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INTERVIEW

PICTURING HISTORICAL ABSENCES A CONVERSATION WITH JOANA HADJITHOMAS & KHALIL JOREIGE

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Abstract

In this interview, Lebanese artists Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige discuss their artistic practice on historical narratives and memory, particularly regarding their approach to the wars in Lebanon. By critically appropriating and scrutinizing archival materials, their work challenges dominant narratives, revealing historical absences that would otherwise be forgotten. Delving into the complexities of the past, the artists explore how history shapes identity and informs contemporary discourse. Through this dialogue, Hadjithomas and Joreige reflect on their artistic process and the transformative potential of art to foster critical reflection and promote more just and compassionate futures.

Keywords: Archive, Photography, Historical narratives, Memory, Lebanese Wars

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary artistic practice, the exploration of historical narratives and memory occupies a central position, providing fertile ground for critical inquiry and creative expression. At the forefront of this discourse are Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Lebanese artists whose work delves deeply into the complexities of interpreting and representing history, particularly in the context of conflict and the aftermath of the Lebanese civil wars. Born and raised in Beirut, Hadjithomas and Joreige offer a unique perspective in their artistic practice, drawing from their lived experiences in a region marked by decades of war and political turmoil.

The work of this artistic duo serves as a poignant reflection on the complexities of the past, delving into the ways in which history shapes identity and informs contemporary discourse. Central to their practice is the critical appropriation of archival material. By recontextualizing historical documents, the artists challenge dominant narratives and provide alternative perspectives on contentious events, through artistic interventions that disrupt conventional modes of representation, illuminating the gaps and silences inherent in the archival record. Working across mediums, including photography, film, installation, and performance, the artists explore the enduring impact of historical events on individual and societal consciousness. Despite their multidisciplinary approach, they assert the fundamentally photographic nature of their practice, emphasizing the materiality and fragility of the photographic image, particularly in relation to memory preservation. They stress the importance of confronting absences and latencies in history, imbuing invisible narratives with physicality. Through projects like “Lasting Images” (2003) and “The Story of a Pyromaniac Photographer” (1997-2006), they aim to capture the complexity of historical narratives and reveal latent presences through the materiality of photography.

In their historical inquiry, the artists explore the interplay between micro and macro history to create counter-memories, focusing on specific historical points to reveal larger narratives and challenge official histories. Through projects like “Unconformities” (2016-2020), they uncover forgotten events and highlight the disruptions and ruptures in historical narratives. Moreover, the artists reflect on the impact of technology in shaping contemporary perceptions of reality and memory. Projects such as “The Lebanese Rocket Society” (2011-2018) and “On Faces” (2009) harness technological advancements to explore issues of memory, visibility, and justice.

In this interview, Hadjithomas and Joreige delve into their artistic process and thematic concerns, reflecting on the challenges of navigating historical documents and the transformative potential of art to foster critical reflection on both the past and present. Through a comprehensive analysis of their artistic interventions, this dialogue seeks to illuminate how art can shape our understanding of history and memory, while also envisioning more just and compassionate futures.

Ana Catarina Pinho & Arola Valls Bofill | Your artistic practice often engages with archival research and historical documents. How do you navigate the complexities of interpreting and representing historical events? When navigating these historical documents, what kind of challenges do you encounter and how do you translate them in your artistic practice?

Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige | We started making images in a very specific context, in the aftermath of the Lebanese civil wars. We wanted to escape a kind of fetishisation of war images, while at the same time bearing witness to what had happened, keeping track of some fragments “transformed by the violence” before they disappeared. War or any other catastrophe is a rupture, a break in our history. How can we then conceive a continuation, a continuity or even a transmission in which we can believe? How can we produce representations closer to us, reappropriates our images, reclaim our imaginaries. We are thinking about images here more in relation to that breach defined by Hannah Arendt in the Crisis of Culture, that moment of rupture when, caught between the past and the future, we have to project ourselves into an uncertain future, to start something new, to invent ourselves in uncertainty.

During the civil wars, the various powers instrumentalised images, using different forms of propaganda. So we grew up and evolved in a world of suspicion and doubt, where we constantly had to question images, documents, facts and their uses. At the time, the archive was either missing, badly indexed, invisibilised or disrupted. It said that history is written by the victors, but in our Civil Wars, in which no history was written, there were no victors. The archive as such is not something that fascinates us and we have no fetish for it. But we invoke history, and archives as traces of that history, to reconfigure, experiment and perform anew in the present, but always in a critical, political and hopefully poetic way. We have developed various strategies to achieve this: Fiction, as in “Wonder Beirut,” with iconic images that populate our imaginations, which we borrow and transform. Latency, as in “Latent Images, the diary of a photographer,” and “Lasting Images” or “180 seconds of Lasting Images,” undeveloped images that come back to haunt us. The anecdotal, in the etymological sense of stories kept secret, which is really at the heart of our research and what we oppose to official history. But also performativity, for example in films like “Je veux voir” (*I want to see*) when we go with Catherine Deneuve and a film crew to southern Lebanon after the 2006 war and try to get a road opened and film at the border, or when we transport in the streets of Beirut a sculpture representing the Cedars 4 rocket in “The Lebanese Rocket Society,” the strange tale of the Lebanese Space race, to fight against the misunderstanding that saw them as missiles when they were produced for science experimentations.

The use of archives is to fight against shrinking possibilities. What does history choose to tell us, why do some facts disappear while others populate our imagination? Who writes history? Part of our challenges is to deconstruct a certain dominant representation that reinstrumentalise for political reasons. Stories kept secret can constitute an alternative History.

Ana Catarina Pinho & Arola Valls Bofill | Your work often blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction. How do you balance historical storytelling and artistic expression? The creation of fictional characters, as observed in *Wonder Beirut*, seems to act as an interesting mediator between fact and fiction. Does this allow you to create a certain distance to the event?

Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige | Borrowing a character from fiction is to say something about the close proximity that exists between fiction and reality, documentary and fiction. We both see ourselves as storytellers first and foremost, in film and in art. We like to create bridges between these two mediums, which are much more opaque than they seem. For “*Wonder Beirut*,” we created the character of Abdallah Farah, who is said to have photographed Beirut city centre and the Riviera in the 1960s, considered to be the country’s golden age and dubbed the Switzerland of the Middle East. We have attributed to him images from postcards that lulled our childhood and adolescent imaginations, and that reappeared after the Lebanese civil wars, when most of the places they represented no longer existed. “*Wonder Beirut*” was born out of this desire to deconstruct the images and icons represented by these postcards, this dangerous nostalgia that asserts that the war is a parenthesis that must be closed, ignoring the deeper reasons that divide the country to this day. These are very popular and accessible images that we burned following destruction and shellings of the civil wars to bring them closer to our reality and also to produce Postcards of war that denounce the amnesty and amnesia that followed the war years (and which, alas, as we can see, did not really lead to peace).



Figure 1
From the series *Wonder Beirut*, 1997-2006.
Courtesy of the artists.

Our relationship to what you separate as fiction and reality is very complex. Personally, we do very little to divert images and have a great deal of respect for the provenance of archive images because we come from places where history is not shared. It's not a question of inventing it, it's a question of deconstructing the manufacturing processes, the propaganda of the truths that clash. And this applies to every historical event. The case of Abdallah Farah was possible because the fictional element, Abdallah's life, was at the heart of it all, and we never played on ambiguity — on the contrary, we claimed this character who came from a generation other than our own and who was going to share his views and his life with us in "Latent Images, diary of a photographer." These images, for example, were taken and captured in his name but never developed. Their description creates this latent diary. It is not about fictionalising History, or throwing doubt or a suspicion about historical facts. Particularly in moments where we doubt images and narratives in the age of artificial intelligence, or in societies like ours where there is no shared history. Not a common narrative that enables us to overcome our divisions.

Art comes in place to question this situation. The writing of History or the construction of imaginaries that we have inherited and that we continue to produce. The idea is not simply to distance ourselves but to let an individual voice be heard, to add complexity to a reality that is far too binary. It also says a lot about our society, the representations we have of ourselves or want to impose. We call for innovative, playful or poetic forms because we want to leave room for others. The participation of the other is essential if we are to deconstruct situations together. How can the reality of the Lebanese space project, for example, has been considered a fiction and still seems unimaginable to some, while the fiction of internet scams, spam and scams, which we have explored at great length in many of our recent art installations, becomes real for some people and push the boundaries of belief?

The question is precisely how the history of an event is written, how a collective imagination is formed, and this question is crucial today in shaping our relationship with others and our representation of ourselves. What makes us believe in certain images? Why believe in an actor or a story? What makes us believe? This was at the heart of our research into internet scams, in our project "On Scams," these specific scams where the person writing pretends to be a well-known political figure or one of their descendants who has a sum of money and would like the recipient to help them recover it in exchange for a percentage... These stories are particularly effective, victims are numerous, and in 2018, the transactions and amounts scammed are estimated at several billion dollars. These scams are very old and take roots in the "Letters from Jerusalem," listed after the French Revolution by Vidocq.

We started to archive the scams we received over the Internet because, firstly, their imaginative stories fascinated us and, secondly, because the scammers were surfing on the major news events, such as wars, ecological

disasters or financial collapses. It was like a parallel history of the world, the kind we throw away in the dust bin of our computer. We then considered this material as texts to be performed by actors and the result was very disturbing. Because all of a sudden we believed it for a moment. It's this confusion, this complexity that is sometimes interesting and that has also enabled us here to denounce the imaginary corruption of the swindled but also of the swindlers who place their swindles in regions where corruption would be plausible. It creates a parallel History of the world made out of scams and junk. We published a book entitled "Rethinking Trust in The Age of Internet," edited by Dr Omar Kholeif, in which our work on SCAMs and Internet scams that led us to question the conditions of belief. This kind of narrative manifests itself at certain times, in certain situations, and presupposes an imaginary (made up of both fact and fiction) that authorizes a certain form of narration. It is this imaginary that enables forms of representation and belief. We're interested in the conditions of belief, the circumstances in which a narrative becomes possible and effective.

Ana Catarina Pinho & Arola Valls Bofill | Such fictional characters introduce us to the conflicts of History (with capital H). How do you interweave micro and macro history towards the making of a counter-memory?

Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige | If we had to speak in photographic terms, we'd say we're looking for focus and perspective. We always start from a precise point, not a general one, but this point must resonate with the larger story... We're looking for a point that concentrates, but isn't a reduction, because this point has to preserve diversities and possibilities. So it's a kind of nodal point that we scratch, dig until it becomes symptomatic, and the manifestation of a whole, a world. It is the result usually of a long enquiry that we can sometimes also revisit in a later stage.

We try to oppose to the official History, the anecdotal, in the ethymological sense of the term, the stories kept secret. These are counter memory, a counter history. Putting the spotlight on a completely forgotten but real spacial adventure, that seemed first like fiction, is emblematic of this. Or revealing the story of Orthosia, a Roman city that disappeared buried by a tsunami in 551 and found in the north of Lebanon, completely preserved under the ruins of a Palestinian camp destroyed by war in 2007. These forgotten events are not part of the collective memory. These archives are therebut they seem to be lying dormant, in a state of latency. They need to be told to be revealed.

In one of our latest project, "Unconformities," we explore this questions with archeologists and geologists and it challenges our conception of time and History. We realise that the traces of human or even natural presence are not successive, well-ordered layers or linear stratifications. These geological, anthropic, human or climatic actions reverse the chronology, and specifically

in contexts such as ours, which are prey to ruptures, wars and disasters, sedimentation is disrupted. It's as if we're witnessing a joint operation of rewinding and fast-forwarding, flashbacks, constant backward and forward projections, jumps cuts, ellipses, in a different relationship to history whose linearity, beginning and end have been turned upside down. We then realise that to understand this story, and History in general, we paradoxically need both the long and the short temporality, continuity and discontinuity, overviews and close-ups. We need the infinitely large, the macro, such as the drone images that affect the archaeological gesture... And the infinitely small, such as the microscopic images that analyse the transformations of stones and then appear as magnificent abstract paintings. It's a matter of vision, sometimes monstrous, what the human eye cannot see and what escapes it, which is the very definition of the fantastic. These changes of scale and shifts in time that we approach by working alongside archaeologists enable us to reconsider the way in which violence and destruction, ecological and climatic disturbances affect possible narratives, the construction of imaginary worlds. So in a way, it shakes our relationship to the world and to history, and our way of telling it and it is in these tensions and paradoxes that we have to work.



Figure 2

Trilogies, 2018-2021.

Part 5 of the project *Unconformities*,

2016-2020

Courtesy of the artists.

Ana Catarina Pinho & Arola Valls Bofill | Among the different media explored in your work — from installation to performance and film—, the photographic image seems to play a crucial role in your practice. Would you agree?

Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige | Whatever medium we use, strangely enough, we consider what we do is specifically, ontologically photographic. Even when it's not photography... For us, photography has been a formidable tool for understanding the world. It's through it that we came face to face with the world, that we discovered it even before turning it into an artistic practice. Through these media, a relationship with the world was established. How to perceive, interpret, transmit... Photography haunts our thinking and continues to haunt our works, even if they are not photographic. It allows us to experience, reflect on and form our relationship with the world and the present, but also with reality. Through photography, we are trying to create an image in a world that is crumbling under the weight of photographs and representations. At the same time, we are questioning representation and the photographic medium. The visible and the invisible, the trace that fades, the trace of a trace, the absence, the latency of images, their remanence, the imaginary and the non-recognition that reaches the image has constituted us. This non-recognition of images that are there even if we don't see them never ceases to question us. When, for example, we explore what lies beneath our feet, and when we resculpt core samples and exploratory drillings in the "Unconformities" project, we consider that these boxes of earth and stones that go back in time and into the depths are like archives or rushes from a film, contact sheets that we have to edit with archaeologists and geologists. For us, it's the same impetus around the tenuous secret history, its unveiling, making visible what we can't see, or revealing latencies. Or accepting that we can only imagine or describe them.

The relationship with analog photography is probably also articulated around the relationship to reality, analogy, symbolism, representation and its critique, and beyond that a relationship to indiciality, to direct trace. The perception of an inscription or a direct imprint, and at the same time a reflection on the modalities of its interpretation. In a certain way, photography appears through in all our practices, even if they don't seem directly photographic. As for the tapestries, "Message with(out) a code," that, after a arduous work to choose the colors and texture of the yarns, unravel and reveal itself to us when it is woven mechanically by the machine as the analogic photographic images were revealed and suddenly appeared before our eyes when we used to develop them.

Ana Catarina Pinho & Arola Valls Bofill | Technology plays a significant role in your work. For instance, "The Lebanese Rocket Society" reimagines Lebanon's space program through archival materials and personal narratives, thus articulating the themes of technology, memory, and national identity. In a different context, the work

“On Faces” reconstructs the faces of missing persons using forensic techniques and digital imaging, thus engaging with issues of visibility, memory, and justice. How do you see technological developments shaping contemporary perceptions of reality and memory?

Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige | It is undeniable that the tools we use are contemporary with our research. Our relationship with technology is transforming our relationship with narrative, reality and representation. These are issues that exist in our practices, even involuntarily or unconsciously. We then wanted to reflect on the issues at stake and how they are transformed by different technologies. Our work constantly takes into account modes of production and distribution.

In the “Faces” project, we photographed images of martyrs hung on out-of-reach lampposts but exposed to the weather, so the images evolved and disappeared. We are using a technology that has now evolved, other tools have been developed (today the use of AI would be obvious) but we use the possibilities offered to us at a particular time. And that raises questions about the very possibilities of our medium. The use of drawing to compensate for persistent images underlines the relationship we have with the modalities of representation, the promise of photography to keep a trace, a promise that is difficult to keep in certain situations. We photographed those images at various stages of their progressive disappearance. Then, with the help of a graphic designer and various drawers, we attempted to recover certain features, to accentuate others, to bring back the image, a trace, matter, a lasting image.

“Memory Box,” our feature film, confronts a form of chronicle based on analog photos and notebooks originally written by Joana between 1982 and 1988, with those of today’s social media networks and smart-phones. Analog photography presupposes a certain distance, an assimilation to the viewfinder and the body of the camera, whereas the smartphone will enable the selfie and its consequences, on self-presence and the relationship to the body. It is a sort of tribute to photography as we no longer see it, it is barely used, and to the various formats that existed and showed different perspectives. The video, the LCD screen, which made the eye and the body of the filmer autonomous, subtitling the point of view autonomous, were a revolution in the end of the 20th century.

Likewise today, there’s blockchain, AI, climate change, power transformations, deep fakes... everything has profound consequences. Enumerated like this, every technological change has political and medium-related consequences, on issues and relationships to the image, to power and to perception. Even if, of course, there remain some incredible invariants or recurrences. This question is always present in our work. Techniques are always symptomatic of a historical period, following technical developments and transformations is also a way of staying contemporary, sharing a same concern and temporalities and also of questioning each of these periods.



Figure 3
Memory Box (film still), 2021.
 Courtesy of the artists.

We love collaboration and borrowing other people's knowledge, like that of archaeologists or geologists, but also exploring other mediums and technologies. There's very little we don't allow ourselves if it serves the story or, rather, the investigation. Each time we have borrowed the gaze or the knowledge of other, points of view and crossed disciplines, we have learned to see our own realities differently, through other expertises and techniques. Every time we have to work with a technique, we're going to collaborate with experts, whereas we're just novices or amateurs (in the truest sense of the word). This encounter allows us to push the technique further, as we displace traditional expectations and uses of a technique or medium, and this allows us to develop other techniques, the lab (it's the experimentation with experts and the encounter with novices that allows them to look at and perceive their medium differently). This is the case with scientists, musicians, archaeologists, curators, dancers, actors...

For the "Lebanese Rocket Society," we tried to reconstruct this story in the absence of archives at the beginning of our research. It's not that there were no images at all, but that we didn't recognise them because we didn't really have access to the story, to how it unfolded. It was like a withdrawal from the image, a lost imagination. The film and the art projects tell the story of a group of students led by their mathematics teacher, Manoug Manouguian, who designed, produced and launched more than a dozen rockets that went on to

become increasingly powerful, reaching distances of over 600 km. This project, aimed at space exploration and scientific research, began in 1960 and came to an abrupt halt in 1967. Then, strangely enough, this story, which made the headlines in all the media, fell completely into oblivion. It was only when we met Manoug Manougian, who had kept the archives of this adventure for him, that we were able to pick up the thread of this story. Faced with the real absence of the Lebanese rocket adventure in our history and, above all, in our imagination, we felt the desire to tell this story, but to avoid nostalgia and the weight of the past. And to do that, we felt the need to activate the past in the present. This gave us the idea of re-enacting what had already been re-enacted.

First, we made and then gave to the Haigazian University, where this space adventure began, an identical reproduction of the Cedar 4 rocket, the most emblematic of all. Reconstructing the rocket, 8 meters long, more than 50 years later and taking it across the city is an essential part of our project, to show that this is not a weapon but a commemorative monument of science. An artistic sculpture in homage to the dreamers of the Rocket Society. And it's at the University and in the art world that this rocket can be recognised for what it is, an artistic and scientific project. Then we re-enacted it in the "Restaged" series, a photographic re-enactment of the rocket transport event. The photographic act becomes performative. It's a work that is once again ontologically photographic, returning to the act itself without recourse to digital software. Instead of transporting the rocket as we had done the first time, we replaced it with its two-dimensional white wooden silhouette, and once again took the same route, with the same convoy and the same (many!) authorisations that we had needed to block off

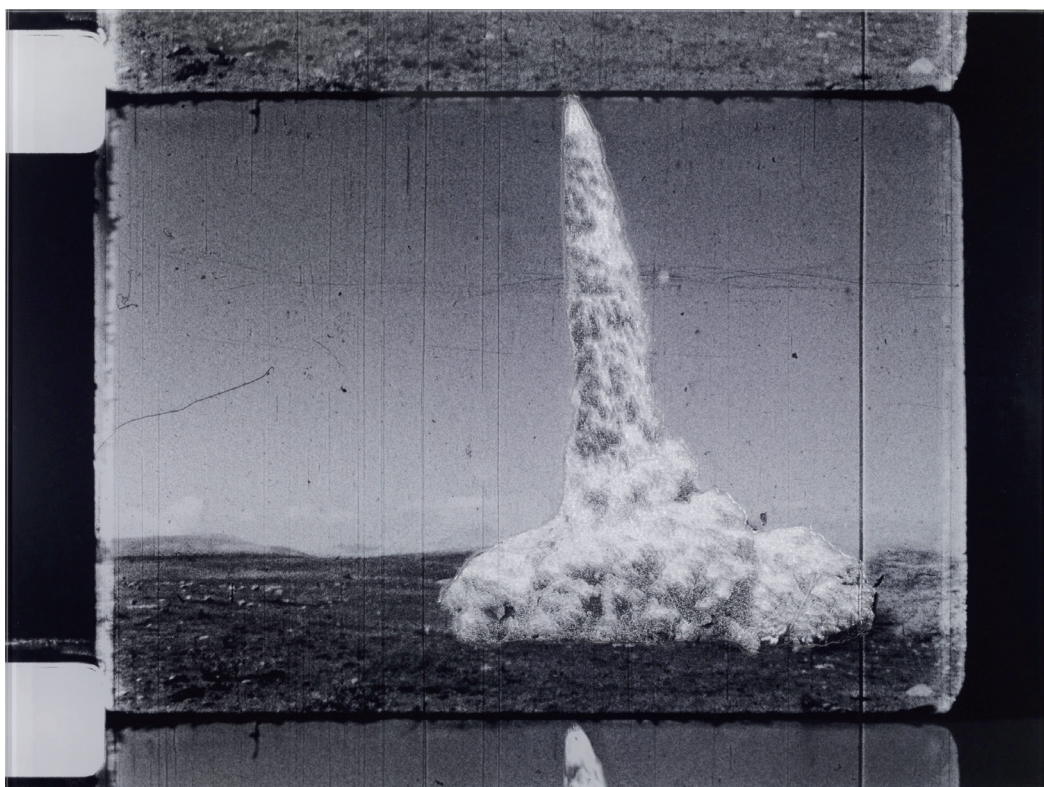


Figure 4

Dust in the Wind, 2013.

Part 6 of the project *Lebanese Rocket*

Society, 2011-2018.

Courtesy of the artists.

the streets when the real sculpture passed through. With the help of two other photographers with digital equipment and ourselves with film, we photographed the passage of the rocket in the field, or rather in the frame, during the exposure time of the photo. This exposure time was determined by the passage of the rocket, i.e. it depended on the speed at which the convoy crossed, the field covered and the distance at which the photograph was taken. As the silhouette of the rocket is white, the trail of light it causes is in turn ghostly, like the trace of a trace. The idea is often to replay things, knowledge and truths, sometimes with the help of technology. Especially in a world where propaganda reigns and subversion is often recuperated. It's about escaping definitions and a certain form of dogmatism, even among artists.

Ana Catarina Pinho & Arola Valls Bofill | Your work often puts to the fore the question of the materiality of the photographic image, which becomes tied to the idea of memory survival. We can see this relationship in "Lasting images" or "The story of a pyromaniac photographer". Which nuances of history do you think could emerge from the photography's materiality? And how do you think this fragility of the analogue photographic image can be related to the digital?

Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige | Our position in history is one of resistance through the deconstruction of knowledge and power, of dominant positions and voices. So under no circumstances is it possible for us to repeat things or position ourselves in places or comfort zones. So fragility is essential for us, and is even at the heart of many of our experiments. This has been the case since our first installation, "Circle of Confusion," where we cut an aerial image of the city into 3,000 pieces, glued to a mirror and allowing visitors to take a fragment away, which led to the destruction of the work. In "180 seconds of Lasting Images," we printed and cut a film that we stuck onto fragile, shaky Velcro. The fragility of this materiality, whether analogue or digital, raises questions,

It is interesting to confront the fragility of an analog photography to attempts to surpass a systematic process of disappearance or negation. In a way, our work has consisted in rendering absences and latencies a physicality.

They are also contexts that require a certain attention or preposition to receive the manifestation or even revelation of something differently. It allows us to pay more attention to invisible stories, to give physicality and form to what we can't or don't know how to see anymore, to give substance and existence to a certain imagination, sometimes even in absence, as in the latent images that can be read but haven't yet been revealed. Yes, that's specifically analogue and impossible to do in the digital age, but it's representative of our practice over more than 10 years of images taken but not developed, but also described in such a way as to be evoked and imagined by the reader. We have always wanted to capture the complexity of our realities and the 'ghostly' or sometimes latent presences that do

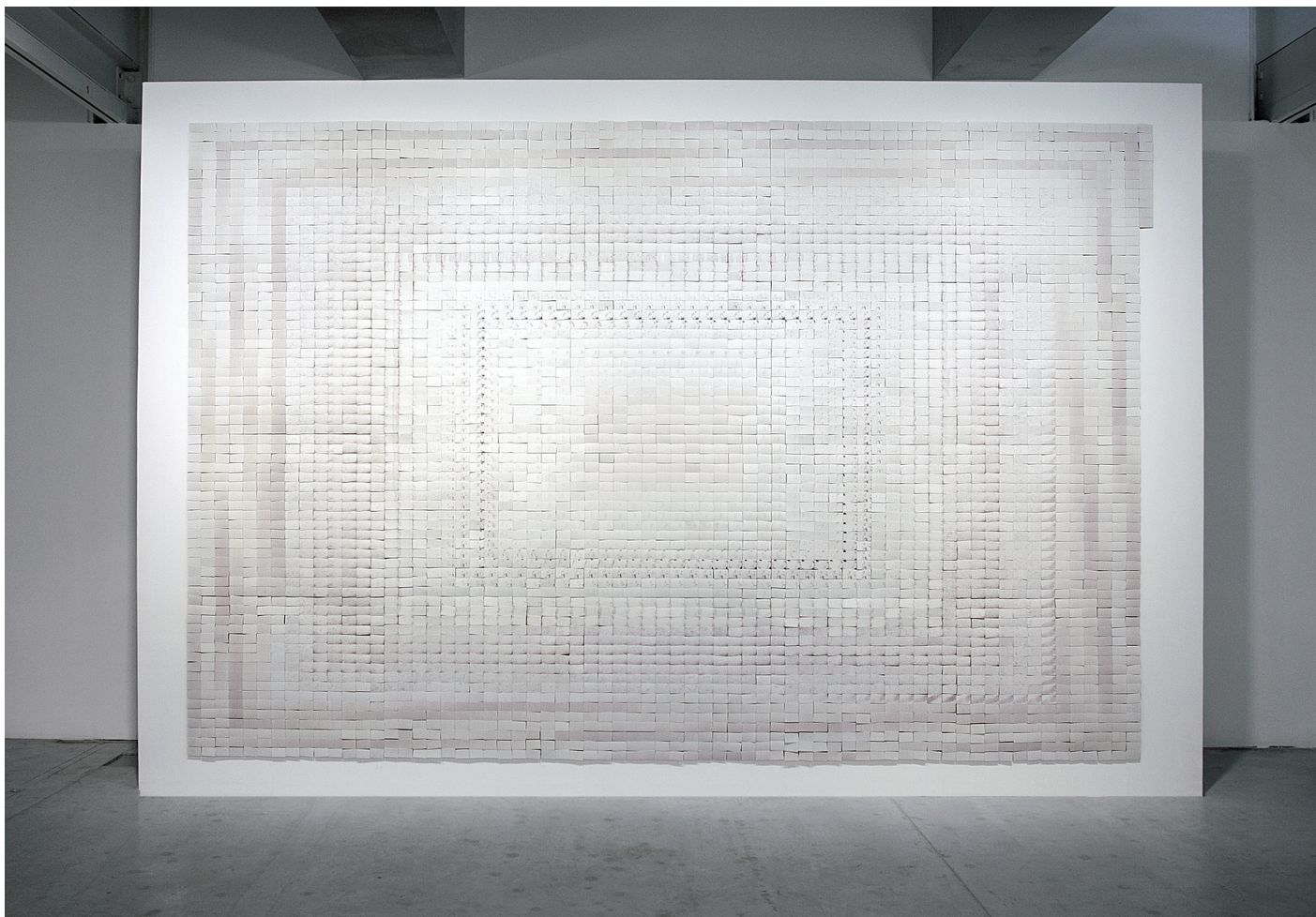


Figure 5
180 seconds of Lasting Images, 2006.
 Courtesy of the artists.

not meet the conditions for visibility. Because we also need a context that allows this perception, this revelation in the photographic sense, a process that allows the images and the narrative to appear but also to find a certain performativity.

Our project, “Unconformities/Discordances,” is concerned with what we leave behind us, the sediments of underground passages, archaeology and geology. A discordance refers to the forced and unexpected meeting of two distinct geological units following a natural disaster, sometimes creating a regeneracy. It is a break in time, a hiatus. In cinema, we would speak of a false connection or an ellipsis. In a context of ruptures and disasters, actions are neither linear nor chronological. “Unconformities/Discordances” aims to tell the story that lies beneath our feet in a poetic rather than scientific way, through a material that evokes these temporal ruptures but also the lasting impact of human actions on our planet. It’s a different kind of materiality, one that seems far removed from photography, but which for us, as we said earlier, is entirely in keeping with that continuity.

All this shakes up our relationship with time, memory, History and its representation, like a palimpsest of continuous and discontinuous layers, destruction and regeneration.