

Hans Ulrich Obrist in conversation with Marwan Rechmaoui
Centre for Possible Studies
Serpentine Gallery, London
September 7, 2010

Published in *Marwan Rechmaoui, Metropolis*. Beirut, Kaph Books, 2017

HUO

What inspired you in the start?

MR

It all started by coincidence, actually. I went to the states to study engineering. I just wanted to major in any profession, just for the sake of obtaining a degree. It was during the 80s at a time when I had some leftist ideas, like many other young people. Then the fall of the Soviet Union happened and it had a strong impact on me. I began to rethink and redefine everything I believed in.

By that time, a friend of mine advised me to take up some drawing courses because I used to work on some crafty pieces by hand. It just clicked and I decided to study art. I was still a student, but I started working in abstraction, in a way to redefine everything. It has been twenty years since then, but I am still trying to redefine things. Of course, I am not working abstractly anymore, but I am still in art. It was never a decision. It just happened.

HUO

Were there any artists from Beirut from previous generations who were an inspiration?

MR

Not really. I was very much influenced by Persian miniatures. I am not comparing here, but let's say in Western art up until the First World War when Dada started to flatten the surface – that aspect itself made me very interested in Persian miniatures because they had something similar. Of course, during class, you get influenced by a lot of great artists. They change over time because with each artist you have certain questions and interests or you notice different issues. Each artist talks to you in a different way.

HUO

We suggested going through your images of the different works. Obviously, where do we begin? Where would you say your catalogue résumé starts?

MR

Probably when I started noticing connections, relations, between my past and present works. Even if the works are different, and for years they were not coherent, at some point they start making sense together. There is a link that I can see, and that establishes one's beginning, I think. It started with my *Concrete Works* series (1996-2000), they were influenced by this motif, which is an object that began appearing in downtown Beirut in the mid-90s. The object is made of concrete and painted with tar on the outside, something water-resistant and was used specifically by a real estate company in Lebanon that was developing the downtown area. Part of the development was the rebuilding of infrastructure, so these objects were used for the intersections of sewage pipes. Aesthetically, for me, they were attractive. Before that, I used to work a lot with geometrical shapes, like line, colour and space, so I started using this motif in my drawings. Then I decided to use the material itself rather than reproducing it with acrylics or oil paint. From then on came the development of the ideological or the intellectual components in my work. In the early 90s in Beirut, there was a monopoly of private galleries and they dictated the rules: the kind of work they wanted to show and the subjects they wanted to talk about. I stopped working with oil on canvas and I started using unconventional materials. At that same time, in 1994, a group of artists and friends – including myself - founded the art association Ashkal Alwan, under the direction of one of the founding members, the curator Christine Tohmé.

HUO

Can you talk about the beginning of that? It was such an important project that has changed everything.

MR

It began as a joke. The first event was a party in 1993, just after the official ending of the civil war. We had a party because we wanted to show work in another way, not in a sacred way. We gathered a group of artists and did some installations in a house. That party was a motivation to start something more serious. So, we began working on getting a licence for an association and started projects intervening in public spaces. There were many parallel issues and questions we were discussing: What do we want to do with art? What is public space? What is for me? What do I own and what do I not own?

HUO

So, it was the decision to leave the gallery space?

MR

That is one reason and the other is to intervene in public spaces, to try to make art public. I am not sure there is public space in Beirut, I'm talking about Beirut, specifically, not Lebanon, because I live in Beirut as a city. I don't think anyone has reached a conclusion about public spaces and it can get very complicated culturally. These three issues created a change in my work: leaving conventional material, which means leaving the gallery; starting the new association that dealt with public space issues; and the transformation in my intellectual process.

HUO

And that was then the first project of Ashkal Alwan. How was it made public?

MR

We started organising events in gardens [Sanayeh Garden project, 1994; The Sioufi Garden project, 1997] or on the streets [The Corniche project, 1999] and in old shut down cinemas [Homeworks I, 2002]. There is an area in Beirut called Hamra, which was famous in the 60s and 70s for its cinemas. There were probably around fifteen cinemas on one street and now most of them are shut down, actually all of them are shut down. So, it was a way of reopening those spaces to see if it was possible to revive them but not necessarily as cinemas. We learned in our process that it is very, very difficult to change the spaces we have. We have to go back to earliest regulations to change anything in that sense. So, by the early 2000s, our strategy became a little bit different and that is how *Homeworks* started. It was more of a space for discussions, panels, seminars and exhibitions, but not in the public space. It is still there but I am not an active member of Ashkal Alwan anymore, because the association grew and I began to focus more on my work.

HUO

We should maybe look at some of your maps, which would be exciting as there are still so many things to see, and I suppose the mapping started already here, this whole idea of you going into the city that leads to a mapping of some sort, no?

MR

This was the piece that changed the direction of my work into what became the mapping later. So, with this motif I started making works that were not painting-like anymore, they are not cast, no brush work, no colours. The material itself has colours, some with silver leaf, concrete, tar, some with glass and resin. So basically, the material itself is what gives the colour in the works. These are fixed glass with cast cement around them. Some more work, traces of drawings... And then this is the first Ashkal Alwan project, at the Sanayeh public garden in Beirut (1994). It was temporary, for one week. The second project, we had permission to put ten permanent sculptures in another park. From then on, I

went in a direction that I don't know how to describe exactly. It's neither sculpture nor installation nor conceptual. I decided as an artist, after a lot of discussions with my colleagues in the late 90s, that our culture needs a lot of archiving and analysing. That was one of the reasons why I started moving away from abstract work. I needed to get more critical and analytical about my subjects and of course let's not forget political because it is important, for me at least.

HUO

You said talking to your colleagues, who were they? It is something we discussed the other day, because it is interesting, a different moment now, there used to be lots of avant-garde movements and even in 60s neo avant-garde movements, artists groups with manifestos and now the situation is maybe more atomised, but you were telling me in Beirut there was and is a very close dialogue among artists so, it would be great if you could reveal more who were the artists in Beirut with whom you exchanged most?

MR

Of course, we know that there was an artistic movement in Beirut in the 60s. There was a big group of artists who came back from European universities, with a lot of new ideas and they formed a movement that lasted until the early 70s. The movement kept going because of the civil war and the circumstances made it difficult for newer artists to exhibit. So it was stretched thin until the late 80s or early 90s.

HUO

In the 60s, were there manifestos in Beirut?

MR

No, no, we are not talking about movements like you read in European art history. There were no manifestos – even today there are no manifestos, there is some kind of momentum that happens during a certain period and this is what I am thinking of as a movement. There was a big enough group in 60s, the artistic scene was very vibrant back then, and then it faded away until mid 90s. That's when my generation started to show their work. From my generation, you know most of them: Walid Raad, Akram Zaatari, Walid Sadek, Tony Chakar, and many others. In filmmaking: Ghassan Salhab, Mohamed Soueid...

HUO

Actually, many of these artists in Beirut work with photo or video or they work with archives. Your work has been different somehow from the outset in this sense because you work a lot with materials...

MR

Of course, but I am not very far away from the archive, even though it is not completely essential for me. In the late 90s, it was important for me to archive. Later on, it became less important, archiving is like carrying a lot of stuff on your back. We depend a lot on abstraction in our culture so I think it is very important to label things by their names and be exact about language. Part of the problem in the Middle East today is how we translate the news or how we understand politics around the globe, in general. This makes us take the wrong decisions, sometimes, so, it is important to be analytical, that's for sure. Back to archiving, I am not very far away from it because in some projects, such as *Monument for the Living* (2002-2008), I worked on reproducing exactly Burj El Murr (Murr Tower), a building in Beirut that lived through the civil war.

HUO

So, you documented it, you made research on it?

MR

Yes, and this is the archival aspect of the work. It is not a model for an abstract building. It's a specific building and this is where I think my work takes its rationale.

HUO

And is this the first building, which entered your work?

MR

Yes.

HUO

Does this then lead to the *Spectre* building?

MR

Chronologically, the *Spectre* building was made five years later (2006-2008). However, as I usually have several ideas working together in my mind, it is clear that *Monument for the Living* inspired *Spectre*. Other works came between them, such as *Beirut Caoutchouc* (2004-2006).

Beirut Caoutchouc is an aerial view of municipal Beirut, in which the zoning of the city is clearly defined. To create this giant floor map, I walked street by street in Beirut, and documented each of the fifty-nine sectors defined by the Electricity of Lebanon company. This zoning system doesn't follow the municipal zoning; it is not a state system. As there is a lot of illegal housing in Lebanon that cannot be on an official map, the municipal zoning is not accurate. Each of the fifty-nine sectors defined by Electricity of Lebanon is clearly written on blue signs, placed on every street, making it easier for me to reassemble the puzzle of the city. The idea behind *Beirut Caoutchouc* is, on one hand, to archive the city of Beirut, and on the other hand to fit Beirut into the spectator's eye. I was trying to create a space that can be in-between the paper map you look at, and the city you walk in.

HUO

The other day I was speaking to Bruno Latour and he said that the problem with maps is that they are not participatory. It is only now through the Internet that they become participatory, but you made something that is not the Internet, it is something very physical, but it is a participatory map.

MR

It's true, anyone can use Google Earth and play around with maps. And sometimes it really gets me dizzy – I press the wrong button and end up in china!

HUO

It is also something, which in this sense, I suppose, is infinite, no? The complexity of a city, in terms of when you talked the other day about Beirut and all these different possibilities to mapping, no, because there are so many different possibilities to mapping, it's probably something which is infinite, infinite possibilities.

MR

Yes, of course. But then the map in *Beirut Caoutchouc* is flat – there is no topography, it is basically streets and real estate. The streets themselves are the divisions between the different neighbourhoods. At the time when I was working with this piece in 2002-2003 a lot of the new highways in Beirut were already in place. Earlier discussions about urban development were coming true, but those highways would disconnect regions, and create more enclosed neighbourhoods. One would have to cross above or below the city, not noticing anymore the city and people who live on both sides of the highway. These new borderlines between areas started to cause political problems. All the attention shifted from the infamous Green Line [an imaginary line that divided Beirut during the civil war, and was dangerous to cross], into smaller lines that are inside neighbourhoods now, so the city is really being divided into smaller and smaller quarters.

HUO

It is like an archipelagos.

MR

Exactly, all the action happens in the centre of neighbourhoods and nothing happens at the borders where the meeting points between neighbourhoods take place. We only need to leave our centre if we have something to do outside of it and then we return. Society is getting more and more divided into smaller groups and more isolated. Even with new technology to bring people closer together, it doesn't happen, plus the state or the government did not create programs for integration. You can make fast highways, but you could also make a public transportation system that connects neighbourhoods. But unfortunately this is not happening so everything is getting more isolated. It was one of the reasons for my work, to try to show how the city is really divided. This is what made me move to my next project.

HUO

Which leads us to your unrealised project. Because the other day I was asking you my recurring question, what are your dreams and your unrealised projects and you told me that you had to do something that was an encounter between the sea and the mountains. You had an unrealised project.

MR

Yes, but for me it is a reaction to the 2006 war. I was moving away from the mountains without thinking of coming back. At the end, we have the sea with no mountain in the horizon.

HUO

And that is part of the photographic research you made, on buildings in Beirut?

MR

Yes, there are probably fifteen or twenty buildings in Beirut from the late 50s to early 60s. In 1955, laws and regulations started changing in Lebanon. The region was living in turmoil, between social changes and the new oil economy. Real estate investors came to Lebanon and skyscrapers changed the cityscape with commercial and residential construction. The project *Spectre* is a replica of the Yacoubian building, one of these buildings built in 1961. It was designed according to modernist ideas and aesthetics, to accommodate upper middle class or Arab bourgeoisie who spent some time in Beirut either for vacation or business. It was located in Ras Beirut and in its basement was the most important nightclub in Beirut in the 60s, Venus. The building began deteriorating from the mid 70s onward, when the civil war started. Many of the tenants took refuge in different areas of Beirut or left the country so it stayed empty for a couple of years until 1978. This was when the Israeli invasion of the south happened, causing the biggest migration of people of all different sects from the south to Beirut, creating many squats. Of course with time, the façade of the building and the interior changed. It was supposed to have a consistent model of windows and unifying colour for the outside. The ACs were not supposed to be hung on the exterior and all these interventions really transformed this ideal modernist concept into something else. I don't know what to call it. I am not saying its negative or positive, but it was transformed into something else. Again, this work [*Spectre*] had a lot to do with questioning the ideas of modernism and what happens when something goes wrong. This ideal collapses very quickly, but it also raises the question, if this happens, what is the alternative? Is it really chaotic or is it something different, something parallel to what was there before? Because from a modernist point of view, this is chaos. All the people here are from various groups – income, gender, ages – and they manage to live in one structure and use one entrance for the building, which accommodates probably 750 people.

HUO

It is what Yona Freedman said, when he came here to London and we had a conversation with him, actually said that he believes there is this top down sort of Le Corbusier type master plan, but this is all to do with the opposite – it is self organisation, it is about the map.

MR

Definitely, if you look at the interior of the building you see how each corridor is arranged in a different way by the tenants, not by the architect. This is also an archival project because I documented

and photographed all the details from the outside of the building. I never went inside the apartments because it wasn't important for me. The story of the building is that an Armenian guy who came from Aleppo, Syria in the 50s got a loan from the Russian People's bank - it was in Beirut back then - and he built and then sold it as condominiums before it started its transformation into today's structure. So again, I decided to document its state. Of course, you have all the different kinds of windows. These are security doors – better doors that are attached to the regular apartment doors. In modernist structures, you do not need these because you have a concierge, intercom and security cameras but because of the unstable situation, things happen. I was working on this project to show it at the San Paulo Biennial in 2006, but because of the war that broke in Lebanon that summer, I could not ship the work. So, I ended up going there with a suitcase full of envelopes with numbered windows and had a wooden structure built in San Paulo instead of the concrete one I made in Beirut. When I came back, I reworked the project and I did a larger piece made out of concrete, glass and aluminium instead of wood and plastic.

HUO

What I think is very interesting, what we discussed the other day is the reception of this piece because I also Googled it and if one looks at a lot of things that have been written about this piece, as you have pointed out, there have been so many misunderstandings, a lot of texts are just totally wrong: they say that the building had been evacuated, it is empty because of the war, so I thought it would be interesting to talk a bit about this, you know the wrong perceptions that have been triggered.

MR

Yes, there are misunderstandings, driven by perceptions of a place or a country. These pre-conceived ideas are usually formed through the media. When we say the Middle East, people always think of war, if we narrow it down to Lebanon, Lebanon means war usually, too. “Are you from Lebanon? Oh the war”. There are many things other than the war that people don't know about. They assumed that I was suffering from the war because I could not transport the work in its original form, so that brings us back to the same old story of war. That's not it. The problem was that the work could not be transported because the ports and the airports were blocked. People were still living in the same building during the whole month of the war that summer [2006], nobody moved. The idea is to show the subtle transformation of the building because of the civil war [1975-1991]. It is not that chaos happened, people escaped and the next day you had new people coming in; it takes years to change. Someone takes a home and then one year later he brings his family over and they start growing. A neighbour comes from the same village and settles. This is how the population expands in our cities. So, it has nothing to do with the war directly. The war is always indirect.

HUO

What is also fascinating is the idea that you do so much research and you do all the photographic research and it is almost like an atlas of all kinds of research and then it all goes then into one sculpture in some way so you know it is also a very slow process.

MR

Yes, it is very slow. I'm slow too. I could be working faster but I don't mind having the time. Usually, I get an idea, put it aside and then I do a lot of research to consolidate the idea. There are a lot of questions raised in the process. I need the facts, the tangibility. I do a lot of research so I can inhabit the work fully, but usually the initial idea never changes.