



# Beirut Art Center

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## INSTITUTION

*Despite Beirut's status as a major capital of art production and exhibition in the region, complete with a robust history of galleries, organizations and institutions for art production, one major infrastructural gap in the cultural map was a non-commercial art space in the city. Until now. January 15th marked the opening of the Beirut Art Center, a non profit association and permanent art space in Beirut, conceived of over 5 years ago, and run by former gallery-owner, Sandra Dagher and artist Lamia Joreige.*

Before and during the civil war period, there were various institutions, including Janine Rubeiz's Dar al Fan, a gallery which also hosted conferences and workshops and a multitude of other galleries which opened and closed, moved, and shifted according to the political situation in the country. Post-war, leading the initiative of Ashkal Alwan, the Lebanese association of Plastic arts, Christine Tohme, as well artists, filmmakers, writers, and intellectuals, supported various projects of art production and exhibition throughout the city. Many organizations and projects are currently active in the city: Samandal, a comic book which has been up and running for over a year, to the 98 weeks project which organizes workshops and artist talks, the Arab Image Foundation, which collects and archives photographic images, the film organization Beirut DC, in addition to yearly events including various dance, music, and film festivals. But the issue of a physical cultural infrastructure is relatively weak for such a dynamic and productive city. There are galleries, and spaces, which are rented out, and transformed for screenings, lectures, and performances, but no multi-purpose permanent non-commercial space for artistic exhibition and support which has programming year-round. The Beirut Art Center is the first of it's kind in the city's recent history. It is also the first of a few other permanent cultural spaces in the city currently underway, including a space for artistic production, education and exhibition as part of Ashkal Alwan's next project, and the government-linked Dar Bayrut: A House of Arts and Culture projet set to be in downtown of the city mostly funded by the Sultanate of Oman.

BAC is a multipurpose space with it's aim "to produce, present and promote local and international contemporary art and cultural practice in a structure that is open and active throughout the year" through rigorous programming and activities: four exhibitions a year, in addition to weekly activities of screenings, performances and concerts, workshops, as



well as an educational arm offering guided tours for students, talks, and seminars. Since BAC's opening mid-January, with an exhibition of 11 artists, "Closer," the center has hosted an experimental music concert, in support of Gaza, and had call for application for an emerging artists exhibition and prize to be held and presented in April. Despite its obscure location, people have been flocking to explore the space and the show, including the 1,000 people who attended the opening night.

Structured as a non profit association with a board responsible for the decision making and artistic direction of the association and center, Beirut Art Center's Executive Board is comprised of the two founders, Sandra Dagher and Lamia Joreige as well as three other members: Bassam Kahwagi, Rabi Mroué and Maria Ousseimi. The move to "implicate" a group of people in the decision making process and vision of the center, as opposed to just the directors and founders, is significant.

The conversations and dialogue are important to the direction of work of the BAC. Joreige said, "organic growth" and "evolution" are significant aspects that Dagher and Joreige claimed is necessary for the future of the space, with the space adapting to the quickly changing situations and events in the country (both politically and artistically) as well as re-

gionally.

The Beirut Art Center is situated in an industrial district on the eastern end of Beirut, in Sin al Fil. The two-story building, covering over 1500 square meters served as a furniture factory, and since has been renovated; the industrial aesthetic remains, with high ceilings and expansive space. Across street, a building is tagged in colorful graffiti. The high white walls and ceiling reflect the sunlight which flows in creating a lightbox for the space. The ground floor serves as the main exhibition space, in addition to a screening/performance room, and a bookshop, with carefully selected and imported books, exhibition catalogs, and publications that are nearly impossible to find in the city. On the second floor are the administrative offices, a beautiful outdoor terrace, soon a café, and one of the most important features of the center: the mediatheque, dubbed a "digital multimedia library." Two stations with computers contain artist information and profiles, videos, images, sound pieces as well as and texts by artists, theorists and writers. Serving as an archive, research center, and viewing station, visitors can access information and artwork for viewing and research purposes. Currently containing several dozen entries that are searchable by various fields, the meditheque will continue to grow with time and will serve as a long awaited resource. In addition to sup-



porting a artistic production and exhibition, the cataloging of material, particularly of the work itself, made easily accessible to the public, is a significant gesture.

Opening with an exhibition of eleven artists not only from the Arab world, the center's first show, "Closer" engages the notions of the public and private, often presenting with familiar situations but in an intensely intimate way. The mediums of installation, film, and photography are particularly prevalent within a frame of deeply personal stories. The artists included are Jananne al-Ani, Tony Chakar, Antoine D'Agata, Mona Hatoum, Emily Jacir, Jill Magid, Anri Sala, Lina Saneh, Akram Zaatari, Cynthia Zaven, and Lisa Steele.

Sandra Dagher and Lamia Joreige, the co-directors, conceived of the idea for such a space five years ago, whose concept hasn't changed over the period until the opening. "The concept came out quickly. It came from an necessity and we always meant for it to be a public space," said Lamia. Joreige is an artist whose

work includes painting, installation, and video. Dagher has been involved in the art scene in Lebanon for over ten years through the gallery space she previously owned, Espace SD and served as one of the co-directors of Lebanon's first pavilion at the Venice Biennial. While some programming of the gallery is similar to what takes place at the BAC: conferences, workshops, exhibiting younger artists, Dagher asserts that this is a completely different space and is not an evolution of Espace SD. "[It] was a private space, a company" self financed by sales. [The Beirut Art Center] is closer to an art space" with freedom to exhibit as they like. The conversation about a "dream space" as the like to call it, between Dagher and Joreige stemmed from seeing how the gallery was function-

ing and recognizing what else the city and artists' needed.

While the idea was in place, Joreige states that in Beirut, "to make anything that is sustainable is difficult because of the political context." While Dagher and Joreige agreed on a concept, the more difficult parts of execution involved fundraising and finding a space, which came with time. The financial aspect is structured in the form of a sponsorship program, of both individual and companies, a donor scheme, as well as membership to the space, all of which allows commitment from the community in sustaining such a project, an important goal of the independence from the more often sought out finance of European cultural institutions. Finding the owners of the building ended up being a scavenger hunt of

searching and getting papers mailed and signed by 12 heirs that were around the world. A common situation in landholdings in Lebanon, the success of renting the space is a feat.

As a proper permanent site is now around to support the community, this space is a positive move in the direction

for cultural venues in the city; hopefully the first of many spaces and initiatives. The next exhibition in April will be those selected from emerging artists call which closed mid-February. Artists living in Lebanon can apply and submit new work to be considered for the show, and the artists will be chosen by the Executive Committee of the BAC. "It's a very important thing to encourage production, and there are a lot of artists to be discovered," says Joreige. "It's a statement, and experiment." While an experiment, BAC already seems to already have positive results.

