

Index

1. Introduction_____	3
2. "Putting a mirror in front of yourself": Art & Change_____	5
3. "Art smoothens the edges of differences": Art & Lebanese Culture_____	6
4. "You can talk about it but you cannot confront it": Art & Censorship_____	10
5."We can't speak about art without speaking about economy": Art & Finance_____	13
6. Conclusion_____	17
7. Sources_____	20

1. Introduction

"I wish for you to stand up for what you care about by participating in a global art project, and together we'll turn the world... INSIDE OUT." These are the words of the French street art artist JR introducing his project INSIDE OUT at the TED prize wish speech in 2011. His project is a large-scale participatory art project that transforms messages of personal stories into pieces of artistic work. Individuals as well as groups are challenged to use black and white photographic portraits to discover, reveal and share the untold stories of people around the world about topics like love, peace, future, community, hope, justice or environment¹.

This project can be taken as an example of an artist's work changing the one-sided division of roles between stage and audience, which was already demanded by Walter Benjamin in 1934. In his essay "The Author as Producer," Benjamin postulates that the art system has to be changed as it only produces art works without any impact. He wants to redefine the hitherto clearly assigned roles between stage and audience, text and performance, director and actor. According to Benjamin, art turns into practice when artists educate and thus enable consumers to take over the position of the artist. One example given by Benjamin for such a conversion of the production system is Bertolt Brecht's *Epic Theater*.² The goal of Brecht and his colleagues was to display complex social and political realities in order to induce the audience to change society for the better. The overall idea is to "re-assign" theater, or art in general, a new social use.

Nowadays, we can observe more and more art working in that "Brechtarian" way. "From visual arts to literature and music to dramatic performance, the arts exert a powerful influence on societal development" states the Global Agenda Council on the role of arts in society.³ But how is this influence or alternative potential generated? What can artists, alone or in communities, accomplish in the political and social dimension?

Artists have the potential to challenge views and perspectives by creative thinking as invoked by JR and his INSIDE OUT project. They are able to raise awareness for social issues that are underrepresented in the public sphere. And moreover, they can break down barriers between cultures encouraging a global dialogue and understanding. However, in practice this potential might be restricted by society itself, i.e. the local conditions might restrain an artist in his or her political work. Therefore, the realisation of the potential might vary from country to country.

¹(author/video title perhaps)

http://www.ted.com/talks/jr_s_ted_prize_wish_use_art_to_turn_the_world_inside_out.html

² Reitsamer, Rosa (2005)

³ <http://www.weforum.org/content/global-agenda-council-role-arts-society-2012>

Lebanon, being the most liberal and democratic country in the Middle East, apparently has a higher potential for political art than other countries in the region. Beirut as its capital gains more and more international recognition for its booming art scene, which is also reflected in the high number of small and big galleries all over the city.⁴ It is, however worthwhile to have a closer look at the everyday reality of artists and how they see the environment they live and work in. To what extent can the art scene truly act in a free manner? Do artists have the desire to influence society, and if yes, how do they judge their potential to do so?

This project examines the actual political potential of artists in Lebanon, based on interviews with artists active in the current scene. It sheds light on the art scene's structure, its problems and how it interacts with society. Moreover, the research also includes the question whether specific characteristics or problems are only restricted to one particular art form, thus allowing some art forms to develop a different potential than others. Knowledge about these differences could in turn help to better understand and analyze overall trends in the art scene.

In order to gather our information, we conducted guided interviews with eight (male and female) artists from different branches of art, such as theater, music, fine arts, poetry or fashion design. After examining the interviews we decided to only include those results in the report that were repeatedly confirmed by most of the artists and could therefore indicate a trend within the art scene.

First of all, the report will display what theoretical potential for societal change the artists see in their specific art form. Afterwards, it will be shown in which environment the artists work. Therefore, their perspective on culture, governmental censorship and on the relationship of arts and economics will be illustrated and furthermore discussed examining their actual potential for societal change. For this reason, the relevant results can be divided into four main categories: art and change, art and culture, art and censorship as well as art and financing.

⁴ compare e.g.: <http://www.artnet.de/magazine/kunstszene-naher-osten/> ;
http://programm.ard.de/TV/3sat/2011/07/10/kunstszene-beirut/eid_280076560596792?monat=&jahr=&list=main

2. "Putting a mirror in front of yourself": Art & Change

The group of interviewees for this project included representatives of every art form. According to them, each art form has its own potential for influencing civil society. Artists working with theatre considered their medium as a possibility for self-reflection and "not [a] power of change but as [a] possibility of questioning things."⁵

*"Let me be franc and brutal if I can. I don't believe theatre changes the world. I believe theatre gives the opportunity for people to reflect on themselves, on ourselves. I don't think any piece of theatre can do more than [put] a mirror in front of yourself and I think a play like this, whoever did it, will serve only as bringing this topic into the public discussion."*⁶

Within the music scene the interviews stressed the importance of giving options to the Lebanese society and creating a non-judgemental environment for the Lebanese. The Hip Hop artists described the potential of their art as followed: "That's the powerful tool we have. Rap can basically change your mind and certain stuff. [It] can put you in a certain mood. [It] can change your state of mind."⁷ During the interview it also became clear that Hip Hop, in their point of view, can actually create a movement:

*"Yeah, HipHop can change anything. The biggest example in that is the case that I told you about the 'Général', the Tunisian rapper who basically did the revolution from a song. (...) I might open up certain [points of view] that you didn't see before or you didn't notice. We can do a change."*⁸

A poet and painter explained that the power of art "is awareness first".⁹

Although not believing that a piece of art can change the world or even a country, none of the interviewees completely denied that their work could actually influence society. In the end, they all explained at some point that the potential of an impact is at least one of the reasons they create art. On a theoretical basis, each one of them agrees with Benjamin's idea of art that can bear a social use and lead to change within a society – whether great or small. Nevertheless, Benjamin pointed out the external circumstances as an influencing factor on the impact of art. For this reason and because theory and reality are two different things most of the time, it was necessary to question these artists about the environment in which they create their art.

⁵ Interview 7 (Part II, 9:12-9:20)

⁶ Interview 5 (12:23 -12:54)

⁷ Interview 1 (16:32-16:44)

⁸ Interview 1 (31:34-32:07)

⁹ Interview 6 (15:40-15:43)

3. "Art smoothens the edges of differences": Art & Lebanese Culture

Throughout the guided interviews the artists were asked to describe Lebanese culture from their perspective. Although getting a variety of responses to this question, there was a very strong trend towards describing the Lebanese culture as a culture of adaption. Almost every artist considered the Lebanese culture as a culture imitating Western countries such as European nations or the US.

*"The relationship the Lebanese identity has with the West is disgusting. (...) Even that similarity or this pseudo similarity with Western culture could have been positive had it been approached with some [dignity] or with some self-affirmation. But the Lebanese culture negates itself and adopts as it is without questioning. We are not creating, we are not making our own ideas, our own notions. If there is anything that you want to pass as good in a conversation about art just say: oh they do this in France or in Britain. And I genuinely believe that they build their identity hating where they are, what they are, and through this negation they just swallow something that is not them. The result of that has to be monstrous. It is monstrous."*¹⁰

A Lebanese musician states that there is

*"Too much import - cultural import - from outside and [that the Lebanese are] not seeking identity for themselves. If you walk anywhere, all pubs, all restaurants are mostly non-Lebanese restaurants. Most of them are either global franchises or Lebanese franchises, which are based on [the] European or American style of restaurants."*¹¹

As Lebanon connects Asia and Europe with each other it has always been influenced by both sides explaining the mixture of culture in this country. Another musician comments on this as followed:

*"We have people coming from all over the world to Lebanon. So that would influence the locals, like, unconsciously - it will. I blame the people [for] not pushing their traditions, too, and letting you know about our traditions. (...) It is part of development. It is part of the world getting smaller. All the cultures are very close to each other now. out our duty, our job is to tell you that we have our culture. We have to preserve it too."*¹²

¹⁰ Interview 5 (40:22-41:37)

¹¹ Interview 1 (41:40-42:13)

¹² Interview 1 (43:25-45:03)

Throughout the interviews it became clear that achieving this goal, preserving a Lebanese culture, is challenged significantly through the constant aim to adapt and imitate and the high consumption of Western products which is directly connected with the refusal of local (art) products and the confrontation with local issues. Additionally, the artists pointed out how easy it is for Lebanese to avoid problems within their own country.

*"Lebanon is a real strange place where you can have everything at the same time. People will be fighting in Tripoli and dying and we will be having a show in Beirut. This is Lebanon. This is how much divided it is."*¹³

The result of this was described as an illusional perception of freedom and rights. One interviewee explains:

*"They created a space where they can contradict you. Where they are telling you: What are you speaking about? You can drink that means you are free, you can wear a short dress in this circuit; that means you are free. You don't want to live in Dahieh or the South of Lebanon? Go live in Hamra."*¹⁴

The possibility of consuming and escaping problems creates an illusion of free choices and makes avoiding problems within a society or country easier. Another artist referring to the same phenomenon continues:

*"The gap between what people feel is their right or their freedom and what it is really their freedom is [is] quite huge. The Lebanese are really delusional about their own rights and freedoms. We believe that we are free and that we have [rights], that we have freedom – that we have freedom of opinion. And in reality we don't. As soon as you scratch the surface of those you will face it."*¹⁵

Freedom of choice is not the only illusion described within the interviews. Several artists describe how deeply the sectarian system is rooted in Lebanese society. "It's the single most dangerous aspect of the Lebanese society. And we identify with it. People are identifying with this."

*"[...] Then even the most well-meaning people when you go a little bit further with them you will hit their sectarianism. Even the liberal, progressive, you know, modern types you see in Hamra, in Gemmayzeh wearing skirts or pissing on the streets or drinking alcohol –scratch them a little bit and you will face their sectarianism."*¹⁶

¹³ Interview 6 (21:37-21:58)

¹⁴ Interview 7 (23:00-23:32)

¹⁵ Interview 5 (1:01:10-1:01:53)

¹⁶ Interview 5 (1:05:00-1:05:50)

A musician explains:

*"It is very easy to get sucked in with this religious flow and with this political flow - it takes you, it is very easy. Even for people who like to think that they have an underground and kind of alternative way of thinking but if you dig deep inside - if you scratch below the surface you see that it is so easy for them to get carried away."*¹⁷

According to the artists, Lebanon is a country still heavily divided by differences in which art is seen as a room for choices and an alternative way of dealing with diversities. A musician explains his conception of what he is trying to establish with the words:

*"This is what we're trying to do eventually: to show people that there is something else, there are other things than just the regular problems you hear every day in Lebanon. You can actually enjoy yourself; you can actually distance yourself from this and live a normal life in Lebanon even with all of this. When you create your own bubble – by saying create your own bubble I am not saying become really introverted because by the end of the day you live in Lebanon. You need to work, you have to make money, you live in this society. But by knowing that there is always an escape for you, there is always something else where you can all come together regardless of the differences and celebrate these differences."*¹⁸

Art as a possible solution to the problem of diversity also becomes clear in the statement of a theatre artist.

*"Without the common you cannot build a culture. It is the basis you build a culture on. Because if you have [differences] all art is based on conflict, on struggle, (...) on opposition. And art smoothens these edges of differences. You need the differences but you also need to deal with them. Art makes difference ok. And this is really absent."*¹⁹

Art was as already mentioned often described as a space within society to celebrate and overcome differences. But it also serves the purpose of a "getaway" from what the interviewees described as the "organized chaos in Lebanon".²⁰

"This is what bothers me: all Lebanese people, when they travel outside they become really, really organised and they follow rules and regulations. And they become different people. But when they come to Lebanon they feel that they can do whatever

¹⁷ Interview 3 (23:10-23:30)

¹⁸ Interview 3(26:55-28:09)

¹⁹ Interview 5 (31:26-31:52)

²⁰ Interview 3 (21:44-21:48)

they want. They don't stop at traffic lights. They do whatever they want. It is like a Luna Park here – it is like a zoo.”²¹

Throughout the interviews most of the artists described the relationship between them and the Lebanese culture/society as one heavily characterized by disconnection. Furthermore, they are aiming to create a creative space, bubble, scene or just a place through their art where people can come together regardless of their differences, be confronted with important issues and work together.

“(…) Regardless of the music the message is the same. If you are doing underground parties/alternative parties the message is the same: you're against the mainstream flow, you're against the commercial flow, which I am not saying is bad but we do not connect with it, we're not associated with it. So if you're doing this, the message is the same: you are trying to create another environment for (...) people. You are trying to create something else, something different. You're giving them choices/options because before that we had no options in Lebanon.(…) We try to give a better example, that different people, different systems with different music can come together and work together. And I think this gives an example for the politicians and all the different [religions] or different societies that even if you have differences you can come together and work together and can achieve something nice.”²²

It became obvious that for the interviewees art is a place to create a contrast to Lebanese culture. For them personally it seems to be a getaway and an attempt to create something that differs from the Lebanese culture and attacks the problems they see within it. “I don't connect. I don't connect here. I feel like I live in a little bubble in Lebanon. We have our own bubble; we have our own friends that kind of think the same.”²³ The creation of personal spaces existing next to Lebanese society resembles a change within the culture that most of the artists achieved for their own scene. Through sharing a set of values, attitudes, preferences or needs, which differ from the mainstream society, the interviewed artists created a sort of subculture or multiple subcultures within the Lebanese culture. Although they are not just part of the Lebanese culture but also dependent on it in terms of following rules and regulations or addressing it in their work, most of them expressed the art scene as a seemingly self-contained group or elite. Despite of forming a group or subculture within Lebanese society, most of the artists clearly express their wish to reach out to the broad society. Which barriers they face when they try to address the public sphere or people outside the like-minded scene will be illustrated in the following chapters.

²¹ Interview 3 (19:48-20:07)

²² Interview 3 (28:22-30:01)

²³ Interview 3 (22:35-22:46)

4. "You can talk about it but you cannot confront it": Art & Censorship

Lebanese artists are confronted with censorship on a regular basis. One of the interviewees explains: "You have to give your script to the General Security to review it before you can perform. There is a pre-censorship in Lebanon for movies, theater, music and there is a post-censorship for other things."²⁴ This statement confirms that every artist in Lebanon is in one way or another affected by censorship. The responsibility for this can yet not only be reduced to the executive authorities. The government does not only implement censorship related to their own agenda but also if religious institutions file a complaint. Religious institutions are eager to use this means, which already hints at the topics that are especially sensitive in the public sphere. "Whenever [there are] ideas related to religion, any religious establishment has the right to address the General Security (...). The General Security will censor artwork because a church or sheikh or anyone else complained about it."²⁵ Religious as well as political issues can be considered a kind of taboo in Lebanon – due to their imminent relevance for society.²⁶ For the very same reason, however, artists aim to address these topics.

Instead of categorically avoiding certain topics, Lebanese artists found their ways around censorship and most of them expressed they didn't feel dominated by it. The majority of interviewees seems to not feel affected in their freedom, however. For example, a comicartist stated: "So far I never censored myself. I never said: *this* I cannot do."²⁷ Although they acknowledge the existence of governmental censorship, they claim to feel free to express their opinion through art within the public sphere especially nowadays with the existence of the internet.²⁸ Nonetheless, feelings seem to be mixed. On the one hand, each one of the interviewees claims to feel some sort of freedom of expression but on the other hand they are admitting that there are limitations by saying that e.g. it is "the way you address the issue, it's the way you talk about things".²⁹ In the end all interviewees actually confirm their use of "avoiding techniques" such as hiding messages in metaphors or paraphrasing. "There are [a] lot of things you cannot talk about and if you want to talk about them you really have to do a lot of turns and hide it in a way."³⁰ A Lebanese rapper for example explains the effect of censorship on his work by saying: "This is one of the things that [are]always [on]your mind when you are writing (...) [but] there is always a way you

²⁴ Interview 5 (53:59-54:20)

²⁵ Interview 5 (54_32-55:12)

²⁶ In order to display this complex subject accurately, the authors want to add another reason for the missing public discussion on religion and politics in Lebanon. Due to the civil war and the lack of national reconciliation, political and religious issues remained to be highly charged in the Lebanese society. Avoiding such explosive topics could therefore also be part of the effort to prevent any form of new incitement.

²⁷ Interview 2 (46:54-46:58)

²⁸ compare Interview 6 (06:45-07:20)

²⁹ Interview 1 (28:10-28:16)

³⁰ Interview 5 (56:42-56:54)

could find to basically say what you want to say without insulting nobody (...).³¹ The comic-artist continued to explain:

"I know it exists and I always say whatever I want. But rather than doing this, I say it in disguise - and then it works. It passes in the newspaper. I said some very censorable things in the newspaper about religion, about sex, about drugs, about whatever, but never directly."³²

He further explains that besides talking indirectly about topics he also uses other techniques to make something a subject of discussion. One of the techniques is to use a child in his comics through which he speaks his mind.³³ This is particularly helpful because society perceives children as innocent or naive and therefore it doesn't blame them. In addition to this, Lebanese society doesn't treat cartoons, drawings or comics in a serious matter, which facilitates his work and the work of other artists.

How severely the government censors also seems to be dependent on the topics being addressed. It became clear that political criticism followed by comments on religion passes the doors of censorship the hardest.

"Back in the Syrian regime's time, it was mostly political (topics) in. And still now a little bit - we cannot talk about the president or things like this. But this I am not interested in. Most of my things, especially in the newspaper, are more on the society rather than politics. (...) but I attack many things like one huge thing is racism in Lebanon."³⁴

The other interviews also showed that social topics escape censorship easier than politics. An artist and poet who got arrested for spraying graffiti of a soldier on one of Beirut's walls explains this phenomena as following: "Even in my case, (...) it was nothing. Just a picture of a soldier on a wall, really? But again that tells you one thing: (...) it is a weak government. A picture on a wall or a scene in a movie or a passage in a novel can really threaten a government."³⁵ He furthermore explains how the art scene is suffering from governmental censorship.

"Censorship has always been there. (...) Every work that has been censored has been censored for the wrong reasons. Or because it has a sex scene in it or because it is talking about current political issues that usually everybody is talking about -

³¹ Interview 1 (26:20-27:25)

³² Interview 2 (49:06-49:28)

³³ compare Interview 2 (50:17-52:44)

³⁴ Interview 2 (50:17-51:39)

³⁵ Interview 6 (06:07-06:33)

everybody knows about it but when you put it into (...)theater or into a movie or something it becomes a taboo. ()... They go and they censor the whole film. (...)."³⁶

This statement implies that art that is not just reporting but also commenting and criticizing a topic will have a hard time passing the General Security. One interviewee cuts right down to the matter saying: "You can talk about it but you cannot confront it. The worst part is that they are tolerant with those who do not criticize ... talking about it but not really confronting it."³⁷ This situation seems to result in a gap between perceived freedom of expression on the artist's part and the actual freedom to talk, comment or criticize social, religious and political processes in the country. In the end, all interviewees underlined that censorship has an effect not only on how they create art but also on what they write, paint or who they address it to. Saying something in disguise doesn't leave room for confrontation and evokes the question if the audience is still able to follow the actual message, even if the General Security got shook off. Nevertheless, even if not confronting or criticizing openly, every artist proves that it is still possible to bring topics into the public discourse.

The strong possibility of getting censored while talking about or commenting on social taboos is yet not the only external force imposing limits on the work of artists in Lebanon. Financing as another strong influence on issues addressed within the art scene will be explained in the following chapter.

³⁶ Interview 6 (04:06-05:02)

³⁷ Interview 5 (53:58-55:35)

5. "We can't speak about the art scene without speaking about the economy": Art & Financing

It seems to be the same problem everywhere. Being an independent artist and creating art without funding from big galleries and stages goes hand in hand with the problem of financing your work and yourself. This is not a unique problem only experienced by Lebanon's art scene, but it can be said that Lebanese art finds itself in a more difficult situation. Other than in European states for example, here there is hardly any governmental funding for culture. After the civil war, Lebanon did not reconstruct Beirut's opera house, it does not have a national theater and much less subsidies for a grassroots art scene. At the same time, private donations, a main source of culture funding in the United States, are not common in Lebanese society. Therefore, the Lebanese art scene also seems to be highly constrained in its creativity and choice of topics by money. A theater writer, producer and actor explains:

*"There is a problem with Lebanese culture these days. I think the past 15 years we witnessed a mutation of Lebanese culture because all of it from every domain (...) is so dependent on foreign funding that a vast majority of artists now cater for the funders. We create art that the funders want to fund. We talk about it in the way that we think they want to hear about it and this is a two-way-problem. It's mutating Lebanese culture. There are artists now in Lebanon that create theatre that only exhibits abroad as Lebanese art. They show one night in Lebanon so that they get the pictures, they get the tag 'that's Lebanese' and then they take it abroad. The funders now are pushing the agenda. (...) You sense what the donors want to pay for and how they want you to talk about it."*³⁸

It seems to be an issue of demand and supply, which in some artists' point of view leads to an adaption of the Lebanese art scene's agenda to a foreign one.

*"Our art scene is completely perverted by Europe and [the] US because the money for our work comes from international funds. You should check cases where you respond to their moods. This is why you can't find a single performance anymore that is not related to the Arab spring or the rights of women."*³⁹

Another interviewee stated: "trying to get this work produced, it really hit me in the face: I can't write about the misery of 200.000 people living in Lebanese homes, suffering every day because there is a political situation in Syria."⁴⁰ Throughout the interviews this scenario was often illustrated when the artists were supposed to describe the Lebanese art scene:

³⁸ Interview 5 (15:36-17:05)

³⁹ Interview 7 (23:50-24:40)

⁴⁰ Interview 5 (17:27-18:08)

“We can't speak about the art scene without speaking about the economy.”⁴¹ Lebanon as being located in the Middle East especially seems to face the additional problem that: “The Occident needs a theatre play that reflects their own vision of the Middle East or the Arab world or Africa and they throw money on it. And what we give them is their conception of the Middle East and not culture.”⁴²

Some of the statements suggest that this dependency on foreign funding leads to an alienation of art from the audience and society since it is no longer addressing its own relevant issues in order to please the perceptions of foreign societies.

*“For me, I didn't see any work that really touched the collective conscience of the Lebanese people. (...) What is theatre? What is art in the end? For me, art should express the opinion of the street, of the country, (...) every aspect of what is happening in this society, but when you look at it: no, it's not.”*⁴³

Another artist states: “Now we are creating art because there is someone willing to pay for it. Not because our people are going to consume it. Not because we want to affect what happens in our own society.”⁴⁴

The feeling of a disconnection of art from society could be confirmed in all the interviews regardless of the art form. Foreign funding as the explanation for this phenomena appeared very strongly especially in the theatre scene. But throughout all the interviews an image of an art scene that does not address their own but foreign societies or cultures was created.

*“For example: I am a rapper let's say. A lot of rappers, they sing in English or French. But why in Russia they rap in Russian, why in Germany they rap in German [and] in France they rap in French. Why in Lebanon they need to rap in a foreign language? And then they tell you that you have to expand your world. But people here are not listening to you. (...) You need to get your message to your people. (...) Speak the language of our culture not with the language of another culture.”*⁴⁵

The high dependency on foreign funding in Lebanon and, as the artist stated, its severe impact on the art scene can be explained by the lack of local funding. Next to this it also seems to be a result of a lack of support for local artists through Lebanese society itself. The interviewees connected the high attraction of the Lebanese audience towards the West (see chapter 2) directly with the rejection of local artists.

⁴¹ Interview 7 (26:30-27:35)

⁴² Interview 7 (28:16-28:37)

⁴³ Interview 6 (13:38-14:01)

⁴⁴ Interview 5 (17:27-18:08)

⁴⁵ Interview 1 (46:05-46:54)

*"Any type of alternative music faces a lot of hard time. Even the stuff that people would listen to and they will say: 'Wow this sounds nice!'. Once they know it's something local and, I don't know, once they feel they are very close to this they avoid it instead of supporting it. They are very easily attracted to anything foreign and it's too tough to convince them of something local even if it is way better, much more sophisticated than what they listen to."*⁴⁶

The problem seems to have its roots not only in the aim to consume foreign products but also in the refusal to be confronted with local issues.

*"They prefer to go to a pub and listen to lounge music instead of going to a Hip Hop concert. Maybe for many reasons: One, because we talk about issues they want to forget probably. Some of them are in denial. They know that there is everything wrong around them, you know? But they are in denial. They don't want to think about that. They just want to have fun and actually get out of that environment."*⁴⁷

Regarding the matter of not producing art for their own society, whether caused by a foreign agenda or the refusal to deal with local issues, raises the question what artists can do to solve these problems in order to start creating art for the collective. There are really just two ways: either society changes and starts supporting its art scene or art changes and finds a way to address society again.

One of the artists explains that art has to adapt to the society it is talking to. In order to get back in touch with society, he proposes that the tools an artist uses have to change in a sense where it starts reaching its audience again. He furthermore implies that if people are not willing to go and see art, the art has to come to people instead. This artist sees a solution for this problem in bringing theatre from the stage into the streets as a public intervention to actually reach people and avoid adapting a foreign agenda and point of view.

*"I am now giving up on theatre as a stage. Next thing I want to stop doing that. This society does not want it. Why do we keep hitting our head against the wall? It doesn't want it. 500, 1000, 500 people as audience are not enough to support a theatre scene. And it's only one fucking city. We don't have five big cities to create theatre in. It's one city and the society does not want it. So instead of trying to beg for foreign money and changing my ideas I think if the art scene starts re-examining the tools we use maybe we can start saying things that the society wants to listen to."*⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Interview 1 (22:37-23:24)

⁴⁷ Interview 1 (15:39-16:13)

⁴⁸ Interview 5 (51:14-52:03)

This approach shows that the art scene actually tries to increase its effect on society by talking about sensitive issues or even confronting them. Whether they actually do have an effect on society will be discussed in the final conclusion by once again pointing out the most important drawbacks of Lebanese society as well as the significant characteristics of the Lebanese art scene.

6. Conclusion

The interviews showed problems facing the art scene in Lebanon, especially in Beirut. One major problem that was revealed is the increasing sense of detachment from civic society. Some identified foreign funding as the main reason for this detachment, saying that local artists adapt the agenda of foreign organizations due to the lack of local funding. Apparently this drawback almost automatically leads to a lack of confrontation with society or with the topics that actually matter in the country which are reflected in the internal agenda. An actual confrontation with not just issues but also with people causing these problems is furthermore harmed by pre- and post-censorship within the country. Although it became very clear that artists in Lebanon still manage to get their contents into the public discourse by talking about issues and delivering hidden messages, a direct confrontation does not seem possible.

Another problem that appeared often throughout the interviews was the question whether a confrontation is even desired by the society. The Lebanese mentality was often described as one that is seeking distraction instead of confrontation and is escaping by consuming foreign products and arts. This mentality also seems to be one of the greater challenges of local artists. The descriptions of Lebanese society revealed a loss of identity and tradition, which seems to be the result of the immense influence of Western culture. This leads to a loss of interest in developing their own culture and to an introverted art scene which can't address its own society.

Next to changing the art that is being created and the tools that are being used as suggested above, almost all the interviewees see an immense increase of the potential for change through collaboration. It is described as the key to achieve an actual change in society. "The art scene is really growing over here, for sure. But at the same time it's a bit individualistic. I feel like there are so many people who have such similar ideas that are happening. It is just a matter of really coming together and collaborating."⁴⁹

As already mentioned in the introduction of this report, Benjamin ascribed art the potential of societal change. Brecht's theatre was a medium to display complex social and political realities in order to have an impact on the audience and consequently also on society. In theory, art can act as a tool to influence society by challenging views and creative thinking. Such a potential can be restricted through barriers set by society, politics or the country art is created and performed in. Taking the romantic idea of theatre that changes the world into the reality of Lebanon you can easily see that especially these restrictions are holding back the potential of the art scene in this country. Stimulating an audience in order to create a change becomes difficult if there is no audience dealing with political or social issues or

⁴⁹ Interview 4 (17:52-18:04)

challenging views. Creative thinking can only be achieved up to the point where too much creativity is being censored. One can say that although working under difficult circumstances, the art scene in Lebanon carries a potential for change in it, just as any other art scene addressing valuable topics. The immense wish for collaboration and the feeling of working alone against a society and/or system shows that the Lebanese art scene can be described as a kind of subculture that is divided into groups and especially divided into individuals. It seems to carry the individualism and sectarian division of the Lebanese society within it. Nonetheless, it is united by the wish for change, confrontation and collaboration, which – if these aims were translated into reality - could actually lead to societal change.

7. Sources

Primary sources:

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Interview 2 (01:12:54) conducted on the 18th December 2012

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Interview 4 (39:52) conducted on the 4th January 2013

Interview 5 (01:15:34) conducted on the 27th December 2012

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Interview 7 (40:07; Part II 18:48) conducted on the 7th January 2013

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