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Whither the Spiritual? Rethinking Secularism's Legacy in post-Ottoman Art

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"This is not an exhibition. And this is not Beirut" A free-format curatorial platform exploring the space of Beirut in the aftermath of the August 4 explosion

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### *THIS IS NOT AN EXHIBITION. AND THIS IS NOT BEIRUT.*

A free-format curatorial platform exploring the space of Beirut in the aftermath of the August 4 explosion.

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*This is not an exhibition.* is a platform for experimentation in the public spaces of the city through timely interventions in the form of installations, performances, discussions, walks, etc. These interventions aim at questioning and contesting established artistic and curatorial practices by transgressing the normalization of social, political and urban dynamics in the spaces in which they take place and invite the audience to participate in the production of the works. The pilot version of *This is not an exhibition. And this is not Beirut.*, engages with Beirut in the aftermath of the August 4 explosion through artistic interventions taking place in public. In the wake of the explosion, there is a lingering fear of the politics of erasure and the displacement of city residents. Thus, the works produced shed light on the present and the reality of the city, as opposed to projecting an illusory future in which the city's inhabitants are mere observers of the city's transformations. The productions presented on this platform are non-representational and engage with the present and reality of the city rather than projecting a unified image. Concocted in the *BePublic* lab –a timely experimental lab engaging with the social, political and urban dynamics that form the given space– *This is not an exhibition. And this is not Beirut* in which the produced interventions across different points of the city. Through these works, the audiences are invited to navigate and explore the space of the city across a myriad of contributions, not restricted to a medium or an approach. The multimedia and multidisciplinary platform in the form of a website archives the produced spatial and temporal ruptures in Beirut. By navigating the city, we are able to perceive it in its heterogeneous fragments, instead of a collective and enforced romanticization of the blast. The importance of these works lies in the process through which we allow ourselves to discover the needs of social, economic, political and urban spheres as we frame their ruptures.

**Keywords** | Curatorial practices, public interventions, August 4 explosion.

On August 27, 2022, Hashem Adnan, Lama El Charif, Nassim Banna and I went to the Medawar district in Beirut, home of the infamous Karantina slaughterhouse. We went for Adnan’s performance, “It is a public invitation.” The performance contributed to the platform for experimentation in the public spaces of the city titled, *This is not an exhibition. And this is not Beirut*. Through such timely interventions, the platform aims at contesting established artistic and curatorial practices while transgressing the social, political, and urban dynamics normalized by neoliberal policies at the specific sites of the platform’s three interventions. Crucially, each work or performance required audience participation in its production. To that end, many site visits and discussions with Karantina’s residents had preceded our touring the neighborhood that evening with Adnan and calling its people to join us with the chant, “يا اهل الحي الحي” (O the living people of the neighborhood).”

At 6 pm, the performance commenced with the audience filling a 2m square cloth, spread in front of the public park in Karantina, with words written by El Charif in the form of taxonomical lists. With the help of some of the participating audience members and Adnan’s own contribution, chosen words from each list were put together in a sentence and the sentences, into a chant. [Fig. 1] Being the third-to-date documented and produced intervention, Adnan’s performance



Figure 1: Hashem Adnan and Lama El Charif performing the writing of an incantation in front of the Karantina public park, on August 27, 2022, by Presica Chaar.

allows me to unpack the theoretical and practical layers behind the entire platform, *This is not an exhibition. And this is not Beirut*, which I designed as part of my MA thesis in Art History and Curatorial Studies at the American University of Beirut. Resonating with the other works, “It is a public invitation” showcases the concepts essential to the platform’s theoretical formulation. In what follows, I expand on what the negatively named platform became as it worked against both curatorial conventions and spatial routines. I then examine the platform’s fundamental ideas in relation to Adnan’s affirmative answer to my curatorial negation. Finally, I provide an overview of the platform’s expected future development.

*This is not an exhibition. And this is not Beirut.* assesses artistic productions’ ability to challenge the *status quo* aesthetically. It argues that transgressing pre-established aesthetic regimes politicizes, in and of itself, framing and visibility. Hence, as a free-format curatorial platform *This is not an exhibition.* challenges and engages with existing artistic and curatorial practices, be it in relation to the positionality of the producers, audience, or modes of production. This platform does not provide preconceived curatorial and artistic solutions, however; through trials and errors, it assembles practical tools to put together political artistic interventions in public spaces.

The previously mentioned notion of the visible involves not only direct perception but, more, our spatio-temporal understanding. Artistic productions of this platform breach the agreed-upon commonality of our social practices and articulate public space’s formative invisibilities. In this sense, *This is not an exhibition.* triggers the transgression of reality, or the “specific forms of ‘commonsense’” (as articulated by French philosopher Jacques Rancière), through thorough engagement with the conditioning framework of time and space.<sup>1</sup> In the now-transgressed and transgressive space, we re-question our role as producers, curators, and artists inhabiting a specific social, political, and urban context. Because all installations, performances, city walks, discussions, screenings and workshops, alike interrupt and alter spaces through political, social, economic, and urban dynamics, I call them “interruptions.” These interruptions halt ongoing dynamics and incite rethinking their apparent “naturalness.” The neoliberal policies of market emancipation and state-weakening long applied at city-scale come into focus when art hits the brake to their ongoing routines.

Like Adnan’s performance, all works in the first edition of *This is not an exhibition.* engage Beirut’s urban public space in the wake of the August 4, 2020 explosion. Architect and artist Rana Haddad blazed the trail with her BePublic Lab, an urban and architectural laboratory that foregrounds the present and reality of the city against its illusory futures wherein the city’s inhabitants merely

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1- RANCIÈRE, Jacques, “The Paradoxes of Political Art” in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing: 2010): 134-151. P. 141.

observe the spatial transformations ensconcing them.<sup>2</sup> For its part, *This is not an exhibition* confronted the naturalization of territorial, social, and political practices of urban Beirut by treating the August 4 explosion as a turning point in its history and trajectory. The interventions it proposed aim at challenging the prevailing apolitical narrative of rebirth, return, and resilience which would have us passively transition to an uncertain future. Specifically, I investigate through this platform the role of public interventions towards evaluating the urban alterations ensuing from the explosion. For example, an ambiguous law No. 194, drafted on October 16, 2020, to protect the residents of the areas affected by the explosion, includes provisions for the demolition of the grain silos, the last remaining witnesses to the crime two years on, and allocates responsibility for distributing relief aid to local NGOs, effectively replacing the state.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, the *This is not an exhibition* platform maps online the interventions dispersed across the city.<sup>4</sup> Both multimedia and multidisciplinary, it also archives Beirut's spatial and temporal rupturing. These components further invite, if not incite, audiences to explore and navigate urban space without confinement to a single medium or approach. Navigating the city enables platform users to perceive it in its heterogeneous fragments, rather than through a collective and enforced romanticization of the blast.

## The Intervention, the Streets, and the Political

Interventionist art is not produced for the space in which it appears; rather, space itself produces. In fact, Haddad believes that public and site-specific installations execute acupuncture; like a medical needle, they engage with the problematics of a particular space and tap into its informalities. As an artist and architect, she produces “acupunctured” work of interdisciplinary installations and performances stemming from the socio-political conditions of the city.<sup>5</sup> As

2- The BePublic design lab invites its participants to produce installations addressing the city and its practices. Participants acquire hands-on experience while addressing everyday issues including their rights as citizens. For further information please refer to <https://ranahaddadworks.com/home/bepublic> and [https://www.domusweb.it/en/design/2016/09/22/silence\\_in\\_beirut.html](https://www.domusweb.it/en/design/2016/09/22/silence_in_beirut.html).

3- For the law's contents, see “Law No. 194 Dated 16/10/2020 Relating to the Protection of the Damaged ...” ALDIC-The Lebanese Association of Taxpayers' Right, n.d. <https://www.aldic.net/law-no-194-dated-16102020-relating-to-the-protection-of-the-damaged-and-affected-areas-and-their-reconstruction-following-the-explosion-of-the-port-of-beirut/>. Public Works Studio published a study detailing the loopholes in this law and showed that it is not as effective as it appears to be. Public Works Studio, “صفر إخلاء: لحماية سكان المناطق المتضررة من تفجير ع آب وضمان عودتهم.” available at <https://publicworksstudio.com/en/node/104>, last modified August 2, 2021. For silos' status, see Soha Mneimneh and Mona Fawwaz, “Demolishing the Beirut Port Silos Will Deepen Lebanon's Collective Amnesia,” DAWN, available at <https://dawnmena.org/demolishing-the-beirut-port-silos-will-deepen-lebanons-collective-amnesia/>, last modified May 6, 2022. On the NGOs role, see Sader, Marie Jo. “How Did Local NGOs Handle Tens of Millions in Private Donations after the Beirut Explosion?” L'Orient Today, available at <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1285702/how-did-local-ngos-handle-tens-of-millions-in-private-donations-after-the-beirut-explosion.html>, last modified December 28, 2021.

4- See [www.notanexhibition.com](http://www.notanexhibition.com).

5- HADDAD Rana, “iPlace,” *Play with the Rules: ACSA Fall Conference Proceedings*, 2018, eds. Benyamin et al, available at <https://www.acsa-arch.org/chapter/iplace/>, 351-56. P. 351.

we go on to practice our daily life, every corner of the city emits reminders of the blast's effect on the city and its residents. As a reaction to given conditions, these ephemeral interventions on the urban space stimulate the civic engagement of the participants. "Being on the street," she asserts, "has a ripple effect bound to make a constellation of changes."<sup>6</sup> The ripple effect is the engagement of participants or the public that engenders transmissible reactions, according to Haddad. Haddad explores the political relevance of public interventions as "urban catalytic tactics" in creating change.<sup>7</sup> Whereas the ripple effect does not produce immediate change, its transgressive nature offers the possibility of reexamining the *status quo*. In other words, these works prompt the audience to resist and reconsider the practices of space we are accustomed to.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to highlighting Haddad's conceptualization of *in situ* interventions, I underline concepts key to the platform's collective spirit. Adnan's intervention in Karantina exemplifies how artistic productions emanate from the nature of a space rather than from impositions onto found spatiality. Space directed the choice of the precise location and the elaboration of the content. After our discovery that the Karantina Public Park, like all other public parks in Beirut, was still closed, some 2.5 years after the Ministry of Interior's COVID-19 response, we knew we had to work there. We noted that the space is accessible to NGOs, with authorization, to plan events in it, while Syrian toddlers are barred or restricted from participating in them. Thus, a performance by Adnan inside the park would have reproduced the state and NGO's management of (and engagement with) the social, political, and economic conditions of a space. Instead, through fiction and chant-composition, Adnan addressed the marginalization of the Syrian community among Karantina's residents long awaiting integration into the social life of the neighborhood.

During their participation, the children of Karantina (along with Adnan), drafted an incantation to safeguard the neighborhood, the city, and its residents. For several hours, they imagined aloud acquiring a tool to fight their punitive reality amidst the country's crisis. The fictitious activity of writing the incantation reframed the lived reality of Karantina, the struggles of Syrian families discriminated against by their neighbors and deprived of their rights by the state. Put in this context, fiction for Rancière reflects neither an evasion nor a disconnection.<sup>9</sup> It simply highlights the unseen or the unperceivable in the experience of the real. When the invisible becomes apparent and the uncommunicable, articulated, fiction foregrounds the full attributes of the real. Encounters with this genre generate discomfort. Rancière calls *dissensus* the uncanny, when the invisibilities

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6- Recorded interview with Rana Haddad, June 2021, Beirut.

7- HADDAD Rana "Public Installations or How to Reclaim Our Rights as Citizens," *Art & the Public Sphere* 9, no. 1-2 (2020): 97-106. DOI: 10.1386/aps\_00035\_1.

8- *Ibid.*

9- RANCIÈRE, Jacques, "Paradoxes of Political Art," p. 149.

of reality are communicated through fiction question the commonsense. This *dissensus* fuels political action, when those whom the system will not integrate or legitimate politically reclaim their voices.<sup>10</sup> While politics seems to evaporate from the domestic and social sphere, in the practice of everyday life the political is the mode of action which gives the tool to redefine these dynamics.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, “It is a public invitation.,” like its platform peers, made one realize that Beirut is, in fact, not Beirut, or at least, not as how one believes it to be. Yet, the anxiety to create the ideal view of the city tends to erase from sight everyday life and experience of it.<sup>12</sup> Positivist studies and visions reduce urban public space as they reinforce the totalizing bird-eye view, turning the city into a homogeneous object of study. Hence, the salience of an intimate view to a rightful understanding of the city’s formative spatial conditions.<sup>13</sup> Navigating the city, from ground level, reveals such spatial intricacies. To realize the space of the city, one must go back to the streets; dissect the totalizing understanding of the city; and grasp it as intertwined social and economic dynamics forming urban space. Based in the streets of the city, the platform of *This is not an exhibition*. produces interventions of primarily non-representational character and practically dismantles the unified image of Beirut.

The public park in Karantina is still closed, the social fabric still quite segregated, and the economic crisis yet peaking. While this intervention and the others—documented to date and to come—do not instigate real change, they provide a political platform to rearticulate a particular reality. Earlier that day, little did we know that in the afternoon the majority of our audience would be children and that most of their lexicon would relate to death and violence. While some parts of Beirut continue to live, others visualize and articulate their death, daily and all too - often in silence.

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10- *Ibid.*, p. 28.

11- *Ibid.*

12- MEAGHER, Sharon. “Philosophy in the Streets.” *City* 11, no. 1 (2007): 7 - 21. P. 7, DOI: 10.1080/13604810701200722.

13- *Ibid.*, 9.

**Notice biographique | Philippa Dahrouj** is a graphic designer who works in print and holds a masters degree in art history and curating from the American University of Beirut. She merges both the practical and theoretical aspects of both her interests into questioning notions of visibility, production and perception. She has been accompanying professor Rana Haddad in her research on public installations as catalytic artistic and political tools in redefining the urban landscape of the city of Beirut. In collaboration with BePublic, Haddad's pedagogical, experimental and urban lab, Dahrouj has developed *This is not an exhibition. And this is not Beirut.* a free-format curatorial platform for experimentation in the public spaces of the city through timely interventions, documented on [www.notanexhibition.com](http://www.notanexhibition.com)