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A conversation with Abir Saksouk (Dictaphone group) about engagement

The sky is grey in Zurich. Memories come back to my mind as the phone rings. Abir answers from Beirut. I was there exactly a year ago. We start the conversation. I can still remember the hard winter sun, mirroring on the sea. We talk about engagement, narratives and appropriation. Lebanon is a fascinating country full of complexities and the work of the Dictaphone Group is a refreshing response to it.

TM Before we dive into the heart of the interview, could you please briefly introduce the Dictaphone Group to our audience? When and why did you form this collective?

AS Dictaphone Group was founded in 2009. It started as a collaboration between Tania El Houry, a site-specific performance artist, and myself, an architect and urbanist. We met in London as we were doing our Master's. I had a lot of interest in research on space and in pursuing outdoor and public interventions, so we decided to join our disciplines together. This is what made the Dictaphone Group. The idea behind it is to build a different experience between the audience and the outdoor/shared spaces of Beirut. The city is mostly privatized and public spaces are a highly contested issue. We wanted to bring audiences to those places and share our research with them in a different way. A way where they could be interacting with the material but also with the space, and building a relationship to it.

TM What are the motivations behind your work? It feels like there is a lot of social engagement. Would you describe yourselves as activists?

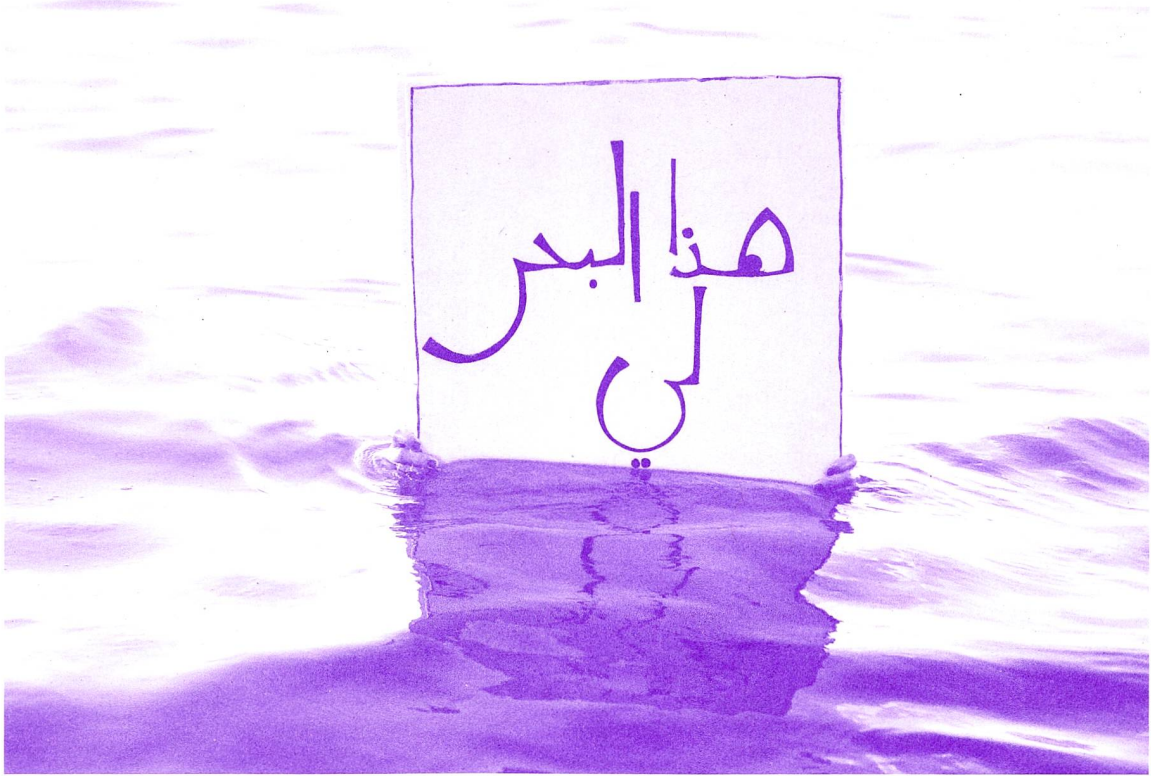
AS We try not to put labels on the work we do. I wouldn't say we are doing this as activists. Of course, our main motivation is urban and social change. We believe in change. We believe in a change that comes incrementally, through building networks, producing knowledge, as well as having people engaged with the subject in different ways. So yes, that is our main motivation. It's interesting that people don't know how to categorize the Dictaphone Group. Some call us activists. Some call us artists. Some call the work we do campaigns. Some think we are only researchers. We believe in the combination of all those disciplines in the making of what we do.

TM Which work you did do you believe was the most relevant for people?

AS The project «This Sea Is Mine» (2012) had a very big impact. We are still not sure until today how come it had such an incidence. I think it came at a time where not much was being said about Beirut's seafront, in terms of data, mappings, and events. «This Sea Is Mine» is a site-specific performance. It's a tour that took the audience on a fisherman's boat from one edge of Beirut's coast to the other edge. Along the way, it unraveled stories and social histories about the coast, but also about how it got privatized and what the laws were that governed it. It was accompanied by a research booklet. This project had a massive impact, in the sense that it is still until today being referenced in terms of research material. The media talked so much about it. It also set the basis for a lot of the activism that happened later. I think it was impactful because it combined two things. One of them being to offer a very fresh way of looking at the seafront and talking about the issue of privatization. The other one being to actually take the audience out of the city, on a boat, in the sea, where they were looking at Beirut from a different perspective. This gave them the chance to really contemplate the issue and to embody it. Interactivity was very important in this piece. The audience also had their own stories about the seafront. They were truly engaging with the material.

Another piece that was important for us, is «Nothing to Declare» (2013). It explores borders by following the abandoned train tracks of Lebanon. The fact that they have been left since the civil war says a lot about the conditions we live in within the country today. It was a video-based installation. Leaving from Beirut, Tania, Petra and I went each on a different route of the abandoned train tracks. One going north, one going south, and one going towards the

A



B



A Tania reclaiming rights to the seafront, «This Sea Is Mine».

B Tania, Petra and Abir during a lecture performance, «Nothing to Declare».

east. The project was important to us because it documented and talked a lot about what was happening outside of the capital. We passed through cities and villages that are not necessarily included in the mainstream discourse. We highlighted the issues of faraway towns. A lot of them are next to the borders that had been marginalized for years. The idea was to look outside of the center, especially in a country like Lebanon where everything is very much concentrated on the capital. It was to us a very big learning experience.

TM You said that the research material of «This Sea Is Mine», had a big echo in the media and created a ground for some activism to later react on the issue. What happened?

AS Basically, the performance was taking the audience from Ain Mraisseh to Dalieh, which is a site towards the south of Beirut. A year after the piece, the site of Dalieh became a source of massive contestation, because the landowners, who are politicians and real estate developers, evicted the fishermen and were trying to close it off. They were planning a private resort to happen there. A big campaign called the «Civil Campaign to Protect the Dalieh of Raouche», when it emerged in 2013, used a lot of the material that we had produced, whether in terms of research, through the connection we made with the fishermen or through the fact that people knew the site because of the performance. It was a very strong activist movement, that is still ongoing until now. We were happy to see how things complement each other over time and have an impact in that sort of way. It's an accumulative process.

TM What is the situation now?

AS The campaign was really strong between 2013 and 2015. In 2015, when the garbage crisis happened, there was a very big movement in the country. Within this movement, some activists went to the site and removed the fences that surrounded it. Up until today, people go to it a lot and there hasn't been any recent attempt by the owners to privatize it. So in a sense, this is a success. Still, at the same time, it is not being taken care of by the municipality. It's in a bad condition. This is opening up a series of challenges. Besides that, the state has not responded to any of our demands yet. So the risk that the landowners would again close it off and start a real estate project at any time still exists. Yet, it is definitely promising and hopeful as long as it stays open.

TM In a talk you made at the American University of Beirut, you said that the engagement of the people established through the performance was for you more important than informing the people about the research itself. Why is that?

AS Research can be shared in a lot of different ways, but I think that the particularity of our work is that it takes people to those abandoned or contested sites. It pushes the audience to have a personal experience/memory with the sites. I believe that this is something highly needed. Thus, they can build a different relationship with the city. This is very particular to issues of public spaces that are controversial in Beirut, and to which not many people have access, even if they are public. People's engagement with places is what really makes them want to defend those places. Only then they would say: «I have been there. I like it. I know what it's about. I don't want to lose it». It is very different from just learning or reading about it.

TM In your work, there is this constant exploration of the past in order to understand the present. You often rewrite history or at least tackle it from another perspective. Is it meant as a kind of appropriation of a past you would have wished to see evolve differently?

AS Definitely! This is why we put a lot of stress on oral history. We do believe that many of the issues that we face today are directly connected to the past and how the past has been written, as well as by who. This is a topic in all our projects. We attempt to rewrite a certain history. I wouldn't call it one history. It's several histories based on different people's narratives, from different perspectives. In the booklet of «Nothing to Declare», in the section about the town of Riyaq, we published four narratives, each told by different persons coming from different backgrounds. Each one of them had a different history about their town based on their positionality and social condition. This is something we did intentionally, because we believe in writing history from below. We find it very pertinent while speaking about sites, spaces, or certain cities.

We are now planning a new big piece, which is going to come out in about two years. We called it «The Projects We Abandoned». It plays on the idea of works we have wanted to do but then gave up. It's also a lot about failed state projects. By this, we mean big visions of the state in history that didn't succeed, because they were ridiculous in the first place. I can't talk about it in detail, as we still don't know what is going to happen with it. The embedded thinking behind it is that we actually want to

tell a different story about the Lebanese state. It's like rewriting its history by looking at its failures. We also want to include our own abandoned ideas, so it would be this thing between the personal and the bigger scale.

TM What does it mean for you to be an architect today?

AS For me, architecture was like a stepping stone. It was very important to study it, even if I don't practice it fully. I believe it teaches us a way of thinking, which opens us up to a lot of other disciplines. Architecture has a tight relationship with sociology, anthropology and social sciences in general. It also has a strong connection to engineering, geography, and urban planning. I think that this is its beauty. The problem is that it is being practised in a way totally opposite to its essence. I can't generalize about other contexts, but I can definitely say that here the act of building has become a tool of the market, the state, and real estate development. It no more reflects the social needs, and it is the product of a bad legal framework. I would definitely say that architecture is in sort of crisis. I think that we should be learning from the city and its people, rather than imposing on them how space should be.

TM Do you build?

AS I do, but very small projects. Ever since I graduated, my architectural projects have all been mainly rehabilitation rather than building something from scratch. They are always in a sort of challenging context. I have worked on several schools and libraries in Palestinian camps in Lebanon. I have a lot of experience in informal areas or refugee camps, where it's very surgical and sensitive. I really enjoy it.

