

Artists at Work: Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige

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Chantal Pontbriand



Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, The Lebanese Rocket Society, 2013, 35mm film, colour, 97min, still. Courtesy the artists; CRG Gallery, New York; In Situ, Paris; and The Third Line, Dubai

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige have been involved in the artistic context of Beirut since the late

1990s, with links to Metropolis Cinema, Ashkal Alwan and About Productions, which they co-founded with Georges Schoucair in 1998 to support Arabic-language film production. Their artistic practice encompasses films, including A Perfect Day (2005), Je Veux Voir (I Want to See, 2008) and The Lebanese Rocket Society (2013), as well as installations, photographs and artists' books.

With various new platforms, museums, art centres, foundations, art faculties, biennials and art fairs, there has been intense development in the Middle East over recent years. In this conversation with Chantal Pontbriand they reflect upon how the work of their generation has affected this situation, and vice versa.

Chantal Pontbriand: You were both raised in Lebanon and have been well known on the international scene for over ten years now. How do you see the situation in the Middle East at this point? How has it evolved?

Khalil Joreige: We started practising at the beginning of the 1990s without having studied art or cinema. We came to these by necessity – by asking ourselves how to reconfigure things after the civil wars, how to react to what was being reinstated – and in fear that it would start all over again. As often is the case in our works it was a question of dealing with this specific situation. Beirut was being rebuilt; a lot of things were disappearing. The relationship to memory, to history, was of great interest to us. There were a lot of questions about how to document the present that we were dealing with at that moment. In a politicised way, we had to look for an alternative to the images surrounding us.

Joana Hadjithomas: Beirut had just come out of civil wars. As for the art scene, there were some galleries in the 1970s that had very courageously stayed open during the war, but these were oriented more towards modern art and painting. We didn't have spaces where we could show our work. The market was non-existent and there were no structures for contemporary practices. Our work developed in parallel spheres that constantly had to be invented. The main consequence of this was that it allowed us to find our own forms and ways and means of representation.

CP: Since we did the Beirut issue of *Parachute* in 2002 there has been a remarkable increase in the international attention given to art in the Middle East.¹ It seems that Beirut attracted attention first. Why would this be in your opinion?

‘During the war, every militia had its own media station, television, newspaper or radio. There was a real war of images. Audiences or publics had to learn to deal with these images.’

KJ: Everyone had heard about Beirut, and it was firmly in the global imagination. Perhaps people wondered about the kind of situation you have to deal with in the aftermath. During the war, every militia had its own media station, television, newspaper or radio. There was a real war of images. Audiences or publics had to learn to deal with these images. We as artists became critical about the use of images. Perhaps interest in art

coming from Beirut was due to this sophisticated relationship to images.

JH: People from the art world were attracted to what was happening in Beirut because the works being produced there were interesting thematically and formally had their own singularity. It was not really about nationality, or about being Lebanese artists. It was what we were proposing, what we were searching for and how we were dealing with questions of memory, traces and history. It was also the result of a convergence of research by artists from very different backgrounds who were developing common questions without knowing each other. The situation of the local and regional scene also led to the founding of new initiatives such as the Ayloul festival and Ashkal Alwan.² All of this created a sense of emulation. Together with the increasing interest of curators, the work of some galleries and the new artistic endeavours in the UAE, a market developed all over the region.

CP: Do you think that the criticality you developed has something to do with postcolonial issues, the fact that the French, the British and the Americans educated you?

KJ: For our generation of artists, this is obvious. Edward Saïd's lectures were important to us at the time; we realised that we were not just working on defining an identity for ourselves, but that we also had to look at the way others saw us.

JH: We were not just following what was developing in postcolonial studies; we were also very critical of them. We garnered attention because we tried to invent something that was linked to our situation and not to theory. We were not interested in positioning ourselves as victims. Our work was more about questioning history and defining a position and a singularity in a communitarian society.

KJ: One of the main changes in the last fifteen years is that when we started, we were trying to invent a position for ourselves as artists; we were neither with this, nor with that. We were fighting against dominance – the monopolies held by local powers, inherited from the militias – and their relationship to economic life. We were face-to-face with this neoliberal logic and had to think about mourning, for example, or the latency of things that are present even if they have become invisible.

CP: In London, Tate only started to seriously collect works from South America and the Middle East in 2002, and from India in the last couple of years, successively setting up purchasing committees for each region. In Paris, The Centre Pompidou initiated a comprehensive globalisation and research programme in 2010. When we look back, the 2000s will be considered the time that large central European institutions started enlarging their field of investigation for their collections. How do you explain that interest and what might the effect be?

‘It’s not only an interest in art, but also a general interest in the region. Europe is not in good shape economically while, on the other hand, markets in Latin America,

JH: The process doesn't just give you legitimisation, but brings your work to new places and publics. This is good, though you have to be very careful not to be recuperated.

KJ: There were very few local critics or art experts

India, China, the Arab world, Turkey, are developing.’

public spaces. Likewise, Western museums needed to look to this region because they have an obligation to research to justify their international status and expertise.

JH: It’s not only an interest in art, but also a general interest in the region. Europe is not in good shape economically while, on the other hand, markets in Latin America, India, China, the Arab world and Turkey are developing.

CP: What happens when this is the case?

JH: Making objects.

KJ: Products.

JH: I think that when you think about recuperation, suddenly you think in a different way. You are haunted by it. You ask yourself questions such as: can my work travel? Can my work sell? What is the right format for the work?

KJ : We don’t think of our work in this way, because even if we work from a very local perspective, we don’t consider it to be nationalistic or geographic. The links we have woven with curators, writers and collectors are often conceptual links or themes or strong artistic views. We share what we call the territory of art and cinema; these biennials, festivals, exhibitions in the world where our works interact with others in their formal policies and research, sometimes more than with other artists of the region. We talk about territory instead of nationality.

JH: Our case is also specific. While the art world has long regarded us as film-makers and the film world sees us as artists, we consider ourselves 'researchers'. And we like to blur the frontiers or the boundaries of marked spaces, invading territories where we are not expected.

CP: How could museums be developed in the region that could be different from the traditional models in Europe or America? Would you say that in your region fairs are more important at this point than museums for artists to show or legitimise work?

KJ: What do we mean by 'museum'? A public space? The mission of a museum today should be to present work to an audience in a public space, to give access to works and also to a context. To build meaning, knowledge and a place for experimentation. It should not be a place for financial speculation.

JH: It's interesting to think not only about how you can redefine the notion of a museum in this region, but also about how the presence of a museum can re-create the public sphere. When we started working in Lebanon, there were no public spaces. We were opening new places and they were interesting times. We try to remain linked to this spirit.

CP: What new institutions exist at this point? What are their main focus points?

JH: In Lebanon, we still don't have a museum of modern or contemporary art. There are more foundations today in the region because that's what private collectors are interested in setting up. Without state support, you are bound to create something very new. However, the situation gives power to just a few people who can decide what art is acceptable or not. These people are creating institutions and biennials for showing artwork, but this investment could stop and it could all come to a halt. Limits also exist because of the way society is structured. Institutions are not responding to the wider society or evolving at the same speed. If serious differences arise such as those over censorship or other restrictions, some institutions will simply have to close down.



Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Je Veux Voir (I Want to See), 2008, 35mm film, colour, sound, 75min, still. Courtesy the artists; CRG Gallery, New York; In Situ, Paris; and The Third Line, Dubai. Pictured: Rabih Mroué and Catherine Deneuve

CP: How do you perceive the meta-narratives of modernism or postmodernism in the social fabric of the Middle East? Is there such a perception, and how does it differ from that of the West, since you have experienced both intimately, sharing your time between Beirut and Paris?

KJ: The creation of an institution is also the creation of a certain history. It's bizarre because we started

with little consciousness of any history of art in the region. Today we are starting to build bridges with this older generation. We now are in need of history.

CP: Do you think that the West creates this history?

KJ: I would say it's not a question of West or East or North or South. I would rather think making history is about influence. Let's say that a collector loves this artist and devotes a whole museum to him. The artist might appear important but what will the true influence of this artist be in time, on other generations?

JH: There was a moment when an opinion coming from the West on any artist was very important. Now it's changing. We see this happening in the case of our own work. We now produce more work in the Arab world with Arab money than before. It's an alternative. When several sources of funding are possible, it guarantees a greater autonomy of the artistic and film projects.

CP: A self-valuation of the region by the region... How does *The Lebanese Rocket Society* project deal with the impact of modernism and ideas of utopia?

JH: This project explores the space race between 1960 and '67, at the time of revolutions and Pan-Arabism. In fact, the project was not only Lebanese in spirit. The scientists involved were from Armenia, Iraq, Jordan, Jerusalem, Palestine, Syria... people from all over the region joining together to create a rocket. We were interested in how we re-imagine these years now, how we fantasise about this time and how space research made us see ourselves as part of the rest of the world. One of the scientists in the film says that they were attentive to the development of technology all over the world at that point. They felt contemporary. At that period, it seems people were looking for an international revolution rather than being only concerned about problems in individual countries. Of course this idea of being contemporary is at the centre of our research in the film.

KJ: In the films *Je veux voir* and *The Lebanese Rocket Society* we wanted to redefine the notion of territory as related to time rather than geography. Territory is not about sharing the same place but more about sharing the same time.

CP: The same zeitgeist...

KJ: Zeitgeist, if you want. This is the meaning of 'contemporary'... a common time. How does this relate to modernity? We can re-read the past, but how can we reactivate it in the present? This is something very important to *The Lebanese Rocket Society* project. Not just considering the past because of nostalgia, but also looking at where we are today.

JH: What interested us in *The Lebanese Rocket Society* project was this idea of a territory in science, a territory of political ideas and political ideology. What we have been trying to do for years is to find a shared territory that is outside of geography – one we can attempt to invent or reinvent via the art world. You can see this territory as utopian. In a certain way, it's reinventing something that is not what traditionally interests the West about our region. It's about ideas, about concepts. It's about a reflection on art we can share.

KJ: This is why it is *not* a utopia. A utopia is usually a non-place. As artists, we are negotiating with reality. For example, when, in our last film, we build a rocket and we take it into the streets of Beirut, there is a negotiation with reality. There is always a possibility that a clash between what we envisage and the actual conditions. This performance we put on can fail because reality can override the performance or just ignore it.

JH: Art in the region is negotiating with reality all the time. And this is why it's interesting. This is why we constantly pay attention to how things develop in Doha, Abu Dhabi, Sharjah, Beirut or Cairo.

CP: In the film *Je veux voir* you brought Catherine Deneuve to Lebanon in an attempt to understand a

Westerner's perspective or gaze on the situation. Can you describe this particular gaze and what you were aiming at when you made this film?

JH: In *Je veux voir* we worked on the idea that the 2006 war represents a schism. At the time we were outside the country. We saw and lived this war out through images on television, blogs and the internet. These incredibly spectacular images ended up being, in a way, powerless. It was a very strange moment. We really felt this was a time of rupture in our history, not only in the history of our country, but also in our history as artists in the region. It's like what Hannah Arendt said about the uncertain future, you *know* that there is no certainty in it. We decided to deal with this by confronting someone from our history as Lebanese film-makers and artists, with someone outside of it, bringing together the artist and actor Rabih Mroué, with whom we have worked with a lot, and Catherine Deneuve, the French film icon. In this way we are attempting to experiment with new strategies for film-making in the aftermath of the 2006 war.

KJ: Traditionally when television shows victims of war, you can't really identify with them because the images are designed to distance you. You sympathise but don't identify. By bringing someone who is familiar in the Western history of cinema and someone from our world together, we wanted to see if through this encounter we could regain our face, our images, our identity, our names. And not play the role of the faraway victim, but create something that could engage the spectator. The idea was to displace the gaze and to question it. Paradoxically, the film is called *I Want to See*, but explores what you don't see, or haven't seen.

JH: The film works by constantly making you question what you're seeing and what you're not seeing. The film is about the way images are used in reporting conflict today and what this does to you, the spectator. Our big fear is always that, in the use of images, the use of art, the use of intellect, everything can be co-opted or instrumentalised, in order to make the individual into less of a thinking person, less of a subject, depoliticised, accepting reality in a lesser way.

CP: Your previous film *A Perfect Day* dealt with latency – the notion of a hidden past. A young man who suffers from apnea, a condition where his breathing intermittently stops, addresses the fact of his disappeared father, not yet pronounced dead, and deals with an infatuation with a woman who ignores him. There is a constant feeling of things unresolved in the film. If the situation in Lebanon is not changing from a sociopolitical perspective, is it changing from the art world's perception of itself?

KJ: Things are always changing. When we talk about latency, the question is under which conditions can something be revealed? In a film like *A Perfect Day*, we offered a sense of the complexity of certain situations, how things are layered, how you can still feel the presence of absence, a missing body, missing images. The 2006 war changed something deeply in our practice. It ended the project on latent images. We felt our own territory as artists was shrinking and that we needed to produce new images again.



Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, A Perfect Day, 2005, 35mm film, colour, sound, 88min, still. Courtesy the artists; CRG Gallery, New York; In Situ, Paris; and The Third Line, Dubai

JH: To access visibility.

KJ: We aim at mapping out a territory in which we can be recognised. In this sense, something is changing. These changes are not just on an aesthetic or even social level. They are much more important. At the same time, it's thinking about our condition that allows us to be recognised for what we want to be recognised for.

JH: The issue also applies to museums... the question should not be just about what museums are going to do but rather how to take into consideration the kind of work we do and the fact that it doesn't always fit in with existing museum protocols. We must redefine museum practices and objectives in this region overall. Immaterial culture and practices and other kinds of traditions need to be recognised.

KJ: The other issue is for whom and why do we show art? If you imagine what might happen within thirty years: society, universities, other institutions are bound to change. A revolutionary energy, from Egypt to Brazil to Turkey, is demanding change now. It's not just about gaining a perspective on the future. It's more than this. It's about shifting the gaze.

Footnotes

1. The 'Beirut' issue of *PARACHUTE* (ed. Chantal Pontbriand, n° 108, Oct/Nov/Dec 2002) included contributions by Dina Al-Kassim, George Azar and the Arab Image Foundation, Gilbert Boyer, Tony Chakar, Mona Hatoum/Richard Noble, Bilal Khbeiz, L.E.F.T. and Amale Andraos, Rabih Mroué, Walid Raad/Sarah Rogers, Walid Sadek, Jayce Salloum/Michael Allan, Hashim Sarkis, Stephen Wright, Paola Yacoub and Michel Lasserre, Mahmoud Hojeij, Mohamed Soueid and Akram Zaatari. In the

same year Catherine David edited the first edition of *Tamáss* with contributions by The Atlas Group, Tony Chakar, Bilal Khbeiz, Elias Khoury, Saree Makdisi, Rabih Mroué, Paola Yacoub and Michel Lasserre, Walid Raad, Marwan Rechmaoui, Walid Sadek, Jalal Toufic, as part of her ongoing project 'Contemporary Arab Representations' (*Tamáss 1: Contemporary Arab Representations: Beirut/Lebanon*, ed. Catherine David, Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 2002). ↑

2. The Ayoul festival was initiated in Beirut in the 1990s under the leadership of Pascale Feghali and Elias Khoury and contributed to introducing Lebanese artists to the world and contemporary artists from elsewhere to Lebanon. Ashkal Alwan, The Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts, was founded by Christine Tohme in 1995 in order to facilitate the production and circulation of artistic endeavors in Lebanon and abroad. It has developed several programmes including the Home Works Forum on Cultural Practices (a recurrent international festival), publications, residencies, the Video Works production and screening program and Home Workspace, dedicated to education and production. See <http://ashkalalwan.org> ↑

Comments
