The Beirut Project

By Youssef el Helou

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ABSTRACT

The Beirut Project

This thesis project addresses and challenges the narrative of conflict that has largely defined the city of Beirut for decades, and which has instilled a sense of ontological determinism among its residents, leaving them with no agency and no means to change their situation. The central inquiry of this thesis probes whether it is possible, by experiencing Beirut as unfamiliar, heterotopic, and multifocal, to disrupt the everlasting cycle of predicaments that shapes the citizens 'understanding of themselves and the place where they live.

Adopting a geocritical approach inspired by Bertrand Westphal's *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*, this paper engages with three key conceptual frameworks — spatiotemporality, transgressivity, and referentiality — laying the foundation for the construction of an imagined 'Other' Beirut that opposes, transposes, and disrupts the original.

The Research unfolds in the writing of *The Beirut Manifesto*, designed as the initial phase of a broader collaborative project, as well as an invitation for a community conversation about the relationship with Otherness and the mechanisms of spatial segregation. This thesis also includes the installation *This is Beirut,* presented on November 23rd, 2023, at OCAD's Grad Gallery. The installation employs architectural representation and experimental animation as mediums to explore alternative ways of perceiving and experiencing the city.

For the Future Readers of this document: Lands/Acknowledgement(s)

We acknowledge the Indigenous Lands and Indigenous Territories of this part of the Turtle Island now known as Canada. We acknowledge, and recognize, the incredible expertise and leadership of the Indigenous Nations that have directly shaped this place in the water where the trees are standing, known as Tkaronto.

The Anishinaabe, the Haudenosaunee, the Huron-Wendat, the Métis Nation, and the Inuit Nation: we speak your names and write your names here. We acknowledge that the IAMD program and OCAD University continue to engage in dialogue with these Indigenous Nations, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, and Indigenous Knowledge Leaders, and we, as individuals gathering on these lands to learn, are grateful for the opportunity to think alongside these strong Indigenous Nations and their knowledge systems.

We recognize that we are forever transformed by your expertise.

Now, we turn our attention to the world. We honor and give thanks for the ancestral knowledge that travels with us and within us as we gather on these Territories. We acknowledge our respective Ancestors and their skills that guide us as we walk these lands. This knowledge meets Indigenous knowledge in the tradition of gathering and knowledge sharing.

We next turn toward the water and the sky.

We acknowledge the expertise of the fish and other water-beings, as well as that of the birds and other winged-beings, who have contributed to our understanding of these Territories and the gatherings that occur here.

We recognize that we are forever transformed by your expertise.

We are committed to honoring our responsibilities to you because of what you have shared with us: thinkers, dreamers, writers, researchers, artists, designers, and community members. Thank you for guiding us on this journey.

THE BEIRUT مانيفستو
MANIFESTO بيروت

v.01

As my friends and I stood on the bridge, we examined the map once again. We had been walking for several hours already. We had followed the map, and it led us here, to this bridge, spanning the two halves of the city.

There was an unsettling feeling in the air. And this fog. Heavy. Unusual for this time of year. It seeped into our already damp clothing and made us shiver. As we reached the middle of the bridge, we paused and peered through the shifting mist. From this spot, we would normally see the whole city. The mountains on one side, and the city fabric stretching down to the sea on the other. But that night, Beirut was a mass of diffuse grey shadows, overlapping the familiar shapes of the city. We stood quietly in this spot, marked with an X on the map. We had arrived. But to what? And where?

We noticed a metal switchback staircase that descended along the exterior of the bridge's central pier. It was wide enough only for one person, zigzagging towards the water below. Carefully, we descended the steps, grasping the cold iron railing, until we arrived at a concrete landing that wrapped about the base of the pier. And there we discovered what we were meant to find: framed within the pillar of the bridge, an improbable wooden door. And on its face, illuminated in flickering neon letters, we read the following words:

THIS IS BEIRUT

A strange sensation overcame us as we stood before this door. A door that defied structural logic. That shouldn't have existed. Yet it was there, on a concrete island, lost between the two banks of a river that does not run through our city.

The map had been with us more than a year already. It was an ordinary city map, the kind that you buy at a gas station. This wasn't our first night of wandering. We had been looking for answers, for some alternate to the violence that seemed to be sealed in the walls of our city, paved into the streets. Beirut had grown hopeless. Claustrophobic. Every route led us back to the conflict. Our hunger for motion, for change, kept us pacing the avenues and alleyways. Fruitlessly searching for a way out of our demoralized circuit. We had almost given up. But on that night, the X had appeared, pulling us from our various flats and occupations, igniting in us a small hope.

As we nudged the narrow door, we held our breath with anticipation. And with fear. But to our surprise, there was nothing inside — or very little. It opened to a short flight of steps that led down to a single rectangular room. The room was empty, with austere white walls. Not a single window, object, or observable source of light could be seen.

We laid the map out on the floor in the center of the room, uncertain where to go from here. However, as we unfolded it, it seemed to keep opening, fold after fold, longer and wider, more expansive than it had been. As it filled the space, we tried to find the X, to orient ourselves again. But it had disappeared. In fact, the lines of the map seemed blurred, and ended midway, as though they'd been erased. This room was a dead end. Like the city. A trap.

"Is this Beirut?" we thought: "a room filled with nothing, caught between the two banks of the city? Is this where our quest ends?" There must be — there should be — something else. The room, the map, explained nothing. I stepped away from the map towards a blank wall and pressed my palm onto the surface, gently at first and then again more firmly. To

my surprise, I realized that my hand had left a hole in the wall. What seemed to be a thick, impenetrable surface was in fact a brittle, tenuous one. *An illusion*.

From this hole, still shrouded in fog, we could distinguish *our space*. The portion of the city where we have always lived. Where we buy our ice cream, hang our laundry, undress our lovers, study, work. We could see its familiar grocers, bookstores, and vendors selling water and umbrellas. We could make out our neighbours going about their business, hands stuffed in their pockets, or trailing a thin stream of cigarette smoke.

We turned as one towards the opposite wall. With a determined movement my friend struck a blow into the wall, at eye level. From the new opening we could see the opposite side of the city. *The space of 'the Others'*. And moving within it, the Others themselves. We watched them with their monstrous hats and their strange gestures, walking their long shadows through their unfamiliar streets, filled with unsettling music and wares we could not recognize.

Standing in the center of the room, we looked one way and then the other. It was fascinating to witness from the same vantage point, two spaces, two opposing visions of the city, at once so discordant and so similar. And unmistakable through both holes were the snaking barrier of *"The Green Line"* with its fortifications, towers, arrow-slits, barbed wires, flags, statues of saints, and pictures of martyrs.

A long time ago, we had drawn this line. At first our aim was simply to separate 'Us' from 'Them', to make the boundary clear. But over time, this line evolved into a physical barrier. Monumental walls were erected, gradually isolating our space from 'the others', from *"what lies across the border"*.

We could see it now, as we watched our space and the other space come in and out of focus through the fog — we had made the green line, and in return it had made us. It enclosed our space, but it also enclosed our being in the world. Leaving us in conflict with other realities, with other ways of being which were foreign to us.

So we began making holes, big and small, in the walls of the room. We punched and carved and tore openings and apertures. With each breach of the wall, we felt a sense of liberation, of breaking free from limitations. We could feel the breath expand in our bodies as the horizon expanded. Each hole, each opening that we created, allowed us to see our city from new perspectives. The room was crumbling around us, and we felt for the first time we could truly see.

We could see our Beirut, and their Beirut, but mixed in amongst them, other Beiruts as well. Beiruts we had dreamed of or never imagined. Beiruts multiplying and unfolding in every direction. Beiruts that would not hold still, that rose up one from the other, and replicated and altered themselves. *ad infinitum*.

With the city undulating and shifting around us, my friends and I sat down around the map on the floor, now smudged and blurred beyond recognition. We believed we were looking for a way out, but the map led us to a way in. Beirut has been waiting for us to set it free. To scatter its old lines. And to dream up new ones.

Into our map we etched the following words: **Beirut is This.**

1. BEIRUT IS A TERRA INCOGNITA, a place that lies beyond the borders of the known world. The city is perpetually immersed in an impenetrable fog making it unmappable. **2. BEIRUT IS A BOUNDLESS CITY.** With the dissolution of its territorial boundaries, Beirut relinquishes its spatial definition, its certainty. The city transforms into an indeterminate entity, unburdened by physical and ontological constraints. **3. BEIRUT IS MULTIFOCAL.** It defies synoptic views and converges as a multitude of perspectives, where alternate and conflicting temporalities coexist. **4. BEIRUT IS A CITY THAT LIES AT THE INTERSECTION OF THE REAL AND THE IMAGINARY.** Beirut is a liminal space, where reality becomes unreal, and where fiction takes form and becomes factual. **5. BEIRUT IS METAMORPHIC,** ever shifting. The city exists in a state of perpetual motion, constantly re-imagined, in a relentless state of becoming. **6. BEIRUT IS A GATEWAY.** The boundaries that formerly enclosed Beirut have now become bridges to elsewheres. Bridges to other times, to other spaces. *TO OTHER BEIRUTS.*

Figure 1. Youssef el Helou. *The Beirut Manifesto* — **مانيفستو بيروت** — 24x36'. 2023.

I begin with *The Beirut Manifesto*, serving as the entry point to this thesis. In the following sections, I will explain the motivations that led me to write this document in November 2023, and its significance to *The Beirut Project*:

The Beirut Manifesto – V01

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1.1— Leaving Beirut

I left Beirut in January 2019. I came to Canada to start over, far from the city where I spent most of my life. For decades, Beirut has been a site of conflict, with recurring episodes of sectarian violence. Throughout my childhood, I perceived the city as predetermined, as if I navigated through endless cycles of traumatic predicaments without any sense of control or agency. Any aspirations of escape were shattered by the relentless return of conflict. The future seemed to offer nothing but the continuation of violent turmoil. Along with so many of my peers, I understood that the city was a trap. So, I left Beirut, and I closed that door behind me.

Shortly after my departure, my daughter was born here in Tkaronto, anchoring me further to this place in the water, where the trees are standing. Meanwhile, Beirut seemed to go up in flames behind me, erupting into financial crisis with three-digit inflation, followed by the shut down and fear of the Covid pandemic, and then in August 2020, the explosion of the of Port of Beirut that tore through buildings, streets, neighborhoods, and hundreds of lives.

As I looked behind, I understood that the remaining bridges that still connected me to Beirut had burnt. Even if I wanted to, there was no way to go back.

1.2 — Land of the dreams

Arriving in Canada felt like leaving the past behind me, and a chance to start over. I first decided to return to post-secondary studies to advance my research and develop my professional practice. Additionally, I hoped to find new roots by engaging with a new community. I completed a Master of Architecture at the University of Toronto, then, I enrolled in the Master of Fine Arts program at the Ontario College of Art & Design University, which I am currently defending as part of this thesis paper.

And in Spring 2022, as an assignment for the Directed Interdisciplinary Studio, I was tasked with attending and reflecting on Shirin Neshat's *Land of Dreams* exhibition at MOCA. I didn't know how impactful this event would be. Upon entering the exhibition space, a sense of estrangement enveloped me — an ambivalence, blending deep familiarity with a disruptive unfamiliarity. I could clearly recognize the Middle Eastern cultural framework, close to my own, yet other elements of the exhibit remained entirely foreign, mysterious, and enchanted. It was as if Neshat was telling the story of *another* Middle East, simultaneously magical and realistic, familiar yet open to multiple interpretations.

Within the series of portraits she created, I could discern all the dreams, hopes, desires, failures, and longings of her subjects. I couldn't help but think about my people, my friends and family whom I had left behind, back there, *in Beirut*.

Although I had given up on Beirut, the city remained dormant just beneath my consciousness, waiting for me. At night I dreamed of Beirut's streets and alleys, its hidden courtyards and brash glassy towers. Monstrous beings emerged from the cracks in concrete walls and from beneath the shadows of narrow stairways. And Neshat's exhibition offered me an opportunity to reflect on the significance of this place that I once called home. It also offered me a vision of how different this place could have been.

1.3 — Another Beirut

As I started to recognize the central role Beirut has had, and continues to have, in shaping my identity, I felt a strong urge to reconnect with it — with *my* city. This need was intrinsic, almost innate: the need to get in touch with a part of myself that was central to my being-in-the-world, but which I had wanted to ignore, to bury; a part of myself that was desperate, and despairing; a part that had stopped hoping, dreaming. Burdened by the reality of a city frozen in an oppressive present, incapable of projecting itself into the future, incapable of dreaming, the

part of myself I had left behind in Beirut lay buried under the layers of an overdetermined history of violence.

I had, I knew it, to experience the city *otherwise*. I had to return to Beirut, but on my own terms — to a *different* Beirut. I needed to have inspiring, magical experiences, breaking away from the city's gloomy, hopeless, deterministic, oppressive reality. I had to return to a Beirut where I could exercise agency, instigate change, dream, hope, create, play. I had to return to a Beirut where I could, perhaps, change the course of time and space.

And if such a city didn't exist already, I would have to create it.

It became clear to me that the purpose of my thesis should be to conceive and articulate an *alternative vision of Beirut*. A Beirut that is simultaneously the city where I have lived, loved, forged memories and shaped my identity – and a city that is different: *other*. A city at once familiar and unknown, strange and magical. A Beirut that unfolds simultaneously in the present, and in another, hypothetical, imaginary time, located in a revisited past, in a speculated future, or in both simultaneously. A Beirut that superimposes several Beiruts: the city as it is, and a multiplicity of other cities that it *might have been*.

1.4 — Thesis goals

This thesis project emerged from the impetus to find an-other Beirut. It is a personal, creative, and introspective endeavor to alter my relationship with Beirut and, by extension, with myself. It allows me to articulate a foundation and a framework for a renewed relationship with Beirut, and to engage with the city through an artistic and spatial practice based on imagination, subjectivity, and creativity.

But this project of reinventing Beirut is not solely for me. It is also intended for my people—my friends, my family, my community. It is for those whom I had to leave behind, those

who still live in this city and can't imagine a different future, or those who, like me, have left but maintain a bittersweet, ambivalent link with it. By working on my own relationship with Beirut, my hope is also to inspire others for whom the city of reality, of history, is too oppressive, and to invite them to imagine another, more changing, unpredictable, multiple city.

I have come to realize that such an ambitious project will require more than the year or two allotted to my thesis work; it could, I see now, extend indefinitely into the future. Therefore, I consider the work presented here as the first act of a much wider project. My focus, for the time being, is centered around a dual, yet closely intertwined objective: On one hand, planning and conceptualizing the other Beirut, outlining its parameters, providing it with a theoretical framework, and defining its modus operandi. On the other hand, launching an initial artistic exploration that opens a breach in the deterministic narrative of Beirut and, much like peering through a partially open door, allows viewers to perceive the city from different, unexpected angles.

I will thus be presenting alternative visions of the city through a series of discontinuous, fragmented, and multifocal architectures. These imaginary representations won't propose a new model, nor will they offer a personal interpretation of what an alternative Beirut could look like. My goal, instead, is to create a space for others to dream and reimagine their city. By immersing viewers in an unbounded and uncharted Beirut, I hope to provoke a state of creative uncertainty, where the city as they knew it becomes less tangible and they are empowered to envision new possibilities and explore new realities.

The thesis project will be titled *The Beirut Project*, as it evokes a city of Beirut that projects itself into other dimensions, parallel realities, and future times.

1.5 – Thesis questions

The project will ask how it is possible, while honoring the city as it is and has been, to record an alternative history, to remap and re-world a Beirut that is other than the one that is in a

constant state of conflict; how to reflect a multiplicity of existing and parallel Beiruts that can converge and diverge from one another; how to dislodge conflict as the axis of the city's meaning and purpose; and to discover, create and ultimately to live other realities in the city. In other words, can we, by experiencing familiar spaces as unfamiliar and new, as heterotopic and multiple, disrupt the apparently immutable cycle of conflict that we have been led to believe is our destiny?

1.6 — Thesis framework

1.6.1 — Phenomenology

Phenomenology serves as a response to one of the initial questions posed in this thesis, which revolves around the problematic of addressing, and potentially transforming, the ontology of an entire community —specifically, that of the inhabitants of an entire city. Phenomenology asserts that our ontology, our way of being in the world, is connected to our situatedness in space; we exist in spaces, our existence depends on them, and they shape our being and relationships with our environment (Mulhall). By altering the way the inhabitants of Beirut perceive their city, by presenting a vision of the city that remains Beirut but oriented otherwise, this thesis hopes to promote shifts in viewers' self-perception, their understanding of who they are, their dreams, their hopes, and their place in the world.

1.6.2 — Heterotopia

Foucault's influence pervades every part of this thesis, as I have been profoundly shaped as a space-maker and artist by his ideas. In particular, I would like to emphasize my reliance on Foucault's definition of a Heterotopia as a "counter-site", which can be understood as "… a kind of effective utopia in which… all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (*Of Other Spaces*). Foucault's fascination with heterotopias stems from their particular capacity to simultaneously hold infinite possible

realities. In his view, the evocation of places that are "different" – or "other" – is carried out as part of a "simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live". By incorporating this thesis into a heterotopic framework, I am able to overlay and integrate multiple spaces, real and imaginary, and opposing temporalities within a single context. These diverse elements both challenge and shed light on one another.

1.6.3 — Dual perspective

I approach this thesis from a dual perspective, simultaneously as an artist and an architect. On one hand, I incorporate the emotional and aesthetic freedom inherent in artistic expression, while on the other hand, I apply the spatial sensibility and meticulous planning characteristic of the architectural practice. While recognizing the adjacency and interdependence of artistic and architectural processes, I consider the subjective/experiential approach and the scrupulous planning as the two core elements of the Beirut Project.

2.1 — Space and its representations

This section addresses matters of space and its representation, drawing from Henri Lefebvre's 1974 book, *The Production of Space*; a book that, as the geographer Edward Soja describes it, is "arguably the most important book ever written about the social and historical significance of human spatiality and the particular powers of the spatial imagination" (Soja 8). Lefebvre, in his magnum opus, describes space as follows:

> Just as white light, though uniform in appearance, may be broken down into a spectrum, space likewise decomposes when subjected to analysis; in the case of space, however, the knowledge to be derived from analysis extends to the recognition of conflicts internal to what on the surface appears homogeneous and coherent. (Lefebvre 352)

Inspired by Lefebvre's ideas, this thesis takes on a critical perspective that views space not as an inert and totalizing entity, but rather in motion, simultaneously "whole and broken", "global and fragmented" (356), and encompassing three spatial modalities: perceived space, conceived space, and lived space:

> It is not, therefore, as though one had global (or conceived) space to one side and fragmented (or lived) space to the other— rather as one might have an intact glass here and a broken glass or mirror over there. For space 'is' whole and broken, global and fragmented, at one and the same time. Just as it is at once conceived, perceived, and directly lived. (356)

In Lefebvre's theory, the perceived space is the concrete space that emerges from "the spatial practice of a society"(38); the conceived space is the space of abstract representations and plans created by scientists, planners, urbanists, and others (38); and the lived space is the "space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols"(39), which is the space of the

subjective experience of the individuals. Lefebvre describes the relationship of the perceived-conceived-lived spaces as a conceptual 'triad', as it functions as a "trinity"— as a "three element" relationship, "and not two"— where the third element breaks down the tensions and the contradictions between the first two (39).

The target-space of the present thesis is Lefebvre's lived space. It is in this particular space, shaped by imagination and subjectivity, that the prevailing perceptions of Beirut are located, and could therefore be altered. However, for this change to take place, it would have to be implemented through at least one of the other two spaces of the triad: perceived and the conceived spaces. The thesis also recognizes that changing the perceived space of Beirut *per se* is beyond its scope; it is not possible to change the organization of the urban landscape of the city. Such space is created over time, and gradually taken over by a society (38). Consequently, the space where there is leeway, room to operate or bend, is in the conceived spaces, which encompass the representations of the city: By reshaping how space is conceptualized — or *conceived of* — we can indirectly influence the actual experience of inhabiting that space. This transformation would take place through the subjective, lived encounters — with both real and imagined spaces — of the individuals who have been exposed to the work and for whom it lingered in memory, dreams, or thought.

Consequently, the Beirut Project will operate <u>from </u>the level of Lefebvre's conceived space. The Beirut project acknowledges the performative potentialities of representation, advocating for a re-presentation of the city, aimed at opening new spaces of imagination and subjectivity, countering the long-engrained perceptions of hopelessness.

2.2 — Chrono-political context

In this section, I will briefly discuss the general chrono-political context of Lebanon, and the city of Beirut in particular — a city that has been divided many times over. First, a note on the title of this paragraph, the *Chrono-political* context. The expected title might have been

Geopolitical context, as this thesis engages with the impact of wars and politics on the geography of Beirut, both at the human and the physical levels. However, emphasizing the Chrono-political rather than the Geopolitical allows to underscore the weight – the primacy – of time, of history, in generating the impression of determinism that pervades Beiruti consciousness, and subjugates the spaces of the city.

The following demonstration is derived from the book *For the War yet to Come: Planning Beirut's Frontiers*: its author, Hiba Bou Akar, engages with Beirut as a divided and contested city, highlighting the intertwined relationship between the repeated conflicts and the mechanisms of spatial segregation. On the impact of historical time, Bou Akar argues that:

> Even during the darkest days of the civil war in Lebanon, officials and spatial experts were still drawing and imagining a future of peace, order, and prosperity. However, gradually, in the years following the civil war, this expected future became less about peace and more about the inevitability of future conflict. This shift in perception has been informed by past experience, and by a sense that there can be no end to the many conflicts that now define the larger Middle East (9).

The central claim of Bou Akar's book is that as the country has been repeatedly devastated by ongoing cycles of conflict and predicaments, Beirut's spatial practices have gradually integrated a distinct logic: "the logic of the war to come" (7). She demonstrates how during the civil war of 1975-1993, the city's spaces were developed or adapted in response to the conflicts of the moment (9), a practice that continued after the war, in anticipation of future conflicts (177).

Bou Akar explores how the reality of the city and its inhabitants is caught in a double gridlock: a temporal gridlock involving a present time from which the future is exclusively envisioned as a continuous succession of violent conflicts; and a resulting spatial gridlock, produced by the continual articulation of the city's territories into demarcation lines and borders of future wars (7). This understanding of a closed space and a closed time is produced by a specific perception of historical time. By a merciless timeline of dates and events, punctuated by

stories of dazzling victories and bloody defeats, with their cohorts of heroes and martyrs. These stories are as uncompromising as they are inescapable. Unless we consider that... *time is relative*.

In response to this impasse, we propose that the Beirut Project be grounded in a spatio-temporal perception that addresses space and time as two relative entities, thus escaping from a monological perception of history. Our aim will be to create a new shift in perception, by opposing Beirut to other Beiruts, emerging from different possible spacetimes. This approach will be contextualized methodologically below (paragraphs 2.4 and 2.7).

2.3 — The border of otherness

Growing up in Beirut, our reality was defined by linear formations. No matter which part of the city we were in, *the lines* — walls, barricades, boundaries, limits, borders, and frontiers — were always there, watching over our space. These lines were the product of time; they were its outcome, its materialization. And as history unfolded, they kept growing higher, stronger, and sharper, becoming as unforgiving as our timeline. We cherished their linearity, and we believed them to be almighty, impenetrable.

This section examines the relationship between Beirut's inhabitants and the linear constructions — demarcation lines, boundaries, barricades, borders — that have shaped and continue to shape the city. To understand the mechanisms that led to the separation of Beiruti minds, bodies, and spaces, I refer to Henk van Houtum and Ton van Naerssen's critical studies on the trope of the border:

In an article published in 2001, Van Houtum and Van Naerssen propose the triad of *Bordering, Ordering and Othering* as a geopolitical framework to study the process by which borders are being constructed. They define *bordering* as "the ongoing geopolitical claiming, appropriating, and demarcating" of a specific territory (Houtum 36). *Ordering* is referred to as "the continuous construction of a .. community and identity in the bordered space" (36). While *othering* is described as the stereotyping process by which certain others are being antagonized

for their difference (37). Van Houtum and Van Naerssen recognize that borders are not merely the visible lines drawn on the ground, but the expression of a much deeper process that functions simultaneously across all three levels (36):

> Bordering processes do not begin or stop at demarcation lines in space. Borders do not represent a fixed point in space or time, rather they symbolise a social practice of spatial differentiation (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen 126).

A similar process took place in Beirut. The lines that we had drawn to delineate the differences between *us* and *them*, soon turned into physical boundaries, partitioning the city, and ordering the bodies. At first, we felt safe, embraced by the protective homogeneity of our territories. But as the lines kept growing stronger, our space became narrower. The same walls that enclosed and protected our space have also enclosed our identity and our being-in-the-world, resulting in a society that is sclerotic, perpetually living in a state of fear and conflict with other identities and alternative ways of being. Entrenched behind this boundary of otherness, our city has stopped moving, stopped imagining, stopped recreating itself.

In this context, it becomes clear that the objectives of the present thesis will not be achieved without addressing the polarized relationship between otherness and identity. For as long as the boundary which delineates and defines the relationship with *the Other* is perceived as a hermetically sealed border, there will be no end to the conflict.

2.4 — The thriving uncertainty of Geocriticism

The methodological backdrop of the Beirut Project is Geocriticism, as developed by Bertrand Westphal in his book *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*. In the book's preface, Robert T. Tally Jr. presents Geocriticism as "an exploratory critical practice, or set of practices" (xii), which draws on a range of "interdisciplinary methods" in order "to understand the real and fictional spaces that we inhabit, cross through, imagine, survey, modify, celebrate, disparage, and on and on in an infinite variety" (x). While Geocriticism "surveys a territory," Tally suggests, it

also "speculates about others, suggests possible paths to take, and argues in favor of certain practices and against others, all while peregrinating around multiple discourses of space, place, and literature" (xi).

Beyond these somewhat broad definitions, Westphal's explicatory remarks clarify his methodological approach, which I am adopting in this thesis. One of the main characteristics of Geocriticism lies in the fact, Westphal writes, that it advocates for "a Geocentered approach, which places *place* at the center of debate" (112). Such keen attentiveness to matters of space and place aligns with my thesis, which investigates the spatial, cultural, and perceptual meanings of the city of Beirut. Another central feature of Geocriticism is that, in a postmodern vein, it engages with reality through a prism of uncertainty: in this context, reality, "once concentrated in an absolute determinism", is subverted by a multiplicity of other "visions of reality" (35).

Westphal identifies three key principles at work in the theoretical foundation of Geocriticism : *spatiotemporality*, *transgressivity*, and *referentiality* (6). The first principle, spatiotemporality, refers to the understanding of time and space as relative and interconnected ontological entities (26). The second principle, transgressivity, focuses on "a characteristic element of contemporary space: its capacity for mobility or movement" (6), and its ability to constantly transgress the traditional norms, limits, and structures (42). And the third, referentiality, "refers to the relations between reality and fiction, between the spaces of the world and the spaces in the text" (6).

All of these principles, crucially, are modes of uncertainty:
An uncertainty in the "perception of historical time" (13); an uncertainty of the established norms and boundaries (41-47); an uncertainty regarding "the distinction between real space and represented or transposed space" (84); and an uncertainty about the separation between the world of reality and the world of fiction (3-4).

The Beirut Project thrives on this uncertainty. Adopting Geocriticism as a methodological framework, it places Beirut in an uncertain geography that blurs the perception of the city of reality, of history. In this newfound indeterminacy, a vibrant spatiality is born, providing a space to contemplate, speculate, imagine, dream, and construct another Beirut.

2.5 — The fog of liminality

One of the challenges of this thesis was to define the factor of alterity of the other Beirut, to define the specific component that the Beirut Project needs to alter, or shift, for the city of Beirut to be perceived otherwise than its present reality as constantly, hopelessly, immersed in its cycles of discord. To address this issue, we have already established (section 2.3) the central role played by the border of otherness, which shapes and delimits the relationship with otherness, in the repeated conflicts in Lebanon. In this section, we will consider how the Beirut Project approaches the city of Beirut from a liminal perspective, blurring the boundaries between identities, and further blurring the geographic and territorial markers. This section also builds on Geocriticism's skeptical uncertainty toward established norms and boundaries, discussed in section 2.4 above.

Borders, as noted previously (2.3), are not to be understood as an absolute given, but rather as a construct — which carry with them the potential to be de-constructed, altered, and transgressed. Examining the etymology of the word transgress, deriving from the Latin *transgredi* (to cross or go over, as in a threshold) Bertrand Westphal discusses the meaning that the threshold held for the Romans:

> [For the Romans], the threshold itself was seen in two different ways: it was a *limes*, or boundary line, intended to make one stop, but it was also a *limen*, or porous border, intended to be crossed (42).

Westphal defines the state of liminality as corresponding to the threshold (*limen*), which assumes unrestricted passages between both sides of the border (98). However, he then moves on to

discuss the Janus-faced characteristics of the threshold without providing a clear and definitive definition for the state of liminality. For methodological clarity, I will provide my own interpretation of the liminal state, which involves being situated at a spatial threshold that is simultaneously a *limes*, and a *limen*— an impenetrable barrier, and a permeable boundary.

This thesis proposes to immerse the city of Beirut in a state of liminality, which we like to imagine as a kind of perpetual fog, blurring the border of otherness, and creating a state of confusion between *us* and *them*, between *here* and *there*. This liminal state also affects the boundaries between the real and the fictional, as well as between reality and alternate realities, discussed in sections 2.6 and 2.7 below.

2.6 — Heterotopic interferences

Discussing the different patterns of referentiality that inform and condition the ways we experience reality in relation to fiction, and vice versa, Bertrand Westphal cites moments of "heterotopic interference" or blurring, during which "the connection between reality and fiction becomes precarious" (104). He cites the example of the Italian novel *Bastogne*, where the author superimposes the Italian city of Bologna on the French city of Nice. Throughout the book, the spaces of the two cities are intermingled and blurred in a narrative and temporal ambiguity. Even the title of the novel — Bastogne, a town located in Belgium — adds to this state of confusion (104).

This example has much in common with the Beirut project. In my mind, the 'other' Beirut should in no way erase or substitute the existing city; the intention is not to replace a static reality with another reality that could become just as static or rigid. On the contrary, the aim of the Beirut project is to overlay — to project — another Beirut onto the city we know, and in so doing to induce a creative ambiguity that questions our given certainties.

One of my sources of inspiration for the Beirut Project is *Les Cités Obscures* — The Obscure Cities — a Franco-Belgian series of comic strips created by Benoit Peeters and François

Schuiten. *Les Cités Obscures* depicts a world parallel to our own, with its own chronology, cartography and structures of knowledge, and which is at the same time heavily inspired by real-world cities and spaces, and individuals — the novelist Jules Vernes and the architect Victor Horta, among them — as travelers between both worlds: the real and the imaginary. My interest in *Les Cités Obscures*, aside from the fantastical aspects of the construction of an imaginary world, lies in the fact that they place fiction at the heart of reality — and, especially, in the space of reality. Peeters' and Schuitens' work is primarily concerned with issues of spatiality and architecture. One of the major cities of *Les Cités Obscures* is the city of "Brüsel", which bears several connections to the real-world city of Brussels. According to the authors, both cities are connected by a series of crossing points, including in the *Palais des Trois Pouvoirs* — a replica of Brussels' main courthouse—, in the *Porte de Hal* metro station, and in the *rue Marché-au-charbon*, all located in the 'real' Brussels (Peeters and Schuiten).

Through the creation of these crossing points, Peeters and Schuiten introduce a portion of the *Cites Obscures*' fictional world into the real world. And this intrusion can be felt, for example, in Brussels upon walking by the mural *Le passage* — the passage — located in *rue du Marché-au-charbon*. *Le passage* is a *trompe l'oeil* perspective view, drawn on a street wall designed by Peeters and Schuiten, and representing a passageway to the *Cités Obscures*[1]. Unexpectedly, at the corner of the street, pedestrians discover this wall that is not a wall, but rather an entry point to another dimension, to other spaces, other ways of being. This particular moment forms a heterotopic interference, where the boundary between the referent, Brussels, and its imaginary reference, Brüsel, suddenly becomes blurred. In this temporary fictionalization of the city, the reality that we knew becomes less tangible, instilling the idea that things could have been different from what they are.

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[1]   Le passage is featured on the website www.visit.brussels, which promotes the touristic and cultural activities of the city of Brussels.
https://www.visit.brussels/en/visitors/venue-details.Le-Passage-Schuiten.263136

2.7 — The end of the line

In his introduction to Geocriticism, Bertrand Westphal presents the concept of spatiotemporality as follows:

> [A] reflection on spatiotemporality will enable us to see how temporal metaphors tend to spatialize time, and how, especially in the aftermath of World War II, the critical attention to space has increased relative to time, which had previously held nearly unchallenged supremacy in literary criticism and theory (Westphal 6)
>
> Following this definition, Westphal describes the process by which time has been

spatialized. He first explains that the metaphor of the line has been used to express the linear progression of history (12). Consequently, he argues that the weakening of historicity is associated with what he describes as the death of the straight line (12). He attributes this event to the advent of spatiotemporality (13), which moved away from the "strictly linear logic of traditional historiography to[wards] a multilinear logic" (17). This transition led to the emergence of spatiotemporality wherein a "temporal network cannot be accommodated except in a spatial pattern" (18).

In his demonstration, Westphal cites several references, including *The Garden of Forking Paths,* a short story written by Jorge Luis Borges and published in 1941 in *Ficciones*, and which is also one of the major inspirations for my thesis.

This story unfolds against the backdrop of World War I, set in an England where a clandestine conflict between spies is taking place. The main character, Yu Tsun, a Chinese spy working for Germany, finds himself cornered by the British counter-espionage services. In a desperate move, he is compelled to murder a man named Albert, and then to get himself arrested, in order to indirectly pass on sensitive information to his superiors. Throughout the story, although the action takes place in England, we sense the presence of another place, and another time. That of a labyrinth entitled 'The Garden of Forking Paths', built in China by Ts'ui Pen, the

ancestor of Yu Tsun. The Garden of Forking Paths is also described as a book made up of inconsistent fragments, and reflecting the vision of time of its author:

> [Ts'ui Pen] believed in an infinite series of times, in a dizzily growing, ever spreading network of diverging, converging, and parallel times. This web of time— the strands of which approach one another, bifurcate, intersect or ignore each other through the centuries— embraces every possibility. (Borges 100)

The ambiguity between a present times and space, and a book written in distant times, reaches its climax in the scene where, as Yu Tsun is about to murder Albert, he senses what he describes as a "pullulation", in which:

> It seemed to me that the dew-damp garden surrounding the house was infinitely saturated with invisible people. All were Albert and myself, secretive, busy and multiform in other dimensions of time. (100-101)

The moment of "pullulation" described by Borges, marks the precise instance when linear time breaks down, expands, and transforms into space. This moment represents sheer multiplicity and potentiality. While reality appears singular, difference manifests as multiple and expansive. With the breach of the time barrier, a myriad of entities — mythical monsters, intrepid pirates, or extraordinary machines — emerge from the otherness of distant time-spaces, submerging reality in a multitude of alternate realities. In this multiplicity, the meaning of things is renegotiated.
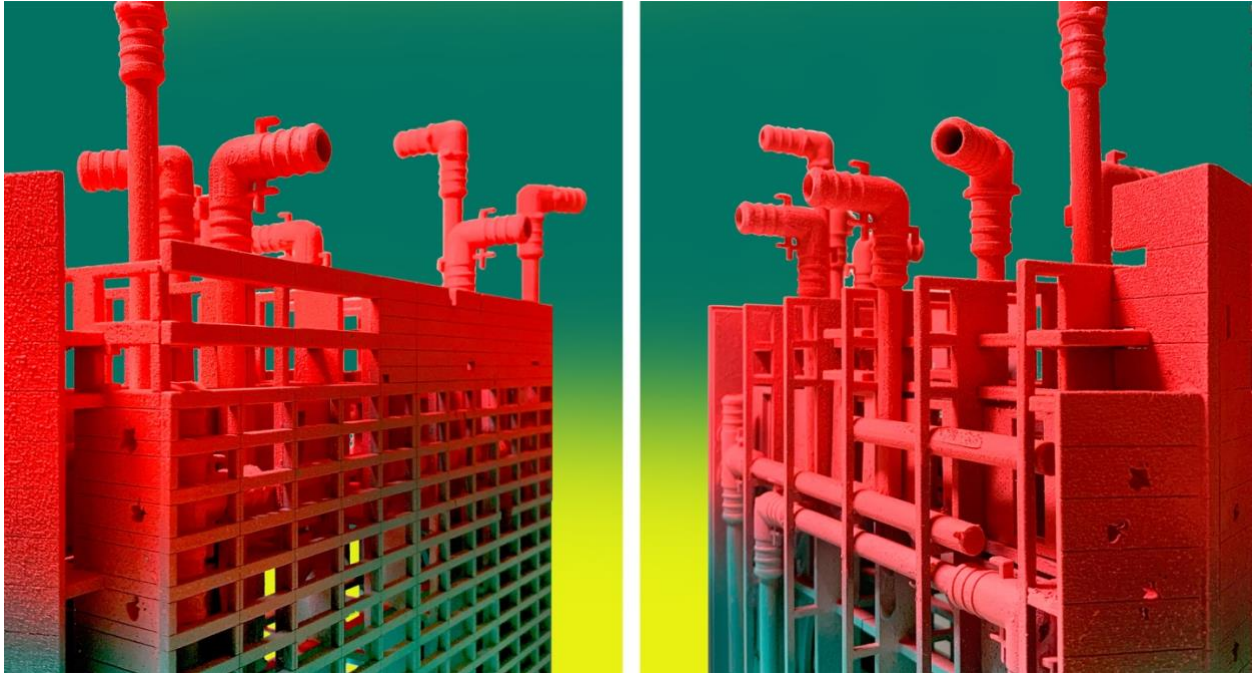
Figure 2. Youssef el Helou. *The Dream Factory — مصنع الأحلام —* (40x40x10cm) model; wood and plastic. 2022.[2]

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[2]   *The Dream Factory — مصنع الأحلام —* is a design fiction which I developed in June 2022 as part of the "Thinking-through-Making" course led by Professor Michelle Gay at OCAD. This project was my first attempt to explore the performative aspects of spatial representations, as discussed in section 2.1, and the blurring of the connection between reality and fiction, as described in sections 2.4 and 2.5, within the context of the city of Beirut.

     The project focused on the Holiday Inn hotel building in downtown Beirut, a site that witnessed intense battles during the civil war. Its strategic location in a contested zone between East and West Beirut made it a focal point during the conflict. The building's 26 stories provided high ground with panoptic views, from which snipers controlled the main axes on both sides of the city.

     In my design fiction, I described *The Dream Factory* as a gigantic a storytelling machine located on the 27th floor of the hotel. This machine draws its powers from the fears of the city's inhabitants, which infiltrate the building through the shrapnel and bullet impacts. Once these fears are inside, they navigate a complex network of pipes and tubes, where they are converted into narratives that dehumanize and stereotype the 'other'.

     This speculative approach to one of the landmarks of the civil war was designed to challenge established perceptions and illustrate how reality is constructed across various modes of representation. The project resulted in the construction of an architectural model of the Holiday Inn, blending elements of reality and fiction (figure 02), along with a pseudo-documentary titled "*The 27th Floor*," and a fictional newspaper called "*The Other Times: Stories from an Endless Holiday*" (figure 03).

Figure 3. Youssef el Helou. *The Other Times: Stories from an Endless Holiday.* Fictional newspaper, (11x17'). 2022

3.1 — About the Beirut Manifesto

Figure 4. Youssef el Helou. *The Beirut Manifesto* — مانيفستو بيروت — 11x17'. Photo taken during the installation: *This is Beirut* — هي بيروت — 2023. Digital image by Natalie Logan.

In this section, I discuss a major piece of this thesis project: the Beirut manifesto. (Section 0, Prologue). The action begins in a Beirut shrouded in fog. A liminal, uncertain Beirut, where anything can happen, and where, for example, we can find a room that is a border, nested in a column, down the stairs of a bridge that doesn't exist. We can tell it is fiction. But we're not sure. And then, there's also a map of Beirut; and an inscription on the door that asserts: This '*is*' Beirut. Maybe this door, this room, this staircase, this column, this bridge are real, or were once real. And then, a major event takes place — a *manus festus* — a striking with the hand. As

Anthony Vidler notes in his article *From Manifesto to Discourse*, the act of striking with a hand could be etymologically connected to the literary form of the manifesto:

"Manifest" comes from the Old French word *manifeste*, which in turn comes from the Latin *manifestus*, meaning "struck by the hand, palpable, evident, made clear." *Manifestus* itself comes from the conjoining of two words: manus, or "hand," and *festus*, "struck"—which itself derives from *infestare*, "to attack" or "to trouble," and is closely related to *infestus*, "to be hostile, to be bold, attack, to overrun in large numbers, to be harmful or bothersome, to swarm over, to be parasitic in or on a host." Countering this set of negatives, the Latin *festum* also means "feast," or "celebration." In short, this means that at the same time as manifestos make trouble they also celebrate the fact. (Vidler)

I've chosen to incorporate this description of the manifesto, as simultaneously a disruption and a celebration, because it aligns perfectly with the approach used in developing the Beirut manifesto. Indeed, the pivotal action — or gesture — of the manifesto is none other than a blow, delivered by the author's hand, initially gently and then more firmly. Despite its seemingly small scale, this *manus festus* has an immense impact, leaving behind a hole, a crack, in the wall that separates the two parts of the city.

Beyond challenging the physicality of the wall, the crack represents a rupture in an entire system of belief —that of a city of Beirut forever trapped in a reality of determinism, doomed to replicate the same models of discord; and that which stipulates that there is no future for the city's inhabitants, and that they have no means or possibility of changing what '*is*'.

The very presence of the crack that shouldn't exist challenges the reality of reality, replacing '*what is'* with *'what if'?* What if there existed alternate realities, other ways by which Beirut could have been? What if there were possible futures where the city wasn't in a state of constant conflict? What if Beirut's spaces weren't destined to always be contested, weaponised, and receptacles of our conflicts? What if the city's inhabitants accepted their differences, and

dreamt about a different Beirut together? What if our dreams, our imaginations, our visions for Beirut could one day become reality?

From the breach that breaks the linearity of time, emerge other Beiruts; an infestation of Beiruts, fluid, malleable, multiple, swarming, moving, stirring in all directions. This questioning of the monological perception of time has freed space, thereby allowing for a reimagining of the city. Consequently, city inhabitants take on new roles, becoming architects, dreamers, travelers, and time explorers, navigating through time and space… The second aspect of the Beirut Manifesto is indeed a celebration —a *festum*. And what is being celebrated is the advent of agency. The agency to move, look, think, interpret, imagine, and change at will.

3.2 — This is Beirut: A space of inquiry

This section covers the installation *This is Beirut*, presented on November 23, 2023, at OCAD's Grad Gallery. Designed as a heterotopic interference, the installation acts as a spatial materialization of the themes and questions proposed in this thesis, creating an opportunity for viewers to re-envision and reimagine the city of Beirut.

The Grad Gallery, where the installation took place, has a floor area of 10.5 x 7.5 meters, with a column positioned almost in the middle of the space, approximately 6/10ths of the floor length. The gallery is accessed through a single door, located slightly off the axis of the column. Interestingly, this column is the first element encountered upon entering the space.

Before I was assigned the Grad Gallery, I envisioned translating the experience of the fictional room described in *The Beirut Manifesto* for my thesis exhibition. In the manifesto, this room, conceptualized as a spatialization of the boundary that divided the city, embodied various forms of uncertainty and impossibility, including that of being embedded in a column. When the university assigned me an exhibition space laid out around a single column, it further encouraged me in this direction. I decided to title the installation *'This is Beirut'*, echoing the words inscribed

on the door in the manifesto and serving as an assertive statement intended to amplify the uncertainty induced by this thesis.

The installation consists of a video quadriptych. Its 4 channels are simultaneously projected onto four screens made of rolls of tracing paper, translucent, suspended, and floating. Positioned diagonally to the room's general orientation, the screens are not meant to be viewed in their entirety or from a specific vantage point. Arranged loosely in a semi-linear composition, they suggest a broken, porous boundary, that invites movement, wandering, and daydreaming (Figure 5). The screens' lightness and immateriality echo the illusory nature of the "green line" depicted in the manifesto.

Experimental animation is the central medium of this installation, aimed to explore new ways of perceiving and experiencing the city. The 4 screens present a series of animated architectural drawings that shift and transform through a non-linear choreography, designed to destabilize habitual modes of perception and cognition.

The lighting, using directional spotlights, alternates moments of light and darkness, with the back-projected floating screens appearing as unreal patches of light, detaching themselves from a dark background. The soundtrack, featuring ostentatious ambient bird sounds and distant forest noises, contributes to the overall impression of being elsewhere.

The protagonists of the four video channels are architectural buildings, freely adapted and inspired by buildings and spaces from the city of Beirut (Figures 6-7). The animated nature of these representations, alternating between moments of movement and stillness, suggests alternative and emergent realities. (More on the use of architectural representation in section 3.3).

Although there's no human presence other than the artist's hands, these hands play a central role in the installation. Like a puppeteer, they breathe the drawings to life, altering viewpoints and inverting perspectives. With each gesture, the spaces seem to twist and swivel, morphing into new shapes and silhouettes that transcend the boundaries of space and time.

Shadows are also a crucial element of the animation process, emerging as dynamic entities with a life of their own. Deliberately diverted from their conventional course, they shift and multiply to become obscure monsters and menacing machines. This black-and-white choreography adds to the overall atmosphere of *clair-obscur*.

It is in this gap between object and shadow, between city and counter-city, that otherness nestles. *This is Beirut* is an installation that questions this experience of otherness, offering a speculative geography where space expands, multiplies, and connects with other spaces. The above-mentioned wanderings provide visitors with the impression of navigating between different spaces, and different times, with the possibility of stopping, starting over, returning, feeling, questioning, and reflecting.

3.3 — This is Beirut: Architectural drawings

In the installation *This is Beirut*, I have used several processes drawn from my training as an architect, including traditional architectural drafting methods, as well as the use of tracing paper as an additive support to overlay several layers of drawings. This section discusses the use of architectural drawing in the context of my creative and artistic practice.

The discipline of architecture combines a wide range of representational devices such as architectural drawings, modelling, in addition to visualization renderings. Their common denominator is an assertive and comprehensive representation of reality — of what it is, or what it ought to become. As Alberto Perez-Gomez and Louise Pelletier explain:

> Today, the process of creation in architecture often consists of a formalistic approach that assumes that the design or representation of a building demands a set of projections. These projections are meant to act as the repository of a complete idea of a building, a city, or a technological object. (*Beyond Perspectivism,* 21)

Through a body of work spanning several publications, Alberto Perez-Gomez explores the process by which the architectural drawings shifted from being symbolic "images" that embody

an "architectural idea", to become scientific and projective reductions of reality (*Architecture as Drawing*, 2). He traces this shift to the development of descriptive geometry by Gaspard Monge at the end of the 18th century (3), which had a profound impact on the industrial revolution:

> [Descriptive geometry] became an effective instrument of power, and an absolutely essential tool of precision during the Industrial Revolution. The original architectural ideas were transformed into universal projections that could then, and only then, be perceived as reductions of buildings, creating the illusion of drawing as a neutral tool that communicates unambiguous information, like scientific prose. (3)

Furthermore, Perez-Gomez and Pelletier explain that the perception of architectural representations as scientific truth is grounded in the supposed objectivity of the "syntactic" projections between the images, where each representation is considered as part of a coherent "dissected whole" (*Beyond Perspectivism,* 21).

It is by distorting this language of projective syntax, derived from descriptive geometry, that my animation process questions and challenges the objectivity of what is perceived as reality. Converting the architectural drawings into temporal progressions enabled me to use the transitions between frames — where the drawings are in motion and the buildings shift — to introduce dissonant projections, or changes in point of view, that defy the conventions of descriptive geometry. This discrepancy between the different visual regimes — axonometric views, oblique projections, cross-sections, top views, and so on — significantly contributed to the overall atmosphere of uncertainty within the installation.
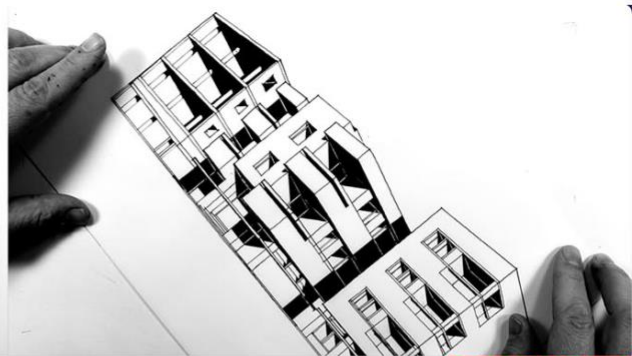
Figure 5. Youssef el Helou. This is Beirut — هي بيروت — 4-channel video installation. 2023. Digital image by Natalie Logan.
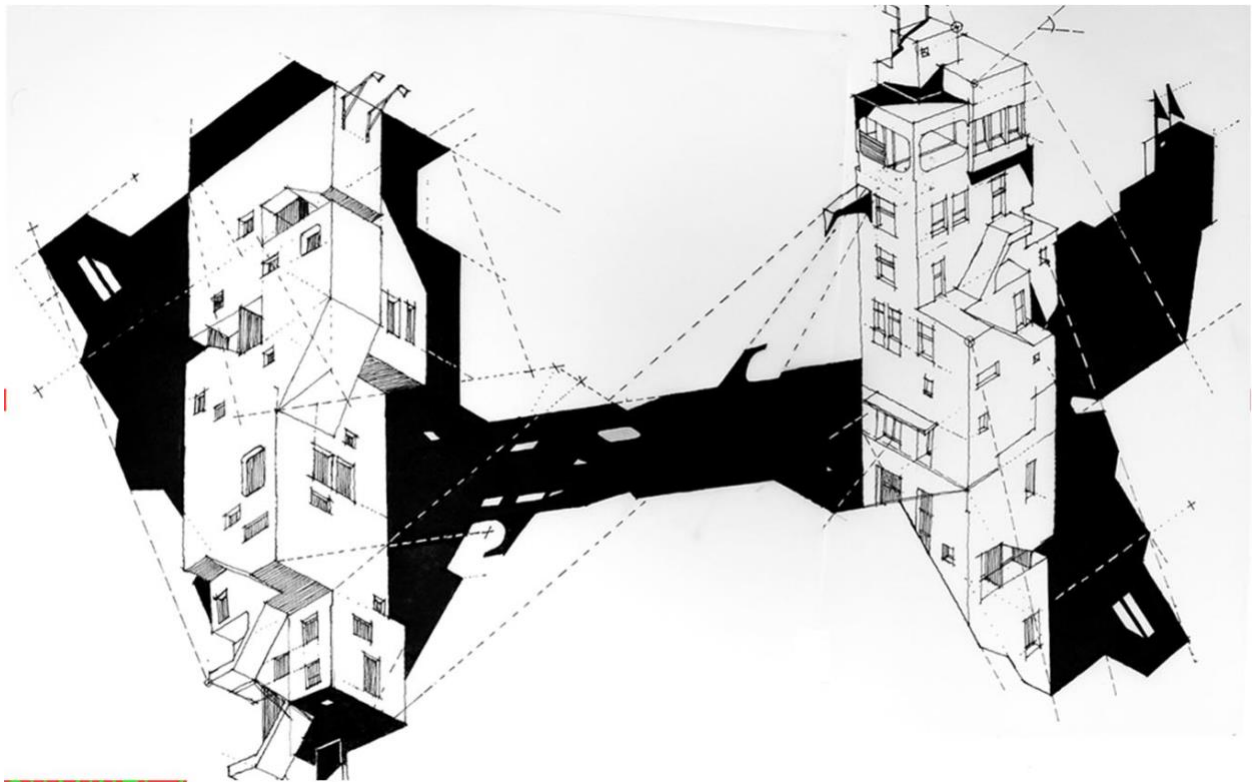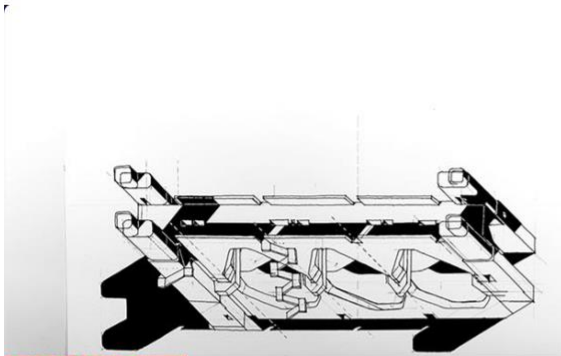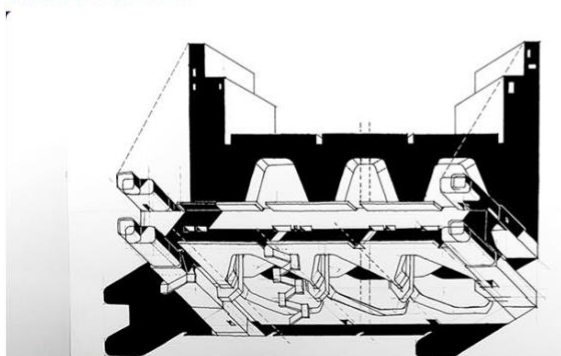
Figure 6. Youssef el Helou. This is Beirut — هي بيروت — 4-channel video installation. 2023. Still images.
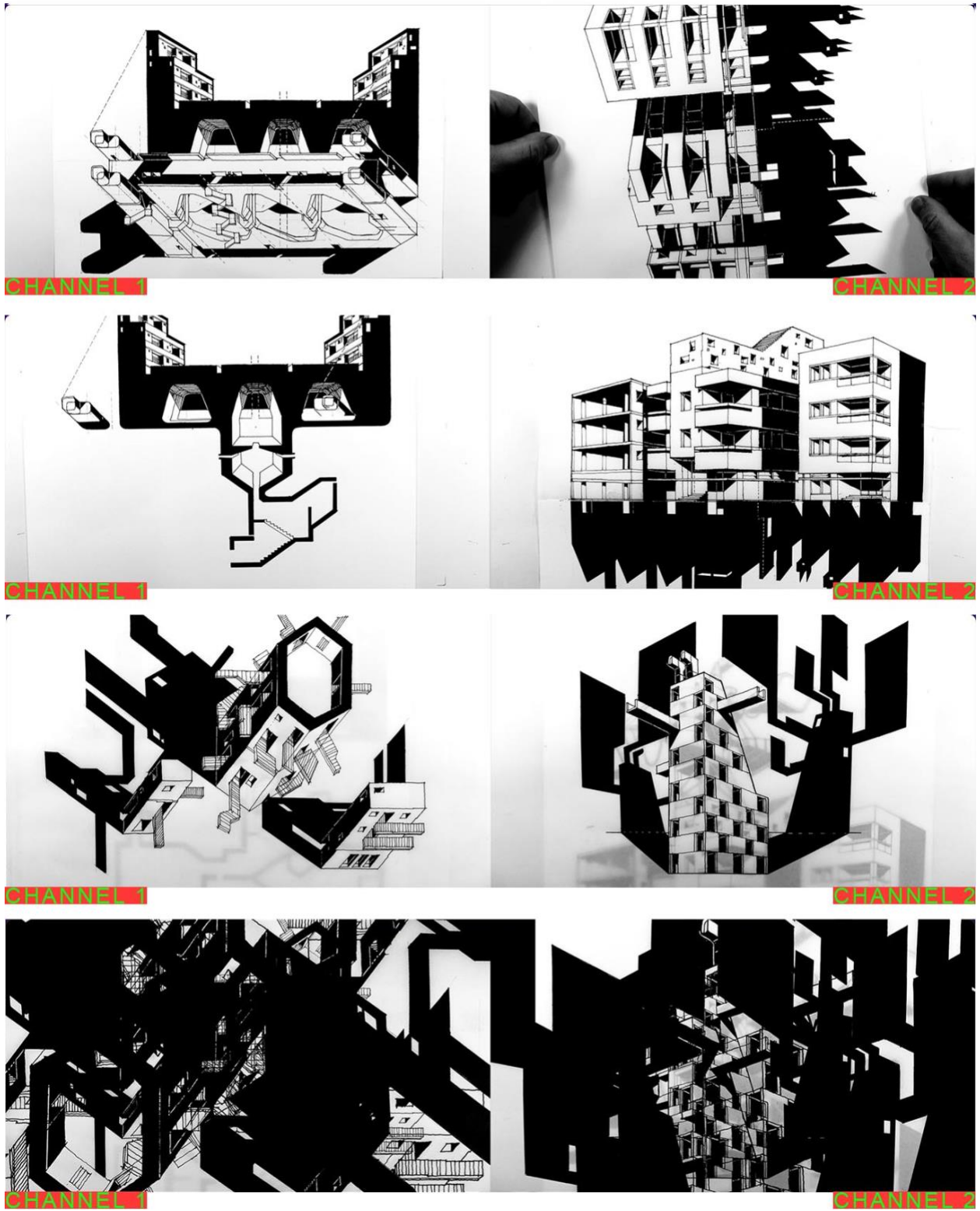
Figure 7. Youssef el Helou. This is Beirut — هي بيروت — 4-channel video installation. 2023. Still images.

4.1 — My friends and I

In concluding this study, I will allow myself to revisit the text of the Beirut Manifesto, returning to where this journey began. As stated in the introduction (section 1.4), the Manifesto holds a deeply personal significance—it is both about me and for me. Serving as a witness, and almost a travel diary, of my introspective journey through my relationship with Beirut and, consequently, with myself. This text allowed me to establish a written framework for a renewed bond with Beirut, articulating my thoughts, desires, and aspirations. However, the Beirut manifesto is more than merely a text; it's also, and above all, *a space.* A space for play and experimentation; a space where I can tell different stories about Beirut through art and imagination… A space which my intention, my hope, is to open up and extend to others.

I have written the manifesto in the plural form. In my fantasy, "we" are standing on the bridge, examining the map, and peering through the mist. "We" are nudging the narrow door of the room, holding our breath, laying the map on the floor, and so on, and so forth. Apart from the one moment where the author, "I", steps away from the map to punch the wall, all the other actions involve "my friends and I", "we". The use of "we" or "my friends and I" as central subjects or protagonists is common to the manifesto literary genre of the manifesto, particularly in the celebrated manifesto of Futurism, written by Marinetti in 1908 (Appolonio). On the use of the "We" in manifestos, Craig Buckley tells us:

> "We" remains a tricky type of plural expression; its exact referent often remains ambiguous, capable of referring to a defined group, but also to a larger, unspecified collectivity the reader is invited to join. "We" can mobilize a powerful provisional constituency, proposing forms of solidarity that can allow an individual to appear to be

many, yet it is also a pronoun that can disable disagreement and run roughshod over differences. (Buckley)

I view the pronoun "we" as a call to action aimed at a community that remains unspecified. This "we" includes my friends, my family, and kin, as well as the people that I've left behind in Beirut. Or those, like myself, who have fled the country but maintain a complex, mixed connection to it. "We" could be *the others*. Those who once looked at me from the other side and saw in me the monster that might devour them one day. Or maybe, those who will be inspired by my introspective journey, or by the installation *This is Beirut*, to question their own relationship to the city. "We" could also refer to all those makers, artists, designers, writers, creators, who will read the present paper and decide to work —together or separately — on imagining their own parallel Beiruts. Ultimately, "we" could extend to anyone who encounters the Beirut Manifesto.

For this experience of otherness in the city of Beirut should be simultaneously personal and collective. It's an experience of oneself in the space of the others, and it's an experience of oneself with others in space. Because in a Lefebvrean rhetoric, space is a social construction. And because the perceived-conceived-lived triad implies that our experience of space is shaped, at least in part, by how others represent, imagine, discuss, and dream about it[3]. "We" created this city together. We are its builders, but we are also its protagonists - its heroes, and its victims. So, if we were to undo this city, it would be together, in communion.

"We" are the inhabitants of a city that is yet to come.

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[3] See Lefebvre, section 2.1

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