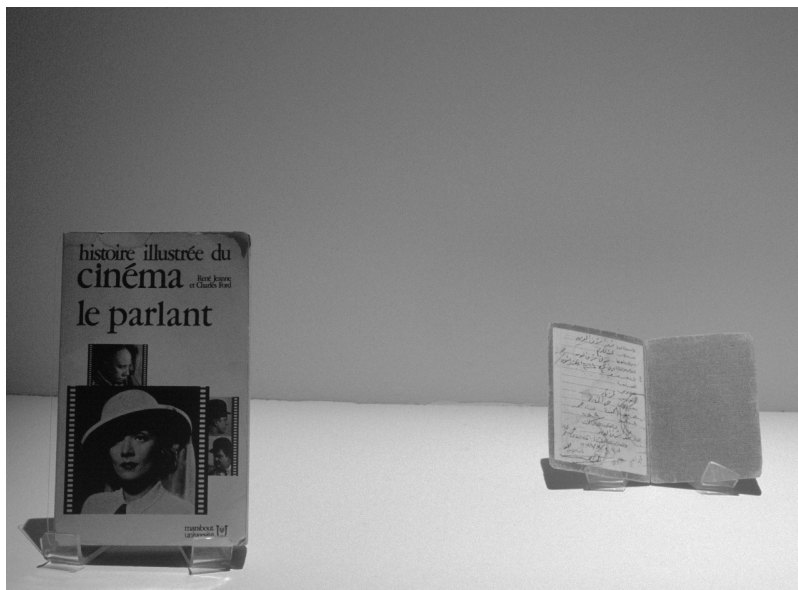


Disappearance and Memory of the War

I will not do a formal reading, but instead go through different artworks that I have developed over the years and, while doing so, discuss my artistic process and how it deals with the theme of memory and the documentary practice. The first project is called *Objects of War* (2000-ongoing). With the official end of the civil war – which was not actually just a civil war – that started in 1975 and ended in 1991, the main questions my generation of artists had were: How do we narrate something so dramatic? How do we approach history? How do we recount such events when many issues were left unresolved, such as the fact that the war had not ended with a peace treaty or a true reconciliation, but rather with a sort of amnesia¹ and a self-amnesty law that had been made by those in power? What was our responsibility as artists?² From these questions about the notion of responsibility, how to approach history, and how to deal with the narration of such tragic events came the project *Objects of War*.

- ¹ Maybe the word amnesia is overused. Although I don't think there is or was a general amnesia in Lebanon, I use it here to say that amnesia was almost institutionalised by the fact that the people who were in power and the perpetrators of crimes during the war amnestied themselves with a law at the end of the war, creating the impossibility of openly discussing what had happened during the war. It produced what people commonly called 'a state of amnesia', but when you talk to people, there is, of course, no 'state of amnesia'.
- ² The issue of the artist's responsibility is not new. At the end of the wars in Lebanon - the official end, since they haven't really ended - there was no serious attempt from the government or the political class to reflect on what had happened and no public debate for everyone to discuss the possibility of thinking about a shared history and identity together. It became clear that it was among the artist's responsibilities to provide alternative discourses on that matter and to underline the absence of any official discourse or the excess of ones that were politically affiliated to the wars' militias. Having grown up in a certain context in Lebanon, it is very normal that artists coming out of such an experience would reflect upon it.



Lamia Joreige, *Objects of War*, 1999—in corso.

The idea behind *Objects of War* is very simple. It had become quite clear that it was not possible for me to say: there is one history of the war and one discourse or one narrative. That is how the idea of fragments became very important to me, as I found myself torn between the necessity of recounting history and the knowledge that it would have been practically impossible to recount it in its full form. I decided I would use proposed subjective histories and simultaneously underline the idea of those histories having missing elements. I asked several people that I knew and later also strangers to provide me with an object that could be the starting point of a story. The object had to be something personal that they owned – a familiar object that was related to their experience of the civil war. People started bringing me their objects and, from the start, the idea was to show the objects along with the video. So, the main goal was not to make a film, but rather an installation in the space. Some of the objects were quite peculiar – there was something to water the plants, a drawing, a passport, a flower, a teddy bear, a radio. They were all very personal objects.

The object became the trigger for the memory and the relationship between them is based on the idea of *performative memory*,³ as well as that of language and of re-enacting a personal experience within the present.

When I displayed the objects in a museum with a label indicating the owner and origin, the latter acted as a document and became a relic.⁴ So, I started creating this on-going series that became an open archive, a sort of archaeology of the war. The first version of the video for *Objects of War* was edited, but I decided to stop editing from 2003 onwards, so that every time I filmed someone, it all depended on the time or needs of the individual, giving every interview a different timing.⁵ The diversity of the many stories narrated, their accumulation, and their unequal repetition links every personal experience to the collective one, making the idea of a unique truth difficult, if not entirely unattainable.

³ The term 'performative memory' can be understood here as the re-enactment of something that has happened in the past and is replayed or re-enacted in the present. It is not the idea of memory that interests me, but the idea of a process that encompasses the losses. The attempts at remembering and the possibility of remembering are always performed in the present through the language.

When one remembers or when someone's memory is stimulated by a question, like in the video *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere*, or triggered by an object, like in the installation *Objects of War*, what is happening in the present is the act of remembering, which is 'performative'. There is nothing exact like a 'factual' souvenir, but the fact of remembering or evoking something in front of a camera that is simultaneously recording something that has happened, and the idea of remembering or forgetting it is a performance of memory in the present.

⁴ Although *Objects of War* borrows from documentary practice and could even be considered a document itself, as it presents unedited footage and relics from the war, it also largely deals with fiction. The mere fact that people are filmed, that they are 'playing' - telling stories, perhaps reinventing their lives - implies a type of fiction. Furthermore, the fact that many elements of history are missing and the very process of remembering and forgetting all involves fiction. Since there was no public debate at the end of the war, it became more interesting to deal with subjectivities, with fragments, with what remains and what is visible, while also pointing at what remained invisible and missing, thus leaving room for imagination and fiction.

⁵ When I removed the idea of editing from *Objects of War*, it was because it allowed the speaker to go on for a certain length of time, which I think is very important. This time allows the experiences from all of the stories/histories to unfold. I am very interested in real time sequences and the experience of unedited material that allows that unfolding. Simultaneously, I am interested in the idea of 'elliptical' time, which is not a contradiction. One allows the experience to unfold, while the other allows me to convey an idea of time that is not necessarily about progression or about the past, present, and future.



Lamia Joreige, *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere*, 2003.

The idea of relative truth brings us to a second project that I did while I was working on *Objects of War* that is also related to the ideas of fragments of history, of a multiplicity of discussion on the war, and of performative memory. *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere* (2003) is a fifty-four minutes documentary – although, I don't actually know how to define in terms of genre, as it looks like a straightforward documentary, but is more inspired by artistic practice. Even though it has a beginning and end, it could have also lasted 30 hours if not for the restrictions of format. In fact, it doesn't really have a beginning or an end. Originally, my intention was to do a feature film based on the structure of the film *Rashomon* by Akira Kurosawa from the fifties, which tells the story of a murder as recounted by five different protagonists, each giving his own version of the facts and his own truth. I wanted to make that film happen in Beirut in the middle of the eighties. At that time, I was a film and painting student and I didn't have the means and capacity to do such a big project. A decade later, this project became a short fiction titled *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere*, which was first released in French and German in 2003. In 2009, I made the website hereandperhapselsewhere.com with the Arabic and English translations.

You can browse through the five protagonists and click on each of the characters: the sniper, the militiaman, the old lady. Set in the middle of a district in Beirut, each of them tells the story of how they killed Wahid Saleh, a man that disappeared. This place is real and fictive at the same time: of course, it refers to what was commonly called the 'Green Line', which was surrounded by a no man's land and divided East and West Beirut during the war. In the fiction of *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere*, the area is not geographically real, but is based on reality.⁶

To realize this work, I decided to take my camera and go out into the streets without any preparation: I wondered what would have happen if I went and asked the same question to all the inhabitants I encountered in the neighbourhoods around what used to be the Green Line. That meant walking east and west across what used to be a real dividing line, but also a mental division that had lasted for a very long time. I took a map and I created a film that went from the harbour to the suburbs, going east and west, asking the inhabitants one question: 'Do you know of someone who was kidnapped here during the war?' Sometimes people refused to answer and at others, the question triggered either a very strong testimony or a digression from the question of the disappearance to other issues of the civil war and the Lebanese wars at large. To do that cartography, that mapping of the city, I used archives of former checkpoints and I brought photographs from daily newspapers. The city had several checkpoints and some of them were also points of passage. At these checkpoints, militiamen or various armed forces often used to ask for people's papers and this is where many of the kidnappings occurred during the war.

The reason why I asked this question about the kidnapped is that there were seventeen thousand people who disappeared or were kidnapped during the war and no one knows the circumstances surrounding it or what happened to their bodies. Among the kidnapped, was my uncle, my mother's brother, who was taken in 1985 and never returned. This personal family drama raised the question of the collective memory and the collective history.

⁶ In *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere*, the names of the characters and the location are fictitious but informed by real lives, by maps and photographs of the city, by accounts of snipers and families of disappeared persons. When filming a city in general, even if the scenes can be imagined, I am recording a present, making a *de facto* document, as it is a diagnosis of the city at a specific moment in its history.

This is something that happens often in my work – the personal and the collective memory and history meet, feed off of, and confront each other.⁷ I did not prepare and only had the help of a sound assistant when I asked people the question. They looked at the photograph to locate the former checkpoint with me. The work's title refers to Jean-Luc Godard's film *Ici et ailleurs*, which has influenced many people. Obviously, the method and the practice here are different, but I sometimes like to steal titles or deviate from them to create my own. There is a very simple explanation for this title: the Green Line divided people and is located here, but it could just as well be elsewhere – it could be east and west, it could be here and there – but these are the stories of the disappeared, stories that were shared around the world in many other countries that were confronted with similar issues. When working in and on a specific context, the idea that the testimonies and statements expressing the human experience will attain a universal dimension is always on my mind. These questions of relative truth, loss, and disappearance are also at the heart of the film *A Journey* (2006), but in a more personal way this time. *A Journey* is a complex work that I realized, as I often do, by collecting materials, such as notes or photos (photography) or videos, and later working them into a 'montage' to construct the narrative. In 1999, I started filming my grandmother for *Objects of War* and later I accumulated different material. It was only in 2005 that I started to see the possibility of making a film that could start with the character of my grandmother Rose, who was born in Palestine in 1910, moved to Lebanon in 1930, and whose family also moved to Lebanon in 1948 after their expulsion from Jaffa when Israel was created. I'm not very interested in linear narratives; in all of my projects I try to create something with a non-linear temporality, or non-linear narrative. So, the film is constructed using found footage from Super 8 films, contemporary videos I filmed of my grandmother and mother, as well as photographs acquired from different collections. It tries to construct a narrative that conveys the notion of elliptical time. At the heart of the film, there is still the question of the disappearance of my uncle, but here I deal with it in a much more personal way than in *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere*.

⁷ The point of departure of *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere* is precisely the knowledge that there were 17,000 people kidnapped, as well as an interest in what would have happened if I went out into the streets and asked this question. What would emerge?



Lamia Joreige, *A Journey*, 2006.

In *A Journey*, the character of my grandmother both allowed me to create a link and to question the complex relationship between the history of the Palestinian and Lebanese people from the catastrophe of 1948 onwards. It also allowed me to reflect upon our present situation and how it relates to the failed promises of peace and modernity that were made for our region many decades ago. In this film, I look back from what seems to be a hopeless present to a moment in our past when things still looked possible. Our present did actually inherit the fragmentation of the entire region and society, and the elliptical narrative of this film reflects this fragmentation. In *A Journey*, my grandmother encounters many losses: first her homeland Palestine, then her son who was kidnapped during the Lebanese war and was never returned and, at the end, her death is implied without being shown, as her contact with reality becomes very fragile. In *A Journey* there are no answers to the question of identity, no answers to the disappearance of my uncle, and finally, as my grandmother's illness grows and she becomes frail, she almost totally loses her sense of reality. The film follows her character and, in parallel, my own quest for an identity. It also depicts a relationship to a territory that is now inaccessible and to the idea of Palestine as a place that created a community among Arabs and has led to much fantasy, but at the same time also led to so many transformations in our region.



Lamia Joreige, *Replay (bis)*, 2002.

Thus, it is the idea of Palestine as a place that is unreachable and inaccessible, something that is real and fictive at the same time. The film ends at the border of Lebanon and Israel/Palestine. As you may know, we are still officially at war with Israel; therefore, it is a border that we cannot cross, making it very important to end the film there.

It should be noted that this complex relationship is brought up in the film precisely because it is rare in Lebanon to deal with the unresolved issue of relations between the Palestinians and Lebanese. This is because, as much as all of the Arab countries have agreed share in Palestine's cause, the Palestinian refugees that have been in Lebanon since 1948 have created a massive demographic transformation and the creation of many factions in Lebanon, which are linked to the beginning of the civil war in 1975. The fighting among different Lebanese factions began with the issue of the Palestinians and their fate has been part of a strong division within Lebanese society. As such, this question is still very delicate and controversial today.

Now I'll go back in time to a work called *Replay* (2002). In *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere*, as well as in *A Journey*, I worked with archives using different methods. The project *Objects of War* could be considered an open archive. In *Replay*, however, some of the images were found in a book titled *The War in Lebanon: Images and Chronology*, which was poorly printed in the early days of the war. When I discovered it, I had just started working as an artist and found myself haunted by those images. In one of them, you can see a man that was shot while being photographed or who was photographed while being shot; in another, there is a barefoot woman and you don't know whether she's screaming or escaping or if she is running towards us, calling for help. I did not know what to do with those images for many years. Then, one day I realised that I had been linking them to the banality of everyday life. I had been wondering why, seeing a man fall in the street, I imagined that he was actually dying; why did I project so much violence onto the image of a man that was simply falling down? I realized that it was because, for me, the image of the man falling was an image/fragment of something that had already happened and had been replayed and re-enacted many times in other geographies.

I imagine that the idea that this man had died in an undefined past, that the man who was falling in front of me here had already fallen before in another time, was likely unconsciously influenced by Chris Marker's film *La Jetée* and by its expression of a non-linear time, where the past, the present, and the future do not exist or, rather, they coexist. The relationship to memory here also uses performativity, but in a different way.

I asked two performers to re-enact the moment that I had pictured happening before the photographer took those pictures, thus, an imagined moment. I asked a man to fall down and this one sequence of him falling is looped. Likewise, I asked a woman to run towards the camera as if she were constantly escaping and constantly trying to reach us. The use of repetition creates a feeling of melancholy because their actions are vain, but it also simultaneously conveys this idea of the re-enactment of something imagined. Three synchronized screens of equal size make up the installation that presents this work. Each sequence lasts four minutes. The left and right screens are in black and white until the end of the loop, when they become coloured, referring to this idea of archives, as if these archives were brought back to life. I used the sea in the middle, partly because I think Beirut is defined by the horizon of the sea, but mainly because the concept of *Replay* is based on this idea of a 'rupture of time'.



Lamia Joreige, *Nights and Days*, 2007.

The sea is also the place of uninterrupted rupture, of uninterrupted movement, and the installation is based on this idea of the instant of rupture, of the instant of violence onto which one can project something. It is based on an imagined instant onto which I projected a story.

When I finished *A Journey*, the film dedicated to my grandmother, in June 2006, I thought that it would be my last work dealing with the Lebanese wars. Unfortunately, in July 2006, another war broke out: after Hezbollah kidnapped two Israeli soldiers, the Israeli army attacked Lebanon and the siege lasted 33 days. I didn't want to do a film because I was very shocked at the time and I don't use a reporter approach in my work; instead, my method deals more with events that have happened in the past, with a distance – a critical distance. I didn't know what to do with myself during this war apart from filming from my balcony and filming the empty streets of Beirut, cooking for friends, and trying to overcome the fear and the state of waiting and anticipation at that moment.

The first questions that came to me regarding my practice were: how can I work in the immediacy of the event without having a critical distance?

How can I testify on the horror while it is happening? How can I resist the pressure of fulfilling the requests of so many people calling us from outside Lebanon and asking for images and recordings of the war? There were many films that were produced on the spot and were not necessarily of any artistic value, but instead responded to an outcry. *Nights and Days* (2007) considers the relationship between the time when a dramatic event occurs and the production of documents on that event – the relationship between the overwhelming experience of war and the knowledge of the war. It asks whether it is possible to represent it, to understand the war as we experience it.

When I mentioned filming from my balcony or capturing the empty streets of Beirut, it was because at the beginning of 2006 we all saw ourselves as potential targets, we all thought that we were in danger and, of course, it was very scary because they were bombing bridges and homes. However, after ten days, it became clear that the targets were the southern suburbs and the south of Lebanon, where the majority of people supported or lived under the control of Hezbollah. It became clear that, although we were hearing the bombs and it was terrible to know that these bombs were killing people who were only a few kilometres away, we were not direct targets. I think that how you position yourself is also very important in documentary practice. One cannot claim to have the position of the victim if one is not the victim, but one can still reflect on the events. Here we go back to the position of Godard when he did *Ici et ailleurs*. I wanted to reflect on this war but, at the same time, I knew it was not the same as if I had lived in the south. I mention this point because it informed the very structure of the film, which is divided equally in two parts. The first part is a personal account with a voiceover, which is deliberately used because it's my own experience. In the second part, the voiceover (my voice) withdraws, leaving room for the sound that accompanies the devastated landscape of the south, as if there were no longer any speech that could testify for this devastated land.