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author:

Tomasz Szerszeń

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The Artist at War

Translated by Katarzyna Bojarska

1.

Beirut, Armenia, Iraq, Bosnia, Palestine... Sophie Ristelhueber has traversed the world, tracing contemporary conflicts and catastrophes. She has examined, recorded and juxtaposed them. Her guise has been that of a reporter which provided her with a kind of passport into the war zone, a justification of her nomadic life. However, unlike reporters and other observers who have focused on an immediate response to violence, misfortune and destruction by documenting their direct symptoms often forgetting that, as Paul Ricoeur rightly put it, "to see one thing is to ignore another; to tell of a tragedy is to forget another..."¹ her attitude involves distance. Sophie Ristelhueber actuates the shutter "the moment after." This distance temporal but not affective is key to understanding the world of her images.

In his book on war in Bosnia, Jean Hatzfeld sketches an image of ruined Sarajevo: the landscape of a besieged city, a city in a "state of war." In one haunting fragment he describes a dream set in war-torn Sarajevo – when silence takes the place of the sound of gunfire and the ruined space becomes the site of an intimate contemplation of the ephemeral and horrifying beauty of decay:

This crossroad is exposed to wind and snipers on the lookout at Staro Brdo hill, which is covered with larch forest. But at night I like to stop by then everything calms down. A big, triangular esplanade, delimited by crossroads, extends down to the river, transforming into destroyed warehouses, unusual piles of rubble, concrete, iron and glass plus the distant smell of dust... Walls, trees, pavements all was destroyed in the past month by tank bullets. These ruins also include the remnants of nearby buildings, pushed to the side by wind and shovels, as well as trash bags slowly gutted by dogs and scrap collectors. We step on a rustling carpet of glass, rubble, nailed plinths and plaster. Between the ruined walls one smells burnt plastic mixed with the more pleasant smell of

fertilizer made of leaves.^c

For Sophie Ristelhueber, the moment described by Hatzfeld, when the spectacle of destruction and everything else congeals the moment that can be best grasped by the metaphor of night is crucial. The night allows for a different insight, a particular kind of distance: it allows one to see abstract constructions instead of ruins: instead of people, the traces of their absence.

There are no people in her “nocturnal” photographs. Their lack, however, is only apparent: in the end this “absence of a human being makes him/her even more present.”³ The work of Ristelhueber excepting maybe her first project, *Interieurs*, made with François Hers is a kind of “phenomenology of trace,” the following of what has remained of human existence. “In a sense I am an artist who works a little like an archeologist”⁴ declares Ristelhueber herself. This archaeological approach, however, goes beyond a simple process of documentation, the gathering of visual remnants. The traces, tropes, and remains that we see in her pictures become ever more obscure the more we look at them. Their structure becomes more complicated: it is no longer a single trace an imprint of people’s presence and action but rather its multitude: overlapping, intertwined, fugitive. We see something similar in *Fait* (1992), a project made during the Gulf War, which confronts us with exceptional monochrome images of layers of desert destroyed by the war, and thus with the difficulty of defining what we see. This optical uncertainty makes us move from formlessness to the landscape of the desert to the war landscape to Man Ray’s *Elevage de poussière*. “This specific attention she pays to physical traces which mark the world does not stop on the level of testimony but rather moves on to extremely abstract and conceptual interpretations,”⁵ writes Cheryl Brutvan. Even then, however, when we remain on the level of abstraction an abstract image, abstract or metaphoric interpretation there still remains an element that grounds these images in something concrete: *fait*, a fact, a detail. It is the detail that remains of History; it saves that History.

In Sophie Ristelhueber’s case , such a focus on detail originates in her fascination, as a student, with the French *nouveau roman*, and Alain Robbe-Grillet in particular. It was he who wrote in his manifesto, *Une voie pour le roman futur*: “the world is neither meaningful nor absurd. The world is”⁶ ; the world is the set of “details” and

a sequence of our looks upon them. There exists only that which is external, what we see this prose is a specific celebration of visibility. At the same time, in the work of the author of *Jealousy*, the description of one detail cancels, to some extent, the previous one; perspectives coexist with one another, questioning not only a singular point of view, but also any truth claims. Just as with Ristelhueber's work, photos details that survived the catastrophe, survived History have always existed within a relationship: as elements of a certain set of images that does not form a narrative (a book, an arrangement of images in an exhibition). This is a kind of stereoscopic look, which despite being concentrated on details, fragments and remains, allows one to think of these photographs as a kind of typology, or rather, a constellation: the multiplicity of images allows us to remember of a multiplicity of tragedies.

The French photographer does not tell stories about History: rather she creates a kind of atlas, an arrangement of images, a typology of traces. What strikes one in her works is this unique receptiveness, the similarity of images of war: Beirut, Kuwait, Sarajevo, Iraq... The repetition is multiplied by the use of texts as a kind of timeless counter-point: such context is provided by excerpts from the Bible, Lucretius, Thucydides, Sterne or Clausewitz. But as the artist herself puts it, "there exists a certain universality of forms"⁷: she thus believes in the repetitiveness of images of war, accepts our being here as an ongoing catastrophe, a continuous series of destruction. There emerges a question as to whether as in W. G. Sebald's prose, especially *Rings of Saturn* – this course of catastrophes, wars and conflicts is not an element of a larger plan, of natural, rather than human, history?

2.

In *WB* (2004) Sophie Ristelhueber presents other kinds of ruins. Those that emerged not so much as the outcome of war or natural catastrophe, but rather from the minor everyday activities of Israeli soldiers in the occupied Palestinian territories. These are small stone barricades and obstructions built in order to disturb circulation on the roads of the West Bank, to ruin economic and social life as well as to shatter the spirits of the inhabitants and symbolically mark the existence of a border, a dividing line, as a concept deeply inscribed into this space, its history and its presence. Again Ristelhueber places destruction at the very centre of the

common and the everyday, making it an indispensable element of the world. By doing so, she naturalizes violence.

As in the case of her other projects, what we see here is not immediately clear. Arranged piles and heaps of stones recall the outcome of avalanches so common to such undulating terrain. Only when one realizes the context (*WB*) is it possible to see them anew and read their political potential. Also, the very notion of a barricade proves deceptive here. It is usually associated with resistance against authority; it is typically a weapon of the “weak” that belongs to a revolutionary tradition. There exists a whole “iconography of the barricade” that begins with representations of the French Revolution, and whose canonical images are those taken during the times of the Paris Commune, or photos of barricades from the uprisings in Warsaw in 1944 or Budapest in 1956, right up to very recent pictures from the Maidan in Kiev. However, in Ristelhueber’s photographs we are dealing with an inversion of meaning: barricades are not built in order to disturb the actions of the occupying army, but on the contrary, in order to devastate the everyday existence of the inhabitants of the West Bank.

WB is surely one of Sophie Ristelhueber’s most political projects. Political not in the sense of direct involvement, but precisely in its distance, this specific “presence through absence” so thoroughly discussed by Jacques Rancière. The philosopher himself has commented on this project on several occasions, pointing to the artist’s gesture of not showing the Wall: “Ristelhueber photographs the barricades on the Palestinian roads. But she does not show the dividing wall that paralyzes the gaze.”⁸ From this point of view, small stone obstructions on the country roads of the West Bank gesture metonymically towards the Wall.

“There are not doubts as to the *actuality* of these works. What would be their *anachronism*?”⁹ asks Georges Didi-Huberman in the context of Steve McQueen’s photographs from the series *Barrage* (1998). These images also contribute to the iconography of the barricade and provide a kind of typology of “fallen matter” rugs lingering near the drains, a modern incarnation of destroyed drapery from Baroque painting. What would be the *anachronism* of *WB*? Despite differences, the series features almost all of the elements characteristic of all of Ristelhueber’s other series, which form her world of images. The political reading of these works is but

one key to *WB*, one that does not cancel out other possible interpretations. It is one of the “rings of Saturn” equally important as the other, which is the spectacle of constant ruination, a recurring element of both History and natural history. Last, but not least, there is the final “ring”: a kind of self-portrait inscribed into the image of war. On the back cover of the *WB* portfolio one reads the photographer’s words: “doubtless, as an artist I too am at war.” Is Sophie Ristelhueber, like Aby Warburg before her who was also working with images of conflict and violence, and who treated his *Kriegskartothek* as the space of a specific psychomachia – constructing a contemporary file of destruction as a site of affect, of an “internal war”?

Footnotes

- 1 Paul Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2000), 105.
- 2 Jean Hatzfeld, *L'Air de la guerre*, (Paris: Éditions de l'Olivier, 1994), 12.
- 3 Catherine Grenier, *Sophie Ristelhueber. La Guerre intérieure*, (Zurich: JRP-Ringier, 2010), 43.
- 4 Cheryl Brutvan, "Les obsessions des Sophie Ristelhueber," in Sophie Ristelhueber, *Détails du monde*, (Arles: Éditions Actes Sud 2002), 11-12.
- 5 Ibid., 253.
- 6 Alain Robbe-Grillet, "Une voie pour le roman futur," in: *Pour un nouveau roman*, (Paris: Gallimard 1961), 18; Quoted after Brutvan, *Les obsessions*, 29.
- 7 Grenier, *Sophie Ristelhueber*, 67.
- 8 "Art of the possible Fulvia Carnevale, John Kelsey in conversation with Jacques Rancière," *Artforum*, (March 2007): 259.
- 9 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ninfa moderna. Essai sur le drapé tombé*, (Paris: Gallimard 2002), 51.