

Patchwork Languages
Marwan Rechmaoui's Beirut
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Models, be they physical (“caoutchouc”), three-dimensional (maps), or colored (in reddish brown hues), project to Beirut and the larger Arab world an illusion of connectedness to their objects of representation, a sense of unity even. That external patch of skin, even if connected, smooth, and impermeable, which separates between the inner fabric of a cohesive society and a scattered exterior, must remain alert to this sort of comparison. And the process of binding the city, a phenomenon extrapolated from laminating school books, isolates its body from external threats like ink, paint, sweat, water, scribbling, tearing, and reattaching, etc. However, this identical process eventually traps the city in a ceaseless cycle of conflict and chaos, costing it, its internal unity and equilibrium between body and essence.

Skin

Enveloping the body of Beirut with “caoutchouc” skin neither “laminates” the city nor isolates it, but rather outlines it, the manner in which a tight dress would trace a woman’s silhouette. Skin, in this case, is a symbol of groups and communities, their means of transportation and communication, barriers and blockades, spaces and directions that occupy the city, forces struggling over and recreating it inasmuch as they divide and multiply it. These observations assert the fact that the city – or the balance of its body and being – emerges out of a series of moving lines, or rather the meta-movement of lines upon lines which speak to one other in countless ways. Some lines are parallel; some intersect at acute or obtuse angles; others come together in the form of squares, rectangles, triangles, or semi-circles. Then there are some lines that neither take on a shape or form, nor do they seek it. They suspend any sense of completion and settle for imitating or projecting an idea of form. Some lines merge with those adjacent to them, penetrating their movements, either dissolving into them and dispersing, or emerging in a different form altogether. Thus, skin/maps both herald the birth of new lines and conceal them for it is not always clear where roads begin and end, nor where they may lead. This movement is born out of others and leads to more without having a clear beginning or end. It occurs in spite of administrative, geographical, and natural borders that enclose villages and cities, as well as their outlying suburbs, continually constricting such places and redefining them.

On the one hand, border-lines distinguish among squares, rectangles, semi-circles, and other distinct hybrid geometric forms, and they might have even preceded the tectonic plates upon which the world (the Arab world in this case) presides. But, on the other hand, borders do not ensure the map’s stability, nor do they safeguard its “internal” units, as though there were such a thing as separate and protected units in a world where connectivity and communication overwhelm elements that are fortified and fenced in. What invites the viewer to contemplate Beirut’s protruding skin is neither its strong and stubborn borders nor its ability to enclose upon its circles. For that is impossible and in all cases pointless, because the violation of borders is a

cardinal rule predicated on spontaneous and inestimable movements, deviations, and convergences that occur under unpredictable circumstances. This picture of Beirut comes alive instantaneously, born out of mercurial and unstable components which alter its lines, shapes, and spaces, and transform it based on fluctuating and changing scales. It whimsically zooms in and out according to a form fixed in that which is visible or audible, as Wertheimer says; or according to the viewer's whims, motivations, and intentions in perception, as others say. So if you set aside the borders, what's left of the canvas are the parameters (however loose or distant), the many or few junctures, their ordering or chaos, and their positionality on the map's surface. Because of these lingering aspects, the viewer is able to perceive an index of connectivity, synergy, and disconnect. Based on this, the city's surface is "a body without organs" as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari claim in *Anti-Oedipus*, for this surface is nothing but a portrait of unchecked impulse and emotion.

The Panel

Perhaps the picture most faithful to Beirut and its "caoutchouc" skin is the transportation light guide panel that traces the railroad, metro, or bus lines in big metropolitan cities such as Cairo, Shanghai, New York, Tokyo, Paris, Barcelona, Moscow, and others. The light guide is a mapped out surface that presents all possible roads and connections to a traveler or migrant (and here, perhaps, it is more accurate to say *al-mutarahil* (the émigré) or *ath-tha'in* (the non-resident who leaves home and travels elsewhere). These possibilities combine parts of the lines and stops such that the traveler gets a sense of all the directions he can take from the position he happens to be in at that particular moment. The panel also contains all possible positions, directions, and destinations that a traveler might want to arrive at. These stops and stations, and their connecting lines, are represented by colored light bulbs embedded in the panel which operate on levels "deeper" than the surface. Underneath every station, there are neighborhoods, roads, squares, and sites. And often times, what appears to be a singular station is actually a mass of stations that produces a set of directions distinct from the ones that pour into it. New lines are born from the combination of stations that travelers pass through or go to. And if he so chooses, a traveler can invent his own travel map. It all comes down to the power of his imagination and ability to "connect the dots," for the city is a panel in many senses. While it can be a mapped out color coded guide, it can also be a space plunged in a dark abyss or dispersed on a level white plane without any distinguishing landmarks. This "superficial" or surface-level metonymy of the city – its ability to create places and directions and mix locales – manifests itself regularly and is bolstered by available supplementary tables and graphs.

As chance would have it (or is it really a coincidence?), the last few months of 2016 witnessed a raging war in Mosul that, as many observers and activists have said, is likely to bleed into the early months of 2017. This war was a pretext for some television news stations, like BBC Arabic, to retrieve panoramic aerial shots of Mosul that were most likely captured by drones or UAVs (as many specialists know, there's a close kinship between the art of reconnaissance and that of war). In those photographs, or perhaps on them, the viewer can see Mosul's houses, its neighborhoods and transportation networks lying flat, covered in dust, and stretching far into the horizon, which the viewer assumes ends at the city's invisible borders. This Iraqi city in the Arab north, which was once home to two and a half million people who reared houses, systems, and

'*arba*'¹ (as they used to say in neighborhoods and close quarters), today looks like a patch of brown skin – streaked, connected, and disconnected – in pictures taken from above. Were it not for the slight protrusion of its two or three story buildings and the lines that connect between demographic clusters, Mosul would wear its skin like a sandy tundra. This apparent flatness conceals many localized cracks and fissures, countless pits of woe and sorrow that have remained unaccounted for.

Mosul, along with other parts of Baghdad and its suburbs, is perhaps a mirror image of what Aleppo has today become, following in the footsteps of Homs and Kobani and the many besieged cities in between which have been under sniper fire and attack for years – from al-Zabadani to Nubl and al-Zahraa, Handarat, Sheihoun, and many others. In the closing days of 2004, sometime between Christmas and New Year's Eve, Aleppo seemed like a corpse with scattered limbs, lined with large minarets and domes, some churches, and a few smoke-spewing factories that can be seen from a distance. Those who set their sights on this colossal urban mass could not help but mine images from it – here called a “mass” not merely because of its external curves and edges, but also because it is distinct from its invisible essence. Looking out over Aleppo at night from the tenth floor of the Amir Hotel, one of the city's tallest buildings in its heyday, the viewer will meet a vision in pale gray, stretched flat above dull buildings in the image of its Iraqi counterpart. There is, nonetheless, a stark contradiction between the grandeur of Aleppo's monuments, its citadel, magnificent mosques, bars, mental asylums, *souks*, inroads, neighborhoods, city lights and the modesty of Mosul with its introverted inclination to envelop its own parts and lie in shadow.

The Charged Space

The aforementioned categories – the skin, map, levelness, the abyss, fault lines, harmonious and discordant spaces, points of crossing and exit, internal divisions, and recon photos – call for establishing links among them or at least among some of their aspects. Because the body (or the city's skin) lacks organs and nodes of sensation, and because it stretches flat on a surface accosted by uncontrollable movement in all directions as well as dense “pores” that create centers, sites, and landmarks, we can deduce that this body is essentially a charged space criss-crossed by irregular electric currents verisimilar to the way a power plant operates. The excess blood that circulates through the veins and arteries of the city's centers of command and control does not preclude the possibility of conflating among its unstable and fluid identities, which makes it easier to turn the city's surface into dispersed war zones and sites of moving targets and volatile outbursts. And it does not seem improbable to argue that military warfare has had a large hand in destroying the organized chaotic rhythms of cities, as is manifest in how combat aircrafts usurp the skies (or the government as the French military historian Hervé Dréville has suggested), and ravage cities with some omniscient and external God-like power of surveillance. The conclusion that has thus been drawn came to light through projects and installations decades and decades after the catastrophic events. We can say that it is a retrospective kind of conclusion drawn on a limited aspect of reality, which in turn builds on a series of facts and events that have been publicly acknowledged as Ludwig Wittgenstein would suggest in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921/22).

The Index

¹ Progeny and groups of people.

The truth of the matter is that using the term “Beirut Caoutchouc” during the exhibition, as the pictures indicate (pagination), lifted the veil of abstraction and grounded the work in reality, assuming that the spectator bore no emotional connection to the installation (the word “emotional” here means being inclined towards something, someone, or an event). Some observers purposefully stood in specific positions with respect to the work based on where they live in the city, and they perceived the sites on the three dimensional map through their biographical narratives and personal histories. While they were standing before the installation spread out on the exhibition floor – or perhaps on it – underneath the skylight, we can say that most of the spectators felt liberated from their homes, circles, the trajectories of their comings and goings, and the tensions between their city’s exposures and enclosures.

In an exhibition for Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige’s work at the Forum de Beyrouth in 2013, a protruding map of Beirut was on display. The artists suggested that exhibit visitors break off their “piece” of the city from the map, or the building they lived in, and carry it around with them in their pockets.

The act of identifying specific sites, appropriating them, or even just straddling the life-sized map and marking it, challenges the traditional creative and constructivist role of the artist, and presents the artist in an alternative light as one who conceives of the work with the help of a *murshid*² in the didactic sense, as can be seen in the photograph hanging beside the picture of the 56 blue metal plates the Beirut municipality uses to designate the different areas of the city (Ras Beirut area, Rmeil area, Hotel Dieu area, etc.).

The creation of an abstract map based on its creator’s *murshid* thus combines a concrete, structural, functional, and residential origin with a close examination of the city’s parts. This combination is foregrounded in the photographs that document Beirut’s sites, areas, and place names which checker its skin and surface in a manner characterized by “caoutchouc” or hard wax. The specific picture of the 56 metal plates, for example, is not organized by alphabetical order (it moves vertically in the first column towards the right from el-Jisr to Jumblatt then Gemmayze and then the letter G/J is interrupted in the first column and gets picked up again with Geitaoui in the second), nor by spatial proximity (for even though there is no geographical or alphabetical link between Mar Maroun, al-Watah, Mina el-Hosn, and el-Sanayeh, their connection forms a square shape in the bottom corner of the table’s third and fourth columns). These metal street signs, which list the areas and suburbs of Beirut using Arabic and Latin alphabets, describe a language which was first auditory and then transformed into the written word for the reading public in the aftermath of its oral circulation among social circles. Marking the list with the title “Beirut Caoutchouc,” which signifies both the relief map and the substance with which it was made, invites the viewer to simultaneously perform a dual reading and implicit translation of both the map and its index. While on the one hand, the silent map speaks through abstract lines, spaces, and modes of movements and privileges them over static edifices and known visual sites; on the other hand, the index which designates neighborhoods and places frequently referred to, elicits a deeper reading of the city’s areas through their names from a lived socio-historical point of view. This reading, however, unfetters the specific sites and their place names from any form of spatial totality, the complex networks of which are embodied by the map itself. Therefore, both forms of visual and lexical representation liberate and

² A guide, memento, or detailed summary of main ideas.

contextualize Beirut at the same time, even if they don't draw on the same signs, languages, or grammatical structures and even if the movement between both "panels" is incongruent.

Reading at Two Poles/Bi-Polar Reading

If the map is a representation of a flat and connected surface that is crosscut by its own roads, channels of movement, and implicit networks, then its list of place names and identical sites render an image of separate and scattered entities that cannot be brought together under one roof except by its people – those who know and live in these sites, to be exact. They are illuminated by the many subheadings in the record of place names with no obvious order or index. Without the latter two, the panel cannot be a part of the three dimensional map, but that does not mean the viewer cannot distinguish the areas on the map's surface. The ongoing "dialogue" between the map and panel suggests that the one constantly refers to the other without either of them being fixed. Perceiving the map as a pole of unity and totality doesn't contradict viewing the panel as a pole of multiplicity and diffusion. And if the map calls for a reading of the city that is both aerial and external (beyond the influence of war and suspended authority), the panel will in the same way reflect the city as abundance and uncontrollable chaos (as al-Mawardi, d. 1058, says in *Al-Ahkam al-Sultania w'al-Wilayat al-Diniyya* or *The Ordinances of Government*: "there is chaos and they have no Imam") that cannot be reined in by any sense of order.

And the fact is that both poles are abstract, stripped by the aesthetic and intellectual imagination of substance and mixed "magma" as Cornelius Castoriadis expounds in *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1976), and they are taken from an unspecified and unnamed mix into the logic of collectivity, identity and their representations.

It isn't simply a matter of one meeting the other – map and panel – for the pictures of the map's assembly from several numbered parts and the visitors positioning themselves at some sites versus others constitute a double metaphor of one pole encroaching on the other, of parts undoing the whole and the whole intimidating the minuteness of its parts. Several individualized panels form sub-collections that seek to interpolate themselves within one of Beirut's many harbored areas and destabilize the illusion of the map's unity. In this light, the table of popular place names resolves the panel of official urban areas through names (entries) that are at times more detailed, at others inclusive of more areas than one. But there are also times when the place name/signifier corresponds to the number of places it signifies. If we take as an example the larger Cola area, which does not have a designated administrative or municipal name but just imposed itself on urban planning in post-war Beirut, we can see that it combines al-Watah³ (Watah Burj Abi Haidar and Watah al-Msaitbeh) with Mar Elias and al-Malaab in al-Taree' el-Jdeedeh (colloquially referred to as Taree' el-Jdeedeh without the article preceding the antecedent, its area code being 56 and listed at the bottom of the table's first column on the right hand side). The Barbir area is cradled among Corniche el-Mazraa, el-Horsh, el-Park (more commonly known as el-Hirsh), and Ras el-Nabeh. The venerable Park, however, is enclosed within al-Tayyouneh and does not exceed it, in the same way that Tallat al-Khayyat is synonymous with al-Oubari – the same Oubari located in the upper part of Mar Elias to the east and the west side of the hill towards Télé Liban, followed by Verdun and Saqiyat el-Janzeer. At that point, Mar Elias disperses in the direction of el-Cola, the Spinneys supermarket area, and al-Zouheiry, which is both a gas station and a family meeting spot. And based on this division, it

³ The Arabic vernacular indicating the lower side of a specific area.

can be said that al-Watah and parts of Unesco (Habib Abi Shahla Square) are derivatives of Mar Elias and the original areas that belong to it including the refugee camp and the Greek Orthodox cemetery.

The table of popular names of Beirut areas operates through formulae that constitute an index of 51 new names added to the original 56 that comprise the list of Beirut's urban centers – 52, if you count al-Malaab in the latter list. These new popular names echo the historical facts and events that interwove themselves into the fibers of urban social networks. It was the people of Beirut who gave these names an afterlife through monuments and signs in the currency of their communication. Some of these are physical statues like the ones in Beshara el-Khoury, Riyad el-Solh, Habib Abi Shahla, as well as other sites and squares. These names have only recently been attributed to these places, specifically in the wake of the Civil War's eruption in 1975. This was a response to a primitive political impulse to instill sentiments of nationalism and independence, both of which came under serious threat during the war, as did the unity of the nation's capital city. People began invoking these place names and site-specific monuments in practical ways, referring to specific locations that came into being out of an intersection between old areas and popular or well known ones. Perhaps, this was pursued for the sake of specificity and identification, based on the prevalent logic of reification by attributing the **local patriarchal** label "Sheikh" or "Ra'ees" to the neighborhoods and areas that are frequented by the "rayyes's" group. For this reason, the formation of the Abi Shahla, el-Khoury, and Solh squares followed the pattern of areas like el-Barbir, al-Oubari, Dennaoui, Noueiry, Shahroui, Zouheiry, ad-Dana, Barbour, al-Akkawi, Abou Taleb, Sadat, Bliss, and Charles Helou, in size and form, though not necessarily in time.

The prevalence of informal, communal, local, and sectarian acquaintanceships and identifications over localized spatial, residential, and occupational considerations has facilitated these informal naming processes. After all, people with an Arab background tend to make associations based on family ties and connections rather than occupation, social class, and individual motivation.

Hybridization

In truth, this process of abstraction and attempting to induce factors that determine popular and emerging names overlooks a form of hybridization which cannot help but continuously influence, merge and develop abstract formulations. The Barbir area, for example, has come to replace Ras el-Khatt, the Maqasid-Horsh square, the beginning of Corniche el-Mazraa and the end of Ras el-Nabeh, its crown jewel being the eponymous medical institution built by a Beirut physician who comes from a Sunni family of sheikhs, religious scholars, tradesmen, and employed workers. It is interesting to note that the square, which is essentially an intersection of roads and stations, was named after the Barbirs even though they are not and never were a particularly notable family. Instead, other factors combined with the grounding presence of the main family branch to fixate the place name, mainly the physician's professional career which involved playing social and philanthropic roles, as well as acquiring the location in which the clinic was opened. Pursuing this liberal profession gave the Barbirs social clout on the one hand, and made them an average middle class family on the other. The popular name "Barbir," therefore, carries household, vocational, and social connotations all at once. It is also worth noting that it gained traction in the wake of the area losing its original prominent name, Ras el-Khatt (the word "khatt" referring to the tramway line that linked el-Mazraa to Horsh Beirut and

Dora to the northeast), once the company had closed down in 1965 and the public bus system replaced it. So the name of the hospital, which is more of a medical center, succeeded the Ras el-Khatt name after the latter had lost its function and prominence. The same can be said of other medical centers with community-driven names such as al-Roum Hospital and Geitaoui Hospital, but there are others that were not named in this way (such as the American University Hospital, today called American University of Beirut Medical Center).

It has become a common phenomenon for popular place names to somewhat replace official ones, or at least to have come into use to refer to specific parts of an area which are nonetheless accounted for by their municipal moniker. Popular names like Dannaoui, Ayyoub, Zouheiry, and ad-Dana all bear familial weight tied to the business of owning gas stations, which anchor people's daily movements and interactions and provide them with a concrete sense of their whereabouts, places where they live, and do business. The Dannaoui Station, for example, resonates with people much more specifically/realistically than say, the Patriarcat, Bachoura, or Basta el-Tahta. The same logic applies to almost all common and emerging popular place names, the impulse for inventing them comes as part of a move to frame the city's sub-spaces in more specific terms. This also has to do with the city's expansion, both in space and population density, complicating forms of administrative, political, economic, and environmental control, and swelling with the influx of outsiders while trying to induct them into the system, enculturate, and familiarize them with its environs.

Government sites like Hbeish, Karentina, al-Maslakh, Banque du Liban, al-Adab, Électricité du Liban, and al-Adlieh, are often considered public spaces in and around Beirut. Iconic hotels, both historical and contemporary, are also sites of identification. To the canonized Saint George, Holiday Inn, and Beau Rivage hotels, we can add the Riviera Hotel between the Bain Militaire and the lighthouse by the water, the Habtoor Hotel on the intersection of Mkalles and Sin el-Fil, the Summerland and Coral Beach Hotels on the old beach strip (where the San Rimon and San Michelle used to be) also known today as Jnah. In a similar fashion, movie theaters that have been named after streets with proper names have brought many residential circles and neighborhoods like Clemenceau into the spotlight. Their names grew increasingly popular in neighborhoods that in the mid 1950s started becoming diverse in terms of residents and their religious backgrounds. Cinema Salwa thus became associated with Ras el-Khatt to the southwest and Cinema Beirut with the area between the latter and Dar al-Aytam. Cinema Aida came to stand for a section of a street that leads to Dar al-Fatwa. Similarly, Cinema Hawwa became an emblem that marked the end of Mazraa Street followed by el-Barbour before reaching Watah Burj Abi Haidar and Watah al-Msaitbi. And who could forget about the several theaters on Hamra Street, localized between Banque du Liban to the east and Sadat Street to the west, which have died out in the last fifteen years but that, at one point in the 1960s and early 1970s, spawned many parking lots to lodge their popularity?

Nevertheless, the aforementioned observations about the table of popular area names, the Beirut Caoutchouc panel, and the official list of urban area names are not nearly enough to describe the hybridized way in which neologisms are formed. What initially prompted these preliminary remarks is an inherent connection between the panel-list with Beirut Caoutchouc, the map-body and its nameless nature. It's a dual yet contradictory relationship, a juxtaposition of sorts. Beholding the embodied map evokes a set of binaries that involve zooming in and out, connecting and fragmenting, and coalescing in a sense of movement. The map suggests, in other

words, a formulation of an algebraic or calculable nature that conceals these dichotomous images which only come to light through the aid of circumstantial and structural signs. Unlike silent architectural models and structures, panels make note of facts, bodies, and appointments and constitute a preliminary corpus of popular place names that have been imposed on official ones, and even prompt putting together appendices that take account of minor places like private swimming pools, clock towers, statues, granaries, tunnels, bridges, public gardens, ports and harbors, roundabouts, and stoplights. These interconnected processes are ultimately an indication of the logics of hybridization that control the city's developmental and expansionary dynamics in these contemporary capitalist times.

Underneath the tables and appendices that are etched into Beirut's superficial skin lie countless pseudo maps – names, signs, homes, sites, professions, and systems of mobility and stasis. It can thus be argued that viewers – they at whom the work is projected – have the power to conceptualize, derive from, and append to the work, which in turn may be a map, panel, photograph, table, sculpture, carving, as well as media forms, words, and shapes that compose it. The people, in other words, assign a sense of identity to particular places in the city, like car parks and bus stops, major hotel locations, bank centers and ATM networks, movie theaters and restaurant chains, commercial centers and marketplaces, administrative centers, military and security bases, hospitals, medical centers, clinics, and pharmacies, houses of worship and cemeteries, and many others. People are the ones who rescue these places from falling into neglect and obscurity within larger official circles. As such, there is nothing trivial or indispensable about site-specific place names, even more so when considering the argument that the abundance of material and name based forms of identification can supersede and in some cases do away with abstract and numerical addresses (in the manner of a boulevard number followed respectively by the street name and number). The condition of dual identification or its division between official and unofficial categories is in fact emblematic of Beirut's multiplicity and its tendency toward experimentation underneath its seemingly connected and cohesive skin/surface. In any case, the list of popular place names is just the tip of the iceberg, for if the inquirer were to dive deeper into the underbelly of Beirut, "beneath" the 56 areas, into the streets and sub-streets, he would be able to follow the trail to residential buildings that themselves are named after an individual tenant or a family that lives there. This speaks to the living difference between the body politic of a city – its urban and administrative centers – and its body natural – the organic, living, breathing self. This difference, however, does not mean that both constituent parts are disconnected; instead, they assume the form of patchwork in the same way that disparate parts are stitched together along fault lines that connect rather than divide.

The Light Factor

It serves the city to apply this patchwork model, which connects groups of people, neighborhoods, locations, signs, and names to the city's map, skin and surface to much of Marwan Rechamoui's works, particularly Pillars, The UNRWA Series, Blue Building, On Solid Ground, and C60, even if it is a theoretical application. It testifies to the interconnectedness of the works themselves (Beirut Caoutchouc with the name plates, photographs of panels, and colored maps). At the same time, it is a practical example that exposes the logic which led to the work's production, and lays out for the eyes and the mind the process of its construction/creation and perhaps even the pretexts to its formulation. Completed in 2010, C60, for instance, is a hollow metallic and spherical structure with hexagonal rings and golden hinges. When lit, it

glows with two distinctive colors and casts the base on which it is mounted in dark shadow that combines both model and flat horizontal surface to resemble the shape of a basket. The colored body seems to jut out of a heart of darkness: a picture in metallic gray with streaks of light green bordering on pale blue. It is an image of iron spokes that intersect almost at the center and opening of a metallic circle which seems flattened at the top and is surrounded by a vat of concrete encircled by a metal frame thicker than the skeletal spokes, which conceals itself, allowing only a fraction of its circumference to be seen.

Despite the difference between the two forms in their stages of completion, there can be no doubt in the viewer's mind that they are nevertheless similar to the point where it becomes difficult to discern which preceded the other. And the raw form is indisputably organic as opposed to the manufactured nature of the installation. But great likeness stems from the metal grid intercepting the viewer's line of vision and mediating the space between the latter and the grounded metal circle, which pervades the heterogeneous concrete mix. This kind of interception and mediation is what the raw skeletal setup and the final installation have in common. The stages of the sphere and its six rings thus fluctuate between what appears to be a Sufi quality of interweaving light and dark patterns (with light prevailing over darkness) and an industrial material aspect in which the lackluster metalwork lies on a bed of unmoving blackness. The resulting patterns highlight the importance of the base – whether cast in light or shadow – in producing and projecting images. Confusing the base with the object itself parallels the installation's three stages and their conditions (three being an arbitrary number here, which could easily multiply to many more). The gray colored lattice metal circle seems to float above a stony, earthen surface which emits a silvery light that echoes a cosmic one of unknowable origins. This synthesis comes as a result of proximity, organization, and imitation that a viewer cannot possibly reproduce in discourse with a coherent beginning, middle and end. For what syntheses (or patchworks) suggest is a presentation of parts, some of which are natural and some synthetic, in order to expose their many aspects and relationships (which usually involve light, material and media, as well as the environment or context of the work itself) and experiment with possible outcomes of the exhibit and how its components will settle in relation to each other. But it is worth noting that these creations do not require unfathomable strength or imagination; they already exist in nature in different combinations of light, color and context. All it takes is a keen eye to discern what patterns and formations can be done and undone.

Deterioration

The collection of drawings, photographs and other works were compiled under the Concrete Phase, which is also a picture perceived in the aforementioned sense, but not in the up-close, deconstructionist, and mysterious way that C60 was composed. Instead, the Concrete Phase speaks to outstretched dimensions. At the picture's forefront, which the eye's lens immediately captures, you can see a section of a dirt road with tire tracks that replicate the grooves and canals on a rubber tire's outer layer, which allow it to catch and release grains of sand and gravel as well as drops of water from the road. And off to the side, a little behind the road on eye level, there is a brownish mound of soil that seems to have been extracted from the ground some time ago. It is covered in yellowing weeds and at the foot of its slope sits a pile of cement stones, gravel, and small rocks. Behind the brown mound there is a group of four black concrete blocks with the word "Amal" painted on them and metal spokes sticking out of their tops like strands of hair standing erect on the crown of a bald head. The blocks seem abandoned, the first being the

largest and the second about half the size of the first with metal spikes about a third as long as the first. The fourth is spike-free but rests part of its weight on the third block; both of which are the same size: about a sixth of the second.

Further behind these black blocks and their crooked setup, there are two identical buildings, four stories each, built with the same design: matching front façades, arched windows, tiled balconies with iron balustrades and wooden shutters concealing thin glass windows draped with sheer white curtains... There is a slice of sky peeping out between the two buildings and hanging above a tile roofed house in the distance. Another more modern looking structure stands even further beyond these but is blurred by the startling light of day. Between the twin buildings and the blocks there is a fence that, interestingly enough, does not wall in a garden or piece of land. Instead, it is composed of two levels: a stone base mounted with a level iron railing. Two rounded pillars stand on either side of the gate leading to the backyard, and they are a couple heads higher than the fence. When a profile picture was taken of the scene, at a thirty degree angle to the photographer's right hand side, it caught about two-thirds of the building on the left and only subtle features of the building to the right.

Describing the elements of the desolate yet abundant landscape in front of the buildings is a segue to talking about the picture's components. Having the black concrete blocks and iron rail encroach on the forgotten mound of soil and the piles scattered around it paradoxically prefigure the near and imminent future: the yellowish-brown weeds and upturned earth (a sign of neglect) as well as the vandalized blocks (indicating that some situation or event prevented their being used in the dug-out hole nearby) all suggest that a *force majeure* interrupted this work-in-progress. The construction of the whole and the parts which were meant to support it were turned to forgotten remnants that foreshadow a blind stillborn future ahead. There stand the vulnerable mound and timeless blocks before the buildings obstructing the way out from the social world into the natural one – or are they in fact closing in on the latter and silently plotting an attack? As for the windows, all barred except one on the third floor to the side (if you count the ground as the first floor), they too are tell-tale signs of families that have completely abandoned their homes or return to them infrequently.

Upon observing this picture, the viewer will perceive the struggle contained and nurtured within it. It has the effect of a portrait hanging on a museum wall that stops viewers dead in their tracks. The subjects of the picture, the twin buildings, seem to welcome those who observe them from the light's perspective which hits the picture, almost splitting it in two and spilling over to its top and bottom halves. Their faded pink color also draws the viewer's attention, seeming to welcome it at first but then reveals that a protracted length of time has passed over its façade, preserving the past in its present condition, which has taken on a yellowish gray tinge. The viewer's eyes are then drawn to a large yellow protrusion jutting out on the edge of the left-side building above the balcony on the fourth floor, wrapped around the edifice in the shape of a horizontal "L." But no sooner does the viewer start to ponder these sights than his gaze stumbles over the black concrete blocks and adjacent dirt mound. The fact that these crossbred eye sores intrude upon the picture's balanced composition does not escape keen sighted attention.

It thus makes sense to argue that the picture gives birth to several smaller, mongrelized others that live in the margins and corners of the original. These hybrid formulations made of various shapes and colors have dead weeds growing out of them, carpeting their surfaces, and tiny green plants sprouting out of cracks at the bottom of the fence wall with its dull, yellowish-gray

balustrade. The metal wires sticking out of the blocks have gotten tangled in the fence nearby, the two sentries at the entrance of the twin buildings with the railing on the side balconies above. Shades of brown accented with subtle highlights color the balcony doors, window shutters, and the tiled rooftop of the house in the background. These seemingly small details do not detach the picture from the temporal and spatial context in which it is viewed, nor do they force the viewer to perceive it only in terms of dichotomies (close-ups or landscape views, grouping elements or deconstructing them, linear or non-linear arrangements). For these obvious contradictions are never divorced from the specific material and sensory conditions of their objects' existence. On the contrary, proximity among these elements (the unused concrete blocks, the grassy mound, the paint splotches on the walls, the faded pink hues, the distant dirty brown roof, and the bluish green "Amal" graffiti lighting the pit of concrete blackness) is laid out like patchwork and is a metaphor for civil war, gang raids, arrested development, shrinking populations, and mixing color and taste. The picture also symbolizes occupation, displacement, plundering and division, the passage of time, fearmongering, classism, sectarianism, and social inequality. That said, anchoring the elements in those meanings, or alluding to them, occurs without calcifying them within limited conditions.

The Sociological Mosaic

Little by little, patchwork forms and languages begin to encroach on all works, and even become the driving force behind their creation, exposing the tensions and divisions among their structures and buildings. Each of the concrete works – the Blue Building, the Shabriha, Ayn el-Helwe, and Nahr el-Bered camps, the groups of columns including the Yacoubian Building – attests to being a complex installation in uneven measure, which is the stuff of urbanization and urban planning (like camps, for example). Their very nature is a hybrid cross-mixture of resources, interests, motives, and milieus. This can be observed in some of the composite works from the Concrete Phase that were put up on walls for display; they look like wounded patches of skin that have been stitched together at the seams. What comes out of this supposed flat-surface skin (skin-wall) are patterns of cuts and pastes (literally, patchworks) that cover a cracked and fissured wall with a flat and connected stretch of skin in varying degrees of smoothness or roughness. And at the center of this so-called wall, you'll find a part of another wall made of jagged bricks. Its rough edges and cement filling reveal how the intruding wall breaks through a surface area that already lacks homogeneity.

The wall accomplishes what the caoutchouc city and its extensions aspire to through other methods; or it seeks to create a difficult and unlivable atmosphere. But what is there in common between the materials the wall is made of and the materials that it tries to patch together? To the viewer's left, in the bottom corner of the wall, beneath the stony patch which looks like an agape and toothless mouth, there are two black masses topped with metal rails, derived or "imported" from the aforementioned picture of the buildings. Defying the natural laws of physics and gravity, the vertically anchored structures/masses simulate the concrete patch that occupies the center of the wall (or its model). This comparison essentially challenges our traditional notions of verticality and centrality, and makes the vertical structure seem like it is hanging by a thin black thread which neither begins nor ends from whichever way you look at it. This symbolic view of the line/thread is based on pure convention, just like the vertical structure which operates outside the implicit negotiations that take place when perceiving a portrait and determining the logics of its representation. Conventionality reproduces layers and levels of space and pushes

them apart, leaving them suspended in dualities, entrances, exits, and crossings, in the same way Beirut's map behaves when reproducing the popular names of places in the city.

The process of appropriation, palimpsest, and placement continues to grow. More and more bodies and parts are found and pasted on the wall which always already is never homogenous and united. To the bottom right side of the picture, another patch of earthy stone in the image of the original comes into view from behind a foggy mist. It looks like it's been cast underneath the soil or in cement powder before mixing it with water and pink mist. Also at the bottom to the right, you'll find the opening of a vent or a grill that seems to have been placed there by force. These kinds of objects usually occupy the uppermost part of a wall, but there, instead, you have other complete works of art layered on top of one another without a clear sense of order. These include cracked façades, a rough wooden door, open pipelines, stony patchwork, or drawn sketches. And being able to measure them with mathematical signs (like 1.4 meters) does not exclude them from the process of imagery, comparison, and embodiment that a portrait pursues or strives for. The wall thus becomes a vertical field of connections and fragments that constitute and produce patchworks. It doesn't stop at one flat and interconnected surface in the figurative sense, but extends to wider levels and dimensions, merging them together, simulating the already simulated and retracing that which has already been traced (meta-depictions).

This, however, does not mean that the portrait is an anarchic mess of lines, patterns and images without any semblance of order besides shared spaces and borders. It undoubtedly belongs to a field of ever-changing vocabularies and morphologies, a dialectical heteroglossia subsumed within the same language. This dynamic field – and the inter-referentiality of its terms – captures the dawn of color in which the portrait is draped, making it seem as though it floats above its own ether or reproduces the conditions of its own materiality and representation. These images swim in Joan Miró's surrealist waters: like fish, they are independent creations that define their own space of mobility without swimming beyond the shared waters, for color and light both play a primary role in establishing an image's autonomy and collective sensibility. The elements that build, ground, and wall in – the wall here is an internal limit in the Benjaminian sense which staves off an encroaching exterior – collaborate in order to create a blend of color that wavers between dreaming and wakefulness, as André Gide once said, and this parallels the communion among light, color, air, time, design, size, and stitching together the fabric which both city and society are made of. Though it may be cloaked by displacement, exile, and dispersion, the mosaic comes to life in light of the refugees and exiles who build walls wherever they go on which they draw or write their valuable stories. These become their tools of social integration and communication with the world around them, reclaiming their lost identities in fragments and images, and creating through their imaginations new notions of light, color, time, and patchwork...

Other works that belong to the Concrete Phase – wooden, mixed between panels and models, and (photo)graphic – resume this process of division. They allocate individual functions to each and every tool of sociological cohesion to the point where they seem like discordant and miniscule parts of a mosaic structure. Windows, for instance, are appointed two complementary functions. They crack open inside frames that try to keep them barred. It's as if they were doors that revolved on their hinges and opened on to a world plunged in darkness. Widening the cracks and "suarifying" the rectangular, elongated slits reveals, in an ironic and terrifying light, a portrait, hung and framed, invaded by the hatch of a prison cell or the remains of a human skull... This

belabored metaphor, which is essentially a commentary on the process of reification and artistic creation, is but one of many examples that highlight the relationship between the art object and its materiality. Truth be told, exemplifying with concrete objects is not nearly as significant as turning back to the object's compositional materials and scrutinizing the relationship between them: light and dark, square and rectangle, frame and image, the object and its simulacrum. Projecting these relationships on concrete objects like doors, windows, prison cells, and skulls is merely a symbolic gesture because value lies in their constitutive elements (color, space, length and width, light, protrusion, embodiment, foundations, etc.). In light of this, the viewer's response to the work of art is by extension a function of understanding its origins and imagining what they may symbolize or suggest.

The Curtain of Doom

It can be surmised that the caoutchouc map, with all its present/absent places, tends towards plotting a lexicon of genealogical place names rather than towards plotting borders or temporalities. Raising buildings in this heteroglossic vein, like the Blue Building (2015), allows us to trace its development over many successive yet distinct stages and connect between its base (almost like a cigarette butt) and its pinnacle. For the collection of pictures and drawings that represent a work made of concrete, nylon, and metal, and that recalls the composition of colored photographs (blue, brown, metallic gray and impure white), and planning (the geometric division of floors), is an example of the gradual movement from expressive and individual parts towards a composite whole. That is essentially the function of curtains that cover different sections of a building under construction: a blue waterproof sheet curtains the lower half – its columns, exposed ceilings, cement walls – and leaves the top three floors open to the world. A separate orange-colored wooden curtain is cast over the space where a panoramic window should occupy the front façade to the viewer's left. And finally, a dirty, torn white curtain thrown over the wet topsoil near the foundation as an extension to the blue waterproof one. All of these curtains work together to expressively fragment and compartmentalize the structure within the picture.

That said, the photograph is only a part of the final installation, albeit a fundamental, nuclear part that the artist confronts. We might have gotten away with calling it coincidental were it not for the strong similarity this work bears to others that have preceded it. In this sense, the blue curtain compares to the black concrete blocks and the brown grassy mound in the picture of the twin buildings. Moreover, the paved concrete wall is almost a replica of the composite picture. The lines that streak both sides of the wall from the bottom are also a point of confusion: were they drawn by the artist or were they "created" by the building itself? Part of the confusion stems from old sandy gray streaks around the corners at the foot of the buildings. If the building in all its parts – from the dirt road on the incline by the ground floor to the blue curtained façade and its worn white extension and the topmost parts that are also covered in white – is painted white, we can't be certain whether any resulting streak marks in the folds are shadows of the building or if they're made by the paint. In both cases, what we have is a tall snow-white and translucent edifice standing erect and projecting illusions of geometric shape and color, seeming cold and rigid on the one hand, but wild and outgoing on the other.

There thus seem to be two heavy and unequal forces struggling on the surface of the picture: the first moving upwards from the concrete world of earth, water, and hard metal manifested by gaping floors that look like eyeless sockets staring into a hypothetical horizon; the second descending from a bottomless heaven (in the words of Nietzsche: "I know the depths of every

atom) onto the world below from all directions such that there is no way back from impending doom and its invasion of what prematurely turned to ruin by abandonment (like the black concrete blocks that have become wasted bodies on which slogans are inscribed before they could be put to proper use). This cascading whiteness gives the work an impression of being art, which begins to confuse the viewer, for he is unable to immediately discern the parts of the work despite the obviousness of the earth, the concrete, the white patches, and blue folds. The doubt sets in, as he confuses the bricks assembled between the ceiling and columns with lines that resemble the shadow of scaffolding and other skeletal structures that can be seen through the folds of the thick white curtain.

Suddenly, wavering between certainty and uncertainty becomes the subject of the work itself, the driving force behind the tensions and divisions which draw the viewer's attention in the first place. This nuclear theory then produces multiple works and compositions that make use of materials and resources in innovative ways, which detracts from the work's distinctness and individuality and contextualizes it within a larger series of sequential works. In metaphorical terms, each building floats on a steamboat with all the other ones standing behind it on deck, crowding the space and blocking the horizon with their towering heights. This arrangement (or lack of it) begets the question of what lies beyond the limit of the vanishing point (the "meta"). The crowded buildings clash with the downward moving force, making it seem like whatever draws strength from the earth cannot help but get lost in the dizzying distance. The ground is no longer a safe haven when the horizon keeps moving and delaying life to another time or place. These transformations or unrestrained outcomes lead to the reincarnation of a bare mountain that resembles the hills of Aix-en-Provence and the bareness of Avignon underneath an open sky, and reflects the same blueness of a sea that the lonesome Mohammad Abdallah saw decades ago. It's also dwarfed by low-voltage power lines in the West and nighttime guards who turn their backs on unrestrained revelry in the East.

Proliferation

On the other hand, however, these same outcomes lead to modeling objects and buildings in cubes of hard wax that purposefully resemble each other. Think of barns, pens, metal bureaus, and mailboxes ("تجهيز موقع خاص", 2002-2004). The frontages of these gray-colored models reveal structural differences among the various parts of this housing project like the apartment balconies. The subtle distinctions could be anything from the distance between the handrails to the curtains behind the glass windows and the white or brown corners... All these façades reflect is silence and emptiness inside. Under construction or ready to be inhabited, the building occupies the same state. It's almost as if it were standing on land as flat and smooth as a surface made of water or linoleum: in other words, there is no distinct connection that distinguishes between the natural world (where the base is) and the socially inhabited world (where the building is). That is what Burj el-Murr – itself a part of the installation – today stands for as opposed to the Blue Building which clearly demarcates the limit between the two worlds. Nowadays, fully furnished buildings are being assembled in this strain, like children playing with Lego pieces, proliferating and multiplying. They have become more horizontal and the same resources can be used so long as the following three specifications are met: using architectural models, creating subtle graphic design differences, and making connector free models. In fact, we can say that most models (and pictures of models) replicate the conditions of real life buildings. Proof of that is when the latter tries to conceal the basic structural elements that are

then exposed by the model. Hence, the proliferation of rosy façades in pictures and plans comes to life by stacking floors that fill the space between the last highest rise and the ether. They begin – without a clear sense of beginning – to climb towards a shrinking horizon, ironically leaving no room for growth. This metastasis occurs at such a high frequency that you can no longer tell the difference between living and excess.

Similarly, the external geometric forms and figures are nothing but a reflection of an empty physical materiality inside. Hallways that lead to closed doors and iron separators on every floor: the interior simulates the exterior to a tee. Both can be reduced to a series of flat, elongated or squared surfaces, parallel lines, right angles, walls, floors, and ceilings that our sights glaze over, inevitably reaching a disappointing end. So juxtaposing between pictures of the six buildings and nine corridors exhibits an almost literal symmetry. And even if the buildings are lit up at night and there are cars parked in the driveways, indicating signs of life sustained by flower pots, buckets and mops, and dangling wires inside the apartments, this all remains hypothetical. In spite of all logic, things are never what they seem.

The Chameleon

Perhaps this symbiotic relationship between the interior and exterior is what the wood, steel, stone, and marble columns were suggesting about ten years back when they were bare and exposed the building's guts and bowels. Its entrances, exits, and windows – which normally indicate a way in from outside – turn to eyes dispersed over the wall's entire length (or the skin), and they become both a part of the column and the origin of an outward gaze, personifying the "I," the "we," the viewer himself. Similarly, that which fills the empty space between structures – teeth-like stairs, white ceramic tile, window shutters, straw baskets and seats, and stomata resembling pupils in the Frankenstein-ian column – could be a sign of sight being directed centrifugally from the center to the periphery where the viewer stands.

Drawings made by the children of the Shabriha, Ayn el-Hilwe, and Nahr el-Bered refugee camps identify all that has been overlooked in terms of names, colors, numbers, materials, shapes, directions, and functions. There's not a single place without a corresponding name, direction, or context. In a way, the children artists combined the map of Beirut Caoutchouc with the name lists of tunnels, popular areas, and crowded squares, etc. And though they might have agreed about the location of Abu Ayman's orchard (*bustan*) in the southwestern corner of the map, they disagreed when it came to the placement of other sites: while Omar Faour and his brother, Ahmad, focused on the whereabouts of the Salha family (sometimes spelled Salhah or Salah), Mahmoud Jomaa and Hassan al-Ali were in charge of the Arab tribes and mentioned quite a few of their branches – al-Mawasi, as-Soueilat, al-Qudeirat, as-Samniyeen – and they placed them all over the camp – some near as-Samniya Mosque, others near the old *bustan*, far from Nizar's butchery, and some around the Bilal bin Rabah Mosque. The two artists, Jomaa and al-Ali, also showed the tribes' places of worship, as Islamic historians called them (*masajid al-qabā'il*), and their positions with respect to the family zones and quarters. Other children identified many of the shops (Abul Abed, Abu Maher, Nizar, the Coop, etc.) and teachers' houses, which were considered just as prominent as the *masajid*. While some tried to draw a flat, coherent map of the camps, others succumbed to bringing out its non-linear chaos and did away with lines and borders as well as the roundabout that grounded a lot of the former children's maps. Few were the drawings that looked alike; some chose to pinpoint the bakery, mini-market, and police station while others identified the military checkpoints and bases (al-Qastal forces, Fateh and al-

Tawarek checkpoints, etc.). Others, still, decided to convey the sun and the clouds, flowers, trees, and houses that carried the Palestinian flag. Drawings of the Ayn el-Helwe and Shabriha camps are equally as complex and varied, and suggest an inability to contain the young artists within their artificial borders. In all cases, these internal representations are but signs of abundance, multiplicity, intersections, divisions, and tensions.

At the end of the day, these camps and columns are a broad and biting response to what the blind walls, cubic containers, right angles, empty interiors, and mirror windows, all stand for. Inasmuch as these geometric models and bodies withdraw onto themselves, keeping mute interiors on lockdown inside closed quarters, you have on the other end of the line columns that explode into a riot of sound and color, and refugee camps that follow suit albeit in a more sociologically restrained capacity. In a poetic sense, they “suture” the smile, an outward symbol of excess, worthy of the beloved in Bassam Hajjar’s poetry, to the point of collapsing unto a limitless inner world. Patching these two together – the external smile and the internal realm of unconsciousness – is both an art form and a language, and it comes close to the meaning of patchwork in Ibn ‘Arabi’s famous saying on the science of Sufism: “Know your Creator like a chameleon.” For the chameleon takes on the colors of its surroundings, internalizes them and allows them to determine its character without rejecting any. The succession and gradation of colors on its skin sometimes speak to its identity and sometimes, they tell their own story.