

# Arts and Disability in Lebanon

## Literature and Practice Review – Summary

### March 2021

#### Background

The Disability Under Siege project seeks to examine what are the opportunities and barriers to promoting discussion of culture, disability, and inclusive education in Jordan? And how can such discussions be developed through collaborative partnerships between cultural partners and disability-led organisations?

This review undertaken from December 2020 to February 2021 mapped and reviewed available literature and cultural practices relating to arts and disability in Jordan. This report provides a summary of available literature and practice to help the project engage the following key questions

- How do contemporary cultural practices engage with disability?
- How do disability organisations engage with contemporary cultural practices?
- What can these models of engagement tell us about the priorities of each institution?
- Are there productive ways of engaging the institutional structures of cultural practices to reflect upon the issue of inclusion and disability education?
- How can discourses and social practices related to disability reflect upon political concerns about marginalisation within cultural practices, including issues around identity, ideology, the body, and social injustice?

All arts practices identified as a result of this study have been mapped to a database which can be viewed here: [www.disabilityundersiege.org/current-research](http://www.disabilityundersiege.org/current-research).<sup>1</sup> The full Literature and Practice Review of Arts and Disability in Lebanon, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and Jordan can be found here: [www.disabilityundersiege.org/current-research](http://www.disabilityundersiege.org/current-research)

#### Summary

Lebanon's unstable history and 1975-1991 war left the country in a precarious socioeconomic state. The 2019 economic collapse and the Beirut Port explosion on August 4, 2020, has further added to a sense of crisis in the country. Despite that, it maintains a vibrant cultural hub, and its artistic scene continues to have a national and international reputation. The Lebanese art scene comprises largely of private foundations and some governmental institutions. All of them have the potential to develop or host events related to art and disability.

There was **little by way of structured academic literature on the subject of arts and disability produced when it comes to Lebanon**. The available research and literature on disability mostly focuses on the legal, health and educational aspects, with much less concern given to arts and culture. The majority of resources concerned with disability, art and culture include non-academic articles, reports and case studies of projects and/or events relating to disability in the artistic and cultural scenes.

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<sup>1</sup> If you would like to contribute further evidence of literature and practice related to disability in Jordan please contact [disabilityundersiege@bham.ac.uk](mailto:disabilityundersiege@bham.ac.uk)

The **relative lack of academic resources, absence of evaluation mechanisms, and the insufficiency of unified policies**, while troubling given the concerns and issues around disability and the rights of persons with disabilities, can be also understood as an opportunity for disability-led and cultural organisations to develop projects that address their own priorities in relation to inclusivity and education. In general terms, future projects and/or research could include an examination of how institutions often use the concept of inclusivity in the arts but neglect disability.

The **use of arts as a means of therapy could create opportunities for further engagement and collaborations between art and cultural practices and disability-led organizations**. The opportunities therefore involve the development of both practical elements and theoretical discourses on disability. This would encourage the development of already existing interdisciplinary collaborations, as well as encouraging research-led practices in the art sphere to further activate the multi-sector role of art in social and community transformations.

Given the significant potential for arts and cultural practices to develop education programmes around issues of inclusivity and the politics of representation, there is a **need for further coordination between literature and practice in the arts, cultural organizations and civil society**. In partnership with arts and cultural organisations, disability-led organizations could develop their expertise and knowledge on the needs of persons with disabilities and, in turn, produce vital projects and initiatives in the field of measuring the impact of arts education in relation to disability.

Supporting **research-based practices and collaborative initiatives would encourage engagement with the arts in the lives of persons with disabilities** and would support the development of a cultural infrastructure that is capable of engaging more fully with disability.

## Areas for Discussion

While our research maps the relationship between art practices and disability-led practices in the cultural sphere, there are further areas of research that need to be expanded upon to give a fuller sense of the potential to be had in supporting cultural organisations and disability-led organisations in the development of projects.

A number of key questions emerged throughout this research, one related to the opportunities and barriers to promoting inclusive education through collaborative partnerships between cultural partners and disability-led organisations; the other was concerned with how disability studies could affect an alternative methodology for cultural practices to further engage with the politics of representing forms of exclusion? In light of these questions, three further areas of research need to be expanded upon:

- Disability Studies and Arts Education
- Disability, the Arts, and Digital Methodologies
- Art Activism and Disability in The Middle East

In effecting collaborations between cultural activities and disability organisations we can, as a result, encourage research-led practices in the arts and humanities to develop a number of interrelated outcomes in partnership with disability advocates and organisations, including:

- the improvement of public understanding of, and everyday engagement with, disability;

- the development of local, regional and international capacities to address issues of access in education for those with disabilities;
- the promotion of interdisciplinary research methods for research-informed policy and future practice;
- the development of legacy programmes through developing communities of practice within cultural and disability organisations;
- the enhancement of multidisciplinary forms of knowledge production and methodologies.

## Review of Literature

The available research and literature on disability in Lebanon mostly focuses on the legal, health and educational aspects, with much less concern given to arts and culture. Due to the existing literature gap in arts and disability, this brief review will firstly outline Law 220 on the Rights of Disabled Persons passed by the government year 2000 (herein referred to as Law 220/2000), as well as advance its relation or lack thereof to the cultural sector.

Generally speaking, we observe an absence of law enforcement that affects the participation of persons with disabilities in daily socio-economic life (Lakkis et al., 2015), and that includes the arts and cultural scene, as will be seen further below. To begin with, Emilie Combaz highlights the lack of law compliance with the 220/2000 government law in a 2018 report, stating that despite the existence of the law, it is not fully “implemented and enforced by the State” (Combaz, 2018, p.6). Al Thani (2007) further argues that the prevalent cultural view and stigmatization of disabled people in Lebanon contributes to the lack of governmental action on the subject (Al Thani, 2007). The minimal compliance in law within the wide range of healthcare services, rehabilitation, and educational services, has an immeasurable effect on physical accessibility to public spaces, inclusivity policies, and accessibility to cultural information.

Moreover, there is an absence of clarity amongst disabled communities as to what their rights are and what are the available, public services and facilities provided. The result is that people with disabilities—who often also lack basic education—are unaware of their basic rights and what services would be accessible to them, including any links to cultural events (Wehbi and Lakkis, 2010). This would appear, based on the practice review below, to be further reflected in the arts and cultural sphere on an institutional level where the absence of cultural and/or institutional policies, alongside the lack of staff member awareness about how to cater for the needs of persons with disabilities, was evidenced. In this regard, Al Thani further states that “there is a strong belief [in Lebanon] that “people take care of their own” rather than delegate that responsibility to government. This “results in something of a forced integration for persons with disabilities” (Al Thani, 2007). Such attitudes further reinforce the medical model or the charitable approach in Lebanon rather than a “social or rights-based ones” (Combaz, 2018, p.6) with regards to both disability studies and cultural perceptions of disability.

Existing literature on disability indeed has a clear focus on education and medical matters, academic practitioner, and policy literature, which are mostly presented in the form of country situational analysis reports. Only two of these reports referred explicitly to arts and culture, albeit very briefly. In the 2015 UNESCO periodic review, there was a recommendation that Lebanon recognize the right of disabled people to participate in cultural life through facilitating their involvement in the arts and cultural scene for “communities, practitioners, cultural actors and NGOs from civil society, as well as vulnerable groups (minorities, indigenous people, migrants, refugees, young peoples and people with disability)” (UNESCO, 2015, p.13-14). The other text briefly mentions the importance of making cultural material and media material accessible to persons with disabilities, besides other relevant governmental information (Wehbi and Lakkis, 2010). Lakkis and Wehbi stated that “relatively powerless people—such as many people with disabilities—do not have easy access to information that could help bring about change” (ibid, p.4) and observes that access to information “is based on informal social and political networks” (ibid).

Despite the clear lack of academic research into the links between arts and disability in Lebanon, it is important to note that disability-led organizations and NGOs have been actively working with disability movements in an attempt to counter the predominant culture of isolating disabled people from society

and their consequent lack of education, and some use art as a tool to “empower” the disabled community. As for the Lebanese art practices of individual artists and institutions, few Lebanese art institutions directly engage in tackling disability as a theme or representing artists with disabilities (see practice review below). We should observe, finally, that before the 1975-1991 Lebanon War, disability was not on the political agenda in Lebanon. Post-war Lebanon saw thousands of people becoming disabled due to sustained war injuries and this developed social awareness on disability (Berghs and Kabbara, 2016). Although the disabled community is not directly represented by art institutions, the theme of disability was taken up by numerous artist practitioners across Lebanon, especially in relation to artists who tackle the theme of the war and post-war effect through their work on memory, identity, territory, etc. Some address more directly the theme of the body in particular vis-a-vis violence, which directly or indirectly address disability, as will be seen below.

## Arts and Cultural Networks and practice in Relation to Disability

As previously mentioned, Lebanon is considered to have a large cultural and artistic network; some of the ongoing initiatives include **Maqamat** (initiated in 2002), the **Zoukak Theatre Company** (2006), **Collectif Kahraba** (2007), **Ashkal Alwan’s Home Workspace Program** (2011), **Haven for Artists** (2011), **Modern and Contemporary Art Museum- MACAM** (2013), the **Temporary Art Platform** (2014), the **Sursock Museum** (reopened in 2015), **Beirut Art Residency** (2015), **Aishti Foundation** (2015), one entire new floor for **National Museum of Beirut** (2016), **Dar El-Nimer for Arts and Culture** (2016), **Hammana Artist House** (2016), **Beit Beirut** (2016), the **Nabu Museum** (2018), and the forthcoming **Beirut Museum of Art—BeMA**. However, most of the above are private initiatives, and a 2017 report observes that the preponderance of private initiatives “may be due to the fact that in a country without a state art museum, without state-funded theatre and with a minimal cultural budget, the arts are not so highly valued in society. In fact, Lebanese cultural life is supported by the artists themselves as well as private local organizations in collaboration with international institutions. All money must be especially procured” (Kohse, 2017).

To date, the Lebanese government’s priorities lie with basic requirements such as security and/or economic reform. The relative under-prioritizing the arts and culture sector has resulted in a notable absence of coherent national cultural policies, the lack of a unified national museum policy, and inadequate governmental budgets. Therefore, each cultural institution operates differently according to constitution and resources, including whether or not they generally include accessibility programs for persons with disabilities, audience study programmes, and audience outreach developments. Despite the abundance of museums and arts and culture initiatives in Lebanon, the issue of inclusivity and outreach continue to be a major concern. Based on preliminary research, these institutions are not primarily geared towards accessibility and outreach and, for many, there is a failure to attract a broader Lebanese audience that is further compounded by a lack of co-ordinated efforts to engage new audiences. The perception of elitism around cultural institutions also represents an obstacle to developing inclusive programmes and educational initiatives for persons with disabilities. This raises further concerns, and potential opportunities, as to the role that art practices can play in both developing arts and education programmes for persons with disabilities and encouraging disability-led initiatives.

Law 220/ 2000 safeguards basic rights for the disabled; employment, transportation and housing, as well as health care and education (Lakkis et al., 2015). Accordingly, when it comes to architecture, the country’s construction laws must apply Law 220/ 2000 by demanding that all public buildings, installations, facilities and means of transportation should implement regulations that facilitate persons with disabilities’ access to them, most of which are still ignored. In addition, Law 220/2000 does not mention access to information, which would seem to be a major flaw and, apart from the issue of accessibility to newly built cultural institutions, very little is clarified when it comes to policies that should be undertaken by private institutions (including art organisations). According to a country report in 2015 conducted by the Director of the Physical Handicapped Union in Lebanon, the notion of access to information in general highlighted: “a draft law on access to information was submitted to the Lebanese parliament in April 2009, which has not yet been adopted, because of a political crisis in Lebanon [...]. The draft law includes no specific requirement to provide information in accessible or usable formats for persons with disabilities as proposed by the CRPD” (ibid). This would and should of course concern museums and institutions when it comes to making cultural information accessible

to all. If institutions are starting to implement architectural and spatial elements for accessibility, and developing other projects related to disability, to date no institution has produced its information in a user-friendly state that is accessible to all types of disabilities (using, for example, appropriate formats and technology). The majority of reports on disability in Lebanon cover education, accessibility and other similar notions, but rarely tend to cover cultural information too. There is therefore an urgent need to make cultural material and media material accessible to persons with disabilities.

### **Cultural Institutions with projects relating to Disability and the Arts**

**Planet Discovery: Children’s Science Museum** is not only the only museum in Lebanon dedicated specifically to children, but it is the first museum that includes explicitly a sentence on inclusion of the disabled since 1999. In the Quarterly online newspaper in 1999, they state the following: “Abiding by international standards of safety and security, it is equipped to welcome the disabled and visually-impaired [...]. All activities are available, according to the children's needs, in either of three languages, Arabic, English and French, in addition to Braille.”<sup>i</sup> On their current website, nothing of the such is written explicitly, unless you click one downloadable PDF: “In line with international standards of safety and security, Planet Discovery is equipped to welcome disabled visitors. The curvilinear architecture, gentle inclines and sunlit interior makes the museum a friendly space.”<sup>ii</sup>

**The National Museum of Beirut** in partnership with the NGO **Red OAK** (which focuses on mental health initiatives, the empowerment of women, and persons with disabilities) and Omero National Museum of Italy created the Please Touch Me tour guide for people with visual impairments. The 1942 building had not initially been designed to be accessible, but there has been the addition of a lift to move from one floor to the next and accessibility from the entrance has been provided.<sup>iii</sup>

The **Modern and Contemporary Art Museum (MACAM)** mission statement includes the following statement directly linked to disability- which is not the case for most Lebanese institutions: “MACAM prides itself on being a ‘Museum for Everyone’, by championing inclusivity and ensuring accessibility for the special-need persons and the blind”. Furthermore, they include community-based programs, activities with locals and with non-museum visitors.<sup>iv</sup>

**Zoukak Studio and Zoukak Theatre Company** is a non-hierarchical structure, dedicated to theatre practice, with a belief in theatre as a space for common reflection as a position against marginalizing systems. They include in their mission statement the inclusion of children with disabilities: “We have tested and developed theatrical interventions in emergency situations and beyond, working with incarcerated youths, children with multiple disabilities, women subjected to domestic violence, migrant domestic workers and other marginalized fractions of our society, while continuing to work with people affected directly and indirectly by war”.<sup>v</sup> In addition, they hosted Pierre Geagea's performance in their venue (see below).

**Ashkal Alwan’s** renowned **Homework study-program** initiative had a yearly course in 2015-2016 that was entitled **Accessibility, Human Rights, and the Ghetto Effect**. Part of the course was focused on disability studies.<sup>vi</sup>

An example of a museum space that takes into consideration several forms of disability is the **Armenian Genocide Museum**, also known as the “Aram Bezikian” Museum (opened in 2015). Not only does it include ramps and easy-access paths, it also includes audio-visual elements within the scenography so the differently-impaired can still experience the exhibition in one way or another. However, it does not explicitly mention accessibility and inclusivity in its mission and vision.

The **Human Rights and Disability Festival** was launched in Lebanon in 2003. It is not clear for how many years the festival ran, but it is no longer an annual event. The **Lebanese Physical Handicapped Union (LPHU)**, in collaboration with various national and foreign associations, hosted the festival for two years with the aim of raising awareness on disability through film in particular, showcasing international, regional and national film-makers.

Finally, the **Sursock Museum** has a coming-soon access program which will be designed for people with special requirements, including persons with visual impairments, hearing impairments, and learning disabilities. The program is open to all ages and will enable access to the Museum’s collection and

exhibitions through talks, tours, and workshops led by specially-trained staff and artists. These include visual descriptions of work for visitors with visual impairments, to tours delivered in sign language.<sup>vii</sup>

### **Individual projects relating to Disability and the Arts**

**Rabih Mroue** (visual artist, stage and film actor, and playwright) theatre performance **Riding on a Cloud** (2013) is based on the true story of his brother who was shot to the head and became physically and mentally disabled because of the 1975 war. In it, he intertwines fiction and reality, whereby his brother Yasser appears on stage to recount what he remembers of the war and its traumas.<sup>viii</sup>

**Mohamad Al-Rawwas** created a video installation entitled **Please Sit Down** (2007) “inspired by a school of ancient Arab odes known as “Al Wouqouf ‘alal Atlal” (Standing over the Ruins), a poet’s lamentation on his beloved’s seasonal migration with her (Bedouin) tribe. A wooden chair faces a video screen. We are invited to be seated and a video loop shows people reciting a verse by Abu Nawas, an eighth century poet, in sign language.”<sup>ix,x</sup>

**Gregory Buchakjian** (art historian, visual artist) curated a virtual text-exhibition called a **Cabinet of Broken Bodies**, 2020, published by Selections Magazine in their Curated By section. The exhibition discourse is about the body in parts and its link to post-war trauma, and as such contains artworks by Lebanese artists that showcase disability, but also intimacy, illness and gender.<sup>xi</sup>

**Said Baalbacki’s One Hand Alone Can’t Clap** (2010) is a sculpture of a dismembered hand, symbolizing the story of the lost Beirut Martyr’s sculpture hand and at the same time symbolizing the scars that the war perpetuated (this sculpture also appeared in Gregory Buchakjian’s article, see above).<sup>xii</sup>

**Walid Sadek’s** (artist, writer and critic) work and essays generally treats all Lebanese as wounded survivors and his general theoretical work on a post-war society are not only a critique on the reluctance of post-war reconstruction efforts, but could also be read as proposing solutions for mental and physical war traumas and amnesia. Of particular note here is his essay **Inside Mourning in the Presence of a Corpse** (2012) and a parallel installation entitled **Inside Mourning in the Presence of a Corpse**, and **The Boy in the Sick Room** (2013).

Renowned artist **Etel Adnan’s** untitled ceramic wall, with abstract patterns and **Nadim Karam’s** sculpture **Grasping the World**, are permanent public art intervention for the Special Olympics Abu Dhabi in 2019. This was also the first time that the Middle East hosted a Special Olympic games.<sup>xiii</sup>

**Rusted Radishes Collective** is an interdisciplinary literary and art Journal. One of the collective’s recent projects was a digital illustration called **Object of Protest**, 2020. The project was part of a partnership with Public Works, an architecture practice working within and towards public spaces, and the **Lebanese Physically Handicapped Union**. The proposed outcomes of Beirut Moments are self-built interventions focused on social impact, raising awareness and challenging perceptions regarding disability and its material culture.<sup>xiv</sup>

**Mai Ghossoub** is a writer and artist who lost an eye during the 1975 war due to a bomb shell. She was the founder of Saqi Bookshop and Publishing House. She also wrote an autobiographical book, **Leaving Beirut: Women and the Wars Within** (1998).

**Lamia Al-Raad** is a writer who became paralyzed when she was 11 during the 1975 war due to a bomb explosion. Her book, **Le Bonheur Bleu** (2002), is an autobiography mainly focusing on resiliency and how a child survives a trauma and adapts to disability. In addition, Lamia is often found discussing her book in schools around Lebanon to raise awareness on the war and disability.

**Marie Khoury** is a self-taught visual artist who is almost completely paralyzed because of the 1975 war. She draws with her wrists and mouth. The artist is represented at Exode Art Gallery, Beirut, one of the few examples of a visual artist being represented by a gallery.<sup>xv</sup>

**Pierre Geagea** was born deaf. He is a contemporary dancer, performer and he is mostly known to combine dancing with sign language.<sup>xvi</sup>

**Paul Guiragossian** was a prominent visual artist with an international following who had one leg amputated due to an accident in an elevator and had previously painted amputees. However, few biographies mention that. In addition, he has a painted series on amputees 20 years before the accident, which are not found online.

For the First International Salsa Festival 2009, the 1st wheelchair show entitled **Wheelchair on Fire** was presented in Lebanon by **Fadi Halabi** and **Maya Nehme**. Since he was a kid, Fadi dreamed of creating a dance group where people with disabilities and those without disabilities were able to dance together on stage.<sup>xvii</sup>

## 1.1 Methodology

The research methodology used throughout was primarily based on first-hand knowledge of the cultural networks under consideration (through observation, meetings, and previous research), online research, a consultation workshop carried out with key stakeholders, and focused interviews with artists and institutions.

The interviews were undertaken with a particular focus on modes of work and praxis in relation to disability (including concerns around access, cultural policies, the politics of collaboration and representation), and the issue of agency and self-representation. Conducted by researchers based in the report is underlined by critical inquiry, social network analysis, content analysis, visual analysis, case studies, and participant observation. The focus on art practices ensured that the research is largely qualitative with some quantitative analysis of statistics.

This initial mapping of arts and culture actors across Jordan, Lebanon and OPT has been recorded in a database throughout the process and is available through the Disability Under Siege Website ([www.disabilityundersiege.org](http://www.disabilityundersiege.org)). The research methodology was primarily based on local knowledge of the art scene, as well as further observation and research. The preliminary mapping was carried out by roughly listing all arts and cultural key components, i.e.: artists, collectives, institutions etc. and then investigating each entry through online research, as well as some additional interviews when needed. The aforementioned was carried out with a particular focus on extracting modes of practice in relation to disability, i.e.: methodology and/or policies of access, policies and ethics of collaboration, as well as a reflection on direct or indirect thematic representations of disabilities in the arts and culture sphere.

## 1.2 Report Authors

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## About Disability Under Siege

The Disability Under Siege Network+ Project is a co-created programme bringing together a community of researchers, educational practitioners, advocacy organisations and disability led groups in the UK and Middle East. It will contribute to research efforts by providing intellectual and logistical resources that local practitioners need to transform education provision for children with disabilities in conflict-affected countries.

Disability Under Siege Network+ Grant Ref: AH/T005440/1 is funded by the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

For more information please visit: [www.disabilityundersiege.org](http://www.disabilityundersiege.org)

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- <sup>i</sup> See; <http://www.lebanon.com/construction/the.quarterly/99/jan-mar/discovery.htm>
- <sup>ii</sup> See; <http://www.solidere.com/sites/default/files/attached/planet-discovery.pdf>
- <sup>iii</sup> See; <http://www.redoaklb.org/news/the-national-museum-of-beirut-opens-its-doors-to-the-blind-and-visually-impaired>
- <sup>iv</sup> See; <https://www.macamlebanon.org/>
- <sup>v</sup> See; <https://zoukak.org/zoukak-theatre-company>
- <sup>vi</sup> See; <https://ashkalalwan.org/program.php?category=4&id=309>
- <sup>vii</sup> See; <https://sursock.museum/content/access-program>
- <sup>viii</sup> See; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s4PiXuP8zb4>
- <sup>ix</sup> Buchajkian, Gregory (2010). Territory, Space and Body: Historical Issues in Contemporary Lebanese Art in book: Convergence: New Art from Lebanon Publisher: APEAL Editors: Amal Traboulsi
- <sup>x</sup> See; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=khQ0wew1CXU>
- <sup>xi</sup> See; <https://selectionsarts.com/a-cabinet-of-broken-bodies-gregory-buchakjian/>
- <sup>xii</sup> See; <https://www.barjeelartfoundation.org/collection/mohammed-said-baalbaki-one-hand-cannot-clap-alone/>
- <sup>xiii</sup> See; <https://www.abudhabi2019.org/recent-news/new-permanent-public-artworks-in-abu-dhabi-to-deliver-a-lasting-legacy-of-inclusion>
- <sup>xiv</sup> See; <http://www.rustedradishes.com/object-of-protest/>
- <sup>xv</sup> See; <http://www.equipeexode.com/MarieKhoury>
- <sup>xvi</sup> See; <https://pierregeagea.com/>
- <sup>xvii</sup> See; <https://ritachemaly.wordpress.com/2010/03/16/wheel-on-fire-people-with-disabilities-dancing-rita-chemaly/>