

[Albers on Bellan, 'Dismember Remember: Das anatomische Theater von Lina Saneh und Rabih Mroué'](#)

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Monique Bellan. *Dismember Remember: Das anatomische Theater von Lina Saneh und Rabih Mroué.* Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2013. 240 pp. EUR 59.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-89500-982-2.

Reviewed by Yvonne Albers (Philipps-Universität Marburg) **Published on** H-AMCA (June, 2015)
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Audio: Ok... But what are you guys trying to do with theatre?

Artist: We're doing theatre.

Audio: You mean these performances you've been presenting this last while, you consider them theatre?

Artist: I would prefer to delay my answer for the simple reason that I don't want to be accused of preempting criticism and blocking it.

[...]

Audio: So, why aren't you acting...really acting?

Artist: Honestly, I'm getting offered a lot of roles...but I'm not interested in any of them.

[...]

Audio: Ok. Ok. If there aren't any directors to your liking... Your husband...why doesn't he produce anything for you?

Artist: He doesn't feel like it.

Audio: Speak into the microphone.

Artist: He doesn't feel like it.[1]

This short extract from *Biokhraphia*, a theater performance mocking the genre of the artist's interview while negotiating the state of theater in Lebanon today, allows a telling glimpse into the highly conceptual, albeit provocative, (auto)critical, and nevertheless savvy theater of Lebanese artists Lina Saneh (b. 1966) and Rabih Mroué (b. 1967). Starting with their first joint project, "Ghandi as-Saghir" in 1991--an adaption of Elias Khoury's novel of the same name--and continuing with many separate and joint projects until today, the couple's radical formal approach, combined with a deep commitment to the "Lebanese 'conditio humana'" (p. 1), succeeded in fundamentally provoking Lebanon's theater traditions and inspiring an international art scene. Both are commonly referred to as part of Lebanon's "postwar" generation, which spans famous peers such as Walid Raad, Akram

Zaatari, Joana Hadjithomas, and Khalil Joreige. Since the turn of the millennium, one can hardly find an international festival on contemporary arts from the Middle East that does not feature at least one representative of this “generation.” As just one recent example, Rabih Mroué was invited to the 13th DOCUMENTA in 2012 with two of his latest works concerning the documentation of death in the Syrian revolution: *The Pixelated Revolution* (lecture performance, 2012) and *Instructions and Advice How to Shoot Today* (installation, 2012).

Surprisingly enough, little scholarly work has been published on Mroué and Saneh, and until now, no comprehensive volume has been dedicated to their oeuvre.[2] Luckily now, Monique Bellan has drawn attention to this desideratum: the above-quoted performance belongs to a corpus of work at the center of her book-length study “Dismember Remember: The Anatomical Theater of Lina Saneh and Rabih Mroué” (2013, German). This critical corpus of four stage performances and one video work is the object of a pervasive analysis that draws from current theoretical work in the fields of theater studies, literary studies, and post-Marxist aesthetics. Bellan traces the many allusions and references to Arab (and non-Arab) cultural history, like themes and images that go back to classical Arabic literature,[3] as well as to Lebanon’s recent political history and present age, all corresponding with each other in these highly conceptual artworks. The author also provides a synchronic perspective of cultural critique conducted by Lebanese peers and critics to supplement her analysis.

As prolegomena to this endeavor, the book’s introductory historical chapter supplies an indispensable reference for scholars interested in contemporary Lebanese theater and its histories. Here, Bellan presents a discursive background story of the debates and aesthetics that preceded and inform Lebanese theater and performance art today. Starting with the nineteenth-century Arab debate on a missing Arab theater tradition in comparison to the European model, the text subsequently focuses on Lebanon, where Bellan traces the emergence of a specific local avant-garde theater in the politicized period of the 1960s, together with its contribution to the then-dominant debate on *aṣāla* (authenticity) vs. *mu’āṣara* (modernity). With the end of the civil war (1975-89), a “generation of rupture” (quoting Lebanese journalist and art critic Pierre Abi Saab, p. 53) would then remap the artistic field. These artists are related to each other by a shared interest in the ambiguities of collective memory, as well as their profound critique of aesthetic representation conditioned by an increased “NGO-ization” (quoting Hanan Toukan, p. 55) of cultural production after 9/11.

Regarding her main objective, the performance analyses, Bellan pervasively opts for an inductive methodology of deconstruction, which stands in accordance with Mroué’s and Saneh’s own critical practice.[4] Their deconstructivist criticism, as Bellan presumes and proves, is primarily performed through monologic speech at the expense of dramatic dialogue and physical action on stage. Bellan’s main interest lies in the ways in which this strategy subverts conventional patterns of perception based on Lebanon’s social orders, and how visibility is produced by a confrontation of text, image, and body as a crucial element in both artists’ approaches. Saneh’s and Mroué’s “excessive descriptivism” (p. 169), by which they are carrying out a physical, epistemological, and social autopsy of the individual, leads Bellan to describe this theater as intrinsically “anatomical.” Bellan’s terminology of an anatomical theater revives the eponymous event established in the European Renaissance, in which dead corpses were exhibited in lecture halls and an autopsy was performed under the eyes of an expert audience. This scenery offers Bellan a fertile ground for sketching the main gesture (or rather posture) of a theater based on public indicating, depicting, and surgical

cutting in order to bare the hidden mechanisms at work both in art and Lebanon's amnesic society--a thought also provoked by the book's title: "Dismember Remember." The title refers to a quote by playwright and Brecht pupil Heiner Müller, by which Bellan points to the dynamic of an anatomical theater as the locus of constant de-/reconstruction, to which the following analytical chapters are dedicated.

The major portion of the book focuses on three of Saneh's works: *Biokhraphia* (in cooperation with Mroué, 2002), *I had a Dream Mom* (a videotaped conversation between Saneh and her elderly mother about a mysterious ghost city she dreamt of, 2006), and *Appendix* (2007), all of which share a radical gesture of revealing the impossibility of individuality in Lebanese society. One of Bellan's important achievements is to disclose and contextualize Saneh's overarching artistic occupation with the body as a "battlefield" (p. 124), which becomes particularly obvious in her literally anatomical work *Appendix*: posited in the sterile setting of a white cube (at least in her first performance at Sfeir-Semler gallery Beirut), Saneh sits, mute and motionless, on a transparent chair. In front of her and behind a lectern, her husband Mroué would meanwhile inform the audience about Saneh's wish of a total physical disappearance after death, and the many undertakings she has taken into consideration to reach this aim, since the Lebanese state does not allow for the cremation of her corpse. After none of her ideas has yet helped to realize this desperate wish, Saneh, as the audience is told, now opts for a last exit strategy: to sell her single body parts--upon request also signed by the artist--to art collectors and galleries. Bellan now impressively manages to locate Saneh's sculptural "body work" in a dense cultural reference network: the body in *Appendix* is exposed primarily in its objectness, as a plastic matter which can eagerly become a projection surface for political, social, erotic, or anarchic representations or even, if necessary--and by the act of signing it--an artwork to sell, an easily done "ready-made" (p. 138). It is shown how this links Saneh's performance equally to Artaud's Theater of Cruelty, to the attempts of body artists like Piero Manzoni, Michel Journiac, or Marina Abramović, as well as to the traditional figure of the *ḥakawātī*, the storyteller in Arabic culture. The *ḥakawātī* is often regarded as the forefather of Arabic theatricality: by thrilling his audience with a compelling narration and an occasional use of physical gesture to animate his monologue, the *ḥakawātī*--similar to Saneh's, but also Mroué's attempt--upholds the "predominance of the word" (p. 185) over the performing body.

In contrast to the rather "introspective and microscopic" (p. 2) work of his wife and colleague, the performances of Rabih Mroué are distinguished by Bellan as comparatively "extroverted." Often, they choose a specific historical event as a point of departure and involve extensive documentary material in order to retell (or re-enact) a distinct chapter of Lebanon's (post)war history. Bellan confines her analysis to the two quite different performances: *Who is Afraid of Representation* (2004), in which the story of a Lebanese assassin is confronted with the history of Western body art, and *How Nancy Wished that Everything Was an April Fool's Joke* (2007), which revives four fighters who served for different sectarian militias during the civil war. Here, the body does not appear as a "battlefield," but as an unanimated "site of history" (p. 191) that is confronted with a detailed, austere, and redundant historiographic narratology that generates the atmosphere of a trial in which the difference between "(aesthetic) judgment and (legal) sentence" (p. 149) is put under scrutiny.

In comparison to her treatment of Saneh, Bellan's account of Mroué's works unfortunately does not fulfill the book's self-identification as a "comprehensive introduction" to the work of both artists. Rather, *Dismember Remember* tends to underexpose some of his oeuvre's most distinguishing

characteristics.[5] Still, as Bellan notes in her introduction, Mroué is doubtlessly the more visible (and celebrated) of the two artists, particularly on an international level. Hence, her study should be received as an attempt to do justice to Lina Saneh's important but less regarded works. Nevertheless, Bellan sheds light on the core issues of both artists' approaches and finally characterizes them, according to Jacques Rancière's notion of the political in art, as a dissensual practice, which aims to disrupt established systems of social order and is thereby able to redefine (and redistribute) the realm of the common.[6] Due to her theoretical emphasis on theater theory, the study is moreover able to analyze aspects that most existing studies neglect: the position and critical self-identification of Saneh and Mroué as *theater* artists within a specific (trans)national theatrical tradition and the relevance of this self-positioning as a crucial impetus of both artists' work. The initially quoted performance *Biokhraphia* serves as a good example for that: Saneh's and Mroué's anatomical theater does not spare itself from deconstruction, but instead subjects itself to an auto-critical examination of its core elements with regard to its legitimacy as a locus of critique in a given society. Bellan also responds to a dearth in existing research on contemporary Lebanese art, which usually tends to understand Saneh's and Mroué's multidisciplinary approach by referring to a rather generalizing contemporary art theory. In contrast, she locates both Saneh and Mroué as part of a shift in contemporary theater to the "post-dramatic" (a term established by theater scholar Hans Thies-Lehmann), but does so without dismissing the local discourses that inform their attempts and by taking into account the distinct position theater has occupied in modern Arab thought and criticism. All of this is written in a subtle and sensitive style which, one would hope, an English-speaking audience will soon get the chance to read.

Notes

[1]. An English translation from the Arabic performance text was first published in *The Drama Review* 52, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 167-178. Here: 172-73.

[2]. One semi-academic exception is Maria Hlavajova and Jill Winder, eds., *A BAK Critical Reader in Artist's Practice: Rabih Mroué* (Utrecht: post editions, 2012), which assembles a broad array of essays on Mroué by international artists, critics, thinkers, and curators. Thought-provoking and insightful, the format aims to offer both an introduction to his work and to intellectually engage with its impact on the understanding of art today.

[3]. To give an example, Bellan points to the motif of "Wuqūf 'alā-l-aṭlāl" (Standing by the ruins) in Saneh's *I had a Dream, Mom*, a theme that can be traced back to pre-Islamic poetry such as *Layla wa Majnūn* (p. 114).

[4]. Bellan identifies Saneh's and Mroué's approach as deconstructivist insofar as it encompasses a decentralization of single elements (such as Saneh's organ selling or Mroué's meticulous reenactment of an assassination) and a dissolution both of binary oppositions (actor vs. role; author/actor vs. reader/spectator; fact vs. fiction) and of the concepts of identity, subjectivity, and representation (p. 165).

[5]. For instance, Mroué's distinct auto-fictional attempt, his conceptual interest in an involvement with his spectator, and his clear-cut engagement with rewriting the history of the Lebanese Left are only three emphases which distinguish his approach from Saneh's, but which are touched only

cursorily.

[6]. In his aim to question the traditional dichotomy between aesthetics and politics as two distinct spheres, French philosopher Jacques Rancière developed the conception of the “partition of the sensible” (*Le Partage du sensible: Esthétique et politique* [Paris: La Fabrique, 2000]), starting from the assumption that the Foucaultian “police” (*la police*) not only governs through organizing power, distributing positions, and thereby establishing and preserving a certain order, but also defines what is visible, audible, i.e., perceptible or *sensible* at all. Rancière hereby enters a discussion on the nexus of aesthetics and politics, conceiving “politics” (*le politique*) not as process that aims for a collective consensus, but as an inherent antagonism in the representations of the common, an essential dissent. In his view, art is capable to reveal this partition of the sensible by materially and symbolically dissenting against the ways of “being, doing, and saying” defined by the police and thereby creating a transient moment in which the fundamental disagreement (*la mésentente*) in a given community is temporarily exposed.

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