I probably would not have written this book had I not been in Beirut's Gemmayzeh district, which is located close to the port, during the explosion and had I not stayed in town during the aftermath of the blast. This is not only because after this event I felt a deep connection to the tissue of the city, which had been torn apart in front of my eyes, but also because I observed, with a certain unease, the emergence of images of the dead from 4 August on the city's walls. I started to ask myself where the urgency to put up photographs of the killed comes from, as this is a practice that is not performed everywhere. For example, no posters were issued for the dead of the Paris Bataclan shooting in 2015. Furthermore, the emotional discussion on- and offline about whether the dead of 4 August should be called martyrs or victims made me question the importance of terminology.

Trying to understand what happened on 4 August is a futile endeavour. We know that ammonium exploded in the port but not why or what led to its detonation, and it is unlikely that the exact circumstances will be revealed anytime soon. It even remains unclear how many people died; the estimated numbers range from 250 to 300. Knowing that an event happened, but not knowing the precise details has often been the case in Lebanon's history.

The explosion wounded Beirut, and it made life more difficult than it already was before. In October 2019, the upheavals against the sectarian system that governs the country, which are known as the thawra, started. Soon after, in February 2020, COVID-19 arrived in Lebanon, and a severe economic crisis resulting in mass migration, the constant devaluation of money, and a rise in poverty started to unfold. Additionally, there is a shortage of necessary everyday resources such as electricity, while the government's corruption and incompetence often lead to deadly tragedies. On top of that, a war between Israel and Hezbollah erupted in the South in October 2023, just when I was about to leave Beirut for good after having submitted my PhD thesis, which serves as the base for this book. This is also why my analysis stops at this point and does not include images that were produced after 7 October 2023.

1.1 An Underview of Pictures of the (Un)Dead in Beirut

Although the explosion sparked my interest in images of the dead in Lebanon, only a small part of this book is about images of the dead of 4 August. Rather, it encompasses a broader context. I will primarily investigate how contemporary artists critically question and appropriate images of martyrs that are produced by the Lebanese sects and, in doing so, comment on the fabrication of martyrs and their images. I further examine how the artworks discussed can be contextualised with recent images of the dead in Lebanon. The question that I aim to answer is not: What is a martyr? But: How do artists question and interrogate the visualisation of

martyrs and reveal the uses of the martyr's image? To expand on this core question, I will also ask: How can image-making (both artistic and non-artistic) that has taken place in relation to the dead between 2019 and 7 October 2023 be contextualised with earlier images of martyrs?

I focus on one work as a case study, namely Rabih Mroué's play *How Nancy Wished That Everything Was an April Fool's Joke* (2007; *Fig. 1.3*; henceforth, *Nancy*). In my reading, the play carefully and deliberately reflects on and appropriates the image and thus the figure of the martyr. In the play, four actors narrate instances of conflict in Lebanon since 1973. The actors repeatedly die as martyrs, come back to life, and die again. Almost every death is accompanied by an image, in most cases an appropriation of a martyr poster from the *Wars in Lebanon* (1975–1990). However, the photographs and names of the martyrs are replaced with those of the actors.

Except for an outlook on possible further research in the final chapter, the discussion in this book is restricted to Lebanon, in particular Beirut, as I am aware of

Fig. 1.3: *How Nancy Wished That Everything Was an April Fool's Joke*, 2007, © A Play by Rabih Mroué. Written by Rabih Mroué and Fadi Toufiq. Directed by Rabih Mroué. Posters Designed by Samar Maakaroun. Based on Zeina Maasri's Research and on Her Book *Off the Wall: Political Posters of the Lebanese Civil War*. 2007, Tokyo International Arts Festival, Tokyo, Photograph Kohei Matsushima.

the pitfalls of writing about a place one has not been socialised in. Understanding (art) historical and social circumstances takes time, and mistakes easily happen when looking at several contexts. Therefore, limiting the study to one location allows me to dig deeper and, hence, to avoid potential misconceptions. However, this does not mean that I am seeking to offer an overview of contemporary art from Beirut or Lebanon; rather, to use Declan Long's term, this book offers an 'underview' of a specific topic.[2]

I also want to emphasise that this is not a study about images of the 'Middle East'. I am generally critical of applying this paradigm to contemporary art and visual culture, because, as Derek Gregory has pointed out, it remains unclear what the common unifier of this colonial, artificial mapping of the world is.[3] Beirut-based artist Tony Chakar has also written on this issue in the following email conversation with Stephen Wright:

> Stephen, I've read what you've written many times, and each time the thought of belonging to a 'region', namely the Middle East surprises me—not out of an internationalist refusal to belong to a specific region, or out of denial of belonging to a 'backward' region and the desire to identify with a more elegant appellation ('Mediterranean' for instance). The more I thought about it the more it didn't make sense. What does it mean that I'm from the 'Middle East'? What does it mean to a European and what does it mean for me? In fact, the region itself doesn't exist. We might talk about it as much as you want but it's still not there. […] Do you think I might be able to understand what it means to live under Saddam Hussein's dictatorship or to be 'liberated' by the Americans? Or would I be able to understand what it means to be living under the constant threat of being 'transferred' from Ramallah to Jordan? Or would I be able to understand what it means to live in a megalopolis of 20 million people in Cairo? How can we connect or find a common ground—and if you want to write about art in the 'region', what would be your theoretical ground.[4]

Chakar here points to the many different daily lives that coexist in the part of the world in which Lebanon is located and the fact that there is no shared ground that justifies thinking of the 'Middle East'.

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2 Declan Long, *Ghosthaunted Land: Contemporary Art and Post-Troubles Northern Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 10.

3 Derek Gregory, 'Middle of What? East of Where?', in *Safar/Voyage*, eds. Feresteh Daftari and Jill Baird (Vancouver: Museum of Anthropology, 2013).

4 Stephen Wright, 'Territories of Difference: Excerpts from an E-mail Exchange Between Tony Chakar, Bilal Khbeiz, and Walid Sadek', in *Out of Beirut*, ed. Suzanne Cotter (Oxford: Modern Art Oxford, 2006), 60.

This book also has nothing to do with the field of terrorism studies, which includes works by Joseph Croitoru, Christoph Reuter, Robert Pape, and Charlotte Klonk.[5] As Judith Butler has noted, the term 'terrorist' can 'apply variously and wildly to both insurgency and counter-insurgency groups, to state and non-state sponsored violence, to those who call for more fully democratic forms of government' as well as to 'those who criticise the repressive measures of the US government'.[6] In making this observation, Butler points to the random, ideologically motivated, and unstructured use of the term 'terror'. I am not interested in which groups are perceived as 'terrorists' by European or US entities nor in which groups are not. It could even be argued that feeling entitled to decide who is a 'terrorist' suggests a certain colonial attitude. Importantly, while Klonk, for example, analyses non-Western images in Western media and frames them as images of terror, I am examining the use of images in their country of origin, where the visuals usually are not understood in the framework of terrorism.

Further, I aim to challenge ideas about the figure of the martyr, who is frequently placed in an Islamic context. Researchers like David Cook and Hatina and Litvak Meir have published books that ignore the fact that martyrdom is also celebrated in Christian communities.[7] In the works of other scholars, such as Carole André-Dessornes and Verena Straub, the idea of the martyr is narrowly discussed as a non-European human being who decides to conduct an operation that includes his or her own death.[8] By framing their research topic from such perspectives, these researchers, probably unwittingly, contribute to the image of the 'Muslim jihadist' who kills himself and others, propagated in the European and North American media after 9/11. By discussing Christian martyrs and the framing of civilian deaths as martyrdom, this book will point to concepts other than, and in refusal of, 'terrorism'. Through the analysis of artworks and political images, I will make clear that only a minority of martyrs die because they blow themselves up and that martyrdom is a complex phenomenon that has various nuances.

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5 See Joseph Croitoru, *Der Märtyrer als Waffe: Die historischen Wurzeln des Selbstmordattentats* (Munich: Hanser, 2003); Christoph Reuter, *My Life as a Weapon: A Modern History of Suicide Bombing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Robert Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005); Charlotte Klonk, *Terror: Wenn Bilder zu Waffen werden* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2017). For a discussion of the problematic term terrorism, see Verena Straub, *Das Selbstmordattentat im Bild: Aktualität und Geschichte von Märtyrerzeugnissen* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2021), 21–28; Klonk, *Terror*, 16–23.

6 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), 153.

7 See David Cook, *Martyrdom in Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Hatina Meir and Litvak Meir (eds.), *Martyrdom and Sacrifice in Islam: Theological, Political and Social Contexts* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017).

8 See Carole André-Dessornes, *Les Femmes-Martyres dans le Monde Arabe: Liban, Palestine et Irak: Quelle Place Accorder à ce Phénomène?* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2013); Straub, *Das Selbstmordattentat.*

As the title of the book indicates, this study is not only about martyrs but also about pictures of (un)dead people. By employing the term 'picturing' I am drawing on Douglas Crimp, who uses the term for different media, such as photographs, drawings, paintings, sculptures, billboards, posters, and magazines. In other words, all media, including so-called high art as well as popular imagery, are understood as 'pictures'.[9] Following Crimp, I do not view posters in the streets as inferior or superior to paintings or sculptures exhibited in art spaces. This is why I will use the terms 'picture' and 'image' synonymously throughout the book. I will also apply both terms to videos and films because, as Caroline Overhoff Ferreira has shown, there is no reason to exclude moving images from art history, as is often done.[10]

The term (un)dead is used to refer to Jacques Derrida's hauntology, which he developed in *Specters of Marx* (1993). As long as the dead are here in pictures on the walls, they oscillate between being absent and present. Although they ceased to exist physically, they are not fully dead because, as Mroué mentioned,

> the dead are present, they are talking to us as if they are talking about today. We, the living, are using the dead actually and I don't know if the dead like this, if they approve of this. Maybe the dead want to leave Lebanon, leave the world, but we, the Lebanese, are using them as a weapon in our daily wars.[11]

As we will see throughout the book, the (un)dead do not fully belong to the past because their faces are still in the present and are, like weapons, being used for contemporary political purposes. This might be in the interests of the deceased, but also, it may not be. To avoid confusion and for the sake of a better readability, I will use the term 'dead' for the physically deceased in many parts of this book. However, in those sections where the state of being between being dead and being alive is foregrounded, we will also encounter the term '(un)dead'.

1.2 Through the Chapters

To begin, in Chapter 2, I will introduce the basic background frameworks that are necessary for the discussion of *Nancy*. I first address the roots, conceptions, and modes of the dissemination of martyrs before presenting an overview of the emergence of the figure of the martyr and his image in Lebanon.

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9 Douglas Crimp, 'Pictures', *October* 8, 1979: 75; Hal Foster et al. (eds.), *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 580.

10 Carolin Overhoff Ferreira, *Dekoloniale Kunstgeschichte: Eine methodische Einführung* (Berlin/Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2023), 13.

11 Rabih Mroué and Richard Gough, 'Interweaving Performance Cultures: A Perspective from Lebanon', *Performance Research* 25, nos. 6–7 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2020.1910457.