

Research for the Bermuda Triangle's contraDINE, Haven for Artists, Beirut, Lebanon, 2018

Essay by Layane El Hajjar, Talent Coordinator at Haven for Artists, Beirut, Lebanon, and audience member at contraDINE, 2019

"We thought of what we put in our bodies, waste, the meaning of the first Thanksgiving, conspicuous consumption, our carbon footprint, and what we're made of. The participatory - some might say demented - side of performance art is sorely missed around here. We need more of you."

–Marie Tomb, 2018, for *LE WAW* art reviews (a platform for 100% independent arts and cultural criticism of Beirut and beyond).

From September to November 2018, Regina Mamou and Lara Salmon were in the residency program of Haven for Artists in Beirut, Lebanon. There they formed the collaborative "Research for the Bermuda Triangle" (RBT), which focuses on excavating the unknown from a research and body-based practice.

Their first piece as the duo-collaborative was contraDINE, a one-night intervention hosted in Concept 2092, the gallery for residents' final projects, on Thursday, November 22, 2018. Except for the date, which is the American holiday of Thanksgiving, the entirety of the intervention was kept in secret. For those unfamiliar with the traditions, the Thanksgiving inspiration and theme was only discovered as the evening unfolded.

The invitations themselves sparked questions, with the attendees' curiosity heightened upon entry. The evening commenced in the large lounge, where Lara and her two assistants, cloaked in black, served Wild-Turkey-Grand-Marnier cocktails. The drinks were set on fire and distributed to all attendees.

The evening was an out-of-the-ordinary visual, physical, and olfactory experience for the guests. As if placed under the microscope, ten innovators from the local community were chosen to be a part of the intervention as integral elements to the piece. Established artists, executive directors of NGOs, activists, gallery owners, and collectors along with independent journalists were among these ten selected guests.

The only prior information provided to them was the following:

"At CONTRADINE guests will be presented with an xxxx to commemorate xxxxxxxxxxxx. This will be followed by a midnight celebration to ring in xxxxx xxxxx. While xxxxxxxxxxxx is known for excessive consumption of food and drink, xxxxxxxxxxxx is known for excesses in material consumption. Mamou and Salmon create an intervention to explore the bacchanal overlap between these consecutive holidays."

The mysterious nature of the night allowed for open interpretations and fluid reactions by the audience over the course of the evening. Guided by their hosts Regina and Lara, guests were asked to move from the cocktail lounge to the gallery where twelve dinner settings were placed for the ten invited guests and the two artists.

The invited participants sat down following their hosts' gestures as more attendees filled the room. As their place settings were uncovered, a cement plate with burned and charcoaled food was revealed. The attendees were then signaled to crush this burnt food with the concrete tools that the artists had also prepared. The smashing and beating sound of the concrete cups against the concrete plates rattled the room and intensified the feelings behind the action.

Upon the burned food being rendered to ash, Lara proceeded to step onto the long table filled with concrete plates, black ash, and the expression of curiosity. As she walked across the table, she recited the poem "O Captain! My Captain," a poem that is a eulogy written by Walt Whitman for Abraham Lincoln. Lara collected bits of ash from each of the guests' settings in a cement urn, also made by the artists.

Following this performance, Lara and Regina presented the attendees and audience with a homemade seven-layer activated charcoal cake. This towering, sugary gray cake emphasized the gluttony of the holidays and was served on mirrors. The seated dinner guests cut their seven-layer slices into smaller pieces, sharing the cake with the audience that surrounded the table.

The evening ended with a sense of "togetherness" as everyone lit their cigarettes and the room, following the silence and curious stares, was taken over by conversations and discussions regarding the events and observations made during the course of the intervention.

It became clear to everyone that this event, which took place on Thanksgiving Day and Black Friday (and also coincidentally Lebanese Independence Day), was a conceptual critique regarding conspicuous consumption, our carbon footprint, and a lack of mindfulness and awareness for the state we find ourselves in.

As Beirut is faced and submerged with the constant rise of over-consumerism this intervention experimented with pushing the limits of our understanding of the values and habits that have been trivialized and ignored when it is our responsibility to face them and invoke change.

—Layane El Hajjar, 2019, Haven for Artists