



Notes from Beirut (2) – Buses and civic rights¹

Matthias Lilienthal, 18 July 2013

It's so easy to get it wrong. Soon after arriving in Beirut, I end up at a kefta stand; a small, garage-like shack that no tourist would voluntarily set foot in. Yet the kefta and the chicken skewers taste fantastic. While eating, I look around. Straight across, there is a bus terminal. Especially in the darkness, it is at first difficult to make out that these are ancient junkers standing around.

Two years ago, the public bus system was abolished. And now these buses are rusting away at the bus terminals. Most of them have a flat tire; or nocturnal visitors have taken what they needed.

Nobody gives a thought to scrapping or selling the vehicles. A strange thing, this neo-liberalism. All of Beirut's pavements are fully parked up at all times. And over the course of four months in this city, I have never seen anybody issuing parking tickets. However, short-distance transport by share taxi works perfectly.

Together with my students, I am working towards a May edition of *X Apartments*, a project in which artists create installations in private homes. A project that makes the artistic gaze voyeuristically meet private reality. I developed *X Apartments* at the *Theater der Welt* festival in the Ruhr region; later versions were staged in Berlin, Istanbul, Warsaw, São Paulo. Spectators walk from one flat to the next. On each tour, they see seven pieces, each lasting around ten minutes. I don't know how spectators in Beirut are supposed to walk from one flat to the next. It is impossible to manoeuvre on the pavement. And on the street one is grazed fondly by cars' wing mirrors.

Searching for venues, we visited a very friendly Palestinian camp – Mar Elias. But I also want to see the camps in Sabra and Shatila. In 1982, Christian militias, covered by the Israeli army, perpetrated a horrific massacre. Jean Genet and Oriana Fallaci wrote about it; the Israeli animated film "Waltz with Bashir" is concerned with it.

¹ The German version of the text can be accessed at:
<http://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/matthias-lilienthal-busse-und-buergerrechte/7690656.html>.

The market in front of the camp is full of people. We eat warm hummus and foul for a song. One enters Sabra through a round arch. A few metres in, one's nose fills with the stench of rubbish, the whole facility is totally run-down. Visitors are greeted with hostile glances. A few youngsters are sitting at the intersection and playing with their guns. We don't really disturb the drug trade, but aren't quite welcome either.

In the camps, the Lebanese police and the military hold no authority. We are happy to be back outside. Nobody has said a word. We can forget about staging our project here. For the Lebanese, it conforms to the cliché of foreign observers that they are always edging towards these camps. Anyway, no matter what a piece might tell here, it is just impossible, way too dangerous.

We go back to our bohemian ghetto. The weather is beautiful. We want to go to the sea, to a café. As we are driving through Downtown Beirut, I think: actually, the Palestinians should be resettled in this neighbourhood, in these fancy houses. The total lack of life on the streets seems absurd.

Palestinians have only been allowed to work for a few years, although not as doctors, architects, or lawyers. They have been living here since 1949. The Hezbollah may be fighting against Israel, but it wants no civic rights for the Palestinians: as fully-fledged citizens, they would shift the delicate balance in favour of the Sunni.

We want to form a party: the Palestinian Bohemian Party. Civic rights for all Palestinians, public beaches for all – and the introduction of sewage treatment plants!

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Translated by Maude Capelle

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