

Beirut Report: Lebanon as a State of Mind



A brief stopover in London this October—time to catch up with friends and take in some of the season’s art offerings—preceded my recent arrival in Beirut, where I am living for one year. Between the salted beef, tired feet and handsome ales (good to be back to the world’s best-named pub, The Hermit’s Cave) exhibitions taken in over those few crammed UK days included [Walid Raad’s](#) “Miraculous Beginnings” at [Whitechapel](#). This comprehensive overview of the Lebanon-born, US-based Raad included video works, several photo series and a number of documents-turned-complex-narratives that encompassed nearly two decades of Raad’s work. Though largely elaborate fictions, these projects—including many presented under the moniker of Raad’s masterful fraud, the Atlas Group—shed a startling and disorienting light onto the nearly incomprehensible intricacy of modern Lebanon.

Following that artful introduction by Raad, I landed in Lebanon with my partner Miruna Dragan, who is teaching drawing and conceptual-art courses at the [American University of Beirut](#) this year. While the past few months have seemingly evaporated, they have not been without the city—one of those cities built upon cities built upon cities—revealing some of its layers to us, like one of its locally abundant archeological sites. As Raad so slyly parades, however, such sites are never uncomplicated here.

Chris Marker and the Otilith Group
Inner Time of Television 2010
Installation view



Nevertheless, Beirut has revealed itself as gregarious and resilient; both human and automotive traffic is organically dense and, as the constant and mysterious language of car horns suggests, navigation—geographical, historical and political—is complex. The prolonged campaigns of the Lebanese civil wars and, to an extent, the several subsequent conflicts (most recently the Israeli-Hezbollah war of 2006) have resulted in extensive destruction of the city's infrastructure; they still penetrate Beirut's psyche. Though scarred facades throughout the city attest to hostilities, Beirut has also undergone a tremendous revitalization project during the past two decades, one driven by the industriousness and determination of several organizations. In recent years, this renewal has been marked by a new generation of artistic energies and activities, seen in a developing combinator of distinct practices, public galleries, artist-initiated spaces and commercial enterprises.

Born out of previous artist-run activities and established in its own right in early 2009, the [Beirut Art Center](#) occupies a 1,500-square-metre purpose-built space near the Beirut River. In November it opened an exhibition of the French photographer, documentarian and filmmaker [Chris Marker](#). The bulk of the exhibition consists of several hundred images presented under the title *Staring Back*. Many of these are stills pulled from an extensive archive of footage. Though stirring—the collective stares of these images' subjects transmit a true longing to participate in and belong to history—the unfortunate overall effect is that of images collapsing under a too-linear presentation and pixelated surfaces. Redeeming, however, is Marker's collaboration with Turner Prize nominees the [Otilith Group](#). *Inner Time of Television* re-presents all 13 episodes of Marker's ambitious, elusive 1989 televisual essay on the cultural heritage of ancient Greece, *The Owl's Legacy*. This project, as the Otilith Group describes, "works with a notion of condescension which the present holds toward the recent past." It is a work with particular resonance here. Accompanying the installation is a slim publication, well-designed and containing excerpts from each episode as well as corresponding contributions from Marker and the Otilith Group.



98weeks research project at the Festival for Lebanese Art Books

The first edition of the [Festival of Lebanese Art Books](#) coincided with Beirut's designation as [World Book Capital](#) in 2009. The bibliophile in me spent weeks anticipating November 16 to 20, which saw the festival's second edition take place at the UNESCO Palace. The emphasis this time around was photography, which not surprisingly yielded tomes of photo-documentary projects detailing the city's tumultuous war years. Additionally, the fair offered a heavy emphasis on Lebanese art that mostly betrayed a persistent modernist ethic. Publications featuring figurative sketches and abstract-expressionist sentiment abounded—evidence of slowly transitioning practices and a stubborn penchant for the traditional. In many ways access to and understanding of contemporary art practices is still limited here, but things are changing. I must admit that I left feeling generally disappointed; thankfully, the booth of [98weeks](#) stood out.

For 3 years, 98weeks, a platform for research and experimental activities, has presented a wide range of performances, publications, screenings and exhibitions, most recently out of their project space in the city's Mar Mikhael district. Originally an initiative of cousins Mirene Arsanios and Marwa Arsanios, the team now includes Cecilia Andersson. Together they have managed, despite limited resources, to produce a considered range of activities that are deserving of the recognition they have received—visit 98weeks.blogspot.com to see why. For further information on Beirut's artist-initiated projects, an online version of the recent publication *How to make (nice) things happen* (edited by Mirene Arsanios) is available at <http://www.arteeast.org/pages/virtualgallery>.

Mounira Al Solh *Double Burger and Two Metamorphoses: a proposal for a potential Cat, a potential Dog, a potential Donkey, a potential Goat, and finally a potential Camel* 2010
Video still



Among commercial spaces, [Sfeir-Semler Gallery](#) (the Beirut branch of this Hamburg gallery opened in 2005) shines brightly. Inconspicuously housed on the fourth floor of a highway-side industrial complex, the gallery's ample natural light, high ceilings and vast exhibition spaces have provided the grounds for a number of wide-ranging, high-calibre exhibitions, with a particular focus on the work of Middle Eastern artists. On view now are two exhibitions: "[Wael Shawky: Contemporary Myths II](#)" and "[Mounira Al Solh: Exhibition No. 17.](#)" Divided in half, the gallery is dominated on one side by Shawky's epic *Cabaret Crusades: The Horror Show File*, a truly brilliant marionette production that retells the story of the first crusades. On the other side, Al Solh presents several bodies of work, including the charming video *Double Burger and Two Metamorphoses: a proposal for a potential Cat, a potential Dog, a potential Donkey, a potential Goat, and finally a potential Camel*. In this work Al Solh stages conversations between herself and each of the animals mentioned. These conversations are intimate, confused and ultimately failures, as each time Mounira makes a request it is denied. The work lightly and touchingly remains an absurd rumination on the breakdown of communication.

Looking to the near future, a December reception at the Italian Embassy celebrated Lebanon's participation, for just the second time, in the Venice Biennale. Following the official speeches was a restaging of scenes from [Cornelia Krafft's 777](#), a sweeping collaboration with her AUB students. Originally presented last year as a singular event in one of the city's most bizarre bombed-out structures, 777 mesmerized the audience. The operatic and oddly Venetian set of performances, in which the protagonists struggle to evade sin but are ultimately consumed, culminated in a memorable, and cleverly DIY, gory death upon the white marble of the embassy's terrace. Though other participating artists are yet to be announced, the theme "[Lebanon as a State of Mind](#)" promises to delve further into the complex psychology of this small but tenacious state. Exactly where this will lead remains a mystery for now; what is clear is the promise of further excavation.

