



IBRAAZ

Platform 006

INTERVIEWS

Uncommon Histories

Lamia Joreige in conversation with Anthony Downey



Lamia Joreige, *Under-Writing Beirut – Mathaf* (2013). Mixed-media installation, commissioned by the Sharjah Art Foundation. View of exhibition at Art Factum Gallery, Beirut.
Image courtesy of Art Factum Gallery.

Anthony Downey: I wanted to start with your most recent work, *Underwriting Beirut – Mathaf* (2013), which I saw in 2013 at the Sharjah Biennial 11. I was quite fascinated by this work because it seems to have a methodology, but the methodology seems to be doomed to failure. There are a lot of limitations in this work: there are the limitations of recording; the limitations of archival knowledge;

the limitations of art as a practice for producing knowledge. But it seemed to me in this work that those limits for you are quite productive; they're precisely what you use to develop your own imaginative investigation into *Mathaf*. Do you see these limits (the limits of knowledge, the limits of art as a practice, the limits of recording, the limits of an archive) as productive for your work?

Lamia Joreige: It's interesting because I was not expecting to have so many limitations when I started the research on this project. I have included in other works the notion of failure as an integral part of the work, for instance in a previous work that I have developed since 1999 called *Objects of War* (ongoing), which is about the possible narrations of the Lebanese War, at the core of the project there was the impossibility of having an exhaustive or a complete account – the idea of history was undermined by the very failure of this attempt.

When I started the project *Underwriting Beirut – Mathaf*, the person directing the museum did not give me access to the reserve of the museum because I was not an archaeologist and I did not know precisely which object I wanted to investigate. To which I responded, how could I know what existed in the reserve if I had never been given an index or the possibility to know what is in it? Usually this research is confined to archaeology students, and then when I asked to see the photography archives and also the archive of all the gazettes and journals of the museum published over decades, I was also not given access because the director had very little assistance and she was overwhelmed with work.

I was later told that there was no index of the museum's contents prior to the war. So the index starts after the war, and was mainly based on what was published in these journals. So I had to work within these limitations, I understood that I had to work with what she was proposing. She quickly suggested that the only object I could have access to, which was damaged by the war and not yet on display was this mosaic – which, by the way, is now on display to the public.

AD: *The Good Shepherd?*

LJ: Yes – so *The Good Shepherd's* mosaic was not publicly on display, and she probably allowed me to see it because she knew it was going to be displayed very soon to the public. I had proposed to them to do a work that would potentially include a collaboration with the museum, doing a postcard of the mosaic as it was damaged by the sniper and using an archival image that she had given me access to. But I wasn't allowed to publish that image within my booklet or in other publications, under the reason that this was an archival image that belonged to the museum. So I had to take into account these limitations regarding the mosaic. I used what she was giving me, and I immediately went and took photographs of the mosaic, and took measurements and sketches of the hole that the sniper is said to have done within that mosaic, which was one of the rare objects that could not be protected by the director. The former director of the museum, had a great sense of conservation, and was able to save a lot of the objects from being destroyed during the war because he had them covered with concrete, and also had walls built to prevent objects from being destroyed or stolen.

The mosaic of *The Good Shepherd* was vertical, so this is probably why it was not possible to protect it with concrete – it may have been impossible to pour concrete on it to protect it, hence the destruction that occurred. This is also why I used concrete for the reformulation of the hole of the sniper that became a sculpture called *Object of War* (2013). The use of concrete was a deliberate reference to the use of concrete by the former director of the museum.

AD: That's interesting – it seems that obviously there were institutional limitations placed upon you which forced you to rethink certain relationships to the images and to the objects, but it also seems that the work is about the limitations of archival knowledge, and the limitations of the museum as a repository for a natural, or national, history. So there seems to also be a notion of exploring notional limitations.



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LJ: Absolutely. The second piece that expressed those limitations is a piece with the photographic print, which is 3m by 1m 50 called *Objects from the National Museum of Beirut* (2013), and the leather book that is *Objects Missing from the National Museum of Beirut* (2013). This was a sort of literal interpretation – when she told me 'you cannot access the reserves you can only access and take as many photographs as you like of the visible objects', I took it literally. I went one day, on December 15 2012, and I photographed all the objects inside the museum. My idea was that this image is actually the image that is a mirror of this museum. In a way, it was to show in one image the entire politic and content of the museum through its collection which is, of course, limited, because it is mainly a funerary collection that is quite biased as it is mostly Phoenician, and, on that matter, you know, that our national identity is still at stake.

This is a controversial aspect in Lebanese history: it is precisely the notion of common history and of common identity that we still have to agree on. This is one of the aspects that led to civil war and today's conflict. The national museum has everything but a consensual identity. My main point was not to discuss identity and politics as much as it was to use the limitations that I was confronted with and suggest several notions, such as the notion of a contested national

identity, and what it means to be able to see (read) an entire (national) collection at once in one singular image- text.

Of course by putting this image along with a secret book *Missing Objects of the National Museum*, it refers to everything that has been missing and that will never be retrieved, and to the knowledge that these elements are missing. In the same way, in my works *Objects of War*, and *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere*, the idea of a multiplicity of discourse that can be assembled together but nevertheless cannot render a full historical account points at all the missing elements, and leaves it open, that is always open to the future but also to things that will never be retrieved. The idea of missing parts and missing elements in history expressed in this new work and using an archive (which means de facto missing elements), had started in previous works.

AD: It seems that the missing elements, the fact of absence, is a major component in any sense of a complete history. Absence is integral to that.

LJ: Absolutely, because some knowledge is missing – well, there are things we will not have access to, precisely because they have disappeared. Sometimes there are some symptoms or there are traces that can suggest a previous mark or a previous event, etcetera. In the case of the Lebanese Wars, there is also the fact that the people who took part in that war are still today part of our political life. So there are also many elements, in which we cannot dig, in the same way that I could not dig in the reserves of the museum. And there I don't think it's because of political secrecy, but there are a lot of missing objects of the museum that probably ended up ... – regardless of the war and before it happened, there were objects that were taken and were never given back to the antiquities department. There are a lot of things - from people who disappeared during the war to other elements - in which we cannot dig today because we have to preserve a certain political balance. There are cases (and the most important ones are the cases of the disappeared) that are not talked about enough and not investigated enough for reasons that are obvious, because many of the 'actors' of the war are still 'acting' today in our current political realm.

AD: It seems that *Mathaf*, the museum, becomes symbolic of a political reality as much as it becomes symbolic of a cultural reality; the history of the museum itself as it strives for national identity becomes symbolic of the fallacy of creating a national identity.

LJ: Yes it's true, this is where the print *Objects from the National Museum of Beirut* can have a certain level of criticism, but this is not the only aspect of that piece; it's the first layer, if you want. It expresses a contested identity and it's obviously a piece that says: 'this is our national identity as expressed culturally', in a sort of ironical manner. Also the museum is so small that it can actually be embedded in one image, which is three metres by one metre fifty, so in a way it has an ironical aspect to it, but this is not the only aspect.

I must say, I cannot but be seduced by this collection because it is a very beautiful collection. So for me, it's not about criticizing national identity as much as it is to point at it as a problem or something that is unresolved. The collection of the museum is very well presented, it's definitely a collection that is worth seeing for what it is: an archaeological collection. For me what is interesting is

how to see it culturally – to dig in this collection, to take from this collection and read these objects from a contemporary viewpoint – is similar to looking back at history from the present point in any place in Beirut and trying to think about the traces, the absence of some traces, the potential narratives that can come out of such objects and such locations.

This project is the first chapter of a longer project that will explore various locations in Beirut. I will use similar methods for the other locations, but I also I want to leave it open to what the spaces and locations suggest to me. The nature of the *Underwriting Beirut – Mathaf* project was very much linked to the area of the museum itself, it might be different in the other chapters of this project, which will extend over several years probably. But what will be similar will be looking back at the past from the present point of view, and trying to explore and investigate the history of the place but also the potential for narratives and reformulations using what I find in these locations.



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AD: I want to ask a broader question about Beirut itself. Obviously Beirut forms a very key element in your work, and I'm just thinking about Beirut's relationship to history. The Lebanese wars seem to have created an almost catastrophic effect that has fundamentally disrupted Beirut's relationship to history. It seems that this disruption has provoked artists to rethink traditional methods of historiography, different methods of recording. I'm wondering in particular in relation to your work *Beirut, Autopsy of a City* (2010) – this methodology has been provoked by the fact that Beirut's relationship to history is so different, so disrupted, so fundamentally recalibrated, because of the Lebanese wars, that you as an artist, through works such as *Autopsy of a City*, have had to find different ways of recording that history. Do you think that's true in relation to the work?

LJ: I don't know if I would go as far as to say catastrophic, but I think what I tried to do in *Beirut, Autopsy of a City* – what I discovered in making *Beirut, Autopsy of a City* was precisely that what is commonly called the Lebanese War, was not a unique case, but that the history of the city was made up of so many different wars and so many different invasions and so many catastrophic elements. I don't know if the recent wars were a disruption that was unusual as much as they were probably part of a historical process in which similar events had already occurred several times. But what was surely a disruption was for us on the personal level, because when you're within such a process it's very different to see your life disrupted than when you take a distance, and look at history with a critical distance – it becomes something else.

So I think what was interesting to me precisely was that *Beirut, Autopsy of a City* came out of an irrational feeling, a feeling of anxiety, which was provoked by the years between 2005 and 2010, in which so many assassinations and disruptions – mainly the assassination of the prime minister but the others that followed too – and the near-break out of civil war in 2008 and the war with Israel in 2006. I think I literally woke up one day and asked myself: what if all of this disappeared and our experience of what we call Lebanon has ended? Because it does happen in history that geographies and nations get transformed and dismantled, I mean it happened to other populations. So it was irrational but realistic and very possible. I said to myself, why don't I start to look back from antiquity until today at those moments where it almost happened, where it almost happened that the city was entirely destroyed? And the city became a symbol for the rest of the country.

This is when I discovered that Beirut was absolutely not important and not interesting and not even on the map until the nineteenth century. There was almost no account of Beirut – there were a few pilgrims passing by who testified when the tsunami happened. Beirut was well-established around 6th century AD because of a famous Roman law school, and then totally destroyed in 551AD, by a tsunami, a fire and earthquake. But outside of that period, Beirut was, for hundreds of years, not on the map, in the 18 century there were only 5,000 inhabitants. That was also something that I did not know, I realized there were so many things I did not know about Beirut – not that I'm very knowledgeable now, but I thought it was interesting to look back at these moments, by using texts and images. It was not exhaustive, there were two things: there was the idea of the missing moments and there was the idea of the timeline that couldn't be complete because there are so many things, which were left out, unsaid or missing – there are so few texts that describe the city over centuries, so we have no idea [what happened]. So the timeline is chronological but it has huge gaps, and it includes texts written by historians but also by poets along with testimonies. So it's absolutely not about the accuracy of a historical account or truth, but rather the possibility of having juxtaposed poetic texts along with historical accounts, bringing out this idea of subjectivity within that historical timeline.

AD: It seems like the work itself, *Autopsy of a City*, is not just about creating a narrative of the history of Beirut, it's almost about creating a different relationship between the city and history itself; a different relationship to time itself?

LJ: Yes, because I'm very interested in the idea of non-linear time. It crosses all my work such as in the installation *Replay* (2000). For me the idea of a timeline is also about the possibility of reading things in non-linear way. Although the timeline is de facto a linear element that was used in historiography to say that history is something that has to do with continuity and progress – I undermine this image of the timeline by creating one that goes in zigzag. Maybe I could have undermined it a bit more, sometimes I think I should have gone even further in disrupting this idea of timeline. I based the drawing of the timeline on a drawing by a French man named *Renouvier*, which I found in a book of maps, he made a beautiful map in zigzag. For me the very idea of not having a straight line, and the very idea of having jumps and gaps in history, was important, because then I could suppose that when you see it on the wall you don't have to go left to right, you could go right to left, top to bottom, and you have readings that are not necessarily linear of each element, you can juxtapose them and make associations between something that happened in 1200BC and something that happened in 2010 AD. So you're absolutely right, here I put in relation the very idea of history with the city – Beirut allows for that because of all these things that are at stake.

AD: There's almost a sense of disjunction, but equally a sense of anachronism; things do not happen in chronological order, things do not happen in what we see as accepted historical order. I'm thinking specifically here about another work of yours, *Three Triptychs* (2009), and I'm just thinking of the influence of, for example, Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972), Jean Cocteau's *Orphée* (1950), David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (1990-1), and equally Jalal Toufic's notion of the *Overtun*. I was just wondering if you could talk about that because it seems to me that your work engages a lot of different strategies for re-reading the limitations of historical narrative and historical knowledge. Could you talk a little bit about Tarkovsky and Toufic in relation to *Three Triptychs*?

LJ: I think that the strategy is not so different, maybe the form is different because it was the second interactive installation that I did and it was based on the very idea of experiencing alone a narrative that I proposed – instead of watching something with a distance you immerse yourself within the space and the narrative that I proposed. The different connections, associations that I did between Jalal Toufic's concept of *The Overtun* and *Solaris* and *Twin Peaks* were all – I mean *Twin Peaks*' last chapter is about this labyrinth and place, where time and space are not following, let's say, the rules that would operate in our reality, and I'm very interested in that – this idea of non-linear time, time as a rupture - a moment of rupture, something that can also be re-enacted at different moments and in different geographies but that would still be the same. This is something that I started to develop with an installation called *Replay*, using an image-fragment (an archival image from the war) and re-enacting this image in the present through the use of filmed performances.

In *Three Triptychs* there is this idea of non-linear time, which is very predominant in *Solaris* because in *Solaris* even death doesn't exist anymore, we don't know if the woman he sees exists or not. Does she physically exist through something that he imagines? Here, what interests me, is the idea of loss, of something that disconnection you from reality, where your relationship to reality is transformed by various elements. In *Solaris* it's because of the ocean's emanations. I think this is something that I wish to explore more. It's really the

idea of the loss of the real and the possibility of another time-space equation that is important to me. Because if you think about memory, the concept of memory, the idea even of an account following a war or a massacre, there are moments where things have slipped – you are anachronistic, you are not necessarily remembering things in continuity, things come out as reminiscences, they come out with a different relationship to time.



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This is something that interests me. In my video *A Journey*, my grandmother loses her sense of reality towards the end of her life, she goes in and out of reality, there's a sense of loss, but then again something else erupts in the language. That's something that I'm interested in. I think in *Three Triptychs* I developed a similar idea but in a different way when dealing with the concept of memory and reminiscences and the idea of a reality that becomes a bit 'slippery'.

AD: I have a nice quote here from Stanislaw Lem, whom I'm sure you know was the original author of *Solaris*, he said the following: 'As the author of *Solaris* I shall allow myself to repeat that I only wanted to create a vision of a human encounter that cannot be reduced to human concepts, ideas or images.' And it seems, just to recap on what we've been talking about, there's this sense that human concepts of history, human concepts of time, human concepts of linearity, human concepts of chronology, need to be reconfigured to fully conceptualize both the history of Beirut but equally one's personal relationship to that history.

LJ: Then again, we are only human. It's possible to always question and reconfigure our concepts of history, but no matter what, we are human and it would be hard to extract ourselves from this condition, therefore we can only imagine and speculate on other ways of seeing history (from a non human point of view). But it is a beautiful quote because what I really liked about *Solaris* is that for me it's really a film about love, about the possibility of love as something

that surpasses reality and surpasses the physical reality of Earth. I think in that sense it's a film that blurs our sense of reality but also it's a great melancholic film on love and the possibility of love.

Lamia Joreige is a visual artist and filmmaker who lives and works in Beirut. She uses archival documents and fictitious elements to reflect on the relation between individual stories and collective History. She explores the possibilities of representation of the Lebanese wars and their aftermath, and Beirut, a city at the center of her imagery. Her work is essentially on Time, the recordings of its trace and its effects on us. Among her works are *Beirut, Autopsy of a City* (multimedia installation, 2010); *Tyre 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, Portrait of a housing cooperative* (video installation, 2010); *Three Triptychs* (interactive installation, 2009); *Full Moon* (video, 2007); *Nights and Days* (video & series of prints, 2007); *Je d'histoires* (interactive installation, 2007); *The end of...* (prints); *...and the living is easy*, in collaboration with Rabih Mroué, (video & text, 2007); *A Journey* (video, 2006) – *Objects of War 1, 2, 3, 4* (video installation, 1999-2006); *Embrace* (video, 2004); *Sleep* (Super.8, 2004) – *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere* (video, 2003); *Replay (bis)*, (video, 2002); *Replay* (video & text installation) 2000; *Le déplacement* (video-stills installation, 1998-2000); *Untitled 1997-2003* (video installation). Joreige is the author of two publications: *Time and the Other* (Alarm Editions: Beirut, 2004) and *Ici et peut-être ailleurs*, (H.K.W: Berlin, 2003).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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