

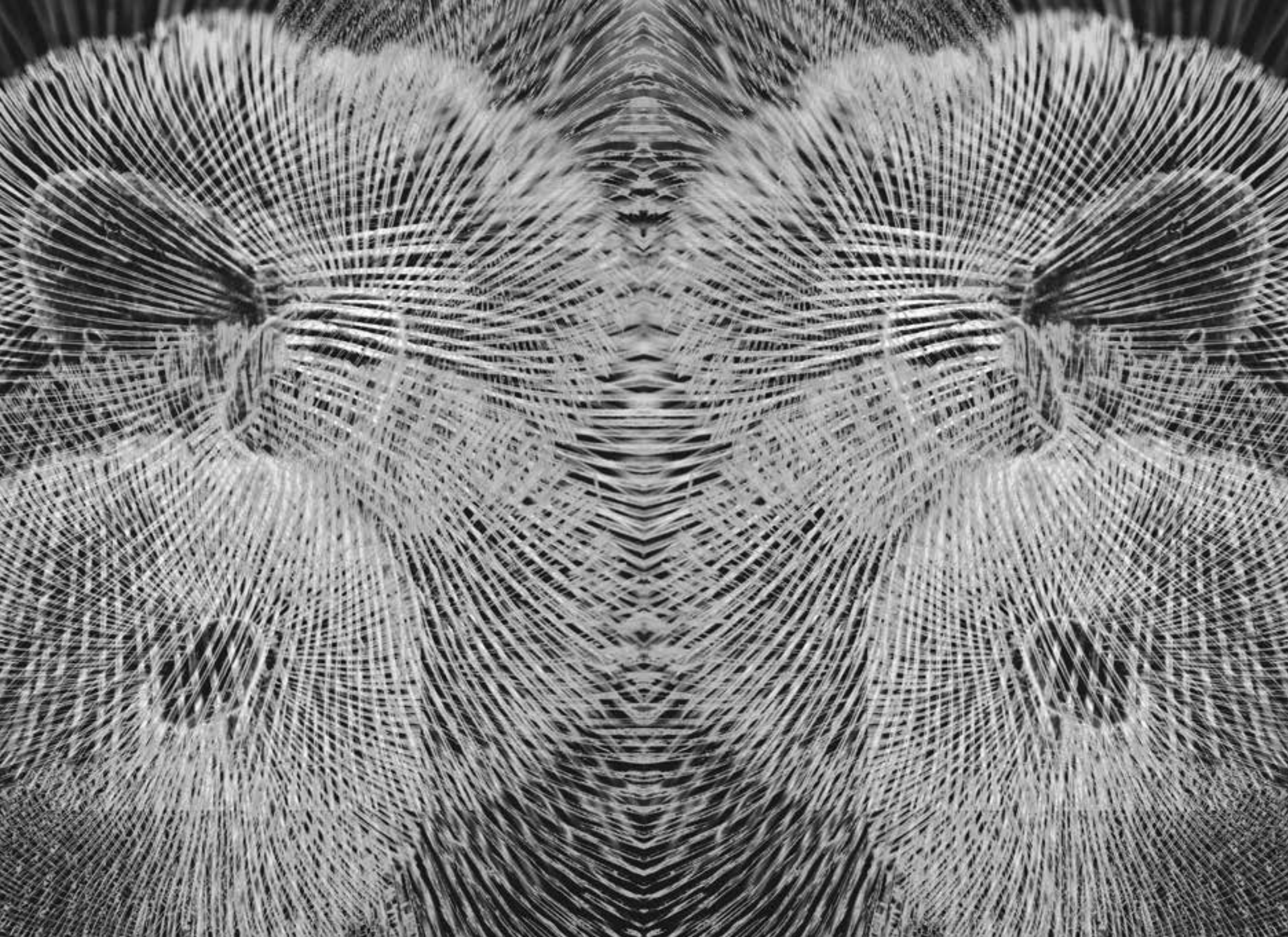
GeK

● Library for
radioactive afterlife

GeK

Susanne Kriemann

Spector Books



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Ge(ssenwiese) K(anigsberg)

Library of radioactive afterlife

Ed. Cassandra Edlefsen Lasch

Spector Books

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Ge (ssenwiese)

You can be in two minds about radioactivity. As you will know, sudden and severe radioactive events are human-produced: atomic bombs detonating from 1945 onwards, the nuclear reactor at Chernobyl exploding in 1986, or the lethal dose of polonium-210 isotope, invisible and undetectable, administered to Alexander Litvinenko, causing a slow death to quieten his dissident voice. These events were transmitted across the world. We can witness the symptoms of their aftermaths, knowing that the radiation progressed relentlessly through the air and into organisms, irredeemable and undiscerning once unleashed.



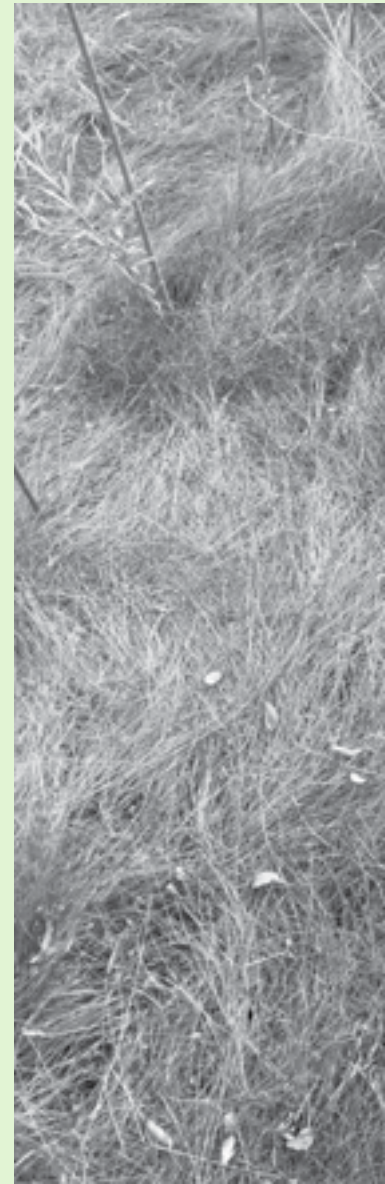
However, radioactive materials are also naturally present: in our bodies, in the Earth's surface, in the air we breathe, or in the atmosphere, known as cosmic radiation. We live with radioactivity. And radiation finds its beneficial application in medicine, of course, for diagnostic imaging and for cell treatments. All the same, these are two states of mind about radioactivity that are human-centred, where the benefits of radiation or its destructive force relate to humanity at large or the individual human being. Yet, toxic radiation released by humans offers another reading. Radioactivity protects nature. At Gessenwiese radioactive radiation keeps us out. The forbidding nature of radioactive radiation creates a landscape abandoned—by humans. Radioactive radiation gives nature the chance to reorganise itself after the human event.

Gessenwiese is a meadow. Its access is restricted to but a few. It has become a field of study for natural scientists and photographer Susanne Kriemann alike. In these photographs the meadow is captured with its layers of soil and plants under the cloudy sky. Sometimes the camera makes us float above the tree line or moves us close to a collection of shrubs. The meadow, however, sways between being a pastoral landscape and a radioactive field, its symptoms emerging. As a field, it is suspended within the endeavours of diagnosis and bioremediation. As a field, it serves scientific and artistic investigation, which both in their ways deconstruct the field into some of its constituent parts. As a landscape abandoned, Gessenwiese is undetermined. Who is to look at this landscape? Who is the landscape for, if not for humans?



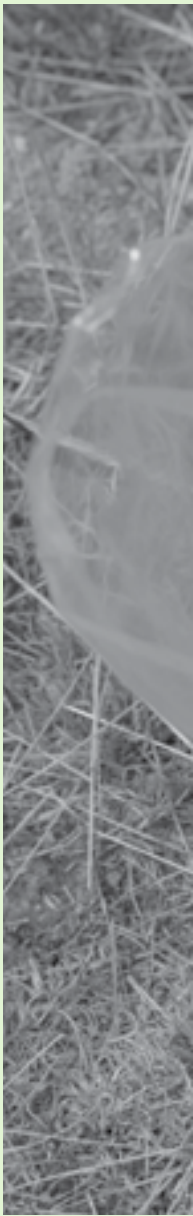


The oscillation from field to landscape resonates in the words by poet Anne Carson. She writes in 'Short Talks,' *Plainwater*,

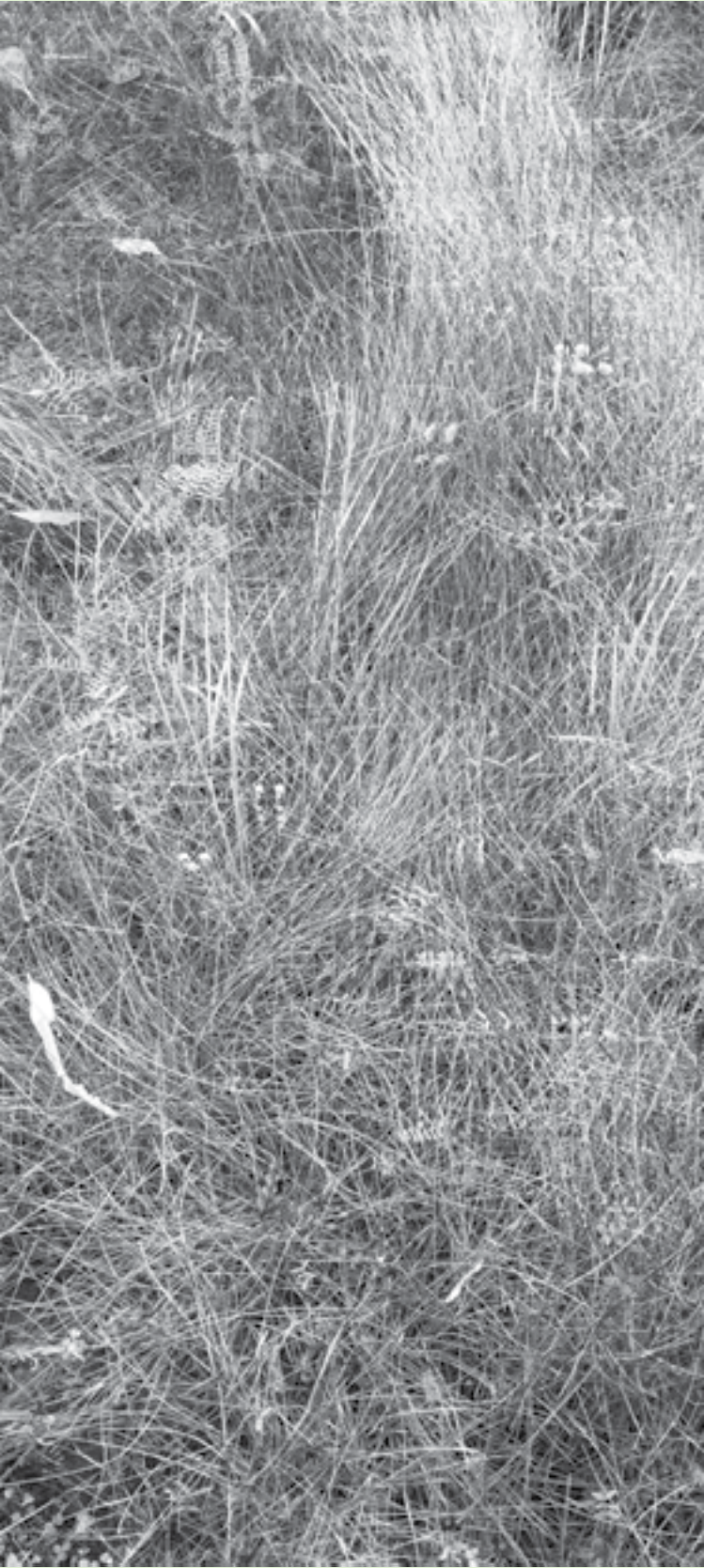


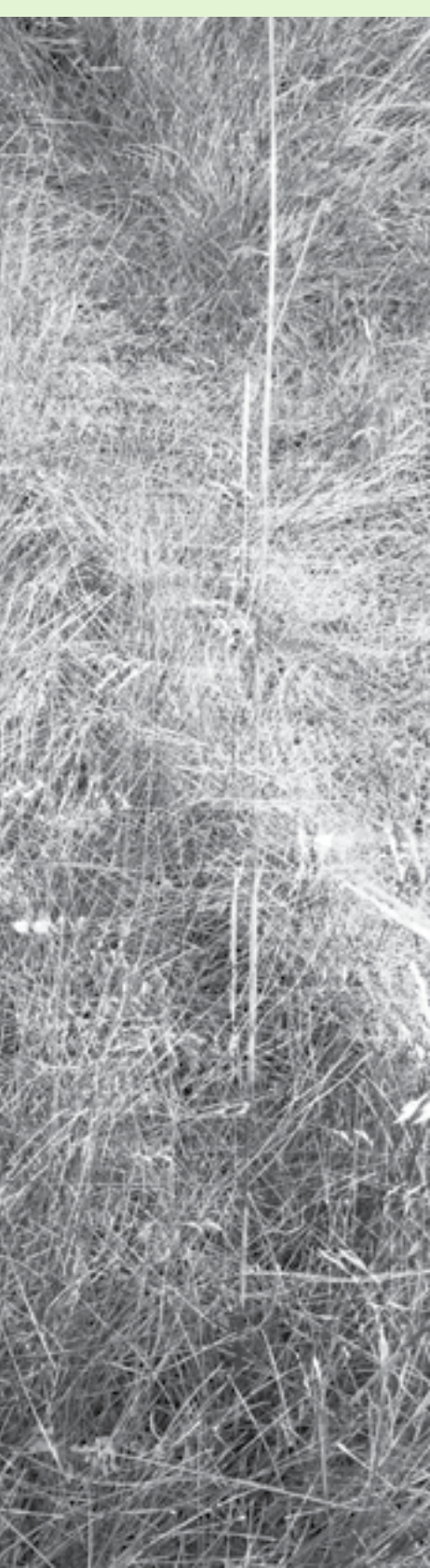
Three old women were bending in the fields. What use is it to question us? they said. Well it shortly became clear that they knew everything there is to know about the snowy fields and the blue-green shoots and the plant called “audacity,” which poets mistake for violets. I began to copy out everything that was said. The marks construct an instant of nature gradually, without the boredom of a story.¹

I imagine the women bending, their old hands gleaning. Looking at the photographs, Kriemann is judiciously recording the work of the scientists. In one of the images documenting the fieldwork, a blue, disposable laboratory-gloved hand inserts itself into a clump of grass, the long grass blades falling limply under their own weight. In another image scientists are milling under an open marquee, near a wooden make-shift shelter. Some photographs show a plastic object clamped around the leaf of a plant. Hands are holding plant leaves and a measuring device. Their experiment asks: Is the plant leaf’s ability to undertake photosynthesis affected by radioactive radiation?



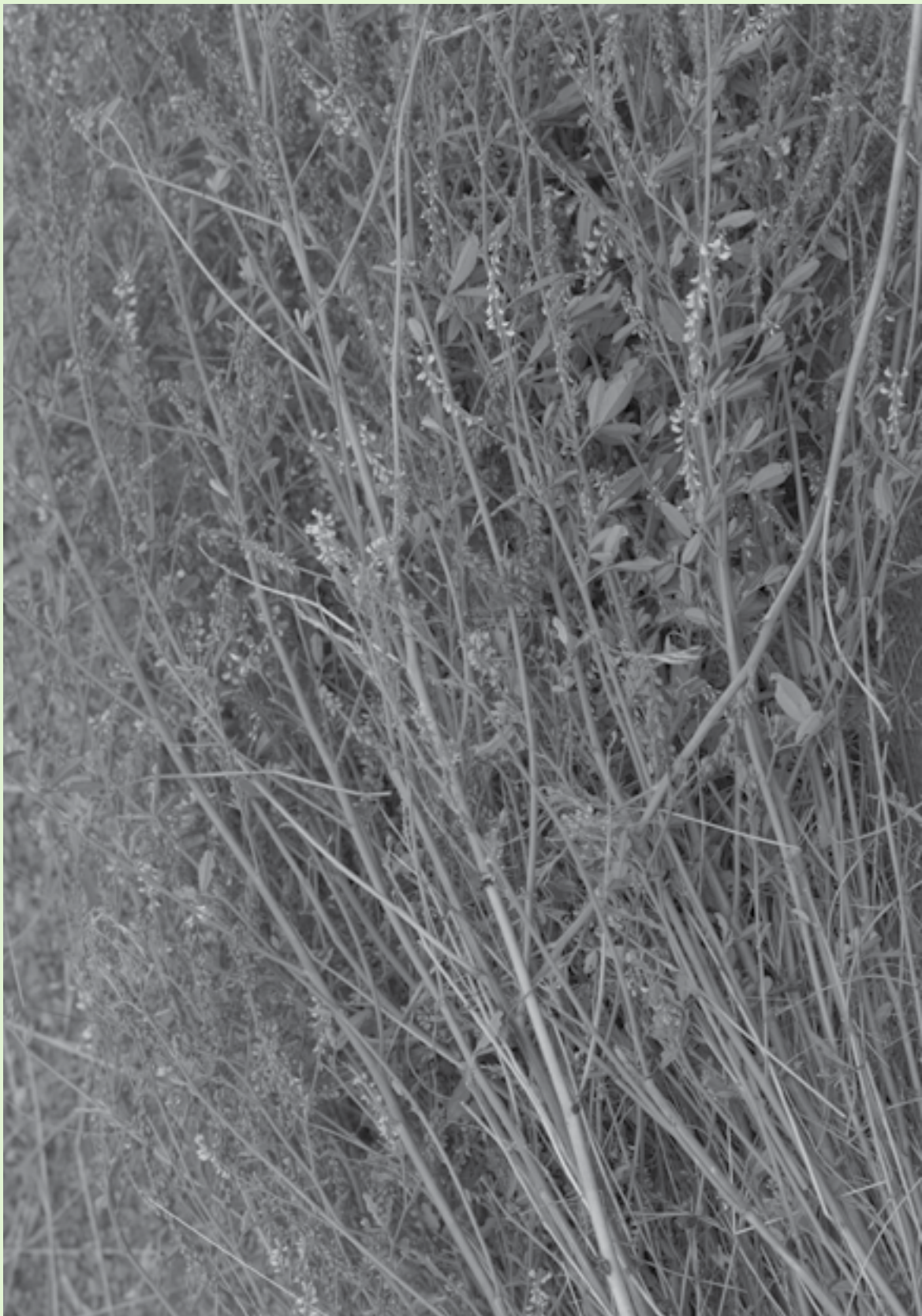
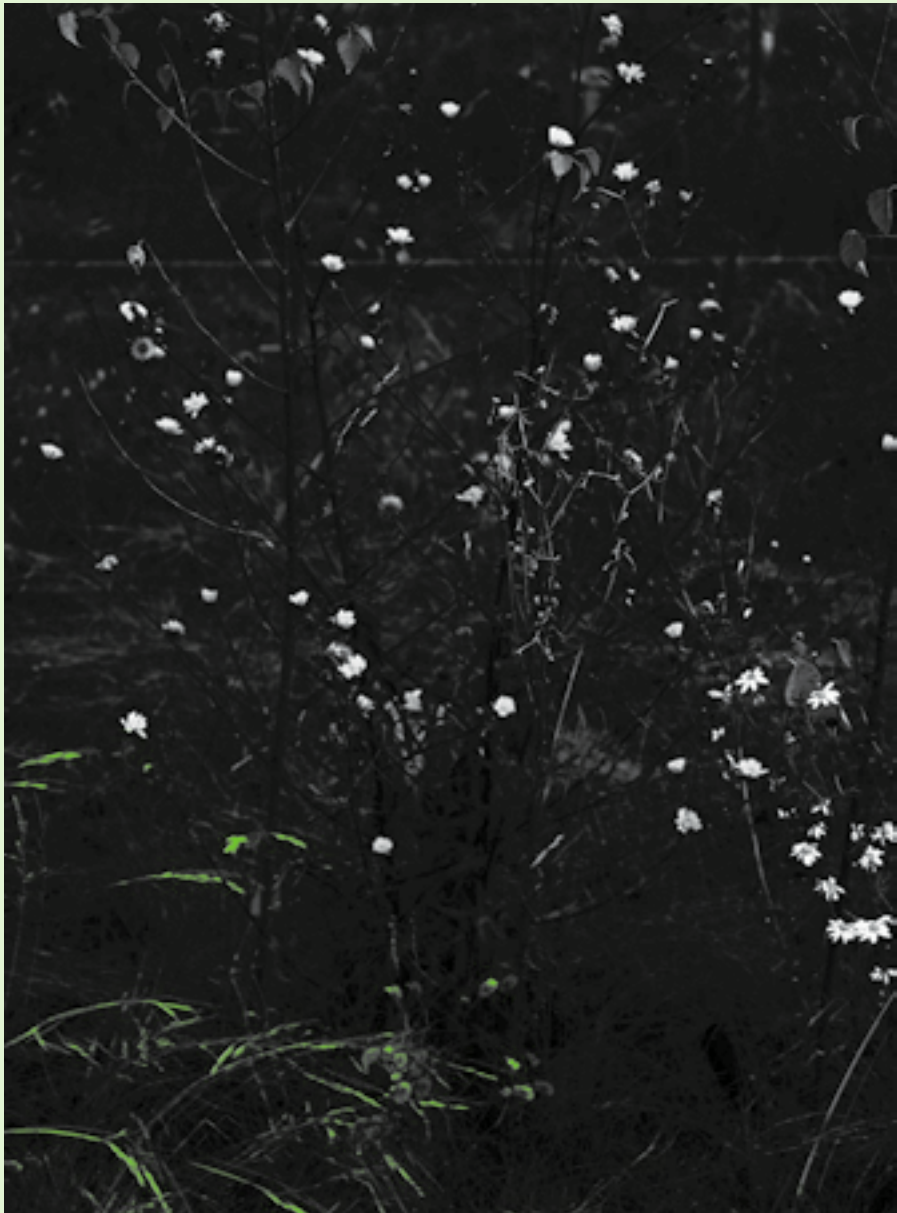
Another set of images shows the surface of the meadow divided into squares. Geographer Felix Driver writes that fieldwork activities are complex, performative acts of engagement.² A field is a space that promotes interactions between the field and the investigator, both are touched in this process. One shapes and informs the other.







Here the documentation of the field and the research activities within are not just performative acts of engagement expressed through gathering and gleaning, observing and testing, squaring up and dividing. These distancing acts shape how the landscape becomes field. These acts also become the materials of Kriemann's works. Her negotiations are visual, material, and tactile, giving form to the invisible radiation.



She makes the materials fall out of the field into her photographs. She extracts constituent parts of the field and re-connects them elsewhere, in her photographic lab, her studio, in a gallery space, or in a book. Considered together, these engagements with the site become a composite montage of an environment. A montage that simultaneously holds both, negative and positive, thoughts.



Experimentation with radiation has been understood since physicist Wilhelm Röntgen discovered X-rays in 1895. The rays rendered the hand of his wife translucent and revealed the hand's bone structure. On seeing the visual rendition of her hand stripped bare, Anna Bertha is said to have exclaimed: "I have seen my death!". To us now, knowing what rays can do, the image taken without light links structure with destruction.



If radioactivity describes the disintegration of atoms and causes transformation and death, then humans shockingly disintegrated the environment of and around Gessenwiese through uraninite mining. In what is now the exclusion zone of the Gessenwiese, a landscape is at rest. It is at last rewilding. It is not being "sheepwrecked," to use a term by environmentalist George Monbiot.³ Though a landscape with grazing sheep might look pastoral to us, introduce sheep and you soon have a landscape denuded. As we speak,



scientists continue their investigations of the field, probing its non-human life forms with more questions to slowly reveal how these species relate to each other:

What is the relationship between grasses, their roots and endomycorrhizae mushrooms? What is the growth of trees in this environment, replete with heavy metals?









Kriemann messes with radioactivity. Her works create an audacious confusion between rationality and risk, mind and senses. She explores the uncomfortable relationship and caution humans have with radioactive materials. Her gleanings from the field bear witness to the transformations of materials and how these have been produced.



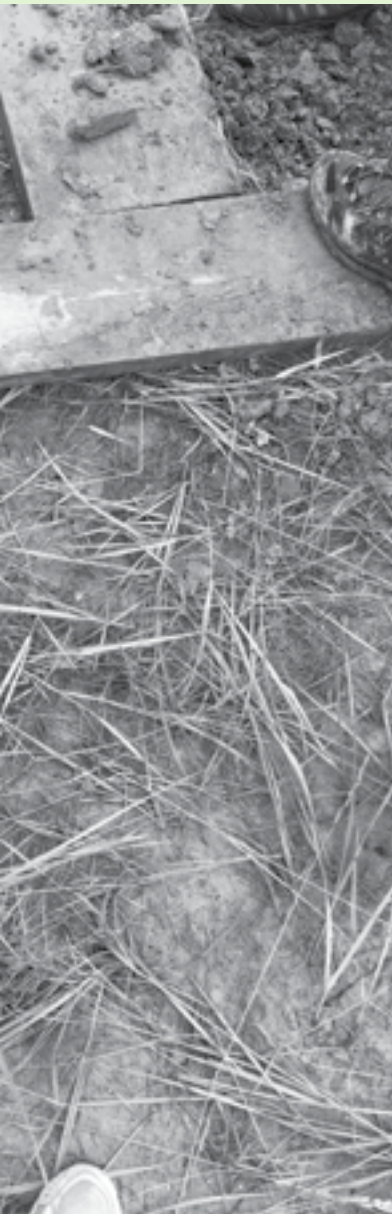


Gessenwiese is a place that continues to vacillate between field and landscape. Seen from afar the landscape is one for human consumption, a pastoral picture, yet experienced from close up this is a landscape evolving beyond human interference.



Close the gate when you leave.

¹ Anne Carson “Short Talks,” *Plainwater: Essays and Poetry* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1995).
² Felix Driver, “Editorial: Field-Work in Geography,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 25, no. 3 (2000): 267-68.
³ George Monbiot, *Feral: Searching for Enchantment on the Frontiers of Rewilding* (London: Allen Lane, 2013).



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