



## INTERVIEWS

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# Present Continuous

## Christine Tohme in conversation with Rachel Dedman

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Rachel Dedman

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In this interview, Christine Tohme, founder and Director of Ashkal Alwan, Beirut, discusses the seventh iteration of Home Works Forum, which opened in Beirut on 12 November 2015, the night three suicide bombs claimed by Daesh were detonated in the suburb of Bourj el-Barajneh, a predominantly Shia neighbourhood of Beirut as the crisis surrounding garbage collection and waste disposal, driven by government corruption and political incompetence, continued. Then, in January 2016, Tohme had her passport confiscated at a time when visas and travel within the region have become increasingly restricted. In light of such physical, psychological, philosophical attacks on safety, health, speech, and mobility, in Lebanon and elsewhere, spaces such as Ashkal Alwan have become reinforced as sites for critical discussion and resilience. Reflecting on the relationship between the Forum and the pedagogical dynamics of Ashkal Alwan's annual year-long educational course, the Home Workspace Program, whose scope and self-critical approach shift year-on-year, Tohme speaks about the methodologies, practices and external forces that shape an institution from within and without, and also discusses her approach to the Sharjah Biennale 13, which she is curating in 2017.

**Rachel Dedman:** I want to start by asking you about the basis of Home Works 7. For me, a strength of the program was that it felt unencumbered by a defining thesis. Nothing felt illustrative of an idea that was pre-established or questions that were already answered. Rather it was a timely and pertinent response to key concerns that are happening in multiple fields and which are relevant in Beirut, the region and beyond. You didn't have one theme per se, but rather an approach that attempted to respond to the political context. Can you talk about the process of curating the programme in collaboration with Bassam El-Baron and Frie Leysen?

**Christine Tohme:** For me, working on Home Works is an ongoing research informed by my relationship to what is happening around me, what is happening in the Home Workspace Program with the fellows, what is happening in the region, and what is happening in other institutions. It could be inspired by an article I read in the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, or the work I put into producing Video Works, or something I read in *Makhzin Journal*, or the encounters that happen in Beirut at the Arab Image Foundation, Mansion, Zico House, or Beirut Art Center. All of these constitute my research for the Forum.

Home Works is like everything we do, we do not think about it in a formulaic way. Some molecules come



Natascha Sadr-Haghighian, *pssst Leopard 2A7*, 2013-ongoing. Installation view, Home Works 7 (November 11 – 24, 2015).  
*Photo by Bilal Jawiche, courtesy of Ashkal Alwan.*

together and they make a great atomic collision, and some others come together and produce a structure that is polite and prim, and others do not work whatsoever and are redundant. We are not looking for beautiful shows or perfect conferences or symposia. The strength of Home Works is that it is not a biennale, it is not a conference; it is what comes out over a period of time – an accumulation. It's like a calendar.

Ashkal Alwan's work has been about the people right from the beginning. For us, the people are the most important thing – to have people congregate in Beirut. Home Works is an open house, an open council, and this open house can be chaotic. It can be fragile and it can be strong because it is about everything that is politically and socio-politically and poetically and philosophically urgent. It is affected by the Home Workspace Program, by institution-building, by the wars around us, by the fragility of refugees, by what is happening in terms of art foundations and new places opening up. You saw clearly this year that artistic practice and relationships to activism was a strong and pertinent theme. What does it mean to create this reservoir of work that is talking about the civic sphere and creating a civic discourse, without falling into a set formula?

Home Works is not about gilded structures; it is about taking risks. This is a space that allows for non-formulaic thinking, or repeating things that have been done so many times; it is a space for things to be born, a space of emanation – intellectual, political and socio-political. So that's why this is like a theatre or an arena, where philosophers used to sit and discuss the pathos. This is the embryo, the nucleus of what happens; this space is the mind, the brain, the right and left hemispheres of Home Workspace.

Of course, some of the public is only interested in attending performances or watching films. But others are interested in working and discussing the questions that are predominant in the city, and during these two

weeks, they meet in this space, agreeing, disagreeing, fighting, laughing and having fun. When you think of Ahmad Ghossein's lecture-performance, it was born in Home Works, in a way. It came from here, and now he has taken it and developed it and is still working on it. It just flew off.

**RD:** Home Works breathes then; it has a body?

**CT:** The forum has been performative from its inception, and this is crucial. I have my affinities with performativity, I believe in it and there is always a number of lecture performances, dance, music and theatre in Home Works. This year, I invited Frie Leysen, and we had a huge line-up that she worked on and brought in. Working with Frie meant a lot to me, I worked with her on Meeting Points in 2008 and it was an experience close to my heart. I feel that the city is always celebratory of the performance and film programmes. If you look at the film programme in Home Works 7: at 5pm every afternoon, the Beirut Art Center was fully booked, packed for every screening!



Marlene Monteiro Freitas. Sunflower Theater, *Of Ivory and Flesh – Statues Also Suffer*, , Performance, November 25, 2015, Home Works 7.

*Photo by Marwan Tahtah, courtesy of Ashkal Alwan.*

**RD:** This was my first Home Works. Something I liked was that the Forum bred a very active energy in the whole city, which bled into its fabric. Even getting a service [shared taxi] to Ashkal Alwan from Hamra would find you in a cab with four other people also coming here, and these are the spaces that conversations happen – on the periphery – continuing and coalescing. To see the audience so hungry was exciting.

**CT:** I was depressed when the explosion took place on the opening night of Home Works, and I thought that

was it, the whole city has been electrocuted, nobody will come. Every single explosion is horrible but this one was so aggressive, how it attacked people shopping early in the evening.

Every edition, an incident happens. This time, however, the explosion did not take place before Home Works, which would have had greater consequences on the turn out. The first night, for the opening night performance of #3 *Bonanza* by Berlin, there were maybe 85 to 100 people out of 300 in the theatre. By the second day, however, people seemed to insist on coming; it was like an act of resistance. You could feel the sense of urgency, the desire to engage in a constructive way with the situation. We had 300 people for Ahmad Ghossein's lecture-performance, the same number for Tony Chakar's; Dictaphone Group drew 200 people for their panel. The space was packed with young and old people, artists, students, activists...

What is so strong about Home Works is that you feel the fluxus, the fluctuation of this platform – it changes with every single speaker. Every talk brings in a new wave of people, engaging and contributing and leaving again; then others come in.

**RD:** What such a varied programme allows for also is the exposure of audiences to different contexts to those they came for originally. Perhaps someone comes to see the talk on activism, and then straight after is Matthew Poole talking about his poetry and theoretical ideas, and they stay to listen to it. People are exposed to new things in one space.

**CT:** And in one stretch. This is a space where people who do not necessarily want to meet, meet. All these guests come from all over – Ramallah, Cairo, Baghdad, Berlin, New York – and you feel this is a project about the city, where these people merge. But it's not spectacular. Even those who could not be here with us in person were present with us; lots of friends would tell me that they left Beirut but are still following the program online, through the livestream.

**RD:** I think the being-with is the crucial thing in Home Works; it's not a biennale in the sense of being a distanced institution producing external events. Ashkal Alwan is a family, in a way, and the site a base for people to be with each other.

**CT:** And to make things together. All these discussions that happen in bars and coffee shops outside the program are important.

**RD:** It is in these conversations that the genesis of Home Works 8 is born.

**CT:** Exactly, and people staying til 3 or 4am every night, it is great, it is fundamental. This is Home Works, it extends itself outside the programme – the affiliations and friendships that people form together, from the stage to the city, to the cabs. You suddenly become a partner – Home Works becomes everyone's project. People start connecting, inviting each other, doing projects together. It is a fruitful and productive time.

**RD:** I'm sure the Home Workspace Program learns a lot and draws a lot of its energy from Home Works Forum as well; how do you feel more broadly that Ashkal Alwan as an institution learns from its educational Program?

**CT:** Firstly, if we didn't have Home Workspace Program, there would be no need for the space, and it is the space that became the home for Home Works. Every year, we work with the Curricular Committee to select

fellows from all over the world. This year we have two fellows from Iran, two from Turkey, one from India, the US, four Lebanese, one Palestinian, one Egyptian, and one Cuban. It is Home Works Forum that created the Program: HWP started in 2011 and in its initial years my main concern was to extend what we had collectively started with the Forum – we would meet for twelve days at a time but after that we would all go back to what we do. I wanted to create a lasting platform that was about continuing those discussions everyday. I didn't want Home Works to be only every two to three years, I wanted this vibrant, urgent energy of people meeting and affecting each other, and being affected by the city, the political situation, the institutions, to be continuously present.

But, the program has also affected our daily concerns, not least of how to get people to Beirut, and undertake long-term planning. Making a platform for the fellows, a continuous platform, takes an enormous amount of work and perseverance. It becomes a year-round space of doing, thinking, happening, playing ping-pong [Resident Artist Haig Aivazian is playing table tennis with a Fellow in the background of the interview]. This is a space for people to take time off from the stress of production and market pressures. I'm not saying that there should not be a structure or that these things should happen haphazardly; no. Ashkal Alwan is strict and rigorous when it comes to content, and HWP is careful about the infrastructures it creates.



Exhibition view, *What Hope Looks Like After Hope*, curated by Bassam El Baroni, Home Works 7, November 2015.  
*Photo by Marwan Tahtah, courtesy of Ashkal Alwan.*

**RD:** And attempts to challenge that infrastructure also – to move beyond normative modes of pedagogy. Something Ashkal Alwan is often questioning is what it means to have institutions, whether we still need them?

**CT:** In the 1990s, when we started Ashkal Alwan, we felt there was a political urgency to build an institution. I

now feel that young people do not want to build institutions. On the contrary, there is an urgency to destroy institutions. Which is, maybe, one of the ways to rebuild yourself and say 'this is who we are, this is how we are screaming'. In the 1990s, we wanted to reclaim our city, and this was one of our shrieks, to identify with the territory at hand. When you lose everything, you want to become more territorial. Things are different now.

My identity is not necessarily Lebanese; my identity is what I do. And this identity can be extended anywhere. If you take me to wherever it may be, I will always meet with the people who are similar to me, who also hover where I hover. Our work is related to understanding what it means to be a minority, to be someone who is on the margins of the mobs, against the big voices and ideological/identitarian points of view. The minorities are the flowers, the animals, women, gay, people of colour, anyone who's different. The more this world becomes polarized, becomes binary, the more you have people who are intolerant of anything that is different. Religion and identitarianism have produced fundamentalist groups that are everywhere, nowadays. Whereas our identities were composed through our work, through our practice, through what we do.

**RD:** There is a responsibility, then, to create space for the margins, the other.

**CT:** Yes, there are no trees in this city and this is indicative of how the space to breathe, think, and live differently is getting narrower. Today in Beirut, the only trees that we have are enclosed in Horsh Beirut and access to it is tightly controlled.

**RD:** Do you think Ashkal Alwan is a place without ideology of its own?

**CT:** Ideology is a heavy term; Ashkal Alwan is a space that is pre-occupied, haunted, lived, but it is not ideological.

**RD:** What did you think of the Home Workspace Program in its 2013-14 iteration? It experimented with a different kind of structure, what was this like for the institution itself?

**CT:** It was great. Every year is an entity in itself, and 2013–14 was a hub; 200 people attended the program. It was like a tidal wave, and very strong. If you reflect on the history of this program in six years, the road it took and how every iteration was informed by previous years, you will understand that this history constitutes the program's DNA. This is why we now have a Preface and a Resident Artist for every edition – these elements were developed from within the needs of the program.

**RD:** What I most took from that formative year was the network and people I connected with between the gaps of the the institution. The spaces in which things coalesced among people. By far the most interesting aspect was seeing the human dynamics that play into such structures.

**CT:** There is a network that you build, friends you make, collaborations that you form, that is very important. And so are the disagreements – the frictions, the discussions that paved the way for thinking 'no, I don't want to be part of this, I want to do things differently'. The fact that you were not obliged to attend the workshops or the seminars made you understand that you had a bigger responsibility, one to yourself!

**RD:** You create your own stake.

**CT:** You create your own stake, and state. This is a kind of investment.

**RD:** There are not many contexts or spaces in which this is possible.

**CT:** Definitely, it is not a university.

**RD:** Perhaps what it captures is for many the best part of university, the people you meet, and the spaces for this to happen entirely outside the classroom. I respect this aspect of your approach too, and its integrity: your practice is your life, these are not things you distinguish between.

**CT:** I am rooted in practical work, I don't try to reproduce theory but rather use it on the ground to understand the circumstances. What formed me is that I did not come from theoretical walks of life, nor any form that is stultified and stilted. I listen, I learn, I listen to the street.

**RD:** Given the deeply personal nature of your practice, which issues from your own experiences, what happens to Ashkal Alwan when you are no longer in it?

**CT:** We are thinking about that. I don't know what will happen. I will not run Ashkal Alwan for fifty years. It is now my 25th year. When I started Ashkal Alwan I was young, I did what I wanted to do. My sense is that people should do the same. If there is no one to run Ashkal Alwan then it means there is something wrong in the city. I have said this before. There are a few things I want to do first – archiving most of the projects that Ashkal Alwan did in the past 25 years, and opening up projects related to Arabic language – but then in two, three, or four years will see what happens.

Ashkal Alwan is not going to stop, someone is going to come and pick it up and continue, or make something else. When I started 25 years ago, I was picking up on things. When Ayloul Festival stopped in 2001, I continued with Home Works, and if 5 years from now Home Works stops, something else will begin. Ashkal Alwan was one of the first players, like Townhouse, al-Ma'amal, Darat al-Funun, and SALT in Istanbul. There is still a need for these institutions and there will always be this need. Maybe in the future these institutions will be called clusters, or small shops, or maybe they will be like these capsules in Tokyo where people come in and they use them as offices. I don't know. The soil, how it is brewing, fermenting, will decide on this.

**RD:** Your passport was recently confiscated by General Security when you went to renew it. What are the implications of such extra-legal administrative obstruction, and scrutiny of Ashkal Alwan's work, that you are feeling most keenly?

**CT:** Firstly, I would like to say that what happened with my passport, the Mouzkarat Ikhda' or memorandum of subjugation, is quite minor compared to what other people have been subjected to. These arbitrary measures are indicative of the power that culture and activism have in the public sphere.

For some time now, personal liberties in Lebanon are being hacked and surveillance is at it's peak, phone calls and data are monitored, like everywhere else. It is becoming increasingly difficult to secure visas for our guests and continue our work.



From the Invention of Ruins to the End of the National Museum, artist talk with Ali Cherri in conversation with Sam Hardy. November 15, 2015, Home Works 7.

*Photo by Marwan Tahtah, courtesy of Ashkal Alwan.*

[Christine Tohme's passport was given back to her five days later after the press heavily relayed the story].

**RD:** Before we end I want to ask you about the Sharjah Biennale. How do you reconcile the approach that you have, and embeddedness in the socio-political locality, with the context of this biennial?

**CT:** I'm not going to reinvent myself. I'm going to work the way I worked on Home Works and on Ashkal Alwan, and everything else. I've always worked with people, I cannot work on my own. If I'm doing a project and I have a question about the Arab Renaissance for example, I call thirteen people and then I decide. I get inspired and informed and aroused by working with people, so again Sharjah will be a group of people, a core team; it is not just going to be me. Of course, when Hoor al-Qasimi invited me, she invited me for who I am.

**RD:** What potentialities for you come out of this being in Sharjah, as opposed to somewhere else?

**CT:** I'm not going to use Sharjah as a pot, I'm going to use Sharjah as a base – and a trampoline.

**Christine Tohme** is the founding director of Ashkal Alwan, the Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts, established in 1993. Tohme was the recipient of a Prince Claus Award in 2006, given in recognition of her achievements in supporting local multidisciplinary art production and art criticism, as well as the 2015 CCS Bard Audrey Irmas Award for Curatorial Excellence. She is on the boards of Marsa (Beirut), a sexual health



centre providing specialised medical services for at-risk youth and marginalised communities, and SAHA (Istanbul), an association supporting contemporary art from Turkey. Tohme was appointed curator of the Sharjah Biennale 13.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### Rachel Dedman

**Rachel Dedman** is an independent curator and writer based in Beirut. Rachel is currently curating At the Seams, the inaugural satellite exhibition of the Palestinian Museum (West Bank, Palestine); Halcyon, a project for the Transart Triennale (Berlin); and exhibitions for Beirut Art Center and Dar el-Nimer (Beirut). In 2015 she curated projects for apexart (New York), MUU Galleria (Helsinki) and 98weeks (Beirut), and received grants from Independent Curators International, the Getty, and AFAC. Rachel studied at the Universities of Oxford and Harvard, and was a participant of Ashkal Alwan's Home Workspace Program, Beirut, 2013/14.

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