

## The Right to Shelter

### Helene Kazan in conversation with Amal Khalaf

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Amal Khalaf

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Helene Kazan, *Engineering Shelter*, 2015. Video still, moment of impact.  
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What trace does a predicted episode of violence leave? And what effects do these traces have on the present? Discussing recent works, including *Engineering Shelter* (2015) and *Masking Tape Intervention: Lebanon 1989* (2011), Helene Kazan explains her use of rehearsal and re-enactment in her research on the domestic space.

Through articulating her central themes of risk and its spatial and temporal manifestations, Kazan describes the increasingly phenomenological presentations of her research, rooted in her very personal relationship to the themes. Through her experimental performances, Kazan investigates perceptions of risk and how they alter the dynamics between past, present and future.

**Amal Khalaf:** I'd like to start by talking about *Engineering Shelter* (2015), a performance that you developed at Fort Brockhurst in Portsmouth as part of the *Space Interrupted* exhibition in 2015. Could you talk about how this work came to be and what it was like creating the live performance?

**Helene Kazan:** The project began when I found images of an experiment that had been carried out on the Morrison shelter, a table-like bomb shelter used in people's homes in the UK during World War II. At the time I discovered the 'before' and 'after' images of the experiment when looking for depictions of the home during the war. I was interested in this period because, through the widespread use of aerial bombing, it was the first time the home entered the battleground. As a result, the image of the domestic space started to be re-appropriated by the state in relation to notions of home security. The archive images had been used in a public announcement recommending the use of the Morrison shelter, declaring it as a safe way to protect yourself and your family during air raids. The images describe the table shelter as having a three millimetre steel sheet on top and wire mesh around the sides. In the 'before' image there is a couple sleeping comfortably inside the shelter, within a tranquil domestic setting. The 'after' image explains that two experiments were carried out on the shelter during testing, first a 350 pound concrete block was dropped from six foot above, then in a second experiment an 800-pound concrete block was swung at an angle onto the table. The 'after' image shows that following the two experiments the table suffered no real damage, proving that it would be safe to use as a shelter.

Straight away I was really curious about the truth claim of the images, and it was this curiosity that led me to re-enact at least the first part of the experiment. When I was invited to take part in the exhibition at Fort Brockhurst, a fort built in the 1850s in the south-east of England, it seemed like the perfect context within which to produce this work that connects the fortification of the home with the World War II table shelter and the architecture of the site itself. But conceiving the work and actually carrying it out were two very different things. So it went, that an interrogation of the image led to a re-enactment of the experiment, then the research that needed to be done to carry out the experiment uncovered the real controversy of the government recommended shelter. It made visible the precarious situation that people using it would have faced by placing their bodies, and those of the ones they loved, in the position of relying on the shelter as protection.

**AK:** Can you talk about this work in relation to the body?

**HK:** I quite often talk about the architecture of the home in my work but not so much about the human body in relation to it. But that's really what my work is about - the affect on the human body by the built environment that it inhabits and how this relationship with the materiality of the architecture shifts under conditions of threat. I approached the re-enactment of the experiment on the shelter in this way - by relating each part to how my body, or any human body, would come to experience it. To produce the 350 pound concrete block (which is roughly the weight of two tall men), I needed to cast a series of smaller interconnecting blocks, so it could be

easily transportable and able to be constructed on site. The fort was opened especially for the exhibition, so we had very limited access to the site, which put the whole process under some pressure.

Using the specifications outlined in the archive images, myself and a team of technicians built the shelter, as the families using it would have done, and we then placed the shelter within a scaffolding tower that enabled us to lift the 350 pound concrete block six feet above the table before dropping it. For all of the speculation of the outcome of the re-enactment, right up until the very last second, I wasn't sure what would happen to the shelter.



Helene Kazan, *Engineering Shelter*, 2015. Elevated view.  
Copyright and courtesy the artist.

**AK:** Why did you decide to do it in that way? There wasn't actually an audience present to witness the drop.

**HK:** Health and safety meant that no audience members could be present. But the whole event felt very performative regardless of the lack of a live audience - each aspect of the day was being documented by a complex audiovisual set up capturing each moment as we knew that the documentation would be needed as proof of the final outcome. This therefore created a palpable tension as we performed the tasks at hand, knowing in the end that there would be an audience scrutinizing what had happened.

Experimentation is a key aspect of my practice, operating in different ways from project to project like, for example, in *Masking Tape Intervention: Lebanon 1989* (2011) which looked at the function of masking tape on

windows to prevent shattering glass during aerial bombings.

**AK:** Your practice seems very personal - it's really about your body and its relation to spaces under threat.

**HK:** Yes, *Masking Tape Intervention* is very personal. The project started from four archive images I found tucked away in a cupboard at my parents' house - the images show each empty room in our flat in Lebanon and were taken just before we left because of the civil war in 1989. I became really interested in the one image depicting our kitchen because it seemed to be the only one that registered what was going on outside, signified by the masking tape on the window. Aesthetically it is an incredible photograph! It was taken early in the morning and so the sun streams through the south-facing aluminium-framed window, which is cross-hatched with masking tape put there to stop the glass from fracturing during bombing. This masking tape also casts a crosshatched shadow across the whole space.



Kazan Family Archive, Lebanon, 1989.  
*Copyright and courtesy the artist.*

The image stuck with me as it bears witness to an intimate moment that marks a total shift in my life and that of my family. I wanted to use the dynamic power of this image to see if it could connect an audience with that time and space. Reading the image objectively, and using the information it held about the physicality of the space, I

recreated the kitchen as a model, dissecting each part to regenerate it three-dimensionally. I then experimented with recapturing the photographed 'moment' by using natural light to cast a shadow through the window again. It became an incredibly thorough investigation into the image and the conditions that produced it, which resulted in a short stop motion animation where the shadow cast from the masking tape on the window acts as an intervention for the second time, as it moves across the kitchen describing the space to the viewer.



Still from BBC interview with Kazan family, Larnaca, 1989.  
Copyright and courtesy of the BBC archives.

The research that went into producing the finished film also helped me uncover archive footage from a BBC report that includes an interview with my family as we came off a boat that had travelled from Lebanon to Larnaca. In both *Masking Tape Intervention* and *Engineering Shelter*, the image is central and the research and practice are structured through and around it, making the image operative and, in a sense, making present the images' incredible potential power.

**AK:** *Masking Tape Intervention* was the beginning of narration in your work; the start of your discussion about the future and the idea of risk, which is part of your research-based practice and is the basis of your PhD and MA.

**HK:** That's absolutely right. Through the work that I developed as part of my MA, I was looking at these photographs as if they were pre-emptive, considering Brian Massumi's idea that 'preemption operates in the present on a future threat, in such a way as to make that present futurity the motor of its process.'<sup>[1]</sup> I argued that the action of taking the photograph itself almost induced that future into the present, predicting the apparent emptiness of the kitchen and relaying it again and again over time.

That one image has really informed the way my practice has developed. In a text that I recently read by Michael J. Shapiro, in which he discusses the archive, he says, 'an effectively politicized and ethical archive is one that cannot be sealed: it operates within a 'temporal plasticity''.<sup>[2]</sup> I think this is an important way to think about archival material and its potentiality. *Masking Tape Intervention* starts to work with this as an operative process. In *Engineering Shelter* the act of interrogating the archive images and revealing the controversy in the engineered design utilizes an operative power in the 'temporal plasticity' of the unsealed archive.

**AK:** For me personally, I remember the crosshatching of tape on windows during the Gulf war. We would help my mother put the masking tape on the windows - it was a way for her to find something to do with us because we weren't able to leave the house. The masking tape was so easy for us to tear whereas other kinds of tape are really hard to break. In this way there is a real sense of fragility to masking tape both as a material and a concept. It is somewhat paradoxical that this fragile thing can be such a protective gesture.

**HK:** Yes, and it also becomes a signal to the outside world, like a shamanistic act to ward off exterior violent forces. There are so many people that connect with that image of crosshatched masking tape on windows. I did a related work called *Window No.17* (2012) using three archive images from different points in history where tape had been used on windows as protection: the first was during World War II, the second our flat in Lebanon, and the third from New York in 2011 after Hurricane Irene. I refabricated the windows as closely as I could from the images, recreating the pattern of the tape on each, and I then conducted a pseudoscientific experiment, exerting a symbolic amount of violent force on each of the windows to investigate the way the tape functioned.

During World War II, using tape on the windows was understood as a new technology and there was thoroughness to the way it was applied, crossing each separate pane of glass in the window. In the image of the window from New York the window has just one great big masking tape cross through it - during the experiment this window totally smashed.

**AK:** You investigate both distant moments in history and pivotal moments in your own life, such as your family leaving Lebanon. These re-enactments touch on the element of risk embedded in the past, present and future.

**HK:** Absolutely. It is a human characteristic to try and control the uncontrollable nature of our lived environment by attempting to calculate, imagine and manage the potential threats that will come to affect us. Different strategies of analysing risk are adopted under a wide range of circumstances and create a complex reality fabricated by algorithms, hopes, fears, conflicting philosophies and historical precedence. These projections of



Helene Kazan, Window no. 17, 2012.  
*Copyright and courtesy the artist.*

different potential futures enable a level of preparedness, and therefore protection, through the forecast of knowledge.

In a performance lecture I gave recently, I talk about a National Strategy for Disaster Risk Management (NSDRM) that was launched in Lebanon in 2013. Apparently the first such strategy for the entire region, it is meant to 'balance corrective, prospective and compensatory action and to strengthen risk governance as well as the resilience of communities and critical infrastructure'<sup>[3]</sup>, which is lacking. In the lecture I proposed that this strategy reflects a regional shift in the perception of risk since 2013 with a growing awareness of how a lack of infrastructure can leave areas disproportionately vulnerable to the effects of both armed conflict and natural disaster. This change in perception can also be read through the First Arab Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction, which took place in March 2013 in Jordan and a second conference in September 2014 in Egypt.

In a recent operation carried out by the UNDP Disaster Risk Management Unit and the NSDRM, they completed a field simulation on disaster management in an earthquake situation. The rehearsal took place in Saida, in March this year. I'm not actually sure how productive the NSDRM has been - particularly in terms of the mounting issues that have come out of the public services crises that started in Lebanon in July this year and still continue - but the images of the rehearsal or re-enactment of a disaster situation show that these performative modes of operation don't just exist in theatres or art galleries. It's a method used across many fields in planning or preparing for a potentially threatening situation. Whichever way we look at it, risk, and its

many perceptions, exists as a human-made mechanism for affecting control over the uncontrollable nature of our lived environment, and by this process becomes a mode of knowledge production that can colonize the future through a projected reality that affects the present situation.



UNDP and NSDRM rehearsal of earthquake situation, Saida, 2015.  
*Copyright of the Embassy of Switzerland in Lebanon.*

In *Engineering Shelter* the re-enactment revealed that the engineering theory that was used to design the Morrison shelter was a totally untested scientific theory. It wasn't until years later that any building was made using this theory, so to distribute the shelters to over half a million low-income households as a mode of protection was an extremely controversial decision. People often suggest that it would have been better than nothing - but was it better than nothing to be put in that position of increased risk just because you were from a low-income situation?

**AK:** This brings to light the unequal distribution of protection, or the right to shelter along socio-economic lines - precarious lives subjected to speculative analysis. In a time when we are surrounded by images depicting future disaster, danger and destruction how do you see this affecting our perceptions of both the future and the present?

**HK:** During the delivery of her Brunel Lecture on resilience and post-disaster shelter response, Jo de Silva, who

is director of Arup International Development, spoke about how science and engineering need to be prepared for failure. In her lecture she talks about how the public perceive science and engineering as being infallible when it isn't. She goes on to say that when engineering shelters for potentially catastrophic situations the responsibility of the engineer is to design to thresholds that give a much larger margin of safety before reaching a catastrophic breaking point. In terms of the Morrison shelter this was not the case, in fact the opposite was true: the shelter was intentionally designed with a practically non-existent margin of safety before catastrophic breaking point. That this would have been your only access to protection simply because you were from a low-income household, is, I believe, a crime. In the introduction of *Forensis*, Eyal Weizman talks about the structural crack and how it can be read as an indicator of a problem of 'evolving force conditions.'

Thinking along these lines my work operates before the crack appears and rather than putting you in the position of the building surveyor it puts you in the position of engineer. Arguing that the crime, as seen in the example of the Morrison shelter, occurs in the intentional placing of the material structure itself with the understanding that its purpose to protect will inevitably fail.

In engineering shelter for the future we need to take seriously the warning that Jo de Silva speaks of and the need to design shelter with larger margins of safety before a catastrophic breaking point. The problem is, as with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) tented camps in the Beqaa Valley that are about to go into a fifth cold winter, designing to these extended thresholds will need to be reflected through more permanent material shelters being put in place. But this permanence would ask us to shift our temporal and political notion of the refugee, as imaged through the flimsy temporary fabric nature of the tented camp.

**AK:** I saw your lecture performance *From Above and Below* at the Mosaic Rooms in London in 2015, and it was very much linked to this investigation into risk and the future. It was the first time I saw you position your body within your work. Of course, there are always traces of your body in previous work, but this time you were fully present.

**HK:** You're right. There's a funny anecdote about my physical presence: when I finally got the archive footage of the BBC interviewing my family in 1989, I watched the clip for the first time and discovered that I wasn't part of the interview. Apparently, the BBC cut me out because I wouldn't keep still! So it's somewhat poetic to reach back to that moment and be missing, but to be made present through the making of the film itself.

But coming back to the performance lectures, yes, they are more 'bodied'. The performative aspect first entered the lectures at the event you saw at the Mosaic Rooms. I have always been a very nervous public speaker and I started thinking about how I could use my nerves as an element of risk in giving the lecture.

**AK:** So you are putting yourself in that position of performative risk?

**HK:** Yes. The night before the event at the Mosaic Rooms, I was working on the material for the lecture and started wondering if I could take my nerves and use them as a risk that needed to be managed, taking the format as a way of experimenting with the theories and practices of risk management and speculation that the research observes and turning the hypothesis into a methodological question.

Each part of the lecture performance is a variable that is controlled: I write the script, determine the environment, and the audio/visual material referred to is set to run in a fixed film format. Before the live performance, I rehearse the lecture three times, which gives me an average timeline for how it materializes. During the performance lecture the text I read is projected and includes the rehearsal times and the averaged time codes for the audience to see. The audio/visual material then runs to these set time codes, making the mechanics of presentation visible and making very clear when the planning starts to fail.

**AK:** Do you relate this new development of your work to other lecture performance practices?

**HK:** Yes, I was recently talking with Ghalya Saadawi about the performative aspect of her work *After the Future Heritage Redux 2080* (2013) that included a walking tour of a part of Beirut's privately reconstructed downtown area. We spoke about the role of the so-called lecture performance, specifically with practitioners working in Lebanon, such as Tony Chakar, Rabih Mroueh or Walid Raad, who have also worked with this format.

**AK:** I think it's interesting that you mention those three examples. I took part in a walking lecture performance by Tony Chakar, *The Sky Over Beirut*, at Homeworks 5 in 2010 and have since seen projects by Zoukak and Dictaphone Group that employ walking, the drive, or the promenade as part of their performance practice. There are now several projects in Beirut about walking and bringing bodies into the city as a form of political critique, storytelling and resistance.

**HK:** Performative walking is really about augmenting the relationship between space and time - for Saadawi the text and walking performance enable time travel and constructs a futurity and a present, partly through the act of walking in a controversial but normalized space; performing these elements simultaneously.

My performative lecture shifts the focus to the image of the home as it maps various methods of calculating risk and makes visible a relationship formed between expert perceptions of risk experienced, for example, through the real-estate market or risk felt as a tangible, bodily threat experienced within home. This simultaneous articulation of risk breeds a tension within two images that I use in my lecture performances - they are images of domestic space that depict the future in Lebanon.

**AK:** What are those images?

**HK:** One image is a life-size architectural visualization showing a luxury apartment block yet to be built in Beirut, which is currently visible on the billboards that envelope the construction site. The second is an image of destroyed homes from a risk assessment report predicting the next war between Israel and Hezbollah. These images are connected on a semiotic axis, as both are speculative - one is an image of future destruction, whilst the other is an image of perceived opportunity. Although both are uncertain, both come to affect the realization of each other, as one or the other becomes seemingly more concrete. In their uncertainty, both images require the viewer to not only observe and believe in the future they depict, but to go so far as to ask their audience to invest and gamble on it. Through this process, the images not only represent two different potential futures but, as a mode of production that colonizes the future, they produce a form of reality that is felt in the present

situation.



Image of life-size architectural visualization showing a luxury apartment block still to be built in Beirut, 2015.  
Copyright and courtesy the artist.

At points during the performance lecture I am forced to fight with the material that is set to run as I begin – as it intervenes I lose control in these moments and the audience, observing these mistakes, engage closely in that moment. In a conversation with Göksu Kunak, Rabih Mroué talks about the interruptive moment when the actor forgets his lines, and I feel like these 'accidents' create real engagement.<sup>[4]</sup> I've had the opportunity to give the lectures in a few places now and it always turns out differently, however much planning goes into it. You never know what will happen.

**AK:** It's interesting that in these lectures you describe yourself as the variable that you try to control.

**HK:** Yes, so much of society is built upon constantly predicting the future and even within ourselves we are always trying to imagine what will happen next. In planning *Engineering Shelter* I researched every detail of the re-enactment, trying to manage every possible risk. Then in the final stage we nearly had to abandon the project because one crucial aspect, lifting the concrete, didn't go to plan, even with all the calculations.

At the end of the performance lecture, after calm settles, I return to the two images of the domestic spaces that depict the future in Lebanon. As I said previously, these images are not autonomous but are connected on a semiotic axis and contribute to a disruption of the present through the possible realization of their future vision. The problem is that whilst the two images of the future domestic spaces in Lebanon have the persuasive power to perform their perceptions of the future, there is a wider issue of access to, or protection from, what the images depict. What takes place then is a hierarchy in the importance of human life: between those who are able to invest in their own future protection and those who are cast outside of a protective frame. My ideas, in this way, are firmly rooted in the work of Judith Butler; in *Frames of War* she writes about a grievable life as a life of value and the precarity of a life that is valued less.<sup>[5]</sup>

In these past few weeks, there has been a lot discussion in the media about the reactions to the tragic events that took place over a few days in Beirut, Baghdad, and Paris and the ongoing situation in Syria through attacks by ISIS. In particular the debate seemed to settle on how we come to more equally recognize the value of life and each life that is lost. During the performance lecture I talk about the human right to shelter and although this statement is rooted in the understanding of shelter as a material condition, I also want to draw attention to the notion of the right to shelter as a lived human condition. I argue that it should not be afforded to individuals according to their economic, political or national status. Rather, when we think about engineering shelter in the recognition of the value of all life, we should design it to a necessary threshold that will provide shelter as both a lived and material condition.

***See Helene Kazan's Engineering Shelter on [Ibraaz projects](#).***

**Helene Kazan** is an artist and writer, who uses research and archival material across her practice to generate text, multimedia performance and installation. Her work focuses on the domestic space, as a complex site where a range of values converge, and as an environment that articulates and registers multiple perceptions of risk.

Recent exhibitions, publications and events include: 'Interrupting Space' at Fort Brockhurst in Portsmouth, 'Future Domestic' the 24th Edition of Cambridge Architecture Journal, 'Perspectives of Home' the concluding event as Artist in Residence at the Kunsthalle Exnergasse, Vienna, 'From Above and Below' at the Mosaic Rooms, London, 'Frames of War' at Momenta in New York, 'Urban Encounters 2014: Movements / Mobilities / Migrations' at the Tate Britain in London, 'Forensis' at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin and 'Exposure' at the Beirut Art Center, Lebanon. Kazan is the recipient of the CHASE Award for her project as a PhD student at the Centre for Research Architecture at Goldsmiths, University of London.

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[1] Brian Massumi, 'Fear (The Spectrum Said)', *Spectrums* 13.1 (2005): 31-48.

[2] Michael J. Shapiro, 'Zones of Justice: A Philopoetic Engagement,' in *Plastic Materialities: Politics, Legality, and Metamorphosis in the work of Catherine Malabou*, eds. Brenna Bhandar and Jonathan Goldberg-Hiller

(Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

[3] Andy Mc Elroy, 'Lebanon embarks on regional first with disaster risk plan', UNISDR website, 21 August 2013, <http://www.unisdr.org/archive/34432>.

[4] Göksu Kunak, 'Theatre of the Present: Rabih Mroué in conversation with Göksu Kunak,' *Ibraaz*, 28 May 2015, <http://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/167>.

[5] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2008).

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## TAGS

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