

# JOANA HADJITHOMAS KHALIL JOREIGE WONDER BEIRUT

Opposite and on following pages:  
Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, *Wonder Beirut:  
The Story of a Pyromaniac Photographer, 1999–2006*.  
Postcards.

We have been working since 1997 on a project entitled *Wonder Beirut*. Based on the work of a Lebanese photographer named Abdallah Farah whom we met at the beginning of the 1990s, the project, which includes many parts, deals with the Lebanese war, or rather wars. The project is an interrogation of history and our difficulty in writing it.

In 1968, Abdallah Farah published a series of postcards of Beirut. The absurdity of the Lebanese situation is underlined by the fact that these postcards are still on sale today in Beirut bookshops, although the monuments and sites they represent have mostly been destroyed.

At the beginning of autumn 1975, Abdallah began damaging the negatives of his postcards, burning them little by little, as if he wanted them to correspond to his contemporary situation. He imitated the destructions of the buildings he saw gradually disappearing because of bombings and street battles. His process was, at first, highly organised and documented, with the trajectory of shellings and corresponding defacing of his images relating to the events of the day. We called this first stage "the historic process".

Later, Abdallah began inflicting, accidentally or deliberately, additional destructions to those same buildings. We call this second phase the "plastic process". We decided to have these images published as a new set of eighteen postcards of war.

The second part of *Wonder Beirut* is made up of the "invisible" work of Abdallah Farah who, although still taking photos of his daily life, no longer develops them. It is enough to take them. The reels pile up. He notes, however, every single photo he takes in a book, describing each one in great detail. Hence his images are to be read rather than to be seen. This part is titled "Latent images". The work reflects our concerns. How can one produce images, reflect about their economy and their potency, considering the instability of our context; a feudal, confessional society where personal status is hard to achieve; where one can hardly find one's own rhythm; where we question how history is written.

We are attempting to find new ways to create images through evocation, absence, latency. Latency

is a state which haunts all of our work. Traditionally, latency is defined as the state of what exists in a non-apparent manner, but which can manifest itself at a given moment. The latent image is the invisible, yet-to-be developed image on an exposed surface.

To this should be added the idea of "the dormant", of slumber, of slumbering, of something that can be awakened. To us, latency is beyond evidence. It is the reminiscence of an image, of knowledge but which can barely be grasped. How can one produce images, export them, move them around, while avoiding cut-and-dried definitions? As image producers, we try to avoid being made use of, or taken over by, propaganda within our country or our region, or reduced to a simplifying, often "orientalist", vision. Our work takes into account this possible risk, this breach.

Aware of this situation, we resort to the idea of the anecdotal. Etymologically, the anecdotal appears as something unrevealed, something kept secret, at odds with a certain concept of history.

In our opinion, the anecdotal is not necessarily metaphoric, but rather symptomatic. It is not small history trying to reflect history at large, but a research around sensations, and the re-appropriation of events, like elements of space-time that record a specific, significant moment.

The symptomatic is therefore the possibility of an image, the manifestation of something made visible. A symptomatic image is intimately linked to its context, to a situation and to a history. It is a proposal, an experience. By going back to a personal fact, to a given event, or to "something secret", we refuse the spectacular aspect and the general sociological subject. The symptomatic image is the product of a situation that cannot be reduced to an allegory or a symbol.

The anecdotal is the possibility of appropriating our history. If we consider official history as written by the winners, there is another unofficial and subversive space governed by the anecdotal, "the thing kept secret", which perforates that official frame. Latency is about affirming a presence. The anecdotal is the story and the development of that presence.