

"The Days of the Blue Bat", 2013

Installation, images and objects

A project by Salah Saouli

The year 1958 in Lebanon was marked by a crisis that lasted six months and made the deep rifts in the society clear. The regional geopolitical situation and its players influenced the crisis strongly, including the landing of 14,000 US-marines on the coast of Beirut: Termed "Operation Blue Bat"; this was intended to curb the alleged communist threat to regional stability. In the aftermath, this episode of Lebanese history was defined as either "Revolution of 58", "Violence of 58", "Unrest", or "Insurrection", followed by the "Counter-revolution", depending on the political affiliations of the narrator.

The conflict arose from different social and political aspects and led to a general chaos. In many locations of the country armed struggles took place; members of the community of several quarters of the city of Beirut armed themselves and descended into the streets and built barricades. What followed was a period of militant euphoria and intoxication, where each local leader with decision making capacity in the conflict, had his personal goals and visions and fought his own war, regardless of the consequences.

The war was not only fought with weapons but also through representational rituals. Each group tried to assert its power through an ostensive display of their arms when moving around the city and posing for photos. The result was a particular iconography that still today bears witness to the importance of self-representation in times of armed conflict. It also seems full of contradictions, as many of the fighters clearly appear to be inexperienced in handling weapons as they pose; they seem to emulate models taken from popular media of the time, action cinema, etc. with its understanding of virility and strength. Often the young militants seem to have internalized their movie heroes' mannerisms and transported them into their own self-image.

A political compromise with the motto "no winners and no losers" ended this brief period of revolution, but despite certain efforts to build up a civil society in the following years, the fundamental issues that had led to the conflict remained unsolved. The Earth had shaken, but people continued their lives as if nothing had happened. 17 years later, this led to the real earthquake of the Civil War, whose aftershocks are still felt today. The corrupted political leadership is still in firm control and dominates society and the political landscape. At the end, there were no winners, only a large number of victims, only losers.

The exhibition "The Days of the Blue Bat" explores a period of the recent Lebanese past that remains largely unexamined. It presents some different figures, actors and witnesses of this crisis. Taking the popular memory with its background and history as its starting point, the project presents a dynamic step beyond mere documentary and allows for a new contextualization of historical processes.