

MILIEU

Dear friends

As part of our current exhibition *Winds of Change* Yamu Wang holds email conversations with guests on the subject of neoliberal conditions in our daily life. The exchange with Barbara Preisig deals with questions about care work. The exchange with Edwin Nasr deals with questions about resistance. Enjoy reading!

Barbara Preisig in conversation with Yamu Wang

Yamu Wang: Could you share your daily routine before and since the school closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Barbara Preisig: Before the school closure:

I was working four days a week as an employee of the Zurich University of the Arts on my independent publishing and research projects. One day a week I spent with my children at home. My children usually went to daycare and school three days a week. Most evenings were spent at home doing office work, housework and childcare.

Since the school closure:

I get up around 7 am, make breakfast for the children, tidy up, teach my six-year-old son (2.5 hours daily of reading, arithmetic and writing are compulsory) — well packed into playful units, of course, since a first grader cannot yet have a home office — and watch over my three-year-old son, all while cooking lunch. After eating lunch I tidy everything up again, then prepare for the next morning's schooling while my partner takes over the kids.

Ignoring the indescribable chaos that exploded in our apartment during the morning, I start my home office day. The locked room does not help against the noise of the children. I realize how incredibly exhausted I am — I am still halfway sick (with coronavirus?) and then I see the text message from my neighbor, who lives alone and is currently in self-isolation. She asks me if I could do the shopping for her. Which I then do. That's good, because our fridge is already empty again. Home office yield of the day: two hours.

YW: Has your experience of working from home and at the same time parenting two young children changed your conception of what the boundaries between working time and family time might be when the kids are able to return to school?

BP: I am really longing for school to reopen. But I am also noticing that care and office work have, since the shutdown, somehow become more united. I am doing these diverse kinds of work more as one person now. Things are less separated from another, which I like.

YW: That exhaustion you felt when you were finally alone for office work is totally understandable. As you describe it, the care work you perform before doing office work (which, at the moment, must be done at home) includes cooking, cleaning, pedagogy and, perhaps most fundamentally but less noticeably, the emotional labor involved in maintaining a household as well as being a parent. I find it interesting how you said that these two types of work somehow became more united and that you do them more as one person. Despite their close proximity to one another in time and space, your office work and care work are still of quite a different economic nature and require two different sets of professional skills. Could you elaborate a bit more on the 'integrity' that you experience?

BP: The coronavirus crisis is the first time that care work has been classified as systemically relevant. I have always tried to ensure that my job and my care work do not interfere with one another (no one should notice how much my performance at one is affected by the other). Since the school closures I am now suddenly obliged to look after my children during paid working hours! Care work suddenly becomes systemically relevant and perhaps COVID-19 holds a moment of reconciliation between wage and care work. I find it problematic that parents are doing more and more salaried work, while the children, housework and care work are increasingly outsourced to women with a lower level of education and often with a migration background. Inequality of opportunity is being redistributed among women, care for one another is being outsourced and thus subjected to capitalist dynamics. On the other hand, I am only now realizing how much I associate the feeling of autonomy with the possibility of having my own professional life as a mother, and I look forward to regaining this autonomy.

YW: It was not stated but rather implied that you and your partner seemed to share an arguably equal timetable as well as workload in running a home. (For example, before the lockdown, your partner probably also had four workdays per week like you, so that the boys could go to school and daycare three days per week. And since the lockdown, he probably takes care of the boys in the afternoon besides making dinner.) If equality was intended, does gender still play a role in the way you engage with your care work and in your domestic domain in general? If so, to what extent?

BP: Fortunately, my partner and I share all of the care work equally. Even the coronavirus-related lockdown has not changed this. Our experience is that sharing care work does indeed cause one to question gender-typical forms of behavior, which can be partially overcome. What is more deeply seated in terms of gender are socialized behaviors that are trickier to negotiate, such as how emotionally involved or dissociated to become, or what expectations are placed on the emotional and communicative exchange in a relationship.

YW: The likelihood of sharing equally in housework is very much preconditioned by factors outside the domestic domain. Take myself, for example: at the moment I'm not in a socioeconomic situation which would allow me to have a child. If I become pregnant, the support I can expect from either the father of this child or the state, or both together, would determine the terms under which I can be a mother. Very likely the father would have to be the main breadwinner and my pursuit of a career would be compromised. I may make a series of decisions that are logical and practical in terms of running a household, but end up reaffirming the status quo of gender inequality, such as women earning less than men, spending more time in unpaid care work, etc. Is there a way out (besides being a childless, single woman)? Would it be possible to think of being a mother and/or someone's partner as a feminist project in and of itself, which contributes to emancipation from the gendered roles and expectations that exist for both men and women?

BP: I, too, believe that the shaping of the family, like many other areas of life, is largely determined by economic factors. And I also think that the independence of many women is in point of fact threatened by motherhood. The only feminist perspective I can think of is to choose a feminist partner and a relationship in which both never tire of questioning gender roles.

Barbara Preisig is an art historian and art critic. After studying at the Universities of Bern and Vienna she worked for several years at Galerie Francesca Pia and as an independent art critic. Since 2014 she is a research associate and a lecturer at the Zurich University of the Arts. In 2015 she earned her Ph.D. at the University of Bern. Barbara Preisig is co-editor of Brand-New-Life, a magazine for art criticism aiming to create a critical voice for Switzerland that takes up international debates. (brand-new-life.org)

Edwin Nasr in conversation with Yamu Wang

Yamu Wang: Six months have passed since Lebanon's uprising began on October 17, 2019, initially triggered by the 'last straw' of a newly planned 'WhatsApp tax'. Considering that the political and economic situation has never quite been resolved, but has instead worsened since the beginning of the lockdown, protesters are highly likely to take to the streets again once the lockdown is lifted. What has changed during the last period? And what changes do you expect in the days ahead?

Edwin Nasr: The ignition of the uprising in Lebanon in October was the logical conclusion of over thirty years of crippling neoliberal governance and sectarian-clientelist rule. Whether or not the material conditions are sufficient for a revolutionary momentum to develop remains to be seen. At the time, most of us were surprised by the spontaneity with which hundreds of thousands of protesters simultaneously took to the streets and occupied public squares to demand the government's resignation. Today, writing from an apartment in Beirut where I'm currently confined, I find it difficult to grapple with the future, or even to assert, in a way, that the uprising wasn't permanently broken off due to the COVID-19 pandemic. There have recently been a few noteworthy attempts at reviving popular fervor, but I do believe that the 'first stage' of the uprisings has indeed been concluded, for better or worse.

I'm now trying to articulate my current understanding of the situation we're traversing, on a planetary scale, and of how that affects local politics. In Lebanon we are facing an unprecedented financial crisis that is unfolding synchronously with the pandemic—it's quite a novel situation to be in, especially since the economic crash doesn't have particularly much to do with the pandemic itself. As soon as confinement measures begin to be lifted, however, I do expect that protesters will return to the streets. What will be different this time around, though, has to do with the fact that we will have experienced even more gruesome conditions of precarity—due to the government's fundamental mismanagement of the pandemic, on top of the decades-long cycle of economic and physical violence that the government has inflicted on the population of Lebanon. There are lines of continuity between the initial protests and the coming insurrection, but I do believe that the latter will be much more dependent on certain strategies of dissent that we haven't previously been able to employ. In October we had been suffering from a growing shortage of liquidity and from a crumbling public infrastructure. Come next fall, we'll be lying on top of actual debris, a ghost country running on dust and refuse. At the time of writing, banks are closed indefinitely and cash withdrawals are blocked, ministries and hospitals are disintegrating under the weight of the pandemic, and the working class is getting fired from their jobs and evicted from their houses for not paying rent.

It's also crucial to note that the initial uprisings had at a certain point been somewhat depoliticized—notably when a majority of participants (composed of 'moderate' civil society actors) were intent on framing the crisis as one of representation and legitimation. This led many to reject the dominant discourse of the uprising and to abandon their organizational roles altogether—especially among leftist factions, who much preferred to set their own agenda, despite remaining a minority within the broader movement. Things will undoubtedly change in the near future, though. Now that the lives of a considerable portion of Lebanon's population have grown considerably more precarious—i.e. prone to eviction, bankruptcy and unemployment, the demands that arise from the streets will undoubtedly present a more 'radical' character. Moderate factions and the 'middle class' are finally realizing that the country's hyperliberal economic structures and institutions—especially banks—are at fault for impoverishing and dispossessing millions. It's only a matter of time before social confinement measures are openly defied and people start partaking in mass gatherings and acts of civil disobedience.

YW: Can you elaborate a bit more on how the dominant discourse of protest, which framed the crisis as one of representation and legitimation, was considered moderate and depoliticized in contrast to the leftist factions? To put the question differently: why would confronting the country's economic structures and institutions be a more political approach? And how does this relate to the neoliberal governance and sectarian-clientelist rule that Lebanon has suffered over the past thirty years?

EN: Most of the protests that have taken place in Lebanon since the nominal end of the civil war in 1991 focused on state corruption and were therefore detached from broader questions of class antagonisms and the systemic neoliberalization of our economy. When a discourse of political opposition prioritizes the notion of corruption, it suggests, by definition, that a system of governance may simply be 'fixed' through mechanisms of transparency and accountability. The power-sharing sectarian framework that constitutes Lebanon's parliamentary system has been the 'object of critique' for many civil society actors, while leftist factions have consistently maintained that these terms were insufficient to effectuate systemic change and to activate the process of social transformation and wealth redistribution. The dominant discourse within the October uprising had thus been to demand the formation of a technocratic, 'apolitical' government to take charge of state affairs. What this does is that it conflates the particularities of sectarian representation with political representation more broadly; in other words, it asserts that any political project with pronounced ideological tenets is inherently suspicious, as it supposedly complies with the logic of the ancien régime.

It goes without saying that this reasoning undoubtedly mirrors the doxa of neoliberalism—it is ideological par excellence, especially in its very insistence on transcending ideology. Many local scholars and activists have attributed the rise of this 'depoliticized' form of discourse to the emergence of both international and local NGOs in the country following the civil war, which has, in a way, had a strong effect on leftist mobilization and organizing. What this symptom of 'NGOized resistance' (to use Arundhati Roy's term) has eventually produced is a sort of compromised terrain in which political platforming is inherently dependent on bureaucratic processes built around specialized training in conflict resolution, human rights-oriented approaches, and entrepreneurship. New NGOs and 'social initiatives' are established in Lebanon on an almost monthly basis, but there has been zero interest in constructing a mass political party—even a reformist one—since the 1990s. Consequently, we are left with a collection of leftist micro-cults that all eventually seem to disintegrate a few years after being formed, while independent unions are denied political legitimacy by the Ministry of Labor and thus rendered useless.

YW: The uprising has had its ups and downs in the last six months. Although the initial stage of revolutionary momentum seemed to have come to an end, it still manages to stay alive. People returned to the streets when the currency lost more than 50% of its value, despite the lockdown. Considering that Lebanon is experiencing arguably the worst financial crisis in its history, it's not difficult to imagine that the coming protests may assume a more radical character. The question would then be: How can the pressure on the street—manifested as demonstrations, strikes, roadblocks, self-immolation and such—be transformed into demands by the people for concrete political gains?

EN: I wish I had an answer as to how the strategies of dissent that are currently being practiced could be translated into concrete political gains. Many have said that the past six months have demonstrated the impossibility of bringing about any sort of systemic change within our present system. Although I vehemently disagree with that sort of defeatist reasoning, one can't help but despair when confronted with the barriers that this sectarian-clientelist system has imposed, how it has ensured the atomization of the working class and produced a space and time organized around perpetual paralysis.

As I already mentioned, however, the present financial crisis seems to have reconfigured the dominant discourse informing the insurrection: there is a considerable shift in tone on the streets of Lebanon, a form of political opposition that is more rooted in anger and desperation than it was at the beginning of the uprising. People are now calling it a 'revolution of hunger', and rightly so: the social distancing and self-confinement measures that were enacted by the government were not accompanied by any form of aid to the vulnerable and precarious communities which now constitute the majority of Lebanon's population.

At the time of writing, the city of Tripoli—which has long been subject to substantial economic hardship due in part to military campaigns targeting Salafist cells in the 2000s—is now witnessing forms of insurrectionary violence unknown prior to this month. There is now a noticeable rejection of the tactics of non-violence, as well as a collective will to confront the state's security apparatus. As a result, a 26-year-old protester, Fawwaz Al-Samman, was killed by the Lebanese Army; massive arrests followed by documented cases of state-sponsored torture ensued and continue to take place.

YW: Despite the participants' varied approaches to the struggle, the past six months have been marked by a process of collective subjectification in which the masses to become 'we, the people' against the sectarian regime and its elites. It's interesting to see the Lebanese national flag being used as a revolutionary flag by the protesters, and to observe how this undermines the governmental legitimacy on the one hand and unites the people on the other. I wonder if this newly established collective subject may, in the long run, foster a process of deconfessionalization and the formation of a non-confessional parliament? (Or perhaps it's still too early to imagine this?)

EN: It is perhaps too early to formulate a deconfessional imaginary within the present conjuncture. The insurrectionary process that has emerged in Lebanon since October has, for the time being, often hinted at antagonistic forms of reform and repair. As I mentioned above, the dominant discourse locates an emancipatory potential in the transition of the sectarian Lebanese state towards a civil, 'apolitical' one, while other factions insist on situating sectarianism within a broader political economy sustained by clientelist practices and power-sharing arrangements. The question we need to ask ourselves first and foremost is, I feel, whether committing ourselves to a process of deconfessionalization is a sufficient goal, or whether it is rather the neoliberalization of our economy—its decades-long reliance on debt accumulation, private banking and unregulated markets—that we should seek to dismantle.

I do agree, in some way, that a process of deconfessionalization is already unfolding, even unconsciously, whenever communities in Lebanon 'unite' on the streets and march towards a common goal. I would however link this to the Marxist

notion of class consciousness. It isn't that protesters are choosing to 'shed themselves' of their sectarian subjectivities (as some liberal commentators would frame it) but rather that their opposition to a form of government producing mass precariousness is shaped by their shared material interests and position within the social totality.

YW: On October 25, 2019, a week after the beginning of Lebanon's uprising, a Statement on Open Strike in the Cultural Sector, in solidarity with and participation in the general strike, was announced. It was back in the initial stage of revolutionary momentum. What has been discussed, reflected, or perhaps even debated within the cultural sector in light of its relation and contribution to the movement as it unfolds? How does the cultural sector understand its work within the Lebanese context (with its particularities such as the lack of public funding and space) in this moment of historical urgency?

EN: Most artistic-cultural institutions in Lebanon were born out of the crisis in the 1990s, and were thus structured and made to respond to the postwar reconstruction project and its gruesome expropriation of public spaces. Most of these institutions struggled with the registration procedures instituted by the country's Ministry of Interior, and had to face a repressive state apparatus bent on enforcing censorship on 'alternative' cultural production. While still operating outside of the state's support, most of these institutions have grown to benefit from sizable international funding over the years. Many of them are perceived, in fact, as enforcing a sort of hegemony on cultural production in the country through, say, various gatekeeping practices.

It thus proved to be a complicated task for these institutions to situate themselves within the uprising, and to figure out what their 'role' could be. I think it was indeed a wise move to have them partake in the open strike, which allowed all cultural workers to join and participate actively in the protests, instead of forcibly 'contributing' to the momentum by way of cultural gatherings, symposia, pop-up exhibitions, or the like. There was just no room for that sort of thing to take place, and the uprising demanded first and foremost that people communally occupy the streets and partake in forms of mutual aid and political organizing instead of retreating to their respective echo chambers.

YW: You studied law and economics but work as a cultural practitioner. If it was a conscious choice, how does it make more sense for you to do what you do now, compared to taking the career paths that are more conventional for a graduate in law or economics?

EN: I think my trajectory can speak for itself here: at the age of 18, I enrolled in a law and economics program in Paris, but I dropped out of it a couple of years later, due mostly to despair and an urgent sense of wanting to step out of the university and to tend to what I perceived as being more 'urgent' matters, such as being part of a political party or reporting on social movements for left-wing blogs. My initial decision to participate in that academic program was primarily due to the availability of scholarships that made such studies possible in the first place. I was more interested in film and European literature but was driven perhaps instead by a sort of 'class guilt' to construct a more conventional path for myself. Thankfully, it didn't take long for me to untangle myself from these deviations.

After I came back to Beirut I started working for local newspapers and then applied for a communications position at Ashkal Alwan, the Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts. Only then was I able to experience the disciplinary porosity of the artistic-cultural sector and I began to rethink my trajectory. I like to locate a potentiality for the circulation of radical discourses and aesthetic practices within the contemporary art sphere, and it's why I'm choosing to navigate that space and continue working in it, though I remain cautious of some of its structures and modes of operation, which I feel reproduce conditions of precarity that I'm increasingly growing tired of.

Edwin Nasr (b. 1994) is a writer and cultural worker based in Beirut. His writings have appeared in *Afterall Journal* (forthcoming), *The Funambulist*, *n+1*, *ArteEast Quarterly*, *Makhzin* and *Jadaliyya*, among others, and were commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation and Sharjah Architecture Triennial in UAE, *Biennale de l'Image en Mouvement* in Geneva, AA School of Architecture in London and MMAG Foundation in Amman. He is currently the Assistant to the Director at Ashkal Alwan in Beirut and will serve as a Curatorial Research Fellow from 2020-21 at De Appel in Amsterdam.

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Milieu wird unterstützt von / Milieu is supported by:
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Migros Kulturprozent, Temperatio, Ernst & Olga Gubler-Hablützel Stiftung, Bürgi Willert Stiftung – vielen Dank!

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