

May 21, 2019

Sophie Ristelhueber's Ruinscapes

1. Photography and War

The battlefield has always constituted one of Photography's most hallowed testing sites; a site where Photography could define its aims, its sphere of influence, its relationship to truth, testimony, and trauma. The shift that occurred as the general public, and not soldiers on the front, all those directly involved and with recourse to experience, became *spectators* to the theater of war—a development made possible by advancements in technological reproducibility, when photojournalism was born from a convergence in the history of printing and of photography—signalled also a discursive shift, as images mediated particular ideas of and about war, atrocity, and violence, which circulated on the level of language as consumers of images gave expression to the affective disturbances such images elicited. To employ a term coined by Rancière, these new practices of documenting the scene of warfare facilitated a *redistribution* of the sensible, whereby the once only *describable* experience of the trenches or the front was suddenly transformed by its visual supplementation in the cultural imaginary. This is another way of expressing the *aesthetic* stakes of this development, if “aesthetics can be understood... as the system of a priori forms determining what presents itself to sense experience” (Rancière 13). The burgeoning practice of photojournalism that sprang from the bloodied soil of the battlefield thus gave rise to a new constellation of political realities predicated on the new representations of the scene of war.

Yet the *way* that the nascent genre of photojournalism represented the object it sought to depict also lays bare a central paradox at the heart of photographic practice in general: that of photography's dubious claim to objectivity, to full and transparent "capture," whereby the operation of the lens is described as one of selection rather than one of interpretation (an issue we shall get back to). We shall see the extent to which the interpretation involved in early practices of photojournalism often extended beyond a mere operation of the lens as well—.

The photographs of Sophie Ristelhueber are decidedly in dialogue with this tradition and these questions; the operations of war and the traumas of ruination intersect through her various projects and provide a thematic unity to an otherwise diverse and expansive oeuvre. What interests me most here, in my attempt to trace the lineage of photojournalism and connect it to a body of work that has been described as "patently anti-journalistic," is a certain repertoire of forms that situate "aftermath photography" (a genre often mentioned in connection with Ristelhueber's work) as an aesthetic analogue to embedded reporting and military reconnaissance. By placing Ristelhueber's work in conversation with the history of war photojournalism on the one hand, and that of aerial photography on the other, I hope to highlight the problematic legacy of dominance, violence and capture that necessarily structures any attempt to photograph the aftermath of war. Focusing on a specific project entitled *Fait*, photographed in 1991 and exhibited the following year at Le Magasin, centre d'art contemporain in Grenoble, France, I interrogate the political assumptions and regimes of visibility implicated in Ristelhueber's work. The question is not whether these photographs aestheticizes (and thus depoliticizes) destruction and death, but what kind of *aesthetic practice* they form around war, trauma and witnessing. In a manner of speaking, it is a question of *how* they aestheticize,

keeping in mind Rancière's designation of the aesthetic as inextricably bound up with the political. Understanding Ristelhueber's photographs of ruin *as* emerging from an artistic practice—thus bypassing the thorny issue of their place on the spectrum between the documentary and the aesthetic (which by no means form such a discrete binary as is often presumed)—“Artistic practices are ‘ways of doing and making’ that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility” (Rancière 13). This is well in line with Henrik Gustafsson's reading; he argues that her work 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” (Gustafsson 70). This “cut”—derived from Sarah Kember and Joanne Zylinsky's notion of photography as an operation that cuts into the flow of mediation to create the conditions of subject constitution and thus agency—is not only an intervention into time and the distribution of light rays, but also represents a cut “into the circulation of images of conflict perpetuated by the military and the media alike” (ibid.). Yet, as I shall argue, this framing of Ristelhueber's work often performs a problematic disavowal of the complexity of the relationship of these images to existing discourses and image-repertoires which have always been imbricated in practices of exploitation, conquest and justification. Such accounts of her work also fail to sufficiently incorporate her subject position as a non-participant in the scenes whose aftermath she photographs, and as an artist whose practice is tied up with specific (scopic) economies, viewing spaces (what is the relationship between the organization of these images as they are displayed in the gallery, and the moment of their generation?), and discourses. If we are writing about the reception of these images and the affective power they command—not to

mention *how they demand to be interpellated*—questions of audience and visibility deserve careful consideration. Taking these questions into account, I would like to propose another way of approaching these images, one that moves beyond the traditional terms of the debate surrounding her work—aesthetic versus documentary, subversive versus apolitical—in order to foreground instead questions of trauma, witnessing and affect. I ask, Can these images inform practices of witnessing conducive to the production of affective and ethical reactions often precluded by other forms of war photography? Can they help us in imagining modes of witnessing that are capable of reckoning with historical trauma in novel ways? Taking for granted the aerial photograph’s “dynamic potential as a trigger for the kind of ethical response central to the act of bearing witness” (Deriu 197), I argue that Ristelhueber’s carefully composed scenes of ruination are characterized by a reflexive act of historical testimony that addresses both the subjectivity of the artist and the articulations and cuts performed by the actions of her camera. By acknowledging their own status as *aesthetic documents*—and in light of the fact that they are often presented without any explanation or significant contextualization—her photographs draw attention to the particular framings which they construct. In this sense, her work may indeed be said to intervene in the image-repertoires associated with regimes of visibility reiterated by military and media alike. Yet it is worth outlining the precise way in which they do this, for the political nature of these images is not easily conceptualized. The subversive power of series like *Fait*—if they can be said to have any subversive power at all—lies in their very artistry, in the internal dialectic by which they aestheticize ruin in order to defamiliarize it. Her work hovers between the two poles of abstraction and photojournalistic cliché, perpetually in danger of losing its referent yet creating just enough distance to the point

where the scenes depicted remain recognizable and foreign at the same time (perhaps “uncanny” is not a wholly inappropriate term in this context). Following Edward Pierce, we might say that the effect of her “stylizations” is to disorient the viewer—thus disrupting ineffectual affective responses conditioned by worn iconographies of war and aftermath—but “not to the point where the images [become] completely abstract and [lose] their power” (Schlesser 419).

2. Photojournalism and the Staging of the Image

First, however, it is worth contextualizing these images within the larger histories of photography, on the one hand, and the specific image-repertoires associated with war photojournalism, on the other. Indeed, what is often elided in discussions of Ristelhueber’s work is a critical assessment of the history of war photojournalism itself, even as the evolution of photojournalism as a genre has shaped the critical reception (Gustafsson 68). A crucial development in the evolution of war photography can be traced back to the Crimean War and the work of Roger Fenton, who in such photographs as *Valley of the Shadow of Death* captured haunting scenes of battlefields devoid of soldiers, dead or alive. Yet it is known that Fenton there existed multiple versions of this photograph: one in which cannonballs lay scattered on the dirt road in the center, another in which they are absent. This single example from a history of *staging* practices, whereby photojournalists manipulated not only the lens of the camera but sometimes the objects before it (the name of Felice Beato may also be adduced here), sheds light on the dubious mythologies behind the iconographies of war which Ristelhueber (consciously or unconsciously) references. It also prompts us to consider how, and to what extent the scenes which she documents are staged—at the least, it urges us to consider the ways her aestheticism may or may not undermine the aims of the images themselves.



Roger Fenton, *Valley of the Shadow of Death*, 1855



Eleven Blowups #1, 2006
 Colour silverprint mounted on aluminium
 Frame: 110 x 133 cm
 Courtesy Galerie Jérôme Poggi, Paris

Fait (1992), which translates (as Gustafsson has pointed out) as both “fact” and “that which has been done,” contains images from Ristelhuebers trips to Kuwait in the aftermath of the first Gulf War. The result of her “excavations” is a series of 71 photographs, either taken from the air or providing a view from the ground of scarred battlefields and empty desert landscapes.

Exhibited as a row of images of constant size—with aerial shots and close-ups alternating in no particular order—and without any accompanying textual supplements that might contextualize the photographs, the series “at once emulates and contradicts the gridded visual field of aerial reconnaissance” (Gustafsson 73). Ristelhueber, commenting on her own method of organization for the exhibition, said “just like the book, which I planned with no priority given to any single image, the wall installation unfolds in same regularity, with aerial and ground shots that make us lose all references of scale” (Ristelhueber 282).



Fait #07, 1992
 Colour photograph, silver print mounted on
 aluminium, with golden polished frame
 Frame: 101 x 127 x 5 cm
 Courtesy Galerie Jérôme Poggi, Paris

Ristelhueber’s photographs, too, are in some sense staged; in the heady sense of distance and abstraction they perform, they are so obviously the result of careful reflection and compositional deliberation. This too, relates to the spaces in which so much of Ristelhueber’s work is displayed: the “white box” of the art gallery (although much can be said for the way she approaches this space itself, as she often employs innovative and multimedial exhibition

techniques).

If regimes of truth that have been reiterated by military apparatuses relied on claims of authenticity and objectivity to reinstate their claim to truth, then Ristelhueber's "staging" practices might actually subvert these regimes, in their very rejection of exclusive documentary status. As Gustofsson notes, "The inventory of scattered facts conducted in *Fait*... undermines its own evidentiary value by simultaneously exhibiting the evidence and withholding its explanation" (Gustofsson 75).



Fait #61, 1992
Black and white photograph, silver print
mounted on aluminium, with golden
polished frame
Frame: 100 x 127 x 5 cm
Courtesy Galerie Jérôme Poggi, Paris



Fait #47, 1992
 Colour photograph, silver print mounted
 on aluminium, with golden polished frame
 Frame: 101 x 127 x 5 cm
 Courtesy Galerie Jérôme Poggi, Paris

3. Affect and the Aerial Photograph

Another image-repertoire whose trace is visible in *Fait* (perhaps as well as in Ristelhueber's entire oeuvre) is the iconography of aerial photography. In his essay, "Picturing Ruinscapes: The Aerial Photograph as Image of Historical Trauma," Davide Deriu traces the origins and evolution of aerial photography from the invention of aerostatic photography in mid-19th century to its instrumental role as a tool of reconnaissance in the first and second world wars.¹ Although such images' functionality was largely defined in terms of their ability to provide vital strategic information and to document the "before, during and after" of bombing raids, what Deriu describes as "the oscillation between photography as authentication and

¹ "Since the airborne camera was integrated into the military apparatus, it left a unique visual testimony of war devastation. In pinpointing bombing targets and subsequently recording the destruction of bombardment, aerial photography functions, according to Charles Merewether, as both 'an instrument of war and a witness to its effects' (190). Deriu also traces the emergence of aerial photography in tandem with military technology and the subsequent appearance of archives of ruination: "During 1920s and 1930s, airpower acquired a decisive role in the apparatus of modern warfare and, consequently, aerial photography became increasingly involved in the record of ruination" (192).

aestheticisation,” which “continued to characterise the production and reproduction of aerial photographs during the Second World War,” is testified by (among other events) the appearance, in internal reports circulating within the British military, of “puzzle pictures” prompting soldiers to guess the subject of particularly abstract aerial photographs, an article published in 1943 in the *Illustrated London News* entitled, “How to read air photographs of destruction caused by bombing,” and the fact that reconnaissance images were even traded on art market after WWII. (Deriu 193).



RAF reconnaissance image from the National Collection of Aerial Photography in Edinburgh

It is important to underline the extent to which the history of aerial photography is conditioned by its emergence as part of the military apparatuses of the first half of the twentieth century. As Deriu notes, aerial photographs “bear witness not only to their subjects but also to their own conditions of existence”—in this case, their deployment as vital visual reports to aid in reconnaissance and the planning of bombing raids and other offences (Deriu 200).

Commenting on the effect that the distribution of these images might have had during the conflicts of that century, Deriu draws from an observation of Caroline Brothers concerning aerial photographs and their mediation by the press during Spanish Civil War:

Its artificiality, its ‘rationally structured order,’ its elimination of the appallingly sensory aspects of warfare, the sense of all-seeing power it conferred on the viewer, and above all its eschewal of empathy in recording war’s most devastating deeds as abstractions—all these characteristics of the aerial photograph were normalised in the pages of the press (Deriu 192).

It is impossible to dissociate Ristelhueber’s aerial images from the iconography that eventually found its way into the public imaginary and visual culture of post-war American society. The dissemination of such photos compels us to reconsider the extent to which her work—and one might reference *Fait* in particular—does not also partake of the characteristics described above by Brothers. This should give us pause in uncritically situating Ristelhueber’s work in a tradition of subversive iconographies oriented *against* the great military and media apparatuses that govern regimes of visibility and truth, and lead us instead to be mindful of its proximity to those very apparatuses (as well as those governing photography itself, which a Flusserian analysis might further elucidate), with which it is inextricably entangled.

Ultimately, the way Ristelhueber negotiates this lineage is not to deny its influence in her work, but to defamiliarize the viewer with the very iconographies which determine the frame she also works within. Her rejection of overcontextualization also speaks to this effort, and might instigate a breaking apart of the frame in the absence of reproducibility, yet according to the same logic Judith Butler has outlined in *Frames of War*:

The frame that seeks to contain, convey, and determine what is seen (and sometimes, for a stretch, succeeds in doing precisely that) depends upon the conditions of reproducibility in order to succeed. And yet, this very reproducibility entails a constant breaking from context, a constant delimitation of new context, which means that the "frame" does not quite contain what it conveys, but breaks apart every time it seeks to give definitive organization to its content (Butler 10).

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