

Interview

The Many Metamorphoses of Mounira al Solh

Mounira al Solh in
conversation with Nat
Muller

Mounira al Solh is a bit of a maverick in the Lebanese art scene. Her work is humorous, tongue-in-cheek and prone to the unexpected. Whether she deals with complex gender or political issues, or questions the pressures on Arab artists who are wedged between local and international expectations – a dose of lightheartedness serves as a strategy to open up conversation. If anything characterises her work it is an investment in the back and forth of dialogue without giving away who is doing the talking from which position. It makes for interesting, and at times very confusing, communication. She has been busy over the past few years, with shows and projects at Art in General, The New Museum Triennial, Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam, Bucharest Biennial, Istanbul Biennial, and Thessaloniki Biennial under her belt. In this conversation, al Solh discusses her work and her practice.

Mounira al Solh
The Sea is a Stereo, 2007-
2013, project photograph.
Courtesy of Mounira al Solh.



Nat Muller: You have spent much of the past decade between Amsterdam and Beirut. How has this state of in-betweenness informed your practice? What do both places offer you in terms of how you work, whom you work with, and the thematics you focus on?

Mounira al Solh: In a way it's about looking at art from different perspectives, looking at very different societies and being able to compare them, or at least have the illusion that you can do so. It's tricky too, as you might remain an outsider to both societies. I was 24 when I moved from Beirut to Amsterdam in 2002 to study. I wanted to be away from family/friends and an environment that was too (un) comfortable. I also learned to be more independent as an individual, which is not possible in Lebanon, since you are always part of a mini-clan, a mini-sect, or a micro-system. There is also something about going to a place where you have to start from scratch; you can be incognito, and this allowed me make works in which I really dared to speak my mind, like for example the video *Rawane's Song* (2006), where I address the Western art market's expectations from artists coming from the Arab world or from post-conflict situations.

NM: In *The Sea is a Stereo – Video 2: Paris Without a Sea* (2007-2008) you interview a group of Beirut men, amongst them your father, who swim every day in the Mediterranean, rain or shine. Their love for swimming, the sea and sunbathing becomes a vehicle to talk about society, religion, personal and family relations, as well as masculinity. For your project for the 2011 Thessaloniki Biennial, you cut

the electricity at the showing venue on a weekly basis, echoing the daily power outages in Lebanon. The audience had to view the work – a series of documents, drawings and texts – by candlelight. You use details from daily life - often your own life - that are place-specific but often overlooked, and then embed them in much larger social and political contexts. Can you elaborate on this?

MS: In *The Sea is a Stereo* the men swimming every day in Beirut live between the city and the sea. It is as if they emigrate every day to somewhere else through the water, without really leaving their country. They are out of place, yet still immersed in it. I felt their situation was similar to mine when I was a student in Amsterdam: out of place, but fully immersed. I don't try to make art that speaks to big ideas such as feminism, liberalism, Marxism, and all those -isms. What I make speaks about these concepts and -isms without taking them as a façade or as a direct motto. For example, now I am developing a performance for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in The Hague, in which I incorporate elements from my naturalisation exam for the Netherlands.

NM: In much of your work there is an element of role-play or ambiguity of voice. In *The Sea is a Stereo* you interview the men swimming, but also dub their answers in your own voice. In the video *A Double Burger and Two Metamorphoses* (2011) you – Mounira – have conversations with a series of animals, but also perform the role of the animals. So there is always a confusion who is speaking or who is speaking for whom. Can you comment on this subject of voice and role-play?

MS: By playing someone else I allow myself to take some distance, to have more imagination for the narration, and to be playful. It's not that I am really trying to make a point by engaging in role-play, I think it is more about the challenge. In *The Sea is a Stereo* dubbing the voice of every male character allows me a sense of appropriation. I was always jealous how on The Corniche [seaside promenade] in Beirut men are free to walk shirtless and show off, or how they can just jump off the rocks in the water in their underwear.

Mounira al Solh
The Mute Tongue, from the proverb "Like a deaf at a wedding dance" (Mithl al Atrach Bil zaffé), 2011, video still.
Courtesy of Mounira al Solh.



NM: Following the previous question, you take role-play to a completely different level with your male alter ego – the Beirut juice merchant and painter Bassam Ramlawi. You have been trained as a painter and once told me that through him you can deal with the medium of painting and tackle a range of issues you would otherwise shy away from. Can you talk about your relationship to this character and his/your relationship to painting?

MS: My relation to Bassam is quite complex: when I paint I become him, and when he paints he becomes me. That allows “us” to take more distance from painting as crafts, which is how I was trained as a painter at the Lebanese University in Beirut. For Bassam and for me it is a fresh way of dealing with the medium, and somehow “we” also remain outsiders to it. The fact that Bassam works in his father’s juice shop influences how much he paints, but also his choice of colours and subjects he uses in his work. We grew up in the same neighbourhood in Beirut. Many characters in his paintings are the neighbourhood shopkeepers. As a child I used to detest them because I always felt they were keeping a tab on my comings and goings. But now through Bassam I have another way of looking at it and dealing with it. I grew up in a predominantly Muslim neighbourhood, highly populated, but also pretty mixed. I always felt that the street belongs to men and to their energy. Through Bassam I discover a neighbourhood that looked enormous to me as a child. Now each time I am back, I am surprised to experience its tininess, as if it can fit entirely in my pocket. When Bassam and I collaborated for the Bucharest Biennial in 2012 it was very interesting. How do I psychologically collaborate with my own alter ego? How does he, himself, feel about it? Bassam came to my studio every day and delivered juice in plastic bottles to me. Then he used these plastic bottles to make paintings that transformed more and more into three-dimensional imperfect objects. Together with Lebanese poet and art critic Jacques Aswad, I made a book about Bassam’s work titled *In a Time Fleece*, where we explore Bassam’s influences and his ideas. This book was also a way for me to ‘create’ Bassam with the help of Jacques.

Mounira al Solh
A Double Burger and Two Metamorphoses. Proposal for a Dutch cat, a Dutch dog, a Dutch goat, and finally a Dutch camel, 2011, installation detail, Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam, Amsterdam, 2011.
Courtesy of Mounira al Solh.



NM: Can you speak a little about *NOA (Not Only Arabic) Magazine* of which you are editor-in-chief and how it ties in with your artistic practice? Can you tell us why you chose the topic of “treason” for issue I, and ‘arrest’ for issue II, as well as the distinctive way the content was presented to the reader?

MS: I believe *NOA Magazine* to be one of the richest projects I have undertaken. It is a collaborative endeavour, like a group work. My partner Fadi el Tofeili, a poet and writer, is co-editor of issue I and II. I usually invite artists and other practitioners to contribute to the magazine. So in a way *NOA* functions like a magazine, but it isn't. I am not interested to distribute it commercially, or have it in bookshops or anywhere else. Instead, people have to make an appointment and read it in a specific – almost secret – location. This way of working allows me to integrate many things that would otherwise be impossible to publish in a certain geo-political context. In other words, its form allows it to touch on really sensitive issues. For example, Lebanon and Israel are countries at war, so if you speak in public with Israelis you are a traitor. The first issue of *NOA* dealt with such issues, thus it was traitorous. The theme for issue II ‘Arrest’ was a logical follow-up to an act of treason. If you are a traitor, you will be arrested. Some people who came to read *NOA Magazine* thought that they were being filmed, since they were invited to sit in an empty room, all alone face-to-face with the magazine. So in a way, the reading of the magazine demands from people to be engaged: they have to want to read it, then call to make an appointment, and then go to the specified place to read it. It becomes a performative gesture where the performer is responsible of what is read.

NM: What can you tell us about issue III that is now in the making?

MS: The current topic for *NOA III* is on language and schizophrenia. I started working with this topic in 2012 during an artist residency at AIR in Antwerp, Belgium. It takes its inspiration from Louis Wolfson's book *Le Schizo et Les Langues*. Since language is a spoken act, the approach will be different; the magazine will unfold through interactive works, such as reading sessions, talks, performances, videos, and inviting people to create dictionaries. Interventions include: a video shot in Beirut recording a discussion between a group of artists and writers discussing what in their view is most urgent when it comes to the Lebanese dialect in relation to the Arabic language and our daily usage in Lebanon of multiple languages such as English, French, Arabic. In Antwerp I made a documentary filming a place where yearly twenty thousand immigrants enroll in Dutch courses. In the video I practice speaking Dutch with someone from Spain and someone else from Iraq. I am also planning to create a language school with curator Angela Serino. We are preparing to make a ‘pilot *NOA* language school’ in Amsterdam next June and then travel it to Beirut later on. The idea is to invite artists to design sessions where people can learn a language, or, for instance, forget a mother tongue.

We are also researching different methods of teaching languages for adults and are planning to make a mediatheque that contains all the collected material. I am currently myself taking intensive Dutch classes, and following other 'integration' courses required for my Dutch naturalisation exam. So *NOA III* is a natural vehicle for these experiences.

Mounira al Solh
Dinosaurs, 2011, video still.
Courtesy of Mounira al Solh.



NM: Your interest in language did not start with *NOA III*, right?

MS: In my video *The Mute Tongue* (2010) I started to research spoken language and its effects on our visual imagination. In this work I staged in silent vignettes 19 Arabic proverbs and sayings that I use in my daily life, even though I might disapprove of their meaning. Most of them are cruel, racist, or misogynist. I invited Croatian performer and artist Sinisa Labrovic, who does not speak Arabic, to be the protagonist of these proverbs and act them out. Sinisa interpreted them in an amazing way. He came to Lebanon and we filmed the work in and around my grandmother's house in a small town on a mountain in Lebanon. In retrospect, I approached the proverbs like Joseph Jacotot, whom Jacques Rancière writes about in his book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*. Jacotot favored teaching things that he ignored.

NM: Your project *Dinosaurs* (2012 - ongoing) is your most cinematic to date. You get your friends to re-enact certain film scenes and there's also a lot of drinking going on. Why these particular scenes?

MS: I had an urge to do this work. It is somehow inspired by existing scenes of people drinking, such as in films by John Cassavetes, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, and others. *Dinosaurs* is a work where I film friends who are artists, philosophers, thinkers, musicians, but also family members. Each of them is very creative and extremely talented, and slightly crazy like myself. We see them drinking, flirting, or

getting embroiled in conflicts. I was interested to explore our relationship to alcohol in a place like Lebanon, where your rapport to drinking depends on your ethnic, religious, class, and family background, as well as other individual and contextual factors. *Dinosaurs* explores my fascination with this, without judgement or pretention. It ended up being a very sensual work. I am now re-editing it and shooting a few more scenes for a new version to be shown at Home Works 6 in Beirut.

About the author

Nat Muller is an independent curator and critic based between Rotterdam and Beirut. Her main interests include: the intersections of aesthetics, media and politics; media art and contemporary art in and from the Middle East. She is a regular contributor for *Springerin* and *Metropolis M*. She has taught across the Middle East and has served as an advisor on Euro-Med collaborations for the European Cultural Foundation (ECF), the EU, and as an advisor on e-culture for the Dutch Ministry of Culture. She recently co-curated Power Cut Middle East, a themed programme of films from Syria and Egypt at the International Film Festival Rotterdam, and is curator of the Abraaj Capital Art Prize 2012.