

## 5.2 Artistic Reflections of 4 August

Artists reflected the pictures of the dead of the explosion. In the following, I will identify two approaches to image-making, a documentary one and an appropriative one, and provide examples of each. My selection is only a small part of the artistic production that deals with the blast. I chose the works mainly based on their visibility in Beirut, but also due to certain links to *Nancy* and to other works previously discussed in Chapter 4.<sup>775</sup> By relating the pre- and post-explosion artworks, I would like to show how certain phenomena addressed in *Nancy* are still relevant.

### 5.2.1 Documentary Strategy: The Damaged City, the Silos, and the Absent Dead

Dia Mrad and Myriam Boulos captured the status quo of the city after the blast, variously tracking its structures, its undead, and its living inhabitants. In doing so, they move beyond the discourse of the NGOs and do not sketch futile hopes for justice that will probably never arrive.

Dia Mrad, who was already photographing Beirut's architecture before the explosion, documented destroyed houses right after the blast. The photograph that I am mentioning here (Fig. 5.22) depicts a close-up of a façade with shattered doors and windows, the result of which is that one can see through the houses' interiors. Different wrecked objects are lying around and, at the very top of the image, bullet holes from the *Wars* are evident in the wall. A human silhouette with no visible individual traits is standing in front of a window in the centre of the picture, probably assessing the damage to the house. Below, a white banner is placed on the handrail of a balcony. Black text reads: "The Groom of the Sky...". A photograph of a young man who died during the explosion, labelled with these words, was placed below the banner but not captured by Mrad.<sup>776</sup> The deceased is present not via his

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775 In three recently organised exhibitions, artists reflected on the current situation in the country. *At the Edge of the World Lies the Ebb and Flow of Promise* was a group exhibition held from 12 July 2022 until 6 November 2022 in Abbaye de Jumièges in Brussels. It displayed images that investigated the living conditions in Lebanon since 4 August. *How Will It End?* was another group exhibition that was on display from 2 December 2021 until 6 February 2022 in Villa Empain (Boghosian Foundation) in Brussels and that dealt with the aftermath of 4 August. The photographer collective Collectif 1220, in contrast, held their travelling show *Anatomy of a Fall* abroad and in Lebanon. Also noteworthy is the Art Design Lebanon initiative, which organises exhibitions in various locations around Beirut and is led by Annie Vartivarian, the mother of Gaïa Fodoulain, who was killed in the explosion.

776 Dia Mrad, personal conversation with the author, 25 November 2022.



Fig. 5.22: Dia Mrad, *Ghost of a City*, 2020, Photograph, Courtesy of the Artist.

picture but via his absence. We know that the photograph was here, but we do not see it. Therefore, Mrad's image depicts the absence of an absence, which is only indicated through the banner.

Mrad not only photographed destroyed residential buildings, but also produced a series on the silos. These silos are also present in an image by photographer Myriam Boulos, who also documented the city after the blast. A photograph taken by her (Fig. 5.23) shows a woman standing in her destroyed home looking directly into the camera. She is wearing a mask, which refers to the COVID-19 pandemic that hit Lebanon and the rest of the world in 2020. Behind the shattered windows of her flat, the silos are visible in the background.

Boulos also uses little anecdotes regarding the effects of the blast as captions for her images; in this example, it says: 'Nour Couldn't Listen to Music for Weeks after the Explosion'. This sentence points to the human, non-architectural damage done by the blast to people who have lived through it but have not died or been physically injured. Nour Saliba, the photographed woman, said:

Yes, we are all traumatized, but we are also burnt out. Last October, the Lebanese people had to put out fires that were devastating our forests because our government was unable to do its job. On top of our basic human needs being unmet (access to electricity, water and food), we sunk into an economic crisis so severe that a big chunk of the population was pushed into poverty. In the midst of our street protests that were answered with violence and aggression, the pandemic arrived. On Tuesday, what couldn't have gotten way worse became worse than we could have ever imagined.<sup>777</sup>



Fig. 5.23: Myriam Boulos, *Lebanon. Beirut on the 6th of August 2020. Nour Couldn't Listen to Music for Weeks After the Explosion*, 2020, Photographic Print on Semi-Glossy Paper, Courtesy of the Artist.

777 myriamboulos (@myriamboulos), '@noursaliba stands in her apartment...', Instagram, 7 August 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CD0REwplrG/>.

These words, published three days after the blast, confirm that the future was slowly cancelled. Before the explosion, as Nour mentions, forest fires, a lack of basic infrastructure, poverty, violence, and the pandemic outbreak slowly approached and created problems in Lebanon, but the blast was the culmination of all these hardships. When asked in an interview about her hope for the future, Boulos answered: 'I think it is too soon for me to feel hope, I think that I am still in a survival mode right now, I don't know...'.<sup>778</sup>

The work of Boulos, unlike the statues of Karam and Nazer, does not point to a cheerful future. In the absence of an agreed-upon truth claim about what happened on 4 August, personal and unofficial accounts based on individual memories are currently the only way to speak about the events of this day. Through the accompanying anecdotes, Boulos's images, like *Nancy*, do not write a history or try to find a truth, but give a fragmentary insight into a larger context that we are presently unable to grasp or narrate fully.

The placement of a human in front of an iconic building, namely the silos, in Boulos's photograph recalls *Nancy*'s depictions of Rabih and Hatem in front of the Holiday Inn and Murr Tower (Figs. 3.8–3.9, 3.19). The silos were built before the Wars and served as a symbol of the city's modernisation and prosperity. They were completed in 1970 and survived the Wars almost unscathed. Until the blast, the massive, 48-metre-high structure stored most of Lebanon's grain. On 4 August, the silos took much of the force of the explosion, and without their presence, the destruction of West Beirut would probably have been much graver. Since they, like the Holiday Inn and Murr Tower, carry a heavy presence, they are now an unintentional memorial charged with symbolic meaning.

Soon after the explosion, a public debate about what should be done with the silos erupted. There are initiatives that want to preserve the silos as a memorial, and there are other voices that argue that a new port is needed and that nothing can be built if the silos remain in their ruined state.<sup>779</sup> The question of whether the silos should be kept or razed to the ground echoes the discourse around Solidère's destruction of traces of the Wars in the city centre, as the demolition of the silos would mean destroying traces of the explosion. Unlike the other architectural damage caused by the blast, which was captured by Mrad and also by Boulos when depicting Nour's home, the silos are a celebrity ruin, like the Holiday Inn and Murr

778 Art Breath, 'Myriam Boulos on Photography, Documenting Lebanon and Social Justice', *Art Breath*, n.d., <https://artbreath.org/interviews/myriam-boulos>.

779 In April 2022, the parliament decided to demolish the silos, which sparked outrage from the families of those killed in the explosion, who filed lawsuits to overturn the decision because they want to preserve the silos as a site of memory and evidence that may be required for future legal investigations. See Clément Gibon, 'The Grieving Families Fighting to Preserve a Crumbling Symbol of the Beirut Blast', *Time*, 8 August 2022, <https://time.com/6202125/beirut-explosion-anniversary/>.

Tower, surrounded by a collective emotional sensitivity. Mrad, describing his visit to the silos: 'Standing before a megastructure like this, you can't help but feel the immense weight it carries—not just physically, but in the significance it holds for so many people'.<sup>780</sup>

An incident at the Beirut Art Center in the framework of the annual Irtijal festival on 2 April 2022 makes the emotional weight that the silos hold more tangible. During a performance by *Jerusalem in My Heart*, the audio-visual project showed black-and-white photographs of the silos, which were quickly moving, zooming in and zooming out. The images were accompanied by fast and loud drums as well as by stroboscopic lighting. I perceived this combination as an unnecessary provocation and noticed people leaving the room while the silos were on the screen. This sequence made me feel extremely uneasy, and I later discovered that other visitors had felt the same way.

It remains unclear to me why *Jerusalem in My Heart* decided to show this assemblage of images of violence, sound, and lighting in Beirut, where it could be expected that a large part of the audience had experienced the blast. The inclusion of the silos is also not fully graspable to me, because they are hyper-present in Beirut anyway—not only because they are

visible in large parts of the port area, but also because their smell has invaded the city. Fermenting grains were left inside the ruins, which caused a fire in summer 2022 that the Lebanese government was not able to or did not want to extinguish. As a result of this fire, the northern part of the structure further collapsed twice in 2022; first on 31 July and second, cynically, on 4 August, the second anniversary of the blast. Following the first incident, the Instagram page *Biladi\_Lebanon* posted an image of the silos with the caption 'The Northern Part of the Silos Has Fallen for the Southern Part to Live' (Fig. 5.24), which is a mocking use of an expression commonly employed by Christian parties for their martyrs during the *Wars*, as I have discussed in 4.1.



Fig. 5.24: Biladi NGO (@biladi\_lebanon), 'The Northern Part of the Silos Has Fallen for the Southern Part to Live', Instagram, 31 July 2022.

780 Mrad, personal conversation, 25 November 2022.

In 4.5, I argued that I read Rabilh's and Hatem's presence in front of the Holiday Inn and Murr Tower in *Nancy* as a means of emphasising the connections between the celebrity ruin and the martyr poster, as both elicit emotional responses from passers-by and contain unfinished business. Boulos's photograph follows the picture formula in which a person who has been killed is shown in front of building remnants. We have encountered this formula also in *Nancy* (Figs. 3.8–3.9, 3.19) and in the commemoration of the dead of the blast (Fig. 5.9). However, Boulos shows a living woman who still has agency, speaks, and owns her experience. Also, by juxtaposing the ordinary ruin, namely Nour's house, and the celebrity ruin, namely the silos, Boulos shows different kinds of wreckage in the wounded city.

The photographs of Boulos and Mrad do not look for justice or express hopes that Beirut will recover soon. Rather, they document the loss, particularly the silos, which can be seen as a conceptual continuation of the meaning of the Holiday Inn and Murr Tower. Both photographers refer to the dead implicitly without depicting them in a straightforward way. Mrad does this by not capturing the photograph of the dead yet still preserving a trace of it through the banner; Boulos does this by following an image formula that is usually used for the depiction of the dead, but showing a living person who tells her story.

## 5.2.2 Appropriation Strategy: Violence, and the Absent Future

Stéphanie Saadé, Joana Hadjithomas/Khalil Joreige, and Salim Mourad ask questions about the changing contexts of pictures after a disaster and speak about loss as well as the violence done to images.

Saadé developed her idea for *A Discreet Intruder* (Fig. 5.25) before the blast. The work consists of a shutter, which is commonly used in Beirut to close storefronts or other entrances on ground level. Until 2020, many of these shutters were pierced by bullet holes that date back to the Wars. On Saadé's shutter, there are thirty-eight holes that were shot with an M16 rifle, which is a type of gun commonly used during the Wars.<sup>781</sup> The holes on Saadé's shutter are a cartography of points of departure and arrival, representing the artist's many relocations in Lebanon during the Wars. At the same time, these little openings allowed light to enter and created different patterns in the interior that changed according to time and season. In doing so, the static map on the shutter starts to move on the floor and becomes the surface of a journey.

781 Saadé's shutter was shot from the inside in order to reverse the violence done to the shutters and to pose the question of whether a structure could respond to the violence it had experienced.



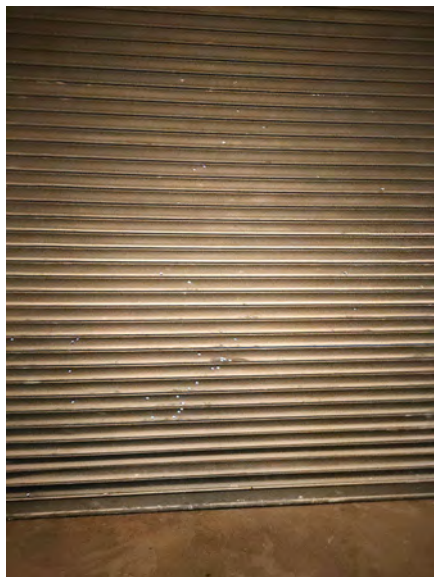


Fig. 5.25: Stéphanie Saadé, *A Discreet Intruder*, 2022, Metallic Curtain and Bullet Holes, 230 × 350 cm, Marfa' Gallery, Photograph AR.

Saadé had planned to install *A Discreet Intruder* in 2020 close to Marfa' Gallery, which is in Beirut's port area. Due to this location, however, the gallery was severely damaged during the blast, as was Saadé's shutter, which was not yet displayed but was stored nearby. Saadé, like so many others, left Lebanon after the explosion, and *A Discreet Intruder* was shown at Marfa' only in May 2022.

Although the work itself had not changed, its meaning did in the new context because the explosion shattered many of these metal shutters and rendered them unusable.<sup>782</sup> The cityscape was now populated with abstract forms that were once used as metal curtains and that, like the silos, were proof of the violence

done to Beirut. Even more than two years after the blast, I still frequently encountered deformed shutters in my daily life in that city.

Although *A Discreet Intruder* still looks the same after 4 August, it is no longer the same, as the explosion added meaning to the work. Returning to my question in 4.6—can a surpassing disaster, as conceptualised by Jalal Toufic, also produce images?—I read Saadé's work not as a resurrection of tradition or as a recording of loss but as a creation of the disaster. *A Discreet Intruder* became more layered because of the blast. Now, the holes, as a violent inscription on the metal surface of Saadé's relocations, provide a link between the Wars and the explosion. The map shot into the shutter after the blast appears to refer not only to Saadé's movements during the Wars but also to the many people, including herself, who left Lebanon after 4 August.

Saadé does not participate in the discourse that believes a better world will come in the near future. She states, referring to the light that enters through the shot holes:

782 Déborah Laks, 'Stéphanie Saadé. Stage of Life. 06 May 2022', *Marfaprojects*, 2022, <https://marfaprojects.com/exhibitions/stephanie-saade-stage-of-life/>.

For as long as I have lived here, the bullet and shrapnel holes from the civil war allowed light to enter this city's closed or forgotten spaces, enabling, during certain hours, secret ballets of sun and shadow to take place on the street. But these dances do not take place anymore in Beirut.<sup>783</sup>

The blast destroyed the shutters and with them the fragments of violence that had turned into light-spots that performed hidden dances until 2020, when they were forcefully stopped from doing so by the explosion.<sup>784</sup>

While *A Discreet Intruder* could be interpreted as showing the addition of meaning to what Toufic theorised as tradition after a surpassing disaster, Hadjithomas/Joreige use Toufic's theory as they did earlier in *A State of Latency*, but now in the context of the explosion. *As Night Comes When Day Is Gone* (2022; Fig. 5.26) has never



Fig. 5.26: Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, *As Night Comes When Day Is Gone*, 2022, Sursock Museum CCTV Recording 4th August 2020, Activation, 14 Videos Synchronised, Approximately 2 min on Loop, Courtesy of In Situ – fabienne leclerc and The Third Line.

783 Kaya Genc, 'Stéphanie Saadé on the Beirut Explosion and an Artwork Lost to the Blast', *Artforum*, 14 September 2020, <https://www.artforum.com/interviews/stephanie-saade-talks-about-artwork-lost-to-the-beirut-explosion-83896>.

784 Gilles Khoury, 'En se Racontant, Stéphanie Saadé Nous Raconte Tous', *L'Orient Le Jour*, 6 June 2022, <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1301808/en-se-racontant-stephanie-saade-nous-raconte-tous.html>.



been displayed in Lebanon, but only in Berlin, Lyon, and Doha.<sup>785</sup> It consists of fourteen screens arranged in a circle, each of which shows a never-ending loop of around two minutes of footage that surveillance cameras recorded shortly before and during the moment of the explosion. Some monitors depict scenes of people in the streets at the moment of the blast, but most of the screens display artworks falling from the walls or suffering other damage, along with other parts of the interior inside Beirut's Sursock Museum, where windows are bursting. In the artist statement on the wall next to the work, Hadjithomas/Joreige write:

Artworks, coming from a time said to be a Golden Age, reach us after facing wars, catastrophes, tragic events.

They have been traversed by a blast, that of the explosion of August 4<sup>th</sup>, 2020 which destroyed in a fraction of a second, a third of Beirut.

Are they the same?

And the way we see them?

And what about us, are we still the same?

All of the artworks in the Sursock Museum were restored and now look like they did before the blast.<sup>786</sup>

If we understand the explosion as a surpassing disaster and the artworks as tradition that has withdrawn immaterially in a Toufician sense, then the security cameras have recorded the moment in which tradition was lost, while Hadjithomas/Joreige, by collecting and assembling the footage, reveal and acknowledge the loss, potentially for those who might resurrect the tradition in the future. The Sursock Museum's artworks, like the mirror in vampire films, reveal the withdrawal of what still seems to be here. Even now, after the reopening of the museum, we see the works from a different perspective, knowing that they are now devoid of tradition, despite the fact that they look like they did before.

Furthermore, Hadjithomas/Joreige ask if we are still the same after the blast. This can be linked to the living martyrs, who, as discussed in 4.6, seemed to be the same when they returned from prison but had changed their personalities, meaning a part of them had withdrawn. The extreme experience of the explosion could mean entering the realm of the undead and dying before dying in a Toufician sense.

785 The work was shown in the group show *Beirut and the Golden Sixties: A Manifesto of Fragility* from 25 March to 12 June 2022 at Berlin's Gropius Bau, in the Lyon Biennial from 14 September to 31 December 2022, and in the Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha from 17 March to 5 August 2023.

786 Sursock Museum organised a talk with three experts involved in the restoration of the destroyed paintings, sculptures, and drawings on 15 December 2022. Most of the works indeed look like they did before the blast; only in a work on paper did the skin colour of the person depicted have to be changed.



Figs. 5.27 – Fig. 5.30: Salim Mourad, 218, 2021, Video, 2:12 min, Courtesy of Salim Mourad, Co-Produced by the Arab Image Foundation and Cinema Galleries.

That is because, as Chalabi argues, when the blast happened, people were unsure if they were dead or alive and perceived time to have slowed down, which is typical for the realm of the undead.<sup>787</sup> This would mean that those who lived through the explosion have turned into undead beings. They became someone else, though this is often not visible on the outside, at least not after a while. Just as the paintings were restored, physical wounds and injuries have healed, and people look as they did before, though they are no longer the same. As *Night Comes When Day Is Gone* documents the moment in which mortals enter the realm of the undead as a result of a surpassing disaster that also causes the artwork's loss of tradition.

Lastly, Salim Mourad's video 218 (2021; Figs. 5.27–5.30) also deals explicitly with the blast.<sup>788</sup> The title refers to the confirmed number of deaths from the explosion at the time the work was made. At the beginning, we see a portrait of a well-dressed woman who is wearing jewellery and looking to the left (Fig. 5.27). Her image then fades into an interior and a male voice, in

<sup>787</sup> Chalabi, 'Present', 125.

<sup>788</sup> The video was shown as a part of an exhibition in the Mina Image Center, initiated by the Arab Image Foundation, called *Translating Images*, which was on show from 26 August until 22 September 2022. Artists were invited to create works with pictures from the AIF archive, with all works thematically circling around Beirut.

French, says: 'The day your house was blown, you found in your living room under the glass debris the face of a man'. The image changes into an ID photograph in *passe-partout* format that depicts a man lying in and under shards of glass (Fig. 5.28). Broken glass, like Saadé's use of a shutter, is immediately associated with the explosion—not only because the city was littered with shards and because the sound of Beirut for weeks after the blast was that of glass being swept, but also because, as I myself experienced, people were still coming across tiny shards in and around houses more than two-and-a-half years later.

The photograph was blown into the artist's house when the blast happened. Due to the force of the explosion, many people's personal belongings were moved into the streets or into other houses. Mourad at first did not know who the depicted person was, but soon after found out that it was a neighbour's ex-lover, who did not die in the explosion but is still alive. The voice, referring to the images of those killed during the explosion, says: 'He did not let go, and 218 other photographs kept on coming'.

Then the scene changes; a young woman, also fancily dressed, wearing jewellery, and turned slightly to the left, apparently in a re-enactment of the photograph in the first scene, is looking at a *passe-partout* photograph (Fig. 5.29). Flickering emergency lights are visible in the background, and the silos in the vicinity of the port area slowly emerge behind the woman. This image formula—a person placed in front of the silos—was also used by announcements of deaths from the blast and by the previously discussed work by Boulos.

The voice goes on, 'But other photographs continued to emerge from everywhere. They caught fire and consumed themselves under your gaze'. In the next scene, we see *passe-partout* photographs in multiples; some of the images are flipped, and importantly, they are burning (Fig. 5.30). Mourad said that these photographs from the AIF archive, like the image of his neighbour's ex-lover, acted as placeholders for the images of those who died in the blast and should embody the violence that had been done to the dead. A fire ignited minutes before the explosion, and some of the port workers and firefighters were burned to death. Even after the explosion, the silos continued burning.<sup>789</sup> The voice-over that refers to the consumption of photographs could be understood as a reference to the fact that the faces of those who died in the explosion, which one after the other appeared on the walls of the city, could be looked at by everyone.

789 There was a massive fire in September 2020, and the silos were still burning or smouldering throughout the summer of 2022.

At the end of the video, the camera jumps back to the re-enactment of the photograph of the first scene, but the woman looks into the camera so that we can see the tears in her eyes. When I talked to Mourad about the video, he said that he felt a ghostly presence of the dead:

What was felt is that something started, an anecdote, and suddenly it became energetically more serious. It was supposed to be a bit funny, but it's not funny anymore. The ghosts used this little doorway to suddenly come with their gravitas and say we are here too. You want to speak about the guy in the salon, fine, but we are here too. This felt a bit heavy. And that's why the lady, the actress in the end, is looking at pictures and is crying. [...] It is a bit suspended, unclear, unresolved; we haven't maybe started to look the explosion in the face. [...] And what really spoke to me was realising that the ghosts of the explosion used the pictures of people from the AIF collection to materialise. Suddenly, some pictures from the collection became in the video almost representatives of the people who died in 2020, [...] so there is an overlapping of time. Of course, I did all that, but if I want to think of our selves as vessels, I feel those unrested energies, which kind of echoed or spoke with, or [were] found in, the pictures that I chose from this collection.<sup>790</sup>

Ghosts entered through the anecdote of discovering a photograph of an ex-lover of Mourad's neighbour in his house. An initially lighthearted search to find out who the man in the image was turned into a serious and heavy encounter with those who died in the blast.

In 218, the dead appear in other forms: first through the picture Mourad found in his flat, second through the photographs of the AIF collection, and third through the re-enactments of these same images. By recontextualising photographs of the AIF that were taken decades ago and re-staging them in 2021, Mourad points out that the time of the ghost is out of joint. In the scene with the burning pictures, we see photographs, which come into being when light is burned on a photosensitive surface, that are destroyed by the same procedure. But Mourad, unlike Khalil in *White Masks*, or those responsible for removing Brady the Black's installation, does not try to expel the ghost by destroying its image; he rather shows the process of death (burning) and re-emergence (appropriation) and therefore the process of haunting. He allows the ghosts to reappear, to point out their unfinished business. Unlike in *Nancy* and *Faces*, however, the images in 218 do not resemble the appearance of the killed. This, in my reading, could be linked to the fact that those who died in the blast are not spectral ghosts like the martyrs are; they are only revenants that announce that the future is, like the images of the killed, absent.

790 Salim Mourad, personal conversation with the author, 7 October 2022.

The strategies of appropriation used by Saadé, Joreige/Hadjithomas, and Mourad enquire into the changing contexts of artworks and other images following a (surpassing) disaster. By incorporating shutters and glass, they include elements that are emblematic for the destruction of Beirut and, thus, materials that embody the violence of the blast. Like the makers of *Nancy*, Saadé, Hadjithomas/Joreige, and Mourad are picture-users who select and present existing images and change the context of their presentation. Violence is inscribed in all three artworks through shots, burnings, and the non-sanitised, endlessly repeated moving scene of the blast. Futures seem to be absent.

### 5.2.3 Artworks Past a Surpassing Disaster

I have identified two strategies found in artistic encounters with images of the blast: first, a documentary strategy, and second, a strategy of appropriation. What all five of the discussed works have in common is that they never directly show the faces of those who died in the explosion and that they instead visualise the haunting presences of the dead, and the aftereffects it produced—such as the destruction of the city's fabric, particularly the silos. Furthermore, none of these works imagines a future. They do not, like the NGOs, look for justice, nor, like Karam's and Nazer's statues, do they express hopes that Beirut will recover soon; they rather seem to translate a depressing status quo into artworks that all bear traces of violence, either via depictions of the destroyed city, as in the documentary strategy, or via violence done to images, as visible in the appropriation strategy.

## 5.3 A Continuation of Violence, Ghosts, Ruins, and Impossible Truths

During the time of writing there were mainly three types of dead on the walls: sectarian martyrs, martyrs of the thawra, and those who died in the explosion. Photographs that changed their function, symbols, and slogans were still to be found in all these images. Nuances of remembrance still existed, because some of the dead appeared more frequently than others in posters, and gender roles were still performed, as they were during the Wars. For the thawra, however, this cannot be observed, as there were no female casualties, whereas regarding those who died in the blast, the performance of gender happens more in the discourse around the images than in the pictures themselves. While there are posters of the thawra that continue the inclusion of Mazzacurati's Martyrs Statue, as has been already practised in the memorialisation of Hariri (Fig. 2.9), some images of those who died in the blast are juxtaposed with the silos, which I understand as a continuation of the meaning of the Holiday Inn and Murr Tower, in the sense that all these structures carry a heavy weight and elicit strong emotions.