

JOANA HADJITOMAS AND KHALIL JOREIGE

IN CONVERSATION WITH LUCAS LECLARE

The city of Beirut is said to have been destroyed and rebuilt seven times. As a result, resilience to war and a fierce desire to survive has permeated generations of the city's inhabitants, standing longer and stronger than the scars left by bombings of the past.

Filmmakers and artists Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige stress that their work focuses on the present, one which bears the archeological and emotional layers of its past. The notion of an interconnected past is echoed in Catherine Deeneuve's refrain 'I want to see' — the title of Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's 2008 film, *Je Veux Voir*, in which Devenue and Rabih Mroué travel through Lebanon in 2006 in the aftermath of the war. It is felt in the words of artist and poet Etel Adnan, who in *Ismyrna* (2016) recalls her connection to Smyrna (modern day Izmir, Turkey), a city from which a part of Joana's family was forced into exile by Turkish armies as the Ottoman Empire collapsed.

Joana and Khalil met amidst a myriad of crossed lives, marked by their steps and migrations across the globe, in a cosmopolitan city that never ceases to nurture stories. It's these stories that became the solid and moving ground of their art practice, whether in exhibitions or in movie theatres, ever-changing in narrative, and constantly discovering new ways to express the lives of others and naturally, their own.

Lucas Leclare: You are now working on a new feature film, The Notebooks, set to release in February or March 2020, is that right?

Joana: Yes. The film is based on notebooks I wrote to my best friend when I was a teenager. I was living in Beirut and she had to leave during the civil war with her mother, who was French. We promised to write each other everyday, which we did for six years. We wrote letters, took photographs, recorded tapes and sent packages to each other, from 1982 to 1988. Life separated us for a long time, but she came to one of our shows a few years ago. She told me she'd kept everything I sent and I had too, so we exchanged the notebooks. Suddenly, we had all this material on our hands. We decided to take the notebooks and tapes and make a fiction film along with photos

Khalil took in the eighties in Beirut. The film begins in Montreal because that's where the main character emigrated with her mother when she was eighteen. She got married and had a daughter, so you have three generations of women. It's a film about transmission, imagination and fantasy.

LL: Khiam (2000) and Ismyrne (2016) also had a documentary setting. With The Notebooks, is it the first time you are mixing so many different forms of media into one work

Khalil: It's different each time. We've made a lot of films that have a strange mix, like in *A Perfect Day* (2005) or *Je Veux Voir. A Perfect Day* (2005) is a fictional film shot in a documentary style and *Je Veux Voir* (2008) plays with these notions too. Even in documentary we mix different elements, like in *The Lebanese Rocket Society* (2013). It starts with an inquiry, evolves into a performative art-action and finishes in an animation — an uchronia in the future.

LL: Je Veux Voir, starring Catherine Devenue and Rabih Mroué, tells the story of an actress and her bodyguard travelling through Lebanon in 2006 in the aftermath of the war. Was there a lot of scripting put in place for this film?

JH: We have a special way of working where we usually don't give the script to the actors. We explain the situation and set them up in action. *Je Veux Voir* was shot in six days but the actors were given no written material. We envision it like an art installation: setting something up and seeing what happens. The fascinating thing is that what we shot ended up being very close to what we had written initially.

LL: So that means the setting was right?

JH: Yes [laughs]. We like to lose control, to let things occur within a setting. Sometimes more interesting things happen than what was written in the first place, thanks to the work of the actors, the crew, accidents, etc. There was alchemy on the set of *Je Veux Voir*, a reaction between different components that provoked organic things to come to life.

LL: I read somewhere that you argue a lot on set, is that true?

KJ: [Laughs] Who told you that? But, yes, we do. We are two very different people! Even if we collaborate, we don't assign ourselves separate roles. So when we disagree, we can't choose another option. It has to be something we are both happy with. When working together, it's hard to move past your frustrations, to bypass something you were keen on and say, 'Never mind, let's not do it.' We decided from the start that we wouldn't let frustrations build up in our working relationship. But arguments are great, we are not afraid of them. They make you search for solutions you wouldn't have thought of in the first place.

JH: Our story is actually in those notebooks. We met in a village in Lebanon when we were very young, but we didn't get along at first. It was only later that we grew close as friends and... it happened. We decided very early on that we would make work together. For us, making films or art is a life project. It seems natural to do it together.

LL: You are known both as filmmakers and artists. Do you ever feel a threat of losing your credibility whilst engaging in different roles? Would you say your art practice influences your approach to cinema?

JH: We know that these things are very separate in people's minds, but for us they are one. People say, 'You have to choose!' I don't see why we have to choose. We have always tried to shift representations of us and the region by refusing to become reduced to narrowed identities. We see ourselves as storytellers. When we started experimenting in the '90s in Beirut, there were no set formats. There was also no real contemporary art market in the region, so there were no expectations from us. We could really express ourselves how we wanted, and we've always kept this way of working. Whether with performance, film or photography — each medium has the capacity to say something specific. We seek complexities. We do not seek the effectiveness of communication. We make art, not communication.

LL: Is it silly of me to compare your work to Lebanese artist Walid Raad?

KJ: Not at all, we are close friends with Walid. We often share research interests and discuss pro-

jects. We grew up with a community of artists in Lebanon and remain very close with some of them — Jalal Toufic, Rabin Mroué, Lina Majdalani, and many others.

LL: You are also teaching at various institutions. How did you see the landscape of art education change in Lebanon over the years?

JH: Khalil and I have been teaching for more than twenty years. When we started, there were very few places where we could teach and this has evolved tremendously. We are not traditional teachers though — we don't like to be in positions of power. It's more about research and exchange. I believe a lot in Home Works, the school of Ashkal Alwan and the work of Christine Tohmé and her team — we will be teaching there next year. We'll also be participating in Raw Academie in Dakar and supporting a program of workshops called Beirut Talents, which we developed with Metropolis Cinema, an association in which we are very active. We are also involved in many projects linked to education: About Productions, which we founded with Georges Schouair and produces feature films and documentaries from the region, and the Cinemathèque of Beirut, which we are developing with Hania Mroué and the Metropolis team.

LL: Your way of working bridges philosophy, sociology, and poetry. Are you ever concerned with reaching a certain audience?

JH: We don't think that way. It's not about reaching an audience. I'm more concerned with how I feel territories are shrinking. I'm afraid of uniformisation, of how representations are becoming more narrow. Art, film and media have to mobilise against it. We see what is happening politically and it frustrates us. But I've always fought for this, so it's sadly nothing new.

LL: You've interviewed so many people for your documentaries and projects, such as renowned poet Etel Adnan in *Ismyrna*. Are some of the people you interviewed for your work still in your lives?

JH: Our projects are long journeys, adventures over several years. This is most prominent in *Khiam*, where we filmed six former detainees from the Khiam detention center in South Lebanon from 2000-2008. But with Etel Adnan in *Ismyrna*, we

met over several years before moving our discussions in front of the camera. Sadly some of the participants from *The Lebanese Rocket Society* passed away before seeing the film, or just after. That moved us a lot. You build a kind of family over the years and those people are part of it.

KJ: For installations like *The Rumor of the World*, (2014) we filmed thirty-six people living and working in Beirut. You immediately feel the diversity of each individual. Some are illegal workers and don't have papers, some are refugees. You see all these extra-territorial lives that are intertwined in the city.

LL: Your work is intensely linked to Lebanon and its activities. Do you feel the need to cover any other regions?

KJ: Lebanon is a very fascinating place for us, with problems we still find intensely interesting. Neither of us studied art or filmmaking, so we began producing images and writing because of very specific situations. These situations can happen anywhere. For example, in *Unconformities*, (2017-ongoing) we worked in three cities: Paris, Beirut and Athens. And for *The Notebooks*, we shot in Montreal. 'Beirut does not exist' was stamped behind each fragment of our installation, *The Circle of Confusion* (1997), because Beirut never stops existing. Beirut still raises a lot of questions for us — it has an urgency that is important. Talking about Beirut helps us address problems in a broader way. The more specific you are, the better you can talk about a larger issue.

LL: You were asked on French television if you were children of war. Would you consider yourselves children of the reconstruction rather?

KJ: We don't see ourselves that way. What is most important in our work is the present time. A lot of what we do is linked to the question of how we deal with today or the future. We are interested in how to live in the present and raise questions. How is history being written? What is being left for ourselves and others?



STILLS FROM *KHIAM* (2000). COURTESY JOANA HADJITHOMAS AND KHALIL JOREIGE.



UNCONFORMITIES, 2017
CENTRE POMPIDOU, PARIS, FRANCE



STILLS FROM *A PERFECT DAY* (2000). COURTESY JOANA HADJITHOMAS AND KHALIL JOREIGE.



STILLS FROM *ISMRYNA* (2016). COURTESY THE ARTISTS, IN SITU - FABIENNE LECLERC, THE THIRD LINE.

STILLS FROM *JE VEUX VOIR* (2008) COURTESY JOANA HADJITHOMAS AND KHALIL JOREIGE.