

Untouch Me

Only in still water can you see your reflection.

Lao Tsu

[The artwork] if it holds out or is able to hold out a promise of an infinity of forms and commentaries, and through this infinity, a promise of community of feeling, it is because it harbours within it an excess, a rapture, a potential of associations that overflows all the determinations of its 'reception' and 'production'.

Jean-Francois Lyotard

A phrase by Baudelaire told to me by a friend had accompanied me through many a dark period: Anywhere out of this world. I came to realize that perhaps the way out was in, a sort of immanence, a sort of yogic pratyahara. Filmmaker Ghassan Salhab might have come to the same conclusion.

Watching his videos, being in touch with his work, one gets an overriding sensation of emptiness and immateriality. Like a fisherman – not the kind who fishes for plenty or waits for more – he guts, excavates, empties, takes the insides out. His tools and video works are for that, purifying and purging, yet always in praise of life and the excess that both emerges from and remains in his work. Let's call it pure excess. Yet, by no means is the work essentialist or trying to uncover the hidden nature of itself. By no means are the videos futile attempts to find meaning behind their image. Rather, they expose and perform precisely that there is no essential intrinsic nature, no back wall, no door, no structure, no in nor out. Emptiness, smoke and mirrors, gazer and gazed at are one. Vide: Lieu où il n'y a pas de matière. However, this emptiness and emptying is active, material even. The purging permits the artist and the viewer to reinvent, to recreate themselves, allowing for new subjectivities, for new ways of seeing, all the while effacing them. Like much organic matter, the work within the videos, and their effect, is of a shedding that allows for regeneration. It is partly this potential which Salhab's videos allow that renders them vital. It is this immanence, this allusion to that which is somehow always-already-there that make his works feel like mystical journeys, albeit remaining relevant and necessary in the physicality of Beirut, the place of their inception and making, and elsewhere in the world where they may be seen. Like a melancholy explorer or a lonely prophet, Salhab takes us with him into the desert of himself, and like a stream of consciousness, emotions, spaces and possibilities begin to emerge. What remains magical in the video visions are the energies and flows that continue to affect us, him, and his future works, demonstrating that the works have left the artist himself and taken on a life of their own.

In *La Rose de Personne*, the phrase anywhere out of this world makes a return. A sort of eternal return as one shot from inside a car driving down Hamra Street is juxtaposed against the next, one after the other in what appears as a loop, creating an ephemeral thickness of one image atop another. These perpetual juxtapositions reassert a materiality and a weight, while at the same time acting to reassert the image's impossibility to

represent or capture this materiality. A contradictory bind. The effect of the car moving down Hamra Street once, twice, thrice in different locations but in the same temporality recalls how memories and cities appear phantasmagoric. The viewer and the artist are witnesses to a stream of consciousness, to Hamra itself. The artist gazes at the street from inside the car and at us from through the windshield, the medium of video allowing him supernatural powers. Is he us? Are we him? Have we taken his gaze and him ours? Are we gazing at each other face to face with nothing between us except a void, an abyss? Fog and cloud over Beirut. We suddenly return from image atop image, to seize consciousness as if from a daydream, to an early sunny morning drive down Hamra Street which we actually 'see' for the first time. Images become witnesses and *La Rose de Personne* is a testimony to place, time and Hamra. We voyage into its belly only to come out again having Paul Celan tell us that it is the weight withholding the emptiness that, with us, will go.

In the second video, Narcissus becomes the very matter from which and at which he is looking. It appears at first that the avatar of the Greek god is not only obsessed with his own image but also with *the* image and *our* image. He comes into being through us, as it were. Are we his pool-like reflection, his witnesses, and hence his punishment and condemnation? In the Beginning -- *Fil Bid'* -- is the film's title in Arabic. In the beginning was the word and the word was God. Narcissus, first born, much loved emperor of his mother has been dethroned and eaten by the light, obliterated, overexposed. A personal testimonial journey, *Narcisse Perdu* leaves us with an affect of bafflement and sadness, with substance and texture within the video image's materiality, and yet with nothing. Much like our own reflected image. The artists' sun-engulfed disappearance is reminiscent of a Bill Violaesque moment in the *Reflecting Pool* (1979) where the figure of a man, or rather his image, freezes over an outdoor swimming pool as he prepares to jump in, before slowly disappearing into the foliage. In his *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House: Writings 1973-1994*, Viola says: "Images have transformative powers within the individual self... Art can articulate a kind of healing or growth or completion process... It is a branch of knowledge, epistemology in the deepest sense and not just an aesthetic practice."¹ Salhab's *Narcisse Perdu* has perhaps, albeit psychoanalytically, engaged this. The fading and returning image within the image is after all a photo of Salhab as a child beside his mother looking straight at 'both' cameras. Doubling could be a form of erasure and negation, and like all emptying, allows for new kinds of consciousness and subjectivities to emerge. It attempts new ways to articulate the uncanny, the inarticulable, and also marks an irretrievable, absolute loss – a deeply modernist melancholy.

Recurring with and through emptiness is the presence of redrawn and recreated personal, physical and organic landscapes. In homage to lost love and to Christ's sacrifice, in *My Living Body, My Dead Body*, Salhab uses the video medium as a tool to materialize, or immaterialise as the case may be, his body and his pain. Like Christ's potential visions during his last moments on the cross, *My Living Body My Dead Body* is akin to the stream of consciousness during the extreme and irreversible pain of sacrifice. Arvo Pärt,

¹ p. 245 Viola, B. (1995). *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House: Writings 1973-1994*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd.

Giya Kancheli, the sound of a beating heart, images of Salhab's body turned into frescos appear like a dedication to the sublime, to the days of sacred art, and simultaneously to ruination; the medium of video, its materiality and potential, a homage to the contemporary. Organic synthetic, ancient new, sacred profane, sublime immanent, timeless contemporary, linear fractured, as his back, chest, ear, lips, belly, hands, eye merge and become one with the images and textures of ice, leaves, rocks, flowing water, amber and flower nectar -- he, and in turn the work, become *untouchable*. Noli me tangere: Christ's last words appear on the screen. The coming together of the sacred, the sublime and the contemporary, its potential for imagistic experimentation and manipulation, further brings to light the work's avant-garde singularity.

(Posthume) brings us to that radical contemporariness very brusquely albeit elegiacally. For some the work is nostalgic, vague, too obviously politically engaged, for others the only poetic and vigilant way to artistically engage with or articulate the barbarism of the modern war machine, and the solitariness of living in a place like Beirut under siege, bombs and bloodshed in 2006. Perhaps it shows the total impossibility of accessing or articulating those states during catastrophes. Permeated through and through with a formal fidelity, *(Posthume)*, after death, like Lazarus, rises again with both a materiality and an immateriality. Salhab juxtaposes several images of the road leading to an area of devastation while never actually reaching it. His sudden reversal, his inability to arrive, to film or to capture the destruction is of a formal, political and poetic power. Perhaps, to paraphrase Jalal Toufic, it attempts to make visible that which has been withdrawn. His fictional characters, ghostly revenants from previous and future films, witnesses to his and their continued existence, their eyes closed trying to be real, are perhaps the only ways to articulate the devastation. Voice-overs of texts written by them and others during the war, coming to us from an elsewhere we can hardly inhabit much less understand.

The ideal way to view the videos, to allow for the experience of them, is in a dark black room; a space where nothing shines but the light emanating from the image projector. The videos hold no narrative, no storyline, no beginning, no end. They ask to be experienced, not to be seen or understood. Through their very presence, spectators can propose new ways of seeing and inhabiting this world. Let us do so generously as Salhab takes us to a part of his world, phantomatic and ephemeral as it may be, where there are no documents, no stories, no lessons, just experiments with living. They are visions, poems, fictional testimonies, ruptures to make way for new perceptions, new ways of being in, but not from the world.

Ghalya Saadawi
2008