

Laura U. Marks

Dangerous Gifts: Lamia Joreige's Objects of War

Artist's Project

Lamia Joreige's *Objects of War* is in a sense a redundant artwork, since virtually everything in Lebanon is already an object of war. Properly questioned, almost any object will reveal its perspective on Lebanon's history from the beginning of the civil war in 1975 to the present. Objects are monads that way, highly curved lenses that can perceive the entire universe from their very particular point of view. Every brick and tree and plastic jug and sound recording in Lebanon, and of course the dust into which some of these things have been ground over time, has a perspective on the history of the war. In short, posing questions to any material object, whether through radiography, spectrometry, or asking somebody what she knows about it, will cause it to give up certain of its histories. There are not too few war stories but too many stories—repressed, willfully forgotten, or remembered with fierce selectivity.

"The irritation of doubt causes a struggle to attain a state of belief," wrote C. S. Peirce.¹ Joreige invited dozens of people to tell their stories about personal objects that they associated with the war. Joreige's project works to arouse thought by teasing or irritating memory. One of the noblest goals of remembering, of course, is to learn from past errors. A new generation of Lebanese secular activists, many of whom were children at the end of the civil war in 1990, has had the energy that their exhausted and disillusioned parents lack. Beginning during the massive reconstruction that took place under Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, they have been organizing outside government channels for more representative democracy, less corruption, economic transparency, and interfaith cooperation.² During the 2006 Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon, civilian resistance groups mobilized to help in areas that even the Red Cross considered too dangerous.³ For these courageous young people, memory causes an irritation, requiring them to rewrite history through action in the present; for them the present is not the inevitable outcome of older generations' crimes, but an intolerable situation that can be assuaged only through struggle.

Objects of War is clearly acting toward this goal of good remembering. Not the memory of Joreige's respondents, who present objects that represent some aspect of the war to them *already*: objects that have been worked through. Indeed the artists among them, such as Akram Zaatari and Rabih Mroue, are making art from their memory objects. Each object can trace numerous paths through history, of which the respondents choose only one. Though many of the objects embody terrible histories, they pose little threat to their owners, for whom they soothe the pain of the past even as they call it up.

It's really the viewer whom these stories irritate—to recollect dormant events or to make connections. The people of Lebanon, like others who have lived through terrible events, have a great need for the calm state of forgetfulness. Given that militia members received postwar amnesty and that former warlords dominate the current government, the burden of war memory has been shifted from the state to the Lebanese people. This burden is too heavy. It has resulted in the famous Lebanese "distraction" whereby this nation of smart, entrepreneurial, resilient people manages to get on with things. The man who lost his capacity to remember

1. Charles Sanders Peirce, "On the Fixation of Belief," in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover, 1955), 10.

2. Hariri held this office 1992–98 and then again 2000–4. His assassination by a massive bomb in 2005 set off the so-called Cedar Revolution.

3. Three of the citizen groups organized to resist the Israeli invasion and active during the 2006 war are Nahwa al Muwatiniya (www.na-am.org), Samidoun (www.samidoun.org), and Civilian Resistance in Lebanon (www.lebanon_solidarity.org).

became a national hero, a role model. The reason was simple: They all knew, almost instinctively, that they have become distracted; that they don't have the will or the capacity to concentrate. The man who couldn't remember was, for them, the logical consequence to that state of permanent distraction. A perfect metaphor of what they wanted to become.⁴

Distraction's opposite is paralysis, or psychosis. No wonder forgetting is so important to Lebanese people.

Thus it is not the tellers but the recipients of these stories who risk irritation, who may be infected by the connections the objects and stories build to history. Memory-zombies, these objects make the present volatile. They speak for every silent object that witnessed the atrocities and sufferings of the civil war—and indeed other histories as well—and open up numerous paths that memory could retrace. They show us that the present is the fingertip of the past and the past is reaching to pull us into the earth. Especially because they are material, tactile objects—magnetic tape, a plastic Walkman, a delicate photograph—the objects in *Objects of War* exert an earthy force. If for their owners they are fetishes, in the sense that they stand for some loss and make it bearable, for their recipients they are spiked gifts, fetishes that establish a material contact whereby the past can leak into the present. They are dangerous.

Several of the speakers in *Objects of War* mention, some nostalgically, how alive and purposeful they felt during the civil war. Their objects and stories testify to Lebanese tenacity, survival skills, and humor in adversity. When your existence is limited to a scope of a few blocks within which you get hold of food and water, deal with lack of electricity, hear news, and ensure the safety of your loved ones, life is immediately meaningful. You don't have time for more abstract irritations.

A strange thing happens in the middle of *Objects of War*. It is 2006, and Mazen Kerbaj is comparing the civil war with the brief and shockingly violent war that Israel has just waged on Lebanon. Suddenly the civil war is no longer an object of memory. It is as though all those connections that people avoided making have blown up in their faces. Another 2006 interviewee, Johnny Farah, describes the weird suddenness with which the devastating Israeli bombardment began and as suddenly ended. "I'm afraid, I feel I've lost something, something is disgusting me. . . . They plan and decide without letting us know our destiny." While during the long civil war the challenge to survive gave people some sense of purpose, the recent conflict cruelly revealed how powerless Lebanese people are, pawns of utterly cynical world powers in a global game even further beyond their control than during the civil war. The activist generation that barely began to emerge in the early 1990s can only be overwhelmed by the paralyzing fact of Lebanese helplessness. The 2006 war did not just irritate the surface of forgetting and distraction so necessary for survival. It viciously tore it away and opened up an abyss that no story can render meaningful.

Remembering, creating one path into the infinitely manifold past, necessarily eradicates all the other possible paths. In this way, remembering is also a creative forgetfulness, a necessary fiction that allows a person to carry on. *Objects of War* assists this process by providing *aides-mémoire* that double as *aides-oubli*.

4. Tony Chakar, "Convulsive Fables," *The Eyeless Map* (Beirut: Ashkal Alwan, 2003), 12.

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Objects of War presents a series of testimonials on the Lebanese wars. Each person chooses an object, ordinary or unusual, that serves as a starting point for his or her story. These testimonials, while helping to create a collective memory, also show the impossibility of telling a single history of this war. Only fragments of this history are recounted here, held as truth by those expressing them. In *Objects of War*, the aim is not to reveal a truth but rather to gather and confront many diverse versions and discourses on the subject.

Lamia Joreige

Objects of War

Objects of War was first shown in 2000, assembling the testimonials of eleven persons. It continued in 2003 with *Objects of War 2*, gathering seven additional testimonials. This time however, and since then, the recorded material is left unedited. The work of collecting and assembling these stories continued with *Objects of War 3* and 4 (2006).

Lamia Joreige has presented her work in solo exhibitions in Egypt, France, and Lebanon, and in group exhibitions in the Middle East, Europe, and Asia, most recently the Second Biennial of Contemporary Art of Seville. Her video work has also been featured in major film and video festivals in Toronto, Paris, Berlin, Rotterdam, Barcelona, São Paulo, and New York. She studied painting and film at the Rhode Island School of Design, and currently lives and works in Beirut. She is one of five artists representing Lebanon at the 52nd Venice Biennale this summer.

Following eight pages:

Lamia Joreige, video stills and transcribed texts from

Objects of War 1, 2000, video/video installation, 68 min., in Arabic and French, with English, French, and Arabic subtitles.

Objects of War 2, 2003, video/video installation, 85 min., in Arabic and English, with English and French subtitles.

Objects of War 3, 2006, video/video installation, 55 min., in Arabic and English, with English subtitles.

Objects of War 4, 2006, video/video installation, 72 min., in Arabic and French, with English subtitles.

(artworks © Lamia Joreige)