

## ***Beirut Forever – Suspended Space in Suspended Time***

*Waiting, paying attention to what makes waiting a neutral act, turned in on itself,  
locked in circles the innermost and outermost of which coincide, with  
attention distracted while waiting and brought back to the unexpected.  
Waiting, waiting is the refusal to wait for anything, an  
extended calm measured out in steps.<sup>1</sup>*  
Maurice Blanchot

*The memorable is what can be dreamt about the place.<sup>2</sup>*  
Michel de Certeau

The work produced by Lamia Joreige since the mid-1990s, and especially major displays such as *Beirut, Autopsy of a City* (2010), is becoming more and more akin to an investigation, a retro science fiction novel, or inventories mapped and organised into chapters, themselves localised, dated and numbered, with the whole making up a kind of atlas of the imagination. Concentrating on the blind points of her personal history and those of the Lebanese history of which she is a contemporary, she juxtaposes, superimposes or places in perspective both documentary and fictional elements which she uses as evidence, an incriminating document, a testimony concerning the events or locations particularly linked to the conflict and unease that have haunted Lebanon at least since the outbreak of civil war in 1975. It is in and with Beirut, where she lives, that she started this complex work with a multiplicity of mediums and genres, taking the risky step of talking about herself and resorting to fiction to construct what is both a work and an archive of the present time which negotiates very finely with a history for which nobody wants to take responsibility in Lebanon and the region that is now more fragile, a channel of violence and obscurantism, than ever before.

### *An investigative novel*

The inventory form was something that Joreige first used at an early stage, in 1999, with *Objects of War*, an as yet unfinished work being further enriched, with varying degrees of regularity, with new chapters. Based on the subjectivity and incompleteness inherent in the subject material chosen by the artist<sup>3</sup>, this collection aims to ‘reconstruct’ the past and ‘put together a collective memory’, on the basis of numerous testimonies born of recollections triggered by the matter chosen and given by actual persons who lived through the period. The spectator’s task is to make sense ‘from the apparent disorder of testimonies, facts and events’<sup>4</sup>. With the confidence given to ‘Romanesque truth’, the artist gives a more literary form to the ‘false’ inquiry that she conducts in *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere* (2009) into the

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *Awaiting Forgetfulness*, Gallimard 1962, p. 20

<sup>2</sup> Michel de Certeau, *Invention the Everyday. I. Arts de Faire*, Gallimard, Col. Folio Essais, 1990, p. 163

<sup>3</sup> Lamia Joreige: “*Objects of War* is a collection of testimonies about the war in Lebanon. Each person has chosen an ordinary, familiar or strange item on the basis of which the thread of their testimony unravels. These testimonies were put together (2000) and then presented in their entirety (2003, 2006, 2014).” lamiajoreige.com

<sup>4</sup> Arlette Farge, *The Taste of the Archive*, Éditions du Seuil, 1989, p. 122

disappearance, one of so many in Lebanon, of Wahid Saleh, who vanished on 15 June 1986. Here also, the personages and their sometimes contradictory testimonies help understand the complexity of constructing reality. The first chapter of the work *Under Writing Beirut*, subtitled *Mathaf* (2013) brings together six elements, produced using different mediums, devices and concepts, which are also incriminating pieces shown in the dossier of objects of art lost from the National Museum of Beirut during the war years. An archive photograph, a book, a printed text, a video, a concrete cast, and ten unpublished photographic prints represent techniques that record and reproduce real data in printed form in an analogue report subsequently processed using digital tools. This use of recording and reproduction techniques, which produce 'resemblance by contact'<sup>5</sup>, is very particular to the work of numerous artists from Lebanon or from the wider region in which the very definition of what is or was real raises problems or does not go without saying. These embalming and conservation techniques encourage reminiscence because they bring together and render inseparable presence (in all its material forms) and absence (the hollow, the negative, the hole). The means by which the various elements making up this work are presented is an echo of the history of the Museum, which became a vehicle of vision for snipers during the war. A launch window made through a mosaic vandalised for the occasion, concrete catafalques to protect the sculptures, and pillage of the exhibits for which there is no reliable list and of which the reserves are inaccessible for the artist, are all facts reflected by the items that Joreige has produced with photographs (pinhole negatives for which the camera could be the building), a video (taken from the hole and aimed at the outside, which is now a garden), a concrete sculpture (material expression of hole) etc. This monument to the shared history of a culture and a people, which a museum generally represents, is seen by the artist as a space in suspense, to which symbolic first aid has been administered in anticipation of the reconstruction of its history.

*"Nobody understands Lebanon..."*<sup>6</sup>

For what has happened in Lebanon recently, this thought by Mahmoud Darwich appears justified, and all the more so in Beirut, which is the subject, and indeed the principal character, of the writings and works of Lamia Joreige. The city is a chaotic palimpsest in which layers of history are superimposed with sections frequently visible (Roman remains alongside modern buildings); a muddled pile of buildings the most recent of which stand above the others, remains of buildings started during the war and abandoned, excavations that have not yet found their target, a mixture of Arab and Ottoman heritage and great Beirut houses abandoned and then demolished in response to pressure from the property market, an entire quarter rebuilt in the same way on the lost ruins of the ancient quarter (Entreprise *Solidere*), and a luxury business quarter. To understand this city requires the tools of archaeology and a good knowledge of political science, as political, economic and denominational organisation marks out the territory. The erasure of former traces is a

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<sup>5</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *Resemblance through Contact. Archaeology, anachronism and modernity of printing*, Minuit, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> "Nobody understands Lebanon, not even its putative masters, its creators, its destroyers, its builders, its allies or its friends, those who enter it and those who leave it. Is this because the disjointed reality is difficult to understand or because the disjointed reasoning cannot understand?" Mahmoud Darwich, *A Memory of Oblivion*, (translated from the Arabic (Palestine) by Yves Gonzales-Quijano and Farouk Mardam-Bey), Actes Sud, 1994. 1987 for the original edition, p. 52

practice that affects all moments of history, without distinction and without vision<sup>7</sup>. Lamia Joreige, without being a specialist in these fields, has worked closely and doggedly with Beirut, her main city and her landmark wherever else she may be. In most of her films and videos, the City of Beirut is present, at least in the background, and most often in the foreground. The cartographic display *Beirut, Autopsy of a City* (2010) offered, in the form of a multimedia inquiry, a reading of the city as a series of temporal layers enriched by literary texts. It already mentions the relationship between surface and depth, between overexposed present and stolen past. "Underneath the concrete, even the very shape of the city can no longer be seen"<sup>8</sup>, says Samir Kassir, "so how can the amnesia and the obscuring be shown in the work?" It is through figures hollowed into surfaces, both real and metaphorical, that Joreige manages, in a highly poetic fashion, to construct an imaginary archaeology of the city. She is fascinated by grooves, cracks and other 'accidents of surface', and by manhole covers and cast iron hatches found on highways, entrances to underworlds and the underground of the city and its memory. Like the *Wunderblock* mentioned by Sigmund Freud in connection with the function of one's psychic apparatus, the city generates on its surface indicators that suggest a depth within which other surface events are crystallised, fossilised. The film *The River* (part of the as yet unfinished chapter 2 of *Underwriting Beirut – Nahr*<sup>9</sup>), was shot in a canalised part of the Beirut River, at the time almost dry: a long journey forward along its debris-choked concrete groove which passes through the city and is partly distinguished 'from underneath', and down the river in a series of clips to look back in time from this singular and usually inaccessible view of the city on which it rests. This "derelict" space, in suspense, devoid of function, awaits water as the city and the country await new energy; they would function once again if the water flowed<sup>10</sup>. However, Lamia Joreige's river shows only shadows, silhouettes of vehicles and pedestrians crossing the bridges, seabirds crossing the screen in the excessively bright light of the blue sky, a remote and as it were deaf representation of reality.

#### *Psycho-geography and recording the body*

A series of drawings in wax, pen and pastel accompanies the video *Le Fleuve* (The River) and reflects another, lesser known area of her practice. Since the early 1990s she has been producing a pictorial work that deploys the geography of the body and the flesh, its crevices, its wounds, its folds, its openings. The five eponymous pictures show forms consisting of piles of yellow-orange fluid cut across in places by a sinuous trace of red, suggesting a spinal column irrigated by a blood flow but also suggesting a map with main roads and construction blocks: a map of the body or of a city incarnate, we are there at the boundary between two living entities each as fragile as the other, the body and the city. The body is

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<sup>7</sup> Bernard Khoury, the architect commissioned, criticises the nostalgia both for Middle-Eastern Orientalism and for the war to explain the absence of development plans and architecture in Beirut. His work as an architect consists in highlighting, not obliterating, the traces of violence and abandonment that have scarred buildings and locations during recent decades. For him, "Beirut has never been rebuilt because the nation has never been rebuilt". (*Liberation*, Next 76, December 2015)

<sup>8</sup> Samir Kassir, *Histoire de Beyrouth*, Fayard 2003, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> Another work will form part of this chapter, *After the River*, on which Lamia Joreige is still working at the time of writing. This prismatic work will continue the inquiry into the quarter in which the video *The River* was shot, its history linked with the migrants who lived there, and the gentrification process that appears to be inexorably drawing its future.

<sup>10</sup> Commentary by Youssef Tohmé, architect, during the open discussion at the colloquium *Leave the Modernity Unfinished* organised by the *Suspended Spaces* collective on 6 December 2013 at the Offices of the French Communist Party, Coupole Niemeyer. Personal Archives.

everywhere in Joreige's work: her own night body recorded during sleep (*Sleep*, 2004, *One Night of Sleep*, 2013), those of her contacts in *Objects of War* in the details of everyday life in *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere* (2009), for example. The bodies form a whole with the places<sup>11</sup> and the objects written by the city, inscribed in its folds, in the intimacy of houses or of places often chosen and used, in the dreams that they excite and the memories they evoke. Beirut is a mirror for telling her own story. The body is also what holds the camera and frequently uses the spoken word. The artist uses the word "I", and the grain of her voice inhabits the sometimes deserted images, as is the case in *The River*. In the works, the other person is addressed; the watcher or the speaker is called on, with a whispered voice, a sound whisper as suggested by Tarek Atoui. In homage to Marguerite Duras, who often accompanies her work, and in particular in *Aurélia Steiner (Melbourne)*, the film shot when sailing down the Seine in Paris (1979), *The River* carries a monologue that states a desire to be elsewhere and at the same time the impossibility of being elsewhere; the temptation of separation and the quickly sensed lack of the contact, violence, and humanity that embody Beirut. The watcher sees his finiteness in time throughout the endless journey down the abstract space of the canal. He can also dream of New Zealand and its "immense forests where nobody lives", build a landscape in his mind and let himself gently drift.

After the last picture, in the darkness of the end credits, Lamia Joreige concludes her recital of *The River* with: "Here we are, I am, awaiting something indefinite, immaterial, indescribable, forced into the present, in suspension. Is this the anticipation of a resolution or of an end? The end of this country, the experience one has had?"

Between documentary and fiction, the artist resists disappearance, borrowing the strength of reality from one and the power of the imaginary from the other; they are absolutely inseparable.

Written by Françoise Parfait, professor of visual arts and new media at the Université Paris I – Panthéon-Sorbonne, and an artist

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<sup>11</sup> "Places are fragmented and folded histories, pasts made illegible by others, times piled up that can unfold but are there as awaited stories as yet not listened to, and finally symbolisations shrouded in pain or bodily pleasure." Michel de Certeau, *op. cit.* p.163.