

Lebanese Rocket Society:

Part III, IV, V

Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige
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UP, INTO SPACE

BY MURTAZA VALI

As repositories of forgotten historical traces, archives, be they public or private, national or personal, actual or virtual, are haunted. Similarly, artistic practices that address the past through recourse to archives are both divine and demonic pursuits; they attempt to resurrect and reanimate, to raise the dead and conjure up history's ghosts. Those who understand these necropoetics of the archive often deploy figures of spectrality, recuperating the lost, paradoxically, through tropes of absence, through visual and narrative strategies that withhold as much as they reveal.

Drawn to lost films, latent images and effaced faces Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige premise their practice on precisely such conditions of (in)visibility, often grappling with the minefield of Lebanon's past and present condition while acknowledging the gaps, inconsistencies, and mnemonic and representational failures inherent to such endeavors. Their retrospection, however, is not tainted by nostalgia. Rather, it seeks to excavate and reenact images and narratives from the past, activating their potential to provoke in the present and catalyze the future. Ghosts reappear not merely as indexes of loss and forgetting but as our current consciences and as figments that enable us to imagine alternative destinies.

Their latest multipart project, *Lebanese Rocket Society*, recounts the largely forgotten story of a determined group of student scientists at Beirut's Haigazian University who, initially free of military or state involvement, designed, built and successfully launched a series of rockets in the 1960s, inaugurating Lebanon's short lived space program. The project's first iteration was an anti-monument, a ghostly all-white reconstruction of the most famous of these rockets, the Cedar IV. By replacing the familiar colors of the Lebanese flag found on the original with a chromatic and political absence Hadjithomas and Joreige introduced a degree of ambiguity, reclaiming national pride in this forgotten achievement while acknowledging the fragility and futility of precisely such collective aspirations and sentiments in contemporary Lebanon, where national history is hotly contested.

Restaged (2011), one of the project's latest chapters, documents, in a series of photographs, a painstakingly orchestrated reenactment of this rocket's passage through contemporary Beirut back to Haigazian University where it is permanently installed. The result of hours spent in tense negotiations with and gaining permissions from city authorities, the restaging demonstrated the degradation of the collective perception of the rocket, from a much-heralded symbol of progress, scientific achievement and claims to contemporaneity to a blunt and devastating instrument of violence. The speed and ease with which the rocket traversed a particular part of Beirut determined the exposure time of the corresponding photograph and while elements of the city's urban landscape remain clear and recognizable in the upper half of each image, the lower half deliquesces, the missile-like form smeared into a floating phantasm, blurred beyond resolution by passing time, both photographic and historical, marking its symbolic decay.

Inspired by the sonic messages of national pride and goodwill sent into space abroad the Cedar rockets and the American Voyager spacecrafts, *The Golden Record* (2011), a restrained video installation that features the titular object simply revolving, is also concerned with time past. While the image keeps time, like a metronome, the accompanying soundtrack supplies historical texture. Inspired by memories of members of the Lebanese Rocket Society, it resurrects a bygone era of Arab modernity—filled with the hope and thrill of space exploration, the promise of Pan-Arab solidarity, and passionate support for the Palestinian cause—through its aural traces. As enunciations divorced from their corporeal sources, audio recordings, and specifically the disembodied voice, are absent presences, are inherently spectral, unattached to a specific time and place. Floating forward through time they seem to transform into oracles for contemporary revolutions.

In contrast, *A Carpet* (2011), which features an enlargement of the 1964 postage stamp bearing the image of Cedar IV, seems all too materially present. Handmade in Armenia, it commemorates the longstanding contributions of the Lebanese-Armenian community. Through this shared ethnicity it links the country's pioneering rocketeers, most descendents of survivors of the 1915 genocide, to a group of orphaned girls, themselves survivors, who, in the 1920s, wove, by hand, carpets of world renown. Archival documents presented alongside the rug tell the little known story of their largest and most prestigious work, made for and given to the White House in gratitude for its support. While the gesture of enlarging a postage stamp to the size of a tapestry seems to want to monumentalize the archival document, the rug's woolen surface actually softens the contours of the source image, registering the impossibility of such a straightforward gesture of aggrandizement in a country with multiple and often contrary narratives of the past. Instead, ghostly echoes of a profound communal trauma and a collective will to persevere, and fuzzy memories of a community's significant contributions to Lebanese history and culture, are woven into its very warp and weft, into the national social fabric.

Disguised as a recovery of the forgotten history of the Lebanese Space Race, Hadjithomas and Joreige's project is nothing short of a study in the hauntology, to use Jacques Derrida's neologism, of modern Lebanon. After the sectarian brutalities of the Civil War and the peculiar amnesia that has followed, this recognition of the tremendous imaginative power that lies latent in these past aspirations, the collective will to survive, to dream, to achieve, to challenge frontiers, to be contemporary, is an apparition both desired and needed.

Vali is a critic, art historian and freelance curator based between Sharjah and Brooklyn. He is a contributing editor at ArtAsiaPacific and a regular contributor to Bidoun, ArtReview and ArtIndia.

INTRODUCTION

The Lebanese Rocket Society, an ongoing project comprised of a series of installations and of a feature documentary film *Lebanese Rocket Society, the Strange Tale of the Lebanese Space Race* (to be released in fall 2012, examines the forgotten Lebanese space program that began in the early sixties at Haigazian University. A group of students, led by Professor Manoug Manougian, created and launched rockets for space study and exploration. More than ten Cedar rockets were launched, which gave rise to mass celebration and international recognition of scientific and cultural excellence. Lebanese Rocket Society: Part III, IV, V ponders the apparent absence of this program from society's personal and collective memory, shedding light on perceptions of the past and present - and the imagination of the future, exploring the notion of a collective dream.

To fight the oblivion in which the project sank and question the notion of monument, Hadjithomas and Joreige recreated a scale reproduction of the Cedar IV rocket, which was exhibited at the 2011 Sharjah Biennale. *Restaged*, a photographic series documents the reenactment of the rocket's transportation through the streets of Beirut, capturing traces of strange occurrences throughout.

The exhibition also includes *A Carpet*; a rug that bears the image of the Cedar IV Rocket stamp that was produced in 1964 to honor this scientific project. The latter was followed by the creation of a handmade carpet by an Armenian orphanage in Lebanon, which was sent to the President of the United States in honor of the great achievement. Re-produced in Armenia, Hadjithomas and Joreige's rug is an evocation, a reenactment, a tribute to

the strengths to the survivors and descendants of the Armenian ethnic cleansing in 1915.

The Golden Record represents aspirations in a different way. The installation shows the Golden Record filmed as it turns on the record player that enables the viewer to discover a portrait, through sound representation and reconstitution, of Beirut and the world in the 60's - highlighting such historic events as Space race, revolutionary ideas and pan-Arabism.

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JOANA HADJITHOMAS & KHALIL JOREIGE

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige collaborate as filmmakers and artists, producing cinematic and visual artwork that interwine. They have directed documentaries such as *Khiam 2000-2007* (2008) and *El Film el Mafkoud* (The Lost Film, 2003), and feature films including *Al Bayt el Zaher* (The Pink House, 1999), *A Perfect Day* (2005), and *Je veux voir* (I want to see, 2008). Their artwork has been shown in many museums, biennials and art centers around the world, most recently at the 10th Sharjah Biennial (2011), 11th Biennale de Lyon (2011), and 12th Istanbul Biennial (2011). They are recipients of the 2012 Abraaj Capital Art Prize.

CEDAR IV: A RECONSTITUTION

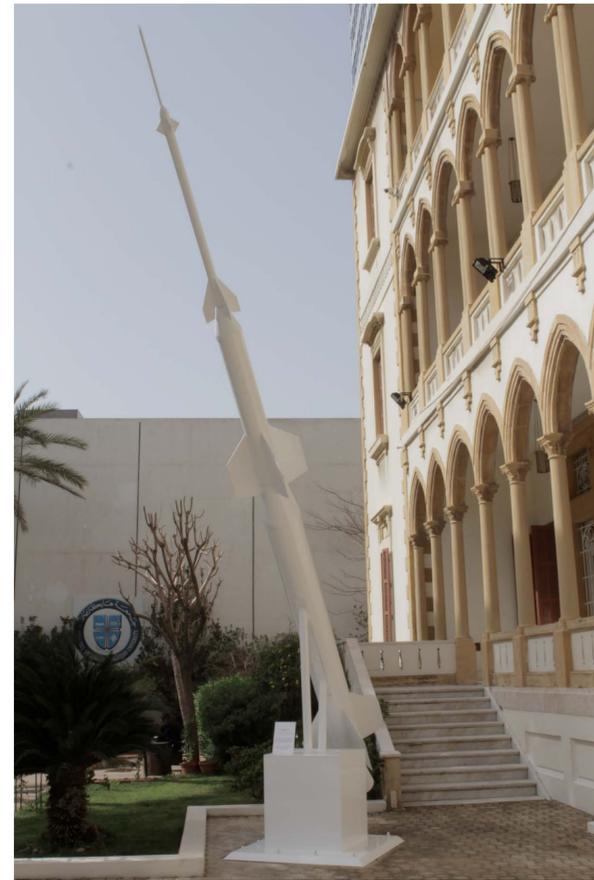
Lebanese Rocket Society, *Elements for a Monument*, 2011

Sculpture Iron, corian, 800 x 120 x 100 cm

Co-produced by Sharjah Biennial 10 and and about productions



Cedar IV: A Reconstitution, View in Sharjah



Cedar IV: A Reconstitution at the Hagazian University, Beirut



Videostill of the transportation of the rocket, from Dbayeh to Beirut, February 2011

Produced in 1963, the Cedar IV Rocket was one of the most impressive developments by the Lebanese Rocket Society. Having traveling a distance of 600 km and reaching a height of 200 km. Cedar IV: A Reconstitution is a scale reproduction of the over 8-meter long rocket, differing from the original in its white color only.

Cedar IV: A Reconstitution traversed through the streets of Beirut to arrive at Hagazian University where it all began and where it is permanently installed. It conjures the temporal distance between the rocket's presence and our own with its current evocation of missiles. It is only within the territory of the university that the rocket is recognized for what it is, an artistic and scientific project.

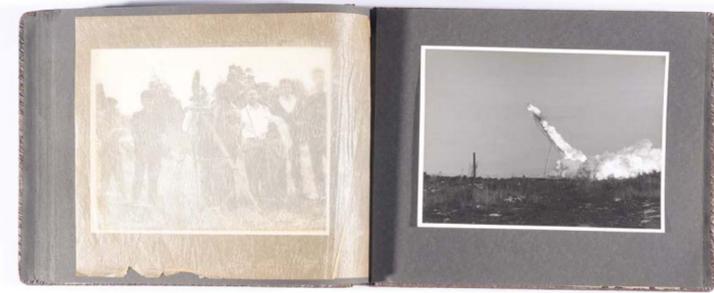
THE PRESIDENT'S ALBUM

From *Lebanese Rocket Society, Elements for a Monument*, 2011
32 digital prints 800 x120 cm each, fold in 32 parties, mounted on wood.
Co-produced by Sharjah Biennale 10

The President's Album is a photo-installation consisting of 32 identical 8-meter long photographs, folded into 32 parts. Each photograph presents a different fold to the viewer, and as a whole the installation displays the entirety of the image in 32 separate segments. Each segment is a composition of two images. The first is an image taken from the 32-page Lebanese Rocket Society photo album that documented the Cedar IV Rocket's launch, and that was offered to the then-President of Lebanon, Fouad Chehab. The second is a part of an image of the Cedar IV Rocket reproduction installed

at Hagazian University, but painted in its original Lebanese flag colors.

The President's Album posits the image, its fragmentation, reconstitution and recognition, as a tool for understanding this history. In each part lies the reminder that while the visible fold represents only a fragment of the rocket, the whole image, and its forgotten history, is potentially there, hidden. It needs only to be unfurled to re-emerge.



Detail of the album



The President's album, Detail



The President's Album, view of the whole installation.

THE GOLDEN RECORD

Sounds of Earth and of Lebanon

From *Lebanese Rocket Society, Elements for a Monument*, 2011

Video and sound installation, 19 minutes

Co-produced by Biennale de Lyon 2011

Upon their launch, it was said that the Cedar Rockets transmitted the message “Long Live Lebanon” to be broadcast on the national radio from a device installed in the rocket heads. A few years later, American space exploration missions such as Voyager 1 and 2 transmitted messages engraved on golden records, and addressed to potential extra-terrestrials. These records broadcast sounds selected “to represent the diversity of life, history and culture on earth” as a message of peace and liberty.

The Golden Record presents the artists’ own version, engraved with a repertoire based on archival sound material dating from the 1960s, and prompted by the memories of various Lebanese scientists who took part in Lebanon’s space adventure. Similar to a time capsule, the record forms a self-reflexive aural representation of Beirut, the larger world, and the historic events of the time.



The Golden Record, 2011. Videostill of the video installation



Graphic representation of the sound, 250 cm x 30 cm

RESTAGED

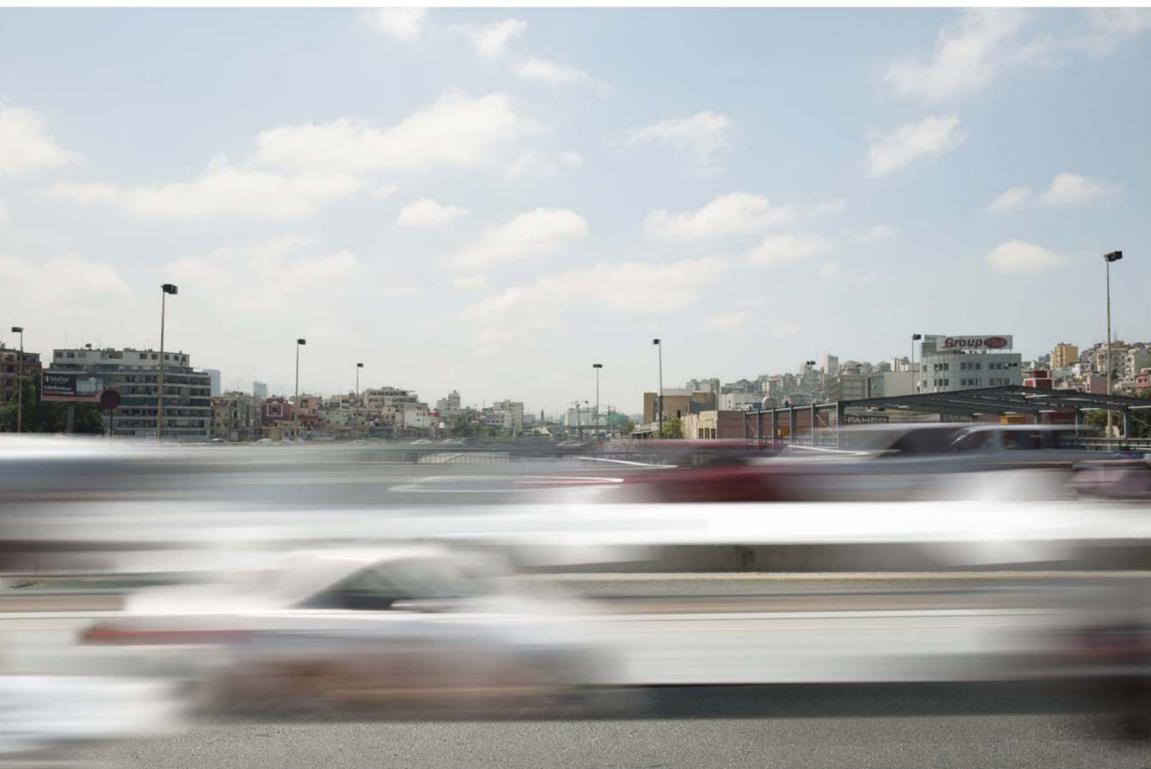
From *Lebanese Rocket Society*, Elements for a Monument, 2012
C-prints 100 x 72 cm

The photographic series *Restaged* is a reenactment of the Cedar IV Rocket's transport that unveils several layers of traces of rockets past and present.

The time of exposure for each photograph is determined by the speed of the rocket's passage in the city's streets, reproducing the moment's exceptional but ephemeral character and capturing traces of strange appearances in Beirut.



Restaged n°3, 2012, C-print , 100 x 70 cm, framed



Restaged n°4, 2012, C-print , 100 x 70 cm, framed



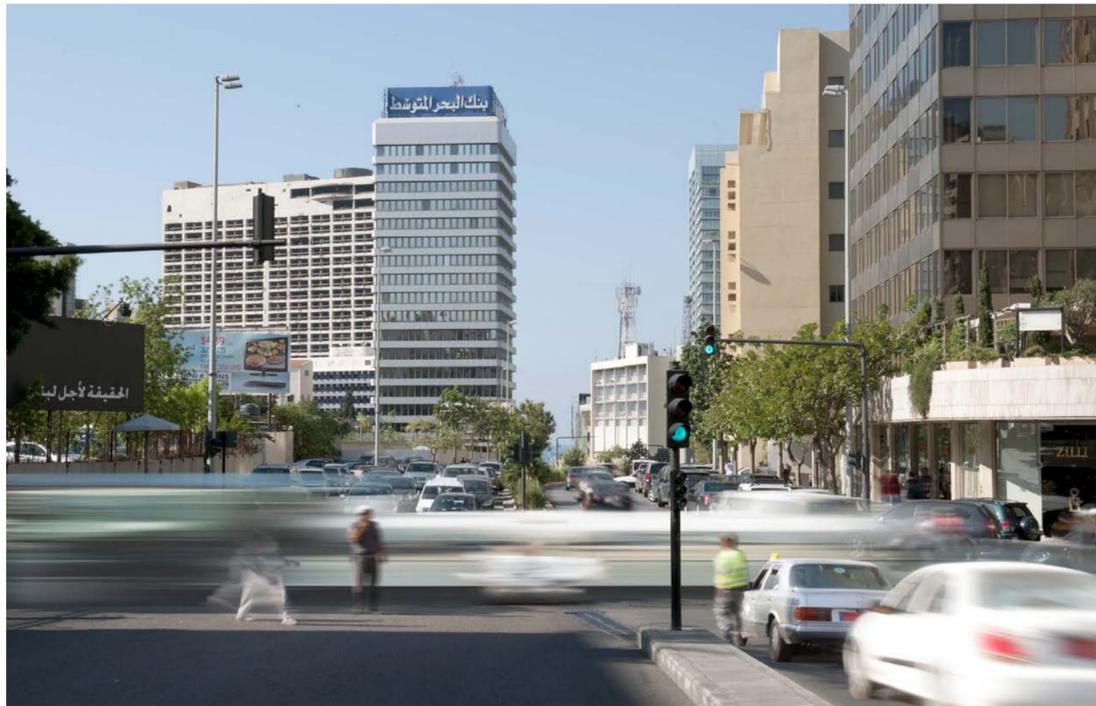
Restaged n°5, 2012, C-print , 100 x 70 cm, framed



Restaged n°1, 2012, C-print , 100 x 70 cm, framed, Edition 1 of 5



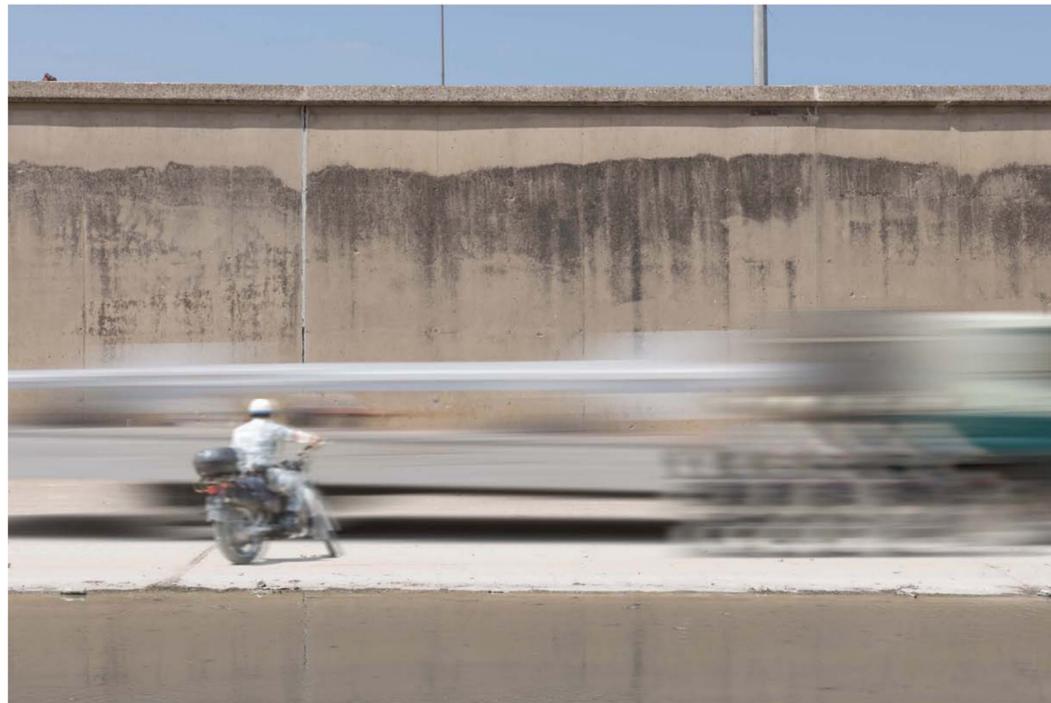
Restaged n°6, 2012, C-print , 100 x 70 cm, framed, Edition 1 of 5



Restaged n°8, 2012, C-print, 100 x 70 cm, framed, Edition 1 of 5



Restaged n°7, 2012, C-print, 100 x 70 cm, framed



Restaged n°0, 2012, C-print, 100 x 70 cm, framed



Restaged n°2, 2012, C-print, 100 x 70 cm, framed, Edition 1 of 5

A CARPET

From *Lebanese Rocket Society, Elements for a Monument*, 2012
Hand made rug, Co-produced by Marseille Provence 2013

During the 1920s, young Armenian girls, most of whom were survivors of the Armenian Genocide of 1915, produced magnificent carpets at an orphanage workshop in Lebanon. One of the largest carpets that these girls wove was offered to the White House as a token of gratitude for American support of their workshop. Produced by more than 400 girls over 18 months, the carpet measured 5.5 by 3 meters in size. After initially being displayed in the White House, the carpet is now, for various reasons, rarely shown; few people are aware of its existence. The Lebanese Rocket Society was born in an Armenian university where many students were the children of these orphans.

Produced by the artists in Armenia in the exact dimensions of the rug offered to the White House, *A Carpet* bears the image of the national Cedar IV Rocket stamp issued in 1964 in celebration of the program. Presented in the exhibition alongside the rug are documents relating to the original carpet's history.

A Carpet is an evocation of these two stories, or two generations, representing the feats of a group to persist, aspire and dream.



Stamp issued in 1964



Installation carpet and documentation (photographs and films), 2012

الخط الثالث
the third line
