

# *Intimate Geographies*



Stéphanie Saadé  
Charbel-joseph H. Boutros

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# Introduction

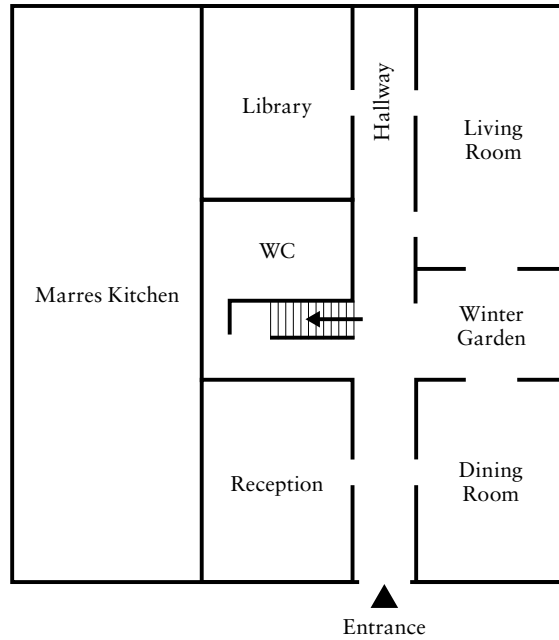
Under the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic, the notion of home has been completely disrupted: the office, the studio, the shops, the museum, the restaurants, and the bars have invited themselves inside our houses, either symbolically or virtually. Home is no longer solely the attractive physical and mental space that it used to be; it has also become a space for endless waiting.

During *Intimate Geographies* two protagonists occupy Marres. This artist couple makes sporadic appearances in a homely environment. They visit a landscaped garden full of plants that the artists had in their former house in Beirut, have a mundane discussion on a couch in the living room overlooking a curiously undulating carpet and have lunch in the dining room surrounded by embroidered curtains from another time-space. They might be making phone calls, napping, or working in their studios. What is the purpose of these enigmatic rituals?

Charbel-joseph H. Boutros and Stéphanie Saadé's duo exhibition *Intimate Geographies* reflects on the typology exhibition-making within a precarious and fragile art world.

# Floor plan

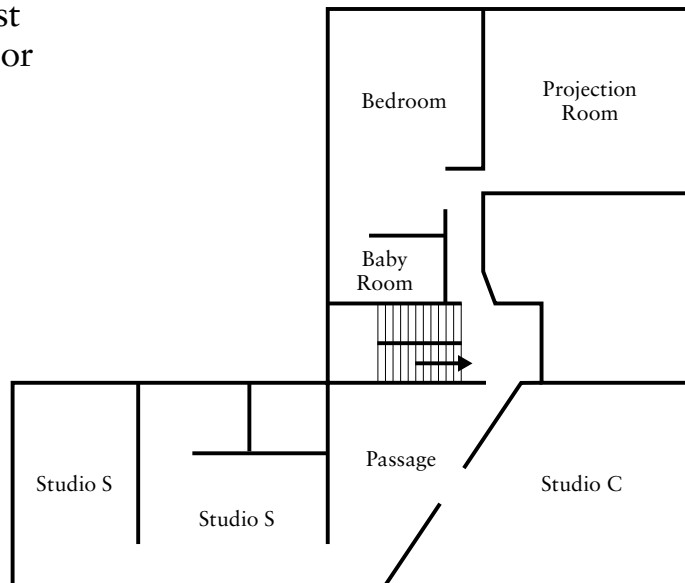
## Ground Floor



## Outside

Days Spent Inside Minutes  
Stéphanie Saadé  
2021: *Printed flag*  
A poem about time, composed during the first lockdown in Beirut, is printed on a flag flown at the entrance of Marres.

## First Floor



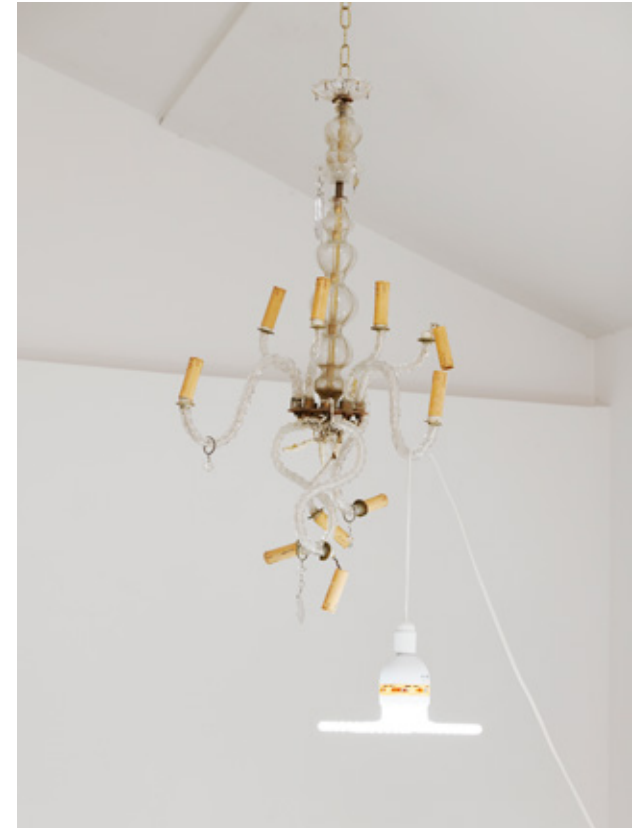
# Artworks

## Dining Room

→ Re-enactment LB/Chandelier  
Stéphanie Saadé  
2012: *Vintage chandelier, Plum Blossom energy-saving bulb*  
A vernacular apparatus seen in a traditional Beirut house—a lamp used as a support for another lamp—is reproduced.

Drinking an Exhibition  
Charbel-joseph H. Boutros  
2021: *Two dehumidifiers installed in different parts of the exhibition*  
Humidity is extracted from the exhibition and transformed into filtered water. This water is frozen into ice cubes exposed inside a fridge, and served to the visitors of Marres Kitchen.

Home Key  
Stéphanie Saadé  
2016: *Gold plated key, 6x2.5x0.2 cm*  
The key of the former home of the artist in Beirut is plated with gold. The occurrences of leaving and returning home are registered in the material of the key as the gold slowly wears off.



Golden Apple  
Stéphanie Saadé  
2014: *24-carat gold leaf on apple*  
A golden apple degrades inside the exhibition.

← Becoming a Painting  
Stéphanie Saadé and Charbel-joseph H. Boutros  
1950s–2019: *Framed oil on canvas, shrapnel marks, 70x130 cm*  
A painting belonging to the artist's grandparents and hit by shrapnel during the Lebanese Civil war.



↓→ The Encounter of the First and Last Particles of Dust  
Stéphanie Saadé  
2020: *Used curtains, embroidery, one set of six pink curtains (2×255(W)×320(H) cm and 4×190(W)×320(H) cm each), one set of four blue curtains (262(W)×286(H) cm each)*



These curtains originate from the communal areas (living room, dining room, etc.) in Stéphanie's family home. They are embroidered with a total of 37 of the most significant routes that she traversed in Lebanon from 1995 to 2001. The number corresponds to the artist's age, while the time span corresponds to the period in between the installation of the curtains to the year when she left the house. On a broader level, it also coincides with the aftermath of the Lebanese war, a period in which it became easier to travel to many regions that had previously been inaccessible to visitors. In addition, many areas, including some previously derelict quarters of downtown Beirut, had become accessible in the sense that they had been constructed, or reconstructed, and now constituted actual destinations. The lines of embroidery depict trips made between her home and those of friends and family members, among many other places that were emblematic at the time. These stitched patterns in thick seams of string represent both the places that became accessible after the end of the Lebanese Civil War and the paths to reach them. The paths are retraced on the map of Lebanon, in the way that she traversed them at the time. The fabric of the curtains bears the physical traces of their use: folded or unfolded, and exposed to light, humidity, and dust. Their surfaces and color bear witness to all that happened inside the domestic spaces that they belonged to. The memories attached to the embroidered trajectories intertwine personal memories with the country's history. These memories are not fixed moments in time. The trips also refer to the movement of memory itself when one travels back into the past — travel by imagination.





## Winter Garden

### ↓ Winter Garden

Stéphanie Saadé and Charbel-joseph H. Boutros

2021: *Wooden structure, various potted plants, anthurium (pink), poison ivy, kalanchoe (white, yellow, pink), thyme, lavender, rosemary, sage, basil, parsley, mint, garlic, onion, aeonium arboreum, jasmine, geranium pelargonium, honeysuckle, geranium (red and purple), Zygocactus (Schlumbergera) (fuchsia), Tradescantia pallida, Hevea brasiliensis (rubber plant), Euphorbia dendroides, Zamiodulcas, polycias (Aralia), Rhipsalis baccifera, Rhipsalis pilocarpa, fern, aloe vera, Tradescantia\* (type to determine), yucca, coleus, Ailanthus altissima, prickly pear (mini), amaryllis (red)*

This garden is inspired by the garden Charbel and Stéphanie had on their terrace and balcony and also inside their Beirut apartment. It started with a mini prickly pear, which Stéphanie's father gave to them and which fully bloomed soon after. He had grown it from his own prickly pear. They placed it on the terrace of their apartment, which also happened to be just outside Charbel's studio, so he had a view of it. The house was adjacent to a primary school, and children (who they never saw but always heard; they would be woken up in the morning by their voices) would drop things like paper planes and balls that they started to collect.



## Hallway

### ↓→ Untouched Marble

Charbel-joseph H. Boutros  
2013–2014: *Carrara marble, 12×12×12 cm*

A marble cube, untouched by humans, has been extracted from a quarry and later accompanied the artist in his everyday actions for the duration of one month—in his studio, at the bar or cinema, on his bicycle, in his bed. Here, the stone is exhibited close to an identical one that wasn't charged with an intimate experience.



## Living Room

### → Geography and Abstraction (Marres)

Charbel-joseph H. Boutros  
2018–2021: *Carpet, concrete cylinders, darkness and heat*  
*Geography and Abstraction* translates the weight of Marres director Valentijn Byvanck into equivalent concrete cylinders, placed under a carpet. His body mutates into an organic abstract sculpture, creating a conceptual plinth for the exhibition and a new geography that visitors are invited to walk through and to lie on.

Untitled Until Now  
Charbel-joseph H. Boutros  
2019: *Neon, 178 cm length (length of a person) before being slightly twisted by heat-votive candle wax, light*

Amitié  
Charbel-joseph H. Boutros  
2018: *One pair of Stan Smith tennis shoes*

Two new shoes from the same pair are separated. The left one was worn by the artist during his trips in Europe for six months. The right one was worn by his friends in Beirut. The two shoes are reunited for the exhibition.



### ←↓ Under the Shadow of Your Fingers

Charbel-joseph H. Boutros  
2018: *Email covered in wax, carpet, metallic structure, laptop*

The film *Under the shadow of your fingers* shows the hands of a woman typing. The hands belong to the artist's girlfriend, who is re-typing, six years later, the first love letter she ever sent to him. The words form virtually, remaining indecipherable to the public. The e-mail has also been printed and is displayed covered in wax to preserve its support and protect its content. Eventually, when it gets hot, the unstable material could melt. The wax is from stolen bits of votive candles, full of believers' wishes and prayers. Here, it acts magically on the love letter, for the exchanged promises are fulfilled and last eternally. The homage continues in this present text, written by the same fingers. (Based on a text by Stéphanie Saadé)



### Dead Drawing

Charbel-joseph H. Boutros  
2011: *Lead, drawing made with the same lead, wall, nails*

← Days Under Their Own Sun  
Charbel-joseph H. Boutros  
2013–2017: *Calendar paper, suns, 10×7 cm each*

Each day of a calendar is exposed to its own sun, from sunrise until sunset: August 9, under the sun of Mount Lebanon, Bikfaya / November 13, under the sun of Brussels / December 16, under the sun of Beirut.





## Library



↑ À Rebours  
Stéphanie Saadé  
2020: 235 editions of "Against the Grain," structure (diameter: 150 cm, height: 140 cm)

The approximately 235 books presented here are editions of a single title, *À rebours* (Against the Grain) by Joris-Karl Huysmans, about the hyperesthetic misanthropist duke Jean des Esseintes who in his endless ennui, insistence on eccentric taste, and hatred of the ordinary is often viewed as the very embodiment of decadence. In his house on the outskirts of fin-de-siècle Paris, Des Esseintes retreats both into himself and into the surfaces of objects, wallowing in their artificiality as though it will protect him from the vicissitudes of the modern age. The duke sleeps during the day and dresses extravagantly at night. He has a jeweled turtle made because of the way the precious stones set off the patterns in a rug in his parlor. Eventually, he finds himself at an

impasse that eerily echoes the final months of the pandemic year 2020. The surfaces of objects cannot be made to compensate for the complexity of collective human experience. It does not matter how meticulously you arrange the cut flowers on the entrance table if your mother cannot set foot in your house to appreciate their subtle fragrance. In *À rebours*, this impasse is rendered formally: Because her library takes the shape of a ring, the most yellowed edition of Huysmans' book is adjacent to its crispest edition. The interval between them reminds the viewer that life is cyclical and that there comes point when one cycle must end; continuity is not inexorable. (Based on a text by Natascha Marie Llorens)

↓ Exhibition Catalog  
Stéphanie Saadé  
2018: Book ("A Thousand and One Flowers of Lebanon," G. and H. Tobme, 2002), silver leaf  
The two middle pages of a book on disappearing flowers are covered with silver leaf.

↓ Bureau-Maison (Home Desk)  
Stéphanie Saadé  
2018: Desk, wood, plasterboard, screws  
The open parts of a desk are closed using construction material, thus enclosing a potential space underneath.

Drinking an Exhibition  
Charbel-joseph H. Boutros  
2021: Two dehumidifiers installed in different parts of the exhibition  
Humidity is extracted from the exhibition and transformed into filtered water. This water is frozen into ice cubes exposed inside a fridge, and served to the visitors of Marres Kitchen.

## Staircase

Mon Amour  
Charbel-joseph H. Boutros  
2014–ongoing (2017):  
*Supermarket ticket, highlighter*  
Chosen products from a supermarket are purchased and presented in a precise order at checkout, so that a secret love message appears on the supermarket receipt.





## Baby Room



## ↑ Memory

Stéphanie Saadé  
2020: *Metallic light box* (41.5 × 43.5 × 39 cm), *rotating light apparatus*

The illustrations on the remaining cards of the artist's childhood memory game are cut out in the walls of a light box whose dimensions are proportional to her childhood room.

## Bedroom

↓ *Building a Home with Time*  
Stéphanie Saadé  
2019: 2,832 *wooden beads* (provenance: *a factory in Germany now closed*), *thread*, *size of installation: variable*

A necklace is composed of 2,832 beads. This number corresponds to the number of days between the artist's birth and the official date of the end of the Lebanese Civil war.





↓ Space Habitability

Stéphanie Saadé  
2021: 1360 grams of hand-glazed  
cast porcelain, dimensions variable

Small porcelain pieces, with  
a weight equal to the artist's  
pillow weight, are displayed. The  
porcelain pieces have been realized  
by Maastricht-based ceramist artist  
David Roosenberg.



Untitled Until Now  
Charbel-joseph H. Boutros  
2020: *Torn paper*  
The first paper ever touched by a new-  
born baby.

Pleasure  
Charbel-joseph H. Boutros  
2019: *Exhibition's carpet, votive  
candles wax*



↑ Night Cartography #3  
Charbel-joseph H. Boutros  
2016–ongoing: *Sleeping mask,  
votive candles mask, wishes,  
dreams*  
Wax from votive candles (stolen from  
a church situated in the Lebanese  
mountains), is poured on an airplane  
sleeping mask, used by the artist for  
sleeping for several months.

← Untitled Until Now  
Charbel-joseph H. Boutros  
2019: *Havaianas, neon light*

Projection Room

Projection of two movies by an  
invited artist (Roy Samaha).

Sun Rave  
Roy Samaha  
2018: *Video, 11 min*

Residue  
Roy Samaha  
2014–2017: *Video, 11 min 30s*

No Light in White Light  
Charbel-joseph H. Boutros  
2014: *Video, 11 min*

A Syriac priest starts reading Genesis,  
in Aramaic—a dead language—a  
few minutes before nightfall, in a  
forest in Mount Lebanon. With the  
light getting dimmer, the reading  
becomes more and more difficult.  
The priest stops reading the text,  
when the Aramaic words totally fade  
in the night.

Passage

↓ Souffles d'Artistes  
Charbel-joseph H. Boutros and  
Stéphanie Saadé  
2016: *Balloon, breaths of two  
artists in love*

*Souffles d'Artistes* is an allusion and  
a twist of the work of avant-garde  
artist P. Manzoni (1933–1963)  
with the same title put in its plural  
form. A balloon has been placed on  
the ground and blown up with the  
breaths of Charbel and Stéphanie,  
which become impossible to divide.  
With time, the balloons start to  
deflate; the air of the lovers dissolves  
into the air of the exhibition and is  
inhaled by visitors.



↓ The Booth, the Gallerist, and the Mausoleum  
Charbel -joseph H. Boutros

*2021: Performance, architectural model covered with votive candles wax, metallic structure, iPad, carpet, beach sand, art fair booth, ashes of press releases*

An excerpt of the script that will be performed by the gallerist (here screened on an iPad, holding on to a stand in the middle of the booth, in front of the floating sculpture-mausoleum).



↑ The Traveling Meal  
Charbel-joseph H. Boutros  
*2021: Food, fridge*  
A delivery meal, from Diwan Beirut, is reconstituted and exhibited in a fridge in the same plastic tray that is used for the delivery service.

Two Meters Long of Isolated Darkness  
Charbel-joseph H. Boutros  
*2019: Isolation foam, obscurity, metallic tube*



## Studio S

↓ → We've Been Swallowed by Our Houses  
Stéphanie Saadé  
2020: *Aghabani embroidery on cotton cloth, 140×240 cm*



Stéphanie addresses the shift in perception of space in relation to the slow passage of time: During lockdown, she measured her apartment in Beirut and drew a map of it before turning it into a human-scale labyrinth. The map was embroidered on a tablecloth that was custom-made to fit her dining table. Woven according to the traditional Syrian Aghabani technique composed of chain stitches and spiral patterns, this skill is present in Lebanon due to the arrival of refugees — the ones who, paradoxically, have lost their home. The work expresses her feeling of a shrinking, inaccessible outside space in parallel with the densification of the inside space of the house, the only accessible zone. Imagine getting lost inside your own home. The title pictures the home as a belly,

evoking sacred and secular stories such as Jonah and the Whale or Pinocchio — a pregnancy in reverse. (Based on a text by Stéphanie Saadé)

Rolling Pin  
Stéphanie Saadé  
2020: *Used rolling pin, mother-of-pearl, 4.5×48.5 cm*  
The artist's family rolling pin is encrusted with the geographical coordinates of the four family members (father, mother, artist, brother).

Apocalypse  
Stéphanie Saadé  
2020: *Ready-made (20×20.5 cm), metallic structure*  
On the tag of a baby towel made in Lebanon, one can read the brand: Apocalypse.

↓ Stage of Life  
Stéphanie Saadé  
2021: *Two carpets cut in strips, dimensions variable*  
Two carpets having belonged to the artist and her brother as children are respectively cut in equal strips in order to obtain the respective distances between their current beds and the entrance of their buildings.



↑ Terre Pourrie (Rotten Earth)  
Stéphanie Saadé  
2020: *Found snail shell, 'Terre Pourrie' pigment, powder-coated metallic structure, 3×3×12 cm*  
A hollow snail shell is filled with a pigment called 'rotten earth.'



# Interview Charbel-joseph H. Boutros and Stéphanie Saadé

Valentijn Byvanck, January 2021

Valentijn: Dear Stéphanie and Charbel: We started talking about the home as a theme for this exhibition before corona hit, before Stéphanie knew she was pregnant and before you were blasted out of your apartment in Beirut. Already at the time, the theme seemed logical to me, perhaps because of the nomadic nature of your existence, or perhaps because I thought it was suitable because it was something that brought you and your diverging practices together. Stéphanie was already working on the now very topical works *Building a Home with Time* and *We've Been Swallowed by Our Houses*. How do you yourselves see the connection between the theme and the development of this project?

Stéphanie: Dear Valentijn, my feeling is that things are changing so fast nowadays that artworks should be dated not only by year but also month, day, even hour ... what we have witnessed since March 2020 in the world, and since October 17, 2019 (and definitely even before) in Lebanon, are changes of great importance. We have been more surprised and more often surprised than ever, and it keeps going on. The first work you mention, *Building a Home with Time* was indeed conceived in 2019, so before all the changes that you mention occurred. The work refers to my childhood, the part of my life that I shared with my country's tormented history. And

I naively assumed that conflict and violence were part of my past. But while I was working on it, we went through a popular uprising, the Lebanese pound's devaluation, hyperinflation, a global pandemic and a deadly blast ... to cite a few ... and this past suddenly came back to the surface, taking the color of more vivid events. *Building a Home with Time* evoked the slow action of building a place of your own, of building your own self probably, inscribed in time, but also building on ruins, on a difficult terrain, and not necessarily a flat one. Maybe it's not a coincidence that I called the work "Building ..." in the present participle, as if this process was to be ever ongoing.

The second work you mention *We've Been Swallowed by Our Houses* is dated from 2020 and the idea of it came during the first lockdown in Beirut. We were still in our home, which also contained our studios. The lockdown gave me the feeling of a thickened indoor space, one that would have swallowed you and that wouldn't spit you out anytime soon! I was pregnant and was experiencing the beautiful feeling of a confinement within my body, in the coziest and most wonderful way. In addition, I felt the confinement provided a much needed break from life's crazy rhythm. Soon after, however, it also led to a suffocating feeling. Today, home is the place in which and from which I'm waiting to be spat out, even, why not, vomited out; not by the house, as this physical space has changed already three times for us since the

beginning of the pandemic, but by the home. I link what's happening to us to biblical stories such as Jonah and the whale, or, in a more modern form, the tale of Pinocchio. It's interesting to note that, to illustrate the story, Jonah is either pictured as being swallowed by the whale, or being spat out. I guess it's a question of perspective, of seeing the glass half empty or half full. In the tale of Pinocchio, there's an active attempt to exit, which I find interesting. Today, we are somehow more and more passively waiting for the doors to open again, and the pandemic and our realization of what it actually is and what it actually means and does, is eating out all that's left of our disobedience, rebellion, and other feelings of the sort. We're somehow starting to become afraid of exiting the comfort of our jails. For safety, protection, and survival purposes we have to stay passive. Passivity is our only weapon, it's the only way to fight. The idea of the show came to us before "home" became a new concept, but it also evolved while this process was ongoing. We felt it was still valid to explore it, no matter what it would become at the time of our exhibition.

Charbel: With the pandemic, home became a sort of refuge from a hostile outside; the only safe place on earth becomes one's own home. Of course, home already played this safety role even before the pandemic started. But the outside didn't wear this dramatic character of hostility, like it does now. The outside used to evoke escape, the future, holidays, the encounter with others, the horizon, friendships. All of this vanished, which is why we find ourselves confined and hiding in our homes, waiting for better days to come. It is a sort of prehistoric scheme that we are experiencing today. Home becomes again the protective cave, a shelter from the outside wilderness and beasts.

That said, the exhibition *Intimate Geographies* presents not a direct reaction to the pandemic. We seek to create works

and exhibitions that transcend specific contemporary situations or trends.

Valentijn: In our conversations you have voiced the ambition to make Marres a home for your art. Even though we know many art works we see in museums have originally been produced for the home, we have become accustomed to thinking that the museum is the proper home for art. I am very curious to see in this exhibition what the home will bring to the art, and art to the home. Will your artworks be more at home in the home of Marres?

Charbel: Our aim here was to create an uncanny situation, where visitors would wonder if they are in an exhibition or in a home. We intended to blur this limit and came up with the idea of having two protagonists inhabiting the exhibition. The protagonists form a couple of two artists. They are not our alter egos, but of course they are modeled on our experiences and speak our dialogues. They live in the house that also contains their working spaces. They are preparing an important exhibition and hence receive phone calls from their gallerists, the people that they work with (assistants, craftspeople), as well as visits by, for instance, you as the director of the art institution where the show will take place. The visitors could easily mistake the artists for other visitors. Yet, the awkwardness of their actions, and their behavior makes their presence more salient. What are they doing there? What is the purpose of the enigmatic rituals—from phone calls to naps—that they perform? The visitors gradually understand that they have entered a home. Yet, they will also be a little befuddled by the entanglement of furniture, artworks, and actors. The piece about the mausoleum of a gallerist opens further questions such as the complex agency of the art world, and the making of art. This is important to us: that



we question the typology of the exhibition within a precarious and fragile art world.

Stéphanie: It is true that a lot of what we consider as art objects today that we admire in museums, was initially made for homes. What is interesting is that functional objects, made for homes, once also held magical and spiritual qualities. The plate, the bowl, and the spoon were potentially efficient and powerful talismans, connecting humans to something greater. This was lost when the objects landed in museums: since their magical qualities are no longer tangible to us they give us the disturbing feeling that we're looking at "dead" artifacts. In my work, I often use mundane objects or 'situations' which I divert toward a transcendence. I like to reenchant these day-to-day items in order to make them meaningful again, potentially useful in other contexts than their original ones. *Intimate Geographies* presents several artworks that depart from objects that belong to a domestic setting and vocabulary. Paradoxically, the mundane objects, reinstalled with new properties, are again redefined by the new situation they find themselves in: in a house among furniture, maybe even used by a couple ... it's confusing. We could answer your question "is art more at home at home?" by saying: let's see what the home is today and whether it has something to offer to art.

Valentijn: The relationship between time and memory is a recurrent theme in your work. Could you tell me why this is so important?

Stéphanie: I've always been interested in a playful approach of time rather than the traditional dramatic linear one. My works are meant to provide the possibility of bringing back elements of the past and weaving them into the present. Memories and objects deserve to be looked at again and have their lives prolonged. New facets

of them appear, fresh ones that are yet to be covered by time's patina. Safeguarding these isolated elements gave me a feeling of satisfaction after the August 4 blast in Beirut, and the ensuing exodus of which we were part. It's not that all our belongings were destroyed, properly speaking, but I would say more a part of ourselves.

My works are like dysfunctional, or enhanced Proustian madeleines ... they project you into the past, not my past in the end of the day, more each one's own past, or even imaginary pasts, but they project the object into a greater future. In that they become "legendary," or favorable, or welcoming to the creation of each viewer's personal legend.

Charbel: I am interested in what I qualify as charged abstraction: an abstraction that is not due to the energy of colors and the rhythms of the composition per se, but an abstraction that is defined by the invisible charge that it endured, like a material that is heated, or a human that received a charge of emotions after having an experience. This invisible charge is an important component in my practice. This is how I proceed with my installations, sculptures, or performances: I take a material which could be the sun, a video, marble, the night, or a shoe and I charge it with a unique experience. This experience can be intimate or more universal. You can see that in my work *Spring*, a work that could formally refer to early abstraction, but which is in reality a paper charged-exposed to the sun of spring, to all the suns that spring has witnessed. It's an abstraction made of a season. In *Geography and Abstraction* we see a wavy abstract shape, undulating: a carpet. But this new geography is a portrait of a man, a portrait of an institution, and this man is the director and curator of the institution. It is his body that is represented here by three concrete tubes hidden under the carpet, creating folds and a new landscape

that the visitor will cross or lie on. Here the intimate body becomes a conceptual plinth on which the visitor will walk. The intimate is woven with something more linked to the functioning and representation of an institution. This is something very typical in my practice, to proceed by a telescoping of scale and narratives. The intimate meets the universal and vice versa.

# Dialogues between the two protagonists



## 1. Art in times of pandemic

C: What do you think of exhibitions under the influence of the pandemic? Do you think it is worth doing them? I mean, maybe the question would be: does one enjoy seeing art, while being stripped from a crucial component: your own freedom? Yes, I feel that we have lost our freedom, I don't feel free as I was before ... the freedom to move, to touch, the freedom to see who I want and to eat with whom I want ... putting on this damn mask, not touching this, not touching that. I think all this has a major influence on seeing art and reading artworks. I personally prefer not to see shows in these conditions ... but maybe I'm wrong! Maybe one needs art even when life's messed up by a silly invisible virus ....

S: We can say that art today is in survival mode. The whole circuit is still here, with all its elements; the artists are here, the museums are here, the public is here, the galleries are here, the collectors are here ... there's just no train connecting them ... you can walk to the nearest station but it's closed .... It's just like wanting to play a "connect the dots" game without a pen ... you can only do it virtually .... But that's without talking about the artworks ... they probably suffer the most, as they can hardly be born anymore; and when they do no one can look at them ... other than through images and social media ... it used to be like that already but now it's the only

option we have left ... can we make art only for the sake of beautiful images?

C: I agree with you ... this social media "thing" absolutely doesn't serve the purpose, you lose all the phenomenological and physical experiences that are crucial for reading artworks. I'm not saying that art can't make use of social media as a tool, or as a medium; it can of course, but here we're starting to talk about something else: artworks conceived to maneuver in the realm of social media ... now, like you said, it smells more of survival mode, a survival mode already collapsing : ) .... But I disagree with you about the suffering of artworks .... I think that artworks don't need to be shown to exist, they exist once they see the light, exhibitions are only one chapter in their complex lives, an artwork stays an artwork even if it never sees the light of an exhibition .... I think that artworks persist even after their destruction ....

Exhibitions and artists, museums and galleries and visitors, all this agency is totally weakened with this pandemic, I really hope that the community of artists will not be totally fucked up after this mess ....

S: Well, I don't think either that artworks suffer from the lack of light, or exposure. And I love the idea of hidden artworks, invisible artworks, buried artworks, secret artworks, forgotten artworks, unknown artworks even .... But I do think that it's



problematic if the only light an artwork is ever exposed to is the light of a screen.... Unless it's been conceived for it, it becomes one more quick image to enjoy or ignore, lost in an ocean of buildings, bags, jewelry, cats, holiday destinations, news... one will only stop if the image is attractive enough and if not... just scroll down to the next one... I'm not saying we're living in an era of superficiality... it can indeed take only a second to understand the genius of an artwork. It's like a spark that hits you and brightens everything around. But the imprint is so strong that it stays with you forever. You will not forget it and just go on to something else. You'll be so intrigued that you'll want to know more about it, about the artist, about the surroundings....

And for this you need time, and the ability to dream... not to have your mind busy with whatever the "online" also offers. You're walking to a museum to see an exhibition and on your way, there are a shops, newspaper kiosks, beautiful boys and girls, cute animals, buildings... in reality, they would be part of your wandering but online, they just become heavy and fill your brain with a load of garbage. Do you think that our show would be the same if it could only be accessed online?

C: The show that we are preparing doesn't fit the online format at all! It is experiential and needs to be navigated by visitors... it unfolds slowly... but I am optimistic! I think that the health situation will be better in a couple of months! I really hope that our show won't close... and you know why! I already had two important exhibitions last year that were disrupted, one in Europe and the other in Beirut. But in the case of Beirut, it was due to the protests that started in the city, the same night of the opening.... Oh my God! For a few days, I had the naïve dream that the political situation in Lebanon might change, that society might change.... But that dream collapsed inside of me soon

after... our country is fucked up, and I blame both politicians and citizens for it. I feel that we are too indulgent toward them and toward ourselves. Change needs to come from within, and the rest will follow. They robbed us from our money and nothing occurred.... Fuck! I still can't believe what happened! How banks confiscated their clients' savings... it's such an absurd scenario.... "Oui Monsieur, today you have the right to withdraw 10 dollars from your account; these are the new directives of the bank: 10 dollars per day per client." Terrible, terrible, terrible... but sorry for jumping from one subject to another.

S: I'm not so sure that that's actually another subject... art and politics are so intimately linked, especially when you're a Lebanese artist... you're constantly swimming in it and you're barely ever dry from it. All the works you make are soaked in it, even when you try to escape it. For me, the bank situation directly affected art and artists in Lebanon. The whole art scene to be exact: when your money volatilizes from your account because the bank stole it, when your American dollars turn into freshly printed Lebanese pounds, when one dollar becomes a million liras, hyperinflation follows. I can't forget queuing at my bank to withdraw my "10 dollars," as you say, and witnessing the bank cashier hand a man stacks of liras wrapped in plastic. They looked just like these cheap tissue boxes. And that's what they're worth now.... Do you remember what followed? Working with others became impossible: you spent more time figuring out how to pay than actually focusing on the work: you would be asked to pay in three currencies: Lebanese pounds at the bank's rate, Lebanese pounds at the black market's rate, and dollars for imported stuff... a real headache! Personally, I stopped working, buying and even selling; at some point everybody wanted to buy artworks to get rid of their fictive dollars.... This whole money

situation became so absorbing! Changing the few dollars you had, if you had any, into Lebanese pounds became a daily activity, a true performance, probably the only one happening at the time. Can one feel nostalgia for a time that was not necessarily happy?

C: I don't know, I am tired, I love you.

## 2. Art and Geography

C: How did you find that show we saw yesterday? I mean, what I don't understand is the obviousness; when an artist's response to a problematic is so predictable.... Okay, you come from a charged geography, a conflict zone. And you produce what a neo-colonial eye qualifies as engaged art! Engaged art, oh! And the same system that you are criticizing is the one promoting you and pushing you to the front scene... all this is very predictable and that show falls into all these easy traps... art is a very difficult job, probably the most difficult one that a human can do....

S: There are traps waiting for the artists to fall in everywhere. And more traps, for curators and institutions. Sometimes it's the artist that sets up the traps: she produces an attractive work, sugar-coated in *local*, or obvious as you say, and waits for the flies to flock. Some other times, it's the curator who sets up the trap: she proposes an attractive exhibition, sugar-coated in *conflict*, or obvious as you say, and invites artists to it. As an artist you're often not aware of the kind of theater play that the show will be in the end. You're just given your lines, not really the whole script. And some other times it's the institution that sets up the trap: it concocts an attractive exhibition, sugar-coated in a geographical zone's misery, and waits for the masses to empathize. I like none of these approaches. If you're only worth a sexy (but useless) passport, you'd better stop right

away... art is indeed made somewhere, but it cannot have an expiry date.

C: From my point of view, the responsibility falls on the shoulders of the artist; he is the one who created the work and he needs to be aware of the global context where this work will be shown. He needs to be able to navigate with his work from the local, the intimate, to the global. Marcel Broodthaers was a genius in that. Curators and institutions have agendas that they need to follow, cards that they need to play; it is their job to map trends. But in the end, the work, it's meaning, it's impact and how a context influences the reading of that work, this is the responsibility of the artist. He needs to be fighting the fight and to avoid falling into ethnical, neo-colonial traps.... I think it's a matter of resistance: to what extent a work resists the traps of reality... to what extent a work resists the present.... If your work is only a mere reflection of the present it will fall very quickly, it won't stand. I think a powerful work can even modify the whole context of a show... right? I started by analyzing what I call pseudo-engaged art, but the same comments can apply to trends, when artists obey them. Trends are—and this sadly something that we often see—a sort of generic globalization of art. Unique experiences become more and more difficult to find. It's the generic versus the interior experience. Anyhow, I still feel that art is such a difficult thing to do. A beautiful one of course, but not an easy job.

S: Coming from a context like Lebanon, where conflict is never-ending, shapes you. Whether you decide to dive into it, or you try to escape it, you're in an uninterrupted dialogue with it. If you want to do things easy-attractive, you submit to your geographical context and to its problematics. Your art is about that in an in-your-face way. And you'll never lack subjects! There's always a new crisis, a new catastrophe, a new revolution,

a new war .... You're served! If on the contrary, you decide to resist your background, what happens is much more insidious: your background infiltrates every single one of your works, sometimes without warning! You think you're working on a landscape, and all of a sudden this landscape appears to have been a battlefield. You think you're working on an archaeological site, and all of a sudden this archaeological site appears to have been looted during the war. You think you're working on a historical lake, and all of a sudden this lake appears to be at the center of a drug-trafficking area. You think you're working on your childhood and all of a sudden your childhood ... very rarely are there breaches in these invisible walls surrounding us. But there are. And then these walls are probably bearing walls, but there are other walls as well, and floors, and ceilings, and windows, made of more universal stuff.

C: It is a question of balance that needs to be established, a sort of archaic parameter in art, when the balance shifts drastically toward this or that direction. It means that with time, the work won't hold. What I'm saying is very abstract, sorry. The sun could burn the person exposed to its rays .... Making the sun your own ally enables you to carefully play with this powerful energy ... charged geographies need to be digested and the political discourse in works should be closer to radiation than screams .... Screams are so obvious ... invisible radiation can be much more toxic and critical .... Yes, I know what you mean, sometimes in your work even if you want to avoid approaching a political context in a very direct way, the political reappears in a very unexpected manner. But again, an artist should be aware of that, no? If the unpredictable becomes overpowering, she needs to fine tune it, a bit like a DJ does ....

3.  
Being locked down at home or  
the impossibility of turning  
the lock DOWN into a lock UP

S: It snowed in February ... right in the middle of the lockdown ... as if the streets couldn't stay empty any longer, as if they needed to be filled with something, if not someone. It's quite shocking seeing Maastricht so calm, so different from the way we knew it when we were artists in residence at the Jan Van Eyck ... sometimes when I'm walking I'm afraid when I see another person in the same street, as if they were going to harm me. You're not protected by the crowd anymore, you face real individuals and the weight of their presence becomes, rather than reassuring, almost oppressive ... lockdown is making us afraid of each other. We're hiding behind our screens and I'm sure that deep down we want this sick comfort to never end. Do you find yourself inspired by staying at home? Are you making any new works? Now that you have all the time in the world, are you actually using it? I fear that art might end ....

C: Snow replacing man, I like that. Snowman ... ☺ Yes, it's crazy how we became afraid of each other .... Your best friend calls you on the phone telling you that she'd like to pay you a visit. It worries you. She becomes a threat. It's sad. I really miss being surrounded by friends ... eating, drinking in a restaurant ... laughing, hugging! But I guess that things will get better soon. Historically, humans have always been confronted by obstacles and difficulties, wars, etc. One just needs to focus on a better future, and this future will come. Staying at home is not the problem for me, the problem is the lack of social life .... You mentioned the time when we were artists in residence at the Jan van Eyck — God, how I miss it! This year was magical for me. And it was just after we met .... Making new works? Yes, of course I am. Even though those times

are quite dark for all of us, art needs to react and resist the present, otherwise, why do it? Doing it only when one feels comfortable and serene will eliminate a lot of important layers of it. My work needs to face reality to be able to create a new one. But maybe my new works are more in my brain now, since production is quite difficult nowadays .... What about you? Don't you feel like it?

S: Well, I admit that the first lockdown inspired me. Lockdown happened for a dramatic reason, the context was dreadful, but the result of it, being stuck at home for a while, was somehow beneficial. First of all because it was so unexpected to suddenly obtain ... this huge joker of time. We kept complaining about the passing of time — always too fast — and the days of the week — people basically wanting Sundays to be followed by Fridays. We were never happy, always tired. What happened gave us a lesson: would you like to have more time? We'll give you ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD! Now show us what you'll do with it. It was also precious because we didn't know how long it would last, and we didn't think that it would last long! In the beginning I started realizing time-consuming works of mine. Ironically, these works involved used travel documents. And travel was slowly becoming an obsolete notion, at least something inaccessible. Then, I conceived new works that reflected on the situation we were suddenly in. You know how dear introspection, dormancy, traveling by imagination are to me and I was finally living them in the most intense way. As you said, physical production stopped, because of the impossibility of getting hold of materials, of working with others, or moving around freely in the city ... but the mental production of artworks went wild. The situation was so uncanny that it was stimulating. It looked like a bad joke, but one heavy of consequences. What mostly filled your time otherwise?

C: Otherwise? I spent my time sleeping, dreaming, waiting and ... cleaning my hands! Do you remember last year, same time as now? Jesus! We were both exhausted, jumping from one country to another, finishing a show here, installing a piece there .... I think it was too much, we were showing a lot, and we needed a break, both of us. We were constantly dreaming about Greece, the islands that we love ... and then bammmmmm! The pandemic started, and everything stopped; the break that we desired occurred and became eternal .... And now it is becoming a real burden one must say ... I miss traveling ... I get bored when I stay more than three months in the same city ... and now the only city we're staying in is home! Hahaha! It will be okay. And oh no don't fear that art will end, art will always be here, it's what we need to survive ....

S: True, the rhythm that we had last year, just before the pandemic started, was extremely strenuous. It was so exciting, traveling here and there, having this and that show, being part of prestigious fairs ... our careers were skyrocketing, and we couldn't be happier about it, but I feel that it was not a normal life for an artist. At least not an ideal life for an artist, who is close to the monk that has taken vows ... being an artist means choosing the difficult path, not the one that will lead you to money, comfort, the car, the house, and so on. Despite that, our lives were starting to resemble the lives of those who went down the regular path, working all the time and longing for these few free days a year when they get to spend the money they made .... Always busy! That's what we were. Busy, BUSIness, and we only ever got to travel in economy! I also felt very unhappy about the art world, and I think you did too. It was like the Catholic Church and all its sumptuous pompous ornaments, so far away from the humble message of Christ. Value was not in the right place anymore; value was given to art fairs, prizes, the market,



etc. The pandemic put a brutal end to all this. First, because a big part of the old art system collapsed. Second, because closures, cancellations, postponements, didn't make it as fun as it was. Even if you were chosen to represent your country in Venice, but would Venice take place? So Venice stopped being important. Who cares about something that doesn't exist anymore? But Greece ...! It's still more alive than ever!

#### 4.

##### An exhibition in preparation

S: What a challenge to work together! How did you feel when the director invited us to this duo show? I had ambivalent feelings, a great joy somehow spoiled by the fear that we would not make it! I'm exaggerating, but it's true, we don't work together! We do have common works which I love, but you can count them on the fingers of one hand. And this is a big project.

C: I am very excited about this new project! It is not easy for an artist couple to work together, but it's so lovely at the same time .... So, to make it clear because it's a complicated scenario, our plan for the show is the following, right? Marres is occupied by two protagonists that form a couple. They make sporadic appearances in the environment established within the art center and could be mistaken for visitors. Except that the awkwardness of their actions, and their behavior, unlikely within a traditional exhibition context, makes their presence more salient. What are they doing there? What is the purpose of the enigmatic rituals—from phone calls to naps—which they perform?

The visitor slowly understands that he has entered a house, The exhibition itself is somehow turned into a home, by its nature and character, and the way that it functions and presents itself to the viewer.

S: Yes that's it! In this house lives a couple, constituted by two artists. The house contains their living and working spaces. The two artists are preparing an important exhibition and hence receive phone calls from their gallerists, the people that they work with (assistants, craftspeople), as well as visits, by the director of the art institution where the show will take place, for example. Little by little, visitors infiltrate their intimate and professional lives. I think it works well.

C: I like it—it will widen the notion of exhibition, allowing its periphery to equally unfold.

The presented artworks will no longer be dissociated from the wider context in which they take place. Work and surroundings will both be exhibited, side by side; daily life actions will be interwoven with the artworks in the exhibition, and inversely. And how would the spaces be divided in that show—how shall we divide Marres?

S: For me it is very clear: the house's different spaces should be distributed according to the following organizational chart: In the ground floor, living spaces (dining room, living room, library). In the upper floor, more intimate living spaces (bedroom, baby room) as well as working spaces (studios).

The works installed in the studios are the ones that we will show in our upcoming exhibition. The visitor will walk through different experiences and environments: a dining room where a couple is having lunch surrounded with embroidered curtains from another time space, a landscaped garden full of the plants that the couple had in their former house in Beirut, a living room where the couple is having a mundane discussion on a couch over a carpet undulating from what is hidden underneath, a library constituted of several editions of the same book and a confining desk, an art fair booth that has landed in one of the artists' studios and in which a gallerist is trying to sell his own

mausoleum, a bedroom where one of the protagonists is napping under a sleeping mask covered in votive wax, a baby's room that becomes a magical light box projecting childhood memories ....

C: It will be a show that reflects on the agency of exhibition-making. This will make it more contextual nowadays: under the influence of the Covid-19 pandemic, the world, including the art world, has been shaken upside down. Exhibitions are either postponed or cancelled, and when they do open they often close soon after. The notion of home has also been completely disrupted: the office, the studio, the shops, the museum, the restaurants, the bars ... have invited themselves inside it, symbolically or virtually. Home is no longer solely the attractive physical and mental space that it used to be; it has also become a space for endless waiting, waiting for the possibility of exiting again this melancholic holiday simulacrum. This show comprehends all those ever-rising parameters; it reflects on the complex agency of exhibition-making like you say, but as well the entanglement of the different elements that allow artworks and exhibitions to unfurl within a precarious and fragile art world.

S: And now, we need to find two actors!

CHARBEL-JOSEPH H. BOUTROS (Lebanon, 1981) lives and works between Beirut and Paris. In his work invisibility is charged with intimate, geographical, and historical layers: finding poetic lines that extend beyond the realm of existing speculations and realities. Being born amid the Lebanese conflict, his work is not engaged in an explicit political and historical reflection, but is more accurately haunted by the said political and historical reflection.

Boutros was a resident at the Pavillon, Palais de Tokyo and a researcher at the Jan van Eyck Academy. He had a solo exhibition at the SMAK Museum (Ghent), Palais de Tokyo (Paris) and the Beirut Art Center. His work was included in exhibitions at venues such as the 12th International Istanbul Biennial, Punta Della Dogana (Venice), Centre Pompidou (Metz), and Home Works 8 (Beirut).

STÉPHANIE SAADÉ (Lebanon, 1983) lives between Beirut, Paris, and Amsterdam. Her work develops a language of suggestion, playing with poetics and metaphor. She shares clues, signs, and imageless and occasionally silent trails, which interact like the words of a single sentence. It is for the viewer to decipher them, as would an archaeologist faced with traces, fossils, and fragments. This enigmatic quality often stems from the artist's own experience. In her oeuvre, personal experience is invoked exclusively as a universal subject.

Saadé was an artist in residence at the Jan van Eyck Academy and the Cité Internationale des Arts. She had solo exhibitions in the Museum Van Loon, Parc Saint Léger, and Maison Salvan. Her work was included in exhibitions at venues such as Sharjah Biennial 13 (United Arab Emirates), Punta della Dogana (Venice), and MOCA (Toronto).

Lebanese artist ROY SAMAHA was invited by Charbel and Stéphanie to intervene in their exhibition *Intimate Geographies*. Two of his video works are continuously screened in the projection room.

Samaha explores the boundaries of filmic language, perception of reality and the memory of personal objects.

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Tuesday – Sunday  
12 – 5 PM

Marres, House for Contemporary Culture is located in the heart of the old town of Maastricht. Marres develops a new vocabulary for the senses in collaboration with artists, musicians, designers, chefs, and perfumers. In addition to bringing a lively program of exhibitions, presentations and performances, Marres also features a beautiful garden and a wonderful restaurant.

#### COLOPHON

Artists: Charbel-joseph H. Boutros, Stéphanie Saadé  
Invited artist: Roy Samaha  
Curator: Valentijn Byvanck  
Performers: Thomas Claessens, Romy Moons, Hélène Vrijdag, and Eliane Zwart  
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