

A Strange Feeling of Familiarity

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[...] A fragment is captured, enlarged, repeated, and thus turned into another version of itself. It carries its own memory: stories enacted (or to be enacted) in other geographies. [...] Violence as rupture with the ever present possibility of loss. Violence projected unto any act, at that singular instant when the real and the non-real are indiscernible. Violence endlessly re-enacted, always recognized. Is there a trace that is not already withdrawn in relation to itself?

From Replay, 2000

The question of History and the possibilities of its narration are raised throughout my work. How do we approach history? Individual stories and the collective History. What image of it do we retain? What image of it will I re-create?

What are we left with from happy or dramatic experiences? Remembrances, which are more or less clear, feelings, which are more or less strong, impressions, which are more or less blurred, but mainly obscure areas. Some facts, dramas and experiences will never reach us and will remain unspoken, buried. We will never be able to witness their existence, but only presume that they are there, yet missing. History appears to be *missing* and becomes subjective stories, stories in the first person.

In a manner similar to the mechanism of memory, my work attempts to collect, record, erase, invent, forget, capture, miss and divert. I say *attempts*, because it also points to the impossibility of accessing a complete narrative, thus underlining the loss, the gaps of memory and history. I underline the process of such *attempts*, integrating it as part of the work.

It is important to keep a trace of things as a *diagnosis* of our time. This is why, I believe that collecting existing material or recording new material, hence creating a personal archive, is the first step of the creative process.

As History escapes us, only fragments remain, words and images; each fragment carries its own memory and its whole History. These fragments are memory and oblivion at the same time, parts of an incomplete whole and assembled subsequently. Rearranged and re-interpreted, they border fiction.

Such fragments constitute the core of past works reflecting on the idea of relative truth, such as the video installation **Objects of War 1, 2, 3, 4** (1999 - 2006), in which I asked each participant to choose an object as a starting point to recount his/her personal story on the war, therefore building an alternative archive of the Lebanese war(s) through these assembled personal testimonials.

In the video documentary **Houna Wa Roubbama Hounak**, (54'- 2003) a journey across what used to be the dividing line between East and West Beirut, I ask the inhabitants I encounter if they know someone who was kidnapped there during the war. Testimonies and discourses on the Lebanese war are assembled through a process of memory and language: what people recount or refuse to tell, what they fear to express or can't remember, what gets repeated from one person to another. I cross Beirut using archival photographs locating former checkpoints, drawing a personal map of the city.

In the short written fiction: *Ici et peut-être ailleurs*, (2003, published by H.K.W. Berlin) freely inspired by Kurosawa's film *Rashomon*, a dramatic event - the disappearance and probable murder of a man, Wahid Saleh is recounted by all the protagonists of the story. The accounts of the protagonists follow one another in an illusory attempt to reconstitute the event through clues and cross-examination. Here the gaps in the story prevent us from reaching a unique truth. Each protagonist claiming his implication in the murder of Wahid Saleh, raises the question of responsibility, making each one of us a potential actor in this crime.

The questions of truth and responsibility, as well as that of disappearance and loss are at the heart of *A Journey*, a documentary that follows my grand mother Rose. Born in Jerusalem in 1910, she moved to Beirut in the 30's. From the borderless Middle East of the Ottoman days, through the Occupation of Palestine, to the Lebanese civil war until her last days, the journey of Rose through life parallels my journey to the just-liberated South, reflecting on the conflicts in our region, questioning my identity and political choices.

The (three screen) video installation *Replay*, (2000) draws its origin from two archival images taken from the book *The War in Lebanon*. (Dar El Massira, 1979). One, a man photographed three times falling on the ground, wounded by a bullet, the other, a woman, barefoot in the street, begging for help. These images / fragments haunted me for years. I tried to imagine – to project – what might have happened in that place during the war. That instant when the man falls, is what I call «an instant of rupture», rupture of time. I reconstituted the frame and the action of these instants of rupture, by asking a man and a woman to replay the imaginary instant which preceded each photographic take.

The idea of rupture in time is also the starting point of the video *Replay (bis)*. A drama set in an undefined place and time and which might have been experienced or dreamt is repeated (replayed) in various forms three times. Using archival photographs, Super 8 and video footage, the story told is “missing” - it has gaps, only bits of it reach us, like recollections bursting into the consciousness of the narrator.

Untitled 1997-2003 my first video installation, explores in a different way the process of memory and narration. The images and the sounds are abstracted and decomposed, oscillating between being identifiable and totally losing their origin. The same video is projected from two opposite sources on five aligned rectangular Plexiglas panels. Images and sounds appear to us like reminiscences, while crossing the multiple panels, they get transformed and parts of them get lost.

These works reflect on Repetition, whether through a repeated question or device (like in *Objects of War and Houna Wa Roubbama Hounak*), which create a frame for testimonies to be gathered; or through a narrative repeated in different ways (like in *Replay (bis)*), or when recreating a scene and playing in loop (*Replay*).

The film *Sleep* (7' - 2004) is a single shot that repeats itself. As it expands at each replay, its content and the rhythm of its images are transformed. This shot is made of a succession of single frames. These recorded *fragments* of sleeping time are as many ellipses. They signify all those moments that have not been recorded and will never be, those moments that will remain lost to the story. *Sleep* is part of *Time and the Other* a story of love and separation. *Time and the other* is a *missing* story, recounted through the subjective eye of one lover (the “I” of the first person) in the absence of the other. The other is present through his absence and the traces left by his body.

Repetition is certainly a way to reflect on Time and to express a perception of History as a non-linear and incomplete narrative. All these works constitute essentially a work on Time: the recording of time, of its trace and its effects on us. A reflection on our relentless pursuit, and yet our incapacity to measure, understand and accept the idea of time.

Elements that disappear (incomplete stories and words, images vanishing or erased); and inversely elements, which survive, which impressed us and left a trace, the work present in this exhibition continues the work described above.

Je d'histoires explores narrative possibilities, this time with the participation of the spectator. *Je d'histoires* plays multiple stories. The visitor is invited to construct his own visual story from an array of video images, texts and music. He/she becomes an actor in the narrative process, each time renewing it. The visitor affects - disturbs the playing. His / her presence is therefore imprinted in the sequence, making it unique. *Je d'histoires* reveals the process of story telling and the mechanism through which text, image and music are linked to create a narrative. How can one « event » be told in various ways?

The video and series of prints ***Full moon*** presents a few attempts over years to capture a poetic moment which happened once: A *traveling* with an extraordinary full moon while driving to Raouché crossing the ring, then back home. The same traveling is repeated each time in a different way, the recordings which are each a diagnosis of our « present » in Beirut, constitute as many fragments of history. Is it possible to capture an instant? Aren't we always beneath or beyond reality? Here, Repetition becomes the reflection of a vain desire to capture beauty and at the same time a mean of renewal. It reflects on the process of creation.

The series of prints ***Nights and Days***, which are part of a body of, works all relating to the war of summer 2006, is based on videos and written notes made during that summer. *Nights and Days* expresses the passage of time, the awaiting but also the transformations made by the war. It reflects on representations of violence and war and notions of « beauty » versus « horror ». The images presents « beautiful » urban or natural landscape where a detail, a written comment, and the relation between one image to another reveals the presence of war and its violence. *Nights and Days* explores narrative possibilities through the many layers one image can present, playing with text and repetition, referring to cinema, diaries and painting.

The series of prints ***The end of ...*** are not far at all from ***Surfaces***, FCC, Beirut 1997, my first exhibition in which I wrote:

My work pulled by two temptations that it seeks to reconcile: to completely make disappear or completely reappear the object. (...) The border that is the surface of the canvas is, at the same time, a concrete space of communication, an interface, and a metaphor of both what is hidden and what is revealed on the surface. (...) There is what I "erase", which I "scratch off" the surface, and what I voluntarily let re-appear in the foreground. (...) Each painting finds itself in a liminal state between an improbable memory and an impossible amnesia.

The series of prints ***The end of ...*** are all « mental images » made of photomontages or single images transformed. I used images from Super 8, video and written notes assembled over years. They are reminiscences of a history, which has gaps. Here the process of memory, through the recording of traces as well as erasing and diverting, is visible on the physical texture of the images.

Images from archives diverted from their origin and recreated in other geographies, images disappearing. Images-fragments, words bursting out, taking on a new meaning. Though they represent post-war landscapes and specific places in Lebanon, there are non-realistic, poetic images. The series *The end of ...* with an emphasis the vanishing of images, is a mean to reflect on violence, loss and disillusion. They are not mere beautiful landscapes but carry within them, in an understated way, all the tensions, conflicts and political turmoil I / we experience. Rather than engaging in any political statement, they express a sense of despair and disillusion critical of all ideologies.
