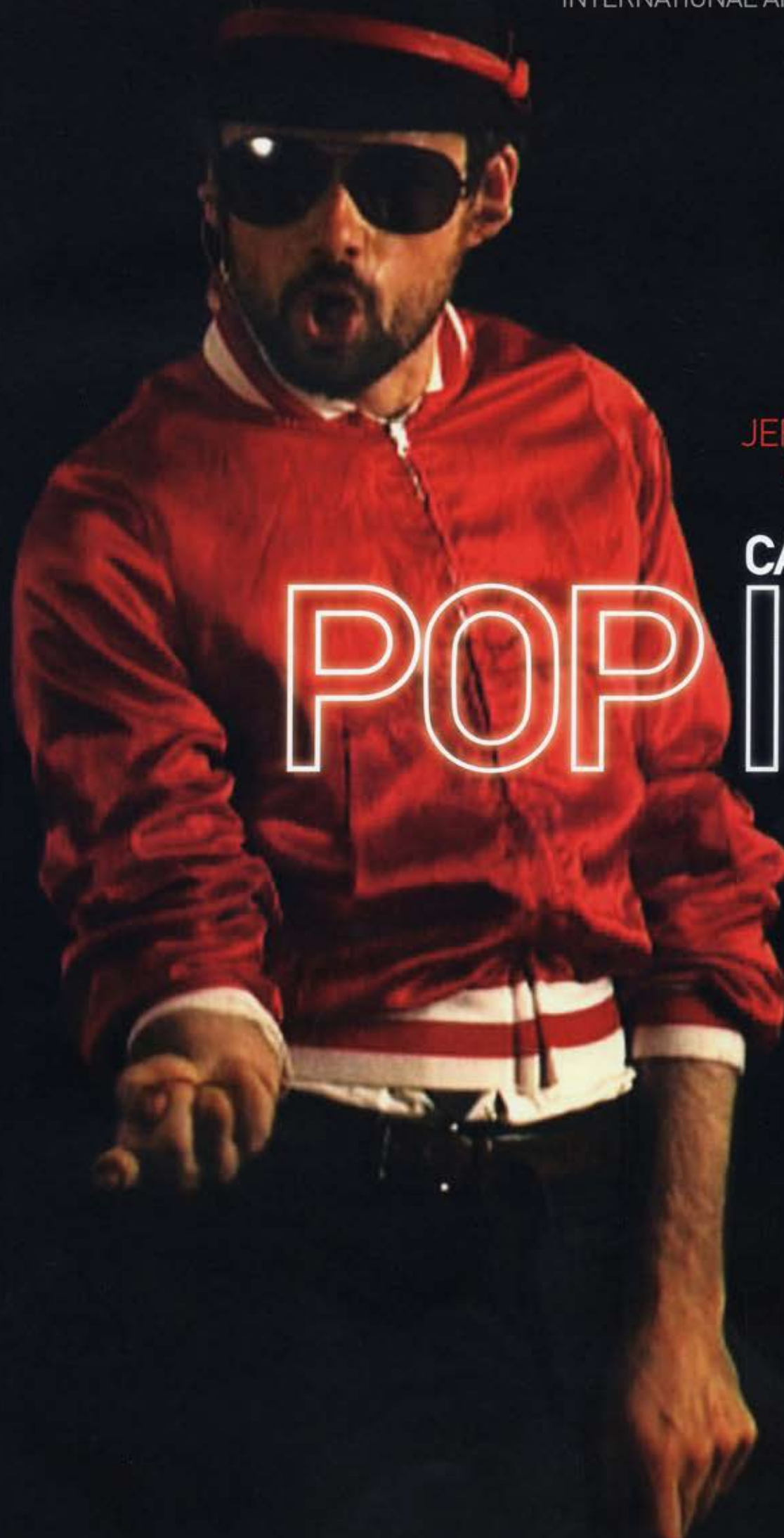


MODERN PAINTERS

INTERNATIONAL ARTS AND CULTURE SEPTEMBER 2005



**SEDUCTION &
INSTRUCTION**

JEREMY GILBERT-ROLFE
ON ART AND FASHION

CANDICE BREITZ

POP IDOL

THE KABAKOVS ON
LIFE AFTER DEATH

SHOT

THE END OF WAR
PHOTOGRAPHY?

UK £5.99 US \$9.95 CAN \$12.50





ROCHELLE STEINER

after the blast

Rebirth of a nation

ONCE KNOWN AS THE 'PARIS OF THE ORIENT', today Beirut generally conjures more violent associations. But snipers are no longer perched atop the city's buildings, and the wreckage of gunned-down aeroplanes is a distant memory. And while Lebanon, which borders Syria, Israel and the Mediterranean Sea, is still at the centre of a region that is undergoing great upheaval and transformation, Beirut is returning to its former role as a melting pot for Middle Eastern, European and North African cultures and as a unique pivot between the past, present and future of the Arab region.

Lebanon and Israel are still uncomfortable neighbours. (Indeed, it is impossible to enter either one of these countries if your passport bears a visa stamped by the other.) Since the beginning of this year, however, Lebanon's tangled relationship with Syria – highlighted by the bomb that went off in central Beirut on 14 February, killing former Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafik Hariri – has become the main focus of attention for Beirut's inhabitants. A pro-Syrian government came to power in Lebanon during its civil war (1975–90), pitted the country's Christians against its Muslims, split Beirut down the middle with the infamous 'Green Line' and divided the rest of the country according to its various religious sects. Hariri, who had advocated the withdrawal of Syrian troops, resigned as Prime Minister in October 2004 after parliament amended the Lebanese constitution to extend the term of pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud. The bomb resulted in more than a dozen deaths and injured hundreds. Months later, a three-metre-wide crater, mangled buildings and debris are still visible at the city's Corniche district overlooking the Mediterranean Sea.

While tragic, this event – and subsequent smaller car-bomb explosions over the following weeks – spurred much lively discussion about the future of Lebanon. And optimism, albeit tentative, is growing. Over the past months – under mounting tension and international pressure in the lead-up to Lebanon's scheduled parliamentary elections in May and June – Syria withdrew its troops from its neighbour in what may be the first step towards democracy. Spontaneous public gatherings along the streets of central Beirut and in Martyrs' Square in March, and a public celebration in April to commemorate the 30-year anniversary of the civil war were interpreted as further signs of optimism.

Another event, originally scheduled for April, though postponed to November of this year due to political circumstances, is *Homeworks III: A Forum on Cultural Practices*, which aims at bring-

ing together hundreds of artists, writers, intellectuals, filmmakers, architects, critical theorists and philosophers from Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Jordan, Iran, Croatia and the United States. Building on the success of two previous installments, as well as a publication that accompanied the 2002 event (the catalogue for 2003 is forthcoming), this exceptional platform for the visual arts, literature, performance and critical debate is important not only to the development of contemporary art in Beirut, but also in terms of nurturing international recognition for artists working in the region.

Homeworks is organized by Ashkal Awan, the Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts, a non-profit organization based in Beirut since 1994 and a focal point for artists working in various media. Run by Christine Tohme, Ashkal Awan has worked closely with architect Tony Chakar and artists Lamia Joreige and Nada Sehnaoui, among others, to initiate, develop and present projects in Beirut and overseas. It is one of a number of impressive start-up arts organizations in the city that have been founded and cultivated by dedicated individuals working collaboratively and capitalizing on the energy and resources available to them. Grants have been awarded to many such developing organizations by the US-based Ford Foundation, an independent agency that has identified the Middle East and North Africa as areas for artistic and cultural development. (Between 1999 and 2001, Ford's grants in the region totalled more than \$35 million shared between 272 institutions, with another 62 grants totalling approximately \$1.5 million awarded to individuals.)

The Arab Image Foundation is a highly professional, not-for-profit organization started in 1996 to promote photography in the Middle East and North Africa, and to promote the study of Arab visual culture. Through the work of its member artists, including Walid Raad and Akram Zaatari, the Foundation locates, collects and preserves photographs from the region dating from the early nineteenth century to the present day. These collections are made available to museums and galleries for exhibition and publication, an example of which was their recent collaboration with the Photographers' Gallery in London to present the work of Hashem El Madani. The artists associated with both the

Left and below
Bernard Khoury
Architects, BO 18
COURTESY BERNARD
KHOURY ARCHITECTS



the realities and memories of the war and occupation have understandably shaped the ways Lebanon has been defined both internally and externally for many generations

Arab Image Foundation and Ashkal Awan tend to mine both past and recent history in order to construct a sense of identity in their work that is personal, as much as it is political, national and cultural.

The large, impressive new branch of established Hamburg gallery Sfeir-Semler is located in a former factory in the Quarantine district of Beirut that also houses the office and studio of architect Bernard Khoury. Sfeir-Semler's 1000-square-metre gallery represents artists working in the Middle East as well as those living abroad with links to the region, and has been successful in quickly stimulating an interest in, and consequently a market for, contemporary art. The launch exhibition was entitled *Flight 405*: a reference to its opening in April 2005 and to the themes of travel, geography

and border crossing which were explored in much of the photographic, conceptual, video and sculptural work presented. Espace SD, run by Sandra Dagher, is another large-scale commercial space in Beirut: founded in 1998 and located on the lower floors of an office tower block, it includes a gallery, a small project room or laboratory, a cinema, bookshop and a café. It has also established Cine-Club, a weekly forum for young Lebanese filmmakers and directors to present and discuss their media work.

Cinema is an important area of artistic production in the region. The Beirut Film Festival, an annual event since 1997, morphed into the Mideast Film Festival in order to focus on film developments in the larger Arab world. Beirut DC (Development and Cinema) was started six years ago by a group of young filmmakers in order to produce, promote and distribute independent films by Lebanese and Arab filmmakers. Seeing its role as an incubator for new ideas, and having developed an inventory of equipment as well as a growing media library, Beirut DC boasts an open-door policy for filmmakers and students who want to research, develop and edit works. The organization has successfully produced over 20 films and documentaries that have been screened in Lebanon and abroad.

Bringing contemporary art to the public is the aim of Zico House, an intriguing umbrella organization for artistic activity, collaboration and exchange run by Moustapha Yamout and Rola Kobeissi. In addition to hosting residencies for visiting international artists and providing studio spaces, it is the source of the Beirut Street Festival, which brings art and performance to the street on a temporary basis. Throughout August and September, the festival stages events and performances including 'Cine Valise', a mobile cinema designed to fill the gap left by the closing of the city's two main theatres.

Urban life is a topic that Beirut's artists and architects alike are grappling with in the face of necessary regeneration and a very strong private building sector. What strikes you most about this city is the number of half-completed buildings – and the difficulty in determining which are the results of progress and development and which of war, neglect or natural decay. Construction plans in the city centre are mostly linked to Solidere, a private company and initiative



Above
Akram Zaatar, *Desert Panorama*, 2002, black and white video, 9 min loop
COURTESY ARAB IMAGE FOUNDATION/N. JABUR AND SFEIR SEMLER GALLERY, BEIRUT

Left
Hashem el Madani, Palestinian resistant, Saida, Lebanon, 1968-72
© ARAB IMAGE FOUNDATION, BEIRUT



of former Prime Minister Hariri, which has equal numbers of supporters and sceptics. Solidere has initiated a series of upmarket streets filled with high-street stores, restaurants and outdoor cafés, but few, if any, buildings by internationally renowned architects.

One of downtown Beirut's most recognizable architectural icons, the Beirut City Center Building – a modernist structure commonly known as the Bubble or the Egg – will be renovated by Khoury, who is Beirut-born but who was schooled in the United States at Harvard University and Rhode Island School of Design. Since returning to his home city in the mid-90s, he has championed the recuperation of its war-damaged buildings and districts. Once home to a cinema, the City Center Building is a symbol of a rich cultural past as well as many years of urban devastation. Its impressive dome will be preserved as it is transformed into a place for both commercial and cultural use, as well as carving out much-needed public space.

Khoury made his mark on the Beirut landscape in 1998 with BO 18, a subterranean nightclub located in the Quarantine district that was home to arriving French troops at the beginning of the twentieth century, followed in more recent times by waves of Palestinian, Kurdish and South Lebanese refugees. The site of a massacre in the 1970s, today the area is something of a wasteland. The emptiness and memories associated with the quarter have been preserved through Khoury's bunker-like structure, which features a retractable roof – a signature element of his architecture – as its primary feature. BO 18 and the two Beirut restaurants he has designed, Centrale and Yabani, all have temporary leases: so while his endeavours are catalysts for the city's gentrification, they also bring to light the instability of their surroundings and the city's undetermined future.

The realities and memories of the war and occupation have understandably shaped the ways Lebanon has been defined both internally and externally for many generations. Today artists, architects, writers and curators are addressing these realities through an exploration of the history, social politics and urban development of the country – as well as within the larger Middle Eastern and Mediterranean regions. Tension and tentativeness have been matched, and in many circles replaced, by optimism as Lebanon is poised for cultural rebirth in the early twenty-first century. ●