



BUS CEMETERY: A PROJECT BY DICTAPHONE GROUP

Dictaphone group

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INTRODUCTION

Dictaphone Group is a collaboration between performance artist Tania El Khoury and urban researcher architect Abir Saksouk-Sasso, whose aim is to research specific urban spaces in Lebanon. Issues of public space and public amenities, or indeed the lack thereof in Beirut, come to the fore in *Bus Cemetery*, a sound-based intervention that took place at a 'cemetery' for disused buses in Beirut. An imagined guided tour in one of these abandoned buses, led by a gregarious female driver, takes the listener on a trip back in time to when the city had public transport, and on to the city of the present, with its lack of civic infrastructure and neglected public spaces, and finally asks: to whom does the city belong?

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'Space is not a scientific object removed from ideology; it has always been political and strategic. (...) Space is political and ideological. It is a product literally filled with ideologies.'

(Henri Lefebvre, 1991)

Boundaries, streets, buildings, open fields – the cities we inhabit are political entities. The complexity of place reflects and gives shape to social, economic, historical, material and political formations. In the context of the Arab world, processes of spatial production have rapidly disrupted social geographies, exemplified through, to quote Mona Fawaz and Marwan Ghandour, 'war-induced massive population displacements ... and manifested in building activities, such as the so-called 'precise' Israeli acts of destruction and construction of urban environments that aim at manufacturing a new identity of place'. It is here that we might want to begin to consider Lebanon, where 'place' has been subjected to ongoing domination, negotiation and resistance. It is in these spaces that urban centres have been subjected to destruction caused by ongoing wars. It is here then that control over space reveals both ambition and desire in all their logic. It is here that Lebanon's ideals in space are made most explicit.



Beirut, the capital city of Lebanon, stands as an epitome of the operations of different conflicting authorities in asserting their domination and control over space; so much so that it renders itself visible, asserted, and exclusive to the other. It is in the post-war ongoing reconstruction of Beirut that the more absolute contradictions can be seen. The ironies of the war did not spare the post-war reconstruction projects that ended up involving additional destruction. In place of lively little streets in need of renovation, forms would emerge with disregard to history and social context. We witnessed up close how decisions were made by the ruling class to maintain development-friendly and clean spaces in the city at the expense of the so-called 'undesirable' classes and their public spaces.

A certain lack exists in the conception of a past and a future Beirut that remains palpable, but in the surrounding rush to put the war behind us, more questions were found than answers. Our conception of Dictaphone Group was informed through these concerns and questions about urban space in Lebanon, specifically about public space, or the lack of it.

The project also arises from the recognition that there is a need to collectively think about notions of the 'public' in Lebanon, and to imagine collective ways of tackling them. We opted for using research of existing spaces in the city to inform and create public events that utilise live art as a means of commenting on urban landscapes. This is an interdisciplinary process to create site-specific public art performance that is the product of site-specific research.

Bridging the fields of social scientific research on space and art is an exploration and a challenge to creating public work. A site-specific public event is therefore our field and a knowledge-intensive zone for learning and collaboration. Through it, we update our understanding of place and how we experience it today in Lebanon. It is where we interact with the public through art, and it is where we derive the basic pleasures of conceptualising a public event and witnessing its realisation.

In our projects to date, the process was guided through interviews with inhabitants of the chosen sites, documentation of oral history, the collection of old photographs, and an analysis of social and physical transformations, among other things. We also opted for a detailed documentation and archiving of the collected researched material in order to produce a document that tells a multi-faceted story of place.

Bus Cemetery

We see the lack of public transport in Lebanon and its 'death' in our city as an extension of the lack of public spaces such as beaches, parks and pavements. This is why our project *Bus Cemetery* came about and how it was given conceptual form.

During an event by the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC) in a space in Mar Mkhayel, Beirut, popularly known as the 'bus cemetery', Dictaphone Group performed a sound-based intervention inside one of the derelict buses. The 'Bus Cemetery' is an abandoned site in which the state has been dumping broken buses purchased from Europe but that proved to be dysfunctional due to lack of maintenance and investment in

public transport. As Nora Niasari explains, 'in post-war Beirut, public transportation has been silenced whilst private transportation companies are providing a short-term solution for mobility'.

For our project there, Dictaphone Group took its audience on an imagined tour inside an abandoned bus. The audience was ushered in by a female driver and seated on the bus, ready to embark on a short trip in the city.



Bus Cemetery, a project by Dictaphone Group, 2012. Spatial Design by Ramzi Mady. Courtesy of Dictaphone Group.

The following is a translation of the sound piece that the audience experienced on the bus:

'Welcome to the cemetery of buses. I am Captain Pop. Not Bob like Ibrahim Mira'shli, although I'm dressed up as one of his hostesses, since it was my favourite TV show when I was a child. Pop stands for Petra. Our journey will start in a few moments. We will depart from here, the bus cemetery, go have a look around Beirut, then return. So the itinerary for our trip is: Cemetery - cemetery - cemetery.

Please refrain from smoking and from being annoying. So men, please do not spread your legs and don't pretend you're touching the women by mistake. And women, do not make foreign domestic workers stand up so you can sit in their places.



[To herself] Oh! What a disaster! How embarrassing! Everyone is looking at me. [To the bus] And you, you only work if I hit you, just like our TV set at home. How irritating.

Dear customers, our journey has begun. We are now leaving the bus cemetery, which is more of a mass grave for the most recent experiment in Lebanese public transportation. As we just saw, these are parked buses that the government bought second hand from the Czech Republic. These buses were not originally designed to function in the Lebanese heat and there aren't any available spare parts to fix them in Lebanon. Anyway, according to the international standards of transportation, public buses cannot be over ten years old. This means that these buses are of no use and they shouldn't be parked here and there shouldn't be hundreds of employees coming in here every day to sign in and sit here staring at them. This also means that there should be a slightly more intelligent solution.

But according to employees of the public transport ministry and to the drivers of private buses, there are individuals in the Lebanese government who are gaining from the private companies that have buses working in Beirut that pretend to be public like those big red ones. Also, the little vans that go to areas outside of Beirut also follow confessional leaders supported by ministers and sometimes by prime ministers.

What is beautiful about our trip is that it is obviously imaginary because as we just discovered, these buses don't work and there is no way they'll ever work.

It's just like back when we were kids and our parents would leave us in the car while they went to the shops and we would sit in the driver's seat and pretend we were driving and would either manage to reverse the car and consequently get a slap, or just pretend that we were driving to a far-off, beautiful place. I used to always take my sister from here to Paris, I would leave her there and then come back ... so if any of you would like to play the driver's role, come and sit in my place. All you have to do is move your hands and pretend you're driving but please don't shout and insult the other drivers. And if no one feels like being the driver, don't you worry because this 'government donkey' [the bus] is so sophisticated that it knows the road by heart.

We are arriving now at the Burj Square in the pre-war era. There, we will find taxis parked respectfully on the side and Renault buses departing every six minutes to all areas of Beirut. The fee is 15 Liras. For students, it's 27 liras every three months.

We could even go back to pre-1964 and get onto the Beirut Tramway, because it's more romantic. Here, from the Burj Square, each of us can go back to his home in any part of Lebanon. Not like now, where every area has its own station that is actually just the space under the bridge filled with the chaos of private buses, vans, cars and workers waiting for relief - the Dawra and Cola areas are two very popular 'stations'.

From the Burj Square, we are going up to Gemmayzeh, to the train station that is now the train cemetery. If we wanted, we could take a train from there to Palestine or to Syria or even to Turkey.



From Gemmayzeh, we are going to Sodeco and will pass by the Jewish and Evangelical cemeteries and then later the martyrs' cemetery, which used to be a pine forest until they started burying people in it because no one could get to the Bashoura cemetery in 1958 as a result of political conflicts.

We will then go to Horsh Beirut and we will find it closed.

The bus will then take us to fetch our friends that are scattered in different countries around the world such as Brazil, Australia, Europe, and America.

We will take them with us and go back to Horsh Beirut. This time, they will let us enter because we have foreigners with us and foreigners can enter Horsh Beirut, which is the largest green area in Beirut and the largest public space.

We will then jump from there towards the sea and pass the cemetery of Druze on Verdun and the cemetery of Saydet El Nyah near AUB. We will carry on to the Ramlet El Bayda Park, a public space in a beautiful spot that overlooks the sea. This one is open for the public but we can't really use it because it's neglected and the grass is very long and hasn't been taken care of for a long time.

OK, that's enough. We will go down to the sea and forget that the Lebanese government is incapable of organising public transportation, not even in the capital, and not even in the 11 years since the war ended. And we will forget that the government couldn't open Horsh Beirut to the public or organise the other public spaces, as if someone decided that Lebanese people don't meet in buses, in trains or in public spaces.

We will enjoy the sea and lean our heads against the window or on the shoulder of the person sitting next to us. I will dim the lights for you so you don't feel shy. We will shut our eyes and take a deep breath and feel a nice breeze on our faces and maybe we will smell the bananas and lemons that were planted along the shore before the beaches were stolen from the public.

We will think that this city is ours because we are its inhabitants and the public spaces are ours and an affordable public transportation system is one of our most basic rights as citizens.

When we open our eyes, we will be back at the bus cemetery and to Lebanon in 2011.

A final word of advice: Do not google the words 'Lebanese bus' because you will find images of a bus explosion in Bekfaya and another in Tripoli three years ago and the Lebanese cross van that was targeted by the Israelis in the July War and photos as well as articles about the Ain El Remmaneh bus, which remains the most famous mode of transport ever known to Lebanon.

We have arrived at our destination. I was your driver, Captain Pop. Thank you.'



Credit:

Article by Abir Saksouk and Tania El Khoury

Voice and Performance by Petra Serhal

Sound Design by Ramzi Mady

Space Design by Rima Najdi

Produced by AFAC

www.dictaphonegroup.com

About the author

Dictaphone group was established in London during the summer of 2009 and since then has been working on researching specific urban spaces in Lebanon.