

frieze

Influences: Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige

For the first time in the new series, *frieze* invites artists **Joana Hadjithomas** and **Khalil Joreige** to write about the images that have informed their practice

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige collaborate as filmmakers and artists, living between Beirut, Lebanon, and Paris, France. They have directed documentaries including *Khiam 2000–2007* (2008) and *El Film el Mafkoud* (The Lost Film, 2003), as well as the films *Al Bayt el Zaher* (Around the Pink House, 1999), *A Perfect Day* (2005) and their most recent work, *Je veux voir* (I Want to See, 2008), which features Catherine Deneuve and Rabih Mroué. In 2011, they were included in the 10th Sharjah Biennial, the 11th Biennale de Lyon, France, and the 12th Istanbul Biennial, Turkey. This year, they have had solo shows at the Beirut Exhibition Center (curated by Ashkal Alwan) and The Third Line, Dubai. They are recipients of the 2012 Abraaj Capital Prize and their video installation *A Letter Can Always Reach its Destination* (2012) is included in La Triennale, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, France (until August). Hadjithomas and Joreige are currently completing a documentary on the Lebanese space programme and are preparing a monograph to be published by JRP|Ringier.

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It all began with a few images we used to look at in our respective grandparents' homes. They were photos of places we had never visited but which had an unknown familiarity. We both come from refugee families – one of them Greek, Syrian and Lebanese, the other Palestinian and Lebanese. The photographs are of times past, but they also contain fragments of memories that could be the seeds of a mythology, launchers of fiction, indicators of world and territory. They are proof of a history and give rise to innumerable stories – who cares whether they are true or not? The image is here as a witness, like the one of a grandfather who wore a tailcoat for his wedding in Izmir, Turkey, and whose portrait was proof of the life our families had before becoming refugees. Or else they are images of

About this article

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By Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige



Framed black and white photographs, collection of the artists

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daily life in Palestine – images often questioned or buried by some ideologies, but which attest to the existence of a memory, a culture and a way of life.



Etel Adnan *Onsi El Haji* 2004, accordion book

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Because of our complex origins, we have an ambiguous relationship to identity and belonging. We constantly move between claiming a form of identity and trying to get rid of it. Moreover, we have an approximate relation to language – be it a mother tongue or an adopted one – since we feel we can master none of them, while somehow also enjoying that fact. We believe in encounter more than in influence and, beyond that, we cultivate admiration: so many photos, film sequences, conversations, meetings and exchanges have nurtured and enabled us, at some time, to admire someone or something. Among those we have encountered is Etel Adnan – poet, painter, artist and an exceptional woman. Like Joana, her family originally comes from Izmir. Neither of them has ever been there but they have been planning to go together for a long time. Among other things, what struck us were Adnan's notebooks made of Japanese paper, the pages of which she fills with writings in Arabic. The writing resembles pictures, because she copies sentences and poems in a language she has barely mastered and in which, in fact, she does not actually write. This greatly moves us. Her gestures inhabit a language that becomes drawing, like a re-created language that nevertheless refers to an exile within one's territory and, beyond, to a deep interior exile.



Found postcard

3

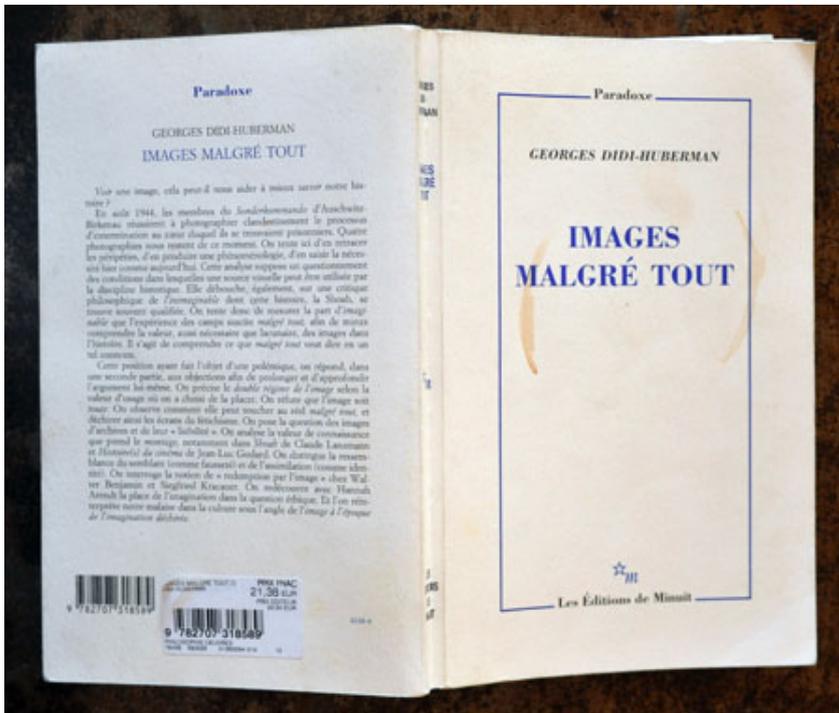
This postcard triggered our work. We did not study art or cinema; we began our artistic practice in the early 1990s in response to the violence generated by the Lebanese civil war, and the way it officially ended. It seemed to us that the war had been put between brackets, considered as an accident, and that things were not really resolved. The fact that these postcards reappeared on the stands of stationery shops as if nothing had happened, although the buildings they represented had been defaced or destroyed by the bombing, prompted us to reject the dominant and nostalgic image that annihilated our actual experience. That was the beginning of our *Wonder Beirut* project (1997–2006) and our production of postcards of war. Burning those images to make them correspond to our present life may be considered an iconoclastic gesture, or rather, as Bruno Latour described it, an ‘iconoclash’, but it’s more about exploring the way history is being written and searching for images and representations we can believe in.



Alfred Stieglitz *Equivalent* 1925, from the series 'Equivalents', 1925-34, silver gelatin print

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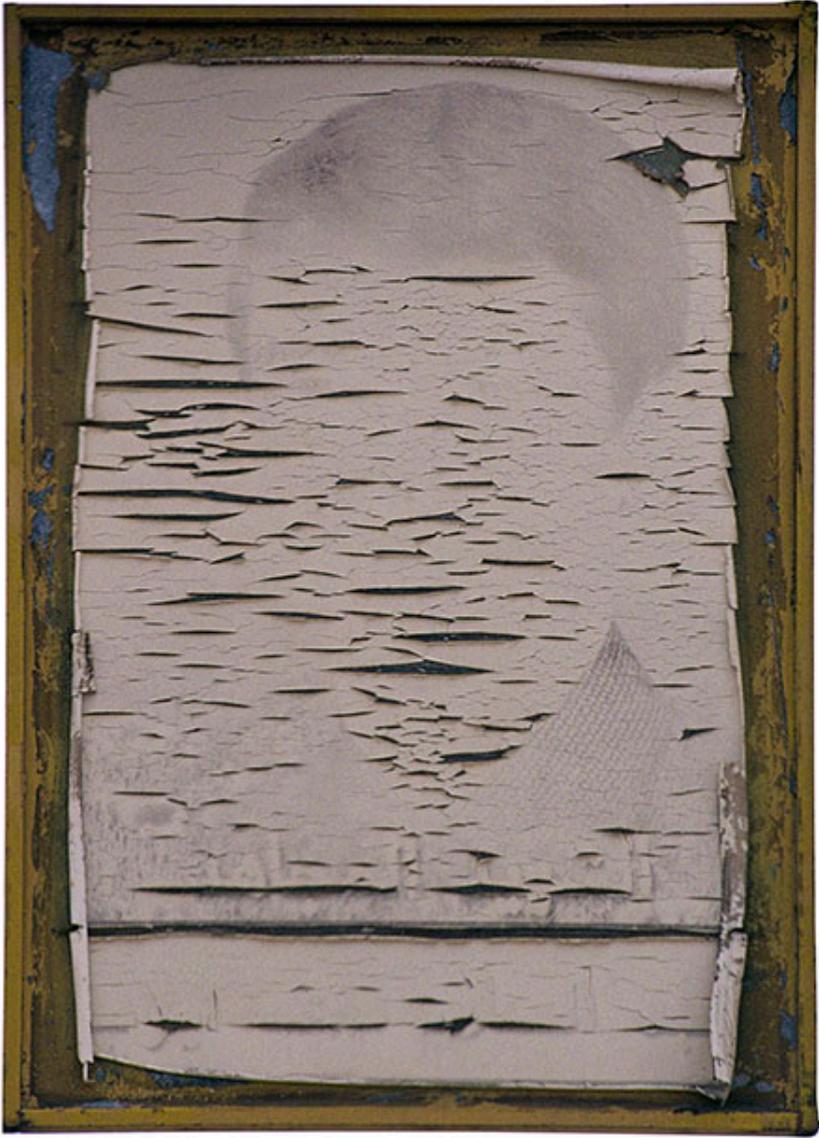
This image may be part of the pictorial tradition of representing clouds, but it also evokes Alfred Stieglitz's thoughts about photographic representation, methodology and the shifting of the gaze and loss of reference. Stieglitz's series of 'Equivalents' (1925-34) determines our relation to photography. We all make photographs of clouds, yet these meditative pictures go beyond other practices. There is a poetic, even political, strength in the production of meaning, the protocols of capture, the mechanism of demonstration. These images are beautiful because they contain all these elements, and go beyond them.



Georges Didi-Huberman *Images malgré tout* (Images in Spite of All) 2004, Les Éditions de Minuit

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Among the images that left a deep mark on us: ‘four bits of film pulled from hell that deserve all of our attention’. Such is Georges Didi-Huberman’s definition of four images taken secretly by a prisoner in Auschwitz in August 1944. They cannot be easily reproduced, yet one cannot help but refer to them. They stirred up a vast controversy about the power and necessity of images. While Claude Lanzmann claims it is impossible to visually represent the Shoah, Didi-Huberman, on the other hand, defends the idea of ‘images in spite of all’. From these two positions emerges a reflection on the power of words and images, but also on distance, ethics, reality, imagination and history.



Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige from the series *Faces*, 2009

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In Beirut, we often feel we live in a strange state, surrounded by latent or hidden images. Maybe certain conditions caused these images to withdraw, as the artist and writer Jalal Toufic would say. The pictures we explored for a long time in our own work are non-images, or the absence of an image that is evoked yet never shown, the latent photograph taken but not developed, that of an imaginary world without images. Much of our work refers to latency and evocation. To restore some power to photographs, to face the spectacular images that surround us, to withdraw our images from a flux, to fight the division of the world that has occurred since September 2001, to counter simplification and cliché, to make images of our present ... these were also the reasons for the scarcity of the images we have produced over the years, based on the very definition of latency: 'I am here even if you don't see

me.'



Front and rear views of the envelope containing the Super-8 film shot by Khalil Joreige's uncle, Alfred Ketanneh, before his kidnapping in 1985

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Sometimes an image refuses to disappear. It comes back to haunt us. The picture that does not recede strikes us with its power and determination. It comes back to prevail upon us, as happened with the Super-8 film found in the belongings of Khalil's uncle, who was kidnapped during the Lebanese civil wars, his fate still unknown. The film was found 15 years after his uncle's disappearance, still packed in its yellow bag, waiting to be sent to the laboratory for development. After hours of work, the whitish representations, altered by time, revealed a few recognizable shapes, some sites, some faces, some lasting pictures.



Objects of Khiam 1999, photograph of a string of beads made from olive stones and thread

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While shooting our film *Khiam* (2008) in a detention camp in south Lebanon, we were deeply moved to hear resistance fighters and activists explain how they would chafe their fingers sculpting a stone into a heart, or rub olive stones against a wall, which they would then wrap in the thread they had unravelled from their socks to turn them into a string of beads. The detainees, locked in a dehumanizing place, braved torture every day in order to create. They battled, thieved, lied or disobeyed to persevere, to create, moved by what could be called an artistic urge. And this is to be found in all places of arbitrary confinement. Whenever there is an attempt to enslave man, there is also resistance, disobedience, a surge toward art.

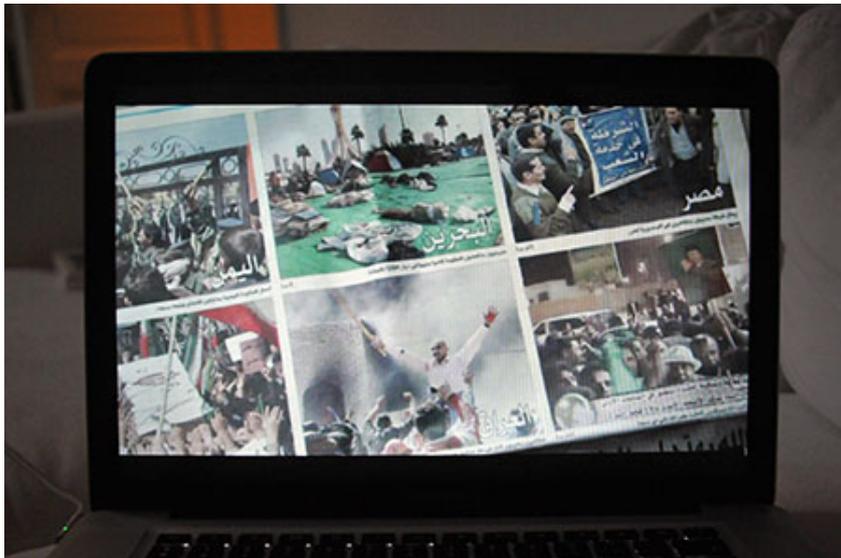


Photograph by E. Temerian of the launch of Cedar III,

Dbayeh, Lebanon, 1962

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We discovered this image 12 years ago and it struck us and shifted our gaze. It is both poetic and political. In the 1960s, this group of students and researchers at an Armenian university established the Lebanese Rocket Society to build rockets for space exploration. In a region where such an image would now evoke a missile rather than a rocket, we can totally relate to the Society's project, because it links our present to the period during which the project was developed, between 1960 and '67. We think of those years as the era of the revolutionary surge, of Pan-Arabism and of the Arab dream, and also as a time when the talk was about revolution, not about causes; when the hope was to rethink and change the world. It was a time of great ideals – or at least that's how we imagine it. In 1967, the defeat of Arab armies at the hands of Israel disenchanted and disorientated our parents' generation, and we inherited their disenchantment. Our films and installations relating to the Lebanese Rocket Society explore this. Recently, we attempted to push the limits by building a rocket identical to the original and moving it through the streets of Beirut. This was a way of questioning our perception of ourselves, our difficulty in projecting ourselves in dreams, and of projecting these dreams into societies where dictators narrowed our horizons and our longing for space.



Images from a Lebanese newspaper via Facebook, 2012

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And, suddenly, with astonishing courage –especially considering the kinds of governments and dictators they are

facing – people everywhere took to the streets of the Arab world: Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Syria ... the wave even extends to the West. First and foremost, the images of popular uprisings are laden with emotion. We don't think it's time yet to comment on the images' formal or conceptual aspects, or to determine the role of Facebook or other social media in these revolutions, but it is time to admire and express our respect for the people who are risking their lives. Whatever the consequences and the final result of what is happening here, dignity, self-esteem and the search for freedom cannot be silenced anymore. The dream, and the hope, are back.

Joana Hadjithomas

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