



## Notes from Beirut (1)

### Workshops, bomb attacks, car wrecks: arriving in a crazy city<sup>1</sup>

*Matthias Lilienthal, 12 June 2013*

My flat is located in the Armenian neighbourhood of Geitawi. It is beautiful and spacious. Directly across, a man shouts every ten minutes. He used to teach Arabic, then he got fired. Now he teaches the street swearwords and curses, of which the Arabic language knows many. The light goes on and his voice thunders on in expansive rhetoric. It resembles the voice of a Burgtheater actor. In the neighbourhood, our street is known as “the street with the nutter”. Nobody gets particularly worked up about it, we simply live with it.

First meeting with the students. There are fourteen of them. A third comes from the Middle East, a third comes from Western countries and has Arabic roots, and a third is – if one may say so – purely Western.

All have come to the Ashkal Alwan Home Workspace for postgraduate studies. That very evening, there’s a bash; the old cliché of Beirut as the capital of parties and social butterflies. In a way it is, in a way it isn’t.

Together with the students, we tour the city’s neighbourhoods. The more they approach things from a foreign perspective and overemphasise the situation, the more interesting it becomes. Wrecked cars are lined up behind the Peugeot salesroom. One can see where the heads crashed into the windshield. The car graveyard as a metaphor for the city. We are told to leave, not to take any pictures.

A few weeks into the programme, the students have gotten used to the fact that I mainly invite visual artists. Phil Collins has beguiled and enthralled them. He flirts with everyone. In his workshop, he screens films, engages with dance. He says that this year of studies offers the rare opportunity to view oneself as part of a collective; something that is so difficult to find later on when working. His departure feels like the end of a love affair. All of us feel hung over without having drunk.

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<sup>1</sup> The German version of the text can be accessed at:  
<http://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/bericht-aus-beirut/7512724.html>.

I am sitting in my office, on the phone to Germany. There is a loud bang. I hear myself say: sounds like a bomb blast, but shouldn't be anything serious. Students and colleagues are standing transfixed at the windows. A cloud of smoke rises over the central square of the Christian neighbourhood of Ashrafieh. Initially, the attack appears to have been directed at the Christians. Then we hear that it was targeting the head of secret services. The Lebanese are depressed. They think: it's coming back, the thing that dominated and destroyed the country for 22 years – bomb attacks, civil war, the spiral of violence.

On a Sunday – it is still warm – I go to the Sporting Club, a pool by the sea. There are tanks and soldiers everywhere; protesters are going to the funeral. Am I mad to be going swimming while these people are fighting for survival? Yet joining the demonstration is too dangerous, I don't know my way around the dozens of political groupings and their agendas. In the distance, I keep hearing ambulance sirens. A phone call: stay where you are, don't go outside, not a good idea. Half a day of civil war. The protesters have marched to the seat of government and have called for the government to resign. We are watching a kitsch sunset, eating overpriced chips, and contemplating the decrepit swimming pool and its concrete architecture, built in the seventies just before the civil war.

The force of the blast pressed open my window. During the night, some neighbourhoods remain agitated, then life goes on as if nothing had ever happened. The next day, I am taking a Pilates class with long-haired Ashrafieh shiksas, getting it all wrong, and I cannot imagine that it has ever been any different. Welcome to Beirut! Bloody decadence!

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Translated by Maude Capelle

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