

Hans Ulrich Obrist in conversation with Marwan Rechmaoui,  
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H: When we met last, you were already a part of a mapping endeavor through sculpture, through drawings, but now this work [Blazon, 2016] seems to be the ultimate portrait of Beirut in a way?

M: This is like a farewell to the old city we know so well.

H: So, it's about something that disappears?

M: Yes, there's a totally new urban space in the making.

H: Before we talk about the new urban space, let's talk about what is disappearing. You document or you show us this disappearing city in fifty-nine chapters, why fifty-nine?

M: That's the number of neighborhoods in Beirut. I collected all the landmarks and names from those districts and I organized them in groups.

H: Can you give us some examples? For example, "ABC", what's "ABC"?

M: "ABC" is a department store and it's the first in the Middle East to employ women. I'm interested in its social role in the city of Beirut.

H: So the "ABC" stands for one specific neighborhood?

M: No, this is one shop in a neighborhood. We have fifty-nine neighborhoods, represented by shields. The shield is like a captain of the neighborhood or the commander. Basically, the shield shows the name, number, character and rank of each neighborhood. I referred to the meanings of the fifty-nine names and came up with five categories to organize them. There is horticulture group named after plants. There is the sectarian group named after saints or any religious institution. There is the architectural group named after human-made structures. There is the genealogy group named after families. And the last one is the Terra named after geographical or geological phenomena. Now for each shield, there are a number of flags, which metaphorically serve as soldiers for the commander. The more flags a shield has, the higher the ranking in its group. In this case, in the architectural group, the chief is the Serail in Beirut because it probably has like sixteen or seventeen flags based on the collections I made from those neighborhoods. I used the rankings of European Medieval Chivalry.

H: Oskar Kokoschka said: "it's almost impossible to make a portrait of a city, cities always change." So what you're basically doing is addressing this conundrum, no?

M: I agree that it's impossible to grasp a city because it's alive. It has many different dimensions, many different layers. So, no matter what we do, we will never have a whole picture, but we can have details. Through long-term research on the city by a number of artists and thinkers, we might be able to understand it more.

H: And why do you choose this military connotation? With the chivalry and the shields? What prompted that?

M: I use this military grouping and categorizing because being in Beirut you're surrounded by military and security issues. There's always a battle happening somewhere, in some city in the world. So basically, urban people are soldiers.

In Beirut specifically, even after the end of the civil war, with recent events we are always living *en garde*, always ready for something to burst. This makes me feel like a soldier. Therefore, I decided to organize the residents of Beirut in battalions.

H: Why is it called *Blazon*?

M: Blazon is the French word for armorial bearings.

H: In our first conversation, which we did in London when you were in residency at the Serpentine Edgware Road project [2010], we talked about the previous endeavors in terms of mapping. How did this project grow out of that? Because obviously you already have been working on this project for ten years whilst you worked on these other maps in a way?

M: Yes, I started researching and collecting in 2007.

H: What prompted it then? Was it a sudden epiphany or was it...?

M: The process started from *Beirut Caoutchouc* (2004-2006), originally. The fifty-nine neighborhoods are in that work. But *Beirut Caoutchouc* is one layer which maps the roads and real estate divisions. With *Blazon*, I research more deeply the city. I used the previous information from *Beirut Caoutchouc*, and I developed it in *Blazon*. I did a thorough historical research for this project, focusing on the history of Beirut since the 1830s, when it started to become modern. Before that, Beirut was a small town on the Mediterranean coast that had not much of importance. But in 1831, historical events happened in a way that it drew the picture of Beirut today.

H: Obviously the future is often invented with fragments from the past. This is a kind of a swan song, it's something which is ending. It's a type of city division or city structure that is ending. The question of course then rises here, what's next? If this is ending, how do you see the future of the city? And for you, how will your mapping endeavor continue?

M: Stepping into *Blazon*, the visitor becomes the *Flâneur* of Baudelaire, but this will be his last voyage as a *Flâneur*. Now, we are more into the underground, the fiber optics. The new city will be more underground.

H: Italo Calvino talks about invisible city. Is he somebody you're inspired by?

M: Of course. I read Calvino in search for concrete information. He wrote this book with a poetic language. At that time, I was more in search of scientific, historical or sociological information. In a city in which things appear then disappear. They don't have a beginning or an end. They just pop out, disappear or fall from the sky, or something happens. So with a background like this, I needed a more concrete, more scientific approach to understand this place. The book *The disabled city* by Lebanese sociologist Waddah Sharara answered that need.

H: Now besides Calvino and Sharara, are there any other literary influences or particular inspirations in terms of Beirut? A novelist produces a city in a way, because the whole imaginary around a city can come out of novels – for example Gerard de Nerval. What we think of a city is much of what novelists say it is. What it is, physically made reality. Are there any kind of novelists, novels on Beirut that inspired you?

M: Yes, there is one specific book by a Lebanese writer called Rabee Jaber, he did a trilogy on Beirut [Bayrut Madinat, 2003, 2005; 2007].

H: And that was an inspiration to you?

M: Yes, because he uses historical documents and manuscripts to write science fiction.

H: So, tell me about these notebooks, Marwan. Do you always have these drawing books with you?

M: Yes, but I never completed one.

H: Can I have a look at it?

M: Sure.

H: This is extraordinary. They should be published. How does it work, you take notes?

M: Yes, I take notes or do some sketches.

H: You made a lot of research for the *Blazon* project, how does this research work? You go to libraries or online?

M: I use the Internet mostly. The funny thing is that when I started the research there was much less information on the Internet than there is today.

H: Can you explain the methodology behind the *Blazon* research? Its very systematic, five groups for Beirut sectors according to their names and then you have a color-code. How does it work? I mean this is highly interesting.

M: What I'm trying to do through this organization is to make sense of what is happening today.

H: So, its soft organization?

M: Yes

H: Each color is for a group? Ocher is for the geographic location of the district, blue is for light, green is for green, red is for sectarian, beige is for architecture and then six is names. It's like a color code.

M: Yes, there are five groups, each group takes a color. I didn't use the same colors in the final work. Ocher is very much like the color of earth. Yellow ocher is a stone.

H: Blue is the sea?

M: Yes, but I removed the sea, because coastal neighborhoods fit under the other five so I removed it.

H: So that's why it's crossed out, coastal is gone. Green is?

M: For green areas.

H: It's the nature, the trees, the plants, it's the parks. Red stands for the sectarian and for the war, for the bloodshed or?

M: No, it's only for the sectarian. It resembles the robes of priests.

H: A lot to do with the colors of the sectarian.

M: Yes

H: And why is architecture beige?

M: From the building stones.

H: And the names have no color?

M: In the beginning, they did not but now I forced a color on them.

H: I'm glad I asked you about handwriting because without it we wouldn't have looked at the notebook and without the notebook we would've missed this. This is the most important explanation for the whole project. Then you say an element from each sector will be embroidered on flags. That explains the flags. The sector would have a shield that would carry the image of the sector's name, the rank, and the sub-names.

H: So, your very complex analysis of Beirut is that it is just a small chapter, it's about scale.

M: Scale makes a big difference.

H: What's the alpha city?

M: The big cities, like Mexico City, New York, Lagos ...

H: And alpha cities are more tolerant? And are more inclusive?

M: Yes. I mean it accepts more people... It accepts more cultures.

H: It's prone to curiosity. Why is it handy?

M: Because you can get anything.

H: Here we have another list, it goes from Chief to Dexter to Sinister to Base to Dexter Chief to Middle Chief to Sinister Chief to Honour Point to Fess Point to Nombriil Point to Dexter Base to Sinister Base to Middle Base. These are all ranks.

M: Yes, and their position on the shield.

H: So, Blazon is a written description of the coat of arms, as you said. Why is it written in French?

M: With my later research, I found out that the musketeers started this system and then all of Europe adapted it. So, if you want to describe a coat of arms in Hungary, or Scotland, or Spain you would use the old French.

H: The coat of arms is random in many different ways as long as it conforms to the Blazon. So, it's interesting that there is a certain freedom within these constraints. I mean that's what I was thinking in terms of the lists. Georges Perec always said that he wrote these French poems with these constraints and actually he did a novel without the letter 'E'. You say there

is many different ways as long as it conforms to the *Blazon*. So it can be many different things, but it has to conform?

M: Yes, because there are certain rules to write a *Blazon* and those rules can take different forms or shapes.

H: And then there are the different sizes of the shields, you have three sizes.

M: Small, medium and large, in proportion with the size of the neighborhood.

H: You say the shield carries characters and flags. The flags carry optional content and the mini flags carry content. Can you explain that to me?

M: The shield carries the essence of the neighborhood, based on what it had inside it. And the flag carries one of the objects that make the neighborhood. The mini flags were removed later.

H: Marcel Duchamp told Richard Hamilton that we mainly remember exhibitions which invent a new display. What is interesting, also, is that the whole thing has to do with an invention or a certain display because the shields go on the wall and the flags hang in the middle. Can you talk about this display?

M: I am trying to create a medieval battlefield with armies waiting to start the fight. You know, they're standing on guard waiting for the cry.

H: What's the role of language in your work? Because there seems to be a lot of plays in names and words...?

M: Yes, language is becoming more and more important in my work. It transmits so many images, endless images, which gives you a lot of choices to work with.

H: This is the architecture?

M: Yes, this is the sketch of the work I showed at the Sfeir-Semler Gallery in Beirut, at their tenth anniversary exhibition [Blue Building, 2015].

H: And can you tell me about the piece?

M: It's a building across the river from my studio, that I see everyday in progress. For me, it resembles corruption, abuse and the destruction of the environment.

H: And it's a building which is already built or?

M: It's almost done now.

H: It's a new office building or?

M: I have no idea what it's going to be. It's a building that started when the Syrian conflict started back in 2011. I could see the workers working even on Sunday night. That's the abuse part. They took advantage of refugees to construct an illegal building. It's right on the riverbank. In the municipality laws, you have to be a hundred meters away from the riverbank, but these guys are only five meters off and it's blocking the river path. I can show you the final work. This piece looks like a painting but it's a construction. It is three-dimensional, and the creation process was construction rather than painting. Of course here, it's a large piece, its made of nine panels. Each panel is 120 x 90 centimeters, this is how I

divided the work, how they're going to be. The top part, the three top panels are the sky, in the middle is the structure, and the bottom is the earth or soil.

H: And it connects, of course, to your earlier things related to buildings, no?

M: Of course.

H: And can you tell me about the pieces which were in Istanbul [Pillars series, 2015]? Because they were also somehow buildings.

M: They were done at the same time, when this building was erased or erected. At the beginning of the Syrian conflict, we started seeing footage on TV about the destruction in Syria, and it was really bad. It triggered my memory and I could smell what was behind the screen, and hear and feel what's happening because we went through a similar situation.

H: In Beirut?

M: In Beirut. So, for me those images were not flat anymore. They were not a screen image. They were like memory capsules. Based on that, I started making those pillars so they looked like capsules. But then they transformed into pillars, because at the same time we were witnessing this destruction in Syria. I sensed the destruction of whole cultures, on a deeper level. Like a whole era was disappearing - the era of Arab nationalism, let's call it. So basically all those pillars started to crumble, culture ... society...

H: So, they're also like ruins?

M: Ruins, definitely. And probably we can will find the word ruins here.

H: It's interesting because it's similarly through this piece, what's the title of this piece?

M: *Blue Building*, I called it.

H: So, similarly to *Blue Building*, your Istanbul pieces have to do with a two-dimensional reality becoming a three-dimensional reality.

M: Of course. But, if you put *Blue Building* with the *Pillars*, you see two sides of destruction.

H: Two sides of destruction, which is?

M: One looks like it's a construction, and the other one is really ruins.

H: The Blue Building is the destruction of construction?

M: Of environment and people and...

H: A building destroying the environment and in the other case it's a real destruction of an existing building of a war, yeah.

M: This is why I called it the *Blue Building*, they put this plastic here so there won't be a landslide when it rains, and the building slides. It's something unreal.

H: And why did they do it, because there's no government in Beirut right now?

M: No, I never saw an official inspector coming to this site.

H: So, it's a country without a government?

M: Yes.

H: You also talk about erosion, I mean erosion is a very interesting phenomenon, with pebbles, sidewalks, a marble of a shrine... Erosion is very sculptural in a way, no?

M: It's true, but the thing with erosion is that it takes a long time to happen and I'm always thinking of how to speed the process. You know when you enter an old church, you see the middle of the stair steps, they are a bit worn out, they are not straight anymore. It took millions of people to take that step, to make it look like this.

H: So you wonder how you could as a sculptor, create, accelerate an erosion?

M: Exactly

H: And have you done that?

M: It's a new idea, I'm going to work on it soon.

H: Of course, the notion of the unrealized brings me to the question. What are your unrealized artworks?

M: Definitely. It's a difficult question. *Blazon* has been an unrealized project for almost ten years and then I achieved it in four months. Erosion is an interest, an idea that still doesn't have a precise shape.

H: The notion of the ruins is interesting, because, of course, the pieces in Istanbul were ruins, and you say ruins here, live somewhere else. What do you mean by normalizing ruins? Is it the idea of having new life coming out of the ruins? Because that's actually what I was wondering in Istanbul, they were like new life. They were not about death.

M: If we get used to ruins, they become normality. The negative role of the media, gets us accustomed to destruction and ruins. It doesn't affect us anymore. We are not motivated to change things, anymore. This is what I mean by normalizing ruins.

H: And you quote Foucault here "Pure felicity is the continued presence of the model in the image". What's the inspiration from Foucault?

M: I'm still thinking about this sentence, but it caught my attention. It has to do with what we are saying.

H: It's the Order of Things, you read the Order of Things?

M: Yes. You know Tarkovsky's movie *The Mirror*? It's one of my favorites of all time movies.

H: "Here are the ingredients of what's on your table, you've got the camera, the money, the passport, the key, the telephone number, the notebook, the charger, the remote control, the cigarettes, the past, the bill, the notes, the pills, the whiskey, the light, the pen..." Sounds very Georges Perec.

M: I've read his manual when I was working on Yacoubian building, *Spectre* (2006-2008). I was reading Perec's owner's manual, I can't remember the title now.

H: Yes, of course, because it's all about a portrait of a building, portrait of a city, portrait of a building...

M: Yes, but *Spectre* was made in 2006 to 2008, this page was in 2015.

H: One very last question, to conclude the interview. What in 2016 would be your advice to a young artist?

M: Get knowledge, disregard it, and work.