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Introduction

Lebanon's Visual Arts in the 1980s Defying the Violence

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"We were a group of dreamers who believed that culture could stand up to the great shifts and devastation that had befallen the heart of Beirut," writes art critic and artist Faisal Sultan in the compilation of selected articles he published in the Lebanese daily *as-Safir* between 1976 and 1993, talking about his peers in the newspaper's cultural section.[1] How the visual arts and its protagonists have stood up to the shifts and devastation that had befallen not only the heart of Lebanon's capital, but the country as such during these years, defying the violence during the conflict-ridden (long) decade of the 1980s, is the subject of this special issue.

Thinking in decades, which can be seen as a form of abstraction and convenient solution, has been called out by art historian Enrico Crispolti as an obsession in the historiography of contemporary art, in a four-part lecture series on the 1970s in contemporary art in Italy.[2] He goes on to underline, however, that taking a decade as a point of reference rather than in the absolute—in which case it becomes an abstraction—can be extremely useful:

> What exactly is the point of reference? What I want to say is that history is something that continues, that continues without interruptions [...]. It is manifested in more than one direction, and in many cases in multiple directions, and to succeed in having points of reference that allow us to in fact not just become aware, but make a reconstructive orientation possible, we need to have points of reference.[3]

In this issue, the decade becomes a tool allowing us "to arrange the events in order";[4] it becomes a container that is by no means rigid, and rather stretches into the past and future. The 1980s in Lebanon were marked by the ups and downs of its civil war, which had officially started in April 1975 and lasted throughout the decade with varying intensity. Artistic production and exhibition practices during this violent period have largely been overlooked, although there is an increasing interest in revisiting how Lebanon's art world experienced the war.[5] While the circumstances forced some exhibition spaces to close and some artists to migrate, the 1980s also saw cultural infrastructures and artists adapting to the evolving context, and new spaces and art practices emerge.

1. Faisal Sultan, *Kitabat must'ada min zakirat funun Bayrut* (Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 2013), 9.
2. These lectures were delivered in 2000. Enrico Crispolti, *Anni Settanta: Aspetti dell'arte contemporanea in Italia / The Seventies: Aspects of Contemporary Art in Italy*, ed. Luca Pietro Nicoletti (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2021), 27.
3. Crispolti, *Anni Settanta*, 29.
4. Crispolti, *Anni Settanta*, 31.
5. In the summer of 2025, for instance, a series of roundtables with cultural actors of Lebanon's civil-war period was organized by Saleh Barakat at the cultural space Beit Beirut, including "Art Galleries and the War: Amal Traboulsi, Brahim Zod, Aouni Abdel-Rahim, moderated by Saleh Barakat" (28 May 2025), "Women Artists and the War: Katya Traboulsi, Ginane Makki Bacho, Afaf Zurayk, moderated by Wafa Roz" (18 June 2025), "Photography and War: Roger Moukarzel and George Azar, moderated by Katya Traboulsi" (25 June 2025), "Writing Art History and the Lebanese War: Nayla Tamraz, Walid Sadek, Gregory Buchakjian, moderated by Saleh Barakat" (2 July 2025), "The Artistic Press and the War: Maha Azizé Sultan, Faisal Sultan, Georges Bustani, moderated by Saleh Barakat" (9 July 2025). Also see Michelle Hartman and Malek Abisaab, eds., *Women's War Stories: The Lebanese Civil War, Women's Labor, and the Creative Arts* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2022), and Faisal Sultan's compilation of his articles written for *as-Safir* newspaper during this period: Sultan, *Kitabat*. Some important work is currently under way, such as the PhD thesis by Çiğdem İvren on art production and cultural infrastructures during the Lebanese Civil War.

This special issue focuses on the experience of Lebanon's artists and its art world during the 1980s, an experience that begins before that decade and lasts beyond it, and is not homogenous. It questions how the political, social, and economic environment impacted day-to-day artistic production and reception. Crispolti called for a "horizontal" rather than "vertical" contemporary art history, one that was informed by its context rather than through the selection of some leading names.[6] By interrelating context and artistic production, the nuances of how artists and institutions navigated the 1980s will be analysed. One concern is to rethink the conventional periodization of Lebanon's history into, first, a golden—or "gilded"—age between the 1950s and mid-1970s, then a war period, and finally a postwar period starting in the 1990s.[7] Whereas the so-called postwar generation of artists engaged extensively with the aftermath and memory of the war, in the midst of conflict artists applied different approaches to their engagement with what was happening around them.[8] War did not emerge out of nowhere; underlying social and political tensions had been present since the foundation of modern Lebanon in 1943. The contributors to this volume thus situate artistic production during the 1980s within the larger trajectory of artists and institutions.

While taking one country during one decade as a starting point, this issue speaks to overarching questions that are relevant for art historical inquiry in a broader sense: breaking down the idea of a monolithic bloc of wartime cultural production or even a shared experience of conflict; transnational experiences; how artists and institutions adapt to an unpredictable environment; how artists relate back to their home country in case of exile or migration; and to what extent the use of diverse media can be linked to the socio-political context of production. Artists' trajectories are also embedded within socio-cultural debates of the time, such as the cultural studies movement. Taking the decade rather than the war as point of reference allows us to consider the lived experience of artists and institutions beyond the war, despite the latter remaining omnipresent in most accounts.

Visual Arts in the 1980s

Let us start by looking at visual arts in the 1980s more broadly. Survey exhibitions or monographs on art in this decade have largely focused on artistic production in the United States and Europe, such as the exhibition and accompanying catalogue *The 80s* at Austria's Albertina modern (2021), or *Painting in the 1980s: Reimagining the Medium* by Rosemary Cohane Erpf (2022), to name two recent examples. *The 80s* defines the decade as the birth of today's art, marked by personalities such as Jeff Koons, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Jenny Holzer, Cindy Sherman, and Richard

6. Luca Pietro Nicoletti, "Introduction," in Crispolti, *Anni Settanta*, 7–21, here 17.

7. For a discussion of the "gilded" age, see Samir Khalaf, *Civil and Uncivil Violence in Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), Chapter 6.

8. On postwar engagement with the war and memories of it, see Franck Mermier and Christophe Varin, eds., *Mémoires de guerres au Liban (1975–1990)* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2010), Section 6 on cultural productions, 485–552; Leyla Dakhli and Klaus Wieland, eds., *The Cultural Memory of the Lebanese Civil War – Revisited* (Leiden: Brill, 2025); Sune Haugbolle, *War and Memory in Lebanon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Chad Elias, *Posthumous Images: Contemporary Art and Memory Politics in Post-Civil War Lebanon* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); Sarah Rogers, "Postwar Art and the Historical Roots of Beirut's Cosmopolitanism" (PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2008); Elisa Adami, "Writing History Under Erasure: Radical Historiographical Practices in Lebanese Postwar Art" (PhD diss., Royal College of Art, 2019); and Ghalya Saadawi, "Rethinking the Witness: Art after the Lebanese Wars" (PhD diss., Goldsmiths, University of London, 2014).

Prince, that the book's introduction labels as iconic and international beyond the Austrian and other European artists exhibited.[9] They are all US American. *The 80s* highlights that rather than engaging with some of the major political events shaping this period, such as the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, just before the start of the decade, or the fall of the Iron Curtain at its end, or some of the dominant political figures of the time, such as British prime minister Margaret Thatcher or US president Ronald Reagan, artists protested consumer culture and feminist art critiqued male power and violence.[10] It was a time when normative art and the singularity of the artwork were questioned, and when forms of subculture such as graffiti art came to the fore. Social activism, such as that around AIDS, also played a role in the contemporary art of the time, especially in the North American context.[11] As Erpf points out, "labels such as New Image Painting, Neo-Expressionism, Italian Transavanguardia, Neo-Geo, and the blanket designation Postmodernism" were used by gallerists, curators, and art historians to categorize paintings of that decade, which despite these attempts at classification was marked by a plurality of styles, in which particularly the label "Neo-Expressionism" was rejected by the artists themselves.[12] It was a time when—rather than grand narratives—individual stories, experiences, artistic commentaries, and opinions dominated, as Albertina modern chief curator Angela Stief argues and summarizes in the phrase "anything goes." It was also a period when the (art) world started to be more globalized.[13] Institutions in Europe and North America started to think about what it meant to turn to the "global" as a programming framework, exemplified by the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*, curated by Jean-Hubert Martin at Paris' Centre Pompidou and the Grande Halle de la Villette from 18 May to 14 August 1989, preceded by the controversial MoMA exhibition *'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* in 1984.[14] The limitations of the Pompidou exhibition's approach have been widely discussed,[15] and the wider move by art institutions to turn truly global has been limited to this date, despite some advances.

In her introduction on painting in the 1980s, Erpf justifies her focus on the United States and Europe by her understanding that it was mainly there that painting within a postmodern dialogue emerged, with elsewhere much of the painting following earlier traditions.[16] Challenging such standing assumptions, an important initiative to take visual arts in the 1980s as practised outside this geographic framework seriously is the forthcoming publication *Chronicle of the 1980s: Representational Pressures, Departures, and Beginnings in the Arab World, Iran, and Turkey*, edited by

9. Klaus Albrecht Schröder and Angela Stief, eds., *The 80s*, exhibition catalogue, Vienna, Albertina modern, 10 October 2021–13 February 2022 (Munich: Hirmer, 2021), 9–10.

10. Schröder and Stief, *The 80s*, 6–8.

11. Schröder and Stief, *The 80s*, 6.

12. Rosemary Cohane Erpf, *Painting in the 1980s: Reimagining the Medium* (Bristol: Intellect, 2022), Introduction, quote 2.

13. Angela Stief, "Von den postmodernen Befreiungsgesten des 'anything goes' zum zynischen 'rien ne va plus'," in Schröder and Stief, *The 80s*, 13–31, here 14.

14. "1984: The Controversial 'Primitivism' Exhibition," MoMA, last accessed 15 August 2025, https://www.moma.org/interactives/moma_through_time/1980/the-infamous-primitivism-exhibition/.

15. See for instance Lucy Steels et al., eds., *Making Art Global (Part 2): 'Magiciens de la Terre' 1989* (London: Afterall, 2013).

16. Erpf, *Painting in the 1980s*, 2.

Anneka Lenssen, Nada Shabout, and Sarah Rogers.[17] Taking an event, an artwork or a commission as starting point for each of its illustrated essays, arranged in chronological order, the book promises to provide a major resource for evaluating this period as it played out in the visual arts of West Asia and North Africa in an entangled art world. It argues that art produced by artists from this region was equally dynamic and formative for laying the grounds of contemporary art.

The chronicle emerged from the conference "1980s: Representational Pressures, Departures and Beginnings" organized by the University of Northern Texas, the Association for Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World, Iran and Turkey (AMCA), and NYU Abu Dhabi's al Mawrid Arab Center for the Study of Art, in November 2022. The same conference was the trigger for this special issue. Under the title "Lebanon's Art World at Home and Abroad in the 1980s: Artistic Production and Reception in Times of War," I had organized a panel examining how artists and institutions navigated this conflict-ridden decade in Lebanon, looking not only at the internal dynamics within Lebanon, but also how artists and institutions were connected regionally and globally at the time, and how artists who chose to leave Lebanon due to the ongoing war were integrated—or not—into their places of exile or migration. One motivation for putting together this issue of *Manazir Journal* following the conference was that despite being multifaceted, artistic production and exhibition practices in Lebanon have barely been analysed for this period of disorder. This holds true both for art historical accounts as well as the growing literature on the civil war, which generally ignores the art world. Let us consider parts of this literature to provide some of the context in which the visual arts in Lebanon emerged during this decade.

The (Long) 1980s in Lebanon

The 1980s in Lebanon were dominated by its ongoing civil war. This section sketches out the main phases of the war going back to 1975, as it is important to understand that it consisted of a series of interlinked conflicts that saw intense fighting in different parts of the country at different times, with intermittent periods in which people believed the war to be over. The intent here is not to go into the details of the different local, regional, and international factions involved in the war, but rather to provide a broad picture of some of its major stages that affected cultural production. Historians have identified five principal phases of the war.[18] Although there is no complete agreement on the exact timing of these phases, a rough overview will help us understand the circumstances that shaped the art world during this period. The official start date of the war is generally considered to be 13 April 1975. On this date shots were fired at Kataeb members in front of a church in Ayn al-Rumana. In revenge, on the same day, followers of this right-wing Christian party killed over twenty Palestinians in a bus heading to Tall al-Za'tar refugee camp. The first phase of the war, referred to as the "two-year war," lasted from April 1975 to mid-November

17. Anneka Lenssen, Nada Shabout, and Sarah Rogers, *Chronicle of the 1980s: Representational Pressures, Departures, and Beginnings in the Arab World, Iran, and Turkey* (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, forthcoming).

18. See for instance Sune Haugbolle, "The Historiography and the Memory of the Lebanese Civil War," SciencesPo, 25 October 2011, https://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/fr/document/historiography-and-memory-lebanese-civil-war.html; Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), Part III; Elizabeth Picard, "La guerre civile au Liban," SciencesPo, 13 July 2012, https://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/fr/document/la-guerre-civile-au-liban.html; Dima de Clerck and Stephane Malsagne, *Le Liban en guerre: De 1975 à nos jours* (Paris: Gallimard, 2025), which also includes a chronology. For another useful brief chronology, see Zeina Maasri, *Off the Wall: Political Posters of the Lebanese Civil War* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 30–33.

1976, when the arrival of Arab Deterrent Forces (ADF) in Beirut, dispatched after an Arab League resolution, formally ended this early period of war.[19] This phase saw several major massacres, some of which were later reflected on by artists: Black Saturday of 6 December 1975, where in revenge for the killing of four young Kataeb members on the road to Fanar between two to six hundred Palestinians and Lebanese Muslims were killed in Eastern Beirut; the Karantina massacre of 18 January 1976, in which Maronite forces killed over a thousand civilians, mainly Palestinian and Lebanese Sunnis; the Damour massacre two days later, in which Palestinian forces and the Lebanese National Movement (LNM) attacked this Maronite Christian town south of Beirut and killed hundreds of its inhabitants in response to the killings in Karantina; and the massacre of Tall al-Za'tar in August 1976, in which Palestinian civilians were killed by Christian militias following the siege of this Palestinian refugee camp in north-eastern Beirut from January to August 1976.[20] The violence of the Tall al-Za'tar killings has been widely engaged with in cultural production, and features in Fadi Barrage's sketches on the war discussed in this issue.[21] This period also saw the "Battle of the Hotels" in central Beirut between October 1975 and March 1976, which further divided the city into East and West. Shortly after, journalist Maria Chakhtoura captured how this early war was played out on the walls of Lebanon through her book of graffiti and posters.[22]

"As if to close the Two Years' War, its most notable protagonist, [LNM leader] Kamal Jumblatt, was assassinated on his way from Mukhtara to Beirut on 16 March 1977 [...]. Everything indicated that Lebanon was finally moving toward peace. It was but the beginning of a new phase of the war," writes historian Fawwaz Traboulsi in his account of this period.[23] This perception that the war was coming to an end followed more than one phase, and was reflected in the response of cultural institutions. Monique Bellan recounts the opening and closing of galleries and exhibition spaces during the period that followed in her article in this issue, "Ruptures and Continuities: Lebanon's Art Galleries in the 1980s with a Focus on Galerie Damo (1977–88)." Although exhibition activities had come to a halt during the two-year war, in 1977 activities resumed, albeit in a limited manner. Of the prewar galleries, Contact Art Gallery resumed its activities in 1977, Galerie d'art Bekhazi (GAB Center) newly opened in the East Beirut district of Achrafieh in 1977, Galerie Rencontre in the West Beirut area of Watwat in 1979, and Galerie Épreuve d'artiste in Clemenceau in 1979, to name but a few of the more prominent spaces active during this time in defiance of the intermittent violence.[24] The lived reality of the period starting in 1977 is also captured visually by

19. Picard extends the period to August 1977, including the assassination of Kamal Jumblatt and revenge actions in the Shouf in March 1977 and August 1977, see Picard, "La guerre civile au Liban."

20. Picard, "La guerre civile au Liban"; Haugbolle, "The Historiography and the Memory of the Lebanese Civil War."

21. See for instance Etel Adnan, *The Arab Apocalypse* (Sausalito, CA: The Post-Apollo Press, 1989); Palestinian artist Kamal Boullata or Iraqi artist Dia Azzawi. On Azzawi and Boullata's interpretation of the events, see Zeina Maasri, *Cosmopolitan Radicalism: The Visual Politics of Beirut's Global Sixties* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 204–9.

22. Maria Chakhtoura, *La guerre des graffiti: Liban 1975–1978* (Beirut: Editions Dar An-Nahar, 1978). For a more systematic discussion of the posters of the war, see Maasri, *Off the Wall*.

23. Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*, 204.

24. See Monique Bellan, "Ruptures and Continuities: Lebanon's Art Galleries in the 1980s with a Focus on Galerie Damo (1977–88)," *Manazir Journal* 7 (2025): 21–56, https://doi.org/10.36950/manazir.2025.7.2 for a more detailed account. Also see the exhibition timeline of the research project LAWHA: Lebanon's Art World at Home and Abroad, to be published in spring 2026 on the website www.lebanonartworld.org.

Lebanese photographer Fouad Elkoury (b. 1952) in his series entitled *Civil War, 1977–1986*.[25] This second phase, which followed the two-year war, continued until the Israeli invasion in June 1982. It is marked by failed attempts at peace, Israeli and Syrian intervention, and internal conflicts.[26]

The third phase is defined by the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and its aftermath, and stretches until 1985. On 6 June 1982, the Israeli army crossed into Lebanon, beginning its siege of West Beirut on 3 July. The siege, which included heavy bombardments in August, initially achieved its aim to kick the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) under the leadership of Yasser Arafat out of Lebanon and install a pro-Israeli Maronite government. Bashir Gemayel, the leader of the Lebanese Forces, the military wing of the Kataeb party at the time, was elected president on 23 August 1982, but assassinated shortly thereafter, on 14 September. His assassination triggered the best documented massacres of the civil war, the Sabra and Shatila massacres that took place on 16–18 September in which the Lebanese Forces aided by the Israeli Defence Forces entered the Palestinian refugee camps and killed a large number of civilians.[27] The artist Greta Naufal remembers in our interview in this issue how the silence that reigned over the city following these events was suffocating, as though everyone had been swallowed by the earth.

The summer of 1982 also generated a number of photographic publications with little to no text, letting the images speak for themselves. The extent of destruction is striking. Lebanese war correspondent Stavro Jabra's book of that year, *Colombes de Guerre*, is rather gruesome, showing corpses, suffering, soldiers, and diplomats, but also a photo of Israeli soldiers passing women sunbathing and relaxing by the water, capturing the contrasts lived during this period.[28] A brief text by journalist Yvan Kougaz on the inside cover flap chronicles the rapidly unfolding events between 6 June and 24 September 1982, when the Israeli army left Beirut after the arrival of multinational forces.[29] *Beyrouth Souvenirs… realité*, created by Ghassan Tuéni with the support of Gebran Tuéni and Georges Trad in 1982, juxtaposes photos of Beirut in ruins with the same areas before the destruction, finishing with apocalyptic images of Beirut burning at night. "There are cities that refuse to die," Ghassan Tuéni begins his preface, continuing, "never has a place of commerce this flourishing become a theatre of wars this destructive" and the "streets occupied by fighters yesterday are waiting today for the return of peaceful passersby who do not recognize them."[30] On the occasion of the 1984 publication of French photographer Sophie Ristelhueber's photographs of Beirut in ruins, taken in November and December 1982,[31] an article in *Le Monde* concluded in the same vein as Tuéni, that "in the morning fog, one could think one more time

25. For samples of his work during this period, see his website: Fouad Elkoury, "Civil War, 1977–1986," Permanent Collection, last accessed 13 August 2025, https://www.fouadelkoury.com/works4respon.php?work=5.

26. Haugbolle, "The Historiography and the Memory of the Lebanese Civil War."

27. Haugbolle, "The Historiography and the Memory of the Lebanese Civil War." For a visual documentation of the aftermath, see Fouad Elkoury, *Sabra and Chatila Camp, a Few Days after the Massacre*, Beirut, 1982, on his website Fouad Elkoury, "Civil War, 1977–1986," last accessed 13 August 2025, https://www.fouadelkoury.com/completerokrespon.php?id=2557.

28. See also Fouad Elkoury's photo *The Sporting Club*, a few days before the Israeli invasion, Beirut, 1982, on his website Fouad Elkoury, "Civil War, 1977–1986," last accessed 13 August 2025, https://www.fouadelkoury.com/works4respon.php?work=5&limit=7.

29. Stavro Jabra, *Colombes de guerre* (Beirut: Aleph, 1982).

30. Translation from French by author. Ghassan Tuéni, "Beyrouth: Otage et defi," in *Beyrouth Souvenirs… réalité* (Beirut: Hachette; an-Nahar, 1982), n.p.

31. Sophie Ristelhueber, *Beyrouth photographies* (Paris: Hazan, 1984).

that the war has finished."[32] The book displays thirty photographs of Beirut's architecture in ruins, without a living soul, followed by one image of Baalbeck's columns of the Temple of Jupiter, with a fallen column in the foreground, maybe hinting at the fact that history repeats itself. The belief that the war had ended could be felt elsewhere too. That year, the Sursock Museum, Beirut's foremost museum of modern and contemporary art, reopened its doors with its tenth *Salon d'Automne* after a seven-year interruption, all three opening statements in the salon catalogue emphasizing the return to peace.[33]

Peace was not to last. The war of the mountains between Druze and Christian forces ensued in 1982/1983. This was followed by what has been considered the fourth phase of the war, dominated by the internal wars of the mid to late 1980s—what Picard calls "the reign of the militias (December 1985–September 1988),"[34] including the war of the camps between Palestinian and Shiite forces supported by Syria from 1985 to 1987.[35] The fifth phase is marked by the intra-Christian wars of 1988 to 1990, which included Michel Aoun's war with Samir Ja'ja's Lebanese Forces and the Syrian army in 1989/1990. This last phase once again included heavy bombardment of Beirut. In the interview with Greta Naufal, the artist remembers how this was the only time she had to make use of the shelter in her building, producing beautiful works inspired by Pina Bausch's Café Müller. This period also saw two exhibitions of Lebanese art in London. *Contemporary Lebanese Artists*, which drew attention to the situation of Lebanon's artists and supported them during hardship, was organized at Kufa Gallery in 1988 and documented in the transcript of a roundtable in this issue. *Lebanon, The Artist's View* was a large-scale effort organized by the British-Lebanese Association at the Barbican Centre in London in 1989 before travelling to the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris later that year.[36] At a moment of peace, back in Beirut, cultural activist Janine Rubeiz and comic artist George Khoury organized the remarkable exhibition *Beirut Tabaan* (Beirut, of course) in 1989, bringing together artists from across generations, artistic media, and the divided city, as discussed by Naufal and Flavia Malusardi in this issue.

Having already made reference to some of the contributions in this issue, the following looks at them more systematically. This issue does not aim to be comprehensive, but rather to offer an insight into the different experiences of the 1980s, of both artists and institutions, at home and abroad. These experiences are sadly relevant today, as war and multiple crises make (cultural) life in Lebanon vulnerable. "Why has the Sursock Museum closed its doors?" asks Zena Zalzal in *L'Orient-Le Jour* in late October 2024, in the midst of destructive Israeli aggression on the country. "'The closure is temporary,' affirms the director of the Beiruti institution, Karina el-Hélou. The

32. Frédéric Edelmann, "Stades de la destruction," *Le Monde*, 19 April 1984.

33. Opening statements were given by Chafic Sardouk, *mutawalli* of the museum and president of Beirut's municipality, Victor Cassir, president of the museum committee, and Loutfalla Melki, curator of the museum. *X^e Salon d'Automne*, exhibition catalogue, Beirut, Sursock Museum, 20 December 1982–20 January 1983 (Beirut: Sursock Museum, 1982). For a further discussion of the Sursock Museum during the 1980s, see Ashraf Osman, "Beirut's Sursock Museum in the 1980s: Inclusion and Exclusion in a Decade of Conflict," *Manazir Journal* 7 (2025): 57–82, https://doi.org/10.36950/manazir.2025.7.3.

34. Picard, "La guerre civile au Liban."

35. de Clerck and Malsagne, *Le Liban en guerre*, 81–86; Haugbolle, "The Historiography and the Memory of the Lebanese Civil War."

36. Extensive catalogues were published for both iterations of this exhibition. See The British Lebanese Association, *Lebanon, The Artist's View: 200 Years of Lebanese Painting*, exhibition catalogue, London, Concours Gallery, Barbican Centre, 18 April–2 June 1989 (London: Quartet, 1989); Liban Culture, *Liban, Le regard des peintres: 200 ans de peinture libanaise*, exhibition catalogue, Paris, Institut du Monde Arabe, 5 October–5 November 1989 (Paris: Institut du Monde Arabe, 1989).

National Museum and several gallerists continue their activities for the moment."[37] By considering how artists and institutions navigated the troubled times of the 1980s, we are given a reference today, fifty years after the formal outbreak of the war, on how previous generations have tried to defy violence and coped with forced displacement, which at times has also been generative.

Institutions Navigating the 1980s

The issue starts with the article "Ruptures and Continuities: Lebanon's Art Galleries in the 1980s with a Focus on Galerie Damo (1977–88)," in which Monique Bellan examines the setting, role, and activities of Galerie Damo, providing an illustrative example of the art scene in the 1980s. Galerie Damo was launched in 1977 in the aftermath of the two-year war. Its portfolio primarily comprised artists who had been active in the decades preceding the war and who were largely considered part of the established Lebanese artistic canon. While focusing on the continuities regarding the choice of artists, the analysis also identifies potential shifts in the artistic approaches and themes pursued by individual artists that may be related to the war context. The gallery is set within the wider gallery system and art market, providing a useful overview of the exhibition scene from the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. The analysis furthermore shows how galleries migrated to the Christian suburbs north of Beirut during this period. In an increasingly divided country, Christian forces had set up their headquarters in the town of Jounieh—what artist Fadi Barrage mockingly calls the "Duchy of Jounieh" in his diaries.[38]

Aside from the galleries, the Sursock Museum was Beirut's only museum of modern and contemporary art. Having first opened in 1961, it reopened to the public in the autumn of 1982 after a seven-year closure following the outbreak of the war. In "Beirut's Sursock Museum in the 1980s: Inclusion and Exclusion in a Decade of Conflict," Ashraf Osman looks at the museum's efforts to navigate the 1980s, while it grappled with questions of representation and artistic value. Looking at who and what was exhibited throughout this decade shows us the challenges and logistics of operating during these times, and what networks and people were instrumental for keeping the museum running. By looking at what it meant to operate in this decade of conflict, and how critics and artists perceived the museum, it will become clear to what extent the war governed choices—and to what extent it did not. The article also draws links with the wider 1980s art world, as some of the artists positioned themselves against a perceived commercialization of art.

The next article examines how a cultural and artistic centre can be kept alive after its physical location is lost. In "The House Stands Tall: The Social Dimension of Dar el Fan and Janine Rubeiz's Curatorial Activities during the Civil War in Lebanon," Flavia Malusardi examines the curatorial activities of Janine Rubeiz after Dar el Fan, the cultural centre she had set up in the 1960s, lost its physical space early in the war. It highlights Rubeiz's efforts to sustain cultural production amid crisis, and her use of art as a medium for political and social engagement. Drawing on concepts such as art agency and exhibitionary sociality, the article situates exhibitions like *Liban 78* and *Beirut Tabaan* as dynamic, relational events that transcended traditional art displays to foster col-

37. Zena Zalzal, "Pourqoui le musée Sursock a-t-il fermé ses portes?," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 30 October 2024.

38. Fadi Barrage diary entries, 19 July 1983 and 25 July 1983. For a discussion of Barrage and his diaries, see Nadia von Maltzahn, "Fadi Barrage, an Artist's Diary: 'To Think Things Out in Painting'," *Manazir Journal* 7 (2025): 160–89, https://doi.org/10.36950/manazir.2025.7.7.

lective memory and critical discourse. Due to the lack of functioning exhibition spaces, Rubeiz also used her home as a gallery, which became not only a resilient space amid war, as Malusardi argues, but also a haven for encounter and dialogue, where new communities were formed.

Artists Navigating the 1980s

The next two articles focus on how artists navigated the 1980s and engaged with different artistic media. In her article "Against the Current: War Motifs and the Medium of Printmaking in 1980s Lebanon," Çiğdem İvren argues that the themes of resistance and struggle, often expressed in war motifs, are closely tied to the aesthetics of printmaking and its links to other fields of visual culture. She examines how Jamil Molaeb's fine art prints engaged with these forms, highlighting their shared ability to document, critique, and disseminate war discourse, contextualizing his work as part of a network of visual practices that crossed boundaries between fine art and popular imagery. Molaeb's woodcuts are discussed in comparison to the aesthetic and ideological framework in the work of Beirut-based Palestinian artist Mustafa al-Hallaj. İvren sets these works apart from what she considers mainstream art, often depicting landscapes, village scenes, abstract compositions, and calligraphic works.

Moving from printmaking to tapestry, a medium usually created in collaboration between artist and weaver, in "Tracing Lines, Forging Connectivity: The Tapestries of Amine El Bacha and Antoine Saadé (1984–1985)," Jessica Gerschultz explores continued artistic engagement with the medium alongside recollections of fibre and loom-making in a period of war. The onset of war had slowed aesthetic engagement and disrupted practitioners' networks. Yet weaving, in form and memory, endured. For some artists, the preparation of raw materials and tools, as well as the weaving of threads, assumed physical, sensory, and poetic possibilities. Tapestry both engendered new relationships and elicited strong, tactile memories. In an intimate portrayal, the article focuses on the tapestry collaboration between artist Amine El Bacha and weaver Antoine Saadé, who became El Bacha's neighbour in Hamra in the mid-1980s. Resonating with Malusardi's discussion of Rubeiz's home gallery, the importance of friendship and community that were formed due to the war context is powerfully evident. Forced displacement here becomes generative.

Going Abroad

The last two articles look at the trajectories of two artists after leaving Lebanon in the context of the war. In "Fadi Barrage, an Artist's Diary: 'To Think Things Out in Painting'," I draw on Lebanese artist Fadi Barrage's diary entries from the late 1970s and early 1980s, along with drawings, sketches, and other sources to explore how abstract painting for Barrage functioned as both a refuge and a reflective process for navigating trauma, memory, and marginalization. I examine the extent to which Lebanon and the early stages of war he witnessed continued to be present in his work and thinking, tracing his journey from Beirut to Athens. A key focus is Barrage's development of "Fleisseh," a term denoting both a real place from his youth and a conceptual framework for abstract expression. Fleisseh works embody what the artist called "paint-feelings," emotional compositions that concealed often erotic content under layers of abstraction. By engaging with Jill Bennett's theory of empathic vision and Kirsten Scheid's concept of *taswir*, the article situates Barrage's art within broader discourses on representing trauma and the interactive creation of

meaning through image-making. His painting practice offers insight into how experiences of violence and queer desire are encoded in visual form, in particular when open expression is constrained by social or political contexts.

Finally, in "Mona Hatoum's Other Story: 'Third World Post-modernism' in 1980s Britain," Joan Grandjean examines Mona Hatoum's early years in the UK after leaving Lebanon in 1975. It focuses on her involvement in British Black Arts and encounter with Rasheed Araeen, presenting a fresh analysis of key works that assesses their critical impact. The article shows how Hatoum actively engaged with the ideas of Araeen, exploring his reflections on Third World art, postcolonialism, questions of identity, and the notion of black arts in the United Kingdom. While she is now a globally recognized artist, there has been limited research dedicated to the phase of her life when she existed on the fringes of art history, often being considered a migrant artist or, as she once wrote, a black one. The article also puts forward her early trajectory in Lebanon, and the continued emotional link to this country where her parents remained based. This comes out very clearly in her 1988 film *Measures of Distance*, which movingly captures the effects of displacement and separation on the artist and her family. "I wish this bloody war would be over soon, so you and your sisters can return and we will all be together again, like the good old days," Hatoum reads from a letter her mother wrote her.[39]

Perspectives

The issue closes with two contributions to the section "Perspectives": a personal testimony of an artist who started exhibiting in the 1980s and the edited transcript of a roundtable on a notable exhibition outside of Lebanon. Greta Naufal looks back at her beginnings as an artist during the 1980s, reflecting on her education and early exhibitions within the context of the ongoing war. I wanted to add here a note about institutional geography. Naufal studied at the Raouché branch of the Lebanese University's Institute of Fine Arts, which opened after relocating from Downtown Beirut following the outbreak of war. A second branch opened in the East-Beirut district of Furn al-Shebak in 1977. As travelling within the country became increasingly difficult, from 1976 onwards the possibility of opening a third branch in Tripoli in Northern Lebanon was studied. It opened in 1980. While this and the establishment of Tripoli's artist collective "Group of Ten," formed in 1974 and active for twenty years, are not discussed in this issue, some existing publications shed light on both.[40]

The edited transcript of a roundtable held in Beirut in May 2024 with the main protagonists behind the exhibition *Lebanese Contemporary Artists* at Kufa Gallery in London in 1988, notably curator Rose Issa and artist Mohammad El Rawas, sheds light on how this exhibition came about, the logistics of organizing an exhibition of Lebanese art in the midst of war in Lebanon, and its reception. A point that emerges strongly in the context of the roundtable is the expectation viewers in London had of seeing the civil war in the works exhibited, and their disappointment at its

39. Mona Hatoum, *Measures of Distance*, 1988. Video Tape, 15:34, accessible on YouTube. Accessed 26 September 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eKGPefM-Uf8.

40. Most notably artist and educator Fadl Ziade's memoir; he was one of the key actors both in the Group of Ten and in establishing the institute in Tripoli. Fadl Ziade, *Trablus... Um Ahmad Um Antun wa qisati m'a al-funun* (Beirut: Arab Scientific Publishers, 2013), especially 121–59. For further insights into the Group of Ten, also see Elias Dib, *Masarat majmu'at al-ashra fi trablus: turath hadatha wa ibda'* (Beirut: Manshurat jam'aiyat al-azam wa al-sa'ada al-ijtima'iya, 2016).

perceived absence. Here two things are important to keep in mind: Rose Issa's argument that many paintings depicting the two world wars, for instance, were commissioned war paintings, and nothing of the sort existed in the context of Lebanon. And that artists produced works engaging with the war, but did not necessarily exhibit them during the 1980s when violence was all around. Sometimes artists needed distance from the events, both physical and temporal. When Pablo Picasso painted *Guernica*, one of the most famous war paintings, he was neither in Guernica nor in Spain, but at home in Paris.[41] As Martin Giesen, co-founder of Galerie Épreuve d'artiste, recollects:

> Between 1975 and 1985, Lebanese artists showed little appetite to participate in postmodernist discourse of meta-life and meta-art. The impact of the war was too immediate to allow clever distinctions. Consequently, one might have expected Lebanese artists to grasp the foil presented by the war to shape their narrative. Think again! Work produced and exhibited in Lebanon between 1975 and 1985 hardly treated the war. Lebanese artists treated it from a metaphorical distance: clothed in abstractions, veiled in quotations, surrealist analogies and mythological allusions.[42]

Fadi Barrage reflected on the war after he had left, and Mohammad Rawas recounted how he artistically dealt with the war from London in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but could not get himself to do so when he returned to Lebanon in 1981. This is affirmed by art critic Joseph Tarrab, who also maintains that of the little artistic activity that remained in the 1980s, it was largely artists continuing their previous work rather than innovating. Those who managed to create something new did so abroad, during longer or shorter stays, finding themselves paralysed again after their return to Lebanon, he reflects in a lecture delivered in Beirut on 6 March 1987.[43] This bleak perception is evident in the subtitle of his conference: "from galaxy to black hole." While the 1980s might not have produced the amount of exhibitions and innovative artworks the previous two decades had generated when Beirut acted as an artistic hub for the whole region (a "galaxy"), it was nevertheless a dynamic period, as clearly comes out in this issue. Not only in spite of, but also because of the war and its consequences, as the context could also be generative. The examples of Greta Naufal, Amine El Bacha and Antoine Saadeh, Jamil Molaeb and the afterlife of Dar el Fan are a case in point.

The Question of Generations

In her book *Painting in the 1980s*, Erpf concludes that the artists she presents "do share several commonalities such as the influence of non-painting sources, use of pictures or fragments to suggest a larger story, the appropriation of images or styles from art history, and utilizing unortho-

41. This is pointed out by Joseph Tarrab, who also makes Issa's point that most paintings that treat war are commissions, and that war often triggers creation but with a delay. Joseph Tarrab, "Liban, société de guerre et créativité. Arts plastiques et théâtre: De la galaxie au trou noir," 6 March 1987, in *Les conférences de l'ALDEC, Liban: Société en guerre et créativité* (Beirut: Université Saint-Joseph, 1987), 21–40, here 38.

42. Martin Giesen, "Our Beginnings," in Amal Traboulsi, *Galerie Épreuve d'Artiste: Chronique d'une galerie sur fond de guerre* (Beirut: Épreuve d'artiste, 2018), 52.

43. Tarrab, "Liban, société de guerre et créativité," 33 and 38.

dox materials."[44] Mohammad Rawas's work would fit well into this description.[45] What Lebanon's artists of the 1980s shared was lived experiences of war, displacement—inside and outside the country—and processing what they witnessed, sometimes choosing to focus on what can be perceived as the mundane aspects of life. In Lebanon's art history, artists are often divided into generations, those of the prewar, the war, and postwar. I am not going to attempt to challenge this division in this introduction, but would like to highlight the following. Greta Naufal addresses the gap between the generations in her interview, stressing that the new generation did not want to make the link with the previous generations. They dismissed the little they saw. The rejection of what came before is to some extent natural, as Joseph Tarrab stated in his lecture: "most creatives are of their time, and reject the paintings of their masters, particularly the Lebanese post-impressionists such as the Onsis, Gemayels, Farroukhs, that today are so much in vogue."[46] He explains this popularity and the return to an interest in landscape painting amongst the public by a renewed passion in folklore rooted in everyone's villages; "finally there are works [...] with which one can identify completely, even more so that for those from the Keserwan mountain they represent Keserwan, the Chouf for those from the Chouf, the South for those from the South."[47] When Ziad Abillama (b. 1969), who is considered one of the pioneers of the postwar generation, returned from his studies at Amherst College Massachusetts in 1991, he was interested in the politics of Lebanon and how people could live together after civil war. He and his peers were reflecting on the urgency of the moment, thinking about the politics of the time immediately after the war and what role art could play in it. Visiting two galleries upon his return, Amal Traboulsi's Épreuve d'artiste and Odile Mazloum's Alwane, the paintings Abillama saw of red-roofed houses, symbolizing the celebration of an idealized Lebanese heritage, for him were reinforcing separation—as Tarrab pointed out—rather than providing a tool for coexistence.[48] It was this that the new generation went against. They were not aware of the more experimental work of the previous generations, and did not search for it either. Abillama had never heard of the exhibition *Beirut Tabaan* for instance, which was held while he studied abroad.[49]

Defying the Violence

While landscapes were selling well during the 1980s, the phenomenon is not to be confused with the act of defiance present in some of the works. In an interview on the occasion of his 1980 exhibition at Galerie Faris, one of two galleries exhibiting art from the Arab region that were opened

44. Erpf, *Painting in the 1980s*, 270.

45. Heather Reyes, ed., *The Art of Rawas* (London: Saqi Books), 2004.

46. He refers here to some of the pioneers of Lebanese painting, Omar Onsi, César Gemayel, and Mustafa Farroukh. Tarrab, "Liban, société de guerre et créativité," 28.

47. Tarrab, "Liban, société de guerre et créativité," 34.

48. In December 1991, Galerie Épreuve d'artiste opened an exhibition entitled *L'Orient: Mirage et réalité, aquarelles et pastels orientalistes du Liban, du Yemen et d'Arabie* by Leyla al Akl Farra, which sounds like it might have contained romanticizing landscapes. See exhibition booklet, Orient-Institut Beirut. At Alwane, he might have seen works in the gallerist's collection of what Tarrab calls "imperfect imitations of the approach of the masters of the 1930s and 1940s" (the pioneers of Lebanese painting described above). Tarrab, "Liban, société de guerre et créativité," 35.

49. Conversation with Ziad Abillama, 7 August 2025.

in Paris by gallerists previously based in Beirut,[50] Amine El Bacha is quoted as saying: "to paint is to put the war in brackets."[51] In his review of El Bacha's 1984 solo exhibition at the Spanish Cultural Centre in Beirut, Mahmud al-Zibawi writes how the most beautiful thing was how the artist captured moments of joy.[52] In his depictions of everyday scenes, such as the picnic scene on the cover of this issue, El Bacha was not escaping reality or catering to a romantic vision or market demands. The scene can rather be read as an act of resistance, the protagonists not giving in to the violence, divisions, and logic of the war surrounding them. To go on these picnics in Mount Lebanon, El Basha and his family had to cross from West to East Beirut before continuing to the mountains, where they would eat their lovingly prepared food, as Gerschultz describes in her article.[53]

Taking the 1980s in Lebanon's visual arts as a reference has allowed us to foreground the artistic practices of a time too often overshadowed by conflict. This issue expands our understanding of Lebanon's art history, but also challenges assumptions about art produced in times of war. It highlights the complexity of artistic responses, and the significance of memory, displacement, and community. In doing so, it opens space for rethinking how we write art histories, not only of Lebanon then and now, but of other regions shaped by upheaval. The 1980s constituted not simply a pause between a prewar past and a postwar future, but a dynamic and formative period in its own right. By returning to this decade, we not only recover overlooked histories, but also gain tools for navigating the urgencies of the present.

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50. Galerie Faris was founded by Waddah Faris, co-founder of Beirut's Contact Art Gallery, at 50 rue de l'Université in Paris, active between 1979 and 1990; Galerie Brigitte Schehadé at 44 rue des Tournelles, active between 1977 and 1996, was set up by Schehadé, who had previously run the Centre d'Art and Centre d'Art 2 in Beirut. For a list of exhibitions at these spaces, see the annex of Elisa Michelle Karam's unpublished MA thesis, "L'art arabe à l'étranger, migration et galleries libanaises à l'époque de la guerre civile au Liban: Galerie Brigitte Schehadé et Galerie Faris à Paris" (Mémoire d'étude [MA thesis], École du Louvre, 2025).

51. Mirèse Akar, "Amine el-Bacha: 'Peindre, c'est mettre la guerre entre parenthèses'," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, 22 January 1982.

52. Mahmud al-Zibawi, "Amin al-basha yansab wa tatahad ishkalihi darbat aula wa lawhat arb'a majmu'at," *an-Nahar*, 31 March 1984.

53. For an image of the museum crossing, one of the few crossings between East and West Beirut, see Fouad Elkoury, *Passage du musée*, Beirut, 1982, on his website Fouad Elkoury, "Civil War, 1977–1986," last accessed 13 August 2025, https://www.fouadelkoury.com/works4respon.php?work=5&limit=14.

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