

Introduction: *Working Through Oblivion*

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The recent survey exhibition *Jamelie Hassan: At the Far Edge of Words* is a testament to the range and diversity of Hassan's artistic practice since the 1970s, when she produced the earliest works in the show. Within this exhibition, which I first attended at Museum London in 2009,¹ I was able to see *Wall with Door* (1977) – a wall painted with masses of green leaves and large red anthurium flowers, to which a readymade wooden door was hinged – in the same space as the blue, white and yellow patterned ceramic *Bench from Cordoba* (1982), the video installation *Meeting Nasser* (1985) and the mixed media installation *Slippers of Disobedience* (1996) – with its prominent use of neon. Such a wide array of artworks, produced over the past thirty years, allowed me the opportunity to experience the interrelated forms and ideas connecting Hassan's artistic projects. In addition to the variety of media employed by the artist, the collected works serve to highlight her continuing interest in the use of visual and textual languages as a means of interrogating issues of personal and cultural histories. Yet, even in the form of a survey, the exhibition remained a notable site of dialogue between Hassan and the world to which she responds through her art, as well as between us and the artworks we, in the words of Marcel Duchamp, bring into “contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications.”² In a manner similar to Duchamp's approach to art making – an important overlap for my own understanding of Hassan's practice³ – Hassan consistently incorporates conceptual and even physical gaps into her work that as viewers we must negotiate in the process of viewing. Such lacunae, like the slightly opened door revealing the lack of an entrance in *Wall with Door*, mark the moments at which language fails to fully articulate or make meaningful our experience of reality.

Encounters with missing elements and information are a consistent experience within Hassan's projects, but none more than with her moving image works. What, for example, is the relationship between the melodramatic newspaper headline “1,000 Moslems Expected in City for Convention” and home movie footage of Hassan's family from North America and the



Wall with Door



Bench from Cordoba



Meeting Nasser



Slippers of Disobedience



still from *The Oblivion Seekers*

Middle East? This juxtaposition, along with scenes of a girl dancing (who happens to be the artist as a young girl), represent the main content of her first filmic work *The Oblivion Seekers* (1985), in which the medium of film serves to collect and bring into dialogue various visual and auditory impressions related to Hassan's personal encounters with cultural events. The exact relation of these events pictured is distinctly not determined by the film, which instead leaves us with a palpable gap that we must fill through our own experience of the work.

Through such absences Hassan's work becomes a space of dialogue in which viewers complete the experience of the work through their active engagement. It should be noted that film technology itself is based upon the black spaces separating a succession of images, the flickering effect of the light causing us to see an illusion of movement not physically present in the images themselves; although no longer a structural aspect of video, the physiological specter of this filmic void arguably continues to affect all forms of moving image representation. Hassan's engagement with film and various forms of video – mediums that are consistently interchanged in the production of her works – represent her employment of an aesthetic language based on an interrelationship between presences and absences. It is her representation of absence that specifically marks her approach to video as a medium.



still from *Meeting Nasser*

The figure of the young girl in the main photograph used in *Meeting Nasser* is just such an absence: at once an anonymous and familiar child who is and is not Hassan herself when she was a young girl. Even with the extreme similarity in hair and build, qualities that are accentuated by the presence of the artist's niece Elizabeth in the video, one can never know for certain if it is Hassan when she was young giving flowers to Nasser. Unknowable possibilities like these are “not encounters with a dreadful void,” according to Laura U. Marks in her important study *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, but possess “a full and fertile emptiness” that allows us the potential to see what is left out of

discourse.⁴ The itinerant Armenian painter from *Boutros Al Armenian / Mediterranean Modern* (1997) is another of these figures: perpetually present in the many details Hassan communicates – collected from the various memories of family members – yet the reality of the man named Boutros is distinctly missing from this account of his life (a fact that can be argued for all biographical attempts). During a lecture I gave on Hassan’s film and video works at the Queensland Art Gallery in Brisbane, Australia, an audience member asked if Boutros and the events described were “real,” whether we were experiencing history or fiction.⁵ This is a persistent question in Hassan’s work. In fact, I believe in *Boutros Al Armenian* Hassan is asking rather than answering the question of her story’s historical authenticity; the only real answer she gives is to re-paint the now lost ceiling paintings that Boutros produced in her family’s home in Lebanon (an act of re-inscription that she does twice). In this way Hassan is also a figure of absence to all of us who experience her work. “In her roles as a raconteur and participant in the re-creation of Boutros’ art, Hassan manages to rescue him from oblivion,” Mireya Folch-Serra tells us; our experience of this re-created reality exists in what Folch-Serra, referencing the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, eloquently terms “the loopholes in existence.”⁶

The examination of Hassan’s films and videos undertaken by Miriam Jordan and myself, represented by this volume and the parallel curated screenings we have organized, began with a literal loophole: most of the works we have compiled were quite literally absent from public view – filed away, as Jordan discusses in her essay for this publication, in “a large white box filled with variously formatted videos.”⁷ Jordan aptly describes the surprise of this discovery in the opening paragraphs of her text, an event that is for both of us intimately connected to the continuing dialogic processes defining the development of this project as a rich exchange between Hassan and ourselves. This previously unknown history of her engagement with film and video is itself based on Hassan’s own dialogue with the medium, in which each work in its own way opens up spaces for



Windsor installation of
Boutros al Armenian /
Mediterranean Modern



still from *Sister Speak to Me:
A Tribute to Zahra Kazemi*

a necessarily answerable dialogue with spectators. To borrow a phrase from Andy Patton, these works are made to be vivid experiences “that promise meaning.”⁸ In *Sister Speak to Me: A Tribute to Zahra Kazemi* (2003), Hassan and Tyson Haller document the Toronto vigil for the photo-journalist by creating a film that is an answerable response to the events surrounding her life and death. This documentary, in other words, promises meaning by becoming “a means for dialogue,” to use Hassan’s own words.⁹ Our project of making these films and videos accessible thus represents a commitment by Jordan and myself to allow others the possibility of experiencing this aspect of Hassan’s artwork.

In a way, one can see the multitude of viewers who experience a particular work of art as the ultimate form of absence: an illusive we – to use the term employed by Jordan – that represents the point of art’s interaction with the world as well as the eventual judge and jury of its posterity. Although my choice of wording obviously draws upon Duchamp’s language, this description of the spectator as a continually absent presence in relation to the work of art is also an important aspect of Bakhtin’s theories of dialogism and answerability – concepts that Jordan uses as the primary support for her analysis.¹⁰ Interestingly, Hassan also draws upon Bakhtin’s ideas throughout her artistic practice in subtle and overt ways; in her text “Not Laura Secord,” for example, her discussion of *Boutros Al Armenian / Mediterranean Modern* references Bakhtin’s early essay “Art and Answerability.” The importance of an answerable spectator for Hassan cannot be overstated. According to Jordan, Hassan “calls spectators to account for their interactions with the world, for the way in which their opinions are formed and have formative results.”¹¹ What Hassan’s films and videos ask is that we be present and participate in our own experience of the work, and the world both containing and contained by that work.

“If a viewer is free to draw upon her own reserves of memory as she participates in the creation of the object on screen, her private and

unofficial histories and memories will be granted as much legitimation as the official histories,” Marks tells us.¹² And this is precisely Marks’ position in her essay for this volume: she embodies the figure of an itinerant scholar travelling within the world of Hassan’s films and videos. Her curiosity is piqued by the fact that she encounters only fragments of memories, from which she interprets and re-constructs her own version of the events being depicted on screen; the outcome of this “struggle,” as Marks tells us near the beginning of her text, “is ultimately more emotional than factual.”¹³ We are not, in other words, simply reading about the already-known of Hassan’s films and videos, but instead are being presented with the author’s personal account of and participation in the creation of the object on screen as she uses her own memories to reconstruct and interpret the works. Here again we can see a very Duchampian quality to this understanding of the work of art, which Hassan stages as a dialogic site shared by artist and spectator. If, as Marks suggests, the “viewer of Hassan’s works grasps that they are not straightforward documents,” how then are we supposed to make sense of and view her moving image works?¹⁴ Marks proposes that we see them as “archival encounters” – a description that captures a key feature of Hassan’s approach to art generally – in which the play between the visible and the expressible, registers Michel Foucault argues are mutually exclusive, are enacted and even reconciled by each of us through our experience of the work. The struggle of Marks’ encounter with Hassan’s films and videos can therefore be understood as her own personal effort or exertion in completing works that Hassan gives to us in the way one donates an archive: not as a finalized collection of facts but as an open-ended site of responses and opinions that fosters ever-expanding dialogues.

This present study, written and compiled by Jordan and myself, is just such an archival encounter with the relatively unexplored archive of Hassan’s film and video works. Although there have been a number of texts focusing on certain of her films and videos, such as Folch-Serra’s exceptional investigation of *Boutros Al Armenian* referenced above or Monika

Kin Gagnon's discussion of *Meeting Nasser* and *The Oblivion Seekers* in "(Media) 'History from Below': From the Snapshot to the Home Movie in Jamelie Hassan's Installations,"¹⁵ this project is the first to bring together nine moving image works produced by Hassan – which, since being handed to us in a white archival box, we have edited, arranged and re-mastered to DVD. The collection of these works forms the basis for the two-part project we have undertaken. The first part consists of the programme of Hassan's films and videos that we curated, the first time her works have been shown collectively, which is being screened at a number of venues. The second part of our project is this book, which examines in detail each of the nine works through a series of texts and visual documentation of the works and related material, most notably the installations in which these film and video works were originally presented. *The Films and Videos of Jamelie Hassan* therefore is our answerable response to experiencing these moving image works, which we present as an important new avenue of research into one of Canada's most prominent artists.

Notes

1. Curated by Melanie Townsend and Scott Watson, *Jamelie Hassan: At the Far Edge of Words* was exhibited at Museum London (2009), the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery (2010), and will be exhibited at the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery (2010), Mendel Art Gallery (2012) and Carlton University Art Gallery (2012-2013).
2. Marcel Duchamp, "The Creative Act," *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, eds. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (New York: Da Capo, 1973), 140.
3. In the process of completing my recent book *Marcel Duchamp: Étant donnés*, the final drafts of which Hassan helped edit, I was more than a little surprised to discover the depth of her interest in Duchamp's work. Since this realization I have been able to recognize an undercurrent of Duchampian elements and ideas within her work, both overt and subtle. *Wall with Door*, for example, can be seen as sharing distinct qualities with Duchamp's *Door, 11 rue Larrey* (1927) – a readymade door the artist installed in his apartment that hinged two door ways and therefore, even when closed, is still open. Additional connections between the two artists are plentiful, from a shared interest in chess to the ways in which text and literature are incorporated into works.

4. Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000), 29.
5. Julian Jason Haladyn, "Working Through Oblivion: The Video Installations of Jamelie Hassan," lecture at the Australian Cinémathèque, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane (Australia), April 22, 2010.
6. Mireya Folch-Serra, "Geography, Diaspora and the Art of Dialogism," *Jamelie Hassan: At the Far Edge of Words* (London and Vancouver: Museum London and Belkin Art Gallery, 2009), 58. This text was originally published in *Parachute* 90 (1998): 10-17.
7. Miriam Jordan, "Chronotopic Bodies and the We of Aesthetic Discourse," in M. Jordan and J. Haladyn *The Films and Videos of Jamelie Hassan*, 27.
8. Andy Patton, "A Tile Over the Door," *Jamelie Hassan: At the Far Edge of Words*, 75.
9. Jamelie Hassan, "Statement," *The Films and Videos of Jamelie Hassan*, 9.
10. This overlap between Bakhtin and Duchamp was the topic of a collaborative paper "The Art of Answerability: Dialogue, Spectatorship, and the History of Art," which Jordan and I presented as part of *Writing Between the Lines: Art and its Historians* at Concordia University, March 27-28, 2009.
11. Jordan, "Chronotopic Bodies and the We of Aesthetic Discourse," 41.
12. Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 48.
13. Laura U. Marks, "Jamelie Hassan's Archival Encounters," *The Films and Videos of Jamelie Hassan*, 19.
14. Marks, "Jamelie Hassan's Archival Encounters," 21.
15. See Monika Kin Gagnon, "(Media) 'History from Below': From the Snapshot to the Home Movie in Jamelie Hassan's Installations," *Jamelie Hassan: At the Far Edge of Words*, 39-51.