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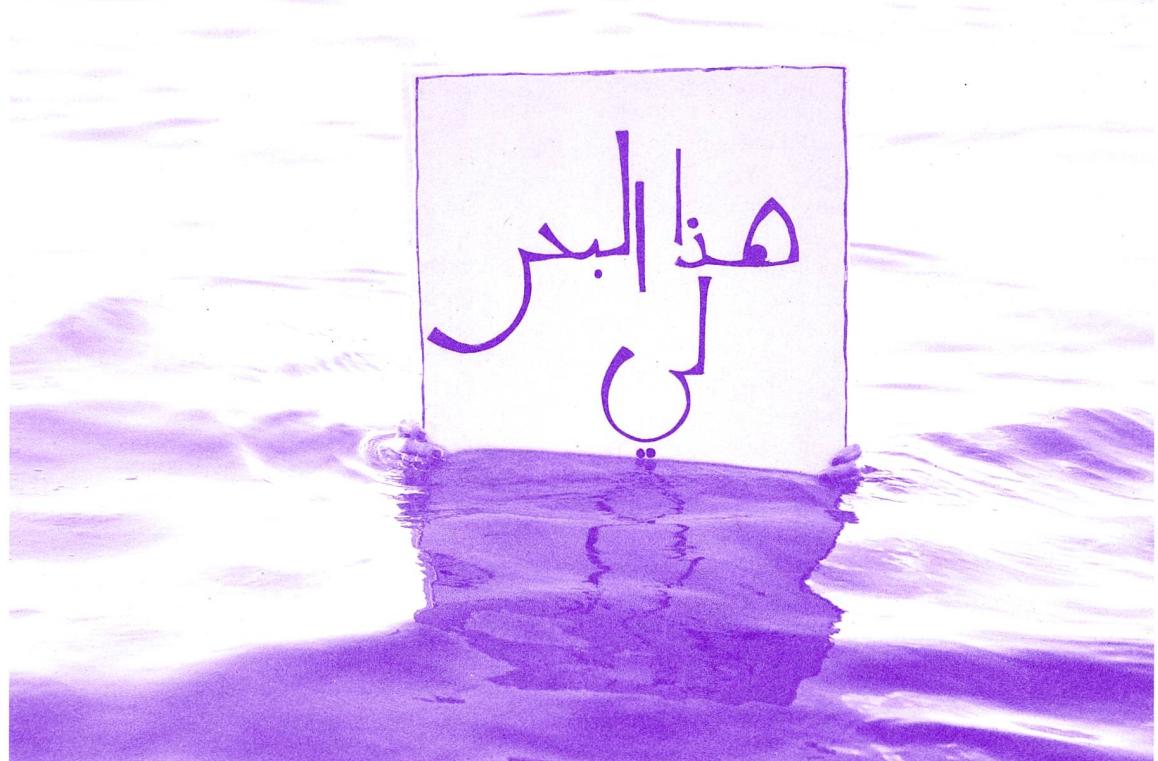
A conversation with Abir Saksouk (Dictaphone group) about engagement

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.

<p>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?</p> <p>AS Dictaphone Group was founded in 2009. It started as a collaboration between Tania El Khoury, 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.</p> <p>TM What are the motivations behind your work? It feels like there is a lot of social engagement. Would you describe yourselves as activists?</p> <p>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.</p>	<p>TM Which work you did do you believe was the most relevant for people?</p> <p>AS The project <i>«This Sea Is Mine»</i> (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. <i>«This Sea Is Mine»</i> 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.</p> <p>Another piece that was important for us, is <i>«Nothing to Declare»</i> (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</p>
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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».

TM		
AS		
TM	What is the situation now?	
AS		

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.

Abir Saksouk, born 1981, graduated as an architect from the American University in Beirut in 2005, and later did her Master's in Urban Development Planning at University College London. She has been involved in several research projects in Lebanon, including the history of informal suburbs, the social production of shared space, and housing rights. She produced related publications, such as *'This Sea Is Mine'* and *'Making Spaces for the Public: The Story of the Beirut's Dalieh'*. Her interests include exploring how community engagement could be employed in planning and actively shaping the future of cities. She is the co-founder of Dictaphone Group (2009) and Public Works Studio (2012).

