

IMAGES OF THE MIDDLE EAST  
ART AND SOCIETY



## STILL SEARCHING FOR OASES IN THE DESERT...

Joana Hadjithomas, Khalil Joreige

We have always feared that it would start again. In fact, we never really believed it was over, hence our focus on latency, on the state of what exists in an unapparent manner but can, at any time, manifest itself. Traces, recollections that become ghostly and haunt, the photographs, the films and the documents, whether true or false.

This latency coincides with an ambiguous relation to images, as we have been working on them since the end of the Lebanese civil war.

What we produce constantly raises questions related to our involvement, to our positioning as filmmakers in this part of the world, questions related to our outlook on a country, a society devastated by war, constantly changing, rebuilding itself, as a body impossible to grasp, a fictitious territory.

We were also reoriented towards a re-reading of our contemporary history and its representations in the prevailing amnesia of our society, and a questioning into the different ways and narratives of our history at the level of artistic projects.

This critical attempt often led us to dead-ends, to paralysis, to crises of representation, crisis of the image after a catastrophe.

It forces us to think and to produce our images outside of a flux, to constantly interrogate their necessity, existence and implications in the world that we live in, in the video or photographic practice we use.

This exploration sometimes led us to suppress the image, to replace it by writing or evocation, to find other means of making the "image" or furthermore to work on borrowed images or official and popular ones such as the postcards of the sixties and the seventies, which were still on sale after the war although the places they represented had been totally destroyed. We felt the need to transform them, to insert the conflict into them, to create the *Wonder Beirut* project.

*Wonder Beirut* is based on a stock of postcards, which we attributed to a photographer named Abdallah Farah. This multi-stage project presently includes: *History of a pyromaniac photographer*, *Postcards of war* and *Latent images*.

Between 1968 and 1969, Abdallah Farah was commissioned by the Lebanese State to take pictures to be edited as postcards. They represented the Beirut Central District and mainly the Lebanese Riviera and its luxury hotels, which contributed to form an idealised picture of Lebanon in the sixties.

A few months after the beginning of the civil war, in autumn 1975, Abdallah started damaging the negatives of his postcards, burning them little by little, as if he wanted them to correspond with the current situation. He imitated the destructions of the buildings he saw gradually disappear because of bombings and street battles. He began by doing so in a highly organized and documented way, following the trajectory of the shelling and defacing the images to parallel the events of the day. This first part is what we call "the historic process" such as the *Battle of the Hotels*.

Later, he was caught in his own game and began inflicting, accidentally or deliberately, additional destructions to those same buildings. This second part is what we call the *Plastic Process*. We took the initiative of having these images published as a new set of 18 postcards of war.

The last part of the *Wonder Beirut* project is made up of the “invisible” work of Abdallah Farah who, although still taking photos of his daily life, no longer develops them. He is content with taking them. However, he notes every single photo he takes in a notebook, describing it in great detail. Hence his images are to be read rather than to be seen, we produced contact sheets of this work as a diary of his personal and professional life. This part is entitled *Latent Images*.

For us, one of the fundamental questions raised by the work *Latent images* and by Abdallah’s approach is that of the conditions for the appearance of, or rather, revelation of images. At what moment and why would Abdallah decide to develop his films, to expose his images to light? What could have brought the change around him, in him, beyond him?

In his book *Distracted*, Jalal Toufic writes that the fact that Abdallah Farah describes his photographs in a notebook “can be considered a contribution to the resurrection of what has been withdrawn by the surpassing disaster. The intended effect of the work of the one trying to resurrect tradition past a surpassing disaster is fundamentally not on the audience, except indirectly; it is on the work of art to resurrect it”. If we were to witness this change in Abdallah Farah’s work, as well as in other artists whose work may evolve in a similar perspective, it could signify that certain conditions – perhaps linked to the state that the country is in, or to the state of the art scene – have been made present for the ‘revelation’ of some images to occur. Two of the photo reels taken by Farah but not developed have nowadays acquired a new dimension.

Besides our work on *Latent Images*, we made a film called *Khiam* on a detention camp run by the South Lebanon Army (SLA), a proxy militia for Israel until the liberation of South Lebanon in May 2000. Until then, it was impossible to go to the camp. We always heard ‘talk’ about this camp, without seeing any images of it. All our information basically came from the testimonies of liberated detainees and of the few Red Cross members who could enter Khiam. When we shot the film, the images of the camp were latent. Here was what seemed to be an impossibility of representation.

The experience lived by the detainees, the act of speaking, attempts a reconstruction, as meticulous and as detailed as possible, of the camp – and of the daily life in such a place ...

The film is a form of experimentation with the narrative, with the way that the image, through the discourse, can slowly construct itself on the principle of evocation. It is evocation that is supposed to compensate for absence.

After the liberation of South Lebanon and the dismantling of the camp, one could go to Khiam. Before the July war 2006, the image of the physical presence of the camp was there to be seen.

Abdallah Farah went to Khiam when the camp was closed and transformed into a museum. In 2001, he took some pictures, 2 rolls of films, which, as usual, he did not develop. These two films are now two contact sheets of invisible images that comes back to haunt us today, after the July 2006 war.

After the end of this last conflict, we went to Khiam...Practically nothing is left, the camp has been totally destroyed, bombed out, there is nothing but ruins and there, suddenly, the image forced itself on us, we felt the need for photos, for the image in “spite of everything”...

The camp was visible only for 6 years, from May 2000 to July 2006. Before May 2000, we worked on evoking the camp because it was forbidden to go there, to film inside the walls. Today, the walls no longer exist - the camp is only a memory...

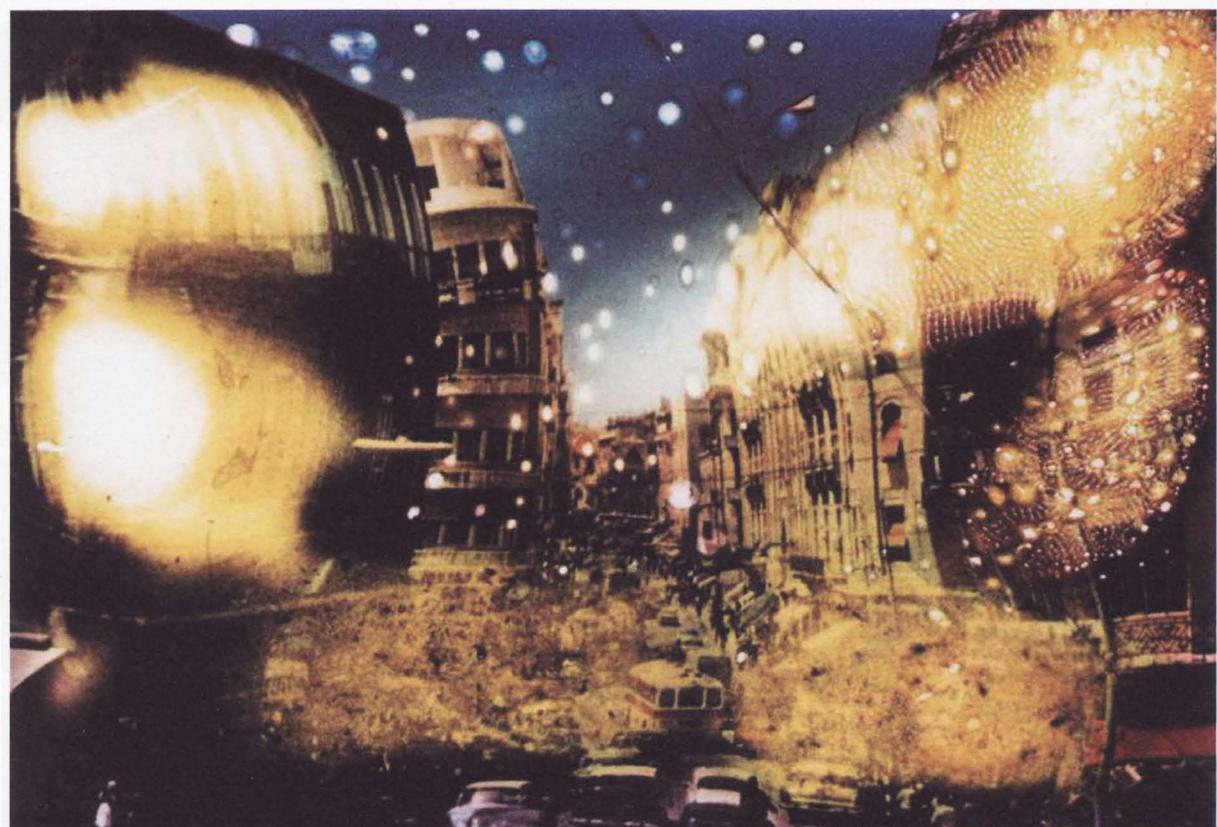
Has the time come to reveal certain images, to at least develop the two films, which Abdallah Farah took 5 years ago in Khiam and never developed? Are the requirements for an appearance of the images after the catastrophe of the civil war unfortunately conditioned by another catastrophe, that of the July 2006 war?

Shouldn’t we reveal the latent images to oppose to this binary world our images, our names and our stories as individuals, as singular political subjects? But will the image come back? What will have been left of it?

RAMLET-EL-BAIDA BEACH

WONDERFUL BEIRUT

THE LEBANESE RIVIERA



Joana Hajdjithomas & Khalil Joreige



And how, in what condition will we find those latent images after all these years?

When the war began in July 2006 the UK newspaper, *The Guardian*, used one of the postcards of our project *Wonder Beirut* to illustrate the cover page of a special issue on the conflict. This postcard reproduced one of the battles that occurred between 1975 and 1976. Using such an image 31 years later to illustrate this last war had a strange effect on us: Can the same image be used for two wars?

Isn't it rather two images for two wars? Even if, outwardly, the image is the same, is it really so? Doesn't it become "another" by the mere fact that it is used to illustrate another war? Doesn't it go through a sort of "temporality" to become "new", a product of a different conflict, as if we had seen this image and shown it for the first time?

Even though there is a strong feeling of a remake in this conflict, the film is not the same. Today, what is at stake is not only opposing history to memory, but also finding its place in the face of a dichotomy between the forces of the western, so-called "civilized" world and those of a world pictured as "dangerous" and "terrorist" wishing to do away with that "civilization".

One of our films called *The Lost film* in a way resists all this. It begins with an "anecdote" that will lead us to "a moment of truth".

Seven years ago, we received an e-mail telling us that on 22 May 2000 a copy of our first fiction feature, *Around the pink house*,<sup>1</sup> had been stolen in Yemen, where it was being shown. It was a historic date, exactly the 10th anniversary of the reunification of the northern and southern parts of the country.

We were greatly surprised by this event: we make films in a part of the world that takes little interest in cinema. Who in Yemen could have been interested enough in our first feature film to steal a print?

We decided to go looking for that lost print and to film the process of this search as a pretext for going to a country of which we knew nothing, and as a way of questioning our status as image-makers in that part of the world.

We followed the tracks of our print very precisely. We went to the cinemas where the film was shown, to Sana'a in the North and then Aden in the South. We followed the route of the bus on which the print of the film travelled as unaccompanied baggage on 22 May 2000. It was on this bus, going up from Aden to Sana'a, that the print (five reels, each about seven kilos) mysteriously disappeared.

We film our research and return from Yemen to the editing room with a lot of questions. We are from a region where it is not always easy to make images – or, rather, to show images. The main difficulty is due to the fact that, as image-makers, we have to fight not to be instrumentalised and reduced to simplifications. Our work is constantly measuring this possible risk, this breach.

Moreover, we are from countries whose governments are rarely liberal, where censorship is active and a threat to us, where one constantly has to fight religious and community fanaticism and feudalism. How are we to reflect this in our work without playing into the hands of certain bodies of opinion in the West eager to simplify the truth and thus justify certain kinds of foreign policy?

In spite of the biographical orientation of our documentary project, the location and specificity of our research, the apprehension remained.

In addition to these debates and hesitations, the events of 11 September 2001 made a second journey to Yemen to complete our research much more difficult.

The project was abandoned. The production stopped. But, the project haunted us. We hung on and decided to continue alone, using the images we brought back from Yemen the first time. This idea impelled us to try to get beyond the latency of some of our photos. Little by little this very absence became the film's subject and the figures of latency became those of the work. This decision transformed our work into a film about the film we weren't able to make about *The Lost Film*.

All we could show was our initial footage. So we studied our own images, looking for something that might have escaped us, something inexhaustible, surprising. The indexical image became our working

space, “the gear shift into fiction.” If only because of its fragmentary appearance, this narrative certainly cannot claim to be complete. It can progress and develop only by means of gaps, emptiness, losses, fragments and fragmentation.

Through these figures, we are trying to show what we were unable to capture, to reconstitute or revive those missing places, the ones we didn't have time to film, and thought we'd be able to come back for. For example, we don't really have images of Hussein Chaibane, Director of the cinematheque in Aden, and yet he is one of the people who most moved us deeply during our journey because he seemed to us to be engaged in a real act of resistance. The great priority being to preserve the films and to save the film stock.

We would have liked to have more pictures of him in his cinematheque. We re-screened, hunted through our location films, and classified our images. Hussein Chaibane is the great absentee.

All we have of him are stolen moments, shots where he appears, where he flits through the frame, where you see his silhouette to one side. We looked for him in every shot, tried to isolate him, to slow down the moments where he just moves through the image. Using evocation and voice-overs, allowing ourselves to reuse the few elements we had taken when we visited the cinematheque in Aden, we negotiated with a missing reality.

The film was thus made by splicing together shots and from what was off-camera, in relation to the film that could have been made. It became this possibility, this opening, this latency.

This attempt to appropriate documents, to say things differently using the processes of evocation, this contamination of fiction and documentary, this loss of delimitations, offers us a compensatory freedom in relation to reality. The film does not presuppose linearity or continuity. The subject is not complete the beholder is not all-powerful.

Consequently, we are less inhibited by those fears of “discourses about” and “visions of.” There is no longer a performative discourse, a “penetrative” gaze that claims to know, to interpret. We are wandering in search of ourselves, of our inscription here and now.

By continuing to work on *The Lost Film* after 11 September 2001, we were in a sense asserting the anecdotal nature of our search.

The anecdotal is generally seen as a minor element, something you probably wouldn't emphasise but would try to play down. The word is usually pejorative.

But we can think of the anecdotal in a new perspective. If we come back to its etymology, it is seen like something kept secret, a break with a certain conception of history in which the viewpoint is displaced towards private life, towards events borrowed from what one could call “minor events.”

For us, the anecdotal is not necessarily metaphorical, but is rather symptomatic. It is not minor history trying to reflect history, a pretext for illustrating something else, but work that could be done on sensation, on the re-appropriation of events.

By relating a personal event, an event in our life, “a secret thing,” we are not trying to choose a sociological subject, a “great cause” with claims to objectivity, to historical truth. We are rejecting the spectacular, but also generalisation, by coming back to work on a human, personal scale – the scale of our everyday experience.

To assert the anecdotal here is to prove that we exist, that we will not be annihilated by the weight of our history; it is to develop a localised, historicised place of work that reflects productions of meaning, a story whose telling can never be exhausted, in which the real is elusive.

It is the possibility of appropriating our history. If we consider that official history is written by the victors, then there is another method, another unofficial and subversive field or domain, which is articulated by the anecdotal, by “things kept secret.” This would then cut through and pervert the official structure of History. It becomes a position of resistance.

The anecdotal element apparent in *The Lost Film* echoes latency, that “subterranean, invisible and

sometimes even parallel” process of work. Latency, then, would be the affirmation of a presence and the anecdotal would be seen as the story and the development of that presence.

As Hannah Arendt states: “If not truth, [we] will at least find moments of truth, and these moments are in fact the only thing we have to try to establish some order in this chaos of horror. These moments arise unexpectedly, like oases in the desert. They are anecdotes and in their brevity they reveal what all this is about.”<sup>2</sup>

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1 Al Bayt el zaher (*Around the Pink House*), fiction film by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige (1999) 35 mm, 92 minutes.

2 Hannah Arendt, Auschwitz on Trial, quoted in Georges Didi-Huberman (2003) *Images malgré tout*. Paris: Editions de Minuit, pp. 46-47

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Born in Beirut in 1969, **Joana Hajdithomas & Khalil Joreige** have worked together as artists and filmmakers shooting fiction films and documentaries. In 1999, they wrote and directed their first fiction feature film. Then in 2000 they made “Kham” a docu-

mentary and in 2003 “El film al mafkoud” (The lost film). In 2005 they presented a fiction feature, which was also shown during Images of the Middle East, “A perfect day”. They are both university professors in Beirut and have written numerous articles.