

## ‘The Spatial Void Could be a Chance to Recreate’: Queer Visual Activism in the Fallout of the Beirut Blast

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### ABSTRACT

On August 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020, Beirut was torn apart by a chemical explosion at its port. The blast was a consequence of dire government negligence – killing over 200 people, injuring a further 6,500, and causing massive destruction. Although the catastrophic effects of the blast were felt across the whole of Beirut, those areas most significantly affected – particularly the neighbourhoods of Mar Mikhael, Gemmayze and Geitawi – were among the most queer-friendly areas in Beirut, in which ‘queer bodies [could be] safely visible’ in the otherwise ‘hyper-(hetero)sexualized city’ (Aouad and Abed, 2021: 3). Intersecting with the realities of an economic crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic, the devastation of queer safe spaces as a result of the blast precipitated deep material and indeed existential losses across the diverse queer communities of Beirut. This article engages with the process of visual activism in the fallout of the Beirut blast, exploring specifically the affective and temporal dimensions of creation against the backdrop of spatial destruction. Analysing the work of three Lebanese visual practitioners from Beirut, I explore how they navigate the terrains of material loss, traumatic grief, reclamation, and resistance through their art and activism. I examine the evolution from immediate adaptation to humanitarian activism post-blast – quickly organised through the mobilisation of existing networks of artists and activists – to the grappling with grief and trauma through artistic outputs, and finally the ongoing work of reclamation and recreation within a particular spatial context. Analysing both loss and rebuilding, this article serves to foreground the voices, work, and strategies of queer and feminist visual activists as they reclaim space and reassert their presence amidst the trauma and material wreckage of the Beirut blast.

**Keywords:** Beirut, queer visual activism, Queer art, urban geography, queer theory

### INTRODUCTION

The day of the explosion and the following days coming down to the city and seeing it in rubble, personally it is a heartbreak I have never felt before in my life. It’s like you lost your home, you lost your identity, everything was taken away from you in the blink of an eye. And following that you are left to clean up the mess; you go down to protest what happened, and the government throws teargas and fires rubber bullets at you.

So, after the explosion we all sat down and said, ‘OK, I think we need to leave the country’. Because something broke that day.

But here we are nine months later, and we are all still here [...] This is our home [...] we are all a part of the city becoming what it is [...] So, yes it was one of my biggest heartbreaks, but I think we are at the point where we are ready to rebuild (Sandra Melhem, founder of Queer Relief Fund, and the queer clubs and safe spaces, 'Projekt' and 'Ego', taken from the Podcast 'Queer Beirut: A Sense of Belonging', Bergman, 2021).

This excerpt – taken from the Podcast 'Queer Beirut: A Sense of Belonging' (Bergman, 2021) – speaks volumes of the experiential context in which queer and feminist Lebanese artists, activists, and visual practitioners responded to and resisted the material and existential wreckage of the Beirut blast. On August 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020, as a result of the detonation of tonnes of ammonium nitrate stored at the port (unbeknown to Beirut's population), the biggest non-nuclear explosion in history devastated vast swathes of the city, killing, maiming and destroying homes and livelihoods, as well as traumatising those subjected to it. Grief, trauma and heartbreak reigned alongside dire material need as a compound of intersecting crises precipitated an expanding reality of precarity, confinement and loss across Lebanon.

As spaces in the city that had become known as 'queer friendly' were destroyed in the blast, diverse queer communities within Beirut variously grappled with the loss of homes and loved ones, and spaces of refuge and organising – sites in which 'we had once practiced the full spectrum of our existence and revolted against the status quo' (Aouad and Abed, 2021, Yasmine, in Art Collective<sup>1</sup> 2021). Asking how queer visual activists navigated this loss of queer safe spaces within their art and activism in the fallout of the blast, this article explores creation and reclamation against the backdrop of spatial destruction – the strategies, processes, and temporal evolution toward rebuilding in the face of such heartbreak. Highlighting the temporality of these responses, this article explores the responses of queer and marginalised artists and activists to the horror and trauma of the blast. Moving from immediate humanitarian – and indeed, prefigurative – action, to mourning and later rebuilding, these processes were dynamically shaped by the complex ways in which queer communities are situated spatially, socially and affectively in the city – before and after the blast.

Those whose work I analyse, namely Dayna<sup>2</sup>, Walid<sup>3</sup> and Ayesha<sup>4</sup> are artists and activists, variously associated with Art Collective – a Beirut-based cultural organisation that works on advancing women's and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and other non-conforming gender and sexual identities' (LGBTQ+) rights through cultural interventions and projects. Discussing both their individual work, and the work of Art Collective more broadly, I draw specifically upon the exhibition curated by Art Collective, post-blast, named 'Moulding the Lost Space', referring to the words of Yasmine, (Art Collective's Creative Director) as featured within this exhibition. I utilised an in-depth qualitative methodology for this, including two online interviews with Dayna and Ayesha, analysis of the digital exhibition 'Moulding the Lost Space' (with a particular focus on the work of Walid and Ayesha), and analyses of secondary and grey resources, most specifically a Podcast with Sandra – founder of Queer Relief Fund<sup>5</sup>, and queer clubs and safe spaces Projekt and Ego – and Andrei, a drag performer with whom Sandra regularly works. As such, the discussion below is based on select interviews, textual, visual and secondary data, all of which subsequently I coded according to themes and patterns that were generated.

In what follows I first contextualise the analysis through spatialising discourses and realities of queer existence within Beirut – from Orientalist discourses of 'Gayrut', to local geographies of sectarian power, sexual citizenship and political economy as they relate to the 'regulative norms' imposed upon diverse queer bodies across different spaces (Ahmed, 2014). Within this section, I also provide a brief overview of queer visual activism in Lebanon prior to the explosion, before then turning to the blast itself, focusing on what was lost for queer communities. The body of the article addresses the work of artists and activists post-blast, predominantly those affiliated with Art Collective, as well as the Queer Relief Fund. Following the temporal evolution of queer activism and art after the blast, I first explore the immediate adaptation to humanitarian activism underscored by both radical

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonym used for the safety and security of the staff and space of this organisation

<sup>2</sup> Lebanese cultural and social activist, feminist, playwright, performance poet, and the founder & executive director of the non-profit arts organisation, 'Art Collective', a feminist cultural organization in Beirut, Lebanon working at the intersection of art and activism.

<sup>3</sup> Lebanese photographer, creative director and copyeditor whose photographic practice was fuelled by the publication of 'Faraway. So close' by Cold Cuts Magazine, 'Nobody owns the Beach' at Sharjah Art Foundation, and 'Disembodied' in 'Molding the Lost Space', discussed below (see more and links in Walid's biography at Nehme, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> A multidisciplinary creative practitioner based between Beirut and London, who has worked in the fields of visual arts, and production, specifically video editing, content creation, and script writing. Most recently she wrote and directed a short film, "بنزين" (Benzine) or petrol in Arabic in 2020, approaching Lebanon's heated political and economic climate in a satirical manner, with her work more recently exploring fashion-films and theatre (see more and links at Starkey, 2022 on Behance).

<sup>5</sup> A group of activists in the Lebanese queer community aiming to provide relief for the marginalized victims of the Beirut explosion.

prefigurative politics and a politics of care. I then explore the return to art as a form of feeling, healing and expression, discussing finally Art Collective's ongoing work of material and immaterial rebuilding and reclamation.

## BEIRUT: A QUEER SAFE SPACE?

Safe space in itself in Beirut is an ever expanding and retracting concept (Dayna, interview, 04/04/22).

Orientalist tropes prevail in hegemonic conceptions of 'LGBT+ rights in the Middle East'. Becoming a potent means through which imperial power has been reiterated in recent years, 'queer safety' has been discursively mobilised in a process of false bifurcation between the (Middle) East and the West – 'as a [supposed] property of the West and a deficiency on the part of the rest (as well as the rest in the West)' (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Haritaworn et al., 2014: 11; Naber and Zaatari; 2014; Puar, 2011, 2013). Indeed, these teleological and racialised designations of modernism vs. non-modernism have formed the discursive backdrop of Western interventionism across the Southwest Asian/North African (SWANA) region. Within these imagined geographies, however, Beirut has been deemed an exception, as 'Gayrut', or 'a gay haven in an otherwise wholly homophobic Arab World' (Chamas, 2021: 3; Reid-Smith, 2012: 1). Through such frames, Beirut is therefore hailed for its 'cosmopolitanism' and 'exceptionalism' – rendering profitable the so-called 'rainbow economy' (Sioufi, 2013) – 'in a region presently marked by war, conflict, and political and religious violence' (Moussawi, 2018: 175).

Such simplistic and Orientalist designations of Beirut – frequently dubbed 'Paris of the Middle East' – occlude an array of intersecting power dynamics, complex realities, and diverse subjectivities, punctuated and shaped by class, race, gender, ethnicity, citizenship status (or lack thereof), state repression, and neoliberal capitalism (Merabet, 2014; Moussawi, 2013, 2015, 2018; Nagle, 2022). Narratives of so-called 'cosmopolitan exceptionalism' so frequently ascribed to Beirut neglect to engage 'the multiple positions that LGBT individuals occupy', and therefore obscure the intersecting socio-political realities that diverse queer communities navigate and resist within Beirut (Moussawi, 2020: 10). Although universally circumscribed by the legislative context in Lebanon, inclusive of Articles 534 and 521 of the Penal Code 1943 imposed under the 'French Mandate' (with the former prohibiting so called 'sexual intercourse against nature', and the latter criminalising gender expression through 'disguise as a woman'), queer individuals and communities in Beirut are by no means monolithic. Indicating the subjectivity in such 'morality laws' and the related dynamism of conceptions and the prosecution of 'sex against nature', scholars have noted that Article 534 of the penal code is most frequently used to 'target the working-classes, refugees, trans folk and the spaces they frequent' (Chamas, 2021: 4).

Dynamics of survival and suppression, precarity and power, inclusion and exclusion, therefore, overlap as much with the global geographies of imperialism, as with the local geographies of Beirut as a complex social milieu, marked as it is by 'plural and uneven modes of governance characterised by sectarian groups exercising control over space' (Nagle, 2022: 958). Contrasting with designations of Beirut as 'queer friendly', the logic and spatialisation of the city's post-war order are 'wrought through uneven processes of urban reconstruction and gentrification which construct some sexual lives as useful and deserving of protection while others are cast outside of the body politic' (Nagle, 2022: 957). As heteronormativity affects the surfaces of bodies, it thus affects too the surfaces of cities, especially in a context in which queer modes of being and loving are criminalised such as in Lebanon (Ahmed, 2014: 145). In this setting, writes Nagle (2022: 956-957), 'a dual Beirut has emerged within assemblages of sectarian power, sexual citizenship and political economy'; while 'gentrification has created a space of implicit tolerance for specific assemblages of sexuality, class and power' – specifically those deemed 'non-threatening to institutionalised homophobia' – this is simultaneously mirrored by the 'cleansing of spaces and forms of sexuality deemed to be transgressive'. As modes of coercion exercised by social norms interact with both neoliberal gentrification and mechanisms of state suppression, complex enclaves have emerged within the city that – to some extent – provide 'safe[r] havens' for communities fleeing from what Soja (2010: 31) has termed 'unjust geographies' defined by discrimination and homophobia (Nagle, 2022: 959).

Within this context, as Naima Morelli (2022: 1) writes in *Al-Monitor* – drawing on Sofian Merabet's monograph *Queer Beirut*: "Beirut artists are at the forefront of the gender and sexual identity conversation in the Middle East, telling different stories of queer cultures that at times are tolerated but often repressed". Joseph Kai, Lebanese queer graphic novelist, photographer and editor thus explains that within Beirut – where he considers himself 'part of the artistic, underground and queer community' – queer communities and the art scene often overlap. Upon moving to the capital and working at this intersection, he explained, "I was literally everywhere, I attended every performance, every exhibition, every talk, every discussion. I was spending a lot of time with other artists who wanted to tell our stories and think about a better place to live" (Kai in Morelli, 2022: n.p.). As diverse as the artists and activists themselves, these spaces, stories and conversations are multi-faceted, as they interact with the realities of living within a politically and economically fraught setting. As Mohamad Abdouni, a filmmaker, photographer

and the founder and editor-in-chief of *Cold Cuts* magazine<sup>6</sup> asserts, “Western media tends to place all these wonderful communities under one label, that of ‘An Arab Queer Community’. This is untruthful, because even in Lebanon, things are drastically different from one neighbourhood to another” (Abdouni cited in Morelli, 2022: n.p.). In founding *Cold Cuts* therefore, Abdouni joined with the diverse body of queer and marginalised artists in Beirut exploring queer cultures in the SWANA region, ‘record[ing] our histories and shar[ing] them under this umbrella, in one place’ (ibid). In discussing these creative places and physical spaces within Beirut, Andrei, a drag performer speaking in the podcast ‘Queer Beirut’ (Bergman, 2021), explained:

You have to be very specific about where you choose to walk or where you choose to go as an LGBTQ person – especially if you are very out or very flamboyant – so Mar Mikhael, Gemmayze and Achrafieh were usually the areas where artists united, and also queer spaces [...] so it gave the LGBTQ community a sense of belonging.

Andrei continued to explain that in these spaces, ‘you start to come together, and seek refuge, and these were the places that really people found refuge in’. Bearing in mind the intersections across LGBTQ+ communities within Beirut, the complexities of these spaces must not be erased, as gender normativity, class dynamics, race and nationality continue to shape and delimit access (Moussawi, 2018). Yet, where the public display of queer intimacy is criminalised, the process of rendering oneself visible, and laying claim to spaces within an otherwise hyper-heterosexualised city are in and of themselves acts of resistance. However, there are many ways and modes of challenging these forms of violence without expressly rendering oneself ‘visible’ with ‘pride’ and ‘coming out’. Whilst these processes are frequently reified as beacons of LGBTQ+ liberation within particular discourses and movements, these idealisations do not necessarily translate across different contexts, such as Lebanon, in which Dayna described ‘coming out’ as a ‘labyrinth’ (see also Chaer, 2020). Speaking of their film *Courage*, they told me:

Basically, there is a kind of Global North concept, that ‘you are not a proud queer if you are not out’ – this is very much based on cultural difference. We perceive that, both coming out and staying in the closet – however you want to say it – [...] is an act of courage in itself.

In this setting, queer visual activism does not always *have* to be visible to be a radical platform for resistance and reclamation. Indeed, it could be that what is largely invisible – the love, the care, the connections and the community networks needed to sustain and support the courage to be one’s entirety – that render queer and feminist artistic communities in Beirut at the vanguard of anti-normative resistance, adding fuel to the fire needed for queer world-making in a society that militates against ‘the Other’. Safety then may not be found in being *seen* by all of society (as it is currently assembled – indeed this may render someone unsafe), but rather being fully seen and held within a community. Beyond a physical space, this *community* can then function as a form of refuge – even if the former is lost. As Ayesha described to me, a safe space is:

... like a very safe cave ... made of rocks. When the blast happened all these rocks fell down and a bunch of people had to come in and take out rocks – but there is still the cave...It still shelters you [...] but it just shelters you differently, because of the lack of rocks ... because of the lack of physical structure ... but the same amount of love and care for the community is still there.

To Ayesha, what truly represents ‘shelter’ is not a material place, but rather the ‘love and care’ made manifest in the way the immaterial spaces are held and incubated. In this way then, the affective dimensions and possibilities of ‘safe space’ are to be found within the artistic and activist community themselves, rather than the locations in which they meet. That said, expanding and contesting the ‘regulative norms’ variably imposed upon queer bodies across different spaces, physical sites, therefore, become more than spaces of refuge, but also the locations from which queer activists and artists could mobilize against diverse processes of violence and exclusion (Ahmed, 2014) – deconstructing and constructing new meanings, and forging counter-publics founded on a radical and intersectional politics (Nagle, 2022).

## THE BEIRUT BLAST

The destruction of the city included the loss of scarce safe spaces and cultural institutions, where we had once practised the full spectrum of our existence and revolted against the status quo, only to witness their ruination birth new forms of loss (Yasmine, Art Collective’s Creative Director, in ‘Moulding the Lost Space’).

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<sup>6</sup> A visual platform and photo-journal which explores queer cultures and the SWANA region.

In an already precarious context, the Beirut Blast constituted one of the biggest non-nuclear explosions in known history, said to have been the equivalent of 200-300 tonnes of high explosives erupting in downtown Beirut. Beirut's residents had been sleeping, eating and walking past a ticking bomb every day with tonnes of ammonium nitrate (a highly combustible chemical compound) stored in a hangar in Beirut's port since 2014, having allegedly entered as cargo. Ravaging vast swathes of Beirut in seconds, and rattling windows as far away as Cyprus, the blast pulverised the port, killed 218 people, wounded over 7,000, and displaced over 300,000 in seconds – while ammonia gas and nitrogen oxides were released into both eco- and respiratory systems (El Hajj, 2021).

In a context in which 'violence perpetuates across and threads through generations to form one continuous narrative that pervades (and purloins) Lebanese lives and livelihoods', El Hajj (2021: 8-10) quotes Lina Mounzer (2020) who writes that, in Lebanon, 'an explosion resonates across time, that the shock reverberates forward into your life, and the pressure reconfigures the landscape of the mind'. As bodies, minds, and being were hence instantly affected – indeed, transformed – by the trauma of the blast, 'bodies [thus] automatically revert[ed] to phantom geography, to war mode' as 'traumatic peculiarities' are passed from one generation to another (El Hajj, 2021: 10). Indeed, it was the learned adrenal reaction to former explosions that saved the lives of many of the staff of Art Collective, who had gathered on August 4<sup>th</sup> in their offices to work on the film *Courage*. Dayna told me:

I was in the office with the creative director, and our filmmaker [... and] if it wasn't for the creative director screaming and running out first after the first kind of shock in the ground – because we felt it – and then about 3-5 seconds later the blast went off. So, it was actually her scream that saved all of us [...] But that is not a positive thing – the only reason she was able to identify it so quickly was that she has been through 8 different explosions throughout Lebanon [...].

Similarly, Ayesha was at a friend's home and recalled watching the:

... window cracks first [...] And then the whole wall. The books. The door. Everything became jello. As if you put a filter that just went wavy. [...] I grabbed my partner and brought him to the floor because that's what you usually do in an earthquake, cover our heads in case something fell.

In just these two accounts, the affective dimensions of past explosions – and the way they show up in behaviour and body through learned response to violence – are clear, as is the trauma of the blast itself as it violently ruptured everyday lives and everyday activities across the city. Immediately afterward, Ayesha told me, phone lines were flooded, with people desperately calling family and friends. In the days that followed, the true devastation of the blast became clear, as the government suppressed protests amidst the rubble with teargas and rubber bullets (Melham in Bergman, 2021).

For Beirut's queer communities, amid the intersecting realities of the pandemic, the economic crisis and the blast, their loss was material, spatial and existential. Particularly in queer safe[r] spaces, entire neighbourhoods where queer people had found community, livelihoods, refuge, and artistic and intimate expression had been completely destroyed. As Aouad and Abed (2021: 3) write, such 'areas allowed queer bodies to be safely visible and offered an alternative space to develop non-heteronormative discourses and to gather, organise, and resist against all forms of oppressions they face'. In these places, employment could be found in a context in which a visibly queer individual may be spurned; bodies could be adorned and carried in a diversity of ways regardless of the regulative norms that otherwise restrict them, and queer intimacy – platonic or romantic – could be more safely expressed. Many had to return to domestic arrangements with families that did not accept their entirety, while jobs were lost, and homes were decimated. Discussing a survey undertaken with 101 LGBTQ+ individuals in Beirut, Aouad and Abed (2021) state that housing-related issues were ranked as the most challenging post-blast, with many queer individuals left without a permanent living space, and the ability to access community spaces and support systems ranked the second biggest challenge. Heightened militarisation, the loss of livelihoods and worsening mental health was also cited by many within the survey, with 70% reporting that they had lost their job within the last year, and 75% reporting that the three-layered crisis had had significant negative impact on their mental health. At the time of writing therefore, Aouad and Abed (2021: 3) noted that 'the potential loss of these spaces [...] could have an especially damaging impact on queer individuals given the scarcity of similar inclusive and safe spaces elsewhere'. Despite these material realities, existing networks of queer, feminist and artistic activists quickly mobilised, first reacting and then responding to the losses precipitated by the blast.

## THE IMMEDIATE FALLOUT: VISIBLE HUMANITARIAN-ACTIVISM

In moments such as that [the blast], it is a test of character; you either hit the ground, or you hit the laptop ... and we hit the streets (Dayna, interview 04/04/22).

Even with homes and spaces destroyed, rents were paid, electricity bills were collected, even despair in and of itself became too expensive a commodity to own alone (Yasmine, in 'Moulding the Lost Space' Exhibition).

In the days following the blast – amidst the trauma and the rubble – many queer activists and artists organised, taking to the streets, opening the doors of their homes and offices, and responding to the urgent need for rapid response humanitarian action in the absence of such provisions from the state. In this context of acute material need, artistic and cultural forms of visual activism were rendered impossible, giving way to more humanitarian forms of practical solidarity activism. 'For the time being', writes Sleimann El Hajj (2021: 16) on August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2020, 'the pain is more immediate and pressing, more physical than cultural. Fractured skulls versus charred books.' As the most basic of needs and rights were stripped away by the blast, 'normal' order and activities were suspended, and so emerged networked humanitarian activism among queer artists and activists.

Predominantly a cultural collective specifically focussed on women's and LGBTQ+ rights and representation, Art Collective quickly adapted into one of humanitarian aid – as Dayna explained, 'we believe in rebuilding and restructuring on the basis of the needs of the community we aim to serve – it is really not about what we want, it is about what they need, [...] even if we are not a service provision organisation, we don't have to be to care'. Pouring 'our tools and skills as artists [...] into our work and advocacy', stated Dayna, Art Collective collaborated with others through the previously established solidarity project Yalla Care – conceived in May 2020 to create a network of support and service provision amongst queer and other marginalised communities at the height of the pandemic (see Khoury and Traboulsi, 2021). Eight organisations, including Art Collective and the Queer Relief Fund, created a referral system and assessed 310 LGBTQ+ individuals affected by the blast, responding to the urgency of the needs that arose.

Art Collective, meanwhile, turned their offices into a shelter, hosting eight LGBTQ+ individuals and two migrant workers who had lost their homes and livelihoods – the latter whom they supported upon their desired return to Ghana. For some of the former, homes were renovated, 'but if they were very triggered [going] back to their old apartment, we just made sure that we got them a new place, a new home, new furniture, and enough money to get themselves back on their feet' (Dayna). For the rest of the community, they explained, 'we paid six months in advance for their rent – I think it was 243 people [...] to give them] six months to just chill, take care of yourselves, your mental health'. This money was raised through mobilising 'artists and groups and people all over the world', with every dollar raised going directly to the community with the 'intent also to create an understanding of – both the redistribution of wealth [...] – but also [...] how we function in a feminist economy', said Dayna.

In these ways, practical solidarity became entangled with the ongoing process of 'alternative world-building' with which Art Collective was already engaged through their cultural work. Even in the immediacy of need, 'prefigurative politics' reigned as Art Collective operated in service of the just, inclusive and redistributive community they seek to foster (Reda and Proudfoot, 2021: 1496). As such, as a form of activist-humanitarianism, the provision of material support for marginalised and queer communities was imbued 'with much broader transformative political significance' than 'classical humanitarianism' – which 'places more stress on guiding principles of neutrality, universality and apolitical immediate relief' (ibid). This proved also to be a coping mechanism for Art Collective staff who too were traumatised by the blast, shattering the physical space in which they had grown and nurtured the community. As Dayna said, "I am one of those people that copes by helping – when I feel like things are desperate, I open a safe space. [...] most of our projects are always stemming from feelings." Thus, both politics and emotion underscored Art Collective's shift to humanitarian-activism at a time when 'despair [...] itself became too expensive a commodity to own alone' (Yasmine, in 'Moulding the Lost Space' exhibition).

Similarly, Sandra shifted energies into founding Queer Relief Fund (QRF) to respond to the dire need among the queer community post-blast, starting by cleaning streets, homes and rubble, joining protests and eventually starting a Gofundme campaign for the provision of diverse forms of material support. As for Art Collective, this too had an affective and prefigurative political dimension – allowing Sandra to process heartbreak:

When you see something negative being channelled and turned into something positive – I think that on its own is something that can give you peace and that peace will help you process. [...] you can't just be passive and fall down when something happens you have to get back up, and you have to lift as many people as you can back up with you – so that is how I function personally (Bergman, 2021).

Humanitarian-activism also generated a greater sense of unity and visibility within and beyond the queer community and their shattered safe spaces. Sandra explained:

... after we started the initiative to help people affected by the blast – you really saw a sense of unity [...] Really there was sense of community – as well as the international queer community – that was not there before (Bergman, 2021).

Moreover, Sandra, asserted that the heightened visibility of queer people participating in practical solidarity activism served, in the first instance, to generate greater societal acceptance of non-normative gender and sexual identities, and be welcomed in spaces in which they previously were not:

After the explosion, especially when we were helping people on the ground, and we were able to walk around looking the way we do, into areas that we would not have thought we could ever walk into – looking very queer or flamboyant – without hearing some bullying or anti-queer words – we were actually able to go and be welcomed.

It was like OK, you people are coming to help, there is no differentiation, there is this catastrophic tragedy at hand – like you can't come and say, 'I am not going to accept help, aid or support or someone to talk to just because of what they look like or what they believe in' (Bergman, 2021).

Amid the state of exception that was the devastation of the blast, queer communities engaged in activist-humanitarianism were – according to Sandra – to some extent accepted by the broader Beirut population, despite normatively denigrated gendered performances and presentations. As such, material solidarity became in and of itself a form of visual activism, rendering queer bodies visible in spaces in which they previously could not be. Once again, prefigurative politics came about through the immediate shift to humanitarianism – a glimpse into a world where individuals have the right to visibly be who they are and be (albeit momentarily) welcomed across spatial divides and entangled power hierarchies.

## **'MOULDING THE LOST SPACE': A DIGITAL EXHIBITION**

But the matter of fact is that, even within this context, there remains a need to express, to try and articulate our state of mind, especially with the looming fear of it becoming futile (Yasmine, Art Collective's Creative Director, in 'Moulding the Lost Space' Exhibition).

As the urgency of material need became at least relatively less acute, after 'more than a year' explained Ayeesha, 'people started coming up with films [...] there's the exhibition with Art Collective [...] it's a whole aspect of trying to heal from trauma through visual arts and activism [...] I guess it just needed time'. With time then, Art Collective 'returned to culture in the midst of 2021', said Dayna, pouring feelings into projects, trying to 'find some kind of understanding or closure through the work – the cultural project itself'.

One outcome of return to artistic work was the digital exhibition 'Moulding the Lost Space' which 'asked marginalised artists in Beirut to reflect on the after-effects of the lockdown and the Blast on our spatial surroundings, on the boundaries of physical space and its impact on identity' (Art Collective 2021). The exhibition serves as an intimate exploration of the artists' inner worlds of trauma, grief and mourning of what was lost in the blast and the pandemic. As participating artist Ayeesha explains, 'this is the first piece of art I have created that began with the question of how I felt. I've never been asked that before when creating something'. Art Collective's Creative Director, Yasmin, writes, the exhibition is an 'attempt to deconstruct collective loss and present it as the binding of individual anguish, reflections, and expression, in hopes of archiving the individual experience in times of cataclysm and disarray' (Art Collective, 2021). Along with Yasmin, seven visual artists contributed to the exhibition, and next I analyse the work of two of these.

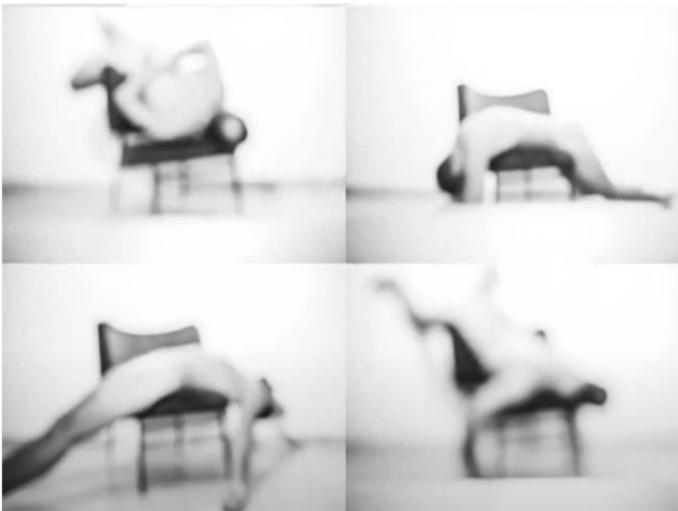
## **THE CONSOLATION/DISEMBODIED (WALID NEHME)**

In 'Moulding the Lost Space', Walid's self-portraits are presented under the title 'The Consolation', as an ongoing personal project that evolved amidst the 2019 revolution, successive lockdowns and the blast. Walid writes:

During these events [...] every time I tried to pick up my camera to document my surroundings, I was faced by a crippling feeling. I was no longer able to connect with the city I knew, the spaces that used to define my every day, nor was I able to practice or experience queer art in its broader form. Suddenly, I felt that I lost everything, and so this self-portrait project started as a means of refuge, both internally and externally.



**Figure 1.** The Consolation/Disembodied (Walid Nehme)



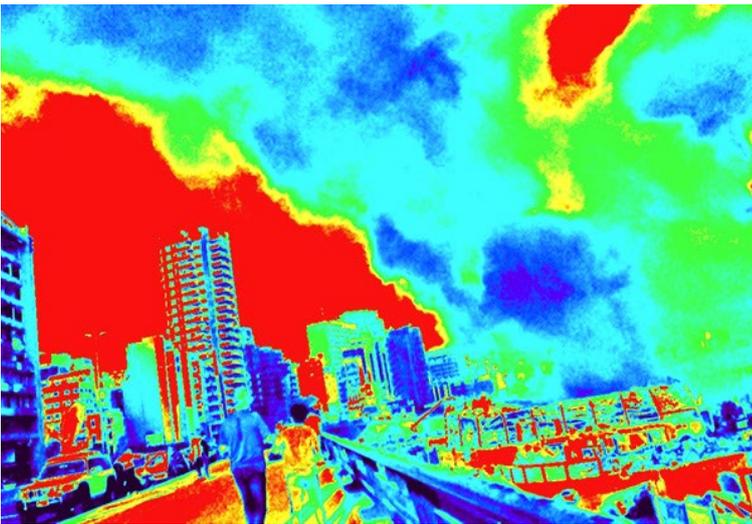
**Figure 2.** The Consolation/Disembodied (Walid Nehme)

In a context of turbulent transformation then, material spaces in the city as Walid had known and experienced them were lost, and with this came a disconnection to self and embodied being (as he writes in a later iteration of the work, *Disembodied*, discussed below). As the process of documenting external landscapes was blocked by ‘a crippling feeling’, he thus turned to the documentation of his internal landscape as a means of refuge (Figure 1).

A common theme in these series of self-portraits is the chair that Walid sits upon – a chair which he writes represents his ‘unrequited love for objects’ which act then as ‘guardians of his solitude’. As he searched for ‘consolation’, he suggests that this could be found in objects ‘incapable of transformation and therefore soothing in their neutrality’. Representing ‘an idea of perfect internality’, the chaos of the external could then be safely internally navigated. As Walid felt he ‘lost everything’, what remained was his self, his body, and the chair that held him. In a context in which El Hajj (2021: 19) notes the population’s ‘inability to verbalise or neutralise pain due to its sheer abundance and continuity’, Walid’s self-portraits communicate a contrasting sense of neutrality – in the enduring presence of the non-sentient (the chair) – and visualisation of loss in his body stripped bare (Figure 2).



**Figure 3.** Neon Lit Skies – Fire at the Port – Original/without filter (Ayeesha Starkey)



**Figure 4.** Neon Lit Skies – Fire at the Port (Ayeesha Starkey)

In a later iteration of these evocative self-portraits – shown on Walid’s website (Nehme, 2021) – the description of the images shifts as he further reflected on the events, and the process of creation amidst them. He told me via email that, while the context remains the same, ‘after some reflection, I changed the narrative a bit and saw a different meaning’ – indicating that even when ‘the product’ – the images themselves – have been created and exhibited, the process of creation, reflection and evolution continues. The image of the chair, however, as the non-sentient permanent to which his body is visibly surrendered remains. However, while his earlier iteration focussed more on the consolation provided by the chair that held his body, his later work focussed on the body itself that ‘during the first moments of the explosion, [...] went into a state of oblivion, even without any physical harm – protecting itself from the shock of that larger-than-life sound.’ In an intensive assault on the senses then, Walid writes that he ‘first became conscious of the existence of my body [...] at the same moment that I realised I lost a sense and ownership of it’. With the blurring in the images perhaps connected to this sense of lost bodily coherence, this project, he writes, thus played an important role in his attempt to ‘reclaim my body and prove its presence in the city that lost its space’. In this way, for Walid, even as all was stripped away in exteriority, his body – that which he had simultaneously gained and lost connection with – was held by some vestige of certainty, represented here by the chair – ‘soothing’ in its ‘neutrality’, performatively laying claim to solidity amidst collective turmoil and turbulence.

### **NEON LIT SKIES - FIRE AT THE PORT (AYEESHA STARKEY)**

A month after the blast, there was a fire at Beirut’s port. Ayeesha Starkey’s photographic interpretation of this event – entitled ‘Neon Lit Skies - Fire at the Port’ – also featured in ‘Moulding the Lost Space’ (Figure 3, Figure 4, Figure 5, and Figure 6).

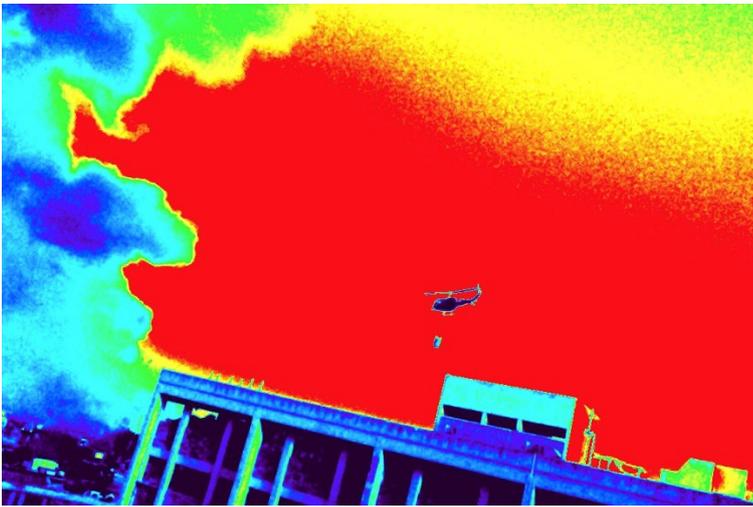


Figure 5. Neon Lit Skies – Fire at the Port (Ayeesha Starkey)



Figure 6. Neon Lit Skies – Fire at the Port (Ayeesha Starkey)

She told me that as black smoke rose, her family and friends called and texted to ensure that she was safe from her workplace in downtown Beirut. Waiting until the fire had calmed, she walked to the port to photograph the fire. Ten minutes after her arrival her phone ran out of battery, and she resorted to her laptop to take photos. ‘What I was seeing in front of me was so big and colossal ... there was this huge black cloud [...] people say, ‘you carry your own weather’ but I couldn’t, it was above me, I was coughing.’ Along with the low-quality camera on her laptop, the heavy, grey of the ash cloud – rendering Lebanon’s usually ‘gorgeous sky [...] murky, barely blue’ – frustrated her, and so she switched to an infrared, thermal effect. As a result, she writes:

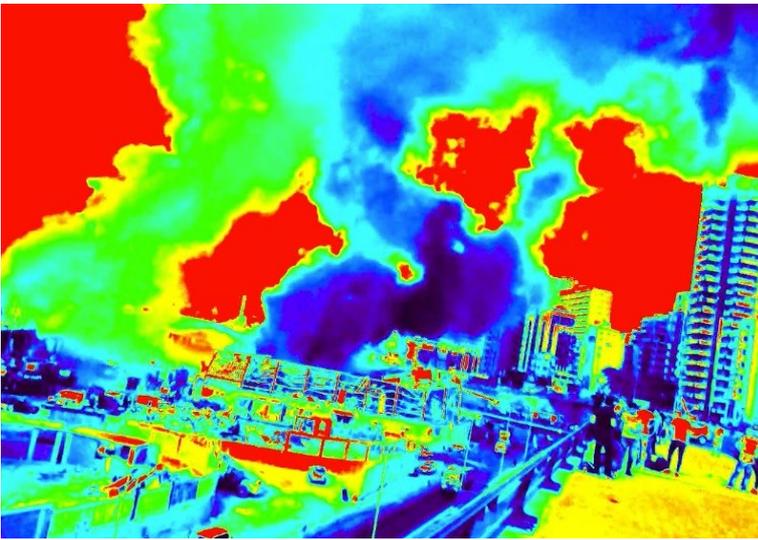
The dark cloud of ash filling the sky turned into neon colours that made the scene somewhat more bearable. A crimson red sky bothered by miscellaneous yellow, and green smoke with seeping hints of turquoise.

She continues:

The temperatures of the bodies present in the photo collided with the surrounding objects and buildings, separating them from the intruder in the image, the port and the smoke, or the grain silos, that the lens deemed a different alien element.

With the fire at the port then presented as ‘intruder’ and ‘alien’, Ayeesha could not see the darkness of the ash cloud, rendering a ‘disconnect’ between what was happening and what she was capturing via photograph (Figure 7). This, she explained to me, ‘created a barrier’ enabling her to stay and document the fire as one of the very few people present. She told me:

When I turned it to neon ... It automatically gave me distance ... If I was to pinpoint a word, it would be very much dissonance ...



**Figure 7.** Neon Lit Skies – Fire at the Port (Ayeesha Starkey)

She writes that this rendered the triggering context:

... less emotional, less personal to me, [... helping] me distance myself from the trauma that is so interconnected with the realistic images of the port blast that are being circulated in the media.

In the exhibition, Ayeesha states that: “I’m livid that I can’t grow in a space that’s moulding over me instead of around me. Because I am exhausted, I have become more solemn than angry”. The greyness then, of the ash-filled sky, the solemnity and the weight of heavy exhaustion, which was so ‘alien’ for Ayeesha to both witness and carry, is cleansed from the images, which, in their boldness fall in line with her normative approach to activism, reflected in her comment that ‘when it comes to pointing out when something is wrong, I am very loud’. The wrongness then of ‘the consequences of unforgivable neglect’ that led to the blast, and for ‘our tactical surroundings to no longer exist’ is loudly and boldly proclaimed in the images.

Ayeesha writes as caption to the images, ‘physical spaces remind us of emotional spaces that we now need to carry, without support, without infrastructure, and without an end in sight’. She continues; trauma becomes ‘an intrusive act that has taken physical and emotional space’ and punctuates ‘the fond experiences’ that come too with memories of the then-destroyed spaces. Space is presented then, in Ayeesha’s words, ‘as purgatory in neon’. Conversely to the above, in which Ayeesha describes a felt sense of distance as provided by the filter in the act of taking the photos, the product itself meanwhile evokes a sense of proximity, as a landscape that is felt through the visualisation of temperature. The heat of the fire and the bodies before it is bold and red, and the hot fire of searing loss and grief is palpable as space is visibly destroyed in the images. Anger too is red and hot in the photos, yet Ayeesha explained to me how this energy shifted over time. I asked her how she now felt looking at the images over 18 months since she took them, querying if she still felt a sense of both purgatory and dissonance. She said:

Not as strongly. Now [...] I feel pride [...] I’m glad this was documented. Whether it was me or someone else. But I’m glad this is how it was documented [...] I’m not as angry. Because I understand how to help. More. How to do my part or, in other words [...] If I want to help, I need to help in my own artistic way. This may be one of them.

I am still exhausted. But I’m much more hopeful [...] I don’t have hate anymore. I have hope.

For Ayeesha, then, the process of capturing and expressing the bold, loud rage of loss appeared to be healing, eliciting pride in her artistic skills, and her related ability to document the realities that were exploding around her and her community at that time.

Both Walid’s ‘Consolation/Disembodied’ and Ayeesha’s ‘Neon Lit Skies - Fire at the Port’ powerfully communicate the deep and dynamic affective realities of the blast, as it visibly affected both the surface of bodies and the surface of the city. With both works communicating the dualities of withdrawal and attachment, distance and proximity, exteriority and interiority, permanence and impermanence, the changing responses of the artists to the unchanging form of the images illustrate the dynamism of loss and mourning in the visual storytelling of devastation. Also illustrative of the dualism inherent to the individual and collective response to the catastrophe, alongside loss and lament, came reconstruction and reclamation.

## **‘A CHANCE TO RECREATE’: REBUILDING AND RECLAMATION**

Yet, there seems to be agency found in the idea of loss and deconstruction, the spatial void could be a chance to recreate, reform, and rebuild material and immaterial spaces (Yasmine, 2021, Art Collective’s creative director in ‘Moulding the Lost Space’).

As humanitarian-activism evolved into artistic mourning of what was lost, activists and artists in the city soon began to ‘rebuild and bring back some of what was destroyed’, stated Sandra (in Bergman, 2021), continuing; ‘hopefully it will now be better than before’. With lands, bodies and psyches scarred, the Art Collective team questioned ‘how can we create a sustainable impact for the community?’, Dayna told me, stating that the answer was ‘to create something that we know is missing’ – ‘a community centre’, that was bigger, better, and more dynamic than that which had been damaged in the blast, then turned shelter, and back to office space, triggering and re-traumatising the staff and broader community. Now, Dayna told me, ‘There is an average of 40 persons in the space every single day. We incubate three organisations that are grassroots collectives from Beirut.’ Although Art Collective remains a cultural centre rather than a service provider, they continued:

It is incredible. It’s a ‘bring-to-tears-everyday’ sort of situation – [...] The community centre is there for artists and activists of all ages to come in and work. We host activities and workshops, we believe that if they have a central place to organise to come together, then the movement will not only just mobilise in and of themselves but also that they can expand their understanding of other movements. So that is why the space in and of itself aims to be an intersectional platform for the exchange of tools, ideas, knowledge and of course collaboration.

Once again, the space then, is more than just a physical site; it’s a dynamic space of safety *and* growth, internal *and* external movement building, individual *and* collaborative work. Initially manifest through immediate humanitarian work, love and care for the communities Art Collective works with materialised into the recreation of what Ayesha referred to as ‘the cave’ – ‘incubat[ing]’ artists, activists, women and LGBTQ+ people to create, heal and collaborate.

Bound with this hope is a vision to reclaim not only ‘the present’ through the creation of this cultural centre, but also the past and future. Included within Art Collective’s two-five-year strategies are both the publication of a historical book ‘also as a response to the Beirut Blast’, said Dayna, that will serve as a queer counter archive of queer art from the region, as well as creating future ‘bridges between the queer artists that have remained in the SWANA region and the queer artists that have emigrated’. With the plan to launch, release and disseminate the book at the start of 2023 – to disperse history as much as possible’ – Art Collective is also discussing the possibility of beginning a process of future ‘repatriation’ of queer and marginalised art and artists (Dayna). As a result of successive crises, Dayna told me that many queer artists have simply had to leave to make a living, and to find a way to continue creating, and to ‘exhibit their art’. Dayna quoted Yasmin, Art Collective’s creative director, who states that the plan is to ‘repatriate queer artists one exhibition at a time’, yet also asserted that this can only be an idea and possibility at this point given the ever-changing nature of Lebanon’s cultural, socio-political and economic landscape.

Both plans, the queer counter archives, and the possible conscious repatriation of queer art, are thus ‘about reclaiming the artistic practice of queer artists within the SWANA region, *and* then it is about reclaiming the art itself as part of our narrative and history’ and ‘basically to bring them [artists] home’. This is bound then with the rebuilding – better and ‘stronger’ – of the Art Collective community and space following both the material and immaterial devastation of the blast and overlapping crises. ‘Bringing them back’ explained Dayna:

... is also to make sure that when they do return that there is their safe space, that not too much of Lebanon has veered away from what they know, and that they know that there is still a space that holds them, in their entirety, when they do return.

Loss then, writes Yasmine in ‘Moulding the Lost Space’, ‘was only the beginning’, as processes of reclaiming, recreating and rebuilding now fill the ‘spatial void’ left by the blast with hope.

## **CONCLUSION**

This article has documented the responses of Lebanese visual activists to the Beirut Blast, examining how they grappled with the resultant loss, trauma and material devastation in their art and activism, and the processes of care involved in re-worlding and reconstructing community in the aftermath of catastrophe. Focusing predominantly on the work of Art Collective as well as the Queer Relief Fund, this empirical analysis has revealed

both the affective and temporal dimensions of these dualistic responses – bound with both turbulent emotional landscapes (evident in both Consolation/Disembodied and Fire at the Port) and solid prefigurative politics – as artists quickly adapted into humanitarian-activists, created cultural outlets for the visual navigation of intimate internal worlds amid external turmoil, and later, recreation and reclamation. Through work of public activism, followed by visual mourning and later rebuilding, queer artists and activists – even in the violence, repression and exceptionality of the blast – could variably lay claim to both visual and physical spaces in the uneven geographies of Beirut, after what was formerly considered a ‘safe space’ was lost in seconds.

The significance of this extends beyond Beirut in a context of imperial politics which designate either the ‘Arab world’ (singular) as inherently and wholly hostile to LGBTQ+ individuals or communities – and who thus allegedly need ‘saving’ by the West – or Beirut as a ‘gay haven’ – imagined as a paradise and playground for those with otherwise marginalised gender and sexual identities. These Orientalist tropes and imperial imaginaries are debunked in analysis of the grassroots community support – indeed, love and care – imbricated in the networked yet organic, response to the devastation of the blast. This immediate response also served to transcend the normative boundaries of exclusion and inclusion; as queer communities lost their spatial refuge, they were meanwhile temporarily welcomed in new ways in other spaces under conditions of acute humanitarian need, and ‘able to walk around looking the way we do, into areas that we would not have thought we could ever walk into’ (Sandra). With such boundaries blurred, the focus was clearing rubble to recover the bodies and spaces destroyed by the explosion, while agency was expressed in humanitarian action, public protest, and later mourning over what was lost. The shifting of such spatial boundaries, however, was temporally bound, entangled with the affective dimensions of acute crisis. New spatial refuges thus needed rebuilding, fragmented piece by fragmented piece *by those who loved and loved in them*.

As Yekani, Kilian, and Michaelis (2016: xxii) write, ‘from the outset queer has been active, connected to the wish to act’, centred not only on identity, but also addressing broader interconnected issues. It is unsurprising then that queer artists organised following the blast to address the wide spectrum of emotional and physical losses that queer communities within Beirut faced, mobilising existing networks, tools and skills to document the horror of what was unfolding, and respond, adapt and rebuild in the face of it. As Dayna explained to me, ‘our creative director Yasmin says we need to stop viewing art as a means of expression but seeing it as a tool for change’. In this context, when change was violently imposed as a result of the explosion, art and artistic networks enabled visual activists to variably navigate that change, imbuing this process with the love and care needed to recreate truly safe spaces.

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