A Fractured Mirror:

Beirut's Cultural Scene and the Search for Identity

Eric Reidy

Center for Media and Cultural Freedom

THE SAMIR KASSIR FOUNDATION

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Foreword

At a time when the modern boundaries of the Middle East are seemingly being pulled apart by political and social upheaval, some may ask: *Why pay attention to a report about culture in the midst of this turmoil? Aren't there more important topics to focus on?*

In Syria, government forces and rebels are fighting each other in a civil war that, according to current analysis, appears to be splitting the country into thirds: one controlled by the majority Sunni opposition, another by pro-Bashar Al-Assad Alawites and their supporters, and, the third, a Kurdish region close to the Iraqi and Turkish borders. Furthermore, sectarian tensions in Iraq between the Shia-dominated government and the predominantly Sunni opposition appear to be spiraling towards conflict as well. Finally, these sectarian pressures are taking a toll on Lebanon's fragile stability. The violence is already beginning to spill over Lebanon's borders and is threatening to embroil the country in another violent round of sectarian clashes.

One of the major arguments being put forward to explain these conflicts is that, without their authoritarian leaders to hold them together, Middle Eastern societies are sliding back into ancient divisions. As a result, the logical conclusion of these conflicts will be the establishment of a series of smaller, sectarian statelets.

This analysis is troubling on several levels. First, it is rooted in orientalist tropes that view Arab society as fundamentally anti-modern. Second, it ignores that these statelets, historically speaking, would be as much a product of fiction as the artificial boundaries created by the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Third, and most disconcerting, is this narrative's ready acceptance of religious, ethnic, and sectarian difference as an unavoidable source of violent conflict in the Middle East. It leaves no room for the interaction and blending of diverse peoples in a positive, productive, and mutually enriching way.

Culture generally, and the works of Beirut's artists specifically, defy this homogenizing logic. Therefore, when the main thrust of commentary is insisting that the necessary outcome of diversity in the Middle East is separation, it is imperative to look at culture as a space where people can come to understand each other, develop a sense of common experience, and negotiate and mix their differences in the process of recognizing the innate hybridity of human life.

Eric Reidy
Beirut
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Table of Contents

I. Introduction

> "Was this the same Beirut which has always been like a ball of many colors rolling along?... The contradictions made the inhabitants of Beirut seem eternal."
>
> *Hanan al-Shaykh in Beirut Blues*

About a month after I moved to Beirut I set out on a trip to find the Beirut Art Center, a nonprofit contemporary art space located along the Sin El-Fil side of the Beirut River. The sun began to set as I wandered around Corniche Al-Nahr and the adjacent highways with a map downloaded from the Art Center's website. We walked up and down the Corniche and crossed the river several times while trying to match the landmarks on the vague, black and white map with the industrial buildings and smoke-clogged overpasses that defined our surroundings. Eventually, we stopped at an outdoor market, Souq Al-Ahad, under one of the overpasses to ask for directions. Not a single person, including a traffic policeman who sent us off in the wrong direction, had heard of the Art Center, which we finally discovered nearly in sight of the market.

While we were still standing in the exhaust-choked market trying to find our way, I quipped that my next article would be on how the hardest part of writing about the art scene in Beirut was actually finding it. Despite the sarcasm of the statement, the question at its core had been on my mind since arriving in the city: *If Beirut is a center of culture, where is this culture located and what role does it play in the life of the city?*

With this question in mind during my first weeks in Beirut, I fortuitously came into contact with the SKeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom, a project of the Samir Kassir Foundation. The SKeyes center offered to support and publish a series of interviews with Beirut artists about their work, the experience of living and creating in the city, the challenges they face as artists in Lebanon, and their thoughts on Beirut's role as a cultural center in the region. The interview series grew into this report.

When I first began the project I had very few connections in the city and none in the cultural scene. As a result, I began my inquiry in the most accessible places, which in my case turned out to be two art galleries off of Rue Gouraud in the neighborhood of Gemmayzeh. When I walked in their doors unannounced, the directors were more than happy to help set up interviews with artists exhibiting in their galleries. At the same time, I turned to event and culture websites such as Lebtivity.com and Time Out Beirut to discover the pulse of the cultural activities taking place in the city.

As a function of the way I was able to make connections, my research ended up focusing on artists who were mostly involved in grassroots cultural activities, activities that were highly accessible to anyone with an interest and who knew how and where to look. Due to the fact that the artists I interviewed were not part of either an elite or commercial pop culture, I found their experiences to be closely related to the day to day realities that many inhabitants of Beirut share. Their works and activities reflected this closeness.

From the beginning, I wanted to interview artists working in different mediums as well as coming from various backgrounds. I hoped to develop a picture of the cultural scene in Beirut from as many perspectives as possible. To accomplish this, I often had to switch focuses before I was able to completely explore a particular aspect of the cultural scene. As a result, this report is not a comprehensive study of any specific artistic activity and does not represent any specific group's experience. It is a general picture of Beirut's cultural scene as revealed through the works and stories of a number of artists whose lives and art form a collective reflection of the city.

Over the course of the project I completed more than 20 interviews with around 25 artists working and living in Beirut. I spoke with Lebanese from a variety of backgrounds, Syrians who recently sought refuge in Lebanon from the ongoing civil war in their home country as well as ones who left Syria years before the revolution began, Palestinians from the refugee camps on the city's periphery, migrant workers living in overcrowded apartments, and Lebanese who lived most of their lives abroad and recently came to Lebanon to be part of the economic, social, and cultural life of their homeland.

In addition to interviews, I attended a large number of events, ranging from film festivals to street poetry readings and gallery exhibitions to story telling festivals and hip-hop concerts, in order to meet artists and immerse myself in Beirut's cultural offerings. I also read as much as I could and had countless informal conversations with colleagues, friends, journalists, artists, and taxi drivers to gain an understanding of the historical and political setting in which Beirut's cultural scene exists. My efforts have by no means rendered a comprehensive or authoritative account of artistic activity in

Beirut. However, what emerged from the research is an affirmation of the energy and vibrancy of Beirut's cultural scene, despite facing several serious challenges, and the importance of cultural activity to the life of the city.

Specifically, what appears is an image of Beirut as a city searching for identity among historical divisions and rapid changes. At the same time, the city is alive with creativity, energy, diversity, and comparative freedom that make it fertile ground for artistic production. The works of Beirut's artists, rooted in the everyday experiences of the city, form a mirror reflecting an inclusive and equalizing narrative of Beirut's social life back to its residents. The ability to view this reflection, however, is obstructed by the fragmentation of physical and social space and mentality in Beirut, as well as other challenges that create a division between the cultural scene and public life. Many of Beirut's artists recognize the need to break the dichotomy between art and public life in order to offer an alternative to the dominant, sectarian social lens. However, without support, the challenges facing the cultural scene limit the scope and reach of its impact. Therefore, there is a need for civil society organizations to play a role in cultivating the cultural scene as a vessel for the development of an alternative, inclusive, and just identity for the city.

Supporting these arguments, the first chapter provides a brief history of Beirut's development as a cultural center before affirming its continued, although redefined, role through an overview of the contemporary artistic production and activities. The second chapter examines the content of the work of Beirut's artists as a mirror that reflects a collective experience onto the city, forming a common text rooted in the experiences of everyday life. It also argues that this narrative stands in contrast to the dominant lens of sectarian belonging that underlines the fragmentation of society. The third chapter outlines the challenges facing Beirut's cultural scene through the experiences of artists with governmental and social censorship as well as with marginalization and the fragmentation of space in the city. Finally, the conclusion highlights the work of artists trying to break the separation between the cultural scene and public life and argues for civil society organizations to play a role in cultivating cultural activities in the absence of governmental support.

My hope is that the following pages highlight the work and experiences of artists living and creating in Beirut and form an entry point for dialogue, debate, activism, and the development of initiatives on the part of artists, civil society, and the general public. I also hope that they render a picture of a movement that has already begun and challenge the fragmentation of society in Lebanon by placing the experience of artists from all walks of life side by side so they can be seen as equal parts of a whole.

II. If not Paris?

> "What purpose remains, then, for Beirut to fulfill, beyond serving simply as a place for recreation and entertainment?"
>
> *Samir Kassir in Beirut, 2013*[1]

"Beirut has something so magical. I think it's a city of art, like Paris in Europe," says Gylan Safadi, a painter who comes to Beirut from Suwayda in Syria to exhibit his work and when he needs a break from the weight of the situation back home. Since the Lebanese Civil War ended in 1990, travel magazines have been trying to resurrect something of Beirut's reputation as the Paris of the Middle East. According to Safadi, the moniker is well deserved not for the same cliché reasons often cited in the media, but because of what he sees as an organic connection between the city and art.

Picture 1: Painting by Gylan Safadi from his exhibition "Ashes". *(Photo by author)*

Omar Sabbagh, a Lebanese poet who grew up in London, teaches at the American University of Beirut (AUB), and recently came to Beirut to pursue writing, sees the city differently. For him, Beirut is more like the Disney World of the Middle East. If people from other parts of the region, particularly the Gulf, want to come somewhere to "drink, party, and use prostitutes," they come here, he says. Although blunt, Sabbagh's statement reflects the view that Beirut is being reconstructed as an elite travel, business, and leisure destination for foreigners to the exclusion of the vast majority of the city's inhabitants.

The tension between these two views is familiar in the post-Civil War era. In the conclusion to his comprehensive history of Beirut, written in 2003 and titled after the city, Samir Kassir seemed to agree with Sabbagh. The miraculous post-war recovery that many celebrated, Kassir wrote, "is but an illusion."[2] In Kassir's eyes, the city had fallen far from its former position as the "metropolitan capital of the Arabs"[3] during the 1960s and '70s. Fifteen years of fighting, a stuttering and uncertain post-war economic, political, and social recovery, and the ascension to prominence of other cities in the region, most notably Dubai, left Beirut searching for its identity. As a result, a nagging question emerged: *Has Beirut simply become a place for recreation and entertainment?*

Beirut's cultural history

Whether deserved today, or not, Beirut's many reputations share a common root in an image of its cosmopolitan modern history. Before it became the Paris of the Middle East, Mohamad Hodeib, a poet and cultural activist, says: "historically speaking, the world perceived Beirut as a capital of books." A literary culture, spurred by the development of educational infrastructure, began to take root in the city during the first half of the 19th century. The competing educational activities of American Protestant missionaries and French Jesuits led to a proliferation of educational institutions established by both foreign and local initiatives. The most iconic of these institutions, the American University of Beirut (AUB), founded in 1866, and Université Saint-Joseph (USJ), founded in 1875, continue to play a prominent role in the city.

The class of local intellectuals who helped to establish, attended, and taught at these institutions contributed significantly to the awakening of Arab cultural life during the 19th century, known in Arabic as *Al-Nahda*. They sought to free the Arabic language from the constraints of convention, translated religious, political, and literary works into Arabic, and established newspapers and cultural societies. Additionally, they produced their own works of literary and poetic merit, some of the first in Arabic during the modern era. In 1848, theatre also made its appearance in Beirut with the first modern play staged in Arabic. For the following 30 years, Beirut, along with Cairo, was at the forefront of the Arabic cultural renaissance. However, the prominence of intellectuals in the rising resistance to the Ottoman Empire at the end 1800s prompted Sultan Abdul Hamid II to crack down on the academic and cultural life in the city.

Beirut's cultural life did not stay depressed for long. Following World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, government repression gave way to a second intellectual and cultural awakening, this time within the increasingly cosmopolitan setting of the French Mandate. Like the first, this second awakening was led by the written word. By the mid 1930s, however, Beirut's cultural scene had expanded to include painting as well as literature and theatre. The vibrant intellectual and cultural life of Beirut under the French

Mandate had a decisive role in the movement that brought about Lebanon's independence in 1943.

The new republic, however, did little to develop an official infrastructure to support arts and culture. In the absence of government action, civil society and private initiative played an important part in establishing institutions that cultivated and supported the cultural scene. Additionally, the appeal of Beirut's distinctly open way of life and the absence of governmental censorship attracted intellectuals and artists from across the Arab World. Beirut's openness during this period stood in stark contrast to the authoritarian regimes that began cracking down on freedoms and dissent in other Arab countries. Cultural luminaries such as the poets Nizar Qabbani, Mahmoud Darwish, and Adonis, among many others, called Beirut home at various times between 1945 and the beginning of the Civil War.

During these years, the full spectrum of cultural, intellectual, and political life in the Arab world made itself present in the city. This mixture of ideas, ideologies, movements, and activities, which gave the city its unique climate and importance, was anchored on the grounds of AUB. It spread out from the picturesque campus to any number of coffee houses, theatres, bars, galleries, and other meeting spots. Due to the interrelation between the worlds, intellectual life and politics inevitably infused the cultural activities of the city with the flavors of the time.

As a result, cultural life came to be another outlet for intellectual and political activity as well as a barometer for the pulse of society. As Kassir pointed out, Ziad Rahbani's play *Nazl al-Surur* (Inn of Happiness), produced in 1974, foretold Beirut's coming fate. Through the analogy of an inn and its denizens, Rahbani depicted Beirut as a city no longer capable of creating a synthesis from its eclectic and often contradictory parts. A year later, Rahbani's portrait proved to be all too painfully true.

Like the rest of the city, cultural life in Beirut during the war was suffocated by the constant fear of violence. However, the city's famous publishing houses continued to print books and, during moments of calm, what remained of the theatre scene managed to put on the occasional production. Even so, only Blue Note, a jazz club in Ras Beirut on the western side of the city, and two other venues on the eastern side remained open for the entirety of the war.

From the shadows of war

When the fighting finally stopped in 1990, the cultural scene came creeping back to life along with the rest of the city. Lebanese people began to return from the various countries where they sought refuge during the war and brought pieces of these places back with them, says Tina Fish, a Lebanese spoken word poet who spent her childhood in Saudi Arabia. The new ideas

and energy they brought helped to start shaking Beirut back to life after 15 years of trauma.

Theatre was the first cultural activity to make a prominent return to the city, partly because it never fully left during the war. However, the first theatres to open after the war struggled financially and were forced to close; the Beirut Theatre being an iconic example of these short-lived experiences. "Now, you can't talk anymore about real theatre activity," says Hady Zaccak, a documentary filmmaker and professor at USJ. Even so, there are several theatre groups active in the city, including Masrah Ensemble and Collectif Kahraba. Additionally, a number of venues, such as Theatre Monnot, the Sunflower Theatre, Babel Theatre, and Masrah Al-Madina, stage local and foreign productions. Still, most of the plays that are produced are comedies meant to make people laugh instead of think, Zaccak says. And, a large portion of theatre activity takes place underground and at informal venues.

As one of the notable exceptions, the Samir Kassir Foundation's 2013 Beirut Spring Festival highlighted the work of Lebanese-Canadian playwright Wajdi Mouawad. Mouawad's plays, including the acclaimed *Incendies* (Scorched), deal with memory and legacy of the Civil War as well as the struggles with belonging faced by Lebanese who expatriated themselves during the fighting.

During the festival, three of Mouawad's plays were staged over the course of five nights at Masrah Al-Madina, Theatre Monnot, and on the steps at the ruins of the Roman bathhouse downtown. The productions were free and open to the public, following the festival's model, and attracted full audiences every night. The Beirut Spring Festival, itself, is organized every year since 2009 on the anniversary of Kassir's assassination to commemorate his life and legacy. Its goal is to bring top quality international artists to the city and offer their work in widely accessible venues for free. As such, the festival offers a compelling model for the sponsorship of public art by civil society organizations.

Additionally, during the post-war era, a number of Arab novelists also added to the resurrection of the cultural scene by living and publishing in Beirut after the war. In addition, a generation of post-war artists, many of them having spent parts of their childhoods outside Lebanon, began to explore and create art dealing with the issue of memory and what remained of the city following the war. However, the mainstream of Lebanese society preferred amnesia to revisiting the past. Regular censorship by the government under the Syrian occupation (1990-2005) also put a damper on the reinvigoration of cultural activities in the city, and religious authorities began demanding artistic works be censored on the grounds of morality, which further limited the space for free expression in society.

Picture 2: Actors perform in Wajdi Mouawad's play *Incendies* (Scorched) at Masrah Al-Madina during the Samir Kassir Foundation's May 2013 Beirut Spring Festival. *(Photo by author)*

The cultural scene post 2005

The assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005, and the political upheaval and string of assassinations that followed, at least temporarily, put an end to the willful amnesia that had been adopted following the war. People realized that the reconstructed image of post-war Beirut was not the true reality, Zaccak says, and that "plenty of problems are still here, and we are in every moment in danger of a new civil war."

As a result, the generation that grew up after the Civil War and experienced the events of 2005, stemming from Hariri's assassination and the subsequent popular demonstrations, wanted to know more about what happened in the past. "Before 2005 when you wanted to talk about war or deal with the issues people used to say, 'we are fed up with the subject and we don't want to know,'" Zaccak says. "The generation of post 2005 is very curious and is dealing more with politics, though it is somehow the same inherited politics."

The desire to know more about the background to Lebanon's current problems coincided with the Syrian army's withdrawal from the country in 2005. Following the withdrawal, censorship by the government lessened, although it continues to exist. Combined, the two trends created fertile ground for artists to make works dealing with Lebanon's past and present challenges, and for audiences to engage with subjects willfully forgotten or ignored several years earlier. Nadine Labaki's films Caramel and Where Do We Go Now? are good illustrations of these trends.[4]

Today, however, opinion among artists is still divided about how well Beirut's cultural scene has been able to recover and weather the challenges of post-war Lebanon. According to Sabine Choucair, a storyteller and performer who uses

art for social therapy, Beirut is still a cultural center. "I'm not sure it's the best cultural scene in the Arab World," she says, "The good thing is that people are trying to do things. They don't stop trying."

Another prominent train of thought contends that the cultural scene is fighting an uphill battle for survival. The elite reconstruction of the city, cultural homogenization, instability, and the persistence of amnesia are pushing the cultural scene to the margins, much to society's own detriment. "Our downfall is cultural," Hodeib says, illustrating the point. At a time when other Arab countries are suffering from political repression, Beirut is suffering because it is blind to its own history and identity. "We are not trying to create a culture for the country. We are just trying to prove that it does exist," he adds.

Although Choucair and Hodeib's views are, in some ways, oppositional, they are united by a sense of activity. Three or four years ago there was far less artistic activity going on, says Mokhtar Beyrouth, a photographer who goes by a pseudonym that roughly translates into 'mayor of the city'. Now, "people are really getting into it. They are really getting involved."

The contemporary scene

Whether fighting against its death throws or experiencing the contractions of its rebirth, Beirut's contemporary cultural scene is characterized by a flurry of activity that suggests it is striving for life. In addition to the theatre activity mentioned above, there are several cultural collectives and organizations active in the city, such as Bukhar Beirut, Haven for Artists, and Ashkal Alwan, which organize regular artistic events. Beirut's neighborhoods also play host to a profusion of art galleries that feature works from local, regional, and international artists. Gallery openings for new exhibitions happen regularly, and sometimes there are as many as four openings in one evening.

Metropolis Cinema in Ashrafieh hosts international and Arab film festivals on a regular basis, and a number of cine clubs make alternative cinema fairly accessible to those who are interested. In terms of music, any number of bars, restaurants, and music halls provide venues for acts from cover bands to local hip-hop performers and international celebrities. Also, the Lebanese Philharmonic Orchestra performs free concerts every Friday at St. Joseph's Church in the neighborhood of Monnot for those interested in a more classical experience. In all, any combination of musical performances, plays, storytelling festivals, dance performances, book fairs, poetry readings, cinema festivals, street fairs, book launches and other events related to the arts and culture are bound to be taking place at any given time in the city.

The abundance of cultural activity makes it impossible to keep track of, let alone attend, all the events occurring during a given week, day, or night. If there happens to be a lull in cultural activity, the many cafés that play host to Beirut's

artists, notably Café Younes and T-Marbuta in Hamra, are bound to be full of individuals scribbling and sketching away in their notebooks, mixing music or editing work on their laptops, and chatting and exchanging ideas. Additionally, it is not uncommon to see musical performances and break-dancers on the streets in Hamra, and Beirut's walls are a veritable canvas for graffiti artists with their spray paint and stencils.

In search of identity

All of this activity would seem to suggest that Beirut's cultural scene has a fairly notable presence in the city; but how does its stature compare to other areas of the Middle East? "I think Beirut is definitely more forward than Syria or Egypt or Jordan," Beyrouth says. On the one hand, Jordan has never been known for its cultural life. On the other, Egypt, and Cairo in particular, has long been one of the centers of the Arab cultural world. Public art played an important role in the Egyptian Revolution, and artistic production flowered in the wake of Hosni Mubarak's ouster. But, Egyptian society is more conservative than Beirut's, and political activists, cultural activists, and artists feel they are under attack by Egypt's new government, headed by the Muslim Brotherhood.[5]

In terms of Syria, Damascus may have been the only city in the region with an atmosphere similar to Beirut's, according to Thaer Maarouf, a Syrian painter who moved to the Lebanese capital in 1996. Damascus had more of an oriental and classical Russian artistic influence, but it was a good place to work as an artist, Gylan Safadi adds. Even before the revolution started in 2011, however, Damascus was not free like Beirut. Government censorship and a more conservative culture limited the space for artistic expression in society. Today, "everything is broken. The city has changed," Safadi says. "I'm coming from the city of death. Beirut, here, is the city of life."

If Beirut is the city of life then Dubai is the city of money. As Kassir noted in 2003, capital and forward governmental planning have been able to make Dubai, and other cities in the Gulf, important players in the regional cultural scene, perhaps at Beirut's expense. Sanaa Ayoub, a young designer trying to make it in Beirut's competitive fashion scene, says: "Beirut is a miniature Dubai." If you make it in Beirut you can move on to bigger markets. In that sense, Beirut is a career starter and the Gulf is the main stage for regional culture, says Tarek Butaihi, a Syrian painter.

Even though an increasing number of important cultural events, such as film festivals and art exhibitions, are taking place in Dubai and other Gulf cities, money cannot buy authenticity. In the Gulf, "you don't feel that the relation between culture and the city is a very old one and a very traditional one," Zaccak says. In Beirut, there is a tradition, reaching back almost two centuries, of people working in literature, theatre, and painting. The cultural scene today, whether in high art or underground activity, is somehow connected to that tradition despite

all the changes that have taken place. The way of life, the buildings, the nightlife, and the style of the streets all exude an atmosphere of nostalgia that connects past to present, Safadi says. Although, many would argue that the atmosphere of nostalgia is rapidly being replaced with an artificial city disconnected from its roots, more like Dubai.

Even so, what Beirut has today, that no other city in the region does, is the combination of an artistic culture deeply engrained in the city's history, diverse cosmopolitan influences, comparative freedom from governmental repression, and relative stability, at least for the time being. Beirut's style is famously collected from Arabic, European, and, now, various other international and regional influences. The large foreign population residing in Beirut and the fact that many Lebanese regularly travel outside the country or live abroad and return, bringing new influences with them, enriches the city's cosmopolitanism. As a result, audiences in Beirut are open to new and potentially controversial ideas and art that would be taboo elsewhere. "Beirut is the only place you can make something different [in the region]," Thaer Maarouf says, emphasizing the point.

However, Beirut's uniquely free and open style of life does not extend throughout the city, let alone the country. Instead, it is mostly confined within the coastal strip of land extending from Ras Beirut in the West to the Beirut River in the East, with its southern limits defined by the poorer neighborhoods that extend into Beirut's suburbs on either side of the airport road. It is very difficult to find audiences outside of this coastal strip, according to Zaccak. Economic disparity, religious conservatism, increasing sectarianism, and self-imposed isolation on the part of the cultural scene all factor into this division.

Still, according to Hodeib, a rich Syrian culture has been coming into the city since the beginning of the revolution, prompting creativity and collaboration similar to what occurred during the pre-war era. As in the 1960s and '70s, the relative freedom of Beirut, compared to its regional neighbors, has made it a safe haven for artists, as well as others seeking refuge from regional events. If Beirut's relative stability gave way to open conflict "I would lose my shelter. We would lose a shelter for all artists," Safadi concludes. However, unresolved issues stemming from the Civil War, economic stratification, increasing religious conservatism, and pressure from regional events make the stability of Beirut's shelter appear all too fragile. The consequences of this shelter collapsing are painfully familiar to the city, as its many bullet-scarred walls still attest.

In all, contemporary Beirut is too complex, dynamic, and difficult to define to carry any simplifying title with ease, Paris, Disney World, or otherwise. However, twenty-three years after the Civil War it is clear that Beirut's cultural scene is active, diverse, and, like Lebanon, sustains many contradictions. At once resurgent and threatened by irrelevance, open to diverse influences and confined by drastically uneven economic access and social conservatism, a safe haven yet vulnerable to instability, the cultural scene is a mirror for the society in which it exists.

III. Reflections in the Mirror

> "Fiction seeps quietly and continuously into reality creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations."
>
> *Benedict Anderson in Imagined Communities*

"We had bad times around Arabia the last two years with the political situation," Zac Allaf, a Syrian emcee who performs as Assasi Nun Fuse in the rap/Raï duo Bilad al-Sham, says in his English diction, heavily influenced by the African American vernacular at hip-hop's roots. "We have the same problems, and can't say it in public… We have the same pain, the same difficulties with immigration, with drugs, and music, and the media," he continues.

Importantly, the 'we' in Allaf's statement is a general and inclusive we. It is not we Sunni, we Shia, we Maronites, or even we Syrians or Lebanese. It is we people who are living and sharing remarkably similar experiences in society irrespective of sectarian identity or political affiliation. Allaf's statement stands in stark contrast to the dominant political conversation in Lebanon, which is connected to a political system that incentives sectarian identity and interests.

Traditional politics vs. the politics of everyday life

Politics in Lebanon follow a clientelist model that is characterized by the relation between the leader of a community and his constituency. The leader's role is to bring benefits to the members of his community in return for their support. This model is not unique to Lebanon. However, constituencies in Lebanon are primarily defined according by sectarian lines. The overlay of sectarian identity on clientelist politics pits the interests of various groups against each other in an equation that is hostile to a sense of the common good. In other words, the benefit of one group is seen to come at the expense of the others. In this formulation, there is little room for shared interests

other than avoiding a return to civil war, which, all parties seem to agree, would be to no group's benefit. As a result of this system, the experience of public life is primarily viewed through the prism of sectarian belonging as opposed to national, social class, or any other form of identification.[6]

Bilad al-Sham's music, however, reflects an alternative perspective on experience. "We are talking about the daily life… about how we live. No politics," Allaf says, again using an inclusive we. In their most recent album, titled Clinic of Bilad al-Sham, the group addresses topics that fall outside of the standard political conversation and affect society broadly. Drug use by youth, society's perception of the mentally and physically handicapped, and the shallowness of media culture all get treatment on the album.

Despite Allaf's insistence to the contrary, the topics of Bilad al-Sham's music are political. Instead of dealing with the sectarian political debate, their music addresses a politics rooted in the daily negotiations that individuals have to make in society. These negotiations unite the disparate existences in the city into a common thread that coalesces around a politics of everyday life. While not entirely immune to sectarian politics, this politics of everyday life insists that there are common issues, challenges, and negotiations that form the root of a shared social experience. However, this shared social experience is almost totally obscured by the fragmented lens of sectarianism. As a result, the problems average people face in their day to day lives are considered apolitical in Lebanon because they do not adhere to the dominant logic of sectarian politics.

Works of Beirut's artists

Bilad al-Sham's work is not alone in the attention it pays to the politics of everyday life as opposed to the politics of sectarian identity. Indeed, virtually all of the artists interviewed for this project took their inspiration from their day to day experiences and the struggles of those around them. In this sense, their works, when taken together, can be seen as a series of mirrors reflecting, or narrating, a Lebanese experience, usually hidden behind the sectarian veil, onto a common tableau or text.

For example, Mohamad Hodeib, the spoken word poet and cultural activist, is a recent graduate from Lebanese American University. His work is about a generation of young Lebanese coming of age in Beirut. It explains, he says, "where I stand as a young man, a degree holder, unable to find work, unable to afford rent."

Hodeib performs his poetry under the name El-Walad, the boy in Arabic. El-Walad is a character sitting by the sea contemplating the city at his back. The character is caught between the contradictory feelings of isolation and belonging, on the one hand, and familiarity with the city behind him and the unknown of the sea stretching out in front of him, on the other.

The city is the only city the boy has ever known. Yet, rapid changes driven by high-end real estate development have made him a stranger in the streets of his childhood. He is sitting on the border between what he knows, which is already beginning to exist only as memory, and the unknown, which is the prospect of leaving the city to make a new life overseas. Regardless of the decision he makes, the boy is fated to be a stranger, either in the land of his birth or in a foreign country.

Hodeib channels his own experiences into the character of El-Walad. After graduating from university, he booked a one-way plane ticket to New York City. He was planning to find a job, apply for graduate school, and build a life in the United States. His decision was driven by a culture in Lebanon that encourages young people to get a degree, get a green card, and leave, he says. However, after a month and a half he returned to Beirut. "This is my city. I'm not leaving it for another," he decided.

While based on his individual story, Hodeib's work is reflective of a common experience in Lebanon. Many young people make the decision to move to the Gulf, Europe, the United States, or elsewhere in pursuit of employment opportunities and better wages not available in the Lebanese economy. Hodeib's poetry captures how the economy and development of Beirut is, in many ways, hostile to the city's native children. Yet, at the same time it is difficult for them to leave because, despite its hostilities, Beirut is the only place they have ever known as home.

For the young Lebanese who do choose to stay, like Hodeib, or decide to make Beirut home after growing up abroad, frustration with the city is an inevitable corollary to living in it. Tina Fish, another spoken word poet, writes about both the day to day hassles and the more existential challenges of living in Beirut. Her poetry is very intimate and revelatory. "I'm taking in what's going on around me," she says. "I found that most people relate to the same things I do." The topics she addresses range from relationships to what it is like being a women in Beirut to being pissed off at the non-functioning of public services, traffic, and government.

Despite dealing with the frustrations of the city, Fish's poetry has an element of humor to it. "I like to be funny," she says. "I think that is how messages really get through. It's embraced. You welcome a message that really makes you laugh."

In one poem Fish has a line that says, "It takes two women to witness and forty men to hear this." The line refers to the fact that a woman's testimony in Lebanon is considered half of a man's. If a man sees a murder and a woman sees a murder, the man's statement is pure. Mine is faulty unless another woman saw it too, she says. This is just one example of numerous ways women are treated as second-class citizens. People think Beirut is progressive

because "you can walk around in shorts and a shirt that shows half your tits, but that's not freedom," she adds.

Another poem talks about a police officer who walked up to Fish and looked into her eyes to see if she was high before offering her a joint. "It's happened. I'm not talking about something that hasn't happened," she says. The poem points out the hypocrisies that people living in Beirut have to deal with and the uneven implementation of the rule of law. Fish also tries to capture an underlying sense that if people shake off their apathy they can do something to make the situation better. "Ok listen," she says, "Life is hard and shit for everybody, but you have to get up. You gotta do something about it."

From power cuts and patriarchy to nepotism and the anarchy of Lebanese parking habits, Fish's poetry deals with the thousands of small obstacles Beirut throws up against the smooth functioning of daily life. She uses humor and expresses resilience to open ears and cultivate a sense of the possible. The frustrations that she addresses in this way are not specific to a particular group. Instead, they are an experience common to all residents of the city and emblematic of the shortcomings of the Lebanese political system.

Moving from the widespread frustration to personal isolation, Mokhtar Beyrouth, a photographer, uses visual images to tackle stereotypes about Arab masculinity and the taboos surrounding male sexuality and sensuality. "The work I do is to show the emotional side of people and to show the sensual side, not in a cheap way, but in a very artistic way," Beyrouth says. "I think everyone sees the Arab figure as a terrorist, and this breaks [that] idea."

Picture 3: Mokhtar Beyrouth's photograph dealing with themes of isolation, sensuality, and sexuality. *(Photo courtesy of the artist)*

One of Beyrouth's photographs shows a male figure behind a frosted window. His hands are placed gently against the glass giving the impression that he is longing for contact with the outside world. His eyes and lips are the only features in sharp focus and there is a subtle look of desire in his eyes. A rusted metal grate in the foreground completes the composition and solidifies the idea that the figure is trapped. The space behind the figure is completely obscured, emphasizing that his world is hidden and impenetrable from the outside.

The composition captures the predicament that exists for men whose emotional or sexual identities do not match the construction of hyper-masculinity in Lebanese society. They are caught between their own internal world, which is necessarily obscured from the public world, and the social barriers that

prevent their identity from being expressed. In the end, the only thing that is made visible in public is a surface image constructed for their protection, but also fraught with tension. Sexuality, emotionality, and identity are all repressed.

Beyrouth's work tackles a subject that is taboo and totally absent from conventional politics. Yet, the construction of Arab male identity is something that affects all members of society. It is both an internal issue related to the socialization of youth in a culture that values machismo and violence and an external issue related to the perception of Arab males as threatening. Beyrouth's photography addresses the topic in a way that makes it accessible to the public and breaks down the typical boundaries of the conversation while expressing a particular experience in the city. "It's not about the male abs or… eyes. Its more about the message," he says. "I thought people would be against it but actually people are getting the sense of the portraits."

Highlighting another experience that is often obscured, Rahel Zegeye, an Ethiopian migrant worker and playwright who has been living in Beirut for 13 years, produces work based on her time living in Lebanon. Zegeye first came to Lebanon because her father lost his job as a soldier following a change of government in Ethiopia. Zegeye's mother does not work and she has three brothers and six sisters. As a result, Zegeye came to Lebanon to help support her family through difficult economic times.

The first Lebanese family Zegeye worked for was abusive. Her 'madam' was very strict and would verbally abuse her if she made any small mistake. She was not allowed to leave the house by herself and also had to put up with verbal abuse from her madam's daughter. Like many other migrant workers, she had very little, if any, access to healthcare and was consistently underfed. At one point, the family left her in their mountain home for 13 days without food.

Following this experience, Zegeye decided to leave the family. She quickly found new employment, but her former employers refused to transfer her work papers. As a result, Zegeye was illegal for three years because migrant workers are the legal trusts of their employers and cannot transfer work without their permission. While she was illegal, Zegeye would avoid public places as much as possible for fear of the consequences of being caught as an illegal migrant worker in Lebanon.

Zegeye's new employer treats her well. She has freedom of movement, enough food, spending money, and he even encourages her to write. She continually emphasizes that the only way she is able to write and produce plays while in Lebanon is due to the generosity of her current employer, but her situation now is a rarity for migrant workers. "Why are we treated like animals? You are white. I'm black. We are the same, but I'm cleaning your bathroom," she says, summarizing the situation of migrant workers in Lebanon. "After 13 years I know now, OK, I am human," she adds.

Shouting Without a Listener, a play Zegeye wrote, debuted in Beirut in January. The play synthesized Zegeye's experiences over 13 years of living in Lebanon into a story that gives a glimpse into the personal lives of migrant workers. It deals with the treatment of migrant workers by their employers, the neglect of the Ethiopian embassy in advocating for the rights of its citizens, and the role of the agencies that mediate the process of bringing migrant workers to Lebanon. However, it also delves into topics such as love, moral dilemmas, and other experiences that migrant workers, like all people, negotiate in their day to day lives. In so doing, Zegeye's work places the lives of migrant workers within a common social experience. In its content and presence on stage, her play challenges the dehumanization and exploitation that migrant workers face by asserting that their experiences are as much a part of Beirut's society as any others in the city.

Similarly, Adbelrahman Katanani's work opens a window into the condition of Palestinian refugees living in the camps in Beirut's southern suburbs. Katanani, a Palestinian from Sabra camp, is one of the few artists in the camps working in the fine arts. Graffiti, hip-hop, and other street arts are much more common largely due to educational and financial limitations. He is also one of the few artists from the camps whose work has a presence in Beirut's cultural scene, which mostly revolves around the city's central districts. Meanwhile, legal, political, economic, and social constraints confine refugees' lives to the margins of society. "I was searching for a way to get outside the camp," Katanani says. "The refugee camp, for me, is a graveyard. It's a graveyard for talent, it's a graveyard for the creativity of youth, and it's a graveyard for the great ideas of these youth."

Katanani first started creating art as a caricaturist in Sabra. He would make one caricature each week and paint it in a public place for everyone in the camp to see. At that time, his work was overtly political dealing with subjects such as internal political dynamics and the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homeland. However, Katanani was frustrated that the message of his caricatures, like the refugees themselves, was stuck in the camp.

Following an unconventional path for members of his community, Katanani decided to enroll in Lebanese University as a student in the Faculty of Fine Arts. While there, he shifted his work away from caricatures and towards modern art. In 2009, he won an award from the Sursock Museum for promising young artists. It was the first time he succeeded in getting his work and its message outside of the camps. Following the award, he was able to make more connections in the art world. The director of Agial, an art gallery in Hamra, began supporting Katanani's work and helped him exhibit in Lebanon and abroad.

Katanani uses discarded materials that he finds in the camps to create his compositions. The foundations for his work are corrugated iron plates that he cuts into shadow figures to represent Palestinian refugees. "I found that the

Palestinian refugees are shadows. They are not painted people, and they are not related to the oil colors," Katanani says. His choice of medium reflects the marginality of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and the sense that they are not able to live full lives due to their prolonged state of limbo.

Also, the corrugated iron plates are constant companions of the refugees, Katanani says. The plates have accompanied the Palestinians from the first days of their exile. "[They] are affected by the atmosphere, just like us, and they are affected by the circumstances that happen to the camp… military, political, and everything," he adds, emphasizing the lack agency the refugees have in Lebanon.

After cutting the plates into shadow figures, Katanani adds clothes, donated by members of the community for his artwork, to his pieces. "The clothes carry the spirit of the people," he says, bringing life to the cold, bare plates. He then adds barbed wire, wood, bottle caps, bike gears, and whatever else he can find in the camps to create details and complete his compositions. "With more details, I thought that the message is going more clearly to the public," he says.

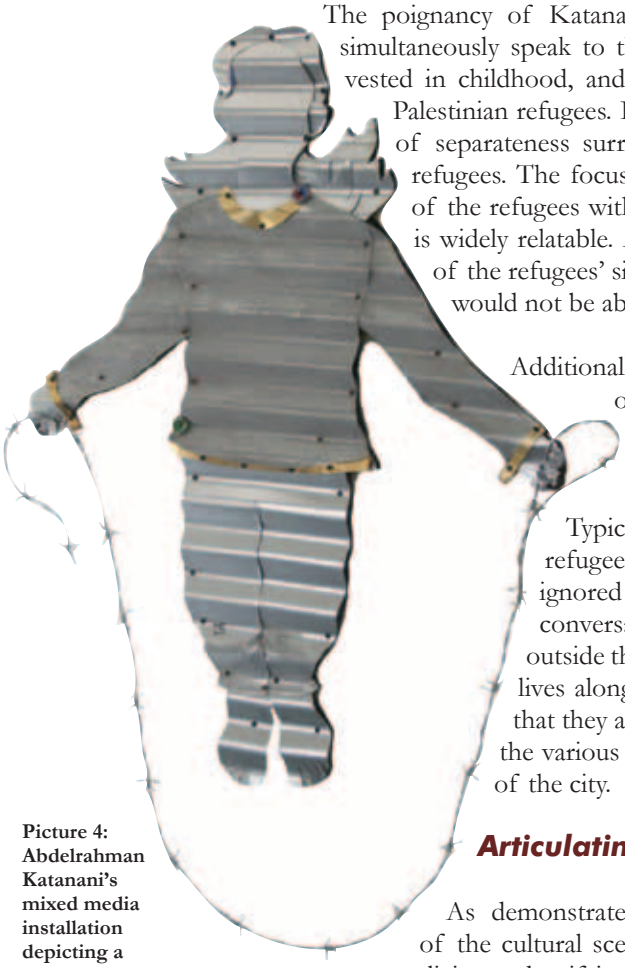
Katanani's work focuses on the experience of childhood. One of the pieces, fairly representative of his work, depicts a girl jumping rope. Her hair, made of corrugated iron, feathers out behind her featureless face. She is wearing a sweater, also corrugated iron, which is highlighted with a copper collar and cuffs, the only touch of color in the composition. Finally, her jump rope is made of barbed wire, and she floats mid jump above it creating a sense of frozen motion. The girl and her jump rope are presented against the blank backdrop of a white wall, which adds a feeling of isolation and timelessness to the composition.

The image is a quintessential representation of childhood, and, in its anonymity, the figure of the girl is universally relatable. Only the physical materials of the piece identify it as the representation of a refugee. The message is clear: Palestinian refugees are people who share common life experiences with all other people. However, the material aspects of their existence, over which they have very little control, separate their experiences from others. Additionally, the absence of a setting has the duel effect of emphasizing the universality of the image while at the same time highlighting the stagnation, in relation to both time and place, which defines the refugees' existence in Lebanon.

Katanani chooses to focus on the topic of childhood because he sees the experiences of children as a bridge for understanding. The refugee children in the art he creates "are just like all kids," he explains. "They want to have their rights… to be free." Yet, despite the strivings they share with children everywhere, children born in the camps are trapped by conditions beyond their control.

The poignancy of Katanani's work comes from its ability to simultaneously speak to the universality of freedom and hope vested in childhood, and to the specific circumstances facing Palestinian refugees. In so doing, his work breaks the sense of separateness surrounding the existence of Palestinian refugees. The focus on childhood places the experiences of the refugees within a common human experience that is widely relatable. As a result, it also makes the specifics of the refugees' situation visible to those who otherwise would not be able, or wish, to see it.

Additionally, by bringing his work to audiences outside the camps, Katanani has succeeded in inserting the experiences of Palestinian refugees into the broader theatre of Beirut's public life. Typically, the lives and conditions of the refugees are obscured by their marginality and ignored by the country's dominant political conversation. The presence of Katanani's work outside the camps, however, places the refugees' lives alongside all other experiences and asserts that they are an equal, if underprivileged, part of the various social existences that make up the life of the city.



Picture 4: Abdelrahman Katanani's mixed media installation depicting a girl jumping rope with barbed wire. *(Photo courtesy of the artist)*

Articulating a common narrative

As demonstrated by Katanani's work, the promise of the cultural scene lies in its ability to function as an equalizing and unifying arena of interaction between Beirut's stratified and fragmented social worlds. Indeed, when taken together, the works of the artists act as a mirror reflecting the image of a collective back onto a society that predominantly sees itself in pieces. The more artists who contribute their work to this image, the broader and deeper the text becomes.

The narrative that emerges from the reflection does not present a picture of homogenized experience, but one in which each specific component, mixing and sharing with the others, makes up an intrinsic part of the whole. The experiences of the young graduate, the frustrated professional, the socially and politically oppressed woman, the gay man caught between identity and social convention, the dehumanized migrant worker, and the marginalized Palestinian refugee are deeply interrelated by the daily negotiations forced on Beirutis by the city, society, and non-functioning system in which they live. Most importantly, each one is as much a part of Beirut as the next, even if the predominant lens on society does not recognize this fact.

Anderson and Beirut's cultural scene

In its inclusivity and inherent equality, the alternative narrative offered by Beirut's cultural scene carries the potential to act as a space for the emergence of new configurations of collective imagination, social solidarity, and, ultimately, a sense of the common good. In his seminal text on nationalism, Benedict Anderson argues, "Print-capitalism made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways."[7] National consciousness, according to Anderson, is rooted in the confidence that the members of a collective, even though most of them will likely never come into contact with one another, are sharing experiences and activities within the same boundaries of space, time, and meaning. The products of print-capitalism, in the form of novels and newspapers, made this intimacy and simultaneity between strangers possible by recording and giving expression to the experiences that defined and united the whole. Furthermore, the ritual of engaging with these texts brought about the ability to imagine the collective in the minds of those who belonged to it.

Today, the alignment of major Lebanese news outlets with political camps, new media's inclination towards isolated, niche markets, and the decline in novel readership limit the possibility for print-capitalism to play a unifying role in Lebanon. However, a robust cultural scene actively engaged in public life offers remedies for print-capitalism's contemporary shortcomings. To begin with, the cultural scene already puts forward an inclusive and unifying articulation of the various social experiences in Beirut. Daily engagement with this narrative in the form of artistic activity as a prominent part of public life would help build confidence in the simultaneity of shared experiences historically created in other societies by newspapers and the novel.

Moreover, the narrative of the cultural scene is disseminated in sound, still and moving images, texts, and other plastic and visual mediums. As a result, audiences are able to interact with the cultural production of the city in a variety of ways. The diversity of media also opens up the content of the narrative to audiences that do not have a strong relationship with the written word. Therefore, the diminishing role of printed text in society is supplemented by other media that engage people in different ways, making it possible for the population at large to develop self and collective knowledge.

Most importantly, the text woven by the collective works of the cultural scene gives expression to a common experience rooted in the negotiation of everyday life in the city. The text narrates an experience that is shared across religious and sectarian lines while simultaneously asserting the equality of all experiences in the city. In this way, the narrative of the cultural scene defies the logic of clientelist and sectarian politics.

Following Anderson's argument, in other words, the cultural scene exists as a reflection of society that reveals Beirutis to themselves as part and parcel of each other. As such, broad public engagement in the cultural life of Beirut could serve as the foundation of the collective imagination of the city, a sense of mutual belonging, and, eventually, the development of a notion of the common good. The outline of such a cultural scene already exists. Like the society the cultural scene reflects, however, it exists in fragments.

IV. A Mirror in Fragments

> "In an initially fragmented culture, the artist himself becomes segmented – Lost in the cleavages between national insanity and the art that attempts to remedy it."
>
> *Hashem Osseiran, Beiruti poet and spoken word performer*

"When we talk about censorship, usually we talk about the state," Hady Zaccak says. In Beirut, however, governmental censorship is not the largest factor enforcing the separation between art and public life. Instead, the influence of religious institutions, fragmentation of state authority, lack of educational emphasis on the arts, the difficulty of surviving financially as an artist in the city, and Beirut's propensity to reflect social divisions in its public life all contribute to the isolation of the cultural scene.

State and social censorship

As mentioned earlier, prior to 2005 governmental censorship was a major impediment to the cultural life of Beirut. Any work dealing with the Civil War, sectarianism, Israel, or the Syrian presence in the country could get an artist in trouble. "It was very rough and tough censorship," Zaccak says, with secret police monitoring and harassing intellectuals and artists and General Security, the governmental institution responsible for censorship, literally taking scissors to films in order to cut out scenes. "This led me in a period between 2000 and 2005 to adopt a very dangerous form of censorship, which is self-censorship," Zaccak continues. He was not alone in self-censoring his work during this period.

Since the end of the Syrian occupation, however, artists have been testing the boundaries of state censorship. They began submitting works to General Security containing content that would have been unacceptable before 2005. To their surprise, Zaccak says, some of this material started getting through

without being censored. "There was really a change, a positive one," he emphasizes, which opened up room for the cultural scene to expand and play a more important role in the life of the country.

Despite lessening since 2005, state censorship of cultural activities persists. In its 2012 annual report, the SKeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom noted four instances of direct censorship. Among them, the case of the film Tannoura Maxi is fairly representative. The film is a love story between a young woman and a seminary student on the verge of taking his vows to enter the priesthood. It initially passed governmental censors, but, after being released in theatres, the Catholic Information Center appealed to General Security requesting that several scenes in the movie be removed on religious and moral grounds. Theaters pulled the movie for several days until the scenes were removed and then began screening it again.

The case of Tannoura Maxi is indicative of censorship since 2005. Although direct state interference has decreased, non-state actors have played a larger role in censoring cultural activities, either directly or by putting pressure on General Security to do so. Topics related to the Civil War, the Syrian occupation, and, increasingly, religious morality, continue to be subject to censorship. However, censorship today is unpredictable. "You cannot know the laws and rules in order to avoid censorship because it depends on the political environment," Zaccak says.

Since 2005, artists and civil society organizations have been using the legal system to fight restrictions on cultural activities, and the courts are playing a positive role. In 2012, several artists were acquitted of charges they were facing related to their art including Semaan Khawam, who was arrested for stenciling images of soldiers on walls around Beirut, and Edmund Haddad and Rawiya Al-Chab, who were charged with violating public morals in their comedy play Halleluiah it's Raining, according to SKeyes' report.

Barriers to culture

In addition to applying pressure to state institutions, however, non-state actors are increasingly dividing up the physical territory of Beirut, which is difficult to fight in the courts. For example, in the process of filming his documentaries, Zaccak has been detained, prevented from filming, and had film confiscated or reviewed by Hezbollah, security at the American embassy, various Palestinian political factions, and the Israelis. "It's very strange, but it looks like the '80s, like in the war era, where to film somewhere you have to have the permit of all the parties or power people in the area," Zaccak says. "The space is not open anymore… It is fragmented."

Additionally, the absence of an educational infrastructure or an emphasis on arts and culture is less dramatic than the fracturing of state authority,

but equally as debilitating to the cultural scene. "We are not raised on this," Sabine Choucair says about the idea that art is important. There is very little opportunity to be exposed to art, let alone experiment with it, unless you are in a very expensive private school, Mokhtar Beyrouth adds. As a result, people do not grow up understanding the importance of arts and culture to life, how to appreciate them, or be able to experiment with their own talents. "I wish I had this education. I would have discovered my skills earlier," Beyrouth concludes.

Even Lebanese universities offer few opportunities to study the arts. Dima Mabsout, a Lebanese art student currently studying in London, initially enrolled in a graphic design program at AUB because it was the closest thing to studying the arts she could find in Lebanon. However, the program was geared towards advertising and marketing. Mabsout, like Hodeib's boy by the sea, was forced to chose between compromising her educational desires to remain in Lebanon and expatriating herself in search of better opportunity. She left AUB after one year and enrolled in Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design in the UK.

Picture 5: Inside Beirut Souks, a high-end shopping center constructed on the location of the city's old public markets. *(Photo by author)*

Hand in hand with the lack of educational emphasis, the absence of governmental support for arts and culture is another major impediment to the arts playing a bigger role in public life. "In Beirut there is a big problem: there is no art museum," Abdelrahman Katanani says. It is important to have a museum with a permanent collection of contemporary art so the public can be exposed and come back to study the same pieces over and over again, he continues. The closest thing Beirut has to a state-sponsored museum is the Sursock Museum, but it is currently under renovation and closed to the public. Not having a public art museum is strange for a city with the reputation Beirut has, Katanani says. Other countries have government-supported art museums. In Beirut, these types of institutions are always private and mostly geared towards making money and not education, he concludes.

Indeed, the privatization and elite reconstruction of the city following the Civil War poses one of the greatest challenges to Beirut's cultural scene. Surviving financially in Beirut is hard for everyone, especially artists, Zac Allaf says. "We have to work and to work on our music," he adds. During the day, Allaf works as a bartender. When he finishes at his day job he goes home, sleeps for a little while, and then stays up late into the night practicing piano and working on lyrics and beats for his music.

"Cultural activism is more like suicide," Mohamad Hodeib continues. It is difficult for young artists who want to make their lives about their work and bringing it to the public to survive in the city. It is hard to find ways to make money and it is hard to afford rent, he says. "We have to stay in the plastic area of Beirut," Allaf adds, referring to the central neighborhoods of the city. This area is where most of the institutions and venues that support the cultural scene exist and where most of the mixture between different groups and influences takes place.

"Most regions outside are becoming one color," Zaccak continues. However, the central area of the city is also where the majority of high-end commercial activity and development is taking place. As a result it is becoming more expensive and less accessible to anyone except for the elite. The gentrification of the city center is pushing artists, particularly young artists who are not yet established, to the suburbs and neighborhoods the airport where it is more difficult to participate in the cultural life of the city. "Outside this small perimeter of Beirut, which goes from Ashrafieh to Hamra, the cultural scene is zero," Zaccak emphasizes.

In addition to financial difficulties, social taboos factor into what topics can be addressed in art and how and where they can be approached. Despite Beirut's comparatively liberal culture, for example, Tina Fish can perform poems with strong erotic components at Metro Al-Madina for an event organized in support of the Uprising of Women in the Arab World. However, a gallery in Saifi Village, an expensive area of downtown that was redeveloped after the war to function as an arts quarter, refused to exhibit a painting by Thaer Maarouf depicting a tank with a penis for its turret. The painting was trying to make a point about men and war, Maarouf says, but it was seen as shameful because of the taboos surrounding male sexuality. Needless to say, outside of Beirut's central districts there is little space for art that pushes the boundaries of social taboos.

Picture 6: Thaer Maarouf's painting that a gallery in Saifi Village would not display because of its depiction of a penis. *(Photo courtesy of the artist)*

Fragmentation of public life

On top of all of these impediments, however, the biggest barrier between the cultural scene and public life is the fragmentation of public life itself. This fragmentation is not only limited to the division and privatization of the physical space of Beirut, but is also manifest in people's mentalities and the failure of the city to create a meaningful physical, social, and economic circulation among its inhabitants. In other words, the shaping of public life by sectarian politics and privatization has created a city that divides and isolates the elements of society from one another.

"There is a lot of competition and a lot of jealousy around artists… If you're a photographer and I'm a photographer I would hate that you do photography too, for example," Beyrouth says. This sense of competition is felt across the cultural spectrum and is an extension of the difficulties artists face surviving financially in Beirut. Additionally, the laissez faire economic attitude of the city contributes to the cultivation of individualistic interests. There is something about the mentality of the people involved in the art scene that makes working together cooperatively on a common project almost impossible, Choucair adds. As a result, artists are always competing against each other for attention and audiences, Tina Fish concludes.

Furthermore, "the city isolates people. It pushes people away," Eyad Houssami, a theatre practitioner and founder of Masrah Ensemble, says. "The city is so porous, and yet it is so inaccessible. It is so difficult to get around." In this sense, the daily negotiations of the non-functioning Lebanese public system that form the basis of common experience also separate people from one another. Anarchic Lebanese traffic and lack of effective public transportation make it difficult to move around the city. Moreover, the mental effects of sectarianism imbue areas of the city with a sense of exclusion and fear for outsiders to the community.

Finally, the reconstruction of downtown has created an elite enclave between the East and West sides of the city. As a result, the central district that, prior to the war, had provided a common space for interaction, exchange, and synthesis between Beirut's economically and religiously diverse parts has given way to the separateness that defines the contemporary city. Some circulation still takes place between Beirut's denizens in isolated areas. However, Beirut as a whole is becoming ghettoized, Zaccak concludes.

The ghettoization of Beirut, both in terms of mentality and physical space, also affects the cultural scene. "There is no public space for people to come together and interact," Dima Mabsout says. Consequently, "there is very much distance between the public and the art world," she adds.

Artists are reacting to this separation in two ways, Zaccak says. "You have the people who are still trying to reach the audience to make a sort of dialogue, and you have in the cultural scene the extremists also." This is dangerous because it looks like the situation in the country as a whole where people's mentalities are moving further apart. There is no middle ground, Zaccak concludes.

As a result of the sense of competition between artists and its distance from public life, the cultural scene mostly exists in isolated, closed circles. Moreover, there is an oligarchy in the cultural scene just like there is in politics, Houssami says. "It's these same people over and over again," he continues. "I felt like all the doors were closed. No one was like, 'come and work.'"

"We are like 0.01 percent of the population," Tina Fish continues. People market their events to their friends rather than to the general public. We did an event together. We all clapped. "But, where is the message actually getting?" Fish asks. "You forget about the people our age in Dahiyeh, or all the people our age in the camps," she says. "What about the Lebanese?"

In other words, the very divisions that the works of Beirut's artists defy in their form and content dictate the patterns of cultural activity as well. As a result, the cultural scene is restricted to closed circles that are mostly distant from the public life of the city. As such, the narrative of common experience and inclusivity these works offer to society is visible only as fragments of a mirror that need to be collected and pieced together.

V. Gathering the Shards

> "Events matter little, only stories of those events affect us. My father and I shared numerous experiences, but as I was constantly finding out, we rarely shared their stories; we didn't know how to listen to one another."
>
> *Rabih Alameddine in The Hakawati*

On a Friday night in December 2012 I headed to Hamra to participate in the Yafta Sessions, a semi-regular event organized by the cultural collective Bukhar Beirut. The Yafta Sessions always take place in a public or semi-public space. On this particular Friday they were located on an open area of sidewalk next to Café Younes. When I arrived, the outdoor seating at Café Younes was full and people were filling the sidewalk and leaning leisurely against parked cars along the street.

The event brought together painters, sculptors, hip-hop artists, poets and audience members for a night of live art. As it began, passersby slowed their walking to mingle at the edges of the audience, drivers rolled down their windows to see what had attracted such a large gathering, and plenty of people who did not set out to listen to poetry or watch painters at work ended up joining the crowd for the evening.

Picture 7: Zac Allaf, aka Assasi Nun Fuse, performs at the Yafta Sessions outside Café Younes in Hamra. *(Photo by author)*

The novelty of the circulation between Beirut's residents created by the Yafta Session began to sink in when two

Syrian refugees, probably around 13 or 14 years old, entered the audience. On a normal night, these boys sell gum or flowers and offer shoeshines to Beirutis on their way to restaurants, bars, or parties. Although the activities of the Syrian street children and the people enjoying Beirut's nightlife take place within the same physical space they inhabit fundamentally different social and economic realms. As a result, there is a strict division between their experiences that, usually, renders them separate, unequal, and un-relatable to each other.

On this night, however, the boys did not enter the audience to sell their roses, even though they still had them in hand. Instead, they had been attracted by the poetry and stood there enthralled, like the rest of the audience, by a poet performing in colloquial Lebanese Arabic. It was the first, and perhaps only, time I had seen people in Beirut from such different, and usually exclusionary, social worlds participating in the same experience as equals.

Challenging the divisions

The Yafta Sessions, stemming from an idea proposed by Mohamad Hodeib, challenge the division between the cultural scene and public life by breaking art and poetry out of closed environments and putting them into the streets. Additionally, they provide a forum for Beirut's artists to present their works side by side. Thereby, the narrative of the cultural scene, normally obscured by fragmentation, is visible as a whole.

Furthermore, during the Yafta Sessions the audience engages with the poetry, music, painting, and sculptures in a way that is not dissimilar, although on a much smaller scale, to the role of newspapers and novels in Anderson's argument. This shared experience creates a common space for people to relate equally and intimately to the strangers with whom they inhabit the city. In a city like Beirut, which pushes people away and isolates them from each other, the ability to be brought together and relate in this way is significant.

The Yafta Sessions are not the only cultural activity that brings together these elements. In 2011, Sabine Choucair went on a story-collecting trip around Lebanon with Chantal Mailhac, a friend and fellow storyteller. The two travelled to villages all over Lebanon and ended up collecting over 200 stories for a project they called Whispered Tales. "We were looking for personal stories to understand the culture, to understand how people lived through war… and how they are not [dead] psychologically," Choucair says.

The stories Choucair and Mailhac collected were very real and personal, Choucair continues. One talked about a woman who went to the tailor because she wanted to get her dress fixed. She did not care that she had to go through the bombs and fighting to get to the tailor because she really wanted to get her dress fixed. Another talked about a couple that decided to get married on

13 April 1975, the day the Lebanese Civil War began. The wedding kept being put off because of the fighting, but the couple really wanted to get married.

Mostly, the stories were about the desire for normal life in the abnormal situation of war. "It gave us a better idea of how people fought, each in their own way, to get over whatever they were living," Choucair says. The stories also showed that people in the South were living similar experiences and struggles as people in the North. "They just didn't know this was happening to both of them," Choucair underlines.

After collecting the stories, Choucair and Mailhac chose ten to perform for audiences. "We had this idea of performing the stories of the South for the people in the North [and vice versa]… so people could know about each other and know how similar their stories are," Choucair continues. "I believe in order to love a person, or to like a person, or to accept someone… the easiest way is to know the person, to know his stories, to know real things about him. That's what links us together as human beings," she adds. "The other is not an alien. He's a human being who lives just like you. He has the same stories with different details."

Choucair and Mailhac organized five performances of Whispered Tales in Lebanon. One of the performances took place in a jazz bar in Hamra, they put another on for the deaf and mute community and, for the final three, they travelled to villages outside of the city. "I like to go to people," says Choucair, who no longer performs in theaters.

In Hamra, the usual crowd of theatergoers and friends attended the performance. In the villages, however, after Choucair and Mailhac told five or six stories audience members began to share their own tales. They were surprised and intrigued that they had similar stories to people on the other side of Lebanon's dividing lines and eager to share their own experiences. "The real impact [of the stories] was in other places where people don't go to theater," Choucair concludes.

Similarly, Dima Mabsout's project the Naked Wagon seeks to make art an interactive and integrated part of public life in Beirut. The Naked Wagon is a cart pulled by two bicycles. When parked, the cart opens up into a platform and stage. It can be used as a space for performance, exhibition, or collaborative work. Mabsout built the first wagon in Glasgow, Scotland, and brought the project to Beirut in April 2013 during her spring break from university in the UK. "It will have so much more to give to the culture here," Mabsout says.

For its first outing in Beirut, Mabsout and several other artists involved in the project brought the wagon to Hamra on a Saturday night and set it up in an open space between two coffee shops along the main road. Mohamad Hodeib and Hashem Osseiran, another spoken word poet, took turns performing

Picture 8: A crowd gathers as Mohamad Hodeib performs on the Naked Wagon in Hamra. *(Photo by author)*

pieces on the stage. Within minutes, a crowd of over 50 people had gathered to listen to the poetry and observe the novel spectacle unfolding along Hamra's main road.

Like the Yafta Session, the audience contained the full spectrum of people that can be found strolling in Hamra on a weekend night, from young students and expatriates to Syrian street children and established businessmen. The wagon has also been used as a collaborative space for recycled art workshops and other performances. "I want to break the separation between the artist and the public," Mabsout says. "I'm feeling people are starting to come together and are really hungry for artistic expression. That's what this country needs. It needs people to unify. We need to create new values and beliefs." Collaborative, public art has a role to play in this, she adds.

A Lebanese Artists' Project

The Beirut Spring Festival, the Yafta Sessions, Whispered Tales, and the Naked Wagon are all examples of how cultural activity that challenges the fragmentation of mentality and physical space in Beirut can facilitate a shared experience in an otherwise divided society. In so doing, these projects help to create the foundation for a sense of mutual belonging and common interest by engaging a broad public in the alternative social narrative put forward by the works of Beirut's artists. However, the reach of these projects is limited because they survive or fail solely on individual initiative.

What is needed, then, in order for the cultural scene in Beirut to reach its full potential, is a Lebanese Artists' Project similar to the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) or the Works Progress Administration (WPA) during the New Deal era in the United States. The FWP only lasted from 1935 to 1939. However, during these four years it employed more than 6,600 writers, editors, and researchers and produced 275 books, 700 pamphlets, and 340 smaller publications. The project also brought many of America's cultural luminaries into contact with one another and provided opportunity and mentorship to young writers.

In addition to its direct activities, writers used the skills they developed, research they conducted, and experiences they gained while working for the FWP to inform their later work. Zora Neale Hurston, Studs Terkel, Ralph Ellison, Saul Bellow, Richard Wright, and many more of America's best writers from the mid-twentieth century all traced a significant amount of their inspiration and the foundation for their later careers back to the FWP.

Furthermore, the FWP was not only established at a time when writers needed support during the Great Depression, but also when mass communication and transportation were threatening to erase America's diverse folk cultures. In the process of recording and preserving these folk cultures, the FWP put an emphasis on employing minority writers and recording the stories and histories of Blacks, Native Americans, and other marginalized groups. As such, it played a decisive role in crafting a more inclusive, equal, and unifying American narrative for the second half of the 20th century.[8]

Similarly, in Beirut today artists need support in order to overcome the daunting social, physical, and financial barriers constraining the cultural scene. At the same time, a Lebanese Artists' Project would play an important part in cultivating an inclusive and equalizing social narrative at a time when Beirut's identity is fragmented and in crisis. However, there is little hope that the Lebanese government would be able to coordinate or even be interested in such a project. For instance, when working on Whispered Tales, Choucair sought support from the Ministry of Culture. They did not even respond to her inquiry. "They aren't interested," she says. "I don't think they care about the art scene."

As a result, in order for a Lebanese Artists' Project to exist, civil society organizations working in the field of arts and culture must develop a campaign to assist and promote Beirut's cultural scene. The campaign would need to involve support for artists, patronage of production, organization of cultural events, and coordination between participating groups. Support could take the form of direct or contracted employment to work on writing, research, graphic design, photography or any number of creative endeavors that would mutually enrich both artists and organizations. Patronage would involve sponsoring artists for a period of time to work on a complete project. Most importantly, the organization of cultural events would entail developing projects, shows, festivals, and so forth, similar to the three mentioned above, that would help Beirut's artists break the division between art and public life.

Combining these three elements, a Lebanese Artists' Project would help artists survive financially in the city and encourage young artists by allowing them to develop the experience and connections to advance their careers. It would help cultivate Beirut as a place where artists can bring their cultural works to fruition and create a meaningful circulation among Beirut's disparate social worlds around a public arts culture. In so doing, it would aid in the

development of a sense of shared belonging and equality among the city's residents. For the project to be a success, however, civil society organizations must coordinate their activities in a unified effort to make Beirut a location of culture.

In a city that has been polarized between identities since the end of the Civil War, Beirut's artists, on their own, have already created the foundations for a cultural scene that offers an alternative to the physical, social, and mental fragmentations of the city. However, the works of these artists are also confined by the same divisions that they seek to overcome. Importantly, many of Beirut's artists are working to break the division between art and public life. With support, the cultural scene could offer a strong antidote to the fragmentation that keeps Beirut, and Lebanon, poised on the edge of instability and sectarian conflict. In the end, what hope exists other than the cultivation of an inclusive and just culture that recognizes the common fate of its essential elements: the people whose shared lives constitute the life of the city itself?

Endnotes

1. Kassir, Samir, Beirut (University of California Press, 2011), 545.

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3. A term Kassir uses to refer to Beirut during the 1960s and early '70s.

4. For information on Beirut's cultural history see:
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6. Mazraani, Dana, "On Hay El Krad: A Kurdish Sunni Neighborhood in Bourj El Barajneh" in Bou Akar, Hiba & Hafeda, Mohamad, (eds.) Narrative Beirut from its Borderlines (Heinrich Böll Foundation, 2011), 78; Kassir 341 & 541.

7. Anderson, Benedict, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (Verso, 2006), 36.

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List of Artists

Abdelrahman Katanani – *Mixed media artist*

Dima Mabsout – *Mixed media artist & cultural activist*

Eyad Houssami – *Writer & theatre actor*

Gylan Safadi – *Painter*

Hady Zaccak – *Documentary filmmaker & professor*

Hilda Abbasi – *Singer & emcee*

Hussein T – *Painter*

Laura Zamzam – *Singer*

Malek Sharif – *Professor*

Marianna Afteem – *Fashion writer*

Mokhtar Beyrouth – *Photographer & filmmaker*

Mustafa Zamzam – *Singer*

Omar Sabbagh – *Poet*

Rahel Zegeye – *Playwright*

Sabine Choucair – *Storyteller & performer*

Sanaa Ayoub – *Fashion writer & designer*

Shewa Wolde – *Screenwriter & Poet*

Tarek Butaihi – *Painter*

Thaer Maarouf – *Painter*

Tina Fish – *Poet*

Wahid al-Jabri – *Singer*

Zac Allaf – *Emcee*

About the Author
Eric Reidy is a journalist, researcher, and photographer based in the Middle East. He graduated in 2012 from the University of Pittsburgh with a Bachelor of Philosophy in History and International and Area Studies. You can follow his work on Twitter @Eric_Reidy.

The Samir Kassir Foundation: The Samir Kassir Foundation was founded following the assassination of Lebanese journalist and historian Samir Kassir on 2 June 2005. Committed to Samir Kassir's values and aspirations, and believing in the need to renew the Arab culture through freedom of expression, several intellectuals and friends of Samir Kassir established the Foundation, officially incorporated in Beirut under registry number 30/A.D., on 1 February 2006.

The Samir Kassir Foundation is a non-profit civic organization, working within the civil society and cultural circles to promote democratic practices in Lebanon and the Arab world, encourage new talents in journalism, and support the emergence of a new cultural awakening.

SKeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom: The Samir Kassir Eyes (SKeyes) Center was established in Beirut in November 2007 at the initiative of the Samir Kassir Foundation. The center's principal goals are twofold: to monitor violations of freedom of the press and culture on the one hand, and defend the rights and freedom of expression of journalists and intellectuals on the other.

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