

Ahmad Ghossein
Serotonin, Benzine, and a Renegade Body
Fragments of Reality

Opening on September 27, 2023

When a wave overwhelms you, you forget your voice and surrender to the void.

The tempestuous events have penetrated my being, reaching deepest within; hitting that infinitesimal point in the relentlessly throbbing nerve; whose beats never cease to haunt me; even when I shut my eyes.

I have been thrashed by momentous waves since 2019; my body pulled and tossed by the events in Beirut; my legs carried me to the Corniche; my hands alternated between flipping the circuit breaker and carrying gallons of gasoline; my breathing is busy drawing in rancid air in my two panicked lungs; now we have all become hunchbacks;

my eyes greeted the owner of the neighborhood's supplier of power with contrived gratitude. How can I not be grateful when he, alone, holds the keys to the propellor for my every day.

I am estranged from whom I have been prior to this time.

And because the body is treacherous, it compels me into its favorite somatic game. It reminds me of my limits; my physical, mechanical limits. It warns me:

I am your limits.

Do not listen to your mind because I will defeat it, just as I have defeated before those you loved. Your mind is incapable of comprehending what you are going through.

I am the body; I am your supreme god.

I am the transient force capable of eliminating you in the blink of an eye. Do not listen to your mind, which tempts you into thinking reality is worse than it actually is. It is only trying to rob you and me of our pleasure hormones.

I am here, and here I shall remain. And whenever you get carried too deep in a depressive cycle, I will prompt the heart to beat faster, so fast, that you will end up at the door of the hospital's ER. We, as members of the body committee, will order your inhalations and exhalations to halt until you are forced to run every morning to regain your strength.

As soon as the brain attempts to attune the flow of happiness hormones to the rhythm of this collapsing reality, we will rise as one to thwart its efforts. We will mute the voice speaking words, heavy with grief, so that you do not choke on your grief-laden words.

We know this wicked organ called the brain is most active at night. This traitor abducts the body's need for respite by playing tricks on you, robbing us all of our rightful neurotransmitters: of joy, of rest, of sleep.

As the collapse worsens, so does my impotence. I can no longer bear all that we have endured, and I am taken by my inner self. Or to be more precise, I have become attuned to the rhythm of the city. Brown-beaten and resigned, I walk around the streets. Whenever the panic in the city intensified, whether over

the fuel crisis or the dwindling dollar, so did my panic. Breathing became harder, and my body and brain cells warred on ceaselessly. And when the situation briefly stabilized or we adjusted to it, my rhythm would calm down and so did my heartbeats. Every act is a solitary act, like everyone else around me, I am busy trying to preserve the limited reservoir of my happiness hormones still left in me, trying my best to control my breathing.

The financial collapse was only the beginning of a series of shocks. I spent hours thoroughly reviewing my bank account. I recall a friend, who repeatedly advised me to set up a saving account for my retirement. He was obsessed and terrified from the idea that we, the self-employed, have no social security or protection for our old days. He would put away a monthly sum and deposit it at a bank that convinced him into thinking his retirement was safe with them. He lost all his money, cheated by the perfidious bank. In one year, he seems to have aged by twenty. He reached his retirement age much faster than expected.

I spent hours examining my bank account in Lebanese Pounds, calculating its dwindling value day by day. I decided to turn my money into an artwork titled "**How to Make your Money Sell**" which uses sliced bills of 1,000, 5,000, 10,000 and 20,000 Lebanese Pounds, bills which have now become useless. The sum of these worthless bills would amount to the money the bank has stolen from me. This artwork is dedicated to my friend whose lifespan was practically halved by his banker.

Running in circles, until we got bored of ourselves, our faces, our own grief. I felt I was thinking from my voice, perhaps it would end this warfare called anxiety, or despair, or fear, or panic. In response, in an attempt to survive or end the conflict between the warring members of the body committee and the sum of my nerve cells, I shifted my focus elsewhere to distract myself.

This is how I got attached to specific events or pieces of news, making them the center of my attention. I collected the most sordid, strange, incomprehensible news items. A journalist who claims to smell the natural gas stored hundreds of kilometers below the sea's bedrock; the arrival of a new self-proclaimed prophet; a generator owner cuts off the power supply to a police station because bills have not been paid; the US embassy recalls sixteen police dogs it had donated to our national police, because they became under-nourished.

I collected all of these news, real stories, stories that are not imagined or invented. One morning, I woke up to news that the Minister of Education is suggesting hauling speakers on roaming cars around the city to deliver classes for kids locked in their homes during the quarantine. Real stories that intensified my urge to take another tab of Xanax.

The video work titled "**So your heart aches, huh?**" or "**The Pit**" is centered around a personal text that narrates the various manners I tried to keep myself together through the collapse, mostly through my obsession with the work of hormones, especially hormones that arouse feelings of joy, contentment, and satisfaction, like dopamine and oxytocin. I was obsessed with learning how to raise their levels in my body while witnessing the chaos and madness of the country and the frenzied audacity of the media and its "news".

I got used to anticipating the absurd events that would happen to me on a daily basis, like my desperate attempt to find gasoline for my car during the fuel crisis. I went to the 'underground' black market in Dahyeh, Beirut's southern suburbs. I bought a gallon of gasoline, "sealed" as the young seller told me. It's an "original" apparently. How strange is this word in this context? I went with him to see how he seals

gallons, fills them up and brings them to his clients—fresh out of the black market. A sealed water gallon filled with gasoline in a country where no water reaches the houses, and no gasoline reaches the people. I ruminates over the different shapes and sizes of the plastic bottle cut in half and the short tube tied to it. It has become a tool to drip the gasoline into the fuel inlet. Almost no car today is without this handy tool.

After setting up the works of this exhibition, I noticed that its timeline oscillates between the beginning of the uprising, the ongoing collapse, and a work that attempts to engage with a previous artwork by the artist Marwan Richmaoui. Is “**Fragments from Beirut 2019...**” emerging from *Beirut Caoutchouc*, a conversation with it, or a rupture from it? In this new version, the building blocks and neighborhoods are not quite discernable, they are fragmented and disintegrating, as I see Beirut now.

I ran into Mounir Sabra on my way out of a yoga class right after the Beirut port explosion. The country endured yet another collective trauma after this catastrophe. No two people would meet without relaying the events of that hour: their exact location when half the city blew up.

We exchanged words briefly, then he immediately shifted to talking about his experience of that moment, and expressing relief that I was safe (alive). When he finished recounting the events, he pulled up photos from his phone of his destroyed home and the buildings surrounding it. He explained how he escaped and the horrors he witnessed.

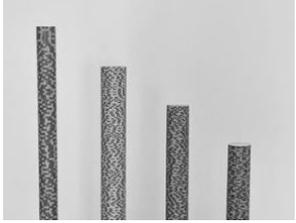
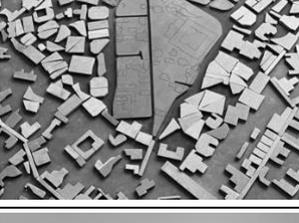
One particular photo caught my attention. It was a picture of a piece of rubber with a map of Nejme Square and the Serail in downtown Beirut, a picture from a work I knew well. Mounir said this piece was still in his house. He didn't know how it got there—it was probably blown away with the shards of wood and glass that ended up in the wreckage of his house. When I told him this was a piece from an artwork, Mounir remembered that in the giant building near his house lived a well-known collector called Henry Salloum. This likely belonged to some work in his collection. Mounir and I went to visit Mr. Salloum carrying the broken piece. He had bought the artwork titled Beirut Caoutchouc and dedicated an entire room for its display. Beirut Caoutchouc was also blown to pieces from the blast. Only a few of its parts remain, scattered here and there. The largest piece had landed in Mounir's house.

Henry refused to take it back. He said he was leaving Lebanon for good, taking with him only a few artworks that had survived unscathed.

This story is fiction. Reality is, however, stranger than fiction. The only true fact in this story is that the blast happened.

This exhibition includes works that reflect the current circumstances in all their frenzy and lethal chaos.

Translation and copy editing:
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<p>Ahmad Ghossein A Sealed Gallon 2023</p> <p>Resin Variable Dimensions</p>	
<p>Ahmad Ghossein How to make your money sell 2023</p> <p>Lebanese Pounds cutout on wooden beams Variable Dimensions</p>	
<p>Ahmad Ghossein For Different Use 2023</p> <p>Copper 60 x 40 cm</p>	
<p>Ahmad Ghossein The Intelligence and His Camera 2023</p> <p>Inkjet on Epson semi matt photo paper (manipulated by hand) 35 x 62 cm each</p>	
<p>Ahmad Ghossein Filming Him, Filming Me 2023</p> <p>Mixed media on paper 35 x 35 cm each</p>	
<p>Ahmad Ghossein Fragments from Beirut 2019... 2023</p> <p>Rubber, EVA foam 320 x 250 cm</p>	
<p>Ahmad Ghossein The Pit or "So your heart aches, huh?" 2023</p> <p>Video 26'29"</p>	

Translation of the photo series: *Filming Him, Filming Me (2023)*

I raised my phone and took pictures of this man standing in the center of the frame, the one photographing the demonstration from a slightly elevated concrete block above the rest of the protesters. Do you see him? There in the middle of the photo, pointing his camera in our direction, tilting it towards the sky occasionally or to the building on his right. He was standing there taking pictures for over five hours. Was he really photographing our bodies? Capturing our faces on that camera? All this time? I had taken a close-up of him during another protest the day before. I tried to figure out which camera he was using. I undertook a strenuous online search and consulted with several professional photographer friends. Opinions differed.

Some said it was a cassette camera, others believed it was the type that needs a card; was it a MiniDV or an SD card camera? Was he really taking all these pictures on a cassette camera? That would have barely gotten him an hour of footage. Was he erasing and recording again?

If it's a camera with a memory card, he can record for hours upon hours.

I know an old Sony camera cannot take HD photographs.

After a while, I became convinced he was an intelligence agent recording the protest. I don't know to which agency he belonged, but he was obviously waiting for something to happen. It was often violence or the beginning of riots that he anticipated. I raised my phone and took photos of him until he noticed me. I panicked and hid my phone away.

I was filming him as he was filming all of us.

Location: Riad El-Solh Square. Can't recollect the exact day. All days following October 2019 looked the same. I only remember being in that square, protesting, shouting.

I couldn't stop myself from looking at him/photographing him. I watched his every move. Clearly he was bored. At one moment, he looked in my direction and pointed his camera towards me. He lifted his gaze from the screen and looked into my eyes. I returned his gaze and held it until he looked away. This challenge pleased me.

This is how our relationship developed over those long hours: Locking gaze through the screen. Sometimes, he would get flustered and raise his camera to the sky, or that's what I'd like to believe! Was he capturing the movement of clouds? Why did he point it in that direction? Was someone up there on the roof of the building?

I would often also avert my gaze if he looked at me too long. I pretended I was photographing the protesters. I would move my phone left and right before photographing him again. I was satisfied with this bond of eyes and cameras between us. To which agency did he belong? Military intelligence? State security? Information branch? Presidential Guard? In any case, I ruled out the Presidential Guard and also the Army Intelligence. Those usually wear the green camouflaged uniform. During the protests, I saw several individuals in military attire with advanced cameras.

He must definitely be affiliated with one of the State Security agencies. Was he able to capture pictures of all the protesters that day, standing there for hours in the same spot, scanning the demonstration left and right with his camera? As time passed, he seemed to grow more bored, indicating he was waiting for something. Or was his only task to document the protest until it ended? He continued to film until nightfall. Let's assume he's using a 32 GB SD card, filming at 720x480 resolution. In that case, he would be able to film for over forty hours. But if this were a cassette camera, he would need to delete and refilm footage on the same cassette.

The intelligence agent is documenting the protesters and their identities.

The intelligence agent is flaunting his camera as a tactic of intimidation.

It's as if he's saying I'm here to capture your photos, to know you are, to document that you were in this protest. Taking the most beautiful shot from the best angle doesn't really seem to interest him at all. He scans his camera from left to right as if he is used to this kind of documentation.

How does he offload everything he's recorded, considering he's been standing there for more than five hours? What software does he use to verify our identities?

Well, what does the intelligence agent do with his camera after he returns to his workplace after filming?

Is there some underground room in his intelligence agency building fully equipped with whatever he needs for filming, editing, storing, and archiving all this footage?

I mean, how do they document everything that has been filmed? And for what purpose?