We would like to start this interview by asking you about how you came to work in cinema: how did you construct your approach to the image during your student years and what path led you to directing?

It happened that I always found myself between disciplines. I wanted to study film, but for many reasons I studied architecture. I graduated in 1989 from AUB (American University of Beirut). I worked as an architect for two years, and then I left to New York. I would have loved to go to film school, but I ended up doing my masters in media studies. In New-York., I was exposed to art practices, including video practices. Until today, I keep this huge love for film and its history on one hand, and a great interest in contemporary arts on the other hand.

In the absence of any film industry in Lebanon, I found myself still in between disciplines, I returned to Beirut in 1995 to work as a producer of the morning show *Aalam al Sabah* (tele-matin) in Future TV. The station was a young structure that attracted most of those who had studied abroad and decided to return to Lebanon after the official end of the civil war. I was able to make many short videos at Future TV. They were in between short films, documentaries, video essays and formal exploration. At the same time, I was active in programming films at the Beirut Theater, and later in the Ayloul Festival.

In 1996, I made my first trip to a video festival, Videobrasil, in Sao Paolo. I was strongly marked with what I saw there. Apart from the so many videos and video installations I saw, it was the time I got introduced to an important historical aspect of video with a huge retrospective of the work of Nam June Paik, Steina & Woody Vasulka and performances by Stephen Vitiello and others. Few years later I made my first video installation in Beirut, Another Resolution, as part of the Ayloul Festival, 1998.

I left Future TV in 1997 when I was co-founding the Arab Image foundation. From there and on, a long journey started, into another discipline, collecting and studying a subjective photographic history.

In your films, you take a lot of interest in images made by others: it seems that popular culture (through its different forms of expression in narrative cinema or private archives) occupies an important place in your work. What relationship did you have, during your childhood and teenage years – in the family circle for example – to amateur cinematography & photography? What role did cinema play in Beirut while you were a teenager: were there many movie theatres for example? What kind of movies could you watch there? What memories of cinema experiences have you kept?

There is something magical about working with images made by others, in different places, in different times. It is an extension of one's sight and experience. I grew up in Saïda, in the south, and lived there until I was 17, when I moved to university in Beirut. In Saïda there were more than six main movie theatres where I saw American and Egyptian films. The only serious film I saw in a theatre in Saïda was Bertolucci's (*Novecento*). That was a special screening organised by the cultural branch of the

communist party in the South. The important films I saw during my adolescence were on television or on rented VHS cassettes. That was my universe.

In the late seventies, I started learning photography using my father's camera. I also started recording audio and music. In the early eighties, I started recording from television. Maybe these recording habits were a response to the impossibility of making films at the time. Audio and TV material where part of my environment, as real as the apartment I lived in, as real as school friends. I grew up in difficult political times, when it was not possible to go out anytime I wanted. So I had developed a special attachment to television, music, and later to recording. From there, the idea of looking for, or exploring people's archive, considers such personal material as representative of a subjective intimate reality. People decide what to keep and what not to keep, and sometimes their decisions are kept to themselves, like desire.

In Beirut the situation was very different. Beirut had a very strong cine-club tradition from the early seventies. It had a lot of movie theaters even if most of them showed commercial films. Still, in the eighties you could watch in regular theaters, films like Rohmer's *Pauline a la Plage*, Bergman's *Cris et Chuchottements*, or *The Serpant's Egg*, or even re-runs of Hitchkok's *Vertigo*, or *The Man Who knew too much*. In the late 80's, Beirut had huge and very well equipped theaters, with more than thousand seats each. I also saw many films at the French cultural center, and at the Goethe Institute, very active during those years, and I was soon responsible for the university's cine-club. I remember I programmed all the early films of Wim Wenders, I programmed Eisenstein's Potemkin, Bergman, Visconti, and Carlos Saura's *Cris du Corbeau*. Of course I had to rely on availability of film prints, but these were generous times! I programmed Antonioni's *The Passenger*, Scorcese's *Taxi Driver*, Bob Fosse's *All that Jazz*, etc...

Up until then, my universe was made with images by others.

How much did television and media affect your daily life then? And more specifically, during the civil war, do you remember how you perceived the images of the conflict, in comparison to what you were experiencing?

I remember sleeping with the radio on, next to my bed. I used to listen to the Arabic channels such as *Sawt el Aarab* (The Arabs' Voice) from Cairo, Radio Monte Carlo, Radio Damascus, and the Arabic transmissions of American and Soviet radios. You know that, in the late seventies, many children used to come to school with a little radio? It was considered as "chic". Anyway this is to tell you that of course we followed closely what happened in the civil war, but I have to admit that it wasn't the case in the seventies. I was too young in the late seventies to follow war-related news. I remember films and TV series on TV. The only clip I remember relevant to the war, was an anti-war campaign on Tele-Liban addressed to children, imagine, and delivered by Dourayd Lahham, who was a Syrian actor, very popular in Lebanon and Syria. The TV clip was a called "Why?" and was made with lyrics and music in the background. It showed children playing, and called children to stop their fathers when they see them leaving home with the gun on their shoulders. That should have been 1976. In the seventies the only existing Lebanese TV channel was Tele-Liban, which we could receive only in winter time, because its broadcast was too week to resist other broadcasts on the same terrestrial channels, notably the Egyptian broadcasting, which used to dominate in summer. As a result, I grew up watching Lebanese, Egyptian, and Israeli TV channels. Later in the eighties, many Lebanese TV channels started broadcasting on UHF. Every political party had a

channel. Their number reached fifty early in the nineties until the government intervened to regulate this and limited them to eight, I think. In order to make one's own opinion about a political situation, one would hear several versions of the news. We learned to read through the lines, and through the tone with which news was written. Even public television, Tele-Liban, was divided in the eighties, and used to have two versions of the news broadcasting from East Beirut, and from West Beirut.

But in Saïda, we lived the war differently. We lived it through the Palestinian presence, and the Syrian on-going control, and through clashes over power between all these different factions. The most critical war I lived was the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

Your work is very much related to Lebanese society and its recent history, through the questions raised (the traces of civil war, male homosexuality). Was there a generation of filmmakers and video artists before yours in Lebanon? Could you tell us if any artists, from Lebanon or from other countries of the Middle East, have been important to your artistic practice? Did you find alternative forms of discourse and representation compared to an international art scene dominated by a majority of "Western" artists?

Maroun Baghdadi and Borhane Alaouie are considered the pioneers of "cinema d'auteur" in Lebanon. They worked in film not in video. Later, Randa Chahhal and others started making films as well. In the late eighties, I was close to Mohammad Soueid, who was then a film critic. After I left to NY I learned that he produced a video. When I saw it, I realised I wanted to return to Lebanon. His work was the only work that shared my concerns in film. It addressed Lebanon's society in a cynical yet poetic way. At the same time, I was influenced by many international figures mainly in film. People such as Godard, Bresson, Fassbinder, and Pasolini were my references. I was interested in Iranian cinema, particularly Abbas Kiarostami, and in Egypt, I was interested in the work of Mohammad Khan. My particular interest in video came later in the nineties, particularly after I visited Videobrasil in 1996.

I was never interested in Eastern and Western dichotomy, and I considered myself as part of an international group of artists. I just happened to want to live in Lebanon.

Can you tell us more about this video by Mohammed Soueid, that you discovered when you where studying in New York and made you feel the necessity to return back to Lebanon?

First I had met Mohammed Soueid when he used to be a film critic in As-Safir daily in the early eighties. I was back then responsible for the American University of Beirut cine club, and I was programming films that I could find on 35mm in the Lebanese market. Sometimes I used to ask him for distributors' phone numbers, or even to suggest films that he knew existed on the Lebanon market. The American University of Beirut, which in 1983 acquired – thanks to the president Malcom Kerr's wife - two 35mm film projectors and donated them to the cine club. I lost touch with Soueid after my graduation. I learned later that he shot some super 8 films with Hassan Zbib that remained unfinished, and later did a documentary named *Ghiyab* (*Abscence*) in 1989. But this film was never released –until few months ago in summer of 2009- because of production problems. I left Lebanon in 1992, and met Mohammad again in 1994 when I was back for a training period at Future TV. I saw both *Ghiyab* and *Cinema Fouad* (1993), which marked me enormously. Mohammad's work was a mix of vernacular local language informed by Godard's late work and the urban music of Ziad Rahbani. Mohammad talked about actual Lebanon, in a modern way. It was humorous poetic and

critical. His works were improvised, in the sense that they were never pre-scripted. I saw Lebanon through this work, and realised how simple it can be to make films there. I didn't feel it was necessary to return, but rather possible to return. I had a preference to return to Lebanon, but was looking into how feasible it was to do so. *Cinema Fouad*, was a documentary set in the downtown Beirut, before the reconstruction project started, and centred around a Syrian transsexual character who worked as a servant at a modest family, *displaced* into this area. He was a former fighter, but at the same time, he was in love with belly dancing, and dreamed of having his sex changed. He considered himself a woman. It was this film that brought me back to Lebanon.

We would like to evoke the influence Jean-Luc Godard had on your early works and more specifically on the importance of the film "Here and Elsewhere", released in 1976 and directed by Godard and Miéville. Godard questions how to make a film on the palestinian resistance, film that will never be achieved: Until the Victory. Can you tell us how this film contributed to your own personal reflexions?

I had seen so many films about Palestinian struggle in Lebanon, and it was the first time I saw a film that criticized it as much as it showed sympathy with the Palestinian cause. How *Until Victory* became *Here and Elsewhere*, was precisely what I was interested in. Godard was reading through many Lebanese minds, he was able to see how victims could become aggressors, how a just cause could cause violence such as terrorism, referring to the 1972 Munich killing of Israeli athletes. For me, Godard provided a way to look at a cause that I supported, and that left me with deep scars at the same time. He made me look differently at militant songs that moved me as a child, and that I sang and loved, although I never believed the words in them. I think Godard unmade the structures of narratives of Palestinian resistance and dissected them in a brilliant way. This is why the film announced the end of militant cinema, the Dziga Vertov experience, and announced the beginning of a more horizontal, and critical look at political discourses everywhere, tying different phenomena together in order to understand them, and get the global picture. On another hand, he makes us aware of the role media plays in mobilisation.

Reflection on the photographic image and its devices occupies an essential position in your work: did you practice photography before starting to film?

Yes, I practiced photography in the early 90's, and I taught photography at the American University of Beirut starting from 1990 to 1992, and later in 1996. But I never considered myself a photographer. I developed further this interest and practice. But photography, its history and current practices, is a universe in itself, and at the same time, it is a mere tool, like pencil.

Is cinema for you a privileged medium that allows one to confront the question of the passage of time, compared to photography for example?

Differently from looking at a photograph, a film clearly unfolds with time, so one needs to sit through it to grasp it. When I watch a good film, it leaves me with an emotion, like the smell of an ambiguous subtle perfume, like a new encounter that comes back to mind, even haunting you. I am not saying that this cannot happen with photography, because it may, but its impact is more visible in film.

When you started making your first films, were you practising other mediums at the same time (such as photography, installation…)?

Not in the beginning. In school in New York I did photographic projects, and later in Lebanon, I made two projects. The first was in 1998, and was entitled *Another Resolution*, a photo and video installation based on studying gendered and often eroticized postures of children in studio and family pictures.

The second project was an intervention in the public space, on the seaside in Beirut. It was a video playing on a small monitor fitted inside a square-column and placed on the side walk of the seaside. The work was entitled *Monuments of Desire: The scandal*, which was later removed upon the request of a local authority, for what was thought of as improper content. I admit that this incident reduced my interest in working with public space, which I found so complicated to work in.

I tried to show a version of the "Image + Sound" serie in an installation form at a gallery called *L'Entretemps*, in 1995, but I wouldn't say it worked. Galleries were still uncomfortable with showing video. Many people told me they used to go to the gallery and find the video not working. They had to put it on themselves if they were interested. These were pre-DVD times, so even if the tape was on, there has to be someone taking care of properly rewinding the tape and re-playing it. *Another Resolution* (1998) was conceived as a two-channel video installation from the beginning. So there were two screens installed facing one another. The Goethe Institute in Beirut had generously lent me the space of the auditorium, which I transformed into a large corridor with a rear projection on each side. The videos showed life size men and women facing one another re-enacting poses inspired by children's poses. I needed this *dispositif* so the project had to be physically, an installation in space. My interest in making a video installation wasn't formal at all. It was a solution that enabled me exhibit a non-narrative set of videos in space, and relating them one to another.

When watching your first films, we get the feeling of watching the progressive birth of a specific aesthetical universe. Would you say that this period holds a particular place for you, as a time of experimentation and research that allowed you to assert your own esthetical language?

I like to call this early period, my morning period. I had to wake up early to be in the TV station at 7 AM, because I produced a morning show. I made these experimental works and showed them on TV (it should have been surreal to see something like *Teach Me* in the morning—after or before a cooking show, or a health report). But in a way I like that. I also like to call these works, my morning period, because they came first in my career, like the morning of something. I think this was a period where I wasn't sure where to go. I had to write, film, and edit quickly, therefore spontaneously. I needed to know myself. I had many interests, but practice was something else. I believe it took me until I started the photographic research with the creation of the Arab Image Foundation, to have a more consistent practice.

With time, I moved away from formal research. Today I define my work as one that is based on fieldwork, like an excavation in a location. So for me, starting a film project is almost a performative gesture, almost an intervention in a location that turns this location upside down, to an extent that the location isn't the same after the film is over. This applies certainly to *In This House*, and to my latest work, which takes studio Scheherazade as site. I am still very interested in formal aspects in a film, but those

aspects are today used in the service of a gesture that goes deeper into our actuality. It is a gesture that starts outside the film, and that carves a place for it in the living.

REFLECTION

If the form of this short film made in your early days seems rather classical, you already disrupt the cinematographic codes of documentary and fiction, notably through the presence of the mirror and photography (like a first step towards the question of representation and the status of image). Could you tell us what Reflection represents in your progression as a film-maker?

I conceived this work part of a series on image making, but did only five. The first of which is *Nour*. I thought of it as an excerpt from a longer script that I never completed. The excerpt is an itinerary of a young boy going from home to his father's place of work, through the alleys of an old city. He gets distracted when he encounters an older boy playing with a mirror. I imagined the plot of the mirror, and I wanted to start from there. I gave the mirror to the boy, and I asked him to walk around with it, and this is how the film was made. Looking into the frame of a mirror is a way of making images without recording them.

Through a mirror, millions of images pass unrecorded. I just wanted to explore this idea, and also take it as a pretext to film the old city of Saïda. It is still a film I like. It shows my interest in working with non-professionals, in totally improvised plots. I don't like to corner it in the discursive question fiction-documentary, because it is neither one. It is not a documentary because it doesn't tell us anything about any of the subjects; neither people, nor place. This is a fiction that uses a family - a mother and her two children and their cousin - actors in a district where they lived. I would say it is a fiction that melts well with a place until it becomes almost part of it. I was strongly influenced by Iranian cinema, particularly the work of Abbas Kiarostami. I had interviewed him in 1992 for a New York based magazine: BOMB. I had also interviewed Mohsen Makhmalbaf, and Jafar Panahi later. But this is to tell you that I was impressed with how Kiarostami weaves fictive elements with reality on the ground.

There are few stills of the boy's mother in the film. She is absent except from still images. I like this cohabitation between images from different orders, different regimes, in the same world. I wanted the mirror to sum up the origin of photography. Next to it, is the iconic landscape of the city; images of martyrs on the walls, religious signs, pictures of an absent mother, and video games simulating a virtual digital order.

The idea of image making more than representation was central to the script. It is central to media studies, which was my field of study. The idea of blinding came later after we started filming. I developed it and pushed the film in that direction. In general, I am interested in how and when people decide to make images. I am interested in how they relate to their images, when they decide to throw one away and keep one in their wallet, or now on their cellphone. And this is different from an interest in representation, which is normally a cultural studies interest that is much less in my work.

TEACH ME, COUNTDOWN
and SINGING, MOURNING PHOTOGRAPHS

"Teach Me", "Countdown", and "Singing, Mourning Photographs" are part of a series of 7 short films entitled IMAGE + SOUND. In what context was this series of video art essays made between 1995 and 1996 produced? How do these films relate to one other, except from the context in which there were realized and produced?

Image + Sound was a series of short episodes that I made weekly for the morning show I used to produce. Each of the episodes used to take one week to be made; including one day of shooting in one location that I used to chose the day of the shooting, and few days of editing. The series was conceived as an exercise that I imposed on myself around the theme of television. I was fascinated by how television encounters people's intimate spaces, anywhere, everywhere in the world. *Image + Sound* was based on a strict discipline, which started with choosing a location for filming, where I used to go one afternoon, try to make a portrait of that location, sometimes with an actor, sometimes without an actor. After this shooting session, I used to go back to the archives of Future TV, where I worked, and used to look for images TV rushes that enabled me to twist the meaning of what I shot and create a third meaning. Godard's work had a strong influence on this serie *Images+sound,* and particularly his *Histoire(s) du Cinéma*. This is clear in the layers provided by the editing, the appropriation of archive material, the manipulation of speed, often with words typed on screen.

I was the executive producer of the morning show *Aalam al sabah*, which was part of the news department, and had its own camera crews and editing suites. My work between 1995 -1997 was entirely produced using the technical facilities of this TV unit. So I wouldn't call this collaboration because television wasn't in a position to approve or disapprove what I was doing. In fact I shot all these works with news crews, and edited them myself after midnight, and I decided to put them on the air as part of my program I used the same actor, Bassem Mughnieh, who was an intern at Future TV. He was still in acting school, and was looking for training. Today he is a known actor. I normally like to use someone who is around. I don't do casting, and prefer to work with people I know.

There was no money involved neither in the making nor after the broadcast of the works. These were moments "stolen" from television, and not produced by television.

These 3 films seem to be built a lot on the editing process, by combining various elements such as television archives and sequences you shot yourself. Can you tell us a little more in detail about the pre-existing material with which you composed "Teach Me" (televised images, movie dialogues) and its sources? Where did the archive pictures come from for example? How did you watch them and select them?

I used to look through the archives of WTN (Worldwide Tv News,) to which Future TV was subscribed. I looked for iconic images of all types of risks, threats, tragedies and wars. So this search came only after I made my improvisation in a specific site. As I mentioned before the series was conceived as a crossover between two times, Beirut time, and TV time. In *Teach Me*, it was further a crossover between different iconographies, different types of violence. The mosaic in the Beirut church presented Pilates washing hands, and the TV rushes showed one of the most iconic images of the Vietnam War. The mosaic was perforated by bullets during the civil war, due to its

location on the demarcation line in Beirut.

In the film "Teach Me", we sometimes get the feeling that you shot the scenes with the actors according to the sound of the musical. How did these two elements combine?

In this work, different backgrounds came to converge in one narrative. First, comes the location the church and the actor's re-enactment of the iconic gesture of Virgin Mary. In a second stage comes TV news, and in a third stage comes the sounds of this old Egyptian musical. I particularly have affection to the soundtracks of Egyptian old films. I used to watch those films on radio *Sawt el Aarab* as a child.

The church frescoes have a lot of importance in this film: they reveal the passage of time and the traces of war, and thus evoke the violent confrontation of ancient and modern history. Could you tell us what exactly this place is, and if it holds a specific meaning?

This is the Greek-Orthodox Saint George Cathedral, located at Nejmeh square, aka the parliament square in downtown Beirut. The church was built in 1767, but was severely damaged during the civil war, and was later restored in the late 1990's. When I did the video, it had just opened for public before starting the reconstruction works. I wanted to see it, so I decided to take the film crew there without having any expectations. It is a highly charged location in Beirut's contemporary history, not only past meeting present, but this is a square that religious and legislative powers occupied, and this is a star shaped plan that couldn't be implemented because of the power of the church, otherwise the church would have been destroyed. Imagine "Place de l'Étoile" in Paris, missing one avenue because there is a church blocking the way.

The iconography on the walls of the church dictated Bassem's postures. The hands had a strong presence in the frescoe as so while looking for rushes in the archive, I was looking for more hands to open up the reading of gestures. Hands have to do with violence, with giving a sign, with power, with greeting masses, with love. I wanted the gestures to travel a wide spectre of interpretation

"Red Chewing Gum" (made in 2000), "Teach me" & "Countdown" all deal with the subject of male homosexuality. In the relation to the model, and in the aesthetic of the sequences, we perceive – through gestures, looks, postures & relationships to objects – a distant approach to the question of the love relationship. Could you tell us about the way you work on the representation of desire in these three films? And in a more general way, what place this question holds in your work as a whole?

Red Chewing Gum clearly addresses a relationship between two men, whereas the other two works evoke an interest in representing a male universe, alluding to -but not clearly-homosexuality. This is visible through the way the main character is filmed. It is only later that I addressed this subject directly while making *How I love You*, and *Crazy of You.*

One senses a kind of obsession for passing time as well as a certain idea of loss in Countdown. This concern is also apparent in "Teach Me" and other later video works like "Red Chewing Gum". In "Countdowns", it is said: "I write to remember". But what about images, those made by others, those that you create?

I believe that we forget moments if we don't take notes of them, or pictures, etc… this is why I make films. In a way I keep track of myself, my point of views. However in the context of *Image + Sound*, this is all an exercise, except you're right about the idea of loss.

There is a sense of an absence in these films. I wouldn't put so much weight on that, and mostly I wouldn't compare the series with *Red Chewing Gum*, which came 4 years later, in a completely different context, with a different level of writing and of personal involvement. *Red Chewing Gum* is also a work I shot myself, after I left television. So I was more in control of what I was filming. In Red Chewing Gum, I was literally putting myself in the picture trying to capture fleeting time, looking at myself aging, at and my images aging too. I looked at love fleeing me with the failure of an important relationship in my life. So it was a moment when I was trying to re-invent myself, and this is where repetition comes from.

Your work is partly centered on the notion of collecting as an art practice. Besides, you are also a co founder of the Arab Image Foundation with some other artists in Lebanon: what led you to this project and what are the interferences between your involvement in the foundation and your own personal researches?

In 1997 I was involved in the creation of the Arab Image Foundation, and very quickly I started a wide research that included travelling in Syria, Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon looking for photographs and trying to convince people to donate them to the Arab Image Foundation; not an easy task at all! Yet in two years, I was able to compile, primarily with Fouad Elkoury and Yto Barrada - both members of the Arab Image Foundation - more than 20000 photographs on different supports, negatives of different types and sizes, and prints of different types and sizes. From the beginning the mission of the Arab Image Foundation was one of photographic conservation, but none of us – founders- was a specialist, we were artists. And whatever this loose term meant had implications on the evolution of the experience of the Arab Image Foundation.

In its first mission statement written in 1997, the AIF announced itself as an institution for the preservation of photographs in the Arab region, an institution that is active in collecting photography. At that time the AIF had zero pictures in its collection.

We had to come up with a term that would accurately describe the situation, accurately describe what we were, accurately and constantly describe the changing mission of the foundation, and accurately describe our relationship to art… We started referring to the collection as an expanding collection, communicating the idea of feeding the collection with new elements. We also started to mention it in the mission statement that the collection is generated through artist and scholarly work, hence making it clear that what we are interested in, is not only sitting on a collection, preserving it and making it accessible; but in fact what we are interested in is encourage site-specific, scholarly or artist's work, that would expand our collection in numbers and in types, (images made to serve different functions). We want to collect and we want to know how photography was used by people, and we want to know what it led people to do, what dynamic it produced and what it inscribed in society. Talking about photography in this part of the world is talking about modernity and society, about a period where the speed with which change was happening was unprecedented.

The term "archive" is an extremely loaded term, and it communicates a total reposing entity, while collection carries in it the process of selecting, and picking different elements, and that is more suitable to describe what the Arab Image Foundation is. One day this project of collecting will stop, so it is then that we could announce it as an archive of all those experiences.

The history of the civil war is a question that seems determinant in the artistic field in Lebanon, like if there were an urgent need to testify and keep traces of what happened.

What can you tell us about the emergence of an artistical scene in Lebanon that seizes that question of collective memory at the beginning of the nineties (Mroue, Joreige, Raad …)?

Thanks for allowing me to clarify many confusions, and misunderstandings around works from Lebanon and the civil war. In the early nineties, I used to have a reaction to making work on the civil war. I was part of a marginal movement that was interested in talking about issues related to the postwar daily. That was mainly a reaction to many representations of the civil war in film, particularly in the 80s. We, as artists, felt we were prisoners of that topic-that is war-especially that these film-works came too early to have enough distance to understand anything substantial about war. So they used it as a set to talk about love, confessionalism, class issues, etc.. anything. Towards the second half of the nineties, many of us, notably Rabih Mroue and me, were tuned to criticize how "we", citizens of this place, have been dealing, or reacting to the Israeli occupation of south Lebanon. We were starting to criticize the discourse of the Lebanese resistance, and the launching of the Islamic resistance. I was interested in how the state had created a seeming consensus on essential issues and conveyed a sense of "fake" national unity, facing the threat of the enemy. All that had no direct relation to the Lebanese civil wars. This essential distinction had to be made because what I am interested in is how the state used different wars to propagate a national unity that does not stand.

Since the seventies, there were overlaps between the Israeli invasions of Lebanon (namely in 1978 and 1982) and the Lebanese civil wars, partly because the Palestinian resistance was active on both fronts, and partly because the Lebanese Forces were at some point supported by Israel. Researchers, historians, and artists interested in fieldwork will face a main difficulty while working on the war subject. There are very little public documents available, so one should rely on third sources, otherwise on oral history and read in between what is said to assess the situation. There is a main difference between working on the subject of the Israeli invasion, and the Lebanese civil wars. The first makes people be proud of saying that they have carried weapons in order to defend their country against the Israeli invaders, whereas they would be less tempted to say that they carried guns and killed other Lebanese people, even-though there is an amnesty law that protects them since the Taef Accords in 1990. Yet the issue isn't a legal one, but moral, and social. Once this difference manifests itself in research, one cannot treat documents and testimonies coming from here and there in the same way. Documents might relate to events that have historical overlaps, yet they have to be interpreted differently. This is why I am not surprised that the first attempt to make art that touches directly on the histories of the civil wars in Lebanon was playing with fiction. Walid Raad's Atlas Group Project was announced in 1999 with important videos such as *The Dead Weight* of this *Quarrel Hangs* (1999), and later Hostage: *The Bachar Tapes* (2000), before he designated them as part of the Atlas Group archive —an imaginary organism interested in producing and compiling and studying all types of documents from the Lebanon civil wars.

The debate on the civil war within art practices, questioning histories and testimonies, the debate about memory and forgetting, started therefore in the very late nineties, particularly with Walid Raad in his two short video works, and later with Khalil Joreige and Joanna Hajithomas who did *Wonder Beirut*, another dialog with fiction; a story of a pyromaniac photographer who started burning his old negatives which he had taken of

Beirut before the war. What's striking about these works was that they relied on the war to talk about recording, and about loaded images, whether actual or mental, which Joanna and Khalil designated as "latent images". These works based themselves on lapses in the history of the Lebanese wars. In my opinion they evolved as if to say: we have lived a war the story of which we are unable to tell through conventional narrative tools, or that we cannot research using conventions of history. Whether conscious or not, these two attempts do not tell us anything specific about the Lebanon civil wars, but they tell us very much about the tectonics of writing history and recording, taking the context of war as a stimulus.

One of the consistent attempts in researching aspects of the civil war with a documentary approach came much later in 2003, with the work of Lamia Joreige, who is Khalil's sister, particularly in her documentary piece *Here and Perhaps elsewhere* (2003), where she walks innocently –even naively- with her video camera along the former demarcation line in Beirut asking people about someone who had disappeared in the eighties, and recording all kinds of reactions. Lamia's work is a performative one, and not only documentary. In 2007, Rabih Mroue made his piece *How Nancy Wished that Everything Was an April Fool's Joke* in which he focused, for the first time, histories of the civil war, basing himself on stories of battles as covered in the Lebanese press.

Living in Beirut, you are asked everyday, why do you focus on war in your work. The question comes often with dissatisfaction, and a desire to hear or see works that have nothing to do with war. The question itself comes with a confusion, not being able to distinguish between the desire to write history, and the desire to question its writing. The question comes with an assumption that the civil war is over, and often confuses Israeli invasions and the civil wars. Funnily enough, these voices very often do not realize how little was produced about Lebanon's histories including civil wars.

I am trying to say that there are works interested in the representation of war, whether fiction or documentary, and others interested in the tectonics of storytelling, writing history, and identifying and producing documents taking the war situation as a case or a base, because war is one of rare situations where notions of common logic collapse, and the notions of evidence in relation to documents and history have to be challenged.

You mentioned the fact that starting a film is more like a performative gesture and that it is obvious in a film like In This House where seeking for the letter of a resistant buried for years in someone's garden becomes a whole event, and reveals tensions that you can still feel. Can this position of provoking or making things happen refer to a political dimension in your work?

This performative aspect applies to my recent works, notably works that were conceived as excavations. *In This House* has become emblematic of this approach, maybe because it is literally about digging earth, looking for a hidden objet. *In This House* - the video - documents the search for a letter buried in a garden. But the video is not the work. It is a documentation of it. The work is originally an intervention in two personal histories. The first is one of a family that owns a house with a garden but doesn't know that there is a letter buried there since twelve years. The second is one of a former member of the Lebanese resistance, who once wrote a letter to a family that he had never met, and buried it in the family's garden without knowing if the letter was ever found. Before being a video, the work is about creating an overlap between these two histories that otherwise - without my intervention - would have never met. The work is performative from this point of view. It is an excavation, metaphorically and physically this time. In

November 2002, when I excavated the letter, something has happened to the life of this family. Since then, they know - whether they admit it or not - that those who lived in their house between 1985 and 1991 were not thieves, were not barbaric, but were fighters with ethics and with an extreme sensibility, at least this. And the earth in the garden knows that it lost one of its secrets.

The Madani project presents another intervention taking place in a photographer's studio, the Studio Scheherazade in Saida, which was opened in 1953 by photographer Hashem el Madani. My work on this material started in 1999 when I met Madani. I was interested in him because he was not the perfectionist photographer. Contrary to what common fine art photography looks for, Madani had produced many images that would look poor from the perspective of fine art photography. Compositions very often disregarded what's happening in the background. He framed his picture simply by putting his subjects right in the centre of the frame, and rarely cared for any mannered or excessive lighting. But Madani did all his best to expand his business, to take as many photographs as possible to expand his address book, to hook up potential clients and make them part of his growing archive. He took pictures in the studio, and went out to the public space seeking potential clients in the public space or the place of work. He photographed in the day, and developed films later at night, seven days a week. He took pictures of weddings, burials, circumcision celebrations, festivities, demonstrations, and even went out on trips with those who wanted to have a photographer with them on a trip. He cared to have the people who appeared in the photographs visible, and the prints well developed, but wanted his prices to compete with other studios in town, so he privileged the 35 mm camera over heavier photo gear, and relied on this format for most of his outdoor photography. Few years after I met him, I realised my interest in researching photographs was shifting, and that I was not looking for individual images of particular significance only, but rather I was looking to understand how Madani worked and how he made his choices. I was interested in how he used his studio, how he treated his clients, and what kind of transactions took place there. I was also trying to understand why did this profession die, and was trying to see if there was any room for any intervention in his life and career. This is how I decided to take the entire studio as a target of an intervention that aims to look carefully at the studio's archive and try to come up with projects, exhibition, publications and videos that would raise issues relevant to photography and society, shed light on the practice and life of a photographer, and allow him a decent income. Studio Scheherazade still exists today partly because of an art study project that takes care of describing a collection, preserving it and considering it as a capital and as study material at the same time.

The gesture, or the intervention makes the work interact with life as opposed to describe it, or react to it. I don't necessarily describe it as political, although in some cases it is, but not because of the path I take, but because of the site of the intervention. .

The title of one of your recent personal exhibition Earth of Endless Secrets at the Sfeir Semler Gallery, and the Beirut Art Centre could evoke the archaeological approach. Can you tell us about the original background of this inhibition, its concept and the fact that the archaeological approach seems to be a guiding principle in your work?

My work is an expanding universe with characters that reappear (which I am part of), places I revisit, and cases that I study, and which sometimes are put on hold to resume working on them later. In 2004, after my exhibition *Unfolding*, at Portikus (Frankfurt), I realised how my work was getting more and more interested in the "objectness" of

documents . That was partly due because of my work on photographic archives and their preservation; I was being tuned to consider any document as an object of physical nature, before considering it holder of data. After that exhibition, Portikus received an amount of money to make a publication related to the exhibition, and this is how I started working on all these documents I had collected while making my videos. I was trying to reflect on their "objectness", and their capacity of communicating complex situations, notably socio-political. For example I had used letters of a former Lebanese prisoner in Israel named Nabih Awada in my video *All is Well on the Border* in 1997, but I have used them as voice over. They were read over rushes from the formerly occupied south Lebanon. Later in 2006, I contacted Nabih Awada after his release and asked him to photograph the letters. In 1997 I was not sensitive to the letters as objects with handwriting, drawings, stamps …etc. so I used them as holders of data, as texts. Today as part of the exhibition I took photographs of them because I wanted to treat them as paper with handwriting and with drawings and all types of Israeli and Red Cross stamps. In a separate work, I even erased all the text written in them and kept the flowers that Nabih had drawn on them, and the stamps, commenting on how difficult it is to communicate ten years of imprisonment through data.

I used the title *Earth of Endless Secrets* the first time in a small exhibition at Art Basel / Statements in 2007, reflecting on the idea of quest for objects, exhibiting the "findings". I started revisiting the collection I had made around videos, trying to expand it, and at the same time taking pictures of them for the sake of including them in a book. I started also making interviews with people who I have worked with in the past, and when I showed this material to Stefan Kalmar, curator of the Munich Kunstverein, he expressed an interest in transforming the book into an exhibition. This is how the new exhibition Earth of Endless Secrets came to exist, first in Kunstverein Munich, and later this summer in Beirut. The exhibition is an organic development of the practice of collecting that I started within the Arab Image Foundation, and my interest in documentary practice in art.

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