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Heimo Scheuch Podcast, Episode 38 "Ali Cherri"

Guest: Ali Cherri, Artist & Filmmaker

00:00:00 Heimo Scheuch

Ladies and Gentlemen, hello and welcome to my podcast. I am Heimo Scheuch and today I have a very very special guest. I'm very honoured, Ali, that you're here. Ali Cherri is an artist originally from Lebanon, from Beirut now living in Paris and there is a lot of things both of us will talk about today.

00:00:22 Heimo Scheuch

But obviously your visit here in Vienna is a special one, because yesterday was the first performance of your film, right?

00:00:29 Ali Cherri

Yes, exactly, we screened "The Dam" for the first time in Austria.

00:00:33 Heimo Scheuch

And "The Dam" is a very interesting film. I saw some parts of it, you presented it some time ago I think also in Italy, right, if I am not mistaken.

00:00:41 Ali Cherri

Ja, I mean we premiered in Cannes in 2022 and then it toured in many countries and got released also in theatres.

00:00:49 Heimo Scheuch

And so happy about the night yesterday in Vienna?

00:00:53 Ali Cherri

It was a great night, I really, really enjoyed it. We had very interesting and engaging discussions after the screening. We had some people from the Sudanese community, cause "The Dam" is shot in Sudan. So, ja, it was for me a very emotional moment and I really enjoyed it.

00:01:11 Heimo Scheuch

Great and that is I think the most important thing also, right? In a city of art like Vienna to present a film like this is obviously I think a great pleasure for you!

00:01:20 Ali Cherri

Yes, it is a great audience.

00:01:23 Heimo Scheuch

Ja, if you go to the film and your artwork, coming from a country that was torn apart if I may so, Lebanon, it's interesting if we probably touch up on a little bit the current developments there and the art and the impact, if you don't mind.

00:01:45 Heimo Scheuch

You know when I studied in the eighties in Paris, I had a lot of friends from Beirut, it was a very different Beirut then, right?

00:01:55 Heimo Scheuch

And what a shame actually what happened to your country! Torn apart by so many, sort of civil wars and unfortunate events, but this obviously plays an important role I would say in your development, and especially in your arts, right?

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00:02:08 Ali Cherri

Hm. I mean of course, like any artist where the starting point is always your personal experience. So that's the experience we've had, that's the context, the anchor we have, even if I am living in Paris now, my anchor is still Beirut, the city where I grew up and where I studied, so this question of living in a city in violence and in continuous violence became an essential part of my reflection.

00:02:40 Ali Cherri

Although like the first works that I was doing were a lot directly dealing with the question of war, what does it mean to survive, how do we tell a story after violence, but more recently I also worked in other countries and other context, trying to look other narratives or how other people also go through this traumatic experiences and what we can learn from them, so it became like a central part of my work, yes.

00:03:11 Heimo Scheuch

And interesting is that when you go back in not so long in history, the Lebanon and Beirut, called the Switzerland of the Middle East.

00:03:22 Ali Cherri

One of the myths!

00:03:25 Heimo Scheuch

Ja, but a very open-minded society, where a lot of cultures live together and religions live together and sometimes, what can we learn actually from this what happened to your country? Because today we are living also in a lot of change and process of different directions.

00:03:41 Ali Cherri

I mean, I think that's what we as Lebanese are trying to understand. I mean of course, we live in the geography in the context also of tension, and it has been ongoing **and this is the creation** of the country since also the division that has happened out of territory of borders, how identities and the construction of national historical narrative happened, so I think what started on the wrong base, maybe of how this identities where put together and imagined and sometimes forced is the consequence of what we are living today.

00:04:25 Ali Cherri

I mean, I think the question of nationhood, of nationalism, things that I deal until today, I mean, what does it mean to die for your country, to fight for an ideology, to believe in higher you know like higher superior values. So all these things become on a shaky ground and make you question, you know, all these constructs, like who writes history, who gets, what kind of authority is allowed to tell who is the winner, who is the loser, who are the heroes, who are the traitors, so all these questions, that sometimes we take for granted in a place like Lebanon, they are put on the table and questioned everyday and I think as artist, it becomes part of our role to show the complexities of these constructs and what we think is taken for granted, is way more complex and we have to you know like question and look at it maybe in different ways.

00:05:34 Ali Cherri

So, I mean of course, it breaks that the country that I love, and that as you said, has a lot of qualities, and I have to say like even today with everything that's happened, Lebanon and especially Beirut have such a beautiful energy, and if you think about the arts, it's a place where

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there's such a dynamic, you know like artsy people who are still believing, opening new art spaces, imagining new projects, even projecting into a future, while we know that this future might not a [XXX] arrive as we imagined to be.

00:06:15 Ali Cherri

So I learn a lot, I think from this, from the people who are there and who are still believing and fighting and hoping for better days.

00:06:27 Heimo Scheuch

It is very interesting what you say and I will come back to this sort of aspect of creation in difficult times, in a very instable environment, but when you look at your work and what you have done when you say, and in one of your interviews in der Biennale you speak also about you make a creation out of mud, ja? Mud, clay or earth, whatever you call it.

00:06:46 Heimo Scheuch

Actually, when you talk about this, the political movements and different religious and cultural movements, all of us are created by mud basically, right? And even in some of our holy sort of books, that we all share actually as a community, we are created, and we go back.

00:06:58 Ali Cherri

Yes, yes.

00:07:04 Heimo Scheuch

And that's, it's fascinating, when you look at what you have done and also the project in Sudan and when you see the people as they work with. Why is it so complicated that we humans don't accept this?

00:07:24 Ali Cherri

I'll ask you the same question! I mean, that's what I try to show in my work, how, as humanity, we've always had the same dreams, the same imagination. We saw then in this coming together of earth and water as the materiality of creation, I mean, as you mentioned, like, Adam's created from mud, Golems are created from mud, even if you go back to Gilgamesh, you know like, Enkidu the Gilgamesh friend is created from mud, so we saw in this simple materiality of earth and water the possibility of other worlds to exist.

00:08:01 Ali Cherri

You know, other possibilities to arise and I and that's why I think today it's important to look at this, to look at this practice, you know, as humans where we create things that are beyond our power you know, we create our gods from mud. That's how, what can we learn from this as a shared you know, like a practice, shared experience of humanity but also looking at the political power of creation or of imagination. That our imagination is political, like to be able to imagine a different world is already a strategy to change the world we live in.

00:08:48 Heimo Scheuch

Can I, sorry to interrupt you, but that's a very interesting aspect. When you talk about imagination and you raised this a couple of times, do you think that today we have not enough imagination? Or a certain group of people has not enough imagination?

00:09:07 Ali Cherri

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No, no, but I think, I mean, I speak a lot about from where I come from and the rule of the authorities and regimes. I think of it like what these authorities and regimes do. First off, they colonize, they take over our possibility of imagining. Like that we, you cannot imagine a world where you know, Hafiz al-Assad doesn't exist, or Mubarak. They take hold of things there is no alternative. We are the only possible world that could exist and you have to accept this world. So I think when people go down on the street and reclaim their power of, you know like taking hold of their destiny, of their political progression and history, is, first thing they do is, we think other worlds are possible, so we could imagine other alternatives, I mean Hannah Arendt spoke about this, about the power of imagination. Imagination is a political project, and we have to reclaim it. Reclaim that we can imagine and there's other possibilities that are imaginable. You think we live today in a capitalist world and a lot of people think that's capitalism is the only possible reality.

00:10:29 Heimo Scheuch

I think even the capitalists don't think that, if you see that, because that's a term of disruption today is actually something that you imagine something different.

00:10:35 Ali Cherri

Yes.

00:10:39 Heimo Scheuch

So, I would say that if we look at neutral, not sort of ideologically speaking, but you have these sort of processes today, where a lot of people question, is the things that we do right or wrong or should we do it differently?

00:10:54 Ali Cherri

Yes!

00:10:55 Heimo Scheuch

So the way actually that culture and art and also science can show us, that there are different ways, but we need as a society be open minded to do it.

00:11:05 Ali Cherri

Yes.

00:11:09 Ali Cherri

Ja, I mean cause we came to the realization that we failed. We failed our planet and we failed, I mean you can see the violence in the world, we failed our humanity, we failed in lots of places, so I think it's good to start to think that other possibilities exist.

00:11:21 Heimo Scheuch

Mhm. What is, and sorry if I challenge you, and you are not obliged to answer, but what you see from your aspect with your background, what our American friends are doing now with all the disruption they are trying to now organize?

00:11:41 Ali Cherri

I mean it's very scary, I think, what's happening, because it's gonna effect not only what's happening in the United States, but throughout, like, I know basic things for example, I know there is a release of you know certain sense of homophobia and transphobia that we thought that we started to get past and now there is like a comeback of these. You know, they've released monsters I think and I don't speak only in the US, but they allowed other monsters now to speak

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up, and you know like to act upon hate, so I think, what is happening now and maybe what will happen under the term of Trump will be damaging for a very, very long time and it is gonna undo, you know, social work, that has been done for very long and now it's, everything feels to be falling apart and we could see how tech and you know like capital directly followed, you know, the, this trend and this is what is sad, I mean all the ideals, that you know, like these big, you know like, companies where promoting we fall, that it took one day for everything to fall apart.

00:12:53 Heimo Scheuch

I am a little bit challenging you, I am not pro and contra here, but I'm just saying, from what you were saying, which I strongly believe is very important that you from the art sight show us through imagination other worlds and other things... Sometimes in Politics, sometimes in business, you need this disruption also to change. Probably we, us two and others should think more positively and see this as an opportunity.

00:13:22 Ali Cherri

Hm.

00:13:28 Heimo Scheuch

You see, when you are negatively positioned, you actually contribute to this. I am trying to be positive, if you see, what I am saying.

00:13:33 Ali Cherri

Ja, I totally understand, but it really depends on your position. I mean, it's a position of privilege, to be able to see this as, you know, as this disruption will create something positive, because some people will pay the price of this and very unprivileged people will be crushed literally by what is happening.

00:13:37 Heimo Scheuch

Mhm.

00:13:55 Ali Cherri

I think also, we have come to almost a dead end in how things are done. Things are not working. So this kind of even negative disruption could create maybe something...

00:14:11 Heimo Scheuch

There we agree, I think, right?

00:14:13 Ali Cherri

Yes, on a theoretical base, but we cannot forget who is also paying the price of this disruption...

00:14:18 Heimo Scheuch

Mhm. Ja, you are very right.

00:14:26 Ali Cherri

I mean what is the price for this? And who is paying the price for this? And it's usually the people, who are more marginalized, you know I spoke about homophobia, transphobia, people who are really fragile and have been like really fighting to find a place in society that's more safe. These are the first people who will be losing in this.

00:14:44 Heimo Scheuch

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I agree with you and I think, this is, as I said, a very important aspect, that we remind those disruptors not to go alone, but take the people with them. You see what I'm saying?

00:14:58 Ali Cherri

Ja!

00:15:00 Heimo Scheuch

And I agree with you that the risk is always there. Change in history has always been risky, but if you don't perform change and you in art show change continuously through your creativity, it's very important that we, as you say, I take your words and I find them great: we have come to a dead end and sometimes when you are there...

00:15:19 Ali Cherri

Ja.

00:15:19 Heimo Scheuch

Either...

00:15:20 Ali Cherri

We need creative solutions, that's for sure.

00:15:22 Heimo Scheuch

Exactly!

00:15:23 Ali Cherri

Yeah, but we need also to always be aware of who's paying the price of this. Cause there are I think, I still believe, there are also possibilities where we don't have to crush all these people on the way of disruption.

00:15:35 Heimo Scheuch

There I agree with you and I think, that's what I meant before, we should be the ones, who advocate the humanitarian aspect.

00:15:43 Ali Cherri

Yes.

00:15:44 Heimo Scheuch

Ja? Also from business, but also from your side. And therefore, I would say we should be the ones that remind them continuously of this fact, ja?

00:15:56 Ali Cherri

Yes, if they listen to us!

00:15:58 Heimo Scheuch

I would say, as you can hear, I'm an Optimist.

00:16:02 Ali Cherri

Ja, yes, I can see that! I mean, I am happy, I mean, despite everything, if I wasn't an optimist, I would stop doing what I am doing and you know like, creating art and still believing in what we do requires very very big amount of, you know like, optimism and trust and, I mean to trust and

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more believe in what we do. Really the moment I stop believing, the one thing I had become cynical, you know and I would never become cynical. So I believe in what I do and if I still do it, it's because I believe it still possible and the day I feel, we have, there is no more possibility of making things better, I think I'll just maybe do some gardening and stay in my house and...

00:16:30 Heimo Scheuch

I do not hope that, because your art is great and you should continue that and I think when you talked about imagination, we should give these people imagination.

00:16:59 Ali Cherri

Ja!

00:17:00 Heimo Scheuch

If you are so tied up in your either political work or in your business work, then you sometimes forget things around you and it's on us to inspire them.

00:17:10 Ali Cherri

Ja! Yes, I mean, I think what we do at least as an artist, we create the conditions like, when we were talking about the film screening yesterday, the film is, you create a world, and people come and you know like, get immersed into this world and this gives and creates the conditions for them to think, "okay that's where I wanna go, that's you know, I didn't think about this", you know like opening up other things I don't think we have the rule as guiders or you know as people who know the way and we are guiding anyone else, but to just create conditions, for people, for things to pop up here and there and other ideas to be able to exist.

00:17:50 Heimo Scheuch

I think there are enough people around who pretend to know...

00:17:54 Ali Cherri

Yes, we don't need more of that.

00:17:54 Heimo Scheuch

We have a lot of them!

00:17:57 Ali Cherri

A hundred percent!

00:17:56 Heimo Scheuch

In all cultures, in all aspects of our human world, but we should actually tell them that this is not the only way.

00:17:56 Ali Cherri

Yes. Ja!

00:18:14 Heimo Scheuch

I must say it's always fascinating to talk to somebody like you with your broad understanding of culture and differences, your work is great.

00:18:17 Ali Cherri

Thank you!

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00:18:18 Heimo Scheuch

And I wish you good luck in everything you do and bring the people together, as you do and imagination, as you said. Creativity is great! And I wish to your home country really all the best because it's close to my heart.

00:18:19 Ali Cherri

Thank you!

00:18:34 Heimo Scheuch

Thank you for being here and thank you for listening in!

00:18:35 Ali Cherri

Thank you!