

'I Am

Without any premonitory signs, except for devastating forest fires that a few days earlier had engulfed much of the country, a popular uprising suddenly ignited all of Lebanon on October 17, 2019. As if the blaze had fuelled a collective and deeply repressed need to release and express frustration at a system that had utterly failed the vast majority of citizens. The government announcement of an unexpected monthly tax on WhatsApp calls, gas, and tobacco was the final provocation that triggered massive and persistent protests throughout the nation. The Lebanese society

is not only divided by social class, but also by religion, with a complex, confessional power-sharing system among Muslim (Sunni and Shia), Christian, Druze, and other communities. By the time the people took to the streets, they had finally come to realise that whatever their origin or religion, they are all equally affected by poverty and are all victims of State inefficiency. Their goals are the same: to change the government and to put an end to corruption, favouritism, and incompetency. In light of its magnitude and in reference to other social protests in the Arab world, the goings-on were immediately called a 'Revolution'. It is the first strong and lasting social uprising in recent history, unifying all communities. Many even consider it the real end of the 1975-1990 Lebanese Civil War, after 30 years of ceasefire.

Overnight, men and women stood up to vindicate their demands for political change and to occupy the streets and squares of major cities. They destroyed gates and barriers that impeded access to a number of emblematic places that have been abandoned since the end of the war. As if their desire for freedom had to be expressed by the occupation of public space as a symbol of a country whose fate all of a sudden seemed in the hands of its citizens. The two most notable public places that were occupied in the capital Beirut, are the 'Egg' ('#Eggupation'), a cinema that had never been completed and was riddled with bullet holes, and the nearby Grand Theatre, which both lay in ruins.

Cybèle Andrei
Beirut, Lebanon

Just as noteworthy is the fact that from the outset of the Revolution, art on all sorts of (abandoned) buildings has been created by street artists and ordinary citizens alike. The unique moments of social euphoria indeed prompted young people who had never painted before, to grab brushes and to join street artists working on what were called the 'Revolution Walls' in the centre of both Beirut and Tripoli – the second largest city in the country, which has fully participated in the uprising. Political messages calling for the removal of the political class were interspersed with sophisticated slogans, the ever-recurring word 'Revolution', ordinary drawings and even never seen messages with sexual connotations.

A selection of photographs from the project called 'I Am the Revolution' shows how the Lebanese people have enjoyed asserting their right to public space in order to openly call for freedom. This project was inceptioned at the start of the uprising and is an ongoing process. As the days passed by, the walls, streets, and pavements of the cities were changing aspect, colour, and texture. The pictures capture fugitive moments when braving the forbidden suddenly proved possible. Resistance gestures, simple and yet so meaningful.

Revolution'

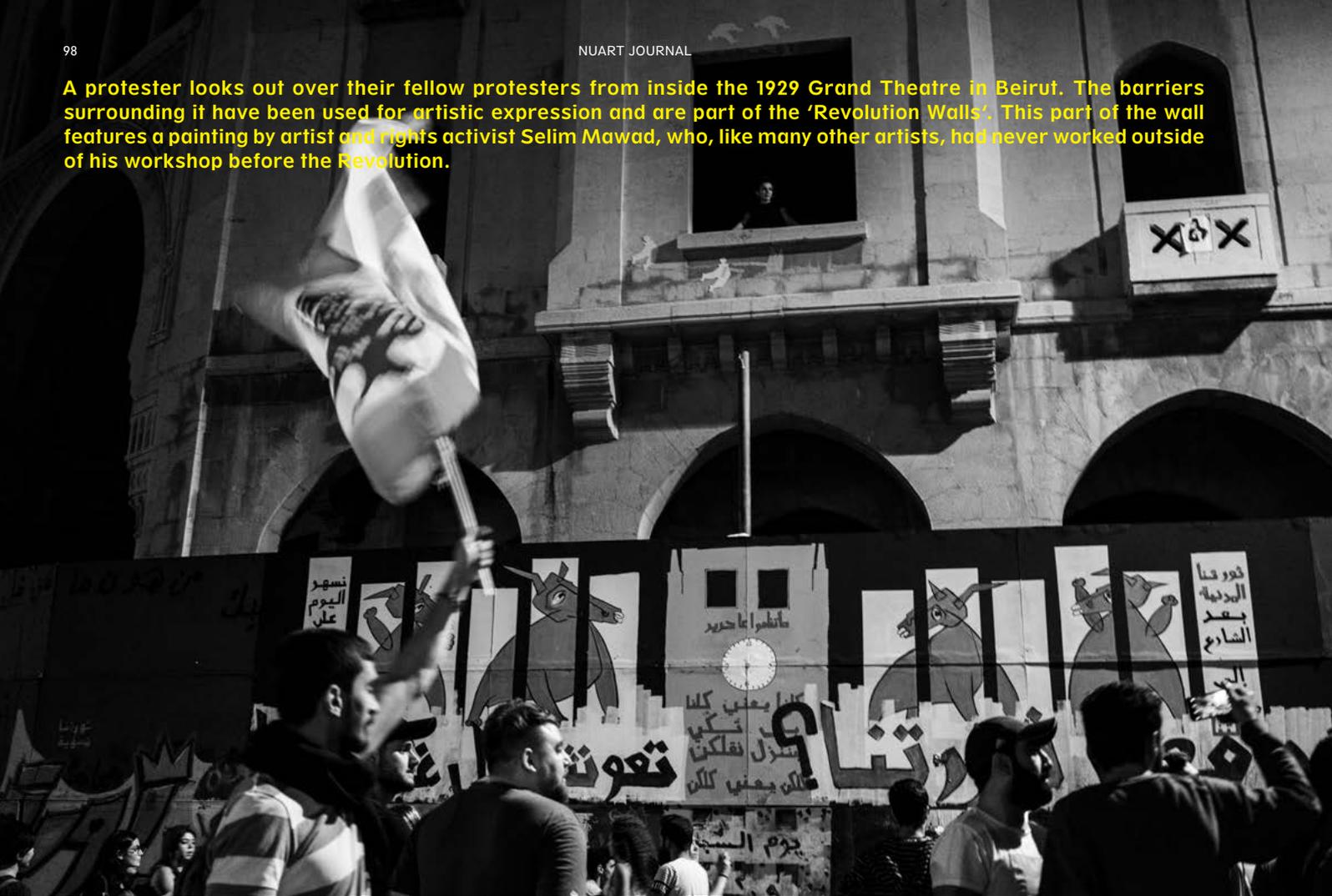
All photographs were taken by ©Cybèle Andrei between October and December 2019.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Beirut-based association Art of Change helped many artists during the Revolution by providing them with brushes, spray cans, paint, etc. They also welcomed and collaborated with me on this photographic project.

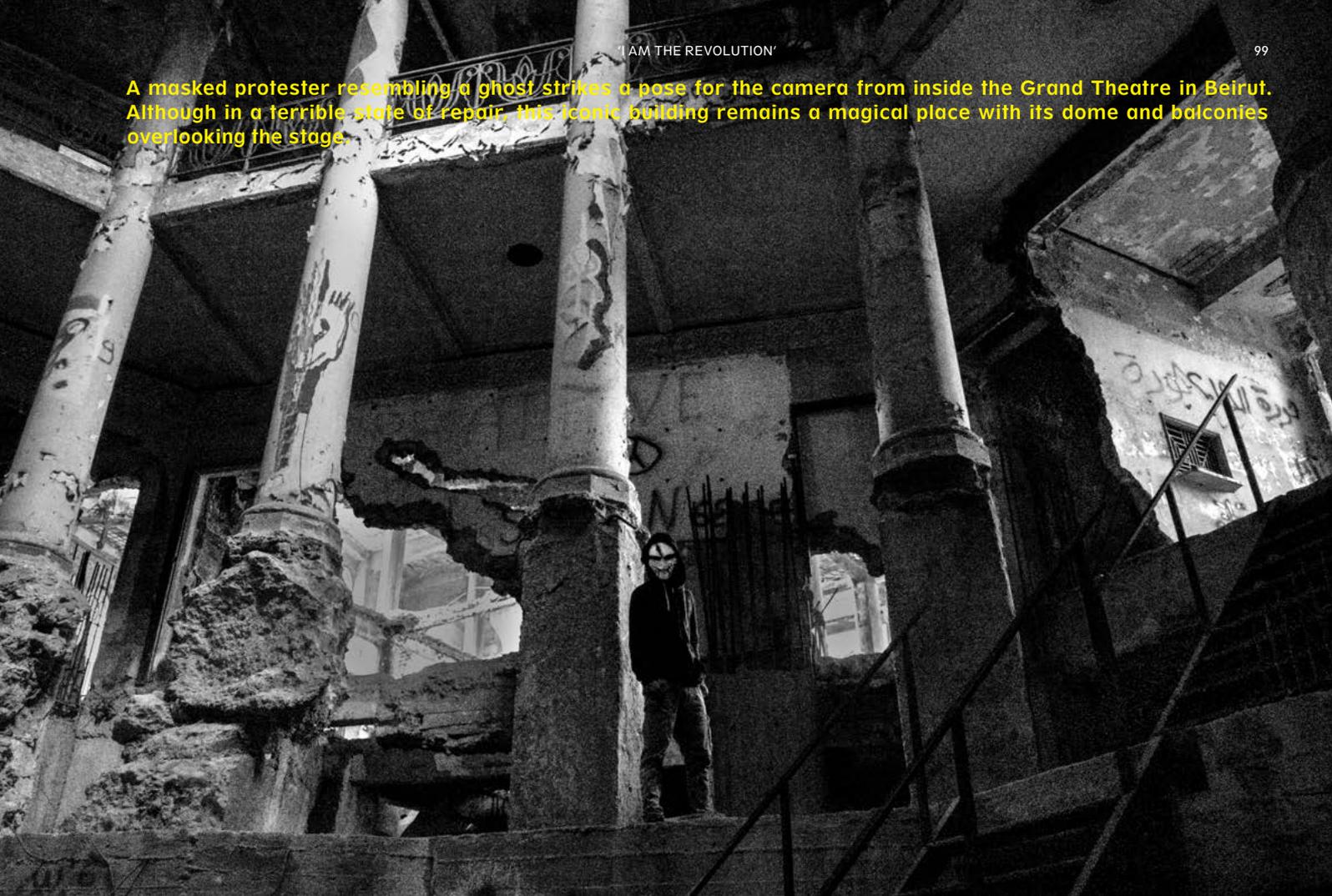
Traveller, enthusiastic, and in search of little tales that, each on its own, make up the big story – microcosms of their own, which subtly assemble or disassemble the pieces of the planetary puzzle that connect or disunite us. Cybèle Andrei's social work has led her to travel through many tumultuous countries, torn by armed conflict. She likes to capture slices of life in the form of photographic clichés as well as documentary films about authors, especially in Colombia, Cuba and Cambodia. She is currently working on a film project named 'Baracoa' about a bohemian slammer in an isolated area of Cuba. The Middle East welcomed her with open arms with the most beautiful gift: to witness the revolt of the Lebanese people who claim with such humanity what is naturally due to them.

A protester looks out over their fellow protesters from inside the 1929 Grand Theatre in Beirut. The barriers surrounding it have been used for artistic expression and are part of the 'Revolution Walls'. This part of the wall features a painting by artist and rights activist Selim Mawad, who, like many other artists, had never worked outside of his workshop before the Revolution.



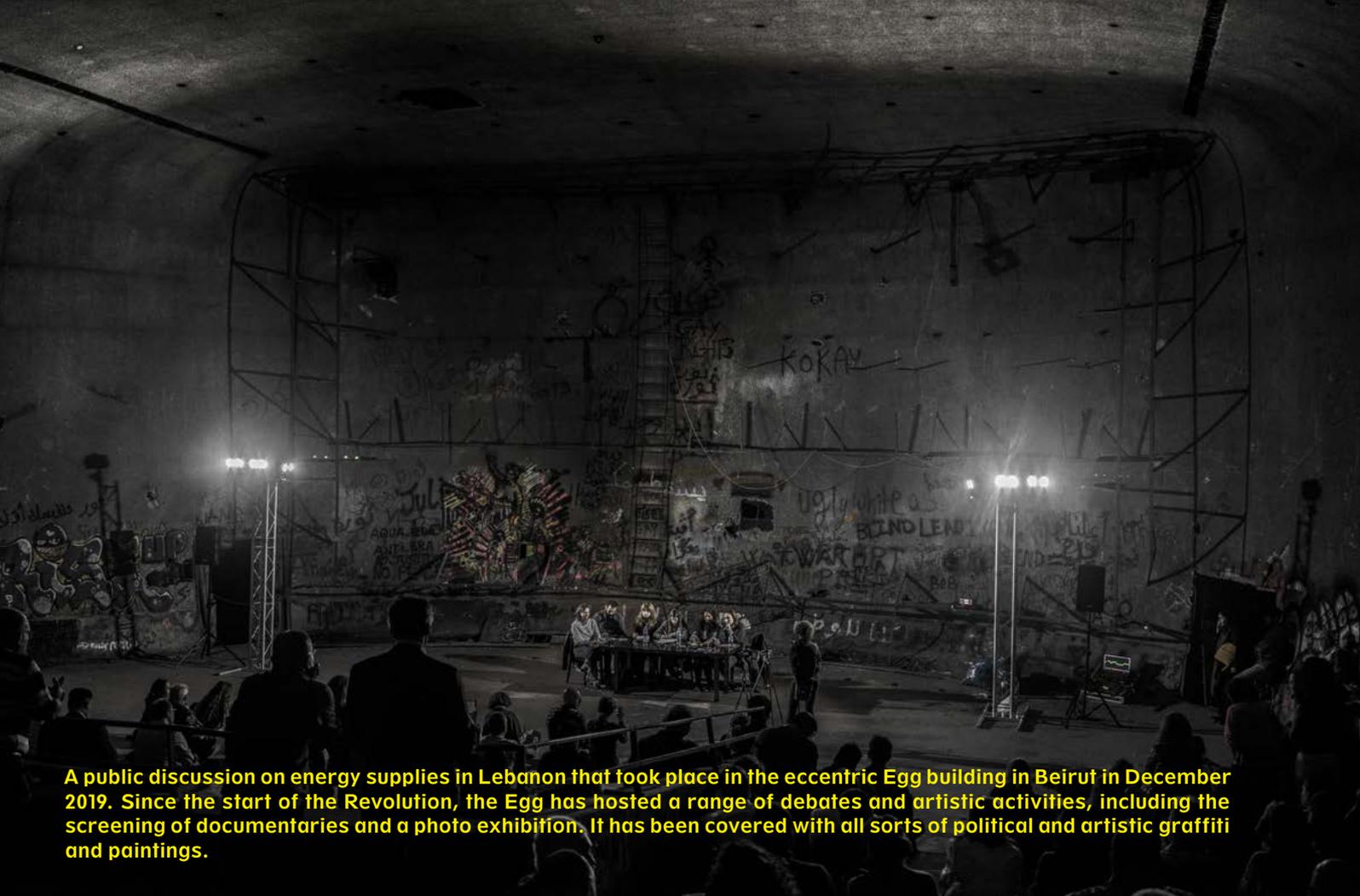
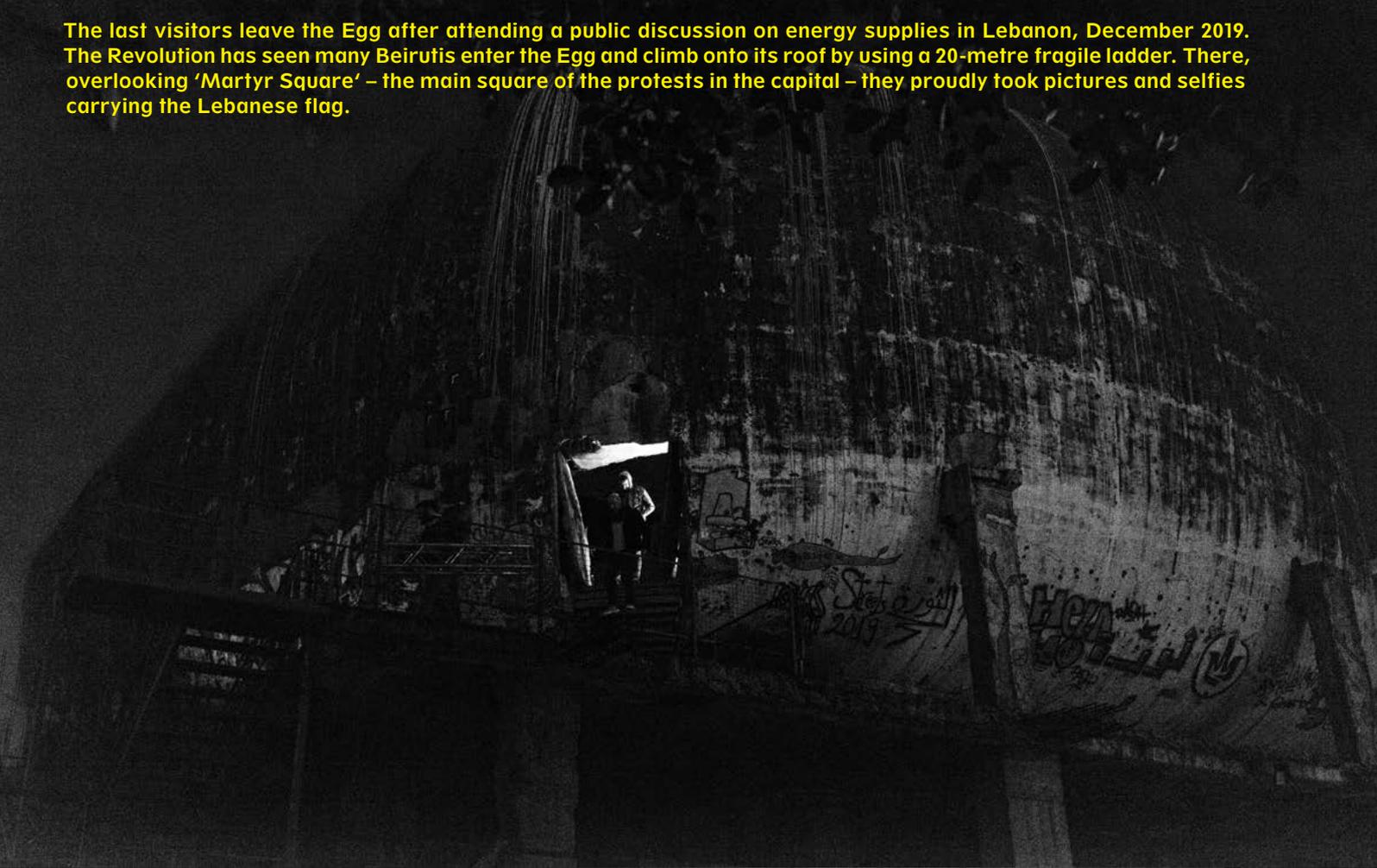
Street artist Weesdom spray painting the 'Revolution Wall' in Beirut at night time.

A masked protester resembling a ghost strikes a pose for the camera from inside the Grand Theatre in Beirut. Although in a terrible state of repair, this iconic building remains a magical place with its dome and balconies overlooking the stage.



A boy playing with candles for peace in front of the barrier that surrounds the Grand Theatre in Beirut. The graffiti piece behind him by street artist Phat2 reads 'Beirut spoke' in Arabic.

The last visitors leave the Egg after attending a public discussion on energy supplies in Lebanon, December 2019. The Revolution has seen many Beirutis enter the Egg and climb onto its roof by using a 20-metre fragile ladder. There, overlooking 'Martyr Square' – the main square of the protests in the capital – they proudly took pictures and selfies carrying the Lebanese flag.



A public discussion on energy supplies in Lebanon that took place in the eccentric Egg building in Beirut in December 2019. Since the start of the Revolution, the Egg has hosted a range of debates and artistic activities, including the screening of documentaries and a photo exhibition. It has been covered with all sorts of political and artistic graffiti and paintings.

A painting on the 'Revolution Wall' by a young female artist who preferred to stay anonymous. The veiled girl spontaneously joined forces with street artists when she saw them painting at night. She said she had never painted before. Her potent message reads 'I am scared you will never speak again'.



Scenes from Nour Square in Tripoli (December 2019), the main gathering place for protesters in the city. Artist Mohamed Abrash painted the Lebanese flag and the inscription 'Tripoli, city of peace' on the abandoned building in the background. The building terrace serves as a podium from which speakers and DJs animate the protesters.

Scenes from Nour Square in Tripoli, December 2019. The abandoned building in the background is full of graffiti and portraits of victims ('martyrs') of the Revolution.



A mural by street artists Dew and Rainoz (DRS Crew) next to Nour Square, Tripoli. In December 2019, protesters next to it were seen queuing up to go the terrace of the abandoned building that serves as a podium from where speakers and DJs invigorate the protests.

'Thawra', the character representing the 'Revolution', seen from the broken window of a trashed luxury building in downtown Beirut that was under construction.



Selim Mawad creating one of his trademark bulls that comment on the state of the country on a wall of the Lebanese electricity company in Beirut. Power cuts occur every day throughout Lebanon, leaving citizens without electricity sometimes for hours on end.

Street artist Renoz putting the finishing touches to a mural in Choueifat, outside Beirut, a few metres from the spot where a protester was killed only days earlier.



Scenes from Tripoli in December 2019. Elderly women have actively participated in the protests. The wall in the background is covered with graffiti related to the Revolution and signatures of DRS and Phat2.

