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## **I, an eye in History**

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Lamia Joreige, 2006

History and its possible narration. How do we approach history? What image of it do we retain? What image of it will I re-create? Questions that challenge our outlook, our subjectivity, and also the relation between our individual history and the collective one.

What are we left with from happy or dramatic experiences such as love and war? What do we retain from these events? 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. They are obscured due to the mechanism of memory itself, to its distortions and the possibility, even the necessity, that human beings will forget. They are obscure due to the fact that assembling all the testimonies and documents relating to past events is an impossible task. Jalal Toufic eloquently expresses in his comments on William Blake's : "*William Blake's to see a world in a grain of sand / and a heaven in a wild flower / hold infinity in the palm of your hand / and eternity in an hour ( Auguries of innocence, 1803) implies We need an eternity to explore and exhaust what is in one hour : « I have no time to remember the event as I have yet to explore and exhaust it ».*

I find myself caught in a tension between the temptation and even the necessity of recounting that History, and the impossibility of fully accessing it.

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. So History appears to be *missing* (in French: *Histoire manquante*) and becomes subjective stories, stories in the first person. An immeasurable loss of words, images and sounds, the magnitude and nature of which we will never know.

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.

Similarly to the mechanism of memory, my work attempts to collect, record, erase, invent, forget, capture, miss and divert. I say, attempts, because in all my work, I point out the impossibility of accessing a complete narrative, thus underlining the loss, the gaps of memory and history.

In *Objects of War*, a work begun in 1999, assembling a series of testimonials on the Lebanese war, I asked each person to choose an object, ordinary, or unusual, which serves as a starting point for his / her story.

The work of collecting and assembling these stories continues and they are now compiled so that the viewer can select which story he / she wishes to view from a database.

By creating a device through which I assemble and accumulate documentary and fiction narratives, I hope to restore an essential speech.

To make visible and audible speech that has been willingly or unwillingly concealed or simply ignored. Essential, because this speech is symptomatic of a peculiar period of our history; essential also because, even when they become fictitious, this speech is evidence of intense and rare human experiences which, even if related to a specific context, attain a universal dimension.

During the Lebanese civil war, thousands of people disappeared. In most cases, the bodies were not found and the circumstances of their disappearance are not certain. In the documentary *Houna wa Roubbama Hounak (Here and Perhaps Elsewhere)*, I accumulate a diversity of narratives, recorded along my journey through what used to be the dividing line between East and West Beirut, and where militias set up their checkpoints, the scenes of many kidnappings, and crimes. By asking each inhabitant I encounter if he or she knows someone that has been kidnapped here during the war, I trigger the process of memory, and reveal the immensity of this drama, the presence of war and its prevalence in language and various discourses. As I cross town and discover places laden with history, I draw a personal map of this city.

The diversity of the many stories recounted, their accumulation and unequal repetition link each personal experience to the collective one, making difficult if not impossible the idea of a unique truth.

That same idea of relative truth exists in the short fiction *Ici et peut-être ailleurs, (Here and Perhaps Elsewhere)* published in 2003. In that fiction, a dramatic fact, that of the disappearance and probable murder of a man: Wahid Saleh, is recounted by several protagonists. The accounts of each protagonist follow one another in an illusory attempt to reconstitute this dramatic fact through clues and cross checking. Here the gaps in the story prevent us from reaching a unique truth. Each protagonist claiming the murder of Wahid Saleh, raises the question of responsibility, making each of us a potential actor of this crime.

These works reflect the process of memory and the relation to History through *linear* narratives, whereas in other works, I seek different narrative forms, in which the story is “exploded”; such as *Untitled 1997-2003* ; *Replay* ; and *Replay (bis)*, where fragments of sounds, images and texts form a non-linear narrative, bursting out and disappearing like recollections of an undefined past.

The film *Replay (bis)*, (9 minutes, 2002) is a drama that replays differently three times. First with text and images, then with that same text repeated with the use of new images, and finally, with the text leading to a view of the Beirut harbor, filmed in real time, during the dusk prayer, inviting us to contemplation. The story told in the first two chapters is “missing”, it has gaps, only bits of it reach us, like recollections bursting into the consciousness of the narrator and trying to find some order in it. We don't know and will not know where and when this drama happened. In the last chapter, one single image, the only image in the present time, sets the narration beyond words; it seems to me that this image alone encompasses all that the preceding chapters attempted to express.

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The installation *Replay*, made in 2000, draws its origin from two archival images taken from the book: *The War in Lebanon - Images and Chronology*. (Dar El Massira, 1979). One, a man photographed three times lying on the ground, wounded by a bullet, the other: a woman, barefoot in a street, begging for help. Those images haunted me for years. They are fragments of History, while looking at them, I tried to imagine - to project - what may have happened in that place during the war. A simple thought was also at the origin of *Replay*: When I see a man falling in the street, quite a usual occurrence, why do I think that this man is dying? One possible answer comes to my mind: It is because the image of that man falling is a fragment of history, which carries its own memory: that of a man dying in an undefined past. The man is falling there in front of me, but he has already fallen before, in another time. Like the man falling and dying in *La Jetée* by Chris Marker, he dies there, in front of us, but he is already dead. That image / fragment, that instant when the man falls, is what I call « an instant of rupture », rupture within time, rupture of time. So I reconstituted the frame and the action of those instants of rupture, by asking a man and a woman to replay the imaginary instant which preceded each photographic take.

The video *Embrace* (which is part of *Time and the Other*, an exhibition and book made in 2004), started from the same concept: That of an instant of violence, a rupture, where the loss of the other becomes possible. Violence projected onto any act, at that singular instant when the real and the non-real are indiscernible

In *Embrace*, there is one single take, the camera doesn't move, but closes in many times; and when it gets closer, we do not distinguish any better the nature of the action. On the contrary, the ambiguity grows as the two bodies and their movements become abstract and the frontier between confrontation and embrace is blurred.

To film sleep, to replay the scene of an experience, to reconstitute a story through recollections, archival documents or fictitious elements, all these constitute essentially a work on Time: the recording of time, of its trace and its effects on us ; a reflection on our relentlessness and yet our incapacity to measure, understand and accept time and the idea of time.

If the last shot of *Replay (bis)* is a unique take, a particle of real time (the time of the dusk prayer), the video *Sleep* (part of *Time and the Other*), is also a single shot made of a succession of photograms (taken with the help of a camera with a programmed intervalometer). But in the video *Sleep*, this shot repeats itself, expanding at each replay and transforming its content as well as the rhythm of its images every time. The bodies in motion of the couple become abstract, blurring the border with reality. These recorded fragments of sleeping time are as many ellipses; they point out to all those moments that have not been recorded and never will be, those moments that will remain lost to the story. *Sleep* is the place of total separation, a unique moment of solitude to which *the Other* has no access. In this video, sounds and images are worked to create a sort of lyricism which is haunted by anxiety, as well as to express the swing between discord and harmony that lies in the relationship to the loved *other*.

*Time and the Other* is a story of love and the terrible slow separation of a couple, told in the first person. Here the experience of subjectivity is pushed further: The "I" - of the first person - is staged not only as a subject of the experience but as a distant object of it. *Time and the other* is also a missing story, a story recounted through the subjective eye of one lover (the "I" of the first person) in the absence of *the other* - this other

whom we never clearly see though he's always there. His presence is obvious, through his absence and the traces left by his body.

To conclude, I'd like to quote a filmmaker – writer whom I particularly admire:

*The process of making film in communion with oneself, the way a painter works or a writer, need not now be solely experimental. Contrary to what people say, using the first person in films tends to be a sign of humility. All I have to offer is myself.*

Chris Marker 1997

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