"There are many stories, but I can't tell you here."
"You're scared of them being recorded?"
"No, I'm not scared of them being recorded. But there's no reason to record them. Because they may be true and they may not, you see? Because they won't give you the answer you're looking for." — Lamia Joreige[1]

Stories lay at the heart of Lamia Joreige's *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere* (2003), a 54-minute video delving into the disappearances that occurred during Lebanon's fifteen-year civil war. Joreige plots these stories, almost literally, like points on a map of Beirut. Armed with a set of archival newspaper photographs depicting the checkpoints that once punctuated the green line — a wide no-man's-land separating the city into eastern and western sectors — Joreige sets out with a digital video camera to find and film the present-day location in each picture. As she moves from one site to another, she interviews residents in surrounding neighbourhoods, asking them for their stories. Do they know anyone who went missing from here? Do they remember the checkpoints, the kidnappings, or the killings? Do they have any idea what happened to those who disappeared?

The film splices Joreige's static checkpoint photographs — all black-and-white images with a vintage grain — into dynamic sequences of current video footage that are sharp, colourful, and roving. The juxtaposition of still and moving images not only paces the work visually but also creates a temporal disjuncture between past and present.

That disjuncture doubles as Joreige's subjects speak. They answer her questions with stories that are both visceral and vague, on and off the point. They slip between fact and fiction, between what seems to be a straightforward recollection of past events and what is clearly an interpretation of memories performed in the present. As the title of the film suggests, these stories are here and elsewhere at once. As one man tells her simply, "they may be true and they may not. You see?"

During Lebanon's civil war, from 1975 to 1990, the many thresholds between East and West Beirut became wrecked urban wastelands. Particularly in the early stages of fighting in 1975 and 1976, various militias erected roadblocks and engaged in tit-for-tat abductions along the green line. As cars approached each crossing, passengers stopped to show their identity cards, which, in addition to the usual information such as names and addresses, indicate the religious sects to which the holders belong.

Depending on the nature and intensity of skirmishes elsewhere in the city, passengers of a particular religion were sometimes killed on the spot or kidnapped to be used later as bargaining chips in prisoner swaps between fighting factions. Kidnappings took place elsewhere throughout the war but were particularly brutal at the checkpoints along the green line, where people were literally picked off to meet quotas of numbers dead or disappeared on different sides. Rough estimates suggest that about 18,000 people went missing during a conflict that claimed 150,000 lives, wounded 200,000, displaced 800,000, and caused a third of Lebanon's population to flee the country.[2]

The civil war came to a close in 1990 and, in the intervening fifteen years, very little has been done outside the efforts of non-governmental organizations to determine the fate of those who disappeared, whether

1 Lamia Joreige, "Here and Perhaps Elsewhere", *Home Works II: A Forum on Cultural Practices*, Ashkal Alwan, Beirut, 2005, p. 177.

2 These are the figures that are generally agreed upon, although solid statistics are famously hard to come by in Lebanon. The estimates of how many Palestinian refugees were killed in the 1982 massacres at the Sabra and Shatila camps outside Beirut, for example, range from 800 to 3,000.

they are alive or dead, where they are being held if they are alive, or who is to be held responsible if they are dead. In six brief articles, Lebanese law delineates the criteria under which a person may be deemed missing, outlines how a judicial declaration of death may be made, and stipulates inheritance procedures, stating that those who reappear within five years may reclaim their estates from their heirs. There is no official list of missing persons and no ministry or government office is charged with handling these cases.

During this same time period, however, the physical city of Beirut has been dramatically reconstructed, particularly in the downtown area where many of the roadblocks once stood. Buildings have been torn down, plots of land have been re-zoned, and streets and traffic patterns have been redrawn, all radically altering the layout of Beirut's spatial environment.

At each checkpoint Joreige endeavours to find in the film, there is a palpable sense of disorientation. She uses the set of archival images to jog the memories of area residents, but time and time again, the interview subjects in *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere* look down at the checkpoint photographs and up at the surrounding city with expressions of confusion. To their frustration (or delight, in the case of a group of kids too young to remember anything of the war but entirely willing to try out a new game), they cannot, or perhaps will not, pinpoint the exact location. There is a repeated failure to match one view with the other, as if these images of past and present refuse to conform to a singular notion of place, let alone a coherent, collectively understood historical narrative linking one with the other.

Binding the film together are the longer sequences of people speaking on screen. Through the act of producing narratives, her subjects attempt to rehabilitate these images of the past into the present. But again Joreige encounters a kind of rhythmic refusal. One subject takes her photographs as a floodgate for polemics — he uses them as an opportunity to hurl invectives at those he still perceives to be his political enemies. Another blanks the images completely. He has nothing to say. He remembers no such thing. Others make telling narrative substitutions. Kidnappings? No, but let me tell you about my son who was killed. Some of Joreige's subjects clearly distrust her, sensing that she is not from the neighbourhood, that she is an outsider. They turn her questions back on her or try to use them for their own gain. Who wants to know and why? Will they be on television if they talk? Some of the stories they tell her are tragic while others seem suspect and Joreige does little to distinguish between them. In some cases, her subjects seem to be boasting to her, as if to be in possession of secret knowledge is to gain some measure of authority in the eyes of the film-maker and the audience that will presumably see her film.

Just as *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere* exposes rifts between past and present and between truth and fiction, the film itself shifts between elements of documentary and artistic practice. Joreige proceeds methodically from one site to the next. She repeats the same arsenal of questions like an ethnographer conducting field research. Yet *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere* is loosely and atmospherically composed. The entire documentary genre has long been contested terrain, and Joreige forces viewers to consider what exactly it means to produce a document on film or video. Joreige draws upon certain conventions of traditional documentary film-making but diverges from them as well. She actively intervenes with her subjects. She uses no voice-over narration. She

offers no statistics, no hard or fast evidence to support the history of the civil war. The film does not offer a definitive study on the subject of kidnapping or the disappeared.

What becomes clear toward the end of *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere* is that Joreige is looking for something, for one story among many. Eventually she interviews an elderly couple who relate back to her the story of her own uncle's capture. This would seem to pose a logical resolution for the film, an endpoint for its narrative arc. Yet even here, the story is unsettling in its brevity and lack of specificity. Are they simply telling her what she wants to hear, patching information together from her questions? It is difficult to know, to be sure, that the tale they tell her about her uncle is true. For the artist's sake, you want to believe it. But at the same time you have to admit, as the man says above, such stories won't give you the answer you're looking for.

Joreige's film is in many respects emblematic of contemporary art practices as they have been developing in Beirut throughout the post-war period. Her work is neither cinema nor reportage. Rather it is a video piece, an artwork, with an aesthetic and at times almost painterly skin grafted onto a conceptual spine. Like a number of her contemporaries living and working in Beirut now, Joreige uses documentary practices, eyewitness testimonies, and archival images to produce art that probes the history and legacy of Lebanon's civil war. As an artist, she works by attempting to move freely throughout the city, collecting the visual and material traces the war has left behind, and subjecting those traces to critical investigation. What do they mean? What do they refer back to? What do they represent and how do they function now?

Here and Perhaps Elsewhere poses the following questions: How was the civil war in Lebanon experienced by those who lived through it? Has the conflict been truly resolved? Have its causes and consequences been sufficiently or even adequately addressed? In giving aesthetic form to these questions, Joreige and her colleagues have staked a claim for critical positions in contemporary art that carry the potential to not only reflect but also challenge and alter the political and social realities that inform identity construction and daily life.

In the context of Beirut specifically, artists such as Joreige have made a plausible case for the presence of an avant-garde that is capable of disrupting Lebanon's mainstream artistic traditions by challenging the dominance of commercial galleries and other institutions that glom onto culture as commerce, kitsch, and escapist entertainment. In doing so, they are recalibrating the role contemporary art plays in Beirut by dismantling its standing as a bourgeois bubble set safely apart from (and above) political concerns. They are also retooling critical art practice into a force that can engage, inform, and change the contents of public discourse and the contours of public space.

More broadly, and beneath the trauma of the civil war itself, their work touches on the failures of nationalism, the fading relevance of leftist political movements that pushed for social justice and secular modernism in the developed and developing world, and the polarisation between the West and the Arab world that has become dangerously pronounced in the post 9/11 era.