THE LOCATION OF LEBANON
Portraits and Places in the Videography of Jayce Salloum
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It's not easy to define home,

After strolling through an exhibition of Arab-Canadian art at the Museum of Civilization in Gatineau, Quebec, a disgruntled onlooker asked, "What does an expatriate Lebanese living in Paris have to do with the Canadian-Arab experience?"[1] The question was a response to Jayce Salloum's video installation, *everything and nothing*, featuring five videotapes, one of which includes an interview with the Lebanese ex-resistance fighter, Soha Bechara.[2] The nearly sixty-minute interview presents Bechara in a wandering close-up shot, speaking to the camera from her dorm room in Paris about the ten years she spent in the Israeli detention centre, El-Khiam. The dorm setting with its fluorescent lighting, white wall backdrop and cot-style bed lend the video qualities more familiar to reality television than to any sort of memorializing artwork; and yet, each of the stylistic features highlights the contrived interaction between the artist and the subject. Over the course of the interview, Salloum, a native-English speaker, poses questions to Bechara in French about her means of persevering during and after her imprisonment. Bechara sits on her bed, speaks to the camera in Arabic and indicates to Salloum in French when she has completed her response. Amidst this complicated and often encumbered interaction, a curious contrast emerges between Bechara's status as a living martyr and her raw presence as a video image. This mythological figure whose image was for so long displayed on posters throughout Lebanon and Palestine becomes a personality to be seen and heard in a style characteristic of a crude home movie. The foregrounding of technical problems, linguistic misunderstandings and time constraints helps to make Salloum's project a unique portrait that ultimately transforms its subject from a mythological figure into a site for the problem of mediation, representation and translation.

The onlooker's question (that is, how this video relates to the Canadian-Arab experience) underscores an overriding expectation that an exhibition of Arab-Canadian art, and Salloum's video in particular, should display material which is identifiably Arab and Canadian. It thus raises

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the question: what it would mean to recognize a work of art as Arab-Canadian, considering that the grounds of recognition are produced by the discourse of Western media? In these terms, the most recognizable image of Lebanon, for example, would likely be the most familiar, and it is precisely this image that Salloum endeavors to dismantle. In a televised world where Lebanon is either the site of civil war or the Paris of the Middle East, Salloum's videos engage representational clichés and the now commonplace assumptions regarding terrorism, resistance and civil unrest. In lieu of ethnographic show and tell, Salloum offers us a critical rupture, at once drawing attention to the role of the camera and fracturing the assumptions at play in the facile identification of Lebanon as a site "out there" to be known and represented accordingly. His videos thus begin not with Lebanon or Beirut per se, but with their representations, the mythology by which each is known. In e*verything and nothing*, the so-called Arab-Canadian experience is not something located in a single portrait or place; instead, the video animates a transformative movement from the mythological image of Soha Bechara to the discursive material of the interview. At the moment we ask, "Where is Lebanon?" we are immediately invited to question which Lebanon we hope to find.

        Seen in these terms, it is the apparent lack of connection between Bechara and Salloum that helps to make *everything and nothing* such a compelling point of departure for an inquiry into the lines of flight between Lebanon and Canada. What the video offers is not so much an exposition to the dominant narrative of Lebanese history, nor the personal relationship of Salloum to Canada, but rather the very challenge of representing an experience distanced spatially and temporally, and mediated linguistically and technologically. Bechara's efforts to articulate her past and to speak of the present result in situating Lebanon as a discursive space, the grounds of which shift according to the time and place of enunciation. Whether shot in Paris, Montreal or Beirut, in Arabic, French or English. Salloum's video produces Lebanon at the impossible crossroads of representation and experience, history and memory. The expatriate Lebanese living in Paris comes to have "everything and nothing" to do with the so-called Arab-Canadian experience. Not simply a portrait or a place, nor simply a journalistic interview, Salloum's video offers us an insight into the

problem of recognition and identification, location and representation. If, as the discontent onlooker claims, "The films [Salloum's videos] have nothing to do with the rest of the exhibit," it is precisely because they rethink the very conditions from which the exhibition, endeavoring to represent the Arab-Canadian experience, is made possible.

**Jayce Salloum and the Video Essay**

Since beginning his artistic career in 1975, Salloum has worked in photography, mixed media, installation art and video. His work has been exhibited throughout North America, the Middle East, and Europe, at the Rotterdam Film Festival, the Robert Flaherty Film Seminar as well as at countless museums, galleries and universities. His most recent and ongoing project, *everything and nothing*, is comprised of five parts, including the footage of Bechara in Paris and a video entitled *beauty and the east* , which contains footage from the former Yugoslavia. An upcoming addition to the project will focus on the predicament of Palestinian refugees. In each of the sections, Salloum broaches the relationship of East and West, distance and proximity, and the complex interaction of history and memory. In his interview with Bechara, for example, Salloum avoids the ordinary questions about her torture at El-Khiam, topics most commonly addressed by journalists in Europe and the Middle East, and instead asks about the distance between El-Khiam and Paris, her thoughts about interviews and her suggestions for a possible title. In the second section, *beauty and the east*, dealing with Eastern Europe, Salloum effectively moves away from an area focus on the Middle East in order to investigate the question of community in places such as Sarajevo, Belgrade and Skopje. Speaking with a number of noted intellectuals, Salloum theorizes borders, nationalisms and the problem of the subject in a style that resists the emergence of Eastern Europe as a coherently comprehensible space. The provocative questions posed in each of the three sections position Salloum's videos as reflections on the status of representation, asking not who or what, but how and why an event, an object or a border is made possible.

It is this essayistic dimension to Salloum's video work, its ability to question, dismantle and reframe its subject matter, that makes it such a compelling exploration of representation more generally. If the conventional ethnographic film emphasizes logical intelligibility, making the grounds of fieldwork comprehensible for the audience at large, Salloum's videos transform place into a conceptual site, resisting the easily intelligible and pointing to the limitations implicit in the aspiration for a so-called balanced representation. "I am not into this knee-jerk game of show and tell PBS [public television] style," Salloum claimed in a recent interview, "I don't think 'understanding' is possible, or that the 'subject' can ever be 'known', as far as the western viewer understanding the *other culture*."[3] An earlier video, *Introduction to the End of an Argument/Speaking for Oneself…Speaking for Others…*(1990), directed with the Palestinian filmmaker, Elia Suleiman, explores representations of the Middle East in Western media, taking PBS-style documentary footage to dismantle and reconstruct an image of the Middle East. For the project, Salloum shot over forty hours of footage soon after the start of the "first" Intifada in December 1987. He followed an NBC news crew and interviewed numerous Palestinians for their accounts of the occupation. The contrast, as the video shows, is one that draws attention to the conventions of televisual discourse and the commonplace vocabulary assumed in discussions of the Middle East.

In his two subsequent pieces, *Up to the South (Talaeen a Junuub)* from 1993, co-directed with Walid Ra'ad, and *This is Not Beirut There Was and There Was Not* (Kan ya ma kan) from 1994, Salloum incorporates archival material, interviews and footage from Lebanon to offer a

conceptual mapping of history, memory and community.[4] *Up to the South* explores the relationship of *us* and *them*, situating itself between East and West in order to engage the provocative vocabulary of terrorism, territory and resistance. As a result of issues addressed in this project, Salloum went on to make *This is Not Beirut*, an essayistic investigation of the challenges of making a video on Lebanon. It begins with a barrage of postcards, tourist sites and names and gradually rethinks the basis from which Lebanon is known in the West. Over the course of each of these two videos, the elusive subject of Lebanon is at once fractured in the contested geography of the South and reproduced, repeated and thereby revised in the flood of news footage and postcards. In either case, Salloum offers us a Lebanon that is not simply a place to be represented as such, but rather a critical site for an inquiry into the question of representation.

Above and beyond his production as an artist, Salloum is committed to the circulation and distribution of his material to a number of grassroots organizations, museums, galleries and universities. His works provide multiple points of entry; or as Salloum remarked in a recent interview, "Any 'audience' beyond the immediate one is a rather amorphous object to predict, so I set up the work to be 'read' on many differing levels by differing viewers."[5] This underlying interest in engaging the audience, avoiding the commonplaces of conventional documentary, emerges rather pointedly in Salloum's role as a curator. Most recently, he curated a show of new Arab video, *intangible cartographies,* for the 19th World Wide Video Festival in Amsterdam in which he drew together the works of artists in the Middle East, Canada, England and the United States. The ambitious four-day show combined not only videos from all over the Arab world, but also from a number of differing genres. Like Salloum's videos, the curated show integrated a number of seemingly incompatible parts allowing for the continued interrogation of what constitutes formal, aesthetic and territorial borders.
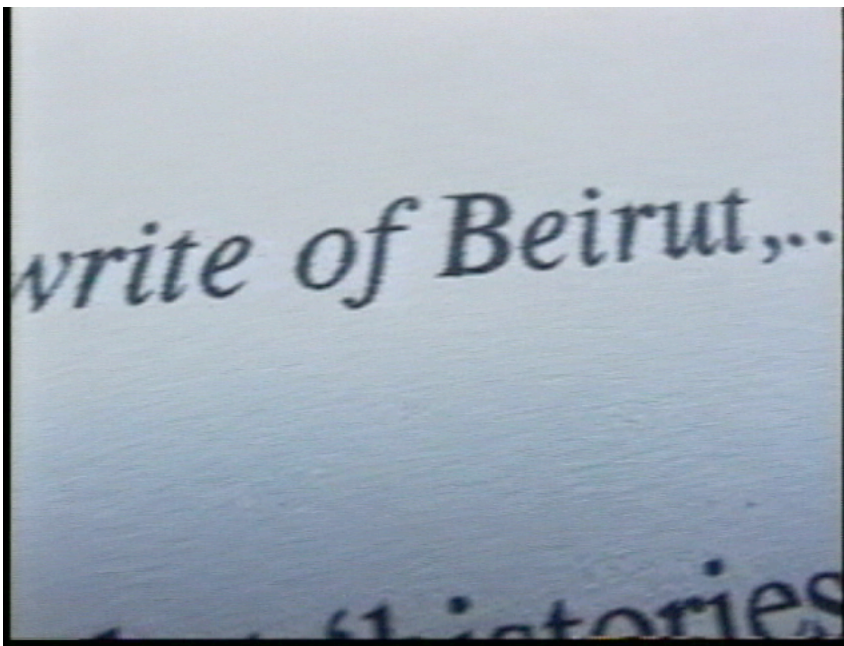
This Is Not Beirut

The page of a book appears onscreen, the words smeared as the camera swipes across it. Cut to black. The text moves closer and farther, backwards and forwards, rendering the passage illegible except for a few select lines that come in and out of focus. Cut to black. The camera continues to roam across the page with select words appearing momentarily. Two sequences flash onscreen, the first focusing on the words "To write of Beirut,.." and the second, "to read Beirut." Cut to black. Already in the first few minutes of Salloum's video essay, *This is Not Beirut*, the task of reading and writing comes to the fore as a challenge of seeing. The moment the words appear onscreen, they slide, disappear or are altogether replaced by the unintelligible syntax of a page without context, of words without sentences, of sentences without paragraphs. It is in this manner that the text presented onscreen confuses the logic of reading, scanning across the page, with that of seeing, roaming the page as a collection of signifiers. The text, intelligible as a written passage,

cannot be read so much as seen in the flashes of blindness and insight provided by the video's cuts and breaks. What Salloum offers is an alternate reading practice by which the context of the passage is unknown, its words separate of its sentences and its sentences separate of its paragraphs. Salloum presents us with a text begun in the middle, already written, already read, and yet as unreadable as the passage it represents. The formal and material qualities of the video, the camera swipes, the focus and the cuts, override the possibility of reading the written passage depicted onscreen.

That the word Beirut appears at the end of this sequence propels the apparent illegibility into a bind akin to the entangled calligram of Magritte's famous painting, *La Trahison des images (Ceci n'est pas une pipe)*. For, as Salloum's title suggests, if the video produces an image of Beirut, it does so only to negate it. This negation in turn sets forth a crucial movement: just as Magritte puts into play the movement between the words at the bottom of the painting and the pipe it depicts, so too does Salloum's video animate the movement between the words on the page and their semantic relation to the rest of the video. There is, however, a crucial difference. In *This is Not Beirut*, the text itself moves within the image, swiped across the screen visually and drawn out between flashes of black temporally. Thus, not only does the video animate a movement between text and image, it also subsumes the semantics of the written page into the visual syntax of its cuts and breaks. What Salloum brings into sight is not only the problem of representation and signification, but also the problem of contextualization by which words and sentences might be understood in relation to that which precedes and follows. In as much as the written passage cannot be easily understood in its scattered fragments, so too does Beirut emerge as a composite of illegible fragments, as a discursive object investigated, animated and dismantled in the process of its videographic representation. Beirut, as it turns out, is inscribed throughout as text, as image, as postcard, as story; and yet, Beirut is never represented in such a way that it might possibly be known, read or simply comprehended.

In the quest to identify Beirut, Salloum's video bombards the documentary with representation after representation, accumulating an extensive archive of images, the composite of which yields an image as unintelligible as the written passage. Immediately following, the video cuts to a shot of a pen on a table strewn alongside a piece of paper. As the scene unfolds, Walid and Jayce discuss Lebanese history while mapping out some of the key axes of identification. The camera focuses primarily on Walid's hand, gripping the pen, and writing the names of a number of Lebanese resistance groups onto the piece of paper. Jayce, who remains out of frame, is heard encouraging Walid to add a box for the consideration of community and identification alongside the principle of resistance. Over the course of the dialogue, the camera wanders the table, at times catching glimpses of Walid's head, his hand and later focusing in on his grandmother seated in the back of the room. In contrast to the preceding scene, in which the text emerges onscreen as the sole source of visual information, this scene complicates the task of reading and writing by making of it a sort of dialogue; and more than a mere dialogue, the scene contains the curious punctum of the grandmother reclining in a chair occasionally glancing at the camera and periodically falling in and out of sleep.

In a video fundamentally preoccupied with news images of Lebanon, Beirut and the problem of naming, these two scenes of reading and writing help to situate the video as a reflection on the problem of representation. The grandmother in particular allows us to engage in the rather paradoxical activity of watching the listener. If the mapping of Lebanese history occurs on the piece of paper, then there is an alternate map offered by the camera in its eventual close-up on the old woman's face. She looks directly into the lens, the wrinkles surrounding her eyes suggestive of her personal history, and at a given point, she blinks at the camera. This curious blink provides an interesting counterpart to the argument unfolding on the piece of paper. While the two artists debate Lebanese history, the old woman appears onscreen blinking, shutting her eyes to the gaze of the camera. As though inverting the flash of darkness punctuating the images in the passage of writing, the blink allows for the view of negation itself, the visualization of darkness, the observation of silence and of listening. The old woman thus provides a necessary

fold in the logic of the video's sequence, a sort of mirror between the two scenes, the face as map, the blink as silence and mapping the story of Lebanon. At issue is not where to find Lebanon or Beirut, nor where to identify the Arab-Canadian experience; instead, *This is Not Beirut* urges us to consider how to read Beirut being written in the interplay of blindness and insight.

Displacing Histories

In his essay, "The Storyteller," Walter Benjamin draws a distinction between storytelling and information. "[N]o event any longer comes to us without already being shot through with explanation," he writes, "by now almost nothing that happens benefits storytelling; almost everything benefits information."[6] Benjamin's distinction suggests the broader problem of communication in the age of information, according to which the effective storyteller must necessarily avoid the explanatory: The most extraordinary things, marvelous things, are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the event is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks.

If Benjamin privileges storytelling over information, then he does so on the grounds that it does not force psychological connection. There is, in other words, room for reading, interpretation and reflection in the artfully recounted story as compared to information "already shot through with explanation."

Each of Salloum's videos negotiates a fine line between storytelling and information. While most of his pieces begin with Lebanon, they do so in order to dismantle and question representation in the media. The videos, in other words, take information as the grounds from which to begin and necessarily transform it by means of juxtapositions, appropriations and repetition. Their poignancy lies in their disarticulation of the informational, their capacity to take that which is already explained in order to break open the possibility of its meaning, to take the seemingly banal and to explode it with the potential for stories. What begins as news footage of Lebanon, replete with the voice-over recounting the dominant narrative of Lebanese history, ends as another beginning, a mere fragment in a collage of representations of Lebanon. Postcards, music, interviews and debates over the problem of how to represent the dynamics of community, resistance and nation, all manage to enact a crucial shift from the informational towards an open-ended text awaiting its reader. There is implicit in each video an amplitude above and beyond the conventional narrative of Lebanese history in as much as history itself functions as the grounds of representation.

In *everything and nothing*, the interview format excavates a particular type of story, held together by the speaker whose memory of the event is brought to the surface through layers of questions. The video does not so much present information, in terms of constructing an informational image or portrait of Bechara, so much as it offers forth a meditation on the relationship between speech, memory and the relation to the not-so-distanced past [and present, at the time of the taping, S. Lebanon was still occupied and the Khiam detention centre was in full operation. JS]. In an exhibit that urges artists to share stories from which to cull information about the Arab-Canadian experience, Salloum's video takes information in order to refuse the very informational conditions of identity-based storytelling. Were Salloum to tell a story, he might have addressed how the so-called Arab-Canadian is positioned as a subject split between two divergent lands, struggling to come to terms with a fractured identity; however, in this sort of storytelling, the very fact of the storyteller's origins pre-determine how the story itself will be heard. Salloum begins with the supposed fact of origin, the supposed information at the base of the story, in order to allow us to think something more. If, in the case of Soha Bechara, *everything and nothing* allows us to consider the demythologization of a figure, then in the case of the so-called Arab-Canadian experience, the video performs an analytic dismantling of the very categories that make such identity politics imaginable. There is no explanation of relevance, no story to be told justifying the discourse of the Lebanese expatriate in Paris; instead, Salloum's story refuses to seek or articulate the sort of information demanded by the listener. His video thus transforms information, news footage, interviews and what might appear to be a documentary, into a story rich for numerous readings.

In Salloum's videographic cartography, there is no ultimate center to be found, no one piece of information to be culled, and no one story to be heard. Situated between the portrait of Bechara and the detention centre at El-Khiam, between the quest for Beirut and the explosion of its representations, the location of Lebanon remains less a destination than it does a meditation on the very problem of the path by which the story is told.

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[1] The exhibition *Ces pays qui m'habitent / These Lands Within Me,* is on display at the Museum of Civilization in Gatineau, Quebec, until March 2003. The disgruntled onlooker was the Rabbi Reuvin Bulka whose complaints are quoted in an article by Graham Fraser, "Controversial Exhibit Draws Fire," *Toronto Star,* October 19, 2001.

[2] Soha Bechara spent ten years in captivity, six of which in isolation. She was heralded as a living martyr, and following pressure from the international human rights community, she was released in September 1998; a year later she moved to Paris, where she is currently a student of international law.

[3] From an interview with Jayce Salloum by Molly Hankwitz, "occupied territories: the mapping of cultural terrain," forthcoming in the British film journal, *Framework,* 43.2 Middle Eastern Media Arts, Fall 2002.

[4] Many of Salloum's videos are also part of installations. *This is Not Beirut,* for example, was displayed as part of *There was and there was not/Kan ya ma Kan*, an exhibition which has traveled to galleries throughout Canada, the United States, and Europe.

[5] Salloum in Hankwitz, *op. cit*.

[6] All quotes in this paragraph by Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller" in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn New York: Schocken Books, 1968, p89.