



d/Art/2006 Festival
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Sydney Opera House

d/Lux/MediaArts' annual
showcase of international video,
mobile and web art.

Middleeastalentine
Tim Welfare

A fortnight after September 11 happened, my family and I moved to Beirut. There was an unusual sense arriving in the Middle East under the cloud of the New York attacks, I found the *'Paris of the Middle East'* in full voice, with sound of car horns, the call to prayer and the chatter of its people. I tried to communicate with my broken Arabic, which in response was in fluent English. There nothing like arriving in a new city and hearing it's voice.

I spent the next three years watching and listening. I watched others watch intensely the latest local, regional and other international news on CNN, Al Jazeera, Al Arabia and Fox News about Iraq, the Palestinian territories, Europe and even the Redfern riots. Everybody had an opinion which they wanted to share. And for right or wrong, I sat and listened. I listened to taxi drivers complain about how corrupt government was, in particular Prime Minister Rafik Harriri. Since his assassination these same drivers now carry images of him around in their taxi. I watched TV monitors in the corner of the bars tuned into illegal cable which began to mould my new vision of the Middle East. I immersed myself in its popular culture, from the Egyptian 1950's or 1960's movies to Arabic contemporary pop music programs. My favourite was the Iraqi government TV station before it closed down, or possibly we could no longer get from the illegal cable guys which seemed to play 1960's Arabic or local Iraqi stars music video clips 24/7. It was like watching old episodes of 'Young Talent Time'.

I sat and listened and watched this world made up of a multitude of little take-away and corner shops which sold "sage" and "mankoushi" and of course my favourite bars such as *Che Andre*, *Abou Ellie* and *Torino Express*. I loved the Arabic magazines: I loved how they would censor 'girlie' magazines by blacking out the cover either by plastic or marker, everything except for the title. I loved the posters of political and religious leaders stuck all over war-torn buildings around the streets, the 1960's typography on shopfronts, and the over-cluttered billboards on the highways. I got to love Michael Schumacher and Aryton Senna. Well that's who I assume was driving these beaten up BMW's, Mercedes and Honda's, as it was Schumacher's and Senna's signature on the rear windows of the cars as they quickly swerved in front of me on the chaotic highways. I loved the paradox of the Hezbollah checkpoints outside American food chain and thought nothing of it because for me the Middle East seemed to be the centre of the world. I loved Beirut.

But behind these day to day observations were the real stories and the stories of our peers.

I used to collect the 1960's postcards from bookshops of Beirut and the region. I loved the story about how one of the main photographers of the postcards spent the civil war slowly burning his calendars and postcard clichés, making them correspond to his shattered reality. Mind you, I don't know of the truth to this story. It could have come directly from the Atlas Group's fictitious archives.

Also there is the story of the lone gunman entering a government office shooting dead his fellow work colleagues, four Muslims and only one Christian (or was it the other way around, my memory is foggy). The day's events quickly spread with rumour and innuendo, but one interpretation struck me. A close friend cynically commented that Lebanon had finally become a western country as it was the first time that he could remember when someone had so publicly killed others due to personal or monetary problems, and not for the same old of politics or religion.

And then there was the '100 Shaheed – 100 Lives' exhibition at the UNESCO Palace, which stripped away all the hyperbole of the representations and images from the media of the Palestinian conflict and simply discussed the lives of the first 100 people who were killed in the intifada. In an adjacent room to the exhibition there were Palestinian children actively drawing the plight of their daily lives. Hundreds of children's drawings lined the walls with common themes of the intifada with children throwing rocks at tanks and the Palestinian flag proudly at full mast.

But it was Akram Zaatari's 'This Day', the centrepiece of this screening, which really struck a chord with me. Sometimes even the footage matched my own experiences such as the stills taken from a car (a drive I used to do 3 or 4 times a day) of a wet downtown Beirut shot on my birthday. It was the detail of the film and its non-linear approach which I felt most typified my own perspective. In the film nothing was in a nutshell, and it didn't have the most obvious meaning or truth. For example, when Zaatari interviews the Bedouin women in Syria discussing the photographs taken of them fifty years ago, he finds that these photos cannot be taken at face value as documents of their time. The women had dressed up in borrowed clothes, which were more elaborate than their own, to model for these images. Zaatari then from his editing suite tries to fathom the ways in which these images, his own images and today's news from the region can be read and understood together. It was a monumental undertaking.

I watched the film originally in Arabic with French subtitles. I sat and listened. It just didn't seem unusual watching and listening and not fully comprehending. I sat and watched for three years and still nearly didn't understand. If Zaatari as an insider has questions, where did it leave me, as the outsider, where nothing was as it seemed? I could therefore afford to be a little more careless and not look at this world with kid gloves on. The stereotypes could be overlooked as I looked for stories, which captured the colour, sound and complexities of a beautiful multi-cultural and religious society. This isn't CNN, BBC, Al Jazeera or the Young Talent Time Team.

Tim Welfare March 2006

Curator of the Middle East Video Project

Bio

Tim Welfare was born in 1966 and is a multi media artist and curator who lives and works in Sydney. He received a Bachelor of Visual Arts at Sydney University, while doing his Masters in Media Arts and Production at the University of Technology, Sydney.

Since 1990, he has directed and produced over 30 major projects incorporating film, performance, graffiti campaigns, street art, radio and sound with multi media group Scratch My Nose. Alongside directing and producing his own projects he has actively been involved in curating and organizing a wide range of cultural projects, particularly while living in the Middle East from 2001-04 in Beirut.