As repositories of forgotten historical traces, archives, be they public or private, national or personal, are haunted. Similarly, artistic practices that address the past through recourse to archives are both divine and demonic, and they attempt to narrate history and reanimate, to raise the dead and conjure up history’s ghosts. Those who understand these necro-technologies of archival recirculations of spectrality, recuperating the lost, paradoxically, through tropes of absence, through visual and sonic loops, and through 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 visibility and invisibility, in grappling with the minefield of Lebanon’s past and present condition while acknowledging the gaps, inconsistencies, and memory gaps and repressed regional fallacies inherent to such endeavors. Their retrospection, however, is not tainted by nostalgia. Rather, it seeks to excite a dialog between isolated 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 narratives of survival and give us the strength to rethink the past.

Their latest multipart project, Lebanese Rocket Society, recounts the largely forgotten story of a determined group of student scientists at Beirut’s American University who, initially free of military or state involvement, designed, built and successfully launched a series of rockets in the late 1960s. The project’s first iteration was a multi-media installation that features the titular object simultaneously as a recovery of the forgotten history of modern Lebanon. After the sectarian brutality of the Civil War and the devastation that has followed, this recognition of the tremendous imaginative power that lies latent in these past aspirations, the collective will to persevere, and fuzzy memories of a community’s significant contributions to Lebanon history and culture, are woven into its very warp and weft, into the national social fabric.

The Lebanon Rocket Society is an ongoing project comprised of a series of installations and of a feature documentary film Lebanon 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 student scientists, led by Prof. Manoug Manougian, created and launched rockets for space study and exploration. More than ten Cedar rockets were launched, which gave rise to a national celebration and international recognition of scientific and cultural excellence. Lebanese Rocket Society: Part III, 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 and of a feature documentary film Lebanon Rocket Society, the Strange Tale of the Lebanese Space Race, revolutionary ideas and pan-Arabism.

Lebanese Rocket Society: Part III, V, 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.

JOANA HADJITHOMAS & KHALIL JOREIGE

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige collaborate as filmmakers and artists, producing cinematic and visual artwork that interweave. 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 vous 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.
Produced in 1963, the Cedar IV Rocket was one of the most impressive developments by the Lebanese Rocket Society. Having traveled 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 Haigazian 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 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.
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.

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°7, 2012, C-print, 100 x 70 cm, framed, Edition 1 of 5

Restaged n°2, 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°0, 2012, C-print, 100 x 70 cm, framed
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.