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Rania Stephan's THE THREE DISAPPEARANCES OF SOAD HOSNI (Lebanon/Documentary)

Starting at 7pm on Thursday, October 15, the film will be available to view on Block's Vimeo page for a 24-hour period; RSVP [here](#)

It's a tale as old as time. A beautiful woman is at first revered—her attractiveness, usually concurrent with youth, a virtue worthy of admiration. Then, as she ages, though often before, cruelty comes into the mix, by way of physical violence, sexual exploitation, and emotional malice, all wielded against her like weapons. Finally, after the admiration and persecution comes the forsaking, the woman relinquished to time, almost as a sacrifice to our collective apathy. This describes both facets of systemic oppression against women in society (especially those in the entertainment industry) and the loose structure of Lebanese video artist Rania Stephan's found-footage video essay about Egyptian movie star Soad Hosni, once known as the Cinderella of Egyptian cinema. Soad was prolific, appearing in 82 films between 1959 and 1991; images from her films comprise Stephan's unconventional chronicle of the Arab bombshell's life. (Hosni passed away in 2001 after falling from a friend's balcony in London; mystery shrouds her death, some believing it was suicide, others murder.) Stephan culls footage from VHS tapes of Hosni's films, creating a tactile quality to the video that emphasizes the star's corporeality. Sporadically manipulated and shrewdly edited, the work is a revisionist biopic as well as a historical epic; it reflects the trajectory of Hosni's life and the ever-changing society in which the films were made. It's divided into three acts, with a prologue and epilogue, and the meanings of these delineations are ripe for interpretation. The first part includes clips from films in which Hosni plays younger, more naive characters; the second features Hosni as more sexual characters; and in the third, she plays older, wary, and thus more maligned characters. On a cinephilic level the footage is thrilling, as Western moviegoers likely don't have access to most of the films sampled. (A 2008 article written on the film at *Bidoun.org*,

when it was still a work in progress, explains that the source material was “culled from cheap, pirated videotapes procured from suburban Cairo street stalls,” and that, at the time of writing, Stephan had tracked down 70 of Hosni’s 82 films.) It’s also something of a mini-archive centered on Hosni, about whom there’s no authorized account. Stephan elucidates in the *Bidoun* article, “There’s no official biography of her, only gossip from trashy magazines. She’s dead, so she can’t tell her own story. And she dedicated her life to cinema and never had a private self. It was as if she burned herself into the film when Egyptian cinema went down the drain. She was stuck. She was stuck in her image.” The saturation effect of Stephan’s video mimics this idea; through repetition, we see how Hosni the person becomes lost in Hosni the character. In general there’s more going on that meets the eye in Stephan’s maximalist editing. Catherine Russell, in her book *Archiveology: Walter Benjamin and Archival Film Practices*, writes that it’s “a parallel version of... history, in which excerpts of Hosni’s films serve as Bakhtian ‘utterances’ that point to a collective memory, particularly regarding the ‘sexual and sartorial mores’ and how they changed over three decades of Egyptian modernism,” referencing the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, whose theory applies in that the work’s editing is, to quote Bakhtin, “anonymous and social as language, but simultaneously concrete, filled with specific content and accented as an individual utterance.” (Here, it’s the language of moving images that is “anonymous and social,” rather than language proper.) The concept of ‘disappearing’ is significant to women in general and in the Arab world specifically; as Russell notes, “Stephan’s film underscores [Hosni’s] refusal to actually disappear forever,” from our memories, from history, and from cinema. (2011, 68 min) **[Kathleen Sachs]**

Followed by a pre-recorded discussion between Rania Stephan and Hannah Feldman, Associate Professor of Art History at Northwestern; registration at the link above is for both a link to the film and to the Q&A.