

On the Politics of Art and Space in Beirut

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Throughout its history Beirut has suffered episodic bouts of violence and chronic political instability. The structure of the Lebanese state is weak and, given the persistence of internal and external conflicts and a slew of urgent issues (unemployment hovering around twenty-five per cent, \$43 billion in public debt, the struggle to provide basic services, the resistance and its weapons, population displacements and reconstruction costs due to war), the government tends to place cultural activities rather low on its list of priorities. At present, the city boasts neither a museum of modern art nor an institute for contemporary art. Public funding for the arts is negligible to non-existent. There is a skeletal commercial gallery system but there are too few collectors to constitute a viable local market, particularly for works in media considered difficult, such as photography, video and installation.

Nevertheless, Beirut is home to one of the most active and dynamic contemporary art scenes in the region. The engine of that scene is a self-organising group of artists' collectives and independent, non-profit associations that have, over the past decade, constructed an alternative infrastructure for the making and exhibiting, as well as the documenting and archiving, of contemporary art practices. This group includes Ashkal Alwan (The Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts, which organises the Home Works Forum and more recently Video Works), Beirut DC (a film collective that runs Ayam Beirut al-Cinema'iyya, a bi-annual festival of independent Arab cinema), the Arab Image Foundation (an organisation for the collection and preservation of the region's photographic heritage that doubles as a creative laboratory for member artists and curators), Né à Beyrouth (which organises an annual festival of Lebanese film) and the 98 Weeks Research Project (a curatorial collective that arranges workshops and symposia), among others.

The contemporary art scene in Beirut has taken shape at a time when similarly independent, alternative scenes have emerged in cities such as Cairo, Alexandria, Istanbul and Amman. Given the general globalisation of the art world and the particular spike in interest in art from the Middle East since the events of 11 September 2001, artists, curators and arts organisers working across the region have had more occasions to share their experiences and resources, and to collaborate, whether through group exhibitions, festivals and conferences held in other parts of the world or through the creation of joint projects within the region, such as residency programmes involving the Platform Garanti Contemporary Art Center in Istanbul, Ashkal Alwan in Beirut, and the Townhouse Gallery of Contemporary Art in Cairo. The emergence of massive, government-sponsored arts initiatives in the Gulf – in Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Doha – has also increased a sense of co-operation and solidarity among arts practitioners in other Middle East cities.

But where it is possible to pinpoint the physical sites of artistic activity and critical vitality in those cities – the old Platform Garanti building on pedestrian-packed Istiklal Street in Istanbul, Townhouse's spread of spaces nestled amid mechanics' shops in Downtown Cairo, the early twentieth-century villas housing the Contemporary Image Collective in Cairo or the Alexandria Contemporary Arts Forum in Alexandria, the gorgeous grounds of Darat al-Funun and next door Makan in Amman – locating the art scene's spaces of manifestation in Beirut is a more difficult task. This is what sets Beirut apart.

Ashkal Alwan, Beirut DC, the Arab Image Foundation, Né à Beyrouth, 98 Weeks – all of these organisations have small office spaces but none of them have spaces for exhibitions, performances or screenings that are active all year round and open to the public. Unlike in other cities – where one can, for

example, drop by Townhouse to see a show, spend time in the library, hear a lecture or buy books in the shop – in Beirut one must make an appointment to visit the various organisations. When they interface with an audience – when an event is staged or a new work is ready to debut – these organisations must rent, borrow or appropriate spaces to do so. The venues most often used for presentations of contemporary art include Masrah al-Madina (an old, derelict cinema converted into a theatre on Hamra Street), Centre Sofil (a functional cinema that lends one or both of its screens for local film festivals), Galerie Sfeir-Semler (a 1,000 square-metre commercial gallery that opened in 2005) and the blob-shaped building on Martyrs Square in Downtown Beirut, which is known variously as the Egg, the Bubble or the Dome, and falls under the auspices of Solidere, the real-estate company in charge of the city centre's urban renewal effort.

There are several reasons why arts organisations do not operate spaces of their own. One is the cost of real estate (prices continue to rise in Beirut despite the global financial crisis and the collapse of property markets elsewhere). Another is the complexity of land deeds, property rights and inheritance laws (often, the signatures of a dizzyingly high number of heirs is required to rent or buy a space, and disputes among heirs are common). Another, more diffuse reason is that the long-term planning required to rent or buy and then run, finance and animate a space is a luxury few organisations in the contemporary art scene have ever been able to afford.

It is worth noting that the space situation in Beirut is changing. In January 2009, the Beirut Art Center opened in a former furniture factory on the eastern edge of the city. The BAC holds regular exhibitions along with weekly events such as screenings, discussions, performances and lectures. A mediathèque is located on the upper floor and boasts an archive of contemporary art works from the region. The BAC, which is non-profit and run by an executive board populated by artists, designers, curators and philanthropists, also has a bookstore, a library, a design shop and a café. Ashkal Alwan is planning to open a permanent space – to house an art school, exhibition space, performance space, a cinema and artists' studios – in 2010. And the Ministry of Culture is now planning to open a centre for the visual and performing arts, called the House of Arts and Culture and located in Downtown Beirut, in 2013. The project stems from a \$20 million gift from the Sultanate of Oman. In March 2009 the Italian architect Alberto Catalano won an international competition to design the building. However, to date, the House of Arts and Culture has no director, no board, no budget and no programme. It does not even exist as a legal entity within the Ministry of Culture. There is considerable scepticism in the arts community over whether or not the project will ever happen, and reservations about how it will function and for whom if it does.

While it is tempting to read the creating of art spaces as a reflection of increased stability in the country, the situation in Lebanon has, in fact, been anything but stable of late. In the years preceding the opening of the Beirut Art Center, for example, a prime minister was killed in a car-bomb blast and a string of targeting assassinations and seemingly random explosions followed; public demonstrations forced a government to fall and Syrian troops to withdraw; there were thirty-three days of war with Israel in 2006 after Hizbullah kidnapped Israeli soldiers in a cross-border raid; fighting between Islamic militants and the Lebanese Army flared throughout the summer of 2007; more demonstrations and an opposition encampment paralysed both Parliament and the downtown district; and in 2008 street fighting broke out in Beirut and spread (until an accord was brokered in Doha).

Given these developments and contexts, to what extent has the lack of spaces hindered or enhanced the contemporary art scene in Beirut? On one hand, it can be argued that the lack of spaces stunts the long-term development and structural sustainability of arts organisations. It means that outreach to unknown audiences is limited, and it forestalls the possibility of cultural venues functioning as community centres (a role which two organisations, Zico House and Umam Documentation and Research, have tried to play by focusing on development more so than art). Each of Beirut's arts organisations has a public, but without spaces to gather crowds, can those publics grow to include people not already in the loop? One might also ask to what extent have the politics and logistics of art spaces in Beirut contributed to the actual forms in which art works are made? Does video, for example, have such currency in Beirut because it is so flexible and easy to move?

On the other hand, the lack of spaces has allowed arts organisations to be nimble and adaptive. Groups such as Ashkal Alwan, the Arab Image Foundation and 98 Weeks are able to ride out political instability

because their programming may be mobilised from one location to another, from one calendar entry to another. Without the burden of public programming or operating expenses, they have been able to fuel their resources into the actual work being made and shown by artists. This may ultimately be more valuable than space. And they have also been able to sidestep censorship (haphazardly applied in Lebanon) because they never run the risk of spaces being shut down (a concern that has, by comparison, become potentially limiting for Townhouse in Cairo). And finally, the lack of spaces has pushed arts organisations to discover and use interstitial spaces, derelict buildings (such as the Abro Abroyan factory in Bourj Hammoud) and the public sphere (such as Ashkal Alwan's early projects on popular streets and in public gardens, and the Arab Image Foundation's open-air exhibition of Hashem el-Madani's work in the old city of Saida). By not committing to spaces of their own, arts organisations in Beirut have often stitched their work into the fabric of the city itself, and they have brought audiences into the streets with them.

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