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## Screening Identity: A Video-Only Art Exhibit at BAC



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on Apr 13, 2015

By [Arie Amaya-Akkermans](#)

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A video art-only presentation is something of a rarity in Beirut where, although video art is widely practiced, the exhibition stage remains somewhat conservative. And whenever new media emerges as a part of the conversation about art in Lebanon, both supporters and detractors question the relevance of the themes for the city, which is always a combination of complex opposing forces.

"Unfinished Conversations", the first exhibition in Marie Muracciole's two-year program, on the other hand, is an species even rarer. Centered around the legacy of cultural theorist Stuart Hall, the works in the exhibition appear remote to a Lebanese audience, and perhaps a bit too difficult for those who are not necessarily trained in more formal film-making and appreciation. On second view, however, the works and the dialogue established between them is more relevant to Lebanon than one would expect.



Stuart Hall (1932-2014) was born in Jamaica and moved to the UK during his youth, becoming a prominent cultural theorist associated with left-wing liberalism and one of the early proponents of ideas such as cultural identity, race and ethnicity at the heart of sociological discourse. This was long before the era of multiculturalism, how it applied in particular applied to the Black question in Britain, and the post-colonial world. His understanding of power relations based on linguistic acts, much influenced subsequent sociological theories in England, positing his central ideas about people being both producers and consumers of culture and the objective realities of identity being an ongoing product of history and culture, rather than something stable and finished. Through a relational framework between work and work, and work and audience, important local questions arise.

In Zineb Sedira's triptych video installation "Mother Tongue" (2012), three conversations take place in an apparent - simulated, perhaps? - real time, between the artist's mother and herself in Algerian Arabic and French, between the artist and herself in French and English, and between the artist's mother and the artist's daughter in Algerian Arabic and English.

As each of the participants in this personal conversation expresses herself in her mother tongue, across generations and geographical innuendos, translation and cultural identity are juxtaposed and yet constructed through difference. The identities, on the other hand, are never fully formed, because of the linguistic disruption characterizing them and do not completely materialize; it is an open negotiation. Indeed, a striking similarity with the transmission of culture between Lebanon and the Arab world with their socio-cultural peculiarities.



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South African painter Penny Siopis, known for her rouge-tinted canvas, presents a number of films from 1997 through 2012, that operate outside the merely cinematic: They are riddled with fragments, clear cuts, sonic interventions and text, in the manner of video aesthetic.

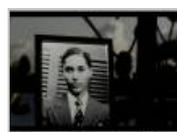
In her production, one is immediately drawn to events under the Apartheid era, treating in her narrative private space as a completely politicized construction open to scrutiny, and the public domain yet as an arena of loneliness, paradoxically. The historical documentary merges with the lyrical and the epic, at the boundary of fiction. John Akomfrah's film that gives title to the exhibition, produced in 2012, is an intense examination of Hall's legacy and ideas, setting them against the background of the geographical ruptures that sustained them.

The work by the three artists in the exhibition is consistent with Hall's proposals and opens an additional space for dialogue at the Beirut Art Center. The relation of these works - and of the conversation between them - to the current reality of Lebanon couldn't be more striking; the post-colonial momentum, war, dictatorship, race, identity. And the effort of the center is commendable, but it still remains to be seen how the audience are able to connect the dots in these not overly accessible works. Perhaps more than a direct engagement, it can serve as a prototype for a much-needed local dialogue.

*Unfinished Conversations continues at Beirut Art Center until May 2.*



#### Upcoming Events



'Unfinished Conversations' Exhibition (Art)