1. Introduction

It's December 2022. I am attending a talk at Beirut's Sursock Museum about the restoration of artworks that were damaged during the explosion on 4 August 2020. The museum, which has a huge collection of modern and contemporary art from Lebanon, is still closed due to the damage the blast did to the building, and the glass windows are still covered with blue plastic foil.[1] To enter, I must pass the museum's esplanade, which houses a congregation of sculptures that commemorate dead people. On one side there is the old Martyrs Statue, which shows a Christian woman and a Muslim woman holding hands over an urn that symbolically contains the ashes of the killed. The statue remembers the Lebanese men who died in the uprising against the Ottoman colonisers in 1916 (*Fig. 1.1*). On the other side, a grey bench and a white swing are placed next to each other (*Fig. 1.2*). They were installed to commemorate Gaïa Fodoulian and Isaac Oehlers, both of whom died in the explosion on 4 August. These two dates—1916, the starting point of a cult of martyrdom in Lebanon, and 2020, the starting point of my interest in the dead in Lebanon—are also the broad time frame that is addressed by this publication.

Fig. 1.1: Yussef Hoayek, *Martyrs Statue*, 1930, Limestone, Beirut – Esplanade of the Sursock Museum, May 2023, Photograph AR.

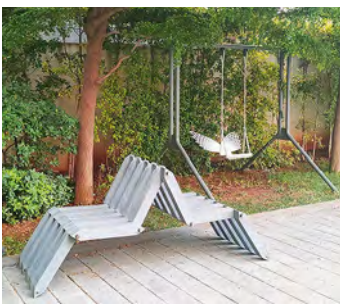

Fig. 1.2: Bench for Gaïa Fodoulian and Swing for Isaac Oehlers, Beirut – Esplanade of the Sursock Museum, June 2023, Photograph AR.

1 The Sursock museum is located in the house of collector Nicholas Sursock, whose private collection is also the base of the museum's collection. It first opened in 1961. After being closed since 2008 it reopened in 2015 and is today one of Beirut's most important art institutions, with changing special exhibitions that are focused mostly on modern and contemporary art from Lebanon.

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