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CITY REPORT - 11 JUL 2017

Learning from Beirut

In a city of maddening contradictions, artists have learned to adapt in manifold ways
BY DAVID MARKUS

The month long 'Financialization' course recently held at Beirut-based non-profit art organization, Ashkal Alwan, addressed the ever urgent need, in contemporary art contexts, for sustained critical discussion of market capitalism. Having just arrived in Beirut from Athens, I was still ruminating on 'Learning From Athens' – the Athenian segment of **documenta 14** <<https://frieze.com/tags/documenta-14?page=1>> – as I listened to Ashkal Alwan guest **Ana Teixeira Pinto** <<https://frieze.com/contributor/ana-teixeira-pinto>> deliver a public lecture on global art and finance. Pinto's focus was on the rise of neofascist aesthetic regimes. But the talk and ensuing discussion also touched on problematic contradictions apparent even in the international art community's best-intentioned efforts, among which belongs documenta's adventure in Athens.



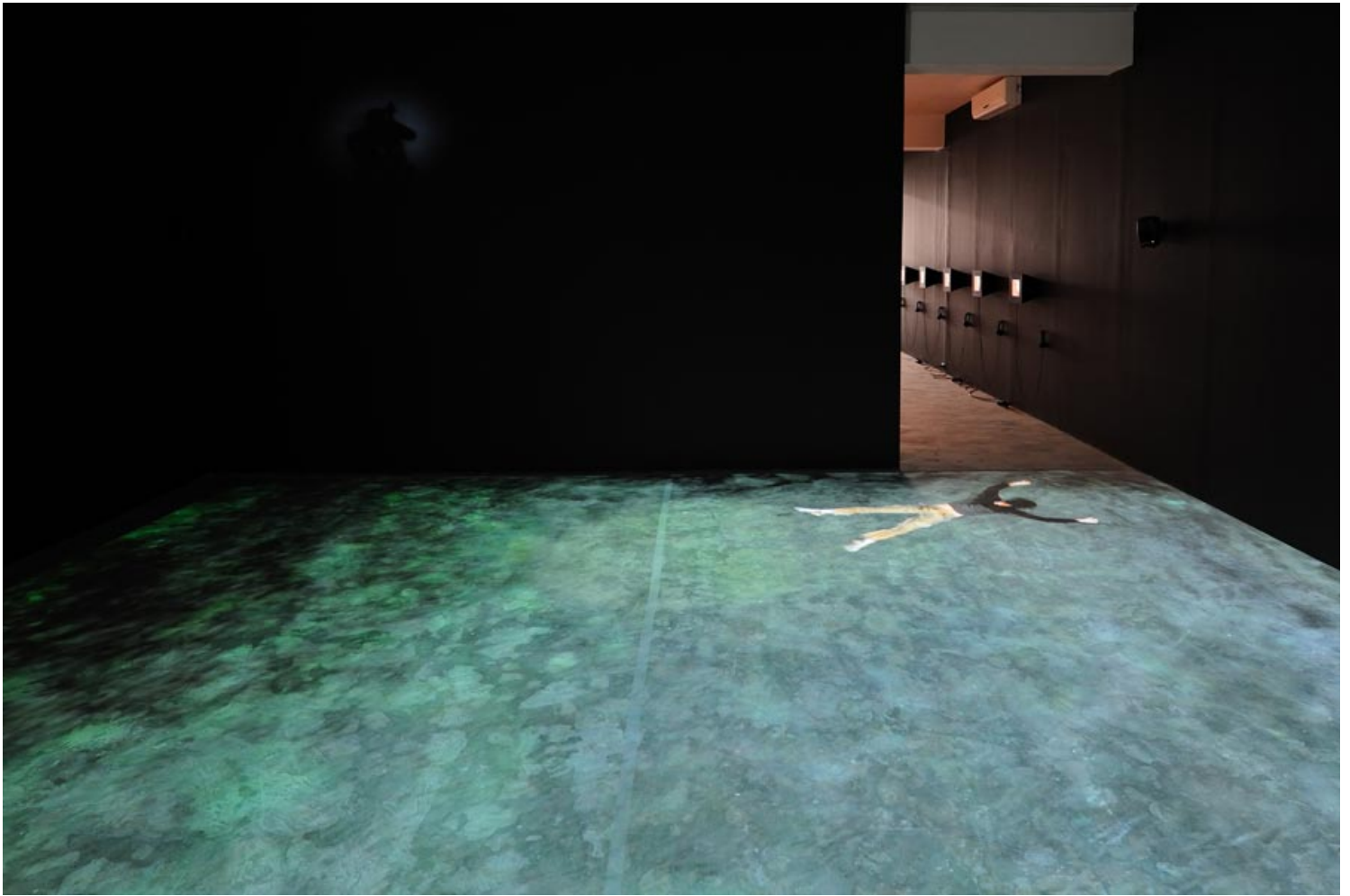
The Sursock Museum, Beirut

In theory, 'Learning from Athens' might have seemed like an excellent opportunity to reimagine the role played by international art exhibitions – to dilate on the local, and reflect, in the context of a city gripped by financial crisis, on the casualties inflicted by the prevailing economic system. In practice, gestures to this effect – among them a strong programme of talks and performances, and numerous works that interacted in thoughtful ways with the fabric of the city – were swallowed by the exhibition's own scale, including the main museum show at the EMST – National Museum of Contemporary Art, which was ultimately as nebulous as the curatorial language framing it [read *frieze* Deputy editor Amy Sherlock's take on it [here <https://frieze.com/article/documenta-14-emst>](https://frieze.com/article/documenta-14-emst)]. As numerous local and international voices have asserted, there was too little immersion in the social workings and ongoing travails of the city – too little *learning from Athens* – to justify the show's governing conceit. It was thus encouraging, following my visit to Athens, to witness the probing engagement with locality evident in the recent projects of several Lebanese artists and curators.



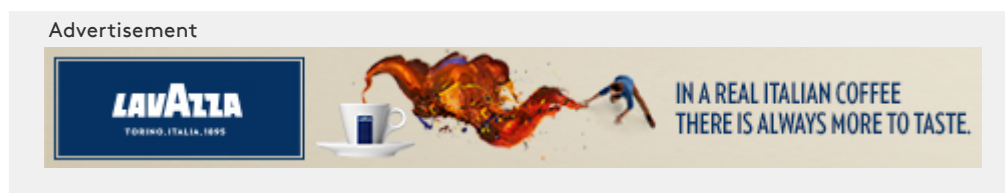
The Aïshti Foundation, designed by Adjaye Associates and opened in 2015. Courtesy: © Adjaye Associates

Though it has long sustained a vibrant local art scene, Beirut's status as a major destination for the art world's jet set class was solidified in 2015, with the openings of the Aïshti Foundation and the revamped Sursock Museum. The former is a new exhibition space attached to a David Adjaye-designed luxury mall; the latter is an established local institution that has expanded its contemporary art focus (videos by Egyptian artist Maha Maamoun were on view during my visit). The same summer the glitterati descended on Beirut, the city was undergoing a catastrophic garbage removal crisis. Privatization and development run amok in Beirut at the expense of civic wellbeing. A vast influx of refugees from the conflict in Syria has increased existing sectarian tensions. Lebanon is a country of maddening contradictions, and local artists have learned to grapple with the perpetually shifting social and political landscape in manifold ways.



Rabih Mroué, *Mediterranean Sea*, 2011, three-channel video, installation view Sfeir-Semler, Beirut, 2017. Courtesy: the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut/Hamburg

Few sites embody Beirut's extreme contrasts like the B 018 nightclub, a Bernard Khoury-designed underground space built on the site of a former Palestinian camp razed during the Lebanese civil war. In *Duo for Two Missing Persons* (2013), a video work from Rabih Mroué's current show at Sfeir-Semler gallery, B 018 figures as a grave into which Beirutis descend, seeking communion with the ghosts of the city's violent past. *Mediterranean Sea* (2011), in the same show, sees the becalming allure of shimmering turquoise water projected onto the gallery floor disrupted by a lifeless body that floats into view. Like many works by Mroué, this one also references the traumas of Lebanon's war years. Its unsettling evocation of the sea, however, takes on more immediate connotations in the context of current struggles to preserve Beirut's last public access points to the waterfront.



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Omar Fakhoury, *The Flag*, 2017, concrete steel fabric, flag. Courtesy: Temporary Art Platform, Beirut and the Civil Campaign to Protect the Dalieh of Raouche

My stay in Beirut coincided with a protest on the Dalieh, a piece of coastline slated for a Rem Koolhaas-designed luxury hotel. Under the direction of curator Amanda Abi Khalil, Temporary Art Platform brought artists together to stage interventions and raise awareness about the human and ecological impact of the planned construction. On an outcrop of rock overlooking the sea, Syrian children from a nearby camp passed several afternoons splashing in a portable plastic pool installed by artist Raymond Gemayel in a send-up of the hotel development's planned infinity pools. Audio recordings made by Nadim Mishlawi in various caves and underwater locations documented parts of the Dalieh that are rarely seen much less heard. Hoisted into the air amid rows of concrete breakwaters was a white flag, installed by Omar Fakhoury, that simply read 'Al-Bahar' ('The Sea'). The simple gesture, like the inspired project as a whole, called to mind a starkly literal appropriation of the May '68 slogan, '*Sous les pavés, La plage*' (Under the paving stones, the beach).



Ahmad Ghossein, *Obsession*, 2017, dimensions variable, installation view, Marfa', Beirut

Further inland, Ahmad Ghossein's solo exhibition at Marfa' gallery centred on Southern Lebanon, where a complex history of French colonial rule, local feudalism, and Israeli military occupation has resulted in a system of land ownership based not on cadastral survey but on communal consensus. In parts of the region, ownership can be attained simply by laying claim to a piece of land and cultivating it for a period of ten years. Through drawings, maps, text, sculpture, and video, Ghossein's show explored not only the emancipatory implications of this system, but the history of cartography in Lebanon and its entanglement with regional political and military strife.



Marwa Arsanios, *Falling is not collapsing, falling is extending*, 2016, digital film still. Courtesy: the artist and Mor Charpentier, Paris

Marwa Arsanios's recently opened exhibition at the Beirut Arts Center, 'Falling is not collapsing, falling is extending,' provides further evidence of how local engagement can result in compelling art. The centrepiece of the show is a video that interweaves personal history with an examination of how developers have schemed Beirut's inhabitants out of recreational resources that should be a collective inheritance. Whereas an earlier postwar generation of Lebanese artists – to which Mroué belongs – helped reinvent transnational contemporary art through speculative, archivally-oriented approaches to their country's blood soaked history, Arsanios, like others mentioned here, is among a younger generation that is casting its gaze toward the struggles of the here and now, and demonstrating how the politics of locality can and ought to be integrated into contemporary art.

Main image: Raymond Gemayel, *Dalieh's Infinity Pool*, 2017, metal frame swimming pool, metal sign, base plate, chlorine, water. Courtesy: Temporary Art Platform, Beirut and the Civil Campaign to Protect the Dalieh of Raouche

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TAPstages a weekend of art for Dalieh

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Summary



Raymond Gemayel's "Dalieh's Infinity Pool" is one of the seven contemporary art pieces that formed Temporary Art Platform's contribution to the Heritage Watch Day events focusing on the Dalieh outcropping – described as one of Beirut's few remaining public spaces.

Abi Khalil is part of a campaign that since 2013 has advocated the preservation of the area as a public space, and organized this festival to engage the public in the issue.

All these public art

👤 Susannah Walden | The Daily Star

BEIRUT: A pre-teen boy splashes in a blue plastic pool perched on a rocky outcropping that stretches into the ocean on the west coast of Ras Beirut. He doesn't seem to care that he is swimming in art. Raymond Gemayel's "Dalieh's Infinity Pool" is one of the seven contemporary art pieces that formed Temporary Art Platform's contribution to the Heritage Watch Day events focusing on the Dalieh outcropping – described as one of Beirut's few remaining public spaces.

"This kid is from Burj al-Barajneh camp. He doesn't know how to swim and his parents can't take him to any resort where they have to pay money," TAP founder Amanda Abi Khalil told The Daily Star Sunday. "He said, 'I'm coming tomorrow morning and I'm going to swim in this pool.' This is an 'infinity' swimming pool because the future project is a luxury resort, so this is a very cynical [artistic] gesture."

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pieces deal directly with the encroachment of development on nature and public spaces and, as is TAP's wont, they engage with the local context.

Picking one's way down the rocky slope, through the scrubby, litter-festooned brush to the sea, the TAP pieces are not all conspicuous.

The artist found a map demarcating the land that can be developed from that which is protected.

Across a white background "Al-Bahar" (The Sea) is emblazoned in blue.

Mustapha Jundi's "Washzone" shows just how much Dalieh belongs to the sea, and how the sea's encroachment on the land has defined its status.

he impetus behind reserving Dalieh as a public space is, in part, Beirut's limited natural and public space.

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The Dalieh outcropping has long been the domain of fishermen, swimmers and picnickers, but most of the land is privately owned and slated for development. Abi Khalil is part of a campaign that since 2013 has advocated the preservation of the area as a public space, and organized this festival to engage the public in the issue.

All these public art pieces deal directly with the encroachment of development on nature and public spaces and, as is TAP's wont, they engage with the local context. "The main idea for this project was to collaborate with the [Civil Campaign to Protect the Dalieh of Raouche] ... to catalyze these conversations between contemporary artists and activists, to really come here and engage with the community."

Picking one's way down the rocky slope, through the scrubby, litter-festooned brush to the sea, the TAP pieces are not all conspicuous. They are mostly subtle, both to ensure minimal environmental impact, but also due to budget restrictions.

Ieva Saudargaite Douaihi's "Thin White Line" drew curiosity and even consternation as visitors crossed it on their way to the Souk al-Tayeb food stands in the main festival area, where the market and music would carry on into the night. The artist found a map demarcating the land that can be developed from that which is protected. Using lime chalk – a limestone byproduct found on site and used in construction – she drew this line through Dalieh's bush, sand, rock and sea.

"I was surprised to find that people felt aggressed by it," Douaihi said. "I would hear them speaking in Arabic saying, 'Are they going to build something? Are they going to do it now?' They were very suspicious of it. So putting a line out there, it becomes an aggressive act, and construction can be like a very destructively aggressive act."

Omar Fakhoury's piece "4'50" could be interpreted as aggressive in its own way. Near the entrance to the site, a flag towers over the giant concrete blocks – dozens of which were placed on the eastern portion of the site by the Public Works Ministry in 2012. Across a white background "Al-Bahar" (The Sea) is emblazoned in blue.

"It's like the sea came and planted this flag," Fakhoury said. "Flags are used usually for claiming something for [political] parties etc, but here it's only a word and it's a poetic word."

Mustapha Jundi's "Washzone" shows just how much Dalieh belongs to the sea, and how the sea's encroachment on the land has defined its status. An architect by training, Jundi explored Law 144, dated 1925, used, as the exhibition plaque puts it, to delineate the "lands along the Lebanese coast that should be free of any development, rendering them untouchable."

"I think it's important to flesh out the parameters of these laws, to make people understand what the law entails physically and what is the method," Jundi said, explaining that the four markers he had placed along the length of the site represented both the height sea waves had reached in various years, as well as the variables used in the method: the wind, wave height, coastal depth and coastal morphology. "This method is dependent on different natural

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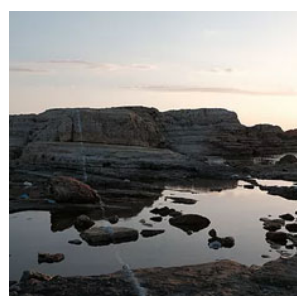
Divers

Dalieh a son propre Watch Day afin de sensibiliser pour sa sauvegarde

Le 29/05/17

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Deux sites beyrouthins viennent d'être ajoutés à la liste des bâtiments et chefs-d'œuvre de l'architecture les plus menacés au monde du Fonds mondial pour les monuments : le Palace Heneiné à Zokak el-Blat et Dalieh à Raouché. Du 18 au 21 mai, des activités et expositions ont eu lieu dans ces deux endroits dans le cadre du Watch Day et de la Beirut Design Week. A cause de la pluie et du vent, deux jours du festival à Dalieh ont été reportés au week-end du 3 et 4 juin.

A Dalieh, la plateforme artistique contemporaine Temporary Art Platform (TAP) a organisé sept "interventions" artistiques dispersées, s'offrant au hasard des déambulations du public. *"La TAP est une association qui encourage les pratiques de l'art contemporain dans l'espace public ainsi que les pratiques contextuelles, c'est-à-dire concernant le rapport entre l'artiste et sa société"*, explique ainsi Amanda Abi Khalil, fondatrice de la TAP. *"La campagne Save Dalieh a réussi à inscrire le site, menacé de destruction pour installer un complexe luxueux, sur la liste du Fonds mondial pour les monuments et leurs activistes nous ont appelé pour faire quelque chose. Nous avons donc encouragé sept artistes à se frotter à la question"*.

Ieva Saudargaitė, Raymond Gemayel, Omar Fakhoury, Ghassan Maasri, Nadim Mishlawi, Pascal Hachem et Rana Haddad, Mustapha Jundi et Thomas Geiger ont donc été invités à établir des conversations avec les activistes. *"L'enjeu primordial est des conversations entre l'artiste contemporain et l'avenir et la situation actuelle des lieux"*, insiste Amanda Abi Khalil. *"Il faut encourager les artistes à regarder un problème de société, ici ce site unique qui risque d'être détruit, et à y faire des petits gestes pendant les quelques jours du festival"*.

Ce débat entre artistes et activistes a comme résultat des gestes éphémères que les gens voient, rencontrent et expérimentent au travers de leur pratique du lieu. Car ces interventions s'adressent principalement à la communauté habituelle de Dalieh, les pêcheurs, les amoureux en balade, et les familles venues se détendre le week-end. Un public qui est loin de connaître l'art contemporain, mais qu'il est possible de sensibiliser à l'avenir de leur espace. *"On peut interrompre leur regard et attirer leur attention"*.

Notamment avec un gigantesque drapeau planté au début du site et sur lequel, en lettres bleues sur fond blanc, est écrit en lettres arabes 'La mer'. Un jeu à la fois sur la politique, rappelant les drapeaux des partis libanais dispersés partout dans le pays, mais aussi sur la notion d'appartenance, avec la mer qui réclame son territoire. Une plateforme illuminée la nuit invite aussi les curieux à se baigner, luttant contre l'obscurité imposée par la municipalité dès que la nuit tombe, pendant qu'une ligne sépare l'espace public du reste par une ligne blanche coupant Dalieh en deux.

On peut aussi écouter des sons enregistrés dans les caves et sous la mer avec 'The invisible soundtrack', un travail sur les lieux invisibles au regard et dont les sons ne sont d'habitude pas dévoilés. Une piscine gonflable ironise sur l'idée de piscines privées forcément en vue pour le complexe, invitant le public à l'utiliser. Un panneau d'information rappelle ce qu'est la loi 144, qui délimite l'espace public balnéaire, là

Dalieh a son propre Watch Day afin de sensibiliser pour sa sauvegarde, Agenda Culturel
où les vagues frappent le plus haut pendant l'hiver, ainsi que comment était
mesurée à l'époque, en 1925, cette hauteur. Afin de rendre le calcul encore plus
précis, des objets délimitent autour du panneau les différentes étapes scientifiques.

Autant d'installations, de gestes éphémères, d'interventions momentanées capables
de rendre sa dimension d'espace public à Dalieh, site menacé mais que ses
défenseurs et ses habitués ne laisseront pas tomber.

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