

## A journey to the white desert

Irene Kopelman

At the end of 2008 I received an invitation to take part in a project that would work on Allan Kaprow's scores, it would take place in Egypt. It would entail at least two stages: a research trip and an exhibition.

The project was curated and organized by Mai Abu El Dahab and Philippe Pirrote. The name of the project was *A Fantasy for Allan Kaprow*, and the artists were to look at Allan Kaprow's scores and interpret them. The interpretation did not have to be literal, but each artist would search and find ways to connect their individual practices with one or more of Kaprow's scores within the contemporary scenario, this taking into account that context of the project was Egypt.

The idea was to start with a research trip, which would be followed a few months later with an exhibition at Contemporary Image Collective (CIC), Cairo.

On receiving and reading Kaprow's scores I became interested in the ones called meditation pieces (meditation pieces-1981). I was attracted to the level of absurdity that those acts entailed and I also tried to imagine how those acts could affect the actors involved. What kind of thinking process is activated by the act of replacing dust or leaves? How is perception affected by the act? Kaprow's meditation pieces consist of two pages with two columns of texts. On the left side, on the top, in-between brackets, it says 'inside'; on the right side, in the same position and in between brackets it says 'outside'. In both columns there is a description of a few actions, in both columns there are the same actors: a sweeper and a watcher.

On the left side the action consists of 'the sweeper' sweeping dust together, standing still from time to time, replacing the dust, standing still from time to time and sweeping the same dust together and again standing still from time to time. Meanwhile 'the watcher' is at first only watching, then watches in a mirror, and at the end, listens and does not watch. On the right side the actions are the same, but the sweeper is replaced by a raker and the dust is replaced by leaves.

From then onwards I started thinking of what a meditation piece would be for me, and how one creates a contemporary meditation piece today.

I thought one way to do this would be an experience with, and in, the landscape, to open a space of isolation and contemplation within daily experience. I therefore organised a trip to the white desert during my research visit to Egypt. The desert became the space of isolation, and a space to experience a peculiar landscape, where the limits are completely blurred, and the horizon dissolved further and further away each time we moved forward.

The trip: three days in the desert by car, with a guide, traveling across the desert. 2nd, to 4th February, 2009.

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The landscape is beautiful, in a weird harsh way. My first idea was to make some drawings there. I also wanted to collect stones from the desert, to take back to my studio and work with. During the trip across the desert, up and down through the dunes, the landscape keeps changing, contradicting the preconception I had of a flat endless landscape with no variations. The days went by sitting in the 4 x 4 car, in a dream-like state of mind, encouraged by the movement of the car in the dunes. I kept wondering what is it that makes the guy turn right here or left there. Where are the hidden landmarks on that sand ocean? After hours and hours you stop at some point for lunch, and many hours after to camp.

Two nights and three days there: sleeping looking at the open sky. Three drawings: all of them from the first camping spot. Two the first evening, made during the few hours of light in-between the car stopping and night falling. The other drawing, made the morning after, in-between the sun rising and the car leaving.

None of the lunch breaks nor the second camping spot, were in places where I could draw. I realised that what was suitable for drawing were the protuberances that come out of the flat land in some areas of the desert; formations which stood out from the rest of the landscape. I came across two of those areas during the trip, as I said in the first camping area and in the afternoon of the second day.

On the third day, the guide saw me collecting black stones wherever I could find them, on the way back he took me to a field filled with those black stones. I collected about thirty small stones that I thought would be suitable to be drawn.

Few questions remained unanswered and were difficult to formulate in a clear way. I kept thinking about the traveling accounts and those detailed drawings, which they use to return from the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century scientific expeditions with. In 2004/2005 I spent hours at the Teyler Museum Library (Harlem, The Netherlands) looking at atlases that were published in those centuries. I was interested in systems of representation that were used to depict nature and the natural world. When traveling across the desert I had all those depicted images in my mind, and those images accompanied any attempt I made to represent the space I was immersed in.

There I was, some centuries later, making a similar move, but with a completely different aim, meaning and art-project, with much less time, much less patience and tolerance to the climatic conditions.

How can one apprehend that space? A kind of impossible task. How can one grasp it?

I thought, perhaps, by taking little fragments of it with me. I collected a few stones among the stones on that vast landscape. Black stones.

With the residual side effect of the trip I came back to Amsterdam and my studio. I chose one of the stones. The one I thought had enough textures, forms and variations to keep me busy for a month. I decided that I would draw, every day for a month, that very stone from the same point of view.



I wanted to experiment if one perceives (and represents) the same stone differently every time. To see if it is the observer who changes even though the object of perception remains the same. I wanted to observe how the experience would affect my understanding of the very form of the stone, if one perceives more each time, if there is any kind of understanding which increases with a repetition of the experience, or if the repetition cancels the learning experience.

The drawings will be 24 x 24 cm, pencil on paper.

The stone measured about 3 x 2 x 2 cm

I created a set in my studio where the stone would remain in the same position during that month. A light was set on the side. A chair positioned in a place from which it wouldn't move. All The paper was cut in the same size and the days started running. 14th February 2009 was the first day.

After few days I realised that it would make sense to start writing during the experiment, a few notes and thoughts on the experience (before or after making the daily drawing). I was trusting that making the drawings will reveal some specific type of 'reflection on drawing', which would not otherwise be accessible to me. Perhaps I should briefly refer to the fact that this 'trust on the making process as a tool for understanding' is not a new element in my practice, but something that I have kept developing, more



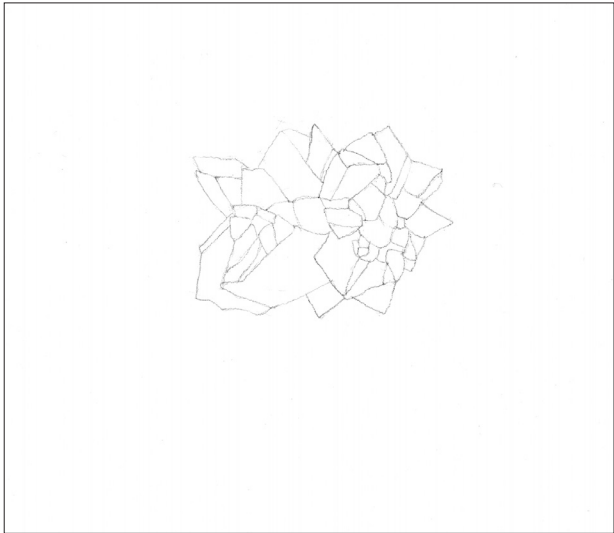
or less since the beginning of my practice. For example, in 2005 I had a project at the Geological Museum in Amsterdam where I replicated (by observing and modeling) a series of fossils from the collection. The replicas were remade in porcelain, scale one to one with the originals (which measured between 1 and 5 cm). I started by identifying which collection I would work with, then I set up the premises and the system: I would replicate the entire collection, by hand, in porcelain, no matter how long that would take. It was not that clear to me why I wanted to do it, but I knew there was something there to learn about.

During the eight months that it took me to accomplish my mission, I learnt a lot about the pieces themselves, about fossil formations, about how material changes from the original to the copy affected the perception of the form and so on. But I did not only learn about the pieces in terms of form and representation, but also about the project itself, the eight months undergoing the experience made me realise what the project was about. It was about time: about the time the fossils took to clash with the time of my reconstructions. It was about the idea of models and the gap between the original and the copies. About the absurdity of a hand trying to replicate (and of course failing) a natural formation.

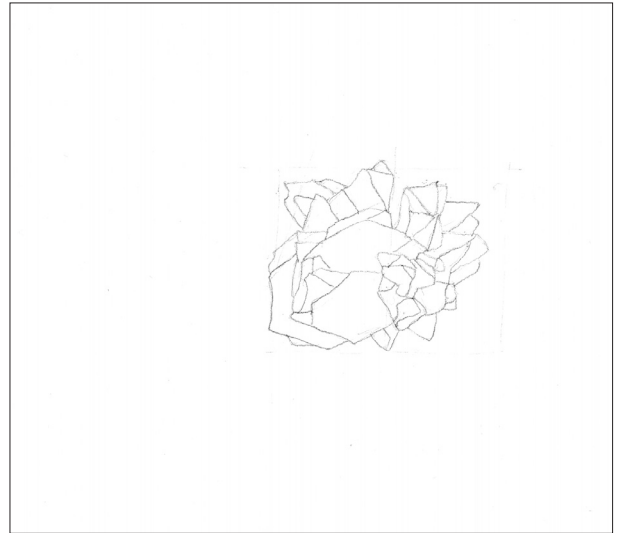
The list could expand and go on about things I learnt, or knowledge I acquired during this process, about the pieces, about the project and my practice in general. In this way the work became 'a tool for understanding'.

In the case of the 'meditation piece', I wanted to get closer to the sample itself (the stone), to the process of drawing the stone, the specificity of drawing as a system of representation.

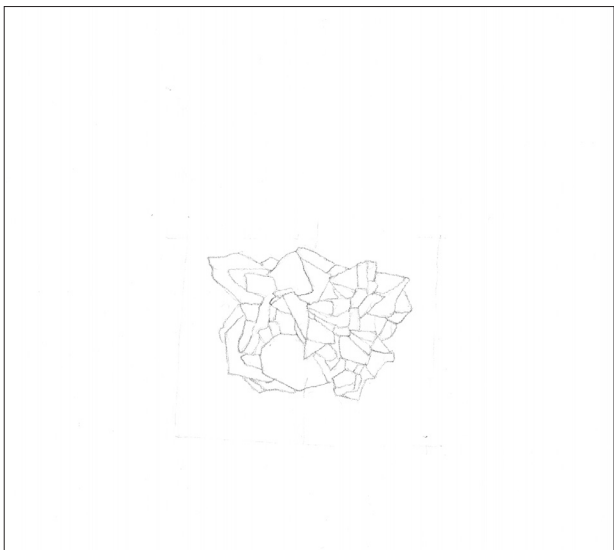
I transcribed the notes I wrote just before or just after making the drawings, they follow:



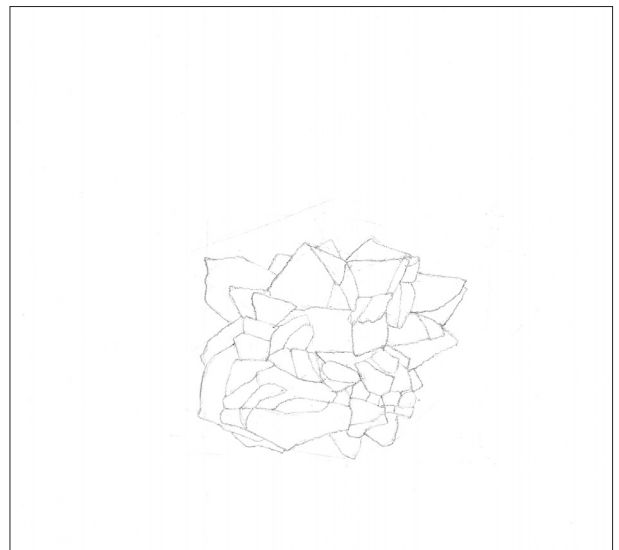
14th february



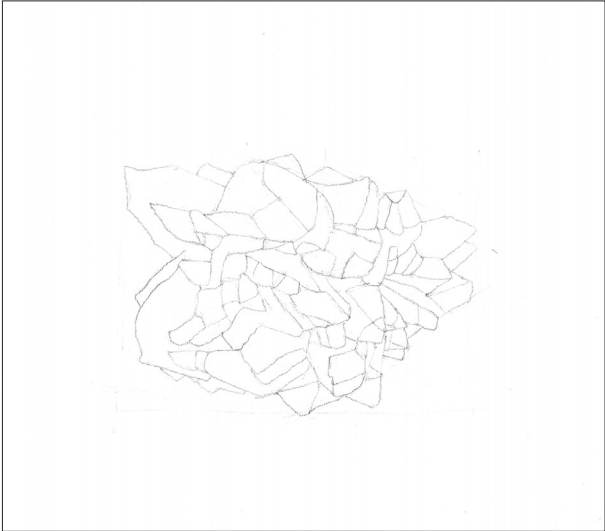
15th february



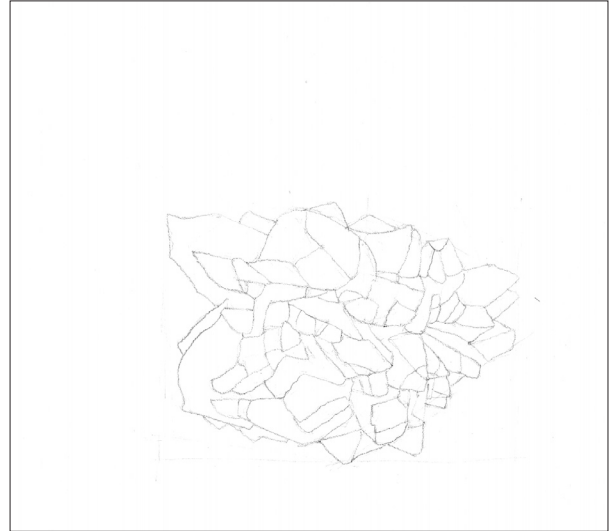
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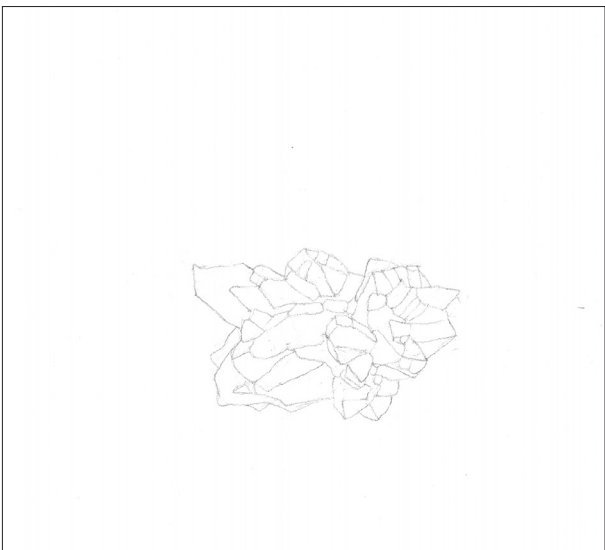
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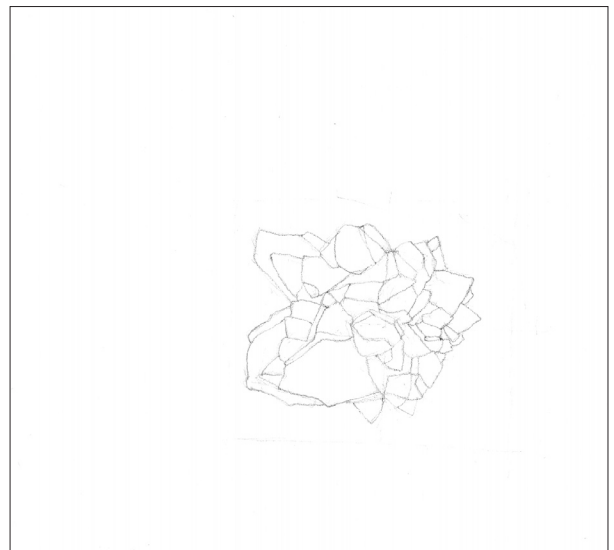
18th february



19th february



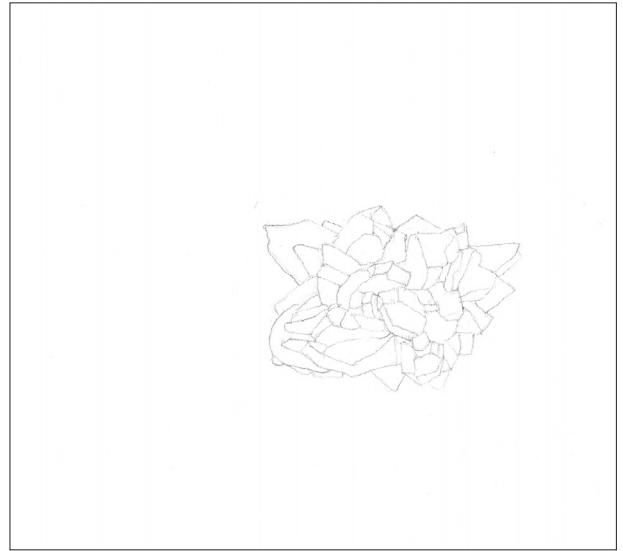
20th february



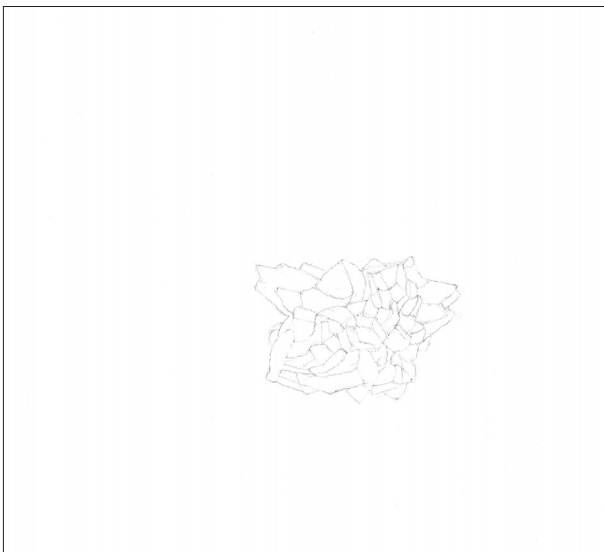
21th february



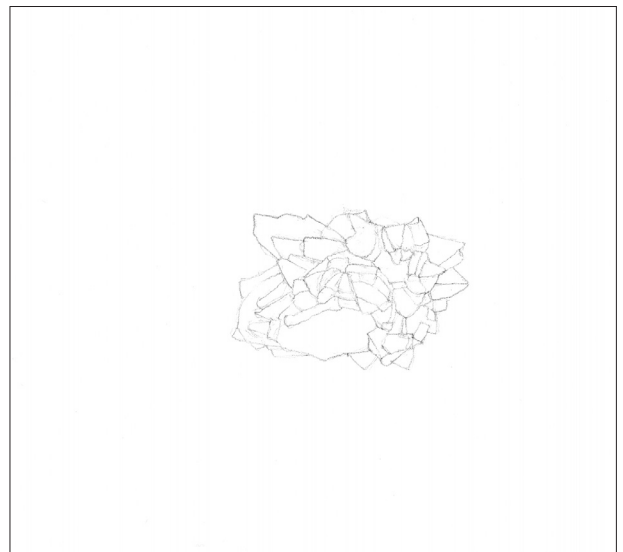
22th february



23th february



24th february



25th february

### 20th February:

The stone is there, the chair is there, the light in the same position, the paper is the same size. How to address today? Where should I start? By the proportions? I'm supposed to know them by now. Today I see few angles here and there, which I hadn't seen before, I see the continuation of some lines which I also hadn't seen, some forms seem to continue from one side to the other. There is a part that is always outstanding, a little plane, more or less in the middle, it always shines more, light reflects more there. I like starting by drawing that part, in the center and organise everything from there. Yesterday I tried to start with a side, the right side and the drawing became chaotic and fragmented.

The coordinates are the same and nevertheless the drawings are very different everyday. Can I see more everyday? I think so. I also lose my patience each day. I'm one-fifth of the way gone with the experiment, and it's already driving me insane.

Yesterday I started with the fragments and built up to the whole. Today I started with the whole, a quick sketch outlining the entire thing, then the shapes came after, adjusting details as I learnt in art-school. Perhaps it worked better.

I try to be objective every time I sit in front of the white piece of paper. I never look at the drawing I made the day before. Nevertheless every drawing is so different from the other.

### 21st February

The question is: if there is a certain amount of progress in the process, would the last drawing be the most accurate one? Am I learning more about the stone everyday?

Yesterday I thought I did, today I think not, the drawing today is more chaotic and lacks detail. Where is the deconstruction happening? Not only is one thing not the same as the other but we, as

observers, never observe the same things. The drawing changes every day, even if I try to draw it with the same concentration each day. Would it be the same with scientific drawings? Weird if so, but more than possible.

### 22nd February

Today is the first day that the drawing is what it should be. The proportions of the parts are what they should be, nothing is forced to connect with something else, but organically falls into place. I wonder what it has to do with; maybe the fact that I went swimming before sitting and drawing. I wonder if, even beyond my will or desire, it's related with my state of mind or mood. Today I started drawing from the fragment to the totality, I started by that fragment in the centre and from there the drawing grew to the sides. I didn't even throw the proportion lines or general angles. I have no idea if it has to do with this that I made a better drawing, maybe it is simply a better working day.

### 24th February

I passed a third of the piece today. Perhaps a good question is: when does the repetition becomes negative or invalid? When is the moment when it is no longer interesting to continue with the experience, when there is nothing else to learn from it, when it is not even annoying anymore and becomes kind of a 'job'? When you have learnt what you have to learn, what about other people? How many drawings does the viewer have to see to understand the point? At this moment it is a bit boring to draw the stone. It has become very far from being exciting, just something which forces me to calm down, look, put the pieces together, and draw.

I feel I 'know' the stone by now.

Idea for future: draw the stone by memory when I finish.



## 26th February

For a few days I think I know the stone better every day, it doesn't entertain me to make the drawings, it doesn't make me angry either, nor restless, not even bored.

It's now about the process of knowing the stone and renouncing the idea that 'I know' how the stone is. And everyday, I don't know.

Drawing organises where the parts are and how they relate to each other.

For several days I started by drawing the parts, and the fragments were leading me to the whole. The problem at the end is the relationship between the parts and the distances among them. Today I wanted to get back to the system of beginning with the proportions, direction lines and the relationship between the parts but I realised that the smallest forms of each part is what affects the general directions. I concluded that this method wasn't useful for me.

In the end, I combined both methods, I started with a fragment, the fragment which caught my attention the most; then the whole around the fragment till I reached the totality, and then started to adjust the details and keep dividing the parts into smaller parts. From the beginning to the left, or to the right, or below (the area I control the best) and then I start losing concentration. The parts I draw at the end are always the least sharp.

The drawings are much better when I manage to concentrate on it and not on theorizing about what I am doing. Drawing, drawing and that's it. I still lack many details to entirely know the stone but I do believe that I can see more every day.

The most performative aspect of the piece is the fact that the action modifies me, it modifies my understanding of the stone and my days, it anchors me or it drives me crazy, but the day would definitely not be the same if I did or did not

draw the stone. Am I going to miss the exercise after the thirty days? I'm not even half way done, hard to imagine that day. It would be beautiful to draw it from memory after those thirty days; to see how one remembers, if one remembers the same everyday, or if one keeps forgetting by the day, one day a line, a fragment, an angle.

Idea: draw the piece by dissected fragments  
When? Now? When I finish the thirty days?

## 3rd March

I do think I understand the nuances of the form better every day, I see more and more details on the rock. Still, I represent them differently every time. I don't know why. I really try to.

A lot is affected by the side on which I start. The first area is the most defined and then the rest follows and gets less and less detailed.

The scene is there, nothing changes, the same little rock in front of me everyday.

This discipline is quite weird too, especially when having to wake up at 06:30 to fit 'the drawing exercise' in the agenda. And still, when I'm in front of the rock, I like to be there, in front of the same problem as yesterday, a friendly feeling for the mind. How do we go with this today? The rock is the same, I'm probably not. And again this notion of time. I was in a rush today and thought the drawing would be a disaster but no, the brain just connected the elements faster. Wondering again how this notion of time influenced accounts of travel. For us today, it's simply impossible to sit days and days in front of the same landscape.

## 4th March

Will the drawing today be the most unfocused drawing ever?

## 10th March

I elaborate a lot on the right side of the drawing,

enclosing that area and then towards the lower part and the upper part, trying to maintain the proportions.

The combination in between what one knows, remembers, and sees starts to be fruitful. It started helping the logic of the form.

I remember that at the end of the 'reconstructing piece' I realised a similar thing: I started to understand the logic of the fossil formations by remaking them.

### 15th March

Might be four-fifths of the drawings left to be done. In fact, I think only three. Tomorrow I'll count how many are left. This is what I know from each day, no matter in what kind of hurry, mental space, or mood I am, I will do the drawing. Ok, cool down, this is the stone, you have to draw it even if you'll arrive late to your appointment. Time has stopped, and what you have to do is sit and draw the stone. Everything else moves and changes, but the stone is there, same position, same light, same muteness.

It takes about an hour to do it, sometimes a bit less.

Every day I feel I know it better and kind of embodied, I get an awkward feeling when I've forgotten to draw a fragment here or there.

I think I know it better every day and every time I draw it over the last few days I think I draw it correctly, nevertheless the drawings are still different every time.

### 19th March

Tomorrow will be the last one.

It's very frustrating but also somehow very calming to sit in front of that little stone everyday. The same lines, the same curves, the protuberances, all the same and the brain trying to organize it into a drawing

The last few days I started in the middle. Three elements which stand out are some kind of landmark to organise the rest around

The important thing is not to go too far from the centre and back, but constructing all the areas around it

Two days ago I couldn't do it, and it does feel like the learning curve went backwards; but it was a nice moment later on to find the little stone still there and waiting.

I really wonder how this image will get imprinted in my brain system

### 20th March

End of the exercise, feels weird.

Today, while I was drawing, I felt that something was missing, I controlled the drawing and found all the parts there. After a while I detected a mini-formation which was missing on the border, on the top, there was this little area which I had forgotten.

The proportions, the lines, the distances at the end were 'incorporated' (embodied?)

A system too, what to draw first, what comes after, what to do or not to do in order to get the least possible wrong

'The piece of forgetting', that might be the next step

### As a conclusion

The combination in between what I know and see became more and more accurate throughout the experiment. At the beginning 'to know' a priori was working against the drawings, it prevented me from observing as I assumed I already knew. By the end of it, 'to know' was what anchored the drawings and gave me space to know more and adjust more. It gave me the tranquility that the drawing will work anyway, that I knew the coordinates and the eye could concentrate and explore more in depth.

To draw the same thing over thirty times is fundamentally and radically different to any other drawing making. To draw is always, to me, a way of thinking, a way of establishing relationships, a way of understanding, even a way of finding a ground or a bridge to my work. When you draw something which is almost the same as something else but not one hundred percent (such as butterflies from the same specie), the attention and the eye focuses on the small differences between samples: Where is that spot in this one? It looks larger, or more off centre; that line is 2 mm shorter here or there, the shadow is more diffused. The micro differences are there and it is what keeps you awake, alert and learning.

Now, if you are going to draw the same thing over and over again, your concentration goes in directions of how to find the most accurate system to represent it, trying different systems, and then, in tracing the balance in between you and the object (given the fact that the object is always there, immutable), if there is a difference in the drawing, the difference is obviously generated by you.

How to organize the same elements on a piece of paper everyday? Even if one always wants to do the same, it comes across differently. The idea of objectivity is a great fiasco. The drawing is one thing if one had a convoluted day, another if one is tired from a bad night or fresh for a good one.

To know and observe: This little dichotomy stayed the entire process, almost fighting against each other, sometimes one on top, sometimes the other, and by the end almost together.

As can be seen in the notes during the exercise, many thoughts arouse in the process. Many of them were related to representation, how do I draw this? And then, how? Again and again.

To represent makes us think about representation. As simple as that, but this statement leads us to another issue, which for me is relevant and keeps coming across the work, and is: what is it that we do as artists, which makes us do this or that type of work, and have this or that approach to the work? In other words, how does the action affect the thinking process? And what actions do we want to follow in order to lead the work one way or the other. How does it make a difference to read about subjective representation, or to have the embodied experience of how subjective representation works by setting yourself the rules of drawing the same piece thirty times

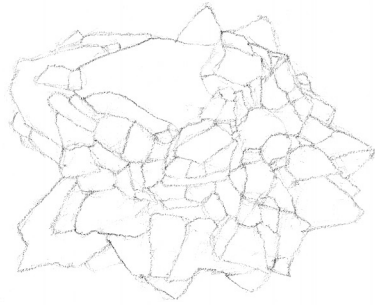
Knowledge of the stone grew over the exercise, and the eye learnt more and more about it, and the hand sort of responded. This gave me some hope on this learning curve, and some idea that we could acquire skills for observing and representing. The awkward side of this is that the learning curve don't and won't stop, it has the inherent potential of growing ad-infinitum, which demands when these types of processes end or have to end. This reminds me of a story I heard when I started visiting the university museum in Utrecht quite a while ago. One of the first stories I heard there is the story of this small microscope from Leeuwenhoek.

Antonie van Leeuwenhoek (1632-1723) was one of those scientists who went into looking closely at things. As well as being the father of microbiology, van Leeuwenhoek laid the foundations of plant anatomy, and became an expert on animal reproduction. He also discovered sperm, blood cells and microscopic nematodes, and studied the structure of wood and crystals. He developed a way to grind powerful lenses, and made over 400 microscopes to view specific objects.

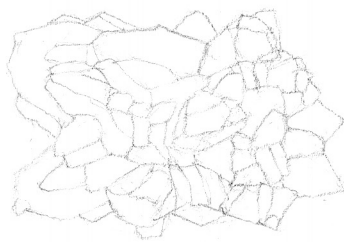
He invented a very special microscope, a tiny one that was controversial in his time because none of his contemporaries could see what he was able to see through it. The reason for this was that this microscope had an extremely small lens with a very short focal distance. The entire device measured about four centimetres and the lens was about one millimeter in a tiny hole in between. The person who wants to look through it has to hold it in his or her hand and with the other hand hold the slide. The microscope would be almost leaning on the person's eye and the slide would be very close to the device. The observer has to adjust the focal distance by manually adapting the distance from the eye to the lens, and from the lens to the slide. Needless to say, this microscope was a completely different microscope to the ones we are used to see. To use this microscope, it was necessary to have (or learn) perceptual skills, otherwise you would simply 'not see'.

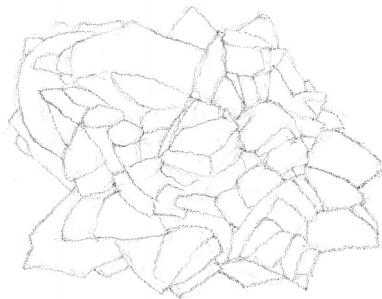
It is fascinating to notice, once more, how perception is such a subjective and individual experience. Also fascinating is this issue of being able to acquire or inherently have skills to observe.

Drawing is a way to organize information and put it into perspective, to comprehend what we observe and systematise it, perhaps even control it. But then doing it again and again, and proving that there is no way or even a possibility of doing it in one way, shows us some kind of impossibility in representing. It deconstructs the idea of drawing as a tool for objective representation. But then, drawing still seems to be an accurate system to acquire knowledge, to comprehend the thing. At least for the one who does it.



26th february





28th february