

Paola Yacoub
Radical Grounds

September 19 - December 27
Marfa' ©2019

Radical Grounds brings together a group of photographs of the ground taken between 1990 and 2012 in the region that stretches from Lebanon to Kurdistan. They *represent* grounds, heaps of pebbles, white and black stones, sometimes flat and sometimes sloping, at other times uneven and broken. Most are indeterminate aediculae that are sometimes hardly distinguishable from any other accident on the ground.

But they also *present* a game with the perspective from which the photograph was taken. The angle of the lens directed towards the ground varies, delimited by both the overhanging frame of the photograph and the landscape. We can deduce the distance from which the photograph was taken, and the stability or instability of the shot. Thus, the soil intervenes as the view and aim of the action, and as its ground.

These grounds may have been trampled, may or may not have been laboured over or neglected. We might be inclined to try to know more about their subject matter, to decipher them, to deduce whether these grounds are dangerous, perhaps concealing landmines. These photographs may

be saturated with information, narratives, or bring together various collages. They remain a simple collection of images of the ground.

But *a priori* the artist is *engaged* on these grounds, and she must verify them before photographing, at times even evaluating their danger. The act of photographing combines a number of elements that can construct other horizons of meaning.

On the one hand, these grounds are the subject of the photographs, they disable the expected pathos in the iconography of the region. There's something lowly about the ground, the mud, the rubble... It's no longer possible to sanctify it, at least as native or ancestral ground, or as the tombs of martyrs.

On the other hand, these grounds are the basis for the artist's engagement, *she's implicated in the scenes constituted on these territories*, in the dramas which play out on them, the outlines of human actions. These photographs then deactivate the anaesthetising grammars deployed by wars at the scale of populations with their growing use of drone shots, or even with various sceptical postures, whether imposed or conventional.

These photographs seem to have been 'taken without thinking, yielding to sudden inspiration, but they have been carefully preserved.'¹ Collected in this way, they remain immanent to the intentional action of taking a photograph. In this sense, they are radical. They contribute to elucidating the historical conditions of a concrete photographic practice.

1. Thomas Bernhard, *Extinction*, trad. Gilberte Lambrichs (Paris, Gallimard, Infolio, 1990), p. 238. English translation from the French by Stefan Tarnowski.

Paola Yacoub (b. 1966) graduated from the Architectural Association in London. Since 1994, she has conducted artistic experiments on our relations to automata in photography and architecture. In 1995, she worked as IFAPO's architect for the archeological excavations of Beirut city center. She began collaborating with Michel Lasserre on an artistic practice in 2000. They made notations on the aspect variations of territories in conflict and post-conflict situations, before working on the perception of territories immersed in information flows. They have undertaken artistic interventions into the characteristics of actions, developing their practice within the broader framework of extended actionism.

Their public lectures and essays were brought together in the monograph *Beirut is a Magnificent City. Synoptic Pictures* (Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 2003). Yacoub and Lasserre have been awarded several grants and residencies, including the DAAD in Berlin in 2005. They have exhibited together in, amongst others, the Venice Biennale, 2000 and 2003; Kunst-Werke in Berlin, 2000; the Witte

de With in Rotterdam, 2003; and the Centre pour l'image contemporaine/Mamco in Geneva, 2006.

Paola Yacoub's solo exhibitions include: a retrospective, *Drawing with the Things Themselves*, at Beirut art center in 2011; and the exhibition *Kiss the black Stones* at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin in 2012. She has participated in numerous group exhibitions, including *The Pencil of Culture* at Centre Pompidou, 2016; the Taipei Biennale in Taiwan, 2016; *Home Beirut: Sounding the Neighbors* at Maxxi in Rome, 2017-2018; *En Suspens* at Le Bal in Paris, 2018; and *Sabine Weiss, les villes, la rue, l'autre* at Centre Pompidou, 2018.

Paola Yacoub is the founding director of the program ARP (Artistic Research Practices, since 2013) at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (ALBA), in collaboration with the Sursock Museum in Beirut.



Paola Yacoub, **F2**, 1994. Gelatin silver print on baryta paper, 78 x 78 cm.



Paola Yacoub, **F5**, 1994. Gelatin silver print on baryta paper, 78 x 78 cm.

Radical Grounds is the title given to Paola Yacoub's solo exhibition presented at Marfa'. Several series of photographs named in alphabetical and algebraic order, from A1 to H3 line the gallery walls in the first exhibition room. These series, produced in varying dimensions and differing printing techniques, in colour as well as black-and-white, all represent grounds. In a radical move, Paola Yacoub deliberately chooses not to name the geographical places where the photographs were taken. She simply states that they were 'taken between 1990 and 2012 in the region that stretches from Lebanon to Kurdistan.'¹ Hence the visitor is confronted to these incidental encounters with different grounds, endowed with diverse qualities of soil, rocks and woods, removed from their original sources. In some way, this action means that the names of these photographs relate to the process of archiving negatives. Moreover, these alphabetical and

1. See Paola Yacoub, *Artist Statement, Radical Grounds* (Beirut, Marfa', September 2019), p. 1.

algebraic names, (such as F2, A5, and so on) echo the notation of a chess board, but an uneven one since Yacoub's photographic series do not contain the same number of works.²

Even though the artist resists naming the grounds displayed, she does maintain a temporal relationship to them. Therefore, the years in which the photographs were taken are constitutive of their titles. These photographs are not holding back time, they testify to a physical world which might have already decayed or disappeared. The act of photographing the ground alludes to several debates on political issues related to geopolitics, particularly in the area stretching from Lebanon to Kurdistan. The reading of these photographs cannot fully relate to the probable historical activities which might have taken place on these ideologically constituted soils. In her affective history of the present, Lauren Berlant points out

2. The reference to the chess board is an allusion to Marcel Duchamp, who in the 1920s, considered becoming a professional chess player.

that: 'we understand nothing about impasses of the political without having an account of the production of the present.'³

The artist not only states that she did physically step on the ground but also that she was the acting agent of the image, in accordance with Alfred Gell's concept of agency, *i.e.* the person who chose different angles during the action of photographing. By doing so, Yacoub sidesteps a direct relationship to documentary practice while testifying to her physical presence on these grounds.⁴ Her points of view are based on deliberate restrictions, shattering any frame of predictable reference. An awareness of the flaws of the photographic medium in providing an accurate account of reality does not interfere with her artistic practice but rather becomes the substance of it.

As viewers, we might not know either where these *Radical Grounds* are located or the significance of

3. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2011), p. 294.

4. See Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998). An anthropologist, Gell considered a theory of visual art through a form of instrumental action. To him, the making of things was a means of influencing thoughts and actions of others.

their representation. They are, however, inscribed in a photographic tradition which has to do with topographical photography, geology and archaeology.

Topographical photography often refers to aerial modes of mapping an area, a territory, which is not the case here in these random images. In the 19th century, topographical geography was common in the illustration of fictional books in Great Britain. Photography was expected to give a natural decorum to fiction, and combined in a picturesque way rocks, wood and water. English writer William Howitt points out that, through this way of illustration, 'we are not amused with pleasant fictions, but presented with realities.'⁵ In the present exhibition, Yacoub reverses this process: by presenting the visitors with these images of given realities, the photographs have to stand by themselves; they are neither fictions nor complete realities. Yacoub's series of photographs

5. Foreword to *Ruined Castles and Abbeys of Great Britain*, quoted by Stephen Thompson, 'Photography in its application to book illustration', *British Journal of Photography*, vol. 9, n. 1 (1862), pp. 88-89.

do not allow us to grasp more than an unstable doubt of a present alienation, as expressed by Roland Barthes: 'We constantly drift between the object and its demystification, powerless to render its wholeness. For if we penetrate the object, we liberate it but we destroy it; and if we acknowledge its full weight, we respect it, but we restore it to a state which is still mystified.'⁶

Another parallel I want to draw between these grounds is their relationship to what lies above and what lies below the actual surface of the earth. Yacoub's photographs reflect on the notion of visibility but also of existence - and its relationship with visibility. On the one hand, the surface of the ground is the seminal component of a landscape, it actually allows to have a landscape. On the other hand, there is the underground. The ground beneath our feet is often seen as an inherently horizontal phenomenon. Yet, this perspective underplays the importance

6. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London, Vintage, 2000), p. 159.

of verticality, the accumulation of stratigraphic layers and composition of the ground, often through human-generated geological features. A manufactured ground is densest in ancient cities, which have been inhabited, destroyed and rebuilt over the time. Soils are the loci of numerous interactions between chemical, physical and biological properties. This is where geology turns to archaeology, an activity well known to the artist who worked in some archeological excavations in Beirut in the 1990s. To the horizontality of these photographed grounds, one can juxtapose the verticality of the contemporary city of Beirut – through its skyline – where they are currently exhibited. This juxtaposition illustrates how ‘the image of the city, in particular, is a thing that is made of geology or on geology, increasingly has to contend with the idea of the city as a thing that makes geology.’⁷ There is little or no preservation in these grounds, because of the unstoppable

7. Seth Denizen, ‘Three Holes: In the Geological Present’, in Etienne Turpin (ed.), *Architecture in the Anthropocene: Encounters among Design, Deep Time, Science and Philosophy* (New York, Anexact, 2013), p. 29.

flow of history and the presence of excavation processes. The action of digging down to excavate, be it only one layer, actually destroys the residues of other layers. Some photographs are a direct reference to soil extraction or building sites, extraction being, according to Stephen Graham, 'the founding of our contemporary society.'⁸

One cannot look at *Radical Grounds* without viewing Yacoub's body of work in connection with Robert Smithson's photographic work. Smithson, best known through his *Earthworks*, made an extensive use of his Kodak Instamatic Camera, capturing the always elusive evidence of geological time and the notion of a disintegrating framework. His work, often categorized as land art, consisted of text, photography, and drawing in combination. In an unpublished article on photography, he wrote, 'An artist may operate in a "closed landscape". His point of view is based on deliberate restrictions, he intends to define or

8. Stephen Graham, *Vertical – The City from Satellites to Bunkers* (Brooklyn, Verso, 2016), p. 12.

plot a self-sustaining autonomous limit within a containing framework. [...] On the other hand, there is the “open landscape” which embodies multiple views, some of which are contradictory, whose purpose is to reveal a clash of angles and orders within a sense of simultaneity; this shatters any predictable frame of reference.’⁹

In the second room at Marfa, photographs give way to recovered fragments. The visitor stands in the presence of further negatives, further frames of references. Here are the negatives of the bullet holes that Yacoub recovered through two archaeological processes in the 1990s. The first technique is a technique consisting of making a cast of bullet impact holes with a special paste before removing it, the second to apply a blotting paper on the wall and by brushing it, to recover some of the traces present on it, including small metal fragments. Both techniques were applied to a wall surrounding the French Cultural Centre in

9. Robert Smithson, ‘Art through the Camera’s Eye (c. 1971)’, in Jack Flam (ed.), *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1996), p. 374.

Beirut. This wall was perpendicular to the Green Line – the conflict line during the Lebanese Civil War, hence it was not possible to deduct from which conflicting party the bullets emanated. On a table, the series *Casts of Bullet Holes* presents 178 tiny pieces or casts of impacts in a horizontal line, whereas the *Wall Stamp of Bullet Holes* are hung on the wall, testifying to the verticality from which these images in negatives were taken from. Paola Yacoub's *Radical Grounds* oscillates between an archiving process of negatives, archaeology and the relationship between horizontal and vertical geographies. This reflection on the earth is not a mere invitation to a contemplating process which might reveal itself, and, beyond it, the subject within the object. *Radical Grounds* acts as a remnant of a not so distant past within our contemporary present.

Isabelle de le Court

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