

## Unfinished Conversations

John Akomfrah, Zineb Sedira and Penny Siopis

23 February – 2 May 2015

Opening reception: Monday 23 February 2015, 6pm to 9pm



John Akomfrah, *The Unfinished Conversation* (2012), three screen installation, HD video, colour, sound, 45 min

With the support of:



The parallel film program is in partnership with:



Beirut Art Center presents *Unfinished Conversations*, the first exhibition in its two-year program of exhibitions, events and educational activities, entitled *Present Time. Ourselves*, that will stress time-based media and will reflect on the position of the spectator. This exhibition of films and videos gathers the works of British artist John Akomfrah, French-Algerian artist Zineb Sedira, and South African artist Penny Siopis. *Unfinished Conversations* will also include a series of round tables taking place during the exhibition.

The whole project is a tribute to the late British and Caribbean thinker, cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall (1932 -2014). Stuart Hall was a seminal figure. He was born in Jamaica, and moved to Britain as a student in 1951. By 1968, Hall would become along with Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, one of the founders of the school of thought that is now known as British Cultural Studies in Birmingham. He would also become an influential contributor to The New Left movement, co-founder of the *New Left Review*, and one of Britain's foremost public intellectuals.

The works displayed in the exhibition echo in different ways Hall's conception of identity as an "unfinished conversation", the phrase that gave John Akomfrah's work its title. The constant motion of the films and the dispersion of speech can be viewed as an image of one central idea in Hall's thinking: the necessary instability and multiple definitions of what is called identity. He conceived of the latter as a conversation "forever unfinished," prone to the fluctuations of episteme, historical narratives and memory, and emanating from a constant exchange between oneself and others. This conception sheds light on current discussions on racism and segregation, as well as different experiences of coexistence and dialogue.

The exhibition includes six distinct projections. *The Unfinished Conversation* (2012) is a three-channel video installation by John Akomfrah. It examines academic Stuart Hall's memories and personal archives extracted and relocated in an imagined and different time, reflecting the questionable nature of memory itself. Stuart Hall is a product of both Europe and the Caribbean. His interests and concerns include Marxian and Gramscian ideas, questions of race, gender, culture political economy and identity. Akomfrah describes the work as an exercise in "spectropoetics": a revisitation of the ghosts that haunt a life, and an interrogation of the fundamental transformations in the imaginary that those hauntings ultimately produce. Hence, the work moves between Hall's voice, ideas, memories, inventions, and insights, and immerses his biography in historical events.

Zineb Sedira's installation *Mother Tongue* (2002) is a video triptych installed with monitors playing three conversations that appear to be taking place in 'real time'. These conversations are between Sedira's mother and herself (*Mother and I, France*), between herself and her daughter (*Daughter and I, England*) and between her daughter and her mother (*Grandmother and Granddaughter, Algeria*). The conversations are multi-lingual, moving between Arabic, French and English as the artist, her mother and her daughter speak in their respective 'mother tongues'. In this installation, Sedira utilizes the presence of the voice to evoke the ambivalent space between what is said, what is heard and what is understood. She explores dialogue and translation within cultural identity as three generations of women in her own family communicate with each other. This work recalls the oral tradition of storytelling, passed along the matrilineal chain, as a means of preserving cultural identity from one generation to the next. However, the fluidity of the chain is disrupted by the different languages, and a broken narrative occurs between the artist's daughter and mother who do not understand each other's words. Unable to communicate verbally, their exchange of smiles, glances and silences suggests another narrative. *Mother Tongue* reveals the potency of slippages between understanding and misunderstanding, and recognition and misrecognition, in negotiating identity as a fluid and multi-layered process.

Penny Siopis is a painter whose work also includes film. She shows four film projections titled respectively, *My Lovely Day* (1997), *Obscure White Messenger* (2010), *Communion* (2011) and *The Master is Drowning* (2012). Siopis works with found film, home movies and superimposes them with sound and subtitles. She evokes characters related to events that took place under the apartheid system, some politically resounding and others that reflect much of histories untold. In *My Lovely Day*, Siopis combines spliced sequences of silent 8mm home movies that her mother shot in the 1950s and 1960s in South Africa with visual text (appearing as subtitles) and a musical sound track to tell a story of displacement and migration. In *Obscure White Messenger* and *The Master is Drowning*, she extends her use of found film beyond home movies to historical documentary, combining

private and public film sequences to create a story that is paradoxically both fictive and 'real'. Both films treat the assassination attempts of South African Prime Minister H.F. Verwoerd, architect of apartheid, one by David Beresford Pratt which he miraculously survived despite being shot twice in the face at point blank range, and the other that killed him in 1966 at the hand of Dimitrios Tsafendas. In *Communion*, the story is about an Irish nun, Sister Aidan, who was murdered by a crowd of angry people in the Eastern Cape during the Defiance Campaign in 1952 in South Africa. The campaign was in protest against apartheid laws. Many of the people in the crowd knew and loved Sister Aidan, but she was in the wrong place at the wrong time. In the film the murdered nun narrates her own death, as if from the grave. Penny Siopis's films exhume an impossible speech, or a discourse that was never held, giving voice to unlikely figures from the history of apartheid, thus defeating this system's binary nature.

*Unfinished Conversations* furthermore constitutes an entry point to director Marie Muracciole's program at Beirut Art Center, that addresses the idea that the sensory experience of the work of art always leads to the production of language and exchange, whether in the form of conversation, dialogue or interrogation.

As part of this exhibition, talks and debates will serve to contextualize Hall's approach in the MENA region. The first of these talks will gather Akomfrah, Sedira and Siopis, to discuss their work. Beirut Art Center will thus inaugurate its first-floor space, dedicated to cultural programming and education. Artists, researchers and students will be free to engage with guests and visitors. In addition, the Beirut Art Center will inaugurate two screening programs. Morad Montazami, adjunct research curator for the Middle East at Tate Modern and co-curator of *Unedited History. Iran 1960- 2014*, will curate together with Andréa Lissoni, curator of film at Tate Modern a film program in partnership with Tate Modern. Another film program involving African cinema specialist and curator Keith Shiri will be announced soon.

## Biographies

**John Akomfrah** Born in Ghana in 1957 and educated in England from a young age, John Akomfrah has become a cinematic counterpart to such commentators of and contributors to the culture of the Black diaspora as Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Greg Tate and Henry Louis Gates. In doing so, he has continued to mine the audiovisual archive of the 20th century, re-contextualizing these images not only by selecting and juxtaposing them but also through the addition of eloquent and allusive text. He is a co-founder of Black Audio Film Collective. Since 1999 Akomfrah has been working on his own. But his films are based on found footage arranged to create cinematic poetry and then use this poetry to tell history afresh.

**Zineb Sedira** was born in Paris in 1963 to Algerian emigrants. As a second-generation immigrant she experienced both a European education and a North African Muslim culture and found herself negotiating between the two from an early age. Sedira's practice investigates this negotiation, drawing on experiences of childhood and education and the complex familial relationships between Algeria, France and London. Her re-reading of Arab and Western culture challenges identity stereotypes as well as cultural and aesthetic expectations. In 2001, Sedira's first autobiographical piece, the installation *Four Generations* was presented together with the screen projection *Don't do to her what you did to me* in the first African pavilion at the 49th Venice Biennale.

Her work was shown in several solo exhibitions including at the Photographer's Gallery (London, 2006), Wapping Project (London, 2008), Pori Museum (Finland, 2009), BildMuseets (Sweden, 2010), Kunsthalle Nikolaj (Copenhagen, 2010), the Palais de Tokyo (Paris, 2010), [mac] musée d'Art contemporain of Marseille (2010), Prefix - Institute of Contemporary Art (Toronto, 2010) and at the Charles H. Scott Gallery, Vancouver and Blaffer Art Museum, Houston (2013). Her work was also shown in many group shows such as Tate Britain (London, 2002 /2013), Centre Pompidou (Paris, 2004/ 2009), Mori Museum (Tokyo, 2005), Musée d'Art Moderne of Alger (2007), Brooklyn Museum (New York, 2007), Mathaf (Qatar, 2010), the MuCEM (2013), Marseille, the Gwangju Museum of Art, South Korea, the MMK Museum für Mordern Kunst, Germany (2014).

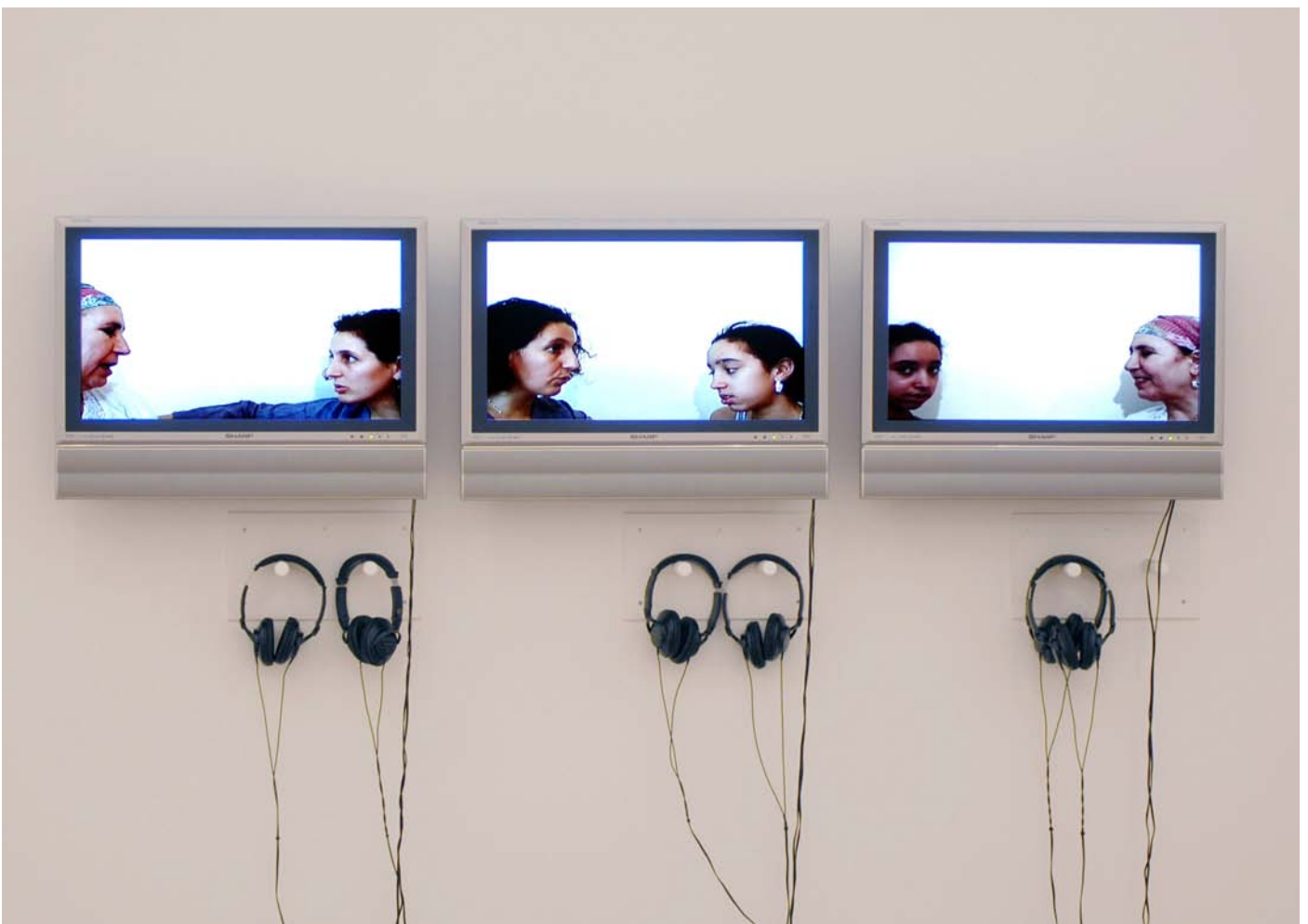
**Penny Siopis** was born in 1953 in Vryburg, South Africa, and lives in Cape Town. She studied Fine Arts at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, completing her master's degree in 1976, after which she pursued postgraduate studies at Portsmouth Polytechnic in the United Kingdom. She taught Fine Arts at the Technikon, Natal in Durban from 1980 to 1983. In 1984 she took up a lectureship at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. She is currently Honorary Professor at Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town. Siopis has exhibited widely, both in South Africa and internationally. Her retrospective exhibition *Time and Again* is on view at the Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town (2014- 2015), and will travel to the Wits Art Museum, Johannesburg, in 2015. Other solo shows include *Penny Siopis: Obscure White Messenger*, Brandts Museum, Odense, Denmark (2014), *Red: The iconography of colour in the work of Penny Siopis* at the KZNSA Gallery, Durban (2009), and *Three Essays on Shame* at the Freud Museum, London (2005). Siopis is the recipient of many awards, including a British Council Scholarship, the Atelier Award for a residency at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris, the Alexander S. Onassis fellowship for research in Greece, and residencies at Delfina and the Gasworks in London, Civitelli Ranieri in Umbria, the Tropen Museum in Amsterdam and the Academy of Fine Arts in Athens and Delphi.

**Please note that Beirut Art Center will be open on Sundays starting the 1st of March 2015, and will instead be closed on Mondays.**

**Opening times: 12 -8pm from Tuesday to Friday, 11am-6pm on Saturdays and Sundays.**



John Akomfrah, *The Unfinished Conversation* (2012), three screen installation, HD video, colour, sound, 45 min



Zineb Sedira, *Mother Tongue* (2002), three screen installation



Penny Siopis, *The Master is Drowning* 2012, single-channel digital video, sound, 9min

## Parallel Events

### **A Conversation with Akomfrah, Sedira and Siopis**

Wednesday 25 February 2015, 8 pm

Beirut Art Center presents a talk around the exhibition *Unfinished Conversations* and the figure of Stuart Hall.

### **Wrong Life Cannot Be Lived Rightly**

A Lecture by Tony Chakar

Wednesday 4 March 2015, 8 pm

Architecture is history solidified, it is society congealed in stone. Tony Chakar, Yara Feghali and Michael Najjar are going to examine how social relations are inscribed in spatial configurations in typical and generic Beiruti apartments.

### **Let's talk about Us?**

Wednesday 11 March 8 pm

Kirsten Scheid and students in anthropology at AUB

## Thinking with Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues on Art and Culture

Wednesday 18 March 3 pm - 8 pm

Program curator: Loyal Ftouni

Thinking with Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues on Art and Culture is an event of roundtable discussions paying special tribute to the late cultural theorist and sociologist Professor Stuart Hall. As a co-founder of The Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and the journal *New Left Review*, Stuart Hall's intellectual trajectory has been a driving force for artistic, cultural and intellectual production in Britain and beyond.

The event brings together artists, curators, art critics and academics, from the region and internationally to think with, through and beyond Stuart Hall's ideas and oeuvre of writings on art, identity and culture. Topics for discussions include: The relationship between aesthetics and politics (anti-racist, anti-colonial, identitarian) in Black British and transnational art practices; Cultural Studies' belated encounter with *Gender and Sexuality*; and *De-centring Cultural Studies: Theoretical and Philosophical Explorations Outside and Beyond the Continent*.

*Thinking With Stuart Hall* is an attempt at cultural translation as an intellectual, political, and aesthetic endeavor that performs and establishes nodes of connectivities and spaces of disjuncture between British Cultural Studies and the emerging field of Arab Cultural Studies. It attends to the urgent debate around the place of identity in both Black and Arab cultural politics.

Speakers include: Sonia Boyce, Artist and Professor of Black Art and Design, at the University of the Arts, London; David Morley, Professor of Media and Communications, Goldsmiths University, London; Roshini Kempadoo, Artist and reader in Digital Media, University of East London, Keith Piper, Artist and associate Professor at Middlesex University, London, Tarik Sabry, Reader in Media Theory at the University of Westminster, Helga Tawil-Souri, Associate Professor of Media, Culture, and Communication, New York University, and Loyal Ftouni, Senior Teaching Fellow at SOAS, University of London.

## Personnally talking

Wednesday 1 April 2015

Victoria Lupton and Stefan Tarnovsky in conversation with Georges Shiri.

# Unfinished Conversations Film Screening Program

## Curated by Morad Montazami and Andrea Lissoni

In relation to alternative voices and cinema traditions from the 1970's up until today and in close collaboration with Tate Modern's curators Morad Montazami and Andrea Lissoni, the screenings will be dedicate partly to New wave Iranian craft and heritage. The rediscovery of such field, mainly embodied by Parviz Kimiavi, whose movies combined ethnographic strategies with speculative narrative or «study of dreams», sheds new light on other contemporary Iranian and international documentary filmmakers; these ones all extend the sheer recording of truth to much more ambiguous «tales» of the truth. This Parviz Kimiavi short retrospective is screened at BAC (with participation of Metropolis cinema) in anticipation of the screening at Tate Modern 19th to 21th June 2015 (as part of the Cinema Mavericks season).

### Qeytarrie Hills (Tappehâ-ye Qeytarrie), 1970, 15 min

Ironic observation of the archaeological site of Qeytarrie, focusing on the aesthetic/commercial value of those objects dug out, by staging them like fetish. Puzzling visual echoes to Les Statues meurent aussi from Marker and Resnais.

### O Protector of the Gazelles (Yâ Zâmene Âhu), 20 min

An ethnographic and compulsive attempt at recording the lamentation rituals in practice at the Mausoleum of Imam Reza, the eighth shia Imam, in the city of Mashad. The sanctimonious cries and modesty of the people clash with the integrally ornamented and gold mosaics that decorate the Mausoleum. It seems like the ritual lasts forever. Day falls into night and night falls into day.

### P like Pelican (P mesle Pelican), 1972, 26 min

A poetic look at ruins that have been home to an old hermit for 40 years, now fooled by a group of children living nearby. While explaining the alphabet to them, at the letter P he runs up against an unknown white creature.

### **The Mongols (Moqolhâ), 1973, 85 min**

A leftfield satire on the expanding presence of cinema and television in Iran's poor villages that reenacts the Mongols 13th century invasion in the 1970's. The filmmaker, played by Kimiavi himself, struggles with both his own scenario and a looming assignment to oversee the installation of a television relay station in the remote province of Zahedan.

### **The Stone Garden (Baqe Sangi), 1976, 75 min**

In *The Stone Garden*, Kimiavi visits the garden of Darvish Khan Esfandiarpur, a deaf mute whose home became a religious shrine after he began to hang stones from tree branches. In each film, Kimiavi explores the status of community, arguably producing allegories of the nation during a period of tremendous transformation.

### **OK Mister, 1979, 72 min**

In a remote village near Persepolis, in the 1970's, one day surfaces mysteriously William Knox D'Arcy the first British oil exploiter in Iran beginning of the 20th century. To enact his plan for exploiting the wealth and the natural resources of this land, he hires Cinderella who is enlisted to keep the illiterate villagers under her charm and make them follow D'Arcy's plans. Astonishing satire on the relation to power for the Iranian people, almost propheticizes the Revolution which occurs a few month after.

**Parviz Kimiavi** (born in 1939) Lives and works in Paris. Parviz Kimiavi is a leading figure in 'alternative' (or 'New Wave') cinema that developed in Iran during the 1970s. By transcending the bounds between popular cinema, experimental cinema and cinéma d'auteur, he opens the process of internationalisation to the following generation that has since achieved considerable visibility in Europe. After a course at l'Institut des hautes études cinématographiques (Idhec) in Paris and a stint in French television, he returns to Iran, where he produces the majority of his work. His films, winning awards in many European festivals, are characterised by a permanent and oneiric transgression of the codes ruling documentary and fiction. Notably giving non-professional actors their own roles – peasants, villagers, dervishes, vagabonds, alongside whom he lived during the film. Deft like a collagist, Kimiavi relies on the art of editing to create an 'anthropology of dreams.' Analysis without compromise of Iranian cultural history, his work regularly encounters censorship and stalemates in political history. Some of his most important films are: *P like Pelican* (1972), *The Mongols* (1973), *The Garden of Stones* (1976), *OK Mister* (1979).

## **Educational Program**

### **Guided Tours of the Exhibition**

Guided tours of the exhibition are offered to universities, schools, and community centers upon appointment.

### **Tours for the General Public**

Every Wednesday and Friday at 12:30pm

Duration: 1 Hr

To schedule a tour email [cynthia.issa@beirutartcenter.org](mailto:cynthia.issa@beirutartcenter.org) or call (01) 397- 018.

Free entrance

### **Workshop**

A two-or-three-day workshop will be organized in the framework of the exhibition. Topic, participation conditions, dates, and fees will be available soon.

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**Hours:** Tuesdays through Fridays, 12:00 to 8:00 pm and Saturdays and Sundays, 11 am to 6 pm

**No Admission Fee**