

Imaginary Cities: Chapter II  
**BEIRUT AS PROJECT**  
Drawings | Photography | Video

An exhibition by **Nadim Asfar**  
in collaboration with **Antoine Atallah**

24 September to 20 November 2021  
Tu - fr: 11-18:30h - Sa: 11-14h

STIFTUNGKUNSTFONDS



**GALERIE TANIT**  
MUNICH | BEYROUTH

Beirut as project  
Nadim Asfar and Antoine Atallah

**About Beirut and the imaginary**

When we started thinking of “imaginary cities”, the first image that surged was that of Beirut. Beirut can be compared to a palimpsest city, a document where things are constantly erased and replaced, superposed or superimposed; context is simultaneously done and undone in a single action. Every period of the city’s history altered, destroyed or covered parts and layers of what had been built just a few decades earlier. This constant rewriting explains part of Beirut’s rich complexity, but also generates its disconcerting instability.

Successive generations have no guidance to how the city was barely a few years earlier, and only through rare evidence and remains. Therefore, Beirut is in constant metamorphosis and sometimes nearly unrecognizable: it exists and is perpetuated mostly through images and personal narratives, through mythologies and the products of imagination. It is a hypothetical construction. Most cities tend to incarnate a stable and sedentary habitat or structure, embodied by defined landmarks. But Beirut’s unstable character turns it into a nomadic structure: the city revolves and, in this process, displaces its inhabitants, both physically and mentally. Here, landmarks constantly shift, even the coastline is altered, as if it were quicksand, rather than the millennial shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Builders dig as deep as possible into the ground altering the core, the very geology, nature, and perception of Beirut’s geography.

Beirut’s present is inescapably a very short instance, a film-like fabric stretched in the thin gap that separates past and future. We dwell in instants that are lost in shapeless time periods. Consequently, one feels ever navigating between where “were we”, where “will we be” and where “are we now”? “Where are we now?” is an acrobatic time-lapse.

Beirut is like an endless project. Spaces are improbable, unthinkable charades impossible to solve. The only stable element seems to be the course of the sun and its trajectory, the weather, the temperatures. Through the light of the sun, the depth of colors, the heat, the humidity, the wind, or the very distinctive chill of winter, the body can recognize where it is, identify its belonging.

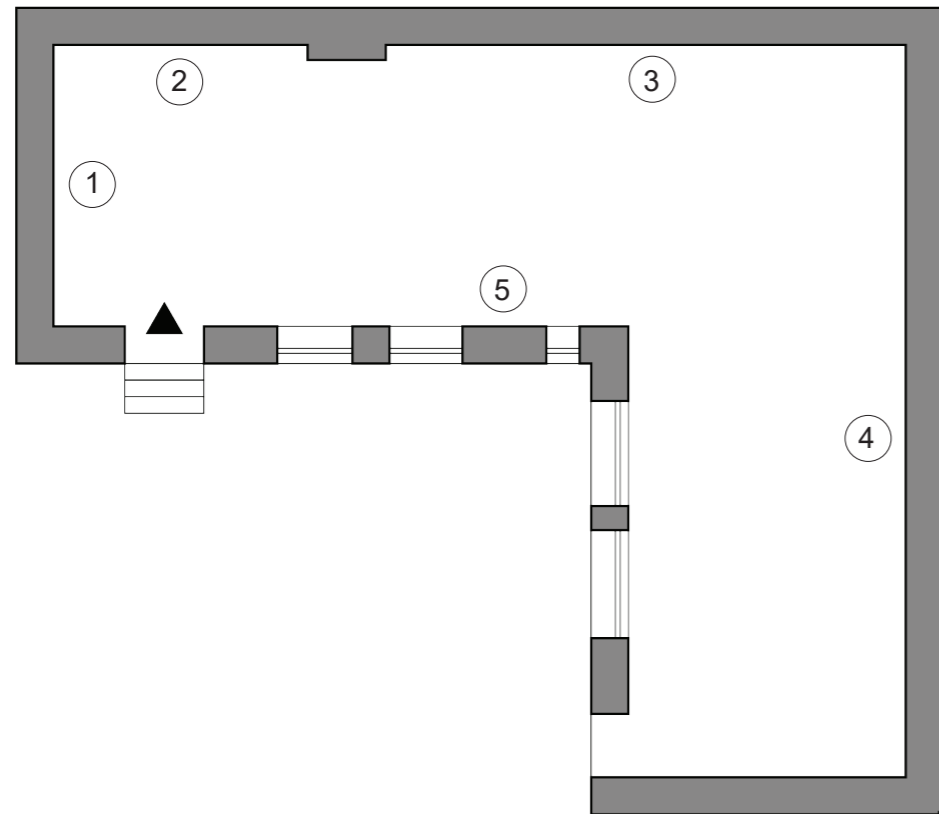
**The exhibition**

The exhibition presents a body of work composed of photographic series, videos and texts, that were produced between 2004 and 2011 in the Mar Mkhahl neighborhood and were all reedited for this exhibition. Drawings were all produced in 2021 by architect Antoine Atallah. Mar Mkhahl is one of Beirut’s last remaining historical areas, where I lived and established my studio, and where my practice took shape.

When I first visited the apartment, I remember walking through it and heading straight to the balcony. I felt I was in an observatory, porous to sound and to everything that happened outside. The limit between inside and outside felt bewildering. The balcony was located on the building’s slanted corner, which offered a peculiar view across the entire depth of the street and the crossroad below. The configuration of the balcony had something theatrical, in the way it exposed the surrounding context and the life of the city.

I was at an early stage of my practice, facing a multi-layered “blank page” as a photographer, as an artist. I didn’t know what to do, what would my practice be. The neighborhood became my field of work, my study sample. Retrospectively, it is probable that city was too big and complex, impossible for me to grasp fully as an entire body or system, especially in the strange post-war period. It was nearly impossible for me to comprehend and work through the city: where to start from, what to talk about, how to photograph such a misshapen body. It felt like being in front of a giant without a head.

My apartment functioned like a refuge or a lair. I confronted only a limited part of the city, as if the direct surroundings of my building were a synthesis of the bigger city. Being anchored in a still place allowed the establishment of an immersive relation, of a kind of daily dialogue, study/ “étude”. With its porous walls and many wide windows, the old building dating from the 1930’s had become like a receptacle for images and sounds: an apparatus to produce videos and photographic series, a setting for all the projects I produced during that period, some of which were not even completed when I left the apartment.



①

**Dessins Mnémoniques** ( 25 by 20 cm drawings, 80 pages artist book ) 2021

These technical drawings produced by Antoine Atallah are drawings of the building I inhabited from 2004 to 2011, and drawings of the apartment itself.

Like a kind of film or storyboard, they are an alternative to the photographs I did not do in there, but also an act of remembrance and recollection. Throughout the process, I had to mentally go through the corridors and places, and reconstruct the building and its experience as place.

It was quite new for me to « fabricate » images when I have always been used to reproduce places through the act of photography. It was nearly a hypnotic process.

The drawings are based on some of my own photos, documents, and the floor plan, and essentially on our memory.

②

**Destruction of the cinema** (photos/ videos/ drawings)

After the war, as I kept recording these short videos of my interior, I noticed workers had started demolishing an entire block facing my building. It was a massive piece of the city that was set to be replaced by a real estate project. On the street was the iconic Vendôme Cinema while behind and adjacent to it, stood four massive traditional residential buildings dating from the 1920's and 1930's. It was legally impossible to document the demolition of those structures from the inside, but I filmed their disappearance from my balcony. There was something prophetic or allegorical, to witness the destruction I had feared for my own home, take form just in front of me : this erosion remarkably mirrored my state of mind.

The workers were dismantling the buildings by hand, with hammers, little by little, bit by bit, while inhabiting them as the same time, using them as houses should be, going up and down the stairs, sitting on the balconies, using the walls as walls, the floors as floors. This slow dismantling produced a sort of undressing, a "mise à nu", as the block revealed itself, was peeled-off to reveal its structure, its core, while simultaneously disappearing.

The technical drawings by Antoine Atallah attempt to reconstruct what was dismantled and not photographed or documented.

③

**Rushes from Home** ( 500 pages artist book + Installation of 18 by 10 cm prints)

During the 2006 war, Beirut witnessed massive and extremely violent airstrikes, along with the entire country. TV channels broadcasted nightmare images of buildings that were turned to rubble in a split of a second. Each night, I would sleep staring at the ceiling fearing I would not wake up in the morning.

In a kind of animalistic impulse, I was afraid my lair would be destroyed and in a kind of panic, I started frantically filming my apartment, probably in an attempt to possess it: its walls, floors, corridors, windows, beams, how my body circulated in it. I recorded the lights and colors that traversed it as the days went by, the sounds that resonated in it. I produced images in a kind of urge or rush. Consequently, these looked rather like sketches or notes, quick traces or barely shadows.

④

**Habiter le jour** (Installation of Book) 2004-2011 for the images, 2017 for the book.

It was the first project to take shape, day after day.

It imposed itself like a ritual consisting of aimlessly photographing people crossing the street, and cars driving through. It took some time to understand that this was a way to dwell and inhabit, to measure time and live through the days. Images filled the blank pages, and the project provided a way to observe, to engage in a dialogue and be in touch with the space surrounding me every day.

It gave me something to do, a practice, that filled the void I was confronted to. Somehow the city is mainly evoked off the field, the grey asphalt was a kind of photographic background, and the street was like an open-air studio.

⑤

**Extraits** ( 25 by 20 cm artist book , 100 pages ) 2021

These cut-outs are extracts of 5 full-frame images from which I picked tiny details here and there that reconstruct a new narrative in places I can no longer photograph in the condition they were at the time I lived there. This process of deconstruction/ reconstruction is somehow producing images out of images, an attempt to re-photograph places.

I produced these extracts not only as images but as descriptive paragraphs or sentences.

The drawings are based on some of my own photos, documents, and the floor plan, and essentially on our memory.

Located just a few hundred meters away from the Beirut Port, Mar Mkhahl was at the epicenter of the 4th of August 2020 explosion. The building I lived in and its direct surroundings were heavily damaged, and Galerie Tanit's Beirut premises were entirely destroyed. We dedicate this project to Galerie Tanit and to Naïla Kettaneh Kunigk and her invaluable contribution to art and her dedication to artists.