

ART AND REPRESENTATION IN POST-WAR LEBANON



A Loving Man, Jananne Al-Ani.



Saïda June 6, 1982, Akram Zaatar.

WHAT CAN ART DO IN THE CONTEXT OF A SHIFTING SOCIETY?

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POST-WAR LEBANESE ARTISTS AIM TO QUESTION HISTORY, IDENTITY AND MEMORY OF THE CIVIL WAR (1975-1990): ALL ARE PUBLICLY DISREGARDED IN LEBANON. MODES OF ADDRESS ARE PHOTOGRAPHY, VIDEOS, TEXTS AND INSTALLATIONS.

OBJECTIVES:

- SCRUTINISE ARTISTIC INITIATIVES IN LEBANON AS A SITE FOR INVIGORATING ALTERNATIVE DISCOURSES ON HISTORY AND FOSTERING RENEWED IDENTITIES.
- BRING NEW EXAMINATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ART AND SOCIETIES BY APPLYING A SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH BASED ON SOCIAL REPRESENTATION THEORY (MOSCOVICI, 1961/2008) COMBINED WITH CASTORIADIS' NOTION OF IMAGINATION (1975/1987).

METHODS:

- THE STUDY WAS EXPLORATORY. 40 LEBANESE STUDENTS WERE ASSIGNED TO VIEW THE EXHIBITION 'CLOSER' FEATURED AT THE BEIRUT ART CENTRE (LEBANON, JANUARY-APRIL 2009). STUDENTS WERE INFREQUENT VISITORS TO ART EXHIBITIONS WITH LITTLE KNOWLEDGE OF VISUAL ART AND AESTHETIC ISSUES. THE CHOSEN ARTWORKS BELONGED TO THE POST-WAR ART IN LEBANON.
- TWO DATA COLLECTING TOOLS WERE USED. FIVE FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS WERE CONDUCTED AFTER EXPOSURE TO 'CLOSER', FOLLOWED BY 25 INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS.
- A THEMATIC ANALYSIS WAS PERFORMED TO INTERPRET THE DATA.

FINDINGS:

THE RECEPTION OF 'CLOSER' ELICITED 2 CONTRADICTORY PATTERNS OF DISCOURSE IN RELATION TO THE POST-WAR SITUATION IN LEBANON.

I - A POSITIVE RECEPTION OF 'CLOSER' WAS ASSOCIATED WITH EMPOWERMENT.

VIEWING ARTWORKS EMERGED AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO DEMYSTIFY LEBANESE HISTORY, RE-HUMANIZE THE WAR, TACKLE TABOOS AND PROPEL INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY.

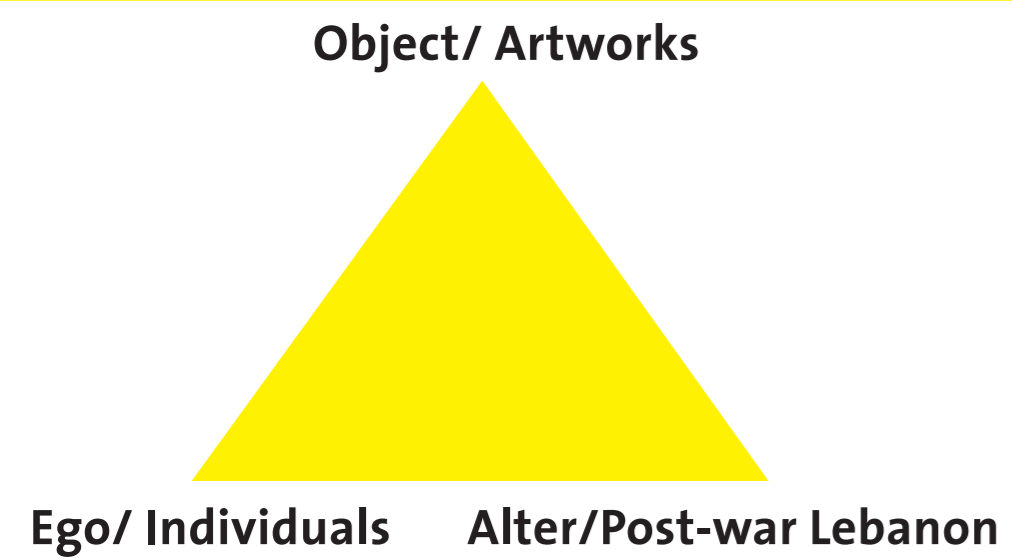
› SYMBOLIC AND METAPHORIC READINGS OF THE ARTWORKS WERE FOUND TO BE A RESOURCE IN MAKING SENSE OF 'CLOSER' AND SUPPORTED REFLECTION UPON THE POST-WAR SITUATION IN LEBANON.

II - A NEGATIVE RECEPTION OF 'CLOSER' WAS ASSOCIATED WITH THREAT.

THE PARTICIPANTS REVEALED IDEOLOGICAL DISAGREEMENT WHEN CONSIDERING THAT THE ARTWORKS MISREPRESENTED LEBANESE HISTORY AND EXACERBATED DIVISIONS AMONG LEBANESE.

› THE PARTICIPANTS REJECTED THE ARTWORKS AS SUBJECTIVE.

III - ALL GROUPS HOWEVER SHOWED A POSITIVE RESPONSE TO THE NARRATIVES IN THE ARTWORKS, WHICH DID NOT ENTAIL EITHER LEBANESE HISTORICAL OR RELIGIOUS REFERENCES.



- EXPLORE HOW MAKING SENSE OF ART IS A DYNAMIC PROCESS BETWEEN EGO/INDIVIDUALS, OBJECT/ARTWORKS AND ALTER/POST-WAR LEBANON.

THE RESEARCH INTENDS TO ANALYSE THE RECEPTION OF VISUAL ARTWORKS BY 40 LEBANESE STUDENTS WITH THE AIM OF:

- EXPLORING HOW THE PARTICIPANTS MAKE SENSE OF THE ARTWORKS IN RELATION TO THEIR OWN REPRESENTATIONS OF LEBANESE HISTORY AND IDENTITY.
- EXAMINING THE SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL RESOURCES ASSOCIATED WITH THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING.



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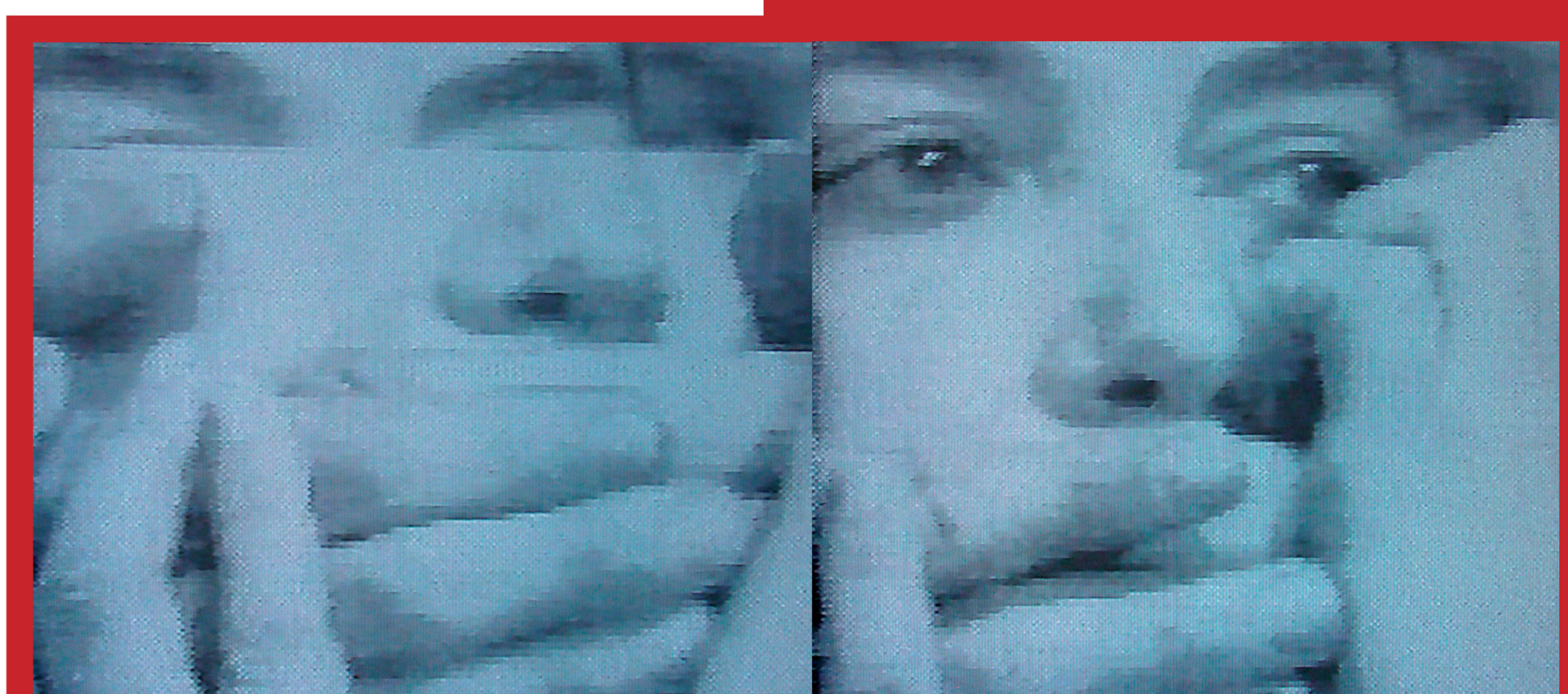
4 Cotton Underwear for Tony, Tony Chakar.

كنت واقفاً في الحاضر أنظر صوب الماضي، لكن بيني وبين الماضي الذي أحاول استشفافه هناك عدسة تشوه ما أحاول رؤيته، وتجعل محاولاتي لإعادة تركيب الذي فقدته، وبالتالي مصالحتي مع هذا الماضي، بلا جدوى. كما أنني أفترض أن هذه الحالة ليست بكل بساطة حالتي أنا وحدي. الأمر لا يتعلق فقط بأبي، بل هو عارض عام أصاب مجتمع يقال عنه أنه يعيش في حاضر دائم، لا قدرة له على التصالح مع أمسه، فكيف بالأحرى مع ماضيه القديم الشديد الاضطراب؟

I was standing in the present looking towards the past, but between that and my past there was a prism that deformed my view, what I saw, and rendered all attempts to reconstitute a lost loved one, and hence to reconcile with the past, futile. I also presume that this is not simply my case. This is not about "my" father, but a general symptom of a society that is said to live in a perpetual present, never coming to terms with its yesterday, let alone its troubled distant past.



CONTRIBUTING TO SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL LITERATURE ON ART AND SOCIETY, THIS STUDY AIMS TO STRESS THE ROLE OF IMAGINATION AND ITS METAPHORIC EMBODIMENT AS A LOCUS WHERE THE EXPERIENCE OF ART INTERFERES WITH THE SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF HISTORY AND IDENTITY. THIS PROCESS THEN ALLOWS THE ELABORATION OF ALTERNATIVE REPRESENTATIONS.



So much I want to say, Mona Hatoum.