33° 54' 10"N 35° 27' 50"E

dı'van_9

33° 53' 25"N 35° 27' 56"E

Temporality and Landscape

From September 2020 through to January 2021, the Eye Filmmuseum in Amsterdam hosted the exhibition *Trembling Landscapes: Between Reality and Fiction*. Curated by Nat Muller, the exhibition and related program of screenings and lectures showcased contemporary films, video art and mixed-media installations tied to the Middle East through the lens of landscape—landscape as the object of territorial conflict and resource exploitation, but also as the site of belonging, and the canvas of our imagination. Eye Filmmuseum's website proposed that "what binds these artworks together is that they explore landscape as a versatile trope for telling stories about the past, present and future, whether rooted in reality or fiction" and it is this relation between landscape, time and temporality, that forms the main interest of this text.[1] The past is inscribed in our environment, sedimented in the traces of our movements or commemorated by our monuments. The aerial shots in Jananne al-Ani's video works, for example, depict the infrastructure of archaeology and mining in the Jordanian deserts as scars on a skin, and in Mohamad Hafeda's *Sewing Borders* (2018) refugees stitch the routes of their journeys across the borders of the region with a sewing machine on a map, piercing the land with the pain of their loss and stitching attachments across time and space.[2] Our sense of belonging is materialized in our childhood home as Hrair Sarkissian's installation on displacement makes us painfully aware, and political relations are embodied in fences and borders, the topic of Heba Amin's project.[3] In contrast, Wael Shawky's and Larissa Sansour's videos project imagined realities onto the land, entire worlds situated in mythical and futurist times.[4]

Trembling Landscapes: Between Reality and Fiction also offered a futurist temporality that is not imagined as a singular and coherent world to come, but rather made present as a set of potentialities enfolded within the present. This text focuses on three artworks that engage with landscape as the harbinger of possible futures. Ali Cherri's *The Disquiet* (2013) and *Trembling Landscapes* (2014) together explore underground seismic activity and geological fault lines in the region.[5] *The Incidental Insurgents Part 3: When the Fall of the Dictionary Leaves All Words Lying on the Street* (2015), by Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme take the spectator on a journey through a landscape that vibrates with revolutionary possibilities.[6] Though these works are very different in both form and spirit, they share an anticipatory approach to landscape expressed in vibrations. It is this idea of the ominously or promisingly trembling landscape that the following seeks to conceptualize.

TREMBLING LANDSCAPES

In the aftermath of the Beirut explosion in August 2020, the title *Trembling Landscapes* evokes the image of shockwaves and the earth reverberating after the blast. But the artwork that lent its title to the exhibition, *Trembling Landscapes* by Lebanese artist Ali Cherri, reverses that temporal sequence. This work consists of a series of satellite images of the cities of Algiers, Beirut, Damascus, Erbil, Mecca and Tehran. Taken from Google maps, the images are rendered in softly toned black-and-white lithographic prints, each with a red stamp indicating the coordinates of a geological fissure. The work thus makes a double vertical move away from the mediatized images of these cities as sites

of geopolitical conflict or religious fundamentalism, up into the air and down into the underground. This double step back repositions the cities as geological rather than geopolitical localities. It is a humbling move—a temporal expansion of our view to include centuries or even millennia of seismic activity, and a spatial expansion that resituates the urban within the planetary.

Next to these aerial views, another work by Cherri, *The Disquiet* or in Arabic, *qalaq*, drew out the fault lines running through Lebanon that wreak havoc every few hundred years, causing imperceptible vibrations that rock the soil on a daily basis. The video combines archival images of catastrophic earthquakes in Lebanese history, images of machines running their measuring activities at a seismological observatory, and of the land: the leaves covering the earth in the forest, and the line between water and sand on the beach. Cherri worked with a sound designer to create a dense and layered soundscape which includes subterranean and underwater vibrations recorded with a special microphone. The idea of something buzzing or rumbling under the surface appearance of our everyday lived reality reverses the notion of "trembling landscapes" from an after effect into a sense of ominous anticipation.

The repetition of the word "catastrophe" and the archival images of destruction and suffering, alongside the aerial views of Algiers, Beirut, Damascus or Erbil, inevitably activate memories of the human-made disasters in recent history. Rather than moving away from our political present, the rumble of tectonic plates seems to resonate with contemporary conflict. A similar redoubling of past and future catastrophe appears from a much earlier work by Cherri. In *Once a Shiny Morning Puddle* (2005) water is bubbling in a black basin, likewise a sense of ominous activity simmering under the surface. Behind the basin is a screen onto which a video is projected, showing a man turning around and the words, "yesterday was dramatic" and as its flipside, "today is OK."

PRECARIOUS TIME-SPACE

In my book on imaginaries of Beirut in visual arts and literature, I analyzed *Once a Shiny Morning Puddle* together with a number of other art works to argue that the urban landscape of post-Civil War Beirut is marked by a peculiar temporality, "the suspended now," "a sense of being stuck in the present, not being able to move forwards, nor to look back."[7] This experience of time is constituted by a past that has remained unresolved, and an uncertain future that seems out of reach. While any claim to a resolved past and a future within reach could be deconstructed, it is also clear that unpunished crimes, simmering conflict and silenced suffering keep infecting the present while a more distanced, historical access to that past remains blocked. At the same time, regional conflicts, structural inequalities and rampant corruption make for a volatile horizon of expectation: always on the brink of losing sustenance, always in fear of renewed violence. An unresolved space of experience and a volatile horizon of expectation make for a precarious present.[8]

How do these temporalities relate to space and to landscape? The same conditions that produce "the suspended now" as a temporal experience create a landscape that is at once charged by past events and that is precarious, utterly exposed to harm. Even the use of strong material such as reinforced concrete or the gesture of monumental proportions cannot dispel the sense that it is all utterly provisional, about to be dismantled or destroyed with the next catastrophe. The subterranean vibrations along geological fault lines co-produce the precarious present because they pose a threat of natural disaster to a landscape already exposed to human made forms of harm—such as conflict, neglect and displacement. More urgently, their spatio-temporal latency symbolically resonates with the sense of forces lurking under the surface.


36° 49' 16"N 3° 0' 34"E
36° 49' 17"N 3° 1' 12"E
ALGIERS

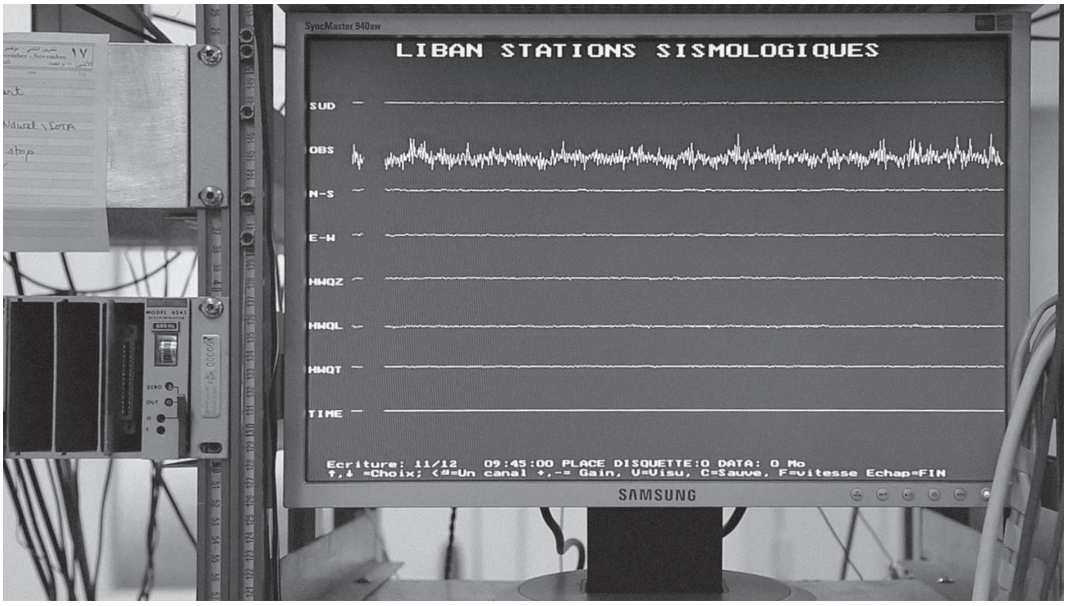
LATENCY

Sigmund Freud used the term "latency" to refer to the repressed desires and memories that direct our dream content. These drifts had become invisible, unknowable even, buried in the subconsciousness, but could erupt in uncontrollable ways, symbolically manifested in our dreams and physically manifested in somatic symptoms. While his drift model and dream analysis are now considered to be outdated, Freud's ideas on the subconsciousness continue to inform the ways in which we give meaning to our psyche and to society. The Lebanese filmmakers and artists Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige use the term latency to describe their artistic practice. They situate this within a discourse that applies psychoanalytic notions of the post-traumatic and the repressed to post-war society in Lebanon: "Latency… evokes what is often felt in Beirut, in face of the dominant amnesia prevailing since the end of the war, in face of this strange paralysis that pervades the city, in face of this violent desire to place things between parentheses—to censure oneself."[9] Latency is thus linked specifically to the precarious 'suspended now' of post-civil war Beirut, where latent images abound "turning sometimes to the past, others to the future, or on the contrary stuck in a continuing present."[10] But the term is also used to describe the imprint on photosensitive material after exposure, but before development. With this technical signification of the term, Hadjithomas and Joreige refer to latency in the context of a more general circumnavigation of direct representational modes such as news images. Here latency refers to the desire to capture the non-apparent, affective traces of subjects and events. Their questioning of representation is therefore not limited to a post-catastrophic context, but fits within broader poststructuralist critique, "a paradigm shift from culture-as-text to culture-as-embodiment [which means] that attention to the world cannot be reduced to a disembodied, cognitive function, but must be understood as a somatic mode of intersubjective engagement."[11]

Cherri's *The Disquiet* opens with the following lines: "In Lebanon, the earth shakes between forty-five and sixty times every day. No one feels these tremors. Except me. I feel every single one." The narrator senses a presence that remains imperceptible to others, remarkably similar to Hadjithomas' and Joreige's latent presence, "the idea of the dormant," "a diffused state, uncontrollable, underground, as if lurking."[12] *The Disquiet's* long takes of seismographs measuring the earth's vibrations and making them legible in scientific graphs and numbers convey humanity's inevitable failure "to fully represent history, or catastrophe, as comprehensible and complete."[13] In Cherri's *Trembling Landscapes*, it is the move from digital to analogue technique, where the supposedly objective aerial view loses its computed precision, leaving room for the gaps and the blurry in the lithographic printing process, presenting the cities in a "ghostly" manner.[14] The following explores some of the properties of sensing vibrations as a mode of knowing the world before engaging Abbas' and Abou-Rahme's *Incidental Insurgents*.

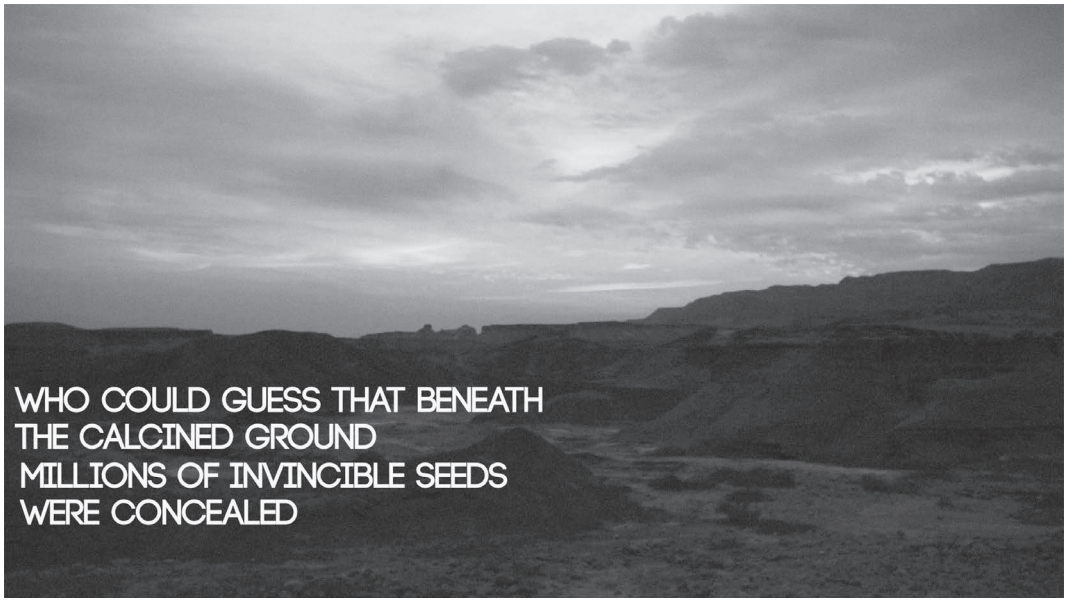
VIBRATIONS

While all sound consists of vibrations, it is especially the lower register including frequencies imperceptible to the human ear, infrasound, that we not (only) hear but also feel. This haptic and tactile quality of sound waves, its ability to "fill space, pulse through matter, and elicit movement," seems to escape our cognitive and linguistic apparatus for signification;[15] "sound embeds itself in the creation of meanings, while remaining elusive to their significations."[16] Isabella van Elferen describes the elusive concept of timbre, or tone colour, as a "sonic excess of precise signification" that is nevertheless "palpably present."[17] Here we can begin to appreciate the peculiar capacity of vibrations to make palpable a latent presence that escapes cognitive perception.


SyncMaster 940nw
LIBAN STATIONS SISMOLOGIQUES
SUD
OBS
N-S
E-W
HWQZ
HWQL
HWQT
TIME
Ecriture: 11/12 09:45:00 PLACE DISQUETTE:0 DATA: 0 Mo
↑,↓ =Choix; <#=Un canal +,-= Gain, V=Visu, C=Sauve, F=vitesse Echap=FIN
SAMSUNG


1956


WHAT WILL ENDURE
WHEN IT ALL BLOWS UP
ماذا سيبقى عندما
ينفجر كل شيء


WHO COULD GUESS THAT BENEATH
THE CALCINED GROUND
MILLIONS OF INVINCIBLE SEEDS
WERE CONCEALED

Exceeding our cognitive and linguistic epistemological capacities, sounds and other tremors seem all the more powerful in eliciting emotions, as evidenced by linguistic expressions such as "to touch an inner chord", "to be shaken to the core", or "to be thrilled". Because of the capacity of sound and infrasound vibrations to extend through space, and penetrate the body, it effectively expresses the relational and embodied nature of affect. In his study of electronic dance music, Luis-Manuel Garcia points out that "sonic metaphors of vibration and resonance" effectively "link affect to collective experience" as in the term "vibe" which denotes a sense of collective intimacy.[18] Sound is also distinctly spatial. "Sound… performs with and through space: it navigates geographically, reverberates acoustically, and structures socially."[19] But, as we have seen, this spatiality is far removed from the practice of mapping and measuring. The tremors the narrator in *The Disquiet* claims to feel daily, but also the sound of his footsteps on leaves and branches in the woods of Lebanon, express an embodied and affective knowledge of the landscape in sharp contrast to the seismographs or aerial views mapping the land.

Operating beyond the realm of the linguistic and the measurable, soundscapes are able to produce a more intuitive conception of time. Significantly to the argument at hand, the spectrum of low frequencies where sound dissolves into tactile vibrations is perceived as the "not yet audible" and therefore generates a collective mood of anticipation.[20] In the dance club, such vibrational ecologies are designed to stimulate excitement, in sonic warfare they are used to instill fear. It is now clear that while the topic of seismic activity may constitute a move away from recent histories of violent conflict and displacement on a cognitive level, the trembling earth does *resonate with*—another vibrational metaphor—a collective mood of anxious anticipation on an embodied and affective level.

As Max Silverman recently argued, this effort to affectively make present latent embodied knowledge is not limited to catastrophic times.[21] Hadjithomas and Joreige themselves give evidence of a more affirmative reading of latency parallel to their engagement with trauma studies, when they write that "latency is the introduction to the possible, to the state of becoming."[22] It suggests that the manifestation of whatever exists in a latent condition is not necessarily a Freudian return of the repressed. The present holds many potentialities. While there is a shared sense anticipation, of something buzzing and boiling under the surface, in the precarious time-space of Lebanon, fear and excitement alternate and often overlap. "It is always living on the verge of, but without the event. Just the anticipation. It is very tiring, but also: everything is possible," explains Cherri.[23] The concept of a landscape trembling with possibilities was more fully developed with the installation *The Incidental Insurgents.*

THE INCIDENTAL INSURGENTS

Basel Abbas' and Ruanne Abou-Rahme's installation filled an entire room. The spectator could move between multiple screens suspended from the ceiling, upon which footage was projected of a late night, early morning road trip in the landscape around Ramallah. The travellers are young and appear alone or in a pair; we do not see their faces, only their silhouettes and shadows. The landscapes are otherwise devoid of people and in the corners of the exhibition room, little constructed watch towers throw large shadows upon the walls.

It is in this charged and precarious landscape of Palestine that sound and text work together to activate the future as a site of possible change. The room is filled with a loud electronic soundscape, including a low frequency bass reverberating in the flesh of the spectators. In large bold script, fragments of archival and new texts invoke a landscape of former guerilla fighters, a network of

revolutionary militants now vanished. But the scattered fragments of this past lie dormant in the land: "Who could guess that beneath/the calcined ground/millions of invincible seeds were concealed/ ready to germinate."[24] So while the incidental insurgent, the young traveller in the video footage, is a lone figure, "part rebel, part artist, part vagabond," the latent presence of a revolutionary collective is implied by the text.[25] This is affectively activated by enveloping the spectator "in something that is speculative and immersive in a whole journey of sound and images."[26] A vibrational ecology of exciting anticipation renders the empty scenery as a land pulsating with possible futures.

THE VIBE IS BACK

This text has analyzed the relation between temporality and landscape in three art works presented in *Trembling Landscapes: Between Reality and Fiction*. Ali Cherri's *Trembling Landscapes* seems at first sight to withdraw from the immediacy of a territory riven by geopolitical tensions and violent conflict. But while the aerial view and the coordinates create a cognitive distance, the gesture towards subterranean vibrations affectively resonates with the present, its recent troubled history and its uncertain future. This is more fully developed in the video *The Disquiet*, which juxtaposes the cognitive distance of the seismograph to an embodied affective knowledge of the land as a trembling land.

Vibrational ecologies in the lower spectrum of frequencies around the boundary between sound and infrasound are particularly suitable to express a sense of latency, a spatial co-presence that inspires a collective mood of anticipation, whether fearful or exciting. While a sense of latency is particularly strong in a precarious context, because everything seems constantly on the verge of collapse, latency also has a strong political potential, "meaning, 'I exist, even if you don't see me.'"[27] Abbas' and Abou-Rahme's installation exploits this revolutionary potential by coalescing fragments of revolutionary pasts and a soundscape physically and affectively moving the spectator. These animate a landscape that appears still on the surface, but the lone incidental insurgent is perceptive of the revolutionary potentialities that lie folded within the land. Because no matter how precarious, anticipation is also something hopeful. Ali Cherri: "when I visited Beirut just after the blast, I thought something had died for good. But when I returned in December, I realized that it had only been muted for a while: the vibe is back."[28]

Notes

[1] Nat Muller, 'Trembling Landscapes: Between Reality and Fiction', Eye Filmmuseum; https://www.eyefilm.nl/en/exhibition/trembling-landscapes

[2] Jananne El Ani, *Shadow Sites* I, 2010 and *Shadow Sites* II, 2011; Mohamad Hafeda, *Sewing Borders*, 2018

[3] Hrair Sarkissian, *Homesick*, 2014; Heba Y. Amin, *The Earth is an Imperfect Ellipsoid*, 2016

[4] Wael Shawky, *Al Arbaa Al Madfuna* II, 2013; Larissa Sansour, *Nation Estate*, 2012

[5] Ali Cherri, *Trembling Landscapes*, 2014, and *The Disquiet*, 2013. See https://www.alicherri.com

[6] Ruanne Abou-Rahme and Basel Abbas, *The Incidental Insurgents, Part 3: When the Fall of the Dictionary Leaves All Words Lying in the Streets*, 2015. See https://baselandruanne.com

[7] Judith Naeff, *Precarious Imaginaries of Beirut: A City's Suspended Now*, London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018, p. 35

[8] I take the terms "space of experience" and "horizon of expectation" which "constitute a temporal difference in the today by redoubling past and future on one another in an unequal manner" from Reinhardt Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, K. Tribe trans, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, p. 263

[9] Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, 'Latency', translated from the French by Tony Chakar, *Home Works: A Forum on Cultural Practices*, Beirut: Ashkal Alwan, 2002, p. 40

[10] Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, 'A State of Latency', *Iconoclash: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion, and Art*, Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel eds, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002, p. 242; https://hadjithomasjoreige.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/A-stateof-latency.pdf

[11] Mark Westmoreland, 'Making Sense: affective research in post-war Lebanese art', *Critical Arts: South-North Cultural and Media Studies* 27:6, 2013, p. 726

[12] Hadjithomas and Joreige, 'Latency', op cit.

[13] Ali Cherri, 'Image and Imagination: Ali Cherri in conversation with Sheyma Buali', *Ibraaz 6*, 6 November 2013; https://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/111

[14] Interview with the author, 22 January 2021

[15] Luis-Manuel Garcia, 'Feeling the vibe: sound, vibration, and affective attunement in electronic dance music scenes', *Ethnomusicology Forum*, 29:1, 2020, p. 35

[16] Brandon LaBelle, *Background Noise, Second Edition: Perspectives on Sound Art*, London: Bloomsbury, 2015, p. xviii

[17] Isabella van Elferen, 'Agency, Aporia, Approaches: How Does Musicology Solve a Problem Like Timbre?', *Contemporary Music Review* 36:6, 2017, p. 483

[18] Garcia, p. 23

[19] LaBelle, p. xiii

[20] Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010, p. xviii

[21] Max Silverman, 'Latency in Lebanon, or bringing things (back) to life: A Perfect Day (Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, 2005)', *Memory Studies*, forthcoming; http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/169816/

[22] Ibid.

[23] Interview with the author, 22 January 2021

[24] Ruanne Abou-Rahme and Basel Abbas, *The Incidental Insurgents, Part 3: When the Fall of the Dictionary Leaves All Words Lying in the Streets*

[25] Nat Muller, in an interview by Reda El Mawy, 'aṭfāl bi-shawārib wa samā' bi-shamsayn fi hūlanda', BBC Arabic, 3 December 2020; https://www.bbc.com/arabic/tv-and-radio-55181569?fbclid=IwAR3G5TWwL68K1-VEVVkvI5mgYIQ3KMILXA_rjL07R5B-uUmnoohQgw8wG5M

[26] Ibid.

[27] Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, 'Guggenheim UBS MAP Global Art Initiative, *But a Storm Is Blowing from Paradise*: Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige on "Latent Images"', transcript; https://www.guggenheim.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/guggenheim-video-transcript-joana-hadjithomas-khalil-joreige-latent-images-10.27.17.pdf

[28] Interview with the author, 22 January 2021