

PERFORMANCE  
PHILOSOPHY

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## SITING PERFORMANCE PHILOSOPHY: POSITIONS, ENCOUNTERS AND REFLECTIONS AT *BEIRUT: BODIES IN PUBLIC*

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*Beirut: Bodies in Public was a three-day workshop that took place in Beirut, Lebanon on the 9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> October 2014, supported by a Performance Philosophy grant for interim conference events.<sup>1</sup> Embracing the work of more than sixty participants from over fifteen different countries around the world, the event was the first performance art conference at the American University of Beirut (AUB),<sup>2</sup> and is one of the most significant collective explorations of performance studies in the region. The mixed programme of the workshop emphasized the integration of academic research with performance practice, movement workshops, film, and site-specific responses to the city, and welcomed disciplinary perspectives from a broad range of fields including: architecture, urban planning and design, geography, gender studies, literature, performance studies and fine art, amongst others. It was hosted by AUB, with events also taking place in multiple public spaces in the city.<sup>3</sup>*

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On the Corniche, Beirut's coastal promenade, an engineer, a Syrian construction labourer, a sales employee from the U.S. and a young female artist build a squat wall of cardboard boxes. Sweatily churning cement to secure each level, the peculiar team call instructions to each other amid a noisy crowd of actors and onlookers. The wall grows until it blocks our view of the sea, another



Image 1: Mohamad Hodeib performing on the Corniche.  
Photo: Hiba Tawk and Aya Nsouly.

obstruction (this time, symbolic) of public access in an area suffering from rampant privatization pumped by high-end real estate. Four kilometres down the coast, the last beach open to the public in the city of Beirut has recently been sold off to private developers who hold weighty political clout.<sup>4</sup>

The cardboard wall, steadily advancing box by box, forms the centerpiece of a site-specific, participatory performance directed by Lebanese artist, Dima el Mabsout. On this busy Saturday afternoon in October,

passers-by have been summoned to play various roles in the familiar story. They are led by Mabsout's collaborators: Issam Dady, in the role of estate agent Mr Promise; two poet-activists, Zorba Ahmad and Mohamad Hodeib; and journalists Zakaria Jaber and Marwan Jaffar. Ahmad, Dady and many of the spontaneous participants are Syrians who have fled the war, just some of almost two million now living in Lebanon – a country that was already struggling to supply electricity and water to just 4.5m inhabitants (World Bank 2013). The controversial real-estate deals that the performance draws attention to, however, pave the way for exclusive, upmarket hotel resorts. Unprompted, the performance ends when the labourers exultantly smash the wall to the ground.

As artist-in-residence for the event, Mabsout devised the performance in response to discussions generated by *Beirut: Bodies in Public*, which invited artists and researchers to think through the concerns surrounding performance in public space in the Lebanese capital. A year earlier, the art journal *PeepingTom Digest* (2013) had published 46 anonymised quotations drawn from dialogues with artists and cultural practitioners in Beirut.<sup>5</sup> The selection was controversial, accused by some of abstracting the remarks from important contextual factors, and of presenting Lebanon as a “self-loathing nation” (Kholeif and Bailey, 2013). We hunted the journal down through a trail of Beirut's art bookshops in the summer of that year, poring over it page by page on the beach in Byblos, on café terrasses, on the steps of the national museum. Ella, a performance researcher, had spent just weeks in Beirut, whilst Eliesh had spent significant years of his life there campaigning for sustainable development; so our responses were varied, and impassioned. The inseparability of the arts from key social and political questions in Lebanon was clear to us both. Buried amongst those 46 statements was the provocation that sparked the workshop: “Art in public spaces doesn't exist anymore” (PeepingTom 2013, 20).

The statement led us into troubled discussions about the past and the future of art in Beirut, its presence and its absence. Was there a time in which art had a visibility and potency in the public sphere, which it had now lost? Did the statement eulogise dead public art forms, or memorialize a

richer, more democratic artistic practice? And if so, what of its implications for the existing work of practitioners seeking to inhabit and animate the public spaces – geographical, psychological, political – of contemporary Beirut? These practices were multiple and very much alive, embracing site-specific works by artists like Nada Sehnaoui; ecological initiatives like Beirut Green Project; festivals like #JazzDanceDay; and a rich graffiti scene documented extensively by Rana Jarbou.<sup>6</sup> Performance surfaced again and again at the crux of our discussions: more explicitly than other artforms, it seemed not just to represent but to *create* a public; to address and, in so doing, to bring forth a community of spectators. Our conversations would grow, eventually, into a collaborative project that enacted an expanded, multifaceted reading of the statement, and a timely enquiry into its claims. *Beirut: Bodies in Public* invited its international and interdisciplinary participants to engage critically with *PeepingTom's* proclamation – whether considering it as a lament, an opportunity, a falsehood, or otherwise – collectively formulating a more nuanced reflection on the relationship of performance to the city's public sites.



*Image 2: Movement workshop with participants and AUB students led by Karen Kipphoff/Julie Weltzien.  
Photo: Fay Basri.*

Although *PeepingTom's* statement may ring false in the face of existing art practice in Lebanon, it speaks to widespread concerns about the conspicuous lack of public space in the capital (see particularly Harb 2013). As commentator Raafat Majzoub argues, shared spaces are key to promoting social cohesion and collective action, but are menaced on the one hand by accelerating privatization, and on the other by abandonment: “The Lebanese government's neglect of Beirut public spaces has turned them into unlawful ‘underground’ zones of the city that the general public needs protection from” (Majzoub 2014). In the eyes of the state, a publicly owned and freely accessible space equates uneasily to a lack of security and regulation – concerns associated with urban crime and misuse, but also with sectarian unrest. The 300,000 square meter Horsh Beirut pine forest, for example, has been closed off to the public for twenty years, as keynote speaker Mona Harb reminded us (see also Shayya 2010, Farfour 2014, Fernandez 2014).<sup>7</sup> Pointing up what she saw as a widely-held opinion in Lebanon – that ‘a good city is a classed city’ – Harb noted that commercial appropriation of public space catered only to the wealthy, excluding the working classes on the grounds that they were not civilized enough to use public space well: they litter, smoke narguileh, play Umm Kulthum too loudly on portable speakers.

The majority of allocated open spaces, then, are owned and regulated by private corporations, and their value is one of capital. The redeveloped Burj (the downtown central business district) is an area where people from different sects and ethnicities can mingle freely; but class inequality actively excludes a huge majority of Lebanese from its designer boutique arcades and expensive



*Image 3: Clara Sfeir performing in Traces of Truth and Circles of Deceit, dir. Sozita Goudouna. Photo: Hiba Tawk and Aya Nsouly.*

public beach; in the city-centre’s politically vexed Martyr’s Square; in the Karantina neighbourhood; and in Hamra, once the intellectual hub of Beirut, now crammed with chain stores, traffic jams and Syrian migrants begging and selling flowers.

Several of these performances were ghosted by the 1975-90 civil war, the effects of which are still tangibly felt in Beirut’s layout and architecture – not least in the Burj, where the expensive redevelopment sits side by side with abandoned, war-damaged buildings and some of the city’s most dilapidated and disenfranchised neighbourhoods. Amongst them, Sozita Goudouna’s *Traces of Truth and Circles of Deceit: Beirut Entangled* – a choreography for two dancers at Martyr’s Square – referred to the failed regeneration of the Square following the end of the war, and its desertion as a potential symbol of post-war nationhood. The performance, a meditative articulation of the site’s affective resonances, took place in what is now essentially a traffic island outside Beirut’s largest mosque, and was watched by a security guard who protected our presence there by assuring his superior that it was “just ballet.”

Merijn Royaards’ collaboration with the Lebanese Parkour Team, *Between the Lines*, attempted to re-trace the lost acoustic pathways of Beirut, “time-slicing” the city by free-running the lines on which sound would have travelled before the destruction of the war and the redevelopment that followed. The controversial acts of running and filming (in certain contexts both can be seen as security threats) were reminders of the sectarian and security-



*Image 4: Screen shot from Between the Lines, Merijn Royaards.*

controlled divisions that still exist between neighbourhoods. The free-runners themselves discouraged Royaards from working in certain areas of Beirut and its suburbs (especially in the south) in which sectarian conflict is often concentrated, and they also refused to work in the Burj, due to the heavy presence of police and private security firms. Whilst they remained subject to these limitations, however, the free-runs also offered an alternative approach to navigating the city. Like the Situationist-inspired practice of urban walking, the piece read the city as palimpsest, allowing memories to bleed through Beirut's layers of post-war reconstruction (see de Certeau 1984, 91-130). Using a system carried by the runners that recorded the sounds of the streets and broadcast them back through amplifiers as an echoic trail, Royaards explored the ephemerality of time-based arts such as sound and performance. The work re-called the city to itself – both acoustically and in the routes it traced – but the transitory nature of the interventions meant that memories were lost almost as quickly as they were recovered, perhaps pointing more to the fragility of performance than to its force.

These concerns were allied with the workshop's interest in recent critical responses to movements such as Occupy and the so-called Arab Spring. In her text "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street", Judith Butler describes the "shared condition of precarity that situates our political lives" (2011, 18), and which comes to the fore in the fragile endurance of bodies in public. To the extent that performance is transitory, enacted 'on the wing', it is also precarious; as such, we might ask to what degree a



Image 5: SOUTK (Your Vote), Nadia Mounier.

valorization of such ephemeral tactics of survival simply colludes with our increasing political instability. *SOUTK (Your Vote)*, a series of photographs by Nadia Mounier, was a reminder of the vulnerability of political expression in public space. Mounier flyposted Cairo with a fake political campaign following the first post-revolutionary elections in Egypt, moving on to document reactions to her posters, and their effacement and deterioration. At the workshop, the exhibition of her images spoke powerfully to Butler's own response to Tahrir Square, and her foregrounding of the dependence of such uprisings on the material and bodily conditions that allow space to be claimed as public at all. "We miss something of the point of public demonstrations," notes Butler, "if we fail to see that the very public character of the space is being disputed and even fought over when these crowds gather" (ibid.).

Within this struggle, however, performance might perhaps take on a different register of endurance. Rana Haddad's talk, entitled "The ripple effect," reflected on the lasting impressions made by public installations in Beirut that had been destroyed or abandoned. Paradoxically, it was often this erasure that gave the installations such a strong hold in public consciousness, as well as

a symbolic mobility that carried their meanings to other struggles. The point was echoed in Yasmine Taan's comments on a graffiti phenomenon that went viral in the Middle East, a stencil of a blue bra symbolizing media photographs of an Egyptian protester with her clothes ripped off by armed officers to reveal her blue underwear. Graffiti, that most exemplary snatching of time from the erasures of history, expresses the viral force of performative acts and symbols – what Diana Taylor might call their “DNA” – whose tenacious endurance exceeds their physical presence (Taylor 2003, 171). These stenciled walls and Taylor’s “repertoire” of embodied expression often constitute the voicing of an emerging counter-public. But in Lebanon, it is also telling that the two dominant political blocs – known as March 8<sup>th</sup> and March 14<sup>th</sup> respectively – are still named after vehemently opposing demonstration-spectacles, held in the Burj in the weeks following late Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri’s assassination nearly ten years ago. “Performance belongs to the strong as well as the weak,” Taylor reminds us, “it underwrites de Certeau’s ‘strategies’ as well as ‘tactics,’ Bakhtin’s ‘banquet’ as well as ‘carnival’” (22) .



*Image 6: Eduardo Cassina in Corps Urbain, dir. Helge-Björn Meyer. Photo: Hiba Tawk and Aya Nsouly.*

Indeed, the architecture and geography of the capital has been in large part shaped by the “strategies” of political agendas. The civil war ended with an Amnesty Law that induced a so-called “collective amnesia” (Khalaf 2002), pushed especially by the post-war Government and reflected in the redevelopment architecture of the Burj, which entirely wiped out the bullet marks and shrapnel scars of recent history. But on the level of the street too, there are neighbourhood ‘strong men’ and private security guards who monopolize the use of routes and pavements. Where public space exists in Beirut, it is perhaps at the level of the encounter, the manoeuvre, which creates a moment of publicity despite the erosion of its proper space, in a place that is nonetheless privatized, strategized or derelict: a growing relationship between neighbours from their balconies; an obstinate use of public transport despite its chaotic inconsistencies; the moment when the traffic is so jammed you can finally cross the motorway to get home. As the intimacies, and the flukes, and the happy accidents of our encounters in October showed us, these moments are always personally situated, as well as public and political. Through the loopholes of administration, the sympathetic policeman, the decision to occupy no matter what, bodies in public appear.

So whilst it may be starved of civic provision for truly publicly-owned space, Beirut is nevertheless a city that breathes the everyday performance of life through all its political divisions and solidarities, on every treacherous pavement, in its nightclubs, beauty salons and places of worship. Its bodies work in alliance and in opposition: they are social, classed, and gendered, and these complex junctures of identity are only amplified in the contemporary geopolitics of the region. No

*Matter Where I Go*, written and directed by Amahl Khouri and performed at the American University of Beirut, was claimed as the first queer play staged in the Arab world. Homosexuality is illegal in Lebanon and we were not allowed to film, but with a packed out audience and more pressing at the doors, the performance was followed by a heated Q&A which emphasized the universality of its themes of exclusion and stigmatization. The performers identified as queer people of diverse expressions, and, highly significantly, of various religious backgrounds.

The play made manifest – in very poignant terms – the irreducible entanglement of questions of class and sect with those of gender and sexuality. Other participants too gestured powerfully towards the gendered concerns intrinsic (but often overlooked) in militarization and violence. Andrew Wilford explored the fetishization of the masculine ‘terrorist’; and Che Gossett’s talk on Israeli pinkwashing – the exploitation of LGBTQ issues to market Israel as politically progressive – was followed by Leila Tayeb and Rima Najdi’s performance lecture on *Madame Bomba: The TNT Project*, in which Najdi walked around Beirut dressed, with unsettling ambiguity, as a fake explosive.

Despite – or perhaps even because of – its very international composition, the workshop was site-specific in the truest sense. Participants arrived from Lebanon and elsewhere in the world with varying approaches to (and anxieties around) attending to the particularities of Beirut and its complex histories; approaches which were hotly debated in a closing roundtable. Some participants had done extensive research and worked closely with us over the development of their projects; others had decided to avoid prior ‘research’ entirely, responding haptically and spontaneously to the city.

Further participants joined us with sketched memories – for architect Wissam Alaridi, the Syrian expectation of Beirut as the great metropolis; for artist Richard Launder, the taste of carrot juice from his adolescence spent there, when cosmopolitan Beirut was known as the Paris of the Middle East. Keynote Jane Rendell’s site writing lecture explored her own entanglement with the region with characteristic acuity. She arrived in Beirut with a guide book owned by her parents in the 1960s, compelling her to trace the delicate affects of her own life in relation to the geopolitical shifts of the region. In the process, as she described in her talk, “I started to understand how it is not only that public space appears and disappears when bodies address or turn away from one another; but also how the body operates as a filter through which public events become private, and vice versa.”

In seeking to explore the position of performance in public space, it was necessary to confront our own positionalities as participants in the workshop: to open the privacy of our own bodies onto the public sphere. It was often the constraints and absences presented by the city that generated the most innovative claims for possibility. The workshop was formed for and from the city of Beirut: its heterogeneity, vitality, potentials, and frustrations. As a practice of performance philosophy, the event seemed to triangulate these two forms-of-knowing with a third; the interrogation presented by the site itself, in which this practice took place. Such as philosophy can be ‘performed’, it is grounded in the particularities of its time and space, an utterance shaped by its historical and geopolitical locality. With the growing internationalization of Performance Studies – through

initiatives like the Performance Philosophy interim events and the decentralized conferences of PSI 2015 – attention to the provocations and opportunities presented by the specificities of place rightly come to the fore. Whilst we sought on several levels to map the city – via its channels of mobility, its veins of memory, or its political borders – Beirut emerged perpetually as a terrain which slipped away from these cartographies. At times, its security checkpoints, deserted landmarks and flower-sellers seemed to reflect our scrutiny like light glancing off an opening window, revealing us starkly to ourselves as ephemeral, transitory bodies in public.



*Image 7: Eduardo Cassina in AquaUrban Routines, METASITU. Photo: Hiba Tawk and Aya Nsouly.*

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Beirut: Bodies in Public* took place in association with Performance Philosophy. It was supported by King's College London and by the Faculty of Arts and Science (FAS), the Department of Fine Arts and Art History (FAAH), the Arts and Humanities Initiative (AHI), the Department of Architecture and Design and the Faculty of Engineering and Architecture (FEA) at the American University of Beirut. With special thanks to Cornelia Krafft and Mona Harb at AUB, and Kéline Gotman, Theron Schmidt and Alan Read at King's College London. Further information, a full programme and participant biographies are available at [www.bodiesinpublic.com](http://www.bodiesinpublic.com).

<sup>2</sup> The event was introduced as such in the welcome address given by Professor Cornelia Krafft (Fine Arts and Art History, AUB).

<sup>3</sup> Off-campus locations included the Hamra district (*Corps Urbain* dir. Helge-Björn Meyer; and the Naked Wagon promenade); the Corniche at Ain al-Mrayseh and near Daliyeh (*Carrot Juice Without Borders*, by Julia Collura and Richard Launder; Naked Wagon final performance, dir. Dima el Mabsout; *i see what we see*, devised by Tracing the Pathway; *AquaUrban Routines*, by Metasitu); Karantina and the Egg building (*Between the Lines*, dir. Merijn Royaards); and Martyr's Square (*Traces of Truth and Circles of Deceit* dir. Sozita Goudouna).

<sup>4</sup> For more information see Saksouk (2013), 22-23; Wehbe (2014). Whilst we refer here to Ramlet al-Baida beach, the prior redevelopment of another publicly-used coastal area at Daliyeh was also the subject of extensive controversy. See <http://greenline.me.uk/activities/campaign-to-save-dalieh-port/>; <http://www.beirutreport.com/tag/civil-campaign-to-protect-dalieh>.

<sup>5</sup> The 46 quotations were gathered during a six-week residency in Beirut in 2011, and subsequently formed the stimulus for a filmed roundtable between eight cultural practitioners based in Lebanon, and a series of individual written responses. The journal edition is comprised of the quotations themselves, the responses, and a DVD of the roundtable.

<sup>6</sup> These examples represent just some of a range of artists and initiatives working in Lebanon on issues of public space. For a selective overview of such projects, see Harb (2013). For more information on the initiatives cited here, see Allsop (2012); <http://beirutgreenproject.wordpress.com/>; <https://www.facebook.com/OrganisationdeDD/events>; <http://ranajarbou.blogspot.sg>.

<sup>7</sup> For up-to-date information on Horsh Beirut, see <https://horshbeirut.wordpress.com/>; <https://beirutgreenproject.wordpress.com/2012/03/02/lets-talk-about-it/>.



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## Biographies

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