



Beyond Ruptures, a Tentative Chronology

Curated by Karina El Helou

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Beyond Sisyphus, Moving Forward

On the 18th of April 1975, an exhibition of Pre-Columbian Art from Ecuador was scheduled to open at Sursock Museum. Anyone who has a slight knowledge of Lebanese history can find the date uncanny as it comes five days after the shooting of a bus in Ain el-Remmaneh, a Southern suburb of Beirut, that is considered as the beginning of the Lebanese war. Conversely, the exhibition, like any event of this kind, was planned way before April 1975. On another hand, it is common knowledge that what is called the “Lebanese War” or “Lebanese Civil War” didn’t start out of nothing and that the country tangled in unrest from the late 1960s to that fateful Sunday. These cycles of violence can eventually be traced over the entire 20th century. In 2018, Walid Raad wrote in our correspondence:

“1975: Start of the civil war? Or do we set equally contested and loaded dates for the beginnings of the war (restricting this to the 20th century): 1910, 1914, 1915, 1916, 1920, 1943, 1947, 1967, 1973, 1974?”

In the weeks and months that followed the 13th of April massacre, the country alternated between “rounds” of combat and periods of lull. People would talk about what was happening as “events.” Each time, combats would spread on wider scales, provoke more casualties and destruction, making the eventual return to “normality” more challenging. In the Autumn of 1975, the destruction of Beirut’s city center, the Battle of the hotels and the dissemination of horror in the entire country made it clear that the “events” were a war per se.

Nevertheless, the 13th of April 1975 comes without any doubt as a moment of rupture. In 2022, I co-organized with MACAM’s Diala Nammour an exhibition of posters from the collection of Cesar Nammour at Alba, the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts. We selected posters of events that took place in Lebanon during the war period in order to show how artists,

galleries and cultural workers adapted to the situation. The chronology spanned from the 13th of April 1975 to the end of 1990. The first entries of the catalogue go as follows:

- Exhibition of Sculpture and Drawings by Jack and Corda Zajac, The John F. Kennedy American Center, Hamra 17 – 25 April 1975
- Pre-Columbian Art from Ecuador, Sursock Museum, 18 April – 18 June 1975
Mahmoud Taha, Contact Art Gallery, Hamra, 22 – 29 April 1975
- Jaro Slavko, Contact Art Gallery, Hamra, 10 – 20 June 1975
- Antoine Berberi. Ten Years. Palace of Culture, Rabyeh, 26 May – 26 June 1977
- Saloua Raouda Choucair, Contact Art Gallery, Hamra, 6 – 21 December 1977

Though the collection is not exhaustive, it clearly testifies of a hiatus from the Spring of 1975 to the Spring of 1977. This blank corresponds to the first two years of the war, also called at the time “Harb al-Sanatayin” – The two-years war – by those who thought that it was over by the end of 1976 which, of course was not the case. In 1977, some art spaces reopened their doors, others, that had their premises destroyed, relocated and many definitively ceased their activities. Subsequently, new galleries emerged such as Amal Traboulsi’s *Épreuve d’artiste* and Samia Toutounji’s *Platform*. Sursock Museum that was left relatively unharmed put its public program on hold until the end of 1982. This year was for many reasons a turning point in the Lebanese War. It beheld tragic events with the Israeli Invasion of Lebanon, the Siege of West Beirut and the Sabra and Chatila Massacres. After the Israeli withdrawal of the Beirut and the city’s reunification under the control of the Lebanese Army supported by a Multinational Force, many believed once again that war was over. On the 20th of December 1982, Sursock Museum opened its first *Salon d’Automne* since 1975. In his forward of the catalogue, Victor Cassir, president of the Museum’s Board, wrote: “Here we are at the dawn of a new era of Lebanon’s history. After the dark years and the long nights, we recover hope and light.” The 1982 *Salon d’Automne* comprised a special section paying tribute to the artists who previously participated in the event and died since 1975: Farid Aouad, Hussein Badredine, Michel Basbous, Jean Khalife, Khalil Zgheib and Ibrahim Marzouk. Marzouk, who was killed by shelling on the 8th of October 1975 while waiting in a queue in front of a bakery and Khalife, who was deeply traumatized and taken by a heart attack on the 12th of December 1978, are on the list of the thousands of direct and indirect casualties of the conflict. Other notable figures would be added such as Samia Toutounji and her father the writer Tawfiq Yusuf 'Awwad who perished on the 16th of April 1989 during the bombing of the Spanish Embassy.

In addition to human wounds, the art scene endured considerable material losses. Studios were sacked and looted. This applies to Fadi Barrage in Bab Idriss and to Said Akl who lost his entire production during the Damour Massacre. Art works were taken away from various locations including homes, galleries and institutions. In the Lebanese University’s Institute of Fine Arts, paintings by alumni that ornated the historical building were gone and never returned. Dar el-Fan, one of the city’s most vibrant multidisciplinary organizations was

wrecked. So was the National Museum whose location became the crossroad on the demarcation line dividing the city in two antagonist sides, West Beirut and East Beirut. When the conditions deteriorated, the museum's curator, Emir Maurice Chehab, evacuated the collections in storage and ordered the most important pieces that were too heavy to be moved to be casted into concrete blocks. However, many valuable works of art couldn't be protected. During the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, press photographs revealed a classical statue of health goddess Hygeia in the middle of a destroyed aisle. In the mindset we inherited from the Age of Enlightenment, the museum bequeaths the legacy of civilization and its destruction is perceived as the end of the world, or, at least, the end of a world.

On the 19th of May, 2016, Ali Cherri envisioned the potential or forthcoming destruction of the museum during a discussion he held with me at the Sursock Museum Auditorium. In this public talk that accompanied his exhibition *A Taxonomy of Fallacies: The Life of Dead Objects*, Cherri questioned the fate of a museum-to-come-that-never-came, the Beirut Museum planned to be built over the archeological site on the Northern side of Martyrs Square. Cherri perhaps didn't have the prophecy of the calamities to come in the coming years though he obviously had in mind, besides Beirut's National Museum, the tragic fate of heritage sites in Iraq and Syria in the first decades of the 21st century. At that time, Sursock Museum had recently reopened after a seven-year closure for an expansion project. This was not the museum's first pause for construction works. In the early 1970s, architect Gregoire Serof was in charge of designing an extension expected to provide suitable exhibition spaces. Since then, Sursock Museum acquired its singular architectural dichotomy with a modernist – some will say “brutalist” – rear façade that is in rupture with the neo-venetian opulent decorum visible from the main entrance. The 21st century project assigned to Jean-Michel Wilmotte and Jacques Abou Khaled was even more ambitious as it multiplied the surface by five and provided types of space that weren't available before such as the above-mentioned auditorium, a library, a museum shop and a café. The 2015 reopening was followed with a state-of-the-art program including high end curated exhibitions such as *Regards sur Beyrouth*, *La fabrique des illusions* and *Baalbek, archive of an eternity*. While Sursock Museum was living its golden age, the country was on the verge of falling apart. On the evening of the 9th of October 2015 grand reopening, protests were ongoing in Beirut City Center in the context of a waste crisis that undermined the country for months. Four years later, the museum hosted its most prestigious event: *Picasso et la famille*. While socialites were gathering in the galleries and the garden to celebrate the masterpieces that traveled under high security, the city was boiling with riots. Three weeks later, rage spread and the *Thawra* –Revolt– started.

Two years and a half after Ali Cherri –and one year before the *Thawra*– it was my turn to be invited in the Twin Galleries with *Abandoned Dwellings, Display of Systems*, curated by Karina El Helou, the museum's present director. The project tackled the history of the city through its built heritage. One of the pieces was an apparatus holding 750 data sheet, each documenting one of the city's derelict edifices. Visitors could grab, manipulate and eventually

steel the sheets. In another room, a video revealed Valérie Cachard and me manipulating hundreds and documents and objects we collected from these places. The idea was not to exploit the aesthetic of the ruins but rather to recover what was perceived as lost. Numerous visitors expressed the thought that the exhibition offered them an opportunity to reconnect with the city. This was supposed to be the happy end of a lifetime obsession haunted by loss, destruction and forced eviction.

On the 17th of October 2019, Sursock Museum previewed *At the still point of the turning world, there is the dance*. The exhibition conceived by Carla Chammas and Rachel Dedman was part of Ashkal Alwan's *Home Works 8: A Forum on Cultural Practices*. In the meantime, the revolt was on its way. On that precise historical day, institutions closed their doors for an undefined period and the cultural scene moved to the streets. At the beginning of the following year, the covid pandemic slayed the last swirls of the revolution. The entire world stayed home. In the spring of 2020, deconfinement in Lebanon was accompanied by a dramatic collapse. In June, Sursock Museum opened its first time of crisis exhibition, *Pastels, or the sparkle of life: Selected works by Georges Daoud Corm*. It was the saddest vernissage I ever attended, partly because of masks and social distancing, and mostly because the of gloomy mood that prevailed. The weeks that followed were even more bitter and the country plunged into sadness and darkness. And on the 4th of August, came the end of the world. In the aftermath of the catastrophe, I wrote "We were waiting for the apocalypse and the apocalypse finally came" to author and thinker Arie Amaya Akkermans who was then based in Istanbul. He later used my sentence in the title of a piece that became seminal for this gloomy period.

In the hours that followed the double blast at the port of Beirut, Zeina Arida and Elsa Hokayem, then director and deputy director of Sursock Museum, were among the persons I inquired about. I will never forget the voice of Zeina crying on the phone, describing what they went through. The day after I went on site. In the upper floor, remained a sculpture by Saloua Raouda Choucair, scratched but still there. I photographed the work of art in the dilapidated space and published it on Instagram with the following caption:

"We are not well. We visited Sursock Museum from the cellars to the exhibition rooms. The rubble was cleaned up and artworks being removed and are stored in safety. When I saw this Saloua Raouda Choucair I couldn't stop crying."

A week later, at Sursock Cochrane Palace, opposite the street, I was also greeted by a – neoclassical – statue standing among the rubble. In my subsequent social media post, I wrote:

"Sisyphus or life after the end of the world. My encounter with Sursock-Cochrane palace was during my Masters, when I studied their collection of 17th c. Italian

paintings. That was a long time before I went into ruined houses. Never I would have imagined that both projects would melt into this apocalypse.”

The reminiscence of these statues surviving in the ruins reminded me Beirut’s National Museum in 1982 and the 18th century artist Hubert Robert. I felt I was living inside one of his paintings: *Imaginary view of the Grand Gallery of the Louvre in ruins*.

Ruins are present in the entire corpus of Hubert Robert. He either depicted existing edifices notably in Rome or set up architectural fantasies. *The Grand Gallery in ruins* stands aside as the place existed – and still exists – and never experienced devastation. Significantly, paintings have disappeared and in the middle of the wreckage, an artist is seated, drawing a bronze statue after the famed *Apollo Belvedere* whilst Michelangelo’s *Dying Slave* lays broken in the lower right corner. The dramatic view was executed in 1796, after the Revolution, the Terror and the dilapidation of heritage sites. The artist had likewise read a literary best seller of the time, Louis-Sébastien Mercier’s *The Year 2440* where the narrator wanders in the Château de Versailles watching debris, pierced walls and mutilated statues. On another side, *The Grand Gallery in ruins* is not a lone piece but part of a pair with *Project for lighting the gallery of the Museum by the vault, et to divide it without losing the view of the prolongation, also called Project for the transformation of the Grand Gallery*. This composition discloses the same perspective in an intact state, with visitors and paintings everywhere. Masterpieces by Raphael, Titian and Guido Reni are notably visible. Most viewers figure out that one pendant – the living museum – represents the past or the present and the other – the ruin – is about a dystopian future. It is actually the contrary, as Hubert Robert submitted *Project for the transformation of the Grand Gallery* as an architectural proposal. In his mind, the idea behind this diptych was to contribute building a new museum after a period of turmoil. Hubert Robert was right and wrong at the same time. In the centuries that followed, Paris endured the wars, revolts and destruction. The Louvre’s immediate neighbor, the Tuileries Palace, was set ablaze during the Commune and torn down after. During World War II, the museum survived the appetites of the German Occupants. Despite all, the Louvre grew to become one of the world’s finest institutions.

After the 4th of August explosions, Walid Raad wrote to me: “And I remember our talking about the scratches being in the world — here we are now.” In 2023, after the Turkey–Syria earthquake, Arie Amaya Akkermans wrote to me: “The Apocalypse Goes On.” Despite all, we are still here. Some of us died and we still are mourning them. Some of us left and we miss them. The rest of us stayed and is alive. Drained, wounded and impoverished, but alive. And, beyond the Myth of Sisyphus, moving forward. So, we are and so is Sursock Museum.

Appendix: The Ruin of the Ruin

The pair of paintings by Hubert Robert was in the Imperial residence of Tsarskoye Selo until the Russian Revolution. Sold in 1917, it traveled to Buenos Aires then New York until its acquisition by the Louvre in 1975. Among the recent bibliographical references on these works is the voluminous catalogue of the exhibition *Hubert Robert Un peintre visionnaire 1733 – 1808* held in the Louvre in 2016. It is the only book in my studio that was damaged on the 4th of August 2020 as a shard of glass flew across the room and transpierced binding area like a cutter. The nowadays knotty manipulation and reading of the volume was a foremost inspiration for this text.