

# Absence of Evidence: Depicting the Truth of War

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*On European Ground* is a group of photographs taken by Alan Cohen between the years of 1992 and 1998. The images feature close aerial views of the ground from the distance of Cohen's own standing height, recorded with a very wide-angle lens. They depict three pivotal moments of relatively recent history: World War I and its battlefields, the Shoah and its camps, and the Cold War and its icon, the Berlin Wall. Cohen took the photographs while standing on the actual ground where the events had occurred. He titles the images simply with a general name of the site.

*Somme* is the title for several photographs of the ground at different sites of the same battle, all taken in March 1998. The images are of intact trenches at Newfoundland Memorial Park near Auchonvillers, France (Figures 1 and 2).<sup>1</sup> Cohen's silent images of the earth fail to evoke the more familiar signs associated with sites of historical trauma, for example images of dead, dying, or mutilated bodies, general chaos and mass suffering. The sequence of photographs, following historical chronology, as presented in the book accompanying Cohen's 2001 exhibition at The Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, does not correspond with the order in which they were taken. All the images are black and white.

Cohen's work addresses the issue of war and memory, and particularly the question of how to represent historical tragedy in a manner that makes sense in our moment, following a century of mass death. Often the discussion of war is accompanied by a level of discomfort or perhaps, as presented by John Lennon and Malcolm Foley, "anxiety and doubt" about the project of modernity. The "project of modernity" can signify the use of rational planning and technological innovation deployed in the Jewish Holocaust, the industrial scale of death in several wars of this century, or the doubt pervading

infallible science and technology (notable examples: the sinking of the Titanic, the use of agent orange in Vietnam, and the bombing of Hiroshima).<sup>2</sup>

The depiction of war complicated by anxiety and doubt surrounding the nature or preventability of war, however, is not new. In her very recent article "Looking at War," Susan Sontag traces the visual representation of war beginning with the voyeurism of torment. Torment, Sontag says, is a canonical subject in art, often portrayed as spectacle to be either watched or ignored.

She compares the invented horror featured in Hendrik Goltzius's *The Dragon Devouring the Companions of Cadmus* (1588), in which a man's face is being chewed off, with the "real" image of horror in a photograph of a World War I veteran's mutilated face, such as those featured in *War Against War!* by Ernst Friedrich.<sup>3</sup> The mutual assumption suggested by such depictions of torment is that torment is something that can not be stopped, and thus can only be subject to passive spectatorship, where the only decision a viewer need make is whether or not to look.<sup>4</sup>

Sontag distinguishes Francisco Goya's *The Disasters of War* (1810-1820) as "a turning point in the history of moral feelings and of sorrow."<sup>5</sup> She contends that the sequence of eighty-three etchings, which depicts atrocities committed by Napoleon's army when it invaded Spain in 1808, set a new standard in that the images are "an assault on the sensibility of the viewer."<sup>6</sup> A factor in the "assault" is the coupling of images with subversive captions (such as the one declaring "One can't look") calling attention to the *difficulty* of looking.<sup>7</sup> In other words, Goya's assault is an awakening of the viewer to his or her own emotional conflict in viewing political horror.

<sup>1</sup> Alan Cohen, *On European Ground* (Chicago and London: The U of Chicago P, 2001) 119.

<sup>2</sup> John Lennon and Malcolm Foley, "Intimations of Dark Tourism," *Dark Tourism: The Attraction of Death and Disaster* (London and New York: Continuum, 2000) 7-8, 12. John Lennon and Malcolm Foley are senior lecturers at Glasgow Caledonian University's Moffat Centre for Travel and Tourism Business Development. They argue that what they define as "dark tourism" can be most characterized by the manner in which tourism sites qualified as "dark," commodify the condition of "anxiety and doubt" harbored by visitors.

<sup>3</sup> Originally published in 1924, *War Against War!* was a pacifist effort attempting to show the horrors of war to the masses.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Sontag, "Looking At War: Photography's View of Devastation and Death," *The New Yorker* (9 Dec. 2002): 88. Sontag makes a complete reversal in this article against the conclusion she had proposed in *On Photography*, stating that the effectiveness of images to incite emotional response from viewers was diminished by the media's constant and overwhelming barrage of images. In "Looking at War," Sontag critiques her own former viewpoint, calling it "breathhtaking provincialism." Such a viewpoint would have to assume that there is no reality existing independently of media representations, and no real suffering in the world, only spectators, 97. Her critique offers viewers liberation from passive spectatorship.

<sup>5</sup> Sontag 90.

<sup>6</sup> Sontag 90.

<sup>7</sup> Sontag 90.

A more ambivalent reading about the nature of war can be viewed in *Der Krieg* (1924), the series of fifty etchings by Otto Dix summarizing his military experiences in the First World War. The images reveal simultaneously a horror and fascination with war, and unlike Goya, Dix omitted the emotion and despair and instead represented war as a natural phenomenon, dissecting “war’s varying phases of physical devastation and desecration.”<sup>8</sup> It is possible to compare Cohen’s photographs of Verdun (Figure 3) to these etchings by Dix. By focusing on the war-ravaged earth, Dix’s pictures ironically critique the German landscape tradition, which insists on seeking the spiritual in nature in order to transcend earthly existence. In *Field of Craters Near Dontrien, Illuminated by Rocket Flares*, bomb craters are likened to “eyesockets of the earth.”<sup>9</sup> Curators Stephanie D’Alessandro and Richard A. Born describe *Field of Craters*: “The result of incessant bombing is an uninhabitable, rubble-strewn, pock-marked land, a vista reminiscent more of a lunar, than earthly, landscape.”<sup>10</sup>

Trusted as documentary evidence (as opposed to a statement molded by the artist, like a painting), photography assumed a role as the logical medium through which wars were depicted. Dix had utilized the authority of the photograph to emphasize the immediacy of his prints even earlier than the photos taken in 1945 just after the liberation of Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald, and Dachau. Studying photographs for inspiration, Dix imitated the visual effects of hasty processing and over-exposure in some of his etchings, using actual war photographs as references.<sup>11</sup> Sontag states that one impetus for war photography was the government initiative to augment public support for war. In 1855, Roger Fenton (called the first war photographer) was sent to the Crimea by the British government. His task was to take photos emphasizing the positive aspects of an increasingly unpopular war. Fenton avoided the chaos and terror of battle, and instead portrayed the Crimean War as “a dignified all-male group outing,” posing the soldiers at tasks such as staff meetings and tending cannons.<sup>12</sup>

Fenton is of particular interest to the discussion of Alan Cohen’s photographs because of one photograph Fenton titled *The Valley of the Shadow of Death*. It memorializes the unfortunate demise of six hundred British soldiers, the same disaster memorialized in Lord Tennyson’s poem, “The Charge of the Light Brigade.” Sontag describes the photograph as follows:

Fenton’s memorial photograph is a portrait of absence, of death without the dead. It is

the only photograph that would not have needed to be staged, for all it shows is a wide rutted road, studded with rocks and cannonballs, that curves onward across a barren rolling plain to the distant void.<sup>13</sup>

However, the site selected by Fenton is not where the charge was made. Stranger still, the second of two exposures of this image reveals that Fenton had the cannonballs moved onto the road and strewn to achieve a desired effect.<sup>14</sup> Regardless, Cohen’s imagery may be considered as having descended from the mode of war photography inaugurated by Fenton, i.e. the portrayal of absence. Although the work of both photographers may appear similar, what sets Cohen’s images apart is the way they question the authority of the photograph. By critiquing the documentation of evidence Cohen circumvents the difficulty of depicting truth and paves the way to a method of war photography that counteracts passive spectatorship.

Similar issues surrounding Auschwitz-Birkenau, the Polish death camps, illuminate the issues around “truth” or “authenticity” as portrayed in Cohen’s photographs. These issues arose mainly due to the designation of Auschwitz I as a permanent exhibition in order to facilitate tourism. The result is that the identity of Auschwitz I has been altered. For example, the crematoria II has been relocated from Birkenau to Auschwitz I, along with spectacles, hair, suitcases, etc. The International Auschwitz Committee (IAC) reconstructed the crematoria in Auschwitz I because it “felt a recreated crematorium was necessary as a culmination to the Auschwitz I tour. Consequently a chimney, gas chamber and two to three furnaces have been re-created. Reality is the crematoria and gas chambers of Birkenau some three to four miles away yet this is rarely the tourists’ experience.”<sup>15</sup> It was in Birkenau that 1.6 million people (ninety percent of whom were Jews) were killed, not in Auschwitz I.<sup>16</sup> The process of restoration itself is responsible for the removal of much of the original structure, placing the status of the authenticity of the site even more in question.

These restoration efforts to recreate the experience of the Shoah in the most concrete terms possible are meant to achieve several goals, including educating visitors about history. Originally the museum-site was meant to demonstrate the evils of Fascism as a Polish/Internationalist commemorative, and also to remind visitors of the triumph of communism. According to Lennon and Foley, “This method of interpreting the Holocaust as a Polish tragedy was part of an overly political ap-

<sup>8</sup> Richard A. Born and Stephanie D’Alessandro, “Otto Dix, *Der Krieg* (The War), 1924,” *The German Print Portfolio 1890-1930: Serials for a Private Sphere* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers Ltd., 1992) 121-122. Born and D’Alessandro are curators at the University of Chicago Smart Museum of Art.

<sup>9</sup> Born and D’Alessandro 123.

<sup>10</sup> Born and D’Alessandro 123.

<sup>11</sup> Born and D’Alessandro 124. The war photographs were supplied to Dix by his friend Hugo Erfurth of Dresden.

<sup>12</sup> Sontag 90-91.

<sup>13</sup> Sontag 91.

<sup>14</sup> The first exposure shows the cannonballs mostly to the left of the road. Sontag 91-92.

<sup>15</sup> Lennon and Foley 62.

<sup>16</sup> Lennon and Foley 46-47.

<sup>17</sup> Lennon and Foley 52.

proach to history and distortion of heritage under the former Communist authorities.”<sup>17</sup> The tragedy of the Jews was used to further the lessons of communism. To create a new context for Jewish suffering, it was extracted out of the whole of history and analyzed or appropriated as an independent event. Cohen precisely addresses the mistake of “dissecting history” in his photographs.

To understand Cohen’s stance requires the consideration of another photographer, the medical doctor Etienne-Jules Marey. Starting in 1861, Marey was an associate of Jean-Baptiste Chauveau, head of anatomical research at the Veterinary School of Lyon. While attempting to measure the speed of blood flow, Marey discovered the complication arising from having to make an incision in order to place measuring instruments in contact with the bloodstream.<sup>18</sup> Incisions would introduce an unwanted variable that altered the actual conditions within the subject organism. Whatever measurements taken would vary necessarily from those measurements of an intact animal. Removal of organs for study and vivisection exaggerate the error in any data collected. Marey’s understanding was greatly influenced by Hegel’s pupil, Johannes Muller, who wrote in *Handbuch der Physiologie des Menschen fur Vorlesungen*:

each part has its cause, not in itself, but in the cause of the whole....It is highly unlikely that the vital principle which produces all the parts of an organism according to one idea or one type should itself be made of parts....A thing that is by nature made up of parts changes its nature when it comes to be divided.<sup>19</sup>

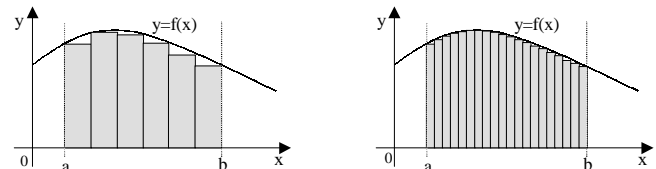
Another critical experiment affecting Marey’s contributions to photography beginning in the 1880s was the ticker-tape acceleration experiment in physics.<sup>20</sup> In this experiment, a mass connected to a stylus was dropped, causing the stylus to brush against a coated cylinder (revolving at a constant speed). The stylus would leave marks of the black coating on a long piece of paper, the distances between which could be measured in order to compute acceleration of the falling mass. The distances between marks were due to a combination of the cylinder revolving at a constant speed, while the falling mass changed speed. If the mass had not accelerated (changed speed) while falling, the marks would have all been placed the same distance apart, just as if the recording were taken

with only the revolving cylinder. In this way, the *means* by which data was recorded shed light on the data’s significance.

By 1883, Marey discovered a new method of recording movement, for example a horse walking or man running, called chronophotography. His objective was to make photography more directly record continuous motion, on the order of the ticker-tape recorder. He wanted to somehow *connect* the independent phases or moments of movement (like those shown in Eadweard Muybridge’s photos of a woman descending an incline plane) in order to include all the intermediary moments as well.<sup>21</sup> To Marey, this would be a more truthful *re-recording* of movement, if not a more truthful representation. Rather than use Muybridge’s thirty or so cameras lined up, Marey’s method utilized a single camera and maximized the number of exposures on a single plate, in order that the greatest number of phases of movement could be shown in a single photograph. Marey also realized that the nature of photography itself, the ability to capture minute details, actually obscured the clear expression of movement. To deal with this problem of surfeit information, Marey constructed special suits for his human subjects which simplified the body into only the lines and points best indicating the body’s changing positions.<sup>22</sup>

Marey’s chronophotography served as a metaphor for Alan Cohen’s images in *On European Ground*.<sup>23</sup> In order to keep history whole, Cohen required an alternative to depicting independent scenes or parts of war, something that would alleviate the problem of representing war as a series of tableaux.

Cohen, originally a chemist working at Argonne National Laboratory in Aurora, Illinois, likens Marey’s photographs in their attempt to record continuity to definite integrals in calculus. One can approximate an area under a curve by dividing the area into narrow rectangles and then adding up the areas of those rectangles. The narrower the rectangles, the more closely the approximation matches the actual area. Definite integrals can be thought of as the case in which the rectangles have become so infinitely narrow that their area sum *is* the area under the curve and no longer an approximation.<sup>24</sup>



<sup>18</sup> Francois Dagognet, “Early Principles,” trans. Robert Galeta and Jeanine Herman *Etienne-Jules Marey: A Passion for the Trace* (New York: Zone Books, 1992) 24-27.

<sup>19</sup> Dagognet 27-28.

<sup>20</sup> Dagognet 31. Francois Dagognet specifically cites the device made by Arthur Morin and Jean Poncelet in *Cours de Mecanique Appliqué Aux Machines*. According to Dagognet, it was the most consistent reference Marey made in his writings. My explanation is possibly more general and applicable to many similar recording devices.

<sup>21</sup> Dagognet 96.

<sup>22</sup> Marta Braun, “Reinventing the Camera: The Photographic Method,” *Picturing Time: The Work of Etienne-Jules Marey (1830-1904)* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1992) 79-83.

<sup>23</sup> Alan Cohen, personal interview, 22 November 2002. Cohen did not use the term *metaphor*, but he did point to slides of Marey’s work he happened to have on his light table, and to the kinship he felt they had to his own work.

<sup>24</sup> Approximating the area under a curve by adding the areas of rectangles. Author’s diagram. The graph on the right shows the same area divided into even thinner rectangles, thus permitting a closer approximation. If the rectangles were infinitely thinner, the sum of their areas would *be* the area under the curve and no longer an approximation.

For Cohen, the summation of the area of rectangles as an approximation is comparable to the representation of war through bits and pieces—the chaos of combat, the destruction of architecture, the dismemberment of bodies, and so on. But in the project of photographing the earth, one records the summation of *all* the events of a war, and even on the largest scale, the events of history, without extracting them from the *whole* of history. Cohen's photographs refuse to depict history as fragments to be analyzed or as separate aspects independent of one another to be dissected out of context of the whole.<sup>25</sup>

The matter of recording history without “vivisection” has even farther-reaching implications. For a start, there is the issue of continuity. One of several images titled *Berlin* (Figure 4), shows the stone bricks that had marked the Berlin Wall path near the Martin-Gropius-Bau.<sup>26</sup> Here again, Cohen has chosen to leave out the image of the Berlin Wall itself, and photographs the ground, instead. The picture also reveals the delineations and surfaces of modernity: painted lines necessary for safe traffic and a section of asphalt which cuts through another surface of asphalt, perhaps laid at a different time. The painted lines are interrupted by the changes in surface textures, due to the different ground coverings of asphalt and stone. At various places, it is difficult to tell which layer has been put down first: the stone or the paint stripe. Cohen has created a visual montage of history, where the sequence of cause and effect are unclear, even though all the surfaces are of the present. Because his photograph fails to serve as a document revealing the actual chronology of the surfaces as they were laid, it begs the question of the authority photographs have been accorded in showing evidence.

It is tempting to consider Cohen's montage of surfaces in light of Ernst Bloch's discussion of asynchronism. Bloch writes, “History is not merely chaff, and all the corn is already removed at the last stage, on the last threshing floor in each case: but precisely because so much of the past has not yet come to an end, the latter also clatters through the early dawns of newness.”<sup>27</sup> Cohen's choice of three moments of history, the First World War, the Shoah, and the Cold War, have been selected for the purpose of examining the continuity between events in time. Sander L. Gilman points out that the Germans see the Berlin Wall as embodying “the Nazi defilement of the city...a late symptom of trauma experienced during the 1930s and '40's.”<sup>28</sup> The Berlin Wall is not just a symbol of the Cold War, our fear of communism, and so forth,

but a continuation of Nazism. By fusing asynchronism to the concept of definite integrals, Cohen's images defy the logic of chronology. Cohen believes they show historical events instead as they are—individual, “backward, and partialized. Atomized....”<sup>29</sup>

Returning to Marey's intention to keep his photographic record untainted (i.e. free of the human hand or eye) another layer of meaning can be found in Cohen's work. In his book *Physiologie Medicale de la Circulation du Sang*, Marey openly refuses information obtained from the senses:

If a doctor gifted with a subtle sense of touch and great patience manages, through observation, to recognize important features in the pulse of certain patients, how will he explain to his students what he himself senses? Will he find in them a sense of touch naturally delicate enough to discern immediately sensations that he himself could only distinguish after much effort? Will he hope to explain the nature of tactile sensation through definitions or metaphors?<sup>30</sup>

By being uninterested in devices that extended the senses, like the stethoscope, Marey further denied the phenomenal. If the photographs taken by Cohen contain traces of truth, the ultimate objective of Marey, the philosopher Levinas can provide some illumination. Levinas describes a trace as something that can neither disclose nor conceal, and thus not subject to phenomenology. Instead, Levinas believes the trace obliges with regard to the infinite and does not answer to “concrete duration.” Furthermore, the trace does not indicate the past, but instead disturbs order, which is consistent with asynchronism.<sup>31</sup> What Levinas's philosophy suggests is that Cohen has found a way to memorialize without recourse to the reconstruction and preservation of sites such as Auschwitz-Birkenau, which sacrifice authenticity in the attempt to replay an experience that so defies logic, it is simply impossible to copy. Gilman repeats Zygmunt Bauman's claim about the reconstruction and preservation of these sites, *i.e.* that they are “apotropaic (intended to ward off evil), a magical gesture to avoid the repetition of the past,” invoking yet another way of looking at site reconstruction and preservation as a “preserved mummy” of the Shoah. For film critic Andre Bazin, the “mummy complex” is the origin of art. In “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” from *What Is Cinema?*, Bazin explains, “The reli-

<sup>25</sup> Molly Nesbitt, “Picturing Time,” *The Art Bulletin* 77 (March 1995): 3. In her book review of *Etienne-Jules Marey: A Passion for the Trace*, Molly Nesbitt of the Department of Art at Vassar College comments “Marey himself did not regard knowledge to be a collection of fragments. He knew solid fact to be shot with unshakable emptiness, return, a turn, again.”

<sup>26</sup> Cohen 125.

<sup>27</sup> Ernst Bloch, “Summary Transition: Non-Contemporaneity and Obligation to Its Dialectic,” trans. Neville and Stephen Plaice, *Heritage of Our Times* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1990) 144.

<sup>28</sup> Sander L. Gilman is Distinguished Professor of Liberal Arts and Medicine

at the University of Illinois in Chicago, and director of the Humanities Laboratory. Sander L. Gilman, “Alan Cohen's Surfaces of History,” *European Ground*, by Alan Cohen, 9.

<sup>29</sup> Cohen, “Interview: Alan Cohen and Roberta Smith,” interview by Roberta Smith, *European Ground*, 116.

<sup>30</sup> Dagognet 19.

<sup>31</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” trans. Alphonso Liugie *Deconstruction in Context*, ed. Mark Taylor (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986) 356-357.



gion of ancient Egypt, aimed against death, saw survival as depending on the continued existence of the corporeal body. Thus, by providing a defense against the passage of time it satisfied a basic psychological need in man, for death is but the victory of time.”<sup>32</sup> The passage of time is an interference preventing the *action* noted by Sontag; without the *action*, war as spectacle is perpetuated, and viewers are voyeurs without the opportunity to suffer deeply and truly from history, and to move beyond war. Returning to Levinas, “The traces of the irreversible past are taken as signs that ensure the discovery and unity of a world.”<sup>33</sup> This means that traces are taken as evidence of a possibly false world we have constructed, a manner of dealing with memory that prioritizes the future. Edward Casey clarifies this point: “Memory is a matter of control in the interest of constructing a well-protected refuge where thought can be free to reverse the course of time....Most seriously, memory brings with it a *nostalgia* that locks it into a circuit of return to the same.”<sup>34</sup>

In looking at the original negatives taken by Cohen, one will notice in almost every photograph Cohen’s own feet on the ground.<sup>35</sup> This information is cropped away by the artist: his final gesture for each image is that of cutting himself out as witness. He refuses to allow his photographs to become documents of evidence that prove, yes, he was really there and that the site was indeed before his lens. His purpose for doing so may relate to Derrida’s observation: “And as for the witnesses of Auschwitz, like those of all extermination camps, there is here an abominable resource for all ‘revisionist’ denials.”<sup>36</sup> The point is that there is a difference between seeing and believing, in that believing in something does not require that the thing be present. Michael Newman refers to Derrida’s

passage: “The evidence of the ‘eyewitness’ has an essential juridical role, but that does not necessarily mean that the event in question can ever be represented nor, indeed, that such an ‘unrepresentable’ can be said to have been an ‘event,’ even though its consequences might be devastating.”<sup>37</sup>

In Cohen’s studio hang two lunar photographs. They are meant to be scientific, to prove that we reached the moon and left our mark there. They are evocative because they describe “in uncanny detail the ‘traces’ of our fleeting presence on the barren lunar surface.”<sup>38</sup> But Cohen’s experience of Europe was also such a voyage. Unlike Dix’s topographical subjects resembling lunar landscapes, Cohen’s photos provide the viewer with a similar opportunity. (Figure 5) Reflecting on his experience at Dachau, Cohen writes

Within the camp walls, more than thirty thousand people had been destroyed, but there was no evidence, nothing, in the present tense. I was in a real place where something unreal had happened and that, to me, was like travel to and being on the moon.<sup>39</sup>

And finally, he states about his photographs:

They are not reliably forensic. They are not evidential enough. And anyway the camps already provide plenty of evidence, if that’s what is wanted....Though fiction is a perfectly wonderful vehicle for real ideas and real emotions, I am scrupulous about the truth in my photographs.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Andre Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” *What Is Cinema?* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1967) 9.

<sup>33</sup> Levinas 345.

<sup>34</sup> Edward Casey is Professor of Philosophy at State University of New York at Stony Brook. Edward Casey, “Levinas on Memory and the Trace,” *The Collegium Phaenomenologicum* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1988) 245.

<sup>35</sup> Cohen personal interview.

<sup>36</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ru-*

*ins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1993) 104.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Newman, “Derrida and the Scene of Drawing,” *Research in Phenomenology* 24 (Fall 1994): 226.

<sup>38</sup> Gilman 3.

<sup>39</sup> Cohen 109.

<sup>40</sup> Cohen 116.



Figure 1. Alan Cohen, *Somme*, 1988, gelatin silver print. Image courtesy of the artist.



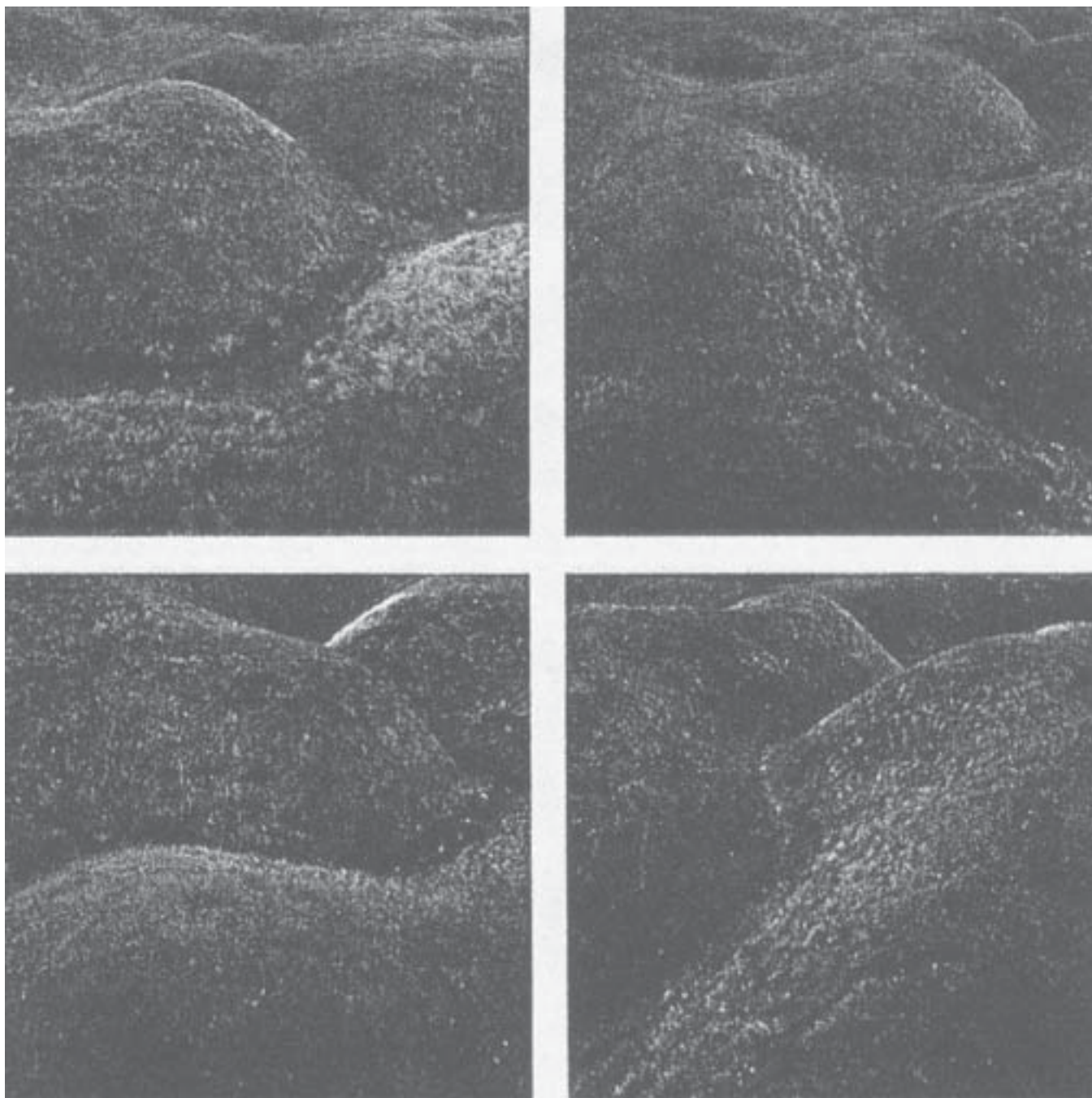


Figure 2. Alan Cohen, *Somme*, 1998, gelatin silver print. Image courtesy of the artist.

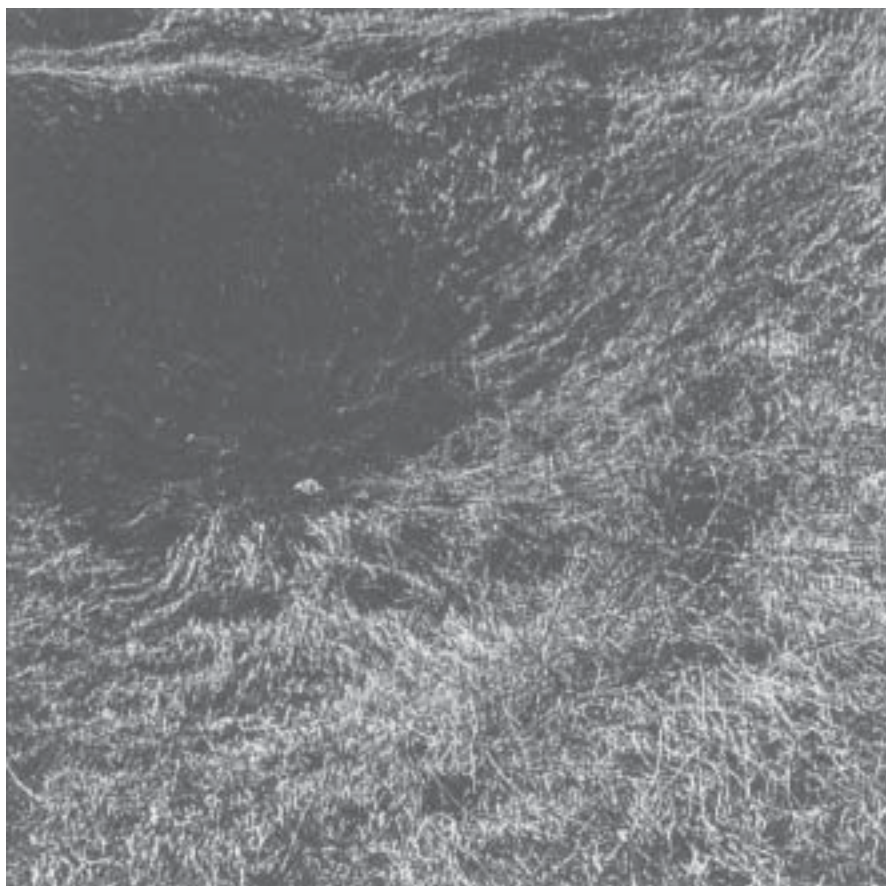


Figure 3. Alan Cohen, *Verdun*, 1998, gelatin silver print. Image courtesy of the artist. Cohen's photograph is reminiscent of Dix's depictions of bomb craters.

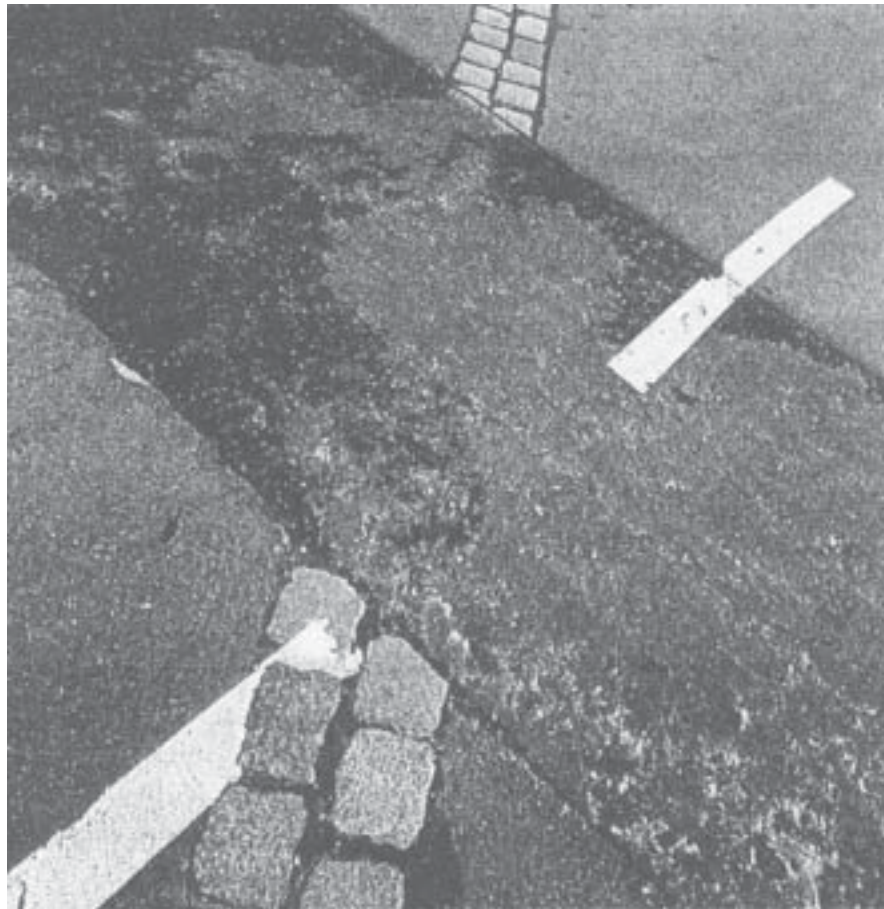


Figure 4. Alan Cohen, *Berlin*, 1996, gelatin silver print. Image courtesy of the artist.





Figure 5. Alan Cohen, *Buchenwald*, 1994, gelatin silver print. Image courtesy of the artist.