

FEATURE ARTICLES

more from the
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issue:

**Does Anybody
Really Know
What Time It Is?**
by Gregory Zinman

**Letter From
the Guest Editor:
Niels Van Tomme**



On Being Contemporary – Re-Activating the Present: Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige in conversation with Nat Muller

Nat Muller: In much of your work you straddle the fine balance between reality and fiction, between that which is credible and that which is not. Imagery and narrative are used to question these sticky relations, but what about the experience of time? How does the temporal feature in your work?

Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige: We never studied art or cinema academically, and actually never intended to be artists. We came to art by making images at the end of the '80s in a city like Beirut, ravaged by years of civil wars (1975–1990). Gradually traces of the war started to fade and disappear. What do you do then with these images? What do you do with these traces? Do you keep them, do you activate them? How? What is the importance of these memories in the context of this history? An image is always a fragment along a time-space axis. In some of our works this relation is disturbed. A good example is our most recent project *The Lebanese Rocket Society*, 2011–2012, which consists of a feature film and a series of artworks. It tells the story of Lebanon's forgotten space program in the 1960s initiated by scientists and students at the Haigazian University. Part of the project is a chronicle of Lebanon during the '60s, a seminal period for the Middle East. It was the peak of Pan-Arabism, a time when worldwide revolution seemed like a possibility, a time of multiple, alternative ideologies. The obsession with space also developed during this period due to the competition between the USA and the USSR, and the way that the space race affected the rest of the world. Manoug Manougian, the Haigazian University mathematics professor who initiated the project with his students, believed that they were participating in international research, albeit at their own level and with their own resources. They saw themselves as contemporaries of their peers around the world, in the strict sense that they were sharing a common time. This contemporaneity could also be seen in the spirit of the revolutions happening in the '60s around the world; they all seemed to be interconnected. This feeling of being contemporary is something that we found very interesting.



Installation view from Sharjah Biennial 10, part of the Sharjah Art Foundation Collection.
Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, *Lebanese Rocket Society*, *Elements for a Monument: Cedar IV, A RECONSTITUTION*, 2011, steel and corian, 800 x 120 x 100

centimeters (courtesy of CRG Gallery, In Situ / Fabienne Leclerc, and The Third Line)

NM: In *Cedar IV: A Reconstitution*, 2011, you produce a replica of the largest Lebanese rocket, the Cedar IV, and bring it back to the Haigazian University in Beirut, the scientific home and heart of the Lebanese Rocket Society, as a tribute to the scientists, and to their dreams. Isn't there a risk that by (re)materializing the rocket and transforming it into a monument, you fix it in time, and therefore relegate it to the realm of the past?

JH & KJ: We are used to working on hidden events or facts within the realms of collective memory and the writing of history, related to difficult or tragic situations of war and destruction. With The Lebanese Rocket Society, it was different. We were wondering how it was possible that such a positive, scientific, and ambitious project had been totally forgotten. It was important for us to bring back this story, a story of conquest, and to tell it in our film. However, more important to us is this notion that we have nothing left of this narrative in our imaginaries. That's why we attempt to give it a physical reality in the form of a film and in a series of artworks. So while working on the film we began to think about the idea of an absent monument, and produced several art installations subtitled *Elements for a Monument*, 2011–2012. One of them was building a replica to life-size scale of the Cedar IV rocket, the most symbolic of them all, measuring eight meters and weighing nearly a ton, and offering it back to the Haigazian University. We moved the sculpture from the factory where it was built to the university on a truck, so everyone could see the rocket passing through the streets of Beirut, and understand that this is not a weapon of destruction but the fruit of science, research, and dreams. It is a commemorative tribute to science, to the Rocket Society and to its dreamers. In the specific case of Lebanon, the notion of a monument is very complex. The subtitle of the sculpture, *Elements for a Monument*, probes the possibility for a monument, but recognizes that it cannot be achieved as a monument proper. Embodying this absent, unrealized imaginary is interesting in a country that has no tangible place or monument that unites its people—a country without a state, where the divisions of the civil wars are still present. In Lebanon, we have very few monuments that are shared amongst the population. Most of them are of a sectarian nature. The reconstitution of Cedar IV can only be installed in places like the Sharjah Biennial (a place of art) or the Haigazian University (a place of science), which will safeguard it from potential misunderstandings. Rather than the monument itself, it is more the context in which it gets displayed that recognizes the project for what it is, namely an artistic and scientific project, and not a project of war.



Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, *War Trophies No.2*, 2006–2007,
photographic print on baryté paper, 30 x 38 centimeters
(courtesy of CRG Gallery, In Situ / Fabienne Leclerc, and The Third Line)

NM: Within *The Lebanese Rocket Society* you have three strategies to reactivate the past, and each of them are respectively translated into separate artworks. You reconstitute, restage, and reenact. All three strategies have different rhythms in terms of aesthetics, performance, and duration. Can you talk a bit about these differences?

JH & KJ: When something of such public importance is forgotten, it tells us something about our present and how we want to represent ourselves. It is not about being nostalgic about the past, but about referencing this past project and reactivating it in the present, in order to ask questions about where we stand as political subjects today. We attempt to tell this story, to extend the gesture into the present, and to activate the chain of the transmission of history. There are several strategies of reactivation of the past into the present that we wanted to develop through this project.

A reconstitution is to reproduce something the way it was, or the way we imagine it was. In the photo series *Restaged*, 2012, we re-enact the ways in which we transported the rocket in the streets of Beirut from its factory to the university.

For us, reenactment does not consist of repetition as it is usually understood, but it is an attempt, an experience, to introduce an element of the past into today's reality. The performance may fail, but it aims at creating new situations, new contexts, and new meanings. By doing something that took place in the past anew, we might fill a gap in our history or reconnect with it.

It also means wishing to reveal the latency of some images, questioning a history that has left no marks. It attempts to understand which imaginary we put forward, which one we accept to adopt, and which history we choose to write or to allow to be written about us.



Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, *Wonder Beirut: The story of a pyromaniac* photographer, 1997–2006, C-print on aluminum, 70 x 100 centimeters (courtesy of CRG Gallery, In Situ / Fabienne Leclerc, and The Third Line)

NM: Works such as *Wonder Beirut*, 1997–2006, or the film project *Khiam*, 2000–2007, are marked by long periods of production, or even multiple production periods. Could you elaborate on this?

JH & KJ: Some of our installations and films indeed have several dates of production. The question of time is central in it as it reveals its relation to the present, as well as a chronicle of our daily life. *Wonder Beirut* was ongoing from 1997 to 2006. It's a very vast corpus of research, especially its section *Latent Images*. We stopped it in 2006, with Israel's war on Lebanon. At that time we had to step out of latency and had to make images. Sometimes the work can change because of a change in the condition of perception, and corollary by its meanings. This is the case with our project on Khiam, a detention camp in the South of Lebanon. When we started working on this project, there were no images of it because it was situated in a territory occupied by the Israelis and by its proxy militia the South Lebanese Army (SLA). So we worked on evocation with the absence of images. The main question in the film was about the relation to time and space, and how six former detainees, whom we interviewed, managed to grow as individual subjects by producing artworks in total secrecy. After Israel had withdrawn from Southern Lebanon in 2000, the camp was turned into a museum. During the 2006 war, it was completely destroyed by Israeli bombardments, and in 2007, we felt the need to reinterview the detainees. The detention camp was reduced to rubble. They shared their thoughts about memory, history, reconstitution, imagination, and especially the idea of reconstructing the camp as it was. In our series of photographs, *War Trophies*, 2006–2007, we show the military vehicles that belonged to Israel, or to its proxy the SLA. They were exhibited as military trophies in Khiam, after Israel's withdrawal. Their function as military vehicles was rendered

obsolete as they became objects of display. However, they were destroyed again in 2006 during the bombing. So in the same image you can have different time-space continuums mixed, two temporalities. This gap is the space where you can actually represent the layering of history. At the same time, it shows how we can relate to history, to memory, have temporal continuity if—whenever faced with the past—we keep superimposing one image on the ruins of another image, one temporality on another, one reality on another.



Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, *Lebanese Rocket Society, Elements for a Monument: Restaged No.3*, 2012, C-print, 100 x 72 centimeters
(courtesy of CRG Gallery, In Situ / Fabienne Leclerc, and The Third Line)

NM: Other projects of yours, such as the films *A Perfect Day*, 2005, and *Je veux voir*, 2007, span 24 hours. How is this particular temporal structure relevant for you as filmmakers? On a similar note, the titles of your exhibitions always insist on the contemporary: *Back to the Présent* (Beirut, 2008) or *How soon is now: A tribute to dreamers* (Beirut, 2012) and *We could be heroes just for one day* (Paris, 2009). Again, these titles emphasize "nowness" to a very large extent. What does this all mean on a symbolic level?

JH & KJ: In our work, we predominantly investigate the present, and perhaps in a more literal way what is happening to us, and the things that we encounter. We are totally permeable to the real and remain very close to our real-life experience. For example, the undeveloped film that we find and develop (as in *Lasting Images*, 2004), the film stolen from us in Yemen and that we then go to look for (*The Lost Film*, 2003), or the postcards still on sale in bookshops while what they represent has practically disappeared (*Wonder Beirut*, 1997–2006). All of this is part of our present, it helps us to understand it better, and raises questions about the way we could live it.

For years we had the impression that we were not fully able to really live in the present moment, or to properly represent it. This is what we want to address in our films and artworks. For us, working on this concept of time is very important. It is a kind of dialogue with the spectator, a question of sharing, and of giving her a space that she can choose to fill or not, to join or not.



Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, *Faces-B*, from the series *Faces*, 2006–2009, photographic print with drawing on aluminum, 50 x 35 centimeters

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige are artists and filmmakers. For the last 15 years they have focused on the images, representations, and history of their home country, Lebanon. Their films and artworks have been shown in museums, biennials, film festivals, and art centers around the world and are part of important public and private collections.

Nat Muller is an independent curator and critic.

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