

©Susan Platt (unpublished)

In different ways, all of the artists in *Out of Beirut* at Modern Art ,Oxford, UK(May 13 – July 16) explore amnesia, false memories, and media falsities. The fourteen artists and one collective address current social conditions and recent political events in Lebanon through random public responses and withheld information.

Rabih Mroué's performance *Make Me Stop Smoking* laid out the falsity of art production itself, as well as the idea of a fixed history. For years, Mroué revealed, he has been amassing newspaper and video clippings about historical, scientific, and anthropological facts, all fragments which he described as “material from the past, waiting to be used in the future.” In *Make Me Stop Smoking*, Mroué is the main character, his own acts are suspect and useless, as he “reinvents what he has forgotten on the basis that he happens to remember it, betting on Death to rediscover everything new.” It is a plea to himself to stop obsessing about past history.

In the collaborative performance *Public Time* by Walid Sadek, Bilal Khbez, and Fadi Abdallah, the car bomb assassination of the Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in February 2005 laced through the performance without ever being specifically mentioned. The piece is a meditation on the intimate nature of death by fire, of public and private forms of grief, as well as media formulations that construct different stages of death and resurrection from the body itself (with a reference to Lazarus), to the cleansed utterances of the deceased Prime Minister. The title “Public Time” refers to the invasion of life by the public scrutiny of the media, which followed the absence of the deceased Prime Minister. Inversely, it presents the people invading public space and the space of rumours.

Several works directly connect to that memorable invasion of public space. Gilbert Hage's *Tout un Chacun* (Each to their own), is a series of photographs of individuals posing in front of the graffiti covered base of the 1960 Monument to the Martyrs (the original martyrs date back to the struggle for independence from the Ottoman Empire in the late teens.) This public space was a killing field during the Civil War between Muslims, backed by Syria, and Christians aligned with Israel. In the last twelve years the same space has been the focus of the multimillion reconstruction of Beirut by Hariri intended to erase that history. In the photographs, all types of people stand up in favor of national unity, rather than more sectarian killing in Lebanon.

Ziad Abillama's *Why Don't you stop Dying* also photographed in Martyr's Square during the same demonstrations, asked people what they thought about the present and the future of Lebanon. Their faces, in contrast to the open poses of Hage's series, are hidden as they make brief comments about the state of the city, the country and their views of the future, comments that are sometimes profound, sometimes supercilious.

Other works refer back to Civil War destruction, consciously distanced with aesthetic devices. The blurry, enlarged black and white snapshots, *Summer 88* by Paola Yacoub rediscovered and revisited in 2006 in collaboration with Michel Lassere, remind me of early war photographs that could only show the aftermath of war for both political and

technical reasons .When first taken by a young Yacoub, the random images suggest panic and incomprehension.

In Lamia Joreige's *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere* the artist walks the Green Line of destruction, where thousands of people disappeared during and after the Civil War. She held photographs of the checkpoints and asked people if they knew anyone who had disappeared. Their stories (true or not, we cannot know) are full of gaps, mysteries, rumours, and tragedy.

Bernard Khoury's well-known BO18 nightclub was built as a bunker structure on a site of brutal torture and killing in the Civil War. Rather than erase the bloody history of the site, Khoury foregrounds it, the nightclub is excavated deep into the ground like a grave. Chairs resemble coffins. At night the bunker opens to the sky. *Out of Beirut* included a video of young people dancing in dark red lighting that looked like a vision of hell.

Walad Raad's *We Can Make Rain, but No One Came to Ask*, obliquely refers to a specific car bombing. The information slips off the bottom of the large white aluminum panels in unreadable sentence fragments and photographic strips. Raad reminds us that reports are inaccurate and incomplete and unread and unknown, but often the only trace of a deep disaster of loss. The absence underscores the ways in which the construction of history is determined by what is withheld as much as what is known.

Walid Sadek entirely removes the image, leaving only captions. *Love is Blind* is about Moustafa Farroukh an artist who worked in the modern era of Lebanese history after independence in 1943. Next to the empty spaces designating Farroukh's paintings and his lost modernism, are poems by Sadek, poignant, brief, elliptical phrases that point even further toward absences: "Disparate are fingers in a hand. The index is name, forgetting is a thumb in mouth."

The collective Heartland intervenes in public spaces directly, posting photographs of fictitious candidates in an election. In this exhibition they have a tourist map of Lebanon produced for the military which is placed on a staircase. As we walk out of the show we have to walk on the map. We have to take the position of the heavy footed occupier.

Working in a post war space that is the site of rampant capitalism interrupted by political violence, the artists of contemporary Beirut form a lucid and coherent avant -garde.