

9/11 – Fifty-Seven Other Possibilities

4-part installation

Tapestry	Ground Zero
Frottages / print on transparency film	Frottage 29.7cm x 42 cm
H 1.78 m – L 9.84 m	in light box
H 0.70 m – W 0.48 m – D 0.35 m	
Aeroplane	
Frottages / print on paper	Aircraft Sounds
W 2.94 m – L 2.07 m	Sound

Susanne Krell in an interview with Petra Thorand and Christoph Schreier

Petra Thorand:

Ms Krell, what was your first thought when we offered you an opportunity to develop one of your works on 11th September in the Cultural Centre – a building with a rather special hall?

Susanne Krell:

For me, the space was very interesting. I've known it for a long time, and a wonderful feature of the hall is this vault, this view up into the exposed roofing beams. And straight away I thought there has to be something there that reaches upwards, where you're standing in the space and looking up. So an upwards eye-catcher. That was one thought, initially quite vague. And secondly, it was interesting that the vernissage date was the 11th of September – 9/11, in other words. And with that it was already clear that a comment on this date was essential.

Those were the first two thoughts that occurred to me about this project. Then there were long discussions as to the extent to which my frottages – my collection of rubbings from sites all over the world – could be enlisted in this connection. I had gone through several different designs, and what emerged is the following: On the side wall at the left, a tapestry of frottages – traces of specific places – was created. I selected 57 places from my collection. 57 places that, as I put it – although I don't like the word very much – harbour the potential for aggression. Places that are very politically charged, such as the wall in Berlin, the wall of the Kremlin, and monuments to battles: places with a real political force of their own. These were printed in negative form onto very firm tracing paper and mounted to the wall as a tapestry.

The tapestry is nearly ten metres long, and its form is open, not closed. It is open in all directions, so theoretically there is room for additional concepts. There are open areas in the middle, so something could be inserted there as well. Then, the second part of the work is an aeroplane, a quite harmless paper aeroplane, yet one of impressive dimensions. This is suspended in this splendid vault, built of the same

frottages – these places from all over the world – and printed on both sides. Actually a harmless child's toy, but the incorporation of places has lent it a completely different force. Beneath the aeroplane is a column of light at the base of which the original frottage of Ground Zero can be seen. Added to this, in different variations, are the sounds of an approaching aircraft – sounds that are suddenly interrupted.

Christoph Schreier:

How did the installation affect visitors? After all, it is a marking of one place by other places. How did visitors perceive this?

Susanne Krell:

It was very interesting. At first, they looked at this tapestry, the areas of which were marked with small numbers. There was an accompanying brochure visitors could consult to see which number belonged to which place. The visitors toured the work and took it all in, and then came the questions. They saw the places; they associated this frottage of Ground Zero and the frottages on the aeroplane with one another. And time and again I actually noticed that the visitors were very deeply touched. It was a process-based approach; they had to ascertain what it was about, what it was. And once that connection had been made in the viewer's mind, it really was a very moving sight to behold, a sight I experienced over and over.

Petra Thorand:

I had spoken a bit about your work in the town hall, but without divulging everything. I wanted to arouse people's curiosity so that they would go see the installation. And you could see on their faces that when I mentioned 9/11, it 'clicked' in their minds and made them wonder, 'What could be going on there?' I didn't see all of the visitors, but I did see quite a few, and it was very interesting indeed, particularly later that evening, when it was dark outside and the mood in the hall shifted again.

Christoph Schreier:

I think that's a decisive point with your work, because when you enter the space wholly unprepared, and you see these frottages, you could think what's being exemplified is a formal structure, part serial and part compositional. But then the substantive plane enters in, because in purely formal terms these could be hatching patterns and frottages of any manner of places. So you need this linguistic, indexing semantics through which you realise: 'Aha, now that for instance is a National Socialist war monument in Munich, or some other "National Socialist shrines."' That's something you have to know. And then you inject this wisdom into your own experience in regard to these frottages. That's probably how it works, right?

Susanne Krell:

When I exhibit these frottages as unique specimens, as pictures, I like to say that they are no pictures. I refer to them as non-pictures; these works certainly have a certain aesthetic appeal, yet something also lurks beneath their surface. That is very important to me. While the picture is a surface, this rubbing or these frottages incorporate a concept, a fingerprint, a very strange trace of this particular place. There are very different approaches to the work. When you entered the room, the one side was illuminated – you can certainly also appreciate the tapestry from an aesthetic point of view – but then there was this aeroplane sound, and that really is a distraction that doesn't fit in with this 'beautiful' sight. From the individual elements – the frottages, the aeroplane and the column of light – questions emerge. These can then be answered with the aid of the accompanying brochure.

Petra Thorand:

But it touches the beholder even without the explanatory text because they realise that they have already been to so many places and always just fly there free from worries. But essentially the same kind of thing could happen to you yourself. That's what went through my mind when I heard the sounds, saw the aeroplane and the places on it – places where you know there are lots of aircraft landing on a daily basis. And then you see the places again on the wall, knowing: 'This airplane could just as easily have been headed there – with me aboard.' I think it's a rather emotional work.

Christoph Schreier:

Now this highly emotional theme collides with this paper aeroplane, and then you naturally think about your own childhood first, about child's play. Don't you worry that this might also downplay the significance of the topic?

Susanne Krell:

I reflected for a long time on just how this aeroplane should make its appearance – and here, too, I worked through several alternative models. But I thought it has a particular force in this harmlessness as a child's plaything. When the observer realises that it is not just this child's toy but also these places, then the aeroplane is charged with a completely different significance. For me, places contain concepts, rules according to which we humans communicate. This work here refers to a

situation in which these concepts of rules are not observed. And these rules are something you learn – or you don't – in childhood. So I thought that the play between observance and non-observance would prove interesting.

Petra Thorand:

With the sound of the engines, you actually no longer have the feeling of toys; the sounds made it very real indeed. If you enter the room and hear this noise coming at you – it started out quiet and harmless in the background but then grew increasingly louder and more vehement – it really does put you in a very nightmarish situation.

Christoph Schreier:

You stitched these facsimile frottages together like a form of funeral shroud that has draped itself over one wall of the space.

Susanne Krell:

There, too, there were lots of materials sampled. I ultimately decided on a firm tracing paper. Then the next question was whether you glue them, tack them together or whatever, and that's where I decided to sew them together. Threads become interwoven when you sew, and to me that seemed – as a metaphor for the interwovenness of all ideas in the world – to be the most consistent approach to take for this work.

Christoph Schreier:

All ideas, or all fates as well?

Susanne Krell:

That, too. It's interconnected.

Petra Thorand:

Was there a certain sequence you followed for the places?

Susanne Krell:

No. I have a very large collection of places, nearly 300 at the moment. I chose precisely those places with political significance. Then I arrayed them according to aesthetic points of view. There was no theoretical background at that point.

Christoph Schreier:

Probably there's no place on earth that is not blood-drenched in this sense, right? You simply don't notice it.

Susanne Krell:

Yes, that's right. This work made me reflect on these concepts again: every place has a history of its own, is a symbol for a collection of events. It may be a peaceful place, but that's not always the case. There are always at least two sides. I found an apt quotation by Ernst Bloch: 'Architecture is an attempt to produce a human

homeland'. This quite appealed to me in this context. The human individual on location as a searcher within his or her situation, who then attempts to produce a homeland referential to his or her location. In my work of collecting traces, I think this is a very important point: we all have our place, our rules, our homeland. And now and then these things collide, and then they're not peaceful any more.

Petra Thorand:

In this respect, what you collect are not just places but indeed history. As a result, things past are transported back to the present. What was your initial thinking when you began with the frottages?

Susanne Krell:

The idea came about in Carnac in Brittany, in these Stone Age structures, the dolmens and menhirs. I was there and sensed a tremendous force, an energy, a situation, in which I thought: 'I'd like to take something with me from this place, something of this energy I sense here'. Photography, sketches, watercolours – the things to which you tend to resort – to me, none of this seemed suited to what I felt there. I was there and didn't take along anything. Nothing occurred to me in terms of what I could take along without destroying the place. Then two years later I travelled back and again thought: 'What shall I take from here?' And at some point I had the idea of laying paper on stone and rubbing it. This gave me unique traces, and with them the concept, the idea of the place. The history behind it, lying behind the surface. This was the point of departure all these entire collections.

Christoph Schreier:

But isn't one defeated at the same time when the things I take along as a rubbing, as it were, is itself in turn not history? Thinking about these things may mobilise our minds, but I think the situation would be different if I were to do a rubbing on a wall pocked with some kind of bullet holes or the like from the war. Then I'd have these marks of the bullets. That would be an immediate reference, but when I look at these hatching patterns now, I have the sense that somehow artistic defeat always plays a role here as well. That you may be duplicating something, but you can only take it with you up to a point. History comes about not through my presentation of this frottage but rather through the fact that it is this place, and that's where the work begins in our minds. It's less of an artistic portrayal as such and more of a conceptual work.

Susanne Krell:

It's a very concrete depiction of a place – I don't believe a depiction can be any more concrete. As with any picture, though, an imagination is part of the process. A picture always provokes the beholder's imagination, and when I have a picture and a location here, I have the beholder's individual imagining. My aim above all was not to show my point of view. In photographs I show my point of view, my approach to a place. Here, though, I always say: 'The place itself makes a picture.'. And if I add the name of the place, then I also provoke the inner picture in the mind's eye of the beholder.

Petra Thorand:

Walls incorporate a great deal over the centuries that some of them have already been standing. Contact with other people, dust, grains of sand blown in over great distances from the winds of the Sahara, and much more. And so I think such a stone, such a wall does in a certain sense serve as a record of history. Of course this is where our imagination is activated, and you ask yourself, What things has this stone already experienced? At least that's how I see it. Or when I see old trees – who has already stood or sat under that tree? And it's just the same as with these buildings – who was inside it, who stood before it, who touched it, what happened inside?

Christoph Schreier:

That's a question I was about to ask before. Is it transferable to trees, or to faces – themselves a collection of history?

Susanne Krell:

Certainly, although if I take faces, for instance, then it's a limited period of time. In the Redoute in Bonn, I once had a work on the history of this place. That's when it became clear to me that only the walls themselves were privy to this history, to all the things that took place in this room. They were there, and we weren't. The faces that were there at the time are no longer. But the walls have, if you will, taken it all in.

Christoph Schreier:

This also makes clear that we are always mere guests, particularly in old buildings. We inhabit them for a time, just as generations before us have done within these same walls. But I believe living in an old house, surrounded by such walls as vehicles of history is quite different from building a home of your own. A house has an entirely different autonomy if I know that it existed 300 years before me and will likely exist another 300 years after me.

Susanne Krell:

It calls for an energy and a scrupulousness, it calls for a certain approach. Carnac in particular was so important to me at the time because the place has been preserved for thousands of years. The people have not destroyed it. Something must have happened there, something must be there to explain why the place has remained intact. These are things that develop on their own power. Where buildings are concerned, there must be a meeting of minds, there must be energy, an idea, a concept. Something like this is rarely the kind of thing one person can accomplish alone. There must be a convergence of forces for something to materialise. With my technique, I believe I have found something that can depict this. Certainly if you let yourself in for it.

Christoph Schreier:

Since we are looking to the future at the moment, could you tell us what other projects are you working on?

Susanne Krell:

Currently there is an exhibition on the topic of 'Migration' at the Kunstverein in Essen as part of the 'Ruhr.2010' European Capital of Culture. For this exhibition I created a work entitled 'ab wann bin ich deutsche?' – 'beginning at what point am I German?'. I selected 9387 Polish-sounding names from the Essen telephone directory and applied these against a background of 35 Essen locations. The work is a large wall piece on which I arranged frottages in column format and the names in a kind of index-card system – Polish names located on the land in Essen. The idea of the work was that although migration is often noted as a current concern, in fact there has been migration in Germany for countless years. Frederick the Great died in 1786, at even at that time 20 percent of the people in the Prussian Empire were colonists. So we have a long history of migration. Which is why I chose an example from more recent history: Polish migration or integration – or however one wishes to put it politically correctly – is 100 years old. So this was my depiction of this. If I'm not involved in projects such as these, then I am working to complete my collections.

Petra Thorand:

How about a frottage of the Cultural Centre?

Susanne Krell:

I already have one.

Christoph Schreier:

So you are continuing to collect your places? As an open-ended project?

Susanne Krell:

There is a series of black-and-white frottages on paper that is ongoing and is waiting for an exhibition in its totality. Along with this there is the 'collection' – a series of frottages of the same format on canvases pre-dyed in hues of green-blue. Some of these have been shown in the City Museum [Stadtmuseum] in Siegburg. Some time ago I also began doing very colourful works on cloth, some of them in rather large formats. There are three extensive series of pictures in progress there.

And for a situation such as this here, I try to use the space provided, the topic, the historical situation or – as in the case of Essen – to trace the topic to create a work that incorporates the place and its background.

Christoph Schreier:

Is there a place you would still absolutely like to visit?

Susanne Krell:

I've never been to Australia, so I don't have a place there, but at the moment no. I think I am one individual among billions; I have certain possibilities to go places and to collect the impressions I find there. The only difference was some time ago with this attigit.projekt, where I attempted to create a correspondence among the

representative edifices of the major monotheistic religions. Then I had to travel to Cairo and Jerusalem, and then, later on, to Rome. That was the only time I travelled to specific destinations because it was important for this particular project.

Christoph Schreier:

The places tend to come to you instead.

Susanne Krell:

That's right: I collect what comes my way. I always think about whether I can set certain standards or priorities, whether that's something I can or may decide. My entire approach is determined by the attempt to withdraw as a person or as an artist. The frottage, too, is the trace of itself. Working now on these works in colour, I blur the colours as I apply them; so this blending is a process determined by the colour itself, as it were. It's always a procedure determined by external circumstances. Here, too, where I thought: 'It has to go upwards, there has to be something about 11th September'.

Petra Thorand:

Ms Krell, Dr. Schreier, thank you very much for visiting with us.

Talk:

Susanne Krell, artist

Dr. Christoph Schreier, deputy director of the Museum of art Bonn

Petra Thorand M.A., art historian