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Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space**

Theatralia. 2024, vol. 27, iss. 1, pp. 236-266

ISSN 1803-845X (print); ISSN 2336-4548 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/TY2024-1-11>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.80033>

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Access Date: 01. 12. 2024

Version: 20240626

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Curating amidst Compounding Crises: The Lebanese Contribution to the 2023 Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space

Essay by Hadi Damien

Hadi Damien has been the curator of Lebanon in the Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space since the year 2015, overseeing the Lebanese contributions to PQ 2015, PQ 2019, and PQ 2023. (For more information, visit: www.pq-lb.org/.) He is also a scenographer and a university lecturer, teaching scenography, events, and (political) communications in the French-speaking Saint Joseph University of Beirut, and has lectured in the American University of Beirut, Lebanese American University, Oxford Brookes, and Freie Universität. He is a published author in Arabic, English, and French, in general and specialised research, writing about scenography, theatre, production, society, and comparative religions. In the essay below he draws from his expansive practice, and comments on curating PQ 2023 in Lebanon going through compounding crises, amidst an international climate of recession and political polarisation.

Věra Velemanová and **Aziza Kadyri**, the guest editors of the issue, invited curator Hadi Damien to share his thoughts about curating PQ 2023.

The text below is the essay which the journal received in January 2024.



Fig. 1: Portrait of Hadi Damien. From the author's personal archive.

2019-----2023: Lebanese crises command austerity at PQ

PQ 2019 ended in June 2019, less than 4 months before the Lebanese nation-wide protests of 17 October, the financial meltdown of the country, the COVID pandemic, the Beirut Port double explosion of 4 August 2020, and the political and socio-economic collapse that has been ongoing ever since.

With these provocations directly transforming lives and practices in Lebanon, it was inevitable that the Lebanese contribution to the next PQ reflects, echoes, resonates, and builds on them.

We confirmed the presence of Lebanon in PQ 2023 and stated that we will be participating in its main components only: the Exhibition of Countries and Regions and the Student Exhibition. In the straining Lebanese realities, it felt indecent and disrespectful to participate in all programmed projects and exude the incorrect image of 'business as usual'.

This restraint marked a stark contrast with the indulgence we presented in PQ 2015 and PQ 2019. In these editions, Lebanon averaged 16 events in 10 days, and highlighted 65 artists through exhibitions, performances, audiovisual working groups and promenades, talks, student design projects, workshops, book launches, and receptions.

I curated this collective work that was conducted by exhibition designers, students, costume makers, performers, audiovisual artists, installation artists, food designers, workshop leaders, authors, and book editors.

The importance of institutions in the curatorial approach

Since I started curating the participation of Lebanon for PQ 2015, I have thought of and designed this project as a collective endeavour that brings together institutions and individuals from both the public and the private sectors.

The Prague Quadrennial is initiated and funded by the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic, and organised by an affiliate-body, the Arts and Theatre Institute. In the spirit of reciprocity, the Lebanese public institutions had to be engaged. Both main components of PQ, the Exhibition of Countries and Regions, and the Student Exhibition, are handled by the country (or region) curator and are not subject to curatorial review by the PQ artistic director.

Throughout the years and the PQ editions, we have constantly outlined PQ to officials, highlighted the benefits of collaboration, introduced designers and artists, shared updates on every step of the project, requested institutional endorsement for the participation of Lebanon, and tailored multiparty projects in the frame of PQLB.

Aware of the financial situation of public institutions, we did not request direct funding, and only asked for institutional patronage as a means to keep officials engaged with our project and accountable to their institutional roles and obligations.

Regardless of the crumbling and eroding of state institutions as well as their ever limited financial capabilities, it is key that we, the citizens, champion the role and importance of institutions, and impel their presence in international events, not in celebration of an official or of a public servant, but in acknowledgement that the sustainability, continuity, and durability of a project is grounded in institutions that go beyond the affinities, interests, and sensitivities of the individuals who carry said-project.

Nevertheless, and despite it not being a personal curatorial production, the participation of Lebanon ended up being self-organised in 2015, 2019, and 2023. PQLB 2015 and PQLB 2019 were endorsed by a few institutions, and produced with personal funding. PQLB 2023, however, happened without any form of participation from public institutions (such as the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Tourism, or Embassies), and private contributors were not able to commit to it.

Each edition of the PQ resonates with performance designers and artists who are sensitive to the echoes of the PQ theme in the realities of Lebanon. This sensitivity drives the curatorial approach that selects the designers for the participation of Lebanon. After a long process engaging with prospective talent, – some disinterested, others requesting funds to commit to PQLB 2023, others confirming interest before reorienting themselves to other projects, others falling to drug abuse that inhibited

their potential and subverted their engagement with the team, – Charbel Samuel Aoun and Mara Ingea succeeded in respectively designing the Exhibition of Countries and Regions and the Student Exhibition.

The Exhibition of Countries and Regions (ECR)

Selecting the ECR designer

The Exhibition of Countries and Regions is the cornerstone of the Prague Quadrennial. This primary platform presents ‘the best’ of the country’s or region’s contribution to performance design, scenography, and theatre. After undergoing multiple changes related to both the selection of the designers and to the proposed concept, the Lebanese Exhibition of Countries and Regions was designed by Charbel Samuel Aoun.

Charbel entertains a healthy and conscious relationship with Lebanon. He is a plastician, a visual artist, who paints, creates installations, and juggles between watercolour and acrylic, technology and other media explorations.¹ His work does not depend on the contribution of clients, sponsors, or donors. He does not expect or wait for funding to produce his art, and, instead, leverages existing resources for production. His problem-solving and solution-finding approach makes his art reflective of the environment he evolves in, and provides him with a wide margin for experimentation, thus reflecting the evolution of his artistic practice.

First concept: One Crumbled Soil

Charbel’s initial design was titled *One Crumbled Soil*, and consisted of an installation featuring a landscape of broken glass. As visitors walk on the glass, contact microphones magnify the cracking sound of the glass squeezing under the visitors’ steps. The installation reflects the Beiruti² landscape and soundscape that followed the Beirut Port double explosion of 4 August 2020. On that day, cracked and broken glass was shattered all over Beirut, covering the surface of the town. Crackling sounds resonated for days throughout the city as we kept cleaning glass for many, many weeks.

The quest for funds

This design did not come to fruition. Broken tempered glass proved challenging to find in Prague, and despite all fundraising efforts and outreach, the necessary financial support to cover the installation’s technical expenses was not met. None of those we reached out to managed to facilitate or to contribute to the Lebanese participation.

1 I met Charbel in 2012, while I was curating the Lebanese Cultural Delegation to the Jeux de la Francophonie that was scheduled in Nice 2013. He participated in the Painting competition, mixing dust with varnish to create the medium he painted with, and earned a ‘Jury Mention’. Charbel would later teach scenography, in which frame he would supervise the Lebanese students who participated in the ‘Common Design Project’, part of the 2019 Prague Quadrennial.

2 ‘Beiruti’ is an adjective that refers to the residents of Beirut.

We stretched our personal finances, and reached out to new sponsors and institutions, and to those we engaged with in 2015 and in 2019. We liaised with public institutions, with incumbent and former Ministers, asking them to look into their network and tap into their contacts.³ We also spoke to bank executives and to regional cultural funds, and we connected with the Lebanese Embassy in the Czech Republic, the Czech Embassy in Lebanon, followed up on their contacts and recommendations, corresponded with Lebanese business owners in Czechia, corresponded with Czech companies in Lebanon, and corresponded with emerging companies in Czechia, even offering business development initiatives in exchange for production support. Charbel reached out to his dedicated collectors, and suggested they purchase a painting to sponsor the installation in Prague. They reaffirmed their enthusiasm for his paintings, but in the stagnant and depreciating economy, none of them gave Charbel a positive return. We further connected with friends we met in the frame of the Prague Quadrennial, notably Dorita Hannah, who drew on her family connections in Lebanon – alas, without success. The financial situation in Lebanon was indeed really, really bad.

Beirut–Prague: A common sensitivity

Three days before the exhibition setup, we were still unclear if we were participating in PQ 2023 or not. We reached out to the PQ organisers and told them of our situation. Exhibitions Manager Magdaléna Brožíková generously offered us the option to waive our participation fees for both the Exhibition of Countries and Regions and the Student Exhibition. We accepted the offer with gratitude, appreciating the PQ organisers' sensitivity to our incessant efforts to deliver the participation of Lebanon.

Across the years, I met many Czech individuals involved in the organisation of PQ, in 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2023. We spent hours talking about our respective cities, about theatre and performance, about the challenges of participating in PQ, about the challenges of organising PQ. The Czech organisers understand why we, the Lebanese, contribute to PQ, and why we keep pushing the Lebanese participation forward. The relationship we have with Beirut resonates with our Czech friends, as they entertain a similar relationship with their city of Prague. The Czech organisers value and hold dear the organising of PQ, the expansive and important exhibition that they and so many others are proud of. They go the extra mile, for us, the thousands of participants from 59 countries and regions,⁴ to enjoy Prague as they do, through their selection of hotels that resemble them, restaurants that echo their exciting city, and merchandising they produce with Czech businesses to connect the local economy to PQ. Their welcoming and supporting approach is revitalising in the performance field. It is also rewarding to see how the emerging Czech generation is open to us, from all over the world. They are aware of, and sensitive to global realities, such as those of Lebanon, and they are particularly proactive with manifesting their tangible support and solidarity – a merit that often lacks in international platforms.

³ Requesting contributions between USD 2,000 and 5,000, so the total amounts to USD 20,000.

⁴ As communicated by PQ 2023 and published on the website (PQ 2023b).



Fig. 2: *A Breath into a Hole* – ECR Lebanon. PQ 2023. Photo: Viktor Tuček.

A new concept: A Breath into a Hole

The desire of PQ 2023 to safeguard the participation of Lebanon met the commitment of Charbel Samuel Aoun to the participation of Lebanon in PQ 2023. In light of the PQ decision, Charbel reconsidered his concept, and chose to premiere his film *A Breath into a Hole* as part of the ECR (Fig. 2). One of his collectors contributed USD 600 to the rental of the screen.

A zero-cost production that reflects the economic crisis in relation to the artistic form, *A Breath into a Hole* documents a scenographic act that Charbel performed in the direct aftermath of the double explosion of 4 August 2020. In Mar Mikhael, the most damaged region, Charbel took over an empty parking lot directly facing the explosion site. For days, he dug in this parking lot, going deep into the earth, creating trenches day and night, using candles to light the darkness of the deep. *A Breath into a Hole* questions destruction as a path for a new existence; to be space instead of being in space. An act, a few tools, and the urge to dig a space of belonging through asphalt and layers of civilization (Fig. 3a–e).

The adaptation and versatility that Charbel demonstrated ensured the participation of Lebanon and confirmed the curatorial choice. The offering of the Prague Quadrennial and the agility of Charbel Samuel Aoun also speak to the relationship Lebanon has been building with the Prague Quadrennial since 2011, promising strong continuity and an expanding horizon.

[guests]







Fig. 3a-e: Stills from *A Breath into a Hole*. Lebanon, 2020. Photo: Charbel Samuel Aoun.

The Student Exhibition (SE)

Selecting the SE designer

I met Mara Ingea during the May 2022 Curators' Symposium *Where Are We?* that prepares PQ 2023. After studying visual arts and animation in Lebanon, she enrolled in the 'Directing of Devised and Object Theatre' programme at DAMU, the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague.

Barbora Příhodová, her university lecturer and curator of the PQ Talks in 2019 and 2023,⁵ suggested that she joined the Symposium to introduce her to the Lebanese curator.

Our first encounter went very well: she is polite, funny, and intelligent. We spent the Symposium together, connected with PQ organisers, hung out during my time in Prague, and talked a lot. We spoke about her artistic practice, about her relationship to Lebanon, to Beirut, to Prague, to the space in perpetual transformation, to memory, change, the temporary, the permanent, embedded spaces within spaces, people's behaviours in the public place, etc. She is a kind observer and a good listener.

It was evident to me that Mara was the appropriate profile for the Student Exhibition. In addition to her neat and articulate make-up, she is a talented Lebanese

⁵ She would be appointed new Artistic Director of PQ in December 2023.

designer, well connected to Lebanon – where she grew and studied, and well based in Prague – where she studies and practices.⁶ Being a member of the Lebanese diaspora also expanded her contribution.

Mara welcomed the suggestion to design the Student Exhibition, albeit a little reluctant at 25 years old.

Communications & trust

We kept talking over the phone after my return to Beirut and met again when Mara visited Lebanon a few weeks later for the summer, and then for Christmas 2022.

Distance is not an issue, as I am not looking to micro-manage a creative process, especially when collaborating with a good talent, even more with a talent I selected. I would ask questions, seek to understand the thinking process, and I am satisfied with answers that show clarity and conviction.

Trusting the designer is trusting the curatorial choice, and I know that I would have appreciated enough space without a curator breathing down my neck. In other terms, it is important that the designer benefits from a large margin of action to freely work and experiment, without the omnipresence of the curator – while remaining available. I also do not worry that matters may get out of hand, as anything can be addressed when personalities are decent, and individuals are comfortable around each other.

Taking ownership for one's work and feeling responsible for it is key for success.

Curating alone & back-up plans

In many countries, like Lebanon, curators are on our own. This was the case for me in PQ 2023, as I shouldered the responsibility of representing a country without institutional backing. Curatorial decisions, such as the participation in PQ, the selection of the designers and the exhibition venues, the signing of the contracts, as well as the design and the exhibited contributions, were not given oversight by the relevant institutions, since their leadership was mostly disinterested, and/or involved on other fronts in the national collapse.

However, the unconcern of public officers would hastily turn into a sturdy inquisition the moment a public opinion is formed about the project, especially if accompanied by some sensational perception. As the State collapses, all pieces are moving, and everything, everyone is fair game.

Therefore, to protect the participation of Lebanon in the Prague Quadrennial, as well as the designers and the curator, it is necessary to devise multiple back-up plans. These plans had already come to good use, back in 2019, when the designers of the Student Exhibition decided, on a whim, to dismantle the exhibition on opening night, and venture into Prague's touristic life.

⁶ Mara would graduate from DAMU 4 months later, in September 2022.

Public institutions no matter what

When Lebanon won 'Best Student Exhibition' on 13 June 2023, I WhatsApped the advisor of the Minister of Culture an online link with a voice note at 11:44 PM. She responded at 6:08 AM with one word: 'Bravo'. Nothing else, as if the participation in PQ was unrelated to the Ministry's scope of work.

One would argue that in the meltdown of institutions, a performance event may not be a high priority for the officials. Yet, this award is an achievement, a recognition of the successful contribution of Lebanon to an international event, and an acknowledgement of the international interaction with an artwork from and about Lebanon, designed by a young Lebanese talent. In its remarks, the awarding Jury mentioned:

the poignant and intimate catalogue of a place in a perpetual state of crisis, with textual and material fragments creating a mechanistic urban simulacrum; city as a dynamic open system constructed from memories, reflections, invocation, and dreams. The work succeeds in framing a world in constant mutation and disequilibrium, attentively and without slipping into sentimentality. (PQ 2023a)

In this institutional void, devising a healthy methodology and adopting a savvy political approach are fundamental. Regardless of the situation of public institutions and the performance of their leadership, engagement with public institutions remains a necessity, and so is their reform from within to properly perform in the public interest. Punctual and specific initiatives – like the participation in PQ – are one of the means to keep the connection going with institutions, and to keep them connected to worldwide happenings.

Concept: Puzzles

The series of provocations that Lebanon underwent from 2019 to 2023 influenced the way we navigated daily life, and affected how we perceived a space in constant motion. Next to the national uprisings, the pandemic, and different kinds of shortages that unfolded simultaneously, the third-largest non-nuclear double explosion in history detonated in the capital Beirut. This succession of crises and catastrophes reshaped society, economics, and landscapes.

In collaboration with research and dramaturgy consultant Natasha Karam, after various iterations in a studio she rented, Mara designed and executed *Puzzles*, an interactive installation with five stations made of upcycled objects and simple mechanisms. Interconnected, these stations form one big mechanical machine. Visitors interact with the exhibition and put the stations in motion, generating movement and sounds. To reflect the complexity of daily life in Lebanon and the transformations that Beirut had been undergoing, the Student Exhibition of Lebanon also displayed texts compiled from Lebanese residents.

These five stations represent five milestones from the years 2019 to 2023:



Fig. 4: Puzzles – SE Lebanon. PQ 2023. Photo: Joe Ingea.



Fig. 5: Puzzles – SE Lebanon. PQ 2023. Photo: Joe Ingea.



Fig. 6: *Puzzles* – SE Lebanon. PQ 2023. Photo: Héctor Cruz Juárez.



Fig. 7: *Puzzles* – SE Lebanon. PQ 2023. Photo: Joe Ingea.

1. The new ephemeral spaces and the soundscapes of the 2019 Protests;
2. The constant vibration of Beirut through people's actions and initiatives;
3. The double explosion of the Beirut Port on 4 August 2020 that destroyed a big part of the capital;
4. The citizens coming together to clean the streets after the blast;
5. The change and vanishing of numerous places due to the crisis.

Change as action & reaction, movement & effort

In the five stations, basic instructions invite the visitors to pull ropes, turn gears, or fill buckets with rocks. A simple mechanism activates wooden sticks that bang on pans – a daily practice that Lebanese people engaged in during the 17 October uprising – while another mechanism activates brooms that remind us of the many weeks we spent cleaning glass after 4 August 2020. The soundscape of these interactions echoes both chaos and change in Lebanon, giving a sonic impression of a city in crisis.

These movements alter the exhibition as they transform the space, either directly on the spot, or over time and repetition. *Puzzles* reflects on the principle of change: change that happens instantly, and change that happens cumulatively, over stages.

Puzzles also highlights the effort that goes into change, and how this effort depends on the environment. To underscore how the malfunctioning Lebanese system has turned every basic daily activity into a complicated effort, some simple actions in the exhibition require a big effort, while something big could arise from an insignificant movement, from almost nothing. In this mix of playfulness, emotionality, and absurdity, the 'machine aesthetics' enhances the principle of action and reaction.

Upcycling: reconstruction, assemblage, & market economy

Retracing and understanding the recent Lebanese events is akin to putting together pieces of a puzzle. Every time the city was destroyed or drastically changed, materials were repurposed, structures and buildings were recomposed, and unrelated elements were combined to form complex social, political, and economical situations. This process inspired Mara to gather objects out of random encounters. She leveraged the attributes of these sometimes obsolete objects and materials, and imagined a new function for them. Upcycling became a means to use existing material, to produce art on a tight budget, to reduce waste, and to simulate ideation for both the designer and the visitor.

The choice of revamping existing material and objects also reflects new professional practices in Lebanon. Amidst the ongoing economic crisis, new businesses, for example, offer to fix and uplift shoes and clothing, while other businesses sell second hand electronics and home accessories. This type of business wasn't as prominent on social media as it has been since the beginning of the crisis. It was also not advertised with the noticeable efforts invested today into its positioning as a trendy and hip practice. With the prevailing crisis, the crunchy economy challenges people to acquire new products, and an appealing branding attracts people to this business and professional opportunity. This reverberates on the approach Charbel followed in the Exhibition of Countries and Regions, when he chose to screen a scenographic act,



Fig. 8: Puzzles – SE Lebanon. PQ 2023. Photo: Joe Ingea.

a zero-budget project to testify to the issues that resulted from the Lebanese financial crisis, including how artistic expression and representation are impacted.

Texts & language

The five stations also feature stories, memories, anecdotes, and testimonies collected from residents in Beirut. Written in their own words, the texts elevate the voices of the Lebanese. They tell of daily life in the Lebanese capital, mention ephemeral places, as well as places that changed, that disappeared, that (re)appeared, and highlight quirky moments that have been constantly adapting for the previous four years. The texts immerse the visitors in Lebanese realities, narrate the constantly changing landscape of the city, and anchor the exhibited machine in the Lebanese context.

As the residents of Lebanon have been forced to wait for hours to access basic needs such as buying bread, withdrawing money from the bank, filling our cars with gas, or waiting tens of months to get appointments to renew our passports, transitory places like crowds, queues, and traffic jams develop, persist, and dissipate. Due to shortages and State dysfunction, these types of spaces could not be avoided, which pushed the Lebanese to get creative, and find alternative ways to wait while ensuring we do not lose our position in the line.

Visitors get to observe and stimulate ephemeral and/or new types of spaces that emerge in times of crisis, wait together in line to activate a certain mechanism, and

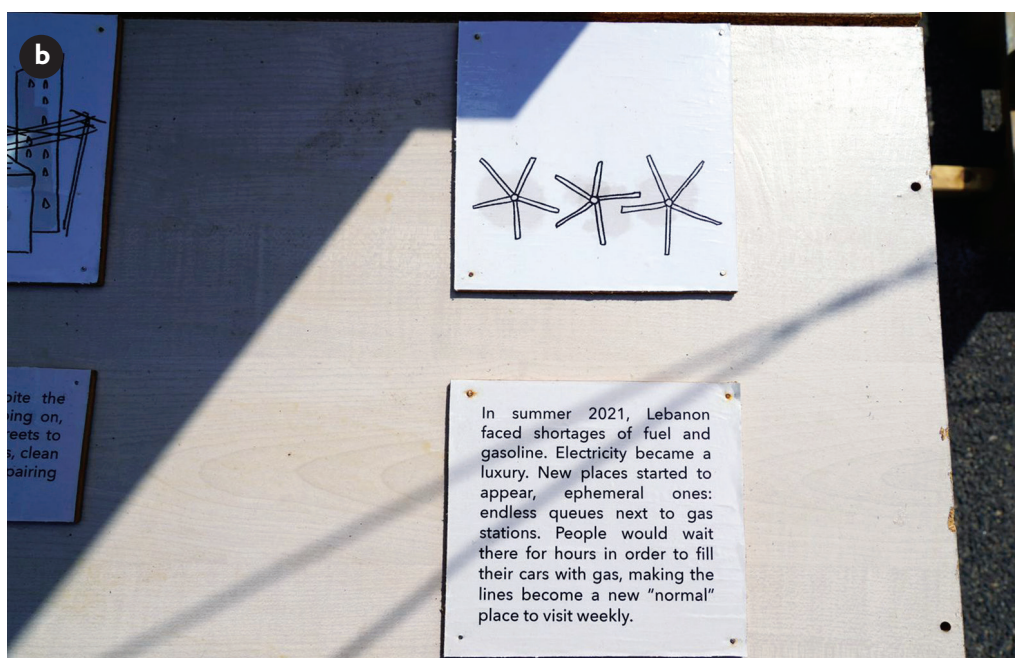






Fig. 9a-e: *Puzzles* – SE Lebanon. PQ 2023. Photo: Joe Ingea.

partake in the performative aspect of daily routines turned into urban adventures – courtesy of the continuous Lebanese socio-economic crises.

The textual dimension added to the exhibition invites the visitors to engage with language, using intellect and imagination to further experience Lebanon. Theatre happens in the mind of the audience, and this textual component roots the exhibition in the tradition of theatre. Theatre in the West, as an art form freed from religious ritual and born in the 6th century B.C., reached us through texts we received from the Ancient Greeks, from playwrights like Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes. In this transmission across history, text precedes actors, movement, dance, sound, music, make-up, costume, lighting, and the audience. The verb comes first. If I were to name a few prominent theatre makers, I'd think of William Shakespeare, Molière (Jean-Baptiste Poquelin), Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov, Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht, Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, and Jalal Khoury – all of them playwrights. They directed and played, but they especially wrote. Theatre acknowledges the actor in the present moment and celebrates the playwright in the future. The textual component of the Student Exhibition touches upon this, crystallising and documenting the legacy of currently lived experiences in Lebanon (see Fig. 9a-e).

SE visitors

Visitors enjoy numerous ways to interact with the Student Exhibition. They can manipulate its elements and put them in motion, observe their changes (causes and effects) without participating in their creation, or read the stories.⁷ The visitor has the choice of being a performer, a mover, a sound-maker, a reader, as well as audience. These are plenty of options to grasp the Lebanese realities at which intersection the Lebanese and the visitors meet.

Diaspora: education, emotions, exile

From a strict production point of view, Mara's involvement in the project is an asset.⁸ Based in Prague, she does not require international transport to PQ, and her accommodation is already secured in the Czech capital. She is also comfortable in conversational Czech, entertains friendships and connections in the theatre and performance spaces, and knows her way around the city – both culturally and logistically. This equips her with autonomy to seek practical support and local solutions to issues that may arise, which makes cultural and financial sense, and discharges a significant part from the production budget.

Mara is a Lebanese expatriate, a member of the Lebanese diaspora. While the Lebanese residing in Lebanon total around 6,000,000 individuals, the Lebanese diaspora in the world averages 12,000,000 people. The contribution of the members of the diaspora to Lebanon has been boundless. But how is it for the Lebanese living abroad, and what lays beyond glitz and opportunity?

⁷ See www.pq-lb.org.

⁸ See www.maraingea.com.

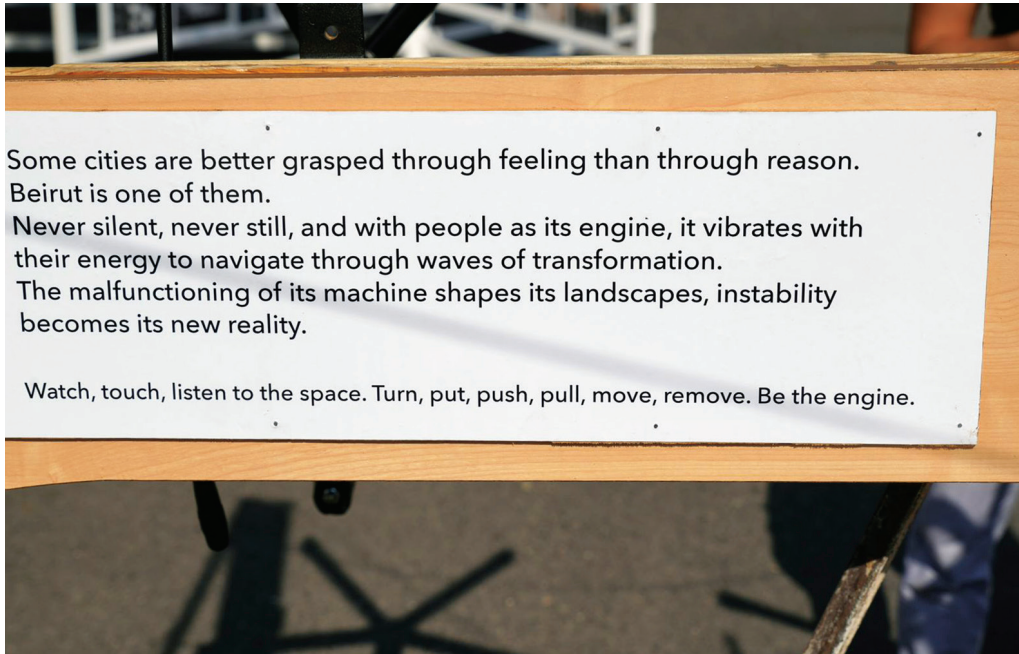


Fig. 10: *Puzzles* – SE Lebanon. PQ 2023. Photo: Joe Ingea.

The members of the Lebanese diaspora traditionally engage with Lebanon on two fronts: they transfer periodic funds to their families (called remittances) and visit them once or twice a year, if they can. They spend and splurge when possible. Their relationship with Lebanon is therefore emotional and financial. Depending on various sources, the remittances of the diaspora to Lebanon account for between 37.8% and 53.8% of the yearly national GDP (HOMSI 2022; ATALLAH 2023; RINALDI 2023). This makes the diaspora a prime funder of the Lebanese State. In other terms, part of the money the members of the diaspora send to their parents has been contributing to funding government expenses, perpetuating a political status quo that led to the financial collapse from which the country has yet to recover. Exporting Lebanese citizens benefits the political establishment: the expats transfer money to Lebanon, while they are distanced from public affairs and do not really disturb the political status quo. This has been a long-standing government decision through education policies, repetitive political stalemate, and maximum-pressure policy – to name but 3 avenues.

Schools in Lebanon teach Arabic as a living language, and deliver all other courses such as maths, science, literature, history, philosophy, arts, sports, and theatre in either French or English (or Armenian in a handful of establishments). A few schools use locally produced manuals, and most educational institutions import their books.⁹

⁹ Lebanese schools provide the necessary courses for students to sit for both the Lebanese official middle school diploma (Lebanese *brevet*) and for the official secondary school diploma (Lebanese Baccalaureate). Many schools offer high-schoolers the option to sit for the French Baccalaureate, the

The Lebanese students develop the academic culture of the countries from which the school manuals are imported. Students are therefore exposed to references, examples, drawings, and texts developed in other countries, from other societies, grounded in other histories, and which echo does not always smoothly resonate in Lebanese realities. As the brain is trained for theories and approaches that do not stem from the locally lived and experienced realities, many grow up with the call to move to an environment (to a country) where their daily life can unfold in better harmony with their perceived learning. Most parents often encourage their children to leave Lebanon in pursuit of better futures, urging them to travel as soon as they get their high school diploma. Parents give birth to children they raise to export and grow old far away from each other, missing out on birthdays, religious holidays, births, funerals, life events, and accidents, as well as missing out on witnessing how their elders grow old, thus losing their chance to better understand their genetic ageing and their legacies. Countless parents will go to great lengths to secure a financial and an emotional situation that enables their children to study abroad and live what they consider to be a decent life, a life they envision to be better than their own, far from social, civil, and security unrest. While the mind may be ready to leave, the heart may not follow and would rather stay in Lebanon.

Some resist this call from abroad, and this is when the political stalemate intensifies the maximum-pressure policy. For those who stay, when family relations become challenging and long standing friends travel; when venues close and disturb habits and memories; when unfamiliar, unrelating spaces open; when the job market saturates and salaries drop; when the economy takes a hit and financial crunches are felt; when the acute political discourse saturates the media and polarises hearts and minds; when stalemate degenerates in insecurity; when crimes rise and discrimination turns violent; when the world always feels as though it is moving forward, but the country seems to be stalling or regressing; when the basic daily task becomes too complicated; when the brain is saturated with tasks that do not even exist in some other countries... most people decide to leave, forced, broken, their relationships severed.

They will leave and develop new habits and lifestyles to better fit and assimilate in the spaces they move to. They will live through excitement and hope, racism, stereotyping, and prejudice. They will sublimate their homesickness into bittersweet nostalgia. Their kids will rarely – barely, if any – speak their parents’ Arabic mother tongue. With time, they may forget their Arabic language, and feel guilt and shame about this loss. As Majdi Mouawad said in 2020,¹⁰ ‘Exile, is not just geographical, it’s also in the throat, when you can no longer feel the sweetness of the “H” (ح), the power of the “Kh” (خ), the dizziness of the “Aain” (ع) and the childhood of the “Ghayn” (غ).’

International Baccalaureate (IB), the German Abitur, all of which being automatically granted the official equivalence to the Lebanese Baccalaureate by the Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education. The Freshman Programme is also an option, and the technical education system exists in parallel to the general education system.

10 Lebanese playwright and director, based in Paris, in a speech he delivered during the 2020 edition of the *Beirut Spring Festival* (<https://www.beirutspringfestival.org>).

They will come back when they can, and their relationship with Lebanon (mostly) remains the same one they had at the moment they travelled, especially if they were severed then. If they left the country at 18 years old, they (forever) engage with Lebanon as if they were still 18 years old, even when they have crossed the 60-year old mark. This one-sided relationship with a Lebanon that is no more, with a Lebanon that has evolved, is toxic – for the expats themselves and for those around them. Life goes on, despite all odds: the country is living, and the people in Lebanon are alive. This relationship frozen in time increases the gap between the expats and the country, with its subsequent stress, misunderstanding and anxiety of not recognising anything, anybody, not even one's parents, siblings, children. How to live in a present you are not familiar with, you've never experienced its evolution, and when all of your references are still from the past?

Each one of their visits becomes a walk down memory lane, a visit of ruins. The ruins of a past that is no more. Parents grow old, friendships evolve as life happens with less shared experiences, locations change, and the visiting Lebanese feel less at home in Lebanon, while never fully at home in the spaces they moved into. Those who live abroad share this feeling, and often make the choice to stick together when visiting, sometimes taking distance from the locals in an attempt to patch common pain and seek healing. The locals hold their hands out and invite them to connect, but how can you engage with a present you are distant from? The locals, who live their own challenges – the compounded and accrued challenges the expats left, – often engage with them with jealousy and envy, dismissing the hardships of a life in exile, or unaware of them, insensitive to them, fetishising the perception of a comfort they do not have. For, if many make the decision to stay in countries in political distress – like Lebanon, – most are stuck, with no choice, with no means to leave.

Naturally, the expats carry the habits they developed abroad, and these basic habits may clash with the locals who will question them: 'How come you forgot how we do it here?', then tell them 'Oh no! We don't do it this way anymore!', and then 'Why do you behave like a Canadian/American/European/Stranger now?'

The emotional toll is heavy on the expats and on the locals. It further separates friends and relatives, expats and those still living in Lebanon. How to engage with a life in ruins, when your friends and relatives are full of life? How to deal with so many triggers? What an exile!

With each reconnection, the relationship with the country becomes more painful, more difficult, more tedious, more taxing. Every time they leave Lebanon to return to their country of migration, the feelings of heartbreak, anxiety, uprootedness, – sometimes failure, disappointment, or bitterness, – vividly awake, storm their souls, and clutch their hearts. The nest feels empty again, the nest feels expelling again.¹¹ There is respite in running back to the adopted home when family

11 Journalist Diana Mokalled wrote about joining the migrating swarm as she travelled from Beirut to the UK to accompany her only son to university, for the first and for the last time. The mother feels a huge loss as her only child runs away to his future, his country expelling him, and consoles herself that she would be lucky if he would call her daily for a few minutes. The empty nest syndrome is the feeling of grief and

issues are unresolved. Others learn to negotiate healthy adult relationships between parents and children, between children, and with society; to make peace with their path; to move forward with the understanding that continuous blame is destructive, and that life is fluid for them to stay in the rigidity of memory, to better live with emotions under control.

It is true that the citizens of most small countries learn other languages and move to new countries, for the home market gets easily saturated, and for one's potential grows bigger in larger territories. This reminds me of the words my theatre mentor Jalal Khoury often repeated to me, as he heard them, himself from his father: 'Dans un petit pays tu resteras petit' (French for 'In a small country, you remain small').

Those Lebanese who freely leave, without a sense of defeatism, without a sense of uprooting, without the bait of a better job, of a better life, without family obligations... these Lebanese are a small group, and their size shrinks with each crisis.

This is how governments prepare citizens for exile, this is how pupils are groomed to leave, branding them as 'brilliant Lebanese talent for the world'. They answer the call for better lives and monies, and pay a hefty social, familial, and emotional price. Some grow in it.

However, the gravity of the crises of the past 4 years shifted the way the diaspora engages with Lebanon.

Between 17 October 2019 and 4 August 2020, a double cataclysm fatally destabilised Lebanon. A population dispossessed of all its savings in 2019, subjected to an economic collapse without precedent in history, suffered on 4 August 2020 the double explosion of the Beirut Port, which wiped out half of the capital, blowing all large and medium-sized educational and hospital institutions in there, and accelerating the crumbling of the health and educational systems barely ten months after the citizens' bank deposits had disappeared.

At a time when the dying people were most in need of international aid, a severe blockade was imposed, strengthening the grip of groups funded by foreign countries, while billions of dollars continued to flow in to finance plans to settle millions of non-Lebanese on Lebanese soil, with Lebanon being the country hosting the largest number of refugees per capita and per square kilometre in the world (UNHCR 2024). Among the national groups suffering drastically as a whole, some in particular suffered an existential danger as their number shrank, which triggered a haemorrhage of emigrants identical to that of Kafno, the famine-genocide of 1915–1918.

This is also genocide. Raphaël Lemkin¹² explains that genocide does not necessarily imply 'the immediate destruction of a nation' through mass murder, but it can mean a coordinated plan of various actions aimed at the destruction of the essential foundations of the life of national groups, such as the disintegration of political and social institutions, culture, language, national sentiments, religion and economic life, etc., as

loneliness that parents may feel when their children move out of the family home to travel, to live on their own, or to pursue a higher education. See <https://daraj.media/112108/>.

12 Raphaël Lemkin was a Polish lawyer of Jewish descent who is known for coining the term 'genocide' and campaigning to establish the Genocide Convention.

well as the suppression of personal security, freedom, health, dignity and even the life of individuals (Lemkin quoted in GENOCIDE WATCH 2014).

Conscious, aware, and convinced that political interference in the judiciary will obstruct justice,¹³ several Lebanese living outside of Lebanon have taken to tribunals in their countries of residence. They filed claims against banks that refuse to give them their money, and filed claims for damages caused by the criminal and intentional double explosion of the Beirut Port of 4 August 2020.¹⁴ This marks an evolution in the way the Lebanese Diaspora engages with their home country: they are no longer reducing themselves to a cash machine only, or strictly providing financial support for the country (through their remittances and country visits). They have widened their scope of work by accepting – under pressure or because they have no choice – to assume a more active participation in Lebanese matters and public affairs. Whether it is organising *en masse* in their cities of residence to show solidarity with the popular uprising that started 17 October 2019, or rushing to vote in the general elections of May 2022, or taking action through the available instruments they can access and leverage to hold Lebanese authorities accountable for their deeds, this significant evolution should be monitored.

The members of the diaspora are also impacted by the developments in their home country. They live to the rhythm of Lebanon, especially when they are working on a project that depends on decisions made in the country. Mara's contribution to the Lebanese participation in PQ 2023 reflects that.

When financing goals were not being met, Mara organised a fundraising in her Prague studio, which represented additional work for her. While this may be a recurrent practice in cultural spaces, a curator would want production budgets met, for designers to only focus on the creative process.

With lack of funding, Charbel and I did not travel to Prague. Charbel asked for Mara's help to confirm the installation of the screen that showcased his scenographic act, to download the film, and to ensure that our entry in the Exhibition of Countries and Regions was playing seamlessly. Our physical presence would have alleviated her from these tasks, especially offering her curatorial, artistic, production, social, and personal support, in addition to acknowledging, appreciating, and celebrating her work. The Best Student Exhibition Award she received is a prize for both Lebanon

13 Including by Lebanese politicians filing more than 25 requests (to date) to dismiss the judges leading the investigation.

14 In December 2022, a US Court of Appeals determined that cases against Lebanese commercial banks can be tried outside Lebanon, paving the way for more cases by depositors seeking to unlock their frozen funds (REUTERS 2022). In February 2023, the Lebanese Court of Cassation overturned a 2022 appeal decision that was in favour of a Lebanese commercial bank against two of its depositors (HAGE BOUTROS 2023). Reported on 23 February 2023, in a first, London's High Court of Justice issued a verdict favouring Beirut port blast victims by holding chemical trading company Savaro Ltd. liable toward the victims of the 4 August 2020 Beirut port blast (L'ORIENT TODAY 2023). In December 2023, a French court ordered a Lebanese bank to pay \$2.8 million to a client residing in France, in the first-known international ruling against informal capital controls imposed by Lebanese banks since 2019 (AZHARI 2021). Other local prosecutions are ongoing in France, Germany, and the Netherlands regarding the death of diplomats in the explosion.



Fig. 11: PQ Awards, Mara Ingea receiving award for 'Best Student Exhibition'.
Photo: Jakub Hrab. Prague, 2023.

and herself (Fig. 11). As proud as I am that a young Lebanese student received this award, I wonder how many talented people like Mara await support, and how we impact change to better support each other. I have been in the shoes of Mara in the past editions of the Prague Quadrennial, and in other projects I worked on, and I remain sensitive to this question.

Puzzles triggers all of these conversations. It represents fears, dissolution, hope, aspirations, perseverance, defiance, construction, success, vision, and understanding. The success of this work also lies in the fact that *Puzzles* reflects the relationship of a student, of an emerging generation, of the Lebanese Diaspora with Lebanon. The Lebanese Student Exhibition is generous and kind, open-minded, and accessible. It does not feature one station, one element, one idea, one artist, or one design. It brings together, under one exhibition and in one space, a congregation of stations, elements, movements, texts, ideas, and noises, all gathered in the 25 m² allocated to Student Exhibitions. It is also an exploration, big enough for people to walk around and to discover from different sides. *Puzzles* also speaks to the potential each passer-by has, whether a citizen or a visitor. It is a reminder that no matter what we go through, we, Lebanese, have the possibility to inform, influence, take matters into our own hands, and engage with public affairs, which is a part of our civic responsibility. The Lebanese set these stations in motion, and so do the foreigners, which opens up the exhibition to the

conversation of political, foreign, and diplomatic interferences. The elements of the exhibition may be discordant, yet they coexist with each other; they may be independent, yet they affect each other; they may be static, yet mobile; they may be set in motion separately, yet set in motion together; each station shows change in its specified space (local impact), yet, seen together, they change the overall exhibition's space and look (national impact). It is a continuous change at the individual level (micro), and a continuous change at the collective, country level (macro). A celebration of particularities and specificities, and a reminder of our collective responsibility.

Curating the Future

Curators engage with theatre and performance practitioners and collectives, think of the artistic direction with the prospective designers, identify and select talent, fund-raise and coordinate efforts.

Expectations from curators in financial recession

Crises are taxing, and they inevitably reduce the mental space one can allocate to new projects and to their follow-up, unless the project shows profit and immediate return on investment. This is one of the reasons why arts and culture are heavily impacted by crises. They are considered less of a priority to sustain, compared to the sectors of health or education. They are therefore the first sectors to lose consideration.

At a time when countries are relentlessly trying to avoid their inevitable financial crises due to poor financial policies that sound the death knell for a period dubbed prosperous, the Lebanese crises are a premonition.

In a climate of financial recession, public and private partnership is key. Public institutions and the private sector, including cultural funds and private funders, must remain engaged and informed of all the steps of the project – even when they do not show interest. In the Lebanese case, and despite our best and ever adapting efforts, those in charge did not see the potential of participating in PQ.¹⁵ Some of them even considered that PQ would not return social investment, access, PR, and networking to benefit them and to benefit the structures they are in charge of. This is an incorrect premise, as every participating talent is an opportunity for collaborations with PQ participants from over the world, be they professional practitioners, students, academics, performance and theatre venues, as well as countries and regions at large.

Curators exhibit, host, and export

Numerous Lebanese contributions to PQ have been prominently highlighted, in Lebanon and overseas. The Lebanese entries to the PQ 2015 Tribes (an 'extreme' costume

15 In 2015 and 2019, the participation of Lebanon in PQ was endorsed by both the Lebanese Ministry of Tourism and the Czech Embassy to Lebanon. Other institutions such as the Lebanese Ministry of Culture, the Lebanese Embassy in the Czech Republic, some *mécènes*, and others, joined us either in 2015 or in 2019. In 2023, no private or public third-party teamed up with us.

live exhibition) were featured in publications for costume and performance, then invited to the *IMPACT International Performing Arts Festival* in Macedonia, to the Beirut Marathon, and to the *Beirut Street Festival*. Published papers in arts magazines and academic journals documented the participation of Lebanon in PQ 2015 and in PQ 2019, writing about the first participation of Lebanon, suggesting elements for growth, and offering abundant context and background to understand underlying reasons, motivations, and challenges. Additional media features in newspapers, on TV, and on social media, expanded the pool of resources to contribute knowledge and to benefit all of the Lebanese participation, the upcoming participating teams, and PQ editions.

Tactically, it is meaningful now, after several Lebanese participations, to showcase in Lebanon all of our entries to PQ, from exhibitions, to performances, talks, workshops, projects, and book presentations. The 2023 Best Student Exhibition Award to Lebanon is also an invitation to export these works and showcase Lebanese performance work to a wider audience. Similarly, inviting PQ participants to Lebanon is a great means for the audience in Lebanon to further engage with PQ productions, and to introduce PQ to a region that is still not very familiar with the Prague Quadrennial.

From Lebanon to the Arab World

Other than Lebanon, Egypt, and newly incoming Morocco and the United Arab Emirates, no other Arab country has participated in PQ yet. Arab countries play host to a flourishing domestic talent, beautiful, young, aspiring, exciting, fresh, traditional, and future-oriented. Encouraging this talent to capture the essence of their work with strong participation in the next PQ editions is our target endeavour. With the Lebanese commitment to PQ since 2011, our incessant efforts to deliver each edition, and our recent award, we encourage performance artists and creatives from Arab countries to participate in PQ 2027, either through dedicated exhibitions, or through a collective exhibition featuring photos, videos, models, installations, talks, performances, etc. This undertaking is part of Lebanon's contribution to the Prague Quadrennial, and to the Arabic World with respect to PQ. The old saying about Arabic books 'Cairo writes, Beirut prints, and Baghdad reads' speaks to the key role that Lebanon has historically played in the transmission of knowledge: through publishing, distribution, and diffusion, the country spearheaded the movement of translation, and was known as 'the printing press of the Middle East' (TADRUS 1982),¹⁶ before being at the forefront of Al-Nahda, the Arab renaissance. The timid Arab participation in PQ, and the absence of an Arab collective do not evidence lack of talent, but indicate lack of information, and encourage further connections to strongly reach countries and regions. This project will come to fruition in 2027 and will contribute to PQ beyond the 10-day period of the quadrennial.

Leveraging contributions to PQ, touring exhibitions, collaborating regionally, and bringing in new participating countries require curators equipped with a vision, cura-

16 The first printing press was established in 1610 at the Convent of Saint Anthony of Qozhaya in the Qadisha Valley, making its first publication, Qozhaya Psalter – the Bible's book of psalms, which was in both Syriac and Arabic, the first publication in the Middle East (TADRUS 1982).

tors who freely think, and who contribute to PQ with a solution-oriented perspective to benefit the international audience.

Internationalising versus cowering inward

Events are not called 'international' because their organisers and participants come from a variety of nations. Events are international when participants, from all over the world, actively connect with each other. We often see – in PQ and in other events, – members of the same delegation spend all their time together, as if they had to leave their country to meet each other. Most participants look at the other participants from afar, with indifference or – at best – with curiosity. Very few proactively reach out to the others, say 'hi' and talk. PQ and other platforms that bring together people from over the world are an opportunity to open oneself to the world, to experiment, to ask questions, to make mistakes, to learn new practices. They are also a means to show the world where you are from, to invite the world to where you are from, to take something from the world, and to give something back to the world. This enables many of us to look into our 'local' perspective through the 'global' frame, and often make peace with who we are, where we come from, and where we seem to be going. The international is a lens through which we see our local.

Nevertheless, and based on their exhibits and behaviour at PQ, most countries and regions remain closed to the rest of the world. They still erect walls around their exhibitions, and isolate themselves in black boxes, sending off a message of self-exile, withdrawal, and little interest in what happens outside their borders. The Exhibition (not Exhibitions) of Countries & Regions is intended as an open landscape that interconnects spaces around the world. Opening up to the world requires acknowledging that we are PART of the world, and not its centre. This humility also requires genuine interest in the other, curiosity, continuous learning, and engagement. This open approach does not dilute grounded historical particularities and local competences.

What are curators for?

The adoption of this mindset, to which I've been inviting exhibiting countries and regions for many years now, is the prerogative of curators. This brings us to the never-ending discussion on the role, duty, and commitment of curators, most of whom, bureaucratic curators, find themselves wearing the same curatorial hat at every PQ edition, with the increased wear-and-tear from previous years. Curators are the ones who identify and guide talent in their participation in PQ. Curators set the rhythm for their team's contribution, motivate them, talk to them about the world, and encourage them to reach out to other exhibitors. Alas, most curators I have engaged with are bored. PQ is a task they complete, one that it is a part of their scope of work, also one that others do not wish to stand up for. They often lack the energy and the excitement to engage with such diverse space, and limit themselves to administrative curatorial tasks, instead of looking at growth opportunities to benefit their artists, institutions, and countries. This subordinate employee mentality doesn't cultivate

generosity, farsightedness, and the desire to invest in new relationships. There is more to curation when in Prague than the succession of receptions – even when wine, cider, and nibbles are offered for free.

But could curators perform such tasks if they do not take ownership of themselves, if they do not give themselves free rein over the PQ process? What solutions – if any at all – can they think and create under the (low) ceiling of (State) institutions? What is there for them to solve, or even risk, when institutions chaperone them? And this begs a pressing question: are these curators, in their stereotypical approach, equipped to fend for unique and novel realities for artists in a world marred with precarity, uncertainty, and epochal change?

Curating the balancing act

The participation of most Countries and Regions in PQ happens under the auspices of Ministries, cultural institutes, some organisations affiliated to a Ministry, and other funding bodies. This institutional umbrella covers the curator(s) and the designer(s). In other countries – and Lebanon is not singular in this regard – the curator substitutes all of these structures. Going back to my country, multi-rolling is the norm, even though this laborious situation presents its limits, as individual energy is always limited, regardless of how intense it is. Joined, individual energies grow a stronger impact. This togetherness requires both sensitivity and perspicacity to coordinate energies and to gather compatible people in order to navigate conflicting energies, and to tend to individuals moved by the gnawing love for showing off: a condition of acute narcissism that puts the self before the project, that forgets that the priority goes to the project we lead on, and that thrives at the expense of the project. As we highlight the exhibition and appreciate the designs, the designer grows recognised. Despite all good faith and planning, energies and potentials sometimes clash, which is another reason why back-up plans are necessary to ensure that the exhibition sustains. This balancing act provides a clearer comprehension of backgrounds and profiles, and with time, improves personal appreciation. In a nutshell, curate with the same standards you would expect when hosting an invitation, curate with the same standards you would expect from public offices.

In a certain way, PQ boils down to us curators, and to the respect we show to the public work that we do. Our rigour is essential, in particular rigour of mind, rigour of finances, rigour of commitment. Keeping track of all our invoices and receipts, for example, demonstrates accountability for money, and helps us curators and event organisers better understand inflation and good deals, while identifying interesting service providers. This exercise also improves self-discipline, which limits corruption, embezzlement, and other sorts of misbehaviour. Sound self-discipline and keeping records neat and ready for impromptu check-in allow curators to keep team members accountable, so we all shape, grow, and elevate our skills, and build up a new generation of curators and team leaders.

Read again, there is much to learn from Lebanon.

Abbreviations used in the text

ECR: Exhibition of Countries and Regions

PQ: The Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space

PQLB: The Lebanese Participation in the Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space

SE: Student Exhibition

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