



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

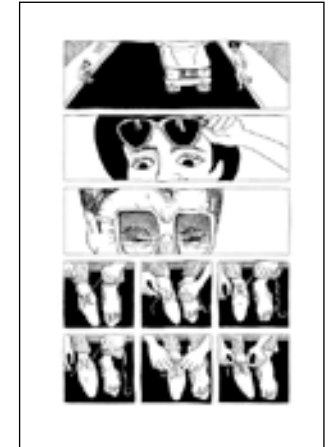
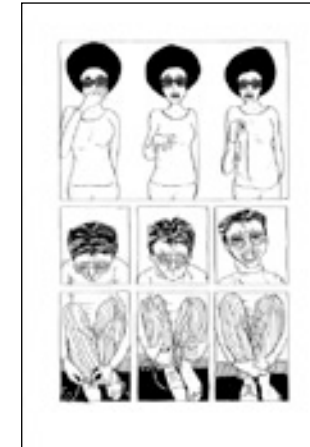
MIRENE: To expand on this question; what methods do you use in your work and what leads you to reconsider them? Ashkan, you are now thinking of a performative intervention rather than a workshop. As for Samandal, you have recently organized a series of workshops. What is it that you want to develop when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