

BEIRUT'S BROOD

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777, loosely adapted from *The Seven Deadly Sins* by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, conceived and directed by Cornelia Krafft, The Beirut City Center, Beirut, Lebanon, May 28, 2010.

If evil still exists, it exists solely in the realm of nostalgia.
Lawrence Rinder, *Art Life*

Cornelia Krafft's recent performance, 777, had nothing to do with Beirut's Civil War. At least that is what its participants had hoped. The Austrian installation and performance artist saw the piece in the context of a larger project she has been pursuing for the past year as the Whittlesey Visiting Chair of the Faculty of Fine Arts and Art History at the American University of Beirut. Working with students in her performance art classes, she describes her project as exploring a trajectory "from concepts of jurisdiction to personal morality." Earlier, investigatory works of performance were staged on campus, based on the play *Twelve Angry Men*. Krafft, a former student of Austrian theatre designer Erich Wonder, and an artist who has taught theatre and film set design at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna, has produced museum and stage designs, and lectured and exhibited widely in Germany, Austria, Italy, Norway, and Australia. She showed an exquisite eye for the mutable

possibilities of degraded space and took a high-stakes gamble when she decided to occupy one of Beirut's overlooked landmarks.

Originally built as a cinema in the 1960s by Lebanese architect Joseph Philippe Karam, the Beirut City Center seemed both an inevitable and impossible place to stage a performance. Various known by the older generation as The Dome, or The Egg, because of its shape, it had a short life as a theatre and witnessed abominations during the war. Though it sits close to Martyr's Square, on the Green Line that once separated the city's warring militias, it does not draw tourists. Set among parking lots, the landmark barely registers over the din of the city's designer boutiques. Krafft first saw the location in 1995 before the rebuilding of downtown. Even then, she recognized its peculiarity—an elevated, almost droopy, soap-shaped space, with its surface mottled by shelling. It is a cross between the pocked surface of a

planet and the shape of a vehicle that might get you there. It is entered the way sci-fi films depict the access to a spacecraft. As Krafft says: "It's one of the only buildings where you enter and leave centerstage." She adds, "The building itself is a bubble—you're swallowed. Audience and performers are equalized." But to mention a "centerstage" is generous. In fact, what Krafft encountered was an architectural shell that required not only the renting of stage lights, sound equipment, chairs, electrical cords—even the water required for the functioning of the urinals had to be trucked in.

The ambitious development firm Solidere owns the building and gave Krafft full permission to use it. Solidere is responsible for the makeover of downtown Beirut. Gulf countries are fond of the developer's ability to create a "main street" feel from nothing, or from ruins, and Solidere has rebuilt the old neighborhoods impeccably, so that they seem made from a mold. Downtown's charming trellises, high-ceilinged apartments, and cobbled streets may not feel like an old city, but that is not necessarily what its clients want. Rome may not have been built in a day, but *rebuilding* a city can happen rather quickly. Which is why the location of this performance had a distinctly endangered quality to it; if Beirut is on the verge of opening up a post-war, or at least interim-war dialogue in the arts, it is also undergoing a rapid plastering over. With the reluctance of many people to address the war—at least in mixed company—it is the buildings that attest to what has happened here.

Krafft's 777 was loosely inspired by *The Seven Deadly Sins*, the Brecht/Weill commission of 1933. Brecht wrote the piece facing his imminent exile from Nazi

Germany. In Brecht's libretto, a fascination for American cities and his revulsion for the country's uncritical relation to its market orthodoxy, imbue the work with an uneasy pathos. In the libretto, Anna I and Anna II are protagonist sisters so alike they seem the same person but literally of two bodies and two minds. In an effort to keep from falling into sin, they must continually skirmish over the right thing to do. But no matter how Anna wrestles with sin, she perpetrates it; such is the nature of American capitalism that modesty appears prideful, pragmatism a form of greed. Brecht does not portray the sins as psychological, let alone spiritual attributes, but sin is a property of capitalism, a product of its inherent compromises and exploitation.

While Krafft's production veers from Brecht's economic critique, it unwittingly finds itself framed, if not subsumed by the political and historical dimensions of Beirut. Just as Brecht's piece was a way of addressing a system invisible to itself (capitalism, for instance, is understood by most Americans as a seamless method of exchange, the most "natural" and "transparent" of economic relations, and therefore as pointless to question as an irregular verb form in English), so does Krafft's piece lay bare Beirut's reticence to address the war, the "naturalizing" of its absence of post-war dialogue. Krafft's students adamantly rejected the idea of creating a political work—or a piece about the war—but this resistance may have suggested what they sensed could not be avoided. The word *Haraam* is used so frequently in Beirut it has acquired a colloquial weightlessness, meaning—in its most common usage—"oh how terrible" or "what a shame." The word derives from the Koranic idea of sin, or the forbidden.



Top: The elevated shroud in 777. Bottom: The old theatre screen and the performers' butcher boots. Courtesy L. E. Bizri.



In Beirut, the word is secularized, and in common parlance, has much less gravity than its original idea of prohibition. Still, it suggests the commonplace vigilance against that which is abhorrent, in life or conversation. It is a word used to express empathy, to say, *it shouldn't have happened*.

Many of Krafft's students confided that the theatre was where their parents had their first dates before the Civil War, and before the surrounding area became a body dump. This may account for the reason so many student participants were hesitant to invite their parents in the first place. Krafft explained that accommodating last-minute attendees was difficult. The four hundred seats were reserved well in advance. But Krafft had to find room for the families of some squeamish students who admitted their parents had no idea what they had been preparing for during the long hours of physical training. This may have to do with shame about the relative novelty of art events—specifically more conceptual, performance-based work—in Beirut today. But it also suggests a deeper issue: the loyalty of many young people who have not, unlike younger generations in the U.S. or Europe, made a conscious decision to look condemningly at their parents'—or even their own—role in their nations' conflicts. In particular, I'm thinking of the convulsive post-war art of Europe after World War I, in Germany after World War II, and the American response to the war in Vietnam. Art, in other words, obsessively engaged in self-critique and moral purging. Beirut is still a culture of allegiance to one's elders. Whether a thriving art scene requires a kind of generational betrayal or not remains to be seen, but for now, works like 777 are potent in part because they

illuminate the struggle to “be good” in a place that has seen such bad behavior, just as the seven deadly sins mean nothing without our struggle against them.

In his essay, “Tuyman's Terror,” Lawrence Rinder articulates the uncanny aspects of Luc Tuyman's paintings in a way that is also applicable to the overall effect of 777. Rinder writes: “Because terror has been relegated to the past, the past—as such—has become fraught with ominousness.” By simply bringing such a large crowd to re-experience, or have a first glimpse of this decimated theatre, and to see it function as a place of transformation, was a balancing of artistic invitation and confrontation. This was important to Krafft, a primary reason for working with the idea of sin in the first place. Just as sin represents a form of stagnation, of remaining locked in old or regressive behaviors; redemption from sin suggests at least a fraught path forward. As Krafft explained to me, “You're marked by a sin—a sin is communal—but a dream you wake from.” This could be seen as naïve, even anathema to the theological idea of sin and its personal domain, its promise of individual salvation.

But Krafft is not naïve. She does not coerce her students but tailors her performances to their wishes and talents; if they believe their work is purely spectacle, an opportunity to simply entertain, so be it. On the other hand, much of her preparation is devoted to training them to trust—in its own way a subversive act. For this performance, her students trained by running blindfolded into mattresses with all their force, or taking many minutes to fall as slowly as possible, with a chair, to the floor. The excruciating final minutes of the show,

in which her performers enacted “sloth,” for example, display the performers’ careful preparation. They moved so incrementally time itself seemed to collapse. Krafft describes the final scene, with its performers inert and a lone dancer moving her way between the bodies under a constant fall of feathers as “a snowy battlefield of sleeping bodies.”

Krafft started with a simple, arithmetical idea for 777; she encouraged her performers to transform the seven sins into seven dreams in seven minutes. Using twenty-eight performers and twelve designers, all between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, the resulting forty-nine-minute, one-time only performance employed tableaux, dervish dance, shadow-play—most of its effects derived by The Dome itself—and an incredibly industrious use of materials gathered from hardware stores in *Dahieh*, an area badly hit in the last Israeli invasion of 2006. Krafft’s students escorted her to the Hezbollah-administered areas, where items like ropes, boots, and all necessary alternative light sources including miner’s caps and flashlights could be purchased cheaply. As Krafft confides, “The most expensive item was the air,” referring to the helium balloons used in the performance. Yet, even watching the video documentation, the visual effects remain otherworldly, so much stranger than the simple bolts of fabric, feathers, and food she used. Krafft not only absorbed influences from Erich Wonder, but one can see aspects of German composer/theatre artist Heiner Goebbels in her work, from whom she claims to have “learned about silence and absence.” Indeed, the whole piece was carried out in silent movements. It was clear that Krafft had considered nearly every aspect of the raw space, and how she could keep

its dome, acoustically and visually, at the center of the event: how its echoes and natural light could be introduced as characters into the work.

The performance began with figures obscured at the back of the theatre and behind a vast forty-five by eighteen-foot cinema screen that revealed only their wading boots, which conjured sewerage workers, or butchers. Performers from the back of the theatre filed forward to the stage in thin, white plastic laboratory overalls that appeared like chrysalides. The performers in lab overalls carried small lights in their hands to the stage, and then rolled out over a large white sheet that covered the unswept floor. They lay there still, frozen. A spot-lit, queen-like figure was then introduced, attended to by two figures in what looked like white beekeeper uniforms. After helping the Queen to her feet and settling a veil over her, they moved among the prone figures, carrying a microphone, and when the microphone was placed at the mouth of one of these recumbent figures, it gasped to life. The sudden first indrawn breath was terrifying, sonically and visually. The performers, their lips painted black, rose up briefly on one arm, with their mouths open like taxidermic animals, baring teeth. One after another, these cocoons drew breath and entered the action of the performance. The beekeeper-attendants attached balloons to elevate the veil of the Queen, making her appear almost cloud-like. This floating fabric gave the whole room a sense of weightlessness while the Queen, absorbed by her reflection in mirror gloves, seemed impervious to the action of the performers on stage. The chrysalis figures rose to their feet, watching, at least temporarily enchanted, until they approached the

Queen, picking the balloons from her—denuding her of this celestial garment—and allowing the balloons to rise to the roof of The Dome, and the veil to fall to the floor.

The chrysalis figures moving about the stage were visually reminiscent of David Cronenberg's mysterious children in the film, *The Brood*, and in some way, this reminiscence seems apt. In the movie, a patient at a private clinic (Samantha Eggar) literally gives birth to her rage through a series of ectopic pregnancies. The woman's mutant "children" all wear similar hooded outfits and are quick to rouse. The mother of these "children" need only think angrily about someone she has perceived to have wronged her, and her "brood" exacts *her* vengeance without her awareness of it. The film has much to say about repression—and of generational violence—particularly because the children in the film are nothing if not fiercely loyal to their sequestered mother; in fact, they are the manifestations of her repressed resentments. This is, of course, the danger that confronts any post-war generation: that the lines and demarcations—of neighborhoods, religions, races, perceived histories—once essential knowledge to a parent, forge a hyper-vigilant psyche in the next generation. Individuation—if it happens—requires either a radical break from the past, or a sense of conscious independence from it.

The risk of internalizing the blood feuds of a prior generation is that a new generation may never fully be realized. In *The Brood*, the mutant children have no belly buttons, no language, and live only to settle old scores. Potentially, this is the cost of loyalty. Oddly enough, Brecht conceived his Anna I and Anna II simi-

larly: as an incomplete, or at least, non-integrated person, and people who are mere products of the choices presented to them, and not those they construct or visualize for themselves, are easily multiplied, and easily manipulated.

The figures on the stage of Krafft's 777 experience sin as a kind of contagion; one sees another's indulgence in it, and they, too, quickly join in, seemingly emboldened. Either that, or a single entity overwhelms the others. One of the strongest moments of 777 occurs shortly after the veil is removed from the Queen. At the center of the stage, a figure rises under a white cloth, and moving crab-like across the stage, begins to gobble the performers, one at a time beneath the sheet. At this point, the figures become a kind of human jellyfish, illuminated from within, and roped around the waist, gathered together in a pulsing movement. The space becomes an aquarium. At some point, from the throbbing mass of silhouetted figures under fabric, individual performers leapt from the flesh-like mesh and dashed across the floor—a violent individuation—until all had dispersed to various unlit corners of the stage. On the one hand, as pure spectacle it was surprising and strangely satisfying; on the other hand, deeply suggestive of Beirut's difficult holding together of so many former enemies, often still divided by disputed perspectives on the past, not to mention the future.

Later, a door of The Dome was thrown open, and the last remaining shafts of sunset filtered into the vast space. A fire dancer entered, torches on each hand. This was the only moment in the performance when a single person occupied the stage, and I can't imagine a specta-

tor not rapt by the terrifying beauty of watching that young woman move across the space, nothing but the sound of the flames cutting the air. Smoke quickly filled the space; it was the one point in the piece when one could imagine the ferocious battles that had taken place in The Dome, and the performer's dance seemed somehow purifying, like the burning of sage.

While Krafft and her crew had many ideas about how they intended to represent each sin and its transformation into a dream, 777 was strongest when the sin was most difficult to discern; the piece had the gravity and dynamism required to work on a subliminal level. In fact, since it was consciously conceived to be apolitical, but was staged in such a charged location, the work functioned as a metaphor of cultural sublimation. There are many ways that culture manages sin; there is obviously confession, but there is also the scapegoat, and punishment. Some cultures allow for the indulgence of sins on special occasions or in specific venues, others ascribe their sins to the past, where they remain inchoate, a set of unspoken temptations and risks. The point of itemizing sins—and the persistent iconic power of the seven deadly sins—is perhaps to remind us of that which destroys not only individual but also civic life.

"Gluttony" was a moment when a literal interpretation of sin threatened to weaken the production. The staging of a Bacchanalia, beginning with vast trays of fruit and culminating in the rummaging of a corpse, seemed to make a silly argument that if one indulges in too much fruit, he may as easily acquire a taste for blood. Interestingly, the grubbing for food during this feast stained the sheets

on which the performers crouched and fought, and these were, at the end of the piece, drawn up with a pulley and displayed, not unlike the bloody shrouds of Hermann Nitsch, which would have well-suited this space.

The lively entrance of a kind of Goldilocks figure, carrying water balloons in two large purses, returned the piece to its perverse innocence. Rolling these water balloons to the "cast" assembled at the edges of the fabric, the girl in flouncy skirts, hair crowned and sleeves stuffed with ping pong balls, introduced the performers to intoxication, and they engaged with these balloons in a sensual delirium, eventually tearing them open over themselves and standing wet, still unfulfilled. At this point, the Goldilocks figure bent backward and another performer dangled a balloon over her, tauntingly. She leaned even more deeply back to receive its contents, and in a shocking moment, is doused by a black, inky liquid, and collapses: a simultaneous birth, baptism, and death. 777 invoked so many scenes suggestive of birth—in this case, of a kind of dreadful amniotic fluid—that The Dome itself began to feel like the inside of a womb.

777 was not only a site-specific event, but historically specific, too; in the next year, The Dome is slated for refurbishing. With enough initiative, it is possible to remove the signs of war, to sew up a wounded city with commerce and construction. One could argue that performances like this one are a reason for keeping some of Beirut's destroyed buildings intact; on the other hand, memorializing war can just as easily enable one to consign it to the past. The performance was ecstatically received, though there is little critical writing on

the arts in Beirut; how it felt for the parents who had perhaps entered that building with apprehension, we cannot know. The students who participated spoke of being involved in something so much bigger than they had imagined. Perhaps performance art, because it has not been touched by the preceding generation, and is as yet unmarked by it, will engender more conscious engagement with the forces that once tore this

city apart. 777 suggested that Beirut may ultimately find the courage to use performance art as a means to break from the loyalties that once defined it, and to awaken from the dream promised by its developers. With courage, performance art may provide a voice for Beirut's abashed youth, responsible for their uniquely complex future. Fortunately, courage is no sin.

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