

Susanne Kriemann: Duskdust

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Rock, Furnace, Rubble, Tunnel

* 1 *

Blank but bright, the winter light in Gotland is a unifying grey tone shared by limestone, cloud and surf. A century ago, Georg Moberg lived and worked under this same pale illumination, having moved to Gotland from Småland in 1916 at the age of 27 to work in the stone quarries in Hellvi. "Rough and heavy work was my Calling, there was not much choice in the matter," he wrote in an autobiographical note. "Sledge hammer, drill and crowbar are the tools that have followed me throughout My life. A tough struggle, scant wages, Privations, seeing injustice all around. Waiting to be better understood."¹ For Moberg there was a clear division between work and non-work. However, in the last twenty years of his life, once retired, the nature of his work changed and he switched materials, from stone to wood. In his intricately carved sculptures, forms seem to be excavated from the tree stumps themselves: Adams and Eves, serpents and donkeys, babies in cradles and twisting vinery emerge from the pliant material. "My sculptures might not exactly be 'fine art', but one thing is certain: they are very time-consuming and it's hard to make them come alive," he wrote. At the Bläse Kalkbruksmuseum, a cluster of stone buildings in a disused limestone works on a windswept shore, is a room crammed full of Moberg's sculptures as well as black and white photographs of the

¹ Hellvimästaren Georg Moberg 1889-1974. Träsnidare. Bildhuggare. Skulptör. AHLMAN, Harald (text) & BRANDT, Thomas P. R. (photo), Stockholm, Carlssons, 1989. p. 99.

bewhiskered artist, surrounded by his work, in his cottage-turned-studio. Here it is, a life's work, preserved together as a homogenous unit, as he had requested before he died in 1974.

* 2 *

An island has clear boundaries, defined by the material differences between rock and water. The boundaries between work and non-work, nighttime and daytime, or indeed the surrogate time zones of subterranean mining, are not so clear. In the daylight terrain of non-work, time adjusts to the pace of observation. A flotsam and jetsam of thoughts and impressions accrue in a state of perpetually heightened receptivity; fragments hovering before the point of coalescence. In the short publication "Fieldwork Notebooks", Michael Taussig describes the value of the notebooks that fill up with jottings during research, becoming a kind of extension of the self, "like an entirely new organ alongside one's heart and brain."² It is as if the stuff that fills these notebooks is freed from the usual rules governing writing, composition, content: "the notebook gets at the deep truth of things. Full grammatical sentences? Forget that. Just jot. And jot some more. Short-circuit language and me, the writer along with it."³ What ends up in the notebook is debris, the drift of half-formed ideas that alight in a space that hovers between thought and process: "The notebook is like a magical object in a fairy tale. It is a lot more than an object, as it inhabits and fills out hallowed ground between meditation and production."⁴ This is the realm of non-work, in which observation becomes a kind of blessed state.

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Susanne's research in Gotland started from a point as blank as the sky, with only a vague awareness of the island's territory or history, and its interstices with her own predispositions. My visit two years later, however, was based on the template of her Gotland trajectory, following the traces plotted out by the basic vocabulary she had furnished me with: wood, mountain, tunnel, furnace. My aim was to research her research, confirm the existence of the evidence she had

² Michael Taussig, *Fieldwork Notebooks* (Kassel and Ostfildern, documenta/Museum Friedericianum and Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2011) p. 5.

³ Ibid. p. 8.

⁴ Ibid, p.9.

already found, and apply my interpretations to her interpretations of it. It was a visit once-removed, already filtered through the subjectivity of her experience. The poet Maria Barnas, who had been commissioned as a partner for Susanne's initial project to ghostwrite a text based on her time in Gotland, experienced a similar distance. Titled "And So She Walked", the poem's subtitle lays bare its own conditions: A walk in words based on a walk through a tunnel in the winter of 2014 on the island of Gotland that Susanne Kriemann told me about. It is a reinterpretation of an experience recalled.

I am reminded of works by Roni Horn called *Things That Happen Again*, where exactly the same sculpture is placed in two adjacent rooms, but out of sight from one room to the next. The experience of seeing the second is unavoidably conditioned by having already seen the first. Its retinal image has immediately been claimed by the viewer's own memory. On the island of Gotland I had the same kind of ghosting feeling: Ah, here is the tunnel, here is the mountain, these are the sculptures and the furnace she told me about. A transition occurs from preconception through recognition to personal recollection: memory, time and environment intervene. "The acquiring of an actual experience is also the content of the work," says Horn of her doubled sculptures.⁵ Memory is a source of illumination too.

"Noonday sunshine cinema-ized the site, turning the bridge and the river into an over-exposed picture. Photographing it with my Instamatic 400 was like photographing a photograph. The sun became a monstrous light-bulb that projected a detailed series of "stills" through my Instamatic into my eye." Kaja Silverman quotes Robert Smithson in her book *The Threshold of the Visible World*, discussing the camera's uncanny ability to preempt reality. "The world in its entirety solicits the click of an actual or imaginary camera, and ... it does so by making itself in advance into a 'photograph'," she writes.⁶

When I arrived at the "mountain" at Fabriken Furillen on the Furilden peninsula it was like a return. Its strangeness was immediately

⁵ Roni Horn in interview with Lynne Cooke in *Roni Horn* (London, Phaidon, 2000), p. 23.

⁶ Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (London, Routledge, 1996), p. 200.

assimilated, I had been here before. Partly in the images that Susanne had sent me, but also due to its utterly artificial nature, so strange as to become familiar. It looked like a model of a mountain, or a sculpture of one; a heap of abandoned limestone rubble, its contours sculpted by the same sharp wind that was whipping the waves into peaks beyond it. The mountain was the protagonist of the project Duskdust, the willing subject for the series of photographs Susanne made on subsequent visits to the island in summer 2014 and August of the following year. Those shades of light express the porous boundaries between day and night, another in-between zone, while the stone playing stone confused the camera, its desire for accuracy collapsing into ambivalence along with the material evidence itself. "The material itself as a way around the question of what we make of it," I wrote in my notes at the time. The subject matter here is matter: both utterly self-evident and quixotic at once.

"The Tunnel" is a squared-off channel, cut through the earth below a great pile of rock and rubble. "Darkness thickens and becomes viscous", it says in my notebook, scrawled in the dark while walking through ("Don't turn the lights on," Susanne had instructed in advance.) Darkness here is another material, pierced by square apertures of light at both ends. (For Susanne, being in the tunnel was like being the lens of the camera itself.) The tunnel and other industrial structures, the rubble, even the artificially construed darkness, are the waste materials of the abandoned quarry. Now the functionally brutalist 1970s buildings have been recycled into a luxury retreat, ideal for those in search of relaxation in a lunar landscape setting equipped with post-industrial ruins. Work meets non-work, again.

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Even on Saturday the cement factory in Slite works, its towering chimney sending thick white plumes into the grey-white sky. A seventy-five meter long steel column lying horizontally, lined with ceramic tiles and heated to a temperature of 1450 degrees Celsius, is in constant slow rotation, blasting the limestone 'klinker' into a fine, high-grade dust of cement. The ash from the coal used to heat the klinker is mixed in along with the dust, so the only waste here are those CO-2 rich plumes dissolving into the sky. The man who shows me around the factory has been working here for over 30 years; at that time the

furnace ran on 100% oil. Now 45% of its fuel is coal, and the rest is recycled waste materials, but by 2030 they aim to have eliminated fossil fuels entirely and reduced CO₂ emissions to zero. There are no workers to be seen, it turns out the whole factory is run by a total of eight people per shift nowadays. In the factory's control room, we find four men, busy monitoring banks of screens, rolling between them on their office chairs, checking the temperature, the movements, the statistics and input and output: the fire must remain at a constant temperature and never go out. Two screens provide a live stream image of the raging flames of the furnace: the flame's color is monitored, as this describes its temperature and changes in material density. These men, in their sweat pants and beanies, are like the custodians of hell. When I leave we pass a huge pile of shredded tires in the yard by the entrance gate, fragments of rubber that will be fed into the furnace. Waste and ruin, work time and non-work time, ash and debris, notes, thoughts, experiences. How does material organize itself?

* 5 *

From sculpture to mountain; tunnel to camera; sun to furnace; dusk to dust – this project thrives on analogy. “Every analogy contains both similarities and difference,” writes Kaja Silvermann. “Similarity is the connector, what holds two things together, and difference is what prevents them from being collapsed into one.”⁷ The thread of analogy, linking similarity and difference, is delicate and disintegrates if handled too much. It exists in and embodies the strange intermediate zone, between meditation and production. On this island enveloped in winter darkness, intervals of slow or vacant time may be cultivated, so that imagination and experience, vision and photography can exist in the same plane.

⁷ Kaja Silverman, *The Miracle of Analogy*, (California, Stanford University Press, 2015), p.11.