No.3 Beirut

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and more
KIRSTEN SCHEID
The Everywhere in Here

#1 "Many artists here are unable to focus on only one medium, and are unable to specialize."
#2 "Many artists here are unable to translate their statements into a pertinent formal aspect."
#5 "The majority of artists here do not make reference to or question issues arising from art history."
#7 "Art historical awareness and interpretation seem to be lacking."

In reading the remarks assembled by the editors of Peeping Tom's Digest from their excursion to Beirut, I am struck by the fervency of invocations of "here." The more I read in the remarks about "here," the more I find the word opens the floodgates for waves of sadness and loneliness. "Here" ushers in words like "unable," "do not," "too much," and other frustrating expressions of inability, inaction, insufficiency. I am not interested in "correcting" these statements or countering them with cause for cheer, because to me it is not the validity of the statements but the conceptual underpinnings that are most powerful and worrisome, too. By considering the structure and impact of the invocation of "here" in relation to art production, I want to explore what non-metropolitan art worlds can teach us about the universal (or global), the role of art, and possibilities for remapping geo-political relationships with art.

#16 "The art scene in Beirut is constructed on incestuous relationships."
#22 "There are too many artists in Lebanon and not enough institutions and galleries."
#24 "The concept of the 'art institution' doesn't quite belong to the Middle East."

Evasively, "here" never requires a map to be found. Occasionally it is replaced by "the local." Some of the speakers have elaborated with "in Beirut," "in Lebanon," "in the Middle East," or "in the Arab world." In these statements "here" merges with metropolitan, national, regional, and geo-political boundaries. Counting these as synonyms of "here" brings to more than three-quarters the percentage of statements that pin art production to a place on a map.

#6 "The investigation and appropriation of archives, is the favorite recipe for artists' here."

Archivisme is a local disease.

The boundaries of Beirut, Lebanon, and the Middle East seem to arise arbitrarily in these statements, when for decades now they have been porous and continuously contested. How can "here" be used in the context of globally active economies, expansive transportation and media systems, and persistent dispersions of food, commodities, ideas, and peoples? How can "Beirut," "Lebanon" and "the Middle East" be taken as spatially fixed references when they have continuously been contested through both wars and solidarity movements, by intellectuals and militants alike? If it is defined by a polylingual educational system, an import and service economy, and an art world that relies heavily on distant buyers and curators, where is "here"? How are artists "here," in Beirut, Lebanon, or elsewhere, if they train, travel, read, think, receive support, and sell hither and thither? How are they "in" any physical, spatial container? In that sense, artists have never been "in" Beirut or anywhere else for that matter. If they have a disease ("archivisme" or otherwise), how can it be local?

HERE AS A CAUSE

#40 "The Lebanese art scene is overrated." "This is a consequence of the habit of self-promotion taking place in Lebanon."

"Humility is not part of the Lebanese vocabulary." "Lebanon's economy is traditionally based on trade and capitalistic business practices: the mentality of importing and exporting seems to have transferred over to the art world and it has made for an artificial tie between Lebanon and the artists, the latter appearing to promote the country as a whole."

#18 "Failure is not a permissible option in Lebanese contemporary society."
In the statements above, "here" plays an enigmatic role. It not only describes a phenomenon's place but suggests its basis, too. Being an artist "here" seems to mean being constituted, caused, and constrained by a locale. The artist cannot admit failure, be humble, limit self-promotion, or avoid a mercantile mentality simply because he exists in Lebanon. I realize that the set-up of the Pera Museum Digest project encouraged answers about "here." Still, that fact does not explain why "here" often operates in these remarks as both the location and the motivation of the practices discussed.

A Subversive Here

"Here" seems to subvert the very idea of universal Art. If Art is one of those things that all humans have the innate potential to foster, like love or law, and one of those things that can be discussed philosophically apart from its specific instances, then the discussions about it that bind it to a "here" (going on in Beirut), are tricky. The very invocation compromises a work's ability to fulfill the capitalized category. And yet, "here" itself is never clear; it describes a curiously impossible space:

I.

#31 "There is no real art market here, as there are only two or three serious collectors. Most of the artwork is collected by the artist's family and friends."

II.

#9 "Many artists here often operate from a local perspective, insufficiently aware of what is being internationally produced."

#11 "The war as a subject of continual scrutiny seems to be a comfort zone for many young artists here." /// "It appears, at times, to be a response to an expectation from the market abroad."

These comments on market conditions (I) suggest that the ideal market for art extends across the globe, but that "here" is at once not local enough ("no real market here"), too local (collected by families and friends), and ultimately too inward to allow for participation in an undivided universality. By contrast, the quotes pertaining to perspective and topics in art production (II) make opposing but equally contradictory claims about art "here": it is too local (unaware of international practices) and, simultaneously, too invested in expectations abroad. In other words, for the first set of speakers, art "here" should begin locally and extend globally, while for the second it should begin globally but end not too far off the coast of Beirut. Of course, there is no reason to assume the same people could not have made both sets of remarks.

A Strategic Here

Here's a definition of "here": An adverb indicating that something exists in this place, where "place" could also be a point in a chronology, hence a moment, as in "the here and now." For linguists "here" is an indexical term for demonstrating distance, meaning that its content is relative to its use—its meaning shifts from speaker to speaker, from instance to instance. However, once uttered, it should have automatic meaning (like "I"), because it will always refer back to the speaker using it to point to a specific setting. Beyond its indexical character, "here" also has connotations of relevancy, of ability to impact. To be "neither here nor there" is to be of no consequence; contrariwise, to be able to have a consequence is to be here (or there). Thus, "here" is that which is marked by the possibility of an event having consequence for it. To return to the discussion of the market quoted above, the problem of artists producing war-obsessed work for markets abroad is that they have no impact "here"—they cancel out its relevancy. By corollary, the problem of the "here" for artists desiring to sell locally is that its market makes no impact on them, beyond a handful of loved ones. Is "here/Beirut/Lebanon/the Middle East a place where art can have no consequence?"

Consequence for what, for whom? "Here" keeps looping in on itself without ever getting anywhere. Where exactly does "here" stop being here and become "there," the land of eager markets, attentive audiences, and properly trained artists? What does "there," as a distal demonstrative, do to reflections on similar yet distant experiences, conditions, and histories, such as "art historical awareness and interpretation?" The problem is that "here" is an obnoxious adverb. It destabilizes the way automatic content adheres to indexical terms generally. While the center of "here" is perfectly clear, its spatial extent is never visible. There is no clear boundary between "here" and "there," even though the first exists as the delimitation of the second. Specificity and ambiguity inheres at once, making "here" a most uncooparative description of the condition of being. It is this tension between specificity and ambiguity that makes "here" a dizzying compass. Hopping between intimate
face-to-face encounters and far-off networks of interest and investment, "here" provides an unreliable map for navigating universal categories like Art. "Here" could extend across an infinite space. This is exactly what it does when it becomes "the here and now," whereby all humans are encompassed in a single moment, and "here" is a synonym for "contemporary." So, according to this tenor of "here," why is a foreign-made market "here" objectionable? On the other hand, "here" should be centered, too, and visibly arrayed round the speaker. So why is a family-made market "here" undesirable? In the first instance, "here" is too committed to having impact abroad and being, thus, neither here nor there for viewers who could, potentially, interact with it on a daily basis. It is a centripetal sling-shot ever propelling its art practitioners into obscurity. Paradoxically, in the latter instance, art made "here" is neither here nor there internationally, in as much as it can have no impact abroad. "Here" is a black hole inexorably sucking art practitioners into oblivion. Again, these statements are not mutually exclusive: I have heard the same people make them many times.

In conversational shorthand, "here" allows for discussion of an implicit set of commonly recurring interactions in a commonly encompassing set of conditions, such as a "local disease" called "archiviasm." Is "here" simply a convenient term for distinguishing the enduring difference, however minute or inconsequential, at stopping points in global trajectories? Or does it, more often, insistently impel admission of a reason for inexorable difference? Is locality itself the disease? These considerations seem to give the slip to the whole philosophy of Art.

If Art can both exist and not exist in a single place, we are compelled to ask, "How does the universal become local?"

Given that "here" maps onto universal entities like Art in problematic ways, what the art world statements collected by the editors of Pepping Tom's Digest suggest is that "here" has a third speech character linguists have not noted. This character is in fact highly political. Because it is both indexically automatic and ambiguous, "here" can work as a strategy to hail a difference between the speaker and the content by creating a generalized and spatially homogenous condition from which the speaker, by recognizing it (and mastering it in the speech act) distances herself, or dissociates herself and gains leave from it. "Here" authorizes the speaker to make a claim based on intimate knowledge of the immediate, apparently bounded off surroundings, but it also propels the speaker across space and into infinity by evading boundedness and allowing the speaker to claim automatic participation in the world at large. It is as if the interviewee opens his speech by saying, "I know about here, because I am here, here is ignorant, and I know this because I am also in the world." By focusing on an apparently mappable location, by addressing it as "here" and not precisely as a specific set of conditions and moments, the speaker sets herself apart from locality, beyond locality: from "here" to nowhere and everywhere at once. This is especially possible in the discussion of universal categories, like Art, which themselves must exist everywhere—a human capacity—and nowhere—something that moves and retains value, that is never limited to a single or paradigmatic instance. In these remarks we can hear the "here" (art in Beirut, Lebanese art) yoked to the universal (Art): a nowhere made up of Art's common features, and in trying to live up to that universal promise, failing over and over, lapsing into "here."

**FROM HERE TO EVERYWHERE AND BACK**

There is no point in responding to the sad declarations about art "here" by finding (or even founding) counter-examples, such as flourishing institutions or art-loving audiences. In the first place, one counter-example is clearly sitting right in front of the interviewer (i.e. the person interviewed). In the second place, and more importantly, resisting the temptation to fill the dearth of universality "here" can transform that "absence" into a trove for thinking about the relationships between aesthetics, difference, and power. If Art is held to have universal existence and value, how can it not be "here?" How is "here" outside the universal? Instead of asking why "here" is not amenable to Art, we can ask how it is not. How have assertions about a dearth (such as gathered by Pepping Tom) created the very situation deplored? And who exactly cares? In other words, how is universality preserved for a few and held before others as a carrot and a stick? I am not asking why art practitioners would want to change their conditions, but rather, why "here" is invoked as a threat and the universal as a promise. I am also asking what other ways Art could work, were energies not wrapped around a pre-extant "here and now" but directed towards producing varying ranges of here, as in impact, and non-teleological futures.

Historically, practices of Art have always been about differentiating the universe into "here" of ranked importance and impact. When Napoleon dethroned the French royalty and expelled them from their palatial residence in the Louvre, he sent his advisors and soldiers to Rome to loot the best statues and paintings from its churches and villas. The plunder was brought to Paris under banners literally declaring that Rome was now in Paris. When it was paraded on the Champ-de-Mars, supporters in the press justified the theft by claiming that the fact that the Romans worshipped their churches' paintings for their sanctity rather than their beauty indicated that they were a backwards, superstitious, primitive people who did
not fathom the treasures they had collected. Rome was occupied by Napoleon's army, and the Louvre became a testimony not only to French national pride but to the national humiliation of many other peoples. In the same language, if gentler spirit, European charitable organizations today sponsor art workshops, art camps, and artist residencies for people "from Arab countries.

The justification for their expenses is that art skills cultivate peaceful self-expression, creative critical thinking, and a love of life—all of which will train these people to be better citizens, to eschew dictatorships, violent uprisings, and terrorism.

From Napoleon to NGOs, Art has been a stance towards one's fellow humans that divides them into different types of humanity with accordingly different privileges. In fact, I would call it an "obstinateness," rather than a philosophical category or a material set of objects, in as much as, in order to uphold Art's self-evidence even where practices "here" do not conform, the definition has expanded and shifted endlessly. At its most vicious, this obstinateness has been a banner for conquering, and at its most compassionate, a banner for "accepting" or "empowering." Either way, humanity is not recognized as one; rather its oneness is postponed for an unforeseeable future, and its actual hierarchy is justified as a means to an end and not a purely political manipulation of resources.

Thus, if we see Art as an obstinateness, it becomes apparent that historically it has been based on the proposition of splitting paths between those who rightfully inhabit the universal and those who have yet to enter it, between those who move forward only in time and those who must also move forward in space, touch base in the metropolis and return to their homelands with modernity in their suitcases. It has been the means for embracing and enacting a philosophy of difference. By this I do not mean Bourdieu's system of class distinction that is reflected in art. Rather, I mean the way of marking off some production as "art" versus "craft," "coincidence," or "decoration," with the result of proclaiming as ideal a certain style of inhabiting time and space. In other words, in undertaking the twin colonial-imperial (abroad) and colonial-internal (at home) modernizing campaigns, people who came to declare themselves as the best of the best, the ruling class of France, Germany, England, Belgium, and later the United States, found that if Art existed in universal space and eternal time, by embracing and making it, they did, too. They were represented everywhere and defined eternity in the uncompromising form of values. The peoples who did not make Art, who lay beyond its jurisdiction, existed outside (or behind) time and beyond (inhabitable) space. They lived in a motley assortment of mostly abominable "heres." The process continues today, when the best of the best consistently, obstinately, contribute to Art production abroad, in places "not known for supporting Art," and yet, despite their unceasing and personally satisfying involvement, never become part of those places, defined by them. Neither do they forfeit any self-defining assets as they extend Art's limitless bridge to enter other worlds, nor do they produce new communities that are not spatially confined and confining.

FROM HERE TO NOWHERE TO NEVER

The foregoing pertains to a specific, institutionally and disciplinarily developed philosophy that can be traced to the eighteenth century and, in particular, to the writings of Immanuel Kant, Georg Hegel, and Johann Winckelmann. Why do I find it curious that the people interviewed for this study of Beirut's art scene would share their vocabulary of universality and duplicitous indexicals? Because if there is anywhere that the artfulness of this universal time and space is most clearly revealed, it is where Art meets its own conceptual boundaries, i.e. the people who have yet to be included in "everywhere" and only exist in an eternally compromising "here."

The pressure of place in the conversations collected by Peeping Tom's Digest makes me entertain the idea that speakers give up too early in the name of pre-extant boundaries and pre-charted teleologies. When I read, "There is no audience or public as such, for the contemporary arts in Lebanon," I hear "here" standing not just for "now" but for "never." The audience has no consequence, so it is not here, but more, it will not ever be "here" because the speaker has made an implicit decision that "here" constitutes all possibilities, in the future too. Thus the decision to stop nagging banks and ministries for funding, that was widely embraced by Lebanese art organizers in the late 1990s, can be reinterpreted in the universalizing light of "here": It was not due to personal fatigue but to cultural failure. So, too, another feature of the late 1990s, the retreat of Art from public space and casual display venues, when restaurant-exhibition areas closed down en masse and public space exhibitions retreated to ticketed halls: what may be seen as marketing strategies in relation to new municipal and tax zoning, now appear as symptoms of a local anti-art disease. The point is that, in these actions taken for undeniably valid reasons, we do see the foreclosure of a certain "here," and the shifting of possible impact to other realms. But we do not see a reflection of a political boundary or a cultural mentality, unless we yoke "here" to everywhere and forever.
I have been asking how art exists “here” (or does not) when its production has long been interesting precisely for its ability to move and stay connected to an essence of its maker (person, people, place). The quotations reproduced by Peiping Tomis Diger do not necessarily call for recuperating “here” by making it more like everywhere. Rather, they may lay out paths for reshaping “everywhere.” For example, public space could be reconfigured to include governmental, familial, and even spiritual concerns without worrying that they are automatically pollutants to “criticality” and to the creative process. Perhaps focus on a single medium and on becoming a “signature artist” could be viewed from different perspectives, so that it no longer looks like the most attractive goal, and other relationships with media could be pursued. Humility might be achieved from systematically confronting international curatorial practices rather than condemning overly enthusiastic kin. New networks of support that do not subscribe national boundaries might be forged if “foreign” organizations were compelled to consider their dependency on “the Lebanese/Arab/Middle Eastern artist,” and not merely vice-versa.

If many of the statements I have cited seem to require submitting to the obstinate universality of Art and admitting the inferiority of “here,” they also suggest that daily (geo-political) boundaries might be overcome by “creative” (critical, individual) agency. Having explored the structure of “here,” I posit that this project of transcendence is inadequate. One must use the troublesome particularity and subversiveness of “here” to remap the universal and to inscribe it in a specific temporal framework. In other words, I am not asking art practitioners to give up notions of progress, problem-solving, learning, and growing; rather, I am hoping that they will take into account how they are “here,” how they have impact on others. For I hope that in so doing, they might create new communities and boundaries, new sites of impact and horizons.

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1. All underlining is mine.
2. The symbol “/” was an editorial addition to note that the different sentences were punctuated by two different persons.
3. Examples of statements that do not depend on place for their validity are #26-28, having to do with “Generations,” and #19, regarding state censorship. Obviously place could be inserted into any of the statements: for example, #26 could read, “In Lebanon, there is a lack of interest between the generations.” My interest is not in whether place could be invoked to clarify and explain a feature of art production, but that the intellectual decision to invoke it was in fact made.
4. Not to overlook that they are in many instances only recently produced by governmental, bi-political, economic, and educational practices.
5. One might also ask why “Arab,” “third-world,” “non-Anglophone,” and “post-colonial” are largely used as general designations in those statements.

6. My thanks are limited to English, but the same structure of thought persists to the Arabic “عند”. The Curator, personal communication, August 3, 2012.
7. According to Caroline Menasie, there was no standard format for the interviews, but most began with a loose biographical and discussion of the interlocutors’ work and relationships to Beirut before, in response to a question of the Peeping Tomis Diger project, statements about “the scene” arose (email, personal communication, August 6, 2012). The fact that the interviews did not stimulate discussing a direct link between production and place would suggest that interviewers were not obliged in their observations about their work and that no attempt was made to persuade the bozos about that work.
8. I use the contextual term “vortex” to indicate the philosophical category as opposed to specific instances.
10. I have been here for too long to really write about it.
11. If “abstract art” is lost, does that mean there has been a abandonment of the current edition of Documents (2012) in Beirut?
12. I have borrowed the formulation from Wael Salik.
13. I gratefully acknowledge Peter Irwin’s contribution to this elucidation.
15. For a further account of examples of the flexibility of the term, that transforms “real” into an art according to political need see Shelly Errison, The Death of Authentic Action: Art and Other Acts of Progress (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). This is not to overlook the fact that many who have expanded the critical role of art have done so with little political goals such as anti-racism and anti-totalitarianism.
The impetus and original material for the making of Peeping Tom’s Digest#3: Beirut is a list of 46 declarations, gleaned by Peeping Tom collective during their residency in Beirut in the fall of 2011. Through a filmed roundtable conversation* and 22 texts—essays, interviews, fictions and beyond—local and international art figures—artists, curators, art venues directors, writers, editors, filmmakers, anthropologists, philosophers, etc.—were invited to examine and react to these quotations.

*This publication includes a DVD: film directed by Peeping Tom and co-produced by Anna Sanders Films.

QUOTATION #10
“The power of Lebanese art doesn’t necessarily lie in the production itself. Rather its power can be located in the ambitions, efforts and vitality of the different actors within its scene.”

QUOTATION #19
“There is absolutely no censorship from the state towards contemporary artistic production.”

QUOTATION #38
“The sudden and relatively recent presence and interest of curators, journalists and editors in the Middle East is annoying and suspect.”

QUOTATION #36
“There is a real discrepancy in the artistic practices of artists living abroad, and those who remained in Beirut.”

QUOTATION #11
“The war as a subject of continual scrutiny seems to be a comfort zone for many young artists here.”

QUOTATION #21
“It appears, at times, to be a response to an expectation from the market abroad.”

QUOTATION #25
“Galleries and art institutions in Beirut are in a monopoly situation, leading to a formatting of the observation of Lebanese art.”

QUOTATION #5
“The majority of artists here do not make reference to or question issues arising from art history.”

QUOTATION #28
“Whereas the older generation (active in the 1990s) didn’t have any template, the new generation of artists has yet to kill off their ‘fathers’.”

QUOTATION #6
“Archivism is a local disease.”

QUOTATION #44
“From a foreign perspective, amalgams are easily made in Lebanon.”

Are these statements facts? Rumors, propaganda, myths, folklore, provocations, common places, obsolete ideas, fantasies, generalizations, subjectivities? Or are they simply a product of our external gaze? Before offering a way to check the accuracy, value and/or the pertinence of these comments, we were more interested in creating a public debate around various topics in order to give a possible reading (amongst many others) of the local art scene and therefore (re)consider our position of external observers.}

Peeping Tom’s Digest is an experimental and subjective publication dedicated to contemporary art. Each issue focuses on friends and movements of a particular geographic area and highlights the artists and initiatives represented within it. Each edition begins with a residency of the Peeping Tom collective lasting several months in the chosen city, region or country. Deliberately empirical, without critical, theoretical or historical pretensions, their approach allows them to veer off the beaten path. Not only sharing the work, the artists and the artistic and cultural efforts they encountered, each volume also aims to reveal the specificity of a depicted art scene; the curatorial process, the context and the structure of the magazine vary from one issue to another, reflecting the characteristics and stakes of each locale. The genealogy of the experiment and its numerous protagonists are showcased in the publication as an inserted poster.

PREVIOUS RELEASES:
ISSUE #1: BERLIN (THE CHAIN) - 2009
ISSUE #2: MEXICO - 2011

Founded in 2006, Peeping Tom is a collective of curators and publishers and a non-profit organization.

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