



**JOANA HADJITHOMAS
KHALIL JOREIGE
SHEIKHA HOOR AL-QASIMI**

The unique practice of Joana Hadjithomas et Khalil Joreige lies at the cross between fine art and film. The couple like to define themselves as “art activists” in reference to their approach both to form and to their identification with Lebanon – a country which provides fertile ground for their research. Fifteen years ago, in order to counter images of the civil wars in which they did not recognize themselves, they developed their own work at the intersection between documentary and fiction, installation and photography, without sparing a thought for the market. Their aim was to question our connection to images and to explore a new way of writing history. Their last film, *The Lebanese Rocket Society* tells the story of the utopian space race of '60s Lebanon. Through their conversation with the Sheikha Hoor Al-Kasimi, head of the Sharjah Art Foundation and the Sharjah Biennale (the only one in the Emirates), we will discover how the Sheikha's interest for their work goes well beyond a mere matter of taste or financial investment. This three way conversation reflects a shared inquiry into boundaries and identity.

JOANA HADJITHOMAS & KHALIL JOREIGE SHEIKHA HOOR AL-QASIMI BY MAIL

You grew up in a period when Lebanon was in a state of war. You began your artistic work at the end of the '90s. How would you describe the Lebanese art scene at the time?

Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige: We began to photograph and film in Beirut, in the early '90s, when peace was officially declared after more than fifteen years of war. We had an urge to produce, with no thought of making a career of it. In fact, we did not undertake art or cinema studies, but majored in literature and philosophy.

There was a specific situation: the innumerable terrible images of war, and the impossibility of recognizing ourselves in the images of present times prodded us into producing other images, ours. Making films, photos, narrating stories, but what stories are to be written when the thread of History is broken, when History is so difficult to describe in the aftermath of civil wars with no official winner?

Our artistic course obviously raised the question of the representation of the trace, the invisible, the memory of History and also of the stakes involved in images and documents.

The artistic scene at the time was peculiar and contradictory: on the one hand, there were no structures interested in contemporary practices, most art galleries showed modern artists and more traditional media (painting and sculpture). On the other hand, a very strong creative energy developed in parallel and informal areas: the first structures appeared with the *Ayloul* festival directed by Pascale Feghali and Elias Khoury, as well as in the exhibitions of *Ashkal Alwan*¹ created by Christine Tohmé which now and then occupied public areas.

Along with some of the artists of our generation who shared our interest in the same problematics and questions, we began thinking about our practice and our relation to politics. The local situation also led us to invent new forms, new tools. With no available production structures or financing, with no art market, we had to occupy public space, to produce by resorting to a parallel, yet coher-

1. www.ashkalalwan.org

ent, system and to transform constraint into liberty. We enjoyed freedom as to format, protocols and methods. We invented our own situations and modes of representation. Today, although things have evolved, we both insist in keeping all that at the heart of our work: creating situations, keeping away from preset formats, blurring frontiers and living our singularity... This also helped us finding our rhythm and our territory, working on a reality within a strong context, in Lebanon, while having a dialogue with the rest of the world.

Because quite soon, our works as well as those of artists of our generation began to travel.

Were you from the outset helped by collectors or sponsors ?

J. H. & K. J.: Not really, for years we had no gallery. We worked and exhibited our work in alternative networks. It is only during the *Mois de la Photo* held in Beirut in 1998 that we exhibited them in gallery conditions. Within this framework we showed, for the first time, our project *Wonder Beirut* at the Janine Rebeiz gallery. We produced *Wonder Beirut* for that exhibition. The photos met with great success and the gallery sold many of them. So we were surprised because, at the time, our practice was more that of researchers and of what could be termed “art activists”. We did field work in Lebanon to question the reality we lived in, and to create new situations. Our artistic research was closely linked to that.

We were therefore highly surprised to be able to sell work.

You soon worked on an international scale, exhibiting in Europe then in the United States. What were your first memorable experiences in the art field in Europe? How did the public and the collectors consider your first works?

J. H. & K. J.: Our first international exhibition was a large one held in 1997 at the IMA (Institut du Monde Arabe), in Paris². It was a scripted scenography built around photos of the Beirut city center and around the evolution of our relation to ruin, a kind of an archeology of our gaze. The exhibition was highly successful with the public and the critics. A book of the exhibition was published and sold out. This exhibition was an essential starting point for us. But at the time, we had not yet considered selling to institutions and collectors. True, Lebanon was the center of our research, where we taught, worked, exchanged ideas and produced, especially to show our work in the city and to question society; yet travelling was essential to us. The specific aspects, the protocols and practices we developed in a very localized manner questioned other experiences, other places, other possibilities outside Lebanon. We also had to propose very per-

2. *Beirut: Urban Fictions*,
at the Institut du Monde Arabe,
1997, Paris.



Wonder Beirut.

sonal things, to interrogate the image itself and its making, to “displace” the way we look at a very complex reality.

Did you meet collectors from the outset, and did they play an important role? Do you have privileged relations with some of them?

J. H. & K. J.: After the 1998 exhibition, we practically never showed our work in a gallery. We met our first collectors only in 2006. We began working with the In Situ Gallery of Fabienne Leclerc³ who showed at the time an exhibition called *Ah, les belles images !* curated by H el ene Chouteau. The first person who bought a collection of work was Claude Berri. We thought of him as our first assiduous collector. Then close ties were established with people whose passion for art monopolized their attention and guided their way of life. There was no longer a question of taste or of investment, but rather a need to share. There are also more modest collectors we respect a lot, who use all their savings to buy one work with which they want to live.

With some collectors, you can speak of an encounter, because something happens in reality which surprises us, which enriches our research, our expectations.

What is mainly their nationality?

J. H. & K. J.: Overcoming the notion of nationality is most important to us. We often refused to take part in exhibitions which selected artists by nationality or area, because we wanted to underline the singular aspect of art. Moreover, we consider that art goes beyond geography to question temporality, contemporaneity. The relations we establish with some artists, writers, curators and collectors are often of a conceptual and thematic nature, we share what we call the territory of art and cinema.

However, if we were to establish statistics, there would naturally be a great number of Lebanese and Arabs. Our main collectors have set up foundations in Lebanon and abroad. But we also have many European or American collectors.

We are also careful about the way our work is sold. Our galleries themselves approve certain principles which are necessary to us since the works often deal with delicate political subjects. For example, we do not sell important work or series to collectors of a same region. We do our utmost to ensure our work is distributed geographically and also between collectors, foundations which are semi private and semi public as well as institutions. The traceability of the works is important to us all the more since we are interested in the trace in our own works!

3. www.insituparis.fr

Therefore, with regards to the persons we know and who started recently collect-

ing works, we deem it important that they should really like a work in particular and not be motivated by the fact of investing in us as names, as artists. Liking a work and wanting to live with it is most significant in our opinion. We are very careful in this respect and at times refuse a sale if we consider it is not justified. This is an essential liberty of ours.

The Middle Eastern art scenes have expanded a lot in the last ten years. How would you define this increased visibility?

J. H. & K. J.: From the very beginning, we considered Beirut as a center. The autonomy of the works of some lebanese artists, their intellectual and formal sophistication, their singularity far more than their nationality, attracted an international audience. What is specific about the artistic practices in Lebanon is precisely that they related to a situation. Afterwards, through the development of public as well as of private structures in the region, artists obtained increased means and also more status and recognition.

Naturally, those opportunities led to the development of practices in all directions. The Emirates contributed in giving the region's artists a visibility on international markets because they attracted art experts, museums, institutions, international collectors and some from the region. They contributed, for better or worse, to the globalization of art. Beyond all the questions which may arise, there is one certainty: some of the countries of the region constitute nowadays an alternative to the European financing on which we totally relied for years. The existence of various sources of financing guarantees a larger autonomy for cinema and art projects.

For people like us who worked on the loopholes of history, anecdotes and latency, this excessive visibility must be managed while not forgetting research and questioning and, above all, avoiding to sink into regionalism. This explains why some Lebanese artists (and we too) find it difficult to participate in global type exhibitions such as "Art from the Middle East"... It has nothing to do with snobbery, in our case at least, it's just not our way of being. True, we know that in some places or countries, these large categories create visibility and lead people to discover territories unknown to them. The choice is made case by case. We are definitely against generalizations, definitions, formatting and stereotypes... There lie our strength and our weakness and we claim them both...

For this exchange, you suggested a conversation with Sheikha Hoor Al-Qasimi,

director of the Sharjah Art Foundation and of the Biennial⁴...

J. H. & K. J.: When you invited us to this conversation, we thought of asking Hoor to join us, because of the work she is doing in the foundation she presides.

We believed it would be interesting to go beyond the traditional categories, i.e. institution v/s collector, private v/s public. In fact, the very special status of a structure such as the Sharjah Art Foundation, the joining of public and private space, of the interests of one person and of those of art, demonstrate the complexity of what is taking place in the region and the transformations of art. Hoor Al Qasimi is not a traditional collector, the work she undertakes with her foundation, which consists in collecting work but also producing them, is most special and interesting in our opinion. We believe that in the last years, the biennial succeeded in bringing to light scenes and presentation mechanisms, in developing laboratories of ideas and in attempting not to adapt but rather to experiment, drawing on local and foreign expertise. The biennial's work is in parallel with the market's development. We are curious to know how it will go on developing and inventing permanently its own instruments. Sheikha Hoor is also a board member of *Homeworkspace*, the school created by Christine Tohmé and *Ashkal Alwan*, in which we joined the founding educational board, the curricular committee. We share the need to ensure transmission in the region. Moreover, we have a strong tie with her due to the crazy adventure consisting in the reconstruction of the *Cedar 4* rocket (eight meters in length and weighing about a metric ton) and the circulation of the rocket, which are at the heart of the film and art project of *The Lebanese Rocket Society*. The Sharjah Biennial invited us to submit an artistic project while we were immersed in the shooting of the film. This gave us the possibility of making a sculpture representing the rocket and offering it to the university where the project was born. The sculpture was exhibited at the biennial, opposite the museum, and remained there for months. But getting the sculpture out of Beirut and conveying it to the Emirates was hectic! Try explaining to a customs officer why two Lebanese artists want to send to Sharjah a rocket that is very similar to a missile... It was so complicated that the Sharjah team, inspired by Tintin's famous album, made posters with a large caption "OBJECTIVE SHARJAH". It was a real adventure.

Sheikha Hoor Al-Qasimi: how did you first become interested in contemporary art?

S.H. A.-Q.: I have always been interested in art and architecture, as children my father would take us to museums and galleries when we travelled. I also grew up with cultural events in Sharjah including the biennial which started in 1993.

4. www.sharjahart.org

There was a lot of things happening in Sharjah, in the '80s in term of cultures,

there was so much. I travelled and studied painting at the Slade School of Fine Art and then went to the Royal Academy of Arts for a year before continuing my MA in Curating Contemporary Art at the Royal College of Art in London. I wasn't planning to work at the biennial, I was studying and was between my BA and MA, but when I visited *Documenta XI*⁵, I wanted to know why our biennial wasn't more like that, I went back and observed the process, I wanted to change it from something that looked more like an art fair and turn it into something more engaging, more site specific and take it out of an expo centre and into the city. And with time, we wanted to commission artists to work on the history of Sharjah, the layers of history that at the biennial we can try to shed light on. As a new country that has developed so quickly, people don't think about our culture, who makes up our audience etc... I always question our region, are we just Arab, Gulf, or also Asian...? In a way, we are using the Biennial as a tool to investigate Sharjah or maybe to dissect the city.

Sharjah Biennial is the only biennial in the Arab Emirates and internationally recognised. Can you describe the steps leading up to the biennial's creation?

S. H. A.-Q.: The Biennial started in 1993 as an initiative of the Department of Culture and Information, Government of Sharjah. It followed the footsteps of the Cairo Biennial which in turn was looking at the Venice model.

What led to the creation of your foundation?

S. H. A.-Q.: When I got involved in Sharjah Biennial 6 in 2002, we commissioned our first film by Rashid Masharawi and in 2005, between Sharjah Biennial 6 and 7, we hosted our first Artists in Residence who were Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen and Naoko Takahashi. We also started publishing books and organising the March Meetings every year. We needed to work on these projects all year round and the biennial changes at every session and has a different identity depending on its theme and curator, so it made sense for us to form an umbrella organisation to hold all these activities together which now include an educational programme and other public programmes and events.

For you, what is the role of an institution as a collector ?

S. H. A.-Q.: When you collect there is always an element of support to artists, but what makes collecting for an institution different from a private collector is that the work belongs to the public, you think of the audience and the way they have done or would engage with the work and it's relationship to the city rather than

5. *Documenta XI*, june-september 2002, curator: Okwui Enwezor



Faces.

your personal interests as a collector.

A lot of artists in the Middle East don't want to rely on galleries, or on private collectors to help them produce their work, or on auctions. They want to produce their work without thinking of the commercial side or the market and that's why we try to help artists produce work and not necessarily through collecting.

J. H.: I have a feeling that the production is lacking everywhere. Lately, we produced two or three works with the support of the region

S. H. A.-Q.: People are interested in the Gulf especially for this kind of support. But you have the other side, the commercial galleries and auction houses that also could be hindering younger artists that are not very developed in their work and fall into this gap.

J. H.: It is the problem of being very quickly pushed on the market.

K. J.: Your institution is ruled in some ways that are very different from a traditional institution.

S. H. A.-Q.: We don't have a board like others museums where there are certain limitations on what you can do or can't do, and I like this. Because at the end of the day, you know what the institution stands for and your responsibility to the public. My background is that of an artist and I don't see the separation between institution and artist, whatever we're doing in Sharjah we're learning from new situations. Things go well we move on, things don't go well, we still move on. We always try and experiment, I can never say what our plans are, I don't have long term plans for the foundation per say. We're just working on our exhibitions, on education programs, experiment and see what happens.

Joana and Khalil are political artists, engaged. Are you being careful with political arts ?

S. H. A.-Q.: Politics are in the news all the time, people are discussing it at home and in public. If it is in the media why can't we discuss it in the arts? It's very important to engage with people on important political and social subjects.

Does the fact that Khalil and Joana produce works at the boundaries between film and the visual arts lead to different production stakes?

S. H. A.-Q.: I discovered the work of Joana and Khalil in 2008 when we were preparing for Sharjah Biennial 9, curated by Isabel Carlos and Tarek Abou El Fetouh. Joana and Khalil presented their work *Faces*: photographs of posters of martyrs which have deteriorated over time and are hardly recognizable. Joana and Khalil's work *The Lebanese Rocket Society* was then presented as part of Sharjah

Biennial 10, curated by Suzanne Cotter and Rasha Salti in association with Haig Aivazian. And now their film, I have followed their research and their work which has been presented in different mediums. Producing a film is of course different to producing an art work and the results vary through distribution and screening films in festivals, whereas producing an art work results in a limited edition or a unique piece. SAF is interested in supporting artists, filmmakers and musicians, this diversity is exciting and creates a range of possibilities which help us broaden our audiences and reach out to different parts of the local community and audience abroad.

Your latest feature film, *The Lebanese Rocket Society*, has been released. Moreover, you had two exhibitions, one at the In Situ gallery in Paris, the other at the CRG gallery in New York, and they bore the same title as the film. The same project therefore relates to plastic arts as well as to cinema as we mentioned before, it is based on those two economies. How did the project develop with two different grammars and economic systems? With such a type of project, are your relations with collectors of a different order?

J. H. & K. J.: Art to us is a life project. We are interested in the present and, more literally, in what happens to us, the encounters we have, what we live through. Our art and cinema works are closely linked in form and themes. They express what inhabits us at the same time. One object of research may take different shapes and the links between cinema and art developed organically. Cinema and art have two very different temporalities and it is always difficult but challenging to create bridges and links between our two practices. A film such as *Je Veux Voir* or *The Lebanese Rocket Society* film are symbolic of this attempt. The project of *The Lebanese Rocket Society* was especially interesting because, for the first time, in our work, art works linked to the project appeared in the film. We consider ourselves as researchers. While for a long time the art world considered us as film makers and the cinema world as visual artists, we enjoy reflecting on this territory and this singular position, and considering that art and cinema are areas open to all possibilities.

S. H. A.-Q.: It was important to have this rocket in our collection because it reflects an unknown history, and is a very interesting project. When my father saw it at the opening of the biennial he knew about it and a lot of his generation were aware of this history, but it is a part of our history that our generation doesn't know about. I also liked the way people were interacting with the rocket, it looked like a static rocket but it is not, it became a meeting point and children would park their bikes next to it. We would see people of all ages and nationalities

meeting there, sitting under it and discussing various topics of the day. People ask questions about the rocket and make their own associations. I could see the rocket from our offices and used to take a picture nearly every day of the public engaging with it.





The Lebanese Rocket Society.