

Chair

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A simple wooden chair. Stable. Large in its mass and square in its proportions, just as the bookcases that are to be found in the same room. The material is rough; unstained, unvarnished. In short, it is a functional and sturdy piece of furniture. Nevertheless, a somewhat strange piece of furniture for a library. The visitor is allowed, indeed *is expected to*, sit down on this work chair, which is to be found in Susanne Kriemann's *Library for Radioactive Afterlife* at the Schering Stiftung in 2016.

Five such chairs have been casually distributed throughout the room in front of five small tables in which tablets have been installed. When the tables and chairs are placed together, a visual scriptorium is created: a medieval writing room for producing manuscripts. This is, no doubt, no formal coincidence, for the design of books is a central component of Susanne Kriemann's creative process. And it is these five tablets that allow entry to the treasures of the library: the artist's entire visual knowledge and photographic work related to pitchblende (uraninite). Pitchblende was the "black gold" of the Erz Mountains, the shimmering and radioactive material which Saxon miners working there in the 16th century already referred to as "Bechblende".

The search for images and evidence of radioactive animals, plants and objects is time-consuming. For over a year and a half, Susanne Kriemann made her way through archives, museums and libraries both in Germany and in the USA, collecting images and texts while at the same time producing her own photographic works: so-called autoradiographs. In the American Museum of Natural History (New York City) and in the Natural History Museum (Berlin) she allowed light-sensitive film to be directly exposed to pitchblende specimens, and only used samples that had been mined in the Erz Mountains. Naturally, this begs the question of how these pieces made their way out of Wismut SAG/SDAG's maximum security zone—that "state within a state" as the Soviet-German maximum-security area mining operation was also known—and to the USA and Berlin. The results of these experiments are images of fantastically abstract forms, with widely different textures, always radiating out from the black. The longer the exposure, the greater the radiance—even up to the destruction of the photographic paper itself. Pitchblende has energy; its radiation level is four times that of uranium.

Whether scientific or artistic research—the work of the scientific community is done to a large extent sitting down. Sitting in the National Archives (Washington, DC) and the Museum Of Uranium Mining (Bad Schlemma), Kriemann explored the background of uranium mining and photographed texts, images and objects with her smartphone to document her research. These photographs became an integral part of her artistic work but are unimaginable, however, without the modern technology of digital devices. That the minerals, which in turn make this very technology possible, must be obtained through mining is an irony of the repeating history here, one translated across continents. While today children and young men who have escaped civil war mine coltan for the smartphone industry in the Democratic Republic of Congo—the second largest sponsor of coltan mining worldwide— at the end of the Second world War returning soldiers and refugees from the East found bread, schnapps and a place to sleep working for the Wismut uranium mining company. The working conditions were catastrophic. Between 1946 and 1954 almost 100,000 miners worked with no radiation or labor protection standards whatsoever. "For an eternal second in those early post-war years the destiny of the world hung on the production of the German uranium mines, and Fischer was one of the few who knew about it. Atomic energy—that was a question of life or death. The world had experienced Hiroshima." The Cold War had ushered in an atomic arms race and in the shortest amount of time possible, a huge amount of uranium-rich material had to be delivered to the Soviet Union; in the first eight years after the end of the war, as reparations. Dry drilling (which created large amounts of dust) was carried out, and radiation

measurement served exclusively to find workable sections of ore. Radon measurements were only introduced in the middle of the 1950s and individual radiation protection monitoring only after 1971. Like many aspects of radioactivity, its long-term effects are multifaceted and of an unimaginable temporality. And thus it is both logical and far-sighted that, as a result of her research into pitchblende, Susanne Kriemann created a *Library for Radioactive Afterlife*. The afterlife—it is a place we've heard a lot about, but of which we *know* nothing.

Let us direct our eyes into this library the artist has realized on two levels: as a physical, accessible space in the Schering Stiftung's exhibition and as a virtual room in the digital universe. Under the keywords *B(lende)*, *A(braum)*, *F(ish)*, *F(ission)*, *P(itch)*, and *T(ools)*, the visitor to the online library will find the artist's own autoradiographs from Berlin and New York, archival autoradiographs from Herman Joseph Yagoda's 1949 book *Radioactive Measurements with Nuclear Emulsions*, scientific images of animals exposed to radiation, from 1946 and aerial photographs of Wismut's uranium mining area from various decades. Time travel.

In the actual, physical room of the library there are three wooden boxes that resemble bookcases and have the same square structures as the wooden chairs. Objects that the uranium miners of the Erz Mountains used everyday sit inside these wooden boxes, which in turn function as inverted camerae obscurae—that is, they are lit from the inside. One sees various miners' tools: a so-called "lifesaver" to be used for oxygen in case of emergency, a battery, a headlamp, a water bottle, and a helmet. At last, these standard miners' objects have finally found some peace. They have been individually draped upon various kinds of material and are projected through a lens onto the gallery walls. The result is a series of incredible images; painting-like they turn the hammer, and chisel, helmet, and bottle into brilliantly colorful entities. The spectrum of colors is orientated toward the chromatic nuances of the waste products of pitchblende: bright green, fluorescent yellow, and gray. In these projected objects, the miners' faces come alive, they wander through our thoughts, they take shape, and their stories are told again and again in a never-ending process. Through the lens of the camera obscura, Susanne Kriemann manages to make the miners' lifework come alive in a way no portrait ever could. At the same time, with the enthroned objects from the Museum of Uranium Mining Bad Schlema, she establishes a monument to the miners the likes of which is difficult to find: both open to interpretation and emotionally touching.

Susanne Kriemann designs her artist's books in exactly the same way as she carefully designs the exhibition space. They are not books *about* her artistic practise, but rather her books *are* her very artistic practise. We wander through them, along windingly cerebral paths, that are forever crossing one another but which, at the end, somehow have established a circuit. For, in the end, everything is connected to everything else—Alpha and Omega. In the beginning, there is pitchblende and at the end there is lead, the final result of the radioactive decay chain. Lead is also a material used for letters in printing presses and at the Schering Stiftung the visitor is greeted by lead letters that spell out the title: *Library for Radioactive Afterlife*. And thus the artist herself becomes a link between worlds, a mediator who creates a mental bond between the past and the present, between physical labor and spiritual work, between the chisel and the chair.