, spying and surveillance) in a multifaceted photo suite—mounted in the circular style, it is important to note, of a panopticon. The work included photographs of migratory birds made by Viktor Hasselblad, the aforementioned throngs of dead birds stored in the vaults of Berlin's Natural History Museum, aerial photographs of a Stockholm suburb known for its high concentration of recent immigrants, and pictures of the famed Hasselblad camera itself. Ostensibly a project about migration, both in the animal kingdom and human history, or about photography's implication in the global war machine (yet again, photography and death). But its ornithological focus simultaneously brings the work in line with the medium's well-established historical tradition of self-questioning, with "photography about photography" in the magisterial manner of the genre's most widely known practitioner, Christopher Williams. Isn't the whimsical, uncontrollable movement of a flock of birds in flight a particularly potent symbol of transience, the evaporation of all that was once solid into thin air? And wasn't photography "invented" precisely to meet the emerging challenge of modernity's shifting emphasis on the "permanence of impermanence," on the condition of continuous instability in a novel regime of mobility, of the perennially fleeting, ethereal and ephemeral? The birds' dazzling dart across the sky, as if specters conjured during an occultist séance, is a type of writing that only photo-graphy can capture, an intricate web of shimmering traces that only the camera-eye can truly preserve.

However, those readers familiar with her work through its high-profile inclusion in the 2008 Berlin Biennial for Contemporary Art might object that Susanne Kriemann's presentation in Mies Van der Rohe's iconic Neue Nationalgalerie was not so much a "portrait" of transience as it was a document of the unfortunate permanence, or persistence even, of a certain architectural "landmark." A landmark that we would rather forget, so much so that we have indeed largely forgotten about it: a 12,650-ton hulking circular mass of concrete tucked away along the shaded borders of Berlin-Tempelhof that is pretty much the only remaining trace of Hitler's psychotic, deluded vision of the Nazi capital

Germania, as it would have been laid out by Albert Speer after the victorious conclusion of the Second World War. (There is of course quite a bit of National Socialist architecture left in Berlin, but very little of it is directly related to the megalomaniacal Germania project.) The structure, however, is not so much a building as it is a sketch (and not even of a building at that), a mere preliminary experiment devised to test the capacity of Berlin's notoriously sandy soil to absorb the unimaginable pressure of Nazi city planning. It is technically referred to as a "Schwerbelastungskörper" or "heavy load body," a monument to a kind of folly entirely beyond praise. This is something very different from, say, photographing the post-war buildings that now stand on the site of former synagogues (for those have really disappeared). Here, the mnemonic nature of photography is mobilized to very different effects. In a way, a photograph of the "heavy load body," which is the very opposite of a flock of birds (and more like the monstrosities being erected on Alexanderplatz right now), is a record of the persistence of the photographic image itself, both in the analogue sense (the endless reproduction of prints from one single negative) and the digital sense (the endless proliferation of zeroes and ones and the impossibility to locate a single original within this encrypted swarm of data). Like a photograph, the concrete sarcophagus on the edge of Tempelhof is a trace of utmost physicality as well. Its windowlessness and sheer intransigence are ciphers of the essential opacity of the photographic image; there is no peering through it to disclose a singular truth; its ambivalence remains forever lodged in the preserve of the eye.

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