

Susanne Kriemann: P(ech)B(lende) – Library for Radioactive Afterlife  
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## Shelf Life

by Jayne Wilkinson

A shelf is a system, a unit of display, and a container for material goods.

In a library, the bookshelf is a critical workhorse, its labours directed towards the creation of an organizational system that holds material in place, allowing items to be found, identified and retrieved. A library's journals, periodicals, newspapers, encyclopedias and all manner of books are stored and organized within the confines of the stacks. Its shelves *are* its holdings, defining its spaces and contours by containing the objects one seeks.

A library is also an archive, but one that is continually shaped and redefined by its users. Its mode is active, encouraging the aleotric movements of browsing and searching, allowing one to read the space of the library in the same manner as one reads words on a page.

The work of Susanne Kriemann translates and transforms space in a similar way: the gallery itself becomes the shelf upon which a wild assemblage of visual and textual information is held. As a researcher and an artist, Kriemann produces exhibitions that require her viewers to actively participate in the reading of disparate materials, texts, references and media.

In *Pechblende (Prologue)*, exhibited at Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art (Toronto) in 2016, Kriemann mixes together archival photographs, photograms, autoradiographs, texts and captions to construct an aesthetic of radioactivity, referencing a visual culture that is largely produced through the science of atomic technologies. A materially minimal installation, it consists of four large panels of plexiglass hung symmetrically in a narrow gallery under fluorescent

lights. Mounted between the floating glass sheets is an extensive collection of eight by ten inch photographs, each with detailed captions on the verso; the aspect ratios and unusual spacing suggestive of the loose, unbound pages of a book.

Carefully arranged and ordered, the visual and textual elements of Kriemann's accumulated images together detail all manner of radioactivity. Prominent among them are autoradiographs she developed from *pechblende* samples stored in natural history museums, a process which entails bringing the radiating rock into direct contact with film. These are displayed together with archival autoradiographs, originally used in the late 1940s to test radiation levels in fish and other specimens. Beyond demonstrating the effects of radiation, they embed the time scale of a still-radiating animal body into the photographic record. The temporality of radioactivity is likewise evident in aerial photographs, abstractions that render visible the changing landscape of intensive uranium mining in the former German Democratic Republic. In the last panel, photograms produced by Kriemann illuminate various tools used in these mines, and her use of cameraless photography again blurs the boundaries of indexicality and abstraction. Together, this collection of visual and textual data reveals the massive scales of radiation—from an atomic nucleus to an immense explosion, from the instantaneity of destruction to the longest *durée* of the decay chain—ultimately suggesting a proximity to radiation that is as dangerous as it is sublime.

From one vantage point, the installation is entirely visual; from the other, entirely textual. Images and texts, recto and verso. Wandering visitors chart their own course at will, navigating the installation's contours, moving consciously between the photographs and texts, and using their bodies to flip from the often-abstract images to the not entirely objective captions. The space itself comes to feel strangely threatening; the reflective surfaces of the plexiglass a bit too shiny, the fluorescent lights too bright, and too hot. Each panel teems with images of life at risk, and contains an almost unbearable amount of the information responsible for the critical decay of *pechblende*'s mineral force.

Kriemann's process seems akin to that of the mad scientist, experimenting with materials and concepts in a visual alchemy whose end results are unpredictable.<sup>1</sup> Or perhaps she is more like a mad librarian, sorting material according to an unknown logic, creating a library of secrets and revelations, full of information that was once highly covert but is no longer. Not content to let images alone do the work of navigating the abstract and the indexical, the objects that annotate her project are likewise fluid symbols of radioactivity. Drill bits, a Geiger counter, a set of lead letters and a stack of typeset printed poems are all ordered and shelved, here serving as reminders of the impact of radioactivity on the body, and the long afterlife of uranium as it decays into lead.

Images that recall the iconicity and familiarity of the mushroom cloud might blind us to the ubiquity of the scientific and medical technologies that allow us to see the invisible world of radiation—the x-rays and image scans that reveal the interiority of surfaces and skins. And while tensions between the aesthetics of abstraction and the indexicality of the image are inherent throughout, it is the unfathomable timescales of radioactive toxicity and decay that are the subtext of this body of work.

What then might a library for radioactive afterlife actually entail? The idea of the afterlife is widely evocative of spirituality, religion, mysticism, and the ways in which an ethereal soul will continue to exist after the physical body is extinguished. But the afterlife of radioactivity is also its half-life, the period of time required for atomic particles to disintegrate by half. A library that spans such temporalities is an archive of life, but one without clear biological properties: is the life in question a human one? Plant, animal or mineral? That the notion of a "life" might be used to determine a span of time—the shelf life, a half-life, an afterlife—is a given, but in our ecologically precarious present, a library that archives such temporalities is ambiguous at best. Kriemann's image-text assemblages point to just such tensions.

In many ways, the space of the exhibition is like the library shelf: a system of logic that is always somewhat excessive, holding material that might be browsed, considered, used or ignored by viewers at will. And in the often-disastrous

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to curator and writer Monika Szewczyk for the suggestion of the artist as mad scientist.

**present time of the Anthropocene, where the shelf life of our world is uncertain,  
the afterlife of continual radiation demands a visual archive of its own.**