Reconstructions Revisited: Unearthing the Place of the Local and the Case of Post-Civil War Beirut

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Abstract

The example of Beirut's downtown reconstruction after the ruin of the Lebanese Civil War is upheld often as a case of privatization out of control or a failure of civic planning. Attention to the writings of urban policy critics and the literary and aesthetic works of post-war Lebanese reveals a different picture of simultaneous demolition and resurrection that uncannily tallies with the account of hysteria. Through a parallel examination of urban studies specialists, archeologists and artists this article approaches a local model of the inscription of memory as material and immaterial at once. Beirut offers to memorial studies a different terrain that challenges the received ideas of the field through encounter with a locality that does not obey the conventions of trauma studies. To encounter Beirut, we need new tools. I propose that revisit the model of hysteria to excavate the simultaneity of exposure/disclosure and burial immanent in aesthetic examples and the theoretical and material accounts of local urbanists.

Keywords: Demolition, Reconstruction, Beirut, Hysteria, Literature

Prologue

> We must believe in a sense of life renewed by the theater, a sense of life in which man
> fearlessly makes himself master of what does not yet exist, and brings it into being. And
> everything that has not been born can still be brought to life if we are not satisfied to
> remain mere recording organisms. Antonin Artaud[1]

Artaud's 1938 essay, "Theater and its Double" inaugurated a revolution in avant-garde aesthetics with its notion that real theatre should infect its audience with a desire to be more than "recording organisms." To rescue theater from ruin, Artaud was also compelled to reflect on cities and sickness in the body politic. Specifically, he began with the tale, part history, part fable, of the ship, the *Grand St. Antoine* (Great St. Anthony), which sailed from Beirut to Cagliari where it sought safe harbor. The ruler of the town, having had a vivid premonition in his dream, refused to admit the ship and chased it from his shores. Later the Grand St. Antoine found refuge in Marseilles where the crew died of a disease that swept through the town: the "oriental" plague. Artaud draws an unusual conclusion from this historical instance. For him, the plague city is a figure for community, bound together by dead language and empty movement, where the only recourse is to not to cure the sick — remedy there is none because history cannot be undone — but to reinvent life by invoking a "psychic entity" and a desire for communication. We must be, Artaud says, like "victims burnt at the stake, gesturing through the flames." Without prescribing catastrophe as a purging fire, Artaud's plague city in ruins stands as an example of a political aesthetics intent to communicate the psychic facts of social renewal. Today I propose to take the plague ship back to the East to revisit some questions of place, location and urban history in the city of Beirut

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1) Antonin Artaud (1958), p. 13.

that have preoccupied me for over a decade.[2] In revisiting Beirut's constant renewal and unending demolition, I will argue that Artaud's plague city remains an apt emblem for the politics of locality, where memory, as in Beirut, cannot be linearly plotted but emerges always entangled with futurity and irreducibly fragmented. If hysteria is the preeminent model of pathological forgetting, Artaud, in contrast, portrays the hysteric's embodied memory as a vital means to perpetuate and reinvigorate a lived rapport to disaster and its recall in the politics of locality.

Better known as a major battlefield in Lebanon's civil war, which lasted from 1975-1990/1, Beirut has since the beginning of the 20thc been the site of constant urban development and demolition. Since the mid-1990's projects of urban reconstruction have been conducted by private enterprises that justify themselves through a mixed appeal: on the one hand they announce their modernity as a redemption of historical destruction and on the other, they invoke, some would say invent, an oriental style to anchor the new in the local. No unified, municipal plan exists for urban renewal in the city with the result that the privatization of renewal does not carry the stamp of democratic legitimacy. Preservation of antiquities and a sudden flowering of small museums catering to different ethnicities and confessions — Lebanon is home to 18 different religious faiths — give the impression that historical memory is a national obsession. Indeed, the claiming of history and the rights to memory form one of the poles of national belonging to a public sphere that has no consensual history, for this is a country with no unified curriculum where

school children today learn radically different histories of the same space depending upon the confessional orientation of schools they attend. National memory is itself a provocation and a social contest borne out in the urban landscape by the built environment and the social spaces it displaces.

Reaching their peak in 2009, urban renewal projects involving mixed-use, high-end residences and visionary consumer arcades ─ all with an oriental flair in design and décor ─ reflect, according to urban studies specialist, Mona Harb, a globalized rather than a local conception of the city, and this is quite ironic for a city that has hosted human habitation for millennia. While there is much truth to the claim that urban renewal has taken its cue more from the malls of Orange County than the traditional markets of the Middle East, one fact complicates the effort to globalize in this way: Beirut is still marked by war in its urban landscape and its own self-discourse, a fact graphically reflected in the choice to preserve certain signs of combat as souvenirs carefully framed by exquisite commercial facades. The salient example of this tendency to forget by preserving exists in the restoration of the Martyr's Square memorial statues with their war inflicted bullet holes intact and planted mere meters from the Rafiq Hariri memorial now nearing completion. The temptation to erase war with the new inscription of reconstruction while a strong desire for some citizens and certainly a necessity for the profitable new city center is not supported either by the actual landscape nor the chronology of demolition and rebuilding for as Joe Nasr argues, "The dual image of Beirut as war city versus as rebuilt city is also false because there were multiple reconstructions of Beirut and because of the intricate connections between destructions and reconstructions."[3] If the globalized city rises timelessly from its foundations, Beirut can never be of its kind. A city of layered history, lacking any urban plan and possessed of

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3) Joe Naser and Eric Verdeil (2008), pp. 115-42.

exposed strata of antiquities, demolition and excavation demands other terms of description and analysis, terms that can be sensitive to the city's habit of appearing and disappearing.

> Can you imagine Cairo without the city centre? Can you imagine Egypt without the city center of Cairo? No, I have not made my peace with Beirut and I think it's too late, because the Beirut I need to make my peace with is no longer there."[4] So says Hoda Barakat, whose novel *The Stone of Laughter/hajr al-dhak* follows the transformation of Beirut from the polyglot city we knew into the segmented spaces of discrete identities that the civil war literalized on the city map as the sides of the Green Line. Characteristic of Lebanese artists' critiques of a progressivist and modernist version of history, Barakat's comment undoes the clean division between past and present which grounds a politics of memorials, monuments and recon- struction. "Beirut is no longer there" might be the motto of the new Beirut as it negotiates with the haunting remains of everyday life, in the form of personal, civic and archeological ruin for postwar reconstruction extends and repeats the issues of war unresolved even after the most pressing danger subsides. The case of the revived post-war Beirut, phoenix from the ashes heralded in so many headlines for the last fifteen years, suggests that without leaving her native soil, Beirut has become herself a stranger and no more so than in the cultural projects that must ask, along with Ziad Abdallah and Farah Awada of the *Arab Image Foundation*. "How does one write the history of the civil war in Lebanon? How are the objects, thoughts and emotions of the war apprehended? How do we represent traumatic events of collective historical dimensions when the very notion of experience is itself in question?[5]

I wish to approach this question of experience through three different examples: 1. Hoda Barakat's 1990 novel *The Stone of Laughter/hajr al-dhak*, written in Arabic and widely translated, has become a touchstone text for Beirut artists and intellectuals; 2. the films and collages of Walid Raad, whose work has

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4) Hoda Barakat quoted in Rakha (1999).
5) Abdallah and Awada (1999), pp. i-xiv.

shown internationally at the Berlin Biennale and elsewhere, along with his fictional project "The Atlas Group", an imaginary collective of scholars and artists investigating the psychic traces of the war, are widely-known, and 3. an archeological catastrophe in Beirut's city centre, authors too numerous to name. Each of these approaches promises to extend our understanding of social memory to incorporate the unconscious historical dimension of a shared situation without relegating the commonly held to a common sense or a discrete private experience. Postwar Beiruti artists and intellectuals have drawn upon psychoanalysis and the French avant-garde to invent new models for examining the aftermath of war in the social landscape; this has yielded a valuable set of reflections on the unconscious burden of social memory. What the unconscious adds to questions about representation and its proper form is the very responsibility to ask the question of response and responsibility for as these examples attest, historical memory is not a self-evident fact, but a stranger exiled in his native soil.

Works of art that ask us to reflect upon the politics of memory find their uncanny echo in the controversy over the urban renewal planned in the early 1990s for Beirut's central district and historic downtown, historically the location of the first settlements. Though slated to break ground in 1993 the reconstruction project was repeatedly interrupted due to political controversy. The area in question covers one of the richest archaeological sites of the Mediterranean, containing the detritus of between 5000 and 7000 years of continuous habitation of the two islands in the delta now called Beirut. Despite a series of false starts and halted construction, bulldozing and excavations proceeded only to discover a wealth of archaeological finds; yet the majority of these were destroyed while still others adjacent were never excavated. This simultaneous destruction and reconstruction mimics the rhythms of war; as

Nasr in his historical survey of the recent reconstruction puts it, "During the more recent war, the distinction between the time of destruction and the time of rebuilding itself is not clear since the reconstruction's projects were a factor of destruction or at least demolition." This simultaneous destruction and renewal is an uncanny echo of the memory rifts also found in novels and films of Beirut and its diaspora. The scandal caused by the knowing obliteration of archaeological materials in the new Beirut, defended as the "necessary cost' of reconstruction in the city centre, converts one symptom of underdevelopment — the visible presence of bombed buildings — into another symptom, this time of overdevelopment. Moving from symptom to symptom, urban development repeats the violence of war in the very same space where it was fought. The destruction of the archaeological heritage of Beirut, which Albert Naccache has called a "memory-cide," raises the dead unseen and unknown and issues an impersonal call to care for the inanimate. As one wrestles with the appearance and disappearance of Beirut, destruction and reconstruction are impossible to separate. Key terms used to approach postwar urban space (terms like: reclaiming, reconstruction, renewal or restitution) are inadequate to describe the shifting urban terrain because in the last two decades the city has been caught between the destruction of memory, history and habitation and the simultaneous reconstruction of new spaces that claim indigeneity. It is a fact that no building or monument has emerged as the bearer of national redemption or reparation.

The archeological example sharply illustrates the problem. When the Taliban destroyed the Bamyan Buddhas, international condemnation was swift to follow. In his interview, "Islam and Its Discontents,"[6] Meddeb goes so far as to suggest that this should have provoked military action on the part of the UN and that it was a missed opportunity for the world to enter Afghanistan and

6) Meddeb (2002).

forcibly remove the Taliban and al-Qaeda leaders. At the very least few would disagree that the destruction constitutes an outrage committed on a world treasure. In contrast, the case of Beirut and the demolition of untold treasures — uncounted because largely unexcavated — drew little media attention in 1995, only a few years before the Buddhas' destruction; a survey of the English, French and Arabic media archive shows scant coverage of the issue. Both cases involve histories of sectarian violence and the intrigues of superpowers, both reveal the entanglements of global politics, yet the salient difference lies with the fact that Beirut's antiquities were not spectacularly available to perform the duties of historical, political and aesthetic representation with which the Buddhas were charged. Their unexcavated state veiled the international duty and responsibility to protect and conserve them. Worse, no object or structure could be held up as a representative of a people or creed and this lack only strengthens the general "imperceptibility" of the southern and eastern Mediterranean cultures in current Western schemas of historical value. This failure to value the record of habitation belongs also to Beirut, as we shall see, but the question remains: What responsibility do we bear towards the unrevealed monuments and repositories of world heritage still buried beneath our modern rubble? While the world responds in crisis to the destruction of the visible, Beirut's artists and intellectuals attest to the crisis of the invisible – sacred and profane, remembered and forgotten, intelligible and unintelligible.

Speculative Returns

The question of how to write history when destruction and reconstruction are simultaneous rather than staged in sequence is a main obsession of the artist, Walid Raad, whose videos and gallery installations employ found images

to create fictions of history. Raad gathers images from newspapers and photography archives and recordings from sound archives and reuses these to tell imaginary histories. He begins his video *The Dead Weight of a Quarrel Hangs* with the fable of gambling Lebanese historians who pass the days of war at the race track,[7] where they distract themselves in the serious business of predicting the future — a near future and one entirely dependent upon the chance bound up in the recording of events, here the record of the photographer whose picture authorizes the winning horse:

> It is said that they convinced (some say bribed) the photographer to snap only one picture as the winning horse arrived. Each historian wagered on precisely when - how many fractions of a second before or after the horse crossed the finish line - the photographer would expose his frame.[8]

Speculation for sure, but no one is betting on the horse. Rather they wager on the utter contingency of the flash, on the disorder within the manufacture of order. The photos are duly recorded in the daily paper, *Annahar*, for all to witness. Charged to certify the winner, the archivist is also the photographer who shoots the picture but cannot himself determine the moment, the position or the placement of the horse. An arbitrariness inscribed within the structure of authority, the errant winning moment remains to be wagered while it opens itself to its own divisibility, plus or minus several hundredths of a second. This fable of the "temporal dimensions of writing history" suggests that history, even

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7) The Palais des Paix is a racetrack like no other. Situated near Beirut's city centre an divided by the infamous Green Line, the track was a repeated theatre of war hosting even Sharon's bloody invasion of June 1982 during which Sharon ordered the burning of the venerable forest surrounding it and in the process slaughtered 120 horses. Ridded with bullet holes, the track nonetheless remained intermittently open during the war. Nassar (1991).

8) Abdallah and Awada (1999), p. i.

the official history guaranteed in public, free of any ideological slant and countersigned by institutional sanction and public repetition, is itself the absolute invention of a chance moment.

Like the gambling historians, the representation of traumatic history must disclose its debt to speculation and invention by eschewing chronicles of certainty for a reflection on its own state of exile. In Abdallah and Awada's "Some Missing Lebanese Wars," which in its published form partially repeats the opening gambit of Raad's video, the authors argue that the war cannot be reduced to a collection of facts and objects ranged in a distinct and easily archivable chronology. Nor can we approach the war as a series of purely personal memories. Each of these points of departure feigns to leave intake the authority of experience, as if that were not the very thing most obscured by the shared character of this shattering trauma. The war is not only the compendium of details but also "an abstraction constituted by various discourses."[9] It spreads across the imaginary boundary that separates the specific and unique event or object from its own discursive framing, what Abdallah and Awada call abstraction, of the event. Cutting across the conceptual categories conventionally available to the historian and the archivist, this war, this trauma demands a new vocabulary, one that will not skirt the unappealing truth that civil war cannot be narrated by the victors. There are no victors here and thus this civil war must first be approached through a more fundamental responsibility to ask "how to write this history?" without being capable of a final answer. Think of it this way: civil war is a catastrophe that demands "we" assume a responsibility for what we do not and cannot know in any final and absolute way. It is the catastrophe that makes us accountable to the unseen stranger in our midst without our knowing how to be responsible

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9) Ibid.

before this invisible trace of the other. For the race track historians, that stranger is the moment of chance. For the authors of "Some Missing Lebanese Wars" responsibility takes the form of fiction because national history has failed them. They invent fables of history which do not offer a factual account retold as fiction; instead they "offer an image of what can be imagined, what can be said, what can be taken for granted, and what can appear as rational or not — as thinkable and sayable about the war and about the possibilities and limits of writing its history".[10]

Raad, Abdallah and Awada approach this strangely groundless archive when they invite us to think of their allegories of war as "hysterical symptoms" in a collective memory; implied is a link between experience and history which then embodies itself in the form of fantasy, stories and details not easily assimilated to instrumental reason.[11] In the video *The Dead Weight of a Quarrel Hangs*, ordinary objects signify a history of violent removal, flight and exile as stories are told over still photographs of family interiors: a birthday party, a family gathering or family portrait. These objects remain shadowy vestiges of another archive, one that records events but burns the record book. Behind smiling faces in family photos, the almost menacing and immobile presence of a crystal vase, a ceramic deer, a framed photo carry for their owner the date of hasty departure and a specific and singular retreat from danger as the voice over recites the list of cities the family has escaped. We see the same objects in new locales and new interiors as the family has moved from one city in crisis to another. Each banal object of an ordinary interior becomes a subtle presence that attests to a history of remarkable movement and historic ruptures: Freetown, Beirut, Jerusalem. Each marks the place of a wound where the very

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10) Ibid., p. ii.
11) Abdallah, Awada and Raad explicitly employ this Freudian term.

notion of place is at odds with the task of memorial.

What can these words "unconscious" and "hysterical symptom" offer in the way of analytic clarity or inspiration to the new Beiruti intellectual or artist who must face domestic estrangement by the fact of war past? Another member of the Atlas Group, Maha Traboulsi, explains the social function of fable: "We have to discover, in the sense that we have to invent, the stories that will convincingly establish in popular minds a link between the detected hysterical symptoms and the traumatic events and situations that have produced such symptoms. We have to integrate these traumatic events into the associative chain of meaning in language, and as such to diffuse their affective power to disrupt our healthy functioning." In this view, fictions that situate the random symptom in its meaningful context would disarm dangerous memory.

The practice here described extends conversion from hysteria to a textual medium that displaces feeling by articulating its relation to other events, words or objects. But these artists pursue an infinite series of conversion rather than adopt a cathartic model. It is worth noting that in the language of psychoanalysis, conversion hysteria is linked to writing and to the body for it describes the conversion of repressed wishes and alarming contents (memories and fantasies) into bodily symptoms. This is somatization of thought, in which memory and fantasy commute thought into bodily signs legible from the exterior and susceptible of further interpretive conversion and transfer. Each transfer distorts the contents while successive hysterical symptoms gesture beyond interpretive translation. Hysteria converts itself, altering original memory beyond recall in the workings of fantasy such that "to suffer from reminiscences" is to suffer the loss of an unmediated past.[12] Hysterical symptoms are the signs of a repeated and stubborn recollection that one does not know

12) Freud (1974).

while at the same time, hysteria asserts the mediation of the present through its contamination by the past. These mechanisms of recollection reconnect the subject to an embodied world threatened with dismemberment and disappearance. The unconscious, then, is one model we have of a "location" or system of salvage that rescues repressed content altered beyond recognition but still usable, legible and capable of signifying. In this way, repressed contents that have been denied access to the light of consciousness come back into focus and are able to signify although authentic and original meanings have been lost. The artists I have been describing understand hysteria and its symptoms in this sense and for that reason do not propose a simple model of healing through recollection and ceremonies of memorial. Rather they engage in the chain of conversions and follow transformation as it is underway.

This model of infinite transformation is very far from the detective work that popular culture associates with psychoanalysis. In that dramatic narrative, the analyst digs deep and triumphs over suffering by confronting the patient with a buried treasure, a hidden memory and a total meaning. Hysteria and its analysis operate through a very different logic. Hysteria, through its intimacy with what cannot be retrieved, reveals the tie between body and public space, personal memory and collective fantasy, and is an apt metaphor for the spatio-temporal ruin that is the social bond and the tissue of history in an era of reconstruction. No coincidence then that the history of modern architecture and that of the psyche share a common "substance." As Anthony Vidler puts it in his study of the architectural uncanny, "the realms of the organic space of the body and the social space in which that body lives and works…no longer can be identified as separate."[13] Vidler further links personal memory and collective memory by arguing that psychoanalysis and modern subjectivity

13) Vidler (1996), p. 168.

render the wished-for distinction between the body and space untenable.

Extending Foucault's account of modern power exercised through the material conceit of transparency, a vision of power most vividly expressed in the figure of Bentham's Panopticon, Vidler shows that the cultivation and dependence upon such an imagination of power has as its uncanny double the simultaneous "invention of a spatial phenomenology of darkness."[14] Dark and light, shadow and transparency, these become the coordinates of a dispensation of public space that zones the dark, crowding it out into the light of scientific scrutiny of brothels, gambling houses, prisons, wastelands. Such a zoning of the uncanny double of power also designates persons as carriers of such "dark" and for Vidler's history of architecture's uncanny, the homeless emerge as a significant unwanted and menacing dark double. Part genealogy and part postmodern critique of a modernist folly, namely, that the body could be clearly distinguished from the transparent spaces of its public habitation, Vidler's work offers a corroboration of the claim to the public space of the unconscious found in the works of postwar Lebanese artists from Raad and The Atlas Group to novels like Rabih Alameddine's AIDS narrative, Koolaids, and Barakat's *The Stone of Laughter*, a meditation on precisely these transformations of war written in Beirut in the 1980's.

In an interview in 1995 Barakat explains, "I write of wars because I have no power; no arms or soldiers. I belong to the dark and dampness and to the forgetfulness of those making history in the streets... under the boots stepping over my head, I still write as if I am an empress or a dictator."[15] Unearthly yet subterranean — literally, she wrote from a basement yet used her surroundings as a metaphor for the reconstruction underway on the page. As Beirut was

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14) Ibid., p. 169.
15) Hoda Barakat, quoted in Fadia Faqir (1995), p. 5. Further references in parentheses.

destroyed, in the very moment of its advance toward ruin and even in its assault on the ruins of antiquity, she rebuilt destruction on the page and as the record of what destroys memory.

Barakat's novelistic technique belongs to this dark forgetfulness as she records the suspension of the present; like hysteria's conversions, this narrative style becomes a mode of preservation that salvages the present but already in ruins. The novel follows the development of a child into male warrior but its story of development is actually one of destruction of character. This reverse bildung is also mirrored in the transformations of interior spaces and public squares. Here architecture is not a metaphor for destruction; it is a character or feature of the novel's investigation of social disaggregation and its argument that "growth", even the life in death that is civil war, is embodied and not merely a matter of intellectual or emotional development. For instance, by the 1980's, new routines of daily life were established along the Green Line, the area of what had been Martyr's Square, which became the battlefield for warring factions who could take cover in the abandoned store fronts, hotels and high rises that line the square. The shooting would generally commence at noon and continue late into the night and so the daily shopping that was typically done in late afternoon and evening had to shift to morning. Barakat offers an example of how time and collective senses are revised by the ruin of the present: "When the sun is high in the sky, to us it is a sign that the city is on its way back home. That is, because the way we reckon our days has come apart from the way that time is generally reckoned by the sun…this has made the city's dictionary hard to understand, for an expression such as 'people go back to their houses' is not longer spontaneous and self-explanatory…the 'darkness' of what we know as night settles, while people listen out for the moment… the metaphoric night settles in as their inner sense of hearing waits

for the revelations of this new night and their ears busily begin to gather up the echoes of the day that is done, so that their heads will be able to respond quickly to the dangers and surprises that the night of afternoon brings, as well as those of the dark night that follows…"(p. 25). Throughout the novel, personal time and the development of character and plot are structured through disruption and the subjective rituals that emerge to control disruption. As time progresses, these rituals are again disrupted and new ones emerge; such a structure of perpetual reconstruction on the basis of a demolition of character, time and space creates a jumbled terrain in which violence is equated to incomplete erasure; traces remain to complicate the present just as all the inhabitants of Beirut who heeded the new daily clock and took to their homes at noon, knew another clock and another time.

In a similar move, Raad evokes the sun as emblem of how the facts of time and space are rewritten by the war's new conventions of forgetting in his film *The Dead Weight of a Quarrel Hangs*. His allegory of a surveillance agent, who daily turns the camera away from its focal point on the busy crowds to record sunset, is one such story of a habitual action that is meaningless in itself but takes on significance in the context of the strange dislocation of community, time and space in civil war. I will now show you a short clip of this film composed of 3 parts; you will be seeing the final segment itself divided into two portions. The first segment overlays the President's farewell speech (in Arabic) with a narration that is translated in the English subtitles and explains that the former President had the habit of taking a photo everyday that he thought the war would end. The resulting collection is then shown as a rapid sequence of images. The second segment concerns the story of the sunset-loving security agent in the post war period. Discovered by the security forces, he is fired and his videos confiscated. Later a portion of these are returned to

him. What we see are the security tapes along with his explanation that he would stop shooting the sun when "he thought it had set". It is worth noting that in Arabic the Mediterranean is called "bahr al-abiyad al-wasta"/ "the middle white sea" because of its characteristic fog or haze which historically, made it a perfect hunting ground for pirates; at least two of the sunsets are difficult to judge complete because of the fog. Turning this fog to his advantage, Raad creates fables from the detritus of actuality but weaves the rumored and believable into visually mysterious narratives of blanked out sound, blinded cameras (as when the image drops out but the sound remains) or cameras that record randomly. The record of time and space becomes a symptom of failed meaning and resistant personal ritual. It is a joke to suggest that the president took pictures of food or advertisements on the days he hoped the war would end, but it is no joke to suggest that government was helpless even as it exercised impotent power. Likewise, the security agent who sits in judgment on a sunset is performing something other than surveillance. In the absence of sovereignty and a failure of governmentality, these little allegories gesture toward the presence of other intelligence and a displacement of communication analogous to the hysterical symptom.

If no one knows when or if the sun will set, if sunset is a fact of personal judgment rather than social or scientific consensus then the evidentiary character of the visible is also in question. In the same way, new habits — like shutting down the markets at noon during the war or establishing a "world class" shopping mall in the historic city center — are effects of the simultaneous destruction and reconstruction that at least one urbanist has called an endemic and local form of "spatial erasure."[16] In fact, the critical descriptions of recent reconstruction projects sound very much like the hysterical symptoms

16) Fawaz and Ghandour (2009).

of memory and the personal rituals that both Barakat and Raad evoke. The urbanists Fawaz and Ghandour make this point when they describe contemporary building in terms of memory and claim that "anything prior to demolition is reduced to a reservoir of moments, selectively invoked to serve the interests of the new project, stripped from social and/or political significance."

Symptoms of Reconstruction

This political aesthetics of hysteria attempts to account for a local historical problem that shapes the relation of body and public space, psyche and national history; the examples I've referenced all agree that we bear a responsibility to what suspends the authority of the record and interrupts the production of knowledge. Conservative, then, in the best sense, this aesthetic model in its attention to the temporal dimension of history and psyche attempts to rescue the link between private and public as a way of "writing history" in a speculative mode. Without advocating the healing effects of memory, a position that covers over the insistence of memory in the symptom and the often painful or simply pointless effect of such symptoms, these artists pursue the link between symptomatic realities and the historical conditions that produced them. Rather than offering remedies, art works like this are political because they reveal the connection between fragments. Nonetheless, it is no exaggeration to say that these aesthetic practices reach their limit when faced with the twin threats of progress, in the form of urban reconstruction, and the lingering vestiges of sectarian rivalry, evident at the national level in the social management of Beirut's antique heritage.

The territory of the city center, heavily damaged by intensive shelling during

the war, was incorporated in the postwar period under a single private real estate corporation called Solidère, which then sold shares to private individuals including such public officials as the Prime Minister. The reconstruction of Lebanon's economy and infrastructure, an obvious priority, concentrated heavily on the downtown area as an easily understandable sign of renewal, progress and cessation of violence. The original urban plan did not incorporate a design for archaeological preservation, and it was not until digging started and massive finds were discovered that the corporation came up with such a plan. Critics allege that the motive behind this turnabout had everything to do with the prospect of profit from finds and nothing to do with stewardship of antique heritage. Whatever the motivation, the fact remains that archaeolgists working for the corporation engaged in what they themselves referred to as "rescue excavations" conducted in haste on "sites selected for development."[17] Surrounded by bags of cement and stacks of rebar awaiting the imminent construction of the new city, Solidère's archaeologists dug out a Neolithic village, a Roman arcade and baths, a medieval souk, a Phoenician port, all to be photographed and catalogued but most to be reburied as the infrastructural foundation of the urban plan. Historian and archaeologist Alfred Naccache describes the scene as a total catastrophe:

> Until November 1994, Beirut's archaeological site, the site of the oldest continuously inhabited city among capitals of the world, and a repository to nearly five millennia of urban occupation, lay under its old Downtown. Then, in November 1994, with the participation of teams of European archaeologists under the international supervision of UNESCO, bulldozers started destroying large sections of it. Today, the massive destruction of Beirut's archaeological site is an objective fact.[18]

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17) Curvers. The report of Solidere's archaeological team can be found at:
   http://almashriq.hiof.no/lebanon/900/930/930.1/beirut/reconstruction/curvers_unesco_april.html
18) Naccache (1998).

Naccache's account of the "deliberate campaign to obliterate a common though 'forgotten history,'" what he calls a "memorycide," can be corroborated by other sources. Naji Karam testifies that an ancient church replete with frescos was torn down without so much as a photograph to preserve it. "No sewage system or tunnel has been deviated of one meter to save an archaeological vestige or historical monument. Often, no one even bothered sending an archaeologist to supervise the bulldozers or tractors; although, Beirut's terrain was endowed with exceptional archaeological richness."[19]

Memorycidal destruction of heritage repeats the by now familiar experience of civil war. According to Naccache's analysis of the site, most of the area was bulldozed without excavation in order to clear the site for building. When a bulldozer levels terrain it compacts the ground, compressing the rifts that riddle the dry earth. It destroys what lies beneath: fabric splits, pottery shatters and walls collapse. Clearing in preparation for the new is not a neutral practice; it performs unseen violence on the unknown body of underground memory. In this case, the promise of a unified national history to match the urban progress is dashed.

The struggle over the unexcavated objects, most of which were destroyed by the reconstruction of history undertaken in the name of the newly recovered nation, assumed the form of two opposed conceptions of archaeology: 1. Treasure hunting — rescue missions that salvage what is being destroyed by the rescue itself. Such an approach amounts to retrieving lost memory on the model of cathartic discharge, which seeks only what it finds in a redemptive idealization of the past; and 2. History writing — an archaeology that does not conceive of memory or the archive as a fly in amber but argues for the

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19) Dr. Naji Karam lists the finds.

complexity of history and the need for interpretive and scientific analysis. On this account memory is not a lost object to be found by the detective or treasure hunter; rather, history is largely a wager on the unknown in the pursuit of knowledge and in the face of felt need. Raad's gambling historians are one fictional emblem of this.

While the catastrophe was heralded as the redemption of history, in fact there remains a dire need for what Naccache calls a "consensual writing of Lebanese history," the lack of which catalyzed the explosion of civil war:

> During the mayhem of the first two years of the war, an estimated 150,000 Lebanese or 5% of the population on both sides of the newly carved dividing line, lost their lives before the society could be rearranged along the "Phoenician/Arab" rift... [which] is recognized as the main chronic ailment of the Lebanese body politic, so much so that the demand for a "Unified Lebanese History Book" is the only unanimously endorsed demand in Lebanon today. But no two Lebanese, historians or not, can agree on how to proceed from the available data to write such a history book and have it accepted by all parties. (Naccache, p. 146)

The opportunity to confirm or to challenge the Phoenician myth,[20] a sectarian national epic espoused by a powerful minority, is lost in the very spaces where the Solidère corporation now presents distinct "ethnic" phases of history on the model of a history already "known," though unproven in advance of the digs and devastation. The sickness of the body politic takes the form of an inability to write or to address itself as a whole in its public works and national institutions; the rift between creeds breeds more symptomatic signs of a mass conversion hysteria without a subject. It is history and a social memory that are made hysterical in and by a writing block, the result of insufficient data,

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20) Cf. D. T. Potts and Hassan for two reports, relevant to the Lebanese case, on the politics of social memory (1998).

repression and trauma, and a memorycidal tendency that wants to know no more. From the perspective of the historian, a detailed material history of the local inhabitants in the first millennium BC "might have helped answer the question of their 'ethnic' identity. Were they 'Phoenicians' or 'Arabs,' or, better, can we really differentiate between the two and if so during what period. This is surely a vital question for Lebanese history" (Naccache, p. 149).

It is a fair bet that Naccache would argue for the common origin of Beirut's people; he shows his hand when offering an example of what is lost at the threshold of the digs. Found: a fragment of a pot handle dating from the second century BC and bearing the potter's name in Greek, ABDOI. As Naccache reminds us, Abdu is a common Arab name, one found in all the faiths of Lebanon. Such a detail in context, in the material context of its burial place, of the open dig approached with care and using the techniques of scientific preservation, such a detail has the potential to unlock an historical picture, a first page of that missing history book. But the site was destroyed; the book was burned before it was written. "The aborted archaeological program has denied the Lebanese the opportunity to acquire a common ancestor and to have a common history" (Naccache, p. 150). And worse, this missing common ancestor, who will now never be known, is also now a given. He has a name. Stranger in our midst, he is given to us as a fragment of an historical trauma, hasty salvage and ruined rescue. A sign of the continued conversion of the civil war into yet more symptomatic traces, the Abdoi fragment is also the sign of that missing book of universal Lebanese history. Like the humble interior objects in Raad's film, the Abdoi potsherd is another silent object in the background of a family photo, this one on the missing page in the still burning book of Lebanese history. The historians find themselves sworn to speculation while the archaeologists, credited with the most direct

drive for origins, are dispossessed of their authority to write the normative history of the nation. Like Raad's gamblers, they can only speculate on the unknown, the unretrieved and the now, newly ruined remains of history.

Naccache, too, becomes a figure in our story for he resembles Barakat and Raad in that he can do no more than "gesture through the flames," while being completely unable to put out the fire.

Treasure Hunting

Responding to the archaeological crisis, Solidère has preserved certain zones of the reconstructed downtown in the form of representative monuments to past historical eras. One can tour the ancient mosque and the Ottoman souks or pass the time gazing at a Byzantine mosaic. These take the form of a stylized garden of archaeological delights are even celebrated as an attraction of luxurious addresses in real estate advertisements directed at a business clientele. To judge from official sources, the Solidère corporation, in conjunction with forward-looking investors, has retrieved the national patrimony from oblivion and redeemed the buried artifacts and structures. But such an account of the past skirts the problem of our responsibility to it by begging the question of means and ends. It fails to produce more than another set of images, aspirations and collective fantasies. For Solidère cannot and will not ask the question of our continued responsibility to shelter and remember the buried and invisible relics of our history and our forgetting, to know that we do not know.

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