

The London Consortium
Static. Issue 03 – Choice and Suffering

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Commentary on “Drive Beirut,” a series of images by Richard Mosse

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Beirut has been in focus for over four decades. The chronology of events is exhausting to enumerate: US Marines land in Beirut in 1958 to "protect" it from the "threat" of international communism; following its expulsion from Jordan in 1970, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) sets up its headquarters in Beirut; 1975 sees the outbreak of a bloody civil war, which begins with clashes between Christian militias and PLO guerrillas in the city; large parts of the city are devastated as a result of Syrian bombings in 1978 and, later, in the notorious siege by the Israeli army during the invasion of 1982; the bombs that have been going off repeatedly since then, from the destruction of the US Embassy by an Islamic Jihad suicide bomber in 1983, to the assassination in a car bomb of the former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri in 2005. As the site of war and violence, Beirut has become an emblem of the Mediterranean war-torn city, its buildings scarred by artillery shells and bullet holes, its people seen in the background of severe-voiced television reports or as the recipients of UN emergency supplies.

The western photographer in Beirut is confronted by a certain set of demands and expectations: as a journalist, an NGO activist or a UN envoy, or even as a military or an aerial intelligence photographer, one knows what images one is expected to provide, or at least what images the western imagination has learned to anticipate. We have been visually educated to "know" Beirut. Beirut has been imagined through the iconography of war, an iconography that both produces and is itself the product of the conventions of Beirut's representation. These conventions are so entrenched that it is difficult, and this discussion is itself evidence of the difficulty, to speak of the city as anything other than a war zone. Like many other emblematic sites/cities of war – Jerusalem, Sarajevo, Baghdad and Gaza to name a few recent examples – Beirut is trapped in the closed circuits of the image economy, which reproduces the image of conflict as a commodity for mass consumption at the same time as it stabilises and fixes its meaning.

In his series *Drive Beirut*, Richard Mosse engages with the histories of Beirut and its photographic representation. The series acknowledges the image/imagined history of the city and constantly walks away from it. The logic of the war-image is defied and the conventions of representation are ignored: Mosse turns "Beirut," the emblem, the symbol, the paradigmatic sign, back into Beirut, a city in time, populated by people who might or might not have any connection with its bloody history, people who look back to the camera, who look at the camera. Just as, as Walter Benjamin puts it in his "Theologico-Political Fragment," one force is strengthened by the movement of the force opposing it, so Mosse's photographs shed light on the conventional logic that produces war imagery, questioning its validity and challenging its relation to Beirut as a living entity that is free to realise itself in the ordinary, the daily – the expected that is not expected.

The images create a strong sense of placelessness, as there is nothing in them that indicates their geographical specificity. "Beirut" is completely absent from our view. Thus Mosse confronts us with the process through which we conceptually frame Beirut and exposes the visual vocabulary used to structure it in the popular imagination. This recurring absence enables us to read the conventionalised image anew as well as to question the interpretative process that goes with it, a process that is a constant negotiation between expectation and its fulfilment or disappointment. The conventional relations created in the photographic act resemble a contractⁱ between the photographer, the photographed and the viewer. Each party in this contract participates in the production of the image and each, to a varying degree, may conform to or breach its terms. The photograph opens a sphere of negotiation that puts the possibility of complicity, or the refusal thereof, at the disposal of each party. This is not to say the parties are equal: as in any other contract, each party negotiates its claims and needs (and might or might not be able to achieve them). For our present purposes, it is enough to stress the potential of each party to choose and negotiate a role within this structure.

This series of photographs obliges us to acknowledge the choices that are simultaneously made by the parties involved in the production of the image. The people and cityscapes in Mosse's images do not give in easily to the iconography that formed "Beirut": at the same time, they are nonetheless Beirut – a city of cars and movement, of nightlife and flickering lights, and of language that, like the visual image itself, is a sphere of negotiation that can be used or abused, that moves between habit and charm.

Richard Mosse allows Beirut what it has been repeatedly denied, namely the ability to choose whether/how to participate in the conventional economy of war-images. It is through images such as these that an alternative to the convention can be brought forth. The presentation of scars and demolished landscapes is a choice to comply with a given visual regime. Mosse, his subjects and we the viewers are free to choose otherwise.

ⁱ I borrow this idea from the ongoing work of Ariella Azoulay and her readings of the intersection between image production and the civil contract in which it is framed. See Azoulay, Ariella. *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Ramat Gan, Israel: Bar-Ilan UP: 2006