

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige

Wonder Beirut (History of a Pyromaniac Photographer) 1998–2006

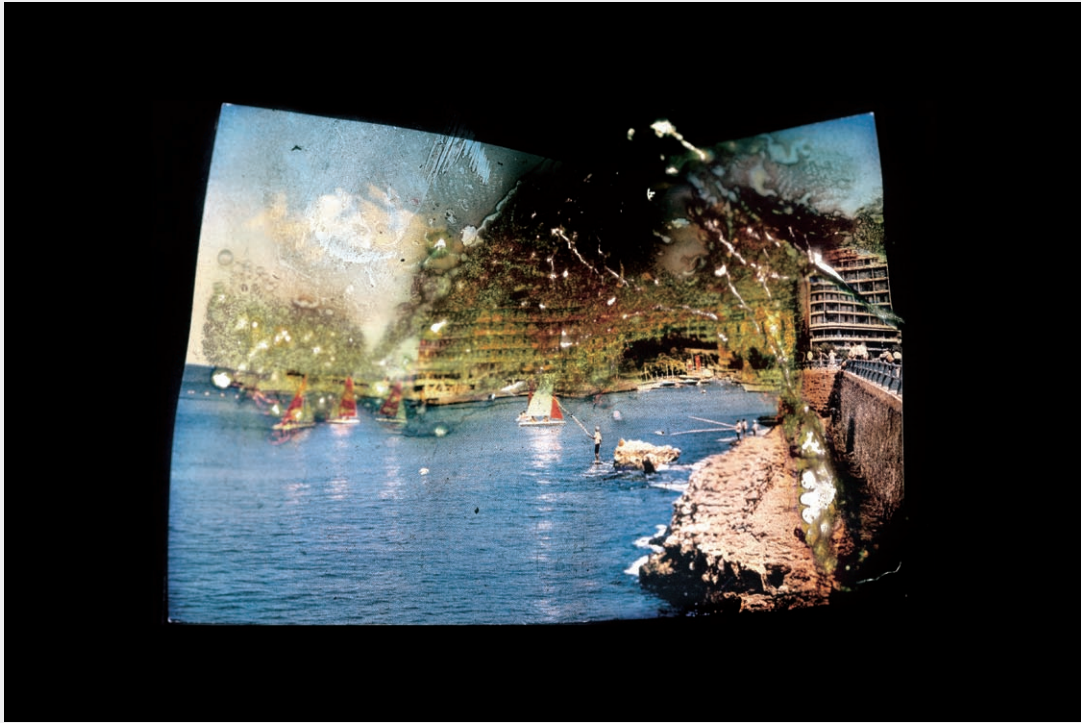
Six Lambda prints mounted on aluminum,
each 70.5 × 105 cm (27¾ × 41½ in.)



#6 (Rivoli Square)



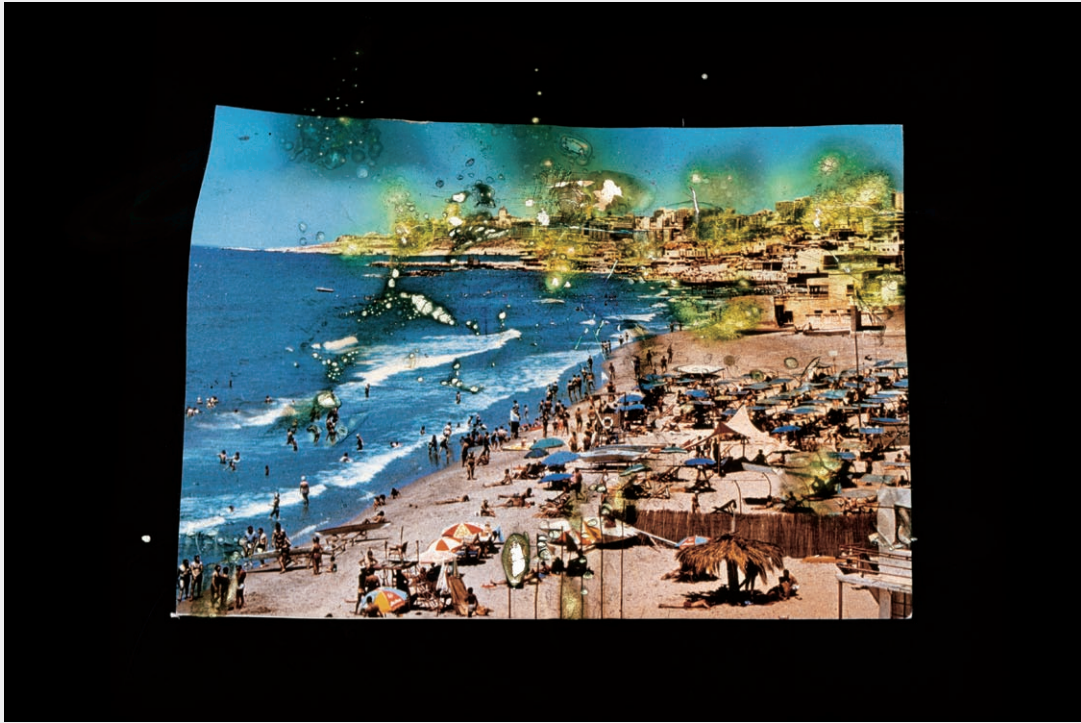
#15 (Rivoli Square)



#10 (The Sea Shore)



#13



#21 (Beaches in Beirut)



#22

Between 1998 and 2006, the Lebanese filmmaker-artists

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige created several iterations of the *Wonder Beirut* project: *The Story of the Pyromaniac Photographer*, then *War Postcards*, and finally *Latent Images*. The first consists of digital Lambda prints mounted on aluminum, the second, postcard booklets, and the third, an assemblage of film rolls. All purport to archive the work of Lebanese photographer Abdallah Farah.

As the story goes, Farah was only sixteen years old in 1968 when the Lebanese Tourism Agency commissioned a series of postcards and a calendar from his father's studio. Several photographers were assigned to the project, including Farah, who was so successful at capturing precisely the image the city wished to project — a cosmopolitan Mediterranean Riviera — that his postcards are still sold in stores today. However, when the Lebanese civil war broke out in 1975, Farah began to burn his negatives in secret. Night after night, he synchronized his pyro-cartography with “the destruction of buildings, which were progressively disappearing in front of his eyes, ravished by bombardment and street battles.”¹ These nocturnal activities only came to light in the late 1990s, when Hadjithomas and Joreige discovered Farah's damaged negatives and decided to print them.

In the prints produced by Hadjithomas and Joreige, Farah's postcards appear as incandescent still lifes. Each image, framed by a thick black border that sets off its bright, saturated colors, evokes a magnified contact sheet placed on a light-box or a miniaturized projection on a cinema screen.² In this way, Hadjithomas and Joreige transform Abdallah's original postcards from clichéd tourist souvenirs into dreamscapes, pseudo-ravaged by iridescent bubbles of melted color and glowing ruptures. The luminescent effects are heightened by backlighting shining through the open ruptures.

But while it is true that the postcards on which Hadjithomas and Joreige's prints are based are still available today, Farah himself is a fictional character. As with *The Atlas Group* (1989–2004), a project by fellow Lebanese artist Walid Ra'ad, *Wonder Beirut* can be described as an instance of what Carrie Lambert-Beatty calls the parafictional mode.³ In such works, real facts are woven into fictional narratives, their interface shrewdly managed by the parafictioneer. It might thus be appropriate

to consider parafiction as an open investigation into the nature of plausibility.⁴

Precisely how is plausibility produced in *Wonder Beirut*? The notion of *trucage*, French for trick, seems particularly relevant given Hadjithomas and Joreige's entwined interests in cinema and photography. The term is commonly used to denote either the production of a special effect, or the creation of an impression of narrative causality through the skillful editing and sequencing of images. *Trucage* generates the illusion that no gaps, whether narrative or structural, exist. These gaps in fact remain, and as Paul Virilio explained, “viewers do not manufacture mental images on the basis of what they are immediately given to see, but on the basis of their memories, by themselves filling in the blanks and their minds with images created retrospectively.”⁵ As with parafiction, *trucage* implies a degree of deception, but it also rests on the assumption that things left unsaid, unwritten, or unseen can be just as powerful as those made explicit.⁶ Christian Metz has written that “in film, the temporal gaps between one image and the next create natural interstices (or spaces) that allow audience members to develop interpretations that transcend what was initially circumscribed by the filmmaker.”⁷

In *Wonder Beirut*, these interstices can be found across a range of supposedly archival evidence. The project's cognitive setup, for instance, operates through the cross-referencing of visual images with the parafictional texts provided by Hadjithomas and Joreige. Contradictions between the visual evidence and the “official” story create a fertile tension allowing for interpretation — or creative misinterpretation — on the part of viewers. In the case of *Wonder Beirut*, the assemblage of still photographs becomes the starting point for stories to play out uniquely in each viewer's imagination, mimicking the porous narrative structure that exists naturally in film.⁸ Joreige uses the phrase “latent images” (as in images projected into the imagination of the viewer) to describe the operation at work in *Wonder Beirut*. These “concepts of latent, residual images, of disappearances, of phantomatic appearances, of documents made fictitious, or of fictions turned into document” make up the terrain explored and the material utilized by *Wonder Beirut*, a project that intertwines the cinematic and the parafictional.⁹

If *Wonder Beirut* partakes of the parafictional, it might be because the city itself exists today in an ambivalent state between fact and fiction. Forgetting, misremembering, and reimagining are inevitable aspects of life in a postwar city such as Beirut, where developers and government officials are systematically restoring many of the buildings lost or damaged during the civil war.¹⁰ These efforts to “reauthenticate” Beirut dovetail with the country’s larger efforts to rebuild its national identity, public image, and tourist industry. As Elizabeth Outka has argued, such commercialized versions of nostalgic nationalism and authenticity create a sense of timelessness that seems to hold out the promise of healing and stability.¹¹

Ironically, the architectural whiteout staged in Beirut effectively removes the possibility of nostalgic desire, described by Susan Stewart as “an act of memory” in which “the past is constructed from a set of presently existing pieces.”¹² Even as the war destroyed parts of pre-war Beirut, so too does the reconstruction of this new Beirut constitute an act of destruction in itself, one in which war memories are being erased by the city’s

now disconcertingly surreal physical resemblance to an earlier past. One can only imagine the sense of dissonance upon seeing postcards of old Beirut sold in bookshops as romantic souvenirs, at the same time that present-day Beirut is being transformed into a shiny new version of that past. When nothing appears to be missing or changed, mourning is no longer necessary, or even possible.

As the violent history of Beirut is transformed into a vision of beautiful amnesia, Hadjithomas and Joreige attempt to reclaim this lost territory through tourist postcards, the very images that work to produce this artificial history.¹³ With this paradox in mind, we can now view *Wonder Beirut* as an intervention that seeks to restore a history of trauma and ruptures to a city in the process of being forcibly separated from its past. In this respect, memory and nostalgia are the artists’ means as well as their subjects. Hadjithomas and Joreige counter nostalgia—a romantic sensibility manipulated by market and institutional forces—with critical attempts to resuscitate history before it is completely erased. **ML**

1 Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, description of *Wonder Beirut*, on the artists’ website at <http://www.hadjithomasjoreige.com>.

2 “On Translation,” transcript of panel chaired by Stephen Wright, with speakers Tony Chakar, Joana Hadjithomas, Khalil Joreige and Rabih Mroué, in *Public Time: A Symposium*, ed. Suzanne Cotter (Oxford: Modern Art Oxford, 2006), 29.

3 Lambert-Beatty, “Make Believe,” 54.

4 *Ibid.*, 72.

5 Paul Virilio, *The Vision Machine* (London: British Film Institute; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 3.

6 “*Trucage* exists only when there is deceit. We may agree to use this

term when the spectator ascribes to the diegesis the totality of the visual elements furnished him.” Christian Metz, “*Trucage* and the Film,” *Critical Inquiry* 3:4 (Summer 1997): 667.

7 *Ibid.*, 671.

8 Although *Wonder Beirut* is comprised of single photographs, they are conceptualized and presented in ways that intentionally evoke a cinematic sensibility. Indeed, the project can be seen as an effort to replicate or engineer the experience of cinema from still images. In the booklets that comprise *War Postcards*, for example, a temporal narrative is generated through the sequencing of still images that unfold accordion-style, not unlike a cinematic storyboard.

9 “On Translation,” 29.

10 Saree Makdissi, “Beirut/*Beirut*,” in *Tamass: Contemporary Arab Representations*, ed. Catherine David (Rotterdam; Witte de With; Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 2002), 31. According to Makdissi, present-day Beirut is not just a shiny new version of past Beirut, but a much “improved” version that only gestures towards authenticity (*ibid.*, 30).

11 Elizabeth Outka, *Consuming Traditions: Modernity, Modernism, and the Commodified Authentic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 8–9.

12 Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 145.

13 Jalal Toufic, *Undeserving*

Lebanon (n.p., Forthcoming Books, 2007), 95 n. 12, <http://www.jalaltoufic.com/downloads.htm>. Toufic’s theories on catastrophe have gained currency among several prominent artists and filmmakers, including Hadjithomas, Joreige, and Ra’ad. According to Toufic, when a surpassing disaster takes place, the loss of culture goes beyond the superficial destruction of buildings and objects. What is actually lost, however, may only be perceptible upon its subsequent “resurrection”—through art, for instance. See also Toufic’s recent book, *Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster* (n.p., Forthcoming Books, 2009), also available on his website.