

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 Codsì, 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).

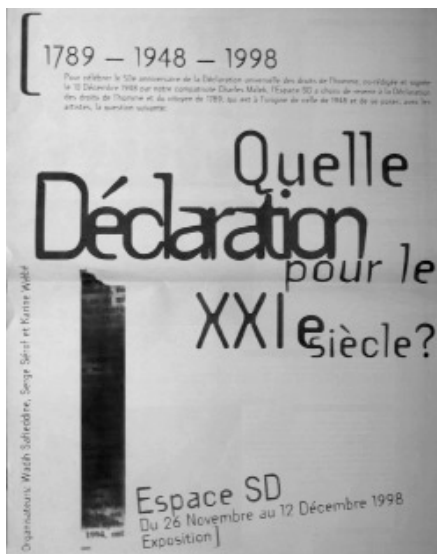
MIRENE: Did Lewandowski come to Beirut?

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



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

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

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