

Mario Kramp:

The Sudarium of Susanne Krell

An excursus on faith, image and aura
in: attigit.projekt, Wienand Verlag Köln

For Sister Brandina Paschalis Schröder, a nun with the contemplative order of Trappists, it is an open and shut case. The portrait of Jesus Christ in linen, housed in the church in the Abruzzo commune of Manoppello is the true impression of the face of the Saviour. To be close to the portrait, she left her convent – Maria Frieden, in the Eifel region of Germany – and took up residence as a hermit in the Italian mountains. For as is said of this image even in the year 1263, in the *Legenda aurea*, brought by St. Veronica and of priceless value: ‘the image derives its force from a devout and pious heart alone’.

Because Catholic imagery have influenced art and artists in the Rhineland – in North Rhine-Westphalia and Rhineland-Palatinate – for centuries, and because Susanne Krell has ties of equal strength to both of these German *Laender*, this is an appropriate way of broaching the topic of this article. Particularly since the introduction serves as more an anecdote or point, as it leads us to the heart of the core issues of image and religion, aura and symbolism, that are at the heart of the works of Susanne Krell.

The problem of St. Veronica

Veronica, one of the women in the circle of those closest to Jesus, admired her Saviour in pious devotion. She wanted to be with him continuously, yet Jesus travelled from place to place with his disciples, preaching. Veronica came up with an understandable idea: she decided to visit an artist and to ask him to create an image, saying: ‘My lord and my master when he went preaching, I absented me oft from him, I did do paint his image, for to have alway with me his presence, because that the figure of his image should give me some solace’, as the mediaeval version of the *Legenda aurea* reports.¹ With a piece of linen for the portrait, she set out to visit the portraitist. On her way there, she met Jesus, who asked her for the piece of cloth. When the cloth was returned to her, it bore his likeness. This is the wondrous way in which Veronica obtained the authentic image of the Lord.

The question with which Veronica was presented is highly contemporary – and both quotidian and philosophical at the same time. It is also the question that presents itself to Susanne Krell.

To have or to be

After all, honestly: who among us has not, at one time or another, wanted to have, to hold onto or to own something belonging to a person we worship, or something from a very special situation? Who among us has never ‘walked off’ with some memento from an outstanding historical or religious place, perhaps during our travels? A small

stone, a plant, seashells, a bit of sand... Such symbolic souvenirs can be found adorning countless fireplace mantles. A keepsake such as this is – as in the case of the remnants of antiquity – occasionally prohibited by law. Still, the urge to take one is understandable. Collecting souvenirs legally is often possible only when – rarely enough – the sought-after original has already been officially designated for demolition or destruction. Which, admittedly, was by no means a foregone conclusion when thousands upon thousands of ‘woodpeckers’ hacked fragments out of the Berlin Wall and took them home as souvenirs.

The decisive question is this: how do I take along ‘genuine’ fragment without inevitably vitiating the original or its idea? There are two answers to this question.

The first is, structurally, Protestant in nature (and doubtless comes close to Islamic theory). It is exclusive. And the answer is: it can’t be done. At least not in a material sense, for what matters is the word of a long, the spiritual aspect, the idea, and not the image. Significantly, Martin Luther had only ridicule for the image of St. Veronica housed in Rome: the Popes in Rome claimed ‘it is the countenance of our Lord’, but in reality it is ‘nothing more than a little black board, squared.’

The second answer is, structurally, Catholic in nature. It is integrative. And this answer is: we know human nature, we know ourselves, we need images, we need materially existing evidence – so we need to find ways and means of providing these.

In this fundamental dilemma – between an otherworldly consistency that is essentially inimical to imagery, on the one hand, and a worldly inconsistency that is essentially encouraging of imagery on the other – great cultural history has been written.

Aura and ‘attigit’

The more modest among us seek recourse to artefacts – books, postcards, photos. The devout prefer halfway theologically approved transfer products such as holy water from Lourdes, likenesses of the saints with (genuine or nearly genuine) indulgence from Rome, or stones and sand from Galilee, over which the Saviour is presumed to have walked.

Over the course of its long history, art has generated a host of avenues for symbolic and material ‘take-away effects’: images within images, spolia, copies, variations, photographs, relics and contact relics, imitations, casts, rubbings. They all represent the attempt to capture, in the full sense of the term, what has been referred to alternately as the ‘initial’, the ‘holy’, the ‘symbolic’, the ‘unique’, the ‘original’, or the ‘bearer of meaning’ – or, to use a term familiar from the work of Walter Benjamin: the ‘aura’ of the object in question.

It should scarcely come as any surprise that Catholicism has been particularly inventive in this respect. When the relics in Aachen were shown as part of the

¹ <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/goldenlegend/GL-vol1-passionofourLord.%20.html>

pilgrimage to the city that took place every seven years, the press of the crowds was such that not all of the pilgrims could catch a glimpse of the sought-after 'sacred objects'. Which is why a new product sold like hotcakes in the 14th century: pilgrims' badges in the form of compact metal reliefs equipped with a small mirror. The pilgrim held the badge high above the countless heads of the pious crowd, thereby capturing the lustre and the purported healing power of the relics. Other pilgrims came equipped with small pieces of cloth or scraps of paper and touched them to the relics or to their containers. The idea was that the beneficial and healing power of the relics would transfer to the paper or cloth, making this power 'portable'. The 'genuineness' and healing power of such secondary or contact relics was certified on small tags attached to them, bearing the inscription 'attigit' (Lat.: 'has touched').

Note: one always manages, and yet always fails, to capture the 'aura'. To anticipate the point while remaining within the confines of the chosen metaphor: Susanne Krell, who has chosen the lovely designation of 'attigit' as the title for her ambitious project, is Protestant for the consistency of the intensive spiritual-intellectual approach with which her work is suffused; for their presence, symbolism and sensuousness, however, the creative results of her thought process are extremely Catholic.

Veronica's 'frottage'

But let us return for a moment to St. Veronica. Catholic tradition actually offers several versions of the magical and fascinating transfer of the image of the Saviour. In contrast to the above-mentioned wondrous gift of Christ, another version reports that Veronica encountered the adored Redeemer in Jerusalem as he was carrying his cross to Golgotha. She offered to mitigate his pain and handed him a cloth with which to dry his perspiration and wipe off his blood. Legend has it that he pressed his face against the cloth. At home, Veronica unfolded her sudarium only to discover a negative of the countenance of the Lord. Although not confirmed by any early written sources, this version was incorporated into Catholic theory as the canonized sixth station of the Cross. And rightly so, as it radically plumbs the possibilities of the pious transfer of image – along the narrow path between popular devotion, superstition and monotheistic-theological theory.

It scarcely warrants mentioning that this process of the quasi-divine direct impression is also very closely related to the work of Susanne Krell.

In the beginning was the image

The touching story of the sudarium of St. Veronica was not without art-historical consequence. As Susanne Krell presented her exhibition, entitled 'in situ – so viele Geschichten', in April 2008 in the Historic Vault of the Mittelrhein-Museum in Koblenz, Germany, two storeys higher, preparations were ongoing for the exhibition of works entitled 'Unser Mittelalter' [*Our Middle Ages*]. This latter exhibition also included an analysis of the painting of a 'St. Gregory's Mass', presumably painted around 1500 in Brussels and part of the museum's original collection (Inv. no. M33). The small precious wood panel illustrates - in keeping with conventional canon – Pope Gregory kneeling before an altar upon which Christ as the Man of Sorrows appears, surrounded by the tools of the Passion.

The art-historical genesis and dissemination of the motif of the 'St. Gregory's Mass' have since been thoroughly researched. Researchers have determined that it was not a story that unleashed a flood of images but rather quite the opposite: a specific image itself led to the development of a momentous legend which, in turn, generated countless images. This 'initial image' appears to have been a mosaic icon of the Man of Sorrows, dating originally to Byzantium, worshiped by countless pilgrims in the Roman Church of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme. The report to the vision of St. Gregory in the sixth century was intended to corroborate the authenticity of the 14th-century image, after the fact.

The Veronica motif came about in a similar fashion. Amidst the tools of the Passion seen in the St. Gregory's Mass in Koblenz, one notices the 'Sudarium of St. Veronica': it shows the countenance of Christ, a frontal view of the face of a roughly 30-year-old man, with long, dark hair and a parted beard. The image was disseminated in this fashion, thus determining the picture we have of the appearance of Christ – from the mediaeval Cologne Master's rendition of St. Veronica down to the modern-day miniatures of Christ. Here, too, however, the maxim applies: in the beginning was the image. First, there was the legendary image of the sudarium 'not created by human hands', which was housed among the sacred objects at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Only then did the Veronica legends begin to come to light in full force, emerging from the darkness of the Apocrypha. They provided a retrospective confirmation of the genuineness of the wondrously authentic countenance of Jesus regularly and solemnly presented in Rome (and ridiculed by Luther).

You shall not make for yourself an idol

The existence of an image of God or Christ, which runs counter to the Third Commandment, is the *contradictio in adiecto* of Catholicism and paradoxically at the same time its *conditio sine qua non*: a Platonic touchstone of cosmic proportions. One cannot reach higher than this – in comparison, all likenesses of saints, images of other images, artefacts or spolia of sacred places in the relics of all 11,000 virgins are nothing more than illustrative glass bead games. And how much more of the contradiction is there when what is involved is not an artefact, not a posthumous ideal rendering of the 'true man and true God', but rather a 'real' impression of the real, existing Saviour?

The fate of the sudarium

Those who delve into the investigations of this face an endless task indeed. According to the Byzantine version, the sudarium is the 'mandylion', originally requested by King Abgar of Edessa, in a petition submitted to Christ himself, to aid in the former's convalescence. The sudarium, according to this version, convolutedly ended up in the Byzantine Empire as an argument in the back-and-forth of the late Byzantine iconographic controversy over the universally venerated relic. According to the Roman Catholic reading, it is the same 'sudarium', the perspiration-cloth featuring the likeness of Jesus, that Veronica is said personally to have brought to Rome to heal the Emperor Tiberius – which, incidentally, led to the punishment and death of Pilate, who had already ordered the crucifixion of the 'Jewish miracle-

healer' Jesus sought by the ailing Tiberius. Or are the mandylion and sudarium possibly one in the same? Perhaps the Roman image has long since vanished from St. Peter's Basilica and is to be found instead as a 'Volto Santo' in the above-mentioned Abruzzo village of Manoppello – unless it is not actually the world-famous Shroud of Turin ...

This is material for a variety of doctoral dissertations. Not to mention semantically questionable, as this actually misses the point. In 1998, Pope John Paul II was clever enough to pronounce a truly Catholic judgement in regard to the hotly contested Shroud of Turin: 'The mysterious fascination of the Shroud forces questions to be raised about the sacred Linen and the historical life of Jesus. Since it is not a matter of faith, the Church has no specific competence to pronounce on these questions.'

Veronica, Susanne and 'the true image'

Veronica herself, at any rate, became a bearer of images in multiple respects. Her 'unhistorical-legendary personality', in the words of the *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie* [Dictionary of Christian Iconography] is eclipsed by her role. Even her identity itself is questionable: is it in fact Martha, the sister of Lazarus of Bethany (Lk 10.38ff; Jo 11.1 and 12.2), or was she the woman who had been suffering from a haemorrhage and was healed by Christ (Mt 9.20; Mk 5.25; Lk 8.43), or perhaps her daughter, or – as others suspect – the wife of Zaccheus, the tax collector (Lk 19.1)? Whether she obtained his likeness during the time of his works, or as he was marching to his crucifixion, remains an open question. There is also a lack of agreement as to her ultimate fate. According to the version already mentioned, she brought the sudarium to Rome, to Emperor Tiberius; according to another version, there she presented it to Pope Clemens – where the first written mention of it is to be found in the year 705 –. Is this the same Veronica who lies buried in Soulac at the mouth of the Gironde estuary and is worshiped in Bordeaux? Is there truth to the traditional account in the bible of Robert of Argenteuil, written around the year 1300? Or rather the report in the *Legenda aurea* of Jacobus de Voragine? Some 40 years prior, he had diplomatically summarised the dilemma that the 'truth' surrounding Veronica entailed: 'And hitherto is this story called apocryphum read. They that have read this, let them say and believe as it shall please them.'²

But the most beautiful explanation was provided around the year 1700, on the threshold of the Counter-Reformation in the early Enlightenment in Paris, by Jean Mabillon, a Benedictine in Saint-Germain-des-Prés and simultaneously the founder of palaeographics: according to Mabillon, the name of the 'Veronica' who vanished behind her image traces back to the legendary image itself – as an anagram of the designation of the true likeness of the Lord, the 'Vera icon'.

The artist Susanne Krell, too, disappears behind her art. She shapes her work not with major gestures, or through her own style or through the otherwise so frequently cited 'unmistakable artistic trademark'. Her work receives its stamp – in the fullest sense of the term – by virtue of the graphic structure of the rubbings taken from holy sites, ergo through these sites themselves, and through their aura. It is inherent that the results of this work should be vehicles of meaning. That her method is both contemporary and most profoundly historical and philosophical, is apparent. The apparent miracle in her work is that it entails the possibility of perennial beauty.

Dr. Mario Kramp
Director Stadtmuseum Köln