

Parergon



On the night of 15-16 July 2006, Mazen Kerbaj—one of the initiators and key players of the Lebanese free improvisation and experimental music scene—recorded on the balcony of his Beirut flat an improvised duet, between his trumpet and accompanying bomb explosions courtesy of Israel’s Air Force. This forty-plus minute nocturnal soundscape, which he titled *Starry Night*—of tones blown, strained, rubbed and hissed, to jarring detonations, silence, distant car alarms and barking dogs—bizarre, horrific, meditative, sombre—has since become widely acclaimed, an act of resignation, resistance and defiance. And poetry. Throughout those days and nights in Beirut during the 2006 July War (aka the 2006 Lebanon War)—of bombings, blackouts, violence and destruction—Mazen Kerbaj kept a daily blog of his discordant fears, anger, frustration and (black) humour (“*Beirut+free improvised music+comics+bombs+drawings*”), observed in real time by a global online audience. On the evening of 4 August 2020, an explosion, since calculated as being one of the largest non-nuclear in history, tore through central Beirut and beyond, killing hundreds and displacing many thousands of people in a landscape already reverberating to the shockwaves of civil unrest, socio-economic crises and a rapidly enveloping pandemic.

The texts here, as diverse positions on another duet, are responses to the impulses of ‘trembling landscapes’ and ‘seismic movements’—not so much of the machinations of Brexit and Hong Kong, or the Trump-l’oeill antics of the US presidential campaign, as two explosions that bookended 2020, one viral and the other chemical (their intrinsic political-class institutionalisms being both responsible and ergo, in repudiation), the latter event symbolic of endemic deceit and prevarication, the former seemingly no less so—echoing multiple attendant global ruptures and fault lines (not least cultural/identity, secrecy, deception, the postcolonial and non-aligned). By chance, *Trembling Landscapes* happened to be the title (conceived pre-Beirut blast) of an exhibition of Middle Eastern artists at the Eye Filmmuseum in Amsterdam held at the end of 2020, while *Seismic Movements* was the title for the Dhaka Art Summit in Bangladesh at the beginning of the year which managed to materialize and conclude before COVID-19’s displacement of global harmony, including that of the ‘global artistic industrial complex.’ History underscores ‘The Contemporary.’