

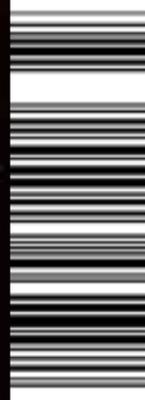
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A Conversation on
Happiness

CULTURE HELPS

BEIRUT

TO REGAIN

HOPE

WORDS BY EMMA SINGLETON



The reconstruction and recovery of a devastated Beirut is a complex task. And while politics often dominates the narrative, it's the more modest role played by culture and community that can really help people gain perspective. Here we see some of the art creating a sense of place, and design that instils hope and even happiness to a confused population.

Beirut has always been subjected to earthquakes, wars and corruption, but the explosions at the city port on the 4 August 2020 at 18:08:18 EEST surpassed it all. Around 200 people were killed, more than 6,000 were injured, thousands upon thousands of homes and businesses were destroyed, and the number of people made homeless has been estimated at 300,000.

Since 2014 Hanger 12, the epicentre of the explosion, had stored 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate next to fireworks - essentially a ticking time bomb. The potential devastation of this pairing was reportedly known to the Lebanese government and the port authorities - their ignoring of the extreme danger paints a picture of a dysfunctional government sullied by corruption, neglect and gross mismanagement.

Billions of dollars of damage coupled with the ongoing coronavirus situation and outstanding debts from past conflicts have left the people of Beirut in shock. And although cultural creatives are generally not the go-to spokespeople in emergencies, talking to affected artists and designers provides an insight into a possible path to healing for this broken community.



Bernard Khoury, Plot # 450 and Plot # 1072, before the explosion

"If culture is a bridge between people, if culture is imagining the future of humanity, deliberately or accidentally, if culture is both identity and freedom, then culture definitely is a way towards healing from this disaster," says Pierre Bouassi, former culture minister and current Lebanese parliamentarian.

Lebanese architect Bernard Khoury calls Beirut "a wonderful toxic catastrophe", a city where he is able to take pleasure in "radical instances in which every second is counted as extreme". Troubled territories and regions where the state has failed to grapple with its urban realities have always fascinated him.

In 2004 Khoury moved his studio to the La Quarantine area of Beirut. The neighbourhood is close to

the city port - which in the 1940s was a refugee camp for Palestinians, Lebanese and Armenians - and was destroyed in the blast.

"A deeply scarred fabric has been left in this city," Khoury says. "It is in desperate need of assistance." Two of the three towers that once rose proudly above the port and his studio were destroyed. "They cannot be rebuilt exactly as they were," Khoury says. "Rather, we now have to work with the architectural scars to see what can be done".

Mira Hawa is passionate about her city and has struggled to find the exact words to describe what has happened. "Whatever you see, whatever you read, it doesn't come close to even beginning to describe what it's like here," she says.

My city is bleeding, contaminating the Mediterranean basin with its toxic fluids. On August 4 2020, Beirut took another major blow. Today, more than ever, its deeply scarred fabric is in desperate need of assistance.

Bernard Khoury



Bernard Khoury, Plot # 450 and Plot # 1072, after the explosion

Together with Sabine El Gemayel-d'Herbécourt and ArtScoops, Hawa helped set up the auction Artists with Beirut to raise funds. "The ground may have been taken away, but we cannot let it crumble," she says. "We must channel the devastation into something that can make a difference for those who need it."

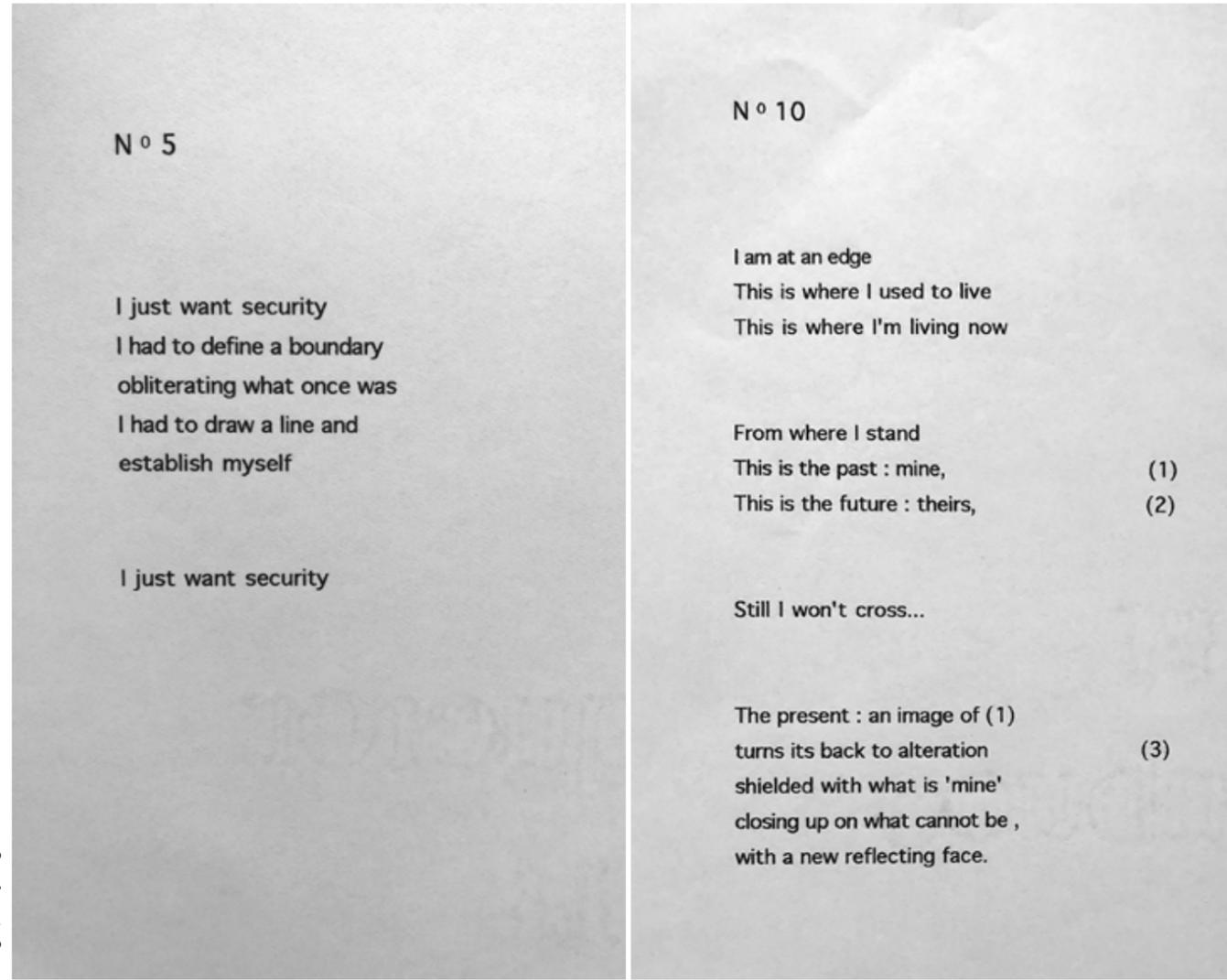
Pascal Hachem and Rana Haddad run the design studio, 200Gr. "In the 38 seconds of the blast, the city's history was ripped away," says Hachem. "It's left scars and ghosts which months later are still raw and painful."

Since those devastating seconds, the studio has been questioning their place in the city and thinking about how to reinvigorate its character. "The city is an oeuvre, closer to a work of art than to a simple material product," wrote philosopher Henri Lefebvre, who the duo cite as a big influence on their thinking.

"When your first reaction to the blast is to run and seek safety," Hachem says, "it takes a lot of strength, a lot of mental power to step back into the devastation and know what to do, how to act, where to start."

The 200Gr studio is best known for work that grapples with the realities of everyday life - its struggles and triumphs. "We try to find a playful way to address a topic that might otherwise be overloaded and hard to fathom," says Hachem.

Since the explosion they have been piecing together an interwoven story of the city, its people and structures, bodies and bricks. They show a line-up of shattered eyeglasses each with a small written tag denoting the street, time and date each pair was found.



A piece of me died on that day but my anger will postpone my grief. Now is the time for action and for vigorous resistance, for asserting what is no longer wanted, and what is no longer accepted. To surrender is not an option I deserve better, we all deserve better. Every human being deserves the right to live freely, in dignity, without a constant fear of death.

(from Rana)

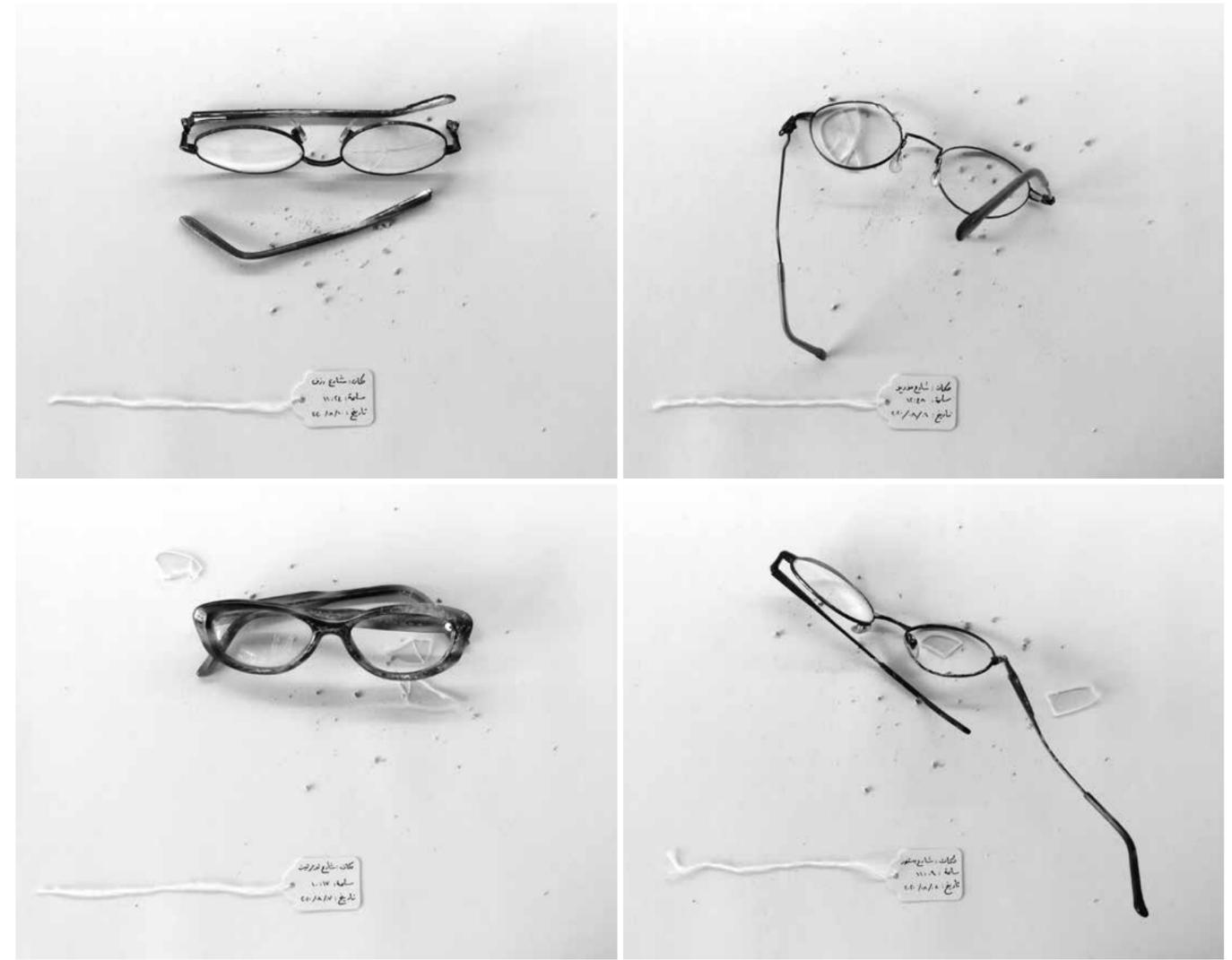
Stripped of all context, the viewer is confronted with the broken frames and starts to wonder about the wearer. Did they survive? What did they see? How is the street they were hurled into now functioning? Alongside the eyeglasses they have also been collecting stories about the blast from the Beirut citizens and its architecture. In a reading it isn't clear to tell which is which, resulting in a layered insight into Beirut and its inhabitants. "The souls of the people and their city have been lost and it's the stitching back together of the two that needs to be worked on," Haddad explains.

Adib Dada moved back to Beirut from New York in 2011, the designer wanting to reconnect and play a bigger role in his country. He was

injured in the explosion when he ran to protect his two-and-a-half-year-old daughter from a falling ceiling. He broke his back; his daughter was physically unhurt but traumatized.

Dada's practice, The Other Dada, is rooted in the study of living systems and regenerative architecture that uses a more holistic and biomimicry approach. Projects like The Other Forest are not about creating objects, but developing architecture that is related to the ecosystems that surround it.

He has now started plans for a Living Memorial. "I don't want this project to be stuck in the past," he says, "but to be looking at the future." The reserve will be a communal



effort and begin with the planting of a forest in the city, a place of memory and healing filled with native plants and vegetation with medicinal properties. It will also be a space to celebrate the lives of those lost in a space of unity and hope.

"The explosion has made all the struggles worse for everyone," says Joana Dabaj, from CatalyticAction, a charity that uses a co-design approach to public projects to empower the most vulnerable communities. She believes cities should be more about people than buildings.

Before the blast, CatalyticAction designed a playground in La Quarantaine, which was still surrounded by a fence despite already being finished. When visiting the area to

assess the damage, Dabaj noticed that the children were jumping the fence to get inside and play. She took it as a clear sign for the organization to get back together with the community to redevelop a place for the children to play safely.

"The most important thing is not to forget about the significance of play and happiness in a child's development," says Dabaj. "All children deserve a space to be safe and express themselves after such an incomprehensibly devastating event."

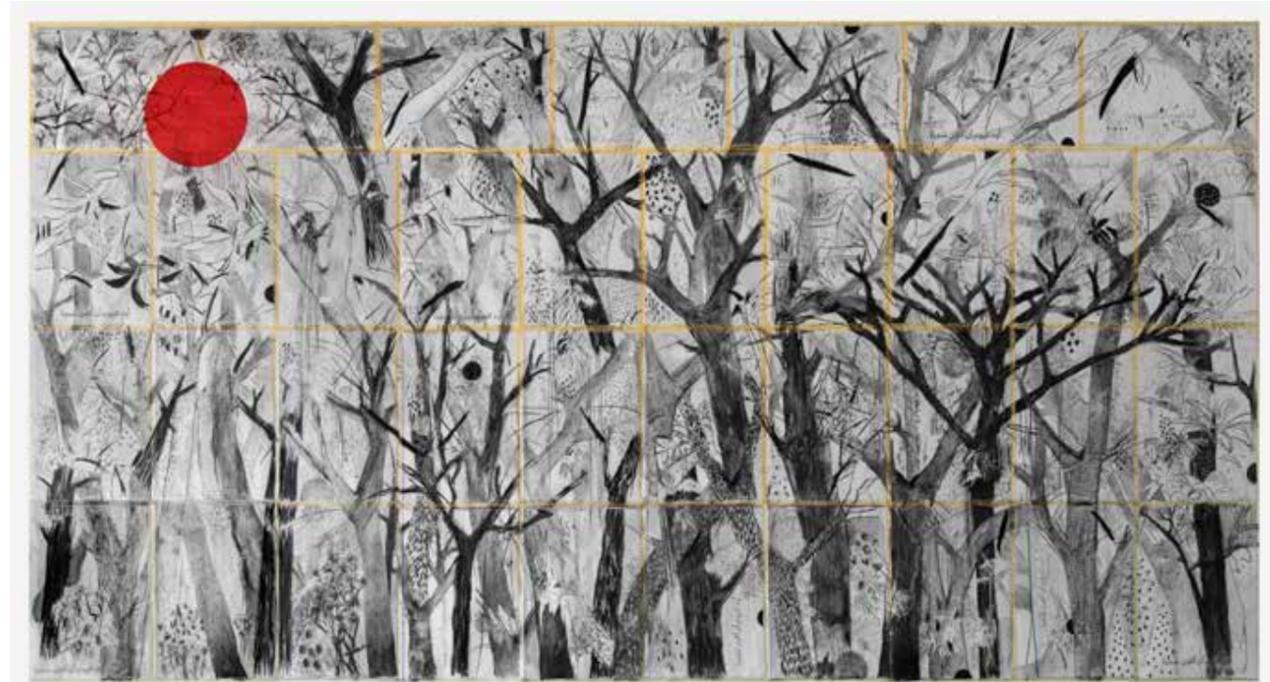
Product designer Thomas Trad was just leaving his studio when the blast struck. "Earthquake? Terrorist attack? A building collapsing?" he says. "I didn't know, but why were 2,700 tons of ammonium ni-

trate being stored in Beirut's port in the first place?" Trad calls the explosion yet another problem to add to the turmoil that Lebanon has been facing. "The Lebanese currency lost almost 80% of its value in less than a year," he says. "People are unable to afford to fix their homes, minds and bodies."

Trad delayed returning to his studio, saying he just needed time to grieve and focus on helping those around him. He says that despite all the destruction and questioning they are all "fighting to stay positive" while grieving for their country that they "still love profoundly".

Just one week before the explosion Abed Al Kadiri opened a show at Galerie Tanit, *Remains of the Last*

Galerie Tamit, after the blast, photo © Abed Al Kadiri



Abed Al Kadiri, Today, I would like to be a tree, photos © Laetitia Hakim

Red Rose – a series of paintings that explore the theme of descending into darkness. The atmosphere at the vernissage was uncomfortable, many cultural people looking grim, dismayed and saddened by the political situation engulfing Lebanon.

Just one week after that night, people were messaging Abed saying his exhibition had been a prophecy. The gallery and Abed’s work were

ruined in the blast leaving him sad and angry, but also with a need to help.

Back in the studio he spent eight hours a day for six solid weeks on a new piece, *Today, I would like to be a tree* – a fragmented mural dedicated to architect Jean-Marc Bonfils (1963-2020) and the other people and places lost in the blast. Each of the 81 fragments have been sold

with all proceeds going directly to the rebuilding of the surrounding neighbourhood.

The European cultural community also reached out to do what they can. In September, French auction house PIASA organized From Beirut Art and Design Scene, a sale to raise funds that included works by Lebanon’s well-known practitioners, David/Nicolas, Nada Debs, Ka-

ren Chekerdjian and Georges Mousseb. Curator Joanna Chevalier said: “The idea of the sale is to help them find commissions from galleries, interior designers and other projects.”

And in the Netherlands Nadja Schlenker added a new layer to the installation she made at the Rietveld Academie, *See you again for the first time, next time – Collaging Beirut*. Originally conceived before the explosion, the work was developed to visually and physically depict her experience of warmth, energy and optimistic resilience in Beirut. She wanted to show the flip side of the usual narrative of political and economic corruption that dominates how the news of the region is told across Europe. “Although it is true that there was and is an overwhelming amount of corruption and turmoil in the country, there are also hidden layers that we don’t see in the news, such as the culture, long rich history and warmth of those who call it home,” she says.

Since the explosion the piece has turned into a call for action. “But the meaning of this work hasn’t really changed,” she says. “It just becomes bolder, louder. So much goes wrong in Lebanon, but no matter how corrupt the story we hear abroad is, there is still a human side to the narrative, and when we watch devastation from afar, it is important to remember that there are people living in those places and they need hope.”

“The situation in the city is still unclear,” concludes Bouassi. “People are still unable to mourn as they wait for the results of the inquiry that has not yet happened. They fear the truth will never come out, which has happened in Lebanon many times in the past. But as with so much that happens in this part of the world, we will find our way.” /



Nadja Schlenker, See you again for the first time, next time – Collaging Beirut

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