

# Research as Montage

## Notes on a Georges Didi-Huberman Exhibition

Von: Alexandra Irimia

“The ancient word for a maker or an author can be traced back to Sanskrit as *cinute*. It means to arrange or collect or put in an order.”<sup>1</sup>

Writing involves a specific kind of curatorial practice: an important part of it has to do with discerning what is better left out, what gets included, and where. Doing research, too, is an exercise of montage, though academia rarely frames it that way. In writing up research, collecting, assembling, and connecting pieces of fragmented knowledge are essential processes whose concrete physicality and physical dispositions are rarely in the spotlight: the intellectual effort takes precedence over the material gestures that sustain it.



Figure 1: Slides gathered for the writing of “La Peinture incarnée” (1984), in: “Tables de montage”, édition Imec © Michaël Quemener/Imec.

Scholars and writers may sometimes share glimpses into their method and their professional habitat (you've seen the cluttered desks, the stacks of paper, the heavily annotated manuscripts), but the convoluted routines of epistemological handcraft are highly personal and can become a very private affair. I cannot help feeling that Walter Benjamin shares something profoundly intimate when he describes his book collecting in "Unpacking My Library."<sup>2</sup> Likewise, there is a sense of voyeuristic pleasure in going through Georges Perec's "Notes on the Objects to Be Found on My Desk"<sup>3</sup> or through Niklas Luhmann's *Zettelkasten*.<sup>4</sup> I experienced this feeling again while watching Georges Didi-Huberman at work, arranging images and concepts on his desk (a solid wooden dressmaker's table) to exemplify his writing method, in Henri Herré's 60h-long interview/documentary footage for *La Table des matières* (2014).<sup>5</sup>



Figure 2: Georges Didi-Huberman at work, filmed by Henri Herré. View from the exhibition "Tables de montage" by Georges Didi-Huberman, at the Imec/Abbaye d'Ardenne, 5 May 2023 – 22 October 2023.

The film is screened in Georges Didi-Huberman's self-curated exhibition *Tables de montage*, which Nathalie Léger and Pierre Leroy describe as a "miniature atlas of his research" traversed by influences from Aby Warburg's library project.<sup>6</sup> The exhibition is currently on display at the *Institut Mémoires de l'édition contemporaine* (Imec) located in the Abbaye d'Ardenne, near Caen (a two-hour train ride from Paris). For context, I should note that *Tables de montage* was created in the context of a recent donation

through which the French art historian entrusted Iamec with conserving his private archive of images (on various supports: photographs, postcards, slides, prints), along with several manuscripts and other objects.



Figure 3: View from the exhibition “Tables de montage” by Georges Didi-Huberman, at the Iamec/Abbaye d’Ardenne, 5 May 2023 – 22 October 2023.

The creation of this personal filing system combining images and cards goes back to 1971, at the beginning of Didi-Huberman’s studies. Described by its author as “a dialectical machine” useful for generating dialogues [*une machine dialectique, donc une machine à dialogues*],<sup>7</sup> it has functioned as material support (not unlike the dressmaker’s table on which they have been created and shuffled) for his thinking, research, and writing ever since. It is also their by-product and a work that remains forever in progress: the components of this “device” [*dispositif de travail*]<sup>8</sup> multiply and move within in the system, creating new networks of association. Eventually, the lot has grown to include more than 250,000 fragments of texts and images. Roughly 148,000 filing cards (notes written in black ink on hand cut paper, 14,8 x 10,5 cm) document reading notes and reflections. Along with a collection of 105,000 images, they are all sorted into three large categories – *Matières* (Materials), *Lieux* (Places), *Corps* (Bodies) – which also organize the books in his library and the files on his computer.<sup>9</sup>

<p>icible (Wittgenstein): ut sans tenter de le</p>	<p>'millions de mo(r)ts' (Perec): de l'histoire aux histoires, de l'absence (expérience) à la langue</p> <p>[<u>VF au souvenir d'enfance</u>, 1975]</p>	<p>tentatives d'épuisement (Perec): espaces, déplacements</p> <p>[<u>Espaces d'opaca</u>, 1974]</p>	<p>disparition = revenance (Perec)</p>
<p>la généalogie (Perec): races, de signes</p> <p>[<u>VF au souvenir d'enfance</u>, 1975]</p>	<p>écriture de l'indifférence (Perec): les choses, l'infra-ordinaire, le non-romanesque</p> <p>[<u>Les choses</u>, 1965]</p>	<p>tentatives d'épuisement (Perec): la bibliothèque, le labyrinthe, le puzzle, la maison</p> <p>[<u>Jeux/Jeux</u>, 1982]</p>	<p>revenance du e (Perec): 'le temps s'étend, l'esté de sens' (et de sexe)</p> <p>[<u>Le Revenance</u>, 1972]</p>
<p>des camps (Perec): pire au montage (jeu)</p> <p>[<u>VF au souvenir d'enfance</u>, 1975]</p>	<p>écriture de l'indifférence (Perec): l'apathie, l'infra-subjectif, le non-sentimental</p> <p>[<u>Un homme qui dort</u>, 1967]</p>	<p>pratique du lipogramme (Perec): 'lettre volée', effet de vérité, imagination libérée</p> <p>[<u>Histoire du lipogramme</u>, 1973]</p>	<p>déjoue-t-on l'émotion? (Perec): retour de la peur dans la forme</p> <p>[<u>Lettre à M. Madama</u>, 1969]</p>
<p>ice orpheline (Perec): ué, langage enjoué</p> <p>[<u>VF au souvenir d'enfance</u>, 1975]</p>	<p>écriture de la différence (Perec): jeu polygraphique, versabilité, errance, obliquité</p> <p>[<u>Note sur ce que je cherche</u>, 1976]</p>	<p>disparition du e (Perec): apparition du blanc dans la 'malédiction'</p> <p>[<u>La Disparition</u>, 1969]</p>	<p>déjoue-t-on la mémoire? (Perec): retour des images-puzzle</p> <p>[<u>Je me souviens</u>, 1976]</p>

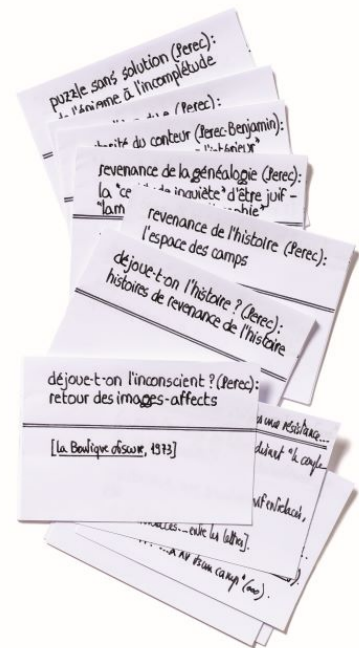


Figure 4: Notes gathered for the writing of "Émotion: motion du e," *Faits d'affects* 3, 2022, in "Tables de montage", édition Imec © Michaël Quemener/Imec.



Figure 5: Slides from Georges Didi-Huberman's visual archive, in "Tables de montage", édition Imec  
© Michaël Quemener/Imec.

Of this immense stock scattered across multiple research fields (visual arts, literature, history, psychology, to name only the most prominent), the art historian selected only a small part – around 4,000 fragments – for the exhibition. He arranged them in microseries, displayed on two long walls into 15 thematic columns. Each column is concerned with a specific affective figure (from fear to desire, from protest to play) that is then explored via texts and images. Even though they share this conceptual arrangement, the visual and the textual fragments occupy distinct, opposing walls.



Figure 6: View from the exhibition “Tables de montage” by Georges Didi-Huberman, at the Imec/Abbaye d’Ardenne, 5 May 2023 – 22 October 2023.

Their symmetry, however, does not set the stage for an opposition, a battle of forces. There is not, like in Lessing’s *Laocoön*,<sup>10</sup> a question of comparing and hierarchizing the expressive powers of the two media. Rather, the staging camouflages a less neat separation, not without the occasional intermedia transfer by which text and image permeate one another: some of the written notes refer to visual details or artefacts; some of the images are photographs of manuscripts or book covers. The space of dialogue in-between, the corridor through which the visitors make their way, is a place for a different assemblage made of hybrid or ambiguous forms featured in or issued from his research: projections, revised manuscripts, collages, fragments of birch bark in a wooden box, notebooks with poems copied during wartime, annotated editions of authors such as (in no particular order) Blanchot, Panofsky, Benjamin, Perec, Colli, or Sophocles.

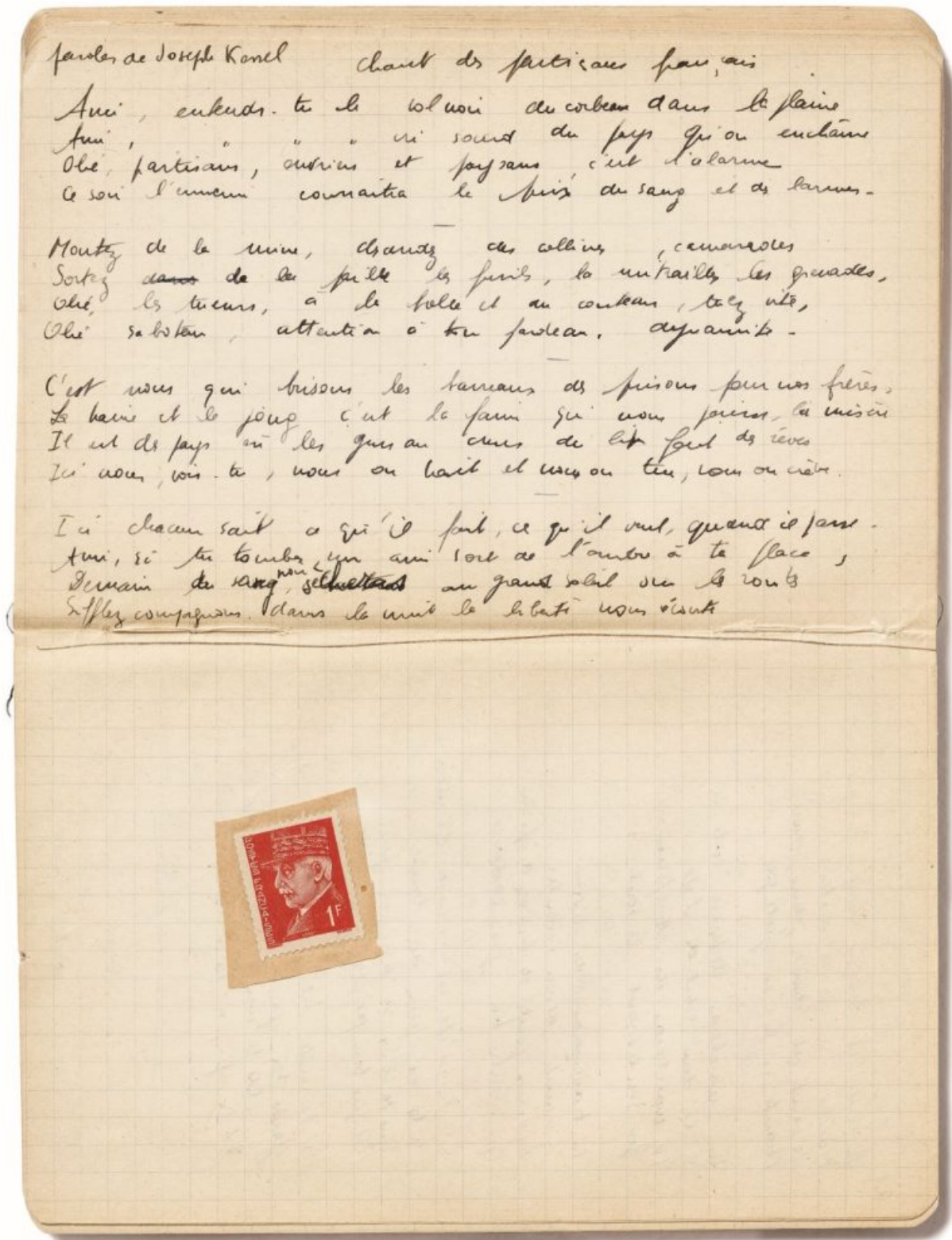


Figure 7: Estelle Huberman. Poetry notebook, opened at the page "Le Chant des partisans" [The Song of the Partisans], around 1943, in "Tables de montage," édition Imec © Michaël Quemener/Imec.

Despite the rigor and minutia maintained in devising this filing and working system over five decades, Didi-Huberman is quite the opposite of a positivist thinker. Anyone familiar with his work will recognize that his "discourse on method," generously transparent in *Tables de montage*, is anything but Cartesian.<sup>11</sup> It is rather akin to an *ars poetica*, presented more extensively in the eponymous photobook (or non-exhaustive catalogue)

that accompanies the exhibition.<sup>12</sup> I will not repeat or summarize his line of thought here. I will only propose an angle for interpreting the table of montage as a tool that is at once material and metaphorical. In his thinking and writing, Georges Didi-Huberman makes use of the dressmaker's table in ways both literal and figurative – it is a surface for cutting and connecting not only paper cards and prints, but also a workspace for reassembling the framing of thoughts, figures, details, and affects:

a table must not be understood as something static, a surface upon which the operations of thought are distributed, an inert support for logical interventions [...]. It must be understood in terms of its dynamic operativity, not as an outline of a frozen architecture, but rather as a plane of action, a plane of montage, a list of pragmatic instructions, or as an ephemeral and transitory succession of mental acts staging a guerrilla operation within thought. The table of categories thus operates in the two modes that characterize a table of cinematographic montage: cutting and connecting. [...] These two activities of cutting and connecting are strictly complementary. It is impossible to cut without connecting, and even more impossible to connect without cutting; cutting is the decisive act of montage. [...] Thought is produced by a framing of shots and by montage, that is, by the reassembling of framings (*ré-enchaînement de cadrages*).<sup>13</sup>

The visual dimension seems to be indispensable to this type of art historical research, not only because images are, quite obviously, its object of study but because it uses visual arrangements and operations (framing, cropping, juxtaposing) to create new configurations of thought. Proceeding by way of montage is a testimony to the significant influence that Warburg's *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* had on Didi-Huberman's method in general, and on the setting up of this exhibition in particular. He explicitly addresses this influence in a piece written for *Critique d'art*<sup>14</sup> during the preparation of *Tables de montage*:

If Aby Warburg played any role in the imagined world of my own work (not of a model to be imitated, which would be impossible in any case, but of an example to be followed) it is that he never dissociated his work from the spaces which made him function: bookshelves in his library and "reading room," files and folders, photographic collections and, of course, the panels of the famous *Mnemosyne Atlas* of images.<sup>15</sup>

By the same token, Didi-Huberman's thinking-through-images is indissociable from the environment in which it takes place, its spatial disposition, its textures, its graphic qualities. The note cards, for example, are all written in the same ink and handwriting, with the same pen, according to the same format. Temporal difference between notes taken decades ago and more recent ones is, for the most part cancelled, were it not for vaguely discernible differences of shade in the whiteness of the paper. Making visible the montage behind the work is one way of exhibiting methodological intricacies as well as material "metadata" that would otherwise be impossible to retrace.



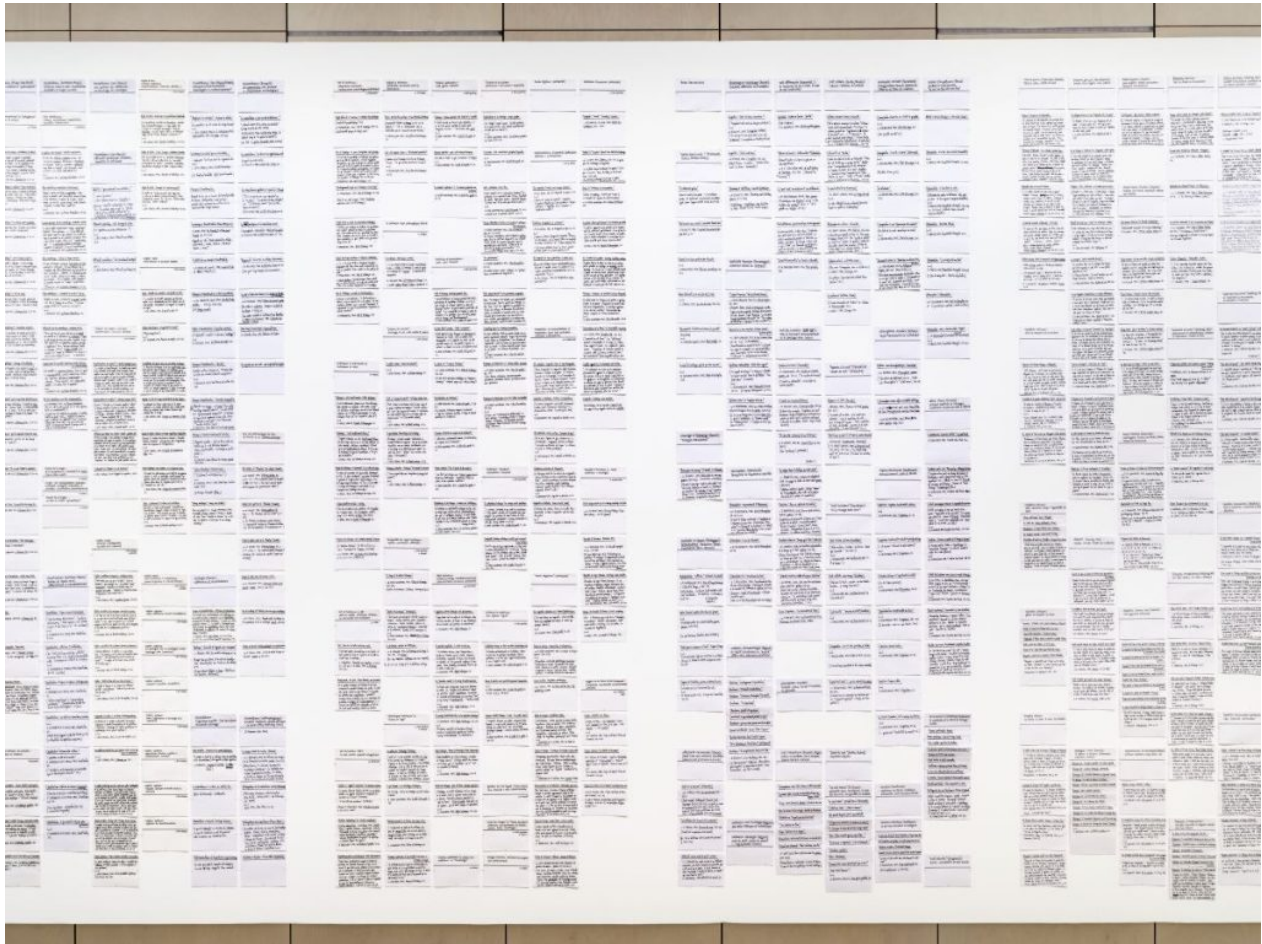


Figure 8: View from the exhibition “Tables de montage” by Georges Didi-Huberman, at the Imec/Abbaye d’Ardenne, 5 May 2023 – 22 October 2023.

This barely perceptible self-inscription of the environment in the processes or the outcome of research makes room for a more personal, less systematic fascination:

I have since documented some workspaces I happened to visit, unconcerned with investigation and even less with thoroughness: for example, Leon Trotsky’s in Mexico and Sigmund Freud’s in London. And finally those of close friends, artists, and writers. It is as though the tables called for whatever was placed on them and required a certain type of functionality. I was not surprised, in 2017, to see how Alexander Kluge<sup>16</sup> had devised a whole exhibition of his works by highlighting the notion of the “workshop” or the “work room” (*Arbeitszimmer*): his images, his texts, his tools, his memories – it all formed one, single world, or rather traced the outline of the infinite totality of a work which is always, by definition, in progress.<sup>17</sup>

The fascination for montage stems, perhaps, also from the fact that it is without end. “The work always follows its course,”<sup>18</sup> it is always in motion and in transformation. In theory, at least, the montage allows for potentially infinite variations of the material (or the matter) at hand, regardless of how extensive or how limited it may be. What this exhibition has showed me is that it always takes some kind of “table de montage” to cut through conventional dispositions of visibility, materiality, and knowledge, to shuffle them

time and again, to reconfigure them in unexpected arrangements. Tables *matter*, in that sense: they open material and metaphorical space for the apprehension and the organization of the new – and I don't know a better definition for doing research.

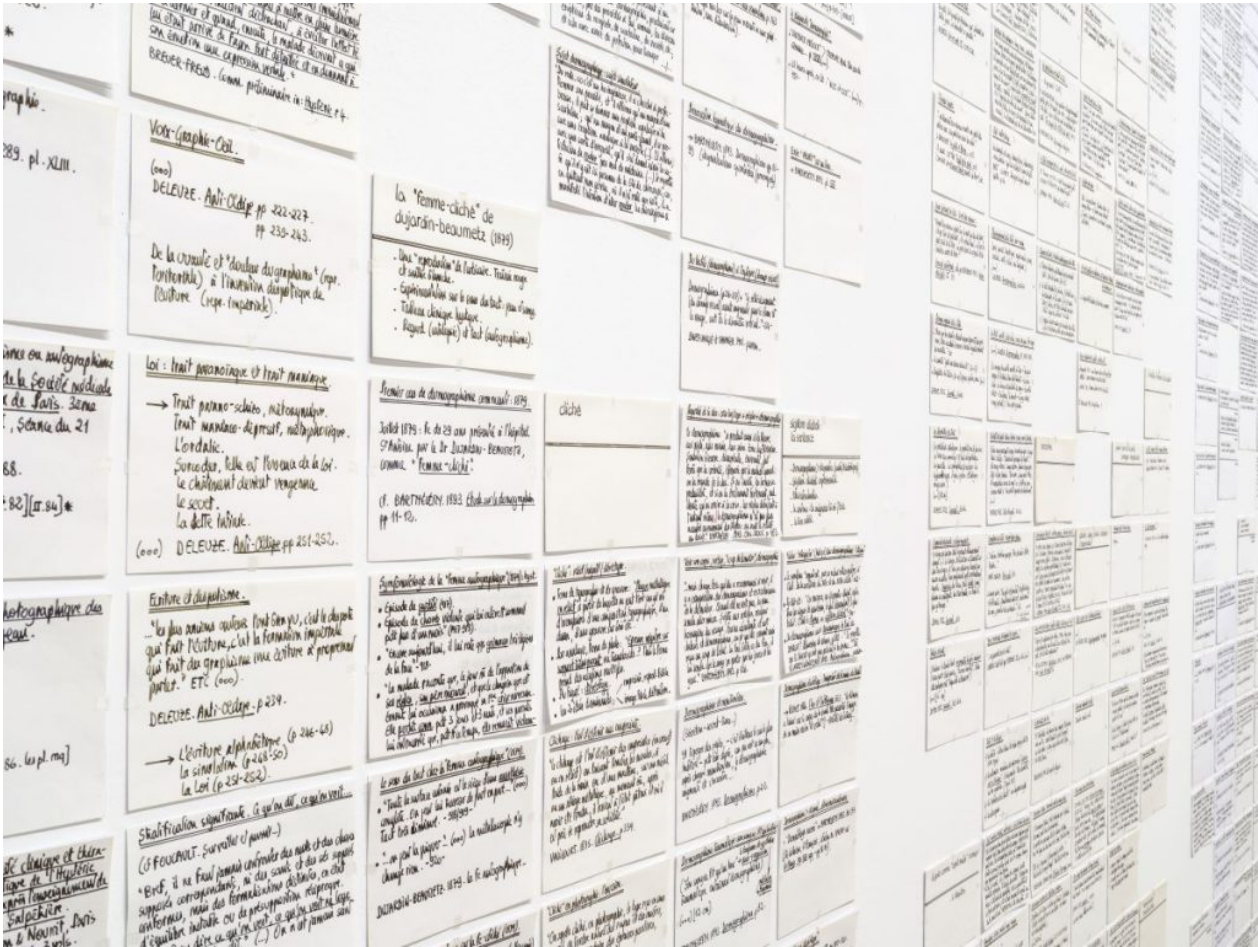


Figure 9: View from the exhibition “Tables de montage” by Georges Didi-Huberman, at the Imec/Abbaye d’Ardenne, 5 May 2023 – 22 October 2023.

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18. Ibid.

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