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Voyage Voyage: The Politics of Travel and Mobility in Contemporary Visual Practices from Lebanon

| by *Nat Muller*

What is travel? It usually involves a departure from point A and an arrival at point B. It may involve a vehicle of transportation that facilitates the movement from A to B, such as our feet, a bike, a car, a plane, a boat, perhaps even a spaceship. Travel is not flight; the kind we—unfortunately—see much of in the world today: people running in fear for their lives, escaping violence, conflict, and repression. Travel somehow suggests a likely, perhaps even leisurely, return to point A. And even if it doesn't, it invites the imaginary, a possibility of looking past a set horizon, eyes trained towards the future, or as we shall see later in several of the art works, directed towards the past. Time and place are the main coordinates defining travel, and yet they prove so difficult to pin down in a context like the Middle East, and more specifically Lebanon, in which geopolitical realities either shift rapidly or, to the contrary, remain mired in stasis.

The ability and agility to move between time and place, and cut through temporal and locative layers, has defined much of the work of the so-called post-civil war generation of Lebanese artists.[1] In these practices mobility, i.e. travelling across an unstable present often plagued by the past, requires manoeuvring through ideological, geopolitical, psycho-geographic, historical and territorial constraints. Getting from A to B is not necessarily done smoothly, but more often than not fraught with obstacles, and at times even gets stuck in transit. In their oeuvre, artists such as Ali Cherri, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Mazen Kerbaj, Mounira Al Solh, and Marwan Rechmaoui employ artistic strategies that scholar T.J. Demos has described as concerned "with

1. The post-civil war generation of Lebanese artists is customarily known as those artists who came of age during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), such as Walid Raad, Akram Zaatari, Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige, Lamia Joreige, Rabih Mroué, Lina Majdalanie, Tony Chakar, Walid Sadek and Marwan Rechmaoui, who made waves in the international art world. Their work has largely been pre-occupied with attempts to comes to terms with the aftermath of the Civil War and an interest in individual and collective history, memory and amnesia, the archival, and the politics of representation (after disaster).

mobilizing the image as much as imaging mobility".[2] In other words, what is at stake here is not only how mobility is visualised, but also how the travel and hence disclosure or restriction, of that very image constitutes in and by itself a political act of dissent or of defiance.

Back to the Future: Time and Space Travel

Ali Cherri's 2-channel video installation *Pipe Dreams* (2011) is a case in point. In it he brings together one of the most aspirational forms of travel, space travel, with one of the world's most repressive regimes, Ba'athist Syria led by the Assad family. On a small, old-fashioned monitor we are shown an excerpt of a phone call filmed on 22 July 1987 between the late Syrian president Hafez Al-Assad, father of the current president, Bashar Al-Assad, and Syrian cosmonaut Muhammed Faris. At the time of the recording, Faris was flying a Soyuz Soviet space mission to the MIR space station. On the monitor we see Assad in his presidential office talking to the cosmonaut flying over the planet. While this is an instance of travel between earth and space, it's simultaneously an oscillation between two nationalist symbols, the former embodying totalitarian state power and the latter an instrumentalised extension of the former as a heroic and hopeful articulation of the nation. A larger projection is superimposed on the monitor, showing initially a statue of Hafez Al-Assad standing solitary in an ominous desert-like landscape. It's unclear whether this representation of repressive power is rising from the dust or crumbling to the ground. Cherri produced *Pipe Dreams* at the end of 2011, just before the Syrian uprising turned into a protracted and bloody civil war. The projection moves between past and present, interspersing excerpts from Faris in his spacecraft with YouTube footage of the removal of the Assad statue, a precautionary measure taken by the authorities in the early days of the uprising to pre-empt vandalism.

The journey of president's image (the symbol of state power) and its material representation (the statue) is quite remarkable. For the image to remain, its monumental representation must disappear. This might not be a very effective strategy, however, since both image and statue are representations of power. Alluding to this, Cherri has said: "You know the end is imminent when power begins to lose its monuments."[3] Following T.J. Demos then, a rather paradoxical immobilisation of the image occurs (it's removed), so that in the future it might be mobilised for posterity, i.e. as state propaganda. Much of Cherri's practice examines visual politics and the politics of the visual. In *Pipe Dreams* the distribution of state power and that of seeing is scrambled. While the president has to rely on cosmonaut Faris to narrate what he sees as he flies over Syria—and it's true that the narrative is, predictably, one of superlatives, with splendid

2. T.J. Demos, *The Migrant Image. The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), xv.

3. Sheyma Buali, "Image and Imagination. Ali Cherri in Conversation With Sheyma Buali" in *Ibraaz*, 6 November 2013. https://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/111 [last accessed 30 May 2018]

landscapes formed of magnificent coasts and majestic mountains—a relocation of the omniscient eye of Syria's repressive state apparatus is also taking place. The president is not privy to what Faris is seeing on his voyage through space. He remains stationary at his desk in his office. "I am very happy with what I *see*" (my emphasis), Faris says to Assad. At that moment, vision literally belongs to Faris, who by way of his extra-terrestrial expedition has reclaimed ownership of the Syrian gaze.

Fast-forward to 2012 and Faris - a national hero - is a refugee in Istanbul and an active member of the Syrian National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change. He remains one of the most high-profile defectors from the Syrian regime.[4]

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's video installation *The Lebanese Rocket Society: The Golden Record* (2011), part of their larger project *The Lebanese Rocket Society: A Tribute to Dreamers* (2011-2013), was, similarly to Cherri's piece, conceived at the beginning of the 2011 uprisings in the region. But it evokes a very different type of time and space travel. Inspired by Lebanon's forgotten space program of the 1960s, the artists rekindle a past moment of hope when a young and ambitious mathematics professor at the Armenian Haigazian University in Beirut, Manoug Manougian, gathered a group of young scientists with the aim to launch a rocket into space. Soon the project secured government funding and the attention of the Lebanese military, becoming an official national project. It's the 1960s, the Cold War and its space race are in full swing. In the Arab world, the Pan-Arabism spearheaded by Egypt's charismatic president Gamal Abdel Nasser is in its heyday. The programme, unlike any other before or since, is associated with modernity in the region.

The works in *The Lebanese Rocket Society* unearth what is absent from national historical memory and not only bring to light these forgotten narratives, but also aim to revive the hope and dreams they inspired. Golden records were included aboard Voyager spacecraft in 1977 to communicate the narrative of planet Earth and its diversity of life to extra-terrestrials or future humans. Hadjithomas and Joreige's version is a life-size golden record projected onto a rotating disk with sounds from Lebanon in the 1960s and the testimonies of the Lebanese Rocket Society's protagonists. While the original golden records were a global snapshot of the present for the future, Joreige and Hadjithomas' golden record is a message from a forgotten Lebanese past to an unruly present. Both operate as time capsules, curated reservoirs of cultural preservation, with the big difference that Joreige and Hadjithomas' Lebanon of the '60s no longer exists. Destroyed, changed, rebuilt after the Civil War (1975-1990) and its aftermath, the artists have tried to encapsulate a spirit of possibility that has been lost. In this scenario there is no return to the point of departure, but there is a wish that in some way or other the past's message of hope can endure and continue to travel into the present.

4. Cf. Rosie Garthwaite, "From Astronaut to Refugee: how the Syrian Spaceman fell to Earth" in *The Guardian*, 1 March 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/01/from-astronaut-to-refugee-how-the-syrian-spaceman-fell-to-earth [last accessed 14 June 2018]

Postcards from the Edge: The Tourist Gaze

In its most recreational form, travel customarily falls under the rubric of tourism. The late British sociologist John Urry wrote in his seminal book *The Tourist Gaze* that "[w]hen we 'go away' we look at the environment with interest and curiosity […] we gaze at what we encounter. And this gaze is as socially organised and systematised as is the gaze of the medic."[5] He continuously emphasises the role photography has played in relaying the experience of travel and how it "gives shape to travel […]; tourism becomes in effect a search for the photogenic".[6] Or put differently, tourism caters to certain visual expectations of place. In their acclaimed project *Wonder Beirut* (1997–2006) Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige turn this expectation on its head. *Wonder Beirut* is often cited as an example of the impossibility to genuinely represent the catastrophe of war. Conceptualised at the time when the contested reconstruction of Beirut's war-ravaged downtown area (or "Solidere"[7] as it is known to the Lebanese) was well underway, it was produced during a time when "nostalgia and amnesia had come to live on the same street…the present was only a convenient place to look at images of past and future".[8] In other words, the present—testimony to a recent past too painful to remember—is conspicuously absent or wilfully forgotten. Only a safe beautiful mythical past, or a fresh and vibrant modern future might find a place within a post-traumatic narrative that still has to come to terms with its history and atrocities. The city's depiction in this context is always of what it once was—more precisely how most people prefer to remember it before the onset of civil war in 1975—or perhaps how it could have been, provided it never happened.

The first part of *Wonder Beirut, The Story of a Pyromaniac Photographer*, consists of a selection of postcard images by a fictional Lebanese photographer named Abdallah Farah. In 1968 and 1969 he was commissioned to produce postcards of notable tourist destinations such as the swanky hotels along the Lebanese corniche (seaside). He photographed typical sun, sea and beach settings with people enjoying themselves sunbathing, windsurfing; other Beiruti landmarks such as Raouché (the Pigeon Rocks); Martyrs' Square and its iconographic statue; and more folkloric images of the city and the Roman ruins of Baalbek. These stereotypical images, which do not differ from snapshots of any other holiday resort, are still on sale in Beirut today. During the early stages of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975, Farah started burning the negatives of the photographs he took, mimicking in real time a city consumed by fire. Of note is that Farah did not venture out to photograph the actual destruction of Beirut, nor did he retouch the existing photographs as if to "correct" them to correspond with the war's destruction unfolding in front of his eyes. Rather, instead of documenting reality anew,

5. John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, (London: Sage Publications, 2008), 1.
6. ibid. p. 128.
7. The area is known as "Solidere", an acronym for the Lebanese Company for the Development and Reconstruction of Beirut Central District, founded in 1994 by then Prime Minister Rafiq el-Hariri. It is situated on the former "green line", which used to divide the predominantly Christian Eastern part of the city, from the predominantly Muslim Western part, and was devastated during the civil war. The public-private partnership status of the company, as well as its brutal erasure of what was left from the downtown area, has generated a lot of criticism. See http://www.solidere.com/.
8. Lawrence Chua, "Virtual Beirut", in: *Transition*, No. 83 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 36-43.

Farah tampered with his undeveloped images in violent fashion, whose purpose was to portray an idealised version of pre-war Beirut. In a way, he destroyed an illusion before it could even come into being and be disseminated. Farah's action suggests that in war any visual mediation will be insufficient to represent catastrophe. To an extent, the circulation of images—their mobility if you will—is short-circuited, not fully available for consumption. It's a sentiment echoed in Joreige and Hadjithomas' feature film *Je veux voir* (2008), which the duo made in the aftermath of Israel's 2006 war on Lebanon.[9] In the film, the icon of French cinema Catherine Deneuve and Lebanese artist and playwright Rabih Mroué go on a road trip to visit Bint Jbeil, the heavily bombarded town where Mroué's family comes from, in South Lebanon. Deneuve insists that she wants to see for herself the ravages of war. Mroué, on the other hand, is apprehensive about witnessing the destruction. When asked by Deneuve why, he replies: "I don't like to be a tourist in my own country [...] But now, with you it'll be different. The film [*Je veux voir*] will make it interesting." The tourist gaze and war voyeurism collapse into each other here: in the end there is nothing to see and little can be learnt from gruesome images of war. The realm of art and cinema, however, can open up a different space, imagined or real, and it can reach out and create connections.

The latter is well illustrated by artist and musician Mazen Kerbaj's series of drawings *Beirut. July – August 2006* (2006), which he made during the same summer of war. They were originally uploaded to his blog (kerblog) on an almost daily basis (electricity outages permitting) as a diary of war chronicling a city and country under the bombs. Kerbaj's posts—raw and beautiful artworks in their own right—captured conflicting and deeply personal emotions of living life under siege. The drawings are funny, feverish, heart-breaking, angry, delirious, absurd, tragic, fuelled by booze, fear, sleepless nights and—importantly—love and friendship. In heavy black ink or in colour, in a combination of French, English and Arabic, they are utterly devastating. I like to think of them as postcards from Beirut to the outside world. A therapeutic lifeline for the artist to keep on producing work under trying circumstances and show a global audience the face of war, as well as a refusal to give in to defeat. With air and sea access to Lebanon blockaded by Israel until a UN-brokered ceasefire, Kerbaj's images travelled all over the world despite the fact that he and so many others couldn't.

What stands out in these drawings is Kerbaj's relation to the sounds of war; how explosions are preceded and followed by an uneasy silence; how from the sound of impact proximity can be calculated. After fifteen years of civil war the Lebanese have become adept at discerning the sonorous aspects of war. In one drawing, quotidian sounds like birds tweeting in the morning almost become perverse, but also signify that life goes on. In another drawing Kerbaj competes with his trumpet against the Israeli bombs. Perhaps most poignantly, in one of his posts for July 16th, Kerbaj asks in a speech bubble "how can i show sound in a drawing?", while black plumes of smoke billow over

9. Also known as the July War (12 July 2006 – 14 August 2006) or the Second Lebanon War fought between the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and predominantly Hezbollah resulted in approximately 1300 Lebanese casualties, the displacement of over one million Lebanese and massive damage to Lebanese infrastructure. Cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2006_Lebanon_War [last accessed 30 May 2018]

Beirut's burning skyline. More than anything else, the drawings make up a fragmented memoir of the artist's lived experience, in which there is a continuous battle between the physical and mental constraints of movement of those under attack (the waiting, the queues at the gas stations, the challenges or impossibility of flight and evacuation) versus the Israeli air force's command over the Lebanese sky and power over when and where to bomb.

Defamiliarizing the Familiar: Domestic Travel and Other Crossings

It's important to refrain from characterising Lebanese visual practices solely through the lens of war. Not only does it fail to do justice to what is a diverse and multi-faceted scene, it also fails to appreciate the complexity of the works that do deal with the many effects of war on Lebanese society. A maverick voice exploring amongst other things the dynamics of gender, language, place, and autobiography, Mounira Al Solh is a case in point. In her body of work *The Sea is a Stereo* (2007-2015), she follows a group of middle-aged men, including her father, who swim every day at the beach in Beirut, rain or shine. The videos *Paris Without a Sea* (2007-2008) and *Let's Not Swim Then!* (2007-2009) illustrate how this daily ritual grants these men a pause from their work and responsibilities, or as Al Solh puts it: "It's as if they emigrate every day to somewhere else through the water, without really leaving their country. They are out of place, yet still immersed in it."[10] This form of domestic travel is at least two-fold. On the one hand, the actual commute from their homes in the city to the sea. On the other, the escapist travel from who they are in everyday life (employees, fathers, husbands, etc…) to an urban all-male nautical tribe, complete with nicknames such as Abu Wahid, Abu Sakhra, Abu Joseph, and so on. Here crossing from one place to another and from one identity into another is firmly intertwined. Moreover, it's the light-hearted banter, the camaraderie, and the humorous instances of competitive and performative masculinity—from who is the best swimmer to who has the darkest tan—that allows the viewer to cross into the world of these men, offering a glimpse of the rapidly-changing urban and political dynamics in Beirut.

Al Solh uses a tactic art historian Simon Harvey has described as "smuggling" when writing about contemporary visual practices coming out of Beirut. "Smuggling", he argues, may produce "contraband modalities of being-in-the-world that embody asymmetrical viewpoints and undermine, exceed, run through, circumvent, or even evade the taxing or taxable object of study."[11] The latter in this case being Beirut with its ruthless urban development, privatisation and neglect of civic and public institutions, as well as the friendship and love for the sea that unite these men. As in much of Al Solh's work, her own subjectivity, voice and position as an artist is continuously questioned. *Paris Without a Sea* consists of a series of interviews with the swimmers. However, not only has she voiced-over her own questions, she has also voiced-over

10. Muller, Nat. "The Many Metamorphoses of Mounira al Solh. Mounira al Solh in conversation with Nat Muller." *Ibraaz*. 27 June 2013. https://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/82 [Accessed 1 June 2018]
11. Simon Harvey, "Smuggling Practices into the Image in Beirut" in *Out of Beirut* ed. S Cotter, (Oxford: Modern Art Oxford, 2006), 39.

the men's answers, therefore partly appropriating their subjectivities and by corollary certain freedoms available to men and not to women in Lebanon. "I was always jealous how on the Corniche [seaside promenade] in Beirut men are free to walk shirtless and show off, or how they can just jump off the rocks into the water in their underwear."[12] This is how Mounira Al Solh smuggles herself into an alternative narrative, one that she can perhaps inhabit in the future, but for now has to cross(dress) into.

A different type of crossing can be found in Marwan Rechmaoui's iconic piece *Beirut Caoutchouc* (2004-2008). Throughout his practice Rechmaoui has taken the complex urban environment of Beirut as his point of departure. In a way he provides us with an alternative cartography of a city that—no matter how many op-eds celebrate its night-life and food scene—continues to be scarred by social divisions, conflict and sectarianism, in addition to struggling systemically with opportunistic real estate development and crumbling infrastructure. In *Beirut Caoutchouc*, however, Rechmaoui has undone the city of all these obstacles by flattening it into a large black rubber map that can be walked on, all its municipal sectors neatly carved out. Beirut is not necessarily a pedestrian-friendly city; *caoutchouc* (rubber in French) car tires are the city's transportation of choice. To use rubber then to engender a different type of movement, a walk across a city with its political, historical and spatial divisions absent, facilitates a different way to engage with the city and the audience's own personal relationship to the place, lived and imagined. In *Beirut Caoutchouc* it's not so much about bridging big ideological or historical narratives in which Beirut often takes on the mythological status of a phoenix city destroyed and reborn,[13] but rather it is about taking small steps—literally—to discover shrunken distances between neighbourhoods, the meandering of certain streets, or the demarcations of the shoreline. With no highways, overpasses and tunnels to cross, there is no East and West Beirut, no Karantina, Shatila or Dahyeh,[14] there are no landmarks, there's just Beirut, homogenised into a black rubber surface that invites you to venture into neighbourhoods you otherwise might not, or that allows you to experience proximity you otherwise might not. In a way, Rechmaoui's project enables a discovery of Beirut without being judged and without being judgmental. Travel then becomes, as the projects cited here all demonstrate, not a means to an *a priori* defined end. But rather an artistic tactic to stretch possibilities, imaginaries and vistas otherwise hemmed in by geopolitical, historical and other forcefields. Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige have described their practice as "blurring the frontiers or boundaries of marked spaces, invading territories where we are not expected"[15], which is exactly, I would argue, what all the works here allow us to do as we voyage with and through them.

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12. Ibid 9.
13. Cf. Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, "Marwan Rechmaoui; Understanding (and shrinking) a city divided." Originally published in *Bidoun*, Spring Bazaar, 2010. https://bidoun.org/articles/marwan-rechmaoui [Accessed 30 May 2018]
14. During the civil war, East Beirut was predominantly Christian, West Beirut Muslim. Shatila, a Palestinian refugee camp on the outskirts of Beirut, was the site for the1982 Sabra and Shatila massacres by the Phalangist militia. Karantina, now a semi-industrial and highly polluted area was the site of another Phalangist massacre in 1976. Dahyeh, as the suburbs south of Beirut are known, is now a Hezbollah stronghold and was particularly hard hit during the 2006 war.
15. Thériault, Michèle and Clément Dirié. *Joana Hadjithomas Khalil Joreige*." A conversation with Dominique Abensour, Etel Adnan, Rabih Mroué, Jacques Rancière, Michèle Thériault, Jalal Toufic, Anton Vidokle." Zurich: JRP | Ringier, 2013. P.107

Nat Muller is an independent curator and critic based in Amsterdam. Her main interests include: the intersections of aesthetics, media and politics; media art, food and contemporary art in and from the Middle East. Her writing has been published amongst others in Springerin, MetropolisM, Bidoun, ArtAsiaPacific, Art Papers, Hyperallergic, Ibraaz and Ocula. She has also written numerous catalogue and monographic essays on artists from the Middle East. She has taught at universities and academies in The Netherlands and the Middle East, and has curated video and film screenings for projects and festivals internationally, including for Rotterdam's International Film Festival, Norwegian Short Film Festival, International Short Film Festival Oberhausen, and Video D.U.M.B.O. Recent projects include Spectral Imprints for the Abraaj Group Art Prize in Dubai (2012), Adel Abidin's solo exhibition *I love to love*… at Forum Box in Helsinki (2013), *Memory Material* at Akinci Gallery, Amsterdam (2014); *Customs Made: Quotidian Practices & Everyday Rituals* at Maraya Art Centre in Sharjah (2014); *This is the Time. This is the Record of the Time* at Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam & American University of Beirut Gallery (2014/15). In 2015 she curated a group show on contemporary Islamic miniatures *Minor Heroisms* for Galeri Zilberman (Istanbul) and Sadik Kwaish Alfraji's acclaimed solo show *Driven by Storms (Ali's Boat)* at Ayyam Gallery in Dubai for which she edited his first monograph, published by Schilt Publishing. In the same year she was Associate Curator for the Delfina Foundation's Politics of Food Program (London). In 2016 she edited Nancy Atakan's monograph *Passing On* published by Kehrer Verlag, and curated her solo show *Sporting Chances* at Pi Artworks (London). Recent exhibitions include the group show *But Still Tomorrow Builds into My Face* on the timely topic of loss of cultural heritage at Lawrie Shabibi Gallery (2016) and Walid Siti's solo show *The Black Tower* at Zilberman Gallery Berlin (2017). She was appointed guest curator for the A.M.Qattan 2016 Young Artist of the Year Award for Palestinian artists that opened at Qalandiya International in Ramallah, Palestine in 2016 and The Mosaic Rooms in London in 2017. Nat has been a nominator for amongst others the Prix Pictet Award, the V&A Jameel Art Prize, the Visible Award and the Paul Huf Photography award.

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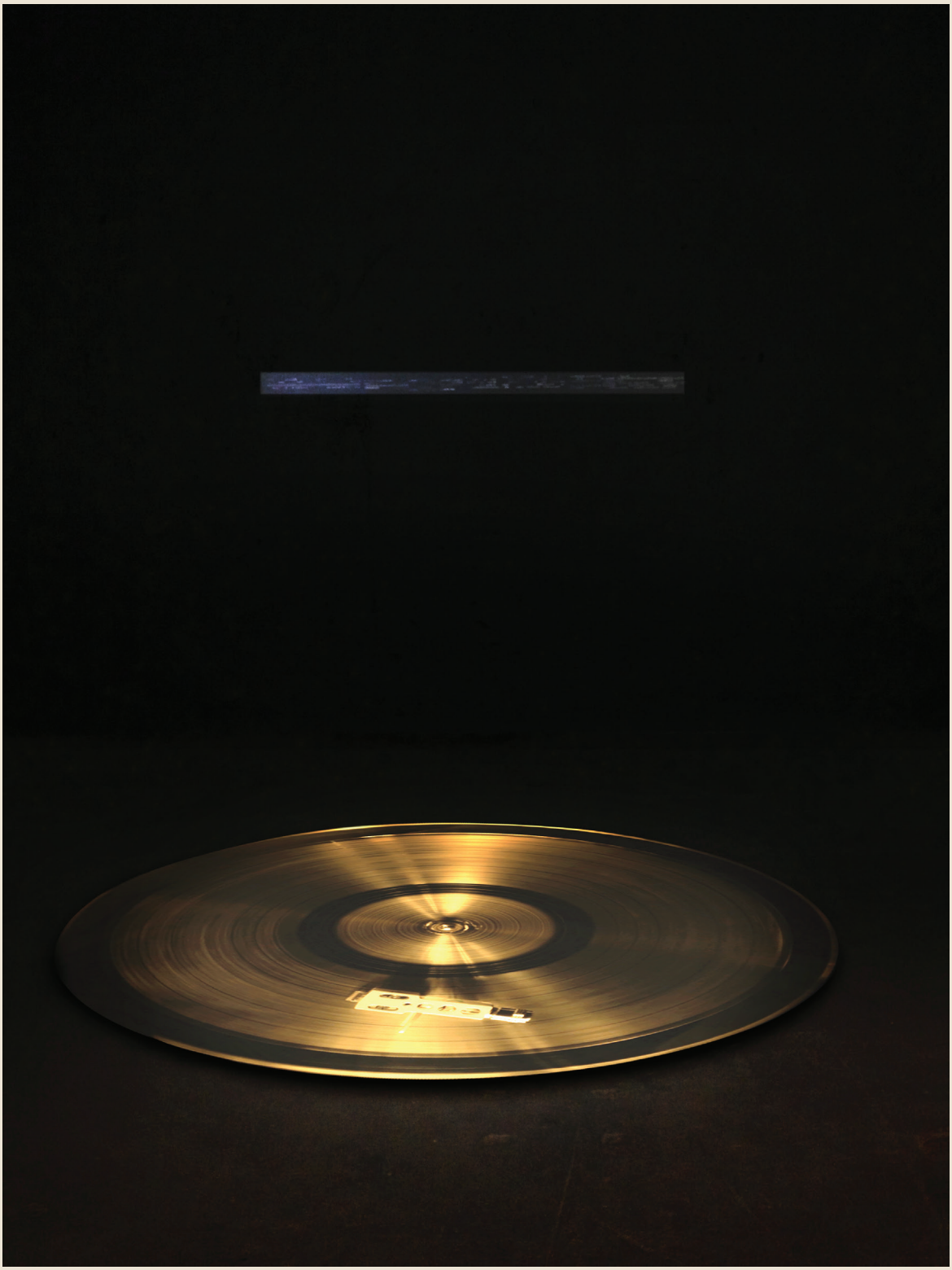
1 | Ali Cherri
Pipe Dreams, 2011
courtesy of the artist and Iman Farès Gallery



2 | Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige
The Lebanese Rocket Society: The Golden Record, 2011
courtesy of the artists

3 | Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige
Wonder Beirut. Part 1. The story of a pyromaniac photographer. Slide Base No.1., 1997-2006
courtesy of the Saradar Collection

4 | Mazen Kerbaj
Beirut, July-August 2006. (selection of Drawings)
courtesy of the Saradar Collection

6 | Mounira Al Solh
The Sea Is a Stereo: Paris Without a Sea, Let's Not Swim Then! (video stills), 2007 - 2017
courtesy of the artist

5 | Marwan Rechmaoui
Beirut Caoutchouc, 2004 - 2006
courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery