BETWEEN US:
CURATING ~~IN / ON / AROUND~~ CRISES

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TAP (TEMPORARY ART PLATFORM)


TAP

Between us: **curating ~~in / on / around~~ crises** is a project by **TAP (Temporary Art Platform)**, published in the framework of Breath is Tide; an Opening Breath for the Upcoming Art Explora Festival & Celebration of Ten Years of TAP in May 2025 and edited by curator **Nour Osseiran**.

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TAP is a nonprofit organization committed to making another world possible, by affecting social change through contemporary art.

Founded in a region of unrelenting volatility and absent cultural policies, TAP curates the conditions for communities, private bodies and governmental institutions to recognize that contemporary artists can be allies in driving enduring social change amidst precarious contexts. In the process, TAP creates accessible tools and production opportunities for contemporary artists, whilst rendering their practice porous and participatory, within and beyond the field of art.

TAP was founded by curator and artistic director Amanda Abi Khalil and registered as a nonprofit organization in Lebanon in 2014 and in France in 2020. It is based in Beirut and Paris, and its interventions take place internationally.
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This project began with a recurring question—one that surfaced often in conversations with collaborators, artists, friends: What does it mean to curate in the midst of ongoing crises? Not just political crisis, but the slower forms of erosion—the collapse of infrastructure, the exhaustion of time, the fraying of social and institutional trust. In Beirut, these aren't temporary conditions—they are the baseline. Yet within and around them, people continue to gather, to host, to make meaning.

Between Us was born from this impulse, and from a desire to broaden what we mean when we say *curating*. Too often, the term arrives shaped by Eurocentric, academic, and institutional expectations: exhibition-making, cultural stewardship, the presentation of objects within sanctioned spaces. But what happens when those spaces are unstable, or absent? When the urgency is not interpretation, but survival, adaptation, repair?

In Beirut, curating has always stretched beyond disciplinary definitions. It is a mode of engagement—a way of holding space, making do, responding in real time. Over the past five years, at TAP, we've seen this firsthand. From learning with forests and organizing emergency relief residencies, to hacking empty billboards and building temporary networks of solidarity, our work has never begun with a fixed curatorial framework. Instead, the framework emerges *from the context*. From being on the ground. From listening, trying, failing, adjusting. From learning by doing.

In May 2025, we invited six people to take part in three informal conversations—each across different disciplines, each rooted in Beirut. A chef and a venue organizer. A trauma surgeon and an anthropologist. An artist and an ophthalmologist. These were not panel discussions or structured interviews. They were invitations to think aloud—about joy, repair, and vision—not as abstract themes, but as living practices.

The first conversation explores **joy**, not as escapism, but as a deeply embodied response to crisis. Wael Lazkani (Jaï) and Hicham Jaber (Metro Al Madina) speak of hosting and nourishing in conditions of

scarcity. The second centers on **repair**, with Dr. Ghassan Abu Sittah and Dr. Kirsten Scheid tracing connections between physical wounds and social rupture. The third turns to **vision**, with Akram Zaatari and Dr. Alaa Bou Ghannam considering the possibilities and limitations of vision and perception.

These exchanges are not definitive answers to the question of what curating is or should be. Rather, they offer a methodology of being together—thinking across fields, listening across experiences, and allowing practices to evolve organically. *Between Us* is a proposition: that curating in crisis is not a top-down application of theory, but an emergent process of relation. It is not about preserving meaning, but co-creating it—on shifting ground, between people, in real time.

Nour Osseiran

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ON SATURDAY, MAY 3RD, 2025 AT 5:30 PM, WE MET AT AL-RAWDA CAFÉ, OVERLOOKING THE SEA.

Wael Lazkani (WL), chef and owner of Jaï restaurant
Hicham Jaber (HJ), artistic director of Metro Al Madina
Nour Osseiran (NO), curator, TAP (Temporary Art Platform)

NO: How do we find pockets of joy in the midst of ongoing crises? I've brought us together—a curator, a theater director, and a chef—because each of us engages in a form of hosting. Though our mediums differ—artworks, performance, food—we each work at the intersection of logistics, imagination, and hospitality. What draws me to these practices is the way we create spaces where strangers can gather, connect, and encounter something unexpected: beauty, thoughtfulness, joy, or simply the chance to feel alive. In precarious times, what does it mean to keep hosting? How do we come together when the act of gathering itself becomes fragile? And more urgently, how do we nourish, care for, and curate when survival feels like the default?

WL: If I think about the crisis and how it changed us from then until now, my first instinct was preservation. Do you remember the Iraqi who hid the books when the war happened? The first thing I did was protect the staff and protect the food *[hugs his hand to his chest]*. This was my first instinct, which wasn't fun. So I jumped into preservation. Actually there was a lot of joy in protecting my community, and finding out who the community was. We all huddled down. I'm coming back now feeling very grateful, and thankful, and happy.

NO: Hicham, did you have any intention to shape Metro's presence in the city during the different crises?

HJ: When we opened, there was a different type of threat. In 2015 - 2016 maybe was the only time when we weren't working towards a big collapse. Then, during the collapse, we actually went the complete opposite way of everyone around us and we decided to open a bigger space.

Between us - Interview #1
May 3, 2025 | Al Rawda café

WL: But don't you feel that during the collapse, you turned from a theater to a cultural center? You became the epicenter of a community. You became a voice.

HJ: It's funny, I opened Metro knowing very well that the world will be destroyed thirteen times.

WL: Same here; this is why I always knew I wanted a small space, then I could easily close up when the war came.

HJ: We weren't born yesterday, we lived through the Civil War.

WL: But the multiplicity of the wars this time was difficult.

HJ: At Metro, we would allow people to pay as much as they wanted for a ticket, we used to do two shows a day, and whatever money we made, we split amongst ourselves. The artists stayed, our community stayed. Almost everyone who works at Metro didn't immigrate. There's no place for us to go.

WL: There was a time when cooking wasn't delicious anymore. It became about survival; there was no more creativity. The quality of the ingredients decreased a lot, and my focus shifted to trying to survive and keep the team safe, fed, and taken care of. Little by little, I'm starting to enjoy cooking again. There was a time when I didn't like the people I was cooking for because the middle class disappeared.

NO: Did you close your doors at any moment?

HJ: We closed during Covid and the revolution, because we were in the streets protesting. And now, during the latest war, we completely stopped our activities, but we were also moving the space. During Covid we started working online. During the revolution, we were in the streets and realized that people were creating theater space in the street, and so we decided to open back up so that our audience can come and enjoy performances in the space.

WL: When there was no electricity and we couldn't refrigerate our food properly, we would close for a couple of days and then open back up. In 2021, we closed for two months at the most.

NO: What does hosting look like for you, beyond the logistics of actually holding space for people to gather?

HJ: The relationship with the audience has always been very important for us, we feel like we've raised audiences over the years. And we kept our "pay-as-you-want" policy even until today. We didn't want the people we've had a connection with for so long not to be able to afford to come to Metro anymore. The audience has always been the basis of the idea of Metro, we wanted to open a theater for the people and not for the artists. We are funded by the ticketing window and food and beverages. It's a game between us and the audience, we work for them in this city, we understand them and they understand us. The program transforms alongside the city, during the war or after the war, the whole program is altered. It's an interesting collaboration we have with the audience.

NO: Do you see joy as a type of escapism?

WL: At the end of the day, no matter what is happening outside, people come to Jaï because they want a change of scenery. They can eat an apple at home, or have a random drink, but when they come to me, it's a responsibility that I have to make them happy. To provide a great service, fresh food, a warm ambiance. There's no bullshit. There's a bit of escapism, but there's also calmness, stillness, and slowness.

HJ: At the end of the day, the theater is for our audience. We see their moods change, we see how their expressions change as they're coming in and when they would leave. It's our job to make them feel that there's something to feel good about amidst all this chaos. The idea that people can enjoy their life is political. The idea of fun, happiness, dancing, expression, seeing… it transports you. You open up to another world. During the revolution, we sang about the good and the bad, it's not about one or the other. We had a night called "music under fire" where people came and played music. You're also a child of the city yourself, you're

enduring the same thing as your artists and audience. But as long as I'm in the theater, I'm happy.

NO: You both spoke of immense challenges, yet here you are.

WL: We have a place in the city, and we have a footprint. If it happens that I do close, something in the city will change. Take Marrouche[1] for example, you still feel that there is an emptiness where Marrouche used to be.

HJ: I would think of leaving Metro to someone else to take over the artistic direction. That's my hope, at the end of the day, for a sustainable format that can live on long after I'm gone.

NO: Any last thoughts?

WL: You know, there isn't a good pickle in this city anymore.

1 Marrouche restaurant had the best chicken and garlic sandwich in town!

ON SUNDAY, MAY 4TH, 2025 AT 12:30 PM, WE MET AT TAHT EL SHAJRA CAFÉ ON BLISS STREET.

Dr. Ghassan Abu Sittah (GAS), war surgeon
Dr. Kirsten Scheid (KS), anthropologist
Amanda Abi Khalil (AAK), curator,
TAP (Temporary Art Platform)
Nour Osseiran (NO), curator, TAP (Temporary Art Platform)

NO: As curators, everything we do is so informed by what we live through on a daily basis. And so, when I was thinking about this publication, one notion I was thinking about is how to address "urgencies." What has unfolded over the past couple of years has changed how we speak, what we say, what we organize, what we think of showing, who we invite, who we empower, in our capacity as curators. The notion of urgency corresponds to thinking about time: Dr. Abu Sittah, you are interacting in real-time as a war surgeon, while Kirsten as an anthropologist you have a tendency to look back in time to make sense of historical events. What happens in these different temporalities? How do you treat the concept of repair in both your fields: the relationship to the body, to the physical act of stitching together, or grafting organic materials?

GAS: If you want to talk about repair, you first have to talk about the wound; because they carry the story of the war. And that doesn't change. The fact that Iraq and Iran now are allies doesn't change the fact that there are hundreds of thousands of Iraqis that carry the wound of the war, or hundreds of thousands of Iranians that carry that wound. And so the issue, from the perspective of plastic surgery which repairs the form and function to the injured body, is trying to understand that wound in its social context, in its clinical context, in its mental health context.

In my 25 years of work, I realized that the war wound is a life within the life of the patient. And so, the wounded children need surgeries as their bodies try to grow. And then the wounded

become elderly, and their bodies start to decay. That wound then takes on a different life, and you operate on them again.

The idea of repair of the wound is then a falsehood, we tell ourselves because we need to hold onto this idea that war is temporary. But actually, war is not temporary. War changes the biospheres of people's lives, their social, economic, and biological lives. And so, repairing a wound allows people to get on with their daily lives, to minimize the damage of what was done to them. But there is no full repair. Repair in these injuries is a kind of rebirth.

NO: so the body becomes almost like a proof, a biological archive.

GAS: I keep telling people, if you want to see an archive of the Palestinian revolution, go to the cemeteries.

KS: It's so different from thinking about art. You're always told that the art object lasts forever, and that it has no age. We do all of these things to make art recognizable that way. The last exhibition I curated on the Arab nude at Columbia University[1] was scheduled to open on October 6th, 2023. We had this long conversation about which objects were "appropriate" to show, meaning which objects have survived in a way that they would be presentable to an American audience who doesn't want to be bothered with the history of Arab art. The audience wants this lens into a world that they don't know about, but without any signs of the history of what was inflicted onto its people, its provenance, or its artists.. So we think about the "best" art to show, the art that has survived, that shows no signs of its age, no signs that it existed in human conditions. Sometimes, an artwork arrives at the exhibition space - a work that would have been requested months, sometimes years, in advance - and it arrives "damaged" or wounded. And the questions become: "what do we repair? And to what end? Is the objective to make it look like the wound never existed?"

GAS: I teach my students to make their decisions based on the 18-year old version of the child they're operating on. The body will continue to grow, and so you don't make a decision based on

1 Partisans of the Nude, curated by Kirsten Scheid at the Wallach Art Gallery at Columbia University, New York

what you think is appropriate today, you take that evolution of the body into consideration.

NO: Is that how war surgery is taught?

GAS: No, it's how I learned practically, from seeing so many patients over the course of my career. And seeing them again as they grow and come back to me for more surgeries to repair the first wound inflicted on them. The ICRC has classified the war wound as something that lasts up to three months from the injury. And the minute the hole closes, it's no longer a wound.

The other critical thing is what happened in the pager attacks[2] and in the marches of return, the idea of mutilation because one of the things, in my opinion, that makes colonial violence different from other forms of political violence is the need to mutilate. The pagers could have easily killed these guys but they didn't want to [kill], they wanted to mutilate. We have over twenty children who have been wounded, who have lost one eye or both. The same thing happened in the marches of return in 2018 and 2020; Israeli snipers could have killed these eight thousand that they shot in the legs but they didn't want to. And so, you start seeing wounding and mutilation as the aim of the war rather than as a consequence. Wounding is about creating a living testament to your omnipotence which is the obsession of white settler colonialists.

KS: To think this in relation to art is to think of all the classical statuary that we admire in their fragmentedness: some have lost their arms because of age, but oftentimes, we see that they have been denosed. There was this deliberate defacing and decapitating. In the art world, this becomes a mark of grandeur and authenticity. And one almost wishes you could speed up a hundred years, because that admiration comes with time. At the end, this notion of urgency versus time that you get to look back and talk about the reasons for those statues being de-nosed or defaced, versus talking about it exactly when it is happening, like what we are witnessing today as a genocide against the Palestinian people unfolds. The advantage of the art temporal scale is you can constantly revisit how things become beautiful,

2 On 17 and 18 September 2024, thousands of handheld pagers and hundreds of walkie-talkies exploded simultaneously across Lebanon and Syria in an Israeli attack.

how things came to have value. And you can show that the same artwork, a masterpiece, was reviled at certain times, and then due to social fortunes, came back into desire.

AAK: It makes me think about a notion that Tania Bruguera, a Cuban social practice artist, defines as "political-time-specific" In echo to site-specificity, she says there are artworks that are made within a political timing specificity. These works can actually resonate and they last the art historical narrative because they were made in a certain context but then re-read in another time of political crisis. I was thinking about this in relation to the concept of crisis in the art world and the wounds and how the art market recuperates it and if we talk about time and urgency, you're saying that these artworks bear or have a different narrative with time, right?

KS: I don't really know. There's a way that art is shown, irresponsibly I think, as a representation of a given culture, of a group of people as they are. I hear this idea all the time, that art is a "window" into the culture, art shows you the value of the people as it shows the best they have to offer. This only reinforces the social hierarchy, the idea that some people don't deserve to be in this [museum] space. Then we get inclusion as a ramp, and maybe even art made accessible through Braille, (to unsighted people), but we don't think about the larger structure of exclusion that is being perpetuated.

GAS: So in terms of urgency during the war the urgency is when you're thinking that "I need to get this patient in and get them out in the shortest period of time so that I can get someone else in." And so that's the urgency and therefore it shapes what you believe is doable and so time becomes one of your resources. In terms of the long-term reconstructive work that I do it's when you realize that the wound is a living thing.

ON FRIDAY, MAY 16TH, 2025 AT 4:00 PM, WE MET AT AKRAM ZAATARI'S LOFT.

Dr. Alaa Bou Ghannam (ABG), ophthalmologist
Akram Zaatari (AZ), visual artist
Nour Osseiran (NO), curator, TAP (Temporary Art Platform)

NO: I wanted to bring the three of us together as I'm questioning the notion of vision in curatorial work and practice: how does our work change what and how people see? I'm interested in challenging the scientific definition of vision which Alaa brings to the table and coupling that with Akram's approach to vision as culture. I'm questioning what it means to repair vision, not just physiologically, but socially, physically, politically, emotionally. And how seeing differently can help others to see when we're living in this state of perpetual crisis.

ABG: Ultimately, my role is to repair vision. Which is, scientifically speaking, allowing someone to perceive what they are looking at; to make sense of their surroundings from a visual perspective. My role as a medical doctor is to try to preserve vision and to improve vision in different ways. We know that vision is based on three things: the eye, the brain, and finally, perception. When I try to correct vision, it can be as simple as giving a patient glasses, or more complicated like dealing with cataracts or corneal opacity. The most complicated is repairing the optic nerve which is the connection between the eye and the brain, and that is the most difficult part to repair.

AZ: How do you measure how good is sight? Is there a scale?

ABG: We have a global universal scale that we use which is very much in a clinical setting. We use optotypes (standardized letters or numbers or shapes) which need to be seen from a certain distance, usually 6 meters or 20 feet. We can test for color vision, for contrast sensitivity, and even for 3D vision. However, even after we run all of these tests sometimes in the clinic, we still don't know why a patient is not seeing "well". We run tests

in a clinical setting, in near-perfect conditions: high contrast between black and white, good lighting, comfortable spaces. But so many things play a role in a person's ability to see or perceive, such as memories and emotions, and they can then be a hindrance to the patient's vision.

NO: Akram, do you feel a sense of responsibility towards taking that clinical vision and manipulating it, in a sense, through your practice?

AZ: No. I cannot claim knowledge of it to be able to manipulate it. But all I can say is, for me, seeing is cultural. You can only work so hard to *make people see*. Except maybe those we can label "terminally blind," Alaa? In my case as a filmmaker, photographer, and artist, how will they see my work? It's a recent concern for me, not because of the idea of democratizing and making my work accessible on all levels, but because I can learn from it. I grew up listening to Egyptian films on the radio, so you would only hear dialogue, and when something is taking place - which you cannot see - the scene is actually narrated for you. Vision is also conceptual, Youssef Chahine once signed a movie as "vision by Youssef Chahine" (رؤية) instead of directed by (إخراج). As if vision was the concept he saw in his mind and with the help of others, made into a reality that could be seen and appreciated by others. I am thinking about Taha Hussein - a blind Egyptian writer - whose published works bring a wealth of knowledge and understanding of someone who has gone blind. In the biography his wife wrote, *Avec toi*, she mentions that one day someone knocked on the door of his office and Taha Hussein felt that this person had a knife, and so he pressed a button under his desk to call for help. When security came and apprehended that person, he indeed had a knife in his hand. He never wrote this anecdote himself, it was his wife, so it could be speculative, but it's interesting to think of how he may have felt the person's agitated presence.

ABG: I give two lectures to medical students: one is called "Visual Pathways," and one is called "Visual Processing." The first lecture is very easy because it's scientific: light enters the eye through the cornea which refracts the light. It then passes through the pupil, focused on the lens, and reaches the retina. The retina

contains photoreceptor cells that convert light into electrical signals. These signals travel through the optic nerves from each eye, cross at the optic chiasm, and the visual information from the eyes are transmitted to the visual cortex of the occipital lobe of the brain where the brain processes and interprets the image. It's easy and straightforward. But, at the end of the day, all of this bears no meaning, because how do we actually see the image? It needs to be processed by the brain. This brings me to the second lecture on "Visual Processing" and how moving objects get processed in a certain area, and still objects in another, how your brain gets input from your memory or emotions in order to create images and your perception of these images. Some people have a disease *Prosopagnosia* where they cannot identify faces: they can see the face in front of them, they can recognize the eyes and the eyebrows and the nose and the lips, but they cannot put it all together to form the image of a face. They would have normal visual pathways, but the problem occurs in their visual processing.

There are a few tests to diagnose this disease like the Navon figure: a capital letter H made up of small S's. They would be able to recognize that it's a bunch of S's, but they can't see the H. Technically, they are seeing the details of the image but unable to see the bigger picture. It's also similar to an image test to rule out *Simultaneous Agnosia*, where you're looking at a picture where many things are happening, and a patient can see that there's a chair, there's water, there's a woman, but cannot put together that the woman is washing the dishes while her child is perched on a chair and stealing cookies from the jar on the shelf. That, for me, is a direct link to looking at and understanding artworks because you can sometimes go to an art show and look at each individual work that is shown, you can consider the aesthetic aspects of the works, but the meaning only gets built when you see the works together, as a whole.

NO: Akram, do you consider this work of composition when you are working on your images whether through photography or film? In your practice, you tend to build an image slowly, unfolding with time, repetition, specific imagery.

AZ: Some artists like to explore the small fissures in how we perceive photographs—those subtle disruptions in our visual expectations—and they dive right into them to see what emerges. I think, on some level, there's a neurological explanation: people who are drawn to this kind of visual ambiguity, or who can appreciate it deeply, may have a more developed or nuanced visual processing capacity than those who simply glance at an image and say, "it's beautiful—it's art."

But there's more to it. If I encountered that same image on the street, outside of the gallery or museum context, it might not register as "art" to many people. That's precisely where culture begins—when beauty becomes a shared language, when vision itself becomes cultural.

When an image sparks conversation—at home, at work, in a gallery—it starts doing cultural work. You walk away not just having seen something, but having learned something. You've been pulled into a space you weren't aware of before. That's a kind of growth. You begin to polish your senses.

A gallerist I worked with in Mexico once told me, "The role of the gallerist is to expand people's taste." He'd walk young collectors—people who knew very little—through exhibitions and explain things to them. Not to dictate value like an auction house, but to articulate what makes one piece of work significant. What did this photograph contribute to the medium? How did this painting shift the tradition of painting itself? He was essentially doing what a curator does—offering context, creating meaning, guiding attention.

Seeing isn't just passive. As John Berger wrote in *Ways of Seeing*, we're conditioned to view photographs in certain ways, shaped by cultural norms, histories, and biases—many of which we're not even aware of. A critical approach to vision can break those conventions down. Berger talks about how our visual culture is loaded with assumptions—about race, beauty, hierarchy—and how art can confront and unravel these assumptions.

So yes, vision is culture. And artists, especially contemporary ones, take that on. They show us how to see differently. They disrupt, question, and reframe. They provide what I'd call a "counter-vision"—a way of looking that challenges what we've taken for granted.

ABG: You can't navigate life when you're looking at something out of its context. This for me reinforces the importance of building a visual system.

NO: We've gone through vision loss, or discrepancies in vision. Do you have any thoughts on those who see too much?

AZ: I'm thinking about prophets and why they would have been considered visionaries in their time. Those who could see better than everyone because of their knowledge. I'm not claiming any belief in that, but it's interesting to consider, even today, those who claim that they see something beyond the ordinary. Maybe you'd call that a hallucination, Alaa, but there's also a comfort to them to name their visions in accordance with religious beliefs. They would convince themselves and their close circle that they are seeing angels with whom they co-exist.

ABG: As if they are singled out by God and chosen to see more than their peers. And maybe that's the binary: either being labelled as schizophrenic, or a prophet, for being able to see too much.


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