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Questioning Museology as a Medium for Conveying Culture

Beirut Art Museum and Studiocur/art organized an exhibition with works placed in architectural landmarks that represent bookends for European colonization



'Cycles of Collapsing Progress', curated by Karina El Helou with Anissa Touati, engaged the works of artists from Lebanon and Mexico in architectural landmarks that represent both contrasting notions of history and bookends for European colonization: the Citadel of Raymond de Saint-Gilles, fortified after the 1099 Crusader conquest of Jerusalem, and the modernist Rashid Karami International Fair, designed by Oscar Niemeyer in 1963. Organized by the Beirut Museum of Art and Studiocur/art as a prelude to the construction of a dedicated building, the exhibition questions museology as a medium for conveying culture and history within the framework of a dynamic perpetual present characterized by migrating conceptions of reality.

Arrayed on a fortress terrace as if an excavation site, the sculptures of Haig Aivazian's *Rome Is Not in Rome* (2016) – including Stadion, a leather-upholstered wrought-iron version of the Coliseum, and Aqueduct, a clay

water pipe fused with a decorative column – distort Western cultural icons. The idiosyncratic ensemble evinced Rome as a state of mind through disembodied archaeological fragments displayed in museums. Employed in turn by the political and consumer cultures of Western societies, these icons are all the more effectively isolated from their origins.

Rayyane Tabet's battalions of castrated column stubs taken from modern buildings, *Colosse Aux Pieds D'Argile* (Colossus with Feet of Clay, 2015), presented history as an unfinished construction, as destroying itself, its remnants merely stumbling blocks to comprehending its totality. Equally severed from the ceaseless narrative of history, like the beheaded Roman statue displayed in the citadel's museum, they are unable to tell the truth.

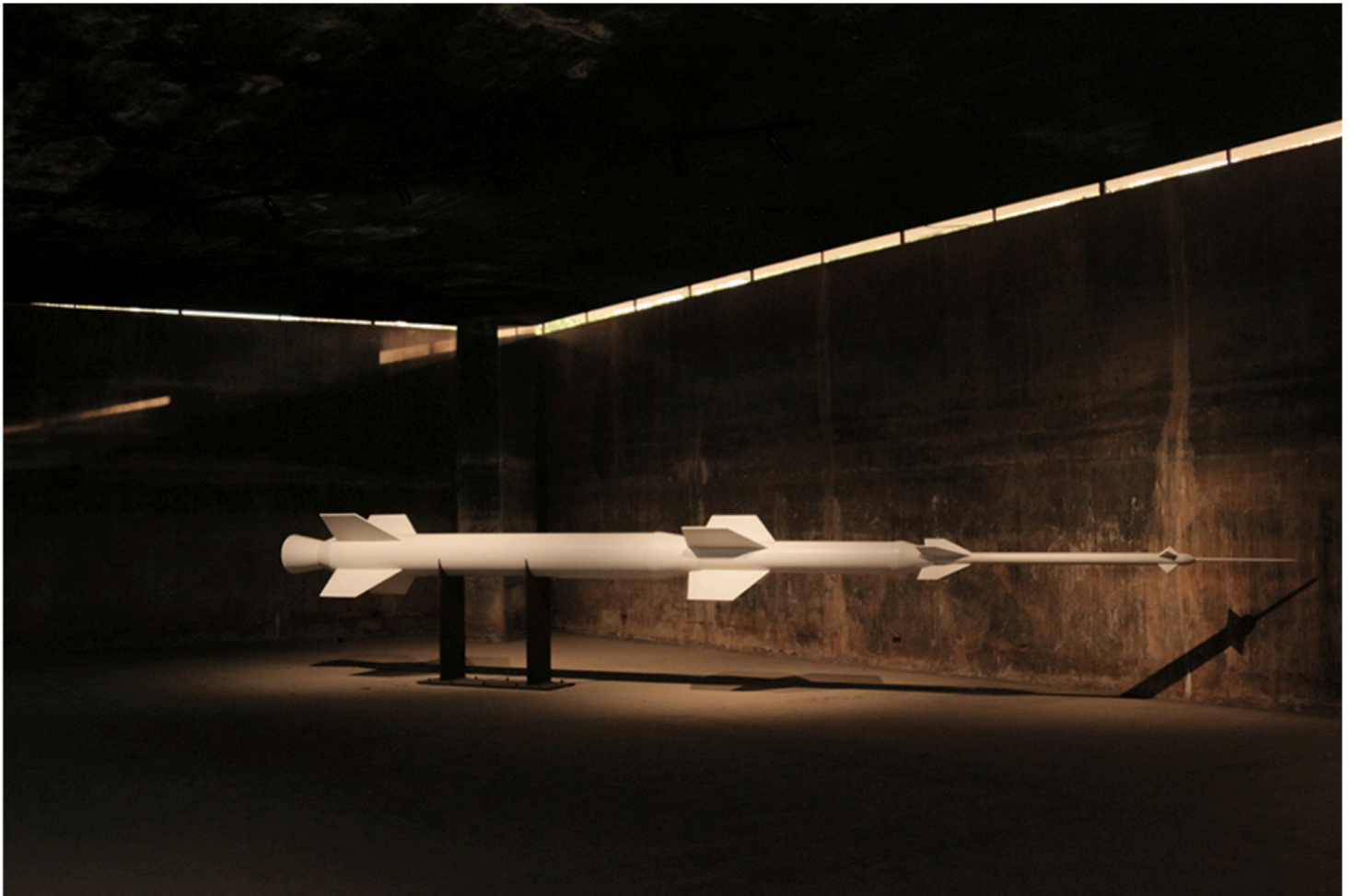


Edgardo Aragón, *Mute*, 2018, sound, film installation. Courtesy: the artist

Edgardo Aragón employed Niemeyer's Lebanese Pavilion – an M.C. Escher-esque maze of suspended staircases and arched apertures reflecting the deceptive porosity of Lebanese territory – for the audio-visual installation *Mute* (2018). A performance of rappers Straight outta Tripoli, transmitted aurally by speakers and viewed in separate videos of each singer, some isolated in underground chambers, compelled visitors to make a

disorienting circuit to integrate sound and image. The band members are only a few of the large number of legally invisible people in Lebanon – including orphans and registered refugees – unable to obtain enfranchisement under the 1925 French law restricting nationality to patrilineage. The empty pool surrounding the pavilion presents a perilously imperceptible barrier for visitors, who can neither perceive its depth nor see their own reflections.

Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's *A Space Museum* (2018) was staged in a subterranean building, designed but never used for that very purpose, topped by a retro-futuristic mushroom-shaped helipad. Videos from *The Lebanese Rocket Society* (2011–13) document the short-lived space programme's unmanned launches of the 1960s. Displayed alongside the suspended model of a sleek rocket ship, they expressed the national optimism castrated by civil war – exemplified in the fate of the Niemeyer complex, an architectural folly symbolizing a failed utopian project and finally a living museum in crumbling concrete.



Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, *Cedar IV, A Reconstitution*, 2011, sculpture, iron, 800 x 100 cm, commissioned by the Sharjah Biennial X. Courtesy: the artist and The Third Line, Dubai

Museums are key to cultural legitimization and self-determination, illustrating a progressive, linear development of civilization that necessarily excludes certain voices in the process. Lebanese history since the French Mandate

has been so tumultuous that neither self-determination nor official historical accounts have emerged, even as foreign-funded skyscrapers in Beirut represent one recent form of insidious invasion. Overwhelmed with refugees since the Palestinian exodus of 1948, with the highest concentration per capita in the world, the country encapsulates our fractured present.

Ali Cherri's breath-taking *The Disquiet* (2013) recalls past catastrophic destructions of Tripoli and Beirut among a dizzying enumeration of natural disasters to conjure the precedence of geological time over the relatively transient chronology of human events. The film concludes with a prolonged walk through a primeval forest accompanied by the sound of lone footfalls – the very earth under our feet echoing cycles of eternal return. As Ibn Khaldoun wrote in the fourteenth century: 'From its inception, the living organism contains the germs of death.'

'Cycles of Collapsing Progress' was on view from 22 September until 22 October 2018.

Main image: Damián Ortega, Harvest, 2013, steel sculptures, lamps, dimensions variable. Courtesy: the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels; photograph: David Regen



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