

The Return of the Real

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By Ari Akkermans

For Rana Jabbour & Gregory Buchakjian



[Hale Tenger, Beirut, video, 2005-2007]

There was nothing particularly unsettling in the **image**. The windows of the pink-hued building are wide open, and with singular precision an almost imperceptible wind blew the open curtains of the bedrooms in multiple directions. Here one discovers at once the **poetics** of an image: Poetry as a mode of *production*, as ποιησις. Removed from the rationalist value associated with the poetic as an *aesthetic* category, what we are dealing with here is poiesis, the activity through which the world is transformed and continued. It is not technical production or creative genius but the reconciliation between thinking matters and a fundamental horizon of reality. The poetic becomes a site of disclosure¹. In production, the artist is not only shaping a definite material so that it resembles an idea but is also releasing it from its relationship to the producer until it discloses its autonomy as a world of fragmented self-reference².

The image in **Hale Tenger's** video work "Beirut" (2005-2007) does not constitute an aesthetic experience as much as it construes the possibility of latency; something that can unexpectedly awake and haunt the viewer not as an immersion. It is an extension of the world as the site of significance and significant³. As the image moves – the sequence is not temporal but semantic – the poetic disclosure begins through staging a site of memory: Tenger filmed the windows of the once glamorous **St. Georges Hotel** in downtown **Beirut**, as it laid in wait for repairs still half-damaged from the war. The windows are wide open and a soft breeze blows into the curtains, creating almost synchronized wave-like motions. This idyllic scenario of glowing light does not attempt to tamper with the violent history of the site but contents with the difficulty of making violence a checkpoint for **memory**.

At the heart of staging a site of memory – and the procedure is always theatrical, a stage in which the performers are turning their back on the public – there is the acute realization, as **Pierre Nora** noted, that sites of memory exists, because there are no longer real environments of memory⁴. St. Georges was one of the main locations in the infamous **Battle of the Hotels**, a two-year-long chapter in the Lebanese Civil War, between 1975 and 1977, which was the first large-scale confrontation between the Christian militias and the Lebanese National Movement (Muslim-Leftist) and the Palestinian Liberation Organization. These otherwise



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luxurious sites in downtown Beirut proved strategic points of defense and territoriality in a city already divided but that ultimately resulted in Christians being pushed out of the area that until then has operated with relative normalcy.

The aftermath of the battle is well known: A decades-long confrontation that resulted in over one hundred thousand dead and millions of refugees. It was however a turning point after which total war was declared and after a small ceasefire called upon by Prime Minister Karami during which staff of the hotels and tourists were evacuated, the fighting continued incessantly for years to come. The hotel district, located in Minet-el-Hosn remained dilapidated until the end of the war and some of the iconic buildings, such as the Holiday Inn and the Burj El-Murr, remained there unfinished, as an open scar in a wounded city. Hale Tenger's daytime image of Beirut however, is not particularly punctuated by the catastrophic events and the latency is derived not from the narrative but from the ultimate consciousness of a break, a semantic lapse that reveals spaces as question marks.



[Wonder Beirut #17, St. Georges Hotel, Joanna Hadjithomas, Khalil Joreige]

In "Wonder Beirut" (1997-2006), an extended project by [Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige](#), Tenger's St. Georges appears in the form of a postcard. Part of that memorabilia that helped consolidate the image of an idyllic Lebanon throughout the 1960s, in their project, a fictional photographer, Abdallah Farah, was commissioned by the Lebanese state to take photographic register of the city's landmarks to be subsequently edited as postcards. After the war began, Farah set to systematically burn the negatives in accordance to the damage caused to the buildings by shelling. The result is the fictionalization of political memory into images that are still in circulation as a living memory of an image. But an image, Hadjithomas and Joreige know, is not an environment of memory. They raise the question of neither production nor destruction, but rather how to inflict an image with **dissolution**?

Dissolving an image is here not a chemical process but an enlarged apparatus of consciousness that prevents things from appearing as they are. This procedure is not only visual but also historical; not merely a question of representation but also of sense-direction. Hale Tenger's video work does not stop at questioning the possibility of latency but instead, stands at the threshold of the abyss: Tenger traveled to Beirut in 2005, shortly after the assassination of **Rafic Hariri**, upholding a thesis that one bomb cannot follow too shortly after another – thesis disproven by the Lebanese between December 2013 and January 2014 – and found herself unknowingly filming the curious windows of the hotel, next to which Hariri and his convoy were blown to smithereens in the middle of the day. A syntactic transition occurs as the oneiric image is sharply juxtaposed with the corresponding evening scene.

An eerie nocturnal vision unfolds with a lighthouse-like glow that dissolves the composition from its solidity into a floating monument to presence – the memorial to the dead that are still dying, and the adamant refusal of the mimesis between life and art. Tenger's aesthetics here doesn't aim at a conflation between historical space and memory in terms of reconciliation but rather aspires to preemptively disestablish the possibility of redemption. As the curtains draw at the end, the extended space shrinks into a thinly veiled darkness, opening the aural channels to audio recordings of an Israeli invasion with sirens and gunshots, after which everything recedes into silence. But this silence is not an absence of sound, a pristine quiet. It is a ghostly immateriality that reveals the aura of the work not as a glowing light or a transparency, but as a shadow.

In the early hours of December 27th, 2013, another bomb set off in the early hours of the morning in Starco, only walking distance from the Battle of the Hotels and from the site of Hariri's assassination. The victim this time was a senior Lebanese diplomat and politician, [Mohammed Chatah](#), an ally of the late Hariri,

foreign policy advisor of Saad Hariri and outspoken critic of the Syrian regime. The explosion, heard and seen throughout the area, cut short Chatah's life and that of seven other people, injuring over seventy. A sixteen years old high school student, **Mohammed Shaar**, was also killed with the blast after sustaining fatal injuries to the head. Hale Tenger's work was here prophetic not because it had an eye into future events but because it totalized the expanse of the present into a circular presence that invades the fragile existence of ghosts that punctuate the silences.



[Memorial for Mohammed Shaar]

The work, nevertheless, is not documentary. The filmmaker **Maya Deren** notes that documentary does an enormous injustice to film and video in practicing surrealism; using an apparently scientific procedure in order to blur the line between art and life, and undermining infinitely the creative capacities of the camera in resorting to the linearity of the literary format in order to create an expression which by nature, should be vertical. It is not the smooth transition between frames what creates a "filmic" experience but the impossibility to think in terms of optics alone as a site of illusion and emotion. Tenger's "Beirut" is a composite map of a war-city, covering the living monuments in asphalt and discovering that these monuments were but lived time, organically growing into limbs of a diseased body politic that registers history only as the field of an ideological conflict.

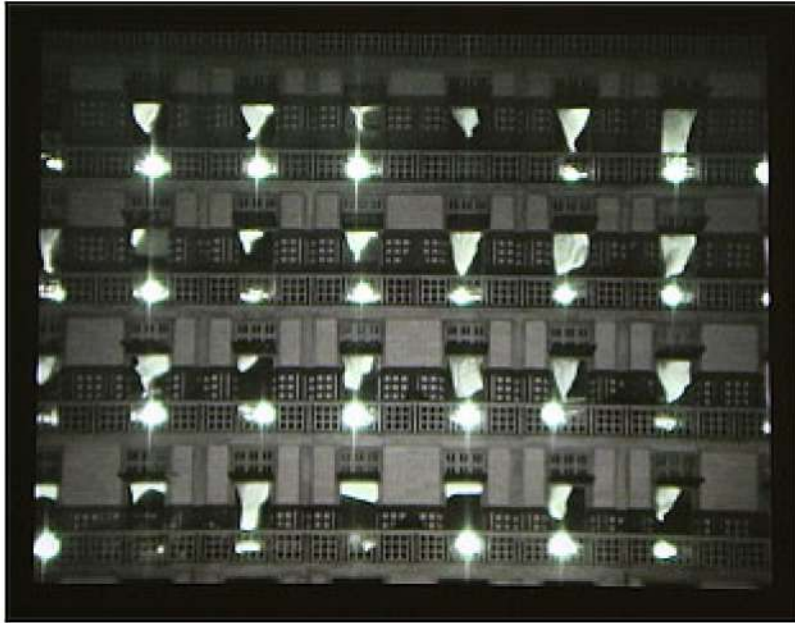
This apparently ingenuous title, "The Return of the Real", is the title of a book by **Hal Foster** (1996) in which through a discussion of Warhol via Lacan, the author posits that the *turn* in contemporary art towards the *real*, is by no means a resistance to representation as illusion or mimesis, as the production of illusion bears a dialectical relation to the real insofar as the real cannot be represented or defined as a negative of the symbolic⁵. The superrealism of contemporary art that is inherited from a profound disappointment with and suspicion of the symbolic order as a vehicle of capitalism, is not a turn to objects as the narrative vessels of social and political reality, but a consequence of a traumatic illusionism in which the framework of reference to understand the inner grammar of the symbol has been lost.

In this new world of "thingness" in which art and theory fuse, the subject is evacuated and with it authorship. The poesis is replaced by a political praxis in which immediacy becomes the currency of representation and therefore tearing off objects from their context in order to present them as whole realities is a means of exchange of ideas between artists. Lebanese artists have practiced this marketing of pure reality since the end of the Civil War, becoming ambassadors and ideological theorists of a country without time or political reality, endlessly suspended in a constant state of uncertainty without the ethical impetus of poetizing the world: Transforming torn off elements into a coherent syntax of being in the world that reconsiders the cycles of self-representation of those same elements. Without a stable concept of the beautiful or a realm of art, these objects become not only simultaneous with but representative of the same reality they critically elude.

In the work of Hale Tenger, the vast majority of which deals with moments and symbols in the convoluted history of the Turkish republic, torn off objects appear prominently in different syntactic arrangements that do not aim to present or perform reality; they carry always the essential quality of "lost and found", ambiguously recreating history in different symbolic orders that speak of a poetry without beauty. It is indeed a poetics of horror, but without turning the symbolic order into a specific posturing. Aesthetics here is not the rationalist construct of value-orientation that in the modern era emerged to replace the absent God,

therefore there is no category-value assigned in it for reality and super-reality as a superior morphology of representation. Aesthetics in Tenger's work is a grammar of a common world that resists being objectified into political opinions of the public domain.

As **Hannah Arendt** remarked, *doxa* – an opinion – is a formulation of speech that encompasses not only opinions but also splendor and fame in its Greek context, therefore it is our way to appear in the world that gains validity not because of its objective truth but because it is shared in a common world with others. Henceforth, in order to look at things as they really are, it is necessary to turn around, or change one's position, because every *doxa* is conditioned by one's position in the world⁶. Hale Tenger's Beirut, accordingly, is a multitude of positions, which do not see haunting and specters as the end of the chain reaction, but develops an apparatus of soft power working against haunting without the need for representing historical conditions or re-stage them⁷. In that sense, she has yet not regarded the facts that created the historical conditions against which she works, as eternal and incontestable.



[Hale Tenger, Beirut, video, 2005-2007]

And the memorial at the St. Georges still remains open, with a certain magic of floating simplicity, wavering between lamentation and panoptic. A conversation with the artist in Istanbul in the spring of 2013, made me soon realize the essence of her need to evoke open-ended monuments as checkpoints rather than stultifications of memory: "When I heard the news of **Hrant Dink's** assassination, I cried and I couldn't stop crying. I didn't know him personally, but after living through all those decades of terror and political assassinations I realized not only that there was no future for me, but also for my daughter." For the Lebanese, Hale Tenger's Beirut is today, six years later, a similar epiphany. The dormant ghosts awaken and the sense of latency that punctuates so much Lebanese art, becomes a living reality. It is not the reality of war even, but of a people that struggle to live together.

In the contemporary age, man can ignite the apocalypse at any time⁸, says **Gregory Buchakjian**, the art historian from Beirut, commenting on the art of the Arab world since 9-11. When will the lights go off at the sound of a gunshot? Or, of a bomb, as in the case of the teenager Mohammed Shaar? On a pristine day of the summer, the winds will still blow gently the curtains at the St. Georges, and if new high risings haven't swallowed by then the view of the entire city, it will still be visible from a far. For the unsuspecting eye, it will simply be another building, another day, another day to live, in this ownerless land. But for Hale Tenger, the living monument remains open. When will you start working against haunting, Beirut?

1. Alexander Ferrari Di Pippo, *The Concept of Poiesis in Heidegger's An Introduction to Metaphysics* in *Thinking Fundamentals*, IWM Junior Visiting Fellows Conferences, Vol. 9: Vienna 2000, pp. 3

2. Martin Heidegger, *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, *Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy*: Indiana University Press, 1998, pp. 147-154

3. Alexander Ferrari Di Pippo, *Ibid.*

4. Pierre Nora, *Between Memory and History* in *Representations*, 26, Spring 1989, University of California, pp. 7

5. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, MIT Press, 1996, pp. 141

6. Hannah Arendt, Socrates (Philosophy and Politics) in *The Promise of Politics*, Schocken, 2005, pp. 14-29
7. Nermin Saybasili, On Haunting and the Voice in the Work of Hale Tenger, Galeri Nev, 2009, pp. 21
8. Gregory Buchakjian, *War and Other Impossible Possibilities*, Alarm Editions, pp. 115