Under the Sign of Brisées

To call something *brisées* is to characterise it as multiple and tentative. So when in the book *The French Connections of Jacques Derrida* Burhan Tufail considers the eponymous philosopher's influences he writes: 'In terms of literary contexts... there might be ways of locating aspects of Derrida's work by means of other genealogies of French writing, *brisées* that might trace or mark out unexpected affinities.'[1] By following 'wider and stranger trajectories of French writing' Tufail's hope is to track 'pseudo-trails that lead across arbitrary boundaries', to attempt to 'bring together two bodies of work that happened to be read, by chance, at the same time and began to generate a series of possibilities and questions'.[2] In Tufail's essay Derrida's work is one body. Oulipo - OUvroir de LIttérature POtentielle ('workshop of potential literature'), the French literary movement co-founded by poet Raymond Queneau with the mathematician François Le Lionnais in 1960 - is the other. If the former asked 'What is literature?' the latter, by employing deliberately constrained writing techniques such as the Snowball[3], Lipogram[4], and Circuit[5], thresh out the formal limits of language. Both, in their ways, have made exhaustive and exhausting revisions to an understanding of what literature *is*.

Brisées, in its specific use by Tufail, is a nod to the French Surrealist writer and ethnographer Michel Leiris, whose collection of essays, *Brisées: Broken Branches*, was first published in 1966. Later, in 1989, it was translated into English by Lydia Davis. *Brisées* is a compendium of long and short essays on friends and things that obsessed the author: artists Hans Arp, Elie Lascaux and Joan Miró; spit; poet Max Jacob (who died in Drancy internment camp); the symbolism of Fred Astaire; modern man's aversion to its body's insides; composer Arnold Schoenberg - the list goes on. In *Brisées* Leiris also recounts his first meeting with Raymond Queneau in 1924. At that time Queneau was not yet associating with the megalomaniacal Surrealist leader André Breton. Later, when their relationship soured, he joined the ranks of other dissident Surrealists, including Leiris, André Masson, Robert Desnos, and Antonin Artaud, who gathered around the magazine *Documents*, edited by Georges Bataille. *Brisées* is both intellectual portrait and landscape. A jacket note by the critic Richard Sieburth on Davis's English translation offers a disambiguation of the book's title:

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[1] Burhan Tufail, 'Oulipian Grammatology' in Julian Wilfreys (Ed), *The French Connections of Jacques Derrida*, SUNY Press (1999) p. 121.

[2] Ibid.

[3] '[T]his procedure, already practiced in Classical times, requires the first word of a text to have only one letter, the second two, the third three, and so on as far as resourcefulness and inspiration allow. The first word of a snowball is normally a vowel: in English, a, I, or O.' Harry Mathews and Alastair Brotchie (Eds), *Oulipo Compendium*, Atlas Press, London (2005) p.228.

[4] 'A text that excludes one or more letters of the alphabet. The ingenuity demanded by the restriction clearly varies in proportion to the frequency of the letter or letters excluded. After all, most short and many extended passages of literature are unintentional lipograms. No b, c, j, k, q, v, w, or z appears in the preceding sentence.' Ibid, p.178. The exemplary lipogram, Georges Perec's *La Disparition* (translated by Gilbert Adair as *A Void*), is a full-length novel that excludes the letter 'e'.

[5] 'A circuit is a path followed when reading a text. The linear succession of words is a first, given circuit. A supplementary circuit - of stanzas (or paragraphs), lines (or sentences), phrases, or words - means that those elements can be read in another order... More complex circuits - such as Raymond Queneau's *100,000,000,000,000 Poems* - are defined by precise mathematical rules and can be represented as graphs.' Ibid, p.126.

In the vocabulary of venery, *brisées* refer to the broken branches or snapped twigs that indicate the elusive presence of game... For the forester, *brisées* in turn signify boundary markers - branches or stakes planted in the ground to define an area of timber now ready for logging.

Venery: an archaic word pertaining to the art, the act, or practice of hunting, or the pursuit of sexual pleasure - the thrill of the chase. The chase proceeds by close attention to nuanced detail in the environment. For the forester, *brisées* are branches or stakes planted in the ground that define an area of timber ready to be processed. They are boundary markers, made of the thicket, planted among the visual noise of the thicket.

In a nod to the French Surrealist writer and ethnographer Michel Leiris, Helen Sear's new body of work is called *Brisées*. Ornamented orbs zone out small, often pixelated, monochrome photographs of woodland scenes. At their most these orbs cover half of the picture space, at their least a sixth. Perfect spheres and distended egg-shapes appear arbitrarily placed, but then again balance carefully in stripped tree crowns, their insides apparently in some mutualistic relation to their outsides. These photographs have been 'ripped' from the internet, found by typing 'tree surgeon' into google image search. The many ropes and ladders trailing from inside the orbs are clues to their occluded subject.

Brisées is a rich and compelling metaphor, enfolding ideas about complexity, the gestalt whole, inside and outside, distance and proximity, visibility and invisibility, and attention economy. It is under this sign that, in researching, thinking and writing this text, I enact my own *brisées* - trace pseudo-trails or risk crossing arbitrary boundaries in order to mark out wider and stranger trajectories in Sear's work. I also recognise the leisure, generosity and leniency in what one might call *brisée-ing*: following false trails in pursuit of the game might generate possibilities and questions.

Scalpel, Chainsaw, Camera

Brisées has developed out of a recent body of work Sear began two years ago by collecting cut branches and twigs from a wood, Cuckoo Wood, close to her home in Wales. It continues a fascination with the trappings of visibility, evident throughout her work, and relates directly to personal biography. From the late 1960s until his retirement in 1995 Sear's father had been a doctor at the Worcester Royal Infirmary, specialising in oral and maxillofacial reconstructive surgery. ('Lots of car crash reconstruction in pre-seatbelt days,' Sear explains, 'I remember reading J.G. Ballard's novel *Crash* (1973) at 18 years old and it having a great effect: all those broken and injured bodies in the landscape.'[6]) Throughout his career Sear's father accumulated an extensive photographic archive used to illustrate lectures. Often he would use family members to conduct experiments, firing flash bulbs into their mouths to reveal bone and tissue. 'For Sear,' the photo-historian

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[6] Helen Sear, email correspondence with the author, December 2012.

David Chandler writes, allowing the artist to finish his sentence 'the familiarity of the camera directed at and inside the body "hold lasting memories of an experimental, scientific approach to the photographic".'[7]

Sear's father died in 2007. Sear recalls how, at the funeral service, she was arrested by her father's friend the anaesthetist's description of the precision and care he always gave to sterilizing and laying out instruments before surgery. This small detail was something she had not previously known about her father. It left an enduring visual impression that commingled with aspects of his other tools: medical photographs, the colour collisions of the human body exposed by the surgeon's knife, the green robes and sheets of the operating table.[8] *Tree Surgeon's Table* (2011) resulted from the lingering impression - thirteen chromed branches daubed with wax, as if to suture lesions, in orderly display on a red silken sheet. At Dove Wood Sear collected branches and broken twigs from trees felled by surgeons, before making bronze casts, chroming them and dabbing on coloured wax. Their display feels clinical, their scale uncannily human. 'I think of them simultaneously as instruments and limbs,' Sear explains. She continues:

> The branches I ended up casting were all approximately the size of my hand and
> forearm so could be seen in place of, or extensions of, them foregrounding the
> sense of touch and also technology which started with the first primitive hand-held
> tools.[9]

The branches were cast using an ancient method known as the 'lost wax' process in which ceramic moulds are built up of layer upon layer of silicaceous slurry and dry aggregate around wax casts of objects, in this instance the found branches and twigs. During firing wax was lost, as usual, and the branches and twigs reduced to charcoal. Both substances were irretrievably lost; as such the chrome branches are vestiges of a double death. Daubs of coloured wax suture imaginary lesions but likewise memorialise losses. *Lost Wood Lovers 8* and *Lost Wood Lovers 9* (2011) are large-scale photographs printed on heavy matt paper that document the strange, pink, coral-like forms of the moulds. They 'became sculptures in their own right, their verticality and interdependence reminding me of hollow versions of *The Three Graces'*. 'In any case,' Sear explains, 'these "figures" would be doomed to destruction in the final pouring of the molten bronze, so I preserved them as photographic ghosts of their former selves.'[10]

Perhaps the relationship between reconstructive surgery and tree surgery seems like a one-liner: a play at the surface of language. A scalpel, like a chainsaw, is invasive. A chainsaw lacks the precision of the scalpel,

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[7] David Chandler, 'Helen Sear: Seeing in the Dark' in *Inside the View: Helen Sear*, Ffotogallery (2012) p. 129. In this essay Chandler describes in detail, among other things, Sear's early formative experiences of photography. He identifies their influence in work made by Sear following graduation from the Slade School of Fine Art in 1983, particularly in *Between Us* (1985) and *Severance* (1991).

[8] Helen Sear, from an interview with the author published in *Blown* magazine, November 2012.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

and normally is not used on the human body. A camera, unlike a hammer, which breaks open a landscape, is irremediably wedded to topography.

In his book *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* Ulrich Baer begins the chapter 'Photography and Hysteria: Towards a Poetics of the Flash' by citing Walter Benjamin's *Short History of Photography*:

> In the nineteenth century, both science and medicine were already wedded to the technical possibilities of photography. Walter Benjamin suggests the existence of that shared gaze in his *Short History of Photography*; declaring that photography was an invention for which the time had come, he adds: "It is through photography that we first discover the existence of this optical-unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis. Details of structure, cellular tissue, things with which technology and medicine are normally concerned — all this is ultimately more closely related to the camera than the moody landscape of the soulful portrait."[11]

History, too, is wedded to the technical possibilities of photography: 'the tense of photography is the aorist... the same century invented History and Photography'.[12] 'That century, also the nineteenth, invented archaeology,' writes Frederick N. Bohrer in *Photography and Archaeology*.[13] Photography's value to archaeology is its descriptive force, yet for Bohrer, more pointedly, their weddedness is in a shared commitment - a condition - to the past. 'Archaeological photography,' he writes, 'pairs the technology of picturing absence with the science of deciphering absence and recuperating from it.'[14] As technique, medical photography makes human biology, injuries and symptoms intimately visible. With the utmost precision photography revealed, insisted on the way things looked: 'Photography pushed the unspeakable horrors of skin lesions, pustules, and burns into vivid relief,' writes James Elkins.[15]

Yet, photography's intimacy and descriptive force (which Elkins believes can easily become an excess of vision) does not amount to invasiveness properly. The scalpel, chainsaw, or hammer cut or break open, while photography remains at the surface.[16] This is *the* condition of photography that is perennially critiqued. Indeed, Sear's extended use of photography, which incorporates sculpture and moving image, seems an

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[11] Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: Photography and Trauma, MIT Press (2002) p.25*.
[12] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howarth, New York (1981), pp. 91, 93 cited in Frederick N. Bohrer, *Photography and Archaeology*, Reaktion Books (2011) p. 8.
[13] Frederick N. Bohrer, *Photography and Archaeology*, Reaktion Books (2011) p. 8.
[14] Bohrer, p.8.
[15] James Elkins, *What Photography Is*, Routledge (2011), p. 184.
[16] In *Frieze* magazine issue 143 (November-December 2011), critic Brian Dillon reviewed James Elkins's homage to Roland Barthes *What Photography Is*: 'Barthes' essay,' Dillon writes, 'has itself attained the force of doxa: the photograph's mournful, deathly aspect is a given of much contemporary theory and practice. I'd love to read a scholar who was willing to shunt the dead mother aside and think hard about Barthes' verbs: all that "pricking" and "lacerating".'

attempt at negotiating this limitation of the medium. But what if, as the American fine art photographer Christopher Williams has suggested, we accept surface - not consider it a shortcoming of the medium?[17] *Brisées* is an acceptance (though not in direct response to Williams, it is very much the consequence of Sear's own conceptual process): a delight in the 'poor image', pattern, and what we might call the super-surface.

Circular and Explicit

What are those among the trees? They are so many variously shaped ellipses: Eggs, voids, bubbles, eyes. Sear has 'lassoed' and occluded bodies of tree surgeons - from Essex, Saskatchewan and Oregon - using the Photoshop 'content aware' spot healing tool that fills intelligently, responding to its surrounding genetic visual environment. Perhaps, Sear shows us, this cloning tool is akin to the *brisées* of the forester, so in fact what we are presented with are so many virtual *brisées* 'writ' large, stamped on the surface of the photograph.

Ellipses appear in various forms and functions throughout Sear's work, as forms occurring in nature, or montaged in during post-production. Sear's HD video work *Pond* (2011) is shot from the centre of a frozen tree-lined dew pond at the edge of a residential housing estate. From its centrifugal point the camera movement describes a sweeping 360 degree arc. Video stills of *Pond* - the way most will encounter it - show the scene from the outer reaches of the pond bank. From here it invites easy association with post-pastoral landscape work such as John Gossage's *The pond* (1985) or Jem Southam's *The Pond at Upton Pyne* (1996-2001) or *Dew Pond* series (1999). Sear, however, makes this pond strange by comparing it to an eye, a lens and a camera obscura. If it is an eye it lies in suspension. Icy fur coats vegetation at its edges. It is unseeing. The water's frozen surface is a clouded lens between ground and sky; twigs and branches splinter out of the encrustation.

Spot (2003) montages block coloured forest canopies (seen from the ground looking up) around the edges of photographic portraits of birds. As the writer Sharon Morris has commented, the resulting incoherent spaces dislocate the notion of a single point of view. In place of an eye, with which the bird *looks* back out, there is only a spotted circle of pure colour sampled from somewhere within the picture palette. The sharply edged spot punctures the creature's head. 'The spot covering up the eye denies the bird's capacity to look back at us, to hold humanity in its regard.' 'Sear's denial of a symbolic use of the animal in art, the animal as metaphor, reinforces *difference* and invites us to reappraise our ethical relations' insists Morris. [18]

In the large scale dual screen video installation *Light Seeking Transparency* (2000-03) searing images of the sun are coupled with those of eyes. In the gallery space, located between the projector and screen, breaking

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[17] Jeremy Millar, *Jeremy Millar Speaks About Christopher Williams*, Deutsche Börse Photography Prize Talk, The Photographer's Gallery, Tuesday 21 August 2012.
[18] Sharon Morris, 'Opening the Book' in *Inside the View: Helen Sear*, Ffotogallery (2012) p.44.

the beam of the sun's image, a model tree rotates on a turntable. An elision is made between the projector which beams light, light-giving sun, and extramission - the ancient theory that vision is achieved by light rays emanating from the eye, a theory long since discredited. Similar ideas seem to be in play in a recent mesmerising video work by Sear called *Chameleon* (2012). A fixed camera stares at something looming ominously in darkness at the edges of visibility. A spot light gradually intensifies to reveal a whimsical sunflower buffeted by wind in the night. So these ellipses might be visualisations of *brisées*. *Brisées* are, after all, in their tentative way, boundary markers. Or the ellipses are visualisations (and simultaenously critiques) of vision itself - vision ironised as clean-cut fields.[19]

Lurking at the periphery is Michel Leiris's colleague and friend the anti-ocular, totemic modernist Georges Bataille. Bataille's slim volume *Story of the Eye*, now regarded a modern classic of transgressive literature, was written and published in 1926 under the protective anonymity of the pseudonym Lord Auch. André Masson's lithographs illustrated its first private edition of only 134 copies. It was not until the book's republication in 1967, after Bataille's death, that the book was properly attributed to him. Before that it was deemed simply too pornographically transgressive. *Story of the Eye* narrates the increasingly sado-masochistic sex of its two protagonists, an unnamed teenage male (who is the narrator) and his lover Simone. Simone takes fetishistic sexual pleasure from her lover stimulating her cunt and anus with soft boiled eggs. When the couple become implicated into, indeed motivate, the suicide of a mentally ill sixteen year old girl they leave for Spain - but not before making love in front of her hanging corpse - where Simone knows a fabulously rich English aristocrat, Lord Edmund, who can assist them. In Madrid Simone insists on visiting the bullfight for thrills. It is here she witnesses a young, handsome bullfighter slay a bull and insists on having the creature's peeled testicles served for her to eat ('there, in broad sunlight, on Simone's seat, lay a white dish containing two peeled balls, glands the size and shape of eggs, and of a pearly whiteness, faintly bloodshot, like the globe of an eye'). But rather than devour them, instead, she pushes them inside her cunt - an anticipation of the book's closing act of violence. Before leaving the bullfight, the narrator and his accomplices witness the death of this handsome matador, killed by a bull horn through the eye. As the corpse is retrieved the eye hangs, bloody and distended, from its socket - a vision intensified by the blazing sun. In the novella's closing act of extreme sexual violence Simone pushes the enucleated eye of a strangled priest inside her cunt while love making.

Story of the Eye's wider distribution in '67 elicited a flood of enthusiastic responses by critics, among them prominent figures such as Michel Foucault, Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes. Barthes, in his essay *The Metaphor of the Eye*, insists Bataille's narrative is not merely sado-masochistic fancy, but also linguistic

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[19] Experiments in perception with WWII aircraft pilots led the American psychologist J.J. Gibson to propose what he called an 'ecological' theory of vision, founded on a distinction between the visual *field* and the visual *world*. We see the *field* by fixating our vision and concentrating experience. The field is bounded sharp and clear at the centre but increasingly vague at the edges. The *world* on the other hand has no necessary centre because we see it by scanning and ambling through it. It has no fixed boundaries and is always in focus, fleetingly, somewhere.

adventure. The story, he writes, is not so much about the sexual accomplishments of the unnamed narrator and Simone, as metaphoric transformations of the objects on which they fetishistically focus.[20] The series of metaphoric transformations connected to the eye itself, which becomes eggs, testicles, and the sun, is its significance. According to Barthes, writes historian Martin Jay, none of these terms is given privilege, none has any foundational priority:

> It is the very equivalence of ocular and genital which is original, not one of its terms: the paradigm *begins* nowhere... Everything is given on the surface and without hierarchy, the metaphor is displayed in its entirety; circular and explicit, it refers to no secret.[21]

'Thus,' Jay writes, articulating Barthes, 'the time-honoured function of the penetrating gaze, able to pierce appearances to 'see' the essences beneath, is explicitly rejected.'[22] It was this project of toppling vision as the noblest of senses that Surrealism is now fully understood to have been engaged in. In this respect, Alberto Giacometti's *Suspended Ball* (1930-31), interpreted as the razor that slices the girl's eye in Buñuel and Dali's film *Un Chien Andalou* or the bull's horn that penetrates the matador's skull in *Story of the Eye*, is an iconic work.[23] It is by this lineage we could understand Sear's *Brisées*. Are those eggs, distended eyes, or peeled bull's testicles that preside over cut priapic branches?

Breathiest Spaces

What if these spheres were not predicated on an equivalence of forms that allows them to be eggs, testicles, or the sun; in other words, not about the denigration of vision. What if, true to the meaning of *brisées*, these spheres are motifs for space and the environment. An eccentric array of bubble, orb and egg images, dating from neolithic times to contemporary art, illustrate the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk's 'spheres' trilogy. Consecutive volumes of his 3,000 page work *Sphären I - III* (1998, 1999, 2004) are titled *Bubbles*, *Globes* and *Foam*. Among these images is G.H. Every's mezzotint of a child enraptured by a bubble he has blown that escapes him (*Bubbles*, 1887); a galaxy in the Sculptor constellation photographed by the Hubble Space Telescope; Leonardo da Vinci's drawing of the uterus, embryo and placenta (1520); and details of Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (c.1500), variously depicting a full ecosystem within

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[20] Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, University of California Press (1994), p.220.

[21] Roland Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye', in *Critical Essays,* Evanston, Ill. (1972), p.242 cited in Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, University of California Press (1994), p.221.

[22] Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, University of California Press (1994), p.220.

[23] See Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of Avant-Garde and other Modernist Myths*, MIT Press (1986), p.58: 'The wedge, acted upon by the ball, is in one reading its feminine partner, in another, distended and sharp, it is the phallic instrument of aggression against the ball's vulnerable roundness: it is not only the razor from *Un Chien Andalou* but the bull's horn from Bataille's *l'Historie de l'OEil*, which penetrates the matador, killing him by ripping out his eye.'

an orb, a couple united inside a bubble and crowds climbing inside an egg. These images and more are reference points among meditations on art, science and metaphysics Sloterdijk draws on to argue for the sphere as a universal, transhistorical concept of life on planet earth and beyond. His philosophical history of spheres spans from what he calls the first metaphysical globalisation of Greek cosmology to contemporary times, in which rapid communications technology interconnects humans into one shared space. These spaces range from the microsphere of the egg[24] to the macrosphere of celestial orbit.[25] Sloterdijk writes:

> The concept of the sphere - both as an enlivened space and as the imagined and virtual orb of being - is ideally suited to recapitulating the transition from the most intimate to the most encompassing, from the closed to the burst-open concept of space... The theory of spheres is a morphological tool that allows us to grasp the exodus of the human being, from the primitive symbiosis to world-historical action in empires and global systems, as an almost coherent history of extraversion.[26]

The detail from Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* showing a couple bound in a translucent sphere represents for Sloterdijk the fundamentally dyadic quality of being and thinking. We exist in shared animate space, where each person influences the other. *Sphären* is concerned with dynamic spaces of co-existence: 'one is never alone only with oneself,' he writes, 'but also with other people, with things and circumstances; thus beyond oneself and in an environment.'[27] This is overlooked, along with so many *qualities* of spaces, for the simple reason that 'human existence... is anchored in an insurmountable spatiality'.[28] Rather than anti-ocular motifs then, we could interpret Sear's work as marking out and drawing attention to a certain quality of space (is this not a definition of *brisées*?) and diminishing the human body in recognition of its co-existence with other people, things and circumstances in its environment. But perhaps that is a false trail that leads *too* afar?

Inseparable

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[24] Sloterdijk on the egg: 'The containers functioning as eggs, whether membranes, gelatinous capsules or shells, represent the boundary principle; they seal off the inner and the outer. At the same time, they allow highly selective communications between the egg and its environment - such as exchange of moisture and ventilation.' In Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres Volume I: Bubbles - Microspherology*, SEMIOTEXT(E) FOREIGN AGENTS SERIES (2011), p.327.

[25] Warren De La Rue and the Jesuit priest Secchi's extraordinary photographs of the total eclipse of the sun (1860) come to mind; or the severely vignetted photograph of William Herschel's telescope seen through the window at Slough (February 10, 1839) by John Herschel. Curiously, Sear's *Brisées* resemble these early photographs.

[26] Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres Volume I: Bubbles - Microspherology*, SEMIOTEXT(E) FOREIGN AGENTS SERIES (2011), p.67.

[27] Peter Sloterdijk, 'Foreword to the theory of spheres' in Melik Ohanian (Ed.) *Cosmograms*, (New York: Lukas & Sternberg), pp.223-240.

[28] Peter Sloterdijk, 'Foreword to the theory of spheres' in Melik Ohanian (Ed.) Cosmograms, (New York: Lukas & Sternberg), p.229.

A fascination with the dynamic, reciprocal relations of human and non-human creatures to their environment is evident in Sear's earlier work, such as *Digital Cake* (2010) and *Inseparable* (2008).[29] *Inside the View* (2004-8) and *Beyond the View* (2009/10) explore this idea with a human actor at the centre: a number of women stand, their backs to the camera, facing landscapes. The square format closely frames the top of the shoulders - sometimes the upper back, and head. Ranging across the surface of the photographs is a mesh that obfuscates the view. This mesh is made up of the combination of two photographs, one superimposed over the other in the computer; the top part of the image is erased through a process of 'drawing' with a pen and tablet across the whole surface of the image. In *Beyond The View* figures stand in fields of wheat, barley and wild flowers. To achieve this Sear uses Photoshop 'like an archeological site where layers can be pulled through one another in order to disrupt a conventional perspective associated with the lens of the camera.'[30] Sear spent four years sitting in front of a screen - her interaction delicate and laborious - to achieve what she calls 'virtual thickness'. Overwhelmingly, the impression is of the subject co-exiting, even disappearing, into the surrounding environment; when viewed close up this mesh ranging all over the picture disrupts the integrity of the image, causing it to collapse and disappear into surface pattern: 'I was interested that the word for retina in German is *Netzhaut*, which is also a net or a trap.'[31]

Sear's work has frequently been discussed in relation to a nineteenth century tradition of the sublime, a northern European genre of painting in which figures are often pictured immersed in landscapes. Properly speaking, these figures (usually male) are not immersed - in awe, they regard a view off towards the horizon, which lies at a marked distance, a supposed different sphere, to their bodies. *Inside the View* and *Beyond the View* are in dialogue with this (gendered) history of the sublime, seeking to recuperate vision back to an active, sensuous body. Sear's new work, *Brisées,* makes certain relays and returns to this question of the sublime - the sublime, described above, as it is manifested through landscape painting, and what the critic Julian Stallabrass has called 'the data sublime' of contemporary large-scale fine art photography.[32] In this new work of Sear's everything lies at the surface. There is no distance - everything co-exists. Insides of spheres bear genitive relationships to outsides, and vice versa. This term 'data sublime' Stallabrass uses as shorthand for the awesome effects of monumental prints by fine art photographers such as Thomas Ruff, Rineke Dijkstra, and Andreas Gursky. Stallabrass writes:

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[29] Roger Callois and John Shepley's *Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia*, in which the authors investigate forms of mimicry and distinction in species of butterfly, is an important reference for Sear. Commonly, forms of mimicry function temporarily to surprise prey or escape the sight of the aggressor. However, the authors describe one species, the Kallima, which, once mimicry has been achieved, loses the ability to return to its former state. This morphological mimicry, they write, 'could then be... an actual photography, but of the form and the relief, a photography on the level of the object and not on that of the image, a reproduction in three-dimensional space with solids and voids: sculpture-photography or better *teleplasty*, if one strips the word of any metaphysical content.' In *October*, Vol. 31, Winter 1984 (MIT Press), p. 23.
[30] Helen Sear, from an interview with the author published in 'Inside the View', *Surface*, YH485 Press November 2010.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Julian Stallabrass, 'What's in a Face? Blankness and Significance in Contemporary Art Photography' in *October*, Vol.122, Fall 2007 (MIT Press) pp. 71-90.

In providing the viewer with the impression and spectacle of a chaotically complex and immensely large configuration of data, these photographs act as renditions of mountain scenes and stormy seas did on nineteenth century urban viewers... they overwhelm the viewer with an ocean of data that they cannot make sense of.[33]

Sear's work *Brisées* seems to me an antidote to monumentality. These physically small (5x4"), often pixelated, found photographs are at the opposite end of the spectrum to the 'data sublime' of Ruff, Dijkstra and Gursky. Rather, they are more akin to what the artist and media theorist Hito Steyerl has called the 'poor image' in her essay *In Defense of the Poor Image* (2009). The true condition of the photograph today is not as an ocean of data, but a degraded, itinerant image in an ocean of other images 'circulating' online.

The poor image is a copy in motion. Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard. As it accelerates, it deteriorates. It is a ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution... The poor image has been uploaded, downloaded, shared, reformatted, and reedited it transforms quality into accessibility, exhibition value into cult value, films into clips, contemplation into distraction[34]

The poor image heralds a shifting of values, negotiations, surrounding the photograph. Away from the rarified space of the gallery, on computer screens at home, exhibition value is transformed into cult value. Quality is happily sacrificed for accessibility: it is the cost of being driven to distraction. Sear's new work differences the poor image, and the spheres in *Brisées*, above all, represent nuance, which is the place of the particular.

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[33] Ibid.
[34] Hito Steyerl, *In Defense of the Poor Image*, E-flux Journal, January 2009. Available free to download at http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/