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Upon and of The Terrain

"Catastrophes are believed to fall suddenly, when least expected. They are thought to be spectacular, almost sublime," Lebanese artist Ali Cherri muses. "Catastrophe has slowed down, abandoning all desire to shock or surprise... A slow death, a macabre dance… deliberate, seductive, repetitive, monotonous to the point of banality." These reflections don't date from 2020. They accompany Cherri's 2013 artwork *The Disquiet*. This lyrical video oscillates between a documentary narrative about the intersection of four different geological fault lines which Lebanon straddles, and the motif of a man ascending a rural incline in wintertime. The narrative is concerned with historic catastrophes "that have become a series of images"—whether block prints and photos recording historic earthquakes in this fault-riven region or footage of seismic equipment monitoring the "forty-five to sixty times a day that the earth shakes in Lebanon." All four fault lines have had a distinct history of seismic activity. Each major geological event has left varying degrees of destruction in its wake. The best known is the earthquake that destroyed Roman Beyrutus in 551. It sent the town's renowned law school tumbling into the sea, later inspiring sardonic remarks that the region has been lawless ever since. "It took Beirut 1,300 years to recover completely from its last catastrophe," Cherri's voiceover says, noting that there are no minor catastrophes.

Whether it's an empire that's collapsing or a bridge, the human beings trapped amid the carnage make it catastrophic. Ruminations on the reliable instability of this terrain return repeatedly to that steadicam footage framing the feet of a man climbing. It's as if the unease motivating this work can only be expressed in images. Take the work's opening vista, showing an islet sunken in the midst of a brisk current, the Beirut River in the rainy season. Flooded foliage emerges from water that is neither blue nor brown but red. It isn't post-production whimsy. The river ran red this day, as if the earth itself was bleeding.

The Disquiet is one of two works Ali Cherri presented in *Trembling Landscapes: Between Reality and Fiction*, an exhibition curated by Nat Muller at Amsterdam's Eye Filmmuseum towards the end of 2020. His other artwork, which donated its title to the exhibition, is a series of lithographic prints of ink and charcoal drawings, based on historic aerial photos of Algiers, Beirut, Damascus, Erbil, Mecca and Tehran. Muller's exhibition assembled work by eleven artists of diverse practices from the MENA region—a territory whose recent history, resources, proximity to European imperialism, settler colonialism, and their ramifications, have ensured that its terrain would be a subject of lingering contestation. As Cherri demonstrates, it's not the region's political history alone that makes its landscape tremulous. The artworks in *Trembling Landscapes* explore and interrogate facets of this wobbly terrain, its representation and attendant uncertainties. Muller's exhibition was conceived before humans underwent the regimented isolation of lockdown, but the pall of contingency that lingered over the pandemic year enhanced the resonance of these works, or at least inflected how some of them could be read. Unfortunately, this is particularly true of the pieces conceived in Lebanon, where the ruin of 2020 was a gradual and multifaceted thing, swelling as the year wore on.

Contemporary art in Lebanon springs from a toxic *terroir*, whose contradictions also gave rise to the country's bipolar post-war politics. Over its fifteen years, the Lebanese Civil War exhibited symptoms of social revolution and ideological conflict, tribal vendetta and geopolitical proxy war. When the early idealism dissolved into exhaustion, its proponents either emigrated, shifted paradigms, or fell back on mafia-style clientelism whose ideological face remains sectarian. It's been widely observed that the Civil War ended without any resolution of its basic causes. The post-1990 reconstruction regime threw its resources into infrastructure building, property development and institutional graft on a massive scale. Politicians (a significant number of whom had been militia leaders during the war) and their enablers in the business sector grew rich from exclusive import agencies and the dividends of foreign investment and aid initiatives. Most Lebanese people were left to fend for themselves. There was a general amnesty for anyone implicated in war crimes but no truth and reconciliation commission for their victims and survivors.

Putting aside the period of institutional development the Shihab regime oversaw in the wake of the 1958 civil war, Lebanon's political parties have tended to be over-mighty, and the post-1990 *muhassasa* (allotment) regime normalized their plunder of state assets. As its institutions were further enfeebled, a culture of impunity insulated political actors from the consequences of their graft.[1] Lebanon's politicians seldom betrayed much interest in enforcing institutional norms other states take for granted—whether the monopoly of coercion represented by state security services or universal provision of basic utilities (electricity grid, water networks, telephone service, etc.) beyond major urban centres and Mount Lebanon. The allotment regime ensured that, rather than recreating (or even consolidating) itself, the state shrank, creating opportunities for petty entrepreneurs.

Mobile telephony found a restless market in post-war Lebanon. After 2006, Beirut traded twenty four-hour electricity for regulated power outages of three hours (or more), gaps in service filled by unregulated generator operators and others tapping the grid itself. Households only had all-day water if they were serviced by a well, creating opportunities for unregulated tanker-truck operators with contacts in the country's water companies. It was harder to fill the gaps created when the allotment state failed to find a solution to its waste problem.[2]

In the early 1990s the company Sukleen had been contracted to oversee rubbish collection and disposal, using a labour force comprised of migrant workers from Syria and South Asia. Around 2015 the company lost their landfill when villages refused to renew their contracts. Swarms of flies became ubiquitous. The state was unable to negotiate a solution, so rubbish went uncollected for weeks on end. As a stopgap, Sukleen dumped collected waste at properties where labourers were housed. When Beirut rubbish piles, festering in the summer heat, reached the balconies of first-floor apartment dwellers, residents took matters into their own hands and began burning the stuff. Plumes of acrid smoke rose all over greater Beirut. When they began blocking the streets with burning trash, nervous state actors told Sukleen to dump the city's waste at undisclosed rural locations. Another company, Ramco, now oversees waste management.

The waste crisis was, for some, the proverbial last straw. Grassroots activists organised the "You Stink" campaign, touting root and branch changes to the political system, abolition of the *muhassasa* state. The country's prolonged economic disintegration reached new lows in late 2019, and the government announced it would place a tax on WhatsApp, the mobile messaging app that allows underpaid and underemployed Lebanese to sidestep the country's vastly overpriced mobile telephone fees. Protesters returned to the streets with a vengeance, repeating demands for radical reforms. In response, commercial banks shuttered for two weeks, unprecedented even in the worst days of the Civil War. When they reopened, ad hoc capital controls were in place, tightly restricting account-holders' access to their savings and credit card usage. Lebanon's currency devaluation began. In October 2019 the exchange rate was US$1=L£1,500. At the time of writing, the rate was closer to US$1=L£10,500.

One government resigned, to be replaced by another that was more energetic in deploying teargas and live fire against protesters. The crackdown depleted the ranks of demonstrators, as did the economic and financial crises, which slashed employees' incomes, eroded the savings of the middle class and set prices soaring. The novel coronavirus pandemic descended upon an economy contracting as businesses shut, a workforce staggered as casual labour evaporated. Lockdown measures are antithetical to the hospitality sector, the most robust in the capital, so measures were at first laxly applied and enforced. COVID-19 numbers soared. The damned year was punctuated by the Beirut Port blast of 4 August. It killed over two hundred people and gutted a kilometres-wide swathe of the urban fabric, damaging over 6,000 buildings and affecting an estimated 300,000 people. It soon emerged that the explosion issued from a massive cache of confiscated ammonium nitrate, incompetently stowed, and ignored by state actors for years. The catastrophe of 4 August was the result of criminal negligence.

It is perhaps no surprise that Lebanon's contemporary artists don't fetishize landscape. This attitude has been eloquently expressed in one work by artist, writer and pedagogue Walid Sadek. His 2006 series *Love Is Blind* is a conversation with ten artworks by Lebanese painter Moustafa Farroukh (1901–1957), completed between 1933 and 1952. Sadek doesn't reproduce Farroukh's romantic renderings of Lebanese landscapes. Their absence is simply noted by the

series' ten vacant frames. Sadek's work resides in the exhibition tags. Of Farroukh's *View of Beirut* (c.1952), for instance, Sadek's tag remarks, "this city is not here. Pilgrims will not find in it a shrine to circumambulate and to no avail will believers proclaim their divorce with its place. Names are fated to be abandoned by us as we are fated to be abandoned by places." Sadek is among the so-called 1990s generation of Lebanese contemporary artists, who emerged after the Civil War ended. Among his contemporaries are artist-filmmaker collaborators Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige. A significant portion of their practice reflects upon or foregrounds the significance of photography in representing and apprehending the world. Landscape, whether in its presence or absence, has long been a feature of their work. Take *Barmeh/Rounds* (2001). Over the course of its seven and a half minutes, this video work follows artist and actor Rabih Mroué as he drives about Beirut—the car-mounted camera trained on the driver throughout. As he navigates the city streets, Mroué complains about all the things that irritate him. Each annoyance prompts a recollection and a narrative, accompanied by the sounds of the city in the background. Though audible, the urban landscape is invisible. The car windows radiate only a hostile, overexposed glare.

Landscape receives a more formally nuanced treatment in Hadjithomas and Joreige's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (2013), which Muller included in *Trembling Landscapes*. This work shows a vista of Beirut as seen from the adjacent mountain, accompanied by a voiceover reading of Constantine Cavafy's poem of the same name, a nineteenth century interrogation of political crisis and complacency eerily evocative of contemporary Lebanon. The tableau isn't a still image but a diorama comprised of fifty-odd overlapping still and film images. The effect is to make the landscape details appear less solid. The voiceover (delivered by the architect, Bernard Khoury) is cluttered, emerging from a sound design that superimposes snippets of the reading atop one another, with discernible snatches of the poem occasionally rising above the dissonance. Visually and aurally, the work is a distillation of Beirut's trembling landscape.

With the suite of eight works that came to be called the *Unconformities* project, Joreige and Hadjithomas seek to use the disrupted earth itself as a narrative media. The material inspiration for this series is the core sample, a feature of geological research that property developers are obliged to take before starting a project. *The Boxes* (2017), part one of *Unconformities*, is a photo series in which each core sample is shot from above so that it's 'framed' by the wooden box containing it. The photo is part of an ensemble that includes lists of the archaeological, palaeontological and geological data the core contains, along with supplementary sketches and texts. The artists use each ensemble as excerpts from a subterranean archive narrating the neighbourhoods from which the core sample was extracted. Each of the eight instalments of *Unconformities* uses the samples somewhat differently. In *Time Capsules* (2017), the samples aren't photographed but physically encased in clear tubes and suspended in transparent resin to form vertical sculptures. Hung from the ceiling of an exhibition space, an ensemble resembles an oversized test tube experiment.

Sculpture is the favoured form of Marwan Rechmaoui. He's worked in a range of media—from beeswax and marble to pre-formed concrete—and is best known for his miniature depictions of facets of Beirut. *Beirut Caoutchouc* (2004–08), is a sprawling moulded-rubber scale map of the city. He has a growing series of maquettes of iconic architectural ruins. *Monument for the Living* (2002), for example, is a rendering of Burj al-Murr, an unfinished pre-Civil War tower that became a torture centre and snipers' nest. When Lebanon's cultural sector launched a general strike in sympathy with the popular uprising of late 2019, Rechmaoui's gallerist Andrée Sfeir-Semler closed her space. Eventually Sfeir-Semler decided to resume the space's exhibition program with a reiteration of Rechmaoui's

Pillars exhibition, which had shown at Sharjah Art Foundation and at Maastricht's Bonnefantenmuseum in 2019. The artist has been developing this series since 2014. *Pillars* emulates the aesthetic of wreckage. Individual pillars are similar insofar as many are chaotic-looking amalgams of breeze block, concrete, and rebar, sometimes festooned with traces of building materials like tiles, insulation or household elements like bits of fabric or spent consumer goods. These forms will be familiar to residents of any city whose neighbourhoods are dotted with the orphaned walls of bombed-out, neglected, derelict or partially bulldozed twentieth century structures. For Beirut habitués, *Pillars* is a modular synecdoche for Lebanon's urban and psychic landscape, redolent of destruction, urban decay and interrupted re-development. The catalyst for the series, Rechmaoui has said, was the Syrian civil war, specifically the battles for Homs, especially the Baba Amr district. The scenes of fierce destruction playing out on television and online tapped into his experience of Lebanon's Civil War. "I could see beyond the screen," he reflected in 2015. "I could smell the images and hear what was happening and imagine the dynamics of the people under that rubble." He recalled how, at one point, he was thinking about T.E. Lawrence "of Arabia", about his self-aggrandizing autobiography, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, and the Sykes-Picot Agreement that redrew the map of the Middle East to approximate the one we know today. "What's happening today is the anti-Sykes-Picot, the mission of [ISIS] is to eliminate borders. I ended up making twenty-five or thirty pillars or more. I had the pillars," Rechmaoui laughed, "but without the wisdom. Later I realized that I'm working on the decay of things that the pillars carry… whether in architecture or society or ethics. All this is falling apart in the Middle East, specifically the idea of Arab nationalism, which proceeded from Sykes-Picot. [ISIS] won't realize their dream, but they'll destroy all the other pillars as they go."[3] The 4 August blast tore through Beirut's Karantina district and wrecked the interior of Sfeir-Semler Gallery. Rechmaoui decided to create a new work from some of the debris. It will debut as part of the Beirut exhibition of *Pillars*, once the COVID-19 numbers drop enough to stage an opening.

Muller's exhibition was replete with Middle Eastern artists whose work reflects upon how landscape is imagined and the institutional and power dynamics that help form these perceptions. After 2004, Kirkuk-born Jananne Al-Ani commenced a series of filmic works that either capture humans upon desert landscapes or else read the terrain itself. In the latter case, she said her aim was to liberate the land from certain orientalist fantasies that had been projected upon it, to the exclusion of the stories of its actual inhabitants. *Trembling Landscapes* showed Ani's two best-known landscape pieces, *Shadow Sites I* (2010) and *Shadow Sites II* (2011).

Shadow Sites I is comprised of excerpts from a 16mm film shot over the Jordanian desert. The camera looks down upon discrete enclosures in the terrain—agricultural furrows of uncertain provenance, verdant circular fields of contemporary irrigation, industrial-scale sheep farms, new villas and archaeological ruins. The vertiginous experience of Ani's original work is reprised in *Shadow Sites II*—while capturing similar terrestrial features, is less an exercise in documentation than a study of forms. She also images these forms differently, using monochrome digital photography. The camera appears to zoom upon the sites until they melt and reform as something else—so the foundations of a Nabatiyyan town appear to bleed into a recently erected walled structure. The works' title derives from the practice of locating otherwise indistinct topographical features by noting the lengthened shadows they project when the sun is near the horizon. The technique was devised for wartime aerial reconnaissance, developed after European armies arrived in the region in force during the First World War. Archaeology, another Western pastime, soon adopted the technique.
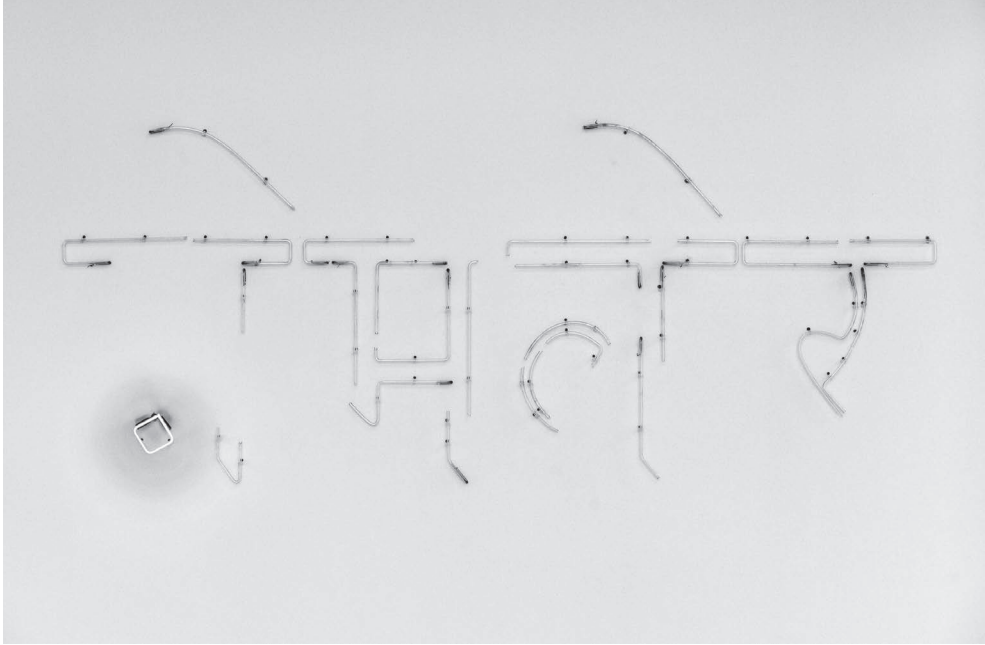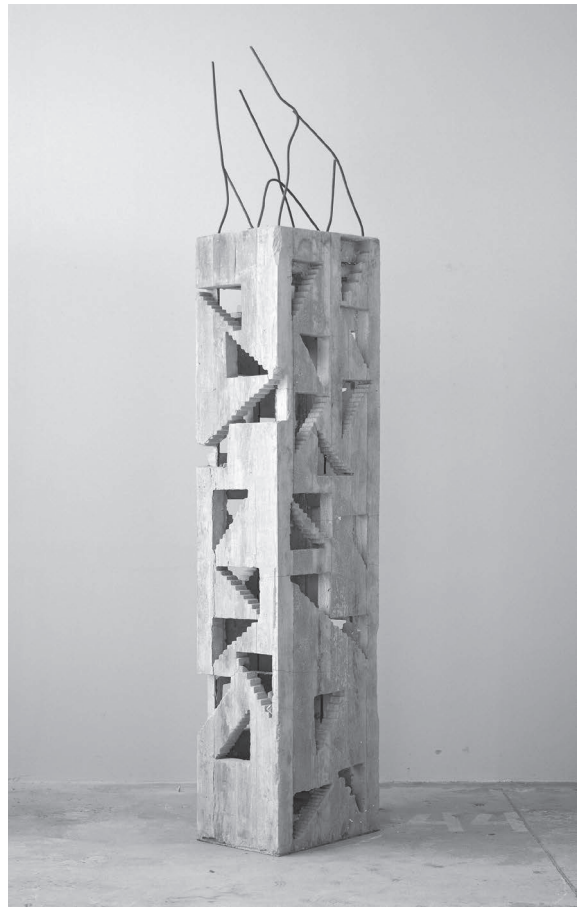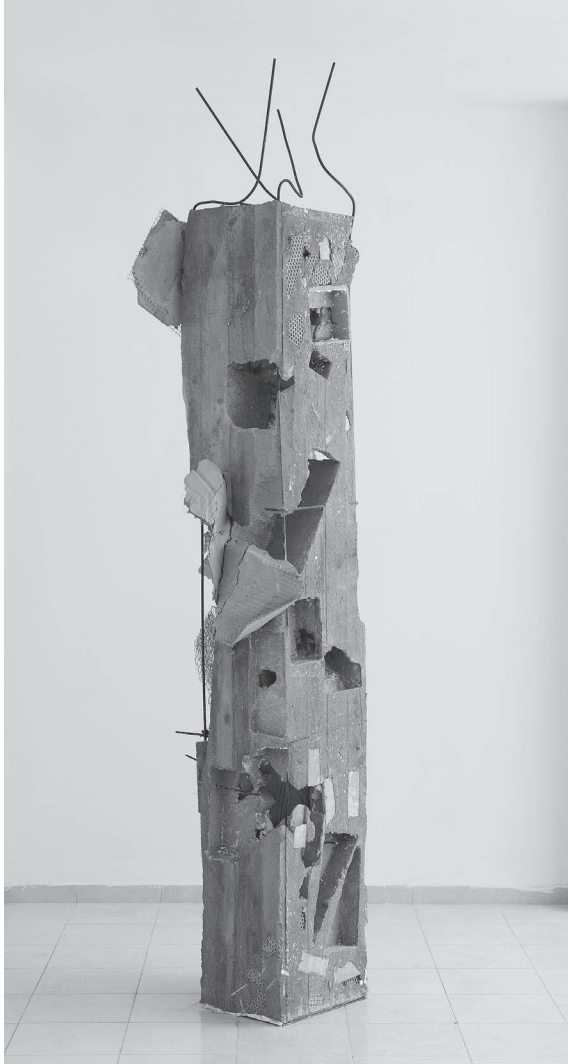
Palestine's decades-long experience of settler-colonialism has made it impossible for its artists to ignore the matter of land. Since the Israeli state and Palestinian resistance-cum-administrative organizations have been busily generating contending national narratives, and supporting appropriately themed cultural production, contemporary artists have been challenged to devise distinct languages of engagement with a terrain that is already multiply mediated. Sensitive to the hackneyed depictions of Palestine thrown up in legacy media, Bethlehem-born Larissa Sansour began addressing the occupation of Palestine early in her career. She's done so playfully, but never frivolously, through the lens of cinematic and television genre and the incongruities they evoke. *Bethlehem Bandolero* (2005), for instance, toys with the tropes of cowboy movies, while *Happy Days* (2006) spoofs American sitcom conventions. Capturing a Bethlehem family's rooftop lunch on a hand-held camera, *Mloukhieh* (2006) veers toward the norms of DIY documentary, with the meal unfolding in black-and-white—save the deep olive-green of the *mloukhieh* itself and the bright yellow of accompanying lemons. Sansour's mature work reflects upon the Palestinian condition via science-fiction tropes. *A Space Exodus* (2008), the earliest miniature, is imbued with a familiar amused incongruity. The gaze of more recent works has found more dystopic terrain in the future of the occupied territories.

For *Trembling Landscapes*, Muller chose one of Sansour's most accomplished sci-fi miniatures, *Nation Estate* (2013). As its title suggests, the video depicts a future in which Palestinians are confined to a single massive tower block. Featuring crisp, cinematic production values and convincing CGI, the dialogue-free *Nation Estate* flirts with sci-fi of an art house sensibility. Reflecting its form, Sansour's work imagines a future in which some Palestinians live in comfortable and spacious flats with a superb view of their historic landmarks, one higher than the wall still separating them from Palestine.

Jaffa-born Kamal Aljafari is also engaged with how media has depicted, or otherwise used, the land of Palestine. A non-fiction filmmaker whose cinema has come to be embraced by contemporary art, Aljafari's work is, like that of Sansour, rooted in the experience of his family —Palestinian citizens of Israel (aka 1948 Palestinians) residing in the towns of Jaffa and Ramla. While Sansour vectors the Palestinian condition through ever more sophisticated application of genre tropes, currently lodged in a speculative future, Aljafari's aesthetic has moved from capturing the textures of contemporary Palestinian lives to seeking traces of home in past cinema. The language of his debut feature, *The Roof* (2006) is that of an un-narrated essay film. His sophomore effort, *Port of Memory* (2010) shifts to re-enactment. Commencing with *Recollection* (2015), Aljafari embarked on a series of projects working with found footage. *Recollection* (which began its public career as the art exhibition *Untitled*) draws upon an informal archive of Israeli-made films (commercial features and documentary) mined from DVDs and VHS tapes. The film set out to recover traces of Palestinian landscape and architecture, and with them shades of Palestinian lives, from the margins of Israeli cinema production in the vicinity of Jaffa.

The aesthetic of *Recollection* doesn't rest in just altering the focus of Israeli films. Aljarafi uses digital film editing processes to excise Israeli narratives and characters from the footage. By redacting the historical document of the landscape, the work formally challenges the colonizing state's cultural-productive hegemony over the land's history. As he's working with found footage, the artist's authorial imprint is more nuanced than in his earlier work. While conventional notions of authorship may be denied—not unlike the way true agency is denied those living under occupation —the artist's role is greater than that of mere witness.

Aljafari released a second feature-length found-footage project in 2020. *An Unusual Summer* draws on a cache of VCR tapes archiving footage shot during Israel's 2006 Lebanon War. Since the footage was shot by a CCTV camera the artist's father installed after someone had vandalized his car, the film's location is the family parking lot. Once invoked, the Lebanon war remains steadfastly outside the frame. True to the function of a security camera, the film commences as a whodunit, with the artist (represented by intertitles) seeking out who smashed the elder Jafari's car window. As the pixelated figures wandering through this low-resolution tableau become discernible characters, the artist embraces the footage for what it is: a time capsule from the edges of the past, made all the more precious because none of its characters knew what was being documented. Like *Recollection*, *An Unusual Summer* finds meaning beyond the intention of the footage's original authors.

Vartan Avakian knows something about contingency snatching a share of authorship over his work. The Jbeil-born artist comes to landscape through an interest in public monuments. He has argued that the power of a monument resides in the residue it collects—its accretions of soil, pollen, fibres, shed skin cells, hair, tears and sweat. This argument frames *Collapsing Clouds of Gas and Dust*. The minute crystalline sculptures of this series are formed from minerals refined from water that pools in a monument's pipes and drainage systems, where over decades the residues of environmental and human pollutants accumulate. Once the artist collects the necessary elements, chemical processes do the rest. This laissez-faire approach to authorship suggests a way of reading the exhibition career of another of Avakian's works. The artist unveiled his triptych *Untitled Signs for Bourj Hammoud* in 2010, part of the group exhibition *Noise*. A knowing wink at contemporary art's

place in the global art market, the work was comprised of classic red neon signs. Each lamp's glass tubing formed "Sfeir-Semler," the name of the hosting gallery. Two of the signs, one in Arabic script, the other in Armenian, were hung in the space itself. The third, in Devangari—the script used in Hindi, Marathi, and Nepali—was mounted on the south-facing exterior wall of the Tannous Building, the light-industrial structure in Karantina that houses the gallery. This third piece faced the eponymous Bourj Hammoud, a sprawling quarter on the eastern edge of municipal Beirut that over decades has absorbed several waves of immigration—Armenian, Syrian, Kurdish, Ethiopian and South Asian. Burning red throughout the night for weeks, Avakian's signage hypothetically notified Devangari-reading residents of the gallery's existence. Since Beirut's migrant labourers aren't known to frequent the city's contemporary art spaces, the work flickered in mute amusement at the incongruity of its gesture.

A decade later, Beirut was in economic and political turmoil. Marfa' gallery's Joumana Asseily had been among those to close her space in October 2019, in support of the civil disobedience campaign. With the protests flagging, in February 2020 she discretely opened *When the image is new, the world is new*, a group exhibition featuring her usual artists. The sole 'new' work was Avakian's somehow familiar *A Sign For Things to Come*. It's text-like glass tube ensemble was inert, save for a small square in its lower left-hand corner. Glowing neon red, it resembled a *nuqta* (an Arabic full stop or dot). When they'd finally got around to removing it from the wall of the Tannous Building, ten years before, workmen had damaged the Devangari face of his *Untitled* triptych, the artist explained, not quite smiling.[4] The backstory of *A Sign For Things to Come* bears no relation to the cycles of ecstasy and hope, strife and paralyzing uncertainty the country had undergone since October 2019. Yet the piece's deracinated cosmopolitanism—an orphaned full stop, glowing amid a derelict work in a self-consciously nostalgic medium—expressed Lebanon's catastrophe well. Something, the *nuqta* declared, had ended.

Marfa' means "port" in Arabic, and it sits only a few dozen metres from the 4 August 2020 explosion's ground zero—the warehouse at Beirut Port where the ammonium nitrate had been stored. A few days after the blast the gallery was a wreck but, remarkably, the squat 1940s-era concrete building housing it still stood. The city's port-side grain silos had absorbed a large part of the blast, saving any structure in its shadow. Within the wreckage, bits of *A Sign For Things to Come* still hung from the gallery wall. The wall itself was smashed. The jury's still out on the rest of Lebanon.

Notes

[1] For an informative précis of the institutional corruption of Lebanon's allotment state in the context of Beirut's 4 August 2020 port blast, see Reinoud Leenders, 'Timebomb at the Port: How Institutional Failure, Political squabbling and Greed set the stage for Blowing up Beirut', 16 September 2020; https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/timebomb-at-the-port-how-institutional-failure-political-squabbling-and-greed-set-the-stage-for-blowing-up-beirut/

[2] Lebanon's 2015 waste crisis wasn't its first. During the Civil War, various militia leaders had padded their coffers by purchasing toxic waste and disposing of it on Lebanese soil, indifferent to risks of groundwater contamination. Jessika Khazrik (aka The Society of False Witnesses) has taken up this business in her early work, recollecting tales of local entrepreneurs taking receipt of deadly cargoes from Italian colleagues and illegally burying it. Her 2016 works *Waste Eats Your Histories* and *All the Flowers that Were Thrown on my Head Come Back Panting* revisit these episodes, exploring the photo archive of eco-toxicologist and herbal pharmacologist Pierre Malychef, one of three scientists charged with investigating the case, who were later accused of lying in their report

[3] Interview with Marwan Rechmaoui, 4 September 2015 during the 14th Istanbul Biennial: *SALTWATER: A Theory of Thought Forms*

[4] Conversation with Vartan Avakian in Beirut, 14 February 2020