Horizon of Possibilities: Artists and the City in Postwar Beirut

Tatiana Mouarbes
CUNY Hunter College

Recommended Citation
Mouarbes, Tatiana, "Horizon of Possibilities: Artists and the City in Postwar Beirut" (2017). CUNY Academic Works.
http://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc_sas_etds/147

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!
Follow this and additional works at: http://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc_sas_etds
Part of the Contemporary Art Commons, Near Eastern Languages and Societies Commons, and the Theory and Criticism Commons

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Hunter College at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Arts & Sciences Theses by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.
Horizon of Possibilities
Artists and the City in Postwar Beirut

By

Tatiana Mouarbes

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Art History
Hunter College
The City University of New York
2017

Thesis Sponsor:
May 9, 2017
Dr. Nebahat Avcıoğlu
Date
Signature

May 9, 2017
Dr. Harper Montgomery
Date
Signature of Second Reader
For Annabelle and Mario
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements........................................................................................................ii

List of Illustrations..........................................................................................................v

Introduction.......................................................................................................................1

Chapter I: The Uneven Development of Site-Specific Art in Postwar Beirut..................13

Chapter II: In Search of an Open City and its Subjects..................................................38

Chapter III: Imaging Beirut..............................................................................................65

Conclusion.........................................................................................................................86

Bibliography.....................................................................................................................100

Illustrations.......................................................................................................................109
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to firstly extend my utmost gratitude to Dr. Nebahat Avcioğlu whose encouraging words and thoughtful mentorship have provided me with a constant source of inspiration throughout the thesis process. In her compelling seminars on art and architecture in the Middle East, she elegantly wove together complex histories of colonialism and modernism in the region into specific moments of cultural encounter, which brilliantly framed our discussion of objects and forms. Her courses inspired me to think critically about the spatial and social processes that structure cities and her emphasis on interdisciplinarity helped shape my methodological approach to art history. I would also like to thank Dr. Harper Montgomery for her insightful revisions and dedicated interest in my work. Participating in her seminar “Oppositional Biennials” added nuance to my understanding of the field of postcolonial studies and helped me to draw cross-cultural links that were integral to the writing of this thesis.

I am especially grateful for my colleagues and friends at Hunter College Art Galleries and The Artist’s Institute, Alexander Benenson, Jenny Jaskey, Jocelyn Spaar, Sarah Watson, and Annie Wischmeyer. I offer deep thanks to my peers at Hunter whose friendship and camaraderie greatly enhanced my experience in the program, especially Jenn Bratovich, Sara Dolatabadi, Alana Hernandez, and Javier Rivero.

This thesis is indebted to the city of Beirut and to the community of friends and family that I have found in its place. I would like to thank my dear friends whose companionship animated my experience of the city, Fadi Abu Nemeh, Victor Ayache, Daniel Barroca, Hiba Farhat, Jessika Khazrik, Chris Miller, Rivers Plasketes, Hannah
Rose Whittle and Mahmoud Safadi, among many others. I am thankful for the support of my extended family in Beirut, especially Micheline, Rasha, Andrew, Ava, and Emile. My greatest appreciation is for the love and friendship of my grandmother Marie. Together we shared a home and a life, her impassioned storytelling enlivened my research and her infectious energy filled my days with joy.

I would like to thank the staff of Ashkal Alwan Library, especially Sarag Gabouyd Pailian and Raymond Gemayel, for their great assistance as I poured through every book, catalogue, and archive housed in the collection. I am thankful for Beirut Art Center whose archival collection provided me with an abundance of primary source material that greatly enhanced my research. In 2014, I participated in the Home Workspace Program (HWP) at Ashkal Alwan, an experience for which I am eternally grateful. I would like to thank Ashkal Alwan for creating both the space and time for experimental thinking and for the inspiring HWP seminars organized by Walid Raad, Jalal Toufic, and Anton Vidokle. I am grateful for the generosity of Tony Chakar, Christine Tohme, and Walid Sadek in sharing a great wealth of information and personal history with me during our conversations. Support for this research was generously provided by the Kossak Foundation.

I would like to express the deepest gratitude for my family whose unwavering love and support has provided me with endless sustenance. The kind words of my beautiful grandparents Margaret, Ken, Marie, and Samir have nourished me from afar. To my partner Pablo, your indefatigable support of my thoughts, ideas, and ambitions along with your positive spirit provides me with the greatest source of motivation. You are my light.
Finally, I dedicate this thesis to my parents, without you none of this would be possible. To my mother Annabelle, your unconditional love and enduring strength sustains me. You make my world beautiful. To my father Mario, my desire to capture your memories of Lebanon, the stories of your youth, of your city, your war and your displacement, lies at the heart of this project. Your presence permeates throughout this thesis, each step of my journey was taken with your cherished experiences in hand. It is my hope that my return to Beirut may inspire you, the way you have inspired me all of these years.


\[\text{this unfinished business of my childhood}\]
\[\text{this emerald lake}\]
\[\text{from my journey's other side}\]
\[\text{haunts hierarchies of heavens}^1\]
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1. Panoramic photograph of Ziad Abillama, *Saint Balech Beach Installation*, 1991.

Fig. 2. Sculpture in metal and mixed media by Ziad Abillama, *Saint Balech Beach Installation*, 1991.

Fig. 3. Ziad Abillama, *Where are the Arabs?*, exhibition poster, 1991.

Fig. 4. Installation photograph of Ashkal Alwan, *Sanayeh Garden Project*, 1994.

Fig. 5. Ashkal Alwan, *Corniche Project*, 1999.

Fig. 6. Newspaper reproduction of Nelly Chemaly, *We Come From Infinity*, 1999.

Fig. 7. Photograph of artist Ghassan Maasri moving his work for *Corniche Project* with Christine Thome and friend, 1999.

Fig. 8. Photograph of street turmoil caused by *Corniche Project* in west Beirut, 1999.

Fig. 9. Photograph of artist Tony Chakar with his sculpture *A Retroactive Monument for a Chimerical City*, 1999.

Fig. 10. Walid Sadek, *I Do Not Think People Leave Hamra*, 2000.

Fig. 11. Walid Sadek, *bigger than picasso*, 1999.

Fig. 12. Walid Sadek, *bigger than picasso*, 1999.

Fig. 14. Tony Chakar, *All that's solid melts into air*, 2000.

Fig. 15. Tony Chakar, *The Eyeless Map*, 2003.

Fig. 16. Guy Debord, *The Naked City*, 1957.


Fig. 18. Tony Chakar, *The Sky Over Beirut*, Achrafieh Tour, 2010-present.

Fig. 19. Tony Chakar, *The Sky Over Beirut*, 2010-present.


Fig. 23. Walid Raad/The Atlas Group, *Sweet Talk: Commissions (Beirut)_Plate 050*, 1987/2010.

Fig. 24. Walid Raad/The Atlas Group, *Civilizationally, we do not dig holes to bury ourselves_Plate 922*, 1958-59/2003.

Fig. 25. Walid Raad/The Atlas Group, *Civilizationally, we do not dig holes to bury ourselves*, 1959/2002.

Fig. 26. Still from Jayce Salloum, *This is Not Beirut (There Was and There Was Not)*, 1994.

Fig. 27. Still from Jayce Salloum, *This is Not Beirut (There Was and There Was Not)*, 1994.

Fig. 28. Still from Jayce Salloum, *This is Not Beirut (There Was and There Was Not)*, 1994.


Fig. 34. Rabih Mroué, *The Inhabitants of Images*, 2009-2011.

Fig. 35. Rabih Mroué, *The Inhabitants of Images*, 2009-2011.

Fig. 36. Rabih Mroué, *The Inhabitants of Images*, 2009-2011.
INTRODUCTION

*Here as elsewhere, but more than elsewhere, the residue reveals itself to be most precious.*

Henri Lefebvre

In 1983, something strange occurred in the downtown section of Beirut, Lebanon. A privately owned engineering company named OGER Liban began destroying buildings in the neighborhood, a preemptive move that would continue to be exercised throughout the next decade. At the time, the country was in the midst of a long-term civil war and Beirut, the site of its major battles and contestations, experienced widespread infrastructural damage. Following the official end of the war with the signing of the Ta’if Agreement in 1989, the reconstruction of downtown Beirut was initiated by a newly-formed government under Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, who assigned the private company Solidère (Société Libanaise pour le Developpement et la Reconstruction de la Centre Ville de Beyrouth) to finance and manage the project. Soon after it was incorporated as a joint-stock company, on May 5, 1994, Solidère released its plans for the construction of a new city center downtown, located in the symbolic “Burj” neighborhood, rebranded as Beirut Central District. Solidère’s campaign focused on

---


2 The Ta’if Agreement is the name given to the Document of National Accord signed by Lebanese parliamentarians in Ta’if, Saudia Arabia, on October 22, 1989, signaling the end of the Lebanese civil war. A new political-economic order was soon ushered in with the appointment of billionaire Rafik Hariri as prime minister in 1992. Owner of OGER Liban and major player in the nation’s economy, Hariri had been exerting his political influence throughout the war through philanthropic, infrastructural, and economic initiatives. In a strategic alignment of interests, the head of Hariri’s OGER Liban Fadel el-Shalaq was appointed head of Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR), the government body overseeing redevelopment efforts, two years prior as Hariri emerged as champion of privatized development. The process of postwar rebuilding was most lucrative for Hariri, who upon purchasing $125 million shares in Solidère became its largest shareholder, and for his cabinet who awarded the company with Beirut Central District, the most profitable reconstruction project.
transforming the city’s architectural and socioeconomic fabric to attract foreign investment into what it called, “Beirut: Ancient City of the Future”. Effectively, what the handing over of the reconstruction effort to the government-sanctioned private interest group signaled was the consignment of Beirut’s future unto the forces of neoliberalization. Postwar policies that encouraged privatization thwarted possibilities for publicly organized, collective, and critical rebuilding processes in Beirut and instead allowed for the city’s remaking to be decided by the edicts and machinations of capital interests.

Throughout the 1990s, the most potent forms of resistance to the privatization of the city occurred largely within the cultural sector. Many artists, writers, and intellectuals took on the concurrent role of reimagining Beirut with a level of criticality and sensitivity almost entirely absent from government-sponsored reconstruction projects. In the wake of the civil war, a host of independent non-profit arts organizations formed to open channels for artistic production and critical debate. From 1992 to 1998, Masrah Beirut, a historical cultural space, organized exhibitions, performances, lectures, and public discussions gauged around postwar recovery, linking an older generation of left-wing artists and intellectuals with their younger counterparts. Another non-profit organization motivated by a similar desire to create a shared space in a long divided city, was Ashkal

---

3 Neoliberalism is defined here as the ideological framework driving post war recovery in Lebanon. The government’s “political project,” a sinister combination of political, social, and economic measures, included the instatement of market-driven liberal economic policies, the reinforcement of a sectarian-clientelist regime, and the dissemination of political propaganda centered on the nation’s “rise from the ashes”. All of which served to enforce the presence of market relations into the practices of everyday life. The dissolution of boundaries regulating public and private spheres in Lebanon was further fueled by the government’s resignation of authority over core sectors of civic life to private corporations and non-governmental organizations. I rely on the definition of neoliberalism put forth by David Harvey in his seminal text [Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism](https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-980-neoliberalism/obo-980-neoliberalism.pdf) (London: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Alwan: The Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts. In 1995, the organization staged a group exhibition in the historic Sanayeh Garden, raising questions around notions of public space and citizenry, a model its curators would reproduce on three separate occasions, ending with the *Hamra Street Project*, in 2000. A similar, short-lived initiative was Ayloul Festival, which from 1997-2001 played a pivotal role in supporting and developing projects in video, performance, and installation. Such organizations fostered the work of a young “generation” of artists working in experimental means and with mediums traditionally excluded from commercial gallery settings, while providing the infrastructure necessary for alternative forms of artistic production and dissemination. The expansive group included Ziad Abillama, Tony Chakar, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Lamia Joreige, Rabih Mroué, Walid Raad, Marwan Rechmaoui, Walid Sadek, Ghassan Salhab, Lina Saneh, Jalal Toufic, and Akram Zaatari, among others.

In the following decade, as Lebanese artists acquired a significant global presence, Beirut’s cultural and institutional landscape shifted and, concomitantly, debates within the cultural sector increasingly turned towards regional issues. By the late 1990s,

---

5 Additionally, organizations like Arab Image Foundation, dedicated to preserving and archiving photographs produced in the region, Zico House, focused on creating spaces for activist-based artistic practices, and Espace SD, a privately-run space hosting exhibitions, screenings, and talks, played significant roles in promoting local artistic production.

6 Art historian Ghalya Saadawi has outlined key organizing principles uniting this group of artists, distinguishing their work from the generation of Marxist artists and intellectuals that preceded them. This previous generation, which included Ahmad Beydoun, Elias Khoury, Waddah Sharara, and Fawwaz Traboulsi, among others, was engaged in defining aesthetic representations for the political resistance struggles in which they were involved. Much of their cultural activity drew from pivotal historical events, the Palestinian catastrophe, *al-Nakba*, the Arab defeats of 1967, the Israeli invasion and occupation of Lebanon in 1982, and the internationalization of resistance against Euro-American imperialism. For the following generation who came of age in the 1980s and 1990s, the defeat of international Leftist movements coincided with the violence of civil war, forced amnesty measures in its aftermath, and the continuation of sectarian divisions in the postwar, leading to a growing sense of disillusionment. Facing a crisis of representation and a need for renewed multi-positionality, artists turned to aspects of poststructural theory and a body of post WWII literature on unspeakability and unrepresentability to organize their thinking and practice. For an extensive analysis of the generational shift see Saadawi, “Rethinking the Witness: Art After the Lebanese Wars” (PhD Diss., Goldsmiths, University of London, 2014).
artists who were supported by institutions like Masrah Beirut, Ashkal Alwan, and Ayloul Festival and came to be known as the “postwar generation”, began exhibiting in major institutions and festivals around the world, garnering international media coverage and attention.\(^7\) Interest in Lebanese art, and in art of the region more generally, grew in the 2000s with an increase of foreign investment into arts production and institutions in the Middle East, heightened by a renewed focus following 9/11 and the emergence of Gulf states as major players in the global art market. Most often, these funding bodies sought out, and subsequently privileged, conceptually oriented, experimental art practices, easily accessible for Western curators and audiences.\(^8\) These discursive shifts were not without material consequence; by the mid-2000s, a horde of institutions for art, non-profit and commercial, were erected throughout Beirut, a trend that has magnified in recent years with the establishment of a large number of museums, private collections, galleries, non-profit art spaces, and residency programs.\(^9\)

This thesis argues that despite the rising tides of globalism within the cultural sector, artists working in and around Beirut have maintained a critical engagement with the city, as continual efforts to politicize and privatize suspend the city and its inhabitants

---

\(^7\) I use the term “postwar” solely for descriptive purposes; postwar provides a historical frame through which the body of artistic practices and movements I discuss can be situated. The period ranges from the end of the civil war, with the signing of Ta’if Agreement in 1989, to the initiation of this project, in 2016. Additionally, the term “generation” is not without contention. It is employed here to historically link the activities of a loose association of friends, colleagues, and collaborators within the above mentioned time frame. From their encounters, whether informal or organized, came a distinctive set of styles and practices that included modernist tactics, interventions, readymade, photomontage, manifestos and printed matter, as well as conceptual forms, deskilling and dematerialization, institutional critique, performance, and documentary.

\(^8\) Art historian Hanan Toukan’s compelling doctoral work on the rise of foreign funding and cultural diplomacy in the region and the effects its attendant neocolonial imaginary on the framing and dissemination of Lebanese art is crucial to understanding transformative shifts that took place in Beirut from the 1990s into the 2000s. See Toukan, “On Being the Other in Post-Civil War Lebanon: Aid and the Politics of Art in Processes of Contemporary Cultural Production,” *The Arab Studies Journal* 18, no. 1 (Spring, 2010): 118-161.

in a state of protracted contestation.\textsuperscript{10} Framed as the government’s crown symbol of postwar recovery, what the reconstruction project represented, in actuality, was the nation’s refusal to negotiate with the structural complexities of its troubled past. Materializing this refusal, officials rebuilt the city upon the interdictions of history and the promise of free-markets and global capital, disavowing the present for the future to come. Failure to properly acknowledge the fundamental conditions that gave rise to civil war has only lead to their persistence and intensification in the war’s aftermath. Beirut remains the primary battleground where legacies of war linger, inflicting their mark on the city’s inhabitant's and its diversity of spaces. Mapping contemporary art practice in Lebanon alongside the history of urban redevelopment, defined here as a spatial and discursive project, allows for a nuanced reading of postwar cultural production and identifies through the analysis of artists’ engagement with the city all that was leftover in its remaking. To contextualize these artistic practices, I turn to theories of the city and its various geographies in the work of French sociologist Henri Lefebvre and British theorist Irit Rogoff.

The project of producing alternative visions of the city is theoretically founded in the work of Lefebvre, as his understanding of cities as fluid social entities, marked by moments of exchange, simultaneity, and encounter, is invoked in part to link the

oppositional efforts of Lebanese artists.\textsuperscript{11} In his seminal text \textit{The Right to the City (La Droit á la ville)}, (1968), Lefebvre outlines principal ideas on urban space, which he understands to be defined by the work of its inhabitants, a collective \textit{oeuvre}, and argues for a view of the city as a totality, that is to be continually reconstituted without ignoring the importance of its individual parts. Within this formation, Lefebvre stresses the rights of participation and appropriation; namely that inhabitants should play a central role in decision-making on urban space and have unrestricted access to all areas of the city.\textsuperscript{12} Underlying Lefebvre’s theorization of the city is an open and non-teleological dialectic, that brings together conflictual and contradictory elements and links theory together with practice; beginning with the urban as a model for the everyday and the lived, Lefebvre contends that the inhabitants of a city can construct utopias that express the “possible-impossible”, projects for and visions of the city that are not fixed but responsive to changing realities.\textsuperscript{13} This dialectic, also called the “regressive-progressive”, is what constitutes the possible for Lefebvre, that is, a regressive historical analysis of conditions of possibility in the present, using both the past to understand the present and the present to understand the past, synthesized to produce a progressive analysis that opens up to the future possible.\textsuperscript{14}

Drawing a temporal and cross-cultural line between Lefebvre’s work and the Lebanese context is motivated by a shared sense of urgency, expressed by the author in \textit{The Right to the City}, and by those critical communities in Beirut, in response to the

\textsuperscript{11} Lefebvre, “Right to the City,” in \textit{Writings on Cities}, 47-159.
\textsuperscript{14} Elden, “Politics and the State: Politics, the Political and the Possible,” 241-256.
privatization of the city, a situation in which inhabitants are rendered devoid of agency and “statesmen, experts, and specialists” fully control the production of the urban.\textsuperscript{15} According to Lefebvre methods for resisting these conditions lie in the possibility of utopia, or the inhabitant’s ability, as a political and social force, to envision new urban realities. He argues, “It is up to them to indicate social needs, to influence existing institutions, to open the horizon and lay claims to a future which will be their \textit{oeuvre}.”\textsuperscript{16}

The articulations of social forces are precipitated by art practice, along with philosophy. Lefebvre writes, “There are implications to the \textit{centrality of play} which is the restoration of meaning of the \textit{oeuvre} that philosophy and art can bring so as to prioritize time over space and thus replace domination by \textit{appropriation}.”\textsuperscript{17} Lefebvre associates art with his notion of appropriation as a form of both resistance and productivity. Putting art in the service of the city, he concludes:

Leaving aside representation, ornamentation and decoration, art can become \textit{praxis} and \textit{poesis} on a social scale: the art of living in the city as a work of art…In other words, the future of art is not artistic, but urban, because the future of ‘man’ is not discovered in the cosmos, or in the people, or in production, but in urban society.\textsuperscript{18}

Lefebvre emphasizes the potential of art to occasion new models and strategies for urban society, claiming the fusion of artistic and social practice in the life of the city. While Lefebvre’s model is unsuitably programmatic, certain aspects of his writings on time, space, and cities as they relate to the notion of the possible remain highly pertinent.

An additional, intersecting notion of the city and its imaginative geographies found in the work of Irit Rogoff is employed referentially, in order to develop a vision of Beirut \textit{other than} and \textit{critical of} its divisive geography. Rogoff’s theorization of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Lefebvre, “Perspective or Prospective?,” 160-174.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 163.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 171.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 173.
\end{itemize}
“unhomed geographies” in her study *Terra Infirma: Geography’s Visual Culture* sees the discipline of geography as “a system of classification, a mode of location, a site of collective national, cultural, linguistic and topographic histories,” capable of being disrupted by zones of resistance through processes of dis-identification.\(^1\)\(^9\) Using geography as a disciplinary model, Rogoff traces discursive meeting points within the realm of visual culture that narrate shifts in the aftermath of colonialism and attempt to rewrite sign systems of geographic relationality, or the relations between subjects and places in a postcolonial migratory reality.\(^2\)\(^0\) Art becomes the interlocutor for engaging with the concept of geography, unraveling the ways geography as an epistemic system with its own set of signifying practices structures geopolitical, national, and economic relations as well as identity constitution.\(^2\)\(^1\) Geography is understood to be as “unbounded” an arena as visual culture. Rogoff’s analysis emerges from a self-reflexive negotiation of her own positioned spectatorship and proceeds to link the two disciplines in their shared efforts in rewriting sign systems from the universal to the specific, towards a more “complex multi-positionality”.\(^2\)\(^2\)

Rogoff’s arguments are fitting, if not heightened in their complexity, when viewed in relation to Beirut, whose fractal geography was marred by scars of separation and violence, populated by displaced subjects and their disrupted histories, and representative of the nation’s failed attempts to define a coherent identity. An uneasy geography marked yet in flux, the postwar city was quickly redrawn as an imagined cosmopolitan façade alongside a very real neoliberal economic system, its wounds

\(^{20}\) Ibid.
\(^{21}\) Ibid., 10.
\(^{22}\) Ibid., 11.
abruptly sutured without the adequate time given to examine their depth at length and properly feel their sting. Upholding Rogoff’s interlocking and intertextual pairing of visual culture and geography, it is possible to read aspects of postwar art as the *re-writing*, or more fittingly the *articulation*, of something other than this sutured geography and its concomitant hegemonic order.

Within this schema, which offers Beirut’s reconstruction as a frame for evaluating postwar cultural production, certain formal and conceptual tendencies prevail, which veer from those presented in conventional readings. Much of the scholarship produced on the subject has tended to focus on the strategic use of the archive and fiction by Lebanese artists, as a way to problematize totalizing notions of historical narration, documentary representation, language, and testimony. Underpinning this kind of reading is the paradigm of trauma theory, frequently employed to discuss postwar artistic practice. When applied to the context of Beirut, theories of trauma place artists and their artworks at the epicenter of a historical rupture. Artistic practice, in this case, is defined through a lack; following this line of thinking, in responding to the traumas of civil war, an interruption in history’s proposed teleological progression, artists must be registering or

---

23 It must be noted that until recently, the body of literature on the subject of postwar art in Lebanon was mostly contained journalism, art criticism, and exhibition catalogues. Notable examples include *Parachute Magazine*, “Beyrouth, Beirut” and *Tamass: Contemporary Arab Representations, Beirut, Lebanon*, exhibition catalogue (2002); *Out of Beirut*, exhibition catalogue (2006); *Art Journal* issue on Lebanon 66, no. 2 (2007); three editions of Ashkal Alwan *Homeworks Forum* catalogue (2002-2005); as well as articles in various magazines devoted to contemporary culture in the Middle East, *Artforum, Bidoun, Canvas, Flash Art, Frieze*, and *Ibraaz: Contemporary Culture in North Africa and the Middle East*. The most advanced material to date is found in PhD dissertations, notable examples include, Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, “Digging for Fire: Contemporary Art Practices in Postwar Lebanon” (PhD Diss., American University of Beirut, 2005); Sarah Rogers, “Postwar Art and the Historical Roots of Beirut’s Cosmopolitanism” (PhD Diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2008); Mark Westmoreland, “Crisis of Representation: Experimental Documentary in Postwar Lebanon” (PhD Diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2008); Hanan Toukan, “Art, Aid, Affect: Locating the Political in Post-Civil War Lebanon's Contemporary Cultural Practices” (PhD Diss., SOAS, 2011); and Saadawi, “Rethinking the Witness: Art After the Lebanese Wars” (PhD Diss., Goldsmiths, University of London, 2014).
acting out symptoms of the traumatized witness in their work.\textsuperscript{24} Positioning the artist as a survivor in order to read his or her artwork in direct relation to Lebanon’s violent history elevates the logic of individual trauma to the level of socio-political historiography. With this approach comes a specious historical relativism, guided by morality, which transforms individual survivors into reliable witnesses capable of speaking on behalf of a multitude.\textsuperscript{25} The artwork is seen as a psychological container, accumulating and repeating witness testimonies in hopes of filling a historical and societal gap and leading towards a future deliverance. Such a flattening out of subjectivities and their relations to complex histories entrap artworks within the confines of trauma theory, falsely defines their critical elements, and drains them of alter existence and multi-dimensional potential.\textsuperscript{26}

To avoid the pitfalls of such a study, this thesis surveys select works loosely grouped around three thematic categories. These are the artworks that take Beirut as \textit{site}, installations, performances, and public exhibitions intervening directly into the urban environment, the artworks that take Beirut as \textit{temporality}, critical writing, photography, and video works that propose alternative temporal and spatial models of the city, and the artworks that take Beirut as \textit{image}, installations, photographs, and videos that interrogate the image of Beirut’s cosmopolitanism and grapple with the limits and possibilities of its representation.

The selected artists and artworks profiled here are in no way representative of the totality of actors in Lebanon’s cultural sector. Instead, the artists represent an inimical

\textsuperscript{26} For further analysis of the application of trauma studies in the Lebanese context, see Saadawi, “Witnessing, Representation and the Politics of Form: Beyond Trauma and Memory,” in “Rethinking the Witness,” 29-61.
bunch, coming from diverse cultural backgrounds yet working in ways that deny
determinative agency to their geographical location of origin. The material diversity of
their respective projects has been produced within the broad framework of modernist and
conceptual art, experimenting with the language and forms encompassed by these
historical and cultural movements. This cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural movement
corresponds to the movement of many of the artists themselves; displaced by the various
upheavals of violence during the civil war, those artists with means left Lebanon for
Europe or the United States, in many cases completing their college and graduate studies
in these locations, before returning to Lebanon in the early 1990s.  

In proposing the framework of reconstruction, along with the three interrelated
and sometimes overlapping thematic categories, it is possible to chart a history of postwar
art on the basis of disinclination, namely, a refusal to engage with Beirut as it was
imposed onto its inhabitants. However, this study is not based on a preclusion of history,
which views the proliferation of postwar cultural activity in a vacuum, and it remains
conscious of a much longer and complex history of arts production in Lebanon. As has
been argued by art historians such as Sarah Rogers, the establishment of Beirut’s
contemporary, globally oriented art scene is rooted in a lengthy discourse of
cosmopolitanism in the visual arts and was buttressed by coincidental shifts in the late
1980s and early 1990s towards multiculturalism in the art world and its associated
disciplines. Therefore, this positioning necessitates an acknowledgement of the study as
a comprehensive analysis of certain works and movements rather than an exhaustive
survey of postwar art.

27 Rogers, “Postwar Art and the Historical Roots of Beirut’s Cosmopolitanism,” 155-156.
28 See Rogers, “Out of History: Postwar Art in Beirut,” in Art Journal 66, no. 2 (Summer, 2007): 9-20 and
Toukan, “On Being the Other in Post-Civil War Lebanon,” 118-161.
In her book *Terra Infirma*, Rogoff retains an understanding of visual culture as being constitutive rather than reflective; texts and images, when encountered by viewers in different contexts, are active in shaping conscious and unconscious perceptions of cultural values as opposed to being subjected to a viewer’s historical reading. From this position, stemming out of the legacies of post-structuralism and psychoanalysis, Rogoff argues that it is “possible to trace the language shifts that have begun to take place in the aftermath of displacements, migrations, enslavements, diasporas, cultural hybridities, and nostalgic yearnings undergone by contemporary subjects.”\(^{29}\) Adopting Rogoff’s understanding of the artwork as constitutive, it becomes possible to open the history of artistic practice in postwar Beirut onto its past, present, and future with multiple points of entry that are relational rather than impositional. This thesis, then, moves between disciplines of critical theory and art history, urban and cultural studies, in order to interrogate the myriad of complex ways in which cultural production in postwar Lebanon, framed by the reconstruction of Beirut, upended linear notions of historical time governing the reconstruction process, antagonized official calls for returns to normative living, and proposed alternatives to thinking relationships between subjects and their cities.

CHAPTER I

THE UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT OF SITE-SPECIFIC ART IN POSTWAR BEIRUT

The public space is the battleground where different hegemonic projects are confronted, without any possibility of final reconciliation...Public spaces are always plural and the agonistic confrontation takes place on a multiplicity of discursive surfaces... A given hegemony results from a specific articulation of a diversity of spaces and this means that the hegemonic struggle also consists of the attempt to create a different form of articulation among public spaces.30

Chantal Mouffe

To think of public spaces in Lebanon, or Beirut more specifically, one must shed the habitual tropes associated with humanist and democratic cultural assumptions. To say it bluntly, public spaces to not exist in Beirut because they are inimical to the politico-sectarian division of the city into exclusive and exclusionary districts where the notion and practice of 'public' is primarily occupied by a public of loyalists subject to the governing edicts of one particular elite.31

Walid Sadek

Following the conclusion of Lebanon’s fifteen-year civil war in 1989, Beirut was opened to its citizens in ways previously thought unimaginable; with the undoing of wartime boundaries separating eastern and western parts, the city and its public were made possible again. Postwar art embodied both Beirut’s newfound openness and the threat of its forthcoming closure, imposed by the reconstruction projects put in place by the Rafik Hariri government and Solidère. The site of the city became a point of entry for a number of young artists, seeking to articulate their concerns through “site-specific,” “installation,” and “interventionist” artistic practices, given the context of reconstruction and the urgency to define models of public opposition.

The history of site-based art in Beirut unfolds contentiously, from the early 1990s into the present-day, as artists developed diverse strategies to approach questions of

identity and art making in the city. This chapter traces the line of its development across multiple points of confrontation; beginning with the analysis of artist Ziad Abillama’s urban installations and the public exhibitions organized by Ashkal Alwan: The Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts in the early 1990s, moving to an overview of changing conceptions of site and spectatorship in the work of Walid Sadek, Bilal Khbeiz, and Tony Chakar in the early 2000s, and concluding with a discussion on the use of mapping and narrative as strategies for subject-oriented site-based practice throughout the 2000s. Focusing on these conflictual and contradictory artworks reveals the nuance with which artists in the postwar period navigated Beirut’s scarred and highly differentiated geography. As I will show, these artists were informed by changing notions of the city and in turn, their artwork formed the discussions, ideas, and images surrounding its remaking.

On the eve of August 20, 1992, artist Ziad Abillama organized an installation in the Saint Balech beach area near Beirut’s central highway in Antelias, a working class neighborhood and coastal town about 5 km north of Beirut, marking one of the first attempts to look critically towards the postwar environment. As with the majority of Lebanon’s waterfronts, the beach had been transformed into a dumping ground during the war and was left covered in accumulated waste. For his installation, the artist emptied an area of roughly twenty square feet, enclosing the space with barbed wire. The enclosure was lit by a noisy portable generator, common during the war, and was filled with several found and fabricated objects (Fig. 1). These were objects of war detritus – scrap metal,
bullets, engines and military equipment – and sculptures the artist produced while working as an apprentice in Beirut’s metal shops (Fig. 2). This arrangement, which included the artist’s missile sculptures paired alongside found ones, blended seamlessly within its environment and gave voice to an aesthetic of refuse. Objects previously violent and threatening appeared drained of their potentiality, shrinking impotently in size as their force moved from the physical to the psychological. Abillama’s repurposing of artifacts of war served to foreground their psychic character, and in this way, the objects occupied an alternative temporality; presented in a discarded and fragmented state, the objects at once became devoid of their lived momentum and were reconstructed anew as historical referents. Working with the extant conditions of Beirut’s urban landscape, instead of against them, Abillama’s project made two significant gestures towards acknowledgement and acceptance; Abillama made work out the city’s waste, beginning with the residues of war, in order to then accept its ruinous state as a contemporary reality to build from rather than destroy.

In addition to his Antelias installation, Abillama produced wherearethearabs?, an exhibition poster containing a black and white photograph of a young Arab boy covered with collaged fragments of Arabic, English, and French text in red, white, and black graphic elements (Fig. 3). Loosely divided into four horizontal segments, the poster proceeds from the upper right corner with a Marlboro cigarette ad followed by a F.T. Marinetti quote, an image of a Constantin Brancusi sculpture paired with an Orientalist quip on the binary of “L’Orient” and “L’Occident”, an excerpt of Florence Nightingale

---

describing her arrival in Alexandria, and finally, in the lower most register, information on the installation that reads, “A Ziad Abillama Project: Towards a Reconsideration of the State of the Arts, Technology, Identity, War, Aesthetics”. Historical, literary, artistic, and commercial, the patchwork of text and image overlaying the young boy’s direct stare elucidate a complex web of performative push pulls, between spectatorship and desire and their interrelated ruling over the individual and the commodity. A host of definitive statements are forced unto the person of Abillama’s youthful protagonist and his image is made more flat by the layers of text that obscure him.

Reading the poster in relation to the sculptural installation at Saint Balech raises questions about warfare and modern art as well as a related critique of the eroticization of peoples and objects that falls within these two discourses. Placed left of the boy’s face is a highly composed image of Brancusi’s missile-shaped sculpture and a text that reads “Look at the SCULPTURES until you see them. Those closest to GOD have seen them. I am no longer in this world, I am a SPIRIT among SPIRITS. C. Brancusi (Sculptor).” Here, the smooth form of Brancusi’s sculpture is linked to a sense of transcendental spiritualism. Hovering over the boy’s jaw line, adjacent to Brancusi’s statement, is a French quote that decries the otherness of the Orient while enumerating its role as a foil of the Occident, defining the Orient as the flesh of the Occident’s spirit. Nightingale’s ghastly narration of the Egyptian people, “an intermediate race they appeared to me, between the monkey and the man, the ugliest, most slavish countenances,” follows this Orientalist inkling and is juxtaposed by two underlying quotes on the aesthetics of movement and machinery. Industrial designer R. Loewy writes “Un manche de HACHE, un SOC de charrue, un BISTOURI, une HELICE de bateau, une AIGULLE, sont
COORECTES du point de vue ESTHETIQUE.” The beauty of war and machine is further articulated through the words of Italian Futurist Marinetti, “Nous affirmons que le magnificiquence du monde s'est enrichie d'une beauté nouvelle: la BEAUTÉ de la VITESSE”. Within this collage, the individual body, or the sluggish and fleshy Orient, is opposed by its modern machinic counterpart – a pristine form propelled at full speed.

A comparably sinister process occurred in the Saint Balech installation, as found missiles were displayed next to fabrications and objects of destruction were molded into objects of pleasure. Additionally, these pairings introduced the artist’s own conflicted identity into the work; faced with essentialist paradigms over his Arab heritage, the US-educated artist produced work in the language of “Western” Conceptual art, somehow occupying both sides of the Oriental and Occidental binary. The polarity of these positions is made to appear futile and the inclusion of Arabic, English, and French text throughout images a subjectivity that is simultaneously multiple, inconsistent, and complex.

In an essay entitled “From Excavation to Dispersion: Configurations of Installation Art in Postwar Lebanon”, artist and writer Walid Sadek sketches out an overview of installation art in Lebanon that begins with Abillama’s work, which he argues prompted a “violent re-start of the arts in the post-war period”. Specifically, what the installation made possible was the “reactivation of war” between two empty poles, Sadek writes,

The first is that of re-staging the theatricality of war’s terror and the horror of its crushing steel, while the second is that of banishing war to the domains of nostalgia and history’s myths. Between these two poles, dominant in the official discourse and which confirm and fix the war as a passing illness, Abillama strains on the contrary to present the war in

33 Ibid., 68.
Sadek reiterates the effects of the Saint Balech installation’s gestural stance, as disinclined to engage with the spatial, temporal, and discursive directive of postwar recovery offered by official bodies. The structural logic of reconstruction, of hearkening back to an imaginary past whilst rubbing out the traces of wartime reality, was reflected through Abillama’s installation in what it denied. Symbolically nostalgic yet materially tied to an economy of neoliberalism, the remaking of Beirut operated within these two “equally bankrupt” poles. Abillama undermined these efforts in proposing an alternative pathway calling attention to precisely what was at risk in this kind of reconstruction, an understanding of the war as a “foundational moment” in Lebanon’s “becoming” and a future built upon its acknowledgment.

The potency of Abillama’s project was intricately tied to its site. In critic Kaelen Wilson-Goldie’s study “Digging for Fire: Contemporary Art Practices in Postwar Lebanon,” she stresses the significance of Abillama’s choice of site, a marginal territory on the peripheries of the city, to stage his installation. Abillama, she writes, “[forgoes] a site of return, a site for which public behavior and civility had already been rehearsed, in favor of a more problematic location on the outskirts of the city, in a dump, on a beach named for one of the war’s arch antagonists. In doing so he called attention to the overlooked urban sprawl of Beirut and proceeded to examine its wreckage.” Working from Saint Balech, Abillama avoided those highly charged sections of the city subject to reconstruction opting for an unrecognized site on the outer edges of the city. Abillama’s move from the center suggested an alternative spatio-temporal path for the remaking of

34 Ibid.
Beirut. What was needed in the aftermath of civil war, his work contended, was not a return back towards an imagined cosmopolitan past and multicultural city center, as was espoused in the government’s plans for reconstruction. Instead, the city’s inhabitants had to return to the site of wreckage, in this case a garbage dump of the war’s accrued histories, in order to face the ruin and proceed from its remains. Abillama’s installation offered a possible trajectory for the postwar citizen and city, distinct from the neoliberal model proposed by Lebanon’s official institutions, while his poster portrayed the contested nature of his own subjectivity, wrought with wiry irony and pointed critique, addressing the fundamental need for both individual and national reflection.

Later in his essay, Sadek argues that the Saint Balech installation and wherearethearabs? made visible the unequal relationship that defined interactions between the artistic and non-artistic realms in Lebanon. For this reason, the artist expressed anxieties around the autonomy of art and remained insistent in regarding art as a, “critical and intrusive activity, maneuvering disruptively amidst the politics of mass appeal and the logic of consumption and marketing.”36 Abillama maintained this critical disposition in his subsequent projects; two years after his Antelias installation, the artist was invited to participate in Ashkal Alwan’s inaugural public exhibition Sanayeh Garden Project, (1995), for which he produced a work on that very unequal relationship between contemporary art and local sociopolitical realities, placing him at the center of controversy. His probing contribution and the public repudiation that followed represented of a major conceptual divergence in the history of Lebanese site-based art.

Soon after the opening of the Saint Balech installation, the notion of site as a viable artistic and theoretical problematic was incorporated into larger discourse on the

36 Sadek, “From Excavation to Dispersion,” 74.
public sphere. This directional shift found its most explicit articulation in the exhibitions and programs organized by Ashkal Alwan. Founded in 1993 by Christine Tohme, Marwan Rechmaoui, Rania Tabbara, and Mustapha Yamout, Ashkal Alwan, like many Beirut institutions, did not have a permanent office or gallery space until 2010, and throughout the 1990s mounted exhibitions and art events around the city. On the impetus for these early projects, Tohme has said, “We were claiming our city, our public spaces. At the same time, we were trying to define the meaning of civics and civic discourse here.”

The first of these public exhibitions took place in the historically significant Sanayeh Garden in west Beirut. Emphasis was placed on deploying visual arts as a means to create a new public for Lebanese society removed from sectarian politics and confessional alliances. Publicity was stressed as Ashkal Alwan organized a weeklong series of public programming around the exhibition, which included interviews with the organizers, artists, and audiences broadcasted on the Lebanese Broadcasting Channel (LBC).

In what was already held to be an intervention of sorts, Abillama’s proposition for the exhibition exerted an additional layer of disruption. As per the curator’s request, artists included in the Sanayeh Garden Project were each given a set space within the park to show their work (Fig. 4). Responding to this organizational configuration, Abillama handed out a questionnaire to the participating artists asking permission to expropriate 30 cm of their allotted space to show his work. If accepted, Abillama would be allowed to exhibit whatever he desired, based on an agreement made with the respective artists. In his questionnaire he asked, “What is the relationship between art, the private (sphere) and the other?” and “Do you think all the artists are a family? Who do

you think will be this family’s enemy? What is the artist role in the making of our Nation?” \(^{38}\) After posing these questions, Abillama’s request was vehemently denied. \(^{39}\) The work exceeded its material form.

Through biting self-reflexivity, Abillama’s proposal brought to light the lingering conditions of civil war, namely the struggle attain liberal ideas of nationality, sovereignty, and fraternity, and demonstrated the futility of the exhibition’s enlightening project in their presence. On his contribution, Abillama maintains,

> The piece was saying, ‘What do we do when as artists we are invited to behave as liberal democratic [beings]?’ You have your own space, each has their own little house, we can all live together; does this not sound like the idea of a Lebanon of all the different mosaics and cohabitation-the cohabitation that failed us during the war? I was asking, ‘What is the connection with that model not only as a failure but as an idea that was refused by different actors of the Lebanese civil war?’ \(^{40}\)

In addition to its provocation for self-criticism, Abillama’s questionnaire interrogated the underlying theoretical claims posited by Ashkal Alwan’s public exhibition model. Despite Abillama’s prodding, the organization maintained this approach and its methodological basis on three other occasions, *Sioufi Garden Project* (1997), *Corniche Project* (1999), and *Hamra Street Project* (2000), each of which were held in sites symbolic of the city’s public. Within the envelope of these projects, Ashkal Alwan encouraged physical interventions into the popular streets and public gardens of Beirut in

---

38 Abillama included his proposition text in his catalogue entry for Ashkal Alwan’s *First Sanayeh Garden Art Meeting Catalogue*, 1994, “What is the relationship between art, the private (sphere) and the other? These questions were addressed to the participants at the Sanayeh meeting: I need to complete my project by making a cube with 30 centimeter each side, where I can work inside it without breaking the natural sides of this cube? Without extending the area of the cube? 1. Do you agree to giving this area? 2. Do you allow the artist to assign a location to his work or you prefer to give the artist an assignment? a. Does the artist have the freedom to choose? b. Or you prefer to assign the artist a certain area? 3. Do you think all the artists are a family? 4. Who do you think will be this family’s enemy? 5. What is the artist role in the making of our Nation?,” translation by Roula Sukkari.


hopes of transforming these from representational spaces into sites of interstitial exchange. In this imagined schema, where citizens of differing sectarian affiliations could meet in shared spaces previously cordoned off during the war, the artwork was proffered as an assimilative interlocutor deployed to facilitate intersubjective dialogue among a divided populace. As Abillama’s project demonstrated, the curatorial conceit for these exhibitions did not necessarily yield its desired results; rather, it served as grounds for unearthing the precarious uncertainty upon which the nation’s postwar realities rested.

The extent of these conditions was made glaringly clear during the installation of Corniche Project, (1999), which resulted in a public battle amongst members of neighboring the community. Organized on the seaside promenade in west Beirut’s Ain al-Mreisseh, the exhibition included a number of sculptural and installation works that were spaced along the walkway’s parameters (Fig. 5). Controversy first struck when members of the local Muslim community protested against a work by Nelly Chemaly. Installed across the road, nearly 100 meters from a local mosque, Chemaly’s work consisted of a spiral of sea salt surrounded by bathroom tiles inscribed with the quote, “We come from Infinity. We live in Infinity. We will go back to Infinity. We are the embodiment of Infinity” (Fig. 6). Condemned for the last line, angry citizens complained that the quote negated God. Three other artists faced censorship for their work; Akram Zaatari’s Monument No. 5 and Ghassan Maasri’s fence sculpture were deemed “pornographic” while Tony Chakar’s kitsch sculpture of a golden Roman goddess, A Retroactive Monument for a Chimerical City, was censured as human representations are forbidden in Islam (Fig. 7-9). In response, Tohme disputed the validity of the mosque goers’ claims, arguing that the Corniche was a public space belonging to all of the city’s inhabitants.
Playing out in the press, in an article serendipitously titled “Mukhtar caught between a mosque and an art place” Tohme was quoted as saying, “They told me not to make a big issue about this, I want to know where the limit of public and private property lies.”⁴¹ The resulting clash between these two sectors of society, a public cultural organization and a private religious institution revealed what Abillama had stressed from the beginning: that there exists an unequal relationship between the art and non-art realms and that the effectiveness of art in this context should always be held in question.

As in the case of the artist’s Sanayeh proposal, the critical element of Corniche Project was situated in the unintended production of antagonistic space. Nearly a decade after the war’s end, divisive tensions within the public sphere could still be felt, and these were intricately tied to Beirut’s physical sites. In the end, political members of the Ain al-Mreisseh Social Committee got involved, sided with the Mukhtar, and Chemaly’s inscription was erased. Claiming historical precedent and vaguely related laws, for instance, that it is illegal to open a bar in the immediate vicinity of a mosque or church, former parliament member and Committee head Mohammad Qabbani posited that the exhibition may be located further down the Corniche.⁴² Though the confrontation did not provoke thoughtful, productive dialogue between the two parties, it succeeded in antagonizing issues left unresolved and revealing their presence in the postwar.

The most significant aspect of Ashkal Alwan’s public exhibitions was their formal and conceptual departure from Abillama’s Saint Balech installation and wherearethearabs? poster. In their respective projects, the artist and organizer’s treatment of both art and site stood diametrically opposed. Abillama rejected the

---

⁴² Ibid.
autonomy of the art object and remained critical of the legacies of late modernism and its “phantasmagorical extension” in postwar Beirut. In both cases, Abillama’s intervention did not succeed in producing an experience gauged towards activating spectators but rather in undermining the very idea of an art capable of making such a direct change. This uneasiness was further expressed in the artist’s choice of site, exhibiting in Saint Balech in order to linger in the city’s peripheries, disengage from the scene of reconstruction, and propose a course of action for the city and its inhabitants that hinged on radically distinct notions of time and space. In contrast, the organizers of Sanayeh Garden Project dwelled in the city’s symbolic sites, harnessing their representational power as a framework for staging political commentary. Value was placed in the communicative properties of art and its emancipatory potential. While both projects shared a motivation in their opposition to narratives of reconstruction and the privatization of Beirut’s public spaces, they remained fundamentally at odds in their attempts to provide alternatives. Their encounter necessitated a reconsideration of the terms upon which art was being made in the context of Lebanon.

By the end of the 1990s, artistic approaches to site-based work expanded in scope as artists began rethinking notions of site as a concept, not necessarily tied to a physical place. To accomplish this, artists employed modernist as well as conceptual tactics, using interventions, readymades, photomontage, appropriation, manifestos, and printed matter, grounding these formal techniques in the political and social context of Beirut. In 2000, on the occasion of Ashkal Alwan’s Hamra Street Project, Sadek installed a billboard on
the corner of Hamra and Sadat Street in west Beirut entitled *I Do Not Think People Leave Hamra Street*, accompanied by a short text in the exhibition catalogue “We Do Not Leave Hamra”. The billboard contained an image of a dried out river and a phrase written in Arabic text (Fig. 10). Not particularly striking, the image appeared as one billboard among the many populating the street, it easily passed without recognition; ephemeral in nature it was intended for accidental encounter with people walking down the street. The work was significant for heralding a new kind of site-specific art, one that did not require a particular viewer or location, but rather one that intervened into pre-existing systems. Parasitic and dispersed, terms used by Sadek, these new approaches took shape as billboards, newspapers, and publications, emerged from the context of cultural events, circulated amongst a network of readers, and eventually exceeded their reach, spilling out into an unknown field.

Much of this work grew out of an ambivalence regarding debates on the role of art in postwar Lebanon. Building upon the polemics of the 1990s, which were largely rooted in questions of modernism, these projects altered its terrain by reconceptualizing the figure of the artist and the site of the artwork. In his essay, “From Excavation to Dispersion”, Sadek describes this situation as one in which “intent faces dispersion” where the artwork oscillates between “critically and indifference”. These new practices were horizontal, not directive, with no efforts placed in mobilizing a spectator. Sadek lists projects like his publication *bigger than picasso*, (1999), his collaborative newspaper with Bilal Khbeiz *Al-Kasal*, (Indolence, 1999), Khbeiz’s *The Water in the Café is Cold*, (2000), and Tony Chakar’s *All that is solid melts into air*, (2000), as the first to engage with strategies of dispersion. In each work, artist’s expressed their intent by choice of

---

43 Walid Sadek, “From Excavation to Dispersion,” 66-81.
context, i.e., in what exhibition or event the work was shown, and its medium of parasitism, i.e., how and through what means it was disseminated.

Within the intent/dispersion paradigm, reading and writing figured prominently both as a mode of production and distribution. In 1999, Sadek and Khbeiz collaborated on *Al-Kasal*, which took the form of a large newspaper. Printed in black and white on newsprint paper, the pages of *Al-Kasal* were filled with images of anonymous individuals lying incapacitated in an empty space, their bodies framed by fragments of quixotic text foretelling a catastrophic future. Appropriating the form of a daily newspaper permitted Sadek and Khbeiz’s work to enter into more complex systems of circulation and consumption. The following year, for his *Hamra Street Project* contribution, Khbeiz produced *The Water in the Café is Cold*, a set of 19 postcards containing short, self-reflexive statements that were made available in all exhibition locations, Hamra Street, Colisée, and Strand Cinemas. Khbeiz’s writing, incoherent and self-involved, was a form of “horizontal writing” that made pronouncements at random and without concern or desire for mobilizing its reader in any political way: “Coffee is neither bitter nor sweet. It has no taste. It just has a sufficient effect and smell to make the memory of horses.” This individualism was countered with the movement of the medium, Sadek writes, “The postcard is individualism made into a spectacle, a revelation of the private, where there is no need to conceal or hide what words or images it may carry. What is primary is the meaning of the medium and its function, both well summarized by the rather generic and consensual images postcards usually carry.” In *The Water in the Café is Cold*, the medium is both site of dispersion and vehicle of parasitism, as the postcard’s circulation

---

44 Ibid.
45 Ibid., 78.
46 Ibid.
within communication networks carries its message among users.

Sadek’s *bigger than picasso* and Chakar’s *All that is solid melts into air* expand this terrain, appropriating historical and theoretical texts, introducing these ideas into new contexts, and exploiting their meaning. Sadek’s small paperback book, *bigger than picasso*, juxtaposes narrative text, related to Pablo Picasso and printed in Arabic and English, with a static image of an obelisk monument dedicated to Syrian President Hafez Al Assad, erected in Beirut on November 15, 1998 under the supervision of Prime Minister Hariri (Fig. 11-12). In this work, Sadek’s writing is less horizontal and more directed towards building a critique of monuments, the public silences they elicit, and dead authority they represent. Similarly, Chakar’s *All that is solid melts into air*, appropriates the map form in order to critique the logic of maps and the forms of seeing/blindness they produce. Reproducing a defunct Ottoman Empire-era map, and includes a series of quotes from Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Walter Benjamin, and Karl Marx, written in Arabic text that proceeds across the top of the map’s edge. Slight alterations appear throughout, in the lower right register of the map near Ras Mukerben and Ras Beirut, Chakar inserts two lines of circular frames that contain zoomed in images of building facades with horizontal forms. Folded up into squares, Chakar’s maps open up into a poster like format, which he produced multiple copies of on the occasion of *Hamra Street Project* (Fig. 13).

Sadek argues that it is in the use of borrowed text that strategies of appropriation and dispersion converge. He writes,

For the displacing of texts and quotes is not an operation critically directed back towards their primary sources and origins but rather it is a temporary/transient appropriation and borrowing of available speech, whose objective is the construction of a vocality for a besieged subjectivity in a moment of protestation that does not conceal the
The pairing of text and image in *bigger than Picasso* and of text and map in *All That is Solid Melts Into Air* confronts the closed, authoritarian silence of these monuments and maps with vocality, articulated through borrowed speech. Though besieged, subjects under the rule of these invisible power structures, embodied in the monuments of war and colonial maps of domination, are able to disavow its authority freely by appropriating available text.

The effects of displacement that follow textual appropriation are more concretely spelled out in Chakar’s map. He borrows several written extracts that proceed as one run on sentence, presenting multiple and contradictory points of view. The historical weight of these fragments create moments of friction throughout, introducing several polemics that raise questions around the migration of text into new contexts and what is lost or gained within its process. Sadek writes, “The text of the map appears to hang on the edge of ambiguities, amidst an ocean of new intentions and a legacy of displaced meanings.”

If this kind of site-based work is engaged with the production of vocal subjects, there is an inherent danger in its weightlessness of reverse appropriation, in which authority is restored to its original source. While Chakar’s map alters the spatial conditions surrounding the art object distinct from earlier iterations of site-based projects, it remains skeptical of the art activity and the validity of its claims.

Despite their lack of material specificity, these site-based works are intricately tied to the space of the city. In each instance, artists were in need of an art event through which their projects could be pronounced and disseminated. This contextual requirement

---

47 Ibid., 79.  
48 Ibid., 81.
contained a, “formal, though decisive, link with the cultural and artistic life of the city, both as a context to enter and a frame to exceed.”⁴⁹ The dispersion tendency made current alternative conceptions of art and its site, which redirected the point of intervention from the physical to informational and ideological systems, and responded to the need for new subjectivities in challenging the remaking of Beirut’s public and urban space.

A consequence of the dispersion tendency was a renewed focus on the relationship between the subject and the city. How the subject and its body could be formed or transformed by the city and, conversely, how could the city be formed or transformed by its subjects and their bodies? In the second decade of the postwar, artists sought resistance through alternative means, focusing on storytelling as point through which the presence of multiple cities, spaces, and temporalities in Beirut could be articulated. Narrative and mapping emerged as key themes, both as formal devices and critical practices involved in the writing, telling, and experiencing of urban space. Artists adopted established modes of address, the lecture-performance, the publication, and the walking tour, to deliver their reflections and propositions for the changing city while testing the limits of these representational and performative frameworks. The diverse performative gestures deployed by artists, including narrating, mapping, and walking had the effect of augmenting the city’s alter-existence in the site of the subject.

On the occasion of Home Works II, (2003), a forum for cultural practices in the region organized by Ashkal Alwan, artist and architect Tony Chakar produced a performance and book called The Eyeless Map (Fig. 14). The work detailed Chakar’s

⁴⁹ Ibid., 78.
discovery, while walking through the neighborhood of Achrafieh in East Beirut, of an anonymous architect’s notebook, which contained a vision for an eyeless map of the city. Narrating his encounter while sifting through pages of the notebook, Chakar commented on the freneticism of the author’s tone and the fragmented structure of his text,

That said, after careful examination, it became very clear that there was no unity in the notebook. Of course notebooks are not meant to have unified contents, but that’s not what I mean: It seemed as if the notebook was made of fragments, and, albeit the coherence of these fragments, their condition made it very difficult for this coherence to come through. An idea would start on page 6, for instance, and then would be continued on page 19, while the pages from 6 to 19 were permeated with other ideas that would start there and end a few pages later. Each of these fragments, I thought, produced its own meaning, while the general meaning of the whole thing would only unfold itself in relation not to the writer (as in, say, a diary), but to the city he was living in, experiencing with all his force. The notebook was a metaphor for Beirut.50

In Chakar’s story, he set up multiple layers of identification in which the individual becomes text, text becomes city, and city becomes individual. The notebook’s mix of scattered thoughts and personal reflection parallel with the trajectory of Chakar’s discovery, in which the author narrated the walk through his old neighborhood while contemplating various memories contained in its streets. He continued,

After reading that, the idea of Beirut being formed by heavily contrasting fragments – each fragment producing its own meaning – seemed so natural and true. Furthermore, every fragment was living in a time of its own, in a temporality that was entirely different from the one right next to it (which made the reference to ‘gateways to other worlds’ so accurate). If one were to look at it from the outside, these fragments would make the city they belonged to completely unfathomable, even chaotic, and I started to believe, like the architect/writer believed, that the only way of producing sense and meaning, the only way that these fragments could be united, was through direct experience, through the movement of our bodies in and out of every fragment.51

51 Ibid., 34.
As Chakar recounted, he began to empathize with the architect’s mapping of the Beirut. This twofold layering of text and translation that structures the narrative framework in *The Eyeless Map*, advances a view of the city as one composed of diverse spatiotemporal fragments mediated through the individual’s subjective experience.

In the plan for an eyeless map, the architect replaces the cyclopean optics of traditional maps with his own bodily movement throughout the city. As in *All that is solid melts into air*, by challenging the dominant logic of cartography through the displacement of vision, Chakar appropriates French artist Guy Debord’s model for a reorganized map of Paris, entitled *The Naked City* (Fig. 15). Published in 1957, Debord’s map is composed of nineteen cut out sections of a map of Paris, printed in black ink, linked together by directional arrows printed in red.52 What he called “spontaneous inclinations of orientation” linking the varying “unities of atmosphere” analogize the individual subject to a locomotive, a self-propelled body whose motion is paradoxically restricted by predetermined movements in “the instrumentalized image of the city propagated under the reign of capital.”53 In his essay “Situationist Space”, art historian Thomas F. McDonough reads Debord’s *The Naked City* against the *Plan de Paris*, arguing that Debord subverts the structure of the latter, critiquing its presentation of the city as a timeless object.54 Dividing his map into unities of atmosphere, Debord privileges subjective, socially produced fragments of the city over its representative whole. In this way, he argues for a “psychogeographic” experience of space structured through synecdoche rather than overarching narrative, image, or description. The impetus behind *The Naked City*, McDonough posits, is rooted in a critique of the restructuring of society,

53 Ibid., 60.
54 Ibid.
urban space, and social relations under late capitalism.\textsuperscript{55} Similarly, Chakar’s evocation of movement, fragment, and psychogeography in \textit{The Eyeless Map} can be read antagonistically; Chakar’s mapping criticized totalizing representations of Beirut put forward by Solidère along with the projected reorganization of the city’s socio-economic relations through the intensification of market-forces in spaces of the urban and of everyday life.\textsuperscript{56}

Chakar expanded this project, moving the locus of analysis to “the city center” or downtown Beirut, in \textit{Yesterday’s Man}, (2009), a performance and text co-produced with artists Rabih Mroué and Tiago Rodrigues (Fig. 16). \textit{Yesterday’s Man} tells the story of a Portuguese man visiting Beirut with an outdated map, following directions that lead him nowhere except to other versions of himself, trying to find but never reaching the center of the city, which may or may not exist. As he moves along the same path, the performance description states, “The city changes, it metamorphoses at the mercy of times’ erosion and History’s convulsions. This man never changes but he always lives different days in each visit. The days that the ever changing city allows him to live.”\textsuperscript{57} In this work, Chakar maintains the critique of cartographical optics from \textit{The Eyeless Map}, introducing two additional elements; in this story, Beirut is given agency to act onto its inhabitants, transform, appear, or disappear, and the individual moves about the city as if in a labyrinth, outside of sequential time. On the performance, Chakar writes,

\begin{quote}
It is an attempt to create moments where time stops, so that past, present, and future will be blended together, so that it would be easy to become lost. A place with a lot of crisscrossing and complicated passages, paths and barricades, holes and cracks, that makes the history
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.

\pagebreak
of the city much more complicated to be simplified. A place appears exactly as a labyrinth where time would stop and streets become as if they are one in the same street where the lost person will have the impression of repeating the same day or the same moment over and over again.  

Chakar negates the spatial ordering of urban space around a center, casting doubt on the fact that one ever existed in Beirut. Contextualizing *Yesterday’s Man* in relation to the recent construction of Beirut Central District, an invented zone born out of the destruction of the city’s symbolic *bourj* neighborhood, underlines the necessity of Chakar’s protest. Positioning Beirut as an autonomous, self-determining force, capable of acting on its inhabitants while insisting in the same instance on the city’s inherent fragmentation, Chakar attempts to make difficult the simplistic notions of Beirut laid out in official discourses of reconstruction.

A year later, these two projects culminated in *The Sky Over Beirut*, (2010), a series of public walking tours in two areas of the city, Achrafieh and downtown Beirut. Led by Chakar, the tours were situated around specific areas in each neighborhood. Throughout the tours, the artist interweaved his personal memories of these places with historical facts, tangentially describing the architectural and the urban evolution of each area he encountered. Tours were recorded and turned into an interactive digital map, containing audio and video footage of the excursions over a Google maps image of the city. Every point on the map corresponded to its position in the tour and was accompanied by a short paragraph lifted from earlier texts, *The Eyeless Map* for the Achrafieh tour and *Yesterday’s Man* for the downtown Beirut tour (Fig. 17-18).  

Focusing on the neighborhood’s idiosyncrasies, both real and metaphorical, Chakar

---

58 Ibid.
exchanged grand narratives for highly specific, personal stories in his performative mapping of the city. In each version of this work, Chakar rejected the logics of map-making and cartographic practice that turn cities over to pure representation and reduce the complexities of urban experience. By injecting the social into visions of Beirut through various forms of personal narration, Chakar creates a space for multipositionality, from which the city can be seen embodying a multiplicity of narratives, memories, and histories.

The methodological potentiality of mapping lies in its ability to resituate cognition through networks of intersubjectivity, incorporating alternative and marginal histories into its scope, while rewriting the empirical model upon which established bodies of knowledge are based. Presenting map-making within this semiotic and linguistic frame politicizes the practice and implicates the activity in complex histories of colonialism, nationalism, and postcolonialism. As an epistemological system, mapping has historically functioned as a tool for delineating and territorializing land through an ideological position. Imperial empires harnessed the linguistic capacities of mapping during periods of colonization, translating topography into a language of cartography, as a way to extend military dominion and political, social, and economic subjugation over foreign lands. On the subject, art historian Irit Rogoff writes,

The connection between those who are colonizing or exploring power and those being brought into their orbit and their order exists at the level of a circulation of resources, markets, and fantasies. The signifying languages of these dynamics translate all the power relations and material and political realities and fantasmatic relations into a benign language of geographical taxonomies.⁶¹

⁶⁰ My discussion of maps in relation to this work is rooted in Rogoff’s analysis in Terra Infirma, in which she argues the practice of mapping, or cartography, as a form of writing that engages issues of representation, identity, and location.

⁶¹ Irit Rogoff, Terra Infirma, 74-75.
Under Ottoman imperial and French colonial rule in Lebanon, representation and rhetoric were synthesized in cartographic mapping in order to physically mark territories, locate these within the dominant power structure, and attempt to imbue these places and their populations with a set of predetermined political, cultural, social, and economic values. Using the practice of mapping against itself, Rogoff argues, it is possible to antagonize its epistemological base by experimental methods, “mapping subjectivities and bodies of knowledge that are not traditionally linked to cartographic form.” Chakar’s succeeding works The Eyeless Map, Yesterday’s Man, and The Sky Over Beirut, are exemplary in this way, as his process of mapping subjectivity involves the addition of narrative into the realm of cartography.

The structural relationship between narrative and mapping, and more specifically space, is elaborated in Michel de Certeau’s book The Practice of Everyday Life. Narratives are mobile, spatial trajectories that connect the places of the everyday together with the atemporal, or temporally distinct, places of the metaphor. Certeau argues, “Narrative structures have the status of spatial syntaxes. By means of a whole panoply of codes, ordered ways of proceeding and constraints, they regulate changes in space (or moves from one place to another) made by stories in the form of places put in linear or interlaced series.” Aligning space with narrativity in this way adds distinction to the relationship between place and space; the former can be defined as a location, a configuration of positions in one point corresponding to those points around it, and the latter as the intersection of multiple “vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables.”

---

62 For example, see Commission des sciences et arts d’Egypte, Description de l’Egypte (French Government, 1809-1822) and its many volumes, including Carte Topographique de l’Egypte.
63 Irit Rogoff, Terra Inflrma, 79-80.
actualized by the “ensemble of movements deployed within it.” Space is a practiced place. Certeau writes, “Places are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reserve, remaining in an enigmatic state, symbolizations encysted in the pain or pleasure of the body.”65 The task of transforming a place into a space, and vice versa, is carried out by a variety of actions tied to the individual figure as it reads, narrates, and traverses the city.

Important in Certeau’s analysis is his understanding of the body as the locus of activity and the mechanism through which the space and place of a city can be produced. Similarly, for Lebanese artists making work in Beirut after the reconstruction debates in the 1990s, the city was not an object to engage with directly but a space to be made through the enforcement of subjectivity into its place.

A similar paradigm exists between maps and tours. Maps are animated by their narrative enunciation in the form of tours, which describe ways of moving through emplotted space. The map flattens the heterogeneity of places into a representative order, partly ideological and partly observational, erasing their stories and their histories. A large part of Chakar’s project was to resist the effects of this flattening by introducing personal and fictional narrative in his performance of the tour. On the significance of these acts, Certeau argues,

Every description is more than a fixation,’ it is ‘a culturally creative act.’ It even has distributive power and performative force (it does what it says) when an ensemble of circumstances is brought together. Then it founds spaces. Reciprocally, where stories are disappearing (or else are being reduced to museographical objects), there is a loss of space: deprived of narrations, the group or the individual regresses toward the disquieting, fatalistic experience of a formless, indistinct and nocturnal

65 Ibid., 108.
The weight of Chakar’s performance lies in its assertion of the individual’s right to move, remember, and narrate his or her city, particularly at a time when Beirut was besieged by blinding forces of privatization and temporal occupation. Simply telling or pairing the Google map of Beirut Central District with a fictional quote from *Yesterday's Man*, had the effect of opening up the city and exposing its double consciousness. In Chakar’s work, it was the performance of the body and the language of its narration that disrupted the representational order of maps and the material effects of reconstruction.

---

66 Ibid., 112.
CHAPTER II

IN SEARCH OF AN OPEN CITY AND ITS SUBJECTS

We had grown accustomed to the sight of maimed façades and collapsed buildings, walls and roofs agape. It did not seem so crucial to hurry up and fix whatever could be fixed, for long now, these markers of destruction - and hurt - were not sore to the eyes anymore. They were our lot, they cohered with everything else the civil war had left us with...  

Rasha Salti

Will we one day learn how to live in a place without dwelling in it, so that the act of deserting it will not turn it into a ruin?  

Jalal Toufic

In the face of history’s violent excesses, an official call was issued throughout Lebanon: to will the weight of war away with overwhelming reprieve, disavowing the present in order to bask in the gold-tinted imaginaries of a bygone age. Within the fragile context of postwar Lebanon, acts of public disclosure posed the greatest threat to the shaky truce structured under the Ta’if Agreement. Fearing that the indictment of wartime crimes would reactivate hostilities in the nation, the Lebanese government passed the General Amnesty Law 84, on August 26, 1991, granting full amnesty to the wide-range of actors in the civil war for all political crimes committed prior to March 28, 1991.  

Warlords and corrupt leaders that in the months and years prior to this agreement were cordonning of city quarters, murdering civilians, propagating internecine conflict, and exploiting the nation’s infrastructure, industry, and resources, were now resolved of their

---

69 The imprisonment of Samir Geagea, leader of the Lebanese Forces, in 1994 offers the only exception. On February 27, 1994, a bomb exploded at Church of Sayyidet Al Najet that resulted in the death and injury of civilians. Geagea was accused of orchestrating the attack along with various attempts to undermine government authority and charged with life imprisonment for violating the terms of Law 84. Following Syria’s withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005, Geagea was released through a special pardon under the government’s issue of a second amnesty law, Law No 677, July 19, 2005.
crimes and relieved of all forms of accountability. Given a clean slate and a clear path, the majority of these figures seamlessly transitioned into seats of governing and institutional power.\textsuperscript{70}

These early gestures of forced amnesty, coupled with the initiation of market-centered economic policies in the 1990s, outlined the framework for postwar recovery and its culminating project, the reconstruction of Beirut. Through its plans for redevelopment, as with its pardoning measures, the Lebanese government sought to pathologize the recent war. Adopting a \textit{tabula rasa} approach, official bodies aimed to erase the war’s urban scars, particularly the central downtown area through forced demolitions, and rebuild a metaphorical, investor-friendly city through a combined program of privatized fast-track development and minimal social accountability.\textsuperscript{71} The government’s singular vision for a conflict-free city center rested upon a highly selective chronology that privileged Beirut’s grand historical narratives while discounting its lived realities. War was denounced as a deviant ill of the past to be discarded into the dustbins of history, and its transcendence, officials proclaimed, would appear in the form of economic solvency.

The government’s efforts to instrumentalize history and corrupt its time were

\textsuperscript{70} Postwar reconciliation measures involved the outsourcing of these activities to international NGOs who operated through contentious frameworks of “transitional justice,” “human rights,” and “international development.” The resignation of government supervision over postwar peace processes to outside bodies is an extension of the larger neoliberal complex guiding the nation’s growth. Pointedly lacking in self-reflexivity, extensive in legal jargon, and wildly accusatory in tone, see International Center for Transitional Justice’s report, “Failing to Deal With the Past: What Cost to Lebanon?,” (ICTJ, 2014) for a stunning example of this flawed and deeply problematic system, a united front of humanitarianism, reconstruction, and consumerism, at work.

\textsuperscript{71} These effects would become glaring, even to the foreign visitor. Upon traveling to Beirut in 1999, British journalist Katherine Viner wrote, “Solidère represents the hope for rebirth of rich Beirut, and there hasn’t been much left for ordinary Lebanese. While Solidère glistens . . . much of Beirut sits in poverty. People living in the downtown area were unceremoniously removed to make way for Solidère; many families still inhabit their bombed-out homes; and the Palestinian refugee camps, which include Sabra and Chatila, notoriously massacred by the Christian Phalange under Israeli guard in 1982, are poorer than ever.” Viner, “48 Hours.” \textit{The Guardian}, March 6, 1999.
subjects of both interest and critique for many young artists living in Beirut, at the time exploring the legacies of war and what it left unresolved, namely a state of protracted conflicts and crises of representation. Evident in the reconstruction plans and marketing campaigns of put forth by Solidère was the extent to which the company’s seemingly haphazard application of history onto the space of the city would be at the service of advancing an economic system that placed primacy on the growth of free-markets and private industry at the expense of public life. The visual polemic introduced was understood by many artists to be more insidious in force and effect than the erection of new buildings. In a sense, Solidère’s use of temporal signs represented two factors: an official program of pathology, by which the effects of the civil war would not be publically acknowledged but treated as an aberration, and an occupation, by which the city and its inhabitants would remain under the siege of a different kind of domination.

The works of two artists and thinkers, Jalal Toufic and Walid Sadek, critically approach the iniquitous logic underpinning the instrumentalization of history, while proposing models for rethinking the temporality on one hand – to antagonize the imposition of neoliberal time and its pathologizing effects – and on the other, to find ways of making the city habitable again. Their theories and writings on the notion of time outline the major discursive shifts that defined postwar Lebanese artists’ engagement with the city from the 1990s into the 2000s. This chapter examines the concerted efforts of artists to contend with the struggle for the nation’s time and livibility, seeking possible futures by way of its forms and subjects, through a discussion of Toufic’s writings in relation to the work of Walid Raad and Sadek’s projects in connection with the novelist Elias Khoury. Elements of their spatiotemporal propositions and reconceptualizations of
postwar subjects are linked to the dialectical work of Henri Lefebvre in his writings on the possible.

In Saree Makdisi’s incisive and longform criticism of Solidère, “Laying Claim to Beirut: Urban Narrative and Spatial Identity in the Age of Solidère,” he discusses the series of wartime reconstruction attempts that preceded Solidère, highlighting the company’s shady origins and poking holes in its “rise from the ashes” mythology, and revealing, piece by piece, its efforts to cunningly craft a chronology based upon the exclusion of historical fact and the dominance of a singular spatial narrative. Makdisi’s analysis resonates when viewed in relation to one of the company’s early information booklets,

Located at the historical and geographical core of the city, the vibrant financial, commercial and administrative hub of the country, the Beirut Central District came under fire from all sides throughout most of the sixteen years of fighting. At the end of the war, that area of the city was afflicted with overwhelming destruction, total devastation of the infrastructure, the presence of squatters in several areas, and extreme fragmentation and entanglement of property rights involving owners, tenants and leaseholders.

What can be evinced from this description, is that Solidère was not interested in treating the war as a history with its own foundations, but rather, as a temporary disease afflicting the nation. An affliction for which the company and the company alone held the antidote. Makdisi rightfully takes note of the fact that in its promotional brochures, Solidère makes no mention of the previous history of reconstruction. Even within the context of war, the city underwent multiple remakings, as iterations of construction were

---

73 Ibid., 675.
carried out in correspondence with occasional periods of peace. In 1977, following the first bout of fighting (1975-76), the government established the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR) as a regulatory body tasked with organizing and managing reconstruction efforts, particularly in downtown Beirut. The first plan proposed under CDR was based on pillars of maintenance and integration, with the intent of restore the damaged central area to its prewar conditions in terms of urban design and communal diversity. That same year, however, fighting resumed in the capital and plans were postponed. After successive fighting and two bouts of violent Israeli occupation, in 1983, a different path was taken: the private engineering firm OGER Liban, owned by future Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, assumed the project, commissioning a new plan from the Arab consultancy firm Dar al-Handasah. Concurrently, demolition began in the city center under the pretense of “cleaning up,” an unauthorized move that disregarded the CDR’s 1977 plan and destroyed a host of significant buildings and souks in its process. Demolition efforts were halted yet again by new rounds of hostilities but in 1986, during a lull in fighting, the practice was renewed, without approval or interference of government bodies. By 1990, the war came to its official end and attention was once again directed towards on reconstructing the damaged city center, under the aegis of those responsible for the 1983-1986 demolitions.\footnote{Ibid.,}

In the following years, the political and legal framework was laid for the establishment of Solidère. Beginning with the appointment of OGER Liban’s Fadel el-Shalaq as leader of CDR in 1991, members of the private development industry were quickly placed at the helm of the government’s principal planning body and as such were given full control over decisions regarding the city’s future. The same year, disputes over
property rights led to a proposal for the formation of a single real estate company to manage the rebuilding process. Under this plan, the firm would be given land expropriation rights and free reign to clear out the neighborhood’s remaining structures for private development. While it was being debated in public circles, a law issued on December 17, 1991 granting expropriating rights for development throughout the country and in the capital effectively legalized proposed plan.\textsuperscript{75} In 1992, further demolition occurred without a defined reconstruction process using harsher measures, such as explosives, causing the unnecessary destruction of many repairable buildings. Despite growing public opposition, the government passed a number of laws allowing for the foundation of Solidère and approved Dar al-Handasah’s master plan for reconstruction before submitting it to the approval of Hariri’s government.\textsuperscript{76}

During the civil war, roughly one-third of buildings in central Beirut were left damaged beyond repair by various military struggles, shelling, and bombing. By the time OGER Liban and Solidère had finished preparatory demolitions and excavations, nearly


\textsuperscript{76} See Fawwaz Traboulsi, “Social Classes and Political Power in Lebanon” (Heinrich Böll Stiftung - Middle East Office, 2014), “This process, or project, was inextricably bound up with Rafic Hariri, who headed the Lebanese government from 1992 to 2000, and then again from 2004 to 2005 and championed a policy of reconstruction that sought to refashion the Lebanese system to match the age of neoliberal globalization with the assistance of bankers, contractors, importers and a political coterie of militia leaders, while the lines between political and economic power grew increasingly blurred. The project was set in motion with absolutely no attention paid to the lessons that might be learned from the civil war; that social inequalities play a role in exacerbating sectarian hatred and fanning the flames of conflict; that the sectarian system itself provides war with the human fuel it needs to go on burning. So, all this set aside, the project’s public face involved a promise to rebuild the Lebanese economic system along pre-war lines and surrender power to militia leaders, after amending the system of sectarian allocations and balances in what was termed a process of ‘heavy consensus’. With reconstruction a synonym for rebuilding the pre-war politico-economic system, it then became necessary to sever all links between the war and what came before it, in order to avoid the following embarrassing question: If the pre-war period was Lebanon’s Golden Age, then why did war break out? In this way the pre-war economic, social and political regime was absolved of all responsibility for the war, which was instead blamed squarely on “outsiders” and renamed “the war of the others…,” 25.
eighty-percent of its buildings were demolished.\textsuperscript{77} Parallel to these acts of destruction and expropriation of private property was the fabrication of the symbolic BCD city center. The primary objectives behind the project were grounded in economic concerns, particularly in fashioning Beirut into a regional commercial hub drawing tourism and international investment.\textsuperscript{78} To accomplish this, Solidère had to invent a placed-based identity for Beirut. Architects, planners, and engineers working on the project drew from an inflated visual iconography belonging to periods of Greek, Roman, French, and Ottoman rule, favoring a mix of colonial flare and modern design stemming from the Mandate period. Construction activities involved the creation luxury housing blocks, a new financial center, a landfill of roughly 60 hectares of the west Beirut waterfront to erect high-rise glass towers, and the restoration of destroyed souks. While promoting vague narratives of heritage and historical preservation, Solidère actively destroyed buildings, selectively preserved monuments, and erected new buildings in a pastiche of older architectural styles, in order to erase traces of the city’s recent history and turn it over to pure image.\textsuperscript{79} In the flattening of urban experience into an image, social aspects of reconstruction and postwar recovery - education, health care, social services, sanitation and housing - were largely ignored.\textsuperscript{80} Officials seeking to pathologize the war and build a neoliberal future were strategically positioned to enact their singular vision under the claim of collectivity. While war torn spaces that bore the marks of a history they’d rather not bear lay vulnerable, public space ruled by capital was at once stripped of its public, and begged the urgent question, how could citizens inhabit a city whose time is not their

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{78} Ragab, “The Crisis of Cultural Identity,” 107-114.
\textsuperscript{79} Makdisi, “Beirut/Beirut,” 26-39. See also Andrew Lawler, “Rebuilding Beirut,” \textit{Archaeology} vol. 64, no. 4 (July/August, 2011): 24-29.
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid.
Moving away from strategies of urban intervention, many artists avoided direct confrontation with the site of reconstruction. Instead, they chose to address the underlying conditions of official and institutional pathology, shed light on what this approach to history left unresolved while criticizing its effects, and search for possible alternatives, or modes to live through. Ruins, as both a concept and material reality of the postwar period, became a source of inspiration for artists and writers like Toufic, Hadjithomas and Joreige.

Toufic began writing on ruins as early as 1993, in his book *Vampires* An Uneasy Essay on the Undead in Film. Toufic proposes the ruin as a “labyrinthine space-time,” a modality to think rather than a form to engage in an environment of unrestrained closures and erasures. His writing takes shape as art criticism, film analysis, and theoretical text implicitly drawing from the conditions of postwar Beirut while rarely making direct reference to its redevelopment. Rather, he focuses on the role of arts as providing the only consistent counterpoint to the regressive actions orchestrated by Lebanese government and imposed upon its citizenry.

Toufic begins his musings on ruins with a quandary: in the time of war, people deserted their homes marking them as ruinous, however, after the return of occupants and the restoration of destroyed parts, their homes and other buildings continued to be ruins. The anticipation of future destruction and desertion born from prolonged civil war had the effect of turning buildings into ruins without specific reason, manifesting their
already being ruins. Beirut’s reconstruction was built on this paradox; Toufic offers the example of “occupied uninhabitable areas”, or half-destroyed buildings occupied by squatters and refugees, versus “deserted inhabitable areas”, those luxuriously restored, unoccupied buildings of BCD too expensive for the average Lebanese to inhabit.81

Throughout his text, Toufic makes a case for Beirut’s destroyed elements as being of as much archeological importance as those of the ancient Roman and Medieval ruins of Baalbek, connecting them through their shared constitutional element: fiction. What the visceral conditions of wartime destruction did was open up the city center to its layered past, displaying remnants of former cities beneath its surface, which were speckled with crumbled building parts from civil war bombardments. Spatiotemporal conditions of the city were disrupted; with the appearance of multiple cities came the influx of differing chronologies and histories. Toufic reformulates the concept of ruin as labyrinthine zone, writing, “What is site-specific about Lebanon? It is the labyrinthine space-time of its ruins, what undoes the date- and site-specific.”82 Following this premise, the linear, chronological line drawing out an idealized vision of Beirut taken up by Solidère is proved to be both unknowing and violent in its fiction. By supplanting Beirut’s present-day ruins with reconstructed buildings and selective archeological preservation, Toufic writes,

Those who are reconstructing Beirut’s Central District under the banner and motto ‘Ancient City of the Future’ are oblivious that ruins secrete and exist in a past that is artificial, one that does not belong to history, was not gradually produced by it. All discourse on authenticity implies a suspicion toward, and prepares the ground for an attack on recent ruins, accepting only ancient ‘ruins,’ archeological ‘ruins,’ many of which while not restored are probably no longer ruins, no longer labyrinthine in

82 Ibid., 69.
their temporality and space.\textsuperscript{83}

The flagrancies of reconstruction mirrored the disregard for the life of the city and its inhabitants imposed by those carrying out years of war, signaling a heightened form of brutality and persistence of civil war conditions.

Toufic tells the story of Dima al-Husayni, an architecture student at American University of Beirut, who in 1992 visited the destroyed city center with her class in order to analyze the space from an architectural and historical perspective. The encounter produced within Dima a deep sense of dissonance; standing amongst ruins, she fell into a time lapse, unable to reconcile the landscape of the layered city and its different architectural markers with those memories of a colorful and animated prewar Beirut inherited from her parents. “This corroborates that there is a very old past that the present of ruins itself secretes, for indeed in that case it is natural that it would be more difficult to remember the destroyed city center, which is maybe as old as Baalbek, than to remember the city center imbibed through the memories of her parents, hence which belongs to the 1960s, 1950s, 1940s.”\textsuperscript{84} Faced with competing images of prewar Beirut alongside lived experience of violence and dislocation, young Lebanese like Dima searched for ways to comprehend their dilapidated and fleeting city. Particularly for those artists who had come of age during the civil war years, either in Lebanon or abroad, capturing Beirut’s destruction through text, photography, and video was paramount to the process of negotiating a sense of self in relation to the city, acknowledging in full the weight of recent history, the physical and psychological effects of war, and the interwoven narratives of personal, public, and political history that it laid bare.

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 71.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 71.
For many artists, the presence of ruins necessitated the urge to capture, document, and record – what was once there, what remained, and what would soon be taken away. In his essay, Toufic argues that there must be a relay between documentary and fiction whenever dealing with ruins, “Fiction has to reveal to us the anomalous, labyrinthine space-time of ruins; and, in case no ruins subsist for the ghost to appear, to supplement reality as a site of return of the revenant…it is too dangerous after a civil war or a war, which produces so much unfinished business, for there to be no ghosts.”

Without engaging with that left untouched, those specters of the civil war, it is too easy to fall into a space of amnesia where the public is robbed of memory and the city is given over to the violence of privatized, linear time. Artists, Toufic contends, must address these issues through modes of documentary and fiction in order to uphold the labyrinthine temporality as counter to the imposition of Solidère’s neoliberal temporality.

A clear example of this impulse to can be found in the early work of Hadjithomas and Joreige. In 1988, the two young art students discovered a drastically transformed Beirut in the site of its destroyed city center. Without clear sense, they began to photograph the neighborhood excessively, accumulating hundreds of photographs of ruinous streets and buildings with an investigative lens. This exercise resulted in a body of work entitled Equivalences, (1997), a collection of photographs detailing aspects of Beirut’s destroyed buildings, streets, and façades (Fig. 19). In these photographs, elements of wreckage are distorted and abstracted, through cropping and zooming so far to the point that they are removed from the topography of war. The tilt and closeness of these images have the effect of dislocating viewers while at the same time drawing them further into the composition; these dualities result from the artists’ efforts to abstract

---

85 Ibid., 74.
ruins into pure form in their photographs, a process in which all sense of time and space are lost. Photographing the details, the artists’ remark, “Is here close to the bomb; it hijacks the object from its context, diverts it from its function, destroys its primary sense. The image no longer aims to impose a reconstitution, a clear delimitation of space.”

In one *Equivalence* photograph, multiple layers of jagged-edged broken walls, covered in ripped paint, are structured around a sharp diagonal pull in the composition and photographed at such an angle that it is impossible to perceive their position in space (Fig. 20). Contextual speculation – what happened here, when did it occur, and where it took place – fades away as the formal elements of the image are brought to the fore. In another *Equivalence*, Hadjithomas and Joreig photograph a bombed out building, zooming in on a section of its bullet-hole ridden façade exposing the building’s underlying cross-shaped structure (Fig. 21). The uneven and crumbling surface is lit with natural light against a darkened background, presumably the interior of the destroyed property. Once again, any sense of direction or positionality in space is obscured; a plant grows horizontally out of the cross-shaped façade’s center while a wrought iron fence dangles suspended in another direction from the same center. Exploring ambiguous fragments of the city in *Equivalences*, Hadjithomas and Jorei test the limits of the photographic image and viewer’s capacity for recognition, challenging normative representations of ruins and their presence in Beirut. Moreover, Hadjithomas and Jorei’s intense focus on objects of ruin at a time when the reconstruction effort intended to erase all traces of Beirut’s civil war raised questions on the writing of history.

---

88 Ibid., 14.
in the postwar – what narratives and concomitant images would be preserved in the rebuilding of the city, and what would remain beneath the surface? “The ruin is not standing; it is buried. It is eminently haunted; it reveals absence, the lack of what we really look for: the body of the other and our own body…let’s remind ourselves yet again that the revenants always return.”89

Art historian Ghalya Saadawi emphasizes the element of fiction in her analysis of Toufic’s work. Ruins as they are fated to various forms of deterioration and decay, she writes, “are an instance of an architecture implicated with fiction. Despite the common urge to document or preserve them...one cannot reach the reality of ruins as subjects of documentary. Fiction becomes the condition of possibility of apprehending or revealing the space-time of ruin.”90 The possible materializes in the emergence of postwar art in the late 1990s and 2000s, which deals employ fiction to evince spectres and the revenant, indicative of meaningful temporal shift. Saadawi writes, “If we follow Toufic’s logic that a dearth of these is an indication that we were still living in a ‘collective post-traumatic amnesia,’ then their rise signifies a move beyond this moment into a time where the conditions of speech, of fiction and of revenants can become a political place and condition from which to speak.”91

Fiction emerged as a mode through which artists could think the war and its aftermath by “other means” against the persistence of political, social, and economic conditions that left fundamental questions around history, witnessing, memory, and their

90 Saadawi, “Rethinking the Witness,” 58.
91 Ibid., 59.
representations unanswered. While its refusal was played out within the public sphere, the very possibility of structuring a uniform history in the postwar was brought into question by artists coming to terms with the fact that their city was at once disappearing and being erected anew. For fellow artists and longtime collaborators Toufic and Raad, this exploration became the subject of their major works, Toufic’s multiform theory of the withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster and Raad’s long-term artistic projects *The Atlas Group*, (1989-2004).

In a collection of revised essays assembled from earlier texts by the author, Toufic theorizes the operative force of history and tradition in postwar, or post-surpassing disaster, contexts. Elements of Toufic’s theory are performed by Raad and elucidated upon in various iterations of *The Atlas Group*.92 The artists’ aesthetic and conceptual styles represented a growing tendency among artists throughout the mid-to-late 1990s and early 2000s working collaboratively through text, video, photography, and performance, blurring distinctions between documentary and fiction, to upset both pathological approaches to history and its political instrumentalization in postwar Lebanon.

In *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster*, Toufic introduces the concept of a surpassing disaster, which he likens to the Lebanese civil war, which is defined not by its material damages, i.e., the number of people left dead or buildings destroyed in the aftermath of armed conflict, but the immaterial withdrawal of tradition in

---

92 Jalal Toufic’s *Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster* (Forthcoming Books, 2009), includes revised editions of essays from earlier texts including, *Over-Sensitivity* (Sun & Moon Press, 1996); *Forthcoming* (Berkeley, CA: Atelos, 2000); *Distracted*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, CA: Tuumba Press, 2003); and *Undeserving Lebanon* (Forthcoming Books, 2007). It is worth noting that Toufic’s thinking on surpassing disasters largely informs the basis and theoretical frame of Raad’s recent work *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Modern and Contemporary Art in the Arab World*. 
its wake. Once withdrawn, Toufic argues, it is the task of artists and thinkers to render what was lost available once again through *resurrection*. Within this logic, which Toufic illustrates through examples in film, visual art, and literature, how conditions of protracted violence can open up tradition and culture to an existence outside of history, a retreat, he argues, that can only be countered by the actions of artists.

Artists experience the withdrawal of tradition on two fronts: first, in finding that an artwork, a film, a song, is unavailable to them, altered in form or vision, and second, in finding that their own work has been withdrawn. Toufic writes,

> When the surpassing disaster happens their works are withdrawn as a consequence of it, this implying that, unlike the vast majority of living humans, who are behind in their time, artists, writers, and thinkers are exactly of their time (the future component of their work, which maintains its relevance far into the future, comes to them through their untimely collaboration with future thinkers, writers, artists, etc.)

The work of withdrawal and resurrection belong to a non-linear time, a situating in which being on time is to be not on time at all, but to be truly avant-garde, when an artist’s work is withdrawn in the present for a future return. Ignorance of this non-linearity underlines one of Toufic’s criticisms of the discipline of history in which the material presence of documents and artifacts obscures the fact that much of what exists is potentially immaterially unavailable. Toufic writes, “All returns to tradition in the aftermath of a surpassing disaster have to be fought because tradition has been objectively withdrawn, and hence the ‘return’ would be to a counterfeit tradition, one characterized by the esoteric and lack of subtlety.” If a society continues to treat tradition withdrawn as still available, counterfeit cultures, histories, thoughts, and truths are not only produced but regenerated over time. He draws a hard line, however, between those artists attempting

---

94 Ibid.
95 Ibid., 29.
resurrection against those who advocate for a return to tradition without realizing it has been withdrawn.

For Toufic, art functions like the mirror in the vampire film, revealing the absence of what one thought was there. Toufic argues artists must continue to document and record nothingness, “We have to take photographs even though because of their referents’ withdrawal, and until their referents are resurrected, they are not going to be available as referential, documentary pieces.” The artistic act in the present is for the future, however, while documenting a referent withdrawn in the present is necessary, it can only function as a preservation of the referent if the work of resurrection counters its withdrawal.

Raad found his “collaborator” in a character developed by Toufic in Forthcoming (2000), a photographer who views “things at the speed of war”. The artist’s work Sweet Talk: Commissions/Photographic Documents of Beirut, a chapter in his long-term project The Atlas Group, (1989-2004), is comprised of a series of photographs of Beirut’s residents, buildings, streets, storefronts, taken by the artist and his various fictional collaborators (Fig. 22). In the late 1980s, the artist says, he began photographing with the intent of documenting a city undergoing massive change. When he developed the photographs, their spaces appeared empty; images of populated street corners and road-filled cars were removed of their signs of life, the presence of the human figure had disappeared. Raad concluded that this was a city not of its time, accelerating at a rate significantly faster than the one marked in his camera shutter, and resigned himself to

\[96\] Ibid.
\[97\] Ibid., 57-58.
taking photographs of a “Beirut for posterity”. Thus, Raad’s withdrawal of the referent was emblematic of the withdrawal of reality itself; as part of the community affected by the surpassing disaster, Beirut was unavailable to Raad resulting in the “blurred, never-on-time, always-to-the-side” photographs.

Similarly, the photographer in Forthcoming responded to the changing face of the city with a comparable impulse:

If he [the photographer] tried to document specifically Beirut’s Aswaq area [the central district], it is not that it particularly was withdrawn since physically turned into ruins, but because large sections of it were in imminent danger of being erased without true deliberation, to provide space for the construction of a new city center...To allow the discussion about the future condition of these ruined areas not to be a foregone oversight, it was crucial not only to criticize the financial interests at stake, and the subjective wish to forget whatever had strong associations with so many individual and collective traumas; but also to either resurrect these buildings or make manifest their withdrawal through art and architectural works, so that they would still be available for the argument against their demolition.

The fact that this did not occur in full, however, Toufic argues is due to the failure on the part of artists and filmmakers to adequately represent the withdrawal of Beirut’s ruinous buildings so as to offer a counter to the planning of a future of a city. These buildings, and the city more generally, once overlooked became susceptible to unthinking demolition. Toufic writes, “[d]id they erase many ruins to forget, or was it rather that they were able to erase them so easily because these ruined buildings were withdrawn by the surpassing disaster and therefore somewhat already quasi forgotten, so that the erasure largely implemented the forgetfulness embodied in these ruined buildings?” The work of Toufic and Raad in theorizing and formalizing encounters with catastrophe and the

---

100 Toufic, The Withdrawal of Tradition, 60.
101 Ibid., 61.
historical ruptures that follow constitute attempts to think through the war in order to open onto a possible future. As Saadawi suggests in her writings on witnessing, living through unsettled legacies of violent conflict coupled with a growing sense of illusionment in the postwar with leftist political struggles, ideologies, aesthetics, and languages engendered a need for new forms of “representations, conventions, and political speaking positions.”

Into the second decade of the postwar, privatized construction progressed throughout Lebanon and the nation experienced a series of successive military conflicts, both internally and with neighboring aggressors. As such, artists engaged in thinking through Beirut’s temporality were tasked with negotiating these changing realities, or framed differently, negotiating the perpetuation of a set of conditions structuring these occurrences. With the passing of time, the theme of occupation grew prominent and came to encompass a more expansive definition. Not only did the state and its agents occupy the space of the city, but also its history. Inhabitants left without agency were forced to live with a sense of time that was suspended. Much like Toufic’s contention in “Ruins”, these lingering conditions constituted “war by other means,” for Beirut’s residents. For many artists, the question became: within the context of rampant privatization and continuous military struggle, how could one find ways of making the city habitable?

Artist and writer Sadek has made the most significant attempts to answer this question in a body of theoretical and artistic work produced in Beirut over the last ten years, (2006-2016). Sadek looks at the temporal conditions of postwar Lebanon’s

---

102 Saadawi, “Rethinking the Witness,” 114.
“protracted now” identifying its strands in order to engage a series of interminable and historical labors (the labor of min, the labor of the corpse, the labor of nearblindedness, and the labor of the missing). These labors resist through a persistent disinclination to participate in official calls for regeneration in the nation’s market-driven reconstruction effort. Additionally, Sadek’s various labors frame the work of disinclination as anti-historical, open to non-linear understanding of memory and history that looks to give name and form to the many pasts eclipsed by future-forward thinking in the postwar. This chapter will focus on two works from this series, “Beirut, Open City,” and “When We Next Meet: On the Figure of the Nonposthumous Survivor,” analyzing Sadek’s efforts to reclaim political significance in discarded concepts and think through historical folds of war to construct a way of living built from an excess of unwanted yet necessary knowledge.¹⁰³

In his essay “Beirut, Open City,” (2013), Sadek outlines his search for a livable space within the parameters of the prolonged civil war temporality, proffering the concept of the “open city” as one such possibility. Sadek begins by introducing a dichotomy, that of the maze and the labyrinth. The maze is a space that exists in linear time, it contains nothing but the possibility of getting lost, contrariwise, the labyrinth is a space outside of chronological time in which it is impossible to get lost. These two configurations, and their distinctions, are invoked by Sadek in order to reconceptualize the concept of the open city against the backdrop of a climate of widespread occupation, material and immaterial, political and personal. From here, the artist unravels the terms from its three appellations, namely its use as a military term, its conflation within

discourses of free markets, and its exaltation in cosmopolitan literature, and offers the reconceived open city as a novel way to think time and space, linking it with the labyrinth, “The open city, to be viable, can only be a radical call to abandon places so that in them living is again possible.”  

Sadek develops his concept of the open city from a series of artistic, literary, and historical sources. Emancipatory potential is culled from Roberto Rossellini’s film *Roma Città Aperta*, (1945), produced on the subject of the declaration of Rome as an open city under Nazi occupation (1943-44), in which the term is recast by Italian resistance forces as the projected victory of military struggle and eventual liberation of Rome. Sadek reclaims the term from its descriptive function in Rossellini’s film, as a “synonym for liberation,” and instead sees the open city as a fundamental and unconscious desire that prefigures resistance struggles. He writes, “The open city may accordingly intimate a temporality that is other to the chronology and sequential accumulation of resistance acts played-out on the ground. Without ramparts, an open city is not a terrain or a built environment to be besieged or fortified. To think thus the open city one must think of occupation as a spatial reality not necessarily coterminous with the occupation of a city’s temporality.” The open city is thus non-site, removed from physical or linear determination, and prescribed to a non-sequential spatio-temporal ordering, akin to Toufic’s ruins. Most significantly, the open city defined here allows for the inhabitants of a place to retain the ability to set their own horizon of possibilities.

To parse out the threads of the open city as labyrinth within the labyrinth/maze dichotomy - the possibilities of inhabiting the former and the destructive force of

---

104 Walid Sadek, “Beirut, Open City,” Author’s copy, 7.
105 Ibid., 8.
inhabiting the latter - Sadek analyzes two works made in Lebanon thirty years apart, Lebanese author Elias Khoury’s novel *City Gates*, (1981) and Ghassan Salhab’s film *The Mountain*, (2010). Khoury’s novel tells the story of a stranger entering into a nameless city, unconsciously stepping over a threshold and finding himself within a labyrinthine temporality. Once there, the stranger cannot extinguish his desire to know where he stands and, imbued with a profound sense of loss, is unable to let go of the tenets of sequential time. Through his inability to surrender, he reduces the city to a “confounding maze in which the possibility of getting lost consumes any possibility of inhabiting it.” The city is then destroyed completely. Accordingly, Khoury’s novel published in 1981, foretells the destruction of Beirut in the following year, when under the invasion of Israeli forces, “Beirut was forced to capitulate on its own temporality and hide in the maze.”

Despite this, the city did not die. What is dying, Sadek writes, are those lamenting words of the past that dwell on its return, a morbid nostalgia. If the city is to resist, he argues, it should not build again the maze it once was, accepting that the city is elsewhere no longer tied to its reconstructed walls. In this case, in September 1982 while the physical ramparts of Beirut succumbed to the Israeli invader, the struggle for the unoccupied temporality of Beirut was displaced to Southern Lebanon, the location of resistance, and as such, was removed from “the fortified maze and into a temporality where getting lost is impossible.”

Sadek concludes that since the writings of Khoury, few artists have ventured so far into the center of the labyrinth, until Salhab’s film. *The Mountain* is founded upon the myth of the Minotaur; it tells the story of a solitary figure who embarks on a journey into

---

106 Ibid., 11.
107 Ibid.
108 Ibid., 12.
a “nonreported center” while misleading his acquaintances into thinking he is departing Lebanon for a vacation. The airport, which represents an exit, is abandoned by the film’s protagonist as he searches for that which he does not know, driving uphill into the mountains of Lebanon, finding himself alone in a hotel and later in an unmarked, snowy landscape. On his way, the protagonist witnesses a murder on the side of the road, which pushes him to secede further from sequential time into the mountain. In what might be the labyrinth’s center, another murder occurs, the protagonist, wishing to linger, kills what is monstrous and in doing so, while remaining, activates the labyrinth temporality. What Salhab introduced through his protagonist’s threshold crossing into an unknown interior is a liberation of the labyrinth from its role as the monstrous other to rational sequential time. It is through artworks like these, he says, where linear time is disrupted, that the labyrinth is endowed with “livability”. He writes, “The livable and inhabited labyrinth is only significant if it prompts a return to the collective struggle that continues in the city. The unoccupied labyrinthine temporality that is the open city is a call to resume the struggle in the durable world. It is precisely this journey to the labyrinthine, to the open city, that we must undertake every time we ask not whether a city is occupied but rather how to resist the occupation. For when a collectivity convolutes itself into a maze, the journey into the labyrinthine must again be set afoot.”

For Sadek, the open city as an unbesieged temporality, structured like a labyrinth, is the fundamental site of resistance against all forms spatial occupation (ideological, military, and economical) where a city can retain the ability to set its own horizon of possibilities. Privileging the artist’s role in this process of resistance in the city is crucial to an understanding of the works produced in, on, and around Beirut in the postwar period, their motivations and

---

109 Ibid., 15.
their effects.

The open city, as outlined by Sadek and intimated in the work of Khoury and Salhab, represents for the author a habitable chronotope, or a livable time for the city under occupation. For Sadek, the search for such a possibility indicated a disinclination on the part of artists to resume normative living in the aftermath of the civil war. In theorizing the complexities of lingering civil strife, Sadek defines the logic of protracted civil war as, “particularly nefarious and iniquitous, governed and maintained by politico-sectarian factions, structurally capable through the deployment of intermittent bouts of violence of renewing the necessary conditions for their long-lived dominance.” 110 This dominant temporality is buttressed by an accompanying “wishful discourse”, which justifies and prolongs the existence of the status quo; within this discourse sectarianism is dismissed, either as an anachronistic remnant of the civil war era or as an ideological positioning that will eventually be surpassed, and is never acknowledged for its foundational role in the formation of the modern Lebanese Republic. 111 Sadek writes, “[t]he pairing of actual violence with this longed-for future release, indefinitely deferred, generates an ethics of hope that appeals to a wholesale rejection and abandonment of the past in the name of a regeneration that must follow a general agreement that everyone has somehow suffered equally.” 112 Under the ethics of hope, what is really a condition of perpetual delay, the protracted civil war temporality holds its citizens in a violent suspension waiting for the deliverance of a future, liberating moment. The structural logic of this temporality impedes processes of witnessing, as an act of disclosure and accountability, in that witness testimonies are immediately evacuated at the moment of

110 Sadek, “When We Next Meet,” 49.
111 Ibid.
112 Ibid.
utterance, lost amidst the interstices of dominant political factions.\footnote{113 Ibid.} In order to continue living in the site of protracted civil war, it is necessary to reconceptualize not only the city but also the figure of the survivor.

Sadek proposes the figure of the nonposthumous survivor, or a witness who knows too much and carries the weight of an unwanted excess knowledge in order to challenge “the official closure of the present to the unfinished past”.\footnote{114 Ibid., 48.} In his essay, “When We Next Meet: On the Figure of the Nonposthumous Survivor”, Sadek considers the figure of Aeneas in Book II of Virgil’s epic poem 
\textit{The Aeneid}, at the moment of Troy’s destruction. Shoudering the weight of his decrepit father, Aeneas at once admits his defeat and proceeds into the mountains. Accordingly if Lebanese accept their loss, they will carry the burden of an irrevocable knowledge that structures their living and conditions their future.\footnote{115 Ibid.} A second figure is introduced, that of Ahasuerus from Siegfried Kracauer’s \textit{History}, whose story contextualizes the element of time in the figure of the nonposthumous survivor. Looking for a way to antagonize notions of time as linear, homogeneous, and progressive, Kracauer calls on Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew, a figure of exile fashioned by the provisions, breaks, ruptures, and transitions of history he has witnessed, to propose a nonsequential concept of history made manifest through the accumulation of unfinished pasts. Taken together, the figures of Aeneid and Ahasuerus precede that of the nonposthumous survivor; alternatively, the latter is born out of the realization that the Lebanese civil war does not constitute a historical trauma or an interruption of social history.\footnote{116 Ibid.}
These elusive figures, formed of an excessive knowledge, resist the temporality engineered by those warlords turned government politicians in the postwar and as such, they are met with hostility. Sadek writes, “The violence of reprieves within protracted civil war lies in part in the injunction for those assumed to be mere overlivers to come forth as if new, intimating no accrued hatred or interminable grief, and ambulating in mutual disregard of their neighbors in cities deeply suspicious of visible grief.”

The lingering violence of prolonged war, then, is the coercion, orchestrated by official decree, of a society’s inhabitants to resume living without acknowledging their past. Nevertheless, these figures attempt to look back “without turning around” in search of other witnesses/survivors. To search, Sadek writes, is to elicit a call with no response except by those who do the same, to search for a continuance of the past in the present whereby alternate paths can be found to counteract their interdiction and begin building a liveable future from the knowledge they gather and bear. Witnesses/survivors look for a shared time, initially born out of a disinclination to resume normative living, in which the possibility of living is built on the knowledge and acceptance of loss.

Toufic and Sadek’s writings differ greatly in their formulation; however, the two thinkers can be linked in their shared affinities to the dialectical analysis developed by Henri Lefebvre in his writings on the urban. For Lefebvre, a Marxist philosopher and sociologist, the problem posed by Karl Marx’s model of dialectical materialism is its leanings towards a linear and teleological understanding of historical processes. To work through this tension, he contends,

\[117\] Ibid., 63.
A triad can be brought in as an analytic framework of the becoming of thinking...It is no longer a matter of the thesis/antithesis/synthesis dialectic, nor of dialectics in nature, nor the affirmation/negation/negation-of-the-negation relationship. In this perspective, dialectics allows for the analysis of becoming...something that can only be conceived in three conflictual moments.\textsuperscript{118}

Lefebvre repurposed the third term from culmination to variable, adopting elements of Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of non-linear time and rhythm. In his approach to cities, Lefebvre posed that both time and space, as constitutive elements of the production of the urban, need to be thought through their relation in a range of complementary and contradictory ways.\textsuperscript{119} This thinking evolved into Lefebvre’s “regressive-progressive” paradigm, a historical analysis of the conditions of possibility for the present that feed into a progressive analysis opening onto the future. Fundamental here is his understanding that, “What is there embedded in the past becomes present through a ‘realization of the possibilities objectively implied in this past’.”\textsuperscript{120}

Moving through text and theory to a place of impossibility to find potential, like Lefebvre, is the critical work of Toufic and Sadek. To think their respective projects and the body of work their thought inspired in relation to Beirut, it is helpful to return to Lefebvre’s famed treatise “The Right to the City”. Ambiguous as it is directive, Lefebvre outlines a set of propositions for a future city building. On conditions of the possible, Lefebvre writes,

\begin{quote}
In a period during which ideologists pronounce abundantly on structures, the destruction of the city manifests the depth of phenomena, of social and cultural disintegration. Considered as a whole, this society finds itself incomplete. Between the sub-systems and the structures consolidated by various means (compulsion, terror, and ideological persuasion), there are holes and chasms. These voids are not there due to chance. They are the places of the possible. They contain the floating and dispersed elements of the possible, but not the
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{118} Henri Lefebvre, \textit{De l'état: Les contradictions de l'état moderne la dialectique et/de l'état}, (Paris: UGE, 4 volumes, 1976-1978), 120.
\textsuperscript{119} Elden, \textit{Understanding Henri Lefebvre}.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 243.
\end{flushright}
Against the backdrop of destruction, the degeneration of the social and cultural life of a city is revealed. Within frames of dominance structuring the urban, in this case the market-driven reconstruction of Beirut powered by the prohibition of memory and forgetting, cracks and fissures appear, obscured openings which Lefebvre names “places of the possible.” These elements can only materialize the possible through assembly, however, in a course of “radical metamorphosis.” This is the task of Toufic and Sadek, thinking through the interdictions of history and prolonged time, which beleaguerers and suspends the city and its inhabitants, and laboring from a position of loss in order to construct livable futures. Their quiet and thoughtful resistance is the slow but necessary work of revolution, the regressive-progressive path of future possibles.

---

121 Lefebvre, “The Right to the City,” 156.
CHAPTER III:
IMAGING BEIRUT

There is a paradoxical effect of nearness and distance between what is close to us and what is foreign to us. Behind the body of the city, the mirror sends us back to our own body. Impossible to seize Beirut, we can never hold on to more than a fragment. Beirut does not exist and makes us exist individually, threatening the dream of a community that is revealed obviously ever more utopian.¹²²

Christine Tohme

Lebanon’s central geographical location between Western Europe and the Middle East along with its many port cities has long placed the tiny nation in the middle of two ideological poles; the bridge between the European and the Arab Worlds, the crossing between Western and Eastern culture, the “Paris of the Middle East”, whatever its denomination, Lebanon has historically been defined by its positioning as a geographical, political, social, economic, and cultural link between two alien entities.¹²³ For its centrality, for the vast amount of international, economic, and intercultural exchange that took place within its borders, for the nation’s diverse demographic composure, encompassing many religions, cultures, and languages in its body, and for the triumph of its proposed universalism in the face of the cultural nationalism of Pan-Arabism, the history of modern Lebanon was built into a discourse of cosmopolitanism, both internally through its incorporation into national myths and externally, by progenitors of Orientalism.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ For a comprehensive analysis of the history of cosmopolitanism in Lebanon, see Rogers, “Postwar Art and the Historical Roots of Beirut’s Cosmopolitanism.” Rogers tracks the formation of Lebanese cosmopolitanism from the nineteenth-century into the present, examining how this presumed national trait was established as such through the visual arts, and argues that rather than a natural outgrowth of the Lebanese state, cosmopolitanism was an ideological tool used to fix ethnic boundaries within Lebanon.

What the cosmopolitan imaginary would come to mask in the late 20th century were the historical realities underlying the foundation of the modern Lebanese republic, namely, the emergence of sectarianism in the mid-19th century, as an expression of the local population’s struggle for emancipation against vying forces of European colonialism and Ottoman imperialism. Beginning in 1839, under Ottoman rule, the Empire’s issuing of the Tanzimât (New Order), a modernizing reform project proclaiming to treat all subjects equally under the law regardless of religion, paradoxically resulted in the partitioning of Lebanon into two divides based on ethno-religious difference; in 1842 the country was geographically separated into a northern Christian district and southern Druze district. Interdistrict reforms under this policy manifested in various forms of communal strife, including the consequential Maronite-Druze war of 1860, only increasing with immigration into port cities like Beirut. Under the French Mandate, (1923-1946), sectarianism was strengthened as a key element in the nation’s governing body; an extension of France’s divisive colonial policy, a confessional system of government was ratified in the 1926 constitution in which political appointments would be made in regards to sectarian affiliation. During this period, the official language was changed from Turkish to French, national history curriculums against the polarities of Europe and the Middle East, and advance a vision of Lebanon tied to the Maronite Church of Mount Lebanon.

125 To understand sectarianism as a foundational component in the making of modern Lebanon, historian Ussama Makdisi argues that the practices of sectarianism must be contextualized by a history of 19th century Ottoman reform efforts in the region, placing emphasis on the period 1840-1861. In his book The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), Makdisi posits that the emergence of sectarianism in Lebanon was a response from within rather than an imposition from above, arising from the local population’s desire to liberate themselves from vying and contested forces of European colonialism and Ottoman Tanzimat imperialism.

126 For a comprehensive review of the modern history of sectarianism in Lebanon, how it was enforced and implemented under various periods of rule, see Waddah Sharara, Fi Usul Lubnan al Tai’fi (On the Sectarian Origins of Lebanon) (Beirut: Dar al Tali’a, 1975) and Fawwaz Traboulsi, A History of Modern Lebanon (London: Pluto Press, 2012).

127 Rogers, “Postwar Art and the Historical Roots of Beirut’s Cosmopolitanism,” 115.
emphasized the nation’s Phoenician roots, and its ties to France as opposed to a regional
history of Arab civilization, institutionalizing a specifically non-Arab, French-leaning,
identity position.\footnote{Ibid., 116.}

Built into the structural makeup of Lebanon during its independence, growing
political sectarian divisions and widespread socioeconomic disparity within the Lebanese
public resulted in the outbreak of civil war roughly thirty years after its founding.
Thereupon Lebanon was folded into another set of overdetermined narratives, those of
violence, war, and destruction, eclipsing its celebrated cosmopolitanism. The country fell
into a second dichotomous trapping, its images and identity tied between nostalgic
cosmopolitanism and extreme violence. This crisis of representation was not solely
relegated to the terrain of the city’s images and narratives, but played out within its
public. Lebanese citizens found themselves stuck between two monolithic notions of
culture, that of Europe and that of the Middle East, and amidst the multiplicity of
politici\-zed identities in Lebanon, unable to occupy any of these spaces wholly, without
the exclusion of another.

In the postwar period, the discursive interplay of cosmopolitanism and
sectarianism maintained its obfuscating powers as the government, rebuilt upon the same
pillars of sectarian-factionalism, proceeded to reconstruct the city with a false sense of
history, using the language and attendant symbolism of cosmopolitanism to mask the
scars of the civil war.\footnote{See Saree Makdisi, “Reconstructing History in Central Beirut,” Middle East Report 27 (Summer, 1997):
“Lost in the development of central Beirut is a sense of history. The company’s rhetorical claim to resurrect the
happy days before the war is an attempt to short-circuit the historical experience and the memory of the
war itself, an attempt to pretend that the war never happened as symbolized by the historical purification of
the martyrs’ statue. To be successful on more than a rhetorical level, the project must stitch contemporary
Beirut into the fabric of prewar Lebanon, patching over the old city center with all its nostalgic memories -}
of representation. This chapter analyzes a selection of works by artists throughout the postwar period who embraced this subject as a point of contention to problematize the polarization of Beirut’s image and interrogate the effects of this twofold positioning on the Lebanese subject.

In 1989, artist Walid Raad began working on *The Atlas Group*, (1989-2004), an imaginary foundation created for the purpose of researching the contemporary history of Lebanon. At various times, the group has been given over to fictional personages, documents, accounts, and dates, a compendium of fabricated information, including audio, visual, and literary documents, organized by Raad through traditional historic research into the form of an archive. A central figure in *The Atlas Group* is Dr. Fadl Fakhouri, who Raad introduces as the most renowned historian of Lebanon and who, following his death in 1993, donated all of his archives to *The Atlas Group*. One of Dr. Fakhouri’s most significant contributions to the archive is a collection of twenty-four black and white photographs titled *Civilizationally, We Do Not Dig Holes to Bury Ourselves*, (2003) (Fig. 23-24). These include a series of self-portraits of the historian, taken during his “one and only trip outside Lebanon, to Paris and Rome in 1958 and 1959.”

In almost every photograph, save for one group picture on the steps of a

---

131 The Atlas Group and Walid Raad, *The Truth Will be Known When the Last Witness is Dead* (Cologne: König. 2004).
132 Fereshteh Daftari, *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking*, exhibition catalogue (New York:
cathedral, Dr. Fakhouri either poses alone or stands alone in a crowd. The photographs can be roughly divided into two groups. The first pictures Dr. Fakhouri in or around great Western European monuments and touristic sites – ancient columns, statues, cathedrals, palaces, modern boulevards, public gardens, and train stations. In these seemingly innocuous images, Dr. Fakhouri continuously appears as a solitary figure, unable to blend in within his surroundings, whether smiling, sitting alone, walking in a crowd, or posing for the camera, his staged presence seems fraught. The second group of photographs shows Dr. Fakhouri posing alone in different interior spaces – sitting in the hotel, reading in the living room or in bed, smiling at the dinner table. Again, Dr. Fakhouri does not seem capable of fully participating in his environment, neither with people nearby nor the grand monuments that surround him nor the decorative interior space of the hotel, he appears an alienated figure, disconnected from yet fully subsumed by these spaces.

In her dissertation “Postwar Art and the Historical Roots of Beirut’s Cosmopolitanism,” Rogers tracks the historical development of Lebanese cosmopolitanism as both a discursive categorization and distinctive national trait, from the mid-19th century into the present. In outlining major political transitions from imperial, colonial, and independent rule, Rogers highlights moments in which competing visions of Greater Lebanon were at stake. During the transition from Ottoman rule to the Mandate, a cleave emerged between Arab nationalists seeking to unify Lebanon with Greater Syria, creating a cultural link based on shared language, ethnicity, religion, and history, and Lebanese nationalists promoting territorial sovereignty based on regional difference, namely Lebanon’s large Christian population and its historical link to Europe. On the nationalist dynamic of Lebanese cosmopolitanism, Rogers draws distinction,

MoMa, February 26-May 22, 2006, 74.
while modernist applications of the term have come to imply the erasure of borders alongside the potential for territorial reconfigurations, in Beirut, cosmopolitanism has been used to entrench national boundaries.\textsuperscript{133}

These developments only intensified under the Mandate period. Already a regional center for missionary, political, economic, and cultural activities, Beirut underwent a significant process of Haussmann-style modernization under French rule, which included large scale urban planning and redevelopment projects, designation of business and governmental districts, installation of sewage systems, expansions of street lighting, importation of mechanized vehicles and the building of private schools, hospital facilities, and an international airport.\textsuperscript{134} On the making of Beirut into a French colonial city, historian Samir Kassir writes, “The image created by the capital of Greater Lebanon was unavoidably linked with the ineffable lightness of being of a social elite intoxicated by the idea of imitating others-something it succeeded in doing in a way, and to an extent, that impressed visitors.”\textsuperscript{135} Furthermore, the internalized hybrid sensibilities of a colonized nation amidst an already diverse, multi-confessional environment positioned Lebanon as “a modernizing and mediating,” force, capable of accommodating both, “Arab customs and European exoticism”.\textsuperscript{136}

The 1943 induction of the National Pact consecrated these divides into government policy, ensuring the seat of President would be reserved for Maronite Christian and Prime Minister for a Sunni Muslim, in a French effort to define the country as having, “an Arab profile that assimilates all that is beneficial and useful in Western

\textsuperscript{133} Rogers, “Postwar Art and the Historical Roots of Beirut’s Cosmopolitanism,” 19.
\textsuperscript{134} Samir Kassir, \textit{Beirut} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., 250.
\textsuperscript{136} Mark Westmoreland, “Crisis of Representation,” 223.
civilization.” Following Independence, Lebanon maintained its laissez-faire economy, inherited from the Mandate period, and Beirut, due to its substantial expatriate community, a city where Arabic, French, and English languages mixed interchangeably, became a central hub for international business and tourism. In the 1960s, Beirut grew into an even greater site of global exchange, through networks produced by the petroleum, finance, and leisure industries.

In his book *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Arab Middle Class*, historian Keith David Watenpaugh introduces his notion of “the paradox of metropolitan desire” in which, “the multilingual and sartorially correct ‘young Arab’ is condemned, in perpetuity, to a hyphenated existence somewhere between a ‘real’ modernity and its exquisite shadow in the East.” In line with Rogers determination of cosmopolitan nationalism and Watenpaugh’s paradox, it possible to read the figure of Dr. Fakhouri as prosopopoeia of Beirut, a post-colonial city whose imaginary was formed between two poles against an unacknowledged, at times disavowed, sectarian origin. Occupying this entangled position as both its object and frame implicates the city at the epicenter of a national struggle to perceive a uniform or authentic sense of self. As Khoury intimates, “Lebanon as a country, and Beirut as its capital, was not understood by us - I am talking about myself - until it was falling apart. We discovered our country when it nearly was no more.”

---

138 Rogers, “Postwar Art and the Historical Roots of Beirut’s Cosmopolitanism,” 11.
The multiplicity of discursively determinative images of Beirut, spanning prewar, civil war, and postwar periods, in the context of political campaigns, historical texts, media coverage, and tourist brochures, among others, never advanced an idea of the place that was consistent but rather always in flux, despite seemingly obvious ideological imperatives that guided their usage. On the divisive escalation of this tendency in the postwar, art historian Ghalya Saadawi writes,

The post-war urban and televisual field was saturated in identity polemics through competing discourses on nationalism, partisanship and reconstruction. This occurred, for instance, through television stations being owned by political parties and, thus, acting as their mouthpieces and, similarly to wartime, through the banner and poster photos that demarcated the various neighbourhoods and regions with leaders, logos and slogans.¹⁴¹

Representations of the city were intricately tied to its identity and that of its inhabitants, a relationship that was tenuous and distrustful, resting upon pillars of instability. This skeptical indeterminacy was the subject of Jayce Salloum’s 1994 experimental film This is Not Beirut (There was and there was not), a personal essay of sorts charting popular misrepresentations of Beirut through the artist’s experience working in Lebanon and the seemingly impossible task of representing the city, or himself, in any concrete way. Beginning with a slew of paradoxical images of Beirut, nostalgic renderings of its prewar “golden age” interposed with depictions of extreme violence and turmoil, Salloum’s film exposes the fraught project of representation from multiple points of view (Fig. 25). Salloum further complicates the scene, juxtaposing the futile search for Beirut’s identity through its images with his own attempt to make a film about Lebanon. In what amounts to a failed effort, Salloum introduces a critique of the ethnographic approach in

¹⁴¹ Saadawi, “Rethinking the Witness,” 131-132.
artmaking, the idea that one could presumably understand and produce knowledge about a place by situating oneself temporarily in its context. Salloum, an artist of Lebanese descent raised and educated in Canada, like many young artists returned to Beirut at the end of the civil war. In an attempt to make sense of the complexities of the place, within the limits and possibilities of its representation, the artist encountered the myriad of ways in which his own identity was formed in the city’s images as both participant and onlooker, inhabitant and visitor.

Composed of over 200 hours of Hi-8, VHS and found film material, recorded and collected in Lebanon and edited into a 49-minute long video, *This is Not Beirut* documents the efforts of the artist to produce a work about Beirut, moving through a compendium of audiovisual layers, self-critically framing the subjects, sites, and relationships he encounters in uncertainty. The film begins with a slew of postcard imagery and audio recordings of nostalgic longing, projecting an idealized view of the cosmopolitan city with its modern spaces and open sea, increasingly interrupted with bouts of footage of violence, explosive landscapes, destroyed buildings, and fear-mongering Western media reportage. In a particularly jarring shot, Salloum records a broken sign that reads “ORIENT” above an abandoned parking lot, overlaying the image with scrolling text that lists out 45 denominations of Beirut. Orientalist at first, these

---


move from a patronizing to a laudatory decree of cosmopolitanism, “Pearl of the Orient,” “Playground of the Middle East,” “Gateway between East and West,” “Crossroads of Civilization,” to a shameful naming of the city as failing, ill, and destructive, “The Suckling Child,” “A Broken City,” “Hell by the Sea,” “Neither Victorious Nor Vanquished” (Fig. 26). From here, the artist records his attempts, with co-producer Walid Raad, to make a film about the resistance movement in the south of Lebanon. Through their troubled conversations and endless questioning as they record their movements around the country, the artists enunciate a voice of refusal. This refusal is imbricated in the very task upon which the film is based, that of representing the nation, the city, and its subjects, in whole or in part.

Another moment in the film pictures Salloum and Raad walking with two locals through an abandoned building in Beirut, partly destroyed during a battle between the right-wing Christian Kataeb Party and Shi’ite resistance militia Hezbollah. The artists are prompted into a revealing conversation with their guides, Guide: “You’re coming here to make a project, this project you’re calling it a representation of what…?” Raad: “Does it have a title…? We don’t have a title yet.” Guide: “Representation of what…?” Salloum: “...of representations...” Guide: “Newspaper of a newspaper...[laughter] don’t ridicule him, he’s right in a sense...” Guide: “You’re thinking of representation as representation of something...There’s no representation of...I’ve noticed in your field there’s something called representation, in Arabic there isn’t. There isn’t such a word. I am going to try and invent a word for this.” Following this grappling scene, the viewer is transported to Martyr’s Square, in its present-day, run-down condition. Salloum holds up a prewar postcard depiction of the very same space against its likeness (Fig. 27). At this moment,
critic Molly Hankwitz writes, “A relationship is drawn between the space of the viewer, what is being viewed and the interlocutor of the documenting process. A critical rupture occurs.” Throughout the film, representational devices are consistently brought into question. Photography and video are deployed paradoxically, for their supposed communicative clarity while, in the same instance, such notions of visual and chronological coherence are subverted. This is accomplished by the various structural disruptions of diaristic reflection that foreground themes of performance and narrativity, spatialization and location, and their convergence in the subject. Fluctuating amidst various points of spectatorship throughout, Salloum’s film attempts to problematize the field of representations of Lebanon.

Building upon this problematic, artists employed diverse formal and conceptual strategies redefine dominant regimes of representation. In 1997, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige initiated a long-term project entitled Wonder Beirut, expanded over three chapters, The Story of a Pyromaniac Photographer; Postcards of War; and Latent Images, (1997-2006), in which the artists use fictional narratives and psychoanalytic theory to investigate images of Beirut and unravel their implications in the construction of the nation’s memory and history and in the production of its psychosocial subjects (Fig. 28).

In its first iteration, Wonder Beirut: The Story of a Pyromaniac Photographer, (1997), the artists construct a narrative, published in numerous magazines and exhibition texts, around a fictitious photographer named Abdallah Farrah who was commissioned in

144 Ibid.
the late 1960s by the Lebanese Ministry of Tourism to publish a series of postcard images of Beirut. Still found in shops around the city today, these postcards portray the idyllic, rose-colored prewar version of Beirut, the “Riviera of the Levant”, capturing images of modern hotels, boulevards, public squares, seaside resorts, and their users, young attractive individuals engaging in leisurely activities around the city. Amid the onslaught of war in 1975, Farah’s place of work, Wehad Studio, was burned down and destroyed in an attack; fortunately, the photographer was able to salvage some equipment and image positives, including those taken for the postcard project. Shortly after, Farrah began burning negatives of his images that depicted the buildings and monuments in his city as they were destroyed during fighting. Hadjithomais and Joreige describe his process,

At first he worked in a very organized way, following the trajectory of the shelling and defacing the images to parallel the events of the day. He always dated the shell impacts, tried to find their origin, and noted it all in a little book. Farah re-photographed the positive after each new burn he inflicted on it, producing a series of revolving images.145

The artists categorize his initial, systematic approach as “the historic process,” or a progressive burning of images that paralleled their real-time destruction (Fig. 29). However, as the war progressed, Farrah began burning negatives at will or accidently, what the artists term “the plastic process” (Fig. 30).146

Hadjithomas and Joreige printed Farah’s burned photographic negatives on a series of aluminum prints and lightboxes, high contrast images with thick black borders and a procession like ordering, which displayed the distortion and movement of these images as their surface boiled and blistered under the heat of Farah’s flame. On the decision to burn their images, the artists write, “It is a reaction to the penury of images of

the present; a reflection on the representations of Beirut and of ourselves; and a fight against the recycling, the mythicizing of the standard images.”  

In Farah’s impulse to inscribe his photographs with the same incendiary marks as those ravaging the streets of Beirut, Hadjithomas and Joreige were interested in provoking the state of images in the postwar, their usage and impacts on Lebanese subjects. Moreover, through the figure of Farah, the artists illustrate the difficulty in creating images during and after a period of war.

Hadjithomas and Joreige reproduced a selection of these images, photographed between 1968-1969 and burned between 1975-1990, into 18, 10 x 15 cm sized postcards, published under the title Postcards of War (Fig. 31). The artists pursued the postcard form due to its conceptual charge. In an issue of Discourse journal the artists write,

> They were trying to make us believe that the war was an accident, an excrescence that had to be disposed of as soon as possible. And, naturally, the postcards of the 1960s were still being sold: Martyrs’ Square, the souks, policemen on camels...this enduring mythology interested us and we worked for a longtime on the postcard as an official image, a cliché...

The postcard provided a symbolic irony, its image used to evoke a dreamlike era of the past, fully subsumed by celebratory cosmopolitanism. The invocation of Beirut’s postcard imagery had the effect of obfuscating its actual realities. Conjuring up nostalgic associations of the city by official bodies, particularly Solidère, offered a more attractive and financially viable path to recovery, with the promise of building up Lebanon’s tourist industry and attracting foreign investment into its institutions and infrastructure. By publicizing the work of Farah, the artists contend they sought to, “counter the trend in

---

147 Hadjithomas, Joreige, and Toufic, "Tayyib Rah Farjik Shighli,” 90.
149 Hadjithomas, Joreige, and Toufic, "Tayyib Rah Farjik Shighli," 89.
Lebanon of idealizing the past and projecting a future fantasy by bracketing off the civil war and including it only marginally in [Lebanon’s] contemporary history."\(^{150}\)

Farah’s story continues, along with his approach to image-making, and constitutes the final chapter of Hadjithomas and Joreige’s *Wonder Beirut: Latent Images*. Throughout the war, Farah’s photographic practice was affected in numerous ways, some more pragmatic than others; due to war-induced shortages, Farah often found himself without fixatives and paper required to develop his images. As such, Farah resolved to stop developing films and photographs altogether, continuing to shoot around the city and accumulate reels of film, storing them belatedly for a day to come when the fighting would cease. However, once the war ended and years passed, Farah maintained this habit, compiling but never developing his images. Farah instead chose to document each undeveloped image in precise and detailed descriptions in his notebook with dates and indexes, shifting the representational register from the optic to the linguistic, so that his images could be read and imagined, not pictured.\(^{151}\) An example from film roll no. PE 136 GPH 160 reads, “Master shot of the dead end from the window of the room. It is raining,” “Close shot of the seepage under the living room’s windows,” “The rain on the room’s pane, with the camera focus being on the drops,” “Close shot of the spots of humidity on the wall and the ceiling.”\(^{152}\) Through Farah’s diaristic gesture, his insights into the transformations of the city through image and text, his ambiguous feelings and disenchantments, the photographer’s notebook of images demarcates a contemporary political and social history of Lebanon mapped through individual experience.

\(^{150}\) Hadjithomas and Joreige, “The Story of a Pyromaniac Photographer,” 37.


Taking on multiple forms, *Latent Images* is composed of physical accumulations of undeveloped rolls of film and contact sheets filled with Farah’s individual notations and indexes, either displayed in physical or photographic form, the latter in digital or aluminum prints (Fig. 32-33). This later body of Farah’s work raises questions as to the prolonged state of futurity contained in these images and as to what would have to occur in order for Farah to develop them in full. Resonating with Jalal Toufic’s theory of the withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster, Hadjithomas and Joreige refer to a section of his essay “Lebanese Photography Between Radical Closure and Surpassing Disaster”. Writing on the experience of *Wonder Beirut* in its three iterations across two exhibitions, Toufic considers the work a contribution as a resurrection proclaiming:

> The intended effect of the work of the one trying to resurrect tradition past a surpassing disaster is fundamentally not on the audience, except indirectly; it is on the work of art-to resurrect it. Such resurrecting works are thus referential. It is interesting to see when-if at all-Hadjithomas and Joreige will feel the impulse to develop those photographs, this signaling the resurrection of tradition.¹⁵³

A new relationship to the image in postwar Lebanon is initiated in *Latent Images*. The development of the image here is aligned with a particular moment in historical time, that which contains the conditions for a revelation of the image to occur, and the question of what would necessitate these conditions is left open.

Underlying this body of work by Hadjithomas and Joreige is a deep interest in the psychoanalytic concept of latency. Similar to Toufic’s notion of withdrawal and Walid Sadek’s writings on lingering effects of “prolonged” and “protracted” temporalities, latency is that which exists in a “non-apparent manner”, an image “yet-to-be-developed,” a diffuse, obscured form that cannot be delineated, but which can manifest at any given moment, intimating a sense of the possible. In a talk given at Ashkal Alwan’s Home

Works, the artists invoke the concept of latency to describe the feeling in Beirut postwar. With the passing of the General Amnesty Law, a dominant sense of amnesia was felt throughout Beirut and that could not be reconciled with the latent memories and experiences of its inhabitants, a “strange paralysis that pervades the city, in face of this violent desire to place things between parentheses - to censure oneself”\(^{154}\). The mobilization of images by the government to advance its path of forgetting in the reconstruction of Beirut produced a further sense of ambiguity among the Lebanese populace. Caught between two temporal frames, a mythified past and projected future, images of the city skirted the present and denied the recent war and its effects. In this case, the artists argue,

> The war is not simply a symptom but it is also an ontology and process that cannot be reduced, a process that escapes, that represses itself and that denotes latency one more time. The war’s near past becomes this latent figure shrouded in the shadow of the city, ready to gush out from the shade; this memory so quickly strangled, the ruins lying under the modernist’s concrete, under the capitalist’s dream of an efficient and proficient country.\(^ {155}\)

Positing the war as a latent figure positions it as both a condition and an antidote within the context of restricted time and privatized futures imposed by Beirut’s reconstruction; what lies beneath, what’s left over, what lingers, is also what is possible and by tapping into these latent elements, by approaching the subject of war, its memories, ruins, histories, and representations, the artists could engender critical attitudes and articulate alternative visions of the city other than those enforced.

---


\(^{155}\) Ibid., 41.
On February 14, 2005, Beirut was thrust into a period of change; that day, Rafik Hariri, the nation’s prime minister and architect of redevelopment was assassinated outside of the St. George Hotel in downtown Beirut. In this moment, the vulnerable truce that had been brokered by Hariri with the Syrian Ba’ath regime and the Shi’ite militia Hezbollah in south Lebanon was broken. The following year, Israel launched a war on the country, targeting an emboldened and assertive Hezbollah. In his essay “Peddling Time When Standing Still: Art Remains in Lebanon and the Globalization That Was,” Sadek argues that these two historical events entrapped the nation and its inhabitants in a renewed form of occupation, stuck between two temporalities vying for control of the nation’s time.

At the moment of his assassination, Hariri’s political backing, the Sunni Future Movement, entered into a time of messianic wait for judgement, the promised deliverance of a declaration of responsibility by the International Tribunal tasked with investigating the Hariri’s death. For the Future Movement, the pronouncement of a conclusive verdict offered, “a beginning, logistically delayed, which will eventually release the nation and the state from 30 years of assassinations left unpunished.”¹⁵⁶ Disregarding historical precision, “the political discourse of the Future Movement does once again what every confessional and sectarian faction has previously done and is willing to do yet again: to rewrite the history of the nation through its own founding moment.”¹⁵⁷ The group’s monopoly over the nation’s time was disrupted by Israeli invasion of the following year, on July 12, 2006, giving Hezbollah, its proclaimed target, the space to propose its own dominant temporality, buttressed by the narrative of resistance in the face of an

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 4.
encroaching aggressor, “one of imminence, which signals an end to the messianic wait for truth and in its stead deployed an ever-readiness against the visible and knowable enemy.”

Temporal shifts across the nation’s political landscape generated renewed efforts to instrumentalize images for ideological domination, a battle that took place in the streets of Beirut and other Lebanese cities. Responding to this changed environment, in 2009, artist Rabih Mroué produced *The Inhabitants of Images*, a layered lecture-performance in which Mroué analyzes a series of images of political figures across three chapters and a conclusion. In the first section Mroué discusses an imaginary photo depicting the meeting of deceased Egyptian President Gamal Nasser (1918-1970) and Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri (1944-2005) (Fig. 34); the second, series of street posters depicting Hezbollah martyrs killed in the 2006 war with Israel (Fig. 35-36); the third a conclusive discussion on posters, images, and videos of martyrs from the Lebanese Communist party; and the conclusion, a refusal to attain a final, memorializing image for the artist. A set of musings on the fabrication of political mythology and manipulation structure the lecture-performance, Mroué deconstructs the formal elements of political images, their symbols, composition, and design, from which he constructs various counter-narratives, spaces of fragmentation opening up to a possible reassembling in the future. Through his performed analysis, Mroué teases out the connection between image-making and affect and how this relationship is deployed to influence and control the political, social, economic, and military life of a nation.

Mroué engages with the political program of images in his work through actions of pulling apart what these lay bare rather than producing new images to draw

---

158 Ibid., 6.
conclusions from outside the image. Mroué contends,

There are a lot of images that have become icons that have in turn become untouchable. For example, when I talk about the street posters of martyrs, it’s a taboo to talk about them — these images impose themselves on society and it’s difficult to question their presence and impact on our daily lives...My work is trying not to produce new images but to find and take these images and deconstruct them through reflection and by re-reading them in a human, personalized manner.  

Despite the fictional situations and manipulated scenes presented in *The Inhabitants of Images*, Mroué accepts what these images purport as truth, searching for what lies beneath them. In an interview with critic Göksu Kunak, Mroué writes,

The main point is not to legitimize this point of view but to accept it as one among many other different ones. In this manner there should be many versions of the same event as well as several history books. By analysing the differences one can understand the political and social discourse they are implying. It makes one realize that history is not fixed but is a continuous conflict. One should try to collect as much as possible to broaden their perspective and comprehend history from various angles.

The work begins from a point of consent in order to parse out the socio economic and political underpinnings of the image and the configuration of visual elements used to transmit its message. In this way, what is hidden gains significance.

Mroué proffers his work on political images as a meditation on the making of history and the formative role they play in constructing political subjectivities. In an era of persistent sectarian violence, artists like Mroué engaged fiction to perform the imaginary of images, what they *imaged* rather than what they represented, engaging with absurdities yet situating their terms in historically specific contexts. While it is physically impossible that former Egyptian President Nasser and Prime Minister Hariri would have

---


met, it seems plausible in *The Inhabitants of Images*, moreover, their alliance symbolizes a unified front of Sunni pan-Arabism in the face of Hezbollah’s Shi’ite resistance camp. Pairing these looming political figures next to images of Hezbollah martyrs, both parties occupying the walls, streets, and sign-posts of the city, Mroué shows how images in this time are inhabited by death, a wreaking spell that seeks dominance through its lingering representation. In fictionalizing and performing the images political images and their instrumentalization the post-Hariri moment, Mroué’s move between reason and irrationality places the viewer at the assumption of truth in order to move to a space beyond objectivity.

Mroué’s reflections in the third chapter of *The Inhabitants of Images* returns to questions of a time occupied in the city and nation and of wartime legacies, their renewals, and the disenchanted subjects left in their shadow. Framing his discussion on representations of civil war era martyrs of the Lebanese Left by present-day transformations in the examples of Hariri and Nasser and Hezbollah fighters, Mroué writes,

Between the two images I that I spoke about earlier, the Nasser and Hariri one, and the Mujahidin one, there is this third one. This would be our image today, an absent one. The absence of their party, of our party, of the role of the Left. These images exist only in lost video-tapes, in unknown places, no specific space for them, the city refuses to offer them even a wall. Walls are like cities, like countries, they are only occupied by those who have power.  

The failed promise of the Left, the ideological and armed struggle for fundamental restructuring of Lebanese society, resulted in a loss of available speaking positions for artists in the immediate postwar. Now, in the wake of reconstruction and current climate

---

of resumed conflict, the city is given over to a new entrapped time, in which a thinkable subjectivity is absent, left only to reside in images that have no place. It seems that in this environment, the only viable option for artists, for those looking to inhabit a time unoccupied, is to pursue this absence. For, as Sadek writes, “As survivors they share nevertheless the depth of the catastrophe and are called upon to inherit the underearth of the city. If they do accept their lot, they can, through their descent, keep this place pulsating and palpable.”162

---

162 Sadek, “Peddling Time,” 17.
CONCLUSION

Between the sub-systems and the structures consolidated by various means (compulsion, terror, and ideological persuasion), there are holes and chasms. These voids are not there due to chance. They are the places of the possible.  
Henri Lefebvre

Lebanon, the country stolen from time - a country put off from reality for a minute - and we search for a place to live, precisely in this minute, in the time we can steal, and in it we leave room for our clumsiness and for poetry.
Fadi El Abdallah

In 1995, a year after Solidère laid out its decisive plan for the reconstruction of Beirut, writer and cultural critic Elias Khoury published his reflections on the viability of memory in a city ravaged by war. “Cities are invisible stories, and stories are invisible cities,” Koury writes in “The Memory of the City,” pondering all that is contained in the history of Beirut, a city made of recycled myths and tales of destruction, “a city with a past built on the ruins of the past.” The extent of infrastructural damage wrought onto Beirut during the country’s fifteen-year war had far reaching consequences; the closure of jails, hospitals, and schools paralleled a total shut down of public services, without a civic workforce garbage piled up in the city’s public spaces alongside bodies of the deceased. The breakdown of the larger social order carved geographical divides throughout the city; fearing sectarian violence, the city’s residents escaped to enclaves of communal affiliation, “between places of belonging and places of non-belonging”. The war had its own mythologizing effects in which survival served as its leitmotif. Within this context of overwhelming horror, the city’s inhabitants searched for ways to create life, possible

---

163 Lefebvre, “The Right to the City,” 156.
futures amidst destruction, and writing, Khoury posits, provided such an outlet.\textsuperscript{166}

Entering into an unstable peace under the Ta’if Agreement in 1989 and the passing of Law 84 in 1991, Beirut was folded into a new mythology: rebirth through reconstruction, guided by the figure of the architect. In following, Beirut and its memories were discarded along with the war’s rubble into the toxic garbage dumps that sat on the city’s peripheries; Solidère’s construction of Beirut Central District, at the expense of the near total destruction of its existing urban fabric, produced, “an empty space, a placeless space, a hole in memory.” In an affront of large-scale redevelopment, Beirut’s memories rested in two places, its physical environment and its myths, positions presided over by the architect and the writer. Setting up a corollary between the two, Khoury posits that while both imagine cities, places, and spaces, the two sit on opposite sides of the same coin: the architect destroys, defines limits, and erects borders, while the writer opens spaces, ruptures limits, and transcends boundaries.\textsuperscript{167}

Fate left in the hands of the former, Beirut’s reconstruction pitted the city against two temporal registers - the ancient and distant past, archaeological remnants of which could be deployed in Solidère’s marketing campaigns to cultivate an attractive image of localized exoticism, and the modernized future-to-be. Bound in this way, traces of the recent past and present time were lost, occupying no part in the regenerated myth of the city. Acknowledging the present, Khoury argued, was of critical importance offering the only possibility for the city’s inhabitants to regain agency in the making of their city and shaping of their society. Concluding his paper, Khoury underlines his call to action with an ominous warning, “When the individual is unable to identify with his present and his

\textsuperscript{166}Ibid., 138.
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., 139.
past, when his physical realm is obliterated and his ownership stripped away, when the
culture of representation becomes a culture of consumption, then this recycling of the city
is one more element in a global move towards impoverishment, domination, and
destruction.”

Concerns outlined in Khoury’s paper are representative of the larger debates of
the 1990s. The intensification of market forces in Lebanon’s political and economic
organization ushered in with rise of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri entailed what critic Saree
Makdisi has termed the complete colonization of the city’s, and the nation’s, public by
private interests. Solidère’s real estate and development monopolization was both
cause and symptom of this colonization and its subsequent incorporation of state and
capital into one unregulated entity. The enclosure of public space, and thus public
agency, spawned a period of intense cultural activity, in which artists sought to create
openings for pause and critical reflection. This thesis argues that by engaging with the
city of Beirut as a site, temporality, and image, Lebanese artists created a critical register
through which one could reimagine and reclaim the city at a time when this activity was
at risk of being effaced in the field of postwar recovery policies.

At the outset of this thesis, I introduced the writings of Henri Lefebvre to
contextualize certain strands of postwar cultural production. It is useful to bring Lefebvre
in relation to this early period, as the author’s principal objective in theorizing urban
society was motivated by a similar resistance to the extreme capitalization of urban space.
Lefebvre links art with the work of appropriation and its body with the oeuvre of cities.
In this frame, he encourages utopian thinking and practice, writing,

168 Ibid., 142.
That imagination be deployed, not the imaginary of escape and evasion which conveys ideologies, but the imaginary which invests itself in *appropriation* (of time, space, physiobecial life and desire). Why not oppose ephemeral cities to the eternal city, and moveable centrality to stable centres? Why limit these propositions only to the morphology of time and space? They could also include a way of living in the city and the development of the urban on this basis.\(^\text{170}\)

Certain works produced on Beirut, prompted by concomitant privatization of urban space, emblematize Lefebvre’s vision for art in the city; building from the theoretical to generate alternative modes of thinking and living Beirut.

The end of civil war in Lebanon in 1989 coincided with another epochal event, the collapse of the Soviet Union and end of the cold war, constituting major ideological shifts that marked a new order for the world. Concurrently, a trend towards celebratory globalism emerged in the art world and its markets.\(^\text{171}\) Born out of a disciplinary shift in the 1980s, in which scholars and artists addressed concerns developed in the field of postcolonial studies, and put into practice and thematization in the 1990s, propagating this global turn took various forms.\(^\text{172}\) To the art world centered in Western Europe and North America, motivated by changing cultural tides and seeking, for the first time, to think outside itself, contemporary art in Lebanon offered an interesting example. Seizing notions of the art world’s “peripheries,” Euro-American curators dragged these perceived “marginalized” figures into their foreground offering artists from Lebanon shows in international museums, galleries, biennials, and art fairs. On the effects of this rapidly changing landscape in Beirut, Walid Sadek writes,

> Already in 2001, at a time when the work of post-Ta‘if Lebanese artists was being shown worldwide, it was possible to remark that the aftermath of civil-war can raise a few chosen individuals onto the stage of globalization just as it can level the lives of many others into an uncertain

---

\(^{170}\) Lefebvre, “The Right to the City,” 155.
\(^{171}\) For a comprehensive review of debates around globalization and the arts, see *Is Art History Global?*, edited by James Elkins (New York: Routledge, 2007).
\(^{172}\) Rogers, “Postwar Art and the Roots of Beirut’s Cosmopolitanism,” 27.
and cold existence. Acquiring the label of post-civil war artist seemed like a dependable means by which to graduate from the position of a survivor to the privileged position of a reliable witness who stands astride the wreckage and addresses the world. No longer part of the wreckage or governed by the extended and damaged time of a civil-war, such an artist gladly appropriates the responsibility of speaking for others and accordingly enters the coveted circuit of international exhibitions and biennales.\(^{173}\)

With a broadening focus on regional concerns and tensions between local/global constructs, the nature of production in the city changed, as did the role of artists. Elevated to this global stage, artwork produced around the subject of the Lebanese civil war was endowed with a testimonial weight that put forth the claims of one in the name of the collective population. Moreover, as interest in postwar Lebanese art increased with its global circulation, on a local level, its impact and relevance waned.

Incongruous with these directional shifts in the art world was the lived reality of the places and artists that were subject to its imaginary; for instance, the majority of artists working in Beirut, whose art was often read solely against the experience of civil war, had actually emigrated during that time, spent their formative years abroad, and received education in Europe or America.\(^{174}\) The twofold effects of globalization as a term employed to both describe conditions of contemporary cultural production and efface the specificity of political, economic, and social processes that structure it, is evinced in the term’s implication in the historical framing of art produced in Lebanon and the Middle East. Offering nuance, Sarah Rogers proposes,

> To reverse the question from 'how has globalization effected contemporary practices in the region', to 'how does contemporary practice in the region effect globalization', is a slight yet profoundly meaningful shift because it enacts a reversal of agency that enables, in material terms, both participation in and resistance to the processes of globalization.\(^{175}\)

---

\(^{173}\) Sadek, “Peddling Time When Standing Still,” 1.


\(^{175}\) Sarah Rogers, “Platform for Discussion 005: How has a globalised cultural economy affected the
Retaining this reversal, one can reposition globalization as an ideological force operating in multiple vectors of direction and from a multiplicity of perspectives. However, the fact of an increasingly global audience in Beirut and foreign investment into its arts infrastructure from international non-governmental organizations brought forth a new dynamic in the city’s cultural sector.\(^{176}\)

The contours of the postwar period after the 1990s and the forms of artistic engagements with the city it occasioned were marked by a sequence of political and military struggles in Lebanon and the region at large. First of which was the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri in 2005 whose death spurred a series of catalytic changes. Most significant was the public uprising in Beirut’s urban space immediately following; galvanized by the former leader’s assassination, a large portion of the Lebanese public gathered together in nonviolent protest, seemingly without regard to sectarian affiliation, accounting for the largest civic action in the history of modern Lebanon. The movement was largely composed of pro-Hariri, anti-Syrian groups who called for the resignation of the full-scale military withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon, including the resignation of certain government officials and heads of intelligence supported by Syria, and an international tribunal to investigate Hariri’s death. Thousands took to the streets, marching from St. Georges Hotel to Martyrs’ Square in downtown Beirut, bordering the newly created Beirut Central District, with hundreds camping out in the square for the weeks following. On March 2, 2005, Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad announced the withdrawal of Syrian military across the nation, ending thirty years of occupation. What production of contemporary visual culture in North Africa and the Middle East?,” *Ibraaz: Contemporary Culture in North Africa and the Middle East* (April 4, 2013), accessed February 15, 2017, [http://www.ibraaz.org/platforms/5/responses/116/](http://www.ibraaz.org/platforms/5/responses/116/).\(^{176}\) Toukan, “On Being the Other in Postwar Lebanon,” 123-126.
looked like acts of political participation took ownership of the city’s urban spaces, this moment unique as it was fleeting, soon devolved into a renewed hijacking of the country’s public time, its political, social, and economic imaginaries by opposing governmental blocs.

A baleful sign of what was to come, shortly after al-Assad’s decree, Hezbollah joined by the Christian Free Patriotic Movement and Shiite Amal Movement, among other political affiliates, organized a counter demonstration in Riad al-Solh Square expressing the party’s support for the Syrian regime shortly after, and came to be known as the March 8 Alliance. A few days later, on March 14, public opposition to their gesture resulted in the march of approximately one million Lebanese to Martyrs’ Square, expressing the population’s commitment to its earlier objectives and leading to the formation of the largely pro-Hariri March 14 coalition.\footnote{177}

These divisions hearkened back to the prewar and wartime period, where possibilities to speak outside the charged vocabulary of these structural oppositions were limited and fueled conservative nationalistic discourse. On the psychosocial effects of these familiar contestations, art historian Ghalya Saadawi writes,

\begin{quote}
This paradoxically can be said to have had an apolitical effect in that in its spreading of rampant disillusionment, sense, powerlessness and indifference, creating the desire among many to either stand by one side uncritically (as supporters for both groups gathered in the millions for rallies and protests); or to reject both, but without an actual political stance or ground from which to critique. The long years of civil war had created the same atmosphere of exasperation, depoliticization, and political alienation.\footnote{178}
\end{quote}

Therefore, the same exhaust and disenchantment that phased Beirut after the war’s terrible violence and for the artists discussed in this thesis the concurrent disillusionment

\footnote{177}{Ibid.}
\footnote{178}{Saadawi, “Rethinking the Witness,” 94.}
with the failure of the Lebanese and international Leftist movement was revived roughly ten years later. There was an urgent need in Lebanon not only for alternative visions for the city but also for forms of thinking and positions of speaking that could problematize dominant political polemics.

A little more than a year later, Lebanon once again entered into a stage of full-scale military conflict. War broke out with the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006, wreaking havoc unto south Beirut and Lebanon’s southern borders. Amidst this destruction, the pullout of the Syrian regime spurred an increase in foreign investment from Gulf nations and prosperous members of the Lebanese diaspora. Leading to a construction boom in the city, similar practices of private development, haphazard urban planning, and disregard to social impact, were implemented in Beirut across various neighborhoods. An inflation of real estate prices fueled the further destruction of Beirut’s architectural heritage sites, in which historic Ottoman mansions were torn down for the erection of towering skyscrapers.\textsuperscript{179}

Following the war, another politically motivated reconstruction project was initiated in Beirut called Wa’ed (Promise) built on narratives of victory and invincibility. Organized by Hezbollah, the rebuilding effort took place in the city’s southern suburbs, which were heavily damaged by Israeli assaults in the 2006 war.\textsuperscript{180} At this time, a number of prominent Leftist figures, politicians, journalists, intellectuals, among others, came to support Hezbollah, as the party served as the primary figure of armed resistance.


\textsuperscript{180} See Fawaz, “The Politics of Property in Planning: Hezbollah's Reconstruction of Haret Hreik (Beirut, Lebanon) as Case Study.”
against American-Israeli resistance and neo-imperialism. Absorbing the Left’s ideologies, social causes, aesthetic and symbolic representations of political struggle, Hezbollah casted these strategies under an Islamist narrative of resistance. The rupture caused by the series of ideological and military conflicts beginning in 2005, and carrying on into the present, served the starting point for engaging with the city in the mid-late 2000s.

In late 2010, the region was turned over into a new phase once again: revolution and the Arab Spring. The ramifications of political uprisings across the Arab world, the great heroism displayed by its citizenry and the extent to which entire social orders were disrupted, were widely felt. Writing on the conditions brought about by the Arab revolutions, art historian Toukan writes,

Through fearless and grateful acts of resistance and dissent driven by an uncompromising rejection of the regimes of thought that have governed their lives for the most part since independence, the peoples of the region have been thrust into a time and space redefined by a series of radical ruptures in the economies and significations of their lived realities, identity formations, normative relations and authorized discourses. What seems to be emerging in their place is a series of cognitive ‘re-organizations’ of historically designated spaces, identifications and modes of thinking ordered along the axioms of age, class, gender, sexuality, and religion to new counter-public formations of collectivities, subjectivities, and agencies still in the making. 181

In this time of great flux, cultural practitioners living in the Arab world faced the urgent task of defining the relationship between visual arts, media, and politics. Though Beirut did not experience political uprising to the extent of the capitals of its neighboring countries, movements across the region inspired a further push into self-reflexivity, offering individuals a chance to not only disrupt Orientalist and geographically-determined stereotypes, groupings, and categories, but also to look at the entrapments of the political realities within their own societies, refusing to operate between binaries of

dictatorship and religious fanaticism.

Lebanon’s postwar history, a near thirty year block of time, has been pushed forth by major shifts in the political, intellectual, and cultural landscape. This thesis argues that in spite of the large-scale transformations and moments of transgression within the postwar period, Beirut continues to be a point of critical contention for artists working in or around the city seeking to articulate possible futures outside those imposed by the nation’s dominant political order. Rather than attempt an overarching history of contemporary art practice in Lebanon following the end of civil war, I look to specific instances of cultural activity centered on the city to construct a history out of fragments. I rely on the work of Rogoff, who sees artworks as constitutive, and propose an alternative viewing of history in Lebanon as told by a number of artworks, grouped around three generative categories - *site, temporality, and image*.

In Chapter I, I posit Ziad Abillama’s Saint Balech installation to be the inaugural work of the postwar period, setting the course for a history of artistic practice that would be engaged with the relationship between legacies of war and catastrophe underpinned by forces of modernity and late capitalism as these played out within the space of the city. The artist’s intervention was guided by an interest in the possibilities of art as an interlocutor for Lebanese public to engage their environment but also a suspicion of its functional role within the context of postwar Lebanon. Into the next decade, as the city’s infrastructures for art changed with increased international funding into cultural institutions, artists like Walid Sadek, Bilal Khbeiz, and Tony Chakar, made attempts to rethink both the place and subject of site-specific art, introducing immateriality and dispersal into its configuration. This body of work resulted in a greater amount of focus
placed on exploring subjective experience of site. In following, artistic strategies of mapping and narrative, as exemplified in the work of Chakar, offered a way to articulate these concerns throughout spatial inflection. While its physical and conceptual designation has shifted throughout the last two decades of the postwar period, the site of Beirut has consistently offered artists a way to rethink urban society and the production of subjectivity in its frame.

In Chapter II, I analyze the work of Jalal Toufic and Sadek to identify key theoretical approaches to the predicaments of living in a time which is occupied and with a history instrumentalized. In “Ruins”, Toufic points to the existence of lingering civil war conditions in the postwar evident in the government’s indifferent treatment of ruinous areas during the city’s reconstruction. Sadek takes this further in “Beirut, Open City” discussing the effects of a later stage of development in Beirut, that of the full-fledged sundering of the city’s time and seige of its inhabitants futures. Expanding upon his formulations on ruins and fictions, in Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster, Toufic defines a sociality, a community of individuals affected by the symptoms of withdrawn tradition, within an environment in which both history and time are not in the control of the general populace. More prominently, Sadek theorizes the protracted civil war temporality in “When We Next Meet: On the Figure of the Nonposthumous Survivor” and puts forth the figure of the subject who knows too much yet is willing to construct their future anew from history’s discarded pasts as its challenge. In texts by both authors, and in artworks made around their ideas, the artists analyze the time of the city as a way to negotiate their lived experiences within the realities of war and its aftermath, and propose ways of living through these conditions.
opposite the course taken by government officials.

In Chapter III, I look at image-based representations of Beirut and a series of artworks engaged with the historical and discursive construction of these images throughout the modern period, their operative use by political, social, and economic forces at various moments in time, and their effects on national identity. The collection of works discussed all point to a tendency to upset modes of representation that express formal and conceptual coherency. To accomplish this, the artists make use of Beirut as a frame through which the effects of images in the pre/civil/postwar periods could be pronounced, looking for possible alternatives within and through its paradigm. Each work employs the tools of representation against itself to some degree, for instance, in the use of fiction in Walid Raad’s *Civilizatoinally We Do Not Dig Holes to Bury Ourselves*, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige’s *Wonder Beirut*, and Rabih Mroué’s *The Inhabitants of Images*, and examine the failure of photography and film to capture direct experience and substantive fact.

Presenting these fictitious histories, based off personal accounts and in official modes of address Raad, Hadjithomas and Joreige, and Mroué at once dismantle epistemological binaries between fact and fiction while undermining the faculties of image-making and its function in the construction of history. Writing on use of fiction and historical appropriation in contemporary art, historian Carrie Lambert-Beatty names this tendency the “parafictional”. She writes, “Unlike historical fiction’s fact-based but imagined worlds, in parafiction real and/or imaginary personages and stories intersect with the world as it is being lived. Post-simulacral, parafictional strategies are oriented
less toward the disappearance of the real than towards the pragmatics of trust.” In creating fictional stories and identities that could be real, framed within a historical event that actually took place, Raad, Hadjithomas and Joreige, and Mroué question the production of knowledge and history as these relate to images, problematize the instrumentalization of images in the postwar period against a refusal to acknowledge the present and unravel the gestures, traces, and reminiscences that haunt them. The work of these artists do not only concern the representation of war and its effects on the city of Beirut, if and how it should occur, but also, it is interested in exploring the effects of war-induced violence on images themselves.

In both Jayce Salloum’s This is Not Beirut and Hadjithomas and Joreige’s Wonder Beirut, the artists illustrate the representational consequences of Beirut’s temporal entrapment, amidst an imagined, mythologized past, a violent and unstable present, and a projected future. These works visualize the forces of imported modernity, underwriting the nation’s cosmopolitan identity as well as its urban structure, and the uneven processes of socioeconomic development that resulted in the eventual physical destruction of the city. Like the juxtaposition of audiovisual fragments in This is Not Beirut, boils on the surface of Farah’s burnt images suggest inherent tensions in the representational consistency of the city’s image of modernity. In relation to the context in which it was produced, this work, like others, resists official narratives denying the realities of civil war in favor of the personal and subjective experience, refusing the thinking of Solidère that looks haphazardly to an idealized past while forcing a pastiched image onto the

---

urban environment of Beirut.

Tracing the history of artists’ experiments with Beirut alongside these thematics offers an outline of significant moments in postwar cultural production intimating various shifts in formal and conceptual practice. In the immediate context of reconstruction, physical site as a place to preserve, question, and unfold, was underlined with a great sense of urgency. With the influx of a more globalized field of participation and spectatorship in the early 2000s, artists sought to reconceptualize the positions of site and subject, the role of artist and audience. Met with continual construction and tense political battles played out in Beirut’s urban environment into the mid-to-late 2000s, particularly after the death of Hariri and rise of Future Movement/Hezbollah cleave, artists countered political spatiotemporal domination by asserting a multi-positionality using strategies of mapping, narrative, rewriting, and performing.

The select artworks presented here involve a diverse range of practices, varying in their complexities and visual languages. Analyzing these artistic, literary, and theoretical projects in relation to Solidère’s reconstruction projects, the effects of globalization on Beirut’s arts infrastructure, and vice versa, and the persistence of political and military struggles positions artistic activity in the realm of the possible, a possible that offers an opening amidst an environment of enclosures. Maintaining the commonalities as well as the differences in these projects, when viewed together, each mark a sustained effort to appropriate urban space, its physical, representational, and discursive constitution, and build a future from its sutures, against the encroachment of an overwhelming totality.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


——. “Place at Last.” *Art Journal* 66, no. 2 (Summer, 2007): 34-47.

——. “Peddling Time When Standing Still; Art Remains in Lebanon the Globalization that Was.” Author’s copy, 1-17. 2008.


——. “When We Next Meet: On the Figure of the Nonposthumous Survivor.”

*ARTMargins* 4, no. 2 (June, 2015): 48-63.


———. “Ethnography + Art: Convergence or Collision?.” Ibraaz: Contemporary Culture in North Africa and the Middle East 001, (June 1, 2011). Accessed December 20,


Fig. 4. Installation photograph of Ashkal Alwan, Sanayeh Garden Project, 1994. Public exhibition, Beirut, Lebanon. Source: Ashkal Alwan Archives.
Fig. 5. Ashkal Alwan, *Corniche Project*, 1999. Public exhibition, Beirut, Lebanon. Source: Ashkal Alwan Archives.

Fig. 6. Newspaper reproduction of Nelly Chemaly, *We Come From Infinity*, 1999. Installation. Source: Ashkal Alwan Archives.
Fig. 7. Photograph of artist Ghassan Maasri moving his work for *Corniche Project* with Christine Thome and friend, 1999. Source: Ashkal Alwan Archives.

Fig. 8. Photograph of street turmoil caused by *Corniche Project* in west Beirut, 1999. Source: Ashkal Alwan Archives.
Fig. 9. Photograph of artist Tony Chakar with his sculpture *A Retroactive Monument for a Chimerical City*, 1999. Source: Ashkal Alwan Archives.


Fig. 22. Walid Raad, *Sweet Talk: Commissions* (*Beirut Plate 050*, 1987/2010. Archival digital photographic print, 111.8 x 188 cm, Edition 1/7 Edition 1/7 (+ 2 A.P.). Pomeranz Collection.
Fig. 23. Walid Raad, *The Atlas Group, Civilizationally, we do not dig holes to bury ourselves. Plate 922*, 1958-59/2003. Pigmented inkjet print, 25.4 x 20.3 cm. Copyright: Walid Raad; Courtesy of the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

Fig. 24. Walid Raad, *The Atlas Group: Civilizationally, We do not dig holes to bury ourselves*, 1959/2002. Twenty-four black and white photographs, digital print on paper, 11.7 x 8.7 cm. Courtesy of Christie’s.
Fig. 25. Still from Jayce Salloum, Still from *This is Not Beirut (There Was and There Was Not)*, 1994. 47 min 30 sec, color, stereo, 4:3, video. Collection: Single Titles, Lebanon / United States. Source: Artist’s copy, https://vimeo.com/81045456.
Fig. 26. Still from Jayce Salloum, Still from *This is Not Beirut (There Was and There Was Not)*, 1994. 47 min 30 sec, color, stereo, 4:3, video. Collection: Single Titles, Lebanon / United States. Source: Artist’s copy, [https://vimeo.com/81045456](https://vimeo.com/81045456).
Fig. 27. Still from Jayce Salloum, Still from This is Not Beirut (There Was and There Was Not), 1994. 47 min 30 sec, color, stereo, 4:3, video. Collection: Single Titles, Lebanon / United States. Source: Artist’s copy. https://vimeo.com/81045456.
