

*Is memory produced by us, or is it us? Our identity is very likely whatever our memory decides to retain. But let's not presume that memory is a storage room. It's not a tool for being able to think, it's thinking, before thinking. It also makes an (apparently) simple thing like crossing the room, possible. It's impossible to separate it from what it remembers." Etel Adnan*



Image 1- Almond vendor sitting on the rocks in Dalieh, Beirut, Lebanon. (By Xaver Könneker)





Image 2- Youth playing in the stepped pools and natural caves of Dalieh, a location where Beirut people used to teach their youth how to swim. Beirut, Lebanon. (By Xaver Könneker)



Image 3 - People enjoying the sunset in Dalieh, A location also used by Kurds to celebrate Nairuz the beginning of Spring, Beirut, Lebanon. (By Xaver Könneker)



Image 4 - On a boat tour with Najib, one of the Ain Mreiseh port fishermen. Exiting one of the Rawsheh rock caves. Beirut, Lebanon. (By Jude Swearky)



## Reworking a *sacred* public space

I am suggesting that we launch a memory work project that merges archive activism with a version of oral histories by the peoples inhabiting, working in and spending time in Dalieh, Beirut, Lebanon. Whether fishermen, minorities, elderly, youth, vendors, migrant workers, locals, child vendors. etc.

The starting point of my thought experiment is the framing of the sea and its coast as a public space. Once we enter into the realm of theorizing of the public space rather than the sea or the coast in particular, we encounter and must include all sphere and domains of both knowledge and activity; demographics, legal frameworks, privatization, infrastructure, superstructure, economic and commercial zoning, war zones and their histories, formal and informal micro-economic practices (and with it interrogations of formal and informal labor), (cultural and natural) heritage and history as a continuum. In other words, in order for us to be able to concretely theorize of public space we must interrogate all of the spheres of activity that have allowed it to manifest in the ways that it does, and most importantly, the organic day-to-day socio-cultural material practices that concretely give the coast or the sea its dynamic character. The people who inhabit and animate the lifeworld of the public space are crucial for understanding or even interacting with the space itself. Let us try to conceptualize it through their eyes.

The space that I have chosen to look into is Dalieh, the forgotten stepped pools nestled adjacent to the monumental Lebanese Rawsheh rocks. This is due to two reasons; the first being that, before I moved to Lebanon I was totally ignorant to the existence of Dalieh (which comes as a shock because my mother and grandparents lived in Beirut for 20 years, and haven't mentioned this space once), how could a space so large (in comparison to the Rawsheh rocks) an rich with cultural practices be totally dismissed? The second reason is due to representations of the sea in Beirut in postcards and archival images that I have had access to; this representation almost always left Dalieh out of the frame and/or didn't give it its own frame. After actually visiting and spending a substantial amount of time in Dalieh, I soon came to the realization that there is a rift between the represented/

archived account of the history of Dalieh in accessible popular culture, and its' rich and diverse reality.

My focus on photography in particular stems from two roots, the first is the accessibility of photography as visual information that could be understood and communicated universally with less barriers of language, literacy or communication. And the second being that the archive, especially a self-authored archive will provide a potent tool for the democratization the capability of self-representation and encumbering or situating the self in the context (i.e. the space), and situating the self or the community in dialogue with public space and specifically the sea. I think the method of photography offers certain kind of interactive engagement that builds alternative relationships to the landscape they are interacting with.

This is essentially a boundary breaking project in three senses; the first being turning the ethnographic lens upon itself through refusing the gaze of the empire, the elites or social institutions and creating images, impressions and representations authored by the peoples inhabiting specific spaces and time frames. The objects and the bodies in the archives become sites of contestation, and along with that the currently produced archive becomes a critical space in its own right. The second being breaking the boundary of passivity between the individual or subject and her history/ heritage, when we shift our ideation of history from being a sort of uncontested sphere of semi-scientific facts, to understanding it as a continuum in which we participate, suddenly a space for agency emerges. When history and especially the realm of the archive becomes a space in which we can participate in the forging of our own futurity and contest the framing (or representations) of our history participation takes on a new form. An active history.

The third tenant is that there must be a breaking of the boundary between land and sea to include all of the entanglements that allow for the dialogue between land and the sea to become more fluid and interactive. In the sense that we must create an existential and real fusion between our communal history,

geographical context with our individual memory and subjective trajectory. Which is why I am focusing on urban spaces as contemporary sites of consciousness and production, and interrogating the ways in which we could cultivate a sort of reconciliation between an imposed infrastructure and our chosen superstructure (here the notion of superstructure, is in dialogue with Delany's 1999 *Three, Two, One, Contact: Times square Red*). The superstructure is the ways in which inhabitants of a certain locality come to terms with, understand, contest and defy the infrastructural realities they are forced into. Furthermore, by infrastructural realities I am referring to the entanglements between the legal, economic, physical, medical, bureaucratic, political and commercial tenants of the locality. And the ways in which this superstructure could be expressed in creative and innovative manifestations that defy its infrastructure in one instance, but also establish a new form of intimacy and reconciliation with it, in another. there is no way to create a fruitful contemporary relationship to public space and our experience of it without a linkage to the past.