

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 Naim 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.