

Reclaiming Public Space

Author: Tania El Khoury of Dictaphone Group

Activity: "This Sea Is Mine" – Live art performance based on urban research about the Beirut sea front.

Story Collected by Zena Takieddine

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I do live art. By definition, it is art interested in action, site-specificity and intervention. Live art can define a zone for intervention in order to promote change in society and politics. It is a very critical form. I want to use the medium of my work to comment on the issues that matter to me and on the every-day space I live in.



Dictaphone Group was founded by myself and a friend, Abir Saksouk, with whom I found common interest in researching certain spaces and intervening in them. Our fields are very different. She is an architect and I am a performer. Together we choose a space of interest and come up with projects that encourage people to think about it more critically. Our work is inter-disciplinary; Abir is responsible for the research, I make the performance and our third partner, Petra Serhal who is also a performer, produces the project.

Public space is a big issue. Except maybe for people who jump from 5-star hotel to 5-star spa resort without ever realizing that the majority of the world doesn't live like that. For "This Sea is Mine", we were granted AFAC support which enabled us to start putting the project together and devising a performance in the sea and the shore, all of which are supposed to have public access. Yes, we should be able to swim in the sea without having to pay 40,000 Lebanese Pounds entrance fee. People need to be aware of their rights.

So, we needed to do research and to make it accessible by creating an interactive site-specific performance. We feel that factual information has to be supplemented by narratives from the inhabitants of these researched spaces. We created a research booklet (designed by Nadine Bekdache) that explains the laws regarding zoning of the shore-line in Beirut, the legal use and protection of public spaces, the requirements for construction permits, the mapping of all the areas that have been illegally/exceptionally built and interviews with the local fisherman and families who live on the Beirut shore. Our aim is to generate an open debate on public spaces in the city. We want to comment on the space and the politics of space.

We invite the audience to a ride on a fisherman's boat to discover the sea front of Beirut and to see the city from the sea. Beirut from the sea appears as a different city. It is the opposite image of what we usually encounter in touristic advertisements. Touristic Beirut is usually seen from behind and above the tall buildings, revealing a shiny horizon with the city's rooftops-turned-nightclubs. From the sea, however, Beirut appears as it really is, a city with no horizon. A city in which high-rise buildings are a separating barrier between the people and their sea. Our audiences are invited to take turns in using the megaphone to read out relevant legal clauses that indicate the infringements by illegally built cafes, hotels and restaurants that line the shore, overtaking what should be protected public space.

Urban research and live performance are two mediums that are typically not very accessible, but we aim to use them to produce something that everyone can find relevant. Some contemporary performances in the Lebanese cultural scene tend to be too abstract. What we want to do to is to create a work that uses a language that everyone understands. We all know that academic research is very important, but there is always the dilemma of where this research is being published and how to make it available to people. So we bring our audiences exactly to the space we are researching and commenting on. Instead of publishing in an academic journal and holding a performance in a theatre hall, we create live art, out here in the city, where the fishermen are having their tea breaks, young men are showing off their cliff-diving skills and couples are taking romantic boat-rides or just sitting together on a boulder watching the sea, all for free, and we're reading passages from the pamphlet on a picnic mat, the final destination of the performance boat ride, while getting stung by sunset mosquitos. Experiential performances are powerful because people will talk about them and share what happened.

We want to make people think about space and we want open discussions. That is our main aim at this point. How to encourage people in the city to start talking about these important issues? They first need to know about their rights and about law infringements, which, unfortunately, because they're so rampant, many people don't even realize them anymore.

A great part of our experience has been the audience. "This Sea is Mine" is not about me talking to a passive audience who listens and claps at the end. With every boat road, we get new stories from participants who share their own experiences with the sea, fishing, walking on the Corniche, lovers' lanes, the urban myths about a group of female bandits who hid in one of the caves, the infamous suicide point facing the Pigeons Rock. With every new boat ride we hear new stories that get added into the performance.

The interactive nature of this performance is a small step towards opening up a bigger debate. What is the nature of public space? How do we imagine it? How do we seek to use it? These are issues that are now being reflected on in many parts of the Arab world, not just here in Lebanon. In Europe, the government controls public spaces, like public parks and beaches. Everyone has access to them and they are kept clean and open. We need to find our own model to understand and negotiate public spaces and its uses. Unfortunately in our part of the world, people with money can rise above the law if they want and take over public space. Governments are also often part of the corruption.

So, we found the laws, we got quotations from the Mayor of Beirut, and we talked to the people. We wanted to understand and share with our audiences how the Lebanese government conceptualizes public space. And then we went around and talked to the inhabitants of the area so we can understand and share their views of public space as well. We discovered many contradictions between the two views. Discussion is a necessity.

We faced some challenges in putting this project together. On the research side, there were definitely documents that officials were trying to keep out of our reach, especially documents about Ramlet Al-Bayda which is one of the only publicly-used beaches in Beirut today. We don't say publicly-owned, since it was originally owned by many Beirut families and has been later bought by Hariri, but at least until today it is still used as public space. I think the fact that so many people use this beach is one of the main reasons why it has successfully delayed its transformation into yet another 5-star hotel. Also, originally we wanted to start the boat ride from Zaytouna Bay, but we couldn't reach it by boat because a private security company runs it. Swimming is part of the performance too, though the water is not clean. Back in the 1940's an annual event in Beirut was the New Year's Swimming Competition at Masbah Ajram where the best local swimmers would join the race. This custom stopped during the civil war when the swimmers were targeted by snipers. And now, the water is so neglected and dirty, with sewage pipes emptying into, and the fishermen complain that the sea is dying, the fish-count is dropping, and nobody really swims anymore.

This is not a protest of privatization. Much of the shoreline was private property owned by Beirut families who lived by the shore from before the civil war. These families are numerous and they usually follow the legislations regarding land use. The risk is when you have companies or one monopolies taking over all this land and getting an exception to use it as it sees fit, often changing and expanding the face of the shore significantly. This is what has happened in many places. When someone with political clout takes over the land, they can change the laws to suit their purposes. Beirut is a sea-side city but the 'Daliyeh' and the 'Ramlet al-Bayda' are today the only large areas still open to the public (though this could easily change). Paradoxically, they are also the most neglected places. Its users are constantly calling for basic public services - electricity, proper roads, water supplies, security - yet they are mostly ignored. Public discussion is crucial. Our location of the performance on site is crucial. It is the only way to start protecting what is public. Once people claim their public rights, it will be more difficult for authorities and monopolies to take them over.

Funding from AFAC was very useful in helping us conduct our research, publication and the performances. We would have liked more support from AFAC in terms of outreach because we really wanted to get different audiences to participate and invite donors and academics. It is important to reach people from outside the small cultural scene in Beirut and people who might be interested in supporting such projects. Our challenge is to open up these discussions to wider groups.

