

## Processing 'The New Normal'



"The New Normal" at The HANGAR March 10-12 (Photo by Zhang Wei)

 Alice Rowsome | The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Nestled among the sprawling streets of Haret Hreik in Beirut's southern suburbs is The HANGAR. The vast and minimalist space was home to the first iteration of the exhibition, "The New Normal," a collaborative artistic response to the unfamiliar or atypical becoming standard, even expected.

"There is a lot of upheaval [nowadays]," co-curator Murat Adashand told The Daily Star.

The artist was not only referring to the clashes that shook the neighboring Burj al-Barajneh area on the opening night of the exhibition, but also the tense political situation in Turkey, where Adashand is based, as well as the election of U.S. president Donald Trump, the U.K.'s exit from the EU and the right-wing populist movements gaining support across Europe.

"Everything is accelerating forward in such an intense way," Adashand's collaborator Hiba Farhat added as heavy rain hit the venue's roof Saturday during the exhibition's three day run. "We felt there was a strong sense and feeling of unease and tension in not only the political, but also the social sphere."

Adashand agreed, adding "[These events] really served as a catalyst for us to put up a show that would create a network and community of artists and individuals, which we think is important during these times."

The aim was to support artists across the world to critically investigate, document and identify abnormalities that have become commonplace, using A4 sheets of white paper as their medium.

"We saw ourselves working as facilitators. We didn't want to comply with ... wordings and role playing that can be found in the economy of the contemporary art world. We wanted to subvert that," Farhat said. "We wanted to be more of a support. We didn't want to be dogmatic."

"You have gatekeepers, who choose who gets heard and where," she continued, something both artists want to change.

They knew most of the contributors personally. Many, they explained had previously been on the sidelines and marginalized. "This was always going to be an inclusive exhibition," Adashand said, highlighting the unusually vast number of artists exhibited

in one room. "We wanted to bring in many voices."

Around 200 artists, composers, filmmakers, choreographers, writers, scholars, philosophers and individuals from a variety of other disciplines contributed a one-page paper document.

The drawings, sketches, notes, text, manifestos, scripts, recipes, maps, scores – to name just a few of the formats used – presented a rich and extensive array of perspectives. More than finished pieces, the A4 sheets provided windows into the minds of the contributors.

The pieces were displayed simply on four long plywood tables.

The narrow space left between the tables was meant to emulate airport border control lines Farhat explained. "We wanted the space to be small. We wanted people to bump into the works." Film screenings, talks and live performances accompanied the exhibition.

For the curators, the process was just as important as the finished product. They spent months communicating with the artists and sent each one a seven-page booklet that detailed the conceptual framework and provided sources of inspiration. "We got a lot of artists come back to us saying wow it was so helpful to think through 'The New Normal,' on a personal and art practice level," Farhat said.

The chosen format served another purpose beyond inclusivity as well, Farhat said, in that they cannot be sold, reinforcing just how far from the contemporary art scene she and Adashand hoped the exhibition would be.

The raw and intimate reimaginings of everyday narratives covered as many topics as there were artists, with environmental, economic and social issues all touched upon, to name a few. However, the curators underlined the project was not about making art as a tool of activism, but about processing the new global order through art. "It was important to work with artists who would bring a critical angle," he added.

The pieces were rooted in the contemporary, touching upon recent events and documenting them in a way that captures their impact on those that lived through them. The HANGAR, an independent platform that promotes artistic and cultural practice related to the use of archives, therefore seemed like the ideal place for the exhibition, the curators explained.

Beirut's southern suburbs are not commonly associated with the arts, something else the curators feel should change. "[Haret Hreik] is so close, yet we never [come] here," Farhat said.

The Beirut exhibition of "The New Normal" will be followed by a second iteration in Istanbul from May 5-7.

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