

Why Eternity Is so Precarious

by Ari Akkermans on August 4, 2014



Artists Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige presenting at Ashkal Alwan (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

BEIRUT — Shortly after the opening of their most recent exhibition, *I Must First Apologize*, in the French city of Nice, Lebanese artists and filmmakers Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige returned home to Beirut to deliver their “An Additional Continent” lecture at Ashkal Alwan, the Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts. This lecture is last in the arts organization’s Home Workspace Program (HWP) 2013–2014, which brings together artists, practitioners, and theoreticians from different fields. Drawing on Beirut as a model for physical and historical porosity, the program set out to explore ways in which historical fates (an idea bordering on myth, but yet so politically relevant nowadays) can be remodeled into contingencies; into new ways to move in the world at a time when concepts seem unable to grasp the way we live now.

Lectures are not an anomaly in the work of Hadjithomas and Joreige, who in the last few years have presented a number of lectures that are not necessarily academic exercises, but experiments in which they themselves become an object of inquiry.

In “Aida Save Me” (2010), the pair made an artwork out of an artwork. In this sense, their lectures overlap with our contemporary notions of performance, as neither author nor audience know whether something is being narrated or fictionalized. Other lectures, including ‘Latent Images’ (Homeworks, Ashkal Alwan) and ‘The Lebanese Rocket Society’ (e-flux), have dealt with characters both fictional and real. “An Additional Continent” brought together material from older lectures/performances and incorporated new material from the recent exhibition.

What is this additional continent? In 2011, Joreige spoke about “Je Veux Voir (I Want to See)” (2008), in which iconic actress Catherine Deneuve travels through the war-torn south of Lebanon with actor and performance artist Rabih Mroué:

When we do a film with someone like Catherine Deneuve, on the borderlands — where it is not possible to do something like this — we enlarge a territory. We work on the principle that Godard proposed: that cinema is one more continent.

Godard may be a great background — filmmaking as an extension of criticism, political complexities, the world as source and subject — but the foreground remains a dislocated territory, external to itself, or in the words of Hadjithomas, a territory that doesn’t operate under the rules of the world.



Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, “La géométrie de l’espace (2005)” (2014) (photo by Jean Brasille)

Having been proven among the most skilled archaeologists of artifacts in Lebanon, Hadjithomas and Joreige turned their attention from extended historical investigations that built their reputation, like the Wonder Beirut series (1997–2006) or Lebanese Rocket Society (2009–2013), towards a new territory that doesn’t operate in terms of events or circumstances, but of conditions. Nevertheless, history – or the limits thereof – is still at the very center of their practice; having compiled extensive ‘data’ from historical events and circumstances in their earlier work, and indexed it into major extended projects, now they have begun to map the subterranean forces that lie behind the political limits of history.

Consistent with the proposal of Ashkal Alwan, the artists want to survey more than documents or ruins; looking at a contemporary Middle East in ruins (and yet not, paradoxically functional and vibrant) as a study case, they’re interested in the new historical conditions that produce foundations and markers under conditions of uncertainty and instability. How to begin something anew, how to enable the possibility of a past, in a quicksand?

They want to propose political and historical cosmologies — trajectories of origin and destination: Their recent project, at the heart of the new exhibition in Nice, began in 1999 when they took an interest in spam emails and scams, compiling and analyzing thousands of email messages, and what do they say about the possibility of a message to reach its destination? This entropy of linguistic signs is not only a mapping of the ‘conditions’ of the present as sensorially abstract, but a glimpse into economic geopolitics and biopolitics: The emphasis of a boundary between north and south, intimately bound with postcolonial cartographies.

In their sculpture “Geometry of Space” (2014) the itineraries of spam are physically visualized and documented through atlases, grounding the liminal margin of virtual communication as this additional territory or continent — something they address in their lecture. The boundaries between chronic and fiction, virtual and possible, have become as porous as those of the postcolonial world.

As Hannah Arendt would describe the postcolonial condition, “What imperialists actually wanted was an expansion of political power without the foundation of a body.” It was Arendt who insisted that totalitarian movements do not found a body politic, but instead, far from stabilizing the world, they set it in motion and keep it moving. Thus, to live in the present today, means to live always in a troubled time, and to dwell on a breach: How to move in this temporal breach?

For Hadjithomas and Joreige it is necessary not only to remember the past, but also to reinvent it as if it had never happened before. Hadjithomas insists that to re-stage is to re-start. They want to reframe the question of political foundations as a problem of culture (or of civilization). How to start something anew? How to be reinvented in uncertainty? How to live without foundations? And by foundation we meant the act of founding a body politic, a human community, a political stage.

Their additional continent, expressed by the possibility of something, embodied well in the historical latency of their earlier work, in the manner of Arendt, to believe in a world without consolation or salvation. Art is here not mere agency as the social realists conceived it, but potential through irredentism; weak potential. Presenting their new video work, “Waiting for the Barbarians” (2014), which is based on C. P. Cavafy’s homonymous poem and contains hundreds of images of planes from Lebanon that are overlap. What if the Barbarians are not coming? What if they’re not real? What happens to salvation? In a period of transitions, not unlike the end of the Roman empire, in which the political bodies that slow the eschatological drive of history, are pushing it forward, how to transform the barbarian (a concept of otherness) into the denizen of an unstable universe, as the older polities begin to collapse?

Throughout their career, Hadjithomas and Joreige have emphasized the encounter with a site of history which is not that of eschatological hope, the reason why cosmology seems more apt a term nowadays. In the supposed homogeneous time of Modernity (a metaphor for an unfinished structure), trajectories have become dispersions, and with the looming possibility of environmental disaster, the forces of political cataclysm seem only too aligned with the syntax of a chaotic universe. Homogenous time, as in the old metaphysics, is tantamount to no time at all; eternity. But eternity, this desperate wasting away, is a very precarious thing, and a form of barbarism in a formless world in which a possible foundation requires the rescinding of overarching economic structures that dictate direction. While from the ubiquitous site of globalization, shaped in isotropy, the cartography of 21st century warfare is seen as an outside exterior, in their speaking and writing — an additional territory of their work — Hadjithomas and Joreige place signposts along the trace of dispersion, pregnant with irony: Eternity is a very long time.

Poster for “Je veux voir” (image courtesy the artists)

