3.4 *Nancy* as Mroué's Most Evasive Artwork on Martyrdom

I consider *Nancy* to be the most deliberate artistic reflection on martyr images by an artist of the Post-War Generation, as it encompasses a multitude of sects and tackles numerous aspects regarding the multi-faceted figure of the martyr. I would also like to note that during the time of researching and writing this book, more than a decade after the staging of *Nancy*, many people in Beirut still remembered the play, which they watched in the Masrah al-Madina theatre. Obviously, *Nancy* has left a remarkable impression.

To better introduce *Nancy*, it is useful to take a look at Mroué's work in a wider sense. Many of the artist's works explore the construction of the image and figure of the martyr, and a whole book could be written solely on this very topic in Mroué's oeuvre. This is not my aim. Rather, I chose *Nancy* because it is Mroué's only work that examines the martyr images of almost all major players in the *Wars*, including Christian groups.

I will now briefly discuss the performance *Three Posters* (2000), which Mroué conceptualised in collaboration with the renowned, late writer Elias Khoury, and the non-academic lecture by Mroué, *The Inhabitants of Images* (2008; hereafter *Inhabitants*).[208] These two works, which address images related to secular martyrdom and Islamic martyrdom, have been more frequently and thoroughly discussed in scholarly literature than *Nancy* has been.

3.4.1 *Three Posters*: Leftist Martyrdom Operations in the South

Much has been written on *Three Posters*, with Shela Sheikh even arguing that it inspired other artists such as Jalal Toufic and Joana Hadjithomas/Khalil Joreige to deal with the image of the martyr in their artworks.[209] *Three Posters* was first performed in Beirut in 2000, yet it was still present in that city's galleries at the time of writing. In 2022, for its fifteen-year anniversary, Tanit Gallery organised a show called *15 Years, Crossed Perspectives*. Gallery artists were invited to choose an artwork that has influenced them in recent years. The curator of the show, Karina El Helou, also chose a work, opting for *Three Posters*, with two photographic stills of the 2000 performance shown in the exhibition space.[210]

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208 Non-academic lectures are a recurring medium in Mroué's body of work. In all of them, he is sitting on a stage behind a table, reading from a paper, often about images that appear on a screen next to or behind him. See Michal Kobialka, 'Refracting Difficult Pasts: Temporal Answers and the In-Between: Rabih Mroué in Conversation with Michal Kobialka', in *Staging Difficult Pasts: Transnational Memory, Theatres, and Museums*, eds. Maria M. Delgado, Michal Kobialka, and Bryce Lease (London/New York: Routledge, 2024), 104–05.

209 Shela Sheikh, "I Am the Martyr (X)': Philosophical Reflections on Testimony and Martyrdom' (PhD diss., Goldsmiths, University of London, 2012), 21.

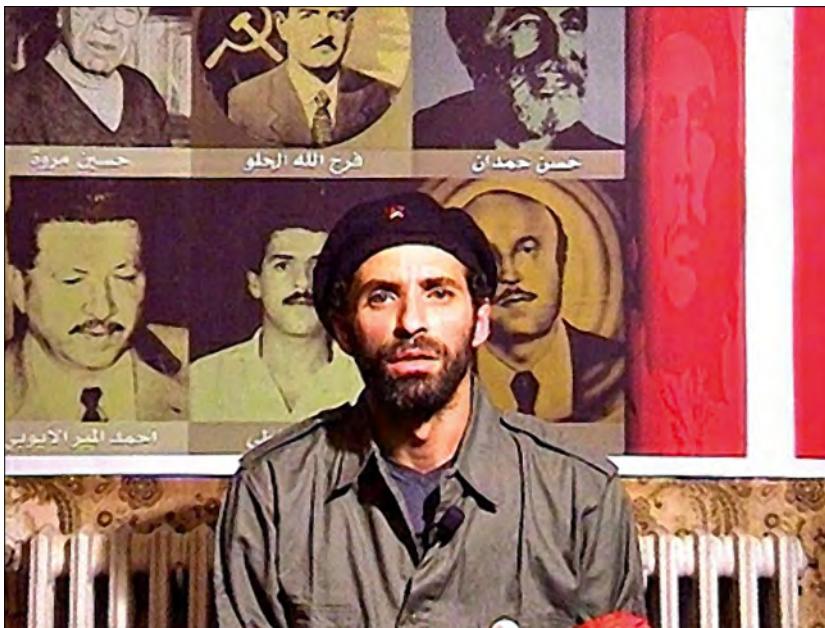210 The exhibition ran from 5 November 2022 until 2 January 2023.

Fig. 3.1: Rabih Mroué and Elias Khoury, *Three Posters*, 2000, Video-Performance, Courtesy of the Artists.

Three Posters is divided into four parts. In the first, Mroué appears on a screen, wearing military clothing and a beret with a red star (*Fig. 3.1*). The wall behind him is plastered with posters of martyrs of the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP), with a party flag visible. Mroué introduces himself as the martyr Khaled Rahal, who is about to conduct a martyrdom operation for the cause of the Communist Party.

Martyrdom operations mostly occurred in the South and were directed against the occupying Israeli Army or their Lebanese allies, the South Lebanon Army (SLA), but never targeted other Lebanese militias. Usually, a vehicle with explosives was driven into a military post, and the death of the driver was almost certain. These operations were, as Bonsen writes, 'a military and psychological weapon', where the memory of the istishahid would 'create emotions and identity to strengthen support by their communities'.[211] Therefore, it was common among certain factions involved in the *Wars* to record a video statement in which the martyr explained his or her reasons for the action beforehand. The broadcast on TV happened only after the death of the martyr.

Yet unlike those who appear in these videos, which are all too familiar to any Lebanese individual who watched television in the 1980s, Mroué as Rahal reads

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211   Bonsen, *Martyr Cults*, 113.

not one version of his testimony but three, which are almost identical. In doing so he conveys that different versions of the martyrs-to-be were filmed and that the 'best performance' was screened. In other words, *Three Posters* reveals the process of making a martyr video. The 'rehearsals' of Mroué as Rahal include signs of insecurities such as stuttering and wandering eyes that do not focus on the camera. These signs show that the martyr is a human being and not only a hero, as he is presented in his images.

In the second part of *Three Posters*, a door opens, behind which Mroué is standing. While the Beiruti audience knew Mroué as an actor and therefore did not question whether he was acting, it was now revealed that the spectators had not watched a taped video, but that Mroué had performed live behind the door. The artist, now on stage, reads another testimony, but this time in the name of Rabih Mroué. He includes biographical information about his participation in operations in the South against opponents of the Communist Party (of which, as he tells the audience, he was a member). This information, as he wrote in a reflection on *Three Posters*, was also new to people who knew him well, and therefore it was at this point in the performance that the audience in Beirut started to question the boundaries of fact and fiction.[212]

In the third part, an actual video that was recorded before a martyrdom operation during the *Wars* is screened. It shows found footage of Jamal al-Sati, a militant of the Communist Party who blew himself up alongside a mule at an Israeli checkpoint in Southern Lebanon in 1985. Like Mroué earlier, al-Sati reads his testimony multiple times with minimal changes. The spectators watch the unedited version with the different takes and thus see al-Sati sometimes making reading errors and stuttering. In his case, the 'best' version was screened on Telé Liban in 1985. Finally, in the fourth part of *Three Posters*, a video projection of a politician from the LCP appears on the screen, explaining the reasons for martyrdom operations.

Three Posters analyses the construction of the figure of the martyr, reveals him as a human being, and questions authenticity by focusing on the media-based fabrication of the shahid as an image.[213] However, in *Three Posters*, martyrdom is addressed only in the context of the LCP, and dying is thematised only via the conducting of attack. Further, the performance deals with today's hegemony of the martyrdom narrative in the South, as Mroué and Khoury write that *Three Posters* reflects 'the politics and role of the Lebanese Left during the civil war' and that 'it

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212   Rabih Mroué, 'Three Posters', in *Image(s), Mon Amour. FABRICATIONS*, ed. CA2M Centro de Art Dos Mayo (Madrid: CA2M, 2013), 307.

213   For *Three Posters*, see Juan A. Gaitán, 'Conciliations: Witness and Spectator', *Afterall* 25, no. 1 (2010); Sheikh, 'I Am the Martyr', 21–25; Chad Elias, 'Stage and Screen', in *On Three Posters 2004 by Rabih Mroué, Tate Research Publication* (2015), https://www.tate.org.uk/research/in-focus/on-three-posters-rabih-mroue/stage-and-screen; Naeff, *Precarious Imaginaries*, 222–23; Elias, *Posthumous Images*, 75–86; Straub, *Das Selbstmordattentat*, 145–53.

makes a critical and autocritical assessment of the Left's absence today in the Lebanese political arena—and in a way, declares our defeat'.[214]

At the beginning of the *Wars*, secular leftist movements fought against the Israeli occupation of the South and celebrated those who died in this process as martyrs. Shia parties gradually took over the resistance, and today Hezbollah holds the hegemony in telling the story of martyrdom and resistance.[215] Soon after 9/11 Mroué stopped performing *Three Posters*, and he explained this decision as follows:

> My refusal to perform this work again has to do with my desire to respect the memory of Jamal al-Sati and his cause. I do not want people to misunderstand his position and label him a terrorist (this is actually what happened several times when we performed the work outside Lebanon). I think that this is unfair and presents a very narrow view of his actions. Although I am against suicide operations, al-Sati was defending his rights. He undertook a military operation against an occupying army, not against civilians, and it was in his country, not on foreign land, so it was an act of political resistance. I think we have to respect this.[216]

The appropriation of images of martyrdom in *Three Posters* is limited to a specific point on the political spectrum, namely the left, to a certain geography of Lebanon, namely the South, and to a certain mode of death, namely martyrdom operations. A non-academic lecture by Mroué, *Inhabitants*, provides a broader view of martyrdom yet does not encompass all parties involved in the *Wars*.

3.4.2 *The Inhabitants of Images*: Muslim and Leftist Martyrdoms

Inhabitants is structured into three parts and a conclusion. Mroué sits behind a desk throughout the non-academic lecture and reads a text from a piece of paper, while images are projected on a screen next to him (*Fig. 3.2*). In the first part, Mroué is discussing a picture that shows Hariri, who was killed by a car bomb in 2005, and the former Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, who died in 1970 (*Fig. 3.3*). They are depicted together, with Hariri looking older than Nasser; thus, this image could not have come into existence without the help of digital tools. Mroué examines the photograph of this unlikely meeting as well as the photograph's production and distribution.

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214   Rabih Mroué and Elias Khoury, 'Three Posters: Reflections on a Video/Performance', *The Drama Review* 50, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 185.

215   Elias, *Posthumous Images*, 90.

216   Chad Elias, 'Interview with Rabih Mroué', *Tate Research Publication* (2015), https://www.tate.org.uk/research/in-focus/on-three-posters-rabih-mroue/interview-with-rabih-mroue.

Fig. 3.2: Rabih Mroué, *The Inhabitants of Images*, 2008, Non-Academic Lecture, Photograph Houssam Mchaiemch.

Fig. 3.3: Rabih Mroué, *The Inhabitants of Images*, 2008, Non-Academic Lecture, Courtesy of the Artist.

In the second part, the artist talks about martyr posters in the Dahiyeh, a suburb of Beirut that is a Hezbollah area. The images of Hezbollah members who were killed in the Tammuz War in 2006 are—as is visible in the image behind Mroué in *Fig. 3.2*—hanging high on highway lampposts, which makes it impossible to look at them closely when walking or driving. Mroué muses about how these posters were created and their overall design, and links them to Hossein's martyrdom in Kerbala. He points out that all the shuhada in the posters wear the same uniform and that their heads were just added to a template with the help of Photoshop, which creates an unindividualised, uniform image of all men.

Fig. 3.4: Rabih Mroué, *The Inhabitants of Images*, 2008, Non-Academic Lecture, Courtesy of the Artist.

Mroué perceives this editing as a violent act against the shahid and his image, even though there are good intentions behind it. He suggests that these montages kill the martyrs a second time. By replacing the head of a martyr with his own photograph, Mroué also demonstrates how easily one can become a martyr, at least visually (*Fig. 3.4*).

The third part of *Inhabitants* evokes *Three Posters*, as Mroué shows stills of video testimonies that were made by conductors of martyrdom operations, mostly from the LCP, while they were sitting in front of posters of their predecessors. Finally, in the conclusion, Mroué narrates that he asked many of his friends to send him an image that the friend's loved ones could use as a memorial image after that friend's death. His request is refused by all. The performance ends with a letter from Rabih to himself in which he explains that he also does not want to select an image of himself that would act as his memorial picture after his death because he does not want to kill his image as well. In this part, Mroué changes his discussion from martyr posters to images of the dead in general.[217]

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217   For *Inhabitants*, see Gaitán, 'Conciliations', 84–85; Peleg and Bruzzi, 'Towards 'Approximation'', 56–57; Elias, *Posthumous Images*, 86–90; Naeff, *Precarious Imaginaries*, 223–24; Straub, *Das Selbstmordattentat*, 93–97.

Inhabitants analyses the fabrication and contextualisation of martyr posters, but also discusses how images have the capacity to manipulate emotions. While this non-academic lecture addresses a broader spectrum of martyrs in Lebanon than *Three Posters* does—namely, Shia, Sunni, and secular Communists who died through different modes, such as martyrdom operations, car bombs, and combat—the notion of Christian martyrdom is absent.

Nancy, unlike *Three Posters* and *Inhabitants*, deals with various kinds of martyrs and their images, not only with the dead from the Communist Party and the Muslim parties. Therefore, *Nancy*, as we will see, reveals that each group operated with similar visual strategies and had a comparable conception of its shuhada. Throughout my discussion of *Nancy*, I will make references to *Three Posters* and *Inhabitants*, since I understand the appropriations of the image of the martyr as a common thread uniting these three pieces.

3.5 Four Sectarian Martyrs on Their Way to Murr Tower: The Protagonists, and the Historical Background of *Nancy*

I will now introduce the stories and not all but a substantial amount of the visuals of the four actors of *Nancy* and show that, although they belong to different parties, their lives and deaths are similar. Furthermore, I will locate the stories of the actors in the historical background of the conflicts in Lebanon between 1973 and 2007, which is the time frame in which the play is set. I will also link the posters of *Nancy* to their underlying images, which, in most cases, are posters issued by the sectarian groups during the *Wars*.

Many of the stories the protagonists are telling could have happened as narrated and they are sometimes inspired by actual occurrences or by literary works. For example, an anecdote relayed by Ziad, who tells of his death by freezing in the mountains (15), is modelled after an episode in Elias Khoury's novel *White Masks* (1981).[218]

In the script, the actors are referred to by their first names only, which evokes a feeling of intimacy, and I will also use their first names in the discussion. As mentioned above, Rabih, Hatem, Ziad, and Lina usually do not talk to each other but speak in monologues. For this reason, I will re-trace the story of each actor separately until the end, when all four protagonists meet at Murr Tower.

All of the images that appear in this section are taken from Rabih Mroué's 2007 play How Nancy Wished That Everything Was an April Fool's Joke. *It was written by Rabih Mroué and Fadi Toufiq and directed by Rabih Mroué. The posters were designed by Samar Maakaroun and are based on Zeina Maasri's research and on her book* Off the Wall: Political Posters of the Lebanese Civil War. *The images are courtesy of Rabih Mroué.*

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218   Elias Khoury, *White Masks* (Quercus: Maclehose Press, 2010 [1981]), 175–77.