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Spatial Practice in a Post Disaster City: Learning from Beirut

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1.0 Overview

This report summarises the findings from our RIBA funded research project into spatial practices in a post-disaster city. The project explores some of the practices that emerged in Beirut after the 2020 explosion in the city's port. Focusing on four port-adjacent neighbourhoods in central Beirut – Achrafieh, Gemmayze, Mar Mikhael, and Karantina – we investigate social and spatial tactics that were developed by local stakeholders and community groups in response to the port explosion, and discuss if they can be translated to other social and geographical contexts.



Destroyed architectural structures, post-blast. Credit: Rami Rizk

2.0 Context

On 4 August 2020, Beirut was hit by one of the biggest non-nuclear explosions in recorded history. The blast, which originated in warehouse 12 of the Beirut Port, killed more than 220 people, injured over 6,000, and caused damages to the built environment of upwards of \$15bn. An estimated 300,000 people were displaced. Our research trip was timed to coincide with the 3-year anniversary of the disaster. No one has yet been held to account for the blast, nor has a formal investigation begun. Indeed, the authorities seem to be delaying any investigative measures, to the frustration of many Lebanese people. The three years since the blast have been characterised by a political vacuum which has highlighted and further exacerbated tensions happening elsewhere in the body politic, often with connections to the Civil War which ended in 1990.



Footage filmed at the moment a massive explosion rocked Beirut at the port of the Lebanese capital on 4 August, 2020. Credit: AFP.

The blast is only the latest crisis in a series of crises that have beset Lebanon in recent years, including geopolitical crises (the 1978 Israeli invasion, the 1982 Israeli siege of Beirut, the 2006 war with Israel, the Syrian occupation (1976-2005), the Syrian civil war and the arrival in Lebanon of large numbers of Syrian refugees), economic crises (the recent hyper-inflation which has beset the Lebanese economy, the collapse of the Lebanese pound), as well as political crises (the failure to elect a President since November 2022, and a general erosion of political legitimacy), health care crisis (the severe impact of the Covid-19 virus), and ecological crises (a variety of climate-related issues such as the increase in uncontrollable forest fires).

2.0 Context

In this context, our project discusses three overarching types of spatial practice, developed in response to the blast:

A. Immediate relief

In the aftermath of the Port blast, and in the de facto absence of the State, individuals and collectives sprang into action to provide relief to their communities. We explore what Beirutis can teach us about the relationship between care, built form, and social cohesion in the context of urban disasters’.

B. Longer-term care

Multiple forms of longer-term care have emerged since the Port explosion. We explore what Beirutis can teach us about the relationship between care, built form, and social cohesion.

C. Political mobilisation

Beirut’s built environment has held an important role, historically, as vehicle and vector for protest movements. We explore what Beirutis can teach us about the built environment’s role as a driver of processes of societal recollection, political mobilisation, and future dreaming.

Our research shows that these practices came together in the surveyed neighbourhoods to form a complex patchwork of mutual aid, resilience, and protest. Developed by local communities and individuals, these practices arguably are particular to Beirut. In its concluding remarks, the report discusses if and how these practices can be transposed to other spatial and social contexts.



Volunteers clear the rubble in the Gemmayzeh neighborhood of Beirut on Aug. 7, 2020 Credit: AFP

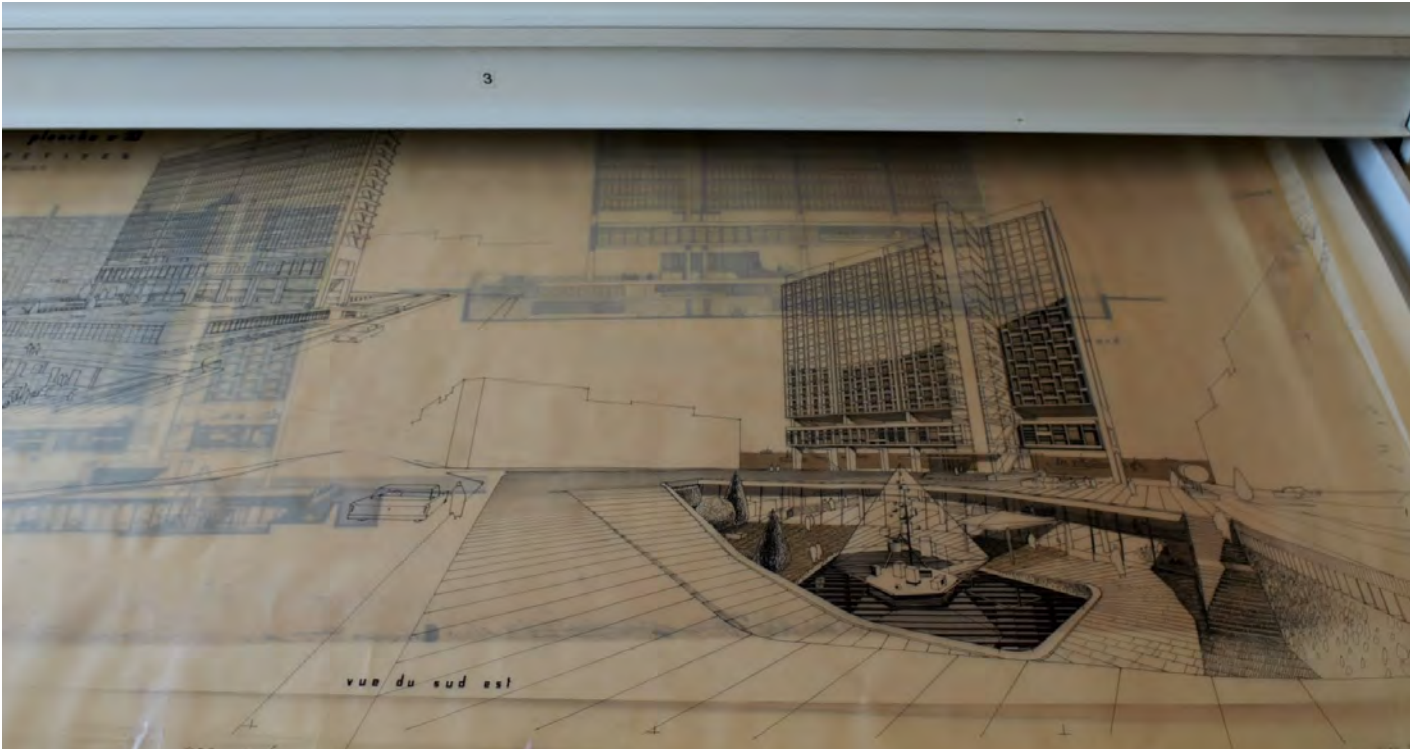
3.0 Approach, Outputs & Dissemination

We have taken a grounded approach to this project. While we had some notions about what the research might touch on when we set out, we have been guided by the data – mainly qualitative – that we gathered in the lead-up to the research trip and in the two weeks spent in Beirut during the first part of August, 2023. In the months prior to the trip, we reached out to stakeholders through our personal and professional networks, to set up consultations with people involved in the response to the disaster; the mix of respondents is discussed below. In addition to gathering preliminary insights, we engaged in consultations to ensure i) that our research would be timely and not duplicate existing research projects, and ii) that we would speak to relevant people – whether architects, planners, heritage experts, activists, artists, or community organisers – once in Beirut



Archival research at the Arab Centre for Architecture. Credit: Fadi Yeni Turk.

3.0 Approach, Outputs & Dissemination



Archival research at the Arab Centre for Architecture. Credit: Fadi Yeni Turk.



A day of filming in the Achrafieh, Gemmayze and Mar Mikhaïl neighbourhoods of Beirut. Credit: Aude Azzi.

3.0 Approach, Outputs & Dissemination

As such, our methodology has evolved to suit the opportunities that our initial consultations revealed. It has also been dictated by events beyond our control. While we initially had planned to develop workshops with local stakeholders, we found that it was impossible to convene larger groups of people during our trip due to the time of the year: August is the holiday season in Lebanon, and many Beirutis leave the city for the mountains or the coast. This prevented us from bringing people together for one large workshop, as we had otherwise planned. We nevertheless felt that it was important to be in Beirut during the anniversary, as this represented a timely moment to engage with stakeholders still in the process of overcoming and interpreting the disaster. Thankfully, we were able to engage our respondents on a one-to-one basis, through filmed interviews, audio interviews, and walking tours – including visits to the port and surrounding areas – and by attending the memorial ceremony convened on 4 August, the day of the blast.



August 4th 2023 Protest. Credit: Aude Azzi

Our research has yielded several outputs, including: interviews with local stakeholders (film, audio and transcribed copy; please see appendices), photography, archival- and ethnographic research. In terms of outcomes, we are confirmed to give lectures and seminars at the following British architecture faculties: Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design (3 seminars confirmed for the 23/24 academic year), London School of Architecture (1 public event confirmed for March 2024), London Met (1 seminar confirmed for January 2024), Manchester Metropolitan University (1 seminar confirmed for February 2024). We are also in talks with the LSA and CSM about screening our film at events open to the wider public. Further, we are exploring publishing our interviews in *Ephemera*, a leading academic journal relating to politics and organisation.

4.0 Local Stakeholders

We engaged with the following local stakeholders during our research:

- + Aia Atoui, Artist and DJ
- + George Arbid, Co-Founder of the Arab Centre for Architecture
- + Hussein Kazoun, Founder of Nation Station, a local community aid distribution centre
- + Charbel Maskineh, Architect and Assistant Professor at the Lebanese University
- + Mona Harb, Professor of Urban Studies and Politics, American University of Beirut
- + Mayysa Jallad, Musician
- + Mariam Daher, Student
- + Adrian Pepe, Visual artist
- + Deen Sharp, LSE Fellow in Geography & the Environment
- + Lamia Joreige, Visual artist and filmmaker
- + Marwan Rechmaoui, Artist

We furthermore worked with the following journalists and editors:

- + Fadi Yeni Turk, Journalist and director of photography
- + Tariq Keblaoui, Filmmaker and editor

We deliberately engaged with a mix of architects, academics, planners, artists and journalists, as we wanted to cover a range of spatial practices, capturing insights in a way that could support facilitation to a wide audience after the trip. We would like to thank all stakeholders and collaborators for their contributions to our research. Without their insights and generosity, the project would not have been possible.



Mapping research at the Arab Centre for Architecture. Credit: Fadi Yeni Turk.

5.0 Insights

This part of the report collates high-level insights from our research. It is intended to act as a resource for other urban communities managing an acute crisis or disaster, although the mix of practices will invariably differ from place to place. We have divided insights into three categories of spatial practice: Immediate relief; Longer-term care; Political mobilisation. These are listed in the table below, and discussed in more detail over the coming pages.

PHASE	TACTIC	OUTCOME
PHASE 1: IMMEDIATE RELIEF	Support the community by setting up a local aid distribution and information hub	Creates a space for immediate care for the community
	Use campaigns to coordinate relief and reconstruction efforts	Supports rapid, bottom-up disaster response
PHASE 2: LONGER-TERM CARE	Use archival materials to ensure reconstruction is mindful of built heritage	Ensures that local character is considered during the reconstruction phase
	Use cultural programming to unlock longer-term care and prosperity in the community	Supports community well-being through local, educational programmes
	Explore opportunities to rationalise the urban grid in the aftermath of the disaster	Creates better connectivity to the benefit of communities
PHASE 3: POLITICAL MOBILISATION	Question the politics of commemoration through community-led action	Supports a critical evaluation of the causes of the disaster
	Use narrative and non-figurative art to charge the political imagination	Creates a space for imagining alternative futures

Table 1: Spatial practices for a post-disaster city: crisis relief, longer-term care, political mobilisation.

5.0 Insights

5.1 CRISIS AND IMMEDIATE RELIEF

The people we consulted with during our research revealed two overarching types of immediate crisis relief: one relating to community aid, and one relating to the reconstruction of the built environment. In Beirut, the post-disaster relief did not come, predominantly, from the State, something which has been taken as indicative of the potential complicity of senior politicians in the events leading up to the blast.¹ While the wider political landscape in Lebanon is not the primary concern of this report, the absence of the State – and the possible reasons for this absence – is relevant to note, not least because it meant that community groups, and International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) had to do a large part of the reconstructive work, whether this concerned crisis relief to injured and traumatised communities, or surveying and reconstructing destroyed structures. As such, the nature of the spatial response was heavily informed by the political situation.

5.1.1 Support the community by setting up a local aid distribution hub

The morning after the blast, a group of people in Achrafieh set up a grassroots disaster relief organisation in a disused petrol station, naming their aid distribution hub ‘Nation Station’. The political vacuum, already a reality prior to the blast – but further exacerbated by the disaster – was a mobilising factor for the group. ‘Lebanese people’, says Hussein Kazoun, one of the founders, ‘have to help each other out in the absence of a functioning state.’² Nation Station initially focused on the distribution of medical relief and food, however it has since become a more diversified operation providing support to the wider community in Achrafieh and surrounding neighbourhoods.

Having a local spot that people could find – and which they could depend on – proved critical to local efforts of reconstruction and support, and the impact of the hub has been impressive. In the first year after the blast, Nation Station distributed 41,000+ hot meals and 19,000+ aid kits. They also supported 350 patients in chronic care, and aided with the reconstruction of 142 houses. With the situation in Beirut stabilising, they have looked to use their expertise elsewhere. Drawing on the experience of setting up aid distribution in Beirut, the team has replicated this method in Syria and Turkey in the aftermath of a large-scale earthquake which struck in 2023. As such, their work provides a useful example of how sharing spatial practices across urban- and national boundaries can help inform on-the-ground efforts during crises.

¹Investigative journalism has uncovered evidence that suggests knowledge of the explosives in the Port at the very top of the political hierarchy of the Lebanese political establishment. Cf. Lebanon: The ghosts of Hangar 12 - L'Orient Today (lorientlejour.com).

²Quoted in <https://www.npr.org/2020/08/27/905811376/after-beirut-blast-lebanese-volunteers-deliver-relief-the-state-fails-to-provide>

5.0 Insights



Nation Station set up August 2020. Credit: Nation Station

5.0 Insights

5.1 CRISIS AND IMMEDIATE RELIEF

5.1.2 Use campaigns to coordinate relief and reconstruction efforts

In the absence of the state, and faced with considerable destruction to lives as well as the built environment, large groups of people rushed to the streets in the aftermath of the blast to clean up the debris and support communities. “You saw thousands of young people, mostly in the streets, trying to help in whatever they could”, says George Arbid of the Arab Centre for Architecture. “They came from Beirut and from outside, cleaning the streets, taking the rubble away, helping the elderly or other people, people with no means. Just basic survival actions. [...] I saw many people who were simply there to try to help. They would propose their help. ‘What do you need? Do you need a car to bring whatever? I would go and do it. You need furniture. I will give you my furniture. I'll give you that.’”³

As a first wave of post-disaster relief, this type of support is critical. It enables communities to establish some degree of order in the chaos of an unfolding crisis, and furthermore builds or consolidates social solidarity between people under extreme pressure. However, uncoordinated individual efforts tend to be inefficient because resources and logistics are managed in a suboptimal way. Campaigns, facilitated by social media, can be a useful way to anchor and streamline such efforts while furthermore providing communities with a sense of agency.



Volunteers clean rubble from the streets following blast.
Credit: Aziz Taher



Volunteers help with the renovation of a Beirut flat belonging to an Armenian family.
Credit: Anwar Amro

³George Arbid, testimonial from interview with Athar Collective. Please see film in chapter 6

5.0 Insights

5.1 CRISIS AND IMMEDIATE RELIEF

This is what *Beb w Shebbek*, a local community group, did in the aftermath of the blast. Their campaign sought to rapidly reconstruct doors and windows destroyed by the blast – the name means ‘doors and windows’ in Arabic – thereby enabling displaced people to return to their homes sooner than would have otherwise been the case. “We couldn’t just sit there knowing that 300,000 people had been displaced”, says Mariana Webbe, co-founder of *Beb w Shebbek*. “We felt a sense of duty to do something to help these innocent people [...] Although reconstructing buildings was something beyond our capabilities, we realised that we could at least repair the doors and windows of shattered homes to get them to look – as closely as possible – to how they did before the explosion”.⁴ According to Hussein Kazoun, campaigns also played an important role for Nation Station:

We started a campaign. We called the people that we know from artists that have big names, big following, a brand of a close friend. So we gathered our forces. Some of us raised money, others used their spaces for storage and we helped them to work sustainably. So that's what it looks like as a whole. I feel like, for me, Nation Station is like we do anything that we can in the moment of crisis and it moves from the neighbourhood approach to helping people anywhere.⁵

In both instances, online campaigns allowed for the rapid mobilisation of community members – whether architects, artists, carpenters, glaziers, painters, etc – around a common, if emergent, set of objectives. This in turn provided a sense of purpose and direction, bringing a degree of order to an otherwise chaotic situation. While social media cannot replace on-the-ground action, it can nevertheless enable it: the online world supporting the reconstruction of the offline one.

5.2 LONGER-TERM CARE

The next set of spatial tactics relate to the longer-term care for communities and the built environment. As such, they are distinct from the practices deployed in the immediate aftermath of a disaster – although some overlaps inevitably exist – and are focused on reestablishing a longer-term equilibrium in the community as well as the built environment after a disaster has happened.

5.2.1 Use archival materials to ensure reconstruction is mindful of built heritage

One of the challenges related to the longer-term care of the built environment is the issue of character. Even when it comes to non-heritage assets, what George Arbid calls ‘B series buildings’, there will likely be an architectural style developed over time in a given neighbourhood, whether that relates to the materiality of the buildings, the way they meet the street, how they meet the sky, etc. While that style does not necessarily have to be reestablished one-to-one during reconstruction, it is important that construction efforts are cognisant of it as heritage and character can support and reinforce a sense of civic pride among communities. Archival materials play a key role in ensuring local character is respected while buildings and public realm are restored. They have been the

⁴ Quoted in *Beb w Shebbek's Mission to Fix Beirut's Broken Homes* - [Lebanon Traveler](#)

⁵ Hussein Kazoun, testimonial from interview with Athar Collective. Please see the appendix for the full interview

5.0 Insights

5.2 LONG-TERM CARE

bedrock of the approaches taken by the Arab Centre for Architecture (ACA) in their collaboration with stakeholders who do not know the local character such as INGOs. George Arbid explains:

We wanted to work on what we call the B series buildings: the normal, mundane buildings of the city that may not be considered as heritage but in fact constitute about 90% of the city. We made a call for colleagues, architects and some students and went on and surveyed these buildings. [Drawing on archival materials as well as survey results] we produced sheets on many of these buildings and put them at the service of those who wanted them. We were asked by the UNHCR to advise them and the associations working with them on what to do. This was important because you could not obviously make mistakes with the heritage buildings as the expertise is there. The respect you have for those buildings is almost natural. But it calls for a certain kind of attention when it comes to a concrete building with the normal wooden shutters or steel shutters or what have you. You think that you can do whatever because they don't have a known character and they are not acknowledged as being important for their time or having any value besides the square metres.⁶



B-series Buildings Credit: Athar Collective

⁶George Arbid, testimonial from interview with Athar Collective.

5.0 Insights

5.2 LONG-TERM CARE

The sheets that George Arbid refers to have since been collated in a manual which is available for download on the Arab Centre for Architecture's website. In addition to detailed sections on materiality and character, the manual also includes a list of craftspeople and a mini dictionary translating built environment terms from the English into Arabic. The centre also delivers online lectures on concrete preservation and how to restore woodwork, and they organise site visits and walking tours to support the reconstruction effort through the development of a grounded knowledge of local character.

5.2.2 Use cultural programming to unlock longer-term care and prosperity in the community

Following the immediate response in 2020 and 2021, Nation Station has transitioned into an organisation whose aim is to develop sustainable operations and programmes through outreach. Their goal is not only to support the community in Beirut but to empower them by giving them the means and tools to operate on their own, for instance through setting up a regularly occurring farmers market. Hussein Kazoun explains: 'The farmers market is twice a week and we give local traders the space and promote them on social media. The farmers come from several places around Lebanon in order to sell their products. We are basically cutting short the distance between the producer and consumer.'

In addition to supporting local trade, Nation Station has also been looking to develop skills in the local community, including sewing and printmaking. 'At some point', says Kazoun, 'there was a sanitary and hygiene pads crisis in Lebanon because [these items] became too expensive. So we launched a project to raise awareness about reusable pads and it worked really well. We also taught project participants how to design and fabricate tote bags for the Beirut Marathon. Some of them are now autonomous and have their own business which brings us to the question of sustainability. When you become sustainable, it means you've crossed a line which is not humanitarian, it's more of a business and something [that is in itself] sustainable without [requiring] help from abroad.'⁷

5.2.3 Explore opportunities to rationalise the urban grid in the aftermath of the disaster

A third spatial tactic for longer-term relief plays out at the scale of the urban grid. It relates to the exploration of opportunities to further stitch together communities through spatial integration of neighbourhoods. As such, the shock of the disaster is used – in a respectful but purposeful way – to improve the quality and connectivity of the urban realm. In Beirut, the main post-disaster opportunity related to the port: an industrial site from which most Beirutis were cut off before the blast, not least because of the spatial severance created by motorways separating the city and the port.

⁷Hussein Kazoun, testimonial from interview with Athar Collective. Please see the appendix for the full interview

5.0 Insights

5.2 LONG-TERM CARE

Discussing this opportunity, Charbel Maskineh, an academic with the Lebanese University, writes:

The reconstruction and rehabilitation efforts following the devastating August 4 blast present an exceptional opportunity to redefine the dynamic between the port of Beirut and the city itself. Given the substantial areas of the port that are no longer required for logistical purposes, a visionary approach can unlock its potential to serve as a catalyst for urban revitalization and community development. The process of reintegrating the historic neighbourhoods entails the reestablishment of physical and conceptual connections between the port and the adjacent historic areas, thus reinstating their historical interdependencies and revitalising their collective activities and functions. The primary goal of this reintegration is to enhance the relationship between the port and the surrounding city by identifying and leveraging various urban elements. Through meticulous analysis, comprehensive data collection, and inclusive public engagement, these elements can be strategically employed to foster a symbiotic relationship that supports the sustainable development of both the port and the historic neighbourhoods. By capitalising on their shared cultural heritage, historical significance, and functional synergies, the integration of these urban elements can contribute to the overall social, economic, and cultural well-being of the city and its inhabitants.⁸

Naturally, efforts to rationalise the grid in the aftermath of a disaster must have the political legitimacy that can only flow from widespread popular backing. Such efforts must therefore not be commenced until considered engagement with communities has taken place. As noted in regards to individual buildings, the role of historic knowledge and archival material can help guide this process of grid rationalisation.

5.3 POLITICAL MOBILISATION

The final set of spatial practices revealed by our research relates not to immediate or long-term relief following a disaster, but to the forward-looking mobilisation of political thinking to support the (re)constitution of a functioning body politic. An important part of this work relates to the careful analysis – and in some instances: rejection – of totalising narratives created or commissioned by the political establishment to explain or contextualise the disaster in question. In the case of Lebanon, where one disaster seems to cascade from the previous one, there is a particular concern for holding the political class to account for the multiple crises that have beset the country over the last 50 years. There is a pronounced scepticism about narratives seen to sanitise or depoliticise the causes for disasters, and a corresponding interest in the active development of critical counter-narratives through artistic practice. As such, this final set of insights relates to the politics of commemoration and how spatial practices can nurture new political imaginaries.

⁸Quoted in: Reimagining the Port-City Relationship: Transforming Beirut's Port into a Vibrant Urban Hub (Charbel Maskineh & Hala Younes)

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5.3 POLITICAL MOBILISATION

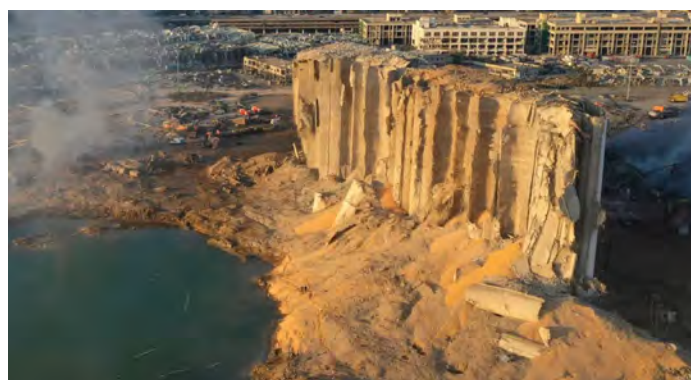
5.3.1 Question the politics of commemoration through community-led action

The epicentre of the blast was in warehouse 12 of the Beirut port, where explosive-grade ammonium nitrate had been kept in storage for years. Due to the simple fact of their positioning, located between the warehouse and the city, two grain silos adjacent to warehouse 12 absorbed a significant portion of the blast as the explosion happened. Built in the 1960s, these structures had played a largely unremarkable role in the recent history of Beirut, merely facilitating the humdrum business of grain commerce. However, during the blast, the silos – through their sheer bulk and mass – were able to shield parts of Beirut from the explosion. They thereby provided Beirutis with the protection that their political class had failed to afford them. In the time since the blast, this passive, protective act has been infused with symbolism by local communities: on the anniversary of the blast, families gather in front of the silos to commemorate their lost ones. As such, the silos have taken on the form of a kind of materialised grief, a spatial anchor for mourning, reflection and healing.

On 16 March 2022, the cabinet of controversial Prime Minister Najib Mikati⁹ announced that the silos – the northern part of which had partially collapsed – would be demolished. This decision was quickly challenged from many sides. Farchakh Bajjaly, a specialist in endangered natural heritage sites, called the demolition ‘a purely political solution to say that the explosion never happened. Without material evidence, one can falsify data and narratives and, little by little, modify the memory’.¹⁰ A group, which calls itself the Silent Witness campaign, has formed to challenge this decision and preserve the silos. The campaign characterises the demolition plans as ‘an attempt to erase the symbol and witness to the tragic accident’. ‘These silos’, they continued, ‘and what they represent, socially and politically, constitute for us and for a lot of Lebanese men and women, not only the witness to the crime of the century. These silos also still hold the blood and remains of our loved ones. We consider that the existence of these silos, in a city that hasn’t yet healed, and at a time when the authorities clear policy is to hide the truth, obstruct justice, stall the investigation, and facilitate impunity, is a must. The preservation of the silos is mandatory so that the monument can remain as a witness to the extent of Beirut’s pain and the sufferings of its inhabitants.’¹¹



Collapsed northern section of the Beirut grain silos
Credits: Issam Abdallah



The destroyed silo sits in rubble
Credits: AP

⁹According to Forbes, Mikati is the richest man in Lebanon with a net worth of \$2.8 billion. He has been subject to multiple corruption accusations over the years.

¹⁰Quoted in [L'Orient Le Jour](#)

¹¹Cf <https://www.change.org/p/the-silent-witness-the-solidarity-campaign-to-protect-the-beirut-port-silos>

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5.3 POLITICAL MOBILISATION

5.3.1 Use narrative and non-figurative art to charge the political imagination

The Lebanese State's attempts to control the post-blast narrative are however not confined to erasure of facts. It has also taken a more proactive approach, constructing its own narratives to help shape the political imaginary and quell dissent. Since the blast, a series of commemorative sculptures have been commissioned by the State. These tend to be structured around narratives of resilience, often drawing on the figure of the rising Phoenix (thereby connecting the present travails of Beirutis with Lebanon's supposed Phoenician past). These sculptures have been met with wide-spread criticism, and the narrative of resilience decried as calculating and fundamentally invalid. Having suffered through multiple crises, many Beirutis no longer want to be resilient. Rather, they want things to break so that the otherwise entrenched political elite can be swept out and a new, more equitable and stable political order emerge.

At the same time, Lebanese artists have been moved to express their emotions – running the gamut from grief and disbelief to disgust and outright revolt – through artistic practice. As if rejecting the didactic symbolism underpinning the Phoenician sculptures, many seek to move beyond overly codified forms of expression through the use of spatial and non-figurative kinds of practice. These artworks often draw lines back to the Civil War; another historical disaster whose memory has been obscured by the State. One artist who works with the notions of memory and repression is Lamia Joreige. Over the years, she has worked actively with the materiality of the city of Beirut, involving into her practice both the traces left in the buildings by conflict and trauma, and the traces that built form in turn imparts to communities. Discussing her artwork, *Objects of War* (1999-ongoing), and reflecting on the cultural impact of the war and the blast on Beirutis, Joreige told Athar Collective about the power of fragmented, personalised narratives in the face of state-sanctioned repression of traumatic events:

[When I started work on *Objects of War*], I was very inspired by a film by a Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa. The film is called *Rashōmon*, where you have a murder and rape, and every protagonist tells the story from their own angle. I understood that maybe if we cannot have common history and one truth, then let's try to also underline that aspect. And it doesn't mean that we shouldn't tell stories. It doesn't mean that we shouldn't speak about the war because this is what happened with the political parties disagreeing on the version of the war. This is not taught in school and still until today, they can't agree to decide what happened. We have facts [but they are disputed]. So my idea is not to give facts. You can find them in newspapers, you can find how many people died and where the explosion happened and who fought who. But it's really more about the narrative. The narrative [is what is] important.¹²

¹²Lamia Joreige, testimonial from interview with Athar Collective. Please see the appendix for the full interview.

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5.3 POLITICAL MOBILISATION

Another artist who has been working with mnemonic practices through the prism of Beirut's built environment, is Marwan Rechmaoui. Over the years, Rechmaoui has created replicas of some of Beirut's ghost structures – such as the never completed Burj el Murr, or the Yacoubian building whose use was fundamentally changed by the war – which are still present in Beirut's cityscape, still bearing witness to the horrors of the civil war. He has also developed artworks exploring the morphology of the city's street network and the taxonomy of street names, thereby extending his analysis from the building- to the urban scale. When the blast happened, Rechmaoui was preparing works for a new show. The artworks were stored at his gallery which, located 900 metres from the blast site, was devastated by the blast. After the explosion, Rechmaoui went to the gallery and recuperated around 600 kilograms of metal from the destroyed wall structures, and compressed them into 34 monolithic elements; 'a memorial', he says, 'to crushed lives, futures and memories'.¹³ In their stela-like form, these elements offer an almost complete rejection of the formal expression of the Phoenix sculptures. Rather than instantiations of an idealised mythology, they reject figuration referring instead to the arduous process of reconstruction. 'The work', Rechmaoui told Athar Collective, 'was not about the explosion. It was more about putting things in order again'.¹⁴ According to Rechmaoui, it also offers a counterpoint to the 'bullshit' narratives perpetuated by the State.



Marwan Rechmaoui, Gallery 6.08, 2020, Exhibition view, Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut, 2021 Credits: Sfeir-Semler Gallery

¹³Quoted in <https://www.sfeir-semeler.com/galleryartists/marwan-rechmaoui/work>

¹⁴Marwan Rechmaoui, testimonial from interview with Athar Collective. Please see the appendix for the full interview.

6.0 Film

One of the main outputs of the project is a film which we have produced together with Fadi Yeni Turk and Tariq Keblaoui. It was shot during our stay in Beirut, in August 2023 – predominantly in the neighbourhoods the report focuses on: Achrafieh, Gemmayze, Karantina, Mar Mikhail – and also includes some archival materials provided by Fadi and Tariq. We thank them for the opportunity to include these materials and for their support.

We chose to work with film specifically for the medium’s immediate communication qualities which we thought would enable us to reach a larger audience than, say, print. This has proven to be a fruitful approach, as we have been invited to deliver film screenings at various built environment faculties over the coming year. We also include clips from the film in our seminars and lectures, thereby making the recordings a solid workhorse for our practice. We include a link to the film below for readers of this report to review should they wish to.

Clip 1: [The Arab Center for Architecture and its Archives](#)

Clip 2: [The archive as temporal anchor](#)

Clip 3: [Post Blast Reconstruction](#)

Clip 4: [Two Models of Reconstruction](#)

Clip 5: [On remembering and forgetting](#)



The Archivist as Activist

A film by اثر Athar Collective
Aude Azzi & Frederik Weissenborn

7.0 Concluding Remarks

In this report, we have summarised insights gathered during our research into the spatial response to the 2020 Port Blast in Lebanon. As discussed in the methodology section of the report, that includes on-the-ground research in Beirut during the days before and after the 3-year anniversary of the blast, as well as extensive desk-based research and consultations in the lead-up to that trip. We have furthermore stayed in touch with the many of the stakeholders since our trip. We hope that we can nurture and grow this community of practice in the years to come and develop further projects relating to the built environment in the Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) region.

Throughout this process, we have worked across different registers – the individual (craftsman, architects), and the collective (community groups); the small-scale (doors, window frames) and the large-scale (the urban grid); the material (medicine, food, construction materials), and the immaterial (symbolism, artistic practice) – exploring these in their own right all the while bringing them into contact with each other. As such, this report covers a lot of ground, even if in other respects it only scratches the surface. More than anything, this is a testament to the ingenuity with which Beirutis have responded to the 2020 disaster, under conditions that can only be characterised as challenging. This report is dedicated to them.

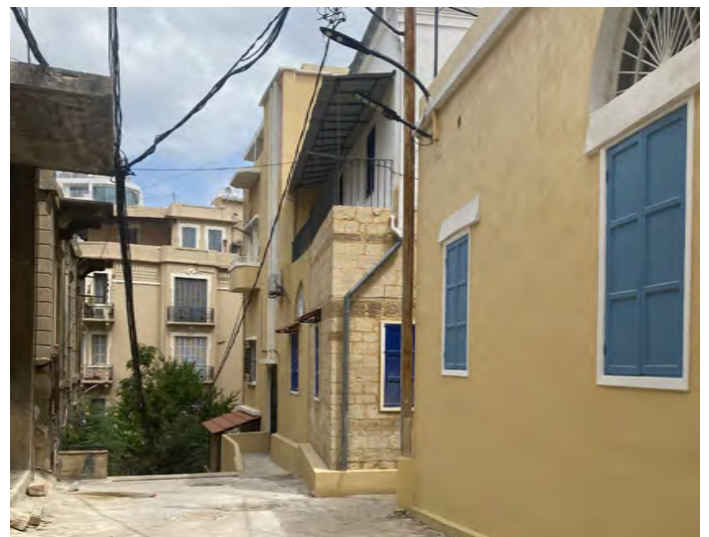
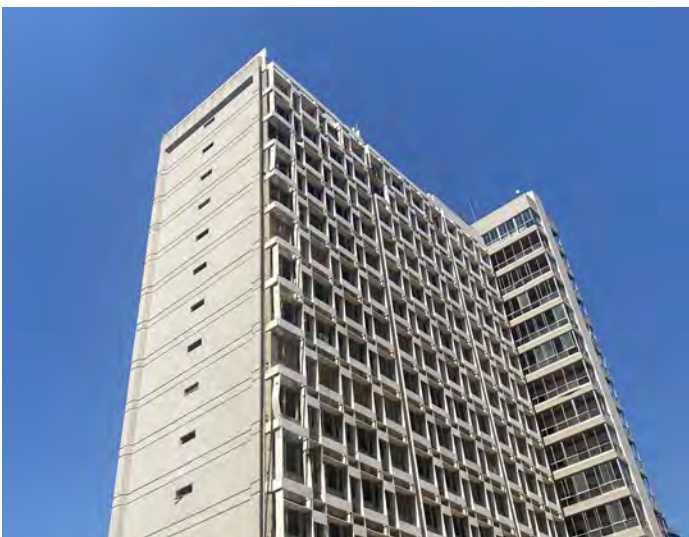
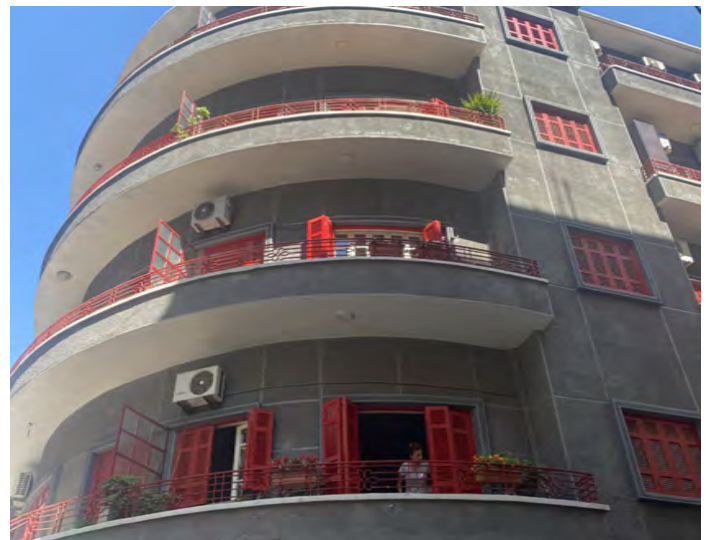
For all our efforts, and despite the important insights provided by our contributors, it is nevertheless clear that a list of tactics like the one we provide in this report cannot be exhaustive. It will not be possible to use the insights captured here in other locales without prior analysis and translation. For that, each disaster is too unique – too rooted in its own historicity and geography, too implicated with local power structures and social mores – for the response to be replicated one-to-one. We therefore see this research project as a first attempt at mapping spatial tactics from one city, Beirut, and will be looking to explore further such tactics in future. We hope that the insights discussed here can add themselves to a growing body of literature.

As the world warms, with all the attendant disasters – ecological, humanitarian, political, and cultural – it is clear that a new vocabulary and tactical skills must be evolved that relate specifically to disaster response. While we despair at the environmental processes that are now locked in – and the political and geopolitical events that they will no doubt lead to – we nevertheless hope that this report can contribute to this emerging discourse and to the future resilience and emancipation of communities across the globe.

Appendix A

7.1 PHOTOGRAPHS

Selected photographs taken in August 2023 during our research trip



Appendix B

7.2 RECORDED INTERVIEW

During our time in Beirut in August 2023, we interviewed: Hussein Kazoun, Lamia Joreige, Aia Atoui and Marwan Rechmaoui.

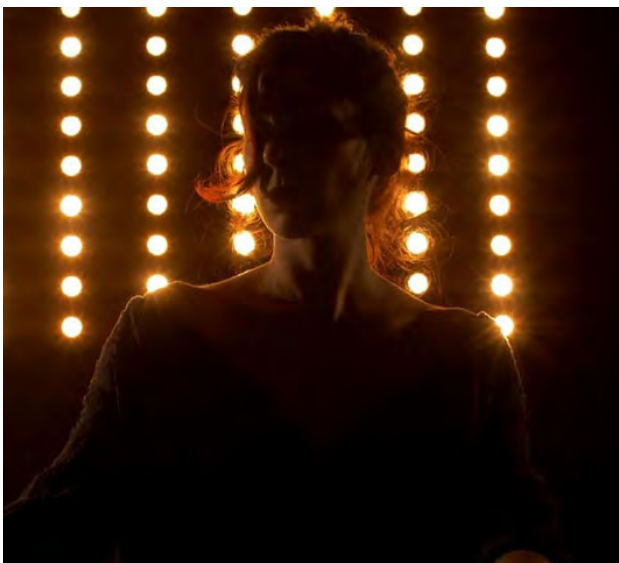
The following pages are the transcripts of these interviews.



Hussein Kazoun



Lamia Joreige



Aya Atoui



Marwan Rechmaoui

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Interview with Hussein Kazoun (Co-founder of Nation Station)

August 2023

About:

Nation Station is a grassroots initiative in an abandoned gas station in Geitawi providing sustainable community empowerment.

Athar Collective [AC]:

You mentioned that you live close to this gas station. What did this space mean to you before the blast? Did you plan to use it prior to this event?

Hussein Kazoun [HK]:

Two years prior to the blast, I always thought, I must do something here. And it was not for humanitarian reasons but more for a business plan. You know, I walk my dog here, we used to play ball. But otherwise, yes, it was always on my mind. This is how I feel about all the things I have done in my life, the businesses, etc...I feel like it's an accumulation of knowledge that you get from everywhere. And I jumped a lot from my studies to businesses to just doing different things. I feel I regrouped everything I knew at each instance and put them in one place.

AC:

Can you tell us about the reaction of the owner of the gas station after your efforts?

HK:

He saw it on TV four, five days later not knowing what was going on. He came and was like, who are you guys? I'm like, Who are you? And then he's like, I'm the owner of this business and why didn't you ask for permission to use the space? We didn't ask for permission because do you see what's happening around you? And from there, he came around, we started seeing what we're doing and he liked it. So he gave it to us for free. And that's been the case since.

AC:

How are you finding the rate at which things are changing since the blasts? We talk about the absence of a state, but also you clearly have a political presence in the area. If you look at the Habib Debs Plaza project that has been stuck because of political influence. Have you found similar instances in the case of Nation Station?

HK:

I mean, I don't think we stepped on people's toes that much because we didn't build anything. At the time people were too caught up with what's happening in the country to come and see what these kids, for them, are doing. Following that, we built trust with the community, so by the time things settled down, it took more than a year to settle down; I think they didn't have a problem with our presence and that was okay. And just to be more accurate, I'm pretty sure some of them didn't like us. They tried to apply pressure in some ways, saying Why are you giving food to Syrians? Or you're only helping foreigners and not helping Lebanese people. And it was always a fight about trying to explain in the beginning that it's only fair that humans are humans and they all need help. Racism is Racism, for them you shouldn't help Syrians, for them

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Syrians are already helped by the UN and are in a better situation than Lebanese people. They don't want them in Lebanon in the first place. That's the situation in mostly Christian neighborhoods. So this situation settled down because we kept our ground. These were arguments with big political leaders but we never really backed down. So then they started seeing that it's not true, we're not only helping Syrians but we're helping anybody we think needs help and so they did try to apply pressure, but not in the same way. You know, there was a smart way of making them feel like if they stopped us, then they would be stopping help to others. We had 5000 people coming for help.

The station used to be completely dark at night so just adding light at night made the difference for the community with some saying It's so good that you guys are here because now there is light when we look out from our window, like we see the street. After that we got involved with multiple projects like solar power for lights on all over the street, not just at Nation Station, the whole street.

AC:

How long does it take for you to implement these projects? What are the main challenges?

HK:

The first problem is receiving funding. The first couple of weeks we didn't have a bank account, so it was difficult to get funds, but now that we have a bank account, it's all about who we work with and if we get the grant. Then it becomes about you and how you use the funding.

AC:

How does Nation Station operate with the clinic?

HK:

The clinic is 2, 3 minutes away from the gas station. There is always someone at the door that would give the community information. But it's funny because it was never someone with experience in that field or that used to dealing with people with trauma, it simply is always very human rather than expert.

I think experienced people have more strict answers, they might already have an answer on what someone would need, they anticipate their needs. Here it would take more time to speak to the person, it would be more tiring, but it's more humane. But it also does not work in our favor because you give people the benefit of the doubt and that you realize they were lying about the situation the whole time.

AC:

You mentioned that you work with farmers to help them sell their produce here and are also doing workshops with women to teach them how to sew. Can you tell us a bit more about that?

HK:

The farmers market is twice a week and we give them the space and promote them on social media. The farmers come from several places around Lebanon in order to sell their products. We are basically cutting short the distance between the producer and consumer.

As for the woman learning how to sew, it's not just sewing, it is printing. At some point there was a sanitary and hygiene pads crisis in Lebanon because they became too expensive so we launched a project to raise awareness about reusable pads and it worked really well. We also taught them how to design and fabricate tote bags for the Beirut Marathon.

Some of these women are now autonomous and have their own business which brings us to the question

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of sustainability. When you become sustainable, it means you've crossed a line which is not humanitarian, it's more of a business and something sustainable without receiving help from abroad, without making business.

AC:

Can you tell us about the work you were involved with in Syria following the earthquake in February 2023?

HK:

It's impossible to train people to prepare for this and we don't want to replicate what we had to do with Nation Station somewhere else. But when the earthquake happened in Syria, for some people in the team, it was like the closest thing that happened to us since the blast, similar scale of destruction and the same feeling as a whole. For some of us, it was like it's our duty to help but not be completely implicated. So a group that was similar to Nation Station group when the blast happened which was Syrian Eyes They are a group of people that also are not signed or don't have legal papers because they are working under the table and the situation in Syria is much different from Lebanon. So we decided to help them. So we started a campaign. We called the people that we know from artists that have big names, big following, a brand of a close friend. So we gathered our forces. Some of us raised money, others used their spaces for storage and we helped them to work sustainably.

So that's what it looks like as a whole, I feel like for me, Nation Station is like we do anything that we can in the moment of crisis and it moves from the neighborhood approach to helping people anywhere.

AC:

From your experience, what can we learn from the Lebanese community?

HK:

I feel like the Lebanese community has been proven over and over that they don't have any power against the politicians. So we were always tamed by this idea. So we had to either fall into a box with one of the political parties, or not be involved whatsoever. And then when the revolution happened in 2019, we realized that more and more people thought the same way.

It was not a revolution per se. It was more like a wake up call for a lot of people. You know, there is a community that agrees and that doesn't want this anymore, that wants change and wants change for the country. But it's just stopped here. But it didn't it didn't lead to anything.

I think it helped projects like Nation Station happen. It would have been more difficult without the 2019 uprising because we had already seen the power of unity and see. So definitely it helped people regroup easier than they used to before.

AC:

So that's the first step towards change

HK:

I don't think the revolution in Lebanon happened overnight. I don't think anywhere in the world revolutions happen out of nowhere... It's like an accumulation of events. And that was the first. And I would say that the second was the reaction to the blast. The reaction to the blast also played a role.

So I think the struggle is to accept where you are, just like anything in life. You have to accept things how they are. You have to work with what's with what's there. I would never be able to do what I do with my

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life anywhere. It's the sense of community that you have here. In Lebanon you have space to imagine, to do things, to ask people for help. Where do you find this? I've never seen it anywhere else. I have lived around Europe, also in other Arab countries and I've never seen.

AC:

Do you have any future plans for Nation Station?

HK:

We keep going as we are and if we can create new projects that make sense at the time when it's needed, we will keep doing that.

AC:

Would you ever think of relocating?

HK:

Only if we're forced. There's an emotional attachment to this place. I think it would be more like corporate openness to something else, more like an NGO.

AC:

You often mention that this isn't an NGO. Why?

HK:

There is a negative connotation to the NGOs and how they function and don't feel like it because we never came from a background in NGOs. We came from completely different backgrounds. It's more human. It's more grassroots than anything. Today it's less grassroots because there's more donors. We have to report things. But deep down diffused in the sector, we're still the same people. It's just we need to abide by some laws

AC:

Do you think this new mode of governance that you've put in place here can be at some point related to politics in Lebanon? Is there some sort of collaboration? Is there a need to go into politics, into municipality?

HK:

In an ideal world, the role of Nation Station would stay the same and the politicians would deal with communities like us to support us and know more about what is needed in the neighborhood.

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Interview with Lamia Joreige (Artist)

August 2023

About:

Lamia Joreige is a visual artist and film-maker who lives and works in Beirut. She earned her BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design, where she studied painting and filmmaking. She uses archival documents and elements of fiction to reflect on history and its possible narration, and on the relationship between individual stories and collective memory. In her practice, rooted in her country's experience, she explores the possibilities of representing the Lebanese wars and their aftermath. Her work is essentially on time, the recordings of its trace, and its effects on us.

Athar Collective [AC]:

One strand of our research is looking at the role of memory in Lebanese culture and the way that different artists and journalists work with memory. We spoke to George Arbid the other day who in his own way mobilizes an archive to try to influence the way the built environment evolves. So this is one strand of our research and the reason why I suppose we're here today. So I guess the first question is: If you could tell us a bit about your work and what you're working on these days and then also the role that memory memorialization amnesia plays in the way that you conceive to live your work.

Lamia Joreige [LJ]:

Okay, So I started my practice in the mid-nineties, and as someone who grew up during the war, partially in Lebanon, partially abroad, in Paris, there was always this need to recount this experience. Most artists from my generation who were practicing in the mid-nineties dealt with issues that were related to that experience in different ways. But I find it absolutely normal because what else are you going to talk about after such a tragic experience, but also that is rich in terms of human experience. For me, it's not like I was working on the war, but it's more like the experience of the war has led me to think about certain ideas of representation, certain ideas of how to relate to history, what kind of forms can emerge from this kind of experience. In the beginning of my practice, I collected a lot of images, filming with video in Beirut that was transforming in incredible ways; the roads were changing, the circulation decreased, the reconstruction with Solidere project in which we were meant to be critical of, but nobody could do anything. It was hard to actually counter this kind of project.

So to record these traces of the buildings and of what was happening with the transformation of the city were important. For instance, in one of my first projects called the Displacement, it was a lot of images taken from these videos that had to do with the transformation in Lebanon. It was 190 images, excerpted from some videos. And then in another one in 1997 called Untitled 97 2003, I used videos and the layering of these distorted video material to almost abstract it and to remove the representation of this destroyed building to a point of almost bordering abstraction. Untitled 97 had two projections of the same film coming on five panels of plexiglass, three of which were sanded and this was a sort of metaphor about the layering of memory and how when something crosses and is projected, with time with layering, certain things, varnish, other things still appear. It was a sort of media and device to express the mechanism of memory.

This was my first installation presented in the solo show in Beirut in 1997 along with a series of paintings that I wouldn't show today if I wanted to be true to myself, but were my set of paintings that I've done for my degree in painting and film. I had studied painting and film, and these paintings were also related to the

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city and to the expression of the devastated city. They were also questioning this relation between figuration and abstraction. So already in 1998 I was obsessed with this idea of oral histories and of rendering visible discourses and experiences, subjective experiences of the war.

I was interested in the human aspect of these experiences, but there was an amnesty law where warlords gave themselves amnesty of their crimes. By creating this law supposedly to prevent revenge, they actually were no longer accountable, therefore, everybody accepted this matter of fact, there was no possibility of reparation, there was no possibility of accountability and they exchanged their war suits and became ministers and members of parliament. They started to take power by putting their people in the key position, which actually leads us to where we are today. For me it is a result of that moment because this corruption, this system which also relied on sectarianism, relied on nepotism and on corruption made it impossible to have a collective consciousness and a common history.

So this idea of grand history, of collective history, of something that we would share was impossible. Therefore, my project Objects of War was a sort of a failed attempt to reach a truce or a grand history. So I knew it was a failed attempt, but I wanted to work on this notion of collective memories by accumulating testimonies. I asked various people from different social backgrounds, different religious backgrounds and even different citizenships, to choose an object that for them was very personal and reminded them of the period of the war. Based on that object, if they could unfold their personal story and, and the objects were incredible because some objects were playing cards, photographs, a perfume flask, a guitar, a photograph of a hero, an identity card that half of it was lost, a Walkman, a radio, so many stories unfolded. Some were extremely analytical, others were extremely emotional. Some are still contemporary today when you hear them.

Objects of War started in 1999. I released a video along with the object as an installation in 2000, and then I continued the project in 2003. I recorded other series in 2000 and 2004 and it's not excluded that I will continue

At the same time I was thinking a lot about the question of truce and the notion of relative truce. I was very inspired by a film by a Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa. The film is called *Rashōmon*, where you have a murder and rape, and every protagonist tells the story from their own angle. I understood that maybe if we cannot have common history and one truth, then let's try to also underline that aspect. And it doesn't mean that we shouldn't tell stories. It doesn't mean that we shouldn't speak about the war because this is what happened with the political parties disagreeing on the version of the war. This is not taught in school and still until today, they can't agree to decide what happened. So we have facts. So my idea is not to give facts

You can find them in newspapers, you can find how many people died and where the explosion happened and who fought who. But it's really more about the narrative. The narrative was the most important. This is how I came to a project on the Disappeared. My uncle was kidnaped in 1985, my mom's brother, as he was crossing the checkpoint.

For us it was a drama, like a very important drama. We were all very close and the family with my three cousins and his wife and for years and years, I saw my grandmother, I saw my mother, I saw his

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daughters and his wife, searching for the truth without being able to find it because there was no real proof of what happened. Nobody was found.

The same thing happened with over 17,000 disappeared. Some were kidnaped, others were killed on the spot, but their bodies were never found either. We really don't know what happened. So I decided I wanted to make a film about the Disappeared, but the film was also supposed to border fiction by going in the street and asking the inhabitants what happened.

Do you know of anyone who was kidnaped here? Maybe I would emerge different stories out of which maybe a character that is not real would emerge from these different rumors. This was the idea to create this sort of docu fiction. But when I went to the street and I started filming in 2002, the amount of dramas that happened and that I was able to record was so big that I dropped the fictional element. I felt like it would be an imposter or it would not be possible. Therefore I decided to follow a map from the harbor. So from the sea until the suburb of Beirut. The map would follow what used to be the green line, the line dividing east and west Beirut and to go across the various neighborhoods, east and west and ask the inhabitants the same question in the performative way. And so I walked for three weeks with a camera and a sound person interrogating the inhabitants and recorded their reaction in the immediacy of my interview, actually, because I was not prepared. So for me, what was interesting was a mechanism of memory where they could remember what they could, not what they wanted to tell. Well, some people refused to talk.

And this is symptomatic also of the political context then, because you had the game power between the political parties was different than today. So if I was to film this today, I would have different answers and the idea was that ten years had passed, almost 11 years have passed since the official end of the battles but the war was still present in the language

So my interest was how to record this performance of memories through language and this is how I divided the project of doing a fiction based on the rational, but which would have been set during the war in Lebanon, became one documentary, 54 minutes documentary called Here and perhaps Elsewhere and a short fiction story of the same title.

AC:

I wanted to ask you about one of your artworks which I also think relates to this relationship between the trace that we leave materially through individual activities or cultural activities and then the absence that we talked about now, and it's a work that you produced for the National Museum.

LJ:

So after that phase where I felt that I needed to address directly, the war and the narratives of that period, I drifted to some works that were taking a distance and starting to approach that topic in a more conceptual way, which didn't mean that wouldn't produce a tangible object, but that may be something that...this urgency of dealing with or the history and the recording of the actual testimonies was no longer there. I was away from this urgency and I could, I could start to research different ways. I was commissioned by the Sharjah Biennale to do a work and I wanted to start a project based on different locations in Beirut and dig into the histories of these locations.

After I did the Beirut autopsy of the city, which had to do with a possible disappearance of Beirut in 2010, and this, we will go back to it because it had to do with the apocalyptic sort of prediction of Beirut.

After I did this, which had to do with the history of Beirut for thousands of years, I wanted to do

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something that was more specific to locations. So the idea was that if I dig like an archeologist into the various layers of its history, what kind of forms would emerge and what kind of stories would emerge? And so the idea of the palimpsest was predominant. This is why I called the project underwriting Beirut.

The first chapter was in the neighborhood where I live, the idea was to look at the neighborhood and its history. It was created in the fifties. How does this neighborhood evolve? What happened during the war, etc.?

Very quickly, I got interested specifically in the museum. The National Museum has a stunning collection. It's a very beautiful building, a very beautiful collection, and a very beautiful museum. And so my place, which is not where I live now, was even closer to the museum. My window overlooked the museum and I started researching and I had already used in the Beirut autopsy two objects that had melted due to a bomb that had fell on the museum, and there was a fire and some of these objects had melted.

And I had used photographs of this object and I wanted to research more. So I started to talk to the director of the museum and she told me, if you have any specific objects from the storage, I could show it to you. But if not, it would be hard because you're not an archeologist.

So it was a bit like the egg and the chicken because they didn't have an index. They didn't have a list, and I didn't know what to do, how to approach it. They had the magazines of the museum and photographs. So I was struck by the history of the museum during the war when the director and his team protected the museum by pouring concrete over the sarcophagus and he literally installed an entire room to create a space that was invisible, where objects would be concealed from the militiaman.

The only object that they were able to show me before it became public was a mosaic of the Good Shepherd. And this mosaic had a hole made by a sniper. And there was an archival photograph of the set up that the sniper had made where he installed his set up to be able to look at the Madhaf roundabouts or crossings. So where the museum is located is where the most important checkpoints were located, dividing east and west Beirut. People went for hours trying to cross from one side to the other. And so I decided to take the measurements of that.

The mosaic of the Good Shepherd could not be protected by concrete because it was vertical and not horizontal and this is how the sniper was able to create a hole and the museum had decided not to conceal the hole, to leave a trace. It concealed it only from the outside to prevent wind from coming inside, but from the side which is inside the museum, I had access to the wall, so I measured it and I did sketches, then I asked the 3D designer to create a 3D model based on it. And then from that 3D model, which we fine tuned, I decided to create a mold. And then from that mold, I poured concrete to create the trace of the void left by the sniper. So it's really for me, it's almost like a direct imprint of a war of the war trace, which is a void. So it's like the negative of the void. I wanted to do it in concrete for the reason evoked earlier which is that the director used concrete to protect the object, and also because concrete is what was used in the in the modern architecture and the construction of the museum was made in the late thirties or forties, inspired by neoclassicism and a bit of Egyptian art, a bit of everything.

For me, the use of concrete was symbolic in its use. In architecture it is seen as a sign of modernity,

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but also because this is what the director and his team has used to protect the object during the war. Along with the object, I always show the sketches, the archival photographs of the set up of the sniper, and the two sketches

I made and accompanying so the work can be shown alone. But sometimes I also show with it. I mean, most often when I show the entire installation, I have a photograph which includes all the object of the museum that was visible in December 2012 when I went to visit the museum because I could not access the storage, I decided to take it literally and to index all the objects that were visible from their labels. So the photograph is actually it encompasses to the museum. It's like a scan of the museum historiography. And at the same time there was a lesser book called All Objects Missing from the National Museum, which emphasized the fact that some objects were looted, some objects had disappeared, etc...And then you also had a pinhole. from my window overlooking the museum for maybe a few months. I took almost every day a photograph made with a pinhole camera of the view of the museum, which renders a black and white image that looked a bit haunted. And look, it looked a bit like something that merged the past and the present in one in one image. And finally, I also had a video that reenacted the point of view of the sniper. It's called 180 degrees Garden View, and it actually is just a pan on the garden of the museum, imagining the point of view of this sniper so that the whole installation is called underwriting Beirut mathaf.

AC:

You mentioned that the reason why the impression was made or the damage was made to that particular mosaic was because of its location, which is at the intersection of the most important green line. And in one of the most important buildings in Beirut during the war. So I think that leads me on to my next question, which you alluded to before, which is the role of Beirut as a city in your life both in terms of the architecture and in terms of the urban scale

LJ:

I was always obsessed about the representation of Beirut. My first project of displacement was not just about exile, it was about displacement in Beirut and how the roads were transforming and how sometimes your sense of trajectory would shift. But the one where I felt I finally got a physical sense of the city was when I walked for three weeks doing the film Here and Perhaps Elsewhere, because when I was a child my parents didn't let me walk in Beirut like I wanted. And then when I was a teenager, I would come back here. It was a war and we would not be in Beirut. We would not come to Beirut anymore. So when I came back as an adult and started to work as an artist, I was obsessed about this idea of appropriating space with my own body and trying to understand it and still until today, it keeps changing.

It is rare to see a city changing so much to the point of not recognizing places. Downtown where Solidere has done the project is something really shocking to see such a transformation. But in terms of spaceand I wouldn't say architecture, but more urbanism, in one of my recent projects, which I made in 2017 speaks a lot of this issue. It's called Under-Writing Beirut — Ouzai. So still digging into one of the locations: the first one was the National Museum, the second one was the river. Actually, the river was a neighborhood where I worked and co-founded Beirut Art Center with Sandra Dagher and this is the eastern suburbs of Beirut.

And I was very interested in the river as a place that was suspended because it no longer acted as

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a river. And it was not yet a project because there were a lot of projects made by architects and urbanists. Some were theoretical, some were absolutely ultra capitalistic, and wanted to erase all the neighborhoods around the river and build some kind of towers, like Dubai and others wanted to plant gardens and do an ecological project as if we were in another in an idealized setup.

But I started to be interested in the river and its social history. And I did a project called Under-Writing Beirut—Nahr . When you deal with the river, you deal with the history of Beirut, because Beirut grew and expanded through its harbor, the river didn't affect the city like the Thames or the Seine. The river is almost like it's dry most of the year and because of the war, you had the massive displacement of population first from the south of the country and then they moved to this eastern suburb and it created what Samir Kassir called a Belt of Misery.

It really became like some of the poorest neighborhoods around it. And then some of these people who had already been displaced from the south were displaced again in the southern suburb of Beirut because of the sectarian war. So they were displaced twice.

I did a series of drawings and a video installation in relation to that space. I would say the installation after the river deal was a sensorial geography and the social history of the river and that specific neighborhood, where you had factories in the sixties and is now totally being gentrified.

So when we created the Beirut Art Center in 2009, you still had two factories working and you had no one living there. Nobody was living there. Now you have many buildings that have been created in the last ten years. it's totally been gentrified and the river is still dry. And they were built with a promise of maybe some kind of project around the river for some of them and sold for quite a lot of money.

So this is one aspect of how my work dealt with space and Beirut. And then the third chapter was Under-Writing Beirut — Ouzai , the southern suburb of Beirut. Why? Because in a feature film that I filmed in 2011 and released in 2014, that had to do with Beirut, where five characters were filmed playing themselves, improvising their life in Beirut. One of them (Firas) lived in Ouzai and this character who became a friend of mine, through him I was able to interview his family and friends and to film in this area, which is now controlled by Hezbollah. This area until the sixties was a sand dune and you only had a few families among them Firas's grandfather or great grandfather who established himself in the fifties and later on, because of the war and because of the massive displacement of the South, because of the Israeli attacks, and also because for social reasons, a lot of people moved and like I said, they moved to the eastern suburbs first and then moved to the southern suburb where they start to build in an irregular way, informal constructions, there was no planning. There's only one ax that goes from Beirut to the south, which was a road that was clearly planned. The rest was informal. So the streets are almost created informally. It's not that there is a plan. It's like the anti Haussman.

I was very interested in this because Ouzai encompasses all the problems of contemporary Lebanon: Displacement, Sectarianism, overurbanization. The population density now is so large, the conditions of life are very complex. You have people who have the means and of course you have a lot of poverty and really informal constructions that are built by pouring concrete, building a few walls and then it becomes a matter of fact . You do that and then overnight you build a roof and then it becomes a matter of fact. Then you have a cousin or family that moves, you build another floor and then it becomes a three storey building. And so I started to be interested in the stories of people

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there. Of course, it's a totally biased history of Ouzai.

I made an installation of drawings and text, the sculpture that was based on Google Earth, but also my friend's memory of this place. The sculpture is one piece of metallic alloy that is poured in the process of sand casting. It's like a piece of jewelry but in fact, it takes from these different streets that I talked about, it expresses a kind of completely chaotic way of the streets and the constructions.

I did a series of photographs based on a year in missions from the Army between 1956 and 1990's along with Google Earth. I worked with a graphic designer. I made this overlay image that speaks of the transformation from a sand dunes to an overpopulated area.

AC:

I was interested in the way you describe how you root your practice sometimes anyway, in the presence of your body in space. And that's the point of departure for some of your artworks. And we're here talking to you today on the 3rd of August 2023. It's the day before the 4th of August, which is the day of commemoration of the blast in 2020 in Beirut. It's also a day where many Beirut people have come out physically with their bodies into space to protest or to memorialize what has happened. As a final question, I wonder about the tactics that you've employed as an artist. Do you see some of those tactics as being useful in processing and kind of trying to come to grasp the tragedy that we had in 2020? And do you see other artists working in that way?

LJ:

I don't know. Sometimes I feel like there's a new generation of artists that will deal, I think, in a very different way. I could see this when the uprising happened in 2019, how fast there were a lot of people doing videos immediately on Instagram or things that were done a bit fast.

I'm usually wary, including myself, about producing artwork and the immediacy of an event. I find it an approach that likes distance and critical distance and I think a practice needs to mature and develop.

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Interview with Aia Atoui (Artist)

August 2023

About:

Lebanese Artist

Athar Collective [AC]:

Aia, We're here today to talk about your artwork that you produced together with Anthony Sayoun in the aftermath of the 2019 protest and also, I suppose, related to the 2020 port blast. Or, in a way, that became part of the story and evolution of the artwork. But also we're here to hear about the work that you're doing now and work that you are planning on doing in the future. So hopefully we can have an interesting conversation. I wanted to start by asking you about the genesis of the Ghost Opera. Is that what you call it?

Aia Atoui [AA]:

Yeah, I mean, we do call it the Ghost Opera, but its title is Shabah El Rih, which in Arabic literally translates to 'the Ghost of the Wind'. But in English we've translated it to 'Second Wind', which is this sort of genesis experience of the rebirth of Lebanon, or the second wind of Lebanon post everything. When we actually worked on the piece and came up with the concept it was before the blast even happened. It was because everybody on the streets during the uprising in 2019 were going into these public spaces and they were reclaiming them. And we thought 'Holy shit, this is great. We should go into these spaces and intervene and do something here'. So the Grand Theater and the Egg were two very predominant spaces in that area that were frequented quite a bit during the uprising.

AC:

And do you want to just tell us for the audience who might not be familiar with the kind of geography of Beirut, where roughly are we in Beirut with the grand theater and the Egg? which neighborhood in Beirut are we in?

AA:

Sahat al Shohada Downtown. This is the space for the martyrs. That's what Shohada means 'martyrs'. So we went into that space quite a few times, particularly the Grand Theater, knowing full well that this space had not been occupied since the Civil War in 1975. It was occupied by the military. The snipers were in there, but not much else was happening outside of this. We decided that we wanted to give the people, during the uprising, an experience where they can come and see a performance for the first time since the Civil War. So ultimately we'd be the first generation post-Civil War that comes and experiences some sort of show in that space. A space that was heavily known for some of the most prestigious operatic experiences, or musical experiences, within the Arab region or theatrical experiences, really. And it was mostly occupied by the elite. Ticketing was pricey. People who couldn't afford it couldn't really go. The people who couldn't afford it would sort of be on top of the Grand Theater looking down to see whatever shows they wanted to see of Fairuz or Oum Kalthoum, all of the greats, sort of performing in there. And so [during the revolution] we went in there saying how beautiful it was to see everybody from all classes go into that space and be able to dance in there and do whatever they wanted in there. And we wanted to be able to facilitate that experience by working with the opera piece that we did. It was meant to be a live experience, but it took

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us a very long time to record the opera singer that we were working with, and work on the entire piece in and of itself, because there was a lot happening in the city with regards to, you know, the [political and economic] collapse and the pandemic, and a bunch of different things, and this made it very difficult for us to facilitate the experience inside of the space. Also on top of the fact that the space was not particularly the most safe space needed to build the experience. We had to take a lot of precautionary measures in order to do this. So by the time we actually finished filming the entire video of the opera, the blast had happened and we put it on pause for a while and then we reignited working on it because we had been working on it for a very long time and we thought this would it would be a complete waste not to keep going. And so we finally finished it and we decided to put it out as a video because the pandemic was there at that point. And that's when we contacted Nowness and NTS Radio and decided to work with them on trying to not just work with, you know, facilitating the experience for people in Beirut, but also making it, you know, kind of sending out a message internationally. If we could. This was not this was not what we wanted to do, but it kind of happened that way.

AC:

I'd like to go back to the beginning of the artwork and the team that you assembled to produce it. You and Anthony are the directors, and then there was a team of artists and filmmakers that was supporting you. Did you all know each other before the protests or was the protests in a way a part of you coming together as a group?

AA:

We did [know each other]. We were all good friends ahead of that time. So ultimately recruiting the team was really easy because we all knew one another and we were very comfortable with working with one another, especially because, I mean, this was more of a contribution basis type of work as opposed to any of us getting paid to do it. We were all doing it for free and everyone believed in it. So this was great. There was an established trust with the team.

AC:

So the artwork itself, you briefly outline its evolution and the way that you collaborated with international media organizations on distribution of the artwork to a wider audience, which is something that maybe we can come back to as well. But I wanted to just explore in a bit more depth, if we can, the kind of the structure of the artwork itself. If you could describe what the artwork was and its evolution. And also why you made some of the artistic decisions that you made throughout that process in terms of the selection of music, in terms of the selection of formats, that would be really interesting. So if you could describe to us the artwork, what it was, and then run through some of the creative decisions that were really helpful.

AA:

Yeah. So ideally for me working ... At least because I was born and raised in Dubai and I was constantly doing site specific work in Dubai as well. And I always saw myself coming back to Beirut to do something site specific. I just didn't know it would be this directly political. And, I mean, ideally for me, 'site specific' works in a way where you go into the site itself and then the site tells you what to do with it. And the Grand Theater did just that in that there were a lot of moments we went into the space and experienced its ontological, sensory narrative that existed in the space. You could feel things, you could hear things, you could see things. It certainly facilitated your imagination quite a bit because it was stripped to its bare skeleton. So it's a very potent space to go into and listen to. And, I mean, you know, this idea of the curtain

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in a theater, you know, it kind of works in that setting very well. There's this idea constantly that we pull back the curtains and we see the performance. This is the fourth wall being broken. And we wanted that symbol of the curtain being the predominant thing. But, you know, we didn't want to go with the thick sort of velvety red curtain. We wanted to go with something a little bit more ethereal, in that it gave a bit more of a hauntological tangent. It made it more tangible, the hauntological experience. We wanted people to come into the space and see this holographic sort of ghost in the space belching the opera. And so that's why we went with this very thin organza material that easily moves with the wind. And, you know, the elements we worked with were the fabric and the wind. And we wanted the wind to sort of like give the fabric the language and move the piece and sort of project the image of the opera singer on the fabric in order for her to kind of get this sort of dysmorphic feel and that you couldn't really identify her features full well, in that she looked like the same person throughout the entire opera. She kind of changes as the curtains are billowing. But the whole point of the aesthetics is that you're there to experience more than just visualize. You were supposed to be there to experience the wind and the emotionality of the space and the music sort of floating in and out of the space as well. So ultimately, this was why we set this paradigm in particular for the piece, but it ended up becoming a video which, you know... I don't want to underestimate the cinematic aspect of it. It's important. But for us, we built what we thought was going to be a very tangible experience because the idea was to have people in there. Experiencing a sensory narrative. And so that's why it was rendered this way in the video. I think initially, if we knew that this was just going to be a video, I don't know, maybe the aesthetic would have changed entirely. Maybe I'm wrong, but the potency of this was meant to be this way because I wanted it to be an installation that was experienced.

AC:

So you've talked about the way that space itself – this is the Grand Theatre – how it kind of suggested certain pathways for you to follow as a collective of artists and how that led you towards this kind of 'ghost opera' where you have a projection of an opera singer projected onto a billowing sheets, which is animated or agitated by fans. So that's kind of the setup. Do you want to tell us a bit about the music that you selected and what that kind of adds to the overall experience and meaning of the artwork?

AA:

So Anthony and I were big listeners of Wagner. We had talked about Wagner way before, we talked about the opera. We talked about 'Tristan and Isolde' in particular. And so it seemed only fitting that we went with this because the piece that we ended up choosing – Liebestod [from Tristan] – was very much emblematic of our experience in Lebanon in particular. You know, we did talk about this sort of violent optimism that we so often ... I mean, at least Anthony and I spoke about quite a bit with regards to Liebestod that existed in that piece was very much so. And it exists in parallel in the revolution for us as well. You know, where Isolde in the operatic pieces is actually over Tristan's body and she's singing and resurrecting his body and there's this sort of like delirious, almost optimistic view of him coming back to life and all of these things. There is this experience that was on the streets, you know, during the uprising where people were constantly singing and resurrecting the ghosts of Beirut and Lebanon at large, not just Beirut, but resurrecting something in its entirety, in its whole. Which was both beautiful and delirious and violent. And all of these things sort of mixed together. Which, you know, which sat very well with this piece that we chose for Wagner. And so that's why we chose that piece in particular, because we wanted to address the second wind, we wanted to address the violent optimism that we were all experiencing, we wanted to address the delirium of change. General change, change for the good, change for the better, which doesn't necessarily happen For us, we understand that it's a catalyzing process, right now, coming forward away

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from the uprising. It's a slow process, but during the uprising, the delirium and the violent optimism was pushing for a capitalization process that was needed and that people wanted to see change immediately. And so that's why we chose that. Because that voice was there in the Liebestod: the immediate resurrection of Tristan.

But also this was cross-pollinated with our concern for choosing Wagner, who, you know, is notably supposed to be the precursor to Hitler. Rumor has it that Hitler has played his pieces in the gas chambers and all of these things. And we talked about all of this. We were very concerned. And I was even told not to use it, not by Anthony. Anthony and I were on the same page but there were other people who were wondering why we would pick Wagner. And in general, all opera is fascist. And I understand where all this is coming from, for sure. But for me in particular, it was really important to look at the aspect of the human condition in the operatic piece that we chose, in that it's a tragedy at the end of the day. And even if it was written by the demon himself, the demon himself can go through a particular tragedy that we can all relate to. And also we were fighting certain paradigms in Lebanon that we were trying to release ourselves from. You know, these people, like Solidere, gave us the space, these public spaces like the Egg and the Grand Theater and all of these things. And we're using the medium that these people have given us in order to facilitate a more beautiful experience. To alchemise the experience. And so what I was thinking and when we were talking about this, me and Anthony, it was the idea of alchemising the darkness into something beautiful. And a lot of the time this comes from tragedy. And, Wagner may have had to have been that darker aspect that we were trying to alchemise. Even if his reputation was a dark reputation, this was the place of the alchemization, where we started in order for us to become something, to look at something in its darkness fully and bring it to another light completely. And so, yeah, I mean, I don't ... This was not a political decision in the first place. I didn't look at Wagner and I was like, 'I want to choose Wagner because he was the precursor to Hitler'. No! I chose this piece because I absolutely adore this piece. Anthony and I absolutely adored this piece. And Anthony absolutely saw himself re-adapting it. Then came all the comments, and then we had to address those comments. How were we going to talk about why we chose this piece, outside of the fact that we love it? Because people want to hear more. They don't want to hear that we just love it. They want to hear everything else.

AC:

That's really fascinating about the sort of subsequent history of how Wagner's been interpreted with respect to various regimes, including the Nazi regime in Germany. And it's interesting that you've had to kind of integrate negative feedback based on that into the way that you position the work. I wanted to ask you, though, more specifically about the kind of musicality that Wagner has and the way that that, let's say, resonates with the work. So I think Wagner in general is associated with this kind of all-encompassing experience of being enveloped in the music. And Tristan, in particular, is an example of that. We know, of course, the Tristan chord, which by many is seen as the kind of foundation stone almost of modern music. The bridge between, let's say, baroque music and the kind of modern classical music of today. But the Tristan note is really a note of confusion and discombobulation. Being lost in a fog. Not being able to kind of orientate yourself, but also being slightly swept away, almost in a druggie, narcotic sense. Is that something that you sort of see in [environmental noise]... So yeah, this kind of narcotic quality, let's say, of Tristan. Is that something that you were interested in for the artwork and is it something that you can see kind of integrating with the phantasmagorical element that you are kind of evoking through the billowing sheet and the ghost opera experience in general?

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AA:

I mean, it wasn't really the premise of the work in particular. It wasn't something that was thought about. But I think with respect to the experience we were trying to give people was sort of like... You know, you were in the space and you kind of are catapulted out of your experience knowing what Beirut is. So, you know, you I mean, maybe there is an altered state experience of... So yes, I think there is this sort of like altered state experience and being in a space that, you know, you knew was supposed to function in a particular way. You know it was a space that was functioning for the elite and that maybe you wouldn't have been able to afford to go in there and see these beautiful performances and experience these transcendental experiences through Tarab, for example. Tarab music which translates to transcendence. And we come to this space now in order to give you another experience that helps you transcend the paradigm of what it means to live in contemporary Beirut right now, with all of these abandoned spaces. You have to be kind of unhinged to go into a space like that and curate a particular experience that allows you to imagine. You know, you have to be a little bit in an altered state to curate that type of experience. And in order to be in it. To accept it as well.

AC:

In a way, I suppose you're also reanimating the spirits of those spaces, right? So you mentioned that the Grand Theatre hadn't been in use since 1975. So you come back to that space as a way of reanimating it, I suppose, I mean, almost in the way that Isolde sort of tries to reanimate Tristan in Liebestod. So do you see in a way, the practices of the artists is also the practice... So the practice of a site specific artwork and the artists that produce it. Do you see that as a kind of activism? Thinking about the way Lebanon more broadly and Beirut has been kind of politicized over the last couple of decades.

AA:

I don't particularly consider myself an activist. I don't think I've done enough work in that area of trying to, you know, move particular things in a direction. I've not done it enough to even call the opera an activist, sort of, experience. I think elements of it are there. Yes, for sure.

We're trying to have a conversation that helps people see things in a different way. But also at the same time, one of the reasons we were having a hard time making this happen on time was because, you know, people were self-immolating on the streets and... I mean, there was a lot happening. And so this was one of the predominant reasons. And for me, the question lies more in 'when is it appropriate to release something that, you know, started out as an artistic endeavor'? Even if it is political, even if it addresses certain, you know, darker paradigms that you're living in within the city that you reside in. When is it appropriate?, Because ultimately it doesn't have the direct functional purpose of helping or facilitating betterment directly. It doesn't do that. It does other things. Moving the imagination is not something that everybody wants to experience when everything is collapsing. Some people just want to sleep. So I don't think it's particularly... I couldn't call it a sort of activist thing. I could, I don't know. I don't know what it would be. I really don't know. Couldn't tell. But not fully activist.

AC:

Okay. So just a couple of more questions, if I may. So we're obviously speaking today in the context of the anniversary of the 2020 Port explosion, which had a huge impact on Lebanon, had a huge impact on Beirut, both in terms of Beirutis that sadly lost their lives, Beirutis that were displaced, the built environment in Beirut. It's now three years since that explosion. And there's a number of artworks that have cropped up in the public realm since then. And I know that some of them are perceived as being quite

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problematic, because of their links with the political elite. But on the other hand, I suppose they are trying to commemorate something that was a huge event, a tragic event, in recent Lebanese history. So I was wondering, in your experience, in your opinion, do you see a kind of a politics of memorialization that's relevant to the way that these different artworks are positioned, and as an artist how do you relate to the 2020 port Blast?

AA:

Oof, loaded question! I think everybody's consciousness sort of shifted after the port blast and that— our organs were moved internally, you know what I mean? Like there was a shift within the bodies completely. My thought process on how I want to tackle particular things has completely changed. To what, I don't know yet, but I know that there are particular things I don't want to do anymore. And there are things that I'd like to do now. I want to be able to work with particular experiences like the explosion, maybe in an indirect manner, in order to catalyze something within the community. I suppose. If I can. I don't know if I can. But I think right now I'm still on the cusp of trying to understand what that is. For me now, it's a lot more correlated to sound. And how... For me. So what changed for me in particular, post-blast, is how sound is registered. And how the political climate orchestrates its own sound experience. Because it does, it has an orchestra of its own. And this is not just linked to the port blast. This is linked to everything like our AC generators, our water pumps, because there's no water, there's no electricity, there's no... So you're constantly surrounded by buzzing sounds, drone sounds, all of these sounds that, you know, possess you like an entity. In the same way that the blast possessed you. Through the impact of air and sound simultaneously. And so for me right now, I'm trying to study this and see what it means to alchemise that experience through a sound installation. Specifically through sound installations, And how I can, you know, look at the political climate and musical composition – if you want to call it that – and oppose that composition with something else in order to create a different space for people to experience sound in a more healing manner. You know what I mean?

AC:

Okay. Final question for me. And so that's kind of some of the parameters that you've set up in terms of how you conceptualize your artworks. As an artist working in Beirut with a kind of audio environment that surrounds you and that has connotations and connections with the kind of current political system and its deficiencies. Can you tell us a bit about some of the artworks that you're working on, specific artworks that you're working on at the moment? Either artworks that are at a more advanced stage or even that are mainly at a conceptual stage at the moment.

AA:

They're more so at a conceptual stage at the moment. I have been in talks with people that I want to collaborate with on these projects, but I mean, they're still... They're also sound-based ultimately. And I'm trying to work with people in order to see if we can build a site specific sound instrument, in order to give people another, hopefully site specific experience that's not going to be on video. I think I'm dead set on having another site specific, in-person, live experience where people can come to a space and see that you can work with the resources of the space. Whatever the space gives you in order to have a particular experience and not have to go outside of what your space is offering. Because the current environment is not giving us the basic fundamental needs that we need in order to be able to push through. And so conceptually, I'm looking at this, this idea of sort of working with whatever is available. In order to facilitate a listening experience that's full-embodied listening, a deep listening experience, if you will. Because I find

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that our listening experience posts everything around the world, not just Lebanon, has been not particularly a deep listening experience anymore. It's more of a fragmented listening experience. And that's where, you know, constantly listening to, you know, a podcast or a musical piece or all of the things. And we're doing other things at the same time and not fully embodying what we're listening to. And how this experience of really listening with our entire bodies has completely become eradicated, or slowly becoming eradicated. Because social media platforms are asking us to listen to the entire world in a very fragmented manner. Our ears are everywhere all the time. I think I'm trying to work. I'm trying to work along the lines of this, trying to listen more deeply with whatever is in your environment.

AC:

And are you looking at any specific spaces in Beirut or elsewhere at the moment for those in-depth experiential artworks?

AA:

Yeah, for sure. I mean, it's been really hard trying to get work done here, but also easy at the same time because, you know, it's kind of lawless – in the jungle – and you can do whatever you want to do here. But you have to fight a lot of other demons with said freedom, well... Freedom. 'Quote unquote freedom'. I am looking at spaces in Beirut and outside of Beirut in a more organic space, less city oriented. But, yeah, this is a priority to try to get this done here before anywhere else. So we'll see.

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Interview with Marwan Rechmaoui (Artist)

August 2023

About:

Created from industrial materials such as concrete, metal, rubber, tar, textile, and glass, Marwan Rechmaoui's work reflects his methodical study of cartography, demographics and urbanisation. Focusing on sociogeographics, architecture and cultural histories of cities and mirroring the sociopolitical structure and complex multi-cultural history of the Arab world; he has produced a variety of works, some of which incorporate maps of city streets, objects with references to urban domestic life and landmarks and histories of Beirut.

Rechmaoui's work has been presented in a number of solo and group exhibitions, including Slanted Squares, Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht, the Netherlands (2019); Truth is black, write over it with a mirage's light, Darat al Funun, Amman (2018); Sharjah Biennial 13 (2017); Home Works 7, Ashkal Alwan, Beirut (2015); Istanbul Biennial 13 (2015); Here & Elsewhere, New Museum, New York (2014); Cadavre Exquis, Suite Méditerranéenne, Musée Granet, Aix-en-Provence, France (2013); Sharjah Biennial 11 (2013); On the Edgware Road, Serpentine Gallery, London (2012) and Sharjah Biennial 7 (2005). His work can be found in the collections of the Tate Modern, London; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Guggenheim, Abu Dhabi; Sharjah Art Foundation, Sharjah and Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid.

Rechmaoui was the recipient of the Bonnefantenmuseum Award for Contemporary Art, Maastricht, the Netherlands (2019).

Athar Collective [AC]:

Firstly thank you for meeting us here today at the Arab Center for Architecture. We're really pleased that we can speak to you. We've got some questions that we're going to run through. A first question relates to your practices as an artist. If you can tell us a bit about your work and in talking about that, also reflect on the role that the built environment, buildings in Beirut, plays in the way you conceptualize your work.

Marwan Rechmaoui [MR]:

I've been practicing arts in Beirut since 1993. So it's almost 20 years, 30 years actually. In '93 I came back from New York. I was studying there. Now during my stay in New York, the urban environment was very present. Of course, you know, it's a huge city. So the residuals of being there started coming, you know, sitting, settling inside. So when I came to Beirut and I experienced the clash between the two urban spaces, it instigated this direction in me. It was automatic, you know, now, 30 years later, I'm talking very clearly about it. But back then it was an instinctive direction. So to add to that, when I arrived to Beirut back then, it was the beginning of the reconstruction hype. And this thing brought with it a lot of positive energy, you know. The vibes in Beirut in the nineties were really motivating. They make you do a lot. So immediately I took the direction of working on the motif of reconstruction. You know, like a construction site. A dig. All these issues were, you know, they were sexy for me to work on. It was, of course, in the traditional material, which was acrylic or oil on canvas, on paper, and this kind of classical art materials. But because of seeing these reconstruction motifs a lot, and specifically one very present – it's still today – it's a, it's a concrete cube that is painted in black tar, and it has holes from the sides. And they dig and put it underground. And it's basically an intersection for pipes. And it has on the top the manhole, the metal part that you see on the street surface. So back then in Beirut, there was a lot of this object, everywhere, to be reinstalled. So I was drawing this motif a lot. And then I decided, since I'm drawing a concrete object, might as well switch to the concrete material instead of imitating it in acrylic on canvas. And go after the thickness and weight of the form. We're still talking wall pieces, now. I did not develop to be a sculptor yet. So I started producing a lot of semi abstract works which were concrete with tar or soldered metal. Or with glass. Or with silver leaf.

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Or with aluminum. You know, experiencing different variations from these materials. And I produced a lot of wall pieces. They were a bit heavy, but they were wall pieces. I'm saying that because I started moving away from the wall little by little. So by the end of the nineties, I was doing sculptures.

So this is where my concern with the urban environment started. And it was fed with the reconstruction movement that was happening here in the nineties. Of course, I was critical from the beginning [of the reconstruction]. Because, you know, the reconstruction program was very controversial. It had pluses and minuses. So in the nineties the debate was about these issues. But this thing kept going until the early 2000s. Until, in 2003, I was commissioned by Ashkal Alwan and Videobrasil in Sao Paulo to produce a piece for an exhibition at Videobrasil. So of course the debates were about highways and the tissue of the city and all these things. And back then still the GPS was not on, and I wanted to do a walkable map of the city of Beirut. Something that you can experience on the way from A to B. Not taking a car and jumping from A to B. Because that was, for me back then, not knowing the rest of the city makes it easier to be divided. So my plan was to make a large map that people can walk on and experience every neighborhood to get to their destination. But to do that, I had to walk the whole city because the maps back then had the name of the sectors floating over the map and their locations. But floating. You can never know the borders. So I had to walk the whole city with a map and line all the borders of the neighborhoods. And in municipal Beirut, we have 59 neighborhoods. For example, you have the [NAME, 07:10] Plaza right here. It's a circle that collects three different neighborhoods. So mainly by crossing streets, you see the blue plates on the walls changing names. You know, if you go in a circle. You have Ashrafieh, Sioufi and Mar Mitre. Three different neighborhoods. And so by walking the city back then, you know, you could start taking a lot of notes for other things. Anyways, I ended up producing that piece, but by doing that, I was getting more and more into the urban subject. Most of the projects were architectural or urban, because after doing Beirut Caoutchouc, the large black map that shows all the streets. It's very accurate. Even the impasses, the dead ends. They are on it. And it also shows the real estate blocks. So you can read a lot of information from it. You know, where like you see the Solidere area: huge real estate lots, owned by one company. Well, if you go to Karm el Zaytoun, which is very residential, the plots become very small and crowded. You see a lot of them. Visually, they are interesting, but scientifically also, they tell us a lot. So after working on the whole city, I decided to go smaller – to the micro – and I pulled out from the drawers the memories of my first studio, in a huge building in Beirut called Yacoubian Building. I lived there and my studio was there from '95 to '99 and I spent a lot of time on the balcony watching people in and out. It's a huge building. I counted back then. It's probably got 700 people living inside, and it has one gate and two elevators. And people living inside [from] different classes, different professions, different sects, different nationalities. It had the Ethiopian Club, social club, and the Lebanese scout. But anyway, it was a huge mix, very similar to Beirut, but on the micro [scale].

And they got along in the building and each one goes in and out, living next to the other with no problem. So for me, that was something to think about. And it happened that I was reading Heidegger back then and his ideas of dwelling. And I used to laugh a lot when I read his standards and I look at Yacoubian. And for me the idea came, you know, that's what we should do about dwelling today. So again, you know, I went, I measured the whole thing and I did a design for the models because it's a big need to be transported. So it has to be smaller. And that building. Exactly. It was built when the Lebanese municipality or the urban Ministry adopted the laws of condominiums and opposed to... I don't know, residential buildings. So Yacoubian like Gefnor. There's probably like ten or 12 huge buildings in Beirut that were built in the early 1960s as a result of this municipal law, which of course allows you to sell the same square meter many

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times [over]. The more you go up, you can keep selling the same meter. So for me this building became a symbol of the history of Beirut from 1960 until the time I worked on it, which is 2000. So it's probably 40 years of the history of the rise and decline of Beirut. Because this building, when it was built, was towards the... it was also something, another concept in Beirut. Because it's a conservative society, the locals... They used to call uh, there was no such thing as the foyer it was called 'Bachelors residence'. So Yacoubian was built to be a bachelor residence. So that helped me to design the piece itself. So I split it into units that become like shoeboxes. Put them on top and you make the whole structure. So it was directed towards the middle-upper class who were thriving in the sixties. Plus all the money that was coming from the Arab world because of social regimes or oil ... many different circumstances. So the banks were kicking in Beirut. Also the students, they were coming. Yacoubian is next to two major universities, UAB and LAU, plus many other smaller ones. So it was ideal for students. So it served its purpose as a modernist structure, very homogeneous from the facade. Everything inside works as it should. Until 75, when the war started, many of those residents left either to the other side of the city or out of the country. And they asked neighbors or relatives to sit in the houses. So they won't be squatted. But by 1978, with the Israeli invasion of south of Lebanon, the huge migration to Beirut happened. All kinds of people: Christians, Muslims, Druze, it's not only Shia. But they, you know, spread around the city, each one in his territory. So that was the beginning of the decline of Yacoubian because, you know, refugeeism was very pressing. So people could not stop, uh, refugees from squatting in houses. And of course there was no money to maintain the building. So when the glass breaks, they put wood or cardboard or something. When the sun is too strong, they put a curtain haphazardly. So you have a colorful facade now with different curtains on the balconies. With glass replaced by wood, with the balconies that were walled and left with a window with [name 14:31], you know, like the provincial kind of architecture. So the building became like a zoo, you know: [in a modernist sense] it became a nightmare. But that's one that's the look of the building. But you also have the behavior of the residents. Most of them came from the countryside, you know, from villages. And suddenly they are in this hostile urban environment. And so they would use their apartments on the seventh or ninth floor as a country house. So the balconies had different activities. Some of them had, you know, they would put some chickens. They are not very careful with dealing with height. So a lot of times things fall, like a pot of plants or a window screen or whatever. You know, things that if you're on the ground floor, you don't pay attention to. But when you're on the height, it's a different feeling. Plus, you have visitors coming, honking their horns from down and someone shouting from the ninth floor instead of using the intercom. You know, there's this, this, the behavior of the residents became... I don't know what to call it, but not the normal urban, which was the modernist urban. It's what we have today, probably all over the world. It's becoming like this. Apocalyptic environments.

AC:

That's very interesting. I think this notion of inhabitation, right, that the use of the building in a way gets transformed by the users, and the users bringing their own perspectives, their own spatial practices to the building, in a certain way almost transforming the program of the building over time is quite interesting. I know there's another... So we talked about the urban scale with the map, and we talked about the architectural scale with this building. Which is a building that's been built and that's still inhabited. There's another strand of architectural engagement in your work which relates to buildings that were never completed. I'm thinking specifically about the Burj el Murr. And I was wondering if you could tell us a bit about that and a bit about, let's say the role in the experience of Beirut's built environment of these ghost structures that for one reason or another were never completed. And how that's informed your thinking as well.

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MR:

Of course it's a childhood thing. But let's clarify things or make it easier. Mostly I work in mapping because again, in the nineties when we wanted to move away from the sixties modernists. You know, you have a gap and we wanted to find our style or our way. The missing thing back then and that was one of the reason that Ashkal Alwan existed and I was one of the founders. And there was Christine. Is because we wanted to build a platform or an infrastructure to build upon. Because it was very abstract. Art of the Sixties was very poetic. In the nineties, after 15 years of war and the mess we had, we felt the need for archiving and deconstructing. Building links with other places. It has a world, but I can't remember cross-fertilization. Something that is similar to 'communication'. Anyway, so our work started going in this direction because of a need. Again, you know, when I did Beirut Caoutchouc there was no clear map. They had maps of Beirut. But after 15 years of war, it becomes very important to know the borders of each neighborhood, because it was before, uh, you know, if you walk in the streets, you see a lot of the shrines. Shrines, there are not only religious and let's take Ashrafieh for example. They are also markers of points: from here to here. And then there is a shrine and then from here to here... There is a PhD thesis by Nabil Bayhum from the late seventies. It's in French, but because it's a PhD, you cannot take it out. You have to read it inside. So I had to use the help of a friend to read it for me, because I don't read French. So we used to go there and sit and he tells me about it. So he talks a lot about the shrines and the points in the city. And I'm sure in non-Christian neighborhoods, there's other ways of doing this. Probably they express it with coffee machines, like this. There are markets also. So I have the mapping work and then inside the mapping work because it's also mapping, but it has a more specific, uh, location is the series of dead buildings. It's a lifetime project I keep adding to it. So far I've done Burj El Murr, the first one in 2002. Yacoubian was the second one in 2006/7. Started in six. I might miss some of them. Then you have the series from Tripoli, from the Oscar Niemeyer architecture Park. So far I've done three structures... The Experimental Theater. The pyramid kindergarten. And the third one is the helipad with the space museum under. There's 20 more structures to be done. But it's going slowly.

So for me, those buildings... and the Raouche market near the sports city: it's a huge structure that was never used. So it's concrete like Burj el Murr. And it sits there, since the mid eighties. Burj el Murr is ten years older. But for me those structures, the dead buildings, they tell stories. Even Yacoubian is a dead building, because it's inhabited but it was not... it did not work the way it was supposed to. You know, because the city declined. And it's again, in the end, it's the economy that makes things look different. It's not people, it's the economy. Simply. You have money, you can maintain things. Even if people are... you put laws for the building and the budget is ready to keep renovating and fixing. So it can stay in shape. But when the economy goes down, like what's happening now, you know, even the infrastructure starts falling apart. So we have the buildings that didn't function, what they did, what they were supposed to. And we have other mapping like Beirut Caoutchouc, or like Blazon, which is a major work. The flags. So you have a map that you walk on, and you have a map that you walk under. And it's more of a visual map. We can talk about that project alone. So the dead buildings, you have, for example, the Burj el Murr. It's very present in the history of the city, in the two years war which is the major civil war, the first two years 75 to 77 uh, version of what was in the newspaper every day. And it was in conversation with another Burj, probably 150 meters away in Ashrafieh. It's called Burj Rizk. Burj Rizk was on a hill. So it was almost the same height with Burj el Murr, and all the time shelling between the two places. So every day in the newspaper there is shelling between Burj Murr and Burj [name] or something happening in the vicinity of Burj el Murr, until the you know when Burj el Murr became a superstar it was in the Hotels battle in late 76. And that battle was

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major because it pushed the Christian line back towards the port. You know the Christian line was reaching Hamra. You know, Hamra, the hotels area, St George or Venetia. These were like extensions to Gemmayze. But when they pulled back and that hotels war, it was very fierce, the line, the green line became near the port. And it was up to Rue Damasce. So because it was such an important battle, it was very fierce. And this is where you hear the stories. The fighters jumped from the 10th floor, or they throw them, or whatever. Or the carpet, they throw Persian carpet to steal. You know, that was the stealing height, you know, maximum. So those Burj el Murr became the star of this battle because they launched the attack from Burj El Murr. It's higher than the hotels and directly facing it. So it was easy to... So anyway, so I decided to replicate it. Because it's such a symbol. And it's standing there not doing anything. So basically I built the mold in 2002 and I tested it and it ended there. Now because it's showing and they're showing it in Sharjah, and they want to... I met a couple of weeks ago, someone from Sharjah who is going to write something about the work, and I was like 'Oh wow, this is from 20 years ago. There's much more to say about it now'. But now I cannot remember much. But anyway, for me it was a very big question. 'How does someone, Mr. Murr, who is a very rich person from contracting in Africa, building schools and highways.. like Hariri related. Someone who became in politics very influential, even in the seventies. He could not predict that something was boiling. And this is happening. Or this building is built like a bunker to serve some purpose. Because it's really thick concrete. You know, if you go see it, it's not a normal structure. And of course, back then it was a new technology how they built it, you know, it's like digging a well, You know, you put the mold on the floor, you cast the first floor, and then you remove the mold, put it on the top, cast the second, and you keep going up. So it was the first process, supposedly. But, you know, it stopped right there. And in the nineties it was not clear who owns it anymore. Because for a while Solidere put a huge banner on the building. How it was going to look like. But then the banner looked like the building, started tearing and falling and no color anymore. And it seems that there was a give and take between el Murr and solidere, and it was never clear who owns it now. Nobody knows. Similar to many things in this place. The irony now is that you pass every day from next to Zaha Hadid's building, which is burnt, and it's been there since... it was burnt a few days after the explosion. I'm not sure if on purpose or not on purpose or because of the explosion, something went wrong. But anyway, you need the court rule to get reimbursed by the insurance [company] to start fixing. So it might take years. You know, that's how things are connected. And I'm not sure if Zaha Hadid's office are suing somebody or they are not worried about this. It's her image.

AC:

It's really interesting hearing you speak about your work and how it's taking inspiration from the built environment and also how it, in a way, casts a light on a part of Beirut and Lebanon's history. Namely the Hotels War. Which in some ways has been scrubbed out from the national memory. Like the big paradox for me, who is not from Lebanon: when I walk around Beirut, I see the traces of the civil war. You know, you also have the Holiday Inn, which is another structure that has been left. You've got the Egg... Structures that were halted. In their developed because of the war that happened in some of the structures cases been used for acts of war or, you know, fighting during the war that are still that there. For me. There's an interesting contrast with the fact that, for instance, the national curriculum does not talk about the civil war. So for me, there's some kind of... there's a tension between forgetting and remembering. You know, that has a very urban and architectural reality to it. It somehow materialized through the built environment.

MR:

Of course, this is the thing. Lebanese love to consider themselves as resilient, resilience is a problem. You know, this is why nobody is doing anything, because they are resilient. You know, everybody managed to

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get something from somewhere. And for example, solar. You know, solar energy, you see this awareness. It's not awareness, it's a need, you know. Because there is no alternative electricity. It's not because you want clean energy. All these things happen like this. But again, this is why I told you about the Prince Fakhr al-Din sculpture in the beginning, because it's an example of the curriculum you're talking about. Fakhr al-Din, he's like the symbol of, uh, of modern Lebanon. He was the Prince of the Ottoman escalator back then in the early 1600s. And back then it was, you know, the height of the exchange between Venice and Genova. With the Syrian cause because of the silk, because all these mountains were with the berry trees. To grow the silkworm. And then it went to Marseilles, mostly. Oh sorry. To Venice and Genova. Later to Marseille. When it started going to Marseille, a civil war happened in Lebanon. In 1860, the Druze and the Maronites killed each other and there was probably 10,000 dead in Mount Lebanon. The curriculum story is that there was a boy passing through a village and some older guy hit him. So the family of the boy came and had a fight with the guy who hit the boy. And that's how the Civil War started in 1860. This is a stupid story. The story is in the silk industry. With missions in Mount Lebanon, Christians became more associated with the West, or they have better relations. They speak the language, they have guests in their houses and the mountain or wherever. So their connection with the West was much [more] organic. Muslims were more on guard with dealing with the West, especially with missions, the Franciscans and the Nazarene. So because of this good relations between Christians and Europeans, and because of the standards in industry... Back then Marseille was the place. Venice and Genoa were long gone. We're talking about the 1800s. Marseille wanted the whole cocoon. They wanted the whole cocoon. They don't want it as a threat because they have a better way to do work with it. The thread was done in the houses and villages by Christian and Druze women. By the time Marseille demanded the cocoon untouched. So a whole industry stopped, which is spinning. The Christian women because of their relations with the West, they transformed into something else. The Druze women became unemployed. And that's where the tension really started. And then later Christians imported the machines from Marseille and they worked. So class wise, they became more advanced. Which made it... Especially, you know, that we are in a region that is supposedly majorly Muslim. So when a minority does well, there's a problem. So in the curriculum they tell you about a boy and the man, you know... it's very much economy. So anyways, how did you get there? Because of Fakhr al-Din. Fakhr al-Din was the same thing. You know, he was the supporter of Maronites to come and live in the Chouf [mountains] because he wanted to improve the situation. They were good farmers. You know, Druze they don't like to work in land much, they prefer to be the boss. So, you know, when you have to breed trees, you need good skill farmers. So this was one of the reasons he encouraged them to come to the Chouf area. But at the same time the Druze were not happy, his people. So he was loved by the Christians and hated by his people in a way. But it was not mentioned because they repressed it in the curriculum. Now it's Fakhr al-Din, is like a folkloric [hero]. And then the second one is Bashir. You know, the one comes 300 years later. So yeah, I don't know if I'm answering...

AC:

I think you are, but I think when we were talking about it earlier, it was in relation to a statue that had been erected that was then, uh, destroyed. And we were talking about that in relation to, let's say, a politics of memorialization, which like the relation between repression of memory and remembering of memory seems to be quite an interesting characteristic, let's say, of Lebanese culture. There's a quote by Milan Kundera, which we often talk about, which is that the battle of people against power is the battle of memory against forgetting. And in a way that seems to be one of the things that is going on in Lebanon. Right. There's some people, let's say a political elite, that has an interest in repressing certain historical events. And then there are all these efforts from people, a lot of them artists actually, to remember in certain ways, uh, sometimes

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also moving beyond facts into the artificial. You know Wallid Raad's is an example of that. But I wondered if you could just remind us about the way that the statue of this person you described just now, the way that it was kind of exploded and the reasons for that. And then also that might be a good opportunity for us to bridge into talking about the memory memorialization of the blast. We're talking to you just over three years after the blast happened in Beirut port. The work that you've done with that, but also how you see that as a kind of a wider landscape of people trying to somehow memorialize or conceptualize in their thinking the trauma of the blast. So firstly, the relation to the statue, and then bringing us up to where we are today.

MR:

The issue with the statue of Fakhr al-Din is that it's a dormant issue. It's not like when Saddam was gone and they started hitting the sculpture with a shoe. That's a revolution. It's more similar to... Something happened in Iraq, actually, with the bust of Abu Jafar Mansoor, the founder of Baghdad in the Abbasid period. ISIS exploded [the statue of him] because he was not a Orthodox Sunni. You know, Abbasids were... They took over the Umayyads, and they were raised in Persia before taking over. You know, they came with the help of Persians to invade Damascus. Executed the Umayyads, some of them escaped to Andalusia and they formed a new empire there. But mostly the Abbasids who lasted the most in the Arab route, you know, you have Umayyads, Abbasids, but then in the middle of Abbasids, it becomes Persian and Turkish. The Caliph. They keep the original one but the Sultan, who was the real power, not the symbolic [power]. The Caliph became symbolic and the sultan is the ruler. They became Turks and Persians, you know, like the Mamluks and then the Ottomans. So it changed, but it never passed. And a few years ago, when ISIS was fighting in Iraq, they exploded the founder of Baghdad. Fakhr al-Din is similar to that because this is a symbol that, supposedly, we all agree on. It's not controversial. But in a political moment, it can explode. You know, it can be [explosive]. Because the agreement on it is not very clear. Again. It's funny because I'm now reading an old book that I read in the early nineties when it was published. Now I'm reading it again. Kamal Salibi 'House of Many Mansions'. It's an amazing book. It's like I'm reading today. It's like he's talking about today, and what's the problem with the Lebanese identity. How when they founded Great Lebanon, many things were vague about how the identity of this country [was] going to be. And it's still happening. But if you read that to understand why it's not as black and white. You know, not Muslims against Christians, that is Muslim against Muslims, Christians against Christians, Muslims and Christians allies against Christians or Druze. It's a very sophisticated, complicated issue. So I'm reading it again now, by chance, I picked it up. It's amazing. So it tells you a lot about the struggle [concerning] the national identity. It's not going to work unless everybody becomes atheists. You have to be non-sectarian to resolve that issue. Otherwise, it's never ending, because there's no trust between groups. And when there is no trust, there is no agreement.

AC:

So I want to just loop back because we talked about your artworks and, uh, the artworks that in some ways respond to the war and the traces that the war has left and the built environment in Beirut. I wondered... I know that you produced some works in the aftermath of the blasts in the port in 2020. I wondered if you could tell us a bit about that work, and how you've framed that work conceptually.

MR:

Thanks for asking this because it's very important. The incident has been abused by different intellectuals. What happened in my case... I've been working on the blast since my beginnings, since 2013 I've been

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producing pillars that look like ruins. It had a different story, but, I mean, it was predicting the collapse. I'm not saying ... you can feel it. Lebanon goes on 15-year cycles. Every 15 years, something happens. We can start from the 1958 mini civil war, let's call it 1960-75. That's one phase. Then you have 75 to 90. That's another phase. Then you have 90 to 2005, which is the Hariri phase and reconstruction. Then 2005 to 2020: the removal of the traces of Hariri. [...] Every 15 years at the switches, it flips. Why are we saying this?

AC:

We were talking about the artworks that you've produced. So yes.

MR:

The explosion happened around this time. By the time we understood what's going on, that was by 8:00-8:30 in the evening. The next day I went to the gallery that I work with, which is [name: 43:18] in Karantina. I went to see what happened because I know it's near and I'm sure something happened. I get there, I find all the staff walking around like zombies, not saying a word, just picking up stuff and leaning it against the walls. Everybody was doing something similar. So automatically I started doing the same thing. I started picking up the aluminum of the windows, because the glass was destroyed and the aluminum was out of its place. Picking up the aluminum windows, putting them outside, picking up the cinema [insulation]. Basically what all of us were doing is putting each material with its similar ones. To try to reorganize this mess. So basically for a few days I kept going to the gallery and helping with this. Of course, my work was inside because I was supposed to have a show and it was postponed because of COVID. I was supposed to have it in April, four months before the blast. So all the crates were inside the gallery and the destruction was on them. But nothing happened. But it was like the work of destruction, in destruction. So this is why I kept going to the gallery, because I was moving my crates from here to there so they can clean and stuff. We did this for a few days. I gathered all the aluminum windows on one side, and two helpers started collecting all the tin that comes from behind the gypsum [boards]. There's like a strip of tin that connects two gypsum boards together from the back. There were 600 kilos of this inside the gallery, because it's a huge place and all the walls were gypsum. So we started collecting these. Then I had this huge pile as big as this room of tin. Probably this much space for the windows, bags of glass, broken glass. Different materials. So this stayed on the floor. And I went on with my life, trying to understand what's happening. Of course, immediately after [they] started producing work about the silos and all this bullshit. Then in January I go to the gallery and I see the tools I need to produce the work. Which basically did not change from the first day, which is putting an order for similar things together. So I produced about 35 compressed tin objects. And the aluminum of the window – because it's straight things – I would do them on the panel as a wall piece. So basically the work was not about the explosion, it was more about putting things in order again, trying to clear things. The violence of the explosion...? We experienced this, you know, much earlier than the real explosion itself. Because everything in the country was telling [us] that we are going in that direction. If it was not the port, it would have been something else. But the absence of the state and the management of the country, and the crisis in the economy and the corruption and the state. It all tells you that a disaster is going to happen sooner or later. So for me, the port explosion... politically, it was not something new for me. The experience of the physical thing that happened, this is what stayed. And the political conclusion was concluded even before this. The experience of the explosion itself and the mystery in the next 15, 20 minutes after the sound: that was the thing that I still didn't work on. It's probably something for the... it's either going to come out as a work or it's already reshaping me. And it will show little by little in different works. You know, not that this is the change. It's not like that. But I never wanted to do what most of the artists did, which is going and recording the moment itself. You know, I've been doing that for 20 years. So

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yeah, this is concerning the explosions. You know, sometimes it's just like this if it's dealt with the way it's dealt with, it becomes like porno. You know, it's drawing silence, destroying silences or handicapped people or, you know, all these issues, you know, if you just put them like this on the surface. It's like watching a violence from the side of your eye. 'Oh, yeah, I want to see him getting killed, how he cuts them'. But you really don't want to see at the same time. So I think we should think beyond the physical moment, you know, more into the reasons and consequences.

AC:

I think that's really interesting. It's something that ... We were speaking to George the other day, and he was talking about the built environment and how there is almost a fetish in some architectural circles to fetishize the war. You know, you leave the bullets in the buildings and you've got a Bernard Khoury that has like a pretend cannon on top of his building in the port, and so on and so forth. But there's no analysis of the processes that led to the war. So George was saying, forget about all this kind of surface level memorialization. Right. If you want to memorialize, let's understand the processes that led us there, and let's use that as a way of initiating a conversation about how we don't repeat that. And he was talking about this in the context of resilience. You mentioned the word resilience before. You walk around Beirut now, you have this image of the Phoenix.

MR:

I was going to tell you this is a result of the Phoenix thing. Yeah, the resilience, but it's the myth of the Phoenix.

AC:

Yeah, but I want to just put to you what George was telling us and maybe I can get your response to that. So George was saying the Phoenix rises, but it rises for the people to benefit from things not changing. He was saying this notion of resilience... if you expect people to be resilient, it's because you have a material interest in things not changing yourself. The opposite of resilience is that things break, and then you can have a conversation about accountability. And then you can also have a conversation about, well, how do we move into a completely different space? You are no longer compelled to repeat the same [pattern]. Resilience implies repeating the same mistake over and over again. Do you share that analysis?

MR:

I totally agree. Of course. We had a mini hope in October 2019. But [only a] few days after the beginning, I started having doubts. Because I saw the dynamics between the revolutionaries. You know the compass started to move around. Signs of falling apart started showing from the first few days. But anyway, the revolt itself gave some breath, gave some life. It turned out to be more damaging than [constructive]. But yeah, I totally agree. I mean, this is what we've been doing, trying, trying to deconstruct what we have to put in its original elements to understand how we can recompose it. Maybe it should be constructed in a different way. But again, if we don't remove religion from the state, nothing will be resolved. We're going to keep being resilient. You know, that becomes 'equality'. It's already equal. 'Oh, no dollars? You get dollars from Dubai. No gas, you put gas from the black market, you get the gallon...' All these issues. That helps nothing change. Instead of 'no really, we have to have no gas and start bickering each other and then maybe something will change'. I used to do a lot of drawing during the revolution, and I did one that shows civil society as half sheep, half wolf. And it had a poem in Arabic. It says 'Freedom cannot be gained unless there is blood', simply. But it's in the longer version and Arabic, you know, Arabic [poem in arabic, 53:50].

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You have to bleed to change. But I don't want to bleed, actually. You know, I'd rather go somewhere else. Because, you know, you're dealing with inhumans, You know the State. You can lose an eye easily and spend your life with one eye. I'm not ready to do that. So the only way is intellectually and politically and parliamentary, let's say, that the change is going to happen gradually, but nothing overnight.

AC:

In the seventies there was this notion of the great march through the institutions. I think it was Joschka Fischer, it was a young German intellectual who was reframing the great march which you had seen in China under Chairman Mao, but focusing on the institutions. Obviously Mao's was like a proper revolutionary, right, in the traditional sense. But the great march through the institutions is: you take a longer view and you try to change the institutions so that the way the institutions operate over time can become more in tune with what you have in mind. The problem with that, of course, is that those that benefit from the institutions being the way the institutions are now will try to fight that. They want the institutions to be supporting them. Anyway, that's a digression. But I think just to tie everything together, we talked about the beginning of your work in the nineties: your return from New York, your encounter with the built environment in Beirut, the way you moved from initially working on a canvas to working with canvases with things fixed to them, almost like Anselm Kiefer, I guess. You know, this kind of appendices, and then moving into sculpture, and then ending up where you've ended up, with lots of resonance with the war. And the buildings that have and in some way or another been shaped by the war. And then we talked about your response to the blasts, this kind of rematerialization, I suppose, of the gallery... its building materials. And I think there's something quite striking about this thing, like what do you do when you're in a complete shock? You try to bring things into order. The phenomenon.

MR:

If you can, yeah, this is the ideal thing to do, but some people can't.

AC:

But you know what you described in the gallery when you went in the aftermath of the blast, this almost automatic reaction. You're just trying to put the foam over here, the metal strips over here. So that covers the blast. I'm wondering, just as a final reflection from you. Where do you see your work going next? What's... you've talked about the 15 year cycle where in the beginning in your analysis of...

MR:

You asked me this at the wrong time because I really have no idea where I'm going now. I'm in the phase of changing. My last exhibition when I showed those objects from the explosion, plus the pillars from before. It was an extensive show. That was in 2022 or '21, something like that a couple of years ago. But for me it was like... I knew when I was installing the show that this is going to be the last thing I'm going to do like this and I'm transforming into something else. But it's not clear yet where I'm going. The work I'm doing now is basically... I've always had the tendency to go towards transparency. To work with the idea of transparency. So now the glass and metal structure, that's very transparent. This is the first step in that direction. But I know there's going to be more layers. More layers of transparency that become not transparent anymore. If you have a window net for mosquitoes, you have less transparency. If you have two nets, you have even less transparency. So this is the logic I'm thinking about. But with different materials, transparent materials. What I'm going to do with that, I have no idea. I work in two manners. I have abstract theories. I do a lot of abstract work. And I do very conceptual work... like Burj el Murr, it's a specific building with an address.

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If I give you the address, you can go see it. It's not a model of a building. Recently, I was producing a very abstract work based on Paul Klee's musical paintings. You know, the rhythmic paintings. Gray, white, black. Black, gray, white. White, white, gray. It's very musical. So I produced a series like this. Actually, that was the last major series I produced. It was an abstraction. So I'm not sure if I'm going to continue with abstraction now, because I've always been next to it. Every once in a while, a project with a reference from the city pops out. Before this abstract series, I produced work with flags. It's called 'Blazon'. That was a major city-related work. It was very extensive about the city. Basically I researched [it for] six or seven years before starting work on it. And when I started researching, also accessibility to Google and the internet was not that [pervasive]... We're talking from 2008 and on. Blazon is dissecting the city of Beirut into its [constituent parts]... in Arabic 'flag' and the word country have the same word: 'elam'. What I did is that I collected the flags of Beirut. But in Arabic: 'elam Beirut', which is not not necessarily the tissue. Elam means more like celebrities or stars or, you know... well-known people or landmarks. I started very scientifically. Beirut [consists of] 59 neighborhoods. I started with the etymology of the neighborhoods, with the names. What does Sioufi mean, it is a family name? So it goes under family names, like Jumblat, like Quoreitim, like many others. Mar Mitre is the same. So this goes under sectarians. Anything that has a relation with God, you have many other things. Gemmayze is a tree. It is the name of a plant, which is a ficus. So it goes under plants. Similar to Snoubra, which is the pine tree. Or Karm el Zaytoun which is an olive orchard. So I ended up with five categories: plants, gods, families, buildings – which is architecture – many of them are like this, like Palais de Justice. It's a building. The court. University is a building. Burj is a tower, is a building. And the fifth one is topography/ geography, elements like Nabee, which is a spring. Like Rass which is a head that goes into the seed.

So from the 59 names, I got five groups of different things. So I gave a color to each group. Each group can have [different numbers of] neighborhoods. The biggest group is architecture. I'm thinking like an army or like a football game: how they put their players. So now we have the five major captains. Those captains, they have groups under them. Younger captains have less groups, higher ranking captains have more neighborhoods. Then the second phase was going into each neighborhood and collecting all the landmarks from popular names. You have a lot of unofficial names in Beirut that's not written. You know, the people say it or you say it to the taxi. So I collected names and monuments. Monument or famous buildings, public sculptures, clock towers. So there were different categories of collection, and I put them in their neighborhoods. So now I designed a metal shield. Basically, Blazon, is an old French word which is used to highlight the language of coat of arms. You know, describing the coat of arms in Europe. It's always used in old French. If it's a Scottish or Hungarian or a Spanish or Danish coat of arms. It's described in blazon language, which is the old French. And then you have the ranks inside the blazons: you have the chief with a band on the top, like a crown. On his right and left, you have the Sinister and the Dexter. There are different ranks, chevrons. So this is the game. The neighborhood that has more flags can have the chief blazon. The vice president can take the sinister and the dexter. So basically I built some kind of hierarchy for the city. And basically the outcome of this whole thing was 59 stainless steel and brass sheets. That tell you: the neighborhood –if it's architecture or sectarian or clan or whatever – and the rank of it. If it's a high rank or a low rank. And the name and number of the neighborhood, which is the official one you find on the blue plate. On one wall, you have the shields, and in the hall you have the groups of flags with the landmarks embroidered on them. So basically you'll be walking under very vocal [manifestation].

AC:

Like evocative. It kind of communicates something about the structure of the environment, but in a pictorial

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way.

MR:

Everything you identify in the flags. You're not saying it verbally, verbally in the word I'm trying to say. So you'll be walking verbally under a very visual thing. Because you start seeing, Oh, Baladiyet Beirut. Oh what's his name? Father [name], among all that, uh, Mr. Clemenceau, etc... All these names that pass through Beirut. And of course, the famous buildings in Beirut, you know, that you use for direction. So basically, this is the work, you know: verbally deconstructing the city in words, you know, because the whole thing started from giving direction to someone.

AC:

In a way, what you describe is a kind of an audio based map, whereas normally maps are based on visual clues, right? You read a map with your eyes. But what you are saying is that this particular artwork somehow translates the experience of navigating the city from the visual thing into something that also has a verbal or audio component. Which is, as you say, how we often navigate anyway. Right? Um, that's very interesting.

MR:

So for me it's very ironic. Beirut Caoutchouc was celebrating the city in a way, even though it was critical about the city. And blazon is farewelling the city the way we know it, because now the younger people, they don't know any of those elements. If you go in a taxi and the driver is old and you tell him Al-Balad, which is downtown, he will take you downtown, to solidere. If you go with a younger driver, I tell him Al-Balad, it tells you where exactly? Because the word changed.

AC:

So in a way, it's a swansong to this way of navigating and understanding...

MR:

Of course. Because again, the younger generations, their way of gathering information is totally different. They go with Google maps or the names they use are different. What is important for them is different. You know, they don't care about Mr. Clemenceau, the French prime minister in the First World War. Who has a whole neighborhood under his name and why?

AC:

But there's a whole thing that we won't be able to cover today, which is, let's say, the imprints on the built environment of the French state, you know, as kind of imprinted during the French mandate. So one area we often talk about is the area around the place de l'Etoile. You know, where you have a place de l'Etoile in Paris and that's been replicated almost, you know, to scale in Beirut. Which is a very kind of evocative, quite powerful image that you've taken, Hausmannian principles, developed in Paris in the 19th century, and you've tried to apply them onto the built environment in Beirut in the 20th century. And in a way, there's something quite powerful in the fact that the association with the French state, and the French mandate, seems to be disappearing from the younger generations. There's also a sense of maybe leaving that era behind, which can be good or bad. I think this is a good place to end. Thank you.

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About Athar **أثر**

Athar is an architectural research collective set up by Aude Azzi and Frederik Weissenborn in 2021. It means ‘trace’ in Arabic, and our research explores the traces left by communities in the built environment, as well as the traces that built form unwinds across communities.