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Always Starts with an Encounter | Wols – Eileen Quinlan

RADIO ATHÈNES

sequence

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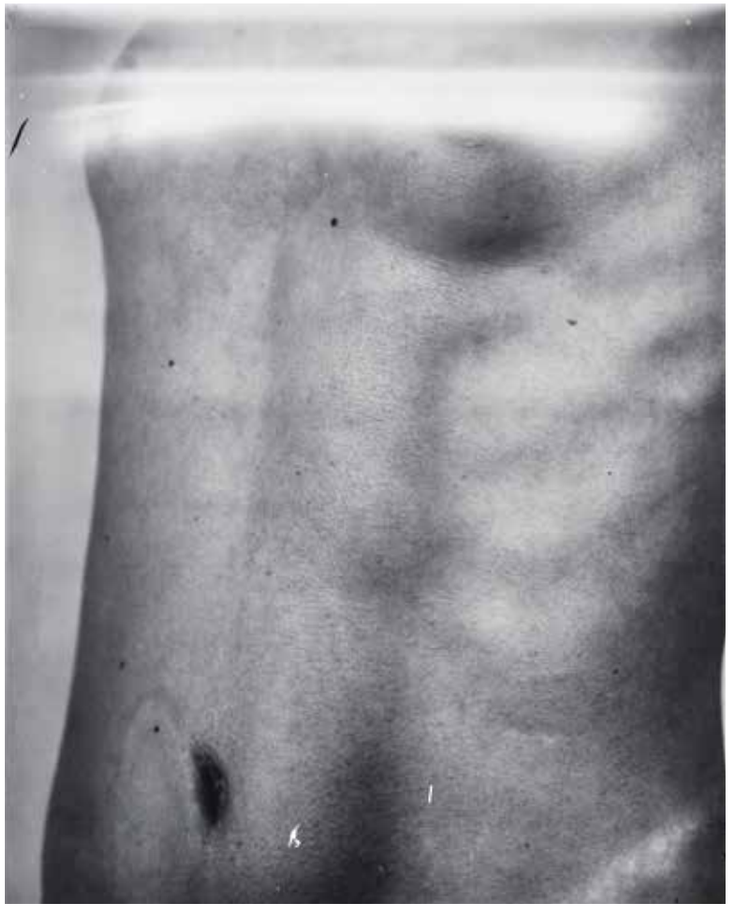
[1] *Index for E.* by Laura Preston appears by entry alphabetically throughout the book.

Atmosphere[1]

A place to begin, particularly when considering an exhibition in Athens, where two bodies of work were placed. A coalescence of two authors, both working in photography. One working with the limits and abstracting the limits — and also the other. One timeframe and then another: Wols in the late 1930s, you, Eileen Quinlan, today. Authorship too is a kind of atmospheric effect: it diffuses across deviations at work. Atmosphere is also another way of saying "the spatiality that is felt." The context can be thick, or it can be a light condensation to be inhaled. There is this, the setting, and then there is your punctuation in relation to it, the artifice of the real. There are many similarities between you both, for example, when you make those photographs that look like pulled meat but are actually bodies behind smoke and mirrors, there is a resemblance to those of the bloody organ he placed on a tablecloth. One is staged and so is the other, and between such props and setups and the optics, the image holds a temperature, almost a scent and the sound of respiration.



Attachment
Eileen Quinlan, 2014
Gelatin silver print
30 × 24 inches
(76.2 × 61 cm)


A

A

A

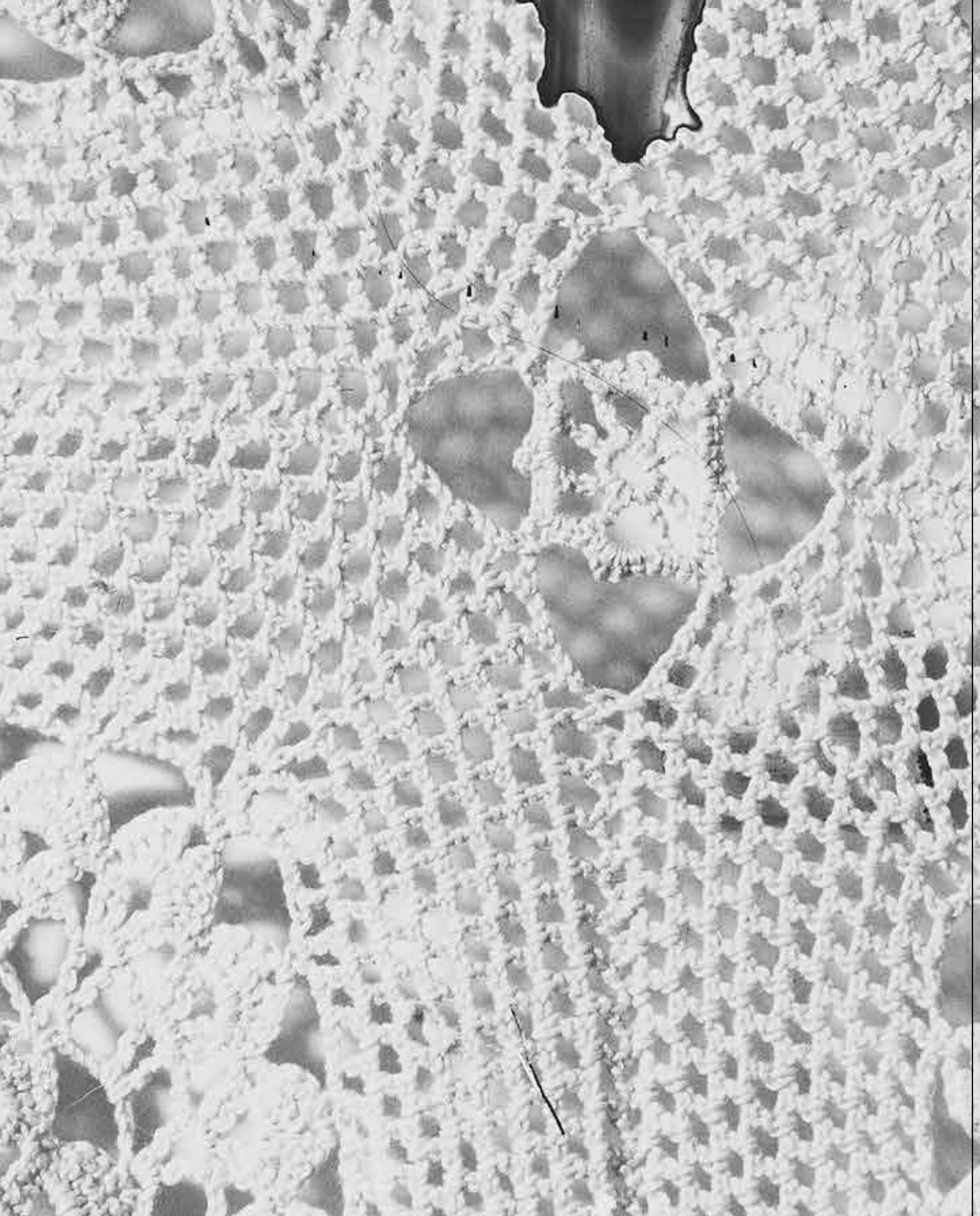
(Still Life – Beans) Untitled
Wols, 1938–39
Gelatin silver print (Agfa-paper), 1970s modern print
18.9 × 13.2 cm

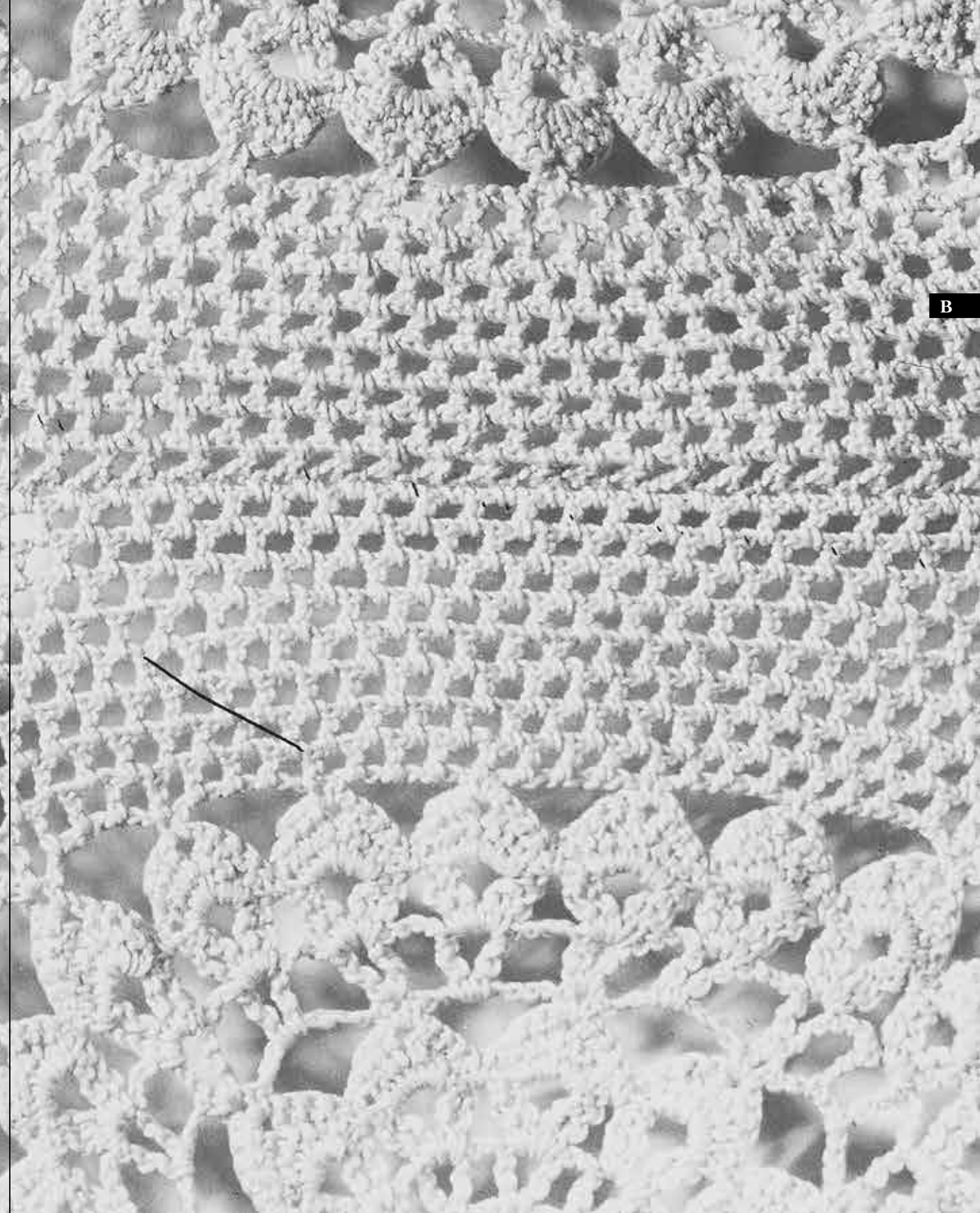
Bonanza
Eileen Quinlan, 2013
Gelatin silver print
25 × 20 inches
(63.5 × 50.8 cm)

B

B


B

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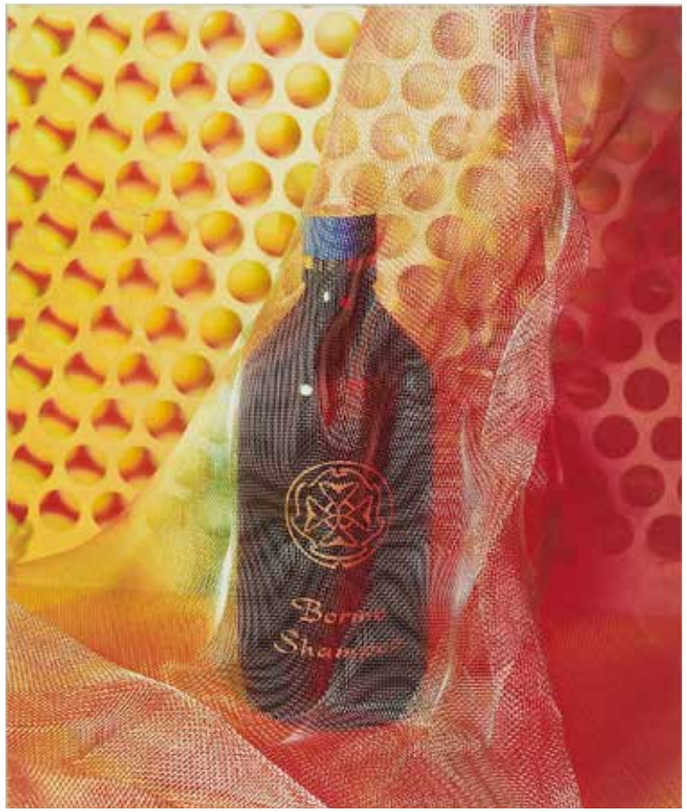
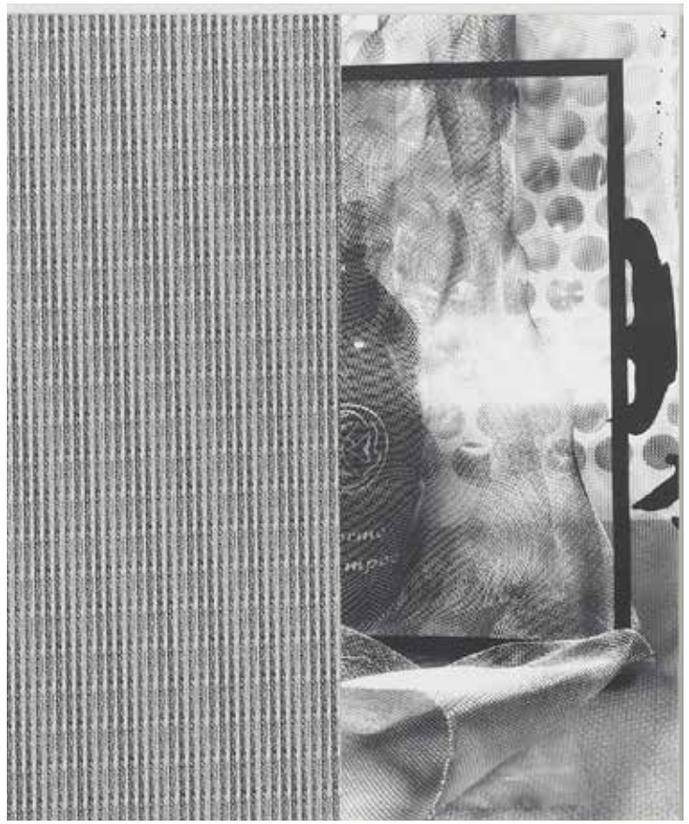


Bormo for Beca
Eileen Quinlan, 2015
Chromogenic print /
Gelatin silver print
Each: 24 × 20 inches
(61 × 50.8 cm)



Fall
It is a season in America, your land. In my land, it is what I try to avoid. But inevitably it happens. This encounter with the self is different to love. Different again to becoming the host or the stranger or that other brought from another continent to sweat for you. There is a certain retribution to the fall and a certain implicit reconstruction. Pictures also fall, between the divide of the idea and the actuality. You make photographs for these conditions and state that in finding this in-between there is a certain luck.

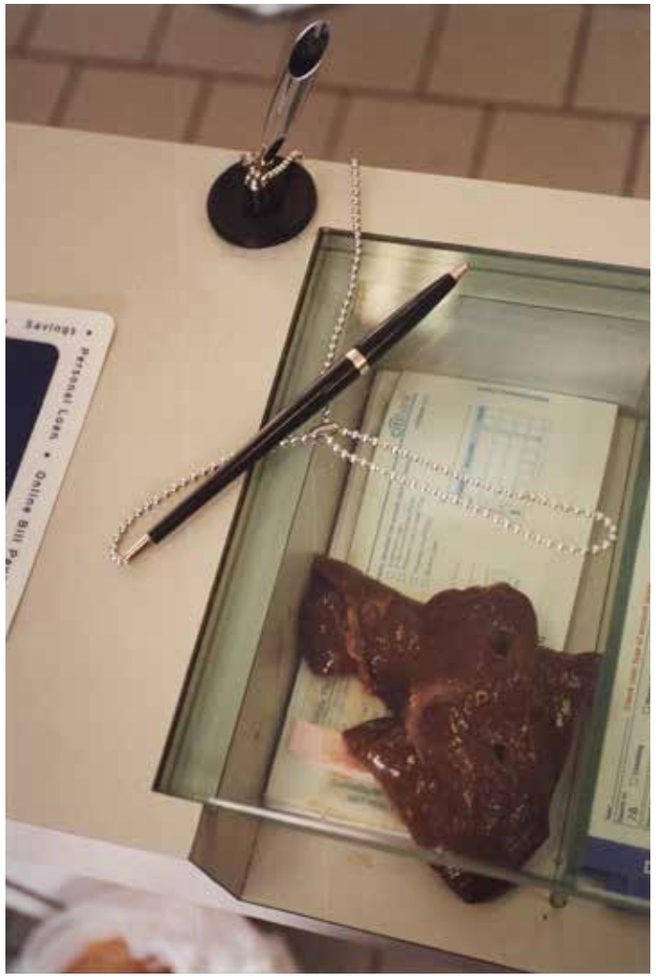
Form
When you make exhibitions of pictures, there is both the image contained within the frame and the images that constellate in the arrangement of the exhibition space. This form may not be formal, however. The form may be discrete, and it may be made up of absences. It may be a statement. It may be a strange thing. You show form as eliding the emulsion by laboring with the ineffable, faltering with the expectations, and casting light on the shifting order of things.

Fox
On the street one winter night that may have been.

Gesture
The gesture is a haunting code. The gesture is evidence of the author. There are gestures that the body carries; they may come from a deep past. We are also losing our gestures and adopting others, all the time. There are some notes on gesture that claim the photographic image has more relation to ethics than aesthetics. I would say that they are both, as you show, like when you gravitated toward commercial photography rather than shying away from it and made beautiful images that show up the very devices of desire. The images are also performing as gestures, revealing and reveling in the artifice. They are calling out to be read.

Great Basin
Eileen Quinlan, 2012
Gelatin silver print
24 × 20 inches
(61 × 50.8 cm)

G



Liver (Paying in Slips)
Josephine Pryde, 2006
Chromogenic print
15.3 × 10 inches
(38.7 × 25.4 cm)

L

Liver, Kidney, Breath, Body: A Series of (Corporeal) Codas on Some Photographs by Wols and Eileen Quinlan

Quinn Latimer

The rumored feelings of photographs are legion, but they need a body to make them be. Not necessarily a body within the frame—Walter Benjamin's line about photography without people being the most impossible of renunciations is taken, yes, but that was some time ago, no[1]—but a body from which to abstract them, a body to receive them, to juxtapose them, to narrate them, to double them, to think them, to refuse them, to disturb them, to make them, in every case, be. Rumors are like spirits: we conjure them. Figments, fragments. So too photographs. Rumors are in black-and-white or in color. Images, also. They are smoke and mirror, mask. They are language that is all atmosphere, insinuation, eroticism, fragmentation, not unimpeachable information, not form that is—what—unassailable. Rumors are smoke, formless. They are something, anything, left in the street, or constructed on the table. Noir, or Kodachrome, or the discrete organ. Some trace. They are evidence without the body. Photographs too, of course (I think).

Form that is deformed, smoke and mirror. Each suggest some *thing* exposed: a body and its vulnerability to abstraction, deformation, amputation, *exile*, absence. The absence, the exile of the figure itself is generally understood as a deformation—we are supposed to be here, intact, our form uninterrupted, readable, totally traceable—which intimates that fragmentation of said body is something profane, something lost, some loss, something that loses. And yet: abstraction. To abstract is to abstract *from*. From what. Bodies,

[1] Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," trans. Stanley Mitchell, *Screen* 13, no. 1 (March 1972): 5. This essay was originally published in *Literarische Welt* in three parts in 1931. I first came across this specific line, however, in artist and writer Moyra Davey's essay "The Wet and the Dry," published as a pamphlet in 2011 by Paraguay Press (castillo/corrales) as part of their "The Social Life of the Book" series.

whether biological or no. Form that is formal or no. And the currency of parts—a kind of contemporary relic trade—remains strong. Why, though?

I am thinking about the body and its parts, what they mean. For example: Spleen. It exists as a fact—most of us have one—and a charged metaphor: of melancholy, of modernism, of artistic creation, of excess, of all that which exceeds (see Baudelaire, etc.).[2] But what about liver? After my mother fell sick when she was a young woman, due to a vegetarian diet and too much running (and likely drinking), a doctor told her she had to eat liver three times a week to regain her strength. She did so throughout my childhood, a meal that was memorable because of the very fact that it was singular, had a solitary form: she made it only for herself—unlike all other food prepared or ordered in our house, it was not shared with my brother and myself—and she made it alone, in an old frying pan. Just liver. Nothing else. It sat alone in the pan and then alone on a plate and then she ate it alone, while I watched. The liver seemed to gleam and hum with not only oil but with meaning. It appeared there profane and, yes, singular, like a metaphor. For what, I wasn't sure. But it had form. I can trace its banal, sinister, meaty outline on some speculative plate even now.

There is a watercolor with pen and ink by the twentieth-century photographer and painter Wols—born Alfred Otto Wolfgang Schulze in Berlin in 1913—called *Slice of Liver-Cello* (ca. 1944). Its detailed, watery, meaty form evokes opposing scales: a scientific drawing of some small, faintly vegetal form rendered larger than life, and something planetary brought down to size, a hairy, pink planet—that organ—rendered in fluid, almost psychedelic detail on paper. The drawing's organic subject and its strange charge, a kind of frisson, seem to shadow Wols's incandescent black-and-white photographs, made a decade earlier, of other kinds of organs and organic matter. The kidneys of a hog, oyster shells, a dead rabbit, eggs and vegetables, for example, all shot from above and against dark-silvery grounds, surreal in their hyper-banality: a

[2] See the "Spleen" poems in Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857).

tablecloth with some middle-class pattern, slick cobblestones, crumpled newspaper whose deep, fomal shadows conjure the rigor of the Bauhaus's concurrent geometric abstractions.

Wols used what was at hand. Stateless and impoverished in Paris before the war, having left his native Germany in 1932 as the National Socialists came to power, Wols used his small kitchen as his photography studio, as his display, as his subject. "He went shopping and cooked Spanish or Chinese … but first everything was photographed [raw]—the rabbit, the onions," his wife Gréty would write in a 1966 letter, long after his early death.[3] He died in 1951 from a combination of food poisoning (parable-like, this) and alcoholism and a fragile, depleted state caused by fourteen months of internment in a camp in Nazi-held France.

To be exposed is to be vulnerable "to the elements." Political, social, chemical. Wols's photographic exposures are equally vulnerable, seemingly defenseless, and yet they remain open in that entirely exposed space, to curiosity, virtuosity, weirdness, and humor. A kind of surreal empathy, its power, turns the quotidian objects that he focuses his camera on into relics, not from the impoverished present but some improbable yet tangible future. The poetry and the pathos of poverty is there, yes, and the kaleidoscopic effects of war and displacement on form and its fragmentation, but not only. See his nearly fluorescent photograph *Schweineniere* (Hog kidney, ca. 1937), its titular subject—the organ's shine a kind of existential sweat—shot tightly from above against a tablecloth of some familiar pattern, paisley, whose almond-like form is of Persian origin, but which became popular in Western Europe in the eighteenth century, and is neither totally figurative nor abstract but some kitsch in-between. Almonds or parasites, say. The kidney itself is meaty, heart-like, a mirror image found in nature; pale fat strobes its shiny surface, dispersing out from its center like a comet, cosmological.

From the same year, Wols's *Kaninchen mit Kamm und Mundharmonika* (Rabbit with comb and harmonica, ca. 1937) shows the pale,

[3] Letter from Gréty Wols (1966) cited in Kah Jagals, *Wols als Photograph*, exh. cat., Von der Heydt-Museum, Wuppertal, 1978, n.p., quoted in Christine Mehring, *Wols Photographs*, exh. cat., Busch-Reisinger Museum, Harvard University Museums, Cambridge, MA, 1999, 23.

partial skeletal body—its white vertical—of a dead rabbit against a darker, almost greasy ground. On one side of the congealed rabbit lies a plastic comb—half of its teeth missing—and on the other side, the harmonica. Each is a kind of mouth, teeth missing. Though rendered in high contrast black-and-white, the photograph suggests a dark kind of French tricolor, a flag of the poor, of the displaced, of the stateless while in state. Wols's images have a feverish luminescence, a sweaty materiality: they burn. Writing this I am aware that his photographs beckon forth a language of illness and photography and poverty. I would not reduce this work that they do to biography, though it cannot be discounted either. What life does not produce what work.

Wols's life, in particular (perhaps not so particular), was bracketed by war. He was born in Berlin, in May 1913, a Gemini—the zodiac sign symbolized by twins, indicative of a doubled self—the year before World War I broke out. He would die in Paris, thirty-eight years old, broken by his wartime internment as well as by the general state of exile and poverty, and their attendant anxieties, in which he lived. Wols was not born into poverty, though, the opposite. In Dresden, where he was raised, his father was a civil servant and an arts patron whose circle included Otto Dix. And his father's friendships with celebrated artists of his period would predict Wols's own. In 1924, Wols was given a still camera; six years later he began studying photography at the Reimann Schule, a private school for applied and fine arts in Berlin. Its avant-garde pedagogical methods shared much with the Bauhaus, which had just begun its famed photography workshop led by László Moholy-Nagy. Both schools explored commercial photography and more experimental practices, an approach to the medium that Wols would also engage—it was Moholy-Nagy who suggested that Wols move to Paris just as the Nazis closed the Bauhaus down.

After traveling around Spain for a year, teaching German, and driving a cab, Wols received a permit to live in Paris, with the assistance of Fernand Léger, though he still had to regularly report to

the Paris police. In 1937, Wols was commissioned to photograph The Pavillon de l'Élégance at the Paris World Fair; simultaneously his more personal photographs, made with borrowed equipment and developed in his apartment, began to be shown at the city's galleries. But after World War II broke out, he was interned; he finally escaped to Cassis, near Marseilles, where he began drawing and painting in watercolor as he attempted to immigrate to the United States, although his application was rejected. As the war ended, and back in Paris, Wols had his first exhibition of watercolors at Galerie René Drouin. He would continue to paint and work on his almost hallucinogenic etchings at the Hotel Montalembert until his early death.

Posthumously, his works were shown in the first three iterations of documenta directed by Arnold Bode (1955, 1959, and 1964) and at the Venice Biennale in 1958, arguably the most important European exhibitions of the postwar period. Wols would be celebrated as one of the pioneering Art Informel artists (with Jean Fautrier and Jean Dubuffet), known for his watercolors, drawings, paintings, and writings (the book *Aphorismes de Wols* was published by Amiens in 1989). His photographs from the 1930s, though, remained almost completely uncirculated until 1976, when the photographer Georg Heusch and the photography historian Volker Kahmen produced a series of prints from Wols's neg-atives made available by the artist's sister, Dr. Elfriede Schulze-Battmann.

The period in which Wols began taking photographs was auspicious, and not only because of its emergent authoritarianism. At almost exactly the same time that Wols began shooting, Benjamin—another stateless German casualty of National Socialism who made a precarious life, and indelible work, in Paris during the war—published his theory of the medium, "A Short History of Photography," in three parts, in the *LiterarischeWelt* in 1931. It wouldn't be odd to think that Wols might have read it. Benjamin begins by noting that though "[t]he fog surrounding the origins of photography is not quite as thick as that enveloping the beginnings of

Studio Time
Eileen Quinlan, 2014
Gelatin silver print
30 × 24 inches
(76.2 × 61 cm)

Synchronicity
Time works in ways that are not always known, foreseen, nor accountable. But when there is that connection between image makers and word makers (they may also be both) there are resonances that can travel over generations, continents of thought, between genres. There is longevity in this, but it is also significant that such connection is only ever elemental: the ring and the metal it is made of.

Text
It keeps you warm, such information. Some burn fires with it. The text is portable and can affect the surrounds in turn. You often select poetry for how it moves and contains space, and I would say because it is in your manner. The text can abstract the events of the situation and show up another angle on what may have happened, similarly to the image. The text can also exceed itself and convey the unexpected. Many writers choose to live away from what they know. With a camera, like Wols, you write near to where you have always lived.

T

Time-Wave Crystals
Helena Papadopoulos

Unorientable, material, not only located in the world but of the world, the photographs of Wols and Eileen Quinlan destabilize intentions and conclusions, always uncertain about limits—risking, beginning.

I wrapped myself in the diagonal relationship of their works, looking for affective processes rather than decisive correlations and convergences.

This book, as the exhibition that preceded it, is about the eventness of their images, their capacity to encircle the temporal and extract the immaterial, undermine indexicality, and wander in the abstruse physicality of the photographic.

It is also about accidental encounters at various times and at various corners between subjects, objects, operations, works of art, and texts coinciding in an imaginary simultaneity, a show and a book.

T

T

A Note on the Book

The indexical format of this publication takes some of its inspiration from *Formless: A User's Guide*, by Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, which, in turn, takes some of its own form from Georges Bataille's Paris-based journal *Documents* 7 (1929). In the latter journal's "definition" of *L'informe*, that is, the formless, Bataille notes that, "A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks." To tasks, then, and all their meanings.