The Cut and the Continuum: Sophie Ristelhueber’s Anatomical Atlas

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From her early photographs of the ruinous aftermath of the Lebanon War in Beirut (1982) to her more recent images of bomb craters in Eleven Blowups (2006), the French artist Sophie Ristelhueber has been intent to maintain, in her own metaphor, ‘the analytical distance of an anatomy lesson’. Exhibiting the evidence of warfare but withholding their explanation, Ristelhueber’s provocative gesture of making art of war, removing human conflicts from their political contexts to render them as still-lifes, ready-mades, earthworks, or surrealist poems, is patently anti-journalistic. In keeping with the artist’s surgical analogy, this article explores Ristelhueber’s aesthetic mode of address as one that shares its fundamental operation with that of photography – namely, to make a cut. Retracing the morphology of recurring imprints and injuries that appear across the terrestrial and corporeal expanses traversed in her work, the article considers the ways in which these cuts pertain to the transformative power of violence and images alike.

Keywords: aerial photography, atlas, cut, dépaysement, Dust Breeding, indexicality, Late Photography, longue durée, Aby Warburg (1866–1929), Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), Man Ray (1890–1976), Alain Robbe-Grillet (1922–2008), Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007), Jean-Luc Nancy (1940–), Sophie Ristelhueber (1949–), Georges Didi-Huberman (1953–), Sarah Kember, Joanna Zylinska

When an object is broken, it is seen better. It seems undressed.

– Sophie Ristelhueber, Operations

Renowned for her photographs of the ruinous aftermath of manmade and natural catastrophes in the Middle East, the French artist Sophie Ristelhueber has suggested that the violent nature of her work – violent, as we shall see, both in terms of content and form – has been impelled by a desire to defy her own fragile and delicate appearance, resembling, in the artist’s phrase, ‘a Pre-Raphaelite painting’.1 Ristelhueber playfully evoked the paradox in an installation called Autopортrait from 1999 (figure 1). This self-portrait of the artist at fifty, one whose oeuvre is clinically devoid of portraits, consists of eight desolate locations photographed in Central Asia. Each print has been affixed to an aluminium trestle and placed upright as a board directly on the floor. Containing no additional information to indicate their time and location, this series of terrain vagues – a desert, a grove of brushwood, a shoreline, mountain ranges, an icy road – are not merely cut out of context, but are also cut into one another, as each print partly screens out the view behind. One has to physically move through this atlas in reverse, scattered in three-dimensional space rather than projected on a two-dimensional page, in order

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to see. At a far remove mounted on the back wall of the gallery an anonymous figure, comfortably seated in an armchair with a cross-stitch in her hands, peaks out behind the row of protective screens.

The alleged self-portrait is in reality a magnified detail extracted from an early twentieth-century oil painting belonging to Ristelhueber’s family mansion, which depicts an acquaintance of the artist’s grandparents. This senior lady, Ristelhueber has explained, is the woman that as a child she imagined she would grow up to become, and the stuffy room the confined world of bourgeois conventions from which she yearned to remove herself. The close-up was made as an aerial photograph, shot from a vertical vantage point four metres above the canvas. Adding to the ambiguous, and somewhat androgynous, appearance of the artist’s alter ego, literally her ‘other self’, the facial features have dissolved into a chromatic blur of pigments (suggestive of grains or pixels). *Autoportrait*, then, simultaneously conveys self as other and figure as ground. The embroidery in her hands, furthermore, is suggestive of the artist’s concern with fabrics, folds, stitches and sutures to which we will return shortly.

Ten years earlier, a similar gesture was made in *Vulaines* (1989). In a series of seven diptychs that combine magnified fragments from black and white family photographs with large-format colour photographs, Ristelhueber revisits the country estate in the village of Vulaines near the Fontainebleau forest where she spent her childhood summers (figure 2). Taken from the point of view of a five-year-old and positioned at floor level in the gallery, the colour images of the interiors of the house emulate a child’s ability to be engulfed in a world of mundane objects. Intent to divest these intimate settings of biographical attributes, the patterns on a carpet or wallpaper, scratches on wooden floors and tiles, folds in a blanket or a depression in a mattress, is perceived as unknown territory. Moving twenty years ahead, these interiors appear again, this time together with a grove of charred palm trees in Iraq cut in half by artillery fire. In the video installation *Fatigues* (2008), a camera has been mounted on a dolly to scan the magnified prints, tracking across their surfaces as if surveying large tracts of land. Most recently, Ristelhueber has returned to the summerhouse in her film *Pères* (*Fathers*, 2014), a work commissioned for the centennial commemoration of the First World War. This time, the camera hovers above the frayed carpets trodden for more than a century by members of the artist’s family, among them her great-uncle who was enlisted in the war in 1914 and perished two years later. The high-angle shots imply an oblique double-exposure of domestic and geopolitical space, the domain of childhood and the battlefield, as the worn and muted textiles evoke the equally enigmatic patterns exposed in aerial reconnaissance photographs traversing the frontlines of the Great War.

While lesser known than the ruined buildings, scarred bodies and cratered terrains that have become Ristelhueber’s trademark, these four retrospective and self-reflective works, spread across as many decades, are nonetheless exemplary of a creative process that proceeds through multiple dislocations, treating familiar images and milieus as raw material to be worked upon, and the work of art itself as a ground for new figurations. From this perspective, Ristelhueber’s oeuvre might be construed as part of the tradition of *dépaysement* in French art and philosophy. Colloquially referring to a condition of exile or dislocation, the concept of *dépaysement* pertains more specifically to artistic strategies that aim to disorient the senses by uprooting prosaic objects from their familiar habitats, as first developed by the Surrealists after the First World War and later resumed in the new, objective literature pioneered by Alain Robbe-Grillet in the late 1950s. To follow this lineage also raises questions about some of the underlying assumptions that have shaped the critical reception of Ristelhueber’s work.

Earlier this year, Ristelhueber’s most well-known series of photographs, made from the air and on the ground in the trenched and trashed desert of

Kuwait six months after the first Gulf War in 1991, was shown at a group exhibition at Tate Modern called ‘Conflict, Time, Photography’. As part of the ‘Tate Shots’ series of interviews accompanying the show, the artist recalls that she ‘wanted to do a statement on how little we see’. The comment paraphrases at once the puzzled reactions of the pilots in the International Forces whom she persuaded to take her on board their aircrafts (“Why are you going into the desert?” Ristelhueber recalled their asking. “There’s absolutely nothing to see”)

4 as well as a recurring objection that has been raised against her images from zones of conflict, which have been indicted precisely for how little they reveal, for not teaching the spectator about the geopolitical context, and for refraining to articulate a clear statement. This critique, I suggest, follows from the expectations that the genre of photojournalism, and of photography more generally, arouse.

*Aftermath*, the English title for Ristelhueber’s work from Kuwait, came to be adopted as a generic placeholder for what David Campany, in the wake of 9/11, detected as ‘a highly visible turn toward photographing the aftermath of events’. What variously has been labelled as ‘aftermath photography’, ‘late photography’ or ‘post-reportage’, charts an almost complete reversal of the traditional virtues of war reportage. In the concise formulation of the artist duo Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, it constitutes a ‘post-mortem of photojournalistic representations of conflict’.

Thus, instead of Henri Cartier-Bresson’s ‘decisive moment’, the indecisive aftermath; and instead of Robert Capa’s dictum ‘if your pictures aren’t good enough, you aren’t close enough’, a distanced and detached position. In aftermath photography, the symptomology of trauma prevails over instantaneity and involvement, a trauma brought on by photography’s loss of its privileged relation to the singular and spectacular event. Along these lines, many commentators have identified the aestheticising tendencies of aftermath photography, with its amplified sense of stillness and muteness, as an elegiac response to sublimate this loss. In Campany’s appraisal, the doubly removed position of the late photographer focalised ‘not so much the trace of an event as the *trace of the trace of an event*’, augmenting the ‘has been’ or ‘having been there’ effect that Roland Barthes and Andre Bazin defined as the *noeme* of the photographic medium.

Ristelhueber, however, does not pay much attention to the question of medium specificity, nor can her work be reduced to an attack of photographic conventions. My contention in the following is instead that it prompts a reflection on the nature of the artwork and an aesthetic mode of address that shares its fundamental operation with that of photography – namely, to make a cut – not merely by cutting into the flow of time and the reflection of light rays, but also into the circulation of images of conflict perpetuated by the military and the media alike. Media theorists Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska have fleshed out the theoretical basis for this idea in their conception of ‘the photographic cut’.

In an effort to move beyond the stale debates on representationalism and indexicality, Kember and Zylinska propose that we understand the process of cutting ‘as both a technique (an ontological entity encapsulating something that is, or something that is taking place) and an ethical imperative (as expressed by the command: “Cut!”)’. Highlighting the inherent relation between this process and the medium of photography, the authors conceive of the camera as a device for placing a cut (the opening and closing of the shutter that arrests duration and slices out a moment in space and time, cutting the world into discrete objects). Taking their cue from Karen Barad’s coinage of the ‘agental cut’, as opposed to the Cartesian cut and the division it effects between mind and matter, internal and external, human and non-human, the process of cutting entails at once a separation (to cut apart, to disassemble) and a relationality (to cut together, to reassemble), what Kember and Zylinska refer to ‘as the two dominant aspects of material locatedness in time’.


5 – Ristelhueber has responded to this criticism: ‘I think that the people who reproach me for aestheticising violence confuse aestheticisation with finding a form for an idea’ (‘Je pense que les gens qui me faisaient ce reproche d’esthétiser la violence, confondaient l’esthétisation avec le fait de trouver une forme à une idée’). Grenier, *Sophie Ristelhueber*, 53.


10 – Campany, ‘Safety in Numbness’, 124; original emphasis.


12 – Ibid., 71; original emphasis.


14 – Campany, ‘Safety in Numbness’, 124; original emphasis.
By marking the process through which we engage with the material world in order to give it, and ourselves, form, the act of cutting articulates an ethical imperative, since to give shape also means to give agency. It is in this light, I suggest, that we may understand the following remark by Ristelhueber: ‘Although my projects are rooted in a socio-political reality, my motivations are also very selfish: when I give shape to a project, it helps me live.’ More specifically, Kember and Zylinska’s definition of ‘photography as an active process of cutting through the flow of mediation’ corroborates Ristelhueber’s own account of how several of her most ambitious projects have evolved from a chance encounter with a news item. The artist has referred to such catalytic images as a déclencheur, a trigger or, in photographic terms, a shutter-release-button. Examples include a newspaper clipping from the siege of Beirut of a woman mourning her dead and, glimpsed in the background, the ruins of a modern building (Beirut, 1984); an aerial view the size of a postage stamp of French Jaguar fighters bombing dug-in tanks in the desert of Kuwait published in Time magazine (Fait, 1992); an aerial press photograph of an Israeli settlement on the West Bank in Newsweek (WB, 2005); or the newsreel footage of the crater left in a street of Beirut after the detonation that killed former prime minister Rafic Hariri (Eleven Blowups, 2006).

These cuts into the flow of mediation out of which a new project begins to take shape are indicative of the material and conceptual implications of cutting, which pertain both to the cuts figured in Ristelhueber’s work (the topoi it traverses, the wounded tissues and terrains) and to the cuts figured through her work (the particular form that they carve out). A salient feature of Ristelhueber’s photography, as identified already by Ann Hindry in her 1998 monograph on the artist, is the impression that each image appears to be subtracted from a ‘huge visual field’ in a manner that also suggests ‘what implicitly carries on beyond them’. Thus, the image at once stands out from, and refers back to, the field or ground from which it has been abstracted. Hindry further describes the tensions at play between the field and the edges of the image as one between ‘an inventorial report’ and a ‘crisis-point’. It is this tension that my proposal to consider the trajectory of Ristelhueber’s work in terms of an atlas attempts to grasp.

In an anatomical atlas, the cut intersects with cartography. Originally referring to a collection of maps of the earth, the atlas became a generic format for any illustrated survey during the nineteenth century, including atlases of anatomy mapping out the topography of the human body. While the notion of an atlas clearly alludes to the nomadic nature of Ristelhueber’s work and the sheer territorial range it covers, it also implies that her approach may be more closely aligned with the formal rigour of a geographical survey than with the pictorial repertoire of landscape art. Evocative of cartographic forms, her photographs typically favour tightly cropped frontal or aerial views, cutting out atmospheric elements such as the cycles of the day or the seasons. We may further note an abiding concern with the question of maps, territories and borders. Consider, for instance, The Air Belongs to Everybody (L’Air est à tout le monde, 1997–2002), which charts the borders of Tajikistan with Afghanistan, Turkmenistan with Iran, and Syria with Iraq; Fait divers (2005), which follows the reaches of the Danube, a former political border during the communist era, from the mouth of the delta until it merges with the Black Sea; or The Equator Line (La Ligne de l’équateur – 1988, 1996), a photograph of latitude zero taken from a deserted terrace on an island in the Gulf of Guinea. From this perspective, Ristelhueber’s project may be understood as an active attempt to resist cartographic division, to undiscipline space and to unsettle scale (often depicting intimate subjects on monumental scales and vice versa).

The challenge posed by Ristelhueber’s work to the territorial logic of mapmaking, and the discourse of the modern state in which such practices are imbricated, brings us to a second group exhibition, curated by art historian and philosopher Sophie Ristelhueber’s Anatomical Atlas
Georges Didi-Huberman in 2010. In ‘Atlas: How to Carry the World on One’s Back?’, the first in a series of shows inspired by the Bilderalas that was assembled by the Jewish-German cultural historian Aby Warburg in the 1920s, Ristelhueber was included among a miscellany of artists all of whom, in the words of the curator, had set out to ‘gather the scattered pieces of the world’ in order to invent ‘alternative geographies’. Before we move on to consider Ristelhueber’s work in greater detail, I would like to expand upon the conceptual affinity between the projects undertaken by Warburg and Ristelhueber, as this comparison will also help to delineate the focal points of my discussion.

Warburg conceived of his Mnemosyne Atlas (1924–29) as an instrument to chart the migrations (Wanderung) and survival (Nachleben) of what he termed Pathosformeln, psychic states of passion or suffering that had been fossilised in the image, from antiquity to the present. By utilising the atlas propensity for making bold connections and comparisons across time and territory, Didi-Huberman has argued that the Mnemosyne should also be understood as an attack on the teleological narratives of western art. For Warburg, and in marked contrast to Cartier-Bresson’s idiom of the ‘decisive moment’, the time of the historical event (the click of the shutter) and the time of the image do not coincide. Conversely, it was the task of the atlas to pierce open this relation through a series of anachronistic breaks and ruptures. A process of cutting is thus intrinsic to the model of historical memory implemented by Warburg. ‘An Atlas is an incision in the archive,’ Didi-Huberman remarks, and this incision was multiplied on the wooden boards covered with black cloth where Warburg continually rearranged a plethora of iconic material without regard to medium or artistic merit, including postcards, postage stamps and geographical maps, reproductions of sculptural friezes, frescos and reliefs, newspaper clippings and commercial ads. Cut loose from the conventional criteria of art history (epoch, canon, oeuvre), the expressive forms embedded in the images were thus isolated and suspended against the black fabric of the panels in order to trace their migration and eruption into unexpected times and places. Hence Warburg’s reference to the Bilderalas as a seismograph, a tool for sensing the waves and tremors running below the territory of cultural knowledge.

Between Warburg and Ristelhueber we may first take note of their shared emphasis on the spatial constellation of images – the space of the gallery or the library as a dynamic medium where images interact and gather force – as well as on the force of the image itself and its capacity to shatter or break something. Ristelhueber’s recourse to medical analogies – referring to her photographs as surgical incisions and the matters explored as recurring symptoms – speaks of this need to break open. Similarly, in highlighting the political dimension of Warburg’s project, which was conceived in the interim between two world wars and in the wake of Warburg’s recovery from a mental breakdown, Didi-Huberman refers to the Atlas as ‘a tool for “sampling,” by means of juxtaposed images, the chaos of history’. Contrary to Warburg, however, Ristelhueber is not concerned with life in motion (bewegtes Leben) but with life injured or interrupted. Instead of the vivid or agitated gesture, the presence of the human is discreetly marked in her work by the traces left behind. Most importantly, her work patently refutes pathos and tragedy. Nonetheless, it confronts us with expressions of suffering, or what Ristelhueber has called her obsessions: ‘traces, fractures, and disappearances’. As Didi-Huberman has noted elsewhere, her work ‘carries the use value of the document to a point of intensity where each photograph seems to demonstrate both the silence of the event and the cry left by its trace’. It is such a morphology of recurring shapes, traversed across architectural, terrestrial and corporeal expanses, which the following analysis aims to retrace.

Charting the symptoms that survive us, or what Hindry simply calls ‘the time of things’, Ristelhueber’s atlas proceeds in a manner that refutes any clear distinction between before and after. We may ask, then, whether the temporal
logic of the Tate exhibition, which was organised around aftermaths of various durations (hours, months, years), as well as the prefixes of ‘aftermath’, ‘late’ or ‘post’ that have been attached to the genre of photography that Ristelhueber’s work has routinely been associated with, fully grasps the account of time that these cuts engender? Pursuing this question, we turn now to the metaphor of anatomy.

Surgical Sites

To open? To break something, then. At the very least to make an incision, to rend. [...] To kill the image, in other words, to mend it or close it up, to dent the violence in it, its essential dissemblance, even its inhumanity.27

The founding gesture of Ristelhueber’s work, in the artist’s own metaphor, has been to maintain ‘the analytical distance of an anatomy lesson’.28 This analogy is familiar from Walter Benjamin’s seminal essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, where Benjamin compares the optical instruments of the photographer with the hands of the surgeon penetrating the patient’s body.29 The particular facets of this metaphor, however, have a more specific purchase on the work of art as conceived by Ristelhueber. As will be explored in greater detail in the following, anatomy pertains to the manifold connotations of cutting that informs her work: to cut into so as to open up; to reduce or remove, cutting out characters and contexts; to make or form something by cutting the material; to intervene or interrupt by cutting off habitual routes of interpretation – but also to cut together, to join something across a gap.

The analogy between photography and anatomy has been firmly in place since Ristelhueber’s first solo project in 1982, set in the operating theatre of a Paris hospital. It is a series of close-ups of needles, scalpels and forceps, masked faces and gloved hands, exposed and isolated body parts. Illuminated by spotlights, the gestures of the medical staff and the surgical sites on the anaesthetised bodies maintain their anonymity. There are no people, so to speak, no subjects, in these images – merely the shrouded process of repairing and the draped flesh being repaired. Two years later, this close-up study of the process of mending the body was followed by Beirut (Beirouth, photographies, 1984), a study of a contemporary city in ruins (figure 3). Made in the immediate aftermath of the first Lebanon War, Beirut showed modern edifices – a sport stadium, a movie theatre, the bank quarters – reduced to crushed concrete, twisted metal and mangled wire, with the impact of artillery fire on pockmarked buildings evoking, in Ristelhueber’s medical terminology, ‘a skin disease’.30

In retrospect, these two works established a bipolar pattern that can be traced across Ristelhueber’s creative output in its entirety, relentlessly shifting between figure and ground, anatomy and archaeology, the corporeal and the terrestrial. Often, her projects tend to come in pairs, with one series of images emerging from the one preceding it in order to set up its reverse shot. This effect was most strikingly accomplished in two companion pieces from the early 1990s – Fait (1992) and Every One (1994) – each responding to a contemporary atrocity: the military operation in the Persian Gulf and the Civil War in the Balkans.

Ristelhueber arrived in Kuwait in October 1991, six months after the first Gulf War had ended, to photograph aerial views and ground-level shots of the deserted battlefield along its border to Iraq. The resulting series of seventy-one photographs are uniformly monochrome, altering between drab sandy hues and shiny blacks and whites. Occasionally, an opaque, dust-filled sky is visible. With the close-ups and long-distance shots all printed in the same size and installed in uniform rows on the gallery wall, Fait at once emulates and contradicts the gridded visual field of aerial reconnaissance. Instead of suturing together a coherent photo-mosaic of successive shots, it prompts the viewer continually to adjust perception while moving from one scale to another. Furthermore, the large-format prints were

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30 – Grenier, Sophie Ristelhueber, 37: ‘des maladies de peau’.

Downloaded by [UiT Norges arktiske universitet] at 02:35 18 March 2016
fitted into wooden boxes waxed with golden polish, turning them, as the artist explains, ‘into objects that were at once precious and much like camouflage […] linked together by a sort of glowing halo’. As Ann Hindry further notes, ‘the all-over images come across like excerpts from a continuum’.

Fait translates both as ‘fact’ and ‘what has been done’ – that is, what the documentary image allegedly contains and conveys. The title bears a marked resonance with two prophetic essays from the same year. According to Paul Virilio’s Desert Screen, the Persian Gulf set the stage for a new kind of warfare where, ‘the first of the “ruses de guerre” is no longer a more or less ingenious stratagem, but an abolition of the appearance of facts. From now on the defeat of facts [la défaite des faits] precedes those of arms’. Extending Virilio’s claim, a second essay by Jean Baudrillard famously asserted that The Gulf War Did Not Take Place. For Virilio and Baudrillard the unilateral military operation was a war only by name, as the media event of the Gulf War, disseminated across the Desert Screen, displaced what in reality were a few weeks of atrocious bombing raids. What took place in the Persian Gulf was, in Virilio’s formulation, ‘the disappearance of the event’.

But what does this expression, ‘events take place’, signify? What is the relationship between what has taken place and the place that remains? Can a site hold the event in place so that it can be accessed or excavated after the fact? Or does the impact of the event extract from place some essential characteristic? Ristelhueber seems to suggest the latter when she referred to Beirut as a city that had been rendered unrecognisable as a city, or when she described the territory in Kuwait as a ‘desert that is no longer a desert’. In both cases, the physical shock of the act of violence appears to have destroyed the former identity and meaning of the place. Fait, however, confers a new form to this assaulted material, although without

32 – Hindry, Sophie Ristelhueber, 75.
36 – Grenier, Sophie Ristelhueber, 46: ‘ce désert qui n’est pas un désert’.
filling this form with a new meaning. While returning us to the real of the location, to the place of the event, Ristelhueber does not present an account of these events, but merely a record of their material impact. The traces are evident – the patterns of tank tracks, bomb craters and spent ammunition – but their causes remain enigmatic. The inventory of scattered facts conducted in Fait thus undermines its own evidentiary value by simultaneously exhibiting the evidence and withholding its explanation (figure 4).

Grouping together Fait (or Aftermath, as it was called in English) with other photographic works from conflict zones in the Middle East and central Asia, such as the deserted Afghan battlefields photographed in the aftermath of the 2002 Coalition War by Simon Norfolk and Paul Seawright, Sarah James has reproached aftermath photography for being ‘deprived of nearly all bodily substance’ and thus unable to ‘accommodate flesh, bodies or selves’.37 Fait, on the contrary, offers an intense mediation on bodily matter, but it does so by insisting on a separation of bodies from selves. Engaging these facts on the ground formally rather than rhetorically, Fait does not convey a message about victims and aggressors, or a morale of innocence and guilt, but a lesson in anatomy. ‘It was as if I were fifty centimetres from my subject, like in an operating theatre’, Ristelhueber recalls from her flights above the desert floor.38 Displaced from the geophysical terrain of battle to the operating table, Fait replays the medical euphemisms through which the bombing raids were narrated: the sanitised discourse of the ‘clinical precision’ of ‘surgical strikes’ that conjured a clean war executed by expert technicians and intelligent weapons – a war primarily waged, in Virilio’s phrase, ‘inside the organs of the missile’.39 Notably, it was in the first Gulf War that the USA first deployed drones for surveillance missions in the Middle East, inaugurating our current ecology of automated warfare conducted with remote-controlled drones, satellites and simulation technologies. This is one of the implications of how Fait makes ‘a statement on how little we see’, or, to put it differently, a statement on what fell through the grid of the Desert Screen.

The physical scars in the earth exposed, but not explained, in Fait, are echoed in the scarred bodies in Paris hospitals that Ristelhueber photographed for her next project, Every One. The series, which was inspired by the aerial view of a zig-zag
trench formation in Kuwait,\textsuperscript{40} consists of magnified close-ups of fresh surgical stitches. At once maintaining and reversing the optics of \textit{Fait}, the framed sections of human flesh remain oddly disorienting as the sheer size of the prints makes the wounded tissue on a chin or torso assume territorial dimensions. As the split between \textit{Every} and \textit{One} instructs, these scars elicit the plural in the singular, the common in the particular (figure 5).

‘For me, the bodies and the territories are the same thing’, Ristelhueber has remarked.\textsuperscript{41} Paying equal attention to their injuries as to the bandages, stitches and scars that provisionally pulls and pieces them together, bodies and territories are the same thing in the fact of their material presence as sites where events take place. They converge as physical objects cut from the same cloth and caught in a cycle of ruin and repair, both with regard to the damage wreaked upon them and to the formal rigour through which they are grasped by the artist. ‘In Kuwait I wanted to become one with the territory, even though it was bristling with mines. It was also a way of formulating the problem of representation, and, in the end, the problem of art’, Ristelhueber further states.\textsuperscript{42} This corporeal relation, however, does not aim to abridge the distance between the individual subject and the physical world it traverses. To become one with the territory, to make the body bristle with mines, implies instead a double register of identification and alterity. Thus, Sarah James’s critical appraisal that ‘aftermath photography has moved away from the humanistic tenets of the documentarian’ is for Ristelhueber a deliberate, even imperative, move.\textsuperscript{43} This inhuman turn also brings us to a pivotal source of her work.

In the artist’s own account, her approach marks a sustained attempt to apply the methods developed by Alain Robbe-Grillet, the spokesman and pioneer of the literary movement in the 1950s known as the \textit{nouveau roman}, and once the topic of Ristelhueber’s master’s thesis in literature. The task set out for this new, object-
centred literature was to efface plotting and psychology through a detailed and detached description of textures and fabrics. Robbe-Grillet formulated his present position against the anthropomorphic work performed by adjectives and metaphors, such as the ‘majestic’ mountain, the ‘merciless’ sun, the ‘heart’ of the forest, or ‘the sadness of a landscape’, which invest the material universe with meaning and ‘implies a hidden unity’ between man and things. The counter-operation plotted by Robbe-Grillet was to cling to the outer surfaces of the physical world with the descriptive rigour of a camera, to face its ‘opaque presence’ and thereby ‘to establish its exteriority and its independence’. This clinical gaze does not solicit a bond, but inflicts a cut. Interrupting the traffic between interior and exterior, it aims to facilitate, in Robbe-Grillet’s phrase, an “inhuman” work of art.

The inhuman has surfaced with some regularity as a distinct trope in the French reception of phenomenology since the Second World War. More importantly for the present discussion, the inhuman has repeatedly been articulated in relation to an unsettling sensation of perceiving a world absented of humanity. In his 1945 essay ‘Cézanne’s doubt’, Maurice Merleau-Ponty set out to define ‘the inhuman character’ of Paul Cézanne’s paintings by considering how the artist sought to abandon the historical codes of single-point perspective, and the anthropocentric worldview they embodied, in favour of an anatomical study of landscape and geology. Merleau-Ponty writes:

We live in the midst of man-made objects, among tools, in houses, streets, cities, and most of the time we see them only through the human actions which put them to use. We become used to thinking that all of this exists necessarily and unshakably. Cézanne’s painting suspends these habits of thought and reveals the base of inhuman nature upon which man has installed himself.

In his wide-ranging contextualisation of Ristelhueber’s work, the British art historian David Mellor closely follows this passage as he links the artist’s eschewal of ‘a certain idea of unified perspectival projection’ to the ‘primordial, chthonic elements’ evident in her photographs, ‘literally breaking through the surface of the world of housing, roads and hardware’. Following Italo Calvino’s characterisation of Robbe-Grillet as ‘the literary equivalent of a Cézanne’, as well as Roland Barthes’s claim that the new novel resumed the ‘destruction of classical space’ first launched by modernist painting, the dismantling of the deep and cohesive space of Euclidian geometry is at the heart of the projects undertaken by Cézanne and Robbe-Grillet. By paying minute attention to surface phenomena without taking recourse to explanatory frameworks or hierarchies, both artists sought to cleanse the world viewed of human purpose and utility, and to conjure an experience of raw matter prior to its domestication by scale and perspective. ‘Nature itself is stripped of the attributes that make it ready for animistic communions’, Merleau-Ponty contends in a formulation that anticipates Robbe-Grillet’s determination to prompt in the reader, ‘the shock of this stubborn reality we were pretending to have mastered. Around us, defying the noisy pack of our animistic or protective adjectives, things are there’.

The insights offered by Merleau-Ponty and Barthes prefigure a more recent concern to open up phenomenological enquiry beyond the remits of the human subject, especially when such a focus has been susceptible to promote ideas of rootedness, belonging and homelands. Challenging the anthropomorphic bias of this phenomenological tradition, which firmly grounds experience in the consciousness and perception of the experiencing subject, the notion of dépaysement, which frequently is invoked in the writings of Robbe-Grillet, has come to gain a new critical currency within the fields of post-phenomenology and posthumanism.

45 – Ibid., 68.
46 – Ibid., 78.
47 – Ibid., 67.
51 – For a probing analysis of space in the novels of Alain Robbe-Grillet, see José Luis Romaniñillos, “Outside it is Snowing”: Experience and Finitude in the Nonrepresentational Landscapes of Alain Robbe-Grillet, Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, 26:5 (October 2008), 795–822.
54 – Ibid., 68.
55 – Ibid., 69.
56 – Ibid., 78.
57 – Ibid., 67.
If the prime adversary targeted by the new novel was the sentimental conceit of universal unity, Ristelhueber’s attempt to implement these techniques into her photographic practice marks an active disengagement from the humanistic and heroic stance of photojournalism, as well as the political rhetoric of humanitarian interventions. For Robbe-Grillet, this objectivist phenomenology constituted a cleansing or, in the idiom preferred by Ristelhueber, an undressing, as when she described the broken architecture of Beirut as ‘a city undressed’. The topoi of Ristelhueber’s work, the surface textures of perforated skin or concrete, are not hierarchically opposed to some deeper meaning; appearance is not opposed to the real. Rather, they bring into focus the taking place of the violent act and the making of an image, the moment when the skin breaks and a scar grows. As Kember and Zylinska note, ‘cutting inevitably involves some degree of violence’. Violence, in turn, entails an act of disfiguration. It is to this relation between image and violence, and the propensity of the cut to at once conceal and reveal, that the next section turns.

Invisible Wars Disguised as Poems

All warfare is based on deception.56

Doubtless, as an artist, I am at war, too.57

In the autumn of 2003 Ristelhueber travelled on the West Bank, inspired by an old newspaper clipping showing a newly constructed Israeli settlement photographed from the air. To the artist, the colony’s neat rows of identical, white houses resembled ‘a décor’ or ‘Lego toys’.58 At the time, the Separation Wall was beginning to carve its route around the landlocked area between Jordan and the State of Israel. For its sheer material monstrosity the wall has been a site of frenzied photographic activity ever since, making it, in Simon Faulkner’s estimation, ‘the most photographed wall in the world’.59 Ristelhueber, however, had something else in mind, pursuing country roads meandering through the gentle hills and olive groves on the West Bank, tilting her camera downward to confront the conflict at close range from above. Prompted by the aerial press photograph of the settler colony, Ristelhueber worked out an alternative form of miniaturisation, photographing mounds of stones from a ladder a few metres above the ground.

The resulting work, WB (2005), consists of fifty-four colour photographs. Each image is a variation of the same motif: a road deprived of its destination, cut off by a trench or blocked by some physical obstacle – a pile of gravel or concrete blocks – with occasional close-ups of torn asphalt or twisted metal railings (figure 6). On the rare occasions when a skyline appears, it is usually reduced to a thin streak in the upper margin of the image. Retaining the same line of sight throughout the series, repeating the same image over and over with minor variations, this taxonomy of roads cut in two brings the conflict down to its material nucleus as ‘a war of stones’, to borrow a phrase from Elias Sanbar.60 As these barricades may erupt anywhere at any time, WB constitutes an attempt to locate the minimal condition of the separation, the point where it begins and gains power, but also where it comes to an end and petrifies into the fabric of the terrain. Instead of the large-scale engineering enterprise along the seam-zone of the Security Fence, with its intricate infrastructure of fences, trenches and surveillance areas, WB hones in on a more modest suture, slowly covered by weeds that sprout in bright greens and yellows.

WB was accompanied by a second piece titled Stitches (2005), a series of eleven black and white close-ups of scratched surfaces and fractured objects on the streets and footpaths of Palestinian cities on the West Bank. Again, there are no horizons, but merely the crude grey textures of brutal and brutalised matter. Divorced from their former use or function, the content of these images can, in fact, hardly be

54 – Grenier, Sophie Ristelhueber, 43: ‘Beyrouth était une sorte de ville déshabillée’.
55 – Kember and Zylinska, Life after New Media, 89.
recognised as objects, merely as materials: concrete, tarmac, oil stains. The gritty black and white photographs come together with twelve canvases with militant slogans, quoted from speeches of George W. Bush, embroidered in red cross-stitch and typographically arranged into small, concrete poems: Our Enemy, Our War, Our Allies, A War Over War, Road to War, Before the War, When it Comes to War, Their Enemies, Their Weapons, The Cause, Homeland, The Menace.

These companion pieces are exemplary of the obstinate manner in which Ristelhueber’s frontal, full-size views arrest the gaze and confront the viewer. Rather than guiding us into the scene and giving access to a legible narrative of perpetrators and victims, her images tend to obstruct straight signification, like the blocked roads repeated across WB. Our response is not directed along a ‘familiar emotional pathway’, as Debbie Lisle puts it, that canalises pity into political action. This disruption not only overturns the conventions of war reportage, but also the aesthetic conventions of landscape art and its repertoire of perspectival cues, framing figures and atmospheric effects that entices our gaze toward a vanishing point. While set in the pastoral confines of olive orchards and terraced valleys, WB dispenses with all the embellishments that render the natural, physical world as an artfully produced stage-set for human affairs to unfold. In Ristelhueber’s work, the spectator does not flee into the scene, but runs aground. As the artist explains: ‘I do not pay attention to perspective. I avoid the sky and focal points. I privilege saturated, compartmentalised spaces. The eye cannot fix itself to any path or cloud. There is no escape’. In WB and Stitches, space does not recede along perspectival sightlines, but appears abruptly stalled and stacked in broken masses. Nor does the frame act to resolve pictorial composition; instead, it makes a scission, cropping out everything but the scar.

Scars are also an intrinsic feature of Ristelhueber’s artist books. Shunning the classic coffee-table format, they are designed in a deliberately modest scale with the images spreading across the fold between the pages so that the stitches of the binding create a scission in the photograph. A similar effect has occasionally been produced in the gallery, with large-scale prints applied like wallpaper so that the images become fractured by the nooks and corners of the walls. In both cases, the image is at once an integrated part of, and ruptured by, its material support. As a
variation of this, the photographic prints have also been stacked against the walls in a gallery in an apparently disassembled manner, so that they lean over and partly cover one another. The process of cutting is further amplified by Ristelhueber’s habit of exhibiting her work unframed, affixing the photographic prints to the edges of thin cardboards, accentuating their appearance of being grasped or cut from context.

The notion of the cut elaborated above, and the metaphor of anatomy more generally, establishes an innate relation between the violent act and the making of an image. With a more general implication, the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy has extrapolated this relation. In his essay 'Image and Violence', Nancy defines the latter as 'the application of a force that remains foreign to the dynamic or energetic system into which it intervenes'. Violence imprints its image by force, Nancy writes; it leaves a mark in order to expose and make evident its effect. For Nancy, this is also a definition of the image, which 'makes its mark', ‘its stigma’ or ‘its scar’ as it grasps itself, ‘as if with claws or pincers, out of nothing’. The image is at once ‘cut out within a ground’ and ‘detached from a ground’, and it bears within itself the mark of this tearing away. Nancy’s reflections bear a marked similarity to the position taken by Kember and Zylinska as elsewhere in the same volume, Au fond des images ('The Ground of the Image'), declares that the volatile ‘grasping’ through which the image detaches and distinguishes itself from the ground is most strikingly expressed in photography. Nancy’s reflections seem particularly pertinent when considering the nexus of image and violence, the cut and the ground, as calibrated by Ristelhueber. In her work, however, each cut is also a camouflage, inducing a state of a suspended recognition.

Two projects undertaken in 2006 and 2007 add another palimpsestic layer to the interrupted roads of WB and snippets of political rhetoric in Stitches. The first of these, Eleven Blowups (2006), is a composite work based on digitally manipulated stills drawn from video rushes retrieved from the Reuters agency in London (figure 7). Triggered by images of the bombing of Lebanon’s former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri’s motorcade in 2005, Ristelhueber set out to search for images of craters – a subject of little interest to the local journalists who had

Figure 7. Sophie Ristelhueber, Eleven Blowups # 11, 2006 © Sophie Ristelhueber/ BONO, Oslo 2015. Colour silver print mounted on aluminium and framed.
shot the footage. Displaced from their photojournalistic origin, Ristelhueber then fabricated a series of eleven craters by digitally amalgamating the found footage with raw materials drawn from her private image archive of blasted rock, melted tarmac and debris. Thus, the ancient ruins of Ctesiphon outside Baghdad could serve as the backdrop for a crater from the 1988 earthquake in Armenia.

Eleven Blowups traces the stigma of the crater – in the artist’s phrase, ‘the “tombs” – that open up in the ground’ – as it returns across time and territory with the obstinate persistence of a symptom. Instead of the eruptions of earth in WB from the previous year, it offers a series of implosions where the crust is blast open and dark masses of earth show through. ‘What prompted me to make these pictures was the impression that the ground was ripped by the shock’, Ristelhueber has commented, ‘as if the earth was sucked out from its own centre. I was inspired by the idea of earth charged with history swallowing itself up’.

Recalling the images of the wiring and pipes spilling out of the gutted buildings in Beirut, the shell-shocked ground here appears to react like a body to the violence inflicted upon it, with the craters resembling open wounds. Eleven Blowups, which Ristelhueber has described as ‘an end point’ of her photography, marks a culmination of the minimalist impulse in her work. Further accentuating the analogy between the photographic prints, affixed on a wall or a piece of cardboard, and the material imprints they depict, Eleven Blowups blatantly conflates the violence of the photographic act – the blow-up – and of the subject matter – the crater.

The companion piece to Eleven Blowups, a video installation called Operations from 2007, probes an archive of a different kind. This time the raw material consists of words culled and collected from codenames for military operations undertaken from 1982, the year of Ristelhueber’s solo debut in the Paris operating theatre, to the present. On one page spread in the artist’s book that accompanied the film, codenames for military operations conducted between 1982 and 2007 are assembled together with the names of the countries where they took place. At the bottom of the page, the artist wryly observes: ‘the countries are only the operational theatre’.

These names appear, as did the embroidered phrases of Stitches, in red capital letters against a neutral background. While some parts of the list read as a fable – Anaconda, Bison, Daring Lion, Desert Scorpion, Pelican, Salamander, Unicorn – others evoke natural cycles. The record of military interventions conducted in Iraq between 1991 and 1996 – Desert Strike, Desert Thunder, Desert Storm, Desert Spring, Desert Calm – chronicles the succession from the blow that opens the wound to the motions of wind and sand that cover it.

Taken together, the codenames assembled in Operations conjure warfare simultaneously as a self-perpetuating eco-system and as an art form. Extending upon Ristelhueber’s reference to this list of ‘invisible wars disguised as poems’, Dominique Abensour has provided the following reflection: ‘Removed from the wars and terrain of the action, these given names effectively dig a trench between the words and the deeds, so composing a quasi-surrealist poem’.

The enigmatic lines of military poetry in Operations surgically separate the actions from the ground that it targets and transforms. Furthermore, they elicit a parallel to the operations conducted by the photographer, placing the cut that exposes the prosaic objects left in the wake of these operations: a carpet that dangles out of a crushed apartment block in Beirut, a mattress that stuffs a wall of servants quarters in Sarajevo, Scottish blankets or military boots washed over with sand in Kuwait. As Ristelhueber notes: ‘Such “still lifes” highlight the prosaic side of warfare. At the same time, once divorced from their purposes, objects too become abstractions’.

In the concluding section, this transformative act of making art of war, treating its mass-produced detritus as still-lifes, ready-mades, earth works or surrealist poems, will be considered in light of a final cut, and what Ristelhueber has referred to as ‘a foundational image’ for her work.
Cutting the Dust

This land was made for War. As glass
Resists the bite of vitriol, so this hard
And calcined earth rejects
The battle’s hot, corrosive impact.²⁴

In closing, I will attend to a single image, yet one that, on closer scrutiny, turns out to be two images folded into one. *Because of the Dust Breeding (A cause de l’Elevage de poussière)* is dated 1991–2007, spanning sixteen years from the first Gulf War (figure 8). The title also alludes to another historical moment, as it pays homage to a canonical work of the avant-garde, Man Ray’s photograph *Dust Breeding (Elevage de poussière)* from 1920. Man Ray’s picture appears to be a bird’s-eye view of arid reaches of land with low ranges or sand dunes and marks of human activity (reminiscent of airstrips, motorways or trenches) spreading across its surface. In support of this reading, the picture was captioned *View from an Airplane (Vue prise en aeroplane par Man Ray – 1921)* upon its first public appearance in the Surrealist journal *Littérature* in 1922.

For a contemporary audience, aerial images were intimately associated with warfare. Pioneered during the First World War for the purpose of tracking front lines, ballistic paths and troop movements, the novel genre of aerial reconnaissance photography exhibited a territory doubly transformed: first by the high-powered artillery fire, and then by the high-altitude vantage point. Revealing the inhuman scale of destruction along the blasted no man’s land between the trench lines, the airborne imagery formalised an abstract optics of modern warfare that evacuated human agents from the scene but maintained the traces of their actions.²⁵ More pragmatically, aerial reconnaissance photography was a consequence of the concealed nature of trench warfare and its exploitation of the environment as a camouflage for military activity.

Like camouflage, *Dust Breeding* muddles the boundary between figure and ground. While Ristelhueber’s doppelgänger is in fact an aerial photograph, an outtake from *Fait*, Man Ray’s image is a close-up disguised as a long-distance shot. Exposed over the course of an hour, Man Ray’s lens framed the backside
of the lower section of Marcel Duchamp’s sculpture The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (1915–23), also known as The Large Glass, made during his exile in the USA towards the end of the First World War. Duchamp had mounted the glass face down on sawhorses over a period of six months in his New York studio in order to allow layers of dust to gather. Ristelhueber, in turn, replays in reverse Man Ray’s counterfeit aerial photograph by transposing Duchamp’s land of dust to the desert battlefield in the Persian Gulf, and to what Baudrillard, in a paraphrase of Duchamp’s sculpture, called a ‘war stripped bare by its technicians even’.

This ambiguity also pertains to the question of authorship. On its first publication, Dust Breeding was accompanied with a second, extended caption in the form of a short poem: ‘Here is the domain of Rrose Sélavy. How andr it is – how fertile it is/how joyous it is – how sad it is!’ Rrose Sélavy was the pseudonym concocted by Duchamp for his alternate female persona, incarnated in a series of photographs made in New York in 1921 where Duchamp posed in drag before Man Ray’s camera. As David Hopkins notes in his deft contextualisation of Dust Breeding, ‘this image also constitutes a portrait of absence, or absence doubled; that of Duchamp and that of his “other half”, Rrose’. In this sense, the arid domain of Rrose Sélavy anticipates Ristelhueber’s alter ego in Autoportrait, where the nomadic artist withdraws behind the protective barriers of barren lands. The domain of the artwork, then, is not staked out to instigate the expressive style and subjectivity of the artist, but rather to renounce such claims.

In his rumination on Dust Breeding as an afterimage of the war, Hopkins further calls attention to the dual connotations of its title, augmented by the poem’s conjunction of arid/fertile, joyous/sad, as at once evocative of mourning (smothered bones, ashes, ‘from dust to dust’) and of the manner in which ‘dust has been coaxed forth, made into an active principle’. Hopkins here takes note of how T. S. Eliot’s poem The Waste Land, published in the same year as Dust Breeding, conjured ‘a similarly weird mix of barrenness and the stirrings of new life’. Cropping out the lower half of the Bachelors’ domain on Duchamp’s sculpture, Dust Breeding thus conveys ‘a paradoxical male fertility, in an age that had seen the men of his native France slaughtered in their thousands’. Considered in this light, Dust Breeding may also be the déclencheur, or the shutter-release image, which has compelled Ristelhueber’s repeated returns to the provincial summerhouse in Vulaines – the primal scene of an oeuvre profoundly attuned to absences, implicit marks and the traces of loss, or what Ristelhueber simply refers to as her ‘interest in human activity, for construction and destruction, this endless cycle of our species’. In the silent rooms of Vulaines, an ominous fertility is suggested instead by the faded floral patterns on a shower curtain, a bedspread stained with mildew, the paper peeling off the walls and the carpets treading by generations. Along these lines, Ristelhueber speaks of how the low vantage point assumed in Vulaines was intended to convey at once enthrallment and oppression, a lost paradise and a nightmare, and a sensation that the heavy furniture and narrow passages may ‘prevent you from breathing’. This liminal space, apparently oblivious to the outside world yet haunted by a sense of asphyxiation and entropy, is prefigured in Man Ray’s photograph of the Bachelors’ domain.

Cut from a larger work in progress, Dust Breeding straddles a border between interior and exterior (the studio loft and the aerial view), visibility and invisibility (territorial expanses and specks of dust), transparency and opacity (the dust-coated glass), the artificial and the organic (industrial glass and pulverised matter), transience and permanence (a small section of the dust was coated with clear varnish while the rest of the glass was wiped clean). Being at once the beginning and the aftermath of all things, dust is also, as Rosalind Krauss has pointed out, ‘a physical index for the passage of time’. The allegorical density of Dust Breeding as an almost hyperbolic record of the gathering of marks and traces over time, on Duchamp’s Large Glass as well as
on the glass-plate in Man Ray’s camera, has made it a seminal reference point in photographic theory. Indeed, Krauss has argued that Duchamp was the first to connect photography with the semiotic category of the index, speculating that *The Large Glass* was, in fact, conceived by the artist ‘as a kind of photograph’.  

In her analysis of *Dust Breeding* as ‘an index of an index’, Krauss further anticipates Campany’s reflection on the allegorical impulse of Late Photography as well as his interpretation of Duchamp’s photograph as ‘a trace of a trace’.  

While absence is frequently doubled in Ristelhueber’s photographs, the traces they depict are not confined to a singular moment in the past. Rather, as a formal response to a physical situation, the photograph marks the trace of time through the temporal constellation that its cut engenders. This returns us to the imperative ‘to cut well’, as formulated by Kember and Zylinska, which ‘means cutting […] in a way that does not lose sight of the horizon of duration’.  

If the image creates its own time, then perhaps the act of cutting not only articulates an ethical imperative, but also its own historiographic concepts.  

Three intersecting paths in the genealogy of the aerial view are significant as we consider this horizon of duration. First, Duchamp began working on *The Large Glass* in 1915, the year when the first British aerial patrol arrived in Mesopotamia, never to be dismantled. From this perspective, *Because of the Dust Breeding* abbreviates a legacy of desert wars from 1915 to 1991. Second, it was during the latter half of the First World War that Marc Bloch, who would later found the *Annales* School of French social historiography together with Lucien Febvre, was transferred to serve as an intelligence officer to supervise aerial reconnaissance reports. It has been claimed that it was while observing the criss-crossing patterns of the trenches and dugouts from an aircraft that Bloch first conceived of the notion of a *longue durée.*  

Flattening topography into a geometrical grid, the plunging viewpoint and inhuman scale of aerovision conjured the unconscious and invisible dimensions of history, a ‘geo-history’, in Fernand Braudel’s term, and described by him as ‘that other, submerged history, almost silent and always discreet’.  

Finally, it was due to a chance discovery made during these military reconnaissance flights that the method of aerial archaeology came to be established. Seen from the air in the raking light at dawn or dusk, even low-lying features at ground level will cast long shadows. Aerial archaeology exhumed, by optical means, a territory and time-scale hitherto unseen, revealing the land below as a palimpsest or scar tissue formed over millennia. Dust Breeding heralds this method; cast in relief by the oblique angle and slanting light, the lead wires and wads of cotton scattered on *The Large Glass* come to resemble ancient geoglyphs or earthworks. More recently, this method has been utilised by Iraqi-born artist Jananne Al-Ani in her *Shadow Site* films (2010–11) shot above the Jordanian desert. Gradually illuminated by the low sun, Al-Ani explains, the desert floor ‘acts as a photographic plate’ summoning ‘the possibility of the landscape itself becoming a bearer of particularly resilient and recurring memories by exposing signs on the surface, not only of loss but also of survival’.  

Such a palimpsestic vision is often conjured in Ristelhueber’s work, most explicitly through her use of literary sources and quotations, where texts and images are cut together not to compare, but to elicit a relation across time and territory. For *Beirut*, Ristelhueber selected a passage from Lucretius’s two-thousand-year-old poem *On the Nature of Things*; for *Mémoires du Lot*, the prologue from *The Book of Ecclesiastes*; for *Fait*, two excerpts from military theorist Carl Von Clausewitz’s philosophical treatise *On War* written during the Napoleonic era; and for *Every One*, Thucydides’s *The History of the Peloponnesian War* from the fifth century BC. Subservient neither to context nor to explanation, these excerpts instead affect a displacement of the historical event from its topicality. Similar stratifications of ancient and modern forms are also highlighted in


87 – Kember and Zylinska, *Life after New Media*, 82.


Beirut, which concludes with an image of the temple columns at Baalbek, and in Dead Set (2001), where deserted housing projects in Syria are shown next to rows of antique colonnades. Just as roadblocks, trenches and craters may be mistaken as the outcome of landslides, earthquakes or meteor strikes, these cross-sections or junctures of ancient and contemporary cause human history to relapse into natural history, and chronological time to veer into a longue durée.

Because of the Dust Breeding presents itself as a summative statement of this strategy, although conceived in the form of a cipher. First, there is the protracted duration of the artworks themselves: the six months of accumulating dust and the hour-long exposure of Man Ray’s photograph; the six months that passed between the Gulf War and Fait and the arc of seventeen years comprised in the title of Ristelhueber’s homage. Then, there is the long duration of the work that it depicts: the slow violence of dust as it moves across numerous scales. Dust is a by-product of the human body, compounded of skin flakes, hair and secretions, pulverised and airborne. Mountains erode into dust over eons, and cities attacked from above are ground to dust within a matter of hours. Dust accumulates and is swept away, just like the marks of tank tracks, bomb craters and spent ammunition in Fait were first inflicted, and then erased, by ‘Desert Storm’, by a power foreign to the land that it marks and sweeps.

For the new school of historiography in France, the notion of a longue durée implemented a geological terminology of deep time, strata and morphology into the social sciences, facilitating a shift from a positivist, linear and event-based history, focused on individual biographies and battles, toward slowly evolving structures. At the same historical moment, a parallel project was undertaken in art history, turning away from individual artists and aesthetic canons toward the long-term migration of expressive forms mapped out by Aby Warburg across the large panel networks of his Mnemosyne Atlas. Just as longue durée ‘approximates physical geography’, Warburg’s cartographic metaphor prompted a spatial constellation and stratification of time. Georges Didi-Huberman has stressed the theoretical affinity between the Annales School, founded in 1929, and the Bilderatlas, left unfinished at Warburg’s death the same year. Considered as parallel concepts moving along the same vector, Nachleben and longue durée steered away from the linear timeline of positivist historicity toward the slow-moving rhythms of material duration. Didi-Huberman pushes this analogy further by eliciting a comparison between the material that was gathered by Bloch and Fevre while they served on the front line, including photographs, maps and drawings that documented the devastation of the war, and a little known iconographic collection that was assembled by Warburg between 1914 and 1918, known as the Kriegskartothek. This collection, Didi-Huberman suggests, can be understood as a precursor of, and the model for, the Bilderatlas.

Before the relocation of Warburg’s library in 1933, when it was smuggled out of Hamburg and shipped to London, the Kriegskartothek comprised ninety thousand files of iconographic material, including a collection of around five thousand photographs. Didi-Huberman refers to these photographs as a ‘collection of symptoms’ and as samplings of ‘a terrifyingly long durée, that of a “European civil war”’. The following list of specimens identified by Didi-Huberman could just as well be an inventory of Ristelhueber’s photographic works from the Middle East: ‘villages in ruins […] carcasses of tanks […] bombs left on a beach, houses destroyed from the inside, bridges broken in two […] Doric columns speckled with the impact of machine-gun bullets’, and ‘aerial perspectives, most of a lunar or prehistoric appearance, suggesting that destruction leads to archaeology’.

Archaeology may in turn lead to destruction. Ristelhueber’s very first aerial photograph, featured in her installation Mémoires du Lot from 1990, shows the archaeological dig on the rock Masada at the edge of the Judean desert. The former
stronghold during the Roman siege of Jerusalem has provided the founding myth and model for the current formation of fortress Israel. The artist, however, does not aim to uncover historical timelines or continuities between a people and their land. The repeated forms of gaping holes and closing wounds, of eruptions of earth, tears in the flesh, and weird patterns in the sand that spread across Ristelhueber’s body of work are not records of isolated events, with beginnings and aftermaths. Gathering ‘heavy stress marks’ and scattered ‘details of the world’, Ristelhueber’s anatomical atlas expands the category of the index to cover what she has described as the ‘terrain of the real and of collective emotion’. These emotions do not belong to the artist, nor do the scars belong to the individual bodies or territories where they appear as they break through the surface of the present.

95 – This paragraph includes quotes from two different sources: ‘heavy stress marks’ is Rainer Michael Mason’s phrase used in the press release for Stitches and quoted from Ristelhueber, Operations, 370; ‘details of the world’ and ‘the terrain of the real and of collective emotion’ are both Ristelhueber’s coinage, quoted from Brutvan, Details of the World, 18.