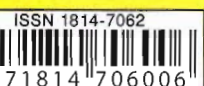


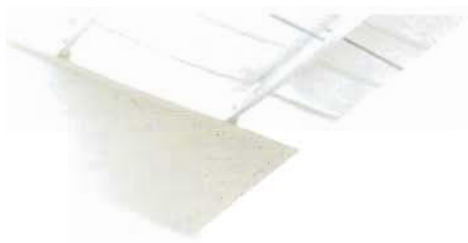
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ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD

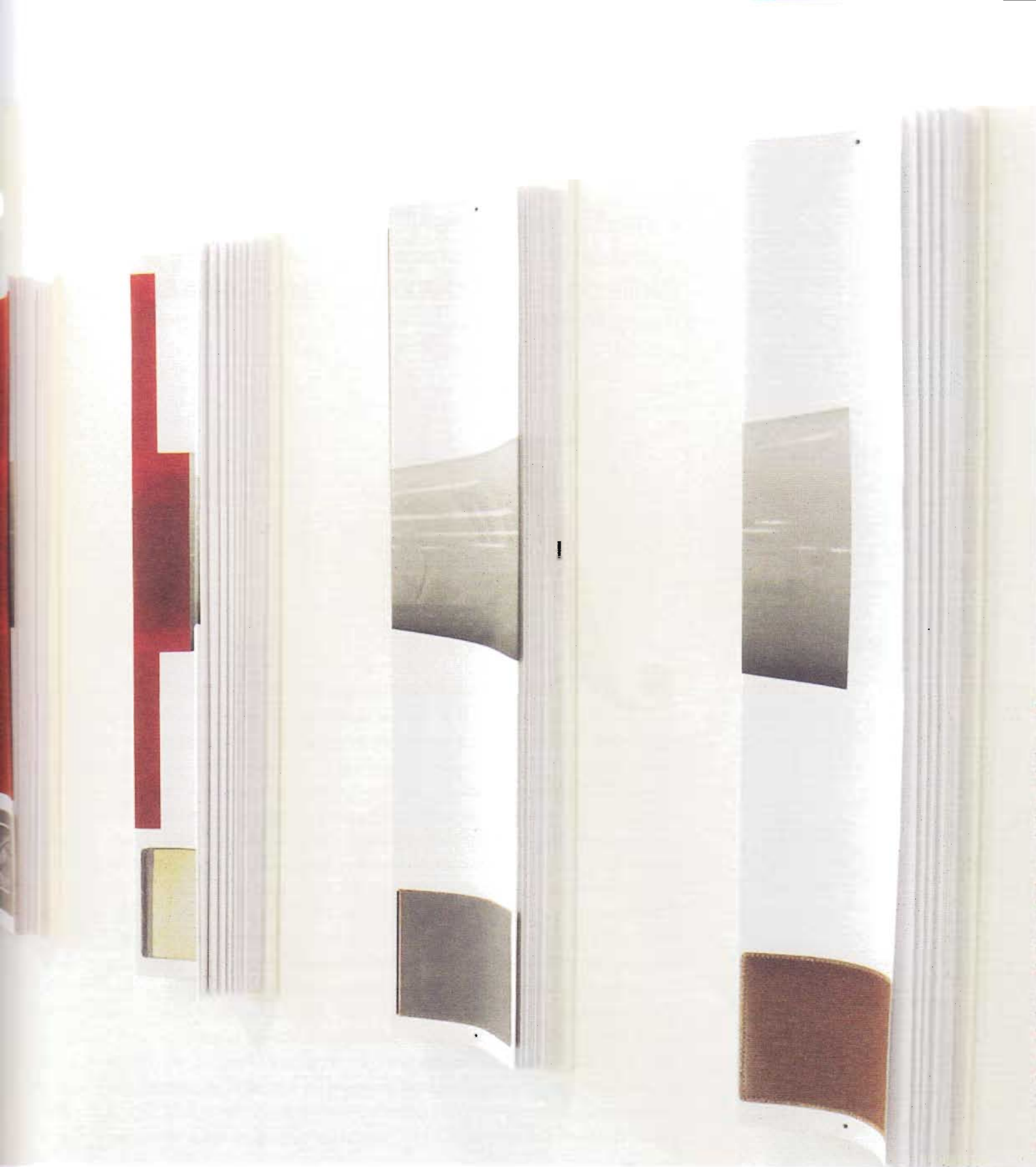
THE YOUNG COLLECTORS ISSUE IV

PLUS our fourth Cutting-Edge issue featuring profiles on Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige, :mentalKLINIK, Walid Siti and Abdulrahman Katanani





DREAM A LITTLE



DREAM

JOANA HADJITHOMAS
& KHALIL JOREIGE

A freedom of spirit, tempered by thoughtful reflection, is evident in the *oeuvre* of Lebanese artist couple Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige. **Alana Chloe Esposito** meets them in Dubai.



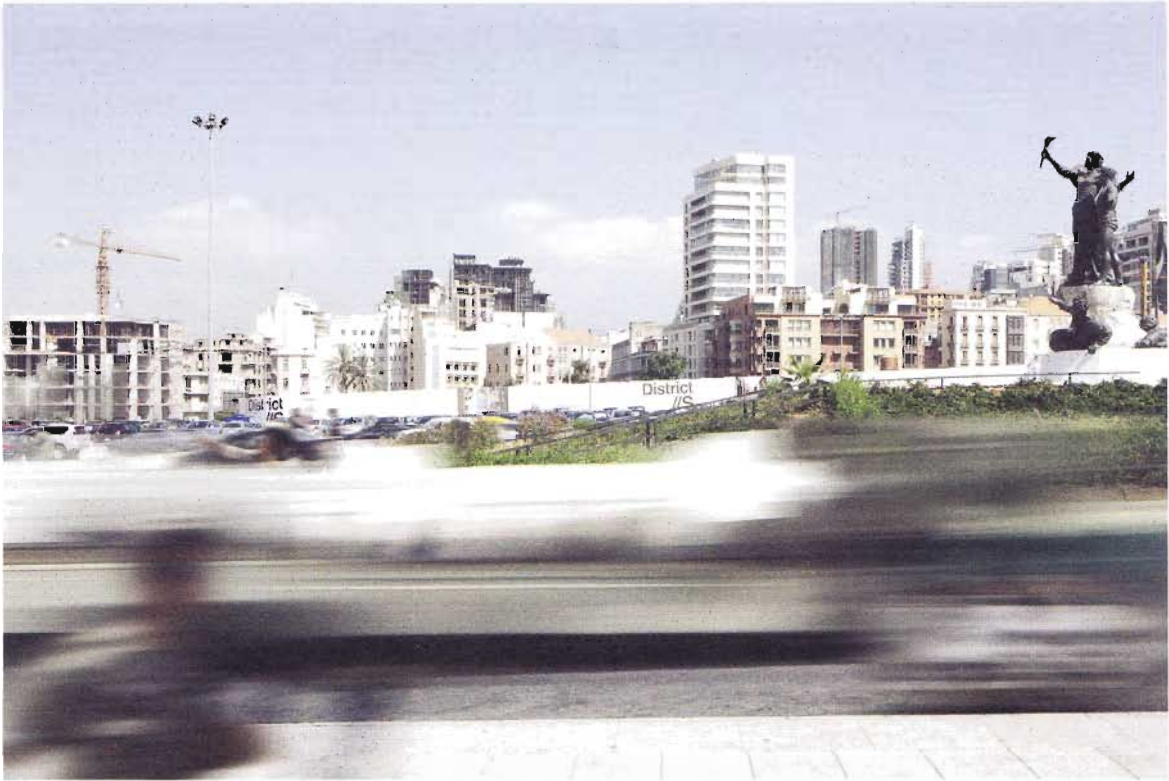
Joana Hadjithomas confesses that she and Khalil Joreige “couldn’t stand each other” when they first met as teenagers. However, their shared quest to “interrogate reality” drew them close and now, “fully inseparable”, the artist duo live and work together between Beirut and Paris. I meet them at The Third Line in Dubai before the vernissage of their March show *Lebanese Rocket Society* and the unveiling of their video installation *A Letter Can Always Reach its Destination*, for which they are among the recipients of the prestigious Abraaj Capital Art Prize (the work depicts individuals delivering monologues based on the text of spam emails that the artists had collected). While the duo usually avoid fairs, “because it is not the artist’s place”, they credit Art Dubai with catapulting regional artists onto the international radar. I learn that both were born in Beirut in 1969 and neither trained formally as an artist or filmmaker – they studied philosophy, literature and theatre at the Université Paris X Nanterre. The opening of their first major solo exhibition, *Beirut: Urban Fictions*, at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris in 1997, galvanised their careers. In 1998, the pair, along with Georges Schoucair, founded About Productions whose mission is to produce auteurs films with “a distinct Arab voice”. A year later, they directed their debut fiction feature film, *Around the Pink House*, about a controversial attempt to tear down an old mansion in Beirut which had sheltered two families during the Lebanese Civil War. But why did academics with no art background become obsessed with images in the first place? Hadjithomas and Joreige describe themselves as autodidacts who turned to photography and film to make sense of inundating images “that moved us and pushed us to question representations and produce images in which we could believe,” says Hadjithomas. Scepticism over the truthfulness of images continues to inform their work to this day, in what they describe as an archaeology of their observations.

Opening spread: An installation view of *The Lebanese Rocket Society: The President’s Album* at the duo’s solo show *How Soon Is Now* at the Beirut Exhibition Center, Beirut, 2011. 32 digital prints folded on wood, 800 x 120 cm each.

Facing page: Works from the *Restaged* series. *Restaged 5* (above) and *Restaged 6* (below). Both 2012. C-print, 100 x 72 cm each. Edition of five.

SHOCK AND AWE

It was in the aftermath of the Civil War that the pair felt compelled to capture images of Beirut’s destruction and reconstruction. “It was never just about documentation, but rather about how to articulate symptoms of daily life in a place like Beirut,” explains Joreige. Idyllic postcards taken during Lebanon’s golden pre-war era began resurfacing in the 1990s. “It was as if the whole country was plagued by amnesia,” says Hadjithomas. Unwilling to join the chorus endeavouring to gloss over the





ugly realities of the war, the duo offered an alternative narrative through their own postcards of the city. The resulting installation, *Wonder Beirut*, comprises several photographic series inspired by Abdullah Farah, who had taken the photographs for the original postcards in 1968 and 1969; ironically, these postcards are still available for sale today. From 1975–90 Farah burnt the negatives of the postcards – it was his way of transcribing the war’s physical destruction onto the film, and every time he’d burn the negatives, he’d photograph them too. The ongoing *Wonder Beirut* project features images printed from the negatives and can be understood as an attempt to create a more nuanced narrative of a complex political situation. “We really think a lot about our projects and there is a conceptual component, but it is really linked to our experience, to what happens to us, to what we see. We want the viewer to experience emo-

tions and question the way we look at images,” explains Hadjithomas.

The pair work in parallel with the political present and yet are primarily concerned with the formalistic aspects of the media. “We work on subjects close to us, but we reflect on how to use sound and images for each subject, and search for strategies to make the images more powerful and poetic,” explains Hadjithomas. The poetry she refers to is illustrated in *Circle of Confusion*, a four-by-three-metre aerial image of Beirut’s coast taken in 1997 and cut up into 3000 pieces which are stuck onto a mirror; each piece’s back is numbered and labelled with the words, ‘Beirut does not exist’. It was shown during Art Dubai 2011 through a collaborative booth between CRG Gallery and In Situ, Fabienne Leclerc Gallery, and was a highlight of the fair. The work engages by inviting viewers to take pieces away with them and the choice over which bits to take becomes involuntarily personal. As the fair progressed, ‘fragments’ of Beirut’s coast were taken, and the image – although not in its entirety – disappeared. Beirut did not exist anymore in pictorial form but through the act of peeling

“All of our works are about pushing boundaries.”

away its 'fragments', its *existence* was confirmed in peoples' reflections in the mirror – as though people existed *because* of Beirut.

The shock of the July 2006 war in Lebanon marks a clear rupture in the couple's work. "We asked ourselves how we could produce images after such a violent war, a catastrophe? What can cinema or art do?" asks Hadjithomas. The project initially featured the duo with a tripod on the Lebanese-Israeli border in September 2006, a little over a month after the hostilities ended when tensions were still high. Objections over the use of a tripod on the border were raised by UNIFIL forces, Israeli Defence Forces, the Lebanese Army and Hezbollah. Hadjithomas and Joreige considered an alternative – perhaps in gathering a film crew and notable actors, the project would proceed. "We needed someone to look at images with us and question the line between fiction and documentary," says Hadjithomas. The duo fought back against what they perceived as "shrinking artistic territory": they enlisted the cooperation of cinematic icon Catherine Deneuve and ultimately succeeded in filming in sensitive places and opening a closed road on the borders in May 2007. That Deneuve agreed to play a version of herself in an unscripted film about how cinema can witness history in Lebanon – and *pro bono* too – speaks of the charm and integrity of the artists who reached out to her as strangers. "All of our works are about pushing boundaries and this was a metaphor in a sense, and also an episode with happy accidents that we are always waiting to stumble upon," adds Hadjithomas. The resulting feature film, *Je Veux Voir* (I Want to See), stars Deneuve and Lebanese artist Rabih Mroué and premiered to critical accolades at the Cannes Film Festival in 2008. Like many of the pair's works, the film elicits sorrowful undertones. "Yes," affirms Hadjithomas, "I can be deeply sad in general." Nevertheless, sorrow can inspire creativity and Hadjithomas admits to channelling her emotions into work. "You don't get rid of the sadness," she clarifies, "but you transfigure it, you project it, you share it with others. We refuse to be cynical and want to continue dreaming, we try to bring back complexity in a binary world."

MULTIPLE GALAXIES

Their latest project is *Lebanese Rocket Society*, the culmination of over a decade of research on a 1960s initiative by a young mathematics and physics professor, Manoug Manougian, and his students at Haigazian University in Beirut to form the Lebanese Rocket Society. Curiously, despite successfully launching several rockets, the Cedars, into the stratosphere, securing backing from the Lebanese government, drawing interest from the USA and the then-USSR, and instilling pride among the Arab peoples, the Lebanese Rocket Society disbanded in 1967 and has since faded into obscurity. Intrigued,

Facing page, above: *The Golden Record*, 2011. Sound and video installation. 19 minutes. Variable dimensions.

Below: (Detail) *The Golden Record*. Image courtesy The Third Line, Dubai.

This page, above: *Wonder Beirut #1, Greetings from Beirut*, 1998-2007. Lambda print mounted on aluminium. 70.5 x 105.4 cm. Edition of five.

Below: *Wonder Beirut #20, Beirut by Night*, 1998-2007. Lambda print mounted on aluminium. 70.5 x 105.4 cm. Edition of five.

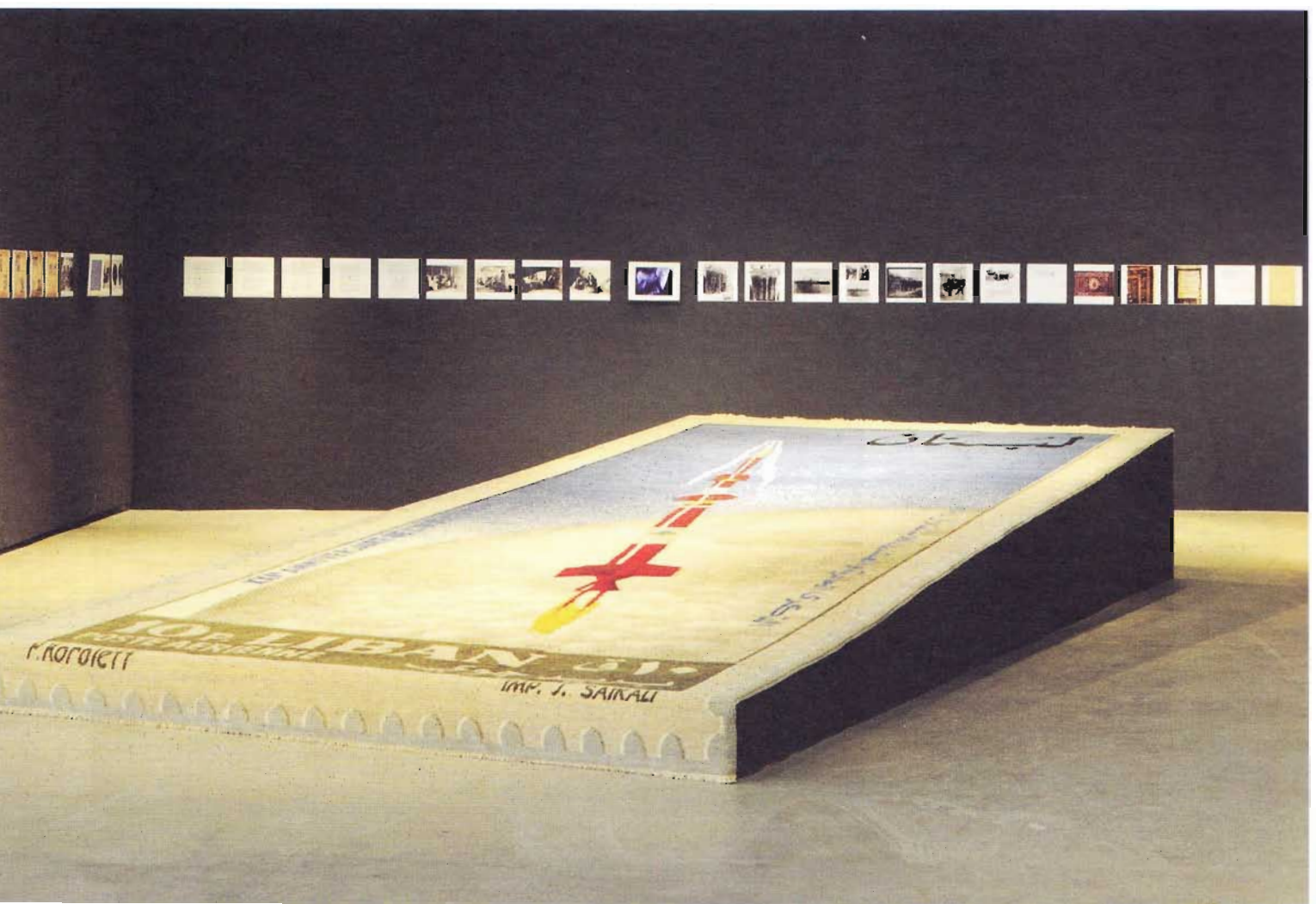


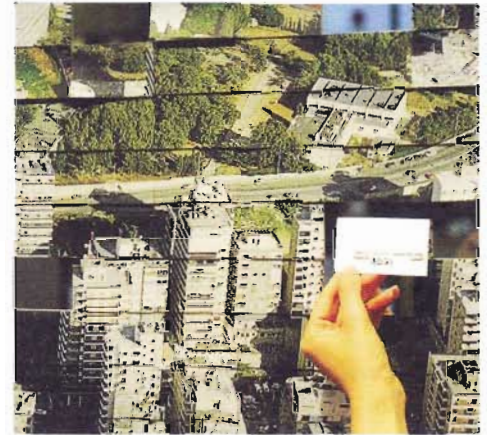
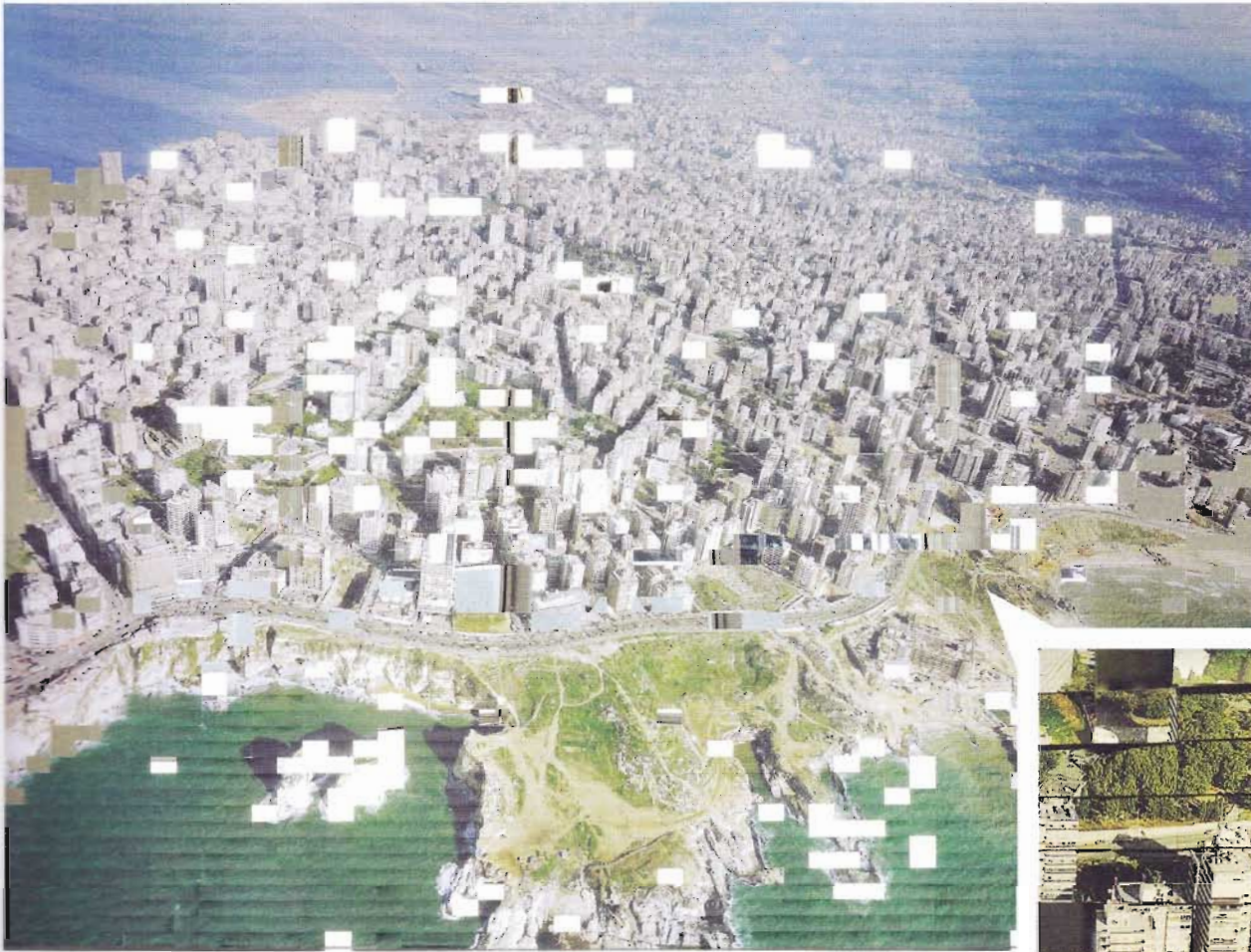
Hadjithomas and Joreige began poring over archives and interviewing those who had been involved in the project. Initially, the duo intended to produce a documentary about the abandoned Lebanese space programme, but like so many of their projects, the idea evolved into something entirely different. "Suddenly we thought, 'Why not make a sculpture?'" recounts Hadjithomas. Then, through a serendipitous discovery, they learned that the factory selected to produce the life-sized cedar rocket model was located in Dbayeh, the former launching site of the actual rockets. This seemed to validate their decision. Dissatisfied with simply producing and exhibiting the sculptures, however, Hadjithomas and Joreige negotiated with the government for months over permission to transport the rocket through downtown Beirut. Devoid of any insignia that might identify it as an art piece reconstituting an emblem of science and research, many onlookers shuddered as the missile-like

structure passed through Beirut's streets. The cedar rocket sculpture featured in the 2011 Sharjah Biennial and was donated to the Sharjah Art Museum, where it currently resides outside the premises. Offered as a tribute to this scientific adventure and to the self-proclaimed dreamers who carried out the project, Joreige adds that "it is within the territories of art and science that the rocket can be seen for what it is, and avoid misunderstandings: that this is not a weapon, but an artistic and scientific project."

The mention of the Sharjah Biennial sparks a tangent on the burgeoning Middle Eastern art scene. Hadjithomas and Joreige applaud the explosion of galleries and the development of an arts infrastructure in Beirut: "When you spread art, film and philosophy, you are spreading ideas and these are what give strength to people." The couple play their part in forming the next generation of artists as university lecturers and by supporting mentoring initiatives such as

"We are symptomatic of our experience, not representative of it."






Home Workspace, a 10-month interdisciplinary arts programme for emerging artists created by Ashkal Alwan, the Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts. Yet, they also hint that the formalisation of artistic practices may inadvertently constrain younger artists. "We made whatever we wanted without regard for market concerns or the tastes of gallery directors, and I'm not sure it is the same today," explains Hadjithomas.

TAKING THE PULSE

Hadjithomas and Joreige flow between the realms of cinema and art with an ease that has often bewildered critics, some of whom do not know what to make of the duo. "People want you to choose," confesses Hadjithomas, going on to explain how people working in cinema have defined them as artists who dabble in film, while the art world has inversely labelled them as filmmakers dabbling in art. She defies the critics' attempts at categorisation and embraces the tension: "This is what I want! Definitions are what kill nuances and singularities. I'm always fighting against this, but I accept this fight as part of my work."

Politics may be an inescapable domain for Lebanese artists whose calling emanates from the experience of witnessing war. Yet, like all great artists, Hadjithomas and Joreige produce works that transcend the particularities of their experience and can reach audiences on a human level. "We are symptomatic of our experience, not representative of it," insists Joreige, refusing to accept the role of cultural diplomat so often imposed on artists. "We are not ambassadors. We don't want that power," he continues.

A brief moment of silence ensues as we reflect on the complex relationship between art and politics. Hadjithomas breaks the silence as she points to the rocket whizzing by on the screen before us, "The project is about dreams," she says proudly. "It is made for dreamers by dreamers. Whatever happens in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria or beyond the region, self-esteem, dignity and dreams are coming back to us." 

For more information, visit www.hadjithomasjoreige.com, www.thethirdline.com, www.crggallery.com and www.insituparis.fr

Facing page: An installation view of *A Carpet as How Soon Is Now* at the Beirut Exhibition Center, Beirut, 2012. Handmade rug, 555 x 295 cm. In the background is documentation on the making of the work.

This page, above and right: detail: *Circle of Confusion*, 1997. Photographic print, repositionable glue and mirror, 400 x 300 cm. Detail image courtesy The Third Line, Dubai.

All images courtesy CRG Gallery, New York unless otherwise specified.