

## Okwui Enwezor in Conversation with Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige

**Okwui Enwezor** Let's begin our conversation by looking at the constellation, the map, of your career, from the formal to the conceptual to the philosophical. Broadly speaking, your practice is a meditation on the status and the nature of images, the way images travel through the world, the way they infiltrate and embed themselves in our historical consciousness.

I would like to start with a question not about images, though, but about your methodology. My principal interest is the concept of the cut, the incision you make in an image to both disentangle it from the frame and to recontextualize it as an object. You are filmmakers; in order to look at an image, you cut into it. Can you talk about your practice through this notion of the cut? Can we pursue an understanding of your work through this device?

**Khalil Joreige** For me, the idea of a cut comes from this idea of a continuum – that you are taking a cut, a fragment of it. In a film, for example, when you finish shooting, you will have to rearticulate the whole in the editing, taking a little bit of footage out, adding some effect. So when you're talking about the cut, it's the relation between the fragment and the whole. It can refer to the continuum but at the same time be a concentration of it, embody the realities and simultaneously express others, potentialities.

**Joana Hadjithomas** For one of the first works we ever did, *The Circle of Confusion* (1997), we physically cut an image into three thousand fragments. The image was not the fragment, but the whole. People took a fragment, as Khalil was saying, a fragment from the image as a whole so the fragment becomes abstract and represents something only for the person who took it.

The relation to the image as a whole is, in a way, what we always question. Thinking that you can define a place, that you can have an entire picture of a place, removes the complexity of the way everything is fragmented. Notions of representation are layered and very complex. But in the cut, there's this idea of a perfect moment to stop something, and at the same time there is all that is *hors-champs*, as we say in French – off sight, what you remove from the scene.

**Enwezor** How do you bring these two tropes, the fragment and the whole, together, beyond the idea of cutting into the image, and in a sense locating the symptom, if you will? Isn't the cut really an attempt to locate the symptom, almost like a biopsy of the image? What attracts you to an image, a fragment, to an object, so that you want to biopsy it?

**Joreige** If we go back to how we started, we didn't study art or cinema – literature is what we studied together. We started to become conscious of our practice by the fact that we were shooting a lot of images in Beirut at the end of the civil war. Here, the notion of rupture, of cut, is important, because we were feeling that it was the end of something. The end, perhaps, of the rules. This rupture could even be found in the method of representation. So in our images, we were not representing the violence; we were interested in how the representation was affected by the reality. That situation was affecting our use of images, our use of narration, our use of a character or our singularity. The rupture here is about a certain way of dealing with traditional images. There is the tradition, and the cut in this tradition. Sometimes a jump cut, even.

Take, for example, a building. A building hit by a shell is no longer a building. It is transformed into something else. This is where you cannot understand, where is the top, where is the right and left? It's a fragment that allows you to rotate the image in all kinds of ways. 'A form of a form that has no forms', as Mahmoud Darwich would say. This relation to the rupture, to the tradition, can maybe push us to think about our practice from the beginning. In Lebanon, a lot of people say there is a problem with memory. Actually, it is full of memory, of documentation, of images, made from inside, from regional, international attention – people taking a lot of images.

**Enwezor** It's almost as if the civil war provoked the dam of memory to burst.



**Hadjithomas** Exactly. We have never thought that there is a problem of memory, Khalil and me. We think that there are too many images, too many memories. We are surrounded by so many images. And there's a difficulty, maybe, with writing history, but it has nothing to do with memory. Memory is present.

**Joreige** Throughout our practice, the relationship between fiction and documentary is evolving. An image in a moment can be a fiction; in another, it can be a documentary. And then it will move again. This relationship is how we can reappropriate some images, some realities, to feel that it is concerning us. It is also talking to us, moving us.

**Hadjithomas** We always wanted to give this complexity, but at the same time we wanted to add a layer of poetics. Because we are also filmmakers, the idea of telling a story was always important in the work, even if it's not a story with a beginning and an end – a moment of fictionalisation in the work, where the poetic takes part in telling the story. And with this comes the idea of having our narrative but giving space to others to project their own narratives, and to question what they are doing. This was very important too, this idea of the collective and the individual.



*Traces, The City Center, 1985-95*

**Enwezor** I'd like to go further into this question of narrative. One of the significant discoveries or inventions in contemporary art from, let's say, the mid to late 1990s really happened amongst a generation of artists coming out of Beirut who began to employ fragments of the Lebanese civil war, as one would use pieces of the ruins of the city to re-create and reimagine the social and common experiences of the country as it was reconstituting itself. These artists had to reimagine the very stability of narrative, and the way in which narrative can be used. It's almost as if the entire scene was working on crafting the possibilities of how these narratives can move. Talk a little bit about narrative in this context, and what you've generated.

**Hadjithomas** From the beginning, it was very clear that there was something we would not do. We would not put the Lebanese civil war into brackets; we would not put ourselves as victims, or take the history of Lebanon as a traumatic moment. We are mainly interested in our present and we don't want to look at the past with nostalgia. Instead, we want to take some of these images from the past and reactivate them in the present. As we did with the Beirut postcards when we burned them, or the project about the Lebanese Rocket Society. Even if it goes back to the past, it brings the past forward in another way, rethinks it.



*Je veux voir*, 2008, production still. Photo by Patrick Zwirc



Always, too, in our narratives is this performative aspect. We like to provoke things in the present. For example, taking rockets and putting them in the streets of Beirut, and seeing what would happen. Taking Catherine Deneuve with us to the south, and experimenting with the relationship between fiction and the reality of a place after a terrible war. Our narratives are never linear, completed and controlled. We know where we're *not* going. We might take a direction to go, but after, even if we make very strict setups, we let things happen. We witness some of them, and we follow them. This is our idea of the narrative.

**Joreige** It comes from a specific situation: this very problematic relation to history, to the writing of history in Lebanon. As Joana was saying, we were really focusing on the difficulty of living in the present; we were actually stuck in the present. In most of our films – *A Perfect Day* (2005), *Ashes* (2003), *Khiam* (2000), *Je veux voir* (2008), *Open the Door, Please* (2006), *Barmeh* (2001), the characters are stuck in the pure present, struggling between a past that is haunting them and the impossibility of projecting themselves – they are mere fragments of a continuum. This is probably due to the specific situation in Lebanon. We react to situations, to what is happening around us.

**Enwezor** A very important term for your work is *latency*. What makes your work so compelling is how the complexity of an idea becomes encapsulated in very clear formal principles that are understandable. In the context of latent images, there's a performative dimension, there is an archival dimension, there is a narrative dimension, and there is the dimension of speaking the narrative. You seem to be theorising something quite powerful with this notion of latency. Can you talk about latency and the way it emanates in your work?

**Hadjithomas** We try to not just produce images; we are all the time questioning the medium of images. Why add to the flux of images that you have today? The images we produce question the presence of images.

Latency is defined as the state of what exists in a nonapparent manner, but which can manifest itself at any given moment. The latent image is the invisible yet-to-be-developed image on an impressed surface. We always had

this impression in Lebanon that we were living in a moment where there were so many traces, traces of violence, traces of destruction, traces of history. All of these were present, but not visible. So latency appeared because we had this political impression that lots of things were latent, without discussion, and also because we were interested in what would happen if we removed some of our images from the flux, and in how to give power back to images in a moment when so many images were produced. The concept of latency was questioning our practice as filmmakers and artists.

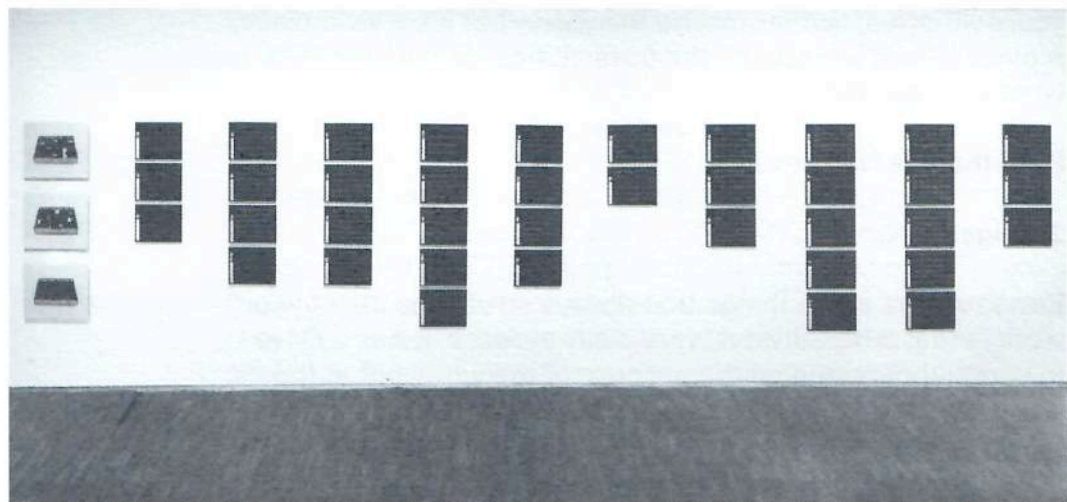
Working on latency happened in an organic way. What happened is that we didn't develop our images for some time, and then little by little, we thought about it as a very interesting principle. We took it as a principle, and we are very strict with it. It was the beginning of the project *Latent Images / Diary of a photographer* (1997–2006). We took images without developing them for ten years, from 1997 till 2006. It was really a question for us – what do you remember of an image, what does it evoke just by being read and when and why would we reveal them?

**Joreige** It came also from, on my personal level, the issue of people who have been kidnapped in Lebanon – more than seventeen thousand missing persons, among them my uncle. We were very close, we were living in the same building. And suddenly you have a present absence. Not someone who died, but disappeared, and you have no news; he's there without being visible. Or he's not there, but you feel he's here. It's a very weird state between several states. So latency for us is really a state, something that is here, but the condition of their visibility is not there. What can be the condition for an image to reappear, for a person to reappear, for a situation to be revealed?

**Enwezor** One of the key themes in your work is the question of the conditions for seeing. Your film *Je veux voir*, for instance – in English, 'I want to see' – was not asking *what* you see, but about the conditions under which an image can either appear or corroborate contending situations. What are the conditions that you establish as the first essential principles for developing the encounter?

**Hadjithomas** For *Je veux voir*, we reacted to images that were shown during the 2006 war, unbearable images of death





*Latent Images, part III of Wonder Beirut, 1997–2006.*

Installation view: Centre Pompidou, musée national d'art moderne, Paris, 2006

and ruins, that were seen but not effective anymore. So we wanted to provoke a real rupture – a cut. By putting, in a very provocative way, a body of fiction, of cinema, represented here by the actress Catherine Deneuve, in places where fiction is not present, where the weight of reality is heavy, we tried to see if this could produce a reaction, chemically; if it could produce another way of seeing. We created a clear setup with which to experiment.

**Joreige** We imagine setup – the conditions for things to happen. But it never happens where we are expecting. If it was in the place where we were expecting, it would be a program. And it's never a program. You have to be surprised, to put yourself in danger. This is exactly why we never give the script to our actors. We write it, the rest of the team has it, but we want to be surprised by something that is unexpected. It's like in a conversation. You know some things, I know some things. But it goes somewhere else.

**Hadjithomas** And sometimes there is an encounter. If we knew exactly where we were going – there's no encounter. Encounter is that you create a setup, but you accept that you don't know exactly where you are going.

**Joreige** It's not you, it's not us, it's something else. It can be a neutral place, as Roland Barthes would use this term, neither

you, neither us, neither me, neither her – but it's a vivid place. A place where you feel all the possibilities, all the promises, where we can build –

**Hadjithomas** Narratives.

**Joreige** Fictions.

**Enwezor** One of the things that always struck me about your work is that it has, always, very clear purpose. It has a drive towards understanding the purpose of the work, but at the same time there's an attempt to deny complete fulfillment in the work. A kind of deferment, if you will, of conclusion. Is this your intention?

**Joreige** We see ourselves as researchers. We believe that we don't really know, we are searching. And when we start to have some answers, usually that means we have to cut, to change projects. If you look at our practice, it's by project, which can take many forms. As soon as we start to master a certain place, it becomes dangerous – we can start to produce repetitions – and we move out. So maybe it's a place of doubt that interests us.

**Hadjithomas** I will use a term – *fragility*. We believe that in an artwork there is a fragility that is essential. Not to be obsessed with being efficient, or with being controlling. This fragility is something that formally we are very interested in. For example, when we created *180 Seconds of Lasting Images* (2006), a large work composed of photograms based on a film taken by Khalil's uncle before he was kidnapped and that we found still latent after thirty years, we felt that the conditions for this image to reappear were very fragile. So the work must give back this impression. Images are scanned, printed, cut and stuck in a way that each moment, we have the sense that it can fall, it can disappear. We think this is very important, to keep this idea. Especially because works are being seen in an art world that is also a market, and that also has this idea of possessions. The artwork has to be, through this fragility, capable of escape. To keep this poetic is essential. And in film, it's the same thing. When we do our films, we keep an open space – that is, a fragility – in the narrative. We really want to keep that. Not to always be efficient.

**Enwezor** This leads me to the fact that, as Khalil mentioned,



you work project by project. How do you come to decisions of what will be the support for each project? Is it going to be a lecture-performance, is it going to be a book, a film, an installation? What guides the final decision?

**Joreige** Our work functions as bodies of works or projects: for example, *Archaeology of Our Gaze* (1997), the project *Wonder Beirut* (1997–2006), the Khiam films and installations, the project *The Lebanese Rocket Society* (2011–13) and more recently the bodies of works around Internet scams and poetry . . . It is not intentional. We usually start with long research and we explore thematic, formal and historical aspects and through the material we are encountering, things evolve. For instance, for the film *ISMYRNA* (2016), we were imagining a video installation, and through the material we encountered, it became a film. We have to respect the encounter. The encounter takes you from one place to another, and you are evolving with it. You are searching, questioning yourself, your own practice. There is also a performative aspect that will take you to build a new narrative that will lead you to a certain form.

**Hadjithomas** Like in our lecture-performance *Aida, Save Me* (2009), an event occurring during the screening of our feature film *A Perfect Day* and leading us to reconsider deeply our relation to images, fiction and documents, or in the project we did at the Venice Biennale – an artwork becoming a book, becoming a performance, becoming a new work. It's never planned. It's a series of encounters. It's mixing different mediums, it's mixing practices.

**Joreige** It's moving work.

**Enwezor** It's experimental.

**Hadjithomas** It's very experimental. It has to evolve a lot. You have to follow it. We like that you can explore one topic and give it a lot of different temporalities, different forms, different shapes. It's a kind of freedom that we want to keep.

**Joreige** Suddenly we can consider that our work can be the condition of creating new setups, or new places of negotiation. Like when we take Catherine Deneuve to the borders and try to see if we will be able to make a film there or open a small road, or when we take a sculpture of

a rocket and cross over the streets showing that it is not a missile but a rocket for space exploration. It's about working on reconstitution, restaging some events and negotiation in certain realities, finding new setups at a moment when you feel your territory is shrinking. As in our double-channel video *Remembering the Light* (2016), where we experiment with the transformation of colours and our perceptions under the water. The ruptures – the cuts – are places where we want to fight, to be present.

**Hadjithomas** It's a rupture because we need to invoke history, to bring back history. To understand more what our place is in these temporalities, and how those temporalities are placed.

**Enwezor** This is part of your idea of chronicles. I think your work has a very strong literary dimension.

**Hadjithomas** We see ourselves as storytellers, for sure. And literature is what we studied together. I think now it's more clear, because a lot of works are connected, some stories are linked together. So there's an idea of chronicle, the writing and representation of what is history and also the construction of imaginaries.

**Enwezor** I want to return to what will be a final point. We've talked a lot about this rupture, or the holes. There are two simultaneities that one has to hold up in your work: the hole in memory and the hole in vision. How are these two things reconciled? When I look at all this work, I ask myself, is it really possible to generate such a rich, dense, complex, almost, in a sense, inexhaustible practice out of this tiny place, Lebanon? Talk about this relationship, between the hole in vision and the hole in memory. I see all these ruptures. They're both physical but also mnemonic, in a way.

**Joreige** Most of the time, we try to deal with a very specific situation, concern. Very precise. The more precise and local we are, the more it enlarges complete territories. And suddenly it echoes in other territories, other dimensions, other times. We believe in a territory of art and cinema, and this territory is the place where we can share political, esthetical and formal questions and concerns. But this is what's interesting for us, when it manages to create other networks and link to other dimensions in time and in space.