



- 1- The Sea Is A Stereo, video Nº 2, *Paris Without A Sea*, 12', video, color and sound, 2007-08
- 2- The Sea Is A Stereo, video Nº 3, *Let's Not Swim Then!*, 90', video, color and sound, 2007-09
- 3- The Sea Is A Stereo, *Elvis and other Photographs*, variable dimensions, digital prints, 2007- ongoing
- 4- The Sea Is A Stereo, *I Plant Opium*, air-brushed enamel paint, silkscreen on original Nivea Jar, 2007

Mounira Al Solh

1978, born in Beirut, Lebanon

Mounira studied painting at the Lebanese University in Beirut (LB), and Fine Arts at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam (NL). Between 2006 and 2008, she was a resident at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam.

The work of Mounira Al Solh is playfully conceptual. Al Solh makes videos, installations, magazines, photographs, paintings and performances. Starting from the personal, or the autobiographical, the work stretches to open up specific micro-social and micro-aesthetic questions, masking back and concealing the personal and the autobiographical. She frequently reflects on specific artworks, by appropriating them and studying them carefully, and often metamorphoses into other characters, such as various other "selves".

At this moment Al Solh has a solo show at Sfeir-Semler gallery in Beirut.

Among many others she has exhibited at Haus Der Kunst, Munich, Germany; and Manifesta 8, Murcia, Spain; The Guild Art Gallery, Mumbai; Stedelijk Museum Schiedam, The Netherlands; and Al Riwaq Art Space, Manama, Bahrain all in 2010; and at Arizona State University Art Museum, Tempe; the Galerie Nord, Kunstverein Tiergarten, Berlin; and the 11th International Istanbul Biennial in 2009. Her video *Rawane's Song* has been screened widely at international festivals amongst them VideoBrasil where it received the 2007 jury prize. Her video installation *As If I Don't Fit There* was part of the first Lebanese Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2007.

MOUNIRA AL SOLH

THE SEA IS A STEREO
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**KUNSTHALLE
LISSABON**

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Kunsthalle Lissabon is proud to present, for the first time in Portugal, the work of Lebanese artist Mounira Al Solh. Al Solh's work utilizes an ironic and fictional strategy as well as a self-reflexive position to investigate everyday reality, thus questioning what is perceived as normal by others.

The project *The Sea is a Stereo* introduces us to a group of men who live in Beirut and who swim in the sea everyday regardless of the circumstances: rain, wind or war. Their obsessive swimming behavior appears as an act of resistance against the impossibility of leading a "normal" everyday life in their own country. This struggle for normality takes a sudden twist when the artist quite literally speaks for the men, dubbing their own voices. Al Solh uses her own voice not only to expose the vulnerability of their behavior but also as a way of exposing the fiction of "normality".

In the video *Paris Without a Sea*, one of the elements that constitutes *The Sea is a Stereo*, Al Solh focuses on interviews that she did with the men. Usually, making an interview presupposes that there should be an interviewer and an interviewee, and that the two stand on different sides; that they are two different entities or units. This video tries to defy this presupposition, without really changing it. The questions begin by asking very basic things that are so banal that they are usually taken for granted. Sometimes the exaggerated fast rhythm of the video, and these surprising questions and answers from the men (that are even more surprising) make the video slide into the absurd, where appropriation and performance constitute underlying strong components of the work.

Let's Not Swim Then!, also a part of the project, is a video based on different scenes of the swimmers filmed individually or in groups as they are on the beach or going there. These scenes were filmed between 2006 and 2008 at different locations on the public beach in Beirut, and during different times of the year. Each of the scenes is followed by remarks that some of the men made after watching a playback. The remarks are the thread that binds the scenes together, clarifying the relationship of the men with the coast line in Beirut and the shrinking public beaches where they swim. In a very realistic rhythm, the scenes intimately show us the daily engagement of the men: how they struggle daily to find the right spot for swimming in Beirut, and where each one of them prefers to swim. We also witness their activities and conversations while they are on the beach.

Also being presented as part of her project for Kunsthalle Lissabon is Al Solh's magazine *NOA (Not Only Arabic)*. *NOA* is conceived as an experimental gesture situated halfway between exclusive magazine and performance. The second issue, produced by and launched during the 11th Istanbul Biennial under the title *Arrest Buried Under Something Else (2009)* deals with the various concepts and notions of arrest. It features contributions by Mohammed Abi Samra, Alena Alexandrova, Amal Issa, Zachary Formwalt, Erden Kosova, and others. The magazine will only be available for reading during a limited period of time and by appointment only. Please call to +351 912045650 to schedule a reading.



WORDS DON'T COME EASY

CONVERSATION BETWEEN MOUNIRA AL SOLH, JOÃO MOURÃO AND LUÍS SILVA, ON THE OCCASION OF THE EXHIBITION THE SEA IS A STEREO, HELD IN DECEMBER 2010 IN KUNSTHALLE LISSABON.

IN THE SEA IS A STEREO, AN ONGOING PROJECT YOU STARTED IN 2007, YOU SOMEHOW TRACE A PORTRAIT OF A GROUP OF MEN. WHO ARE THESE MEN?

Actually I started it in 2006, and these men are in fact all my father's friends and more specifically swimming companions. My father swims daily in Beirut for about 20 minutes in the sea since I was a kid, all year long, except on sundays.

But between 1997 and 2001, as I was studying painting at the Lebanese University, which was located at Raouché, the big famous Pigeon's Rock in the sea of Beirut (this rock is printed on postcards and printed on Lebanese Liras, etc..) I used to swim there with a group of friends, and for two years we also swam during summer and winter every day, and there I also used to encounter some of my father's swimming friends, before knowing that he knew them as well. In 2006-07, I was living in Beirut and in Amsterdam, but when I came to Beirut, I spent most of my days with my dad, and accompanied him to the swimming, and therefore, his friends became my friends as well.

IT IS A VERY INTIMATE PROJECT... IN A WAY,

ONE DOESN'T FEEL ANY DOCUMENTARY OR ETHNOGRAPHIC TENSION OR METHODOLOGY IN YOUR APPROACH. IS THIS SOMETHING YOU WANTED TO AVOID? WE'RE ASKING YOU THIS BECAUSE ON ONE SIDE, *THE SEA IS A STEREO* DOESN'T FEEL LIKE AN OUTSIDER LOOK (DESPITE AGE AND GENDER, YOU ARE ACTUALLY ONE OF THEM), AND ON THE OTHER SIDE IT DOESN'T FEEL LIKE SIMPLY A LOOK, OR AT LEAST NOT AN OBJECTIVE ONE (THE EDITING OF THE VIDEOS AND THE SOUND, FOR INSTANCE, BECOME PERFORMATIVE, AND THEREFORE ESSENTIALLY SUBJECTIVE)...

In fact, yes, it is very personal, but at the same time, it is very "sociological" as well. These two elements often intermix in my work, and at the end, it is hard to distinguish what is personal and what is sociological and what is fantasy and what is critical, or seemingly naive... I shot 40 minute-long interviews with each of the men, and I had more material than what we see in the video. But I made a selection, and I chose pieces and little parts of each interview and in the end, I didn't use some of the interviews at all. To be honest, it was quite difficult for me to start with, and it took me more than a year to be able to reach this point with these interviews. During that year, I was

simply watching all interviews almost every night until 4 a.m. In that year, I lived between Beirut and Amsterdam and when I was editing, I used to live above a nightclub on Rembrandtplein in Amsterdam, so I used to work at my studio at the Rijksakademie until 4 a.m., and return home at around 4:30 to sleep at 5:00 when the dance music had stopped. When I came to the stage of editing, I was feeling the burden of the responsibility towards these men. It was the first time I ever dared to point my camera at someone else than myself. After a year of watching the footage while being far in Amsterdam, I realized that I knew everything the men said by heart. And this is how one of those nights, just before sleeping, at around 5 a.m., I suddenly had the idea of putting my voice instead of theirs. In that year, I was watching the complete works of Jean Rouche over and over again, and I was observing how he gradually dared to break with his "anthropological subjects" and ended-up making films "with them", instead of "about them". He also ended up taking advantage of his camera, shooting only for a limited number of seconds each time, in order to think what he wanted from the following shot... and from the fact that there was

a problem in recording direct sound with it. I have to say that unconsciously, I got probably quite influenced by his approach, and it helped me to dare make what I want to make.

Going back to the sociological aspects of the work, for instance, it is noticeable that each of the men has a different accent and that they are from different mentalities, and that says a lot. The only thing that binds them together is the sea, and their friendship at that specific spot. Outside of that, they live very different lives. And when I had to lip-synchronize their voices, that was very interestingly difficult. Ali Kazma, for instance, speaks very, very fast, and when he speaks, his jaw feels like pushed down. I had to do the same. When Abu Sakhra speaks, it is always an "overexcitement" state of being, because he likes to play "the hero", and I had to be in the same state of being. It was also very interesting to lip-synch my father's voice. His accent has some influence from the mountain where he was at a boarding school during his childhood, and where his mother comes from... Each accent of the men is quite significant of their background. When you speak Arabic, and when you are from Lebanon, these details are





automatically obvious. It is also obvious which religious background each of the men come from after they say their names, or if they're not even believers... Also, the fact that I ask them what they prefer to be called, for instance "Abu Wahid", or "Abu Ghassan" etc... this is also quite significant. Only one or two men preferred not to be called "Abu"... Usually, this is a traditional way to call men or women when they are of a certain age, and after they have children.

YOU MENTIONED THE SEA BEING THE ONLY THING CONNECTING THESE MEN. DESPITE LIVING DIFFERENT LIVES, THE SEA ACTS AS A PLACE FOR COMMUNITY, FOR NORMALITY, IF YOU WILL... THEY SWIM TOGETHER, THEY DISCUSS AND COMPARE THEIR SWIMMING ACHIEVEMENTS TOGETHER. IT SEEMS LIKE THEY ARE CONSTRUCTING, THROUGH THE SEA, THIS IDEA OF EVERYDAY TOGETHERNESS, OF COMMUNITY, REGARDLESS OF THE CIRCUMSTANCES THEY HAVE TO FACE IN THEIR "REAL LIFE", OR THE OUTSIDE WORLD. IS THIS

IDEA OF CONSTRUCTION OF NORMALITY (THE FICTION OF NORMALCY) SOMETHING THAT INTERESTED YOU, ONCE YOU STARTED TO KNOW THESE MEN?

Yes, we could say it that way for sure. Fiction is a healthy part of sea life: in the year 2000, I had already met "Abu Hassan", and he was living down near the sea, in some little hut, sort of illegally built in the rocks at the sea. It looked like a ship made of rocks when you saw it from the water. He told us that he saw sharks or whales at a certain point while diving, and that a mermaid had also appeared to him in the sea. And one evening, a sort of a giant came up to him from the sea. Fiction is created by the specific perception the sea creates, through the movement of the water and the wind, or when being under water, we try to look through goggles, or diving equipment... My father once told me not to believe in what I see under the sea, after I had

perceived a potato while swimming. And in fact, it was a stone, but I was convinced it was a potato... Or for example, like when we look directly at the sun as it sunsets behind the sea, and we get blinded, and then we start seeing what other people won't be able to see... So we can say fiction is a natural part of sea life. Some of the men like "Abu Hassan" like to accentuate it, some others like "Abu Wahid", my father, like to defy it, and analyze it until it stops being fictional, and another kind of fiction replaces it: having the illusion that everything we see down there can be analyzed and understood.

BUT SIMULTANEOUSLY TO THE FICTION THE SEA CREATES, THERE IS ALSO "REAL LIFE"... THE PHOTOS OF THE PAST, OF FAMILY MEMBERS WHO HAVE TRAVELED ACROSS THE SEA IN SEARCH FOR A BETTER LIFE... OR IS THAT ALSO A FICTION?

Indeed, and that is the interesting

point. When real life mixes with fiction, memories, nostalgia, feelings, wishes and even sexuality I would say. Abu Khodre is older than 70. When he was about 5 or 6, his father passed away leaving his mom with a big number of kids, and without money. He had to leave school, and start working at the harbor. He worked there till he retired, without learning how to read or write. But working there, he excelled, and he could, according to the other men on the beach, buy a whole building for himself, or even two. Then he made sure that all his children would study, and he sent them to Canada, as you said, in order to have a better life. So he carries the photographs of his son and his daughter-in-law and his grandson every day in his handbag, the handbag that he brings to the sea. And he also keeps with him his own photographs taken in the sixties. He had made his hair look like Elvis Presley's, and he had posed like him, feeling he was

him. This photograph is very important because it also mixes wishes and dreams and love for beauty. Abu Khodre loves human “beauty” and he is very proud of his own blue eyes! And when he poses, you would think he is not more than 45, but he is more than 70. Abu Khodre is from the generation of men in Lebanon who were proud to show their muscles and work them out. They used to call these sort of men “abaday” (like someone who is strong and has muscles). And these days, I see on the streets that this fashion is coming back. It is coming back differently, it reminds me of how women do nose-jobs and pump their lips and boobs here in Lebanon with silicone... But still, recently, I see shiny muscles all over the streets, and I always remember the “abaday” image my dad used to describe for us when we were kids.. It is quite funny.

YOU PRESENTED A VERSION OF THIS WORK IN THE LAST EDITION OF THE ISTANBUL BIENNIAL. IT WAS A VERY POLITICAL SHOW, CURATED BY WHW, AND THE PRESENCE OF THE SEA IS A STEREO WAS CONTEXTUALIZED IN TERMS OF THE ACTION OF SWIMMING AS A STRATEGY OF RESISTANCE. DESPITE HOW HARSH THE CONDITIONS IN LEBANON (AND IN BEIRUT) MAY BE, WAR INCLUDED, THESE MEN WON'T STOP SWIMMING. THEY RESIST THROUGH LEADING A NORMAL LIFE (OR THROUGH ATTEMPTING TO CREATE THE FICTION OF NORMALITY THAT WE MENTIONED EARLIER). HOWEVER, WHEN WE DISCUSS THIS WORK WITH YOU, AND THROUGHOUT OUR CONVERSATION, POLITICS

(OR POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT) SEEMS VERY DISTANT FROM YOUR CONCERNS...

I do believe that works of art, and texts, are like human beings, they look different and behave differently depending on the context. The WHWs had their point, which is very close and true to “The Sea Is A Stereo”, and I think this is why “The Sea Is A Stereo” appeared to be quite strong at that exhibition. But I believe it also appeared to be that strong because it had this side, and it had many more layers... and people could see that... In other words, politics are made by humans, and that’s why it is more interesting to show the human side of politics: it must contain sexuality, sociology, urban planning, poetry, speech, silence, death, murder, investigation, stupidity, confrontation etc...

These men have different backgrounds, and different political views. If they start discussing politics, they know they will fight right away and will have to swim alone and stand alone on different rocks, which is not good, because it isn’t so safe to swim all alone, and it is boring. They enjoy being together. So their political decision is to try, as much as possible, not to talk about politics when together at the beach. I was swimming with them twice when there were clashes in the city because of internal fights, at that moment Beirut was really scary, and I could observe how they pretended that nothing was happening, although everyone was very stressed. You could

feel it on their teeth, on their bones. Yet, they managed to swim calmly, and each one went back home quickly after drying out in the sun, before it would become impossible to go back home because of all the fighting that was happening. There is a secret consent between them to avoid talking politics. This in itself is very political. And this is exactly how I deal with what you might call “political”. But if I want to be honest with you, and if you watch “Let’s Not Swim Then!”, from the beginning to the end, you will read the remarks that the men supposedly gave after they watched a play-back of the video scenes. These remarks reveal the political views of each of those men, and the video finishes because they end-up fighting all together. So it has a very bad end, a forced end. So, in a way, “Let’s Not Swim Then!”, brings you closer into the “political views” of each one of the men, and you will understand that some of them have a leftist background, even anarchist, while some are more likely right wing, others are progressive, some are very conservative, and that’s why the video is called “Let’s Not Swim Then!”. It shows a sort of a disagreement, a political and social dead-end: the other side of “The Sea Is A Stereo”. But then you could also think that in fact “What keeps mankind alive*” is perhaps to disagree and fight.

* What keeps mankind alive” was the title of the 11th Istanbul Biennial, curated by the Zagreb-based curatorial collective What, How and for Whom (WHW), held in Istanbul in 2009.