



C.K. portrait photo by Nabil Ismail

The Renaissance Artist

An interview with the talented Cornelia Krafft

BY ABIR AL SAUD

Born in Munich, Cornelia Krafft, a multi-talented artist with the perception of a neurologist and a psyche of a philosopher is by all means a modern-day renaissance artist. Cornelia holds a Master's degree of Fine Arts from the world-class Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, Austria. Throughout the years she dedicatedly developed her work throughout the media of performance art, choreography, installation, film and stage and costume design which was showcased in Vienna, London, Munich, Berlin, Venice, Beirut, Norway and Australia, to name a few. Before moving to Lebanon in 2009, she taught at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna, and is still continuing her work in Lebanon as well as Europe. Krafft has taken part in multiple international artist residencies, has been awarded numerous grants for her academic work, and was nominated for the 2014 AUB Teaching Excellence Award. Krafft's performances and choreographies are generally mute and often explore natural or deserted urban spaces as a stage.

Cornelia has been based in Beirut since 2009 where she held the position of assistant professor of Fine Arts at the prestigious American University of Beirut. She has been highly acknowledged by the field experts for her strong contribution in nurturing young talents and cultivating contemporary art by being the first to introduce and implement performance art in the region. The first edition of Krafft's book: "MUTE MOVEMENTS-a performance art journey through Beirut 2009-2014" was launched this March. It documents the extraordinary

collective work of over 180 students, alumni and professional artists under her conduction. "Most people have only very little idea about the strong artistic talents of young people in Lebanon," she said. "This book for me is a silent embrace of the whole journey and hopefully will become a platform to build upon in the future."

The tangible patriarchal scene in Lebanon as well as in the neighboring countries, has inspired her to direct and choreograph "Salome Versus Bluebeard", which is a combination of Oscar Wilde's "Salome" and "Ariane and Bluebeard" by Maurice Maeterlink. The play that was first performed in 2012 at Al Madina Theatre has caught the attention of many foundations, who supported the idea by awarding various grants. The two-plot mute dance performance touched everyone in the audience with its message against violence; a topic that has always been a strong actuator of Krafft's work.

Her latest work "After 100 Springs", a brilliant collective performance staged in 2014 also in collaboration with Massrah Al Madina, Beirut is the reawakening of Igor Stravinsky's iconic "The Rite of Spring", which was first staged over 100 years ago. The original performance of "The Rite of Spring" was a collaboration between Igor Stravinsky and Vaslav Nijinsky in Paris, in May 1913, just before the beginning of World War I. This ballet performance was revolutionary because it redefined how aesthetics are depicted and succeeded in delivering a visual shock since the wealthy audience were anticipating the



JulianaYazbeck TRipoli, 2009. Photo by Alia Haju.



Sugar, Set, Gone. RheaHindi, 2012 photo by Cornelia Krafft



Salome Vs Bluebeard. 2012 photo by Lea Najjar

common extravagant performance. Both Russian exiles, the composer and the choreographer courageously, stunningly, and willfully staged a “barbarian” performance towards the final and collective goal of sacrificing one woman “in order for the sun to return to earth”! In the reinterpretation of this choreography, Cornelia emphasized the importance for total commitment to move beyond the human sacrifice idea and rather to relinquish a violent system for a common ground in peace.

To mention a few of her contributions at AUB, Cornelia also choreographed a performance series titled “Anti_Gone” based on Sophocles and J.Anouilh and “Along the White Line” at the Cornich and “777” in the ruin of Dome Downtown. Alongside these contributions, she has exhibited her artworks in several gallery shows and released the short film “A day in the life of a pomegranate”.

Describe the past five years you spent at AUB?

When I came to Lebanon and AUB in 2009, I could not have imagined the extent of personal and creative growth that came about through my engagement with this country, its people and my new professorial position. Introducing the course Performance Art allowed me to witness the students’ courageous, open minded, honest, talented and enthusiastic acts which have become a lifetime gift!

“Performance Art” offered through the Fine Art and Art History Department is an elective course open to the whole student body where students from many different faculties are brought together and that diversity contributes to the richness of our collective endeavor.

Our performances reached out beyond the confines of the campus into the cultural fabric of Beirut - where

we collaborated with professional artists and alumni in locations such as the ruins of the Dome downtown, the streets of Ras Beirut, at the sea / Corniche Beirut and in Massrah Al Madina.

In a short period of time, the students developed to a professional artistic level that was reviewed by critics as having international standards. I must say, I am truly grateful for those years spent on such a special journey.

How is contemporary art different in the Western and Eastern regions in terms of style and audience reception?

Coming from a very safe, structured and well supported artistic landscape in Central Europe, I feel very fortunate to have gained experience in this very unique, quite small yet so vibrant Lebanese artistic scene. Here you can find openness, curiosity and energetic engagement, which I haven’t encountered before.

In general I feel that the fragility, instability and daily challenges that govern our lives at this time in the history of Lebanon and the Middle East, places us all on an edge yet inspires us to create and urges all of us to face and confront our personal social and political issues through art. In the “East” it is crucial to hear the voices of the emerging generation and to provide them with platforms for the expression of freedom and recognition.

How is “The Rite of Spring” depicted in our modern life?

The original 1913 ballet “The Rite of Spring” by Igor Stravinsky and Vaslav Nijinsky was a model for total commitment towards the final and collective goal of sacrifice in order “to make the sun return!” When I conceptualized our version of it, I had been working in Lebanon for more than four years, in a period marked by the Arab



After 100 Springs 2014 photo by Alia Haju



Lama Zakharia. Along The White Line. 2011 photo by Alia Haju

Spring with “wild flames” spreading, “volcanoes erupting”, and primitive shelters for refugees growing.

The staging of “After 100 Springs” in 2014, in collaboration with the youth of Beirut, was an attempt to explore the contemporary situation, while searching for the spirit of hope. In our performance, the symbols of the four elements (fire, water, earth, and air), the characterization of three generations, and the circular forms were used to portray unity as it is achieved through the responsibility of sharing.

My hope is that by TODAY the transformation of violent fire into a common light amongst us will allow our collective consciousness to finally break away from individual concerns, and to work towards erasing the failed system. The goal is peace beyond the concept of human sacrifice.

What was the major goal for you behind choreographing “Salome Versus Bluebeard”?

I processed these plays with the belief that “freedom is a daily practice”, to instill more kindness and hope, such that, with time, passion overcomes the stereotyping of gender and its inherent powers and inborn beauty. Bluebeard’s interaction with his wives prior to their imprisonment is created simultaneously with Salome’s relationship with men before death. This symbiotic connection seeks to trace the varieties of individual struggles within a greater structure before forsaking or claiming individual freedom.

Which of all the performances staged gained most popularity among the audience and why?

To be honest, I can not really tell, as we were lucky that from the beginning all our performances were full with very curious and appreciating audiences. Each staging

gave weight to different contemporary vibrant topics of this region, which triggered and stirred thoughts and interesting discussions amongst the different generations, who continuously supported us.

What is the reason behind using urban and deserted places as a stage for your performances?

To perform in urban or deserted places and locations such as in ruins, in the streets or in nature settings allows the unrehearsed processes while performing to draw from very different energies: the individually set diverse timeframes, the natural light and sounds become a major spontaneous player and contribute to a unique experience for both audience and performer.

Why do you use mute performing techniques?

By choosing silence as our tool of communication, we built a bridge through our bodies to a widest possible audience without the barrier of language.

What projects are you currently working on?

After just launching my book “MUTE MOVEMENTS”, I am currently working with other artists for the Lebanese participation at the International Prague Quadrennial (PQ) for Performance Design and Space in June 2015. In general though - as this is a transition time after long year of teaching for me - I feel ready to engage again more in my own projects, yet, most of all I am very open for further and other new artistic challenges.

M.M. is available at AUB PRESS and at Librairie Antoine as well as via Antoine Online.

For more information: www.corneliakrafft.com