Rabih Mroué
A Love Letter, Nonetheless
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An imaginary walk through Rabih Mroué's exhibition

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A Love Letter, Nonetheless is the first solo exhibition by Beirut-born, Berlin-based artist **Rabih Mroué (1967)** in Italy. The exhibition is a study in the power of images that order and reorder the ways that one views and relates to the world. It offers a glimpse into the artist's work but also into the world at present, which finds itself in a state of utter destruction and exhaustion.

A key figure within the global art context, Mroué—theater director, actor, playwright, and visual artist—has created over the last thirty-odd years an extraordinary body of work that spans drama, performance, literature, and contemporary art. Having come of age during the Lebanese Civil War, and specifically around the time when media images began playing an active role in the warfare, Mroué's work focuses on the authority that images hold as things bearing witness to reality and, at the same time, shaping it. Mixing masterfully fiction and fact, he often ponders on the paradoxical and repeatedly conflicting relationship of images to truth. Concerned about how art can be a part of the propaganda machine in culture wars that seamlessly morph truth into so-called "alternative facts"—lies in ideological disguise—Mroué is also aware that art can be not just powerful but empowering, particularly when engaging concurrently images and imaginaries. Having the works talking not "about" but rather "to" the war-ridden realities in the Middle East and worldwide, Mroué seems however most interested in having his art talk "past them." This way, he circumnavigates the oppositional logic of war to let his work engage with a creative, propositional ethos, prompting one to imagine how the world could be otherwise.

Upon the entry to the gallery, the video installation ***As If Seen By a Bird Standing on a Cow*** (2018) immediately sets that tone. On the floor, under a tunnel-like box hanging from the ceiling is a cross. Step on it and look up. There you will glare directly into a drone's camera feed, much like the pilots of contemporary warfare do when killing through remote control from the safety of their distant military bases. Now you are sharing in the sights aimed onto the ruins of the city of Homs in Syria after its three-year siege between 2011 and 2014. Here, the Syrian military fought against what was the main opposition stronghold and a key site of popular discontent during the first years of (the still ongoing) Syrian Civil War. Dubbed a "capital of the revolution," shaped and driven by the desire for dignity and justice, it's been turned into wreckage. And yet, behind its image, you can see not just defeat but also a yearning for another world; you can see not just the death that this work so intensely mourns but also the ideals for which the civilians gave their lives. For, as Mroué inverts the bird's perspective, he is not surveying the ground to account for the loss. By looking upward, he wants to try to see through the rubble, in search of a horizon and a possibility of another, just world.

But let's move further. On your left: ***The Crocodile Who Ate the Sun*** (2015). This mixed media installation recalls the summer of 1982, when Mroué was 15 years old. For the first time, he witnessed Israeli forces dropping leaflets over Beirut: a not-unfamiliar scene from today's Middle East, as Israel wages its genocidal war on Gaza, littering it not just with bullets and bombs but with pamphlets spread under the sick, misplaced pretense of "guiding" civilians toward evacuation and shelter . . . as if that were possible under their relentless, barbaric bombardments of the besieged enclave.

Well, back to Mroué's calling to mind of the 1982 Lebanon War, when the Israeli Army invaded the south of the country. Remembering the event of the skies becoming darkened with threatening messages on thousands and thousands of airdropped fliers, some three decades later, Mroué created a facsimile of the notice to share with his friends. He asked them to examine the fliers, to hold them, to do whatever they wanted with them, and then take a photograph of what they have become. Ripped, retouched and defaced, smeared, crumpled and folded, they now hang here as memento mori—a reminder not of the inevitability of death but of the necropolitics of our times, in which powers that be dictate how some people may live and how others must die.

Following this is the installation with video and drawings, titled ***Too close but yet inaccessible*** (2021). The work evokes movement, rather than contemplation, when facing war, conflict, and violence. Mroué himself refers to the work as a composition formed from images of "running," depicting a flight away from destruction and toward a better and more peaceful life.
"Running from one image to another / from one cause to another / from one war to another / from one country to another / from one side to another / from one time to another / from one nostalgia to another / from one darkness to another / from one defeat to another / from one hope to another . . ." Yet, as Mroué suggests, there is no definitive breaking free from the reality of pain and hardship. Humanity seems caught for good in a vicious cycle of violence, in which "Fear won't do any good / Prayer won't do any good / Escape won't do any good," as it is stated in the text in the video. A way out? There isn't one, except through facing reality as it is.

Again, We're Defeated (2018), the title of the next work, seems to capture this feeling of vanquish. In the installation, the video of the legion of flying drones is projected over a fragmented "screen" composed of 112 sketches of what appears to be drawings of the shadows of dead bodies. The asymmetry between the deadly technological gaze and the human bodies; between the untiring throbbing of the unmanned aircrafts and the lifeless flesh of the deceased amplifies the notion of defeat and of the narrative of a world divided into perpetrators and the oppressed, into the victors and those on the losing side.
Yet even as the title and the work itself seem hopeless, Mroué insists on a hopeful element within them: "The repetitiveness indicates that it is neither the first nor the last time we will be defeated, but also that we will keep trying, even when defeat is already certain. So, with this . . . I want to keep hope alive." Even if illiberal regimes, such as those in Syria, amass death through war and other violence and then hide slain bodies from society's view, "they forget their shadows," says Mroué. He continues: "With my pencil, I try to recreate their shadows and trace the trail that remains of the dead."
But what remains of the dead? What are these ghostly shadows and phantom pathways through which they mingle with the living world? Isn't everyone—as Mroué often, if indirectly, suggests—continuously haunted by the specters of the past?

Take the work ***Old House*** (2006). Here, a building collapses abruptly, only to resurrect itself in the same jolted fashion, time and again, as if a present is constructed from the broken masonry of the past in a never-ending loop. The voice-over speaks of continuous oscillating between "remembering" and "forgetting," retelling the world, as it were, "not in order to remember" but rather to forget, and then trying to "remember what's been forgotten."

In a similar spirit, the work ***The Other, the Unknown Other and Other Stories*** (2021) - installed next to Old House in the gallery's "grotto" evokes the hauntings of unresolved pasts. Unfolding in the form of a letter written to a person named Carol, it begins with words that sound as if they're addressing a close friend: "Dear Carol, I hope my letter finds you in good health. I'm sorry for the silence . . ." What follows are confessions of the innermost feelings and experience of the artist in relation to his upbringing in Lebanon—a country whose histories and presents have been shaped by violence and dispossession. Wherever he goes, Mroué asserts, he seems to be haunted by spooks of his country's olden days.

This makes it impossible for him to "leave" Beirut; the past he thought he had lost or forgotten always finds its way into the present, and perhaps even into the future. It is precisely this impossibility to shake off the reality one is so intimately attached to, no matter the temporal or physical distance, that led him to write this letter. In parallel, Mroué evokes a place in an unnamed German town that Carol introduced him to: originally a psychiatric center, it was turned into a concentration camp by the Nazis, and at present, is a site that serves as a small museum. The seeming calm that the museum exudes today is incomprehensible and sharply at odds with the history of the place. It seems just a matter of time that the uncanny, grievous "othering" tropes stored in its entrails—relating to neurodivergence, racism, and colonialism—will burst into the open.

Mroué often teases out the dense histories and present complicities of various places and (art) institutions, usually in ways he cannot foresee himself. Consider this: there is a poster outside an exhibition space in a well-off town in the west that announces a soon-to-happen air raid. A passerby alarms the police, who then order an immediate evacuation of the building. Amid the drama it comes to be known, however, that the poster is "just" an artwork: a reproduction by Mroué of a leaflet dropped in the 2000s over Iraq by the US Army. Mroué narrates this true story in his nonacademic lecture, titled ***Before Falling Seek the Assistance of Your Cane*** (2020), albeit, as he lets the real events gradually transform into imaginary tale and vice versa, no one can really tell where reality ends and where art begins.

You know, this, in my view, is precisely what matters: the place where art meets the world. Not that art can resolve anything—the wars, destruction, pain—because it can't. But no matter the circumstances, it can at least open up a space in which another world's way can be thought through, imagined, and enacted. Mroué has no manual, no plan, no protocol, and no template to follow when imagining a better world. Open and incomplete, always in becoming, and always in formation, he merely wants to suggest that another world is possible. In this sense, his work reads to me as a love letter of sorts, excavating for those who suffer the most a hope and a tenderness from the rubble of the world's devastation.

An aching love letter, but a love letter, nonetheless.