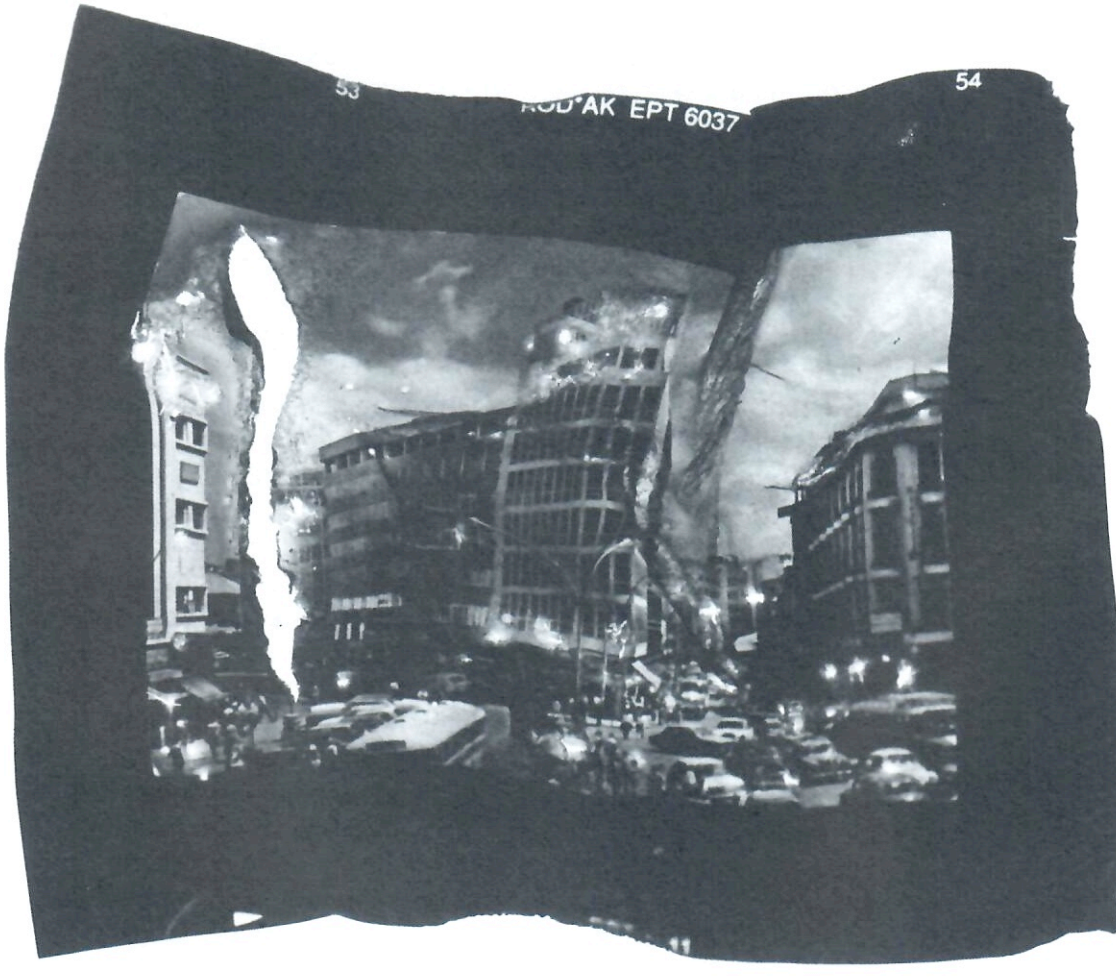
A Pseudo-Presence and a Token of Absence

Hoor Al Qasimi

In her book *On Photography,* Susan Sontag writes, 'the past itself, as historical change continues to accelerate, has become the most surreal of subjects—making it possible, as Benjamin said, to see a new beauty in what is vanishing. From the start, photographers not only set themselves the task of recording a disappearing world but were so employed by those hastening its disappearance'.[1] I found this thinking essential in understanding the work of Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, who use photographs almost as researchers do, archiving and recording histories. So I decided to invite Sontag on a tour of their exhibition *Two Suns in a Sunset.*

As with a number of artists and writers who grew up in Lebanon in the period after the end of the country's fifteen-year-long civil war, a lot of Hadjithomas and Joreige's work reflects the collective 'post-traumatic amnesia encountered in post-war Lebanon'.[2] Working across many media, from film and photography to performance and installation, this common thread of Beirut and Lebanon is especially evident in the large body of work on show. In their series of photographs *Archaeology of Our Gaze* (1997), Hadjithomas and Joreige have 'documented' fragments of the effects of the war. Within this series, *Equivalences* reveals details of buildings – abstract and chaotic, there is no narrative, just a feeling of disorder and unease. This is not the case with *Bestiaries*, where detailed images of streetlamps that have been twisted and destroyed by the effects of war have morphed into beautiful animal-like shapes, creating an atypical and poetic situation out of the aftermath of war. The artists photographed in black and white perhaps to create work 'more decorous than color—or less voyeuristic and less sentimental or crudely lifelike'.[3]

As John Berger discusses in his book *Understanding a Photograph*, 'the most popular use of the photograph is a memento of the absent'. Further, 'a photograph, while recording what has been seen, always and by its nature refers to what is not seen. It isolates, preserves, and presents a moment taken from a continuum'.[4] This is something that is prevalent in the works of Hadjithomas and Joreige. The key phrases, or 'chapters', used for this exhibition suggest this: 'Images Affected by War and Violence', 'Making Visible What We Don't See Anymore'. Both these topics are elements of their long-term project *Wonder Beirut* (1997–2006). Based on the photographs of Abdallah Farah, a fictional Lebanese photographer created by Hadjithomas and Joreige, the story tells of Farah being commissioned by the Lebanese state to



The Story of a Pyromaniac Photographer, slide no. 6, part I of *Wonder Beirut*, 1997–2006

take photographs showing an idealised picture of Lebanon in the 1960s – mainly the Beirut Central District and the Lebanese Riviera with its luxury hotels – that would then be turned into postcards. Those postcards are still on sale, even though most of the places they portray were destroyed during the conflicts. So in 1975 Farah methodically burns the negatives, almost replicating the damages caused to the locations, and then photographs the images after every burn, producing a series of changing images. These photographs were published as a set of eighteen for *Postcards of War* (1997–2006), an installation of which sits in the gallery, where the public is invited to take a postcard of Beirut.

The last part of *Wonder Beirut*, *Latent Images* (1997–2006), shows a series of three photographs of drawers filled with some of the rolls of film shot by Farah, which he has not yet developed. During the time of conflict, when he couldn't afford to develop his film, he just took pictures; then, even after the situation had improved, he still continued to take pictures without developing them. 'A photograph celebrates neither the event itself nor the faculty of sight in itself', Berger argues. 'A photograph is already a message about the event it records. The urgency of this message is not entirely dependent on the urgency of the event, but neither can it be entirely independent from it. At its simplest, the message, decoded, means: *I have decided that seeing this is worth recording*'.[5] Farah did record this: he documented each photograph he took in a small notebook and described it in great detail, leaving the reading of the images to the viewer's imagination. In the artists' installation, a set of thirty-eight contact sheets are displayed alongside the photographs, creating a narrative for each roll of film, each photograph providing a textual explanation instead of a visual. According to Sontag, 'words do speak louder than pictures. Captions tend to override the evidence of our eyes; but no caption can permanently restrict or secure a picture's meaning'.[6]

This project again developed further in 2010, when Rosascape published a limited-edition artist book presenting part of *Latent Images*. Each roll of film is presented in the form of a chapter, and an original photograph of these rolls appears at the beginning of each chapter. Some of the pages of the book are uncut; the reader is given the choice to keep them that way or cut them open. The 1,312-page book was exhibited in 2015 as part of *All the World's Futures*, at the 56th Venice Biennale.

A wall display of books was on one side, and an 'assistant' at a table on the other; the viewer was invited to pick a book up and read the descriptions of each photograph, and when he or she encountered an uncut page, the 'assistant' cut the page open for them. This performance was then mimicked in the exhibition's Arena, where a performance of the reading occurred with actors on the stage taking turns reading and cutting the pages open. As Sontag notes, 'Rehabilitating old photographs, by finding new contexts for them, has become a major book industry. A photograph is only a fragment, and with the passage of time its moorings come unstuck. It drifts away into a soft abstract pastness, open to any kind of reading (or matching to other photographs). A photograph could also be described as a quotation, which makes a book of photographs like a book of quotations. And an increasingly common way of presenting photographs in book form is to match photographs themselves with quotes'.[7]

This use of quote is also present in the visual identity of the political urban landscape of Beirut in the video *Always with You* (2001–8), which shows the poster campaign during the parliamentary elections of the year 2000. The film reveals layers and layers of posters and images that infiltrate the cityscape. You see traces of sentences, or phrases, words like 'you are not alone', 'promises are promises', 'always with you', 'light of the eyes', 'alone', etcetera. This accumulation and saturation of images and words leads to confusion, each image losing its meaning and the words sounding more sentimental and poetic than that of an electoral campaign. In the end of the film you see layers of torn posters, fragments of the city's history. Similarly, for their installation *Faces* (2009), the artists, for a number of years, photographed posters of martyrs who belonged to different parties or faiths in different parts of the country. They chose to photograph posters which had deteriorated greatly over time and where the features and names had disappeared; what remains is a barely recognisable face. They photographed these posters at various stages of their gradual fading and worked with a graphic designer and draughtsman to imagine and insert some of the features. Trying to 'make visible what we don't see anymore'.

This fading or disappearance is an important subject when talking about the history of Lebanon, where over seventeen thousand Lebanese people have been reported missing, including Joreige's uncle, Junior Kettaneh, kidnapped during

Faces, 2009, research process

the Lebanese civil war on 19 August 1985. For their project *Lasting Images* (2003), Hadjithomas and Joreige used an undeveloped Super 8 film they found in Kettaneh's belongings; it had been stored in a yellow bag for fifteen years and survived a fire that destroyed the house it was in, as well as being subjected to the conflicts occurring at the time. They had the film developed and what was revealed was a white screen, from which a faint haunting presence appeared and disappeared. After the artists worked with the film and performed colour correction, this haunting image still exists; the artists refer to this as 'a lasting image that refuses to disappear'. For their project *180 Seconds of Lasting Images* (2006), these images were then printed as photograms, cut out, and placed in a mosaic of 4,500 vignettes. Velcro was used to create a distance from the wall where they hang, making them float, accentuating their ghostly white presence.

Their fictional feature film *A Perfect Day* (2005) also talks about the fifteen-year disappearance of a man, kidnapped in

1988. His wife, Claudia, continues to wait in the hopes of him returning, refusing to declare her husband officially dead. She is haunted by his presence; how can one mourn someone who has been gone for fifteen years, and how can one accept declaring him dead in the absence of a body? Their son, Malek, suffering from sleep apnoea is also haunted – not by his father, but by the woman he loves who no longer wants to be with him. The film sees him continuously driving through the city of Beirut; it ends with both Malek and Claudia seeing something. Claudia looks like she has seen the ghost of her husband and reaches out to touch him, while Malek, wearing contact lenses his ex-girlfriend left in his car, sees Beirut in a different light.

As with most of the works, every project opens up new ideas and possibilities of other works. When filming *A Perfect Day*, the artists/filmmakers were looking for an actor to play the missing husband; due to local superstitions, it was impossible to find someone to play that role, in fear that fiction could turn into reality. Instead, they found a family who provided a photograph of their late husband and father, Antoine. After the

Aida, Save Me, 2009. Performance view: Meeting Point 6, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 2012

premiere of the film in Lebanon, the filmmakers received a call from a woman who had seen the film and recognised the man in the photograph and demanded his image be removed or at least blurred. The filmmakers named this woman Aida; she was Antoine's second wife, and was unaware of the decision to use her late husband's picture in the film. She said, 'Antoine was looking at me and saying: "Aida, save me. I don't know what I'm doing in this film, save me!"'[8] Sontag again: 'Such images are indeed able to usurp reality because first of all a photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask'.[9]

The date of Antoine's disappearance in the film turned out to be the date of his marriage to Aida, and the consequences of his death were still being investigated; in fact, it was an open murder case, which caused the filmmakers to be interrogated by the police and have their film confiscated. As a compromise, they removed his image for the film's screenings in Beirut so as not to haunt Aida with the image of her late husband. This story developed into a lecture-performance and publication titled *Aida, Save Me* (2009). Here again the power of the image in the works of Hadjithomas and Joreige is inescapable. 'This is not because a photograph cannot evoke memories (it can, depending on the quality of the viewer rather than of the photograph)', writes Sontag, 'but because of what Proust makes clear about his own demands upon imaginative recall, that it be not just extensive and accurate but give the texture and essence of things. And by considering photographs only so far as he could use them, as an instrument of memory, Proust somewhat misconstrues what photographs are: not so much an instrument of memory as an invention of it or a replacement'.[10]

Another work by Hadjithomas and Joreige, *Barmeh* (2001), shows actor Rabih Mroué, who appears briefly in *A Perfect Day*, driving through the streets of Beirut. In this seven-minute film, Mroué is haunting the streets like Malek does; they are like Baudelaire's flâneur discovering the city, a character described by Sontag as 'not attracted to the city's official realities but to its dark seamy corners, its neglected populations—an unofficial reality behind the façade of bourgeois life that the photographer "apprehends," as a detective apprehends a criminal'.[11] The film is overexposed and you cannot see the city, but you hear its sounds and the driver describing his journey, the traffic, the effects of reconstruction and redevelopment and

the postwar modernisation of the city. The film ends with an overexposed image of the city, barely recognisable. In contrast to this, the film *Je veux voir* (2008), which seems more like a documentary, also stars Mroué, this time with Catherine Deneuve, driving through the regions destroyed by the war. They visit a village in the south of Lebanon called Bint Jbeil, which was almost completely destroyed during the 2006 war. Mroué comes from that village and had not returned since then, so in a way he was seeing his hometown in a different light, through different eyes. Catherine says, 'I want to see'; she says, 'I don't know if I'll understand anything, but I want to see'. Together they drive through beautiful countryside and also through postwar ruins and derelict and dilapidated areas. Part fiction, part documentary, as with a lot of Hadjithomas and Joreige's work, you never know where fiction ends and reality begins. In the film Mroué says, 'You wanted to see, I wanted to see too, but am not able to see clearly'.

When looking at the film *Waiting for the Barbarians* (2013), once more you see a panoramic view of Beirut, but this image is shuddering; you can't see it clearly. The video films four photographs, each made up of more than fifty images taken at different times. Yet again the artists are creating layers, layers of images where you try to see an image but there is something unsettling. A narrator reads the poem by Constantine Cavafy called 'Waiting for the Barbarians'. It's an internal dialogue, where the answer to every question is 'Because the barbarians are coming today'. Waiting to be conquered by the barbarians, in the end there is disorder and anxiety because they find themselves with no enemy to solve their problems. 'And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians? / They were, those people, a kind of solution'. The city of Beirut is seen again in another work, *The Circle of Confusion* (1997), here a large aerial view four by three metres in size, made up of 3,000 fragments that form this large image, which is pasted onto a mirror. Visitors are invited to take or peel off a fragment and keep it as a memento; on the back of each fragment is a number and the words 'Beirut does not exist'. Over time, as more and more people take away pieces of Beirut, you see your reflection in the mirror and your actual surroundings in the exhibition.

Another major project is *The Lebanese Rocket Society* (2011–13), which also resulted in the making of a feature-length documentary film, *The Lebanese Rocket Society: The Strange*

Tale of the Lebanese Space Race (2013). It recalls the story of Haigazian University professor of mathematics Manoug Manougian, who in the early 1960s worked with a group of students to form the Lebanese Rocket Society, which would build and launch rockets for aerospace technology, research and planetary exploration. They produced what they called 'the first rocket of the Arab World'. The project had no affiliation with the military and was purely scientific. During its time, over ten Cedar rockets were launched into space, and the mission got a lot of attention: it made the front pages of the newspapers, was celebrated and, to commemorate the twenty-first anniversary of Lebanon's independence, a set of stamps with an image of the Cedar IV rocket was issued. However, most documents, photos and films relating to the space project have disappeared, and a part of history was forgotten. The film uncovers this past and ends with an animation that imagines what Beirut would look like in 2025 if this space mission had continued.

As with much of the work of Hadjithomas and Joreige, this uncovering of hidden stories or secrets that seem to have disappeared from history is once again the subject of a series of works, all part of *The Lebanese Rocket Society. Cedar IV: A Reconstitution* (2011) is a life-size reproduction of the eight-metre-plus-long rocket, here purely white in colour; this replica was driven through the streets of Beirut to Haigazian University, where it is now installed as a monument to their achievements, hard work and dreams. *The President's Album* (2011) is an installation made of thirty-two identical eight-metre-long photographs, folded into thirty-two parts. The installation then reveals the rocket in its actual dimensions, each section a composition of two images: an image from the thirty-two-page Lebanese Rocket Society photo album that documented the Cedar IV rocket's launch and was offered to the then president of Lebanon, Fouad Chehab, and a second image of the Cedar IV rocket reproduction installed at Hagazian University, but painted with its original Lebanese flag. In each section you see a fragment of the rocket even though the whole image is there, hidden in the folds; in Berger's words, '*what it shows invokes what is not shown*'.[12] For *The Golden Record* (2011), a spinning golden record is projected onto a circular disc on the ground, with sounds embodying Beirut and the world in the 1960s bringing to light historic events, revolutionary ideas and pan-Arabism. Upon the launch of the rockets, it was said that they transmitted

messages to be broadcast on the national radio from a device installed in the rocket heads.

When looking through the archives, Hadjithomas and Joreige noticed that most of the photographers and cameramen who attended the rocket launch missed the moment of takeoff; all they managed to photograph was the smoke that was expelled and left behind, the trace. In their series *Dust in the Wind* (2013), also part of *The Lebanese Rocket Society*, the artists sculpted this smoke over blown-up images of the negatives inside Plexiglas, turning this immaterial moment into a sculptural materiality, almost negating the fact the photographers missed photographing crucial historic moments. 'Photographs furnish evidence', according to Sontag. 'Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we're shown a photograph of it. In one version of its utility, the camera record incriminates. . . . In another version of its utility, the camera record justifies. A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what's in the picture'.[13]

Hadjithomas and Joreige, through their work, make us question history: what is real, and what is fiction? What can images tell us? How can the spectator interpret these images, and what should he or she take from them? We are continuously taken on a long journey where we can trace histories, tales and elements of the artists' practice. Their ongoing questioning of images and representation results in various complex and experimental installations, which transport us to these real-fictitious moments in history.

1 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 76.
2 Jalal Toufic, *Undeserving Lebanon* (Beirut: Forthcoming Books, 2007), 9.
3 Sontag, *On Photography*, 128.
4 John Berger, *Understanding a Photograph*, ed. Geoff Dyer (New York: Aperture, 2013), 26.
5 Ibid., 25.
6 Sontag, *On Photography*, 108.
7 Ibid., 71.
8 *Aida, Save Me* (2009).
9 Sontag, *On Photography*, 154.
10 Ibid., 164–65.
11 Ibid., 55-56.
12 Berger, *Understanding a Photograph*, 26.
13 Sontag, *On Photography*, 5.