



A BUS AND ITS REPLICAS... UN BUS ET SES DOUBLES...

Although the "Museum of the Lebanese War" is still virtual at this point, one of the objects visitors may encounter in its vehicle area is a bus that stands dramatically apart from other military conveyances, such as civilian vehicles clad in battlefield colors, the remains of booby-trapped cars and a hedge-podge of motorcycles. Deceptively mundane in appearance despite its dubious history, that bus was given an incredibly concise caption by the museum's curators: *The Bus*. Compared to its more visually striking cohorts that bear exhaustive explanations, such as the winter vehicles used to transport arms and ammunition to the different battle fronts, it is immediately clear why such a laconic description was chosen for this vehicle. Indeed, the haunting simplicity of "The Bus" sets it apart from the other displays, such that it now represents the first letter in the war's unique alphabet. Clearly, any attempt to inflate this concise description is an exercise in futility.

Parmi les objets que les visiteurs de la salle dédiée aux « véhicules » du Musée (imaginaire) de la guerre pourraient observer, se trouve un bus tenu à l'écart des voitures civiles camouflées, des morceaux de voitures piégées et autres amalgames de motos. Le cartel, d'apparence ordinaire, que les conservateurs ont choisi pour signaler cet « objet » est d'une concision remarquable : *The Bus*.

Contrairement aux autres objets présentés et pour lesquels des explications sont nécessaires, *The Bus* se suffit à lui-même et incarne, dans sa simplicité obsédante, la première lettre de l'alphabet unique de la guerre.

L'élévation de cet objet au rang d'« icône » ne s'est opérée qu'à travers un long processus. La « vie » de ce véhicule de marque Fargo, construit en 1960 et estampillé « Transport public », dont la capacité de transport est de 14 personnes,

The bus didn't acquire its iconic credentials at one shot—no pun intended—when its image commanded valuable real estate on the front pages of Lebanese newspapers on April 14, 1975. The fact is, that Fargo vehicle, built in 1960 and designated as a "public conveyance" capable of transporting 14 passengers, refused to simply fade away after the "Ain El Remmaneh incident." According to some well-informed mechanical genealogists, before its owners concluded that the bus was cursed and decided to get rid of it, the vehicle would have to become a victim again, this time to "collateral damage" years after its April 13, 1975 "debut" when a rocket impacted nearby and killed one of its passengers.

We could say that the story of the bus and its anxious owners is somewhat evocative of the Lebanese themselves. Indeed, as the Fargo vehicle continued to transport its precious riders years before it was finally considered a harbinger of bad

luck, *The Bus* didn't immediately acquire its dubious status as a tangible memorial of the war. Similarly, the Lebanese did not conclude overnight that the war was indeed a "serial killer" that sorely deserved to be tried. The idolization of this vehicle, a tremendously complex and ongoing process in which this artistic endeavor plays some part, is representative of the efforts being made by the Lebanese to "tame" the beast that continues to live within them—the fiend they call "the war." Of course, this text is simply not the right venue to engage in a discussion about the success of the efforts made thus far to subdue that odious creature.

As we've seen, Houssam Bokeili's *A Bus and its Replicas...* shifts between engaging the individual directly and exemplifying the collective effort to "tame the beast." Moreover, Bokeili's project differs from similar pursuits in that his starts at the true beginning: he focuses on the bus he rode daily from his par-

ents' home to school and back. Through its windows, which seemed to him like a collection of cinema screens, he learned about life in Beirut. And like the old city itself, Bokeili's life was pitched upside down by a bus transiting Ain El Remmaneh on Sunday, April 13, 1975.

It was no coincidence that when Houssam Bokeili came home in the mid-1990s to re-examine his youth, he made a new discovery: he learned of his need to make a "memory pilgrimage" to his childhood school bus and its underworld counterpart, the vaunted Ain El Remmaneh bus. The result of Bokeili's pilgrimage is this series of serigraphic works. Begun in 2004, they question the notion of the "genuine article" compared to replicas as well as the role it plays in fostering memories—Bokeili's own and those of others.

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que la guerre était un tueur en série qui ne demandait rien de plus que d'être mis à l'épreuve. L'idolâtrie vouée à ce bus, processus encore en cours et très complexe, dans lequel l'élan artistique joue un rôle certain, concentre les efforts que font les Libanais pour mâter la bête qui sommeille en eux, cette amie qui répond au doux nom de « Guerre ».

L'artiste commence par le commencement... Il remonte aux souvenirs d'un écolier découvrant la ville de Beyrouth à travers les vitres de son autobus d'école. Ainsi que l'ancienne cité, la vie de Houssam Bokeili a été entièrement bouleversée par un bus passant par Ain el-Remmaneh ce Dimanche 13 Avril 1975.

Ce n'est donc pas étonnant que, lorsque Bokeili revient chez lui au milieu des années 90 dans le but de mieux comprendre sa propre jeunesse, il ressent le besoin d'aller voir le bus de son enfance et son

jumeau des bas-fonds, le désormais trop célèbre Bus de Ain el-Remmaneh. De ce « Pèlerinage de la Mémoire », a résulté une série de travaux sérigraphiques commencés en 2004. Chemin faisant, Bokeili en arrive à la question clef, celle de *l'Original et de ses doubles*. Moyennant une technique de reproduction mécanique, la sérigraphie, il témoigne de sa confusion mémorielle, parfois préméditée entre ces deux bus. Une question à deux volets reflétant une hantise à double tranchant : la transmission par la représentation de ses souvenirs individuels et la représentation par voie de transmission d'un point de vue sur la mémoire collective.

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Houssam Bokeili's draw to the figure of "the bus" stems from his memories as a schoolchild in Beirut, before the 13 April 1975 commencement of Lebanon's civil war. This collection does not just send viewers back to the past; it invites them to make critical leaps between the memory repositories and artifacts assembled.

Using a mechanical reproduction technique inspired by Pop Art, Houssam Bokeili's exhibit navigates his personal memories in relation to collective commemorations of social and political history. The replicas of the Ain el-Rammaneh bus, iconic in Lebanon's historical imaginary, interrogate the relation between art and history forming, to use Pierre Nora's phrase, a "lieu de mémoire".

In *A bus and its replicas...* Bokeili seeks to replicate the essence of "the bus" as it figures in his imaginary: a complex combination of joy and dismay. Ultimately, its path unfolds onto a new "space" where fresh associations and meanings are made possible, where memory and imagination intersect.

Le bus a joué pour Houssam Bokeili, le rôle de « cadre » réactivant les souvenirs d'une enfance heureuse à Beyrouth, avant la date fatidique du 13 avril 1975.

Un bus et ses doubles... tanguent entre la volonté d'engager immédiatement l'individu dans sa lutte contre la bête qui sommeille en lui et d'illustrer l'effort collectif fait en ce sens.

Cette collection de sérigraphies inspirée du Pop Art, questionne la notion d'« objet authentique » confronté à ses répliques. Les doubles du bus de Ain-el-Rammaneh, icône que les libanais ont élevé au rang de mémorial, explorent les rapports entre l'art et l'histoire et leur contribution à former un « lieu de mémoire » selon la définition de l'historien français Pierre Nora.

Bokeili tente de représenter les figures du bus telles qu'elles se dessinent dans son imaginaire, à la fois ludiques et troublantes ; il propose un « espace » invitant aux associations de la mémoire, de rencontre entre notre mémoire et notre imagination.

Houssam Bokeili



Né en 1966 à Beyrouth, Houssam Bokeili a accompli des études de photographie à l'Ecole Supérieure des Arts Appliqués de Vevey en Suisse, il obtient un CAP de dessin d'exécution en publicité à l'Ecole Boule à Paris et perfectionne ses techniques de sculpture et taille de pierre à la Chatre en France (FOREPABE) avant d'obtenir en diplôme en stéréotomie. Il vit aujourd'hui entre Beyrouth, le Caire et Paris. Houssam Bokeili a participé à de nombreuses expositions en France et dans les pays arabes, il a entre autres été associé à de nombreux projets d'artistes établis, notamment l'exposition de Takashi Murakami à la Fondation Cartier à Paris en 2002. Au Liban, il a exposé au Centre Culturel Français en 1996, au musée Sursok et à la galerie Maraya en 1997, ainsi qu'à Zico House en 1998 et 2009. A travers la peinture, la photographie et la sérigraphie, il interroge les mémoires individuelles et collectives en empruntant un style documentaire, aussi bien que poétique voire même ludique.

Born in Beirut in 1966, Houssam Bokeili graduated with a degree in photography from l'Ecole Supérieure des Arts Appliqués in Vevey, Switzerland. He later earned a degree in execution drawings at L'Ecole Boule in Paris. Bokeili continued to improve his techniques in sculpting and stonemasonry at la Chatre in France and ultimately received a diploma in stereotomy. Today, he shuttles between Beirut, Cairo and Paris. Mr. Bokeili has participated in many exhibitions throughout France and the Arab countries. In addition, he has been engaged with several projects by established artists, including Takashi Murakami's 2002 exhibition at the Fondation Cartier in Paris. In Lebanon, Houssam Bokeili exhibited his work at the French Cultural Center in 1996, the Sursok Museum and Maraya Art Gallery in 1997, and at Zico House in 1998 and 2009. Through his paintings, photography and serigraphy, Houssam Bokeili raises questions about individual and collective memory by offering visual narratives and poetry that seek to create an atmosphere that is at once joyful and disturbing.

“ There is no memory that is constructed without a spatial framework. It is in this framework, like a stable landmark, that our thoughts and our imagination can be reconstructed. In a city of ghosts, I had to force my memories to reappear – I used photo albums from my childhood, objects from my daily life, and the stories of those close to me. ”