like the delayed rays of a star

HEATHER M. O'BRIEN

For Liam Ritsu

who reminds me to think of dark moments as the womb, not the tomb

"The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being [as Susan Sontag says] will touch me like the delayed rays of a star."

- Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*

Empires of the Gaze

Juli Carson

"An entire past comes to dwell in a new house."
- Gaston Bachelard

What is a home? At once a crypt and a transparency, the home "houses" not only our secret memories but all the things we have publicly forgotten. As Bachelard considers, in *The Poetics of Space*, "house images move in both directions: they are in us as much as we are in them." Reading Heather M. O'Brien's *like the delayed rays of a star*, I propose our lens be this very aporia, this Bachelardian inside-outness of the house. For it allows us to performatively "collaborate" in the conceptual mise-en-scène of O'Brien's travelogue, one hovering at the interstice between interior/exterior, private/public, fiction/documentary, and, given the subject matter at hand, East/West. On the subject of the travelogue, I'd further propose we take Roland Barthes's *Empire of Signs* (1970) as a conceptual precedent for the kind of protagonist *I* that threads O'Brien's images and text.

Empire of Signs – conceived during the decolonization of the so-called "Orient" – is Barthes' semiotic-poetic reflection on his 1966 trip to Japan, just as the reconstructed country was beginning its re-entry on the international stage. If his travelogue is deconstructive, it's because the foreign traveler here, the journal's protagonist as it were, engages in a critical self-examination of the Western *I* embedded in the East. Barthes' stance easily recalls Antonio Gramsci's reflection in *Prison Notebooks* (1929) – later quoted in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) – that the "starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of this historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory, [but]...it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory."[1] A deconstruction of the travelogue form, then, is really a deconstruction of the self, a process that enacts a kind of *laceration* of the subject's sovereign *I*. Barthes describes it precisely in those terms: that laying down the Western gaze, the way that one might lay down their weapons, leaves him the one starred at. Consequently: *"The situation is the very one in which a certain disturbance of the person occurs, a subversion of early readings, a shock of meaning, lacerated, exterminated to the point of its irreplaceable void, without the object's ever ceasing to be significant, desirable."*[2]

For the deconstructed traveler, it seems to be a matter of refracted, rather than reflected, gazes, or what Barthes would later refer to in *Camera Lucida* (1981) as the *punctum*. For if every photograph is a self-portrait – following Barthes – and our subjective "self" is located in the place of the "other" – following Jacques Lacan, *Lucida's* primary influence – then every person could be said to be like a photograph in that they/it gaze back at us. Hence *Lucida's* opening lines about the 1852 photograph of Napoleon's youngest brother: *I am looking at the eyes that looked at the Emperor.*[3] Or later, in part two, when Barthes realizes that the "lacerating" component of historical photographs pertains to its temporal elision: *History is hysterical: it is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it – and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it.*[4] It seems, then, that there are really two punctums at play for Barthes. Punctum one (a conscious misrecognition) is to be found in James Van der Zee's photograph, wherein a small detail – *first, the strapped pumps of the Black woman in her Sunday best, later a necklace that had been worn by someone in his family – "pricks" him.*[5] Punctum two (an unconscious recognition) is to be found in a photograph of Lewis Payne on death row for the attempted assassination of Secretary of State W.H. Seward in 1865. Here, the photograph's punctum springs from the fact that the historical subject contained, therein, is simultaneously dead and is going to die. Hence Barthes' lament: *I shudder like Winnicott's*

[1] Antonio Gramsci, quoted in Edward Said's *Orientalism*, (New York: Random House, 1979), p. 25.

[2] Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, Richard Howard, trans., (New York: Hill and Wang, 1970), p. 4.

[3] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Richard Howard, trans., (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 3.

[4] *Camera Lucida*, p. 65.

[5] Ibid., p. 53.

psychotic patient, over a catastrophe which has already occurred. Whether the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe.[6]

Pooling together Barthes' travelogue with his reflections on photography, all within Bachelard's poetic space of the house, we land squarely upon O'Brien's stage, *like the delayed rays of a star*.

> *"Only in poetic language can one deal with meaning in a revolutionary way."*
> - Trin T. Minh-ha

First, O'Brien's physical *mise-en-scène*. A second-floor flat, in a building from the Ottoman and French mandates (Late 19th century-early 1900s),[7] sits between Beirut's Hamra and Caracas neighborhoods. It's one of the few remaining buildings intact of this period that's located just blocks off the famed Hamra Street, once considered the "Champs Elysées" of West Beirut prior to 1975, when it was a hub of differing religious sects, politicos, intellectuals, nightclubbers, and tourists, not to mention the legendary American University of Beirut. The Lebanese Civil War (1975-1992) shut all that down, although the building's current landlord, Wadih Farha – a member of a prominent Lebanese family that owns buildings throughout Beirut – had let squatters stay in the building throughout the conflict. Post-civil war, significant parts of the surviving neighborhood have alternately been neglected or gentrified, with urban conservators fighting off the kind of neoliberal redevelopment that rebuilt Beirut's 1990s downtown as a pre-war simulacrum, one punctuated by high-end malls, restaurants, reconstructed mosques, and churches. The current collapse of the Lebanese government and banks—a result of the mass uprising against Lebanon's ruling sectarian oligarchy on October 17, 2019, compounded by the double blow of the global pandemic and the catastrophic Beirut Port explosion on August 4, 2020—shut all that down too.

Flashback to 2016.

Upon settling in Beirut, O'Brien began methodically photographing her flat, one where the past writ large – both her own history and that of Beirut's – commingled in what Bachelard might have called a "housed" daydreaming space: *Through dreams, the various dwelling places in our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days...[for] the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace*.[8] In this way, O'Brien engaged in what Bachelard coined as *topo-analysis*: a systematic, psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives as they (re)surface within a house. Compiled into the photo-essay *like the delayed rays of a star*, totems of O'Brien's childhood and young adult memories are thus transported from prior dwelling places – here a carved wooden bird, there a former mentor's art catalogue – where upon these totems are echoed by the houses surrounding her Beiruti flat as well as the regional artifacts she collected therein. In Barthesian terms, the photographs that O'Brien has elected are ones that initially "pricked" her, due to some uncanny detail of light onto an object, surface, or space that physically and psychologically demarcated a given "zone" of commingled memories. Alternately, some photographs direct our gaze outside this interior, transmigrating the line of sight past the flat's balcony – the porous membrane of her flat's outer shell – onto the surrounding rooftops, and beyond that, the street. For, in Beirut, one is never truly *inside* one's flat or house because the ubiquitous balcony constitutes a neither/nor interstice between the home's inner and outer space, as is well known. All this constitutes "punctum one" of O'Brien's project towards the end of producing a Gramscian travelogue-inventory of the self in photographic terms, whereupon attendant ideological boundaries between US/Beirut and Past/Present begin to soften. Accordingly, *like the delayed rays of a star* instances a "nearby" approach, one informed by Trin T. Minh-ha's *Speaking Nearby* text as well as Ariella Azoulay's *The Civil Contract of Photography*, in which the Western gaze is always engaged anamorphically, from a non-Cartesian angle. As O'Brien puts it: "...this notion of when to look, and when *must* we look. [Azoulay] is talking about looking at violence and how there are moments when we can't turn away from violence. But for me, it is also equally important to show the moments of refuge and beauty in places like Beirut. And even if we don't feel we have the accountability to speak on injustice, we must speak because it's such an urgent crisis. So, it's speaking, but also considering the *place* from which one speaks, both in terms of ethics and immediacy."[9]

All this constitutes the essence of O'Brien's durational photo-essay project. Until the trifecta of the Lebanese revolution/pandemic/blast shattered the kind of critical distance that attends her Gramscian documentary approach. That said, this approach wasn't entirely abandoned. Rather, it was augmented by a return of what's repressed in those models. Which is to say, trauma.

> *What is Heimlich thus comes to be Unheimlich.*
> - Sigmund Freud

This brings us to the psychoanalytic mise-en-scène. Given the inherent domesticity of *like the delayed rays of a star*, how can we not recall Freud's *The Uncanny* (1919)? For it is there that the house as homely/

[6] Ibid., p. 96.

[7] While the French Mandate in Beirut was officially founded at the end of WWI, under the legal and diplomatic aegis of the League of Nations, the root of the French occupation was well established in the mid-19th century, at the twilight of the Ottoman Empire's control of the region. Hence the hybrid colonial nature of houses built in Beirut in the early 20th century, such as O'Brien's residence.

[8] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, (Boston: Beacon Press Books, 1995), pp. 5, 6.

[9] Heather M. O'Brien, "The Place From Which One Speaks: A Conversation with Latipa & Heather M. O'Brien," (October 11, 2019), in *Ethics of Estrangement*, ed. Juli Carson, http://pharmakon.art/life-worth-living/chapter-1-ethics-of-estrangement/

familiar (Heimlich) is conceived as folding seamlessly, like a Moebius strip, into the unhomely/strange (Unheimlich). Put simply, even though Heimlich (conscious) and Unheimlich (unconscious) are two sides of the same coin, we tend to keep the shiny Heimlich side up. But sometimes that's not possible, given the right conditions, by which Freud means the return of the repressed. How, then, to represent this domestic parapraxis? And to what end, if you're critically committed to the photo-essay format as means of ethical, public critique? Perhaps you hold both in the balance, unreconciled, as O'Brien has opted to do here. In which case, the personal/communal memories "housed" in the project's first half come to commingle with the Unheimlich personal/communal trauma of the project's second half. This is afforded by photo-essay's accompaniment of a journaling timeline, wherein the aforementioned traumatic events disrupt and transport the Heimlich "before" images onto Unheimlich "after" images, producing an atemporal loop of *after-before*. Subsequently, the Heimlich-before images, in which personal/historical memories commingle as a critical "nearby" approach to the Western ethnographic dilemma, come to be read through the Unheimlich as after images, in which personal/communal trauma transform the house from a shelter into an uncanny "womb-tomb," as O'Brien has put it.

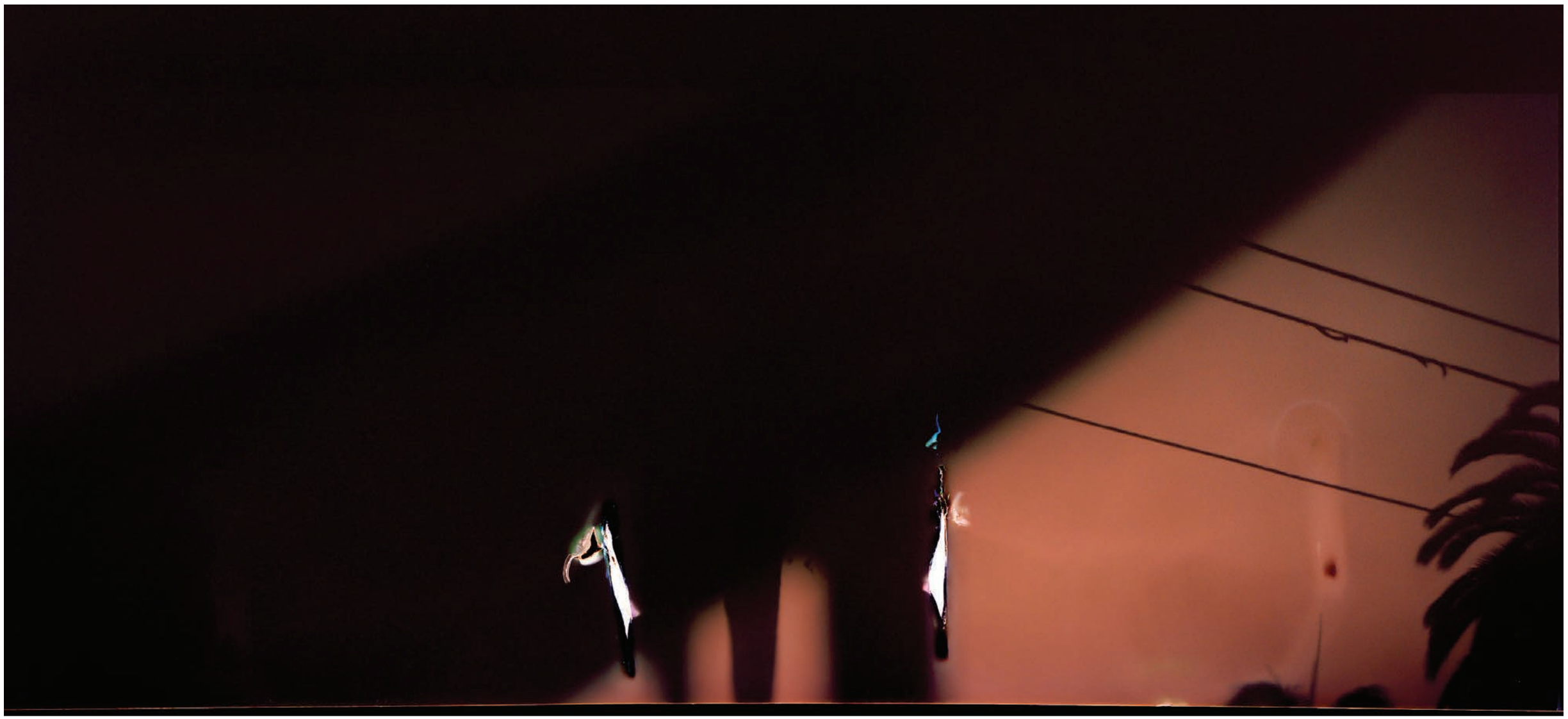
A deeper dive into the work's photo-scape reveals how much this temporal loop reintroduces the question of the gaze, at once familiar and unfamiliar, at once establishing and unsettling the *I*. As Lacan put it, when something uncanny enters the trajectory of my gaze as a *thing* rather than a *look*, it introduces an elision in the picture frame, and, accordingly, something in me that "is in no way mastered by me. It is rather it that grasps me, solicits me at every moment, and makes of the landscape something other than a landscape, something other than a picture."[10] Hence the "wrong" pictures that O'Brien, post-blast, has chosen to punctuate her otherwise picturesque photo-scape, ones that are either askew, exposed incorrectly, or literally blown out by light leaks, and when this happens, our gaze becomes a *thing*, a spot, or stain in the picture frame. The light leaks, in particular, reify the "scotoma" – or partial loss of vision – that attends the traumatic return of the repressed, both personally and historically. Consequently, the private and the public come to mirror each other in this uncanny valley of O'Brien's *exposed* crypt. Given the photo-scape's textual supplement – which in the end is not so *supplemental* – the house gets turned inside out. Metonymically, O'Brien's flat comes to stand for so many others in Ras Beirut, when the stabilizing ground beneath them failed, as glass shattered thousands of window frames during the August 4th blast, leaving hundreds of people dead, thousands injured, and hundreds of thousands homeless. Alternately, a metaphoric repose to the trifecta of disasters is indexed by the slew of detached butterfly wings, quietly found lying upon O'Brien's balcony during Beirut's Covid-19 lock-down.

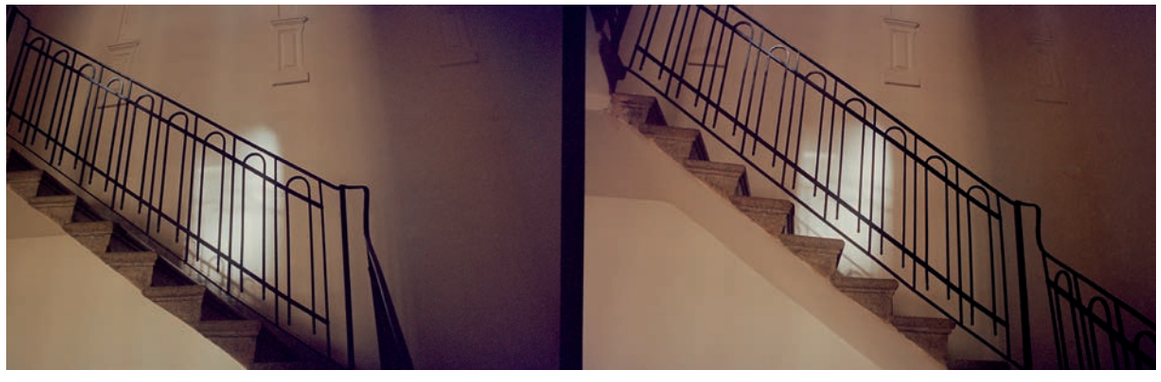
[10] Jacques Lacan, *The Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, Alan Sheridan, trans., (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1973), p. 96.

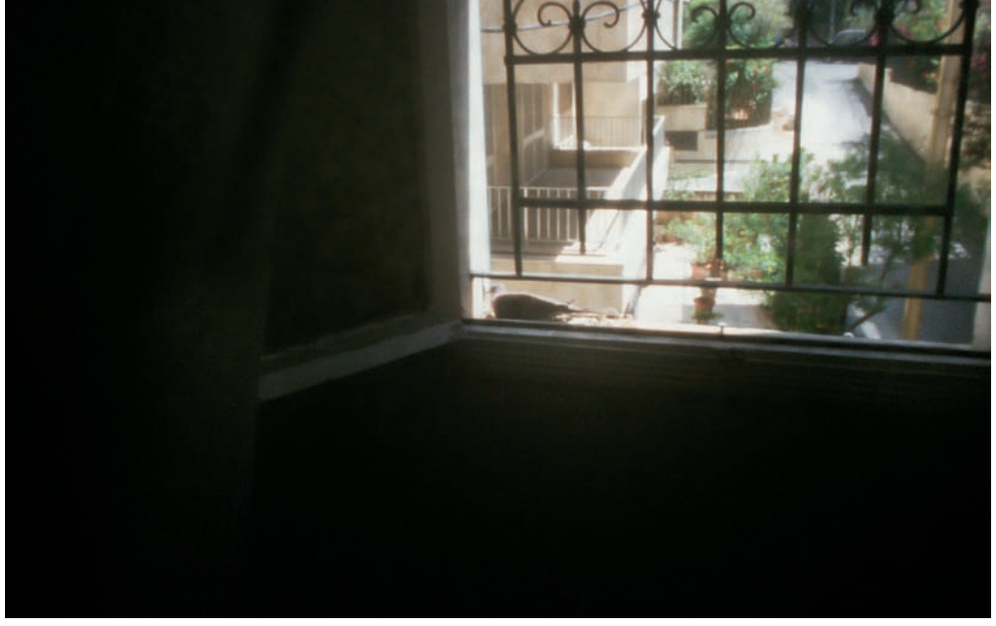
[11] *The Poetics of Space*, p. 12.

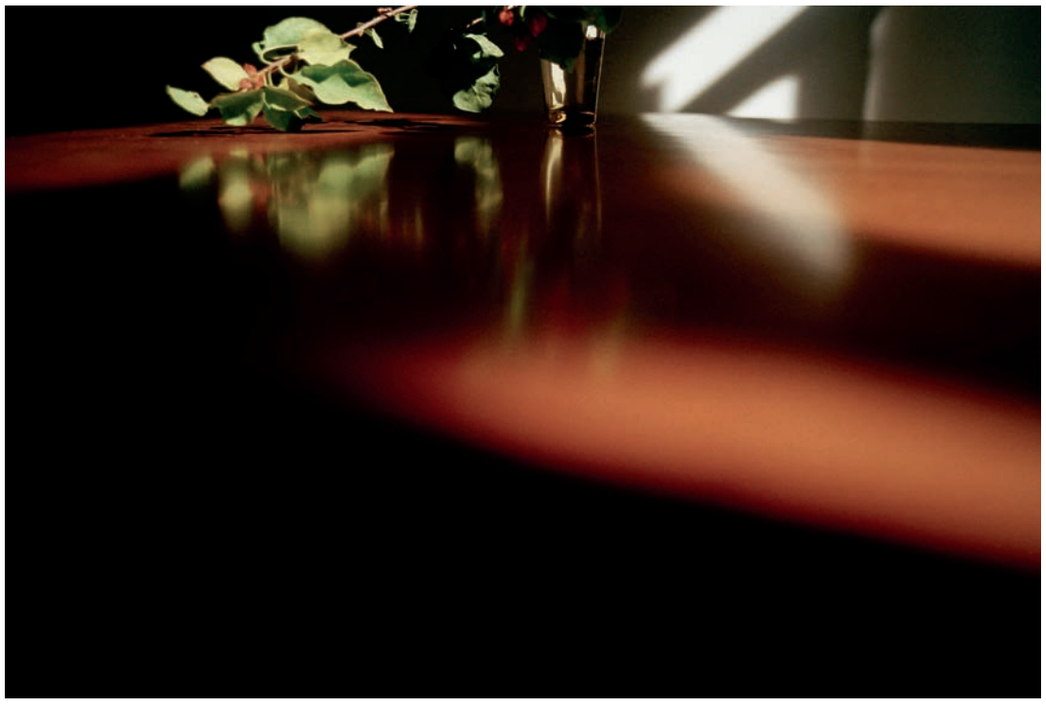
Hence O'Brien's effort to *picture* a house-as-parapraxis. As Bachelard argued, "Over-picturesqueness in a house can conceal its intimacy… the oneirically definitive house, must [therefore] retain its shadows."[11] Indeed, this accords with her photo-essay's first half, wherein the Bachelardian images O'Brien gives us, are characterized by the chiaroscuro of light and shadows in order to defy the straight-up picturesque representation of her flat. While in the second half of this photo-scape – one in which O'Brien's journaled event-horizon becomes increasingly peppered with trauma – we encounter images that are defined by a kind of Barthesian temporal *delay*. Looking back at part one, after finishing part two, who among us doesn't ponder: *So many people are dead and going to die.* Accordingly, O'Brien's photographs are uncanny because they *shutter like Winnicott's patient over a catastrophe that's already occurred*. Therein lies the ethical imperative of the work. It stridently marches on through all the trauma, under the guise of so many gazes that at once reflect and refract the *I* for which "O'Brien," as a protagonist, has come to stand. And in this way, the event-driven delay that defines *like the delayed rays of a star* is not unique to Beirut nor to O'Brien. It's germane to all of us because these events are indisputably global. There is no hardened divide between *here* and *elsewhere*. That is the point.

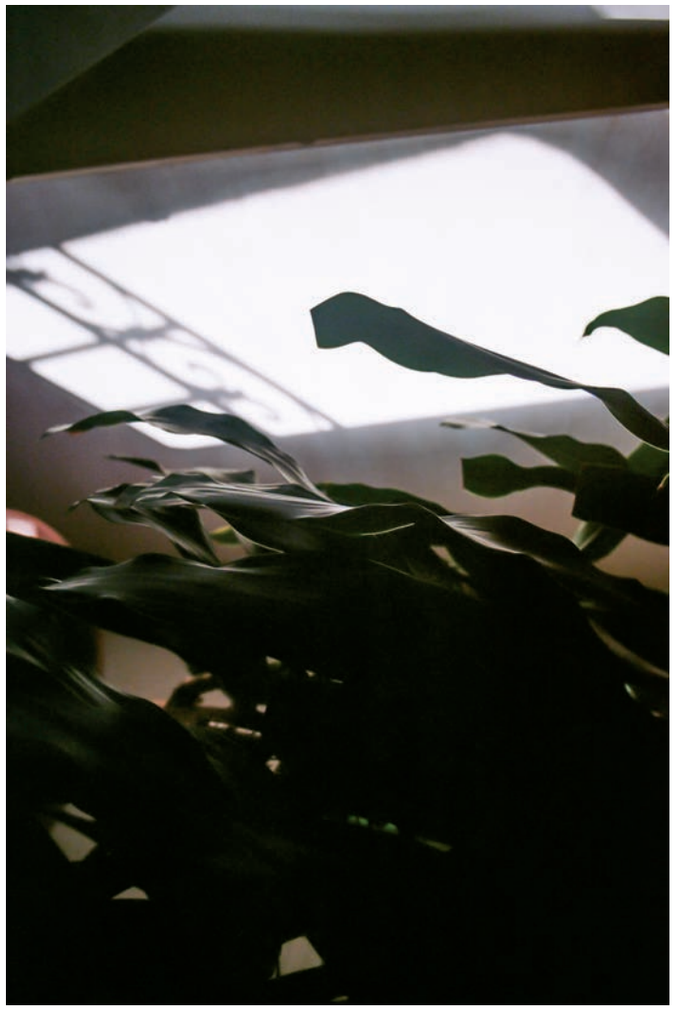
In the end, Heather M. O'Brien insists on *speaking nearby*.

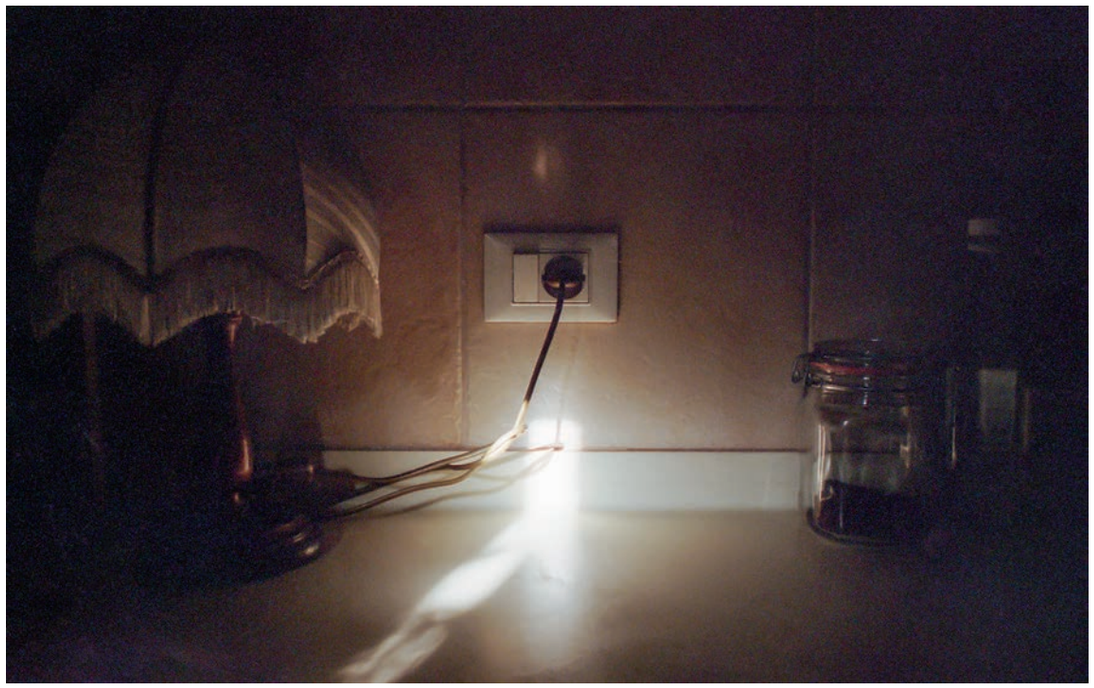


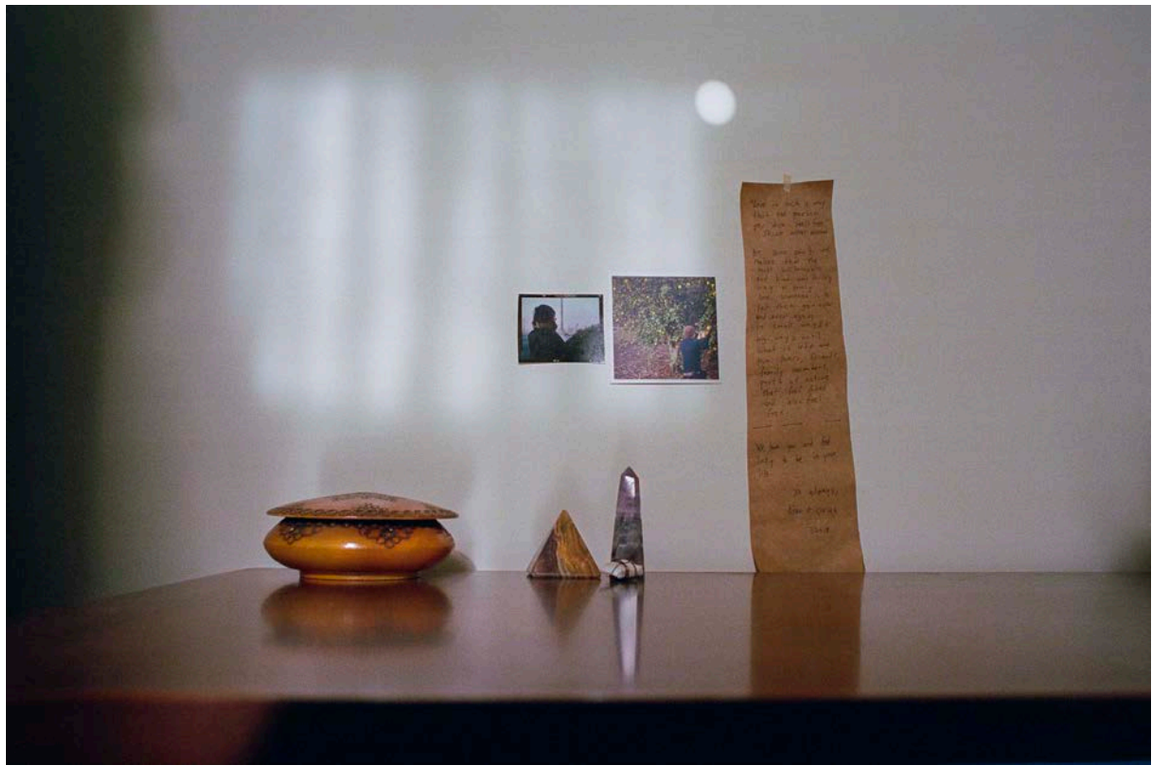


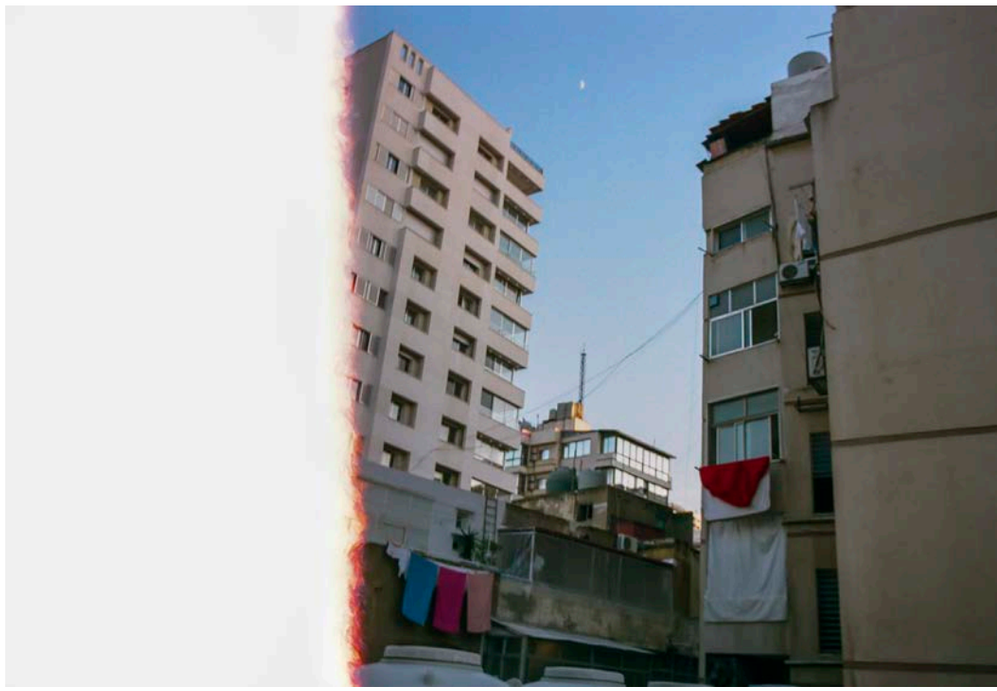


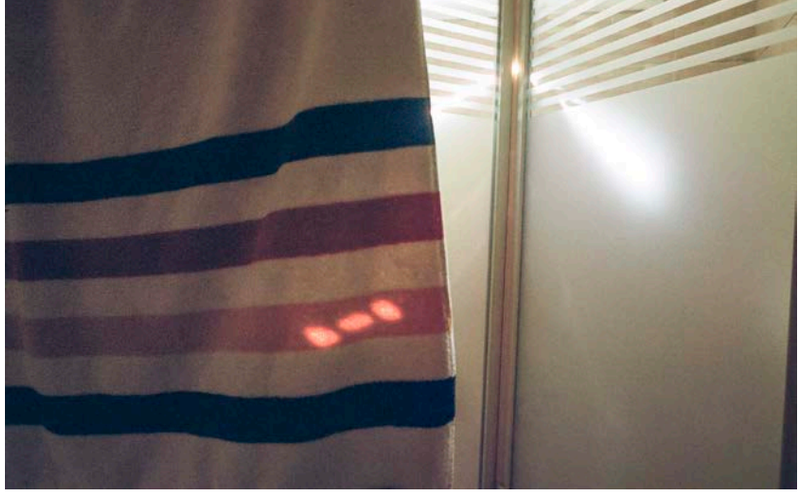


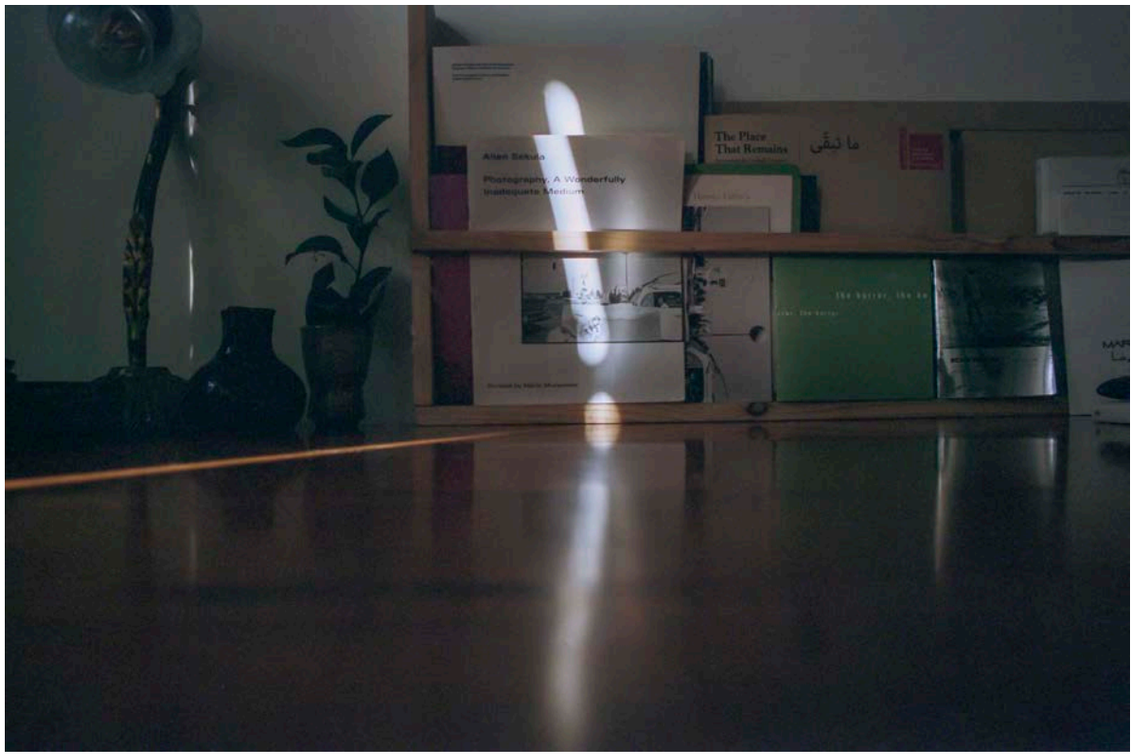











The Place
That Remains
ما تبقّى
Allan Sekula
Photography, A Wonderfully
Inadequate Medium


OF CITIES & WOMEN
(Letters to Fawwaz)
ETEL ADNAN
ETEL ADNAN
SEA and FOG

In attempt to pierce the propaganda, running parallel through space and time

Heather M. O'Brien

"How we spend our days, is of course, how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour, and that one, is what we are doing. A schedule defends from chaos and whim. It is a net for catching days."
- Annie Dillard

June 2020

What began here as an intentional photographic inquiry into domestic space has become a politically charged topic. Looking through the lens of home has taken on an entirely different meaning in our current quarantine. However, here in Lebanon, the Covid-19 pandemic is the second crisis to hit, and a third will soon follow. In October 2019 citizens rose up against a corrupt state, compounded by an impending economic collapse. We saw violent and familiar images from media outlets—smoke, tear gas, water cannons, burning banks. The gaze in conflict is constant.

Is there another way to see Beirut?

March 2016

I find scars on the film from the developing process. Silhouettes of palm trees haunt me. It's time to make a new home. Los Angeles strengthened and swallowed me—the highways burn with constant glare. I'll miss the smell of jasmine at dusk. But they have plenty of jasmine in Beirut, I'm told.

All my life I've been conditioned to fear the Middle East. From the moment I boarded the plane these misplaced anxieties were quickly replenished with fierce light, deep resilience, and profound conversation (not to mention a luscious nourishment of labneh and hindbeh).

Perception pits one struggle against another. We sit on different planes of reflective silver, running parallel through space and time. We whisper to each other in an altered continuum. We echo screams and sighs. Being in Beirut pierced the propaganda. A needle seeks to stitch fragments together, leaving a pale orange sky. Remnants of a color line remain, now fading, dark to light.

Distance moves us into isolated trepidation; proximity is everything.

April 2017

Spring has finally arrived to Lebanon, and after a year, it's starting to feel like home here. I sense the warmth of the sun on my notebook and a warm breeze coming through the bougainvillea leaves. I hear an echo of Bashir's voice and the aroma of coffee rises up through the balcony.

I feel calmer now, after seeing buds growing on the lemon trees. I grab my camera.

What do we remember, what do we forget, what is in between?

There is always this moment in Beirut where the sun is welcomed, but also feared. I hold onto the rainy winter in attempt to steer away from the looming burn. The sweat. The way knees slide against each other. I suddenly remember how Toni Morrison speaks about subjective sexuality. My sex will not be yours; she says, you must look to the back of one's knees, that's where you find true intimacy...

Moving into the heat offers several possible openings, a time to reflect.

Warm rain, bright soil. The light moves softly through the stained-glass windows.

I've been thinking a lot about Walden Pond and James Benning's work *Two Cabins*. The project is about the uncanny similarities between Henry David Thoreau and Ted Kaczynski. Benning builds replicas of their two differing cabins in the wilderness. The sculptural piece and its accompanying film contemplate solitude, a way of resisting that cuts off society entirely. While isolated, Kaczynski writes about the illusion of freedom; his perspectives on seclusion conjure madness in his mind. Thoreau, on the other hand, writes about how the removal from society does not mean one is actually alone. What he means by solitude, is not loneliness or isolation, but rather introspection and a dialogue with inner life. Solitude, for Thoreau, is thus more a state of mind than an actual physical circumstance; it approaches a mystical state.

In the contemporary conditions of domestic life, I can't help but wonder, is there a link between technology and society that is intrinsically a cage?

September 2017

Perfume. Smoke. Fruit. Flowers. Baking bread. Exhaust fumes.

Growing up in the US, I was conditioned with constant representation and rhetoric that exoticized Lebanon, placing a violent and war-torn vernacular in my imagination. But these days I notice a very distinct visual and social landscape that has never felt exotic or violent to me. The things I've experienced here have finally replaced my ruminations from the past.

I run through the plethora of stories and images of Beirut that exist in my mind.

I'm tired. I decide to stay home again.

"*If they say we should get together say why? It's not that you don't love them anymore. You're trying to remember something too important to forget. Trees. The monastery bell at twilight. Tell them you have a new project. It will never be finished.*"
- Naomi Shihab Nye

February 2018

Life gets in the way of work; work gets in the way of life. I wonder if this book will ever be complete. I develop rolls upon

rolls of film. I scan, and look again. My eyes are heavy.

I've taken the same image for over a decade now. But each time I see that reflective light and shadow in the corner I wonder if it will show up differently on the film.

The time between shooting and developing is where memory can move.

Innocent, without perils, I search for lost moments. These gnawed trees breathe delicate air. Far from the familiar, I cling to images in an attempt to bring past into present.

The photograph is all I have left of home.

November 2018

Spots of shade and light hit reflective corners of the room. Being in this country feels familiar now. I'm still an outsider here, and yet the colors, the smells, the feelings, seem to hark back to another life. There is a trifling sense of belonging, albeit broken and bittersweet. The cool breeze under the moonlight ushers in a new season. The flicker of my neighbor's blue light creates a sapphire glimmer on the rosemary bush.

I've been thinking about the genealogy of depression and if it is something I inherited. Ashes from a cigarette in the adjacent balcony rise up in the wind. They absorb gently onto my rashed skin. Last week's shower water felt particularly salty.

The waves in Manara crash violently. I only feel alive at dusk and dawn—the tone of the orange bedroom light, the smell of smoke in my hair. Being in the midst of a mist. The autumn wind sweeps everything away.

I fear the next moment. There must be a way to let go of this illusion of control.

I miss my family and long for a trip to Pine Lake. To be in the trees, to feel a sense of nature. The salt in the Mediterranean air suddenly reminds me of the Pacific Ocean.

I wonder if we ever fully belong to one place.

May 2018

"*I sleep to wake, and I take my waking slow. I learn by going where I have to go.*"
- Theodore Roethke

The only moments of certainty are the dawn and dusk of photographic capture. The spectacle of the image. The mundane image. The solitude or the social. The light is too bright, the dread too deep.

I have the smell of garlic on my fingertips. I will soon be surrounded by the familiarity of childhood—the magic and fantasy of the light, the California summer smog. How do we see through the haze?

A small beige and green toned pyramid sits stoic on the dresser; the tone of twilight highlights a photograph of an old village where I used to live.

The waves don't lie. Holding on to slow moments of now and nothingness. To seek and to be sought.

I look up and realize the fiddle fig tree needs some water.

January 2019

I just finished editing my film ***dyad gaze***. With Beirut as a backdrop, a young writer and philosopher, Noor Tannir, recalls her first memory growing up in the city. The film weaves through quotidian light and asks questions about the place from which one speaks. In pondering dual gazes between filmmaker and subject, a ground of positioning is called into question.

A dyad narrative attempts to unravel through a singular testimony.

The film is an effort to portray Beirut as home from both my and Noor's view, a view that aims to be more complex than the simplistic vision we see through the lens of mainstream Western media.

February 2019

"Stand still. The trees ahead and the bushes beside you are not lost. Wherever you are is here, and you must treat it as a powerful stranger."
- David Wagoner

Nadim Mishlawi and I are working on the sound design for my film. We spend many rainy afternoons in his studio in Sin el Fil. He tells me how he loves to bring his son to the Corniche during the winter storms to watch the waves thrash over the boardwalk.

Beirut always feels the most alive to me in winter.

October 17, 2019

I return to Beirut from Los Angeles on a balmy evening in October. Fire tires fill the highways. The curtain is yanked back and corrupt banking structures are now in full view. Rapid inflation. Urgent sounds of chanting and honking flow through my curtains.

On the balcony the next day, the morning light shifts softly from the lemon to the olive trees.

My crumpled sheets reveal the subconscious. I try to find a chamber in which someone can hear my silent screams.

December 2019

Yesterday I took a walk on the Corniche. The sea and sky blended together as I thought about the new life growing inside me. I have a pinching pain in my uterus, it comes and goes.

I found a bird's nest burrowed in the window. A small egg remained but the mother bird is nowhere to be found.

In his later years, my grandfather made intricate carvings of birds and my grandmother painted them. Wherever I move, I always take one of these small wooden birds with me. I place it on a shelf to remind me of home. Stagnant wings settle within the space.

Everyday life has altered since the revolution started. The University is closed, shops are boarded up. The pace on the streets is fast, progress slow.

I feel like I could sleep for days. My head is cloudy like the looming sky. I can't remember what it was like before the

uprising. The news is difficult to consume, and impossible to translate to people who aren't living in Lebanon.

"I have spent my life trying to understand the function of remembering, which is not the opposite of forgetting, but rather its lining. We do not remember. We rewrite memory much as history is rewritten. How can one remember thirst?"
- Chris Marker

March 2020

I wake up to find dozens of butterfly wings on the balcony. I pick them up off the ground and move them to my desk. The virus has reached us; the airport is closed, all borders locked down. No more sounds of the school next door, or of planes flying overhead.

Dead wings all around.

May 2020

You have to leave Beirut; my family keeps telling me.

I text with my friend Valentina in Italy. She tells me the lockdown is finally easing there; Covid cases are falling in certain areas. We talk about Lebanon and the time she spent here. She asks me if I want to leave—were you able to make a home? This is something difficult to create, she says, no matter how much we love the idea theoretically and politically.

I think about the difference between a house and a home.

I open a window to let some light in. And again, I wonder, is there another way to see Beirut?

August 4, 2020

Let everything happen to you. Beauty and terror.
- Rainer Maria Rilke

This is a quote I've been holding on to for as long as I can remember. They were among the first words I wrote in my diary as a small child. Today I experienced both emotions in the most beautiful and terrifying day of my life.

5:34am
I gave birth to Liam Ritsu Takahashi at the American University of Beirut Medical Center. After the birth, the nurse moved me into a recovery room. I asked for a bed near the window. I wanted Liam to see the sun.

6:02pm
Golden light; like a movie set. The nurse brought Liam into the room. My heart was full.

6:07pm
Glass windows exploded, ceiling tiles fell in. The door blew into the room and the bassinet was shattered. Time froze. I held Liam close as the sky turned pink. Somehow in this terror I found beauty. Nurses passed out masks and water, while complete strangers reached for each other in the dark.

What if this moment is not the tomb, but the womb?

"The time has come, the Walrus said. Perhaps things will become worse and then better. Perhaps there's a small god up in heaven readying herself for us. Another world is not only possible, she's on her way. Maybe many of us won't be here to greet her, but on a quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing."
- *Arundhati Roy, Come September*

September 10, 2020

The sound of sweeping glass permeates the neighborhood. The port is on fire again. Whatsapp messages fly back and forth. "Do we leave the windows open or closed this time?" "How do we escape the flying shards of glass?"

I close the shutters and hold Liam close.

"under our footsteps
a ghost
rises and instantly disappears
because our countries keep going up
in smoke"
- Etel Adnan

One month since the explosion. One month postpartum. The hardest and most delicate month of my life. No one prepares you for the strength this process requires, for the depths it will take you. All while seeing a city you love die before your eyes. There have been days where I cry so hard, I can barely stand. Ruckus rams through my aching body. The moments after this release are euphoric.

I look into Liam's eyes and find purpose to pull myself out of bed and face another day.

October 16, 2020

One year ago, I took a plane from Los Angeles back home to Beirut. The Shouf forest was on fire and the government was continually failing to provide basic services to its citizens such as water, electricity, and sanitation. The banks would soon fall and a year of turmoil would begin.

October 17, 2020

Bashir had tears in his eyes as our taxi pulled away from the empty house.

At the airport, the Lebanese Army accuses us of forging Liam's birth certificate. "It's a fake," they tell us. After hours of pleading, they finally allow us on the plane. Perhaps the birthdate, August 4, 2020, raised a red flag in their minds.

Liam is forever linked to Lebanon, an embryo conceived in chaos, born into a blast, destined to a decisive moment in Beirut.

"Each ray of sunshine is seven minutes old,"
Serge told me in New York one December night.
"So, when I look at the sky, I see the past?"
"Yes, yes," he said. "especially on a clear day."
– Agha Shahid Ali, *Snow on the Desert*

As the plane flies smoothly over the dark Mediterranean Sea, I reflect on the ways in which Beirut shaped me. The sapphire water is lit by a formidable orange moon.

This past year I experienced the violent images I grew up seeing—smoke, tear gas, water cannons, burning banks, a catastrophic explosion.

The gaze in conflict is constant.

Will there ever be another way to see Beirut?

My dear Liam, how will you see Beirut?

Special thanks to Lindsay Buchman, Nadya Sbaiti, Juli Carson, and Jonathan Takahashi for your generous feedback on this text. Deep gratitude to Dr. Ghina Ghazzeri, Dr Fadila Naji, Cynthia Rizkallah, and the nurses, doctors, and staff at AUBMC that collectively ushered Liam Ritsu into this apocalyptic world and saved lives in the aftermath of the Beirut explosion on August 4, 2020.

Views from Home

Frames of foreignness and belonging in Beirut

A Conversation between Corinne May Botz and Heather M. O'Brien

Corinne May Botz I realized the other day that you were in my *Views from Home* class at the International Center of Photography (ICP) ten years ago. It's hard to believe it was so long ago, and it means so much to me to know the course still resonates for you.

Heather M. O'Brien It was insightful to revisit the syllabus since your course opened up so much for me and continues to do so, especially with this project. Initially I was going to be in the Documentary/Photojournalism program at ICP. I'm glad I ended up in the Creative Practices program since my work took a conceptual turn beginning with your course.

CMB Knowing the political/organizing components of your practice and life I can see why documentary was initially your inclination. That part of you still comes through in your work. Thinking back to the *Home* class you were looking at addiction in an unconventional way through family photos, letters, and space. It's interesting to see how your work has developed.

HOB I worked for the artist and writer Martha Rosler after ICP; it was an intense yet worthwhile experience—a pre-graduate school boot camp with aesthetics and politics on steroids. At the same time, I worked with two close friends from ICP, Erica Leone and Felisia Tandiono, on a collective project called

Work Progress Collective (WPC). We were granted the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council SwingSpace residency on Governors Island where we focused on a project that connected the Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographers and images of the Wall Street crash of 2008. My work was moving in a social direction and it wasn't until I started graduate school at CalArts that I was able to take a step back and reflect. Maybe I'm always going back and forth within these two circles—a bolder, more political approach to the quieter work within domestic space.

CMB Tell me about your move to Beirut and how this led you back to interior space.

HOB The first year I was here I couldn't pick up a camera. I had the documentary-critique voices in my head (Rosler, Allan Sekula, etc.) and 2016 was a heavy moment to be an American in the Middle East. I was daunted by the possibility of exploitation. I was born in 1983, the same year as the Beirut barracks bombing and the height of the Lebanese Civil War. I grew up with the Reagan, Bush, Clinton, and post-9/11 rhetoric. I've been constantly conditioned to fear this part of the world, but I always questioned that narrative. As I've grown older, I've become much more critical about U.S. policy and imperialism.

When I arrived to Lebanon, I was observing but wasn't comfortable with bringing my camera to the street. Teaching photography to students from the Arab world, there are a lot of questions that I have about not being from here but having a position of power within academia. It wasn't until I was here for a few months that I moved into my current apartment, which is so opposite from the small apartments where I lived in NYC and LA. You feel an echo the moment you walk into the space. There's beautiful light and the architecture comes from the Ottoman and French mandate eras. There aren't many of these buildings left. I started quietly photographing once I became more settled in the space. It was a therapeutic way for me to slow down and adjust to the new culture and chaotic city. In contrast to photographing the loud streets outside, it felt warm and easy to make images inside.

CMB The pictures are so intimate and the house feels like a place of refuge, but the outside is always hovering. I think of the home as a place of voyage and I can see this expansiveness through some of your images that brings to mind Georges Perec's *The Species of Space.* He zooms out in scale from the page to the whole of the Universe.

HOB When I showed the early images to the artist and ICP professor Jean Marie Casbarian she thought the way I photographed Beirut through the windows made the house feel like a prison. Perhaps at first I stayed inside as I was adjusting to the cultural changes. But the space is much more contemplative than confining. You used the word voyage, and I really identify with that. Beirut is a beautiful, frenzied, and diverse city. Various religions and people of varied backgrounds live within an extremely dense space. Walking into my apartment I was immediately drawn inward, looking out to a maze through fractions of light created by the windows.

CMB In my project photographing the homes of people with agoraphobia, I learned a lot about how the home can be both a prison and a haven. Moving to Beirut must have been a big change from the sprawling vastness of LA. Living in New York City, I've found it essential to see even a sliver of sky from the window and of course what you describe as fractions of light. I interpret the light in your images as designating time and transformation. Can you talk about the metaphor of light in your images?

HOB It has to do with the passage of time, which goes back to the work I did in your class about my brother, addiction, and family photographs. It's about putting an old photo in a room where light falls on it through the window to make a new photograph. In this project I use an image of my childhood home and one of the towns I grew up in. It feels very active to me—to place an image on the wall and shoot it anew. In some ways I'm trying to break nostalgia, but this process can also make the image more nostalgic, so it's an oxymoron in that way.

CMB The way you move around photographs points to the photograph as an object. The repetition of photos in your images also brings rhythm and a sense of time passing. Through this way of seeing, new information becomes apparent and helps counter the static or nostalgia.

HOB I place past photographs into different light paradigms to bring them into the present, which makes me think about the future. Especially now, with the capitalist system we're in, we aren't staying in the same homes for a long time, so that mobility is of relevance to me.

CMB One of the interesting things about teaching *Views from Home* at ICP is that the students are coming from around the globe with different cultural understandings of home. They rarely have access to original physical locations so interesting tactics are used to recreate/explore memories in the present. As Thomas Wolfe said, "you can't go home again," and of course it's a presumption that people have a home in the first place so I think it's a very interesting starting point. Most of the students are living in temporary NYC apartments. Notions of dwelling, traveling, transience, and homeland are recurring themes.

HOB I relate to that idea of transience since I've moved around quite a bit since I was a child. Now I'm more eager to dwell and really steep in a place. In terms of tactics, I was just re-reading Moyra Davey's *Long Life Cool White* before this conversation. Davey talks about photography and accident, "the notion of accident has had many meanings, from "decisive moment" to "photographing to see what something will look like photographed." Often times I shoot in my home because I want to put distance between me and domesticity. I wish to see this way-too-familiar space within the confines of a new frame. Davey also refers to Martha Rosler, "one possible response to Rosler's argument [about documentary] would have been to create instead a world of one's own." This move away from the photograph as document to focus on a particular interiority is certainly something I'm drawn to.

CMB Mary Douglas said, "home starts by bringing some space under control." In your images, chance moments are created by the use of objects within the home. The camera creates a distance and reveals the performance of making a home. I was also thinking about Moyra Davey before we spoke and one thing that struck me was how you both use your home as your studio. We know through the contact sheets in your house that this is also a working space. I can relate to that as well although sometimes by necessity and not choice. Davey prefers her home as her studio. Historically, especially during high modernism, there's a dichotomy between home and studio, and the domestic is negated. But the domestic space as studio creates interesting opportunities.

HOB I prefer to have my home space rupture and bleed into the studio space. When you walk into in the apartment the first thing you confront is large room with two desks and lots of wall space—what has become my studio space. Often the laundry drying rack ends up in the studio and I love that. Plants and gardening have

become a focus for me here because there's so much concrete. Being on the balcony with the leaves ends up being a big part of my day, that carries into the photographs—bits of the garden end up inside.

CMB Can you tell me how shooting film has helped shape the project?

HOB Film for me is always about forced time between the moment of the shutter click and the reveal of the image. Thinking about Davey again, film allows for more accidents. It also offers a gap for one's emotions to shift, to look at the picture in a new way. I shoot with my grandfather's Canon AE-1. He was an air force bomber pilot who used his camera during World War II. So I'm also thinking about this camera's generational shifts in terms of gender, space, and time.

CMB This seems like a good segue to talk about your film, also shot in your home, which follows the philosophical and psychological thoughts of a young woman growing up in Beirut. You had such a compelling main subject, Noor Tannir, how did you come to work with her?

HOB Noor was a student at The American University of Beirut where I teach. We started building a strong dialogue and rapport, especially in my Video Art class. She was an Art History and Philosophy major; I loved her references as well as the energy and questioning she brought to the courses. As an educator I thought to turn the tables and offer her a platform to teach me a bit about her history within the city.

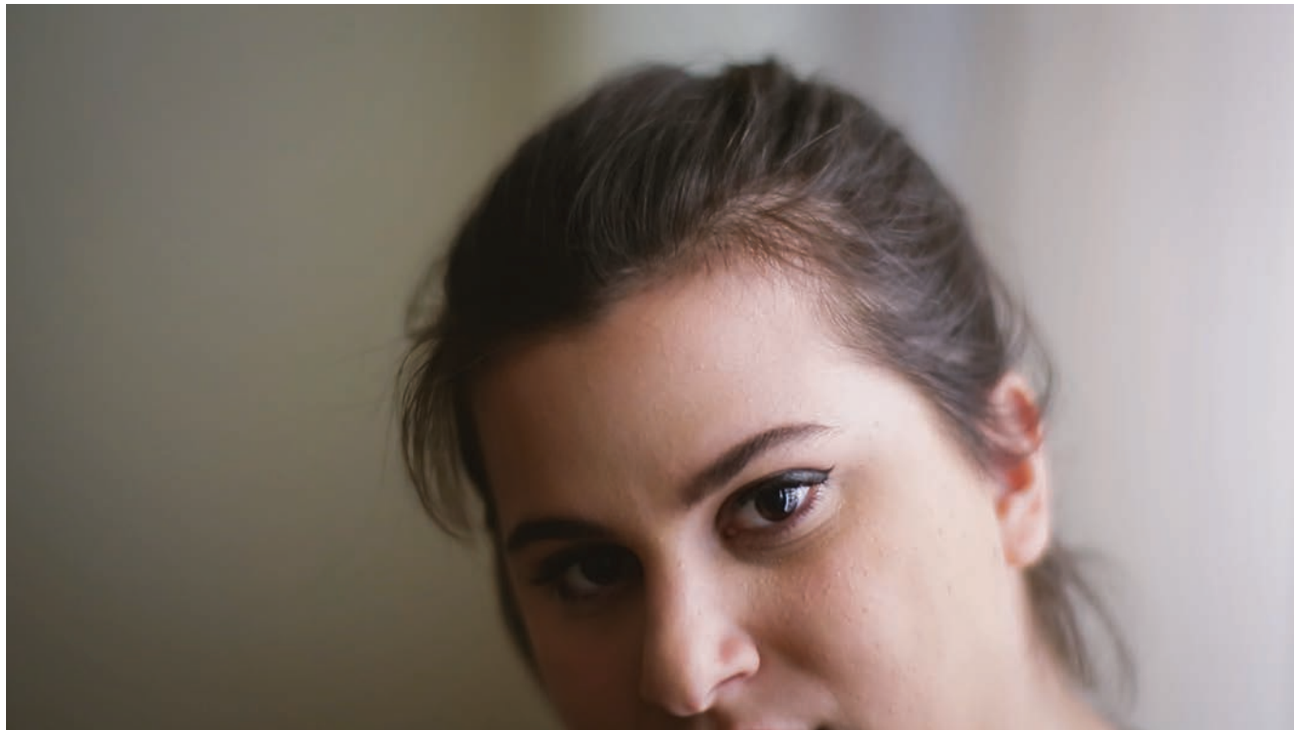
CMB It was a great idea to use your own home as the site where she speaks in your film.

HOB Most students here live with their families until they get married. It's rare they have their own apartment. I wanted Noor to feel comfortable whilst away from her family space. Often there's so much that young people can't open up about in the presence of their families. I also wanted to shoot in a domestic space that would draw a parallel to Beirut's history, particularly since Noor talks a lot about history in the piece.

CMB By putting her in your space you invite community into your personal space. You also make a strong connection between the filmmaker and subject, which goes back to the film's wonderful title, *dyad gaze*.

HOB The *dyad gaze* refers to my first real gaze on Beirut, through and alongside Noor's lens. In this sense, I'm drawn to Trinh T. Minh-ha's notion of "speaking nearby" instead of speaking about. I struggled with the decision to not put my audible voice in the film, but I felt that my voice is so much a part of it in a visual sense—both through how the city is shot and how Noor is responding within the context of my home. There's also an influential film I should mention—*In Complete World* by Shelly Silver. The filmmaker confronts people on the streets of NYC to ask them intimate questions about their happiness, how much money they would like to make, do they feel responsible for the Iraq War. It weaves the personal and political together in a unique way. Silver doesn't put her own voice in it, it's just this long series of responses, and yet her voice is extremely present through the editing tactics. This strategy was really important for me.

CMB It's always a hard decision to make—how much of the filmmaker or photographer's presence to directly include. I didn't question your decision. We know you're there and it would have made it more into a talking head interview if we heard you asking the questions. And it's not that—it's much more personal. Is this the first time that there is a subject's voice in your work?



HOB There was a piece I did as part of my thesis exhibition at CalArts called *bits of colored cloth* that focuses on the voice. It's a performance piece that's read in the round. There are three women readers, all of whom are not from the U.S. They recall their first memory of seeing the American flag—the power and complications of that symbol. The work takes cues from Augusto Boal and is more theatrical in its approach; *dyad gaze* is a more intimate and personal testimony.

CMB In *dyad gaze*, it is a beautiful combination of visuals with the narration.

HOB Thank you. Being a photographer somehow helps with the editing process of image and sound. We're trained to create momentum for the story and to not show everything in one image. For example, in the film Noor says something and then two minutes later we see the thing she was speaking about.

CMB The night before I watched your film, I watched Chantal Akerman's last film, *No Home Movie*. It's really interesting in relation to the first film she made, *Jeanne Dielman* because both focus on women and domestic interiors. Her mom's health is deteriorating and most of *No Home Movie* takes place in her mom's bourgeois apartment, there are also scenes of skyping with her mom from afar and windy desert landscapes. A self-described nomad, there was such unease and restlessness in Akerman's depiction of space. It was interesting to watch the films back-to-back since they both dealt with a central female character, belonging, and exile. In contrast, your film also has a strong sense of calmness that I found really beautiful.

HOB On that note I've recently been thinking about a film Allen Frame made called *Going Home*. Have you seen it?

CMB I haven't but I'd love to.

HOB It focuses on his mother and begins with her in the backyard with her walker and walking into the light. It's very quiet and poignant. He screened it when I was at ICP and it's always remained strong in my mind. Like his photographs, there's a richness and depth of tone and color. His portraiture, and particularly how he lights his subjects has been really influential to me. Shadows are a key element in his work.

CMB It's amazing the way that light can communicate place and narrative in photographs. I also think about Uta Barth's exploration of light, although her work is more about perception and erasing the subject or narrative. There's a more performative quality to the light in your photographs, although in some of the more recent images you sent me, for instance the butterfly wings and the leaf skeleton, I can feel your hand more.

HOB Things are becoming a little more staged: waiting for the exact moment when a plane will go by, or placing a leaf on a particular notebook, or moving a clear vase into the light to expose the plant's roots. It's similar to how I move photographs on the wall to catch the light.

CMB I love the new image with the sheets.

HOB You know me, I can't stop shooting the sheets!

CMB I know I noticed your Skype picture! (laughter) I interpret the crumpled sheets as a landscape containing past and future action that viewers can project upon. It's the moment in-between that we encounter in your images. Is there anything else I should know about the new work?

HOB I love thinking about the sheets as a landscape with possibilities. On that note, I always find Felix Gonzalez-Torres' *Untitled* to be the most political yet intimate photograph of bedsheets. In terms of this work, there is an innerness that I've experienced in Beirut, much more so than when I lived in the U.S. Perhaps it's partly because I'm such an outsider here, so I find myself turning more inwards. And making a home space here has been so important to the work. It's also been a way to psychologically deal with the vast change to moving to this part of the world.

CMB Are you beginning to feel settled?

HOB I don't know if Beirut is ever a place that you completely settle. But I think the relationships I've made with students and colleagues have helped me in immense ways. I've always been interested in a reciprocal teaching practice but here I rely on people a lot more, even in terms of where to go and get things.

CMB That's beautiful.

HOB There are a few images from my old house in LA and I'm thinking about those as bookends to the project. And I included some images of my partner Jonathan because it's also a project about making a home with someone.

CMB I had the feeling that you lived alone in the pictures and I mistook your partner for you. But I can see why it's interesting to introduce a figure into the project. You are trying on a new role in a foreign country as well as within a personal relationship in your home.

HOB I can see why you mistook the figure for me because there is an immense sense of solitude in the work. But I think that's also because it's the first time we're living in a house where we actually have space. I'm going to keep shooting. I'm still figuring out what I want to say through the images. It's taking longer than expected, but I have to trust the process.

CMB It's interesting to me how artists determine when a project is finished. With something so personal in nature, I can imagine you photographing until you move out of the apartment but it seems that you have something more defined in terms of what you want to say. Is that something you can elaborate on?

HOB This work is open-ended and flowing compared to my other work which has a clear purpose, or something specific at stake. In school we're trained to defend our work and ideas; it's not often we find room for play. Being in Beirut has made me think deeply about inner life and the passage of time. I watch the light move slowly across my home and document it in a way I've never done before. Outside is moving rapidly but inside I move the camera gently, without specific intention. There is a sense of history to this space that is not at all like the history I learned about the Middle East when I was growing up. Perhaps this work is meant to offer another gaze of Beirut, one that is much softer than the one the Western media shows us. Too often we're fed these bold one-liner narratives. My hope is that this work can reveal some nuance, the fractions between the light.

CMB Yes, I love this work as a comment on belonging and foreignness. Despite the seclusion or respite from the external world, the outside is present in your images. Your house is haunted by other times and presences which you acknowledge.

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dyad gaze
Single-channel film, 26 minutes, 2019

With Beirut as a backdrop, a young writer and philosopher, Noor Tannir, recalls her first memory growing up in the city. The film weaves through the quotidian light of an old house in the Hamra neighborhood and asks questions about the place from which one speaks. In pondering dual gazes, the ground of positioning is called into question. A dyad narrative attempts to unravel through a singular testimony.

vimeo.com/heathermobrien/dyadgaze
password - dyadgaze2019

Photography
or the Art of Documenting *Affect*
in Heather M. O'Brien's work

Yasmine Nachabe Taan

"Another challenge for the photographer is to impose order onto the things seen and to supply the visual context and the intellectual framework—that to me is the art of photography," explained Berenice Abbott.[1] It is in this sense that I will look into Heather M. O'Brien's photographs, her sense of aesthetics, and taste in the production or re-production of moments of her everyday home life in Beirut, Lebanon.

I first met Heather at a conference on photography and theory in Nicosia, Cyprus when she presented her fascinating project on memory in exploring her grandfather's archive in order to understand his experience as a military pilot during WWII.[2] While her work on her grandfather's archive interrogates the illusion of accurate memory, imagination, and identity, Heather's recent series of Beirut photographs presents us with another vernacular genre—snapshots of a selection of random objects in different spots around her domestic space. Often without any conscious decision on the scenery, the mood, or the spaces that have come into focus in her frames, she documented details of her environment as if recording her quotidian, turning ordinary objects into extraordinary ones.

This essay aims at underlining the emotional, psychological, and affective qualities that are put forward in Heather's images. In her photographs appear everyday objects such as an unmade bed, smoke coming out of a jar, drops of water on a wet body after a shower, and other random sceneries. At the first glance, the photos give the impression of being studies of light and shadow, and most of them seem to be more focused on the shadow than on the objects themselves. Yet on a second probing, one recognizes that they contain a social and even emotional layer that is revealed through the material surface of the image. This gesture can be interpreted as ways of understanding and coming to terms with life, the passing of time and *affect*. It is as if the photos are records of the photographer's *emotions*, as if Heather used the camera for psychological self-study within the domestic realm. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes describes his own exploration and experience of what he calls the power of *affect*.[3] Barthes experiences the power of *affect* more in his body than in his mind, and more in emotion than in thought. It is perhaps the reason for Heather to use images rather than words to express her emotions. Barthes' claim, "what I can name cannot really prick me," can also be applied on Heather's photos. For her too, *affect* is non-verbal. Sarah Kember further develops this concept by discussing objects in the photograph that are "known but have not yet been thought," that is brought into consciousness and into representation.[5] The objects in Heather's photographs are moving through a transformational phase—from the unthought known into thought. This transformation occurs when the shadows of objects fall into the image and take shape in relation to the objects. Looking at such material through an academic lens, many questions arise: Should we focus on the private narrative? Should we regard the photos as objects of cultural, sociological, or psychological insight? Can we speak of a specific aesthetic? And how do we combine all these angles? I argue that Heather's snapshot photos—including concepts related to war, home, and shadow—like other forms of vernacular photography, are objects at the same time related to personal, affective, social, and cultural communication.

Writing about snapshot and random photography has mainly come from anthropology.[6] Scholars from the aesthetics fields, art history, photography studies, and cultural studies have been more hesitant about how to approach such material. Some scholars such as Mary Warner Marien do not even find vernacular genre and snapshot photography interesting enough to write about extensively.[7] However, scholars such as Roland Barthes, Geoffrey Batchen, and Martha Langford developed theoretical writing on snapshots and photography of the everyday life drawing from memory and cultural studies. Other scholars explored the snapshots from an artistic perspective such as Sarah Greenough and Andrea Noble.[8] I will examine Heather's photographs not only as documents recording her everyday life but also as art objects expressing her *emotions*.

Heather came to Beirut in 2016 to teach photography related courses at the American University of Beirut. Upon moving into a flat within a traditional house in Ras Beirut, she was inspired by the light—or absence of it—coming into it and its reflection on various forms and surfaces. No matter what her images actually represent, they generate a poetic and engaging experience to express not only the artist's state of mind but

[1] Quoted in John Tagg (1993). *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 154.

[2] *The 5th International Conference of Photography & Theory* (ICPT2018) *was organized by the International Association of Photography & Theory* (IAPT). It was held in Nicosia on 22-24 November, 2018. For more about the conference, you can log on to the following online link: www.photographyandtheory.com As part of the panel on War, Imagery and Imagination, O'Brien presented "Between Apocalyptic Apprehensions and Dreams of Deliverance," a 35mm slide lecture performance including sound and images from her grandfather's archive.

[3] Barthes, Roland (1981). *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography.* New York: Hill and Wang, p. 21.

[4] Ibid, p. 51.

[5] Sarah Kember (1996). "The Shadow and the Object: photography and realism," in *Textual Practices, vol. 10*, issue 1, pp. 145-163, p. 160.

[6] For example, Christopher Pinney's *Photography and Anthropology*. London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2001, and before him, Elizabeth Edwards' *Anthropology and Photography* 1860-19920. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992.

[7] Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2002), p. 445.

[8] Barthes, Roland (1981). *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography.* New York: Hill and Wang.
Batchen, Geoffrey. (2008). Les snapshots. *Études photographiques*, 22.
Langford, Martha, (2001). Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press. Greenough, Sarah, et als (Eds). (2007). *The Art of the American Snapshot, 1888-1978: from the collection of Robert E. Jackson.* Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art. Noble, Andrea, & Welch, Edward. (2009). *Photography: theoretical snapshots.* London; New York: Routledge.

also rupturing feelings of longing and belonging. Having studied at the International Center of Photography (ICP) in New York in 2009, Heather's photographic practice is expected to fall under photojournalism and documentary, however, her work took a different path. While confronting the traditional photojournalistic school training at ICP, Heather took courses in philosophy, studio arts, and cultural theory to produce work that better reflects her sense of aesthetics and intellectual framework. After ICP she worked with the artist and writer Martha Rosler. Reading "In, Around, and Afterthoughts on Documentary Photography" was an illuminating experience for Heather. [9] In this essay, Rosler is highly critical about documentary photography as a practice. She adamantly criticizes particular ways of looking to homeless people in The Bowery in New York City. This essay tremendously shaped Heather's photographic practice, and she became very careful in documenting other people's lives and events elsewhere. "I was scared to pick up the camera when I first moved to Beirut," Heather told me, "mainly because of fear of exploitation … I had seen that violent gaze so many times, bullet holes on buildings and other traces of war… mostly in the mediated images on CNN and other broadcasting news channels in the U.S."

"Most of those who were called documentary photographers a generation ago . . . made their pictures in the service of a social cause. . . . to show what was wrong with the world, and to persuade their fellows to take action and make it right. . . . [A] new generation of photographers has directed the documentary approach toward more personal ends. Their aim has not been to reform life, but to know it," wrote John Szarkowski describing the work of Gary Winogrand, Diane Arbus, and Lee Friedlander who exhibited in the *New Documents* exhibition in 1967. [10]

Heather's documentary approach tends to lean towards personal expressions. Her aim is not to generate a specific social change but to learn more about her everyday life and offer another gaze of life in contemporary Beirut. Through her senses of locality and distance, she attempts to make sense of the world around her. She was born in 1983 at the height of the Civil War in Lebanon. She grew up in the U.S. haunted by mediated images of the ongoing conflict in the Middle East and within a particularly Western rhetoric of war, especially after 9/11. In turn her images end up generating a social stance, as they are not the typical images that Westerners make of the East.

[9] This essay, written by Martha Rosler on documentary photography, was originally published in 3 Works, Halifax, N.S.: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design, 1981. It was republished in "In, Around, and Afterthoughts: On Documentary Photography" in *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, Richard Bolton, ed. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990.

[10] John Szarkowski, introduction (wall text) to the *New Documents* exhibition, February 28 - May 7, 1967.

Duality

This dual separation as an American and as a generation that heard and watched stories about war from afar gave way to another challenge for the photographer, that of "impos[ing] order onto the things seen and to supply the visual context" a different way of seeing and organizing things in the image.[11] "There is something important in documenting Beirut at this moment in time," explains Heather.[12] The question here is *how* to document Beirut? And what to include and exclude within this representation? In all of her work, Heather is determined to explore a different facet of Beirut, one that is not linked directly to the war, in the same way that she tried to shed another light on Beirut in her recent short film *dyad gaze*. [13]

> A thing can be absolute according to one relation yet relative according to others, order can be at once necessary and natural (in relation to thought) and arbitrary (in relation to things), since, according to the way in which we consider it, the same thing maybe placed at differing points in our order, explains Michel Foucault.[14]

In this sense it is the form and the content of what one knows that becomes dissociated in an analysis based on terms of identity and difference. In this case it is Heather's identity and upbringing, coming in from a different culture that offers a sensitive lens to seeing things from a different perspective.

War

"I have always been drawn to photography in terms of interiority," Heather explained, when talking about documenting corners of her domestic space.[15] At home, she found herself at a distance from traces of the Lebanese Civil War, not that she was trying to smooth over the violence but rather find a space to reflect upon it. Here it is important to note that Heather is not part of the generation of Lebanese artists such as Akram Zaatari and Walid Raad, who felt the need to confront this topic in most of their work in order to move on. Being an educator, she learned from her students that the new generation of emerging artists in Beirut resents previous representations of Lebanon as a war-torn country. For them there is so much more to explore than living experiences of the Civil War. They want to move on.

[11] Abbott, Berenice quoted in John Tagg (1993). *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 154.

[12] Interview with the artist on August 14, 2019 in Beirut.

[13] *dyad gaze*, single channel film, 26 minutes, 2019

[14] Foucault, Michel (1970). *The Order of Things*. New York: Vintage Books, p. 54.

[15] Interview with the artist.

Home

"The idea of home can be daunting, particularly when you consider the political and social histories of this building ... the height of the ceilings create an existential and dramatic space ... it generates an echo that does something to the voice and one's inner dialogue..." said Heather describing her home in Ras Beirut. It is as if she is trying to instill all this in the frames of her photos.

Heather's images not only take a locally specific form but also *produce locality* that creates and negotiates her individual stories. "My work is about a longing for home," states Heather but "you can never actually go home" according to Thomas Wolfe.[16] So here it is a matter of defining or desiring home. *Home* for Heather is also about *making home* together with her partner, artist Jonathan Takahashi, who had never left Los Angeles, California before landing in Beirut. Many pieces of furniture and objects around the house were made by Jonathan, so in a way it is a participatory act in *making home* that is being documented in the photos. Both Jonathan and Heather are grappling with this thought of *home-making* in a land they did not grow up in. They are personalizing the space, or creating their own space within a space.

The images are not only about beautiful local objects and Beiruti architectural details such as the colorful stained-glass windows located in the central space of this house or the mosaic tiles on the ground, but rather about Heather's emotions within this place. There is something particularly dark and unnerving in the images, there is also a sense of longing. They tell the story of Heather experiencing this place as an outsider, taking photographs in search for different ways of appreciating the space while also trying to fit within it.

Shadow

Often in Heather's photographs, it is not the object that is the subject, but rather the shadow. It is the absence of light that produces interesting forms on surfaces that seem to be the focus of the photographer. For example, in plate 7[17] and in plate 57, it is not the drops of water on the body or the smoke coming out of the jar that demonstrate the photographer's sensitivity, but the shadow that creates an unexpected lozenge shape on the body or the shadow that frames the space in which the smoke is framed that is the subject of the image.

[16] "You Can't Go Home Again" is also the title of Wolfe, T. (1940). *You can't go home again.* New York, N.Y: Grosset.

[17] Photo index on page 25

In this sense Heather is again ordering "things," and expressing her sensitivity in her composition. In plate 46, the viewer is left wondering whether the focus of the photographer is Etel Adnan's books or the geometric rounded shapes produced on the surface.

The Accidental

The images also include objects that may appear banal or random yet, they seem to be the focus in Heather's photos—the butterfly wings (plate 58), the carved bird (plate 43), the shower handles (plate 7). There are also the unexpected details that appear in the images–the smoke (plate 57), the stain on the wood surface (plate 58), the water drops on the body (plate 7), and the roots sinking in water (plate 46). Finally we have the focus on shadow which is prevalent in the lozenge window cast on the body (plate 7), the geometric circular shape shadow on the table (60), and the trianglar-shaped leading line shadow extended towards the photographer (plate 46). It seems that Heather focused on combining these three elements to create repetition and meaning—the series of objects, the unexpected details, and the shadow.

If we had to understand Heather's images through Roland Barthes' established distinction between the *studium* and the *puntum* gaze, the familiar and obvious objects that stand like an extension of the field such as the butterfly wings, the carved bird, and the shower handles can be considered the *studium* whereas the second elements that *break*, *prick*, or *punctuate* the *studium*, "rise[s] from the scene, shoot[s] out of it like an arrow" are the smoke, the stain on the wood surface, the water drops on the body, and the roots sinking in water. These are the objects that pierced Heather. It is the unpredictable accidental happening in the photo that stirs Heather's emotion.

It is vis-à-vis the concept of duality, the post-Lebanese Civil War image landscape, and the documentation of home-making that Heather finds solace. She imposes a particular order onto the things in her photographs to supply an alternate gaze of domestic life in Beirut. If Berenice Abbott were alive, she would have recognized the art of photography, and how space and time during her journey East had an impact in Heather M. O'Brien's work.

"In discussion with students, confronting heavy, daunting issues such as U.S. imperialism, a particular malaise arises…" said Heather. It is precisely in her photography where we confront this melancholy. For it is within the framing of particular quotidian objects, details, shadows, and the accidental that Heather offers us refuge, while confronting the complicated emotions that arise when we look intently at the space we call home.

photo index

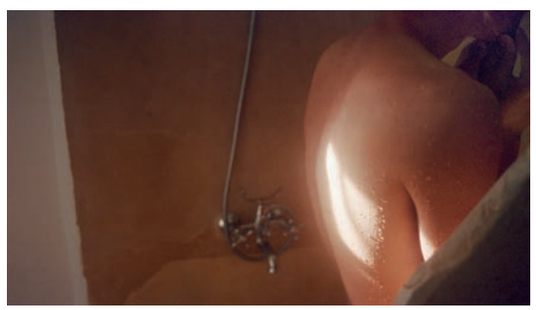

plate 7

plate 60

plate 43

plate 57

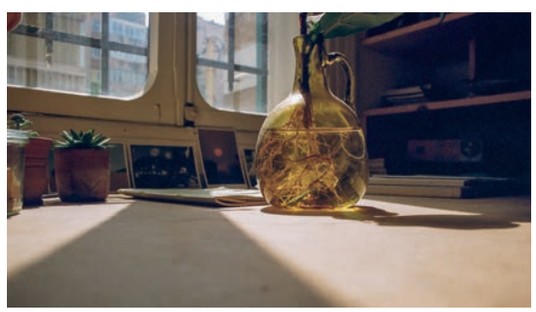

plate 46

plate 58

biographies

Heather M. O'Brien

Heather M. O'Brien is an artist, filmmaker, and Assistant Professor of Cinema and Photography at Southern Illinois University. Her work seeks to build encounters around issues that impact cultural imagination, from familial archives to the illusion of accurate memory. Recent exhibitions and screenings include, *Beirut Lab 1975 (2020) or again, rubbed smooth, a moment in time - caesura,* University Art Galleries, University of California Irvine (Irvine, CA), *Double Helix*, Sursock Museum (Beirut, Lebanon), *Limited Access 8, New Media Society* (Tehran, Iran), and *In search of lost time*, the International Center of Photography (New York, NY). She has been awarded artist residencies with the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, Marble House Project, Woodstock Byrdcliffe Guild, Women's Studio Workshop, Sommerakademie Paul Klee, and the Santa Fe Art Institute. From 2016 – 2020 Heather was an Assistant Professor in the Department of Fine Arts and Art History at the American University of Beirut. heathermobrien.com

Yasmine Nachabe Taan

Yasmine Nachabe Taan is Associate Professor in art and design practice and theory at the Lebanese American University. Her research interest focuses on gender representation in photographs of the Middle East and North Africa region and on compiling and analyzing data on prominent Arab designers, illustrators and typographers of the 1960s and 1970s. As an art and design critic, she publishes essays, reviews and articles on a range of art and design related topics. In 2019, she curated *Traces of Drawings*, an exhibition that took place at the NABU Museum. It included more than a hundred sketches, studies, and artworks by Lebanese artists from the late 19th c. till the mid-1990s. She is the author of *Hilmi el-Tuni, Evoking Popular Arab Culture* (2014), and *Abdulkader Arnaout, Designing as Visual Poetry* (2017) that was funded by the DHS, Design History Society Research Grant, London; *Saloua Raouda Choucair: Modern Arab Design: An Exploration of Abstraction Across Materials and Functions* (2019). Her recent publication is *Reading Marie al-Khazen's Photographs: Gender, Photography, Mandate Lebanon* (Bloomsbury, 2020).

Corinne May Botz

Corinne May Botz is a Brooklyn-based artist and educator whose work engages with themes including space, gender, trauma and the body. Her published books combining photography and writing include *The Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death* (Monacelli Press, 2004) and *Haunted Houses* (Monacelli Press, 2010). Botz's photographs have been internationally exhibited at such institutions as the Brooklyn Museum; Museum of Contemporary Photography; De Appel; Turner Contemporary; Bellwether Gallery; and Benrubi Gallery. Her work has been reviewed in numerous publications such as The New York Times, The New Yorker, Foam Magazine, Hyperallergic, Bookforum, and Time: Lightbox. She is on the faculty of International Center of Photography and John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Botz is represented by Benrubi Gallery in NYC. corinnebotz.com

Juli Carson

Juli Carson is Professor of Art, Critical Theory and Curatorial Practice at the University of California, Irvine, where she is also Director of The University Art Galleries. From 2018-2019 she was Philippe Jabre Professor of Art History and Curating in the Department of Fine Art and Art History at the American University of Beirut. Her books on the convergence of psychoanalysis, hermeneutics and conceptual art include: *Exile of the Imaginary: Politics, Aesthetics, Love* (Vienna: Generali Foundation, 2007), *The Limits of Representation: Psychoanalysis and Critical Aesthetics* (Buenos Aires: Letra Viva Press, 2011) and *The Hermeneutic Impulse: Aesthetics of an Untethered Past* (Berlin: PoLyPen, b_books Press, 2019). She is also author of the website pharmakon.art, which hosts the *Life Worth Living* Series — a rotation of conversations among filmmakers, artists and scholars on contemporary cultural phenomenon — as well as an archive of Carson's select exhibitions and essays.

ISBN: 978-0-578-65317-4

Published by Seaton Street Press
Printed by brilliant :
Design by George Hanna
Typeface Grenze Font Family