

Selecting, sorting, looking: an archeology of Fouad Elkoury's photographic career
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In November 1991, along with Gabriele Basilico, René Burri, Raymond Depardon, Robert Frank and Josef Koudelka, Fouad Elkoury took part in a photographic project in the center of Beirut. The historic heart of the city had been a battleground from fall 1975 onward, then a demarcation line up until 1990, and was reduced to ruins, with cracked facades, rampant vegetation and sunken roadways, haunted by wandering figures. The brainchild of the writer Dominique Eddé, the project took place one year after the end of a war that had lasted fifteen years. With its portrait of post-conflict Beirut, following on from the abundant visual documentation produced during the conflict itself, this project laid the groundwork for subsequent reflections on the city, memory and history undertaken by researchers, artists and writers. It also reminds us that ruins were one of photography's first subjects — the oldest surviving photographs of Lebanon are daguerreotypes by Joseph Philibert Girault de Prangey (1842–44) depicting, notably, the portal of the Temple of Bacchus in Baalbek — while at the same time following in the footsteps of previous endeavors, including:

The Mission Héliographique of 1851 which aimed to “educate and raise scientific awareness” in France as well as supporting the artists commissioned to depict urban and natural landscapes, views and monuments; the famous Depression-era Farm Security Administration photography program in the United States; and the DATAR photographic mission of 1984 which aimed to document the French landscape in the context of regional planning and development.¹

Fouad Elkoury was the only Lebanese member of the team and — except for Depardon, who had visited several times — the only one who already knew Beirut and Lebanon and had photographed them before and during the war. *Beirut City Centre* came at a crucial point in his career, of which the main milestones can be summarized as follows: Elkoury, who never studied photography, started to develop an increasingly systematic practice in the late 1960s. At this point he was using a Nikkormat that belonged to his parents, noting down the shutter speed, aperture and time of day for every shot — and then taking another shot with different speed and aperture settings, like a pianist learning scales. After the outbreak of hostilities, he produced extensive visual documentation of the country's death throes and the population's resilience. In the mid-1980s he published *Beyrouth aller-retour*, his first book, moved to France and then spent more than a year in Egypt having won a Villa

¹ Marcel Fortini, *L'esthétique des Ruines dans la photographie de guerre. Beyrouth centre-ville, une commande exemplaire*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2014 p. 23.

Médicis “Hors les murs” residency. For several years, he was a member of Rapho, one of the oldest photographic agencies, covering a range of subjects for publications including *Géo*, *Libération*, *Télérama*, *Paris Match*, and *Le Monde* as well as for institutions. With his strong interest in different geographic regions, he was very disappointed not to be selected for the DATAR project.² By way of consolation he bought himself a medium-format camera and undertook his own commissions, producing extensive documentations of cities — including Amman, Djibouti and Rome in 1987, for example.

Beirut City Centre was at once a “retaliation” and a return to his own country after more than five years away. It was a trip that had its own unique significance, quite apart from all the emotional and subjective factors surrounding it. Elkoury was coming back in the company of iconic figures such as Robert Frank. Although the city-center ruins had already featured in his previous work — notably in 1977, 1980, and 1983 — here his work was part of a specific commission culminating in a book publication and an exhibition at Palais de Tokyo in 1993. Photography publisher Robert Delpire (whose publications include *The Americans* by Robert Frank)³ curated the final selection of images for the project.

In 1992, returning from a mission in Beirut in which six photographers were commissioned to document the city’s ruins, straight after I had developed the films I set to work examining the 160 or so contact sheets I had in front of me. A quick initial glance was enough to reassure me: no, I hadn’t missed the mark; yes, I had succeeded in expressing the emotion I felt. Once this moment had passed I started to compare the images produced in the same location to find the best one; I considered which ones deserved to be picked out, made individual proof prints to see them better, and then made my final selection. At this point I was almost certain I’d made the right choice. I gave 72 images to Robert Delpire. From the 72 images in his possession, Delpire selected 23. Why those 23 in particular? Was it because of how he planned to set images side by side in the book; was it in relation to other the photographers’ work? I’ll never know. But those 23 images were the ones that would sum up my work for posterity, from this point forward.⁴

The issue of selection, addressed here by Elkoury a quarter century after the event, is fundamental to all photographic work intended for publication, exhibition, or other forms of dissemination. This is a key difference between the work of photographers and that of artists, for whom a finished painting, sculpture, or installation essentially represents part of a body of work intended to be shown.

² The photographic mission undertaken by DATAR (Délégation interministérielle à l’Aménagement du Territoire et à l’Attractivité Régionale – the Delegation for Planning and Regional Action) was a state project initially, in 1984, involving twelve photographers with the aim of “representing the French landscape in the 1980s”. Website: [<http://missionphoto.datar.gouv.fr/>].

³ Michel Frizot, “Robert Frank and Robert Delpire”, *Looking In Robert Frank’s The Americans*, Washington, National Gallery of Art, Steidl Verlag, 2009, pp. 190–98.

⁴ Fouad Elkoury, “Comment établir une sélection ?”, September 2016.

Preoccupied by the question of whether the rejects were as important as the photos that were selected, between October 2016 and February 2017 the authors reviewed the entirety of Fouad Elkoury's photographic archive on Lebanon (in the form of contact sheets and slides), covering a period extending from 1962 to 2017. The work began with *Beirut City Centre* because this specific project, with its unity of time, location and subject, presented a clearly delineated whole. With the twenty-three images of the official selection before us, we examined all the photographs and asked ourselves what made a particular image worthy or not of inclusion.

Starting with these initial explorations and then extending to all the 50,000 photographs taken in Lebanon, the exercise — inevitably — did not produce a definitive answer. Photography is not an exact science — it does not obey fixed, immutable rules. The criteria for any specific selection might depend on compliance with the brief, in the case of an assignment and, more generally, on the photographs' intended destination. However, despite our shared underlying wish to avoid hackneyed "official selection" images, we did retain some because of the emotion they produce. So what is it that makes an iconic photograph? What do Fouad Elkoury's three photographs most prized by collectors — *Corniche*, *Portemilio* and *Sherihan* — have in common? For the first of the three, is it the fact that the landscape is almost invisible in the haze, while the last of them nearly didn't happen at all, the diva having kept the photographer waiting for an entire evening, only finally and reluctantly permitting him to take two shots of her sitting in the auditorium before she left? And what about *Portemilio*? Is it because views of people bathing have become a cliché of how "normal life" is imagined in wartime, while the water fountain and the chimneys of Zouk Mikael power station add an offbeat note to the scene?

The factors that cause an image to be chosen or discarded are indeed many and frequently subjective in nature. The first photographs a selector is tempted to weed out are those identified as "failures", i.e. images that are blurred or badly composed. Selectors also tend to remove any images that are damaged, either because they were not developed properly or because the film has deteriorated over time. Yet even in cases that appear to be self-evident, it is not easy to be categorical. We have seen examples of both researchers and artists taking interest in defective or damaged photographs. An example of this in Fouad Elkoury's work is the photographic "ruin" comprising his negatives from the filming of *Circle of Deceit* (to which we return below). Another type of image it is tempting to eliminate would be the banal shot "anyone holding a camera" or "even a student" could have taken. Here, too, though, the argument doesn't always hold true. Bernd and Hilla Becher, to cite just one example, elevated frontal views of industrial buildings to the status of masterpieces. Elkoury's portfolio, likewise, includes innumerable images that might be classified as ordinary or mundane. During two periods — in 1983 and especially in the late 1990s — he was photographing supermarkets, universities, banks, restaurants, bars, nightclubs and art galleries. This process didn't generate any kind

of magic. Those photographs would probably fall through the net of a selection process, and yet they do have a certain importance for all that. They are undeniably invested with a documentary value — apart from anything because most of these establishments, which were “new” at the time, no longer exist today. Furthermore, they illustrate Beirut’s split personality: this is a city that seems to dance all night to avoid confronting its ghosts. In the photographer’s career too, these two “bad patches” came after especially intense experiences: the Israeli invasion in 1982 and the demolition of the city center in the 1990s.

Other images perhaps went unnoticed in the past, due to their sheer simplicity, but are surfacing again now. Again and again, during our work sessions, Fouad Elkoury would exclaim: “I never saw that photo before!” This was the case with a shot taken on a morning in 1977, on the Beirut waterfront. In an otherworldly atmosphere, two groups of people are busying themselves around two metal structures, resembling balcony railings, whose function remains mysterious. On the right, two men in swimsuits are showering themselves with a hose, perhaps rinsing off after a dip. The restraint of their gestures gives them a dignity that’s almost sacred — so much so that a viewer unaware of where the picture was taken might imagine it to be set by the Ganges.

At the opposite end of the spectrum from the “failed” or “banal” image, photos might also be rejected for being “too spectacular”, “sensationalist”, “clichéd”, “a beauty shot”, or “cheap” (creating a cheap impressive effect), just as some photographers like Salgado have been criticized for prettifying poverty. We might contrast, for example, a photo that looks impressive at first sight, but is quickly forgotten, with the photo that stays with you, like the image of the bathers described above. With this quality in mind I gave myself a memory test, a week after the end of our first work session, in which I attempted to draw and describe the photographs I remembered. While by no means providing a foolproof basis for making a selection (inevitably I had forgotten some important photographs), it did reveal something about what we retain of an image. Do we remember a precise composition? A place, a moment, a character? Or do we tend to remember trivial details like washing on a line or the socks a woman was wearing — even when we can’t recall whether or not her face was visible? Or do we retain just a vague impression, an atmosphere?

Selecting photographs involves an intricate entanglement of the senses (the eye), of memories (“I remember this place”; “this or that happened”), of the emotions. Applying this selection process to all the series covering Lebanon generated many epic discussions around particular images and what they depicted: an anecdotal detail — whether funny, unusual or terrible; a character (whether they were liked or disliked); an event or situation. This was especially true of the series *Traces of War*. Produced between 1993 and 1997, *Traces of War* could be considered as a natural continuation of *Beirut City Centre* in the sense that it is located mainly (though not exclusively) on the same devastated geographic terrain. With respect to its production, though, *Traces of War* was the result of a personal initiative rather than a commission. Every day, the photographer went to the center of Beirut, by

then a vast construction site, without anyone asking him to do so. This decision to undertake unpaid work, day by day — work whose outcome no one awaited but himself — arose directly from the impulse that brought this photographic series into being: *Traces of War* was born out of rage at seeing his city deliberately demolished. It is an act of rebellion against the people who “stole Beirut from me”, an act that follows in a long line of other rebellions: against his father, against authority, against injustice, against consumerism, against photographic agencies that imposed a specific way of doing things. Deliberately engaged, in the political sense of the word, *Traces of War* comes a decade before *Beirut Mission Solidere*, Elkoury’s most problematic project. Undertaken as part of a commission from the real-estate company — the only way of obtaining authorization to photograph this new city, with its stringent security arrangements — the assignment should have resulted in a book, which remains unpublished to date,⁵ combining the work of the four photographers involved (Gabriele Basilico, Robert Polidori, Klavdij Sluban, and Fouad Elkoury). Elkoury makes a point of asserting that his photographs are highly critical of this “proposed Beirut”. His next series, *Visit Lebanon*, was also “an act of rebellion against the appropriation of the landscape” by shady entrepreneurs, gaping quarries, and other unpunished environmental crimes.

But let us return to the business of selection. Without the commission for *Beirut City Centre* it is doubtful whether Fouad Elkoury would have taken a plane to Beirut to immortalize its ghostly cityscapes. Even had he come upon the idea of doing so there is nothing to say that he would have photographed the same views. And the same twenty-three pictures would certainly not have been selected, because Delpire would not have been involved. It goes without saying that the selection processes for these two series, *Beirut City Centre* and *Traces of War*, were diametrically opposed.⁶ During our process of reviewing *Traces of War*, Elkoury frequently called for certain photographs to be kept because they explicitly expressed his outrage in the face of the catastrophe. Apart from those where civilians — residents or refugees — were resignedly witnessing the city’s disappearance, three particular images stand out here. The first shows a block of concrete suspended in mid-air, bearing (in Arabic) the inscription “Bayrout” — placed on it by Solidere: “The arrival of the invaders” is how the photographer sees this image, emphasizing the fact that the block hanging from a crane metaphorically presents the landing of an alien body. In the second image, clearly more evocative, a similar block, just as new, occupies — as though it had always stood there — a terrain that has been completely cleared, almost like scorched earth, its sole survivor a stray dog. The third, finally, is entitled *No Present*. In the foreground, we see the archeological excavations of the Petit Serail, built in the late nineteenth century and demolished in 1950,⁷ with, above it, a

⁵ *Beirut Mission, Photos 2009–2011*, Steidl Verlag. Announced on the publisher’s website as “not yet published” [<https://steidl.de/Books/Beirut-Mission-Photos-2009-2011-0121294560.html>] <https://steidl.de/Books/Beirut-Mission-Photos-2009-2011-0121294560.html> .

⁶ It should be noted that unlike *Beirut City Centre*, *Traces of War* was not produced for a specific publication or exhibition.

⁷ May Davie, “La construction nationale et l’héritage ottoman au Liban” (Maison de l’Orient et de la Méditerranée, Lyon : 2009), p. 5. Available online at http://www.mom.fr/sites/mom.fr/files/img/Ressources_numeriques_et_outils/Documents_numerises/Colloqu

panel depicting the future vision for the view from Martyrs' Square. The photographer sees *No Present* as a central image in his vision of Beirut's reconstruction. I was skeptical initially: it seemed to me that the opposition of the excavation (the past) and the notice (the future) was too obvious. Nonetheless when I spread out the 500 proofs of the preliminary selection on my work table, *No Present* stood out, quite naturally and unexpectedly. The frontal composition and the title show how "temporal considerations were entirely absent from the designs developed by the planners of Beirut's city center: time as the reconstitution of a remembered past and the preservation or rather the restoration of its diverse architecture".⁸ The perspective view illustrated on the panel, unreal as it is, conjures up both the ideal cities of the early twentieth century, like those of Le Corbusier and Ludwig Hilberseimer, and the deserted avenues of Pyongyang and other capitals of totalitarian states, while the excavation supposedly evoking past magnificence is merely pitiful. Beyond its militant message, *No Present* questions what a city can become in a world where urban annihilations are no longer the sole preserve of science fiction. Ultimately, given the multitude of factors involved and the subjectivity of the eyes examining the archives, no selection is definitive. We can only agree with Elkoury himself when he says: "I'm sure that if we undertook the same process in ten years' time we'd discover new photos".

A photograph's selection, then, depends on its intrinsic qualities, on what it was intended for, and on the context of its production. And this context is what determines the subdivision of any photographer's production into commissions, projects, series, portfolios, and other groupings. Elkoury's rigorous organization of his archive reflects a sense of order rooted in his childhood, when he used to collect stamps. His films are numbered in a system dating from 1983, which started with the number 1000. "1000 rather than 1 because I said to myself that one day I might find old films, which did indeed happen on two occasions." Each film has a contact sheet. The contact sheets, many of which we looked at during the selection process, tell us a good deal about the photographer's practice. When the film covers a specific location, such as the Greek Orthodox Cathedral of Saint George, its decaying frescoes covered with graffiti, or the lounges of the Carlton Hotel, which remained open during the war but gradually fell into a state of torpor, we can follow the photographer's eye, the route he took around a particular motif or view, without actually repeating himself.

As well as being categorized and numbered, the films are grouped into series. At the start of 2017, Elkoury's website listed thirty-five of these series. A series can relate to a country (Turkey, Egypt), to specific locations (Petra, Charles de Gaulle airport), to regional themes (rural Europe), architectural themes (military bases) and personal themes. As the present work is focused — for practical rather than

[es_texte_integral/Patrimoines_culturels_en_Mediterranee_orientale/3eme_atelier/Davie_edite.pdf](#) (French only).

⁸ Nabil Beyhum, "Le rôle du symbolisme dans la planification urbaine : le cas de la place des Canons", in *Conquérir et reconquérir la ville : l'aménagement urbain comme positionnement des pouvoirs et contre-pouvoirs*. Beirut: Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts, 2009, p. 149.

ideological reasons — on the photographs taken in Lebanon, ten of these series concern us here. They differ radically from one another — in formal terms, in the number of photographs they contain, and in what they communicate. Some, like *Illusions*, seem to act as receptacles, in which a variety of characters, events and issues co-exist. Nonetheless it is clear that some series, taken together, form a continuous sequence in their depiction of a Lebanese landscape: *Beirut City Centre* (1991), *Traces of War* (1993–97), and *Beirut Mission Solidere* (2009–11) explore Beirut’s city center, first frozen at the point of collapse, then in the process of disintegration, and finally bristling with shiny new structures and crisscrossed by painfully immaculate avenues. Furthermore, *Sidelines* (1970–75), Elkoury’s first project, a road trip looking at rural architecture and nature, seems to anticipate *Visit Lebanon* (2011–present), a series of disfigured postcards which both complements and counterpoints it, as if a circle has been completed.

Of all the series taken entirely or partly in Lebanon (the latter being the case in *Story of Z*, focused on Elkoury’s family), there is one that stands out in three respects — scale, duration, and diversity: *Civil War* which, as its name suggests, deals with the Lebanese civil war. Although it does not cover the full duration of the hostilities, starting in 1977 and breaking off in 1985 with Elkoury’s departure for Paris, it encompasses all of Lebanon, from Beirut to the Beqaa Valley, from Tripoli to Southern Lebanon under Israeli occupation and the Mountain War, and encompasses all kinds of subjects: battles, bombardments, attacks, ruins, portraits of political figures, portraits of fighters, training of combatants, military parades, detention centers, landscapes, street scenes, workplaces and manufacturing sites, film shoots, social life and high society, private scenes. Can the term “series” be accurately applied to this compilation of tens of thousands of negatives and slides? Should it be subdivided into sub-groups, by period (e.g. the Israeli invasion of 1982) or by theme? Or should we accept it as it is — a sprawling, fragmented depiction of the life and death of a country and its people? *Civil War* did not result from a specific idea or approach, as was the case with *Sidelines* — and subsequently with *Beirut City Centre* and the series that came after this. Essentially it is the product of a need “to satisfy a primitive desire that cannot be contained, that spills out in all directions” — a drive that is innate in this photographer.

Given an initial formal structure with the publication of *Beyrouth aller-retour* in 1984, *Civil War* became a series after the fact, in the summer of 2002, with the creation of the photographer’s website fouadelkoury.com. The website launch coincided with turbulence both in the photographer’s personal life and in the wider history of photography as a medium. In the late 1990s, Elkoury — now living in Istanbul — started to experience pain. He returned to Paris. “You’ve got a tiny cancer,” said the doctor. “Can I smoke a ‘tiny’ cigarette?” replied the patient. The cigarette isn’t tiny, nor is the cancer. After two years during which illness eclipsed photography, he went to Iceland to convalesce: it was here that the news of the 9/11 attacks reached him. Back in the small world of photography following this enforced rest period, Elkoury saw his former colleagues losing their jobs, except for those working in fashion or advertising and those taken up by the art market. At the dawn

of the twenty-first century, the advent of digital cameras and online media was turning the worlds of photography and journalism upside down. Witnessing this crisis, the photographer had the wisdom — to paraphrase the title of one of his books (*La Sagesse du Photographe*) — to adapt and evolve. In 2002, he put a website online in order to present his work to collectors, exhibition and museum curators, and the wider public. Fifteen years later he is rather proud that he was one of the first to create a comprehensive web platform, a valuable resource — although he still refuses to use a digital camera, a smart phone (he uses an Indian Nokia, although it is one that can hold two SIM cards), or social networks, which he dismisses, collectively, as “gadgets”.

The creation of the website formalized the organization of Fouad Elkoury’s work into series, accompanying the transition from a practice designed for newspaper and magazine work to one focused on exhibiting and selling to museums and institutions. This change is also evidenced in the numbering of his prints in limited editions, an act he once would have found inconceivable, “because of my activist stance, but also because the difference between photography and painting is precisely this ability to produce an infinite number of prints”. Enjoying an increasingly high profile in France, thanks in particular to an exhibition in the Maison Européenne de la Photographie and the publications of *Suite égyptienne*, *Liban provisoire* and *Sombres*, he felt rather overlooked in the country of his birth, but did get involved there nonetheless as one of the founders of the Arab Image Foundation in 1997.

In the eyes of Europeans I was labeled photographer + Lebanese. In the eyes of the Lebanese I wasn’t anything at all. It was a hostile environment; photographers are routinely regarded with suspicion in the Arab world. I had to emigrate to achieve recognition. If I hadn’t emigrated I would never have done what I’ve been able to do.

In the late 2000s, Lebanon’s cultural scene burst into life again and photography became more highly valued as an artistic practice. In 2007, Fouad Elkoury was among the artists selected by Sandra Dagher and Saleh Barakat for the first Lebanese pavilion at the Venice Art Biennale. Two years later, the Beirut Art Center opened, and in 2011 its exhibition space presented *Be... Longing*, a solo exhibition coinciding with the publication (by Steidl) of the book of the same name.

Around the same time, Elkoury’s work also began to be published in another form — as posters and postcards produced by the artisan publisher Plan Bey. Its founder, Tony Sfeir, was the first to highlight the presence of color photographs, in the *Civil War* series in particular. As a result, some of the Plan Bey posters are in color — such as the photograph of a torn billboard poster for the film *Women in Love* which could be seen at the Starco cinema in 1977. Still in 2011, in Brussels, the exhibition *Ceci n'est plus Beyrouth: Beyrouth plus belle qu'elle ne l'était*, organized by Fabienne Verstraeten, included color photographs, namely that of the girl wearing a red dress in Borj Brajneeh or the one of the photographer on Martyrs’ Square. In 2012, Plan

Bey published three folding editions of double-sided postcards presenting the same compositions but in color on one side and in black and white on the other. These objects showcase the color production of a photographer known over several decades prior to this for his work in black and white.

Indeed, in the early 1980s Fouad Elkoury used to travel with two cameras, one containing a color slide film, the other a black and white film. This is true in particular, but not uniquely, of the period when he was working with Sygma. The photographer himself had erased these images from his memory, regarding color, at that time, as a less serious medium. In *Sombres*, the cover — on which we see a man at the window of a ship on the Sea of Marmara — is a color original converted into black and white. Inside the book, two photographs were published in color — almost by accident, it is tempting to think — along with the portrait of the photographer on the back cover. It is difficult to elucidate the reasons why Elkoury chose to take the same pictures in black and white and in color. An interesting point of comparison, though, is Bruce Davidson's descent into the underworld of the New York subway in the spring of 1980, when he started by working in black and white. After a time, he became aware that his subject "demanded a color consciousness" and that the "strobe light reflecting off the steel surfaces of the defaced subway cars created a new understanding of color".⁹ Since the subjects and locations photographed by Fouad Elkoury are extremely varied, even within a single series like *Civil War*, it seems rather incongruous to seek to establish a generally applicable rule. If *Passage du Musée*, for example, is clearly superior in black and white to its color version, this is not merely because the latter is blurred, but above all because the landscape colors are earthy and dull, while the black and white brings out contrasting textures and gives the scene a timeless aura: we could be in Berlin in 1945. Conversely, the girl wearing red in Borj el Brajneh camp, who exists in color only, can be converted into black and white. While the image retains its strength as a composition, it loses a good deal of the intensity generated by the close-fitting dress at the intersection of all the vanishing lines.

Beyond these choices, faced by all photographers, regarding production (color or black and white, film or digital, 35 mm or medium-format film) and image dissemination, are the deeper questions that are fundamental to — perhaps even the starting point for — any creative act: "I'm surrounded by question marks," says Fouad Elkoury. Indeed, no other creative practice has been subject to so much questioning as photography. Partly because the act of taking photographs and the fact of being a photographer tend to become confused. If we were to define a photographer as someone who takes photographs there would be as many photographers as there are individuals who possess mobile phones. And yet we don't equate people who can write with writers, in the same way. Before digital came on the scene, Instamatic and Polaroid popularized photography — but the people who immortalized their children's birthdays at the time had no other pretensions than to create souvenirs. Fouad Elkoury started, like everyone, by

⁹ Bruce Davidson, *Bruce Davidson: Subway*, Göttingen: Steidl, 2011, p. 10.

photographing his family, his holidays. He insists, moreover, that the unpublished photographs we have grouped under the title *Intimité* [Intimacy] (photographs which are not included in any series on his website) cannot be published with the same status as the others because they were not the product of a conscious strategy, even if some of them are strikingly composed. He was a young man destined for a career as an architect when he undertook his first project characterized by artistic awareness and a clearly-defined theme — an expedition across the country looking at local landscapes and architectures; this project would later be titled *Sidelines*. Yet it was not until much later that he would see this activity as his life, his profession, his identity.

I started to call myself a photographer in 1979. I became a photographer when I was taken on by Sygma. On September 1, 1982, I set foot on Piraeus and became a photographer thanks to the scoop I'd unwittingly stumbled on. Agencies were waiting on the quayside. They wanted photos of Arafat on board the Atlantis.¹⁰ I didn't want to sell the photos. I can't be cashing in on warfare. I wanted to be hired. The photos from the Atlantis weren't published because they were overtaken by events — the news of Princess Grace of Monaco's death (September 14).

(...)

The attack on the United States embassy on April 18, 1983 made me decide to leave Sygma, less than a year after I was hired. Since 1979 I'd dreamed of becoming a photographer, and here I was with the opportunity of earning my living as one — yet after a year I walked away.

Framed by two events (the trip on the Atlantis alongside Arafat; the attack on the American embassy), this brief period with Sygma tells us a lot about Fouad Elkoury as a person. While the fact that he was hired is a clear sign of recognition by professionals in his field, the act of walking away is even more important. Not just as a gesture of rebellion — but because Elkoury's photographic work is fundamentally not that of a photojournalist looking for scoops. His coverage of the attack on the US embassy tells us no more than what any correspondent present at the scene would have conveyed. In Elkoury's work, violence is absent, or in some cases deflected, as in the almost Felliniesque scene in which a Palestinian fighter serves tea to Israeli prisoners. Sometimes nothing in the photograph speaks of war, at least on the surface, as in this example:

In 1981, I took a photograph in an Armenian school at Bourj Hammoud. Hanging on the wall at the far end of a classroom, opposite the teacher and his blackboard, were photographic portraits, properly framed, of heroes of Armenian history. The presence of these portraits became just as important for me as that of the children sitting behind their desks. While all the other

¹⁰ The ship on which Yasser Arafat was evacuated from Beirut to Piraeus during the Israeli blockade of Beirut. Fouad Elkoury was also on board.

communities in the country were fighting in the name of their heroes, the Armenians were content to revere theirs.

Elkoury is a seeker of emotions, sensations, of one angle or viewpoint countered by another. Many of his strongest images have one thing in common: they are inhabited by people telling stories. The woman in white going through the Museum checkpoint, the adolescent girl in a dress standing on a barrel among militiamen, girl in the red dress passing a veiled woman and plunging into the labyrinth of the devastated Palestinian camp. Many images also express resilience to war, like the ones where people are going to the beach, the Sporting Club packed with visitors a few days before the Israeli invasion, *Portemilio*, with its pair of sun-worshipping bathers, and the public beach at Ramlet al-Baida, overrun with crowds as if this were Florida during the spring break. And then there is the picnic at Baalbek:

[...] which appears to me now as the epitome of femininity, decadence, the good life, and resistance, all in a sleeping face, a languidly bent arm, two straw hats, tall grass, and a silver tray piled high with fresh fruit.¹¹

This proximity to the human body is explained by technical factors. Indeed, Elkoury refuses to have multiple lenses, using a 35 mm focal length which forces him to get close to the scene. This living presence also reflects the photographer's alignment with a particular strand of photographic history:

From 1979 through the following years my approach was influenced by Henri Cartier-Bresson. I was photographing situations with human figures, looking for the decisive moment. Later, freeing myself from people, I realized that I could take my time.

In 1991, in the instructions for *Beirut City Centre*, Dominique Eddé said that people should not be photographed in the ruins. "For me this was nonsensical!" And yet after this the human figures began to fade from view, in *Beirut Mission Solidere* and above all in *Visit Lebanon* where, today "I don't have any people left". *Traces of War* arguably plays a transitional role in this gradual transformation, one in which the human figure withdraws progressively, leaving the places to speak. Here, on the one hand we have the crazy city, populated by a freak show of squatters, the war-maimed, and knick-knack sellers, sleeping on tables, hanging from collapsed staircases; on the other we see panoramas of devastation in which nothing remains but rubble, sand, and dust. In this context, a bird's-eye view shot in which we see the tiny figures of the photographer's two sons playing in this vast and dangerous terrain can be seen as a rite of passage.

Also in the 1990s, Elkoury published for the first time his views of an Israeli bombardment in 1982. Taken from an apartment building in Verdun street, they

¹¹ Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, "Always Struggle with the Object, Always Rewrite the World," *South Magazine*, 2015, http://www.documenta14.de/en/south/55_always_struggle_with_the_object_always_rewrite_the_world.

show clouds of smoke over the Ramlet el-Baida district. Too distant, and taken without a telephoto lens, they did not give the press the level of detail offered by much more “explicit” photos of the same district — like the one featured on the cover of *Time* on August 16, 1982. Gathered together in a nine-part polyptych under the name *Peace in Galilee*, for me these distant bombardments connect with two other works arising from the same Israeli invasion: photographs taken by Akram Zaatari, an adolescent at the time, of bombardments around Saida, and collected in 2006 in a single large composition titled simply *Saida, 1982*, and *We decided to let them say, “we are convinced” twice* by Walid Raad. This series of black and white images from The Atlas Group project also includes views of bombardments. The most remarkable shot is the one in which we see spectators, men, viewed from behind, with nothing else visible. The images of bombardments by Elkoury, Zaatari and Raad express a distance from the action; a distance, too, from the whole of Elkoury’s work, which was at the heart of the action, among people, as in *East–West crossing*, *Strada* and *Portemilio*.

From *Beirut City Centre* onward, Elkoury is working not just with distance but also with timescale. In this context, it is interesting to compare the views of ruins in *Beirut City Centre* with those of *Civil War*, which still seem devoid of pathos. Elkoury is moving away from Cartier-Bresson’s decisive moment, toward a viewpoint that is increasingly meditative, connecting with emptiness and infinity.

Yesterday, in the mountains, there was nothing left but emptiness, silence. I remembered the first discussions we had together during the selection process, when I said that I was looking for photos of nothing, photos where the documentary value had disappeared.

Strangely, this viewpoint seems to have always been there. While working on the preselection proofs I was considering them in pairs, combining images from different periods but connected by a shared resonance, like the mountainous landscape captured from the Ainata mountain road in 1974, whose arid, stony wastes are echoed in a view of *Beirut City Centre* backfill from 1991.

More than half a century after he started out, Elkoury is still constantly taking photographs, walking, and writing. The walking is so that he can tell stories, so that encounters come his way, and for the sensation of time passing by — a feeling captured in the Arabic phrase *mourour al zaman* (the passage of time). Walking, wandering, and assimilating the world bring the magic into operation — and the photos happen almost by themselves. This is why he speaks of “taking photos almost blind”, as if his arm was in charge and his eyes didn’t need to be there, underscoring the fact that “the scene comes to me. All the photos came to me. I don’t compose. They were there — I just had to see them.” Which is why he likes to retell this story, which happened at Jenin:

I stopped. There was a flock of sheep and then there were two men, one of them an old man. The old man had a very powerful voice, which prompted

me to take some photos. Afterward, seeing the contact sheet, I realized he didn't have any arms. I didn't see that while photographing. I had been blind (but not deaf). It was intuition, like an electric current, that guided me. Some days are blessed like that.

As this story shows, he is also, constantly, amazed by the world. The capacity for wonder at the world, for emotion, is vital. "A photographer can't not be obsessive. And innocent, at the same time. If I got used to everything, what would I photograph?" As we have seen, too, he never stops questioning the world, photography in general, and his own past photographic practice, excavating work that he had previously erased, whether intentionally or unintentionally. In 1980, Fouad Elkoury took photographs during the shooting of Volker Schlöndorff's movie *Circle of Deceit* — specifically, the scenes shot in the city center, around Souk Ayass and Fakhry Bey, Allenby, and Maarad Streets. The films had been developed at speed and some had been damaged, scratched, the gelatin layer peeling off. For a long time the photographer was in a state of denial about the reality of this film shoot — because of this failure, because of the way the production blew up buildings without the slightest scruple, and because of the movie's somewhat orientalist perspective. Failed, lost, forgotten, the images of the film shoot resurfaced for the first time in a diptych included in the exhibition *The Road to Peace* organized by Saleh Barakat at the Beirut Art Center in 2009. This diptych effectively offered an image, within an image: quite apart from showing (real) explosions produced for a film (a fiction), in a city already devastated by a (real) war, the photographer was showing his own wounds or stigmata here, like a martyred saint in a seventeenth-century sacred painting, revealing his own state of ruin. When we reviewed these contact sheets, faded and almost illegible, the order of the images didn't make sense, suggesting that the films had been mixed up. One afternoon, Fouad Elkoury and I opened up Pandora's box by looking at the films themselves. The first thing we realized was that some images which seemed entirely obliterated on the contact sheets could be brought back to life. We also started to reconstitute the sequence in which the photographs were taken, in order to restore the complete films to their proper order — an order that was lost when they were cut up in the laboratory, thirty-six years earlier. As most of the numbers had been erased we studied the exact shapes and irregularities of the cutting lines, as though absorbed in completing a very subtle — almost imperceptible — jigsaw puzzle. When we had finished, Fouad Elkoury said to me:

"That was almost archeology!"

"It *was* archeology," I answered.