

THE DAILY STAR

Ever wonder what's going on at the Rijksakademie?

By Jim Quilty

Review

BEIRUT: Rumor has it there was once a time when the various forms of art were discrete. Rumors often prove inaccurate, of course. Renaissance sculptor Michelangelo is best known for painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and, last century, Leonard Cohen was a "poet" before he "sang" his way to celebrity.

When points of comparison emerge between a piece of video art and a magazine launch, though, you know any pretence of artificial separation is dead and buried.

The opportunity to make this unlikely observation arose last week during Home Works IV, Beirut's forum of cultural practices, which wrapped up Sunday evening. The culprits are "I Wonder What is Going on Upstairs," the 10-minute work by Amsterdam-based Turkish video artist Ahmet Ogut, and Noa Magazine, founded by Amsterdam-based Lebanese video artist Mounira al-Solh.

Unlike the other new publications promoted or produced by Ashkal Alwan, the launch of Noa was an oddly secretive affair. It wasn't put on display. No review copies were available. You couldn't even buy a copy. This is unusual in Lebanon, where - for reasons of geopolitical circumstance, not "essential nature" - ethical issues tend to dissolve within the crucible of profit and loss.

No. Anyone interested in looking at one of the three copies of Noa had to make reservations and report to the offices of Ashkal Alwan.

The one thing you know about Noa's debut issue before seeing is its title, "Treason is Like a Bible." You assume Solh and her collaborators are making use of a transgressive aesthetic, which has been fertilizing artistic production - sometimes indulgent, sometimes critical - from the Marquis de Sade to J.G. Ballard and beyond.

The title of Noa's first issue seems ironic - based on her previous work, it's unlikely Solh would equate treason to some aspect of Judaeo-Christian doctrine. Rather, it seems to promise, acts of transgression or subversion are as central to artistic practice as the strictures of religious doctrine are to the devout. Without exploring the magazine's content, of course, such observations are all speculative.

At Ashkal Alwan, the sprite-like Solh greets you with a smile and a glass of water. She escorts you to a pristine room, bare but for a fan, an air conditioning system (both sleeping through a power-cut), and a white-topped table. There, sitting perfectly aligned, in the middle of the tabletop, is a lone copy of Noa, volume 1, issue 1.

"I take everything with me," Solh says, gesturing to a framed copy of the magazine cover resting against one wall. "Without leaving a trace."

She leaves you alone in the Zen room, then, to read.

Made of the same high-quality paper as the pages of text and images it encloses, the magazine cover features sketches of four figures: Anna Politkovskaya, Hrant Dink, Musa Anter and Samir Kassir. The four are quite different from one another, though they were all writers and journalists who challenged certain political norms and suffered violently deaths.

Anter, a Turkish-Kurdish writer, was murdered by a Turkish nationalist in 1992. The same fate met Dink, himself a Turkish-Armenian editor, journalist and columnist, in 2007. The 2006 murder of Politkovskaya, the investigative journalist whose work on Russia's Chechnya war was such an embarrassment to Vladimir Putin, grabbed far more international headlines. The same is true of Franco-Lebanese columnist and academic Samir Kassir, the vocal critic of Israeli policy in Palestine and Syrian policy in Lebanon, who was slain in 2005.

The cover art casts an oddly political light on the inaugural issue of the cultural magazine. Not that art and politics are hermetically sealed from one another.

Indeed, Lebanese artists have proven proficient in taking up the stuff of politics and armed conflict (the continuation of politics by other means) and bending it to aesthetic practice. The examples are legion, but the work of Rabih Mroueh and his several collaborators comes to mind. So does that of Akram Zaatari, particularly his 1997 video "All is Well on the Border," which takes up the performative aspects of representing resistance to Israeli military incursions into Lebanon, thereby unraveling resistance as a heroic narrative.

Solh later points out that all four figures appear to have been killed for activities treasonous to the state. In authoritarian states like Russia and Turkey - and, for that matter, minimalist states like Lebanon's - it's always difficult to prove responsibility for such a high-profile murder. In lieu of judicial efficacy, the conventions of political narrative (sometimes called "conspiracy theory") take over, laying blame at the feet of the authoritarian state.

In Turkey, this means the state itself. In Russia, the finger points to state security, or else those Chechen fighters who went over to the collaborationist regime of Ramzan Kadyrov, and whom Politkovskaya linked to criminal activity inside Russia. Lebanon benefits from a host of potential oppressors but, when it comes to finding authoritarian regimes to blame for criminal activity inside Lebanon, narrative fashion tends to oscillate between the Israeli and the Syrian.

On the face of it, Noa is a self-consciously provocative magazine. Any prospective reader, curious to look beyond the cover art and find whether Solh and her contributors live up to the cover's promise, can stop reading.

Like the art it purports to cover, the quality of cultural journalism ranges from decorative to promotional to critical. Noa's content deserves to be addressed critically but given that the magazine's founder is so circumspect about who reads it - since audiences are selected and excluded - discussing its content in the media is a non-starter.

Solh isn't innocent of the several levels of irony at work here, nor of the performative aspect of the viewing ritual she's arranged. All that's missing is a hidden camera to capture readers' responses.

It was while chewing over how to proceed that you watched "I Wonder What is Going on

Upstairs," which screened as part of Home Works IV's video program. Ahmet Ogut is, like Solh, a resident at Amsterdam's Rijksakademie and evidently they collaborate, as he is credited with Noa's cover design.

His video begins with shots of a boom truck backing into the courtyard of an unidentified building. Once the truck's secured to the ground, seemingly random people are invited to climb into the bucket at the end of the boom. They are hoisted up to the second story, where they look into the unidentified building's windows.

It proceeds in this manner for the duration - the variously angled camera capturing people elevated to look, laugh, comment to one another silently, and dismount. The object of their voyeurism is never revealed.

The program notes tell you the building in question is Basel's Kunstmuseum. The video documents a performance that involved Ogut's inviting Kunstmuseum patrons to look at the exhibition from a different angle. The object of the performance, you're told, was to explore the discourse of art perception.

If the performance elevated and alienated spectators from the art object - effectively making them art objects themselves - the document of the performance represents a further regression from the art object. As far as the video's audience is concerned, the art (the putative nut at the core of these several levels of engagement) is invisible, perhaps irrelevant.

In this, Ogut's and Solh's work are reflections of one another across different media. The audience in the Metropolis cinema isn't allowed to know what's on display in the Kunstmuseum. You, the reader, aren't allowed to know what's in Solh's magazine. Tough luck.

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