



Performance Research

A Journal of the Performing Arts

ISSN: 1352-8165 (Print) 1469-9990 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rprs20>

Swimming in Sewage

Tania El Khoury

To cite this article: Tania El Khoury (2016) Swimming in Sewage, Performance Research, 21:2, 138-140, DOI: [10.1080/13528165.2016.1162529](https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2016.1162529)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2016.1162529>



Published online: 03 May 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 35



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
<http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rprs20>

Swimming in Sewage

Political performances in the Mediterranean

TANIA EL KHOURY

To swim is to dance in water, to negotiate power with the sea. This article narrates different instances of swimming in the Mediterranean Sea as political performances that expose and challenge injustice and power structures.

Site-specific performances happen at a site, and are often about that particular site. It is therefore impossible to transport the same site-specific performance to another site. However, site-specificity in performance is a commonly misused term. It is often employed to describe a show that happens in a 'real' or public space, rather than a studio or a theatre. For example, promenade shows that invite people to move and interact in a performance space are often described as site-specific even when they are technically not. Such shows may respond to the performance space, but they do not stem from it. In comparison, site-specific performances are experiences that are unique to the sites in which they take place. They are affected by the politics of those spaces and they happen as a result of encountering such spaces. A site-specific performance in a public space offers its audience the opportunity to engage with the politics of the site and renegotiate them.

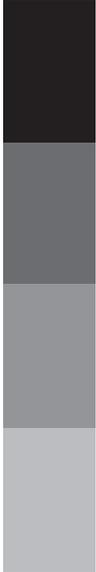
Although performance is by its nature ephemeral, the audiences' experiences in site-specific performances can be long lasting. A performance devised around the contestation of its local environment and the histories of the site's inhabitants is a project for change. Whether it succeeds to do so or fails, site-specific performances are tools that allow embodied knowledge of a space and the creation of a collective spatial memory that is able to challenge a transformation or closure of the space. Site-specific performances tend

to happen in an urban or built environment. They can also take place in a rural landscape. But what happens when the site of a site-specific performance is the sea, an always changing and moving space? The performance length and timing varies in the sea. Moreover, the performer would need to adapt to unexpected elements caused by weather, moving objects and people. A performance in the sea is an interactive site-specific performance in a constantly changing site.

SWIMMING AS POLITICS

Since the end of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90), researchers, media outlets and activists in Lebanon have highlighted the accelerating privatization of the country's coast. Beirut in particular has been prominent in these discussions, as it features some of the most rampant sites of exclusive control of and access to public seashore lands. Over the past three years, activists as well as local communities such as fishers and swimmers have organized against and protested the closure of certain coastal public spaces. The Dalieh of Rawché is one of the main contested spaces on the Beirut seashore. It is an open stretch of land that was historically owned by a number of Beirut families and falls under the rubric of zoning regulation that bans construction on such sites. In 1995, then-Prime Minister Rafic Hariri purchased the majority of the plots constituting Dalieh using three different front corporations to hide the buyer's identity.

When the Dalieh fishers and their families were evicted from the land, a group of activists formed a coalition under the name of the Civil



Campaign to Preserve the Dalieh. The impetus for the campaign was the removal of fisher families from the area and its subsequent enclosure for private redevelopment. Up until that point, the area was one of the only remaining publicly used open spaces on the Beirut coast. As part of its work, the campaign encourages the public to make use of Dalieh through organizing public tours and open events in the space. At one of the campaign meetings, a group of swimmers claimed that they swim every day off the Dalieh during sunrise, and that they intend to keep doing so despite the closure of the space. They said that swimming is their chosen form of activism in light of the closure and they encouraged the public to keep exercising their right to swim for free in the sea. In the recent waves of demonstrations following the August/September 2015 garbage crisis, activists staged an action in which they cut down the fence that encloses Dalieh. On that day, people ran toward the sea and enjoyed swimming and diving from the rocks – a practice that has been prominent in Beirut for as long as the community remembers.

Not far from Dalieh, along the Beirut Corniche is the Ain el-Mraisseh area, where local swimmers enjoy a dive very close to the busy seaside promenade. The swimmers are in the very vast majority males of all ages. The few females among us who swam there have dived during the late night hours when the seaside promenade was almost deserted. But in 2014 a young woman decided to exercise daily by swimming in the sea during all seasons. This is a common practice in Beirut, but is usually reserved for male swimmers and athletes, especially those who consider themselves ‘hardcore’. One of the former presidents of the country was known to be an avid swimmer in the sea, even in the coldest days of winter. Sarine, the young woman, decided that she would enter the sea from the rocks of the Corniche. She removes her clothes there in broad daylight and swims wearing a bathing suit. She claims that no one has harassed her yet, despite the fact that other women have

testified to having tomatoes thrown at them when they attempted to swim in an area where only men usually do. During one of her daily swims, Sarine and the community of swimmers saved a sea turtle from suffocating after she found it tangled up in a plastic bag under the water. After that day, the local community knew who she was: the serious female swimmer or the woman who cared about the turtle too much. Sarine does not claim that she is engaging in an act of resistance by swimming in the sea. She describes herself as simply enjoying swimming without having to pay large amounts of money to private resorts. However, the mere appearance as a female swimming body in gendered public spaces or as a ‘public’ swimmer in private locations becomes a defying act that highlights the existing structures of power. An exercise activity thus becomes a political performance with its very own audience and critics, having both an ephemeral nature and long-lasting effect.

THIS SEA IS MINE

In the summer of 2012, I took small groups of audiences on a fishing boat trip along the Beirut coast from Ain el-Mraisseh fisher’s port to the Dalieh. The title of this research-based site-specific performance, *This Sea is Mine*, is a borrowed line from a poem by the iconic Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish whose poetry defied the occupation. At the start of the performance, the audience boards the boat of Adnan El-Oud, one of the oldest fishers in Beirut. As they set out on their route, they find me in the middle of the sea swimming with a large sign that reads, ‘This Sea is Mine’ in Arabic. The performance was a project by a research and performance collective I co-founded in 2009 with architect Abir Saksouk. Named Dictaphone Group, the project aims to question and redefine our relationship to the city through its public spaces. After the show, which took place for ten days, with multiple showings a day, my mother called me and asked me to stop protesting as she just had seen me on television engaged in a protest in the sea.

I tried explaining that it was a performance, but the media's description of the event as 'protest' seemed more convincing to her. It became apparent to me that crossing the claimed borders of the private sea resorts to swim there for free is an act of protest despite ancient laws stating that the sea water as far as it reaches on the highest tide of the year is in fact public domain. Coming from the sea (on boat) and stopping at private resorts to swim there for free exposed the nonsensical practice of placing borders in water and dividing the seashore as property to be subdivided, owned or consumed.

Days after performing this show, I fell ill. It turned out that, as some fishers have tried to alert me during the performance, I was swimming in the sewage each time I performed the piece. Along the coastline of Lebanon, the seawater is dangerously polluted due to careless waste and sewage management by the government. This is more severe in public beaches such as Ramlet El-Baida, where seawater feels and smells like wastewater. Upon realizing that I was swimming in sewage, I felt defeated. The contamination of water was meant to render us invisible, to efface our appearances from public beaches where we should not appear. The sewage directed to the seashore is slowly killing any hopes of claiming that sea back. One is given two options to choose the lesser evil from: swim in expensive private resorts or swim in sewage. More than ever, the Lebanese Government's corruption and the economic oppression feel palpable both above and under the water.

SEA AS A SITE OF LOSS

One can no longer write, think or reflect about the Mediterranean Sea without imagining it as a death trap for refugees of war. Desperate individuals fleeing war, oppression and destruction set out on the Mediterranean heading north to richer and safer Western countries. For decades, people have died on their way or have experienced the mass death of fellow passengers. In the last five years, hundred of thousands of Syrians fleeing oppression put

themselves at risk on crammed boats in what is now perceived to be the largest exodus since World War II. Thousands of them have died at sea. Last January, a few days before the month ended, there were already 244 reported refugee deaths in the Mediterranean Sea.

And we wonder about the memory of that sea. We wonder if the bodies of dead refugees washed ashore in Europe can be felt back in Beirut. We wonder how one's experience of swimming in the Mediterranean changes when they know that a loved one has died there.

Graves are spaces of care, reflection and meetings. They make loss feel grounded in a fixed space. When the sea becomes a large always-changing grave, it spreads loss on to a much larger site. Loss becomes palpable throughout a boat ride from south to north. It follows us on holidays and on remote beaches. It creeps at us with the sound of each breaking wave. It is that war trauma that we are unable to limit or forget.

The Mediterranean Sea as we know it is no longer a blissful balance of warmth and saltiness, of movement and safety. It is a death trap for the vulnerable and those seeking change. The site is contaminated, the seashore is privatized, the memory is infected and the risks are deadly. Yet some are left with no other choice but to dive in.

The sea is another site for performing border oppression, classist and racist discrimination and brave acts of resistance. Those of us who were lucky enough to collaborate with Syrian refugees on art projects have heard stories about people saving the lives of one another at sea and about war-injured individuals swimming long distances despite their broken limbs. In the face of such actions of life-affirming bravery, we are reminded by a slogan long chanted in the Arab uprisings: 'Despair is betrayal.' In refusing to turn our back to the sea, we swim ahead and demand political and social change from within the water.