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Formes de la Ruine is the catalogue, enriched with scholarly and critical essays, of the eponymous exhibition held at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lyon, France, from December 2023 to April 2024. The exhibition explored various forms and practices related to ruins, whether they concern the gathering of fragments of human activity on or within the earth, the arrangement of natural spaces for commemorative or ritual purposes, or the construction of megalithic buildings, pyramids, and artistic works of ancient empires. The curatorial project was conceived as a journey through ruins, establishing an ongoing dialogue among civilizations articulated around four main themes: memory and oblivion, the balance between nature and culture, the connection between the material and the immaterial, and the tension between present and future.

The catalogue highlights wonderfully the variety of experiences that human beings can derive from ruins, ranging from the care and preservation of past architectures—so highly valued by Egyptians, Mesopotamians, and Pre-Columbian Americans—to the more distanced or even critical approaches of Chinese and Japanese cultures, which partly reject the monumental cult so prevalent among their contemporary Asian, European, and American counterparts. Similarly, it addresses the commemorative practices of Indigenous peoples in India, Africa, and Oceania, revealing how these cultures often privilege a form of pact with nature rather than a subjugation to grandiose architectural forms. In this way, the work offers a journey through ruins that not only encompasses past civilizations but also reaches into contemporary industrial societies.

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The volume is further enriched by an anthology and a “ruinarium,” consisting of 75 entries dedicated to places, artists, theorists, and concepts. Yet this cultural undertaking manages to go beyond simple documentation. The exhibition originates from Alain Schnapp’s book *Une histoire universelle des ruines*, the result of years of work and research, and has inspired a publication that aspires to become a milestone in the field. Drawing from this foundational work, both the exhibition and its accompanying catalogue aim to establish a dialogue among all types of ruins. They investigate the centuries-old traditions that in both Western and Eastern contexts have fostered a culture of monumental ruins, now dominant, as well as the perspectives of societies that entirely disregard the very notion of the monument.

A broad array of ruin-related practices are addressed: from the collection of remnants of human activity, to the arrangement of natural sites for commemorative or ritual purposes, and the construction of iconic structures such as megaliths, pyramids, and major architectural works of past empires. The book is divided into two main sections: an introductory part with theoretical-critical essays, and a second section dedicated to the works on display, offering a broader reflection on the theme of ruins not only from a historical or aesthetic standpoint but, more significantly, from a contemporary perspective.

This indeed represents the greatest challenge of both the exhibition and the catalogue: the intention to move beyond the romantic aestheticization of ruins as picturesque remnants, linked to the Grand Tour and nostalgic contemplation, and instead to reaffirm the strength of ruins, as well as their beauty—one that is not only aesthetic. This dimension becomes evident while leafing through the volume, where one can perceive a clear and coherent connection among landscapes, objects, representations, and places that may appear diverse, yet are all rooted in the semantic universe of the ruin—not in a literal sense, but as embodiments of an idea, a concept. This is true not only in Western culture, where the cult of ruins is well-established and supported by a robust scholarly tradition, but also beyond continental boundaries, affirming that the focus of the exhibition and the related research is not on the individual architectural fragment but rather on a universal and human cultural archetype.

Ruins, thus understood, are not simply relics of the past; rather, they are characterized by the notion of absence—a concept that recurs throughout both the selected works and the accompanying scholarly essays. Beginning with Alain Schnapp’s essay *La poésie des ruines: une*

histoire universelle, the ruin is approached as a global and universal paradigm, not tied to any specific culture that may claim it exclusively, but as a shared system of thought—an archetype of thought itself. This concept resonates throughout the other introductory essays as well (by authors such as Yves Le Fur, Pierre Wat, and François-René Martin), which explore the idea of ruin across different media and contexts: from sculpture to nature, from theoretical approaches to other manifestations of the ruin.

The catalogue thus succeeds in proposing an innovative reading of the ruin, or rather, in assembling a body of works that aim to affirm the validity of an alternative perspective on ruins. This approach deliberately detaches from historicist or aestheticizing interpretations, offering instead a new vision of ruin aesthetics—one that is liberated from disciplinary epistemologies and able to perceive the phenomenon of the ruin as a living cultural spirit, endowed with its own intrinsic beauty. However, the objective is not to construct a new aestheticizing narrative; rather, it is to demonstrate that ruins may serve as the foundation for a comparative study, treating them as a universal principle and a paradigm of human existence.

To this end, the exhibition—and, by extension, the catalogue—organizes the displayed works into four thematic sections, each intended to trace trajectories for reflection and comparison across multiple levels: Memory and Oblivion, Nature and Culture, Material and Immaterial, Present and Future. Each section is introduced by one or more curators, guiding both the exhibition visitor and the catalogue reader through diverse yet interrelated images and concepts, all aligned with the publication's core aims. As Jean-Yves Jouannais reminds us in his recent work *L'usage des ruines: portraits obsessionaux*,¹ ruins acquire meaning and value only through their interaction with humans. This fundamental notion is strongly echoed throughout the volume.

These bold and thought-provoking comparisons ultimately lead to the central reflection proposed by the catalogue: not merely to define the role of ruins in contemporary culture, but to question our present-day relationship with ruins—not only architectural ones—and to explore whether a new aesthetic of the ruin can be formulated, one that moves beyond passive contemplation and opens up to new modes of understanding and relating to the past. Implicitly, such a shift would also redefine our relationship with ourselves.

¹ J. Y. Jouannais, *L'usage des ruines: portraits obsessionaux*, Gallimard, Paris, 2012.