



***Report from Beirut: Days Of Culture, Days Of Siege:
Rasha Salti, 2006; Gregory Sholette, 2005***

July 14, 2006: I am writing from a café in the Hamra district of West Beirut. The electricity has been cut off for a while now, and the city has been surviving on generators. The café is dark, hot and humid. Espresso machines and blenders are silent. Conversations, rumors, frustration waft through the room. Occasionally the sound of Israeli warplanes overwhelms us. They drop leaflets. Yesterday, they advised inhabitants of the southern suburbs to flee because the night promised to be 'hot'. Today, the leaflets warn that all remaining bridges and tunnels in Beirut will be bombed. Rasha

November 18, 2005. I arrive in Beirut. Together with a couple of hundred art world itinerants booked into hotels at either end of the city's lively Hamra Street we came for the week-long, multi-disciplinary forum *Home Works III*. By day we folded invisibly into the cosmopolitan Hamra districts café's, shops, and eateries. Some of these are eloquent, on par with Paris, London, or New York. Others are particular to Beirut, like the fried potato vendor whose small take-out shop was a favorite of late Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. In the afternoon we flocked to the *Masrah al Media* where most of the program takes place. The *Masrah al Media* is a large movie house whose entrance is distinguished by a massive, antiquated film projector cemented directly into the sidewalk. For those of us new to city this monumental apparatus served as channel marker of sorts, a point of reference that also testified to the resolute secularity of Lebanese public culture.

July 19, 2006: Today was a particularly strange day for me because I was granted an opportunity to leave tomorrow morning. I hold a Canadian passport, I was born in Toronto when my parents were students there. I left at age two. I have never gone back, for lack of opportunity and occasion, no other reason. I have the choice to sign up for the evacuation, but the European and North American governments have been so despicable, so racist that I don't want to subject myself to a discrimination of that sort...For days I have been itching to leave because I want to pursue my professional commitments, meet deadlines and continue with my life... And yet when the phone call came informing me that I had to be ready at 7:00 am the next morning, I asked for a pause to think. I was torn. The landscape of the human and physical ravages of Israel's genial strategy at implementing UN Resolution 1569, the depth of destruction, the toll of nearly 250 deaths, more than 800 injured and 400,000 displaced, had bound me to a sense of duty. It was not even patriotism, it was actually the will to defy Israel. They cannot do this and drive me away. They will not drive me away.



DOWNTOWN BEIRUT, November 2005

Home Works III was organized by Christine Tohmé, founder of Ashkal Alwan, the Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts, and by film curator Rasha Salti. Initially it was to take place in the spring. But then came the assassination of Rafik Hariri on February 14, 2005. The program was postponed. The danger seemingly waited-out. After all, tourists were still returning and in March there was the unprecedented public demonstration against Syria, the so-called “Beirut Spring,” in which a multitude of ethnic, religious and political factions were unified by their opposition to Hariri’s murder. Today his death reads less like a nasty bump in the road and more like the thud of things to come.

This is all bringing back echoes of 1982, the Israeli siege of Beirut. My living nightmare, well one of my living nightmares. It was summer then as well. The Israeli army marched through the south and besieged Beirut. For 3 months, the US administration kept dispatching urges for the Israeli military to act with restraint. And the Israelis assured them they were acting appropriately. We had the PLO command in West Beirut then. I felt safe with the handsome fighters. How I miss them. Between Hezbollah and the Lebanese army I don't feel safe. We are exposed, defenseless, pathetic. And I am older, more aware of danger. I am 37 years old and actually scared. ..I am furthermore pissed off because no one knows how hard the postwar reconstruction was to all of us. Hariri did not make miracles. People worked hard and sacrifice a lot and things get done. No one knows except us how expensive, how arduous that reconstruction was. Every single bridge and tunnel and highway, the runways of that airport, all of these things were built from our sweat and brow, at 3 times the real cost of their construction because every member of government, because every character in the ruling Syrian junta, because the big players in the Hariri administration and beyond, were all thieves. We accepted the thievery and banditry just to get things done and get it over with.

The majority of those presenting at *Home Works III* either lived in Lebanon, or in nearby Egypt, Iran, Syria, Jordan, or the Palestinian territories, or had been born in the region and now lived abroad. Its primary focus was on the contemporary culture and politics of the Near East and Northern Africa. Yet in so far as the forum presented the myriad of ways in which art survives, sometimes richly, other times sparingly, within a perpetually unhinged geo-political landscape the program became far more global in reach. From November seventeenth to the twenty-fourth our evenings were packed with short videos and films, performance works and critical lectures. Some half-dozen exhibitions by the Arab Image Foundation among others were on view at different locations around the city. Still, something more was at stake than just another forum on contemporary culture and politics. Those gathered in Beirut late last year were there to bear witness to the convalescence of badly scarred nation that had slowly, painfully begun to reanimate after years of civil war and foreign occupation. Clearly this observation was part of our mission.

Everyone one of us had two jobs (I am not referring to the ruling elite, obviously), paid backbreaking taxes and wages to feed the "social covenant". We fought and fought that neo-liberal onslaught, the arrogance of economic consultants and the greed of creditors just to have a nice country that functioned at a minimum, where things got done, that stood on its feet, more or less. A thriving Arab civil society. Public schools were sacrificed for roads to service neglected rural areas and a couple Syrian officers to get richer, and we accepted, that road was desperately needed, and there was the "precarious national consensus" to protect. Social safety nets were given up, healthcare for all, unions were broken and co-opted, public spaces taken over, and we bowed our heads and agreed. Palestinian refugees were pushed deeper and deeper into forgetting, hidden from sight and consciousness, "for the preservation of their identity" we were told, and we accepted. In exchange we had a secular country where the Hezbollah and the Lebanese Forces could co-exist and fight their fights in parliament not with bullets. We bit hard on our tongues and stiffened our upper lip, we protested and were defeated, we took the streets, defied army-imposed curfews, time after time, to protect that modicum of civil rights, that modicum of a semblance of democracy, and it takes one air raid for all our sacrifices and tolls to be blown to smithereens. It's not about the airport, it's what we built during that postwar.



Ayreen Anastas and Palestinian Refugees, Beirut, November 2005

The evening of November 18, 2005, the *Masrah al Media*: Video artist Ayreen Anastas presents "Pasolini Pa* Palestine," an engaging posthumous dialogue with the heretical communist filmmaker that re-traces locations Passolini visited in the mid 1960s prior to shooting *The Gospel According to Matthew*. Anastas is one of many artists taking part in the program displaced by political, economic or historical circumstances. Born in Bethlehem she now resides in New York City where she is a cofounder along with Renee Gabri of the 16 Beaver Street reading group. Earlier in the day Anastas and I along with a group of other foreign visitors squeezed into a small cab. She was intent on visiting the southern suburbs that are home to her fellow Palestinians, as well as to Hezbollah, and we did not wish to lose the opportunity to take a walk on the "wild side." With video camera rolling intermittently we are left off at an open-air market on the edge of the refugee area. It consists of miles of tables filled with orange vendors, bootlegged porn films, used computer parts piled on rugs, machine parts salvaged from toasters, to automobile engines, to devices not seen in the West for decades. There is even a cage of squealing monkeys.

Because I am a staunch secular democrat, I have never endorsed Hezbollah, but I do not question their legitimacy as a political actor on the Lebanese scene, I believe they are just as much a product of Lebanon's contemporary history, its war and postwar as are all other parties. If one were to evaluate the situation in vulgar sectarian terms, when it comes to representing the interests of their constituency they certainly do a better job than all the political representatives presently and in the past. It would be utter folly (in fact it would be murderous folly) to regard Hezbollah as another radical Islamist terrorist organization, at least in the ideological and idiomatic vein of the American intelligentsia and punditry...If Israel plans to annihilate Hezbollah, it will annihilate Lebanon. Hezbollah and its constituency are not only Lebanese in the perception of all, they are also a key, essential element of contemporary Lebanon.

The transition from the tidy, bustling Hamra is as sharp as the air is now acrid and smoky. In the distance, a utility pole buried beneath skeins of electrical wire bursts into flames, consumed by its overloaded current. We pass a walled-in open space where a makeshift memorial stands to the Sabra and Shatila massacres of September, 1982. Surrounded by weeds and grazing geese the story of the 1,000 men, women, and children slaughtered by Christian militiamen acting in consort with the Israeli occupation is relayed in photographs, text, and splatters of blood-red paint. Inside the narrow circuitous passages of South Beirut Palestinian graffiti appears on distressed walls. The ubiquitous cartoon-child *Hanthala* appears here, hands perpetually folded behind his back, and always looking away from us as if contemplating something that he alone can see. The creation of cartoonist Naji Al-Ali who was shot dead on a London street in 1987, *Hanthala* was emerged here in these Lebanese refugee camps when the artist was exiled here from his home in Nazareth. There is something comforting about seeing graffiti here in this slum, perhaps because it reminds me of my years on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in the 1980s, and a funky, arty bar on First Street named "Downtown Beirut." That was during time of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. The first invasion.

July 28, 2006: Two days ago, a TV station caught Walid Eido (a parliamentarian from Beirut, and one of the particularly mentally challenged from Hariri's al-Mustaqbal movement –God forgive Hariri for plaguing us with his own band of court-jesters), lounging on the beach, playing cards. They split their screen and aired images of the hapless displaced. The contrast was sinister. The next day, this illustrious representative of Beirut rushed on television to seem busy and babbled on as if he were in the "know". I hope that this war will be the end of his ability to walk the streets of Beirut. Do you understand my rage?

November 19, 2005: Another tale of temporal displacement this afternoon, this time by Beirut-based video maker Akram Zaatari. *In This House* documents the excavation a buried mortar shell that soon grows into an absorbing micro-drama involving official interruptions, curious neighbors, and the return of civil war memories. The ordinance at the center of the Zaatari's plot is purportedly empty. It holds a letter written by a Lebanese resistance fighter named 'Ali' who had occupied the nearby home that was evacuated during the war. What is the message in hollow casing? It welcomes back the owners and reassures them that Ali and his fellow soldiers had taken good care of their property. Earlier in the evening Steven Kurtz of the Critical Art Ensemble took part in a panel discussion that included International Center of Photography curator Carol Squiers. Moderated by cultural journalist Lynn Love the ostensible topic was art and science. The anti-democratic privatization of the earth's flora and fauna is the leading topic. Certainly of global significance, nevertheless for those un-aware of the ongoing, federal investigation of Kurtz it must have seemed more than a little out of place.

Not until the next evening was the mystery lifted when Lebanese born Walid Raad delivered his lecture-performance, *Feel a Great Desire to Meet the Masses Once Again*. Written in collaboration with Naeem Mohaiemen of the *Visible Collective* Raad begins a personal account of having his luggage searched as part of the new, elevated security following September 2001. The incident ends unremarkably, but Raad gradually weaves out of it an intricate spider-web of connections that include the CIA's rendition of suspected terrorists, an fleet of jets owned by an American millionaire that are used to transport abductees to secret locations for interrogation, and finally to the case of artist Steve Kurtz who is being prosecuted by the US government for alleged mail fraud, but who is in effect a target of a political witch hunt. Because of the ongoing investigation Kurtz could not speak about the case the previous night. Raad and Mohaiemen's presentation was a reminder to those present from politically repressive regimes that the civil rights environment in the United States, light of liberty, home of democracy, had darkened of late quite considerably. *

August 5, 2006: Throughout the war, shelling , siege, grief and sorrow, the bougainvilleas have been in full, glorious bloom. Their colors are dizzying in their intensity: purplish red, boastful fuchsia, glaring white, and sometimes canary yellow. Most of the time, their bloom, which is the objective outcome of "natural" factors, namely, access to water, sun, heat, and even perhaps wind, has irritated me. Everything has changed in this time of war, except the full glorious bloom of the bougainvilleas. Other flowering trees have wilted, or shied, as their franchised gardeners or patrons no longer operate on the same schedule or have evacuated on the ships of the bi-nationals. On the road to Saida, I was struck, irked and even upset at the bougainvilleas full bloom. From between their abundant leaves and flowers, vignettes of the ravages appeared. Bridges torn in their midst framed by the purple and fuchsia bloom of the bougainvilleas.

November 21st, 2005: This evening offers a lecture by French theorist Jacques Rancière entitled *Some Paradoxes of Political Art*. Translated into English by Stephen Wright, no mean feat, Rancière's dense text argued that mimesis is still deeply embedded in political representation. But his conclusion that artists are therefore most political when their work is most ambiguous seemed like a tired throwback to formalist arguments I thought long dead. (I wonder what his take would be on the events in Lebanon of late?) Before and after the lecture a series of screenings by Jalal Toufic, Ahmad Khaled, Raed El Helou, and the Lebanese-based Otolith Group consisting of Anjalika Sagar and Kodwo Eshun blatantly contradicted the Parisian intellectual's paradoxical conundrums by focusing on politically charged religious allegory, erotic sublimation in Egypt, daily uncertainties about the future in the West Bank, and the call to the present from beyond the grave by the archive of those forgotten by history.

Next afternoon Cairo-based sound artist Mahmoud Refat performed live to Walter Ruttmann's epic 1927 silent film, *Berlin: The Symphony of a Big City*. Waves of electronically generated echoes, hums, and rich walls of sound at times meshed with, and other times contrasted to Ruttmann's poetic celebration of the short-lived Weimer Republic. Refat may not have intended his homage this way, but it was impossible not to think of Beirut while looking at Weimer Berlin, which was one of the most tolerant, liberal societies of the 20th Century. Here we were gathered in different city, recently re-born and dedicated to the concept of a secular, multi-ethnic and democratic society. Now I cannot help wondering, was it precisely those exceptional traits that placed it within the cross-hairs of reckless aggression once again?



Downtown Beirut, November 2005

*... A few days earlier I had appeared on al-Jazeera (I was interviewed about these damned siege notes) and the front c staff thought I was a newscaster. "You're on TV, right?", was the question. "Yes," was the self-assured reply. The lobby hospital was busy with activity, but the movement of limbs, bodies, the pace of conversations, the weight of gazes, all encumbered with an additional gravity... I looked forward to the fragrance of orange blossoms and was now forgiving full glorious bloom of the bougainvilleas. My heart had never felt as heavy. There was a lot to hang on to, I mean for h strength or whatever it is that keeps people going, but there was so much wretchedness.
... The sorrows I have seen.*

Rasha Salti's is a writer and film curator who returned to her native Beirut a day before the recent Israeli invasion. Her reports from Lebanon under siege can be found in their entirety at: <http://rashasalti.blogspot.com/> Gregory Sholette is an artist and writer living in NYC. The Ford Foundation generously underwrote his trip to Beirut in November of 2005

* For more on the case against Steven Kurtz see: <http://www.caedefensefund.org>