

Issue 0

How to make (nice) things happen

Edited by Mirene Arsanios



How to make (nice) things happen is a publication conceived and developed by Mirene Arsanios in response to an ArteEast commission to 98weeks research project for ArteEast's Virtual Gallery. It gathers different examples of art spaces and collectives that have worked and are currently working in Beirut.

The materials presented in this publication are drawn from a pool of connections, personal and associative, rather than provide a historical reading of the Lebanese art scene.

The publication is also available online,
on ArteEast's website.

Issue 0 / Summer 2010

www.98weeks.blogspot.com
www.arteeast.org

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p.17, 32, 65

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53Dots

Special thanks to

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The city is Beirut, the intention is good and the characters are few. They share a common rhetoric, and when they speak something crucial seems to be at stake. At times, they lapse into a shaded romanticism, but generally the mood is sexual, tense and fun. It combines a sense of duty, dedication and trivialness.

The self is communal and involves a practice. It is rooted in a tradition and moves away from one community in order to create a different one with other images and clichés.

The action is printed, diluted and generally circumvents the events. It is made of cameras, phone calls, and long waits. It is dependent and powerless when something truly happens.

The locations vary - a garden, a rooftop, a project space with a rent of \$400 per month, a makeshift cinema, a Skype conversation.

*A space and an encounter may converge, creating a distinctive atmosphere then remembered: this space or this organization is not what it used to be, or has become something else. When it ceases to exist, like *Dar el Fan*, it seems far but also very near.*

The time is 2 o'clock. It is pregnant with virtualities, banal and repetitive.

The method is conversations, interviews, discussions, transcriptions and gossips. It is cash strapped. In this case, its object is a publication.

The plot is intricate because it blurs what separates love from friendship from work.

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How Espace SD started

January 29, 2010. The meeting with Wadih Safieddine and Karine Wehbé is scheduled at Le Chef, at 2:00 PM. Le Chef is a restaurant located in Gemayze serving homemade cuisine for a clientele of Lebanese habitués, European backpackers and people interested in cinema such as Wadih. Karine has not changed much since I first met her. They were dating when they decided to open an art space together in Beirut. They ran Espace SD from 1998 to 2000. In the year 2000, Sandra Dagher, Karine's cousin and currently the director of the Beirut Art Center, took over Espace SD's management and programming. When responding to my questions, Wadih speaks rapidly.

WADIH: I thought that helping artists was something important to do. Today, I'm not so sure anymore. I think that they have to take care of themselves; let them do the shitty job. If someone really has something to say or do, they will find a way of doing so.

MIRENE: But I guess that when you did it (helping artists) you also did it for yourself?

WADIH: No, not really. Everything we did, we did for the artists. We were truly altruistic and generous. I really thought, "poor artist, his/her work is so beautiful, we have to promote it; this music, someone must listen to it; these films, people have to see them." Today, I certainly don't think the same way.

MIRENE: Did you consider yourself as having a mission similar to that of a charitable organization?

KARINE: You have to keep in mind the context we were working in. Wadih and I had lived abroad and moved back to Lebanon in the beginning of the 90s. We were discovering a new country. There was a particular

energy, and simultaneously, desire to contribute to something here: we wanted to share our knowledge and learn from the local context. Back then, we felt that everything was still possible, Beirut was a huge construction site and we wanted to participate in our own way to its rebuilding. I was very curious and didn't know Beirut besides a few neighborhoods. At that time, I was exploring the city and felt that I was returning to something familiar.

MIRENE: How was Espace SD realized?

WADIH: We first had to approach Souhail Dagher, the owner of the S.D. building. Our idea was to create a "free space", a sort of artists squat and we had to find the right words to convince Dagher to support our initiative and allow us to use the space. We argued that we were going to sell works, rent the space, and that the space would act as a promotional window for the apartments on sale in the building. It goes without saying that we didn't really fulfill our promise to sustain the space.

MIRENE: What year did Espace SD open?

WADIH: July 1998. We had a partnership with the European House of Photography (Paris), and we organized an exhibition related to the Month of Photography in Lebanon. We did a fashion exhibition entitled "Fashion, etc." There were 2 or 3 stylists, Rabih Keyrouz and others. We then organized an exhibition on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The exhibition invited local artists to make a statement on human rights. It was really interesting. We invited the graphic



Karine Wehbé working at Espace SD, 2000
Photograph by Wadih Safieddine



Wadih Safieddine writing his diary, 1998
Photograph by Karine Wehbé

designer Tadeusz Lewandowski, Karine's former teacher in Paris, who did a graphic interpretation of the French human rights' chart. I remember that I even had to sell my car to fund this show!

MIRENE: Which Lebanese artists took part in the exhibition?

WADIH: Rita Awn, Sami Basbous, Nelly Chemaly, Elie Karam, Maya Abou Zeid, Fulvio Codsi, Celine Mehanna and Wissam Noshie, Alain Tasso, Jacko Restikian, Nada Yammine, Schawki Youssef, Jean-Marc Nahas.

MIRENE: Did you commission new works for the occasion?

KARINE: Yes, we commissioned and financed all the works.

MIRENE: Was it expensive?

WADIH: Back then, the entire project costed around 10,000 dollars. Today, considering the inflation, the same exhibition would cost 40,000 dollars (including production, communication, printing).

MIRENE: Did Lewandowski come to Beirut?

KARINE: Yes, for 4 days.

WADIH: Right! I remember that the Security General had stamped the surfaces of the works. Huge canvases covered with stamps! I even wrote a press article commenting on this outrageous act.

KARINE: The artist went crazy. It happened on the day of the exhibition opening!

WADIH: The two following years were also interesting. We invited Australian artists (Karine was dating one of them) to exhibit in the space. The same project involved Lebanese artists exhibiting in Australia. Sandra (Dagher) must have all this information, she has



Haber composed a piece especially for Aram.

MIRENE: How did you utilize the space when there were no exhibitions?

WADIH: We worked a lot. I think we had 11 exhibitions in a year and a half. There were few spare moments. We were also trying to rent and promote the space, and I think it even happened once or twice!

MIRENE: How were the exhibitions financed?

WADIH: At the beginning we had sponsors.

KARINE: Later on, we asked that the artist pay the rental of the space. We offered everything else.

WADIH: He didn't pay for the rental, he paid for the production.

KARINE: I think that we eventually asked the artist to pay around 1000 dollars.

WADIH: All I remember is that our debts were steadily increasing and Souhail Dagher was losing patience.

MIRENE: And how did you curate your exhibitions?

KARINE: Wadih was a cultural journalist and artists approached him to exhibit at Espace.

MIRENE: So it was more on a first come first served basis? No selection?

WADIH: Not really. We were part of a specific cultural scene.

KARINE: We were attracted by the practices of many artists. For instance, Jacko Restikian did interesting installations.

MIRENE: Can you give other examples of experimental works, besides Aram's?

WADIH: Aram was really good, he literally occupied the gallery. The

the archives of the gallery since its inception. We did many exhibitions; Schawki Youssef, Bassam Kyrillos...

KARINE: And Aram.

WADIH: Yes, Aram. Aram Jughian did a great intervention, he transformed the exhibition space into an artist squat. People would come to see him live, eat, sleep, work, etc. Like an animal in a zoo.

KARINE: Yes, he moved in, with his mattress and everything.

WADIH: I think that he needed a place to stay, so he just moved in the gallery with a small stove and his mattress (*laughs*).

KARINE: Scrambled Eggs did a series of concerts during the show; Charbel

rest of our program was more about providing an exhibition space to artists that were part of our entourage. Some things were not very interesting. I recently discovered another event that we organized in collaboration with the Maraya gallery entitled "Empreintes". It was a cross-university contest with a roundtable and discussions on the question "Being Young in Painting in Today's Lebanon" ("Être jeune dans la peinture au Liban aujourd'hui"). Around 200 people participated. The two winners were Ayman Baalbaki and Rana Sati.

MIRENE: Ayman is a well-known painter today.

WADIH: Really? I even wrote a manifesto explaining why it was absolutely crucial to work on such an event.

MIRENE: Besides curating exhibitions and planning events, was Espace SD a meeting place?

WADIH: Well, we were always there because our offices were in the same building. People would drop by any time, night and day (*laughs*). We used to hang out with our friends in the office; we had just formed the Soap Kills band. Abou Khaled, the building's custodian, complained all the time. Abou Khaled who literally went nuts by the way. One day he started making paintings himself and tried to sell them. He transformed his room into another version of Espace SD. I think he returned to Syria now.

MIRENE: What was happening back then in the Beirut art scene?

WADIH: I think Ashkal Alwan was already active. Christine Tohme was trying, with limited resources, to organize events.



Aram Jughian, *La nouvelle neige*, Espace SD, 1999
Photograph by Wadih Safieddine



I don't think she liked us much because we were parachuted on the Beirut art scene with a 1200 square meter space.

KARINE: Our situation was ambiguous, people thought we were rich kids and that the space belonged to us. People actually thought that Wadih was the owner of the space, but we were completely broke!

WADIH: When Sandra Dagher arrived, things fell back into place since the building had her initials.

KARINE: There was also a certain animosity concerning our project because we were francophone, therefore all of Espace's communication was in French. People were criticizing us because of that. But Christine used to come often, I remember.

MIRENE: Your project seems to have been motivated by a will to make art accessible, and to offer a space for young artists to exhibit. But did you ever problematize your own environment? For whom were you doing all this? Was there a desire to go beyond your immediate circle of friends?

WADIH: Looking back, I think our vision was very narrow. I am not very proud of this. I don't think we were very clever.

KARINE: We were 24-25 years old.

WADIH: Our intention was to gather a lot of people to discuss crucial issues around art and think of what we could do for the local context.

The problem is that when I say "everybody", I am only referring to everybody we knew; there were many artists we were not addressing.

KARINE: I think that we were addressing a lot of people.

WADIH: As you know, we are francophone and addressed the audience in French. In fact, we had the same problem with Né à Beyrouth (Lebanese Film Festival).

MIRENE: Today, with your work in the Arabic music video industry, you shifted your position entirely!

WADIH: Yes, and I am trying to question my experience and my past to understand where the problem was. Today, I am not in the so-called French intellectual environment anymore. Seriously, it is too late now to maintain such an approach to cultural production. I don't know if people realize where we stand today, politically, environmentally, and economically. Without falling into conspiracy theories, people don't realize that there is not much left to do. I still think that you can find ways of communicating yourself to the majority but it is definitely not through convoluted intellectual thinking. You have to find a way to talk to people today. If Joseph Beuys was still alive, he would be interested in mediums and fields other than art to communicate with the world, and he would be only there.

I delve into a thorough explanation, of why, according to me, it is crucial to keep a space for artistic research that does not directly respond to a logic based on mass communication, efficiency and quantity. That art is precisely a space where things may not immediately make sense since it is always rethinking its own language. In a way, Wadih seems to agree.

MIRENE: How did your experience with Espace SD end?

WADIH: Well, it never really ended; it lasted a year or two and things started to deteriorate gradually. We were very enthusiastic. We prepared a brochure with a 2 year program that we didn't really manage to carry out as we had initially planned. We didn't have the money but we also didn't have the know-how.

MIRENE: Last question: What did you learn from this experience and would you start such an initiative today, a new one?

WADIH: After handing Espace SD over to Sandra Dagher, I started producing a TV program. Then I quickly shifted to a full-time position in film and video production, an occupation for which I was obviously a much better fit. I think one should do what he is best at, and as far as my skills are concerned, it definitely isn't managing an art space!

KARINE: Following this experience, I don't think I would engage in such an initiative the same way; we were young, enthusiastic and filled with desires. We had illusions and we were driven by a naive ambition.

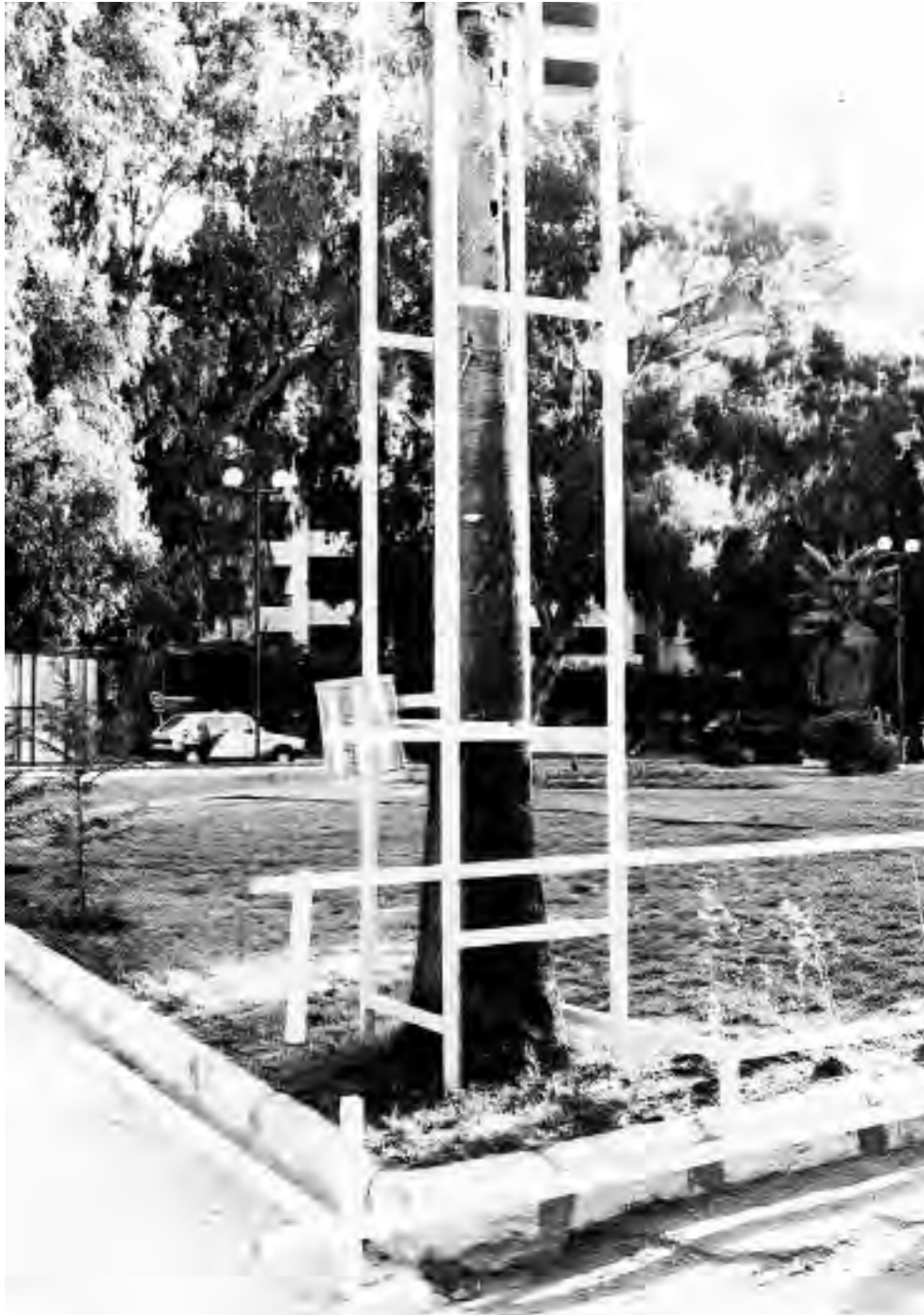
Such naivety allowed for the project to exist and experience that particular moment in Beirut. Today, I do not have the same drive. I would rather concentrate on my artistic practice. If we would have to rethink the project today, we would need to have stable financial conditions and better managerial skills (which we didn't possess at all!). Back then, I was always anxious about paying our debts and everything was building up to a financial nightmare.

Karine Wehbé is an artist and freelance graphic designer.

Wadih Safieddine is one of the co-founders of the Né à Beyrouth Lebanese Film Festival and Production House.

Espace SD's history is entirely documented on the website www.espacesd.org

DO NOT
MAKE
EXCUSES
MAKE
GOOD



Bassam Kahwaji, site specific work, Sanayeh garden, 1995
Photograph by Gilbert Hage

Ashkal Alwan's Sanayeh Project

Sanayeh 1995. The park is sunlit and noisy, and the fountain is filled with water. Anachar Basbous, an artist taking part in the Sanayeh Project, has placed a sculpture at its center. For artists to work and install over night, a permission was requested and obtained through endless negotiations and equally patient smiles. Future Television's reporter is waiting for the start signal to begin the interview with the project's team. Christine Tohme and Marwan Rechmaoui are wearing sunglasses, they slept late the night before. It is the first public project that Ashkal Alwan organizes.

TV REPORTER: We will now begin with the organizers of the exhibition, Rania Tabara, Marwan Rechmaoui...and Christine...Christine Tohme, pardon me. We will join them now to get to know them better and see how the idea of the exhibition started and how they involved all the participating artists. Good morning, can you introduce yourself?

RANIA TABBARA: My name is Rania Tabbara, I am responsible for the fundraising of this event. Christine Tohme came up with the idea for this exhibition in the first place and asked me to help her organize the project. With Marwan's help of course, she gathered all the artists and we worked together with enthusiasm and we hope that we will work together in the future.

TV REPORTER: God bless you. What would you like to add, considering that this project took a lot of preparation, could you please tell us more about it?

MARWAN RECHMAOUI: What can I say? The project took a lot of preparation. We contacted 40 artists and it was difficult to communicate with them, each had his/her own vision. Christine, she did all the work. I was just an artistic advisor.



Christine Tohme with her daughter Raseel Hadjian
Photograph by Marwan Rechmaoui

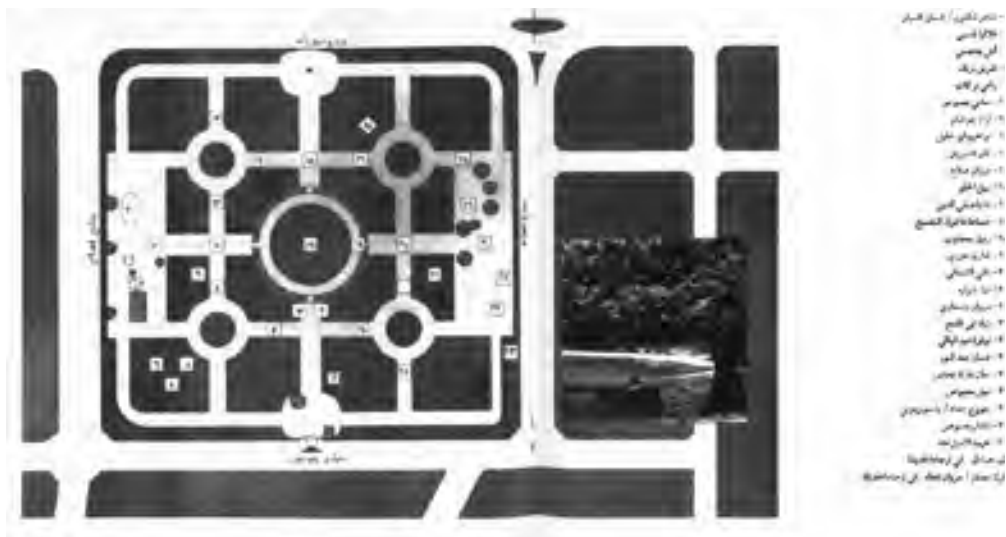


TV REPORTER: Everything brings us back to you... Good morning Christine.

CHRISTINE TOHME: I can't say that everything depends on me, because if I didn't have the support of the people present here, this work would not have been possible. Ok, I had the initial idea, and the idea is very important but it can't stand alone, it needs collective work, if there is no teamwork, nothing can be achieved. My main motivation was doing something that could respond to the lack of art in our everyday life in Lebanon; art is not in the public space, it is not in the street, it is absent from many spaces we could use, but that we are not using.

As far as I am concerned, I live across the garden, I always look at it and think it is not valorized enough. I had this idea, which is just a first step for something that we could continue thereafter, not only in the Sanayeh garden. I would love to develop future projects with everybody's help, with the help of the artists basically, since everything depends on their work. Rania fundraised and Marwan was very responsible with all the artists, but without the artists, the project would not have taken place. They are everything. I would like, for the next project, to utilize the streets, or for it to take place on the seashore, in Ramlet el Baida, or in the mountains, or in Burj el Murr, or in downtown. You choose the place and we will do it, no problem!

TV REPORTER: As our viewers already know, this is the first visual arts event in the garden. Around 30 artists are exhibiting their works here. After being invited, each artist decided how s/he wanted to contribute to the project and did an artwork in a corner or a spot of this spacious garden. We will introduce the artworks presented in the garden. Back to you Magida, to the studio temperature that should be cooler than here. We will be back to you in the company of the artists.



In the afternoon...

CHRISTINE: I wanted to say that myself Rania Tabbara and Marwan Rechmaoui are very happy about the work accomplished because we succeeded in what we wanted to do and say. The important thing to me was the affluence of the public last night. I wanted to ask the public to come and see the works and the garden at night, and witness the mix between the people who come everyday to the garden and the artists. Youngsters, elder men and women are gathering around the works, asking the artists about their work. This is something very important, because we usually say that these people don't understand art, but they do! The proof is what happened yesterday at the Sanayeh garden; everybody came together, and there was a very positive gathering between the artists and the public. The most important thing is that we are getting closer to the people. We are turning the garden into a living thing. This is all I wanted to say and thank you to all the artists that were very responsive to the public. I ask everybody to come to Sanayeh at night, artists are working during the day but at night they are available for questions. Welcome to the Sanayeh garden, we are waiting for you. I thank Alam el Sabah because they are working with us and are very kind and generous towards us.

TV REPORTER: Thank you very much. I want to ask you a question, is it only the people of Sanayeh coming or people interested in art?

CHRISTINE: This is what I was saying earlier, it's a mix of people that usually come to Sanayeh and the public coming to see the exhibition. This is what is important to me, the significance is that ordinary people, the people that supposedly don't understand-I don't think that

they don't understand, intuitively they understand everything but we consider that they don't and keep away from them-are coming to see the installations. This is what is so beautiful about what happened yesterday. People were inquiring about the works, they were amazed by what was happening, they were asking who were these artists, but they were not mocking what they saw. This is why I am so happy and I can't really express how happy I am, together with Rania and Marwan. People came to us, in a surprising way. It is important to challenge the idea that these people don't understand. If we try and give them a chance, they understand and begin to like us.

TV REPORTER: It is great that the reaction was so meaningful and positive. Anyway Christine, you will guide me today at the Sanayeh garden and we will start with this painting behind us, Nabil, Nabil Helou. How are you Nabil? This work was in the background and now that I am standing next to it I look very small! Is it entirely made of steel?

NABIL HELOU: It's mainly steel plates, welded together at specific points.

These selected passages are translated and transcribed from a live reportage realized by Future Television in 1995. The audio version of this interview is available on ArteEast's website.

For more information on Ashkal Alwan, please visit www.ashkalalwan.org.

Dar el Fan

The following text is the English translation of Janine Rubeiz's recollections of Dar el-Fan, published in Janine Rubeiz et Dar el Fan. Regard vers un Patrimoine Culturel (An Nahar, 2003).

Dar el-Fan was a cultural space founded and administered by Janine Rubeiz from 1967 to 1975. It was located next to one of the city's most important thoroughfares, Bechara el-Khoury avenue, that would later become part of the "green line" or the roadway that divided Beirut into its western and eastern halves. The experiment was distinctive because of its scope of activities that included a series of debates, conferences, exhibitions, concerts, poetry contests, film screenings, all this during Lebanon's turbulent social and political pre-civil war years. Figures such as Moussa Sadr and Kamal Jumblat became regular visitors, they discussed issues like women's rights in Islam, for instance. This close engagement of the worlds of politics and arts was possible only through culture. Perhaps its outcome did not instigate an immediate change in the course of Lebanon's political history, at least not tangibly, but such an engagement was only possible in the space Janine Rubeiz established. Dar el-Fan was closed down in 1975 with the outbreak of the civil war in Lebanon. The archives were burnt in 1976, scant documentation has survived.

The sixties witnessed an extraordinary vitality in the realm of culture in Lebanon. Lebanese intellectuals debated passionately ideologies and the state of the world at large, just as artists, particularly in theater and the visual arts, were in their turn engaged in the various theories of practice that animated their worlds. We used to meet in cafés and felt the need for a meeting place where we would feel at home.



The programs of the cultural centers attached to diplomatic missions were designed by ministries far flung abroad, they did not correspond to our yearnings. And the Lebanese government did not seem to have regard for culture and related fields, so the private sector took the role of the public sector.

A growing number of friends, artists and intellectuals joined our group. We decided we absolutely had to create a cultural center. We debated the structure and means to shape it, and after several meetings with lawyers familiar with our group, we came to the conclusion that a limited shareholding company would provide the best model and guarantee freedom of action.

A House, a Society

So we created Dar el-Fan, a limited shareholding company, with a capital worth of 50,000 Lebanese Pounds (LP), divided over 1,000 shares, each worth 50 LP. The shares sold very quickly: Writers, poets, professors, philosophers, actors, film directors, singers and dancers rushed to buy. There was only one condition, namely that no individual could own more than 10 shares to guarantee an equitable participation and that no shareholders could wield influence by that virtue. Keep in mind, Lebanon thrives from an extremely rich and varied cultural heritage, and it is very attuned to the world at large. These realities had to be reflected in our cultural initiative.

Meanwhile, I had found a very beautiful Lebanese house, 550 square meter large, with a 2000 square meter garden, it seemed perfect. It was located next to the Bechara el-Khoury avenue, which would later become the green line. We rented and refurbished it. The central hall was about 17 meters long with a ceiling 6.5 meter high. It became the mixed-use room where we held our exhibitions, and as such it was outfitted with appropriate hanging and lighting system. Conferences, musical concerts, poetry readings, and film screenings were also held in the room. One room was used as a library, two for administration. As to the remaining spaces, I had decided straight away that people should be made to feel comfortable and welcome, so we set-up a small bar, cafeteria and opened the garden. We inaugurated the space in November 1967 with a conference by André Pieyre de Mandiargues, who attended with his wife Bona, a painter.

First Evaluation

It took between two to three years for Dar el-Fan to find its stride. There were a lot of events. A study conducted about ten years ago, estimated that during the eight years that Dar el-Fan was active, we organized and presented more than 240 conferences and debates, 60 poetry readings, 90 different exhibitions, 150 film screenings, and 6 plays.

The program was established as follows: Every week, a talk was followed by a debate. The themes were inspired from a very thorough assessment of the current situation of the country. For instance, the theme exploring sectarianism ultimately included 32 speakers; another landmark theme was creativity, we wanted to interrogate its relationship with imitation; and the theme of oil and the fundamentals of its role in the region. We also dealt with issues that were pressing at the time, such as secularism and gender. I recall a panel discussion that lined Msgr. Khodr, Sheikh Sobhi el-Saleh and Maxime Rodinson on one stage. Discussions included interrogating whether monotheistic religions had secured gender equality. I also recall our failures, specifically one that I was never able to overcome, namely the question of civil marriage, when I could not find, in spite of numerous attempts and pleas, a Muslim who was willing to engage in the discussion, let alone disavow or denounce it. We were all too aware of the difficulties of creating dialogue in our society, that is another reason we were keen on gathering people with different opinions. We know our society well; we do not listen to one another and we want to be right, stubbornly, always. One of my own biggest difficulties was to make sure the other's voice was heard, the other opinion. We cannot build a society based on exclusion, whatever the arguments, no one can be one hundred percent right and the other a hundred percent wrong.

We hosted musical concerts and poetry night, including Oriental and Western music, the artists were Lebanese and foreign (recommended by their embassies). The poets were in majority Lebanese, we hosted some French poets, and Evtouchenko, a Russian poet who left a lasting impression. We screened art house films once a week; we borrowed the prints from foreign embassies, and I should note that these were excellent collaborations. Exhibitions were generally held once a month, we actually discovered several painters who are established today. I would rather not cite them so as not to omit important figures. We also presented plays. I recall King Ubu directed by Gérard Avédissian, and al-Bakarah, written by Thérèse Awad, directed by Fouad Naïm and performed by Nidal al-Ashkar. Very creative performances. And, in addition to all of this, we organized workshops for children, drawing, painting and poetry contests (with prizes), puppet theater and drama classes.

Engagement with the World

So far, the focus has been the local context. We hosted important international exhibitions. Our guiding motivations were dual, on the one hand, engagement with profound knowledge of our authentic heritage, and on the other, an open engagement with the cultures of the world at large. Dar el-Fan was a space for all Lebanese artists and thinkers to

come into contact, a platform for ongoing dialogue. Notheworthy Arabs and European were invited. I recall Kateb Yassine, Rachid Boujedra, Michel Tournier, Marguerite Duras, Pier Paolo Pasolini and the most prominent architect of the third world, Hassan Fathi. (Surely I must be forgetting some names and I apologize for this.) We introduced Indian pictorial art, Japanese art (Hokusai prints), Henri Moore's sculptures, Polish contemporary tapestry work, Grotowski's theatre, the work of the Bauhaus and Czech lithography, Barbara Hepworth's sculptures, and the work of the excellent British sculptor Darwood, and a seminar on the masks and props of the Berliner Ensemble. I am citing the exhibitions from memory, so I am most likely to be missing a few. There was no admission fee at Dar el-Fan, except on rare occasions, it was open to all Lebanese, with no discrimination.

Cultural Management until the End

When I think retrospectively, I see how obsessive I was about archiving, talks and lectures were typed, evenings were recorded on tapes. And nothing of this archive remains. It's a big frustration. We had a very efficient administration; our programs were set three months in advance, printed every month and distributed to a two thousand-addressee mailing list, two months ahead. A weekly reminder was published and distributed to the media; every talk was typed that very same day and distributed to newspapers and magazines (they were around 150). Occasionally, talks were translated. All this work was carried out by two secretaries and a receptionist whose role was to collect the member subscriptions. With an annual budget of only 50,000 LP, one can imagine the amount of precious works our numerous friends gave us.

On September 12, 1975, we had to evacuate our space in emergency. Since the beginning of this fratricidal war -that started on February 25 - we had maintained our calendar of activities, mindless of the situation. In the month of May 1975, we hosted the International Meeting for Women, we had attendees from Bulgaria, Greece, Sudan, Egypt and Syria, among whom two ministers, a parliamentary representative and the president of an organization were present. All scheduled sessions took place in spite of the shelling, but we sometimes had to change our venue twice a day. We published a resolution that was disseminated to women organizations internationally.

I recall a concert that was taking place during a particularly violent night: June 26, 1975. Henri Ghoraieb was giving a piano recital at Dar el-Fan and Sheikh Sobhi el-Saleh was attending. The fighting had reached Basta, some thirty meters away from Dar el-Fan, and yet no one moved, everyone sat still until the recital was over. It was like that with all scheduled events, they continued, until the end and the space was never as full. During the summer of 1975, optimistic and somewhat



conceited, we had almost completed the forthcoming season's program but we had to contend with facts. After the fire that beset the neighborhood was quelled, we only managed to come back in April of 1976, alas! The place had been looted, torched, destroyed. Doors and slabs of marble blown away. Nothing was left. Modern ruins.

Hope and Frustration

In 1977, the situation seemed to have lulled, people thought the war might be over; hopeful, we organized an exhibition of paintings titled "Lebanon 1978", for the country's tomorrow. The intention was to make a stand against partition. One hundred and five Lebanese artists took part in the show.

We had delivered a paper to the president of the republic, Elias Sarkis, entitled "For a Cultural Politics in Lebanon", it was reproduced in all the Arabic-speaking and French-speaking press. In short, we pleaded for the creation of a ministry and outlined a few basic principles that would allow the government to articulate a cultural policy.

Years have gone by and the destruction is still on-going. Nothing remains of this country besides our determination and our hope. We wanted to be the embryo for a ministry of culture. We still believe that someone will take up the challenge; this is why we have refused to relent.

Dar el-Fan still exists, and will exist until someone from a new generation takes over.


We still believe in the possibility of establishing a cultural life that is open, unified, plural, diverse, inspired from values of humanism and equality. Art and literary productions mirror the collective consciousness as well as subconscious. Ideologies can manage this collective consciousness that holds the best and worst, all that makes up social constitutions; it is where their power lies, and how we can explain the danger and incomprehensible success of some ideologies that run against the grain of reason and yet are able to draw masses and cause disasters.

Willing Culture

More than ever, we need to nurture the cultural life: to sustain our artists; decipher their engagement and understand the deep crisis shaking the country and entire region; question notions of progress and under-development, as well as East and West; to pay attention to the resurgence of civilizations from the 'Third World', suppressed for long periods of time and humiliated by the magnificence of Western civilization, they just might have to offer values and a way of life more humane to our world today; to foster communication; to celebrate difference as a source of enrichment; to fight against all racism,

whether religious, ethnic, racial gender or class based; to dispel hate and refrain from violence; to maintain world peace. It is a daunting task. If we can aspire to participate in such a task, even with a grain of sand, it should be a real source of pride.

KNOW YOUR FOOLS



The idiots

Fares Chalabi

A bunch of idiots are populating the grid.
They are organized in small groups, two or three at a time.
They come in couples, like these funny characters: Laurel and Hardy,
Mirene and Marwa, Heckle and Jekyll, The Daltons, Hatem and Omar,
Ashkan and Jan, Mansour and Mansour.
Maybe One needs to be Two to be an idiot.

Descartes was an idiot.
But Descartes used to do it by himself, sitting in a small warm room.
His other was a heater.
Descartes had plenty of room to meditate.
Descartes used to meditate alone.
He needs to be alone, because he is a doubter.
Descartes becomes an idiot when he decides to reach truth by himself.
How can I reach truth, an absolute truth, while being by myself?
In his solitary confinement Descartes starts doubting.
He doubts his heater. He doubts his room. He doubts his handwriting.
Then, pushing doubt to an extreme, he tries to doubt his doubting.
At this moment doubt fails. Descartes cannot doubt his doubting.
He declares "I doubt".
But, "I doubt" is not a doubt. It says so, but as an activity it is an affirmation.
Thus, Descartes declares "I think".
"I think" is identical to the activity it is producing, thus it is an identity, a being.
"I am".

Descartes performs his cogito. "I doubt", "I think", "I am". It is a logic of the implicit, where the transitions are made by jumps, and in relation to their productive acts. Each affirmation envelops an act, and it is the coming to light of this act that brings us to the next affirmation, and so on.

The Cartesian equations go like this:

- Nothingness = Destruction.
- Knowledge = Certainty.
- Being = I.

The truth that Descartes reaches is that the only truth which can be reached by one's self is: only this self is. "I am sure that I am, and the world is nothing, or if I am sure that I am, then the world is nothing."

To get Descartes out of himself and make him reach again for the world, God will have to intervene, but that episode will not be discussed here.

Another famous idiot is Melville's Bartleby.

Bartleby does not isolate himself in a room, but rather installs his room in a public space.

Indeed, Bartleby works, sleeps, and eats in the office of his employer.

His employer is a state functionary, a public notary.

Bartleby is inserted into the public administration, inside its most intimate imbrications and documents.

His robotic personality makes him quite good at what he does.

Bartleby does not think.

Bartleby does not talk.

Bartleby works and eats ginger biscuits.

If you ask him to do something that he prefers not to do, he will answer that he prefers not to. "I prefer not to", is his formula, as Deleuze puts it. Bartleby will utter this formula, regardless of all circumstances and propositions, until this leads him to prison and death.

We are dealing here with an order of preferences not of certainty.

Bartleby prefers not to.

The disjunction with Bartleby is not absolute, it is not the "I am". "I prefer not to" is a formula like in chemistry or physics. This formula solves the problem of a local and yet absolute disjunction. Instead of having an absolute destruction with no locus, Bartleby exercises a power of suspension.

His preference is without an object. It is neither an "I prefer not to help you" nor an "I prefer not", but a preference of a transitive

negation "I prefer not to". It is a modality of movement where movement is neither blocked nor passed through. The movement remains in location and does not cross space anymore, though it does not stop either. It is as if Bartleby injects an imperceptible void between the bodies in movement and their points of friction, which usually allow for displacement. The circulation of movement is deprived of its grip on space and space is freed from the movements of the grid.

What has come to light in this suspension are, on the one hand, the frenetic movements of the grid, and on the other hand, the impassibility of an immobile local space.

The problem is that this suspension of space is bound to the utterance of the formula. The space of suspension is identified with the location of Bartleby. It is a space that doesn't exist by itself. To recuperate the space and the fluidity of circulation, the authority will end up installing Bartleby in a prison where he will let himself die.

The Bartleby equations go as follows:

- Suspension = Abstract space.
- Knowledge = Formula.
- Being = Order of preferences.



Series of photographs taken on a Sunday afternoon, Beirut, May 2010.

So maybe the idiot needs to be bi-headed, in order to be able to do something by himself: Descartes and Bartleby, Laurel and Hardy, Deleuze and Guattari.

To be an organization will consist of voicing not the I but the II. Having two heads is, first of all, to stop talking for one self. The organization will be a device to suspend the entanglement between the thought and the self. By speaking in the name of the organization, the movement of thought is freed from its ego center: it can become a collective thought, a thought that goes beyond space, time and self. But at the same time, the self-organized reconstructs a self of this para-spatiotemporal thought. It is not the anonymous thought of the institution, transcending space, time and selves, but a paradoxical floating thought with a self. The self-organism has preferences: preference for comics, contemporary art or music. Thus the self-organized has an ego that concurrently goes beyond its limits, an ego of egos, and it is an organization with a suspension power. It suspends the flux of necessity and injects the preferences of its multiple egos. A solitary ego will not be able to participate to the grid (absolute ego - Descartes) while a pure suspension power will not be able to inject, in return, new images and preferences (absolute suspension - Bartleby).

To achieve this paradoxical being, the self-organized will plug its selves on the selfless body of the grid. They will have numbers, official status, and sometimes all the subsidiary elements: offices, phone numbers, rent contracts, etc.

The self-organism will intercept a flux of money or funds; rent some equipment or organize events. This will ensure survival in the grid. When its physical durability is more or less secured, the self-organism will start acting and perceiving. Its actions will consist mainly of liberating space. However, instead of having an abstract space, a space that only suspends movement, the new space will generate, in return, movements and images: movements of people visiting and traveling, and images to produce and look at.

These movements and images are the surfacing, in that specific point, of the virtual images and movements of the grid, which could not reach the surface otherwise. In fact, the grid is saturated by the economical and representational necessities. In general, movements and images are dictated by profit (commercial images, circulation of goods) or the consolidation of power (representational images and circulation of personalities).

The self-organized generates a movement that escapes these necessities, movements and meetings devoid of an identified goal, and images with no commercial value or sometimes with no value at all.

When viewed from the outside, from the grid, the self-organized seems to

be in a frenetic activity devoid of meaning and necessity: "Why are you doing this? What for?". It is often confused with charity organizations, however charity organizations are nothing but a resembling other. They are oriented towards necessary problems, problems that arise from the disfunctioning of the grid. That's why charity organizations are the grid complements, and not the grid suspension points.

Thus the self-organized doesn't even have the luxury of having a problem. Its problem is preferential and essentially optional, i.e., I prefer comics over modern literature. The insistent question from the grid comes back: "What for?". Looking from the outside, these self-organizations are tinted by their autistic idiotic origin; they seem disconnected from the world, and highly narcissistic. This is the case only when we postulate that the sole destination of any action is to solve a problem imposed by the grid, to react to necessities. While if we consider that the self-organized is a solution to escape the encompassing order of necessity and reason, and an excursion in the field of contingency and preferences, the inquiry is void. "What next?" is the haunting question of the self-organized, and not "What for?". "What next", in order to keep a flow of non-regulated movements and images, as a counter to regulated images and movements. The self-organized equations go as follows:

- Suspension = Liberation of a space.
- Knowledge = Preferences.
- Being = Self-organization.



Good work

Mirene Arsanios

"I only work with my friends," she once said during an office conversation whose topic I don't recall. However, her affirmation continued to echo, provoking a sensation that I couldn't nail down because it felt both right and wrong. In other words, her statement suggested that labor and time could be utilized in a way that would promise an end to work, because work would not be perceived as such if it were friendship. I was caught in her example, slightly confused. If friendship turned into work, questions as to how to quantify, evaluate and remunerate a work performance would become problematic because friendship is also generosity. How does one measure and judge the efficiency of hanging out together for example, a typical friend activity? Feeling trapped in her sentence brought forth an uneasy sense of fading stupidity. Perhaps, my aversion to 9 to 5 jobs was not entirely justified, perhaps, what I considered to be major freedom was simply more work in disguise. As we accomplished it with friends, and the contained 9 to 5 work schedule pervaded the rest of the day, I was working all the time.

Work and Belief

In order to clarify the dubious equation of labor and friendship, one should begin with a questioning of the nature of work. In this case, work relied on a shared set of interests, references and preoccupations. Working with art was a way of shaping the flow of the everyday and the way it looks, so we could set up a bar or make an exhibition in a public garden. In this sense, work came close to a belief and was often associated with desire rather than obligation. And it was not a privileged choice, as I often contended with other friends, not more



than any other work. Ultimately, all professional choices were guided by belief (in money, power, altruism etc.). This belief however, sustained itself on immaterial values-not that this feature is specific to the field of cultural and artistic production, as the art sphere is primarily known for the market it can generate. The underlying question however, is what principles and beliefs guide your actions.

She had refused a delicious offer somewhere in a big institution because she wanted to stay in her city.

He said that it was painful to pour that much energy and time in the magazine but that he had no choice.

He never had written a CV and was short on money by the end the month although he always had a bill folded in four equal parts to fit his leather purse.

There might be issues of recognition and success within the implausible art world and system, local and international. Still, something remains excessive to the logic of immediate self-interest. Something that may be identified as idealist, and one day, turn into disillusionment and bitterness, or not. It comes close to what André Breton describes in his book *Arcanum 17* written in 1944, in light of Surrealism and its failed attempts to subvert the real.

"There is, in fact, no more barefaced lie than the one that consists in asserting, even- and above all- when faced with an irretrievable situation, that rebellion is good for nothing. Rebellion is its own justification, completely independent of the chance it has to modify the state of affairs that gives rise to it." ¹

Work, when read through this romantic understanding of subversion, channels desire and establishes a direct connection with the self (there is no separation between what I do and who I am). In fact, commonly, such activity is not envisioned as "work" although it involves production. Stemming from an individual desire, its value can't be simply determined through a professional currency.

In this positive affirmation-of desire over obligation- exists a haunting belief that we are doing the right thing and that what we do is "good". Good in the sense that it opposes what is considered bad (the market, the "miserable priests" in Breton's text). The outcome of this type of "work" is that it often acts against its main purpose, to generate (material) profit. Rebellion, when judged through standards of efficiency, is "good for nothing" Breton says, this "good for nothing" is what is to be valued. Aside from Breton's avant-garde rhetoric,

¹ André Breton, *Arcanum 17* (Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2004).



working with art from a stand that is "not for profit" confuses the contractual operations of retribution, value and work, as the values that are believed in are not immediately translatable or reducible to "work".

"We believe of our friends that they are good men"²

If work meant believing in a shared project, a common good that drew us together, how did friendship fit in this equation? Were our "good" intentioned feelings driven by the same belief in "good work"? Does the coming together of work equal to the togetherness expressed in friendship? How to negotiate and reconcile the economy present in these peculiar affects, believing (in work) and love (for friends)? Could they be collapsed as in her affirmation?

I particularly liked her because she does inspire me good. Good in reference to peace and companionship, of looking over each other while sharing intense thoughts. What she gives me and what I can give her back is time for reflection, where judgment is set aside because there is time to bring down the images that regulate the way we appear, the way we speak and the words we choose. Time to forget style and be vulnerable.

Friendship, similar to the work being addressed, also presents an economy of loss, as true friendships are the ones that are able to set aside self-interest for the good of the other, to move beyond one's self towards the "other self".

In his Book on Friendship, Aristotle distinguishes between three kinds of friendships; first the ones that are useful, second, pleasurable and last the ones that are "good" per se and do not serve a purpose. The third kind is the most honorable one since the interest lies in the person and not in what could be gained from that person. Such friendship is possible because it leans on "good" regarded here as a virtue, a premise for good and altruistic friendships. The good in this kind of friendship is not circumstantial; it is intrinsic to the person, therefore, its outcome is necessarily good.

According to Aristotle's logic, there is no possible disjunction between both, since there isn't any difference between a good person and the guiding good of belief, an idea and its embodiment. Aristotle states that if there is friendship there is no need for justice ("...and when men are friends they have no need of justice, while when they are just, they need friendship as well."³). And if we were truly friends, there would be no need of work. The conflict or rather the paradox in work and friendship is that there would be no work if friendship were truly friendship. And work would not be considered work if it were truly good.

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

³ Idem.

But how then distinguish what is good per se from what is good for us, since the good that defines "good friendship" is also linked to the singularity of friendship. Not anybody could give me the same "good", only her. The same question would apply for "good work", how to distinguish what is good per se (belief) and good for me (self-interest). This confusion emerges when what we do as friends starts qualifying and is apprehended as work, that is to say, when our beliefs and our affective relations are assigned an exchangeable value and have to respond to specific demands. Our friendship then, as well as our belief, time and energy had to reconcile to a new logic and economy. Was it possible to systematize work when based on affective relations? What would be lost or gained in this transition? These questions, for the time being, will remain unanswered.

Her affirmation continued to resonate as both right and wrong; driven by self-interest and utterly disinterested, paradoxical just as friendship. Affection, efforts, beliefs and scarce money were weaved into the economy we had to be negotiating everyday, according to singular situations. It required the creation of new and contingent formulas, dependent on individual projects and encounters.



Roundtable at 98weeks Project Space

February 9, 2010, around 6:00 PM. We gather at 98weeks Project Space in order to discuss self-organization in our work. The following persons are present:

Mansour Aziz, media practitioner. As part of the Jaḍmūr collective, he helps manage the Sanayeh House and 3studios, both of which host artists, activists, and events.

Ashkan Sepahvand, writer, editor and translator. Since 2006, he is a co-organizer of the artistic network Reloading Images.

Jan Ackenhausen initiated the artistic research project Reloading Images Damascus in 2008.

Reloading Images is an open network of artists, writers, curators, architects, filmmakers, designers, scholars and interdisciplinary cultural practitioners whose practice takes the form of process-oriented artistic research.

Marwa Arsanios, artist and co-founder of 98weeks research project.

Mirene Arsanios, co-founder of 98weeks research project.

98weeks research project is an artists organization founded by Marwa Arsanios and Mirene Arsanios in 2007. It is also a Project Space since November 2009, located in the Mar Mkhael area of Beirut.

Hatem Imam, visual artist and designer. Hatem is one of the founding members of the Samandal Comics.

Omar Khouri, visual and comic artist. He is also a founding member, editor, and contributing artist in Samandal Comics.

I. INTRODUCTION

HATEM: We could skip the introductions since we all know each other. Do you have specific questions that need to be addressed?

ASHKAN: I understand why you asked Reloading Images to participate in this roundtable, but at the same time we are not a collective that works in Lebanon or that contributes specifically to the Lebanese art scene. We are now developing a project for Home Works, this is our experience for the moment of working in Lebanon.

MIRENE: Your model is interesting because it is structured around a loose network of artists working in Cairo, Berlin, Beirut...

ASHKAN: Tehran

MIRENE: And Damascus with the Reloading Images workshop that took place there.

JAN: In October 2008.

ASHKAN: A one-month workshop that was part of a six month process in planning, organizing and setting up a loose temporary school of sorts.

MIRENE: You are now thinking of a project for Home Works 5?

ASHKAN: Reloading Images was first invited to do a workshop for Home Works' education program. But we are thinking of organizing something other than a workshop, which is also related to the development of Reloading Images.

MARWA: What is it now?

ASHKAN: That is a good question (*laughs*) something that I'd like to talk about separately. It will be a performative intervention in different sites in Beirut, and there will be a small publication.

II. METHODS

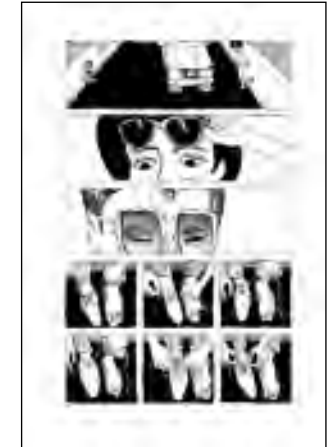
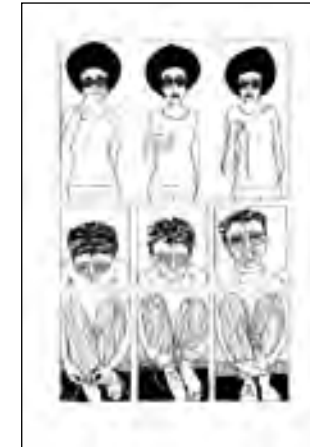
MIRENE: To expand on this question; what methods do you use in your work and what leads you to reconsider them? Ashkan, you are now thinking of a performative intervention rather than a workshop. As for Samandal, you have recently organized a series of workshops. What is it that you want to develop when you decide to adopt a new approach?

OMAR: Concerning the comic workshops, there are a couple of advantages. One is to develop comic art, which is a form that you can't really study in college and for which we have very little local production to be inspired by. In that sense, it's good to have people improving their techniques in the medium.

MIRENE: Do you, as the organizers, learn from the workshops as well?

OMAR: It helps other artists in developing their skills; as in somebody could come back and propose something interesting with Samandal or another organization. Like in any art form, it takes a lot of time to develop your personal style in comics.

Omar Khouri, Salon Tareq il Khurafi,
(chapter 1, p.1), 2006-2007



Hanan Al Neel', 2009
Written by Maya Moumne, illustrated by Hatem Imam

HATEM: Actually, most of us participate in the workshops.

OMAR: We are not experts, we are like everybody else here.

MIRENE: And Mansour, what about you? The Sanayeh project also changed; you initially wanted it to be a residency, then a meeting place, then you started renting it out. You also had to adapt your project to meet certain demands, what is going on now?

MANSOUR: Renting out the space was a practical solution and it worked quite well. I am not against funding but it's not my kind of politics because it requires a lot of energy. We had to rent it out for some time now in order to be able to sustain it. There are political, philosophical and existential layers involved in funding. I consider Sanayeh to act as a host.

ASHKAN: I have been to the Sanayeh space for a talk, and I have also been to the space in Ain Mreisse (3Studios), where I saw an exhibition Are these two spaces interconnected or are they two separate projects?

MANSOUR: They are separate projects, but interconnected.

ASHKAN: I don't know if I misunderstood but the Ain Mreisse Space is for projects that deal with architecture, right?

III. SPACES

MANSOUR: Not necessarily, the Ain Mreisse Space is really meant to be a residency for artists staying and working there, physically it's more set up for that. I am driven by the desire to transform abandoned spaces. Actually in both spaces (Sanayeh House and 3Studios) the buildings are going to be torn down.

MIRENE: Really? When?

MANSOUR: This was clear since our initial negotiations with the owner, it was part of the contract.



JAN: How do you have access to those spaces? Because I noticed that even if you were to get a temporary space in an abandoned building, people are very unlikely to even negotiate.

MANSOUR: It's very difficult and involves a lot of "indirect" negotiations such as building relationships with relatives or friends of the owners. It's a very long process before I can win their trust. For example, concerning 3Studios in Ain Mreisse, the owner's nephew is someone I've been having my morning coffee with everyday for the past two years.

MIRENE: To bounce back on the idea of space, do you think that having a physical space changes the nature of your activity?

MANSOUR: My closest friends work in performing arts and different cultural domains that require a meeting space, and increasingly, there is the feeling that there is less available space in the city.

HATEM: Samandal is also looking for a space to do workshops because there is a certain kind of enthusiasm and energy. We discovered this when we did the 24-hour comic jam in collaboration with L'employé du mois in Belgium. It gathered different people from all over the world, who for 24 hours worked simultaneously on making comics (24 page comics). It was a very productive experience; we had never been that productive before. Also, we often don't have access to the tools we want to experiment with, and we don't have the space to do all these things.

MIRENE: So it's a future project?

HATEM: It's definitely a project but right now...

MIRENE: Recently, several new architecture studios have been opening in the area (Mar Mkhaleh Nahr), massive spaces...

OMAR: As commercial projects, they have proper money. We are NGOs! But even before having a public space we have problems having an office. Right now we work from our studios and houses, half of our magazines are produced in my studio, half in someone else's house.

ASHKAN: But do you ever think that this is to your advantage? Because I think that Reloading Images' major strength is not to have a space. And the irony is that our entire project started in 2005 with a space in Berlin with Azin Feizabadi and Kaya Behkalam. When I entered the picture, the space existed but with no activities taking place there anymore, and the idea of organizing an exhibition or an event turned more into looking at the process that goes into an exhibition, which then became a workshop concept. But the string is the fact that Reloading Images is a mental-physical space.

OMAR: I think the opposite happened to us. We started out in Paris through the Internet. It took us so long to make a prototype (Issue Zero), and it only solidified when we all met in Beirut, in 3 weeks we did more than an entire year.

MARWA: Samandal acts in a specific context, which is Beirut. They have an interest here, whereas the main concept of Reloading Images is international.

OMAR: Still, we receive work from many different places, and invite international contributors. The main idea however is to develop comics in the region.

IV. LOCAL/ NON LOCAL

MIRENE: I have a question regarding the local/international dynamic. Most of us have links with international networks. What is the relation between acting locally and internationally?

MARWA: It's not either/or.

OMAR: Yes, it's not either/or. We try to deal with anyone who is interested or interesting locally but we don't really want to be lumped with an already existing network. We want to create our own, be connected but have our own identity.

HATEM: I think that what defines this magazine also started with a question of language. We were interested in doing a comic in Arabic and have this as an editorial line. But since comic is a medium of instantaneity, a lot of people are more comfortable expressing themselves in English or in French. We are trying to avoid being pigeonholed "we are Lebanese, we come from Beirut etc.". Even for us, the real identity of the magazine is ambiguous. We are still negotiating.

ASHKAN: I think that what you were saying about trying to evade being pigeonholed is interesting. It is also a challenge that we face with Reloading Images. The original constellation of 3 Iranians working on a project in Tehran was seen as a project on Iran. When we started working in Damascus after Jan and Sana approached us, all of a sudden Reloading Images became something on the Middle East. And since our projects were workshops involving international participants, it became something about cultural exchange and development.

MARWA: What is funny about 98weeks is that sometimes we call ourselves an association and sometimes an artists organization.

MIRENE: We change all the time!

OMAR: For us it represents a problem, because it's hard to apply for funding that way.

ASHKAN: When you are what? It's easy to find funding if you are working for cultural development in the Middle East!

OMAR: But it's hard to get funding because we can't define ourselves in one line.

MARWA: For funding, you know for what purpose you are writing. So I am whatever you like me to be.



Postcard by Francis Alys offered to the participants of the 98weeks workshop As Long as I'm Walking, 2008

ASHKAN: Rule number one in fund raising: LIE!

HATEM: When we started the comics we didn't really think about all these issues. People just label you, "You are the first, the only, or the best comic magazine in the region!". And you think "Oh my god, I am the first comic in the region!" (*everybody laughs*).

HATEM: It's stressing because you have to live up to the standards.

ASHKAN: I think a major shift took place after Damascus for us. We gave up the idea of having a core group and decided instead to have a network of people with different skills, talents and interest, and this is somehow a human resource for us. People in their own individual trajectories that make things happen. Reloading Images is an umbrella term.

MARWA: Do you have a core group?

V. ME AND THE GROUP

ASHKAN: We do have a core group, but it is changing, it has changed every year somehow. Right now there are two things going on simultaneously; there are three former participants in Damascus who are organizing a very similar educational workshop/cultural exchange in India (Delhi) with the Raqs Media Collective and Sarai. Then there are three of us that are coordinating a 3-part project that will take place in Berlin,

Fad.ma workshop, Homeworks 5, Sanayeh House, 2010



98weeks workshop, The Ruin in the City, 2008



98weeks workshop, The Ruin in the City, 2008

Beirut and Cairo. There are so many layers in the global art world of inclusion and exclusion and so much of this actually occurs around the community of people who know each other and who utilize each other's friendship or acquaintances to make things happen. In our community it became very clear that the only way to enter into this without having a sense of bitterness is to just do it in your own network.

MIRENE: What I like is that you all choose to identify with Reloading Images. Why keep that umbrella?

HATEM: Because it's empowering.

ASHKAN: I am interested in doing the things that Reloading Images does, but I would never begin to think about them alone. I need other people. It might be related to insecurity, anxiety, or whatever, and instead of responding with fear, I respond with openness to others. For all of us, it is almost schizophrenic, there are certain things that we can't do as our individual identities, and we need to have this alter ego.

MANSOUR: I think that it is unnecessary to say that even an individual's work inherently harbors a collaborative component. Any authorial project involves other people. You need to work with people not only to get things done, but also for inspiration and for a sense of solidarity. Maybe even to use them for issues of self-esteem, confidence or authority. If you are part of a group, you are more authentic and authoritative than you would be if you were to work individually.

MIRENE: This is what makes a collective work, to have a shared identification. If a filmmaker directs a film and authors it, the work is collective but is not recognized as such.

MANSOUR: But there are many ways of collaborating, maybe not always through a defined collaborative project but there are incredible collaborations that happen even in individual works, in fact more interestingly because there are elements of fraternity and friendship involved in it, and there is a very strong pedagogical element.

ASHKAN: Self-education.

MANSOUR: The word comes from Greek, the slave who took the children from the family to the teacher. For me there is a very strong driving factor, which is to learn something new.

MARWA: What is interesting in what we have been saying is that you create platforms in order to develop something for yourself as well, and how the structures you create can, at a certain point, imprison you. I think that there is always a thin line between how much you put into a structure in order to develop in it and how it can become something imprisoning for your art. Also, very practically, you spend your time organizing rather than doing. And I think that there is this conflict all the time.

OMAR: All the time yes, it's taking the editorial right from somebody;



I don't want to adhere to this person's idea, I am an artist, I want to express myself the way I want to.

MARWA: Exactly.

OMAR: How can you have enough time to produce work and still be the organizer or editor? It's a constant conflict.

HATEM: Sometimes you also get jealous of how successful the structure is. You are referred to as the structure and your role as an artist is relegated to the background.

VI. THE PARADOX

OMAR: Somehow you become the structure that you as an artist didn't want to adhere to. As Samandal, we accept or refuse work. That is kind of a conflict; you are on the other side now.

MIRENE: Anyhow you have to deal with structures that will condition you as an artist. But the question is, why you choose to adhere to the higher principle of your organization, and what you get from that? What is the economy here?

MANSOUR: It is the ultimate human desire to enter into a free cooperation with others.

MIRENE: What do you mean by free cooperation?

MANSOUR: For example, I like Hatem, and I think we can do something together. This is an expression of freedom.

OMAR: The freedom is a paradox. To do an organization, you are giving up a certain individual freedom.

MANSOUR: That's fine, there is a sense of solidarity and cooperation that is very empowering on an individual level, even if we end up doing nothing, we had fun, we talked about things. It could result in doing something powerful and interesting. (*Accentuates*). Maybe or maybe not, it depends...

ASHKAN: The free cooperation phase and the more selfish conflict are both part of a much larger process that occurs within coming together and the self-understanding of a collective. The ideal situation is reaching a point, a common language that has been agreed upon, and the grammar had been practiced enough that people within a collective feel completely confident (*pause*), individually as well as collectively, in producing a work.

OMAR: It was a journey to get to this point. I started with painting after finishing college. I did a very strict illustration program and I wanted to have the freedom to experiment. But slowly with time, I started veering towards portraits. Not portraits through photos, I had the strict policy of having to sit with this person throughout the entire painting, each portrait was already a collaboration between me and the subject, and my first show was about these people. Slowly you start to realize what Mansour is saying, whatever you are doing has a collaborative element somewhere. It's always better to have something that you are working with, a person, and/or a few people that are there so you can bring out something common. That common thing is what people relate to in art.

ASHKAN: This makes sense; a successful collaborative work is where there is a value for what is common.

MIRENE: This is what I think is nice, the fact that you create the structure that you need, instead of waiting for a publisher. And I think that this is the way that it works for 98weeks, how to create an educational platform, and/or how to produce knowledge that you don't have access to.

OMAR: Intrinsically, there is a problem in that. I don't know if it is the same for 98weeks, but for Samandal, it is the lack of editors. The four of us are editors, we are friends and to edit ourselves is extremely difficult.

HATEM: It's not really about friendship. Among the four of us, none is an authority; none of us has more experience and expertise in the medium so as to be an editor.

OMAR: It is more about objectivity, having an outside perspective. You become an expert after doing this for a while.

MARWA: I think that what is nice about Samandal is that you don't have this editor.

OTHERS: YEAH...

VII. MAKING A LIVING

MIRENE: Another question that I wanted us to address is the way we make a living.

OMAR: Not through Samandal! That is a major problem.

ASHKAN: Will you ever make a living through Samandal? Probably not.

OMAR: We try to get funding for everything we do, office, administration, honorarium, and the last on our list is ourselves as editors. It gets harder to want to give it so much time, so much passion and energy, and losing the money that you can make somewhere else.

MIRENE: You loose money with Samandal?

OMAR: We loose money in the sense that we loose time.

HATEM: We actually have expenses, such as phone bills.

ASHKAN: Don't you find it funny that when you do a collaborative project and when your work involves some form of demand or engagement -a comic magazine requires readership and a workshop requires participation-you all of sudden enter the realm of not making any profit. There is this art collective whose work I find quite interesting, they are called Slaves and Tartars, and they only make objects. They don't do anything that involves a sort of a productive engagement with their work. Their work is shown and it does not matter what people think. They are a traditional artist collective and they are successful in the sense that they sell their pieces, they have gallery representation, they do commercial work (posters and t-shirts).

MANSOUR: I don't think it's a coincidence to say that free collaboration is the contrary of money. Whenever there is money involved, then a hierarchy has to be formed. I truly believe in that. I don't say it in a negative way, it's fine if it happens. I am very inspired by projects done by people who are involved voluntarily, besides their paid work. When I was in Milan and Bologna, I found out that there are social centers and collectives. People have jobs at the university or in the media world, and in their free time they do something else.

MIRENE: But it's not their main occupation.

MANSOUR: It's not their main occupation, but actually in some way it is. It is what they do during their 9 to 5 jobs, they spend half of their time secretly working.

MARWA: *(Laughs)* They use the photocopy machine.

MANSOUR: We, in Beirut, Damascus, Cairo, have gotten into a logic that I really find ridiculous and that you don't see if you go to Rome, London or New York. The issue of funding is not an issue, not in the same way.

ASHKAN: I think America is worse than Lebanon.

MIRENE: But there is so much money in the art world, and all the work that we do is almost for free. It could be interesting to create a

sort of syndicate for artists where no one would work under a certain amount of money for example.

OMAR: But you know how official things work here, it is so politicized.

MIRENE: True...

MARWA: There is a syndicate for people who are in the film industry and in television, and they already make a lot of money!

MIRENE: But architects for example have many advantages, they can go to the beach for free! They have insurance, a retirement plan, etc.

MARWA: They have a syndicate, just like lawyers.

OMAR: Architects have a role in the city; they have to make buildings for people to live in. You need an architect.

HATEM: We are only artists. Architects have a function! *(Laughs)*.

OMAR: Unfortunately, that's the way people think here.

MIRENE: I know what you mean, but at the same time, you can't avoid thinking about a possible form of organization. To give an example, the Art Workers Coalition was an organization of artists founded at the end of the 60s in the US to put pressure on art institutions such as the MoMA and criticize their policies. It's a way of making your presence manifest.

OMAR: The revolution you mean!

ASHKAN: Plato banned artists from his Republic.

MIRENE: But he did it only to bring them back. *(Mansour laughs)*.

The conversation does not end here and will be continued through future roundtables.

The former Vendôme cinema on Nahr Street, Mar Mkhael, Beirut
Photograph by Siska



The former Vendôme cinema on Nahr Street (Interior view),
Mar Mkhael, Beirut. Photograph by Siska



The Kino Project

Siska

Kino is a traveling movie theater that materializes in new and temporary locations as it travels from one city to another. In each city, Kino takes on the name of a former movie theater that was closed down, demolished or transformed. As a temporary set up, the Kino is built on site and functions like a regular movie theatre; tickets are sold at the entrance and a bar is set up for each edition. An important component of the project is the signage, which is newly produced according to the name of the cinema.

KINO EDITIONS

The Kino Project started in Beirut, where various cinemas disappeared with the Lebanese civil war and its after effects on the urban space. The Kino focuses on presenting super 8 films and videos about cities and their stories.

KINO VENDOME took place on the rooftop of a building in Mar Mkhael Nahr, Beirut, from November 6 to 8. Screenings started at 8:30 PM. The Vendôme Cinema was originally located on Mar Mkhael's main street and is now being demolished.

KINO SKARPA took place at Raster Gallery on Hoza street in Warsaw on the night of November 27, at 8:00 PM. Kino Skarpa was formerly located on Kopernika street. It was demolished in 2008 to be replaced by a housing project and a commercial mall. Kino Skarpa was built between 1956 and 1960 and was known for its modernist post-war architectural style.



Kino Vendôme, 96weeks workshop On Mar Mkhael, 2009
Photograph by Siska

KINOTHEK



DEAD END

Nabil Kanafani

1969, 30 min., Super 8mm (Silent)

Shot in Seattle, USA, at the time of anti-Vietnam demonstrations. This masterpiece on the American dream and its seducing images revealed an unknown filmmaker: Nabil Kanafani.



FILM FI JDITA

Alecco Habib

1976, 9 min., Super 8mm (Silent)

Shot in the mountains of Lebanon, this film shows the life of the Habib family in the early seventies, shortly after the beginning of the civil war.

SPEEDY GONZALES

Warner brothers 5 min., Super 8mm (Silent)

NU PAGADI

5min., Super 8mm (Silent)



STUDY ON NEON WRITINGS 1

Siska

2008, 1:22 min., Video

Holiday Home, Liberty Tower, Savoy Suites, Hotel Padova - Study on Neon Writings films light neon writings in an urban scenery at night.



EBBA

Marwa Arsanios

2007, 10 min., Video

A short story on the motorcycle riders of the Beirut streets.



NASHID AL WATANI

Siska

2007, 2 min., Video

Footage of a Lebanese rapper in Paris, beat-boxing the melody of the Lebanese national anthem and wearing a necklace representing the cedars.



INTERIOR

Hisham Awad

2009, 7:30 min., Video

A modern dictionary of marital arts.



SOL 1

Siska & Zeina Hanna

2008, 15 min., Video

Sol 1 is part of a series of dance performances taking place in different public spaces in Beirut. In an abandoned building, the dancer Zeina Hanna initiates a dialogue with a floor covered by old tiles.

How to develop a winning economy



The performance space at Zico House
Photograph by Mirene Arsanios



Rami Nihawi, *Vous qui nous regardez*,
Beirut Street Festival, 2007
Photograph by Houtham Mcheimch



Abed Awgi, *How to Fail in Love with Books*,
Beirut Street Festival, 2009
Photograph by Houtham Mcheimch

Spears Street, Zico House's rooftop. A performance space nearly as large as the roof's entire surface was constructed to cater for the lack of performance and rehearsal spaces in Beirut. Before being mounted thanks to a YAFT fund in 2009, the stage's materials were used in different events and occasions.

THE STAGE: Hosted a series of performances during the Beirut Street Festival 2009, among which Abed Awgi's *How to Fail in Love with Books*. The event was partly funded by the Beirut World Book Capital. The stage was also used during the 2008 Der el Kamar Festival.

THE PLEXIGLAS PANELS: During the Beirut Street Festival in 2007, Rami Nihawi mounted a Plexiglas booth on Hamra Street for his performance "*Vous qui nous regardez*". Part of the funding of this event came from the Danish Center for Culture and Development. In 2008, the Plexiglas was used to exhibit works in a show entitled "*Mille Femmes*" that took place at the Villa Audi. The event was funded by the Swiss embassy in Lebanon.

THE BLACK PANELS: In 2008, the panels served as tables in an exhibition which took place at Alba entitled "*ECAL Design*" presenting ECAL, University of Art and Design in Lausanne. The event was funded by Pro Helvetia, the Swiss embassy and Alba. More recently, the panels were used for the Bosta project presentation at the Sanayeh garden in the summer of 2009. The Bosta project was funded by US AID.

**NEVER
GIVE
UP**



How to make a durational conversation

SETAREH SHAHBAZI: "DON'T MAKE EXCUSES MAKE GOOD"

JANINE RUBEIZ: "Years go by and the destruction goes on. Nothing remains of this country besides our determination and our hope. We wanted to be an embryonic ministry of culture. We still believe that someone will take up the challenge; this is why we have refused to scuttle. Dar el Fan still exists, and will exist until someone from a new generation takes over."

CHRISTINE TOHME: "But my main motivation was doing something that could respond to the lack of art in our everyday life in Lebanon; art is not in the public space, it is not in the street, it is absent from many spaces we could use, but that we are not using."

JANINE: "We were all too aware of the difficulties of creating dialogue in our society, that is another reason we were keen on gathering people with different opinions. We know our society well; we do not listen to one another and we want to be right, stubbornly, always. One of my own biggest difficulties was to make sure the other's voice was heard, the other opinion."

WADIH SAFIEDDINE: "Our intention was to gather a lot of people and use the space in this way. The problem is that when I say "everybody", I am only referring to everybody we knew; there were a lot of artists we were not even addressing."

JANINE: "It is a huge task. If we could aspire participating in such task with a gain of sand, we should be proud."

WADIH: "Yes, and today I am trying to question my experience and my past to understand where the problem was..."

JAN, ASHKAN, MARWA, MIRENE, HATEM, OMAR, MANSOUR: "(Laughs)"

ASHKAN SEPAHVAND: "I think it takes a long time for you to realize what you individually do. I am interested in doing the things that Reloading Images does, but I would never begin to think about them alone. I need other people. It might be related to insecurity, anxiety, and instead of responding with fear, I respond with this openness to others."

FARES CHALABI: "To have two heads is first to stop talking for one self. The organization will be a device to suspend the entanglement between the thought and the self. By speaking in the name of the organization, the movement of thought is freed from its ego center: it can become a collective thought, a thought that goes beyond space, time and self."

HATEM IMAM: "Ya, but if there is a lot of people who are interested in this. We can rent a space together and get equipment over time. We can also do some commercial projects here and there (t-shirts, etc.) to get some money into it. Something like your project itself. You said that you were interested in doing a hand made magazine. People are interested in this, but there is no space for the moment to accommodate these ideas."

JANINE: "From memory, I recall Kateb Yassine, Rachid Bou Jidra, Michel Tournier, Marguerite Duras, Pier Paolo Pasolini and the third world most prominent architect, Hassan Fathi. I am surely forgetting some and I apologize for this."

KARINE WEHBÉ: "Our situation was ambiguous; people thought we were rich kids and that the space belonged to us. People actually thought that Wadih was the owner of the space, but we were completely broke!"

MIRENE ARSANIOS: "35 min. 44 Sec (inaudible)"

KARINE: "We had illusions and we were driven by a naive ambition. Such naivety allowed for the project to exist and experience that particular moment in Beirut."

FARES: "Maybe One needs to be Two to be an idiot."

MARWA: "What is it now?"