

**José Miguel G. Cortés and Marta Gili in Conversation
with Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige**

Marta Gili The show *Two Suns in a Sunset / Se souvenir de la lumière* was conceived as several distinct yet related 'chapters'. Could you talk about the main lines running through the exhibition, which constitute so many potential modes of projection within the visual corpus explored in your works?

Joana Hadjithomas For us, this show reflects not only the need to rethink the power of images, but also to revisit the way images are manufactured and displayed. During our discussions with the curators, the exhibition cohered fairly naturally not in a chronological or retrospective manner, but rather as a journey through our imagery in five acts, five ways of experimenting with representation, of forcing shifts in perception. And raising five questions. To what extent are pictures affected by violence and war? How can invisibility be given body through the latency and remanence of images? How can pictures force a shift or displacement of eye and mind? How do 'virtual' images from the Internet turn into what we call the 'rumours' of the world? Finally, how can poetry combat the chaos of today's world? The show immerses the beholder in all the paths we've followed – the experiments we've carried out – in various situations from the 1990s to the present.

Gili Your approach is emblematic of the artist as experimental researcher. Is the desire to make or develop experiments, observing them and then conveying them, still as structuring and operative today?

Khalil Joreige We sometimes feel we're digging, like researchers, into a given place, history or situation. Things pop up, encounters happen, and so, letting ourselves be

guided by these chance occurrences, our work sometimes takes multifarious forms and directions – video, installation, photography, text, performance and films that may be short or feature-length, fiction or documentary. Every exploration is a long-term affair, which thereby generates evolving 'series' or 'corpora' that incorporate works which are often very different in nature.

Hadjithomas We're filmmakers as much as artists. The two practices are each based on a certain relationship to time, and they mutually influence each other. We try to use the tools of one to rethink the other, to establish bridges between them, in order to interrogate our imagery, our representations, our stories. We're self-taught when it comes to art and movies, which is why we're less oppressed by the weight of definitions, categories and genres. It's the given situation that will dictate the need to work with this or that medium.

José Miguel G. Cortés I'm very interested in the question of knowing how an image can prove essential either to its era or for just a brief moment. That's the question you raise with *Postcards of War* (1997–2006), the first part of *Wonder Beirut* (1997–2006), by burning postcards of the city that predate the war – a time when 'everything was fine'. Times of war and times of peace don't produce the same pictures.

Hadjithomas That's a recurring issue in our work, and it's at the heart of this show. Every time, we have to ask ourselves what images we need to make and to share. For that same reason we've decided, on several occasions, to remove pictures from circulation. For ten years we created images which we didn't develop, but which we tried to describe or evoke – for example, with the project *Latent Images* (1997–2006) and, in a different way, with *Khiam* (2000). In *Wonder Beirut*, burning the pictures doesn't represent an act of iconoclasm or a desire to destroy them. We were forcing idealised images to confront the picture today. Producing *Postcards of War* was a way of rejecting the tendency to compartmentalise the war, a way of fending off nostalgia.

Joreige We try to resituate images in their context, developing the means to render them simultaneously political and poetic. When Lebanon's civil war came to an end in the late 1990s, Beirut was in ruins. And we became aware of the imminent disappearance of these ruins, because

reconstruction of the city began very quickly. That's what initially prompted us to take photos of them. But the situation steadily led us to question, instead, the chaotic nature of the building, the chaos provoked by massive destruction. Sometimes we no longer recognised the area around us – we were confronted with a loss of landmarks. With works like *Bestiaries* and *Equivalences* (both part of *Archaeology of Our Gaze* [1997]), *The Circle of Confusion* (1997) and *Postcards of War*, we were not trying to record traces of conflict so much as to show how the picture is profoundly 'affected' and transformed by violence and war, even when traces of that violence have been eliminated. These are all issues raised by the first part of the exhibition.



Gili Your work expresses a desire to circumvent persistent oblivion, an amnesiac relationship to history. Is that ultimately the root of your artistic commitment? To act upon your own history, on your country's past and present?

Joreige In the 1990s, we wanted above all to question the situation around us. The trigger was a feeling that this propensity for amnesia was hindering the possibility of living together in the present. We're part of a generation of artists who decided to recount the narrative that people no longer wanted to hear. I don't know if, as an artist, you can act upon society or history, but we felt it was very important to reflect upon that history, on its depictions and imaginative constructs, on its visible and invisible traces.

Hadjithomas As an extension of those concerns, the second part of the show compares various strategies for revealing and developing images, visibility and invisibility through installations based on the principle of latency, of remanence, of images that refuse to fade. Of pictures that come back to haunt us.

Gili And for that matter, beyond the images themselves, isn't our experience of war itself subject to that latency? Those conflicts are not, in theory, put on show, but they nevertheless take place within a general awareness.

Joreige It's a political condition that exists in a subdued, subterranean way, a condition that is more sensed than perceived. A presence whose conditions of visibility may become operative at any moment.

Cortés The latency is closely linked, in particular, to the writing of history, to the way we imagine and picture our history, the way we deal with it. By rethinking your statement that 'Beirut does not exist', we come to understand that your works problematise the notion of identity.

Hadjithomas *The Circle of Confusion* is an aerial picture of Beirut cut into three thousand numbered pieces, on each of which is written 'Beirut does not exist'. Beirut is constantly being defined, is endlessly being redefined. I think our relationship to identity has always been a very distanced one – from the fringe, as though we lived in a kind of shifting definition of identities.

Cortés Don't you think that this need – or refusal – to define, to deal with identity, is closely linked to the specific time frame of your films, whose plots take place in a single day?

Gili There's an urgency to the identity.

Joreige The difficulty of writing and sharing history, like these issues of temporal perspective, is at the heart of our explorations. Sometimes we feel we've been trapped in the urgency of the present. That explains the decision in several of our films, in fact, to work with the unit of time provided by a single day, as in *Ashes* (2003), *A Perfect Day* (2005) and *Je veux voir* (2008), for example. But certain films and installations are developed over two stages – we go back over them and make a second part, as for instance with *Khiam 2000–2007* (2008), which entails a reflection on the way history is rewritten by the victors. Our explorations initially focused on current history, although, more recently, we've gone back to the 1960s with *The Lebanese Rocket Society* (2011–13), a story about the space race in Lebanon, and with *ISMYRNA* (2016), a film set in the completely different period, that of Joana's grandparents, during the Ottoman Empire.

Gili Your entire oeuvre is nourished on the tensions involved in writing the past, a past that becomes unpredictable, taking unexpected forms, in the absence of any conclusions. Can such effects be reinterpreted in light of your experiences with archives?

Joreige We've always been very wary of a kind of nostalgic, passé view of things. Archives are never complete, they're always fragmentary. We're involved in replaying events, tracing the thread of history, questioning the reason why we no longer know how to read these archives or gather these documents. Our approach also has a performative aspect. We have to recover the power of original documents in order to believe in them, we have to succeed in grasping them as though we're seeing them for the first time. For us, the stakes do not involve an attempt to fill the gap and the breaches left by the catastrophes of history – those breaks with the past – but rather to express the difficulty of reconciling these various time frames and projecting ourselves into a future.

Hadjithomas There's often a confusion between history and memory. Whereas some artists base their practices

on notions of trauma and memory, we have always placed ours on the side of the active depiction of the present. We're interested in what Etel Adnan calls 'the eternal present'. Archives and pictures of the past are used in our work only in order to reflect on the present – beginning with difficulty of living the present in Lebanon.

Joreige The third part of the show notably addresses this aspect. It shifts our view of imaginative constructs and representations, such as Lebanon's space program, a utopia which really existed but which has sunk into oblivion, probably due to a phenomenon of discrepancy – it's as though the image we have of ourselves doesn't allow us to recall those days of scientific glory when everything still seemed possible. And maybe also because the imaginative faculty of the entire region has been profoundly altered, so that *rocket* now suggests warheads rather than space exploration.

Hadjithomas In that project, work on the archives – on their absence, lack of indexes and hence on the difficulty of writing a history of that forgotten saga – prompted us to think about the notion of reconstitution. This idea was to move towards materiality, to impart physicality to the vacant imagination of those rockets from a different era (via a sculpture identical to a Cedar IV rocket), towards a restaging or replaying (the images of *Restaged* [2012] and *Dust in the Wind* [2013]). It was a way of respecting the archives while at the same time undermining their excessive authority, the weight of the past and the charm of the photographic process. This approach, far from seeking to match the original, reflected a desire to avoid the pitfall of fetishising the image, to undertake a reconquest of the imaginative.

Cortés We should consequently stress that your interest is not so much in history with a capital H as with personal, everyday stories. From microhistories to micropolitics, you seek paths that run transversely but also converge. In the end, you never address macropolitical issues, and I think it's these micropolitical issues that lend a poetic feel to your work. When you talk to people about personal stories, they are touched, feel more concerned.

Joreige That's why we think the realm of art and film is not a geographical one, but extends much further. It's a whole new continent, as Godard said. As filmmakers, we've always

stressed the 'anecdotal', which is etymologically related to stories kept secret, outside official history. The tales, narratives and images that strike us are the ones in which we can believe, in which we can recognise ourselves, which we try to transform in political and poetic ways.

Hadjithomas So the fourth part of our show hinges on these secret stories, as well as on so-called virtual images circulating on the net. Our installations on Internet frauds – called scams – bring us back, precisely, to micropolitics. We collected over four thousands scams, because the stories they tell are interesting from several standpoints. They are rooted in recent political, economic and even environmental events. In this respect they constitute an alternative modern history; they are a chronicle, a map, of lands where scammers think they can make corruption plausible – thereby reshaping an imaginative construct of corruption and a strangely colonial vision of the world.

Gili In the end, it's also an opportunity to view works from earlier periods in light of your current work since, as you say, encounters and situations get recomposed over time. Could you explain what led you to each of your two new works, *ISMIRNA* and the video piece *Remembering the Light* (2016), which are featured in the fifth part of the exhibition?

Joreige We wanted to evoke a poetic response to the disturbed, violent times all around us. Also with the goal of testing a poetic way to make us see things differently.

Hadjithomas We had already done a video piece called *Waiting for the Barbarians* (2013), based on a poem by Constantine Cavafy. The poem is about anxiously awaiting the barbarians – who never arrive. And so the poet asks, 'And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians? / They were, those people, a kind of solution'. We felt this poem was relevant to the current day.

Joreige The images in that video piece were consistently reworked in various temporal frameworks: it is composed of still pictures, of photos, each of which was composed of nearly seventy different images, filmed in a slow pan and animated through video-keying techniques. The photo thus comes to life before our eyes. So there's a frozen time, suspended time, but also movement that cannot be

halted. Thus a tension between time, space and movement. When nature is disrupted by these differing temporal perspectives, suns become multiple on horizons themselves made multiple. Among other things, the English title of the show, *Two Suns in a Sunset*, refers to this video piece: chaos generates a doubling of suns, even as it offers new perspectives. A little like the 'breach' mentioned by Hannah Arendt, that moment of rupture when, caught between the past and an uncertain future, we have to invent ourselves amid all the uncertainty, chaos and darkness.

Gili It's like the scarf in *Remembering the Light*, whose French title, *Se souvenir de la lumière*, became the title of the Paris show. As the scarf falls in the water, it loses its colours – although it doesn't in fact lose them, it's all a question of perception.

Joreige *Remembering the Light* concerns the way colours change or vanish before our eyes, the deeper you go underwater. Below seven or ten metres, you no longer perceive red, followed by orange, yellow, green, blue and finally black. And if you turn on a light in the darkness, even after it has been turned off the plankton remember the light and continue to reflect it for a long time afterward.

Hadjithomas With the film *ISMYRNA*, we wanted to explore a city located, in a way, in our imagination: Izmir, formerly called Smyrna, was where my grandfather was born. But he and his family had to leave in 1922, forced out by the Turks. They lost everything. I'd never been to Izmir before, even though it made me what I am, in a way. I share this personal history with the poet and artist Etel Adnan, whose mother was a Greek from Izmir and whose father was Syrian, an officer in the Ottoman army. She was born in Beirut, and writes in English and French. Like Cavafy, Etel belongs to several places, several languages. A certain cosmopolitanism. Cavafy is considered one of the greatest Greek poets even though he spent his entire life in Alexandria. Etel and I have been friends for fifteen years, and we always talked about going to Izmir together. Then time went by, and now Etel can no longer travel by plane. So Khalil and I went to see Izmir and brought back images for her. Because we only had a blank imagination of the city, without images.

Joreige It's a film that also deals with heritage, passing on the things that made us what we are yet from which we can also

decide to free ourselves. What is to be done of our parents' sorrow, and how can we transform all of that in the present?

Hadjithomas Etel's mother, like my grandfather, was nostalgic for a place she couldn't go back to, whereas her father lost his whole world when the Ottoman Empire crumbled.

Joreige People don't talk much about the Ottoman Empire and its collapse even though that transition is crucial to issues in the region and, further, to what subsequently hardened into borders, into communitarianism and nationalism, to notions of belonging. Very contemporary issues.

Hadjithomas In a time of withdrawal into ethnic and communal identities, we feel it's important not to lock the work into standard, hardened identities. Many of our films and installations, like *Ashes* and *A Perfect Day*, question the way you live in a community or society while retaining your own singularity, the uniqueness of a political, thinking subject. ...

Joreige All our work tries to underscore singularities within the collective whole. That's why we're constantly negotiating with reality. Over time, the installations become places for negotiating reality. At first, and for a certain time, our approach involved revealing the complexity of certain situations, certain temporal perspectives – we worked a lot on the notion of symptoms. Then, seeing that our territory and the possibilities of existing in it were shrinking, we developed a more performative approach. We started using methods of recording or producing images that would trigger accidents enabling us to requestion the power of, and need for, images. It's a question of exploring what those singularities might produce in a specific context, what we call 'emanations of reality'.

Gili Do you see your *dispositif*, or setup, as an 'apparatus' in the sense that Giorgio Agamben used it – something that records, directs, determines, intercepts, shapes and controls?

Hadjithomas It's a question of putting a setup to the test, of situating it and seeing what happens. It's an action, a performance. This negotiation with reality no longer merely records symptoms, it makes it possible to confront them.

Joreige In *Je veux voir*, Catherine Deneuve and Rabih Mroué behave like two absolute singularities: no one else could have played the roles they assume in the film and in that situation. In *Khiam 2000–2007*, the six former detainees are not representative of all the people imprisoned at Khiam. Yet through their singularity, they produced something specific. Cavafy was symptomatic not just of a historic moment but also of his own singularity. In *ISMRYNA*, Etel and Joana do not focus solely on Etel's father, who was in the Ottoman army – the army that expelled Joana's grandfather. They transcend the expected subject and recollections in order to exist as two autonomous singularities.

Cortés An era that creates such an alarming quantity of images every day necessarily runs the risk of blindness. Given these extreme conditions, what can a picture still do? And when you come from a minority position, what narratives can you recount?

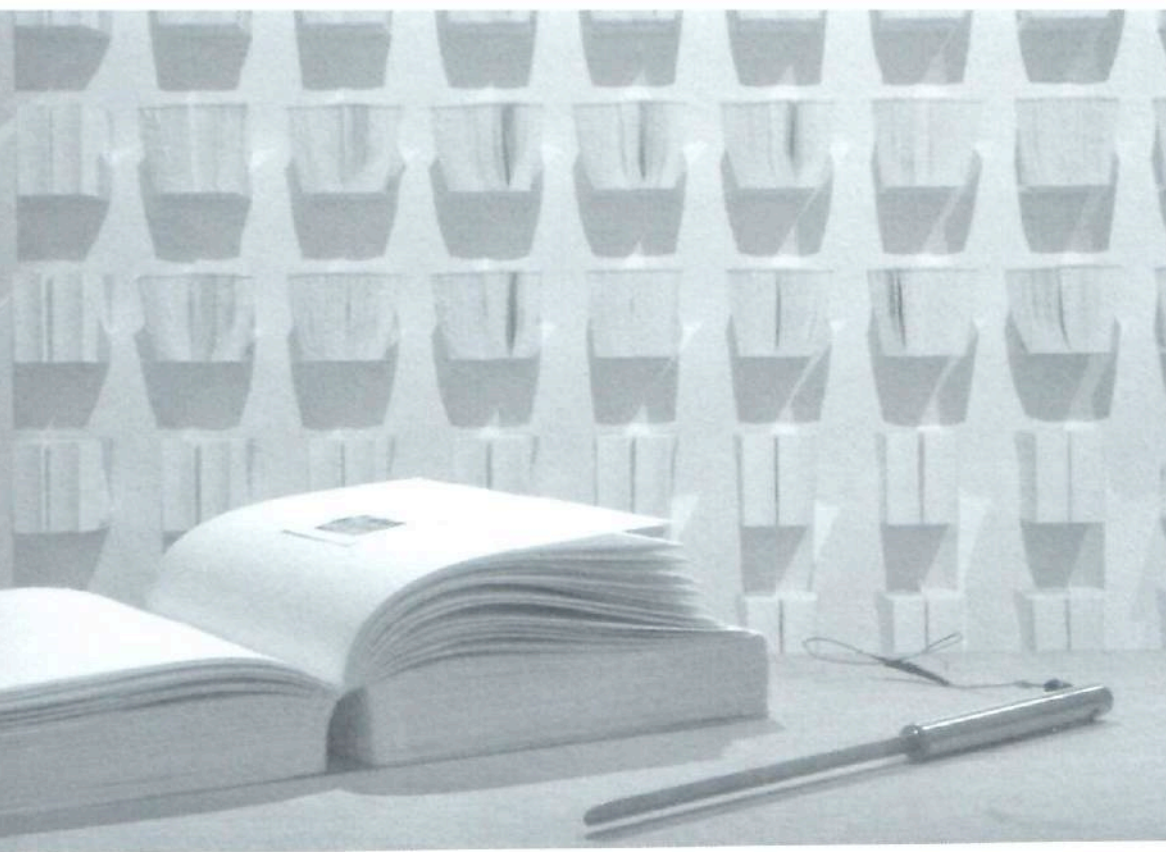
Hadjithomas As an artist, once the picture is there – the image we've produced – we must constantly interrogate it, making sure it shifts our view, that it shrinks from visibility, that it holds out against the barbarians. The image has to be rendered active.

Gili Your exhibition installations and displays are also worth stressing. *The Circle of Confusion* is a photo from which people can take a fragment. We find ourselves torn between the choice of seeing a complete picture of Beirut or taking a piece and contemplating ourselves in the mirror image. But we can't do both at once. It's all a question of distance. The same issues are addressed by the sound-and-image installation *The Rumor of the World* (2014), with all those voices that move us, those nonprofessional actors who embody the texts of Internet scams. The care you put into the installation shows that the way it is experienced is an integral part of it.

Hadjithomas Absolutely. That's how we intend to create an encounter. If we choose media like film and installations, it's because we want to incorporate the beholder into the whole approach. People are invited to take a fragment of the picture, thereby activating the installation themselves. The same is true of the postcards in *Wonder Beirut*, which we give to the audience. In *The Rumor of the World*, the combined voices create a cacophony at first, but if you go up to an individual

you can hear distinctly what is being said: you're face to face with an individual, who is speaking – to you. Even an undesirable message or scam sent indiscriminately via the Internet acquires this face-to-face quality.

Joreige Like Joana says, the notion of experience is very important to us. Our works are often hard to grasp in reproduction. From a distance, *180 Seconds of Lasting Images* (2006) looks like a big white painting. But when you approach it you notice all the variations, the pictures hidden in all that whiteness: a boat, a town, a group of people. At first, *Dust in the Wind* seems like a set of photos, but in fact they're sculptures. It's only by approaching them that you perceive the block of sculpted Plexiglas. As soon as you offer the beholder a space to be occupied, removed from overwhelmingly 'iconic' images, you develop a new way of interrogating the indexical nature of an image.



177 Days of Performances—Latent Images / Diary of a photographer, 2015, detail.
Installation view: 56th International Venice Biennale, 2015, photo by Daniele Bonomelli

Gili At the 56th Venice Biennale you also presented an interactive installation and performance, *Latent Images / Diary of a photographer* (2010). The picture can only be created in conjunction with someone else. If someone else isn't there to imagine the photo from these latent images, forming it in his or her mind, the work only half exists.

Hadjithomas That's right. And this exhibition also recounts its own story, in fact: it can change its perspective on – and from – the works by articulating things between them, by divulging a multiplicity of potential narratives and experiences. It's an environment that is resolutely alive, full of exchanges and encounters.