

Galerie Sfeir-Semler *Beirut and Hamburg*

Andree Sfeir-Semler

Interviewed by Andrew McClintock



Yto Barrada, "Lyautey Unit Blocks", 2010, wood, paint, dimensions variable. Courtesy Galerie Sfeir-Semler, Beirut/ Hamburg.

So you come from a filmmaking background, please talk about how this has changed your perception of the business-side of running a gallery, as well as influenced what you look for in artists you work with.

In fact, when you have started as an artist and not as an art specialist or historian you know what it is to do art and you look much more carefully on things because you can't be bluffed. If you've done it yourself you become much tighter on quality because you know what's good. You this as well when you've study contemporary art, which I did both traditionally and with a very contemporary way of looking at it. I've written a Ph.D. on the art scene in the 19th century titled "Die Maler am Pariser Salon 1791-1880", so all this background gets you a very strong foundation to look at art from an inside view. Whenever I work with artists I love it, we have now the visit of Wael Shawky, one of our Lebanese artists, and we have been working all day on his documentary project. It's the most fascinating part of the work, to assist the artist in conceiving an art piece, listening to what he wants to do and trying to get out of him what is in his deeper inside; to fully relate with his art piece, or at least listen to it and catch what's strongest in his thoughts.

Yes, definitely. I come from an art making background as well, and own a gallery in San Francisco. And [working with artists is] my favorite part as well, along with working as an artist with the artist. Being able to understand the artist's process more.

Yes - In fact I have never learned the commercial part of what I do. I've never done any studies in marketing, business, or in economy. I guess that when you are born Lebanese, you have this somehow in your blood because the Phoenician have traded for centuries. In fact, actually, I never try to sell things or make offers if I'm not approached first by the collector. I don't feel like a dealer or a gallerist, but rather a curator. The collectors are convinced by the quality of what we do and of the strength of the quality of level we aim. Whenever I talk to a client I never try to tell him how great the piece of art is, I rather try to tell him what the piece of art is about. And I leave it up to him if he decides to like it or not. Because you never can talk about loving something. You can either love it or not, but you can shape the meaning of an artist's piece by discussing it with a viewer.

And in fact, most of the stuff we work with is pretty dry, so the clients we get are very interesting people because they're attracted by something as dry as we have.

You mean dry because it's conceptually based or minimalist?

Yes, and also because it's not appealing stuff that you can decorate your apartment with. Most of the artists we work with are conceptual artists, and most of the work we deal in is minimal and reduced.

So you first opened your gallery in Kiel, Germany?

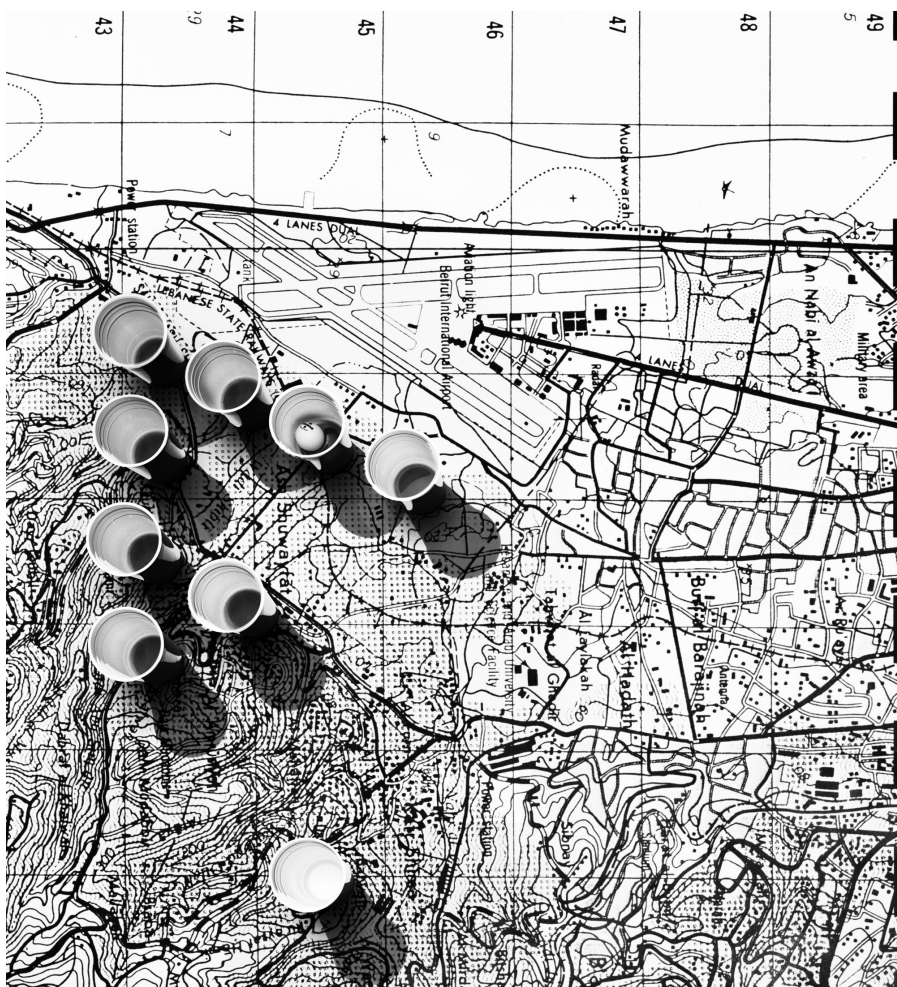
This is correct. You're informed, I don't know where you got your information! I mean, there is only one reason to open a gallery in an out-of-the-way city, my husband was working in Kiel, so we moved to Kiel and then we had a daughter so we stayed there. I felt like I was in the North Pole, it was the one and only gallery in town, which is at the very north of Germany. It was the one and only gallery working in the region north of Hamburg. There was nothing else, the eastern part of Germany with the border and water on the other side. I started very early, I started going to art fairs very soon, because no one would come to Kiel to buy art. I needed to go elsewhere.

Is this why you moved to Hamburg to re-open the gallery? Can you please talk about this decision, specifically from the point of view of Hamburg verses Berlin?

When we were free to move, because our daughter left home, we had the choice between going to Berlin and coming to Hamburg. I say we, because my husband also has a profession, and we needed to coordinate these two professions. I must say I did not go to Berlin because there are 500 galleries there and the city's main economy is tourism. Also there aren't that many art collectors but it does have a abundance of artists. On the other hand Hamburg is the wealthiest city in Germany. Hamburg certainly does not have the number of visitors we would get in Berlin, but we have a number of very important collectors. Harald Falckenberg is in Hamburg as well as many other very big collectors who live in the city and support the local art scene.

Berlin sounds like in San Francisco in the sense that everybody's an artist but there is a lack of larger collectors.

Well there are not many artists in Hamburg, there is a very good art school though. Many important teachers have taught in Hamburg, and some of them still do, like Andreas Sominski who is a teacher at the Art Academy. As far as other good galleries there are a few in



Rayyane Tabet, "How To Play Beirut (South)", Inkjet print on archival paper, 153cm x 138 cm, 2010. Courtesy Galerie Sfeir-Semler, Beirut/ Hamburg.

Hamburg I must say. We're not many but we all know each other. The everyday quality of life in Hamburg is very nice and nowadays you just don't just work in your own four walls you work all over the globe. You don't solely rely on the city you're in. If I was to decide again now, I may regret not having gone to Berlin which is always something that I think about.

But now we have the gallery in Beirut. We opened back in 2005 as a branch to Hamburg, and now Beirut has become the main gallery and Hamburg works for Beirut. Because with the growth of what we did, what we started in the Middle East, the Middle East has suddenly, become a worldwide scene that the world is interested in. Everyone goes to Beirut to visit the gallery.

Your gallery is one of the largest commercial art spaces in the Middle East.

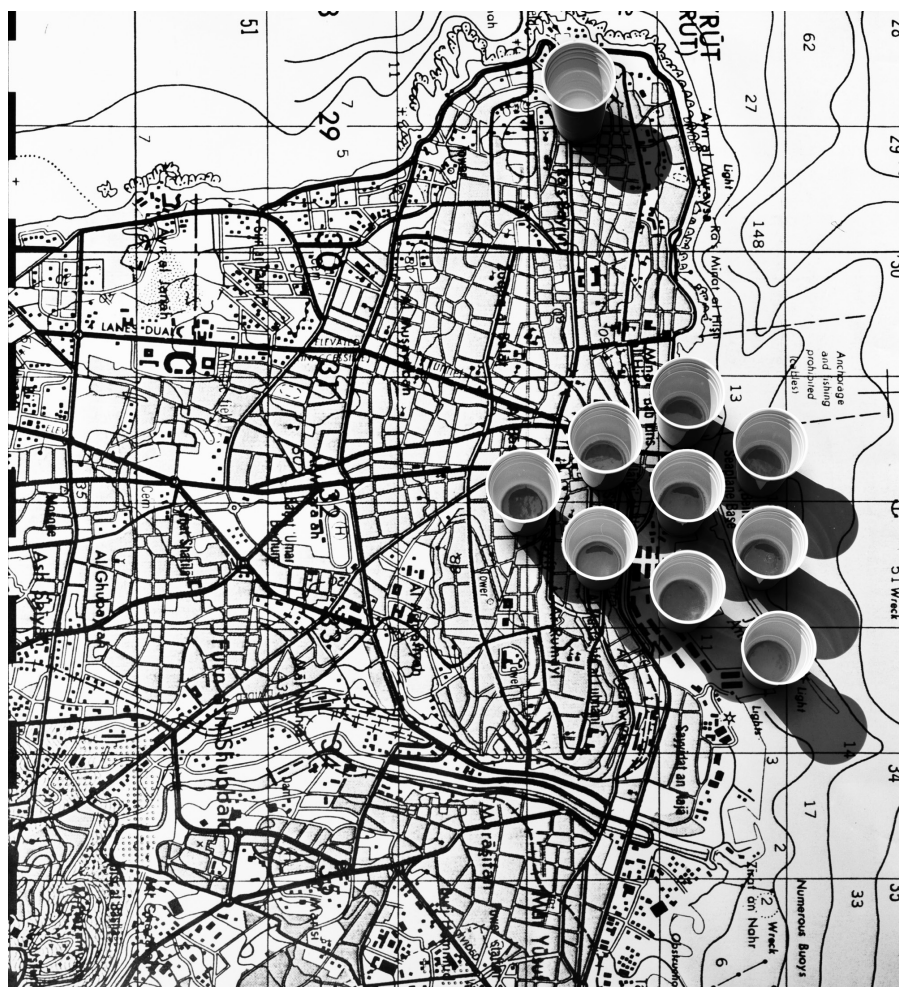
The first to start with. There was no "white cube" in the Middle East before we opened. None, nothing, nil.

Have you seen the local community in Beirut react to your presence? I know you're from there originally, but the physical community, the kind of non-arts community around the gallery, as well as the arts community in general? I know you just mentioned it has become pretty flourishing, do you feel like it's a new epicenter, like a lot of people are paying attention to what's going on in Beirut?

I mean, the art scene in Beirut is developing very, very fast, and there is now an art school, not like the ones which existed before. The scene is developing a lot. When we started Beirut I wondered if I would go the route of opening up a foundation [Non-Profit] or a commercial gallery. But I decided to open the commercial gallery for a very simple reason. I wanted to leave an impact on the region and send works to the region. I wanted to generate new works. If you are a foundation, you make one show with the artist and that's it, but if you are an art gallery you assist the artist and you document the work. You produce the work and try to place the work all over the world in collections and get reviews.

So you're developing the base?

So I decided to make a gallery and not a foundation.



Rayyane Tabet, "How To Play Beirut (North)", Inkjet print on archival paper, 153cm x 138 cm, 2010. Courtesy Galerie Sfeir-Semler, Beirut/ Hamburg.

Right you're working on developing this base of Middle Eastern artists with the intention of building an international presence.

We've already put them on a international presence. Many of them are in important public collections: Walid Raad in National Gallery Hamburger Bahnhof Berlin, NY MOMA (just to name a few), Akram Zaatari is in Centre Pompidou and Tate Modern 'collections. Akram Zaatari & Yto Barrada will be showing big installations at the San Francisco MOMA in September. I won't be coming to San Francisco because it's too far but you will be able to see the show. In fact, the gallery in Beirut over the last few years has really generated several artists who are now on the agenda of many curators and many museums. Two of our very young artists, Mounira Al Solh from Beirut and Rayyane Tabet from Ashqout, Lebanon are in

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Felix Schramm, “Less Roses”. Site specific installation. 2007. Courtesy Galerie Sfeir-Semler, Beirut/ Hamburg.

the New Museum’s Triennial “The Ungovernables”. Rayyane Tabet made his own bedroom in textile, a very big sculpture in textile, in canvas. Mounira Al Solh works in a very expressive way with street lights in Beirut through collages and drawings on transparent paper.

What are the main misconceptions Westerners have about contemporary Middle Eastern art?

Remember the show that happened at NY MOMA a few years ago? It was the first one in the states that was art in the Islamic world or something like this. You should know that many artists from the Arab world are not Muslims. Many of them are Christians, a few others are Jewish, even though they’re Arabs. So it’s very wrong to formulate Middle Eastern art by religion. You don’t speak of art in the Western world by referring to it as Christian art, do you? This is probably the biggest failure of viewing the art in the Arab world. We should formulate it around the language and the culture because they all speak Arabic, and that is the main link. They all have a similar culture. Of course there are diversities by religion, but whoever is an artist is generally a freed person in his mind and is not addicted or ideated to a religion in particular. So this is why, I mean, even if someone believes and practices his religion, it does not influence his art work. If it were the art wouldn’t be free and if the art is not free it wouldn’t be interesting. Art needs to observe and to look at social structures. It shouldn’t be biased by any way of looking at things. Of course, it’s always subjective; it’s the viewing of the single artist, but if that view would be biased by certain religious view points it wouldn’t be interesting anymore.

So the programming that you do is known for being curated like a museum in the sense that the shows are longer, and you work with a lot of conceptual and minimalist artists. You also do large site-specific installations in your shows?

If you look at the Beirut space you will see a commercial gallery, I mean in [Chelsea] it’s different, but generally and historically, a commercial gallery doesn’t have a space of 1,000 square meters [10,800 sq feet], it’s very big. Whenever we do a show, it’s always the curator’s exhibition which means we have a message. And we try to work with the artist on a presentation that is really more of a way to work in museums and in nonprofit spaces, rather than in a commercial gallery. Galleries in Chelsea that do this seem...well we don’t try to impress the visitors by the art pieces. We don’t try to make a huge show just because it’s a huge space. If it’s big it should be because of a certain conceptual reason...we don’t use gold because gold shines. So we’re really very severe about quality.

It takes me years to decide if I’m going to represent an artist or not. And whenever I decide to represent an artist the gallery invest lots of energy in spreading and supporting the work.

We try also to work with the artist and pull out of them all they can give. We don’t just let go and get the work and hang it on the wall.

So I read a quote from you, and I’ll paraphrase a little bit here, but you were questioning the sanity of some contemporary artists who are under 50 and selling work for over \$100,000. You said this before the crash in 2006 in a short piece for “The Guardian” (UK). Do you feel now that the international market has gained a little sanity and realism about pricing since the crash?

There is a lot of money being invested in art, and contemporary art is very expensive at the moment. But the expenses that you face as a gallery are enormous. So it becomes like the elephant in the room. You end up needing many assistants and the space to show the work. If you are going to an art fair, you have a rent of \$50,000. And so it becomes like a company. It becomes like, you lose unfortunately your serenity and your underground feelings when you become like a professional enterprise. And professional enterprises dictates necessities.

When you have an artist for example who is now producing a film for Documenta, and he calls me on Sunday and he says his six figure budget is gone, (Thank God this production is sponsored by several institutions) we need to be able to find more money. You understand? We just sold his first work to the Tate. A major US Museum is on it’s way to buy a work, but this artist is only starting to become an important person and collected by big museums and he’s spending a few hundred thousand to make a film. So when you have all these expenses you just can’t sell the work after that for \$5,000. You need somehow to cover your expenses.

And this is the problem you face with most conceptual art because it’s much more expensive to produce than an oil on a canvas. I don’t need to tell you, but production including lighting is also extremely expensive, and I’m facing this now with my artist. But it must be right, so you end up with an enormous lighting budget and you’ve done nothing besides light the space. You know what I mean. You’re paying for those lights which are rented for three months for a hundred a day, 20,000 euros and you just have put the lights there for the piece.

So imagine that we need to somehow finance this stuff, so when we sell an art piece we have to cover the costs of all this production. So actually an art collector becomes like a sponsor. So whoever is buying this art piece from these artists is like covering the costs of the production of the art work.

I like the idea of the collector becoming a sponsor of culture.

Whenever a collector is buying installations he is, of course, sponsoring culture. He’s not

decorating his home or buying a painting at an auction. These works never sell at auctions, and the auctions don't want these works.

Right, they want the oil paintings.

Yes, of course, they want a painting that you can carry out of the auction room and they want a work that you can show to the public while they're being auctioned.

You've been on the international art fair circuit since you first opened your gallery in Kiel. What would you say about comparing art fairs in New York and Miami to newer fairs like Art Dubai. What would you say some of the differences are?

Enormous. They have nothing to do with each other. When we started Art Dubai we were like pioneers working to actually inform the people on what is contemporary art. We are like writing an ABC dictionary, and we had people visiting who would ask us, "Is this for sale? Is this art? Why is this art?". We were giving introductions and talking on podiums and organizing public discussions, or tools to inform them on art. This is what Art Dubai is about. When you go to the Armory Show or to the Miami art fairs all you need to tell the people is the price. It's really a huge difference. You can't compare it.

Its great that you're so invested in championing contemporary and conceptual art in the Middle East and bringing this kind of culture to an area that has not been exposed to it before.

We are even changing the customs laws in Lebanon because when you fill in those papers for customs there is no space for "Art". If I have a sculpture its considered a chair or a table or an antique piece. They don't have a word for contemporary or conceptual art because no one has imported something like this any time before me. They would buy stuff, hang it in a gallery, sell it, or keep it in their storage. But working on art works that people in Lebanon have conceived, producing them in Germany because of the materials and the quality of the production, bringing them back to Beirut as objects and then saying this is only art when the art is issued a certificate, this is why we need to bring them back on production costs. This is something that troubles them a lot. In fact, our next show is now again stuck in customs because they don't believe, they think we're cheating them. They think we cannot import plastic because its not a piece of art, so they don't believe us, they wonder why we're bringing this stuff and saying this is art.

You mentioned customs obviously, but have you run into any other problems of censorship just because some contemporary art might be considered offensive?

As far as censorship goes not in Beirut, however in Dubai the works you are showing at the fair must go first through censorship, and only if they pass this you are allowed to show them. Many pieces were turned down, not from us, but from others. And the thing about Lebanon is it's the only free country in the whole Middle East. It has always been a democracy. The only democracy in the Middle East. It's a banana republic, it's chaos; that is, you can be killed for your opinion, but you may have one. There is no censorship in Lebanon, but in Dubai or in Saudi Arabia, you would never be able to show certain things, but we don't face this in Lebanon because Lebanon is really pretty free.

Would you say it's because there's always been a balance of different religions such as Christians and Muslims so there's never been completely one set viewpoint?

Lebanon has eighteen different religions. The interesting thing about Lebanon, of course, we have had a very long civil war, but we still have a very independent society. You have people on the beach without a bikini, I mean, naked almost, and next to them you have someone covered from head to feet. So this is something you would not see in the other Arab countries.

Okay. So my next question is, not to sound naïve, but do you think artists working together from traditionally hostile backgrounds, such as an Israeli artist and a Palestinian artist can help transcend tensions on a wider scale, not just in the arts community?

I don't think that this is possible. I don't think that art is able to work beyond politics. The West-Eastern Divan Orchestra has proven that this is not possible. The fact that they were not allowed to perform in Israel has proven that this is not possible. I think this is naïve. I think this is not—art can open eyes, but it cannot change societies. It cannot change politics. I think it's naïve to invite artists on a boat, which has been done—it's not even an allegory, it has really physically been done—invite Palestinian and Israeli artists on a ship and tell them to make works together. This is silly and naïve. I think the governments and the majority of the people in each society can work on their own to give freedom and open-mindedness in all societies. But I don't think that you can bring the two together and think that this will influence politics.



Andree Sfeir-Semler, 2010. Courtesy Galerie Sfeir-Semler.



Timo Nasser, Philippe Taaffe, Christine Streuli. Installation view of group exhibition. Courtesy Galerie Sfeir-Semler, Beirut/ Hamburg.



Wael Shawky, "Cabaret Crusades: The Horror Show File". Film still. Courtesy Galerie Sfeir-Semler, Beirut/ Hamburg.