

A PRESENT: BEIRUT IS IN MY HAND

Rania Ghosn

This is a scan of my hand holding a postcard of a black and white photograph of the center of Beirut. The Photograph is entitled No Present, from the series Traces of War by photographer Fouad el-Khoury (1997). The one point perspective of the photograph suspends the present of Beirut by joining two fantasies of the city, that of a past archaeology and that of a projected vision of reconstruction by Solidere, the real estate company in charge of rebuilding the downtown of Beirut at the end of the civil war. Echoing Solidere's Motto of Beirut as 'An Ancient City for the Future,' both the past and the future exercise their fantastic power by presenting material evidence in the empty space of the centre, whether in the archaeological site or in the billboard of the reconstructed vision of Martyrs' Square. Ironically, the billboard stands on the site of a demolished building that previously defined the northern edge of the square, while the image represented the vision of an unbound Martyrs' Square that opens up the perspective towards the sea. Such vision suspends the present and renders it as a mere backdrop, a sandwiched transient space and time that can be not to be contested but accepted for the realization and perpetuation of the 'common vision' and its promised glories. Such power of the fantasy of another time in the physical space of the city engulfs the viewer in an absent present, depoliticizing the Now as a domain of action.

THE REAL VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY... CONSISTS NOT IN SEEKING NEW LANDSCAPES, BUT IN HAVING NEW EYES, IN SEEING THE UNIVERSE WITH THE EYES OF ANOTHER, OF A HUNDRED OTHERS, IN SEEING THE HUNDRED UNIVERSES THAT EACH OF THEM SEES.

MARCEL PROUST, LA PRISONIÈRE.

I HOLD THE POSTCARD, AND SEND IT TO BEIRUT AS A PRESENT.

