

Signifying Bodies:

Artistic Representations of Embodiments in the Works of Samir Khaddaje, Rabih Mroué and Lina Saneh

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Abstract:

This essay highlights and examines a number of works by the artists Samir Khaddaje, Rabih Mroué and Lina Saneh that present and represent different forms of embodiment: the body pillar, the body ghost, the body in ruin, and the body battlefield. The inquiries of the artists draw on a number of underlays that characterize the contexts the works stem from, contexts that belong to different periods in time, yet present a number of common characteristics in which violence and silence are dominant. The works converge in both their sharing of the same *topos*: the body, and in their thinking about the meaning of the individual, the human being. The *topos* of the body allows them to anchor and exceed any given certitude about the individual, and exposes the fact that it is a reliable site despite, and maybe because of, its ability to encompass paradoxes.

The topos of the body sums up a shared concern about the individual, and reinforces the significance of the body. The various forms of embodiment – spectres, silent bodies, and dead or living bodies – reflect on the plasticity of this topos, and its ability to bring back the individual to the core of the artistic work. In the context of this essay, they also serve to tie two generations of artists, the war and post-war generations, thus reflecting on common concerns about the dwelling place of the individual.

Background information

The artist Samir Khaddaje (1939) belongs to the generation of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), whereas Rabih Mroué's (1967) and Lina Saneh's (1966) artistic contributions are commonly recognized as belonging to the post-war generation. Their works are consequently labeled modern and postmodern according to the periods identified. The works examined in this article address war directly or highlight features common to the war and the post-war periods.

This article highlights the link between the works of Khaddaje, Mroué and Saneh that exceeds a shared interest in bodily expressions and in various forms of embodiment. Therefore, even if the works stem from different theoretical frameworks and contexts, they share a common de-construction of the body of the individual, that is, without presenting any certitude: the re-presented bodies embrace paradoxes, presenting and representing bodies that are not immutable entities. Moreover, the use of the topos of the body in the artists' works undertakes the difficulty of drawing fixed and immutable frontiers within, through and beyond the body. Because "a frontier always implies some relation with an outside" (Bennington 115), the notions of violence, silence, or other features related to the war blur the boundaries between war and postwar, and challenge and undermine what is proper to the individual.

Internalizing Violence: the Body-Pillar

The artist Samir Khaddaje, a professional draftsman by training, exhibited for the first time a number of his artworks, as well as 10 paintings done in the 1980s – commonly called *Collective* paintings – to reflect on the contribution of friends in the making. The collective practice was initiated by his friend and collaborator Marc Mourani to encourage him to represent the war (M. Mourani). During wartime, Khaddaje felt the "urge" to represent the war, an urge that prevented him from painting, as he could not find an adequate "way" of representation (P. Mourani).

The dominant realism in the *Collective* works offers narratives that depict scenes of war. The content clearly redefines public places, mostly streets, as battlefields. In "Untitled (The explosion)," 150x170cm, the violent events of car bombs and explosions mobilize bodies within the space of the canvas to contain the devastating effects of destruction.



Fig. 1. Khaddaje, Samir. *Untitled (The Explosion)*. Acrylic on wood, app. 146 x 194. Courtesy of the artist and Paul Mourani.

On the other hand, in “*Untitled (Le Sac Rouge)*,” c.100x80cm, translated as “the red handbag,” individuals occupy this same space to pursue their daily activities, almost oblivious to the violent events taking place in their environment. Despite the two paintings’ variation in scale, lack of modelling, and use of various



Fig. 2. Khaddaje, Samir. *Untitled (Le Sac Rouge)*. Acrylic on wood, 100 x 80 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Paul Mourani.

media (felt, pencil, acrylic etc.), they both offer a comprehensive space where the contours of every element – including individuals – are clearly defined. The city in war, as Khaddaje sees it, offers a place for all bodies – cars, tanks, militiamen and citizen – to inhabit it.¹

This inclusive aspect is denied in the artworks exhibited in *Éclat* (1992, Montreuil France and 1993, French Cultural Centre Beirut). In this art collection, Khaddaje’s main subjects – the individual and the city – remain his primary concern. However, his relationship to the tropes of the individual and the city

evolved with the post-war era: whether mundane or explosive, the flattened space of the city collapses in witnessing everyday life. Instead, the artist shows a dense and dynamic interconnected relationship between individuals, and a city that cannot remain inhabited. Rather, the city-space, or what replaces it with, is produced by both the city and the individuals. The city and its inhabitants become fused in an amalgam of forms, shapes and colors. The individuals (among other bodies) come to form an integral, undifferentiated part of the structures of the city. In other words, bodies and structure merge together, becoming the pillars of the city.

The renewal of the aesthetic language into a more abstracted style represents a space in which the city, the individual and war blend in together into a chaotic “whole.” According to Deleuze, a “whole (is) simply

¹ I don’t refer to the identities of the individuals – men, women, militiamen or citizens – because the works of Khaddaje, Mroué and Saneh undermine such identities. This argument exceeds the scope of the article.

defined by relations” that holds forms together in a “relation [that] is not the property of objects” but “external to its terms” (10). The painting “Untitled” (1992), acrylic on wood, 146 x 194 cm, is one of the many similar, yet never identical works that exemplify this constructed whole. The shapes of individuals acting, in one place, as pillars, resemble, in another place, crumbling structures. These shapes are constantly metamorphosing, dissolving, and solidifying, yet they always suggest two “bodies:” that of the city and that of the individuals. They enact a lively whole, as if in constant construction and destruction, in which the clear delimited bodies of the *Collective* artworks inhabiting the city are included. The violence of the war that was represented by specific bodies – militiamen, tanks etc. – in the streets becomes



Fig. 3. Khaddaje, Samir. Untitled. Acrylic on wood, approx. 146 x 194 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Paul Mourani.

inherent to the making of this whole: represented by violent, lively, (de)formed and colored shapes and blending forms.

Deleuze’s whole in Khaddaje’s work sustains a complex relation that generates destruction and construction, and blurs the boundaries between the bodies of the city and of its inhabitants. The body pillar (erected, crumbling, or dissolving) is more than a mere representation of a (living) individual and a city at war: it reproduces the complex relation between the two bodies. Khaddaje, then, had finally found a way to

represent war during his voluntary exile in Paris (P. Mourani). The city and the individuals embody forms that encompass strong ties in which violence is inherent.

Embodied Silence

In *Silence*, the body returns *en force* in 1999², after a retreat of almost 10 years. During this “retreat” of the mid-1990s Khaddaje draws and paints on cardboard. The subject matter includes abstracted shapes of objects and human silhouettes of various scales, scattered on the surface of supports. Displayed in



Fig. 4. Khaddaje, Samir. *Silence*. Installation. UNESCO building. Digital photograph. Courtesy of the artist and Paul Mourani.

one of the large room of the UNESCO building in Beirut, the exhibition *Silence* is an installation of approximately fifty scattered human bodies that display a loud silence. The exhibited bodies are similar: each one consists of plaster-modelled shapes that vaguely resemble a bust, a head, and one raised limb – or arm – holding a stick. A long vertical wooden stick wedged in a concrete block holds the partial body upright, in a standing position.

Transparencies unveil the sticks and stones (and other material) that hold the body parts together. The unfinished human bodies are (de)constructed to bits and pieces, and most of the material used recalls foundational city structures, such as building material and city detritus. The bodies seem to have swallowed (*ingurgiter*) the city. The network they form is an *ébauche*, an evocative sketch of a body, which still upholds a standing position. They act like reminiscent ruins of what was a lively and violent relation between the city and the individual, thus disintegrating the body-pillars.

The general effect generated by the installation is definitely that of a helpless silent protest. Internalized violence delineates the frozen jolt created by the *ébauched* (unfinished) protest, and manifests itself in the silent or silenced bodies in de-construction. The bodies therefore retreat from the violent city space to the private space of the individual’s body.

Set in post-war Lebanon, the silence and violence of *Silence* can be read as symptomatic of that period: despite the mutation of violence, both features did not disappear with the end of war. The change in aesthetics and media adheres to the shift from an external and explosive violence to an internalized one, as if revealing an endemic violence. The individual has receded from the city space to find refuge in its core: a body in ruin.

² Between 1995-1997 Khaddaje produces a body of work on cardboards in which the individual as such remains his main concern, yet without any direct reference to the human body.

The Body-Ghost

The series *Cityscapes*, painted by Khaddaje in 2008, depicts a deserted city with buildings crushing each other, denying any liveable space. In “Untitled Series (*Cityscapes*),” scattered ghosts hover above the city. Two significant elements in the relation to the body are singled out: first, the represented city does not offer a space to dwell in; and second, the human body is a shallow spectre. The body and the city are still the subjects of the work, yet their representations undermine the space and substance that define



Fig. 5. Khaddaje, Samir. *Untitled Series (Cityscapes)*, 2008, acrylic on canvas. Digital Photograph by Paul Mourani of the exhibition *Parcours (Trail)*. Beirut Exhibition Centre.

a city or an individual, for the borders that define them are lost. If the bodies in ruin inhabited a place in *Silence*, the (perceived and) represented city in *Cityscapes* rejects its inhabitants that turn into ghosts. Representing an immaterial body is reminiscent of a loss caused by war, whether that of the city, the self, a friend, or an enemy.

Post-war Lebanon is described in terms of “borders” that have progressively faded out. Here, public and private spheres, the friend and the enemy, and violence and war have lost grounds to the point where they are, for the most, “no longer identifiable” (Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 83). Post-war can be described to an extent as symptomatic of “a crime against the political, when in one way or another it puts to death that without which a political crime could no longer be defined or distinguished from other sorts of crimes, when appeal to political reason or to some critique of political reason would no longer be defined” (83). The human figure in Khaddaje’s body of work undergoes similar transformations: the represented body that acted as an inseparable pillar of the city before, transforms in post-war Lebanon into a silent substantial body in ruin, and dematerializes into a ghostly body. As individuals can no longer inhabit their cities, the relation between the bodies and the violent, lively whole has collapsed. The bodies of the city and those of the individual defy being recognized as such. Yet, the ghost-body is a form of embodiment and expresses the un-identifiable, while maintaining the body as an anchor, “a physio-ontological ground” (275).

Similar representations of the bodies as pivots in times of violence appear in the works of Mroué and Saneh that will be examined hereafter. They share with Khaddaje similar imagined bodies in deconstruction that raise the same questions about individuals facing death, destruction, and erasures. Mroué’s performance also addresses the war directly, recalling the major battles that took place through the personal narratives of four fighters.

Undefined Borders

The 2007 performance of Rabih Mroué *How Nancy Wished that Everything Was an April Fool's Joke* (Mroué and Toufic) presents the same *topos* of the body, and enacts various representations of the it — speaking bodies, silent bodies, and spectres — through the vivid dialectics of the text and the (bodily) presence of the actors. The performance, according to Mroué and Toufic, "...is an attempt to weave part of the networks of political and military alliances and conflicts among Lebanese parties, as well as the various other organizations operating on the Lebanese territories, in whose wars the four imaginary fighters valiantly fought, and whose politics and ideological goals they valiantly defended" (9). The performance relies on the four bodies of the actors, all combatants, who speak their "personal" narratives of the war. The narratives achieve the *unidentifiable* by bringing back to life the dead combatant to fight another battle. Similar to Khaddaje's *Cityscapes*, the spectres hover above the places where they died, before joining a new battle. Actually, the narratives bring back only dead combatants to *fight* another battle. It is through repetition that the un-dead (Toufic) "dematerializes" to the form of spectres, the presence of which is haunting.

At the end of the performance, "four corpses and five guns were found lying next to the corpses," supposedly to end the narrative of the war (presumably the 1975-1990 war) (Mroué and Toufic 35). It releases a hovering spectre: a menace or a promise "to-come" (Derrida). The event takes place "[on] Thursday night, January 25, 2007," (Mroué and Toufic 35) way after the end of the presumed narrative of the war.

Borders are blurred between immaterial and material bodies, between life and death, as well as between combatants and actors. The line separating speaking combatants and silent civilians fades out with the return of the combatants to civil life. Other crossings of boundaries are performed: war ends neither with the end of the war, nor with the arrest of the four combatant corpses. Instead, the silence of the fighters, who "confessed in full" (Mroué, Toufic 35), takes over, and their confessions fall retrospectively under the 1991 Amnesty law. This silence is shared with that of the actors, who are presumably all civilians. The play enacts silent bodies — living and dead, combatants and actors — replacing, eight years later, the silent bodies in protest staged by Khaddaje. The loud silence of the silent protest is transformed into the inaudible murmur of spectres and of living bodies: they are either silent or silenced witnesses. The play itself is a return to silence, whereby the silence of the protest is replaced by a murmur.

The reference to the politics of silence implemented after the war³ is expressed clearly in Khaddaje's installation, which also speaks of powerlessness. Its appearance in Mroué's performance confirms the incapacity to speak eight years later, and extends to include various identities staged in the play — combatants, civilians and actors —, thus erasing the same token differences, and highlighting the

³ I am drawing relations from a set of characteristics in the post-war period that enforced the effacement of any reminder and remainder of the war such as the proclamation of the Amnesty Law in 1991 (without any work on recollecting the histories of war or assessing degrees of responsibility), and the destruction of most of the buildings in downtown Beirut. For more on the subject check: Makdissi, Saree. "Beirut: A city without History." *Memory and Violence in the Middle East*. Ed. Usama Makdissi and P Silverstein. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006. 201-124. Print.

individual as such. Silence acquires different signification, yet despite the change it keeps returning to its “essence:” the absence of an audible voice. Therefore, the silent murmur in the work of Mroué and the silent protest of Khaddaje become acts of resistance directed toward the official politics of silencing, and of erasing the traces of the war.⁴

The Body as Battlefield

In *Appendice*, (Saneh 2007), the text begins with exposing the “problem” Lina Saneh is facing: “I have a problem/ I always wanted to be incinerated upon my death/ But incineration is forbidden in Lebanon/ For religious reasons” (Saneh, trans. mine). The performance then takes the expression of her will to be incinerated, which needs to be achieved (for the most part) during her lifetime. Her body is the solution and the pivot: in order to incinerate her (dead) body, the body she inhabits, she should perform a slow and systematic deconstruction of it. The body becomes at the same time the means to achieve “success,” the field to conquer, and a battlefield. Overall, the performance anchors both the quest and the means in the body, and enacts the inherent paradox within the individual in his/her quest to attain autonomy and liberty, that is, sovereignty: “for autonomy and liberty are also sovereignty” (Derrida 76).

The Body: An Anchor

Saneh’s performance encompasses almost all bodily expressions examined above. Silence is attained by letting Mroué “speak” *her* will and her body, as she sits motionless during the whole performance. She breaks her immobility a few times by slowly changing the position of her head. Sitting silently next to Mroué, she “ventriloquizes” and her silent body manages to represent the silence of a corpse. This act parodies, up to the point before which death occurs, the act of a suicide protester. Achieved by the very act of wrecking the body, victory steals away bits and pieces of her I-body from the enemy. As read by Mroué, the text of the performance explains the “plan:”

That is, she could for example

undergo, in several steps,
to remove, one by one//
members and organs of her body,/

from the least necessary to the most vital ones
though without endangering her life.//

⁴ This act of resistance is shared by many other writers and artists. They present personal narratives of the war to breach the silence. Activists battled for years to save buildings. For example, *Beit Barakat* (*The Barakat House*) is one of landmarks of Beirut that stands on what used to be the demarcation line between East and West Beirut (*The Green Line*). A number of activists succeeded in “forcing” the government to acquire it and transform it into a museum and a cultural center. Check this site for more information: <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/features/from-beit-barakat-to-beit-beirut>

The removed organs and members during the operations
 will be then burned; //
 she would thus try to gain the most “terrain”
 possible of her own body relatively
 to what will remain from it to be buried upon her death. //
 She would burn herself accordingly little by little
 /slowly (little by little), to win the largest part/
 of herself over her enemies, //
 and perhaps they would declare their defeat. (Saneh, trans. mine)

An inherent violence is expressed without any recourse to expressive terms. The individual, Saneh in this case, is anchored in her body and performs (bodily) loss as a voluntary act. Originally directed towards the enemy, this act loses its *sense* of direction and turns to harm oneself. It also creates a sense of a loss already encountered in the works of Khaddaje and Mroué. The performance goes further, as it enacts the previously analyzed paradoxical features of the loss of the “friend” and of the “enemy.” The undefined enemy is simultaneously referred to as “them,” and is embodied in Saneh herself. The body is able to define the *undefinable*.

Set in the conditional mode (“I could”), the performance is similar to a slow implosion, almost, but not quite like, a suicide protest: Saneh sets limits to her act of “remov[ing], one by one, members and organs of her body” (ibid.).⁵ She draws an imperceptible borderline that stands on the threshold expressed by the sentence “...though without endangering her life” (ibid.). The assumed threshold encapsulates the imperceptible borderline between life and death, opening up an abyss with its undefined limits.

Violence is inherent to the act, yet directed towards oneself in a process that engenders autonomy and singularity. Violence is thus both inherent, and to a certain extent justified: The question that remains is “to what extent?” (Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 4). And the vision of the abyss, of this fine line, has found its expression in the “abyssal depth” of the body and in the body of works of those artists:

The abyss, if there is an abyss, is that there is *more than one ground [so]*, more than one solid and more than one single threshold [*plus d’un seuil*]. More than a single single; no more a single single (Derrida, Lisse, and Bennington 334).

⁵ The performance is a parody and a revisitation of the suicide protest act in many aspects. (The suicide protester is (in a way) a suicide bomber who implodes instead of exploding, thus setting limits and destroying only him/herself). Thus, the notion of martyrdom is at stake and relates to the notion of witnessing highlighted earlier in Mroué’s *How Nancy wished...* and in his lecture performance *The inhabitants of the Image* analyzed next. The development of this aspect of the work of Saneh and Mroué exceeds the scope of this essay.

The Body image

Mroué's performance, *The inhabitant of the image: a non-academic lecture* (2008), takes the body a step further. He substitutes the bodies by performing a levelling of the body-image. The exchange is visible in the scrutiny of martyrs' posters. There, the body – that is, the last dwelling place of the individual in the work of Khaddaje and Saneh – is (itself) denied and substituted by a flat image. Yet, despite that, the body image remains an anchor. Mroué examines the posters hanging on the lighting polls of a highway in Beirut. He notes that “nothing [is] out of the ordinary,” and that “all posters are similar...and graphically identical” (Mroué 2). What is out of the ordinary, he adds, is that they all seem to be “wearing” the same body. The spectre of a combatant is substituted by a body image that is not his. Hence, all martyrs inhabit “the same body” (4), a ready-made graphic model, and an “unknown” “[Body] waiting for a face” (5). Furthermore, he adds, even the singularity of the face is effaced since “they all have the same face” (5)



Fig. 6. Mroué, Rabih. Photograph (1), *The inhabitant of the Image*, 2007. Performance. Courtesy of the artist.

because of the way the viewer experiences the fast moving images displayed on the high lighting polls of the avenue.⁶

In this presentation, the substitution of the body acts as if the martyr “disavows his body.” According to Butler, the disavowal of one’s body “renders it Other as an effect of autonomy” (Butler qtd. 614). Autonomy is again at stake (as in the work of Saneh), and reflects the “deal” between the “society of resistance” and the martyrs: as Malabou and Butler’s book title suggests, *You be my body for me*.⁷ Mroué reflects

on the complexity of the questions and Malabou and Butler emphasise the complexity of the deal: “This trick or ruses involve a double disavowal and an imperative that the other becomes complicit with this disavowal” (614). *The Inhabitants of The Image* (Mroué) amplifies the paradoxical and complex terms of the deal, to the point of making the identification of “the society of resistance” (Saneh, trans. mine) and the martyrs lose grounds by losing the anchor of the body. The dwelling body is substituted by a body-image, leaving no space nor place for the individual to inhabit. The disavowal is thus accompanied by a double loss: the loss of the martyrs’ body, and the loss of the body of the “society of resistance” (Ibid.). The ensuing result produces the image of an unknown body in the quest for autonomy and liberty. The loss of the body blurs the boundaries between the master and the slave. It is simultaneously heightened and defied by the bodily presence of the performer who speaks – in that case, Mroué.

⁶ “The faces of the martyrs tell us the same thing, as if they all have the same face, one face that tells that they are the beloveds of martyrdom.”

⁷ The question of whose body and autonomy can be formulated is a question of master and slave. This reading rests on Malabou’s reading of Butler and rests of the following quote that takes the body as a pivot to reflect on the paradoxical nature of the deal: “The master claims to be able to detach himself from his own body but denies, in so doing, that he is only transferring it to the slave, asking him to be his body in his place while disavowing this very demand.” (614)

The Dwelling Body

The above representations of embodiment highlight “the abyssal depth” (Derrida, *BSv1*, 149) of the body and serve to allude to the complexity in thinking the individual’s place and his/her autonomy and liberty. Violence becomes part of examining the individual’s striving for liberty and autonomy and is inseparable from the process (itself) on the individual level (Saneh), and on the societal level (Mroué). Analyzing the work of Khaddaje retrospectively, his thinking about the individual involves violence in the same way. His work starts as intrinsically linked to the city in war, then he gradually separates the individual from the city without excluding violence. Violence becomes a characteristic of both the individual and the city, to be internalized by means of the representation of a body in ruin in *Silence*, thus becoming an integral part of the individual.

In *Appendice*, Saneh brings vividly within oneself this paradoxical relation, in which the body is wrecked. The body is the terrain to conquer and the battlefield, and Saneh highlights the need for a body to attain autonomy and the depletion of this same body, in a process of patent violence. Her body is hers and detached from herself; it is both the slave and the master, recalled by the “shared interest” (Aristotle, as qt. in Derrida, *PoF*, 344) in Mroué’s *The Inhabitants of the images*. The resulting “loss” of autonomy and liberty within the body is replaced by an image of an unknown body that further blurs the boundaries between them. Yet, this loss is denied by the bodily presence of the performer: Mroué resets the body as an anchor.

All above representations are grounded, if not anchored, in the body. The plasticity of the body allows the three artists to overflow any given identity (civilian, combatant etc.), and any assumed borderline of life and death, of human and political, (and even of modern and postmodern). The motif itself links the works of two generations and opens up intricate means to reflect on the complexity of the individual.

The three artists represent inherent paradoxes in understanding the human by means of the body. Different forms of embodiment take place to rethink the self and the other, while simultaneously acting as a place in which the “self” dwells or anchors itself, thus performing the “other” and the “self” (the other in oneself and the other’s other). The presentations and representations of the body-pillar, the body-spectre and the body in ruin illustrate the uncertainty of the bodily anchor, and highlights an inevitable bonding process between the individual and the body, by means of a body that constraints and liberates.

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