

A State of Latency

by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige

On the 27th of October 1997, I printed for the last time the contact sheet of one of my photo films. Since then, I no longer develop the images, I'm content with taking them. I make an inventory of them in a notebook and when I read it, I can imagine them and see them. The impressed film, once dated and inventoried, is filed in a drawer.

I take photos in a compulsive way. I go on with my private journal and my photographic research. It covers what I ate from February to March, the streets I crossed during the week, a catalogue of all unrestored buildings, spying daily on my neighbour Zakiyeh, the parties I'm invited to, the imprint of my wife's body on the sheets in the morning, coffee grounds in my cup and all kinds of experiments and research.

In Beirut, I have the feeling of being constantly surrounded by latent images, turning sometimes to the past and others to the future, or on the contrary stuck in a continuing present. I don't know why I decided to go through the images.

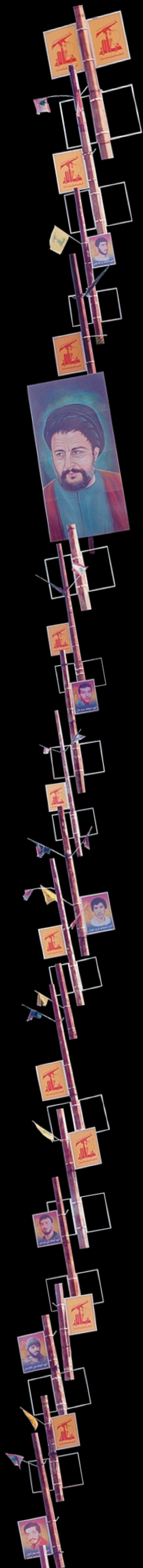
For years, I have been crisscrossing the town and taking pictures of my daily life which no one has seen. When I read the description of my photos in the notebook, I live by evoking my images, by expecting them, while the memory of the images, sometimes present or absent, constantly amuses me or haunts me. I read all those dates and, suddenly, I no longer know. Was it really like that? And when I see all those films, filed but not developed, I fondle them, I fondle that potential which raises my enthusiasm on one hand, and my fears on the other.

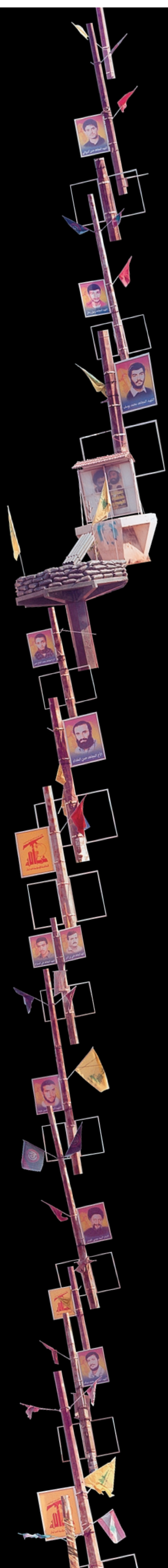
Today, I finished the film of December 20th, 2001. I took mainly pictures of the Ouzai area, then winded up the roll at a friend's party.

I have often photographed Ouzai lately, and I met someone else interested in it, Ahmad Gharbieh. In June 2001, he inventoried all the pictures on the main part of the Ouzai road. It relieves me. It is like an occasional relay for my latent images.

I go along that road that runs between the sea on one side and the airport on the other. Most of the constructions along it have been set up illegally, when the population fled from South Lebanon following the Israeli invasions.

I drive along the 42 posts which divide the road. 42 electric and lamp posts, bearing recto verso frames, all the same size. Some of these





frames contain an image, a portrait of a fighter from one of the two main Shia movements, Amal in the Northern part of Ouzaï, and Hezbollah in the South. Under each portrait there is a caption, “the martyr fighter” or “the martyr hero”, followed by the name of the man.

I always take photos from the car. Each portrait on the Ouzaï road is placed in a flux, a continuum in relation with the traffic which determines key points, those with the best visibility. The road is one of the main arteries of Lebanon and the location of the martyrs’ portraits follows the evolution of the road and that of the bottlenecks. Where traffic is dense, the portrait will represent one of the most important heroes of the resistance according to the party’s own hierarchy.

However, alongside the frames hanging on the 42 poles all along the road, one element always surprises me and catches my eye, an element which regularly interrupts the unending stream of images.

Empty frames. The same as those of the martyrs, but left empty. Frames waiting for an image, waiting for a martyr. Those “holes” are like a missing place, off-frame, a latent image, like mine, bearing all the possibilities. An elsewhere, a transparency. What we could really see would be beyond this transparency.


Driving at 40 km/h at 1.50 meter from the posts, tilting my head and forgetting the rough surface of the road, I observe a strange optic phenomenon. The varying portraits and alternating full and empty frames create a phenomenon of retinal persistence. The empty frames then seem filled by the projection of the various faces seen... I’ve often tried to photograph this.

It is strange to realize that the same post carries the tribute to the martyr and also the negation of the martyr by a criticism of the very status of the image, an empty frame. Therefore, it is no longer the image that makes up the martyr, but rather the frame. The frame, and even more than the frame, the post, gives the image its “aura”.

The electric post is between the image of the past (the martyr) and the frame to come (the next and future martyr). The post anchors these two temporalities in a kind of reality, of continuous present. Whereas juxtaposing these temporalities creates a time lag which cannot be easily represented.

Just like the ceremonial adopted for the video pre-taped farewell of the fighters before their suicide operations.

In this farewell shown on TV newsprogram, the fighter introduces himself in these terms “I am the martyr” followed by his name. His status of martyr precedes the suicide operation he will carry out



Ahmad Gharbelle, *Display*, photomontage,
from *Ouzai'ssue*, graphic design final year project,
American University of Beirut, June 2001.



and which will turn him into a martyr in the eyes of his country, of his party and of his God.¹

"I am the martyr"... This sentence, which has become a staple one in this type of testimony, is an example of temporal confusion which refers to a type of time-lag and to an impossibility in representation.

Is it possible to declare oneself a martyr before dying ?

I remember the testimony of Mayla Soufangi, a former prisoner in Khiam, the detention camp which was closed after South Lebanon was liberated. She recounted that she had decided to ride a mule loaded with explosives and to trigger off the explosion near an Israeli patrol. Her death would make her a martyr of the Syrian Baas party to which she belonged. But the operation failed, and the "martyr" survived. She was jailed then freed thanks to an exchange of prisoners.

While listening to her, I wondered : Did Mayla pronounce, in front of a camera, the sentence which makes a martyr of her ? Can one be a martyr and alive ?

During the TV program, Mayla was named, more than once, the "living martyr"; she calls herself "the adjourned martyr", "the latent martyr". She relates how, once out of prison, she plunged

into drugs, how she questions her femininity and her sexual identity nowadays, dreaming of becoming a man. Another person.

It brings to mind the story of a man who taped his farewell message before his suicide operation. The message was broadcast on national TV, but the operation failed and the man was imprisoned in Khiam. Some time later, he changed sides and turned informer for Israel, the very enemy he was ready to fight till death.

He who proclaims himself a martyr, who projects himself onto one of the empty frames of the electric posts of Ouzai, cannot come back himself, but another. There is no return from the realms of death.

¹ See, on the subject, Rabih Mroué and Elias Khoury's performance *Three Posters*, and Jalal Toufic's essay *I Am the Martyr Sanâ' Yûsif Muhaydly*, *Al-Âdâb*, January/February 2001, Beirut, Lebanon, pp. 44-51.

