Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, 'Truth and Consequence', ArtForum, April 27, 2014

IN HIS BLISTERING critique of colonialism in Africa, the revolutionary Martinican writer Frantz Fanon made a curious if counterintuitive observation about the Arab world: For all the appeal of Arab nationalism and the renaissance in arts and letters that were accruing political currency in Fanon's time, the region was, and remains, deeply divided by its experience of occupation, independence, state-formation, and trade.

"The political regimes of certain Arab states are so different," wrote Fanon, two-thirds of the way through The Wretched of the Earth, "and so far away from each other in their conceptions, that even a cultural meeting between these states is meaningless."

In many ways, the peripatetic festival of multidisciplinary art in the Arab world known as Meeting Points was both named for and founded on the need to redress that notion of a region being riven by disunity and disjuncture. It is both strange and beautifully apt, then, that the four women behind the Croatian curatorial collective WHW (What, How & For Whom) are taking the festival quite far from its original territory while at the same time returning it to Fanon.

Meeting Points 7—which is titled "Ten Thousand Wiles and a Hundred Thousand Tricks," after a passage in The Wretched of the Earth on the dangers of artists, poets, and intellectuals being seduced by the culture of their colonizers—opened in Beirut on April Fools' Day, setting off a surprisingly compact season that is, by some highly messed up logic, as artistically hyperactive as the situation in Lebanon is economically desperate and politically dire. In both the style and substance of their projects, WHW are no strangers here, taking every exhibition as an opportunity to explore a constellation of relevant ideas. Still, in the context of division and rupture in the Arab world, it is a daring move to take on, all at once and as foreigners (no matter how familiar), ideas as sensitive as revolution, counterrevolution, capitalism, feminism, and the complicity of the middle class.

WHW's exhibition at the Beirut Art Center does that, and as such, it set the tone for a few solid weeks of looking and thinking and listening—all the more meaningful in such close proximity to the violence next door. For the fact is that after three years of unconscionable strife, much of Syria is destroyed, some 150,000 people have been killed, more than a million refugees from the elite to the destitute have fled into Lebanon, and still the regime of Bashar al-Assad hangs on. In recent days, it even appears to be winning, and, like Algeria several weeks back, plans to sham a presidential election in June.

The curator Tarek Abou El-Fetouh started Meeting Points a decade ago. The first few editions were tiny, taking place in Amman, Cairo, Alexandria, and Tunis. The fourth edition rolled through seven cities in the Arab world. The fifth was the first to be organized by an outside curator, a fine job for Frie Leyson. It was also the most ambitious—hitting nine cities in the region, from Rabat to Ramallah, before moving on to Brussels and Berlin

That was back in 2007. By the time Meeting Points 6 came around, in April 2011, even a curator of Okwui Enwezor's stature had been baffled and organizationally bedeviled by the uprisings and upheavals of the so-called Arab Spring. Tunis, Cairo, and Damascus were cancelled. The Beirut iteration was subtle and self-contained. Given the conflagration of political and financial crises, Athens was an inspired choice to bring the festival to a close.

A cynic might say that it was the lure and demand of European funders that pulled Meeting Points out of the Arab world. But that argument seems somewhat unsubstantiated now. "It's important to reflect on current artistic and political changes in the region through the experience of Eastern Europe," Fetouh said in an interview with Medrar TV in February, when Meeting Points 7 took up residence in Cairo, after opening in Zagreb last fall and spending four months in Antwerp. "We're rethinking the ongoing changes in ways not limited to the past three years. We need to think about it in relation to events of the past fifty years."

"Ten Thousand Wiles and a Hundred Thousand Tricks" has since traveled to Hong Kong. After Beirut, it travels to Vienna and Moscow, where it will end, at the Institute for African Studies, amid dramatically different circumstances from those in which it was conceived (to its reconsideration of colonialism add the current troubles in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine).

"We've always worked with a classical exhibition format," WHW's Sabina Sabolovic told me in Beirut. "This gave us a chance to think about an exhibition in time. Of course, it's not at all linear, but the chapters are communicating with each other."
And one thing that does still unify artists across the region is the simultaneous compulsion and reluctance to make new work in direct response to conflicts that are open and in your face. With the exception of The Pixelated Revolution, a 2012 performance by Rabih Mroué that already seems almost dated, artists in and around Lebanon have been slow to react to the Syrian civil war. Apparently, that's now changed.

On the opening night of Meeting Points 7, Lawrence Abu Hamdan presented a riveting new piece in the Beirut Art Center's auditorium, a lecture-performance about lying that moved deftly through police procedurals, courtroom testimonies, Shiite jurisprudence, and the concept of taqqiya, for which a religious adherent either denies or blasphemes his faith to save his own life. Abu Hamdan pushed the phenomenon further to consider "more complex forms of self-representation that have a political potency beyond self-preservation." Exploring taqqiya in relation to stories that began circulating in December, about eighteen Druze villages in northern Syria where a renegade sheikh was said to have forced inhabitants to convert to Sunni Islam, he blurred the boundaries between "submissive and subversive," between "traitor and translator," and between "free speech and speaking truly."

Two nights later, the artist Mounira al-Solh opened "All Mother Tongues Are Difficult," her second solo exhibition at the Sfeir-Semler Gallery, which threads her own experience

of forever trying to leave Lebanon, learn Dutch, and emigrate to the Netherlands, into the stories of refugees flooding into Lebanon, as filtered through her family, which lives on both sides of the border. There's a hilarious painting of Hassan Nasrallah and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad discussing Francis Bacon at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tehran. There's a roomful of Damascene clogs. There's a suite of nearly fifty drawings, all portraits of Syrian refugees, titled "I Strongly Believe In Our Right To Be Frivolous." And there's an absorbing new video, called Now Eat My Script, about a sacrificial lamb that journeys from Syria to Lebanon in the trunk of a relative's car as the artist speaks, in voiceover, of the difficulties faced by a "distracted writer" who is "pregnant, penetrated, feminist, postfeminist, and horny," all at the same time.

On Sunday, April 6, the fourth edition of Video Works, Ashkal Alwan's biennial production fund and screening program, began a three-night run at the art-house cinema Metropolis. Introducing the program, Ashkal Alwan's fiery director Christine Tohme spoke of a return to individualism, relationships, and love amid an ever stranger political, religious, and security environment. "Regardless of the bullshit you see on the news," she said, translated roughly, "you'll see something different here."

"This country is full of assholes," said a character in Jad Youssef's otherwise interminable film about a miserable thirty-five-year-old man. "Tell your friends we're gay and we hate football," said another, in Roy Dib's far more joyful Mondiale, about a couple taking a road trip to Ramallah during the World Cup. In a striking adaptation of the 1959 drama The Savage Eye, Romain Hamard transposed midcentury Los Angeles to a luxury hotel room in Downtown Beirut, where a famous Lebanese actress, as listless divorcée, spoke of her children being killed "in the usual way, by robbers, miscarriage, and misconception."

Throughout the month, Irtijal staged the fourteenth edition of its experimental music festival. Bipod, the Beirut International Platform of Dance, took place for the tenth time. 98weeks launched the first issue of a new magazine, called Makhzin. Hito Steyerl opened a new exhibition and the latest chapter in Ashkal Alwan's experimental art school. And on Friday, April 11, the highpoint of the season so far: The filmmaker Charif Kiwan, who speaks on behalf of the anonymous Syrian collective of known as Abounaddara, gave a talk at the American University of Beirut, moderated by the artist Akram Zaatari.

For three years, Abounaddara has posted a new video, every Friday, on Facebook and Vimeo. Each piece—Kiwan calls them "bullet films"—is extremely short and incredibly powerful. A child narrates his family's exodus to Alexandria. Another describes the bombing of a bread line, known as the "bakery massacre." A young man tells a director to wait patiently as a plane circles around the house where they are sitting for another raid. A filmmaker standing somewhere off screen bursts out laughing when a young religious functionary in military fatigues talks of creating an Islamic state. Tomorrow I Will Cross delves into the assassination of Basel Shehadeh, an up-and-coming director who was killed by a sniper. To make a painfully moving pair, Tomorrow I Will Dance shows a raucous roomful of people making music.

"We have no god, no master," said Kiwan when Zaatari asked him about poetry, Mahmoud Darwish, and Karl Marx. "We are filmmakers. We are criticizing the army, the regime, the Free Syrian Army, religion, and religious authorities. We have a big problem, which is credibility. Because the regime made it impossible for journalists to work in Syria, viewers don't know if the images they see are true. But all images are constructed. All images are a lie. Ma fee haqiqa bi soura. There is no truth in an image."

"If you want to resist death, tragedy, you have to show the details of everyday life," he continued. "These small moments are the only way to keep faith in the future. If you depict life without hope, then you prepare viewers to accept that there's no way for people to change the situation. It's our political duty as filmmakers to make space for love, laughter, and imagination. This is our commitment as citizens. We have to keep a place for subversion. Abounaddara wants to trouble its audience. We don't want to give you a version of the truth."

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