

What Is That “And” between Arab Women and Video? The Case of Beirut

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For Western scholars and artists, the term “women and video” brings to mind the heady days of feminist video production in North American (as well as European and Australian) cities in the early 1970s. Compared to film, the newly available medium was cheap and portable, did not require a crew, could (in principle) be widely distributed, and most importantly, was not institutionalized and thus already controlled by men. Individually and collectively, women took up video for personal expression (artists like Joan Jonas, Ardele Lister, Lisa Steele, and Hannah Wilke), formal experimentation (signal-disturbers like Carol Goss and Steina Vasulka), and activism (groups like New York Newsreel, Reel Feelings in Vancouver, and the National Film Board’s Challenge for Change program). Women produced a vast and varied body of work characterized by a kind of organic relationship between the materiality of the medium and its expressive and political properties. The addition “women and video” equaled a *movement*, feminist video.

Thirty years later, for this special issue on women and video, I’ve undertaken to ask whether the conjunction “women and video” designates a

similar movement in the Arab world.¹ What is the nature of the “and” in “Arab women and video”? Under pressure, this question generates a hail of other “and”s: Women and video, women and art; video and cinema, video and television, video and art; women and the Arab world, artists and the Arab world; Arab artists and the West; video and self-expression; video and politics, art and politics. My task became to press each of these conjunctions to see which yielded the most generative equation in turn.

Having heard much about the lively postwar independent media production scene in Beirut, I came to see it for myself. Stimulated by the powerful films and videos of the Lebanese and Arab diasporas, I wanted to learn what this production is like at the source. Watching the work and talking with artists and media organizers here, I began to find that, insofar as we continue to ask how the conjunction “and” is deployed in “Arab women and video,” the answer seems to be: by the West. Arab women videomakers work along first-wave feminist lines mainly for outside funders and outside audiences. When they can produce with relative autonomy, Arab women videomakers take a situated approach in which gender, if it is a topic at all, remains entangled with other issues.

Still the question generates an entry to the scene of independent media production in the Arab world, and its sources of vitality, and its interesting and gendered relationship to Western supporters and audiences. Currently, Beirut is

¹ A word about the terms “Arab” and “Arab world.” I use the former to indicate people who speak in Arabic, even if they do not consider themselves to be ethnically Arab, for example in Lebanon and among the Berbers in North Africa, and the latter to indicate countries where Arabic is an official language.

the only Arab city that has the critical mass of artists, activists, organizations, equipment, capital, and audience for a full-fledged local video scene.

Finally, almost all Arab independent media is intercultural, with the local being inextricable from the global and the diasporan. I'll suggest that autonomy for independent video makers, both women and men, occurs in a delicate relationship between local and foreign interests. Beirut offers a possible model of how an independent video scene might develop in other Arab cities. At the same time, the specificity of Beirut video emphasizes that it's important not to impose Western ideas of modernism and modernity on Arab art. "Arab modernities"² manifest constellations of formal properties and social intervention that are particular to country, period, and local concerns.

Video has always been a homeless medium and never easy to define. For the purposes of this essay I define it as independent work using the video medium that cannot be entirely subsumed under theatrical cinema, commercial television, or visual art. We'll see that even this negative definition is troubled by the material circumstances of video production in the Arab world.

How do Arab women artists arrive at video?

Steina Vasulka categorizes the people who first engaged with video in North America as: filmmakers using video as a substitute; artists based in other media,

² To borrow the title of a conference, "Modernités Arabes," organized by the Centre pour Recherches en Intermédialité, Université de Montréal, April 2002.

activists, and people interested in video as video.³ In the Arab world at present, rather different groups have happened upon video in a slightly different manner. At present, Beirut is the only Arab city that has the critical mass (comprising artists trained in media, intellectuals, activists, equipment, and capital) for a full-fledged video scene. Beirut is certainly atypical given its combination of relative wealth, high degree of Westernization, large Christian population, and relative liberalism even in these increasingly fundamentalist times. Nevertheless, I assume that other Arab cities, though more poor or more conservative, and women in these cities in particular, will eventually catch up with video through one or more of the avenues I describe below.

Many people from Arab countries, perhaps even the majority, receive at least some of their training overseas at present. Lebanon has “indigenized” training in cinema, television, art, and video, so its example allows me to concentrate on training in the Arab world itself.

Writers: The most radical social critics in Arab countries in the twentieth century were poets and novelists. Many of these participated in progressive politics, including socialist and feminist movements, at great personal risk.⁴ They debated how to develop formal means and means of distribution that would be appropriate to their local circumstances.⁵ Although many Arab filmmakers began

³ Steina Vasulka, talk at the Robert Flaherty Seminar, Aurora, NY, August 1997.

⁴ See, for example, Fouad Ajami, “The Suicide of Khalil Hawi: Requiem for a Generation,” in *The Dream Palace of the Arabs: A Generation’s Odyssey* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 26-110; and Nawal El Saadawi, “Seeing the True Colour of Things,” in *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader* (London: Zed, 1997), 228-232.

⁵ in *Contemporary Arab Women’s Art: Dialogues of the Present*, ed. Fran Lloyd (London: Women’s Art Library, 1999).

as writers, including the Maghrebi women Assia Djebar, Farida Ben Lyazid, and Néjja Ben Mabrouk, the power of poetry suggests a correlation between the lightness of formal means and the ability to intervene in social situations. As video becomes more accessible, it claims the activist ancestry of the pen.

Visual artists: There is a long tradition of women working in the visual arts in the Arab world. I mean visual art on the Western fine-art model: needless to say Arab women have been experts at traditional craft forms for millennia, but the formal introduction of Western art can be dated to 1908, when the first School of the Fine Arts in the Arab world was founded in Cairo. Art historians Wijdan Ali and Salwa Nashashibi, surveying schools, galleries, state support, and other art institutions in Arab countries, show that women have been integrated from the earliest days in Arab art institutions, especially in Egypt and Iraq, as artists, art teachers, curators, and employees of state arts organizations.⁶ In many Arab countries it's not difficult for women to circulate in the art world because, Nashashibi suggests, art is considered an innocuous career.⁷

It is a postcolonial irony that art practice in the Arab world developed in the 20th century on a conservative, European academic model just as artists in the West were abandoning it. Only recently are Arab artists catching up to the international "Biennale" style of conceptual, video, and installation art. The most celebrated of all Arab women artists, and perhaps of all Arab artists, is the

⁶ Salwa Nashashibi, "Elements of Empowerment: Support Systems in Women's Art Practice," in *Contemporary Arab Women's Art: Dialogues of the Present*, ed. Fran Lloyd (London: Women's Art Library, 1999),

Palestinian Mona Hatoum, who lives in London, circulates in the international art world, and uses video in the context of installation art. Given the expense of video installation, Hatoum's superb oeuvre, like that of other Western-based conceptual artists such as Jamelie Hassan, could only have been produced in exile.

University art departments beginning to train artists in contemporary international forms. At the College of Fine Art in Alexandria, two women painters have also worked in video installation.⁸ Hadel Nazmy, who studied in Stockholm as well as Alexandria, creates video installations and performances dealing with language. In a week-long performance at Cairo's Townhouse Gallery in 2002, Nazmy struggled to converse with a Sudanese artist in their different Arabic dialects, and inscribed a powerful diary-poem on the walls, and used video to play back her private speech.⁹ Rehab El Sadek produced two videos, one of which she describes as feminist, but eventually rejected video for sculpture. She writes, "I stopped working with videos cause it took my energy away. I used to use my own hands with my brain."¹⁰ While Nazmy remains enthusiastic about video, both artists express frustration with the need to work with an editor.

In Beirut, Nadine Touma, a young artist who studied at Wellesley College, uses video to complement performance, installation, and activist work. Touma is

⁷ Salwa Mikdadi Nashashibi, Laura Nader, and Etel Adnan, *Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World* (Washington, DC: National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1997), 169.

⁸ I thank Samirah Alkassim, a filmmaker teaching at the American University of Cairo, for introducing me to Nazmy and El Sadek.

⁹ Hadel Nazmy, correspondence with the author, May 22, 2002.

¹⁰ Rehab El Sadek, correspondence with the author, May 21 and 25, 2002.

one of a few Lebanese women videomakers who have explored gender, although she used the technology not of video but of a greengrocer's truck and several kilos of marzipan. "Ode to Rhinos" sweetly critiqued the epidemic of plastic surgery among young Lebanese women desperate for Western-looking noses. Touma drove the borrowed truck "Sousou la Coquette," around Beirut offering for sale not fruit but marzipan noses in "ethnic" shapes. On the truck's megaphone (which usually alerts customers what vegetables are for sale) Touma "incit[ed] people to fight the monolithic Lebanese nose—with its political and social implications—and much more."¹¹

The examples of El-Sadek and Touma suggest that visual artists have a take-it-or-leave-it attitude to the video medium, which is a passport to international art circles yet technically and financially cumbersome. Working in video installation limits audience to those venues that can exhibit the work, and in turn limits the local audience. The decision to return to sculpture or performance is continuous with twentieth-century Arab practices (and indeed with movements like *arte povera* and Fluxus) where the most radical interventions took simple, inexpensive, locally accessible forms. Thus if we want to find the contemporary Arab equivalent of what "women and video" meant in North America in the 1970s, we may be more likely to find it in painting, poetry, or performance than in the still-expensive medium of video.

¹¹ Nadine R.L. Touma, "Ode to Rhinos," in Christine Tohme and Mona Abu Rayyan, eds., *Home Works: A Forum on Cultural Practices in the Region* (Beirut: The Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts: Ashkal Alwan, 2003), 136. The book documents Ashkal Alwan's 2002 multimedia event.

Film: Training in filmmaking is rare and costly. Several universities and colleges offer degrees in cinema and television, including six in Lebanon, where some graduation projects are realized on film. Most Arab women who make 35mm narrative feature films, such as the Moroccan Farida Ben Lyazid, the Tunisian Nadia Fares, and the Lebanese Randa Chahal Sabbagh, trained and work overseas. But for the most part, few people in Arab countries have access to the technology, training and funds for film production. Also, unlike the visual art world, the film industry with its immoral associations is generally not considered an acceptable place for Arab women, as Viola Shafik points out. However, she adds, many Arab women do work as screenwriters, documentarists, and television directors, or approach cinema from a background as writers.¹² These two factors suggest that it is easier for women to approach cinema through the medium of video, which is cheaper and “below the radar” of the film industry. Nevertheless, many people who make video refer to themselves as filmmakers, implying that they don’t intend to stay below the radar forever.

Television: Steina did not include the category of television, but in Lebanon and the occupied territories, television has been the springboard for many independent video artists. Akram Zaatari writes that many media producers in Beirut got their formation in the 1980s during the civil war. Foreign news agencies based in Beirut hired young Lebanese camera people to shoot in the dangerous parts of the city. “These agencies, acting like small production units, provided the market with features and news footage. But most importantly, they

¹² Viola Shafik, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity* ((Cairo: American

furnished the city with a simple infrastructure,” which developed into the communication program at the Lebanese American University.¹³ No Lebanese women videomakers emerged directly from these wartime production units (although Lebanese journalist Jocelyne Saab was already well established in France); but many benefit from the new production infrastructure. Similarly, many Palestinian film- and videomakers received their on-the-ground training shooting for the Associated Press during the first intifada; at least one At least one is a woman, Suheir Ismail from Deheishe refugee camp, who is now a documentary filmmaker.¹⁴ The Palestinian videomaker Azza El-Hassan studied in Scotland and then worked for various Arab satellite stations.¹⁵

Zaatari describes a surge of video production tied to postwar reconstruction in Lebanon. Future TV, founded in 1993 (and owned by current prime minister Rafik Hariri), “recruits young people from theater, film, advertising, and graphic design.”¹⁶ Future, as well as Tele-Liban and LBC, occasionally sponsor independent production, but this work is rarely broadcast. Instead a new generation of television workers make independent work on their own time.

Arab television is a good place to get training but not to show one’s work. Palestinian-American documentarist Mai Masri, whose works have been broadcast internationally, says that Arab satellites never supported Arab

University in Cairo Press, 1998), 204.

¹³ Akram Zaatari, “The state of producing video in Lebanon,” catalogue essay, *Instants Vidéo de Manosque*, 1998, n.p.

¹⁴ Dorit Naaman, communication with the author, March 18, 2003.

¹⁵ Azza El Hassan, “When the Exiled Films Home,” in Dorit Naaman, ed., “Middle Eastern Media Arts,” special issue of *Framework* 43: 2 (Fall 2002), 65.

¹⁶ Zaatari, n.p.

filmmakers. “There’s an Arab complex: when you become successful in the West, suddenly they acknowledge you.”¹⁷ A rare counter-current of television-supported video is currently taking place in Dubai. The satellite channel MBC (Middle East Broadcasting Company) and its new news affiliate Arabiya have engaged a subsidiary company, O3, to acquire, produce, and commission documentaries that focus on the Middle East. O3’s programmers are construing documentary broadly, to include quite experimental works, and its six current commissions include the work of two women, El-Hassan and the Lebanese Lamia Joreige.¹⁸ O3’s mandate looks promising for Arab independent video in general and women videomakers in particular, given their strong representation. But more established documentarists reject O3’s advances. Masri says that at first she was glad to hear that there was “a serious effort to set up a channel that would screen independent Arab filmmakers’ work. But then we were disappointed at the terms they were proposing: unlimited satellite rights for ten years for the whole world and a low price. Many of the more established filmmakers felt these terms were exploitative and proposed amendments. We are still waiting for an answer from the channel.”¹⁹

Yet imagine what satellite subscribers may see when they momentarily surf away from Al Jazeera? An intimate, almost imageless interview with former prisoners of the horrific Khiam detention center,²⁰ who kept sane by fashioning

¹⁷ Mai Masri, interview with the author, March 17, 2003.

¹⁸ Mohamad Soueid, communication with the author, March 18, 2003.

¹⁹ Masri, interview with the author.

²⁰ Khiam was run by the Southern Lebanese Army, a proxy for Israel, until May 2000.

objects like rosaries and pencils: *Khiam date* by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige. A dreamy, quirky documentary about the defunct Lebanese railway: *Train/Trains date* by Rania Stephan. A deconstructive and homoerotic portrait of the Armenian-Egyptian photographer Van Leo: *Her + Him = Van Leo* (2002) by Akram Zaatari.

Activism: As I'll discuss in the next section, the Arab world witnesses plenty of imported activism. Grassroots activism, however, is rare. Perhaps the only local Arab media organization with a distinctly activist mandate is Beirut DC (Beirut Development and Cinema). The passionate (and exhausted) founders of this five-year-old video production organization, Dmitri Khodr, Mohamad Soueid, Hania Mroué, and current director Eliane Raheb, have backgrounds in development and human rights work. Its mission is to decolonize the screen, represent marginalized people, and recognize media makers' creativity and humanity as an undervalued resources. Thus the work Beirut DC sponsors is both activist and personal.

Video as video—not as cinema, television, or an extension of visual art—has been introduced by two bootstrapping interventions in Lebanon in the last ten years. Concerted efforts to involve artists trained in other media, as well as non-artists, and to involve women, these projects attempted to create a video art scene *ex (almost) nihilo*. In 1992 two video artists, the Lebanese-Canadian Jayce Salloum and the Lebanese-American Walid Ra'ad, visited Beirut with a portable editing suite and a Hi-8 camera and offered a workshop for artists and writers to develop independent video projects.

In 2001 Akram Zaatari and Mahmoud Hojeij organized a similar project with a pan-Arab focus, "Transit Visa." Recognizing that few artists in the Arab world have access to video, Zaatari and Hojeij tracked down nine young Arab artists who might discover an affinity for the medium and invited them to Beirut for a week of meetings, screenings, video training and video production. The four women included Mais Darwazeh, a Jordanian studying interior design, the Syrian Lubna Haddad, a student of theater and French literature, Farah Dakhlallah, a Lebanese studying film at FEMIS in France, and Ghazel, who, as an established Iranian video artist seemed an odd fit. While the participants in Transit Visa produced one-minute videos during the week, what is most fascinating about the project is its forced propagation of a video scene, whose tiny hair-roots are well documented in four documentaries by the organizers and a book.²¹

Both projects generated works that would be comfortable with international style of video art, a hybrid of critical documentary, experimental video, and personal video, yet are also strikingly inventive. In Transit Visa's documentation video *Welcome* (Mahmoud Hojeij, 2001), for example, artists are asked to write names of cities on their bodies and explain why they associate, say, Damascus with the belly and London with the spine. Like Arab artists who study abroad, the workshops adapted a Western-style video art framework to local and regional interests.

²¹ *Transit Visa: on Video and Cities*, ed. Akram Zaatari and Mahmoud Hojeij (Beirut: Transit Visa: 2001).

What Is That “And”? Western Feminism and Foreign Funding

In recent years, the intersecting concerns of Western feminism and Western economic and non-governmental organizations have resulted in a wave of interest in “empowering” Arab women. These projects often miss their mark, and Western feminism is deemed “maternalistic” in its misrecognition of the interests of third-world women.

Western feminism is strongly based in a notion of individual sovereignty and identity. Identity politics begins with the individual, including the individual body, and in principle moves through a rigorous analytical process to understand how family, society, economy, and legal structures inscribe that body. However, I would argue that many feminist critiques fail to move beyond the body. Hence the outrage at cultural practices whose impact is felt directly on the body, such as the resurgence of *hijab* or veiling across the Muslim world, the rare but legal practice of polygamy, the prohibition on driving for Saudi women, and female genital cutting in rural, often Muslim regions of African countries. In focusing on these practices Western activists are just not doing their homework, which would link such practices, and the religious fundamentalisms that underlies them, to tradition, education, poverty, international politics, and the neocolonialist global economy.

A little study shows that Western-style identity politics cannot be exported. As Inderpal Grewal writes, we must ask “whether women in many parts of the world can be seen as autonomous individuals outside the structure of the family

or whether the problem of their oppression can be addressed by attacking the very families that support many women.”²² And as other feminists argue, interventions in the third world that divide women from men are both disrespectful and destructive.²³

These feminist debates are not only academic, for they intersect with and support the funding priorities of the World Bank, UNESCO, and non-governmental organizations. The World Bank increased its attention to third-world women after it became apparent that women, who bore the major burden of Bank-imposed austerity measures in the 1980s, were also great economic resources in Third World countries. Economist Sophie Bessis argues that the World Bank deploys an instrumental feminism, simply because investing in women is profitable. She argues that the Bank’s new focus on gender is misguided: “Placing the emphasis on gender depoliticizes searing questions of social inequality and conflict, and breaks down notions of solidarity based less on gender than on social class.”²⁴ Such critiques argue *against* singling out women for particular concern.

²² Inderpal Grewal, “On the New Global Feminism and the Family of Nations,” in *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age*, ed. Ella Shohat (New York: New Museum and MIT Press, 1998), 505.

²³ Interestingly, Obioma Nnaemeka makes this comment in response to Alice Walker’s account of her visits to African villages during the making of *Warrior Marks* with Pratibha Parmar. Seeing the village males as the enemy, Walker received their hospitality with what the author interprets as grievous rudeness. Obioma Nnaemeka, “If Female Circumcision Did Not Exist, Western Feminism Would Have Invented It,” in Susan Perry and Celeste Schenck, eds., *Eye to Eye: Women Practising Development across Cultures* (London: Zed Books, 2001),

²⁴ Sophie Bessis, “The World Bank and Women: ‘Instrumental Feminism,’” in *Eye to Eye: Women Practising Development Across Cultures*, ed. Susan Perry and Celeste Schenck (London: Zed Books, 2001), 21-22.

At present, foreign co-production is essential for non-commercial productions over a certain budget in most parts of the Arab world.²⁵ Foreign funding politics insert a very particular “and” between Arab women and video. Notions that oppressed Arab women must be saved from oriental patriarchy in general and Islamic patriarchy in particular inform the funding priorities, content, titles, and marketing strategies of productions. Arab women media makers package work for export in an act of pre-emptive self-Orientalism²⁶ intended to meet the interests of an outside audience. Thus many Arab women makers, living in the Arab world or diaspora, are solicited to make works that “give voice” to Arab women presumed to be voiceless (as in Johns Hopkins University’s “Arab Women Speak Out” program of 1997). And of course, foreign television is endlessly interested in the *hijab* or veil, one example being the 1994 series *Women of Islam: The Veil and the Republic* that French-born, Algerian-rooted Yamina Benguigui made for the French television channel Canal+. In Egypt, as Viola Shafik shows, the increasing number of women videomakers results directly from foreign NGO funding. With the retreat of the Egyptian public sector, it is organizations such as UNICEF and the Ford Foundation that support

²⁵ This hasn’t always been the case. For example, Attiyat Al-Abnoudi was able to make her first documentary, and the first documentary by an Arab woman, *Horse of Mud* (1971), through Youssef Chahine’s production studio, Misr. Free from the constraints of both Egyptian television and foreign funding, Abnoudi’s film had a free and intimate style, which she continued to pursue in later, funded works. But as Magda Wassef points out, Al-Abnoudi’s films are rarely seen in Egypt. “Three Arab Women Documentary Filmmakers,” *Yamagata Film Festival Documentary Box*, 16 (December 1, 2000), n.p.

²⁶ Livia Alexander and Dorit Naaman discuss this term in “Re-“Producing” the Middle East for Metropolitan Audiences: The Challenges of the Transnational Art Film,” unpublished manuscript.

documentary production. The topics that interest them include female illiteracy, in Nabiha Lutfi's *Where to?* (1991), child labor, in Taghrid Al-Asfuri's *Daily Bread* (1995), and women in politics, in Attiat al-Abnoudi's *Days of Democracy* (1996).²⁷

Of course, artists and documentarists have some degree of freedom within the requirements of funding. "Arab Women Speak Out" permitted Azza El Hassan to move from television production to more personal work, such as *News Time* (2001), a diary of daily life in Ramallah. Mai Masri has received almost all her support from Western television, such as the BBC and the Independent Television Service in the U.S. Yet she is well enough established to have autonomy in her choice of subject. When the BBC requested a documentary about Palestinian women during the first intifada, Masri was able to substitute something quite specific for this general topic: a return to her childhood town of Nablus. The BBC accepted her change and aired and distributed the resulting work, *Children of Fire* (1995).²⁸

Makers must balance the interests of funders and subjects, as well as audiences west/north and east/south. Shafik describes these delicate negotiations in her case study of two Egyptian documentaries, Al-Abnoudi's *Days of Democracy* and Yousri Nasrallah's *On Boys, Girls, and the Veil* (1995). *Days of Democracy* follows the campaign trail of several female political candidates in 1995. It was made with both Egyptian and foreign NGO funding and succeeded in reaching both Egyptian and foreign audiences, a rare accomplishment. Shafik

²⁷ Viola Shafik, "Class Difference, Nation and Subjectivity: Two Egyptian Documentaries," in "Middle Eastern Media Arts," ed. Dorit Naaman, special issue of *Framework* 43:2 (Fall 2002): 106.

suggests that the video's conservative form, relative to other documentaries by Al-Abnoudi, might be the requirement of the funders, who intended it to be used for public education in Egypt.²⁹ By contrast, (the male) Nasrallah's *On Boys, Girls and the Veil* was supported not by NGOs but by Youssef Chahine's company Misr International and the French television company La Sept.³⁰ The result is an entertaining discussion of gender relations and the new phenomenon of veiling in Egypt. Shafik argues that *On Boys, Girls and the Veil* constructs an image of Egypt for export, in order to appeal to the French audience newly concerned about Muslim schoolgirls wearing the hijab in France.³¹

By this point in my argument, Western readers may be thinking that any kind of sympathy with Arab issues translates as Orientalism. So now I'd like to defend Orientalism as a legitimate approach. Orientalism is a Western approach to the East that acknowledges the locatedness of its interest in the "Orient," those countries the place where the sun rises on the other side of the Mediterranean. "Good Orientalism" does not pretend to be objective. It is intended for Western audiences, to educate them about matters that are self-evident to Arab audiences or that simply concern Westerners more than Arabs. For example, works that deconstruct Western clichés of the Orient, like the U.S.-based Tania Kamal-Eldin's *Hollywood Harems* (1999), while not essential viewing for Arab audiences, are a necessary first step for Western audiences who want to approach the Arab world. Arab artists who live in diaspora speak largely to

²⁸ Mai Masri, interview with the author, March 19, 2003.

²⁹ Shafik, 110.

³⁰ Ibid., 111.

Western audiences, becoming forces of intercultural understanding. For example, the Lebanese director Jocelyn Saab, educated and based in France, worked as a journalist for European television in the early 1970s and is now one of the most prolific of Lebanese film- and videomakers, male or female.³² Sana Wassef remarks that Saab's works "contain a gaze from the inside and an understanding often lacking in western journalism and documentaries."³³

Finally, there are some works that can only be made in exile. Lack of resources in their own countries mean that women can only work in the expensive media of film and video with foreign resources. Political upheaval in their home countries makes it necessary for many artists to work overseas. Working in exile and/or for an outside audience allows film- and videomakers to deal with issues that can't be covered easily in Arab countries, and also issues that arise only in diaspora. Palestinian-Canadian Jamelie Hassan makes conceptual video and installation dealing with exile, identity, and language. Yasmina Bouziane, a Moroccan artist now living in the US, made the short video *Le Regard* (1993) to explore the power of her own gaze.

In short, foreign funding both enables Arab women makers and constrains them to deal with gender issues of interest to the West. Foreign support is also one of the threads that weave Arab makers in a thick intercultural fabric spanning home and diaspora.

³¹ Ibid., 114-115.

³² Wassef, n.p.

³³ Ibid., n.p.

Women [and] Video in Beirut

Still recovering from the war and recoiling from new economic violence, Beirut is a city that *needs* art: critical, creative forms of storytelling, archaeology and healing, when official voices are guarded or mute. Rather than wait for an independent art scene to happen here, artists and curators have conjured it into existence. As well as the workshops I described above, these projects include the work of curators Christine Tohme at Ashkal Alwan, the Lebanese Association for the Plastic Arts, and Pascale Feghali of the Ayloul Festival. Here curating extends to commissioning, bringing into existence the art that curators think the city needs.

Tohme argues that discussing women's art separately in the current Beirut scene is a misbegotten project.³⁴ The more I learn of the local art scene, the more I agree with her. Both women and men are taking on the pressing political issues, at both global and intimate levels, that shape Lebanese life. They include gender issues, but men are as capable of dealing with them as women are; there is no sense of a separate women's art movement here. Instead, as a survey of works by women shows, Beirut video tend to focus on immediate issues of local interest. Unlike work made to suit the interests of foreign funders, it is characterized by topics and approaches that resist translation.

Typical in its atypicality is *Rounds* (2001), a modest video by Joanna Hadjihomas and Khalil Joreige, in which a chain-smoking driver performs an urban

³⁴ Christine Tohme, interview with the author, February 20, 2003.

archaeology as he deftly handles the wheel. Why is the census of cars, not people? How many bodies are buried under the expanse of new roads? And what's on the radio: national symbol Fairouz, her left-wing son Ziad Rahbani, or the song from *Titanic*?

Works made at Beirut DC focus on local and regional social issues yet maintain a quirky, intimate tone. Eliane Raheb's *So Near Yet So Far* (2002) depicts in a very personal manner Raheb's journeys to three countries to meet children who actively support the Palestinian intifada. Zeina Sfeir's *In Spite of the War* (2001) also takes a very personal tone, and its inside references privilege a Lebanese, indeed Beirut, audience. Her interviews reveal a young generation nostalgic for the war and disgusted with the false peace, a mere band-aid affixed by the Rafik Hariri government. While many Lebanese are newly impoverished, downtown Beirut has been rebuilt at vast public expense into a Disneyland simulacrum. In a downtown café, an elegantly veiled woman says, "I cannot be here; a strange sadness overtakes me. Why have they done this? Why did they erase our memories?" She also confesses, "When they [Israel] bombed the power plant...I felt a certain ecstasy"; she almost skipped to the store to buy candles and canned food, as she had during the war. "I felt that I was reconnected to my fight, to my country."

Downtown cannot replace the loss of Hamra Street, the irrepressibly lively center of the city before the war, which has fallen on hard times in the postwar retreat of Muslims and Christians to West and East Beirut. Hamra means red in Arabic, and *Red Is the Color of My Eye* (2000) is Khodr's love letter to this street,

still the city's memory center. Khodr interviews longtime Hamra inhabitants who tell how Yasir Arafat occupied buildings on the street and how the anti-Israeli resistance started at the Wimpy Café; but also about how once local residents went to the local authority to file a complaint against the sun, whose slanting rays bothered them early in the morning. "People in Ras Beirut are a bit thick in the head." Hamra residents disavow that they live in one of the most important archaeological sites of recent Lebanese memory. It is up to the gentle persistence of Khodr, as well as Ashkal Alwan, which commissioned the video for the 2000 Hamra Street Project, to carry out the excavation.

A work about the war, yes; but not about the cliché of "war-torn Beirut" for which foreigners search the city. *Red Is the Color of My Eye* is so extremely local in its care and tenderness that it cannot and need not travel.

Similarly untranslatable is the aforementioned *Train/Trains* by Rania Stephan, who divides her time between Beirut and Paris. Stephan visited the Lebanese towns where the now defunct railroad used to pass. The locals, delighted to see her, reminisce fondly about how noisy the engines were, how they used to rush out and collect the laundry so it wouldn't get dirty: they miss the trains. Odd and lovely, dreamily edited, *Train/Trains* only subtly critiques the privatization policies that brought this and other national projects to a halt.

Patriarchy is alive and well in Lebanon; the revised family law continues to disadvantage women; Muslim fundamentalism is on the increase with its concomitant pressures on women; and young women, outnumbering men, face extreme pressure to attract husbands while maintaining some semblance of

virginity. Yet gender politics are a rare topic in Beirut women's video. Some works approach sexuality in a tender and gently critical way. Reine Mitri's 5-minute *A Propos de la poire* (About the pear, 2002) poetically explores sexuality and its taboos through a history of erotic art. Nesrine Khodr and Ghassan Salhab's *De la séduction* (On seduction, 1997), a 32-minute personal documentary, is unmistakably Beirut in its mise-en-scène and attitude toward life. Exquisitely, rigorously composed and edited, *De la séduction* provides an aestheticized frame for seven women who speak with a frank mixture of delight and ruefulness, of love, seduction, fantasy, and disappointment. Men are barely present in this work: they populate a café, one man's shadow is cast on a bedroom wall, another's limbs sprawl from under the bedsheets. Khodr includes herself as a fictional character who prefers to love a man she never sees.

Interestingly, Lebanese male video artists seem to pay more attention to gender politics than their female counterparts. Mahmoud Hojeij's video *Shameless transmission of desired transformations per day* (2000) approaches, with great subtlety and sensitivity, the social surveillance of single women in Beirut. This faux, Foucauldian documentary tracks the work of barely-fictional morality police who survey parked cars, trap couples having sex, and force a confession from the young women they catch. These confessions are intercut with the sexist wisdom of a greengrocer who compares women to fruit: they should be easy to peel like a banana, not too ripe, etc. Similarly, Akram Zaatari's *Majnounak* (Crazy of you, 1997) interviews several young Beirut men boasting about their sexual conquests. At least one of these sounds like a date rape, and

others might well be fabrications. It is a charming yet cutting portrait of Lebanese masculinity. Masculinity is also the subject of Nabil Kojok's *January 10* (2002), produced in the week before the artist began his mandatory military service. Its intimate shots, such as one where Kojok uses a vacuum-cleaner tube to deform his handsome face, convey his anxiety about taking on the hyper-masculine and de-individualized identity of the soldier.

What distinguishes these works from North American works that investigate gender is that issues of gender identity are inseparable from a critique of the state and of Lebanese society. This they hold in common with the women's works I have mentioned.

Interestingly, the video that won Best Lebanese Work at the 2002 Beirut Cinema Days festival was made by a foreigner, as though one can only see the whole Lebanon from a distance. Katia Jarjoura, a Canadian of Lebanese descent, moved to Lebanon in 2000 with the intention to produce a video about the role of Hizbullah after Israel's withdrawal from the South. Jarjoura came to perceive that people in South Lebanon find themselves torn, scandalously but normally, between two loyalties: on one hand toward Israel, which "liberated" the South from Palestinian presence in 1982 and offered employment, including military; on the other toward Hizbullah, the Shi'a party that came to power in 1990, defended the South against Israeli occupiers, and provided jobs, education, a welfare system—and a political identity. Jarjoura's 52-minute video *Caught in Between* (2002) portrays people from both sides. One is De Gaulle, a Christian who was imprisoned in Khiam and who chose to side with Hizbullah.

Another is Maha, who worked in Israel before the withdrawal and is now impoverished and hated by her neighbors as a collaborator. Maha's husband, a former soldier in the Israeli-supported Southern Lebanese Army, is now imprisoned and spends his time building ever-larger boats out of matchsticks.

These and other people in the South, with Jarjoura as witness, give voice to a desperate cry to the Lebanese government that turned away from its people when their region was occupied. Echoing the feelings of nostalgia and dispossession voiced both in Stephan's *Train/Trains* and in Sfeir's *In Spite of the War*, Maha bitterly explains her choice to side with Israel: "There is no State to tell you, 'You are Lebanese and we will help you.'" The video expresses the Lebanese national trauma of a people abandoned by their own government.

Lacking a sectarian identity of her own, speaking poor Arabic, Jarjoura was equally strange and equally approachable to both parties. Also her Canadian passport allowed her to shoot in Israel (although her Lebanese passport meant she could be imprisoned for doing so). Jarjoura told me that at the first screening, Christian viewers accused her of making propaganda for Hizbollah. Yet at the same event, some Hizbollah members attacked her: who was she, an outsider, to show compassion to Israeli collaborators? Yet others acknowledged that no Lebanese person could have made it. After one screening, where Jarjoura had demurred that it was a film made for outsiders, a man approached the videomaker to say, "Your film is not for a foreign audience; it's a necessary film for Lebanon."³⁵

³⁵ Katia Jarjoura, interview with the author, February 26, 2003.

In Lebanon at present, politics is everywhere, and art need only press the surface of everyday life to bring political contradictions forward. This may be why artists pursue common issues regardless of gender, and also why the work produced here is so consistently interesting. This in turn is what has attracted international attention to this small art scene. In the international art world, politics is capital, and Beirut art has it.

Beirut: the Global in the Local

The West and the diaspora can be found at the heart of the most intimate Beirut production. In part this is because of the constraints of funding that I've discussed. In part it is because many works by Lebanese artists reach a the international festival circuit before they are exhibited locally, and so they return "home" marked with the looks of others. And in part it is because many artists study overseas, where they learn the contemporary "Biennale" style; or, as in the workshops organized by Ra'ad and Salloum and by Hojeij and Zaatari, the international style is passed on to local artists. These styles are animated by local issues, with a zest and urgency that would be the envy of Western artists. Yet the combination of international style and local content makes these works difficult to place.

Rasha Salti, in a fierce Marxist assessment of the contemporary art scene in Beirut, notes that when Beirut artists borrow forms from post-industrial cultures, such as conceptual, installation, video, and performance art, some

critics judge these to be “imported ‘postmodern’ forms, unfit for expression within Lebanese society.”³⁶ While she does not agree with this assessment, Salti notes, “Besides the hollow questioning of ‘authenticity,’ the problem of legibility lingers nonetheless, and elicits the question, with whom do these works communicate? To what extent do they wish to mediate to an audience and, is there significance to their incommunicability?”³⁷ Salti’s striking question begs a response that will locate Beirut on an international map without sacrificing its specific emplacement.

That emplacement, I have been arguing, is a sign of the autonomy of Beirut art. The very qualities that make Beirut art “illegible” also protect it. Walid Sadek argues that globalization is built on a fascination with local culture, but that this fascination in turn rests on an assumed interchangeability of local cultures. “All issues dealing with the internal hierarchies of these different cultures, which order not only their social existence but also their reception of the other and subsequent hybridisation of and by the other, are usually ignored. For to delve into such difficult political issues is to accept that the cultural/political topography of the world is based on contention and not on continuity.”³⁸ That is, the specificity of Beirut art, as of that of any city that can name and claim local politics, makes it somewhat indigestible to outside interests. Being illegible, or indigestible, prevents Beirut art from feeding into the homogenizing discourses of development and modernity that characterize some (not all) NGOs and

³⁶ Rasha Salti, “Framing the Subversive in Post-War Beirut: Critical Considerations for a History of the Present,” in Tohme and Abu Rayyan, 88.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Walid Sadek, *Karaoke* (CAIR and Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool, 1998), 27-28.

international art institutions, as well as some (not all) Western feminist approaches.

I wrote above that in the international art world politics is capital, and Beirut art has it. Yet, to pursue the metaphor, this capital cannot be exchanged into just any currency. Similarly, what matters in Beirut may not be measurable by the top-down models that some NGOs and reformers wish to impose. And if translation/exchange is so delicate in the relatively westernized example of Lebanon, it may be even more so in other Arab countries and cultures.

Yet, while Beirut art resists homogenization, it also builds an *international* local culture. Given the size of the Lebanese diaspora, many Beirutis are likely to see, for example, *Red Is the Color of My Eye* for the first time ever in Minneapolis.³⁹ And while its meaning cannot be generalized, this work is available to some degree to other Arabs, and beyond ethnicity, other survivors of civil wars, other café goers, and other lovers of experimental documentary. A work is completed by its audience, and some Beirut works take a long trek from Hamra Street to Brussels to Seattle, for example. Along the way they build connections among those who care to try to translate.⁴⁰

Beirut's cultural scene is like a tide pool: a fascinatingly lively and diverse microcosm whose existence is tentative, subject to the crashing of foreign waves on eastern Mediterranean shores. Over the past few years, support for Beirut art

³⁹ At Minnesota's first Arab film festival, "So Much I Want to Say" (the title of a video by Mona Hatoum), curated by Rawi Hage and co-sponsored by Mizna and Intermedia Arts, in March 2003,

has grown from strategic local initiatives, to foreign NGO support, to recognition by foreign critics and curators.⁴¹ These stages should reflect progress toward sustainability. But they might be signs of the delicacy of life in a tide pool.

Foreign support is necessary in a country like Lebanon that has a lively art scene and a poor government. The Lebanese Ministry of Culture coughs up very little funding for these projects. In its mission statement, Beirut DC notes that NGO funding, though it has fallen off since the war, is more necessary than ever, as the government's reconstruction policy "cares only about stones and not human beings."⁴² Organizers exhaust themselves chasing after money from local businesses (for whom cultural contribution is a new notion),⁴³ foreign embassies and organizations such as the Goethe Institut and the French Cultural Center, and, paramountly, foreign charitable funds and NGOs. These include the European Commission, the Ford Foundation, the Getty Grant Program, the Prince Claus Fund (Netherlands), and UNESCO.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Some works mentioned in this article were seen at Jayce Salloum's program of Arab video for the Argos Festival in Brussels in October 2001 and are carried by Arab Film Distribution in Seattle.

⁴¹ For example, the Montreal-based art journal *Parachute* devoted its October 2002 issue to Beirut, with many essays by Beirut writers; and French curator Catherine David, formerly of Documenta, organized "Contemporary Arab Representations: Lebanon/Beirut," for the Fondacio Antoni Tàpies in Barcelona and Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam.

⁴² Beirut DC dossier, n.p.

⁴³ An exception is the Audi Bank of Lebanon, the major financial supporter of the Arab Image Foundation.

⁴⁴ The Ford Foundation has supported the Arab Image Foundation, Ashkal Alwan, and Beirut DC; the European Commission and the Getty have supported the Arab Image Foundation; the Prince Claus Fund has supported Ashkal Alwan and the Arab Image Foundation; UNESCO has supported the Beirut Documentary Film Festival.

But as I've noted, foreign support is subject to the winds of political fashion that blow from the International Monetary Fund, and other powers that determine world "hot spots." Christine Tohme worries that such foreign support may wane when Beirut is considered less "hot," both politically and culturally, than other "third world" cities like Cairo or sites in sub-Saharan Africa.⁴⁵ In fact this shift is already taking place. The Prince Claus Fund abruptly withdrew its support for Ashkal Alwan this year, and the Ford Foundation has informed both Ashkal Alwan and Beirut DC that it will not continue to support them.⁴⁶

Beirut's sophistication may be its undoing. Its synthesis of Western and Arab discourses and its artists' capacity for dialogue with the West, not as subaltern but as cultural equal, are beginning to appear to funders as a sign that it no longer needs foreign benevolence. The example of this city suggests that when an art scene becomes autonomous, foreign supporters lose interest and move on. Yet, as I have argued, this autonomy is also the condition for women, and artists in general, to pursue work that reflects their own concerns and not those of outsiders.

Economic dynamics encourage Arab independent media to persist in the context of development, but not on an equal footing with Western art. Sophisticated and fickle in a different way than NGOs, the international art market demands a certain translatability of non-Western art to which a well-developed local scene, like Beirut's, might not cater. A third resource for Arab independent media is public and private funding in the Arab world itself. As

⁴⁵ Tohme, interview with the author.

mentioned above, the satellite networks MBC and Arabiya will soon be broadcasting quantities of independent documentaries from the Arab world, including works sponsored by Ashkal Alwan and Beirut DC. Although it is a risky venture, I am excited about this “door to the sky” for experimental video in Dubai,⁴⁷ and hope it does not slam shut too soon. And given the increasing rift between the Arab world and the West, it seems crucial that Arab artists find local sources of support.⁴⁸

After Western NGOs, the international art market, and Arab support, artists still have a fourth option. That is to work under the radar, or to maintain their autonomy by working in impoverished conditions and struggling individually to bring their work to publics. But Arab artists deserve better than that.

Arab independent media in its nascent period is inextricably intercultural. Yet if its center of influence swings slightly eastward, at this point that may be a good thing for women artists and others who want to deal with local concerns, speak in their own languages (which may or may not be Arabic), and stop explaining their worlds to the West.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Tohme, interview with the author.

⁴⁷ To borrow a title of Farida Ben Lyazid.

⁴⁸ In an echo of strategies of North American media organizations that lost their funding in the early 1990s, Eliane Raheb of Beirut DC hopes that her organization will be able to earn income, for example by renting its video editing suite. Interview with the author, February 28, 2003.

⁴⁹ My learning curve these past months in Beirut has been steep indeed and not without potholes. I am warmly grateful to the many people who steered me along, especially Samirah Alkassim, Dorit Naaman, Walid Ra’ad, Christine Tohme, and Akram Zaatari.