

CHAPTER ELEVEN

TRAUMA STIMULATED ART, OR THE EMBODIMENT OF AFFECT IN LEBANON: AN ALLEGORY

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The process of doing art in Lebanon is closely linked to politics; it has its root in the traumatic Lebanese civil war that took place from 1975 to 1990. The heightened political environment in Beirut influences affective circulations and expressions within communities, and as Kaelen Wilson-Goldie notes, the divisions in the political landscape often generate divisions in the art scene.¹ In other words, for the Lebanese people, affect is inherently political. It is also economic, as politically biased funding fuels the fires of this politicized affect, revealing certain values and prejudices. Since trauma in Lebanon is most manifestly a result of war, death looms ever-present and is often a major focus of art practice. Artists face an ethical problem since they might be seen to exploit people's misery in mining this political and traumatic history for their art productions. The risk here is that death becomes the point to which all the aesthetic discourses lead: dying for country, for the cause, for religion, for politics, for ideology, and so on. This is evident in a number of artworks, as well as in observable behavioral ideology, and in various social, individual, or national conflicts. Traumatic and violent death becomes a justified aspect of life. This has led some artists to refuse the political and nationalistic glorification of death and to promote life instead. In this way, Lebanese artists attempt to use art to overcome trauma and to affirm life in the face of traumatic affect.

¹ Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, "An art scene divided," *The National*, 2008, www.thenational.ae (no longer available online) (accessed July 2, 2008).

This attempt to overcome trauma in art often involves the construction of narratives, of artworks that tell stories. However, if this storytelling is subject to political interference it is reduced to advertising a certain political ideology. Art can only operate as an overcoming of trauma when it is working on a different platform than that of political propaganda. Politically funded artists fail to truly question and incite people to think. They are no longer engaging with the affective residue of trauma in such a way as to invite productive potential. Instead, they become puppetry for a post-war ideology that robs the artist of autonomy and integrity, and manipulates stories and affect for political purpose. In doing so, art is denied its crucial function of opposing or questioning the alteration of ethical values that politics seek to change. Thus some trauma stimulated art practitioners in Lebanon fail to avoid the trap of fascism in their attempts to address, and express, traumatic affect. In this sense, art in Lebanon has no way out but to deal with its own absurdity. Thus, the story begins.

On Sunday 13th of April 1975, the Lebanese civil war erupted. Clashes between Palestinians and Lebanese Christian Militias led to mass killings on both sides. The heat of the war didn't cool off until years later. During the harsh and gloomy winter of 1976 Charbel turned two. His family, Lebanese Maronite Christians, hid in the safe house of a building not far from the frontlines in Ain el Remmaneh, the Lebanese Stalingrad. Charbel was cold there, and his father, Joseph, went up to his apartment on the 2nd floor to bring him an extra blanket. Joseph grabbed the white cotton blanket from the bedroom that faced the street, and as he headed toward the door, a Palestinian missile dropped near the building. Dozens of shards of metal spread from the missile; many shards entered Joseph, who happened to be standing in the way. The blanket's white turned to red. Charbel, the two-year old, became a man, a traumatized man. In the same year, Dimitri, another Lebanese Greek Orthodox Christian set out to visit his sister in West Beirut, which was partly occupied by the Palestinians. He travelled from East Beirut where the Phalangists, the Christian militia, drew the defense line. Phalangist snipers stood on top of every building and on every corner. Dimitri was carrying clothes for his girl, Caroline, when a sniper's shot killed him. Caroline the little girl became a woman, a traumatised woman. Joseph and Dimitri had never met each other, and growing up, Charbel and Caroline blamed the deaths of their fathers on the Palestinians in the case of the former and the Phalangists in the case of the latter. Not only did they blame the deaths of their fathers on the Palestinians and Phalangists, but also the deaths of those who died fighting to serve their causes. Traumatic memory consumed them both, setting

them on the path of channeling their grief into their work: they both became active in the field of art.

Growing up in a sphere where everyone is socially well-connected, Caroline evolved within the so-called Pro-Palestinian left-wing circles, where she eventually found her way to art curating. Working hard to build up a name in the art scene, Caroline could be seen every day, at the famous Rawda café, known as the left-wingers' meeting place. Caroline fraternized with others involved in art and politics who were committed to helping each other achieve their respective goals. Friends with similar political views were likely candidates in volunteering time for art at the beginning of Beirut's vibrant art scene in 1994; the time of the genesis of the now prosperous art organization initiated and headed up by Caroline. This lively postwar art wave, perhaps destined to happen, shook Lebanon and reverberated around the world. It shook the country because for the first time ever, Lebanon built a globally recognized identity for its local art scene, one that reflected Lebanese issues. And it reverberated around the world because through the Lebanese art scene the West had a window onto the Islam majority in the Middle-East, as well as the Christian minorities in the region, which gave the West an opportunity to explore and understand a region closely linked to terrorism and eventually implicit in the devastating events of 9/11.

While Caroline both discovered and nurtured this burgeoning scene, Charbel struggled to find his creative and political place. He wondered if he'd become a right-wing Phalangist; his parents had always told him not to become affiliated with any militia, for, according to them, militias end up annihilating one another. When he was 10 years old, his neighbor, Roy, a Phalangist was killed, felled by one of the other militia groups, or worse by another Phalangist, which seemed only to prove his parents' point. Charbel's loyalty to mainstream ideology as inherited by the right-wing would be questioned years later when in 1999 he initiated a discussion forum on the Internet about Lebanese-related concerns, a project undertaken while he was an art student.² These conversations, relating not only to religion, politics, identity, but also to gay and lesbian issues, and a mixture of other Lebanese relevant topics of the day, created a problem for Charbel when they were brought to the attention of the Lebanese Sureté Générale, who were known to be dominated by the Syrian regime after the civil war. Tracked and observed, his file was sent to all borders of the

² In keeping with the use of aliases in this article, the reference for this website is withheld, since its disclosure would identify individuals. It is my intention to offer the characters of this chapter as representative of not only a specific artist, but a number of artists working in Lebanon today.

country. But for Charbel, this desire to engage the other and to understand the conflicting points of view of political parties was motivated by his questioning of his naïve understanding of the Lebanese civil war, so he pressed on. He needed to uncover the thoughts of the other. For him, communicating opened up new possibilities to discover the other, and more specifically, to ascertain the trauma of the other. Charbel had begun his project with the intention of confirming the guilt of his father's killers, and to hold them to account, but the online forum took another direction, one that challenged Charbel's perceptions. Day after day, Charbel was learning that these alien others and their parties also had their ideologies, their motives and causes, and that it was the clash of these conflictive points of view that had materialized into war. Art critics linked Charbel's forum project to communicational and relational art aesthetics. Charbel himself considered that this project was an attempt to address and overcome trauma by utilizing an online textual setting, a discussion forum, as a place where affect is not facially expressed. In this way he hoped to uncover the others' true intentions and thoughts, reasoning that the absence of the facial expression, the absence of visible affect, for instance, might reveal the participants' actual thoughts and opinions in a way that was less charged and dangerous, and therefore more accurate. The speaking body, and facial expression, would be removed, replaced by the avatar and the assurance of physical safety, with the speaker's real identity hidden at all times.

It so happened that Caroline was running another online forum about Lebanese issues at the same time as Charbel. Though it may seem to be coincidence, it is perhaps more likely that there is an organic postwar, post-traumatic attitude or reaction informed by the need to know the other and to communicate online—in other words at a safe distance—to avoid the potential of physical harm. Despite this joint impulse, the cases of Charbel and Caroline illustrate a critical division in Beirut's art scene. Caroline's art projects are now funded by international organizations, as part of the pro-Palestinian left wing oriented art, while Charbel has struggled to find support and backing. Without the luxury of having a curator with the means of international funds taking care of him, Charbel has become the curator of his art circle, though it is a role he neither sought nor wanted. The press has subsequently positioned Charbel and Caroline as the principal figures in the divided Beirut art scene for the past two decades.

In 1996, Charbel had travelled to France and the USA to continue his art studies. It was not until he was back in Lebanon in 2002 that the balance tipped. During the war, Charbel was young. As he read the legacy

of war on people's faces, it became clear to him that the misery had to stop, and that it was essential to affirm ideals that do not promote dying for one's country. Charbel's anti-romantic view of war and loss formed in contrast to the many artworks that, post-war, paved the way for the Lebanese people to attempt to cope with trauma by justifying dying for the country. For Charbel, such artworks are a catastrophe, since they justify Lebanese people dying in war. They teach people how to welcome death as an old friend, and how to do the duty of dying for an imagined and deeply problematic ideal.

Accepting death for the sake of a nation is not a concept that existed naturally; it is the result of traumatically shifting values and acceptance of these new values. It's a kind of forced behavior cultivated in conditions of war and violence. When contact with death becomes a habit, trauma becomes a habit too, and habits engender justifications, justifications that support the continuation of the habit. And so, the choice to fight and to traumatize is transmuted into the belief that there is no choice but to accept war, death and trauma. This amounts to an attempt to justify trauma by neutralizing it: trauma stops being recognized as trauma and begins masquerading as national pride. Further, affects, such as sadness, anger and fear, that surround trauma become nullified and normalized in this masquerade. This is best illustrated with the rituals of religious fundamentalists. Before sacrificing themselves to destroy enemy sites, they write love letters to their daughters describing how they will never forget their beauty and hair, how they will always carry their smile and laughter in their hearts. In this act the fundamentalists present themselves a dilemma: their duty for their religion vs. their love for their daughters. But both are to be questioned; is it only their duty that leads them to sacrifice their life or is it revenge? Is their love for their daughters real or a posturing to win the favor of their God and the forgiveness of people? For Charbel, such incidents provoked disgust.

It is unsurprising that performance art in Lebanon excelled during this period. In post-war Lebanon, performance was an effective strategy that offered to protect the performer from the naked insecurity and difficulty of expressing traumatic affect around the Lebanese civil war as a mere subject and citizen. With more and more artists performing, life in Lebanon became something of a performance of affects; affectivity became increasingly visible but it was presented devoid of genuine inner emotion, strangely dis-embodied as it were. Affect became a mask used to disarm the viewer who, at any time, might emerge as a potential enemy, a threat to physical safety and the body that housed authentic traumatic affect. This fakery amounts to the refusal of representation, the limits of

what can be risked in art in Beirut. Performance art questioned not only war, but also performance acts themselves, producing a society of performers and artistic questioning, in which the act of performance and the realities of war merged. After the events of 9/11 suddenly brought the Middle East to the notice of the international art scene, Lebanon became one of the most mediatized regions of the world. International curators, artists, writers, media, critics, art dealers, and gallery owners flooded to Beirut to explore the city and study its religions, economy, politics, culture, history and creative industries. This global attention has become one of the principal preoccupations of Lebanon. In this renewed Lebanese context, people come to Lebanon to observe and mingle with both sides: Caroline's and Charbel's. The new challenge for Lebanese artists is the potential for their work to be co-opted, and not to become, in short, propaganda art. The onus is on them to question, to investigate, to query, to explore, rather than give in to mainstream or gendered demands. The international art community has largely endorsed those artists who seek to understand the conditions surrounding stereotyped concepts of the Middle East, the rise of terrorism, sectarianism, the oppression of women, and Arabism. The danger is that Lebanese artists and organizations unwittingly endorse and feed foreign motives and the projections of the west around the region's symbols and icons.

Whether it was an investigation of local concerns, or an exploration via the point of view of global and international clichés, Lebanese artists started generating narratives in relation to traumatic events, resulting in a plethora of works more narrative-oriented rather than experience-oriented, a move addressed in Anthony Downey's discussion of narrative-oriented works in Lebanon today.³ Charbel created works that transposed narrative texts into images—he used visual codes to give an alternative reading and interpretation to selected texts, while Caroline defended “docufictional”⁴ artworks. Despite their differing approaches, they were both iterating the same themes: war, crime, violence and loss—one as artist and the other as curator. This theme is alive and well today in the ongoing postwar art scene of Beirut, where all alike struggle with the affective aftermath of trauma and the failures of human culture.

³ Anthony Downey, “In the Event of Fire: Precarious Images, the Aesthetics of Conflict, and the Future of an Anachronism,” *Ibraaz*, July 13 2012, <http://www.ibraaz.org/essays/30> (accessed October 4, 2012).

⁴ An example of docufictional techniques can be seen at the blog *Beirut Art Critics*, in a post by Maya Hage, “Akram Zaatari: clin d’oeil,” 24 May 2011, <http://artsbeirut.wordpress.com/2011/05/24/akram-zaatari-clin-doeil/> (accessed October 4, 2012).

In this real and imaginary domain, art is investigating the intermediate space between two fields: trauma and affect. Consequently, one can say that if art in Lebanon has a distinct form, it is largely an affective form created in response to trauma. In this process, an economic engine that involves political alliances, ethical choices and aesthetic considerations influences art production. If the questions posed by artists and art works problematize conventions, then they may prove useful, but if they threaten the human rights charter, they become dangerous. In traumatic societies this danger often involves discourses that defend a so-called constructive self-negation. This is why for art to negotiate trauma it sometimes needs to mutate into other kinds of art that can exist in a traumatized society without compromise.

The current Lebanese art scene is a reflection of Charbel's and Caroline's evolution over the years; they both entered the international art scene from two different perspectives, from two different doors—one that opened out from the Lebanese “left,” and one that opened out from the Lebanese “right.” Both Charbel and Caroline have engaged with narrative oriented art, stimulated by similar traumatic histories, in an effort to undo trauma by experimenting, manipulating and embodying the residual traumatic affect of those histories into their different modes of art. It is an ongoing quest of Lebanese art and artists to process the affective fallout of still being a profoundly and communally traumatized country.