

Ashkal Alwan's Sanayeh Project

Sanayeh 1995. The park is sunlit and noisy, and the fountain is filled with water. Anachar Basbous, an artist taking part in the Sanayeh Project, has placed a sculpture at its center. For artists to work and install over night, a permission was requested and obtained through endless negotiations and equally patient smiles. Future Television's reporter is waiting for the start signal to begin the interview with the project's team. Christine Tohme and Marwan Rechmaoui are wearing sunglasses, they slept late the night before. It is the first public project that Ashkal Alwan organizes.

TV REPORTER: We will now begin with the organizers of the exhibition, Rania Tabbara, Marwan Rechmaoui...and Christine...Christine Tohme, pardon me. We will join them now to get to know them better and see how the idea of the exhibition started and how they involved all the participating artists. Good morning, can you introduce yourself?

RANIA TABBARA: My name is Rania Tabbara, I am responsible for the fundraising of this event. Christine Tohme came up with the idea for this exhibition in the first place and asked me to help her organize the project. With Marwan's help of course, she gathered all the artists and we worked together with enthusiasm and we hope that we will work together in the future.

TV REPORTER: God bless you. What would you like to add, considering that this project took a lot of preparation, could you please tell us more about it?

MARWAN RECHMAOUI: What can I say? The project took a lot of preparation. We contacted 40 artists and it was difficult to communicate with them, each had his/her own vision. Christine, she did all the work. I was just an artistic advisor.



Christine Tohme with her daughter Raseel Hadjian
Photograph by Marwan Rechmaoui

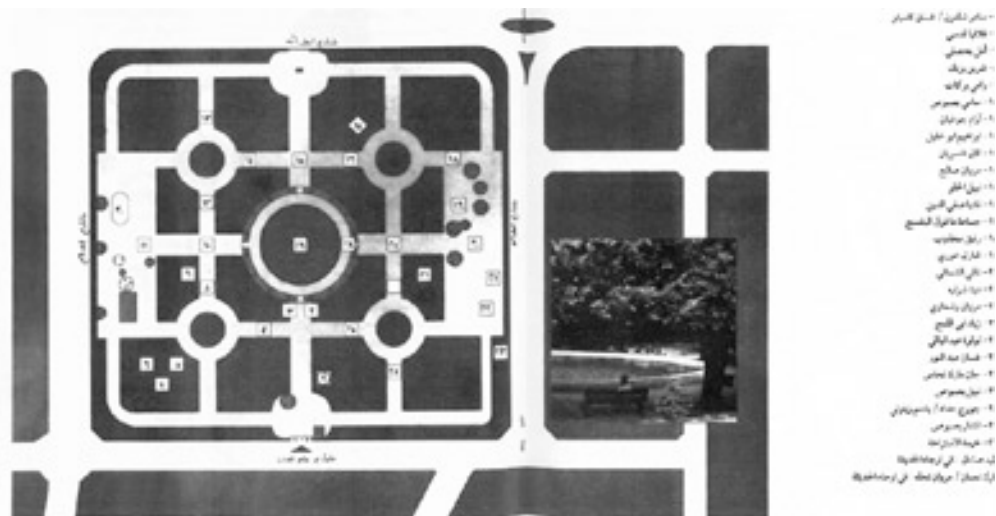


TV REPORTER: Everything brings us back to you... Good morning Christine.

CHRISTINE TOHME: I can't say that everything depends on me, because if I didn't have the support of the people present here, this work would not have been possible. Ok, I had the initial idea, and the idea is very important but it can't stand alone, it needs collective work, if there is no teamwork, nothing can be achieved. My main motivation was doing something that could respond to the lack of art in our everyday life in Lebanon; art is not in the public space, it is not in the street, it is absent from many spaces we could use, but that we are not using.

As far as I am concerned, I live across the garden, I always look at it and think it is not valorized enough. I had this idea, which is just a first step for something that we could continue thereafter, not only in the Sanayeh garden. I would love to develop future projects with everybody's help, with the help of the artists basically, since everything depends on their work. Rania fundraised and Marwan was very responsible with all the artists, but without the artists, the project would not have taken place. They are everything. I would like, for the next project, to utilize the streets, or for it to take place on the seashore, in Ramlet el Baida, or in the mountains, or in Burj el Murr, or in downtown. You choose the place and we will do it, no problem!

TV REPORTER: As our viewers already know, this is the first visual arts event in the garden. Around 30 artists are exhibiting their works here. After being invited, each artist decided how s/he wanted to contribute to the project and did an artwork in a corner or a spot of this spacious garden. We will introduce the artworks presented in the garden. Back to you Magida, to the studio temperature that should be cooler than here. We will be back to you in the company of the artists.



In the afternoon...

CHRISTINE: I wanted to say that myself Rania Tabbara and Marwan Rechmaoui are very happy about the work accomplished because we succeeded in what we wanted to do and say. The important thing to me was the affluence of the public last night. I wanted to ask the public to come and see the works and the garden at night, and witness the mix between the people who come everyday to the garden and the artists. Youngsters, elder men and women are gathering around the works, asking the artists about their work. This is something very important, because we usually say that these people don't understand art, but they do! The proof is what happened yesterday at the Sanayeh garden; everybody came together, and there was a very positive gathering between the artists and the public. The most important thing is that we are getting closer to the people. We are turning the garden into a living thing. This is all I wanted to say and thank you to all the artists that were very responsive to the public. I ask everybody to come to Sanayeh at night, artists are working during the day but at night they are available for questions. Welcome to the Sanayeh garden, we are waiting for you. I thank Alam el Sabah because they are working with us and are very kind and generous towards us.

TV REPORTER: Thank you very much. I want to ask you a question, is it only the people of Sanayeh coming or people interested in art?

CHRISTINE: This is what I was saying earlier, it's a mix of people that usually come to Sanayeh and the public coming to see the exhibition. This is what is important to me, the significance is that ordinary people, the people that supposedly don't understand-I don't think that

they don't understand, intuitively they understand everything but we consider that they don't and keep away from them-are coming to see the installations. This is what is so beautiful about what happened yesterday. People were inquiring about the works, they were amazed by what was happening, they were asking who were these artists, but they were not mocking what they saw. This is why I am so happy and I can't really express how happy I am, together with Rania and Marwan. People came to us, in a surprising way. It is important to challenge the idea that these people don't understand. If we try and give them a chance, they understand and begin to like us.

TV REPORTER: It is great that the reaction was so meaningful and positive. Anyway Christine, you will guide me today at the Sanayeh garden and we will start with this painting behind us, Nabil, Nabil Helou. How are you Nabil? This work was in the background and now that I am standing next to it I look very small! Is it entirely made of steel?

NABIL HELOU: It's mainly steel plates, welded together at specific points.

These selected passages are translated and transcribed from a live reportage realized by Future Television in 1995. The audio version of this interview is available on ArteEast's website.

For more information on Ashkal Alwan, please visit www.ashkalalwan.org.