BIRD'S EYE VIEW

Ali Cherri

CONTEMPORARY ART PLATFORM

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cover: **Paysages tremblants (Algiers)** [detail], 2014, Lithographic print and archival ink stamp
40 x 60 cm, Edition of 7 + 2 AP, Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Imane Farès

Foreword

Ali Cherri poses many questions on the politicisation and manipulation of images in *Bird's Eye View* at Contemporary Art Platform (CAP) Kuwait. The exhibition includes a selection of works from 2010 to present that draw lines between the historical, political, informational and personal to deconstruct systems of thought and ultimately of power. In redefining the very concept of a fact, he highlights the simultaneous gravity and banality of historical events and their consequences, while also acknowledging the conflicting narratives and emotions surrounding them.

The two-channel video installation *Pipe Dreams* (2012) incorporates documented events, archival images, images from the current Syrian uprising and non-historical and non-factual images, thus remixing truth and revaluing information. This democratisation of material is further complicated by its presentation on two separate and overlapping screens, one of which is a tv, the iconic yet mundane object through which information is created to be consumed en masse. This same object famously delivered images around the world of the early space missions, and of astronauts finally reaching into the unknown. This symbol of human achievement is present in both *Pipe Dreams* and *Heroes* (The Rise and Fall) (2013) where an astronaut stands in a relaxed position holding a helmet under the arm, and without a head. The sculpture is made of brass and granite cast in reflective chrome, perhaps acting as a mirror to the lavishly extravagant symbol of power that space programs have always embodied.

The concept of the 'bird's eye view' developed in tandem with map-making. In the *Paysages tremblants* (2014) series, maps of divided cities are seen from above. Their incisions are emphasied, each section framed separately. The parts don't seem to have any connection to each other aside from their bounding lines. Can invisible borders be seen in space? In *Atlas* (2014) Cherri has cast a 19th century atlas in resin and applied charcoal and ink to other vintage maps, altering what information may be accessed by blocking it out or locking it in, and reminding us that all maps depict what the maker wants you to see.

In all of these works the human desire to explore into the unknown contrasts with the abuse of power. The persistent fixation on traveling into infinity contradicts the endless insistence on closing borders. Cherri masterfully curates evidence of both fact and fiction to present a web of expansive complexity, asking the viewers to decide what they see.

Abed Al Kadiri
Contemporary Art Platform - Director

Ali Cherri

Born in Beirut in 1976, Ali Cherri works with photography, video, printmaking, installation, performance and multimedia.

He recently mounted *On Things That Move*, a solo show at Galerie Imane Farès (Paris, 2014). He has also exhibited at the Gwangju Museum (South Korea, 2014), Helsinki Photography Biennial (Finland, 2014) Yalay Art Space (Hong Kong, 2013), Southern Panorama (Sao Paolo, 2013), HomeWorks 6 (Beirut, 2013) and Institut du Monde Arabe (Paris, 2012).

Cherri Has presented his work at various venues and festivals including the Berlinale (Berlin), TIFF (Toronto), MoMA (New York), Centre Georges Pompidou (Paris), Delfina Foundation (London), Tate Modern (London), VideoBrazil (Sao Paolo), Contemporary Image Collective (Cairo), Modern Art Oxford (Oxford), Manifesta (Amsterdam), KunstFilmBiennale (Köln) and Kasa Galeri (Istanbul).

He has been awarded 'Best Director' in the Muhr received Arab Short category at the Dubai International Film Festival 2013 and the Res Artis Award at VideoBrasil 2013 and the NEARCH Award 2014 for his current research on Archeology.

Cherri is working and living in Paris and Beirut.


33° 34' 12"N 36° 19' 21"E
33° 33' 56"N 36° 19' 0"E

Bird's Eye View

A bird's eye view implies the bigger picture. Ali Cherri describes it as "a technical term, as used for instance for architectural perspectives, which imply an impossible viewpoint that no one can have". For years now, this has been creating a poetic and resolutely political visual language, as reflected in this exhibition.

Cherri revisits recent events, such as the war in Syria in the video installation *Pipe Dreams* (2011) which is based on the telephone conversation between the Syrian cosmonaut Mohammed Faris, who was part of the Russian expedition to the space station Mir, and the former President Hafez al-Assad, intermingling archival images and images of the 2011 uprising. Presented alongside this work is a sculpture of a headless cosmonaut (*Heroes*: The Rise and Fall, 2013), a sort of anti-hero on a pedestal expressing our ambivalent relation with power, as well as a series of photographic prints taken from YouTube. "At the beginning of the Syrian revolution, there was a real battle between the government and the rebels' images. I wanted to remove them from this duality, enlarge them and restore some sort of meaning. Far from being one liners, they are open to interpretation." Blurry and pixelated, the large format prints transform the bad quality of the initial photographs into Expressionist paintings.

Deeply affected by war, conflict and fault lines, Ali Cherri ceaselessly alternates between the contemporary world and history. As such, the *Paysages tremblants* (Trembling Landscapes: Beirut, Erbil, Tehran, Algiers, Damascus, 2014) are lithographs of aerial views of cities split by fault lines, not dissimilar to the views of destroyed cities after the Second World War in Europe. Continuing this archaeology of chaos, the artist has trapped a geography book dating from the 19th century in a block of resin (*Atlas*, 2014) and reworked old maps from that time, drowning them in ominous ink and post-apocalyptic charcoal. The silent violence exuding from these artworks is counterbalanced by a certain lightness. Produced between 2010 and 2014, this body of work is an excellent summary of Ali Cherri's multifaceted practice, equally versed in video, photography and installation. Here he unravels his interrogations about the real and the virtual; taking us towards new territories of fiction.

Olivia Marsaud

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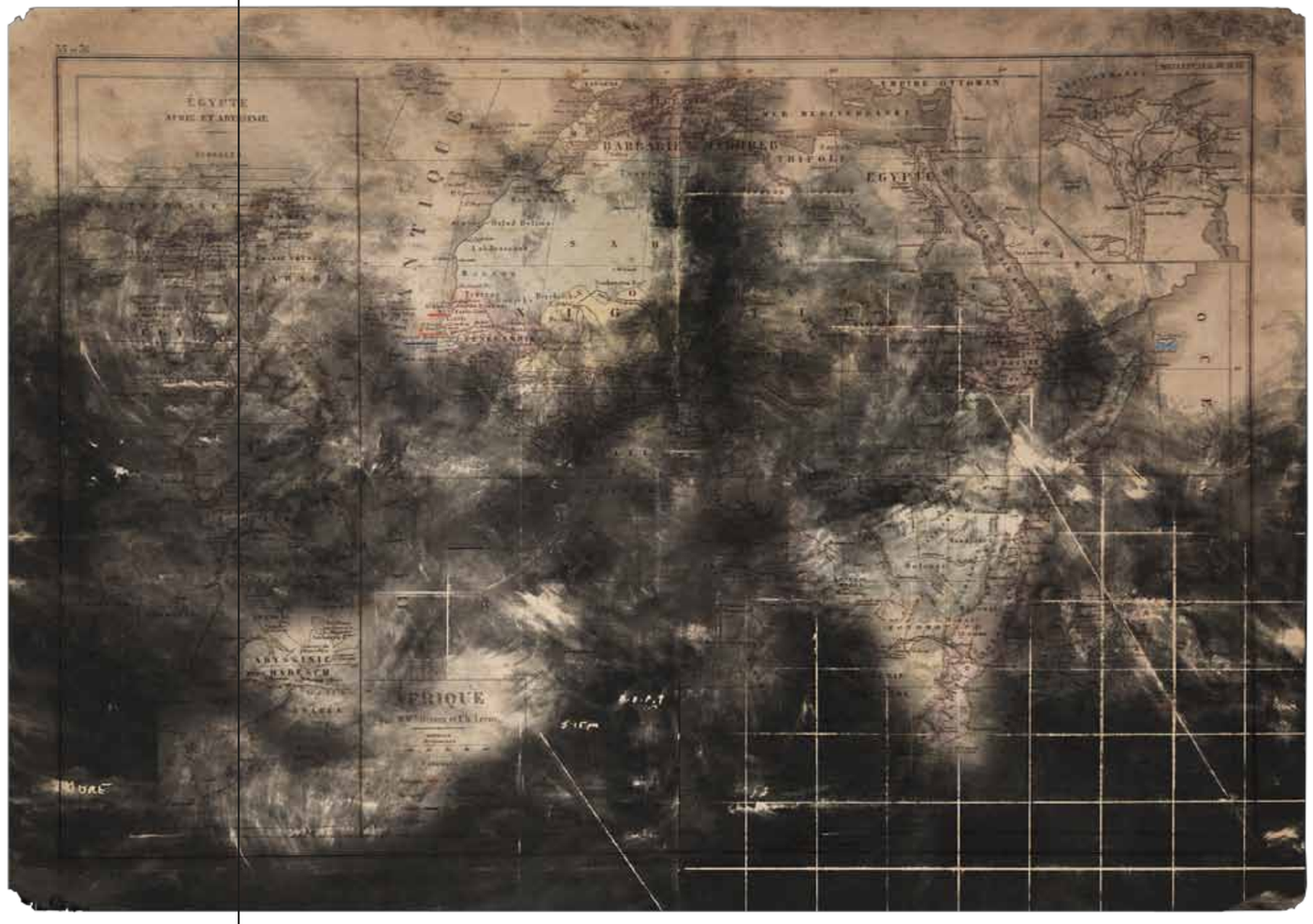
Paysages tremblants (Damas), 2014
Lithographic Print and Archival Ink Stamp, 40 x 60 cm
Edition of 7 + 2 AP, Courtesy of the artist and Imane Farès

Heroes: The Rise and Fall, 2013
Sculpture, Chrome-plated brass and granite, 56 x 26 x 13 cm
Edition of 8 + 2 AP, Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Imane Farès

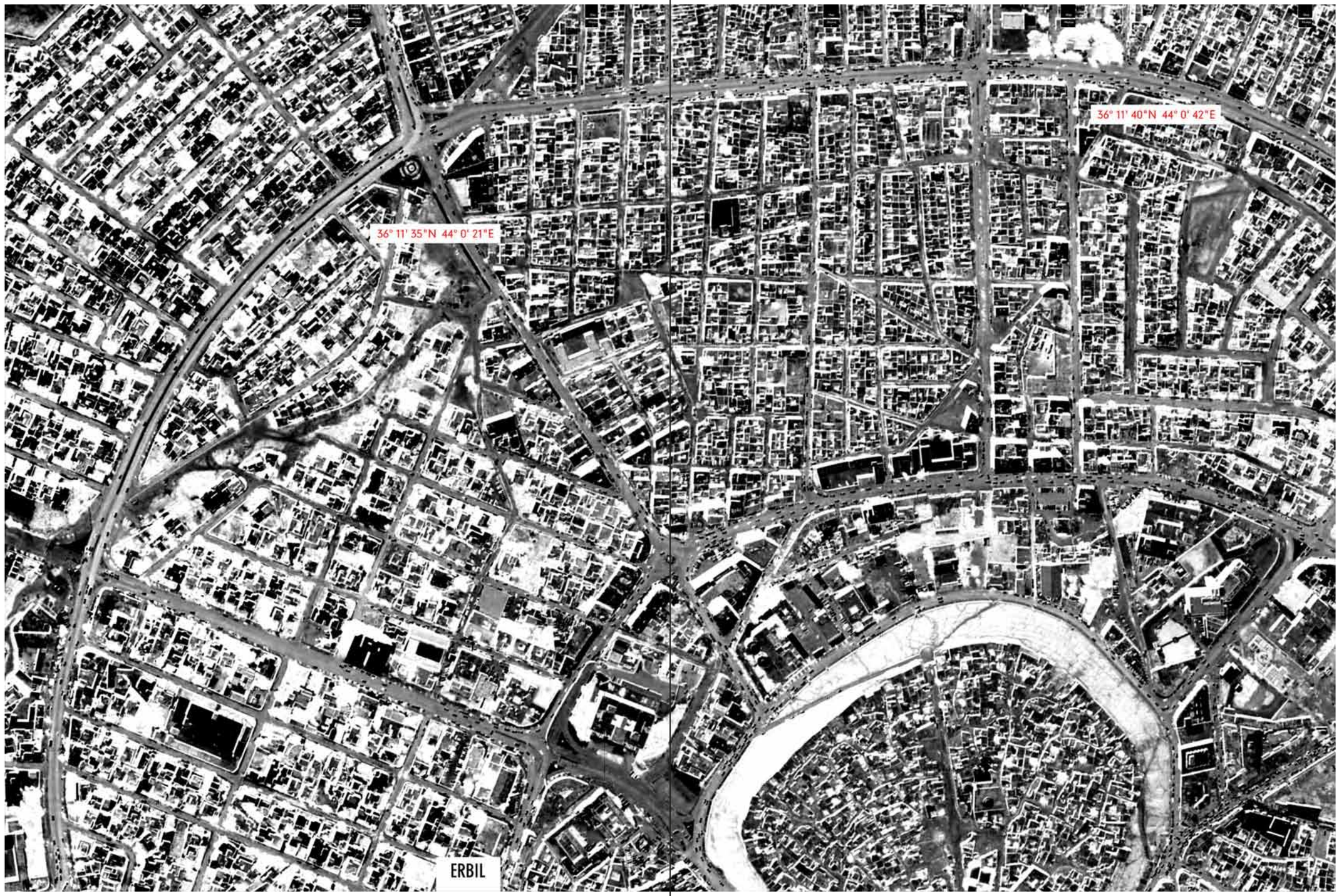
Archéologie (Asia), 2014
Geographic map 1876, ink and charcoal
46 x 60 cm
Unique piece
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Imane Farès

Archéologie (British Islands), 2014
Geographic map 1876, ink and charcoal
46 x 60 cm
Unique piece
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Imane Farès



Archéologie (Egypt), 2014
Geographic Map 1876, ink and charcoal
46 x 60 cm
Unique piece
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Imane Farès

1st of September [detail], 2011
Digital print, 100 x 70 cm
Edition of 3 + 2 AP
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Imane Farès


36° 11' 35"N 44° 0' 21"E
36° 11' 40"N 44° 0' 42"E
ERBIL

previous page
Trembling Landscapes (Erbil), 2014
Lithographic print and archival ink stamp
40 x 60 cm
Edition of 7 + 2 AP
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Imane Farès

Paysages tremblants (Tehran), 2014
Lithographic print and archival ink stamp
40 x 60 cm
Edition of 7 + 2 AP
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Imane Farès

Atlas, 2014
Atlas cast in resin
37,5 x 45,5 x 9,5 cm
Unique piece
Courtesy the artist and Galerie Imane Farès

Image and Imagination

Ali Cherri in conversation with **Sheyma Buali**

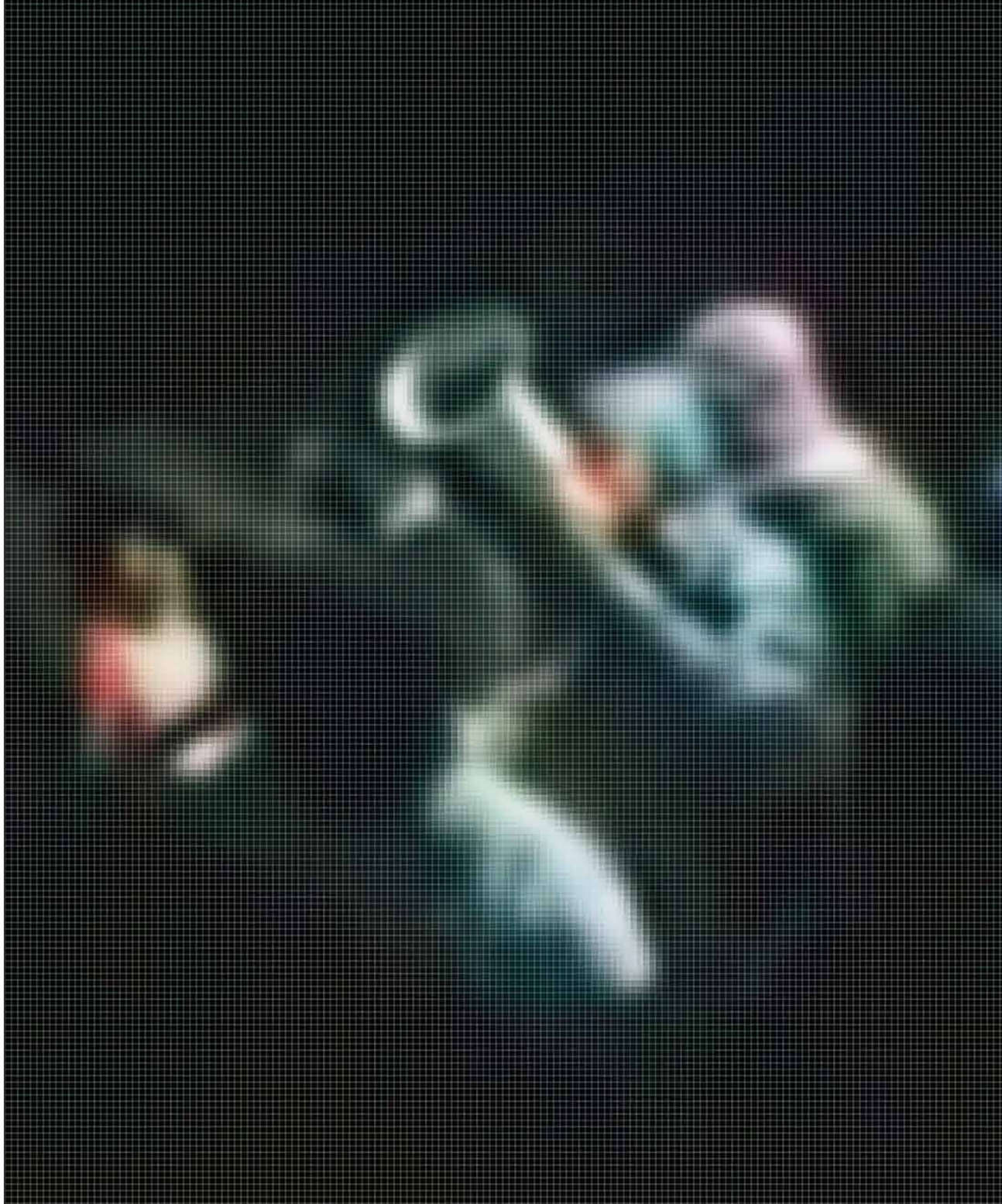
'We need images to create history, especially in the age of photography and cinema. But we also need imagination to re-see these images, and thus, to re-think history,' is a quote by Georges Didi-Huberman, which was shared by Ali Cherri at the beginning of the following interview. The quote reflects the conflicting ideas and the crux of questions that Cherri faces in his work regarding history, politics, violence, images and their meaning and power. This interview follows the changing trajectory of Cherri's work, which explores sources, formats and platforms for historical visual documentation. Cherri discusses various factors of how imagination and image come together in defining our world, and considers the artist's interception to redefine it. The questions that arise are as follows: how are these images kept, how is the form of images changing the archive and meaning of historical visual documentation, how can we talk about violence while avoiding turning horror into showmanship, and how, with time, do these meanings change?

Sheyma Buali: Let us start out with basic definitions. Can you tell me the difference between your definitions of 'found footage' and 'archival material', and how you approach them?

Ali Cherri: Found footage is different from archival footage: the archive is an official institution that separates historical record from what might be considered, in filmic terms, an outtake. The etymology of 'found footage' suggests its ability to uncover hidden meanings in film material. 'Footage' is an archaic British imperial measure of film length, evoking a bulk of industrial product – waste, junk – within which treasures can be 'found'. The absence of official source or authorship distinguishes them from archived material.

The widespread of still and video cameras (analog and then digital) created a huge number of indexical documents outside of official archives: this situation lead to the blurring of the distinction, which was never very stable to begin with, between 'archival' and 'found' documents. With all the documents that exist, it is difficult to decide which ones should be preserved by technologies that are not always available outside of official archival institutions. I use either of them in my work the same way: as 'cited' images, and not 'quoted'.

Found-footage artists' approach is to critically investigate the history behind the images, their modes of creation, consumption and distribution. Much of the material used in experimental found-footage films is not archived, but from other sources.



21st of June [detail], 2011
Digital print, 110 x 70 cm
Edition of 3 + 2 AP
Courtesy of the artist and Imane Farès

As concept and as object, the archive is evolving. The idea of the interactivity of the spectaorial experience, that is, of the relationship between viewer and data, is changing. As Jaimie Baron puts it, certain appropriated audiovisual documents can produce, for the viewer, an 'archive effect', giving these documents a particular kind of authority as 'evidence'. By looking at the archival document not as an object but as an experience, we may begin to rethink how information and knowledge are constituted in today's world. Reading a film sequence is not determined by the 'inherent' and 'objective' characteristics of the footage, but by the particular kind of consciousness that it evokes in the viewer.

YouTube, as a found-footage database that accumulates at a rate of 72 hours of video uploaded per minute, calls into necessary question the whole idea of an archive: a sourced, unique and select record of history, both recent and distant.

SB: Let us look at the relationship between YouTube and archives. You have referred to YouTube as 'a promise of an infinite archive', and much of your work sources images from this 'infinite archive'. Can you tell me what you mean by this and talk about your use of it as a resource?

AC: Maybe I should begin by stating that YouTube itself is not an archive in the formal sense, since preservation is neither in its mission nor in its practice.

As found-footage artists we got used to the coexistence, without any conflict, of degraded, low-resolution images, alongside captivating high-quality media. This helped the disintegration of the fine line of what defines an archive.

It is safe to say that YouTube constitutes today the largest video database for mankind. It has been growing into an archive because of the way it is being used, and is thus evolving into a massive, heterogeneous, but for the most part 'accidental and disordered, public archive', as Rick Prelinger names it.

And because YouTube footage doesn't carry the weight of authenticity and authorship, nor is it subject to a curatorial authority, it liberates us from the anxiety we feel when facing an official archive. When approaching an archive, there is the excitement of interacting with a 'precious' collection, but also frustration for not having the time to view all the material, and the fear of missing out on some 'treasures'. With YouTube, none of this anxiety is present. There is no guilt in not having time to view all that is there, because most of the videos are banal anyway.

We can ask what makes YouTube so attractive, and where did archives fail and YouTube succeed?

Most archival institutions, because of their worries about copyright holders, about 'losing control' of their collections, or about the qualification of the researchers, have made the access to their archives complicated. YouTube can give the impression for users of a 'complete' collection. It's an open source platform, so anybody's video can appear on the same level as their favourite programmes and actors without any prior permission. In this aspect, it seems closer to the Wikipedia project: a massive, crowd-sourced project to index and categorise video footage.

While archives need authorizations for accessibility, YouTube offers instant access with very few limitations. YouTube offers basic social networking, and breaks from the image of the lonely researcher doing private studies. One of the important uses of YouTube is the ability to embed videos, and therefore to restore the idea of using images as a 'citation'.

The low quality of YouTube footage gives the viewer the feeling that he is not really violating any owners' rights: it's just like watching a picture of a video; like being in a permanent preview mode.

The question that we are asking ourselves now is: who will archive the archive?

SB: Interestingly then, just to complicate things, many official archives now have YouTube channels. But most are definitely digitizing their collections. However, they remain to be pictures of pictures, as they are watermarked and, depending on the footage of course, heavily copyrighted. How does that fall into your definitions and the way you work with them?

AC: I try to link my approach to found footage as a cinematic practice, consisting of reusing and reediting archival images, to Walter Benjamin's remarks on 'historical knowledge' and its relation to montage. In Benjamin's words, historical knowledge 'has to develop to the highest degree the art of citing without quotation. Its theory is intimately related to that of montage'. For Benjamin, history is connected to editing practice, through which we deal with the relationship between a reminiscent present and a gone past. We can never see the past in its entirety, but only through a series of fragments, a discontinuous succession, a broken sequence of 'dialectical images'. For Benjamin, dialectical images are images that 'emerge suddenly'. These images operate in a continuous coming and going between the present and the past, and by decontextualising them, I try to decipher how history unfolds in our visible world.

Through montage, image re-interpretation reminds us how the most benign everyday work around us is saturated with political discourse, and how our ideological baggage informs our observation of images.

SB: Images do have power; propaganda is very much based on re-contextualizing images, tweaking details, creating moods, and so on. In *Pipe Dreams* (2012), you work with the images of the statue of Hafez al-Assad being removed, in order to avoid the image of it being destroyed. The video of the statue being removed retains a sense of control because the government documenting this preemptive decision shot the footage. On the other hand, it was preemptively responding to a looming fear. In your film, you show it in the light of the latter, this footage as a sign of weakness. You decontextualised the meaning into the visual phrase that you created, putting the video to follow the virility of the successful space launch.

What is your crux when dealing with the malleable meaning of images, particularly in the area of history and politics?

AC: Pipe Dreams captures an historic phone call between the late Syrian President Hafez al-Assad and Syrian military aviator and astronaut Muhammed Faris, who was part of the 1987 Soviet space programme. In this archive footage, we see the 'father of the nation' questioning the 'hero' about his impressions, as Faris looks down on Syrian lands from space. The conversation features the 'eternal leader', who, from the comforts of his office, casts a watchful eye on the children of the nation, even when they are thousands of miles away up in space. Exposing power structures that are embedded in this 5-minute conversation goes beyond the Syrian example. This was the end of the 1980s, a time when young revolutionaries – in Libya (Muammar al-Gaddafi), Iraq (Saddam Hussein), Egypt (Hosni Mubarak) and Syria (Hafez al-Assad) – had asserted themselves as the sole and eternal leaders of their countries, often taking power following coups that deposed previous governments. Power in these countries was 'founding fathers', larger-than-life billboards, speeches by the countries' leaders, and, of course, by the nations' heroes.

In a sort of mise en abyme, the installation depicts President al-Assad through a monitor, who addresses the cosmonaut in his spaceship through an identical monitor: an infinite loop of the image of the leader looking at the hero. This juxtaposition of archival government footage with amateur YouTube footage from early 2011 in the background, when Syrian unrest began: the authorities, fearing vandalism, dismantled the statues of al-Assad across the country's protesting towns, including Hama and Deraa. Haunted by the images of destroyed statues, from Stalin to Saddam Hussein, the Syrian regime tried to heed off the inevitable, sacrificing the symbol in order to safeguard the image. For me, this was a major shift in the strategies of totalitarian regimes. You know the end is imminent when power begins to lose its monuments.

This interface between two moments in recent Syrian history encapsulates the history of the entire region: the mechanisms of the construction and deconstruction of totalitarian power, the dreams and disillusions of an entire nation. It's exactly by fragmenting moments in history, reducing them to debris, that we can put them in a dialectical process, namely, montage.

SB: Your work often looks at the meaning of images, particularly of violence, catastrophe, and trauma. In a way, the last few years of so-called 'revolution' have also created a new archive of violence. The content of these images gets gruesome and dark.

In your project *Bad Bad* Images (2012), you work with found images that you took from the net, referencing 'bad' in a wide spectrum of the word. Technically speaking, the lower the quality or smaller the file, the farther it reaches, the more it is seen. But you are also referring to 'bad' as in 'tasteless' – or as you put it, 'flawed, nasty, unpleasant, immoral, dangerous, inefficient, inappropriate, and mainly, violent images.' Your idea breaks into two areas: the (violence of the) technical 'value' (authors of the images don't mind that the quality of their images are bad because more people will see them), and the violent content within the frame.

You also note the cycle of violence where people are enacting, witnessing, recording, viewing and reviewing violence repeatedly, in real time and on repetitive screen time. This hyper-reality has, in more ways, moved us away from reality towards a screen-protected shock, a saturated banality where these strange images are no longer strange. All the while, though, you question the possibility of representing violence.

In your work *My Pain is Real* (2010), which looks more directly at this, you note that images of suffering have become part of everyday life. You talk about the inevitability of them being the source from which people learn what war is, mirroring what Rancière said about images as a way to define the world.

How though can images framed with so much violence be disassociated from it?

AC: In my work I was always interested in the body as a site where violence happens. Mark Seltzer talks about the rise of a 'wound culture' that he describes as: 'public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound. The effect of being surrounded by graphic images of death and war does not create a distancing from reality, rather an excess of reality. Our 'wound culture' is unable to differentiate between the figurative and the literal, between the virtual and the real. The wound becomes then the touch-point between the inside and the outside. Violence has become not only a collective spectacle, but it's also the place where private desire and the public realm meet.

I made the video installation *My Pain is Real* in 2010, four years after the end of the July War. In this work, a computer cursor draws on my face wounds taken from actual people who where injured during the war between Lebanon and Israel on the summer of 2006. Despite the overtly computer-generated image, to look at my wounded face was highly disturbing.

With the beginning of the uprising in the Arab world, I was watching hours and hours of this shaky, unofficial footage, which was acting as both testimony and incitement, documenting and reconstructing reality at the same time. At the end of 2011, I put together my exhibition *Bad Bad* Images (2012), where I used stills from low-quality videos from the Syrian uprising, enlarged to the size of monumental classical paintings. At that size, images are no longer pixellated; they become ghostly, gaining an impressionist, painterly quality. It was an attempt to give back to these images their imagination; to give them back their poetic language, their capacity to suggest the political, not to represent it. Images from the Arab uprising should be treated as found footage, and not as documents.

After 2012, I witnessed how violence in YouTube footage was escalating; the images became more and more embedded with sudden discharge of blood and death. With the dramatic acceleration of the events in Syria, I refrain now from watching any of these clips. This level of violence in images does not procure knowledge, only fascination and stupor. I don't have any critical distance to understand or read these images.

But maybe witnessing violence has become an inevitable condition of modernity.

SB: Looking back at the work you have done surrounding violence and image, such as My Pain is Real, how have your thoughts changed in the last couple of years?

AC: In my earlier projects I was working with explicitly violent images, in an attempt to expose modes of operation of media violence. This kind graphic material is becoming less and less visible in my work. I think I don't want to produce more violence. Problematising the dissemination of violent images can also happen in other types of representation. I think we've had enough!

SB: In your latest work, the 20' film *The Disquiet* (2013), you talk about tension in Lebanon based on seismic waves. You go back about 2000 years of earthquakes, and note that the time is simmering for them to happen again. You use archival images of destroyed villages, but only minimally, for instance showing how catastrophe turns into a slide show, showing images of the 1956 earthquake in a series of archive photos. Mainly, though, you create a haunting and moody feel of tension by showing images of the earth, the land, nature, and the squiggly lines of the seismometers.

How do you think we can avoid aestheticising these events?

AC: Seismic studies are an act of writing par excellence. A seismograph embodies the relation between language and catastrophe, or the failure of being able to fully represent history, or catastrophe, as comprehensible and complete. We cannot assume to understand the full scale of a catastrophe, or the traumatic reality of historical events. Even with the use of a witness, or a text, or a photograph: catastrophe is always off-screen, beyond our grasp. With the long shots of seismometers registering on paper or on monitors the movements of tectonic plates, I wanted to highlight our position as witnesses; we observe the catastrophe in the making.

In the film, we see historical images of earthquake destructions and memorial stamps in a form of a flashing slideshow: if catastrophe annihilates speech and compels us to silence, it nevertheless produces images as emblems. These emblems can assume their own authority, and tend to overwrite historical reality. A memorial stamp is there to remind us of the importance to remember, in order not to forget; but more important still, they should remind us that remembering can itself be a form of forgetting.

In The Disquiet I wanted to shift the discussion about violence, war and destruction to a seemingly scientific discourse. What can science tell us about all this? Behind the analytical research about the seismic history of Lebanon and the region is a quest to excavate the traces of our imminent destruction.

SB: How has this change in direction affected the work you are currently producing?

AC: For my upcoming exhibition I am producing lithographic prints; poetic forms that could survive the next catastrophe. It's an Archeology of a Catastrophe: archeology not as the love of ruins, but as the excavation of what has survived. Catastrophes leave us in a landscape of dust, debris, fragments and residues, but it's also a moment of clarity.

This interview was commissioned for **Ibraaz Platform** 006
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left
3*rd* of May, 2011
Digital print, 160 x 110 cm
Edition of 3 + 2 AP
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Imane Farès

The Calling, 2011
Digital print, 110 x 70 cm
Edition of 3 + 2 AP
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Imane Farès

right
Le dormeur du Val, 2011
Digital print, 80 x 110 cm
Edition of 3 + 2 AP
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Imane Farès

Le déserteur, 2011
Digital print, 100 x 70 cm
Edition of 3 + 2 AP
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Imane Farès

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