

ART ON A GREEN LINE

CURATED BY JOHNNY ALAM

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Between 1975 and 1990, Lebanon was a battleground for local, regional, and international conflicts commonly referred to as the “civil wars” by foreigners and as the “foreign wars on our grounds,” or simply the “Ahdeth” (events), by the Lebanese. Beirut was split by competing ideologies that divided the nation. East Beirut was controlled by Christian parties claiming to fight for the preservation of the Lebanese nation-state against increasing Palestinian militancy. West Beirut was controlled by a coalition of Palestinian, Leftist, and Muslim parties claiming to fight for the primacy of the Palestinian cause against a

hegemonic Christian regime. The demarcation line separating East and West Beirut came to be known as the Green Line. While the origin of this designation is not certain, the “Green Line” aptly described the post-apocalyptic cityscape it traversed, where streets and buildings were overtaken by wild vegetation. Although the boundary has ceased to exist physically, it remains psychologically present as a negative site of memory, reflecting Lebanon’s “geography of fear.”¹

October 13, 1990, marked the end of the fifteen-year conflict; no war crime trials were carried out and no truth and reconciliation committees were established. Instead, an amnesty law pardoning the war criminals was passed in 1991 by war lords who became the pillars of a regime operating under Syrian custody.² The history of Lebanon’s “uncivil wars” was repressed through official policies of amnesia and a public will to forget.³ In this historiographic vacuum, a number of Lebanese artists began exploring different aspects of the wars, thereby reviving its *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory). This term was conceptualized by Pierre Nora to describe physical or abstract locations (such as monuments, historic leaders, or national anthems), through which collective memory is crystallized. The fundamental purpose of such sites, Nora writes, “is to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial.”⁴ Seen in this light, Beirut’s Green Line emerges as a *lieu de mémoire* that embodies layers of meaning. It is a symbol of atrocity and the location of ruthless battles, kidnappings, and crimes. It is also a symptom of the national identity crisis rooted in the 19th-century colonially propelled modernization of the Ottoman Empire.⁵

Nearly a quarter century after the termination of the conflicts, *Art on a Green Line* presents related wartime narratives that are woven across diverse media, including photographs, videos, books, postcards, and even a metro map. Inspired by their personal experiences of war, the artists offer vivid impressions of everyday life during wartime that history books cannot convey. In these works, the lines between truth and fiction, past and present, memory and history, home and exile, and personal and collective trauma are blurred. So too is the Green Line, which appears as a figure, a background, or both.

The Green Line figures prominently in the work of Lamia Joreige and Hassan Choubassi. In her documentary video *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere* (2003), Joreige walks along blighted sections of the Green Line, asking local inhabitants if they are aware of wartime abduction incidents that occurred in the vicinity. Her interviewees are generally skeptical and afraid to talk; the few who do speak recall atrocities that took place on both sides of the borderline. A related interactive website from 2009 tells the fictional story of a young man who went missing along the Green Line during the war and transcribes conflicting confessions from various individuals. Joreige’s works were inspired by Akira Kurosawa’s film *Rashomon* (1950), in which eyewitnesses provide contradicting testimonies of the same incident.

Hassan Choubassi’s *Beirut Metro Map* (2005) charts the emotional cartography of the Green Line. Choubassi was not deterred by the fact that an underground transit system does not exist in Lebanon. His imaginary metro lines abruptly stop at the Green Line, forcing passengers to walk across the dreaded wartime checkpoints before resuming their journeys across the city. The trip instructions included in Choubassi’s guide include disjointed wartime anecdotes related to each crossing point.

Zeina Abirached and Joumana Medlej use the Green Line as a point of departure for their illustrated narratives. Abirached’s graphic novel, *A Game for Swallows* (2012), begins with an illustrated map of the Line and recounts an evening of intense battles she experienced during childhood when she was part of a group confined to the only safe room in an apartment building located on the Line. Likewise, the first page of Medlej’s comic book *Malaak: Angel of Peace* (2007) features the Green Line through a series of integrated archival photographs depicting downtown Beirut during the war. The story revolves around the character of Malaak (Arabic for angel), a superhero sent by the Cedars of Lebanon to combat the evil beings behind the violence.

Only those familiar with the landscape of divided Beirut would be able to recognize the Green Line in the backgrounds of Joana Hadjithomas’ and Khalil Joreige’s *Postcards of War* (1997-2006). Hadjithomas and Joreige created these postcards as part of *Wonder Beirut*, a larger multifaceted project created in response to the



Merdad Hage, *Meantime in Beirut* (2002),
Video, 30 min., video still courtesy of the
artist

reconstruction of Beirut undertaken by SOLIDAIRE, a government-supported institution that sought to eradicate the traces of war, idealize Beirut's past, and project a prewar golden age upon the city's uncertain future. To keep the memory of the wars alive, the artists created a fictional story about a pyromaniac photographer who began burning iconic postcards of Beirut to mimic the destruction of the city in 1975.

The Green Line recedes into the background in the work of diasporic artists such as Rawi Hage, Wajdi Mouawad, Merdad Hage, and Pierre Sidaoui. This is possibly because the sectarian language that expresses the memory of the Lebanese wars is neither tolerable nor comprehensible within nations such as Canada. Nevertheless, the spectre of the Green Line is not entirely absent from these works. In Rawi Hage's *De Niro's Game* (2006), two young men are involved with dirty militia business and smuggle counterfeit whisky across the Line. In *Incendies* (2003), Mouawad refrains from naming the places in which his play unfolds, but events such as the bus massacre, the iconic incident marking the beginning of the strife in 1975, clearly point to Beirut. Sidaoui's film *A Scent of Mint* (2002) is twice removed from the Green Line, which we observe first from the distance of his hometown, Abey, and second from the distance of his new home, Montreal. The Line is even more subtle in Merdad Hage's *Meantime in Beirut* (2002), as it only manifests during the flashbacks of the protagonist

Lamice, a Canadian psychiatrist who returns to Lebanon hoping to restore the ruined family house but is unable to find a contractor who will deal with the legacy of the war.

Jayce Salloum is a second-generation Lebanese-Canadian artist who brings the Green Line to the forefront in *sniper's hole (from inside the 'Roum' [Orthodox] church)*, positioned on the intersection at Place des Martyrs, the Bourg, Beirut, 1992. The tension between this image, its title, and the accompanying sentences is meant to raise questions about representations of Lebanon and Beirut. For Salloum, "there is no objective or detached way of regarding his subject matter. Lebanon is both real and imagined; it is a place of exoticism, war, Biblical significance and colonial intervention."⁶ Visiting his parents' homeland in the early 1990s to document the aftermath of the wars, Salloum helped instigate a documentary movement whose members were inspired by his unconventional artistic/archival practices. Some, including his one-time research assistant Walid Raad, have since achieved international acclaim. Raad is known for his playful appropriation of archival imagery to create fictional historical narratives about the Lebanese wars. The exhibition catalogue *Miraculous Beginnings* (2011) features a number of Raad's depictions of the Green Line.

Curating this exhibition has provided me with an opportunity to share my research beyond the purely academic realm. The exhibition is an experiment in "research

creation,” in which I am working as both curator and artist. I have produced four artworks that provide a wider context for thinking about the demarcation line. *Origins of the Green Line: A Media Archeology* (2015) is a collage of archival images depicting the 1860 massacres in Mount Lebanon and the humanitarian French military intervention that followed. The work engages recent theories on the role of photography in advocating for universal human rights. *Beirut’s Green Line* (2015) superimposes two historical maps of Beirut and marks the Green Line with a physical laceration that is stitched together using a green thread; a literal interpretation of Barbara Gabriel’s definition of national trauma as “a tear in the phantasmatic of ‘nation.’”⁷

A Palimpsest of Crises (2015) portrays the complex layers of memory held within the architectural space of Beirut’s city centre, where places of worship built on archeological ruins that date as far back as the Roman Empire compete to conquer the capital’s skyline—and by extension, the image of the nation. *On Humanitarian Aid* (2015) features a blanket received by my family during the war as part of a humanitarian aid package from a country which, I was told, supported the other camp involved in the civil conflict. By including this blanket, I join Linda Polman in questioning the true nature of humanitarian aid, while expressing my ambivalence toward this object of war and nostalgia.

In *Art on a Green Line*, I have tried to reveal how the varied artworks help us remember and perhaps commemorate the wars in Lebanon. Yet, it is also important to consider the ways in which these works make us forget certain aspects of the wars, and of more recent conflicts.⁸

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Notes

- 1 Samir Khalaf explains the “geography of fear” separating the socio-religious Lebanese groups in *Civil and Uncivil Violence in Lebanon: A History of the Internationalization of Communal Contact* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 247.
- 2 The exceptions to this general amnesty were Christian leaders who did not cooperate with the new regime, and were thus assassinated, prosecuted, imprisoned, or exiled. See Samir Khalaf, *Civil and Uncivil Violence*, 299-303.
- 3 See Saree Makdisi, “Beirut, A City without History?” in *Memory and Violence in the Middle East and North Africa*, edited by Ussama Makdisi and Paul A. Silverstein (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 201-14. See also Stephen Wright, “Tel un Espion dans L’Époque qui Naît: La Situation de L’artiste à Beyrouth Aujourd’hui,” *Parachute*, no. 108 (2002), 13-31; and Miriam Cooke, “Beirut Reborn: The Political Aesthetics of Auto-Destruction,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 15, no. 2 (Fall 2002), 393-424.
- 4 Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,” *Representations*, no. 26 (Spring 1989), 7-24, 19.
- 5 See “Religion as the Site of the Colonial Encounter” in Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
- 6 National Gallery of Canada, “sniper’s hole (from inside the church), positioned on the intersection at Place des Martyrs, the Bourg, Beirut, 1992,” <http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=95218>, accessed 7 January, 2015.
- 7 Barbara Gabriel, “The Wounds of Memory: Mavis Gallant’s ‘Baum, Gabriel (1935-),’ National Trauma, and Postwar French Cinema,” *Essays on Canadian Writing* 80 (2003), 189-216, 189.
- 8 See Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory Through the Camera’s Eye* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), in which she argues on page 13 that the proliferation of “Holocaust photos helped us remember the Holocaust so as to forget contemporary atrocity.”