

# THE DAILY STAR

LEBANON

---

## That thing? You call that thing art?

By Jim Quilty

BEIRUT: Beauty, as one well-worn aphorism would have it, is in the eye of the beholder. This platitude, trite as it is, applies to art as well.

Cultural journalism represents art as a multifaceted thing and much effort has been spent praising work, mocking it, and just making it comprehensible. Since most of this writing is directed at the cognoscenti, it hasn't done much to make the general public embrace art.

As there are no incontestable critical criteria for the worth of a work (its authenticity even), the market tends to arbitrate. Its role is as evident in auction records set by Christie's and Sotheby's as it is in the record labels' court cases against the free music downloads of Napster-style websites.

Market believers reluctantly admit that, if someone paid a million bucks for it, an art work must have some worth. Yet, standing in front of a 20-by-20-meter canvas painted in a uniform shade of blue, boyfriends of art students the world over have been heard to utter, "That? You call that art?"

Clearly, the least appreciated work of contemporary art in the world is the Beirut service (pronounced "serveece"). To the innocent eye, the service looks like a Lebanese version of a taxicab, a creature of the economy with eccentricities symptomatic of the local semi-public transit regime.

For anyone exposed to a bit of contemporary art practice, though, the service is no more an economic thing than a \$100-a-seat performance of Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" or "Concert for Anarchy" – that Rebecca Horn sculpture that looks like an upside down grand piano suspended from the ceiling, which, after 15 inert minutes, musically unfolds, keys spilling forth in a clever piece of machine art.

Still, adventurous art consumers ought to be discerning. Like any work of cultural production – from the most-obscure white cube gallery installation to the pop-art performance of the post-cosmetic-surgery nose plaster – the service benefits from some explanation.

Best to start with the service as a work of visual art.

The array of transport services available in Beirut is akin to the range of insects residing in the Amazon, and most are things of commerce. Aside from the red number plate and, recently, a "Beirut public transit" decal that, in form, is not unlike an oversized version of the label adorning

the neck of an Almaza beer bottle, it's difficult to generalize about Beirut taxis.

Though it is sometimes accompanied by a song and dance involving a laminated piece of paper claiming its extortionate rates are legal, the "airport taxi" is not art.

Neither are those radio-dispatched cab companies (reassuringly named "Trust," "Safe," "Lord," "Ready" etc), which appear newer, cleaner, better maintained and air-conditioned. There is performance here too – with anonymous dispatchers arbitrating the cabbies' fares, so passengers don't think the driver is robbing them – yet this too is simple commerce.

At the other end of the transport spectrum are the cheap micro-busses ("vanaat") that ply regular routes from the suburbs southwest of Beirut to points north. Van drivers divert their passengers with loud patriotic songs sung in male chorus, and the pipe-and-synthesiser tunes not uncommon in Syria's Jazira region, but fares are fixed, so the van's not art.

The service, on the other hand, is pure art object. The vehicle may or may not have a "TAXI" sign on the roof and is less likely to be stencilled with any formal company name. Though late-model cars of Asian lineage have been fitted with the red number plate recently, the service aristocracy is comprised of ageing Mercedes – and it is from these ranks that some of Beirut's most gracious examples of machine art have been sighted.

It was once possible to find services whose fenders and doors were Frankensteined from any number of different ur-Mercedes. The most startling work of mobile Arte Povera was a vehicle whose rivets – running from the bonnet to the hood to the trunk – betrayed its left and right sides to have come from separate vehicles.

Most of these works are no longer in service, apparently having been acquired for discreet private collectors. Fortunately the performing art dimension of the service remains intact.

In the merely commercial practice of Anglo-Saxon taxis, hailing a cab requires the roadside pedestrian ("ped") to attract the cabbie's attention by pointing to the tarmac in front of you.

As the service is an objet d'art, Beirutis don't gesture to attract a service driver's attention but to signal you aren't in the market for entertainment.

There are two types of performance: that of the stationary service (whose admission price is, for unknown reasons, always higher) and that of the mobile service.

The stationary service driver stations himself on the side of the road in a shopping or clubbing district (Hamra Street, say, or the mouth of Rue Gouraud) where, in other towns, you might find a guitarist bashing out Cat Stevens or an under-employed string quartet rehearsing a bit of Pachelbel.

Clusters of stationary service drivers are more likely to be seen drinking plastic demitasses of coffee and rehearsing sage insights on the country's political situation – like jazz players practicing their chops in a pre-show jam session.

Upon sighting an audience, the cabbie, with lightning reflexes, will chime, "Taxi? Taxi Monsieur?"

The performance's opening gambit, repeated dozens of times over the course of an afternoon walk, can induce confusion among foreign art aficionados. After a couple of days in Beirut, one Brazilian filmmaker confessed that she'd thought that, in Lebanese, "Taxi!" means "Hello!"

The roving service-driver employs similar street-entertainer solicitation techniques. Anyone standing on the side of the road – waiting to cross the street or photographing some picturesque ruin – will provoke a service-driver to honk his horn, slow down or stop to accost the pedestrian.

"Taaksiiiiii?"

Like that of street performers everywhere, this is a playful practice intimately attuned to a whimsical market. Like any interactive performance, there are conventions.

When a taxi-driver sidles up to you and says "Taxi!" it has two meanings. Economically, it means the ride will cost LL10,000 (a little more than \$6). In performance terms, it's an invitation to join in an interactive improvisation, after which skillful and witty passengers can climb out of the car lighter just a few thousand lira.

Depending on how playful the driver feels, and how foreign you look, at the end of the fare he may tell you "taxi fare" is \$10-20. Such declarations tend to follow performances with no participation from the passenger. Silence is expensive.

"Taaaksiiii?"

"How much?" you reply.

"Ashreen dollar [\$20]," the driver may smile benevolently.

This service-driver is clearly a comedian, so it's wise to burst into laughter, say "Shukran," and wait for the next vehicle.

Some roving service drivers practice a more taciturn form of solicitation. They stop their car in front of you without a word.

The ped should now pronounce the name of the Beirut quarter where she wants to go – "Hamra," say, or "Kahraba," or "Cola." According to local convention, if the driver hasn't already said "Taxi?" it is assumed that you will pay the standard admission price of LL2000 (a little over \$1).

If he judges you to be foreign, or the day to be especially hot or rainy, he may parry your intended destination with an invitation to collaborative improvisation.

"Taaaksiiii?"

It's this embrace of audience and ever-mutable improvisation that makes the service such a refined work of performance art. Service adepts are able to communicate a great deal without uttering a word.

Communicating that you want to go to Dora, for instance, simply requires that you point your

index finger at the ground and move it in a circle or two. If you're not in the market for a service, you can perform this information.

A more theatrical ped will wait until the service has slowed, then slowly close his eyes and, when the nose is pointing skyward, click the tip of his tongue off the roof of his mouth, as if spitting in pantomime.

More taciturn peds can simply raise their eyebrows at the driver before he's slowed down. When one local foreigner learned this dramaturgical lore, he composed a paeon to the joys of controlling the trajectory of a 1-ton piece of metal, with his eyebrows.

---

**Copyrights 2011, The Daily Star - All Rights Reserved**

10/08/2011