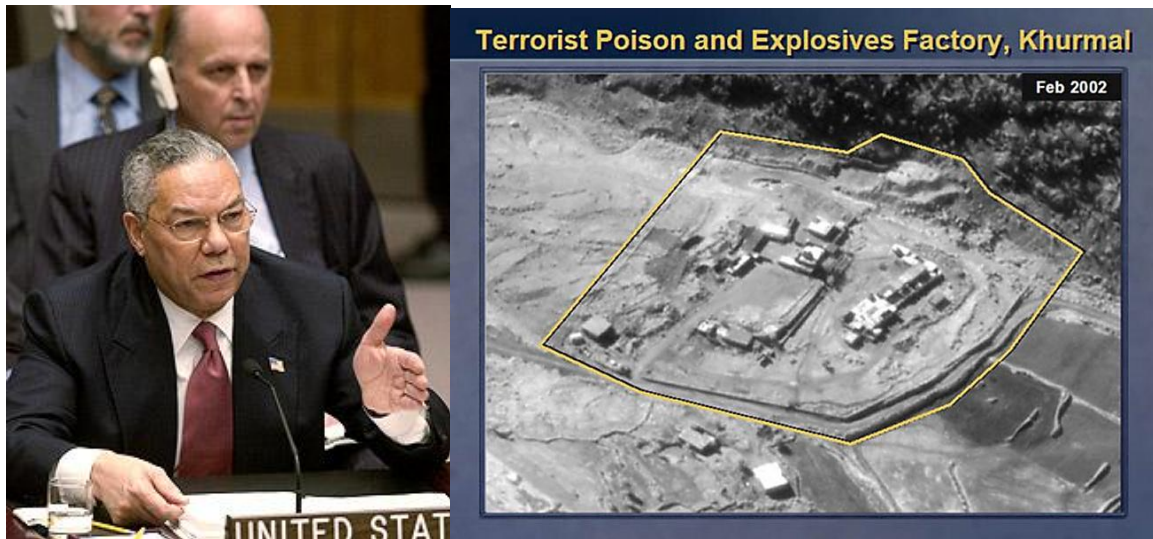


# Borders between Capital and Its Other: the Photographs of Sophie Ristelhueber

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Figure 1



Colin Powell, then US Secretary of State, on 5 February 2003 presented to the UN Security Council blurry satellite photographs and alleged that Iraq had developed mobile laboratories in order to produce biological weapons

Figure 2



Sophie Ristelhueber  
*Beirut, 1982*

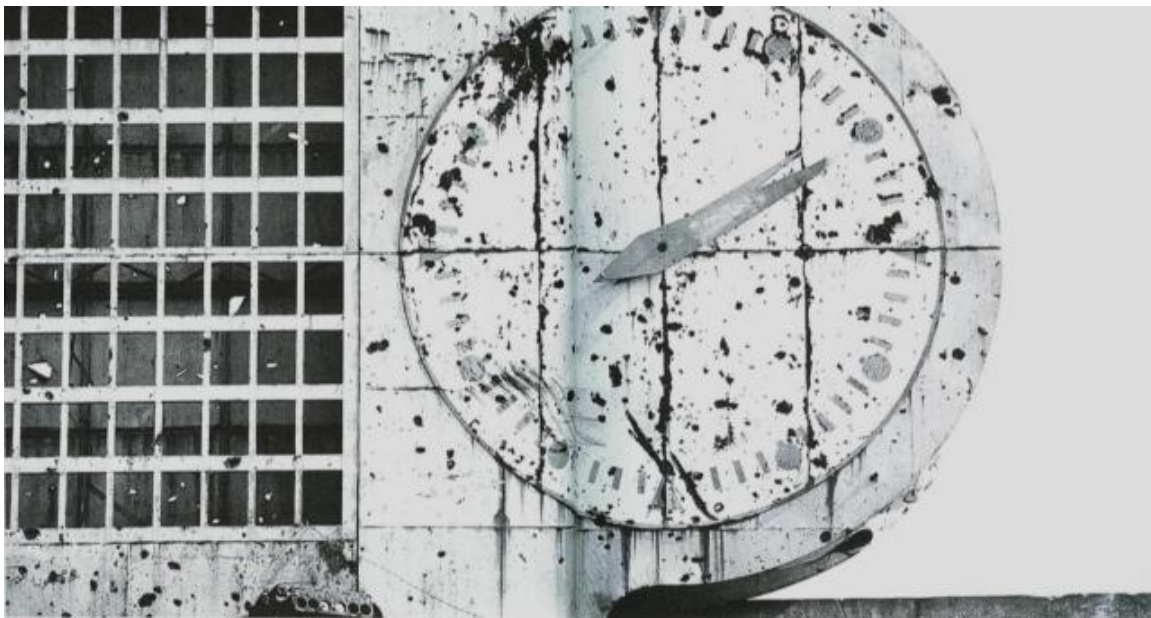
On 5 February 2003 Colin Powell, then US Secretary of State, presented to the UN Security Council several blurry satellite photographs and pointed to specks of shadow, alleging that Iraq had developed mobile laboratories in order to produce biological weapons (fig. 1). Taken from satellites, these photographs represented the supposed ability of the US intelligence community to gather information by global surveillance technology unavailable to those outside of the intelligence community. Why did US intelligence give incorrect if not unintelligible evidence regarding biological weapons in Iraq? Moreover, what significance should be given to the event that the reading given by Powell was believed to be that of consensus in US intelligence? These questions demonstrate a general discrepancy over the authority photographs have as a means of describing events, most significantly ones in which state intelligence agencies sponsor a particular reading. Photographic images may originate in an automated exposure to visual phenomena, yet the possibilities of attaching a synthetic and coherent narrative to an image enter the aesthetic domain. Still, many readings of images enter history according to narratives prescribed by those who possess the most significant information gathering technology, often originating from state surveillance mechanisms. Sophie Ristelhueber, in contrast, creates images of

unintelligible consequence from photographs taken at sites of geopolitical significance on the borders between capital<sup>1</sup> and its other.<sup>2</sup>

In Sophie Ristelhueber's work, photographs of geopolitical conflict remove nationalistic narratives and any coherent origins. For Ristelhueber, the intelligibility of the conflicts on the borders between capital and its other require no identification to one particular narrative. Ristelhueber enters into the domain of surveillance not as a means of objectifying an other by appropriating imagery to fit a spectacular narrative, but, rather to locate the destruction within the ordinary, liminal space of the subject. Ristelhueber does not point to the inconspicuous shadows to say 'there is the enemy.' Instead, Ristelhueber seeks to point to the shadows only to find an indeterminate identity. Ristelhueber attempts to document the liminal space of geopolitical conflict in an intersection of capital and its other.

### Liminality

Figure 3



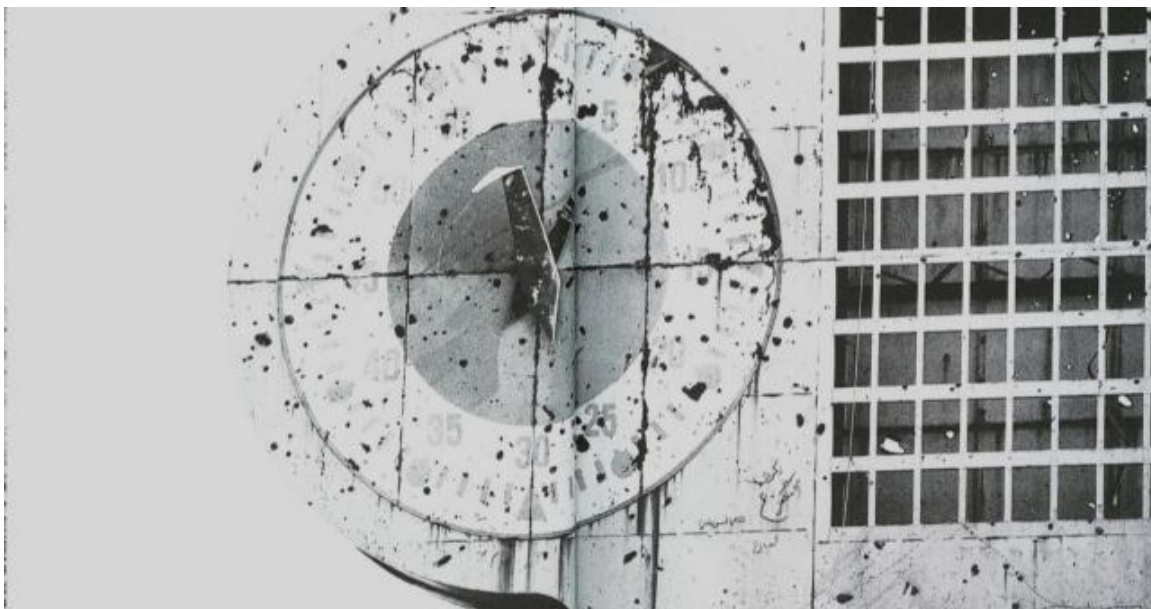
Sophie Ristelhueber  
*Beirut, 1982*

Figure 4

<sup>1</sup> "Capital is thus, from a Marxist point of view, a social relation between men which appears as a relation between things or between men and things" (Mandel, Ernest intro. to Marx, Karl, Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I, pg. 55).

<sup>2</sup> The use of the term *other* refers to the identity of a subject in dispossession of their own identity. The dispossession of the means for generating one's own image follows the dispossession of capital and the alienation of one's own autonomy in light of occupation





Sophie Ristelhueber  
*Beirut, 1982*

Figure 5



Sophie Ristelhueber  
*Iraq, 2001*  
1 of 3 color photographs mounted on aluminum

120 X 180 cm (47 ¼ X 70 7/8 in.)  
 Each, edition of 3

Ristelhueber's photographs represent the foreign, remote, spaces of geopolitical conflict within a localized, liminal frame, one that makes visible the every-day structures within the image. These structures locate the space within a subset of capital beyond the spectacle of commodity fetish. To see telephone poles, streets, rugs, clocks, signs, and high-rises integrated with war-torn landscapes places the objects within an absurd, surreal context, made familiar by the traces of the mundane items and absurd by the therein violence. In this way, Ristelhueber's work depicts the liminal effects of war in a seemingly anonymous frame of reference. Ristelhueber shows a public clock, only to find it speckled with holes by gunfire in *Beirut*, 1982, (figs. 3-4); a desert with trees, only to find their tops burned to stubs in *Iraq*, 2001, (fig. 5). These mundane references are rendered absurd, not in a spectacle that turns the act of viewing into a staged, rigid, sublimely sentimental experience. The absurdity is in the liminality of the effects of war, that the traces of the event do not appear out of the ordinary and that the violence appears naturalized.

Figure 6



Sophie Ristelhueber  
*WB*, 2004  
 color photograph 218 x 269 mm  
 Geneva, Cabinet des estampes

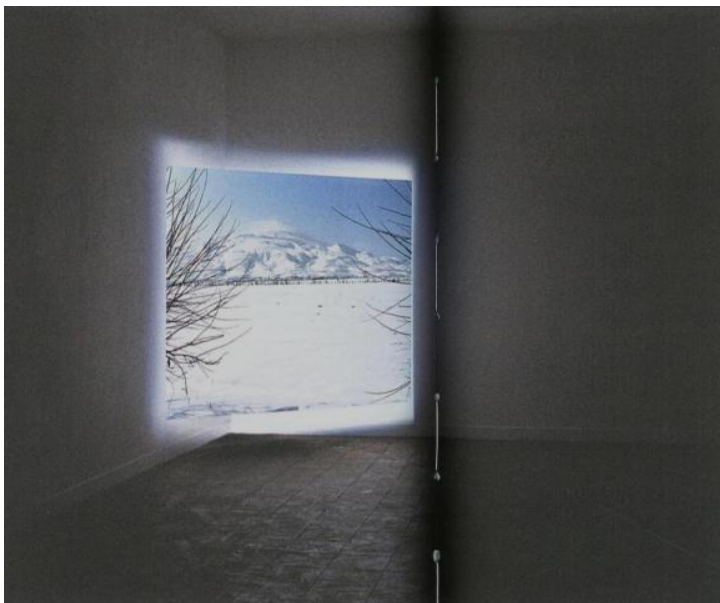
In *WB*, 2004, (fig. 6) Ristelhueber photographs the Israeli deployed piles of debris meant to block access between checkpoints. There is nothing spectacular or sublime about them. However, historically, they are consistently

contextualized according to Israeli and Palestinian conflict, a conflict not unfamiliar with the politics of spectacle and strategies of tension. In much of the West, amid reports of rocket fire and occupation, what does not get said often is that Israel has approximately 528 checkpoints and obstacles in the West Bank, up from 376 in August 2005. These obstacles limit access to goods and services for Palestinian communities. These are the contested areas of occupation and they are enforced by the application of borders, which appear absurd in the liminal frame of reference. The question becomes 'what is the greater impediment to peace?' By removing the identity of power, a power that diverts attention away from the liminal effects of occupation, Ristelhueber removes the scepter of spectacle. Ristelhueber's *WB* represents the every-day occurrences of isolation and colonization of Palestinian occupied territories, contrary to the efforts of the mass-media to sublimate the ambiguous relationship between colonized and colonizer apparent in the struggle to define borders.

Yet, Ristelhueber's photographs are not entirely liminal. Ristelhueber attempts to cancel "everything out" according to the minutest detail. The details in Ristelhueber's work do not refer to the space in which they appear and, thus, dislocate from their present context. They are isolated objects. They sublimate their materiality as an image in a formal operation that stratifies visibility according to significance. It happens, then, that what Ristelhueber finds most significant is what distinguishes itself by an inability to accrue value, an inability imposed upon a landscape in the form of "scars" that have no doubt something to do with the remoteness of the location from the centralization of markets in an age of empire. Whereas Ristelhueber's photographs are significant in that they document remote events, the materiality of the photographs appears insignificant. This removal tends to ignore the construct of the location of her photographs' installation.

Figure 7





Sophie Ristelhueber

*L'air est à tout le monde (II)*, 2000

Color photograph mounted on aluminum and sound  
200 X 250 cm (78 ¾ X 98 7/16 in.), unique

Figure 8



Sophie Ristelhueber

*La Campagne*, 1997

22 digital color and black-and-white prints mounted on cardboard

Dimensions variable, approximately 22.8 m (75 feet)

Overall, unique

Installation at Galerie Arlogos, Nantes, France, 1997

Photographing the remote and often unnoticed effects of empire, Ristelhueber reacts to where imperialism leaves its dirty laundry. She must go to some place foreign to make it seem local. At the same time, it is implied that the local cannot appear foreign, that it cannot be seen by another as remote. She does not recognize the absurdity of the institutions that install her works. She identifies what is liminal in the shadow of sublime narratives. Her sources must follow in the wake of destruction and outsourced events. For these reasons, Ristelhueber struggles with her installations. She locates her images of remote sites in the local lexicon at the expense of sublimating the image's substructure. When she attempts to make the substructure visible, it appears awkwardly disconnected in *L'air est à tout le monde (II)*, 2000, (fig. 7) in which a light illuminates the space between photographs and their respective corners in a manner familiar to Dan Flavin. Or in *La Campagne*, 1997, (fig. 8) Ristelhueber places the photographs in the local framework of their viewing by haphazardly leaning them against the gallery wall.

The images Ristelhueber photographs dislocate the present from the liminality of localized events. Thus, Ristelhueber relies on her biographical accounts and titles to authenticate the images as corresponding to remote events, introducing an otherwise unknown authority to locate their origins in global conflicts. Thus, as these photographs address particular strategies of conflict, they must be considered abstractions. We should not forget that Colin Powell supposedly authenticated the origins of images that had been abstracted by satellite technology, only later to find this authentication historically inaccurate. Such a gap becomes easily exploitable. However, Ristelhueber disrupts allegiances to any constructed identity by removing the photographs from serving such a strategic aim. In contrast, specialists in the US intelligence community presented photographs as if it corroborated a particular narrative in the images presented to the UN Security Council, one in which Saddam Hussein was acquiring biological weapons. They were able to present themselves as authorities over the reading of images by sublimating the photographic analysis to a bureaucratic "intelligence" that was antithetical to the incoherence of the images they presented. Ristelhueber, however, recognizes the incoherence of the events she photographs and does not attempt to apply a coherent narrative. Yet, both Ristelhueber and Powell use photographs as testimony to authenticate an event supposedly dislocated from the space of their viewing.

In the photographs themselves, Ristelhueber's representations of war avoid subliminal overtones that would alienate the image from a liminal,

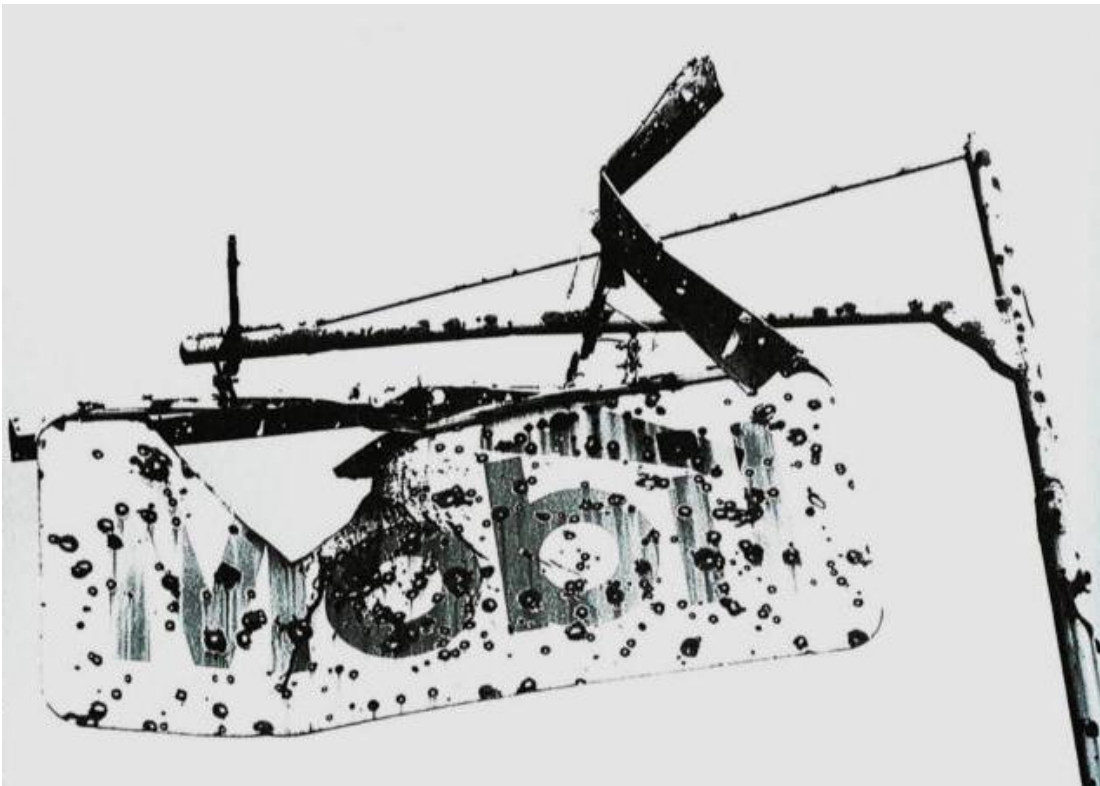


mundane appearance. In a conversation with Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey, Rancière writes:

Ristelhueber photographs barricades on Palestinian roads. But she doesn't photograph the great concrete wall that petrifies the gaze. She photographs from a distance, from above, the little handmade barricades made of piled stone, which look like rock slides in the middle of a tranquil landscape. That's one way of keeping one's distance from the shopworn affect of indignation and instead exploring the political resources of a more discreet affect—curiosity. (Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey in conversation with Jacques Rancière, "Art of the Possible," *Artforum*, March, 2007, pg. 259, 261).

In this way, the images Ristelhueber presents avoid the rigid focus of narratives applied to spectacles, such as those meant to dehumanize the colonized and monumentalize the colonizer.

Figure 9



Sophie Ristelhueber

*Beirut*, 1984

1 of 31 silver prints 19 X 28.5 cm (7 ½ X 11 ¼ in.)

Each unique

Ristelhueber has no illusion regarding the mundane effects of violence. She does not glorify a certain position. In *Beirut*, 1984, (fig. 9) bullet holes perforate a Mobil<sup>TM</sup><sup>3</sup> sign in a photograph taken around the time of the withdrawal of the US's troops from Lebanon.<sup>4</sup> Ristelhueber's *Beirut* depicts an iconoclastic appropriation of what in the West appears as a mundane corporate sign. What strikes the viewer is the incorporation of traces of gunfire with the Mobil<sup>TM</sup> sign. The mundane is rendered absurd. Thus, the spectacle of consumption becomes problematic by the invocation of a Western owned oil corporation met with iconoclastic traces of gunfire.

In the case of Ristelhueber's photographs, the narratives surrounding the identity of war cease to alienate its distant effects from those of local ones. Ristelhueber makes visible the interstices between occupiers and occupied, resisting the sublime messages attached to spectacle that orient the consumer or producer towards perpetuating the relations of consumption and production attached to a system of scarcity that fuels imperialism. In the same way that the spectacle creates a sublime narrative meant to localize and isolate the gaze from being wholly other, the sublime works to maintain capital relations by abstracting the subject from a liminality, which cannot separate from time, which, otherwise, transgresses the spatial borders between localized populations. A spectacularly sublime narrative attempts to divert the gaze away from the liminal affects of time in order to consolidate power. While these subliminal messages alienate the subject from the temporal blurring of *us vs. them* and *me vs. you*, the use of liminality in Ristelhueber's photographs posits the viewer in an existential and common history beyond the rigidity of subliminal narratives that separate capital from its other. In this way, the images recall Paul Strand's architecture with a Walker Evans's sense of fragmentation and Man Ray's sense of absurdity.

## Surveillance

Ristelhueber follows conflict according to a sequential cause and affect. A war happens, she must go to it. Yet, nothing seems all too foreign about the war-torn sites in her photographs. These don't seem like rarified instances. In her surveying of borders of conflict, Ristelhueber does not want to locate something else that would build a consensus. Ristelhueber does not want to find a coherent identity between occupiers and occupied. Nor does the identity located within the frame of Ristelhueber's distant gaze isolate the traces of conflict in a spectacular display of sentimentality. Surveillance for Ristelhueber must locate the borders in an unidentifiable gaze.

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<sup>3</sup> Mobil<sup>TM</sup> is the largest publicly traded international oil and gas company headquartered in the US.

<sup>4</sup> Troops were withdrawn due to increased violence and dead during the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990). Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982 during the Lebanon War between Christians and Muslims to weaken the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PLO), which set up a quasi-state in much of Southern Lebanon. US influence primarily attempted to restrict Syrian influence in the Lebanese Civil War in addition to curbing Hezbollah's influence.

Ristelhueber attempts to return surveillance to intelligence; she must counter counter-intelligence in order to show the incoherency of war narratives for the purpose of pointing to imperialism's dirty laundry. In any event, she must locate the traces of logic, even if that logic meets illogic. She does not mourn the loss of life, the loss of capital, instead, she finds some traces of logic in the remotest places, to confirm what she already knows, that there is no other besides intelligence. The locations Ristelhueber visits bare a striking resemblance to the neighborhoods around the corner, only they are ravaged and war-torn. By surveying the remote spaces of geopolitical conflict in which occupation meets destruction, Ristelhueber photographs the incoherent consequences of war in a landscape evacuated of a particular identity.

Figure 10



Sophie Ristelhueber  
Beirut, 1982

Figure 11



Sophie Ristelhueber

*Every One (#5)*, 1994

Black-and-white photograph mounted on fiberboard

180 X 270 cm (70 7/8 X 106 1/4 in.), unique

Installation at Galerie Arlogos, Nantes, France, 1994

Many of Ristelhueber's photographs locate the traces of war where the subject appears indifferent to a singular cause. For Ristelhueber, the act of surveillance does not constitute an "intelligence" gathering meant to authorize a particular use of something. Surveillance, for Ristelhueber, is not a matter of isolating a potential target. The images of war-torn landscapes Ristelhueber photographs do not appear to have any potential use in their present condition. For instance, a modernist apartment high-rise crumbles in *Beirut*, 1982 (fig. 10). Surveillance, in this regard, does not isolate its subject from the everyday, nor does it prescribe a narrative involving the use of such images. Should we not identify with those the US occupies, or the injured leaving hospitals in Paris (*Every One [#5]*, 1994, [fig. 11]) absent their value as potential markets? What about the victims of nationalist and ethnic conflicts in Kosovo? There is no *us* vs. *them*, or *I* vs. *you*, instead, there is an anonymous divide in the purview of the subject. Surveillance for Ristelhueber does not signal a removal of oneself from conflict. Nor does surveillance imply hegemony associated with state intelligence agencies. Rather, surveillance, for Ristelhueber, implies an act of rendering

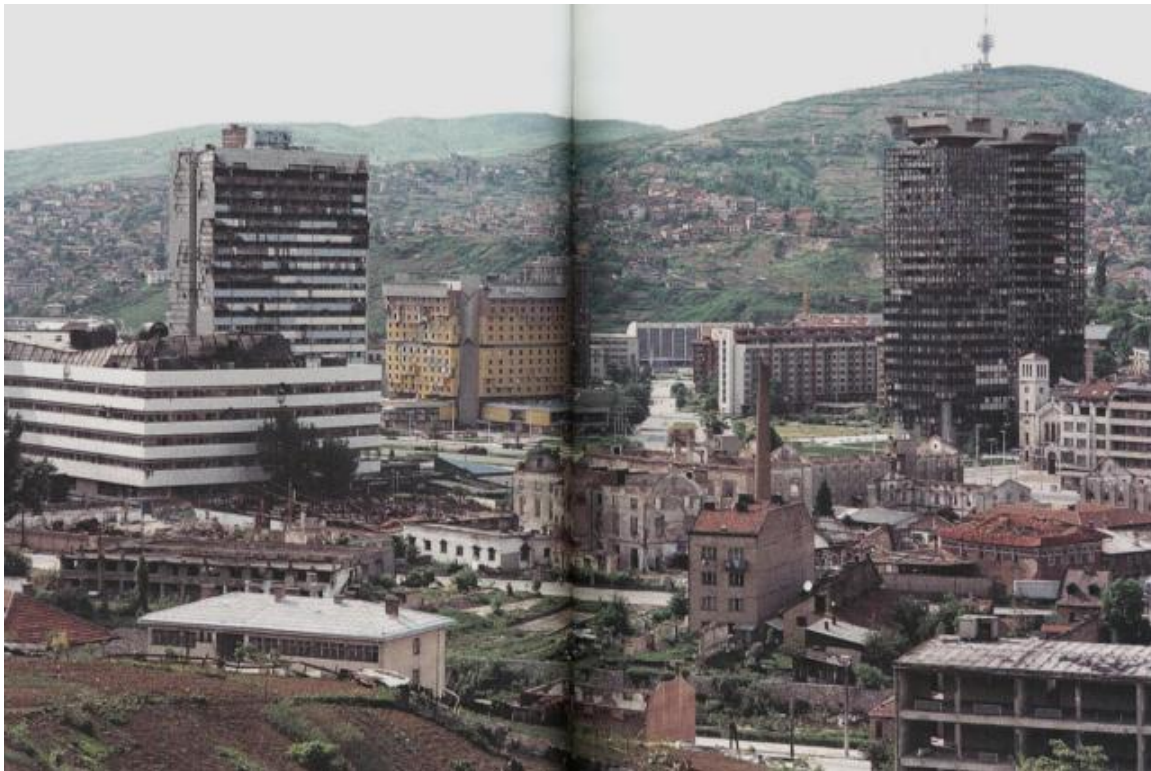


conflict, contradiction and difference liminal, as part of the ordinary and intelligible that makes incoherent nationalistic narratives.

### **Anonymity**

The author locates in an anonymous zone of otherness in Ristelhueber's images, removed from any singular strategy or objective other than their viewing. The images do not focus on a spectacle to monumentalize the gaze on a fixed center, an origin of authority. Instead, her focus is on the evacuation of a central identity. There is an asymmetry regarding the landscapes that corresponds with the absence of authority over the other, an inability to control the composition of the other, a decentering of the image as a power to make visible. What is made visible is the anonymous identity of the author in the absence of a central authority. Ristelhueber, her persona, does not infuse the work with an essential Ristelhueberness. Instead, the photographs call into question an anonymous identity in conflicts that centralize issues of identity and occupation.

Figure 12



Sophie Ristelhueber  
*Sarajevo, 1996*

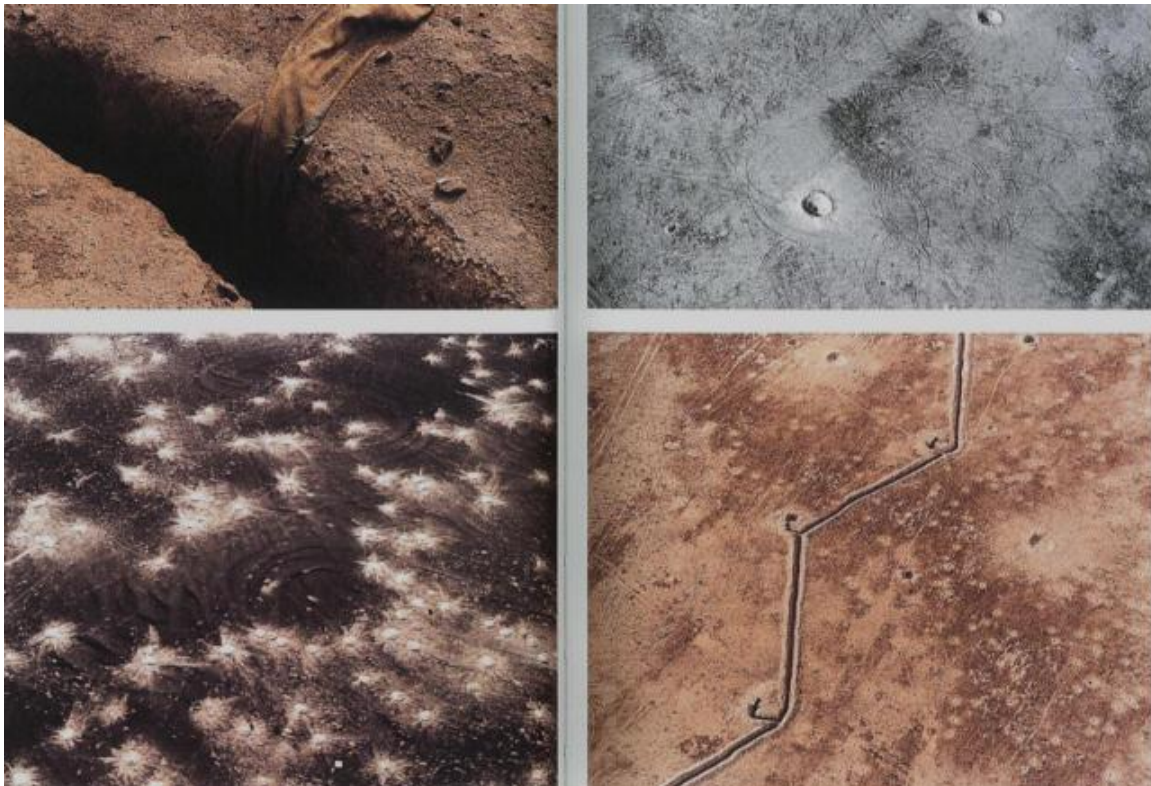
Ristelhueber's use of anonymity disorients commitment to a particular allegiance regarding geopolitical conflicts. The sources of the images appear anonymous. We read the contents of the image as if absent of any mediation.

And since the images do not appear too foreign from a liminal experience, there is not the sense of alienation from the processes of conflict. We are not asked to identify with an isolatable victim or aggressor. Instead, the viewer looks at the image as if disinterested in the reason for the conflict, disorienting traditional regards to property. Thus, in images like *Sarajevo*, 1996, (fig. 12) the destruction becomes born out of an incoherent conflict over identity, as if without any known cause or effect.

By using a seemingly anonymous gaze, Ristelhueber effectively subverts the politics of spectacles that exclude and include identity within a sublime objective. Ristelhueber locates the image of her work on the interstices of geopolitical conflict. The locations exist on the borders of capital, where capital and its hegemony adopts violent measures in securing resources for the perpetuation of divisions in labor. These are the divisions that Ristelhueber's images attempt to disorient by evacuating identity from any one group, neither colonized or colonizer, but on the border of just that.

### Notations and Documentation

Figure 13



Sophie Ristelhueber  
(details) *Fait*, 1992

71 color and black-and-white photographs mounted on aluminum and framed

100 X 130 X 5 cm (39 3/8 X 51 3/16 X 2 in.) each, edition 3  
 Installation at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, 1998

Ristelhueber attempts to document the margins of capital and its other in order to close the gap between identities caught in war. War becomes the naturalized subject in her photographs, liminal, at once affecting a radically oriented subjectivity toward anonymity. As Ristelhueber locates the borders of capital and its other, the images represent a physical divide, fragmentation or scission, such as a barricaded road between the Palestinian West Bank and Israel in *WB #3*, 2005, *WB*, 2004, or the scars of patients leaving a Parisian hospital. In documenting these borders, Ristelhueber removes the divides from utility in order to contemplate their significance. What possible contingent might constitute the subject in *Fait*, 1992, (fig. 13)?

The destruction of various commonplace sites does not appear out of the ordinary. It is a matter of fact, according to Ristelhueber's photographs. Yet, on all accounts, a phenomenological reading of the photographic image, a reading of the photographic image as anything other than a photograph cannot account for the entirety of an outside event. To say that a photograph transparently enshrines an event from being read in the present capitulates on some unknown authority. Yet, photographs have entered the public lexicon to the extent that they have been used in conjunction with political strategy to alter public perception. Collin Powell's description of biological weapons in specks of shadow constitutes just one example in which photographs have been used to naturalize one particular reading. Perhaps the significance of Sophie Ristelhueber's photographs lie not in their capacity to present the unmediated and phenomenological representation of conflicts on the interstices of capital and its other; but, perhaps Ristelhueber's photographs signify a need to locate an other within capital itself. That Ristelhueber goes about this by reacting to geopolitical conflict by following its mundane and absurd tracks employs one particular strategy. However, this strategy relies on an unknown authority to locate the images at the time of their constitutive event. Like the images held up by Powell, someone must give a narrative in order to place the image and its contents. However, Ristelhueber's ability to render narratives incoherent subverts the normative exchanges of violence between occupiers and occupied that centers on the question of 'Who violated the space?' Yet, in these instances, when absent a decisive origin of the conflict, does it matter?

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