

# BAZAAR

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DELFINA ENTRECANALES | HADJITHOMAS & JOREIGE | JEDDAH ART WEEK

HARPER'S BAZAAR ART JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2014

*Practicing is an art when you don't know how, but every effort is worth it. Edgar Degas (1834-1917)*

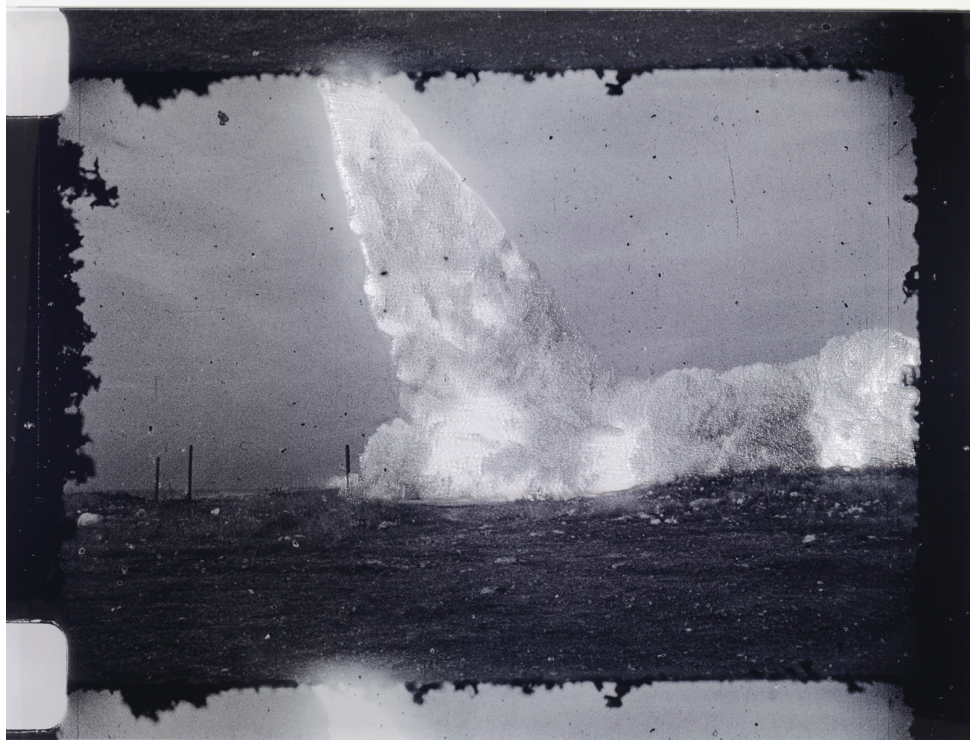
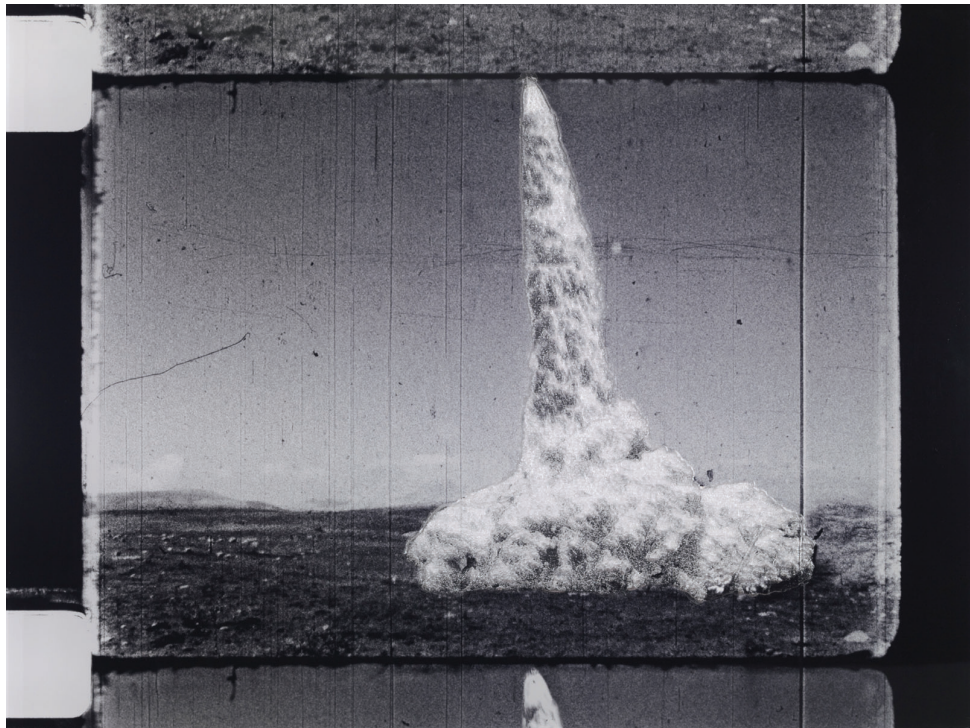
AN ITT CONSUMER PUBLICATION



# *Shifting the Gaze:*

JOANA  
HADJITHOMAS  
&  
KHALIL  
JOREIGE

'The Lebanese Rocket Society  
A tribute to dreamers. Part VI: Dust in  
the Wind' (2013). In collaboration with  
Factum Arte. (Courtesy of the artists,  
CRG Gallery, In Situ / Fabienne Leclerc,  
and The Third Line)



*Forgotten space programmes, spam email, faces, the Wonders of Beirut and making movies with Catherine Deneuve – acclaimed Lebanese duo Khalil Joreige and Joana Hadjithomas's work spans art, film, historical research and imagery across diverse forms and contexts. Following the long-awaited release of their documentary project 'The Lebanese Rocket Society: A Tribute To Dreamers', Nat Muller talks to the pair and surveys a rich, complex practise spanning past present and future.*



Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige like to stress that their practice, and their positioning in the world, is multi-faceted. The

Lebanese artistic and life partners are both artists and filmmakers. The artists are adamant that while there is a continual interplay between these two practices, they each follow different temporalities in terms of production and audience reception. Hadjithomas confides that in fact the world of film and the world of art are rather separate, but that their specificity as image-makers lies precisely in inhabiting the territories of both art and film.

With their most recent project 'The Lebanese Rocket Society: A Tribute to Dreamers' (2011-2013), a documentary film and a series of artworks that address Lebanon's forgotten space programme of the 1960s, they try to connect those two seemingly separate worlds. They do this by adhering to principles that are found throughout their oeuvre: a concern with history, memory, time and the possibilities – or impossibilities – of visual representation. It is no coincidence that much of their work relies on the mediated properties of film, video and photography. The image, whether ➤

(This page)  
From the series  
'Wonder Beirut: The  
Story of a Pyromaniac  
Photographer' (1997  
- 2006). (Courtesy  
of the artists, CRG  
Gallery, In Situ / The  
Third Line)





Film poster for 'Je Veux Voir' (2008). (Far right) 'Faces' (2009). (Images courtesy of the artists, CRG Gallery, In Situ / Fabienne Leclerc, and The Third Line)



still or moving, is never a given. Rather, it is always questioned in terms of what it represents in the world, how it relates to the past, and most important of all what it signifies in the present, and possibly in the future.

Till 2006, 'latency', or the notion of an absent presence, figured as a directive trope in their work. This is best seen in their acclaimed project 'Wonder Beirut: The Story of a Pyromaniac Photographer' (1997-2006), that focuses on the figure of photographer Abdallah Farah, who was officially commissioned in 1968 to photograph the Lebanese seaside for tourist postcards. During the early stages of the Lebanese civil war, between 1975 to 1990, he started burning the negatives of the photographs, mimicking in real time the city's decimation by fire. As the war raged on, Farah used the film rolls salvaged from his studio to photograph people around him. Short on photo developer products, he never managed to develop the rolls. In due time Farah gave up on the idea of bringing images into the world altogether, but continued photographing and meticulously logging details on the subject, mood and technical circumstances of what he captured. Joreige and Hadjithomas exhibit these 'Latent Images' (1997-2006) usually as a series of photos of the actual cases that hold the undeveloped film rolls, in combination with a translation of Farah's notes as contact sheets. In both 'Wonder Beirut' and 'Latent Images', the material potential of the image haunts the destroyed photograph and the film negatives. The image is never allowed to fully emerge, and if it would, what could it tell us about war? What could an image of the past teach us about the present situation? A situation that cannot shirk off the ballast of the past but rather, because of Lebanon's volatile sectarian make-up, relives it every day?

The 33-day Israeli war on Lebanon in 2006, however, produced a break in Hadjithomas and Joreige's practice. 'We felt we had to step out of latency and had to make images. We had to make ourselves visible again.' A case in point is their feature film 'Je Veux Voir' (2008) made in the aftermath of the July War, starring cinema icon Catherine Deneuve and Lebanese playwright and visual artist Rabi'h Mroué. Filmed as a road movie in which, upon Deneuve's request to see the destruction of the war, Mroué chauffeurs her to Bint Jbeil, his heavily bombed family village in the South of



Lebanon. Little is shown of the destruction en route, and Mroué's refusal 'to see' the debris of the war is telling. He has experienced the war himself, so what could the viewing of more images possibly add? And yet, it is in the realm of art and cinema that certain avenues of understanding, otherwise closed to us, can be opened up and shared. It is because of Deneuve's celebrity status that UNIFIL (United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon), with the agreement of the Israeli army, allows Deneuve and Mroué to walk along the Lebanese-Israeli border to be filmed. Anyone else could have been shot, but cinema has managed to do something remarkable here and not only 'raises the question of what can't be seen', as the artists comment in their newly published monograph by Swiss art publisher jrp|ringier, but, I would add, also hints at the possible.

A delicate project that shimmers between disappearance and re-appearance is the photo series 'Faces' (2009). For years the artists photographed fading posters of 'martyrs' throughout Beirut, at times returning after an interval to photograph the same poster again and chronicle its gradual demise and eventual disappearance. Over time the portraits would become more abstract, and lose the reference to the person they commemorated. Not only was their image lost, their memory would soon be lost too. The artists worked



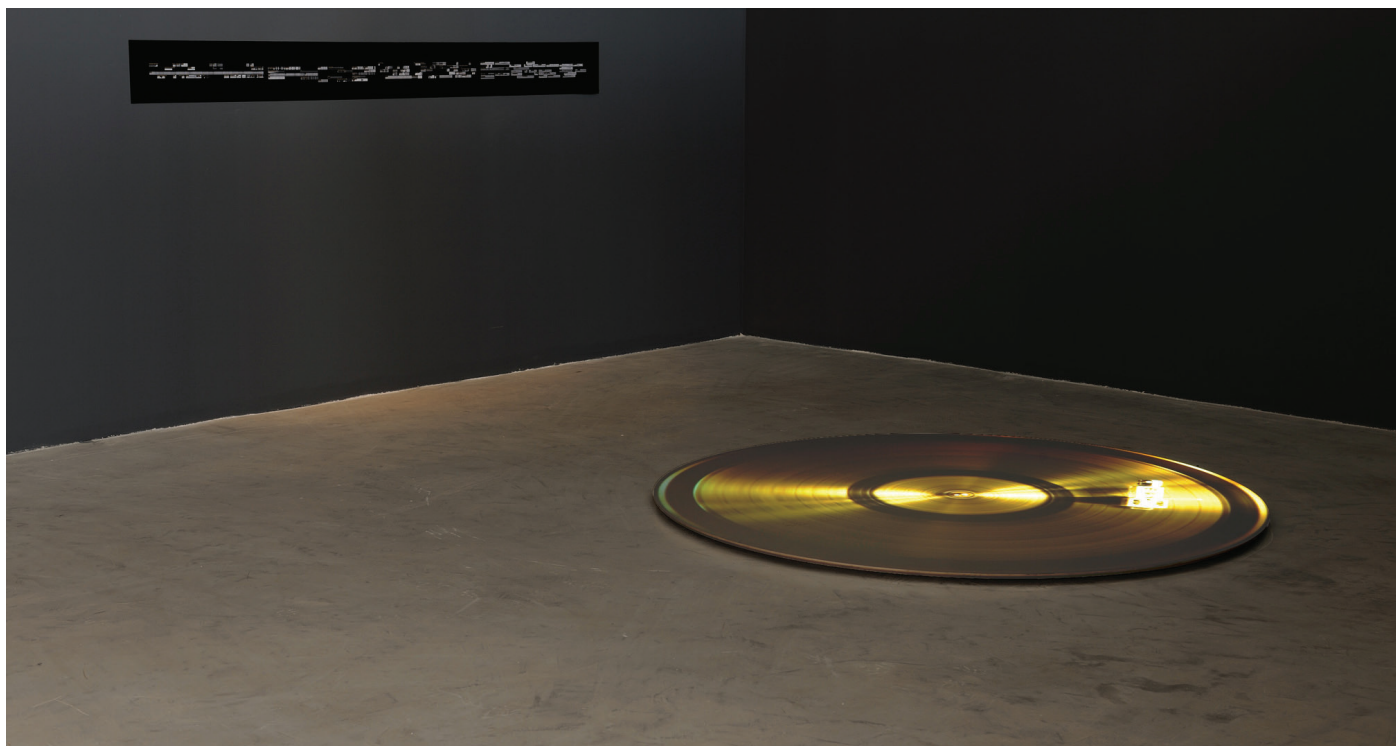
with a graphic designer to retouch and emphasise the facial features of some of these disappearing portraits, thereby insisting on their individuality. The link between materiality and memory becomes very tangible in this process. It is difficult to remember or identify with a waning trace. 'Faces' subtly insists to do away with faceless ghosts that haunt the city and instead puts them to rest by remembering the dead and the disappeared for who they were.

While their previous work had always dealt with the materiality of images – absent or present – 'The Lebanese Rocket Society' pushed them to make works that had a real physicality. Historical references are not simply replicated, but materially reinterpreted: a carpet inspired from a postal stamp with a rocket on it, a rocket sculpture modelled on the Cedar IV rocket placed at the Haigaizian University, a life-size golden record projected onto a rotating disk with sounds of Beirut from the 1960s [as seen on our cover this issue], a scientific project by a group of dreamers narrated into a meticulously researched documentary film. With all these works the artists intend to 're-activate the past into the present for the first time'.

It's rather incredible that the Lebanese have more or less completely forgotten about their space adventures in the 1960s. ➤

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It started modestly in 1960 with the efforts of a young and ambitious mathematics professor at the Armenian Haigazian University in Beirut. Manoug Manougian gathered a group of young scientists with the aim to shoot a rocket into space. These were the early 1960s and the Cold War and the parallel space race were in full swing. It was also the height of Pan-Arab ideology as a project of modernity for the Arab world, spearheaded by Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egypt's charismatic president.

When the space programme secured government funds and the interest of the Lebanese military, it was renamed, changing from the College Rocket Society to the Lebanese Rocket Society. For Manougian, the Lebanese Rocket Society was always about science, but the Lebanese military had other plans. But then came the tremendous 1967 defeat and seemingly-inexorable shift of power in the region, putting a halt to the project. It was soon forgotten.

Asked why a feat like this could have disappeared in such an absolute way from Lebanese collective memory the artists cite the war, loss of archival records, and emigration of those involved. Most interesting they note that '[t]he idea of the space project did not fit our imaginary, or the representation we had of ourselves. After 1967 the idea that Lebanon could be a country that is able to design its own rockets for scientific use and is able to be contemporary with the rest of the world disappeared.'

What Hadjithomas and Joreige's film does - except for unearthing an incredible forgotten narrative - is re-kind the spark of hope and enthusiasm that inspired Manougian and his students. Working on such a project in the 1960s, they literally felt the sky was the limit because they shared a momentum with the rest of the world. The artists posit that the project of 'The Lebanese Rocket Society' asks two fundamental questions: what is our ability to dream today and what does it mean to be contemporary.

'This idea of sharing the same time is this idea that you are linked to others in the world. It is not linked to geography but to the way you represent yourself and the way you consider yourself in



(Opposite page) 'The Lebanese Rocket Society: A tribute to dreamers. PART V: A Carpet'. (2013). (Above) 'The Lebanese Rocket Society: A tribute to dreamers. PART III: The Golden Record' (2011) (Left) Film poster 'The Lebanese Rocket Society: The strange tale of the Lebanese Space adventure' (2013) (Images courtesy of the artists, CRG Gallery, In Situ/Fabienne Leclerc, and The Third Line)

the world. For us being contemporary is about sharing, not only ideas and vision, but being connected and being involved. We wanted to deconstruct the golden age of the 1960s as an alternative moment of what was happening in the Arab world.'

The duo started work on the project in 2010. Soon after, in 2011 the Arab world was dealing with uprisings that could become its own alternative moment. Hadjithomas and Joreige's project could not have been more timely. And yet, not all answers are provided. To the contrary, the reason why this was forgotten is only implicitly addressed in the film. In all of their work they ask the viewer to take position: 'We don't really answer questions in our work, we leave it open, we search for things. We don't have the answer but you have ➤

to look for the answer yourself.' This is beautifully illustrated by the photo installation 'The President's Album' (2011) composed out of 32 identical 8-metre long prints of the Cedar IV rocket, each folded to show a different section of the rocket. Together the eight images make up the complete visual of the rocket, underlining the fragmentary nature of history and memory. Each folded section also features a photograph of the Lebanese Rocket Society photo album that documented the Cedar IV launch and was offered to President Fouad Chehab. Meaning is to be found in how we perceive the fold, and imagine what is hidden from

view. It is very similar to the artists' reaction when they first stumbled on the Lebanese Rocket Society. 'The discovery of such a hidden story makes you reconsider your relation to the past and history. It affects you in your perception. It really shifts the gaze.'

In 'A Reconstitution: Elements for a Monument', they even manufactured a scale replica of the Cedar IV rocket and transported it from the factory in Dbayeh under tight security to be installed at Beirut's Haigazian University, home of the Lebanese Rocket Society. A second Cedar IV replica was placed in the middle of the Sharjah Art Area for the 2011 Sharjah Biennial. This took months of negotiations to achieve. It is a reminder how nowadays a rocket can only be viewed as a missile and not in the context of science, or even as an art project for that matter. In a place like Lebanon, where there is a scarcity of shared monuments and history, the piece points as much to the absence of monuments in



'The Lebanese Rocket Society. Elements for a monument. Part I: Cedar IV, A Reconstitution' (2011). Transport of the rocket from Dbayeh to Beirut's Haigazian University. (Image courtesy of the artists, CRG Gallery, In Situ / Fabienne Leclerc, and The Third Line)

the country as it attempts to propose elements for it. As such, according to the artists, 'it is more the context [of art and science] in which it gets displayed that recognises the project for what it is' than perhaps the object itself.

Many of the artworks in 'The Lebanese Rocket Society' are about materialising that what is absent from national historical memory. This is rendered particularly poetic in the Plexiglas photographic sculpture 'Dust in the Wind' (2013). It addresses the fact that most photographers and cameramen present at the launch site failed to capture the actual moment of take-off due to the limitations of their equipment. All they were able to capture on photo or film was the trail of smoke left in the wake of the rocket. In 'Dust in the Wind' the idea that everyone seemed to have missed the moment suprême is symbolically re-enacted and the plume of smoke in the clouds becomes the actual event. The

# WHAT IS OUR ABILITY TO DREAM TODAY - AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE CONTEMPORARY?





artists super-impose a Plexiglas sculpture of the cloud of smoke onto stills taken from original film footage. The plume of smoke becomes embodied and the artists have 'given materiality to something that had no materiality.' It is this material presence emphasised throughout the works of 'The Lebanese Rocket Society' that besides commemorating the achievements of Manougian and his peers, also roots it in the present moment and invests it with a potential and promise for the future. Or as Khalil Joreige recently summarised at a conference in London, "The Lebanese Rocket Society' is a tribute to dreamers, a gesture of gratitude. Nowadays, a dreamer is outside of society and reality; in the past they were seen as visionary.' If anything, The Lebanese Rocket Society has allowed us to dream a little again, and in times of crisis this is no small feat. **HBA**

*With thanks to The Third Line, Dubai, UAE.*

*Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige are currently showing 'Lasting Images' until January 12th at the Guggenheim NYC. The Lebanese Rocket Society at Adelaide Festival Australia, CACSA, (opening Feb 26th) and at FotoFest International, Houston Biennial March - April 2014. Their DVD will be launched in France and UK in February. On July 4th 2014 their solo exhibition with new work opens at Villa Arson, Nice between Jul 5 -Oct 12 2014.*



(Above) 'The Lebanese Rocket Society. Elements for a monument. PART I: Cedar V: A Reconstitution' (2011) Installation view from Sharjah Biennial 10, part of the Sharjah Art Foundation Collection. (Left) 'The Lebanese Rocket Society. Elements for a monument. Part I: Cedar IV, A Reconstitution' (2011). Installation view from Haigazian University, Beirut. (below) 'The Lebanese Rocket Society. Elements for a monument. Part II: The President's Album' (2011) (Images courtesy of CRG Gallery, In Situ / Fabienne Leclerc, and The Third Line)

