

MISSING LINKS - ART PRACTICES FROM LEBANON CAIRO

To live in the Middle East is to live in a region that directly confesses its signs of unrest in the loaded ideological implication of its appellations; Middle East, Arab World, not to mention a not too distant Levant.

To live in this region is to live torn by a protracted struggle with Israeli racism and expansionism. It is to live in a region of 'adolescent' nations, constantly postponed by a mobilizing, and often ruthless, totalizing pan-Arab ideologies. It is to live in a region whose populations stagnate in the midst of a proliferation of political barriers.

Such a situation begs question as the necessary efforts and practical possibilities open for coalitions based on a critical reassessment of what it means to meet and to struggle. It is possible to draw certain commonalities without resorting to reductive definitions of identity?

Christine Tohme
Ashkal Alwan



"Untitled 22" - porucrepe cut-outs (500 cm x 250 cm x 2 cm)

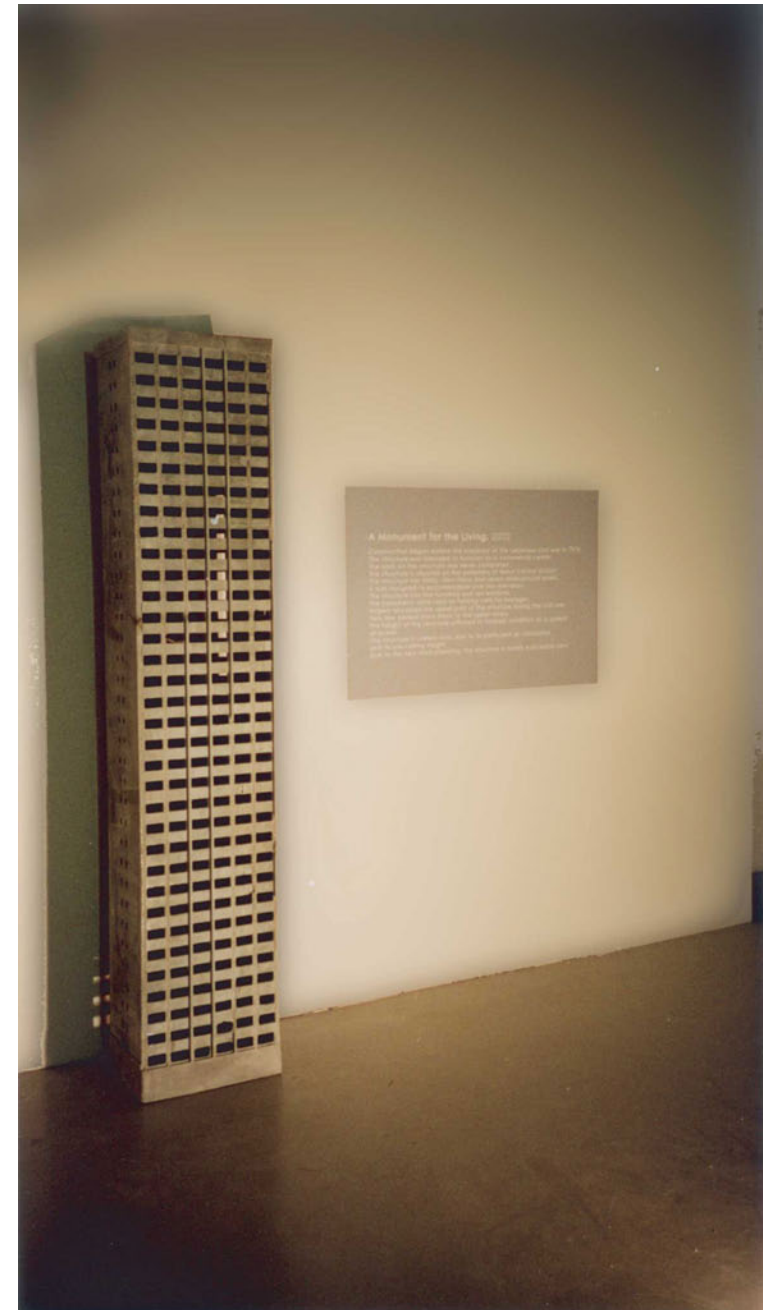
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**CONTEMPORARY ARAB REPRESENTATIONS, LEBANON.
BARCELONA / ROTTERDAM / UMEA.**

A Monument for the Living

A building located on the outskirts of the Central District Beirut. A landmark, being one of the tallest high-rise blocks in the city. It is a thirty-four storey building with seven underground levels and five hundred and ten windows. Although the building was never completed, it was originally built as a commercial center and eventually served as a jail during the Lebanese civil war. The cells where the hostages were held were on the lower levels and guarded by various militias - whichever was in control of the building at the time. Being a highly strategic point, the upper levels were used by snipers [...] ten years after the cease-fire, the building is still dysfunctional due to structural defects.



Casted cement (236 cm x 46 cm x 34 cm)



The puzzle*

The puzzle is not a sum of elements to be distinguished from each other and analyzed discretely, but a pattern; that is to say a form, a structure: the element's existence does not precede the existence of the whole, it comes neither before nor after it, for the part does not determine the pattern, but the pattern determines the parts: knowledge of the pattern and of its laws, of the set and its structure, could not possibly be driven from discreet knowledge of the elements that compose it.

The only thing that counts is the ability to link these pieces to other pieces, by fitting the piece into one of its neighbors, the piece disappears, ceases to exist as a piece. Not only does the piece lose its "raison d'être", it seems never to have had any reason. The two pieces so miraculously conjoined are henceforth one, which in its turn will be a source of error, hesitation, dismay and expectation.

* Georges Perec, *Life... A User's Manual*

** Roland Barthes, *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies*, 1997

Bird's eye view**

A bird's eye view transforms the touristic rite of the viewer into an adventure of sight and of the intelligence: to get oneself on a balcony in order to perceive, comprehend and savor a certain essence of the city.

The bird's eye view gives us the world to read and not only to perceive. It permits us to transcend sensation and to see things in their structure. Hence it is the advent of a new perception, of an intellectualist mode; it makes the city become an intelligible object, without losing anything of its materiality; a new category appears, that of concrete abstraction. This, moreover, is the meaning that we can give today to the word structure a corpus of intelligent forms.

Confronted with prose, every viewer makes structuralism without knowing it (which does not keep prose and structure from existing all the same); in the city spread out beneath him, he spontaneously distinguishes separate - because known - points - and yet does not stop linking them, perceives them within a great functional space; in short, he separates and groups; the city offers itself to him as an object virtually prepared, exposed to the intelligence, but in which he must himself construct by a final activity of the mind. Nothing less passive than the overall view it gives to the city. This activity of the mind conveyed by the viewer's modest glance has a name: decipherment.

Panorama

What in fact is a panorama? An image we attempt to decipher, in which we try to recognize known sites, to identify landmarks.

Panorama compels you to inspect once again; to find the absent point that is missing in your structure, your knowledge struggles with your perception; and in a sense, that is what intelligence is: to reconstitute, to make memory and sensation cooperate so as to produce in your mind a simulacrum of the city, of which the elements are in front of you, real, ancestral, but nonetheless disoriented by the total space in which they are given to you, for this space was unknown to you.

Hence we approach the complex, dialectical nature of all panoramic visions; on the one hand, it is a euphoric vision, for it can slide slowly, lightly the entire length of a continuous image of the city, and initially no accident manages to interrupt this great layer of mineral and vegetal strata, perceived in the distance in the bliss of altitude; but on the other hand, this very continuity engages the mind in a certain struggle; it seeks to be deciphered. We must find signs within it, a familiarity proceeding from history and from myth; this is why a panorama can never be consumed as a work of art.

POSSIBLE NARRATIVES, VIDEOBRASIL, SAO PAULO/BRASIL
HOME WORKS II: A FORUM ON CULTURAL PRACTICES,
BEIRUT, LEBANON
LAUGHTER, LIFT, THE BARGE HOUSE, LONDON, UK
BELONGING, SHARJAH BIENNIAL 7, SHARJAH, UAE



A map of the city of Beirut, engraved rubber (800 cm x 675 cm x 3 cm)



[WORK IN PROGRESS FOR THE SAO PAOLO 27TH BIENNIAL]



“Spectre” is an exact replica of a building spread across two blocs in the neighborhood of Ras Beirut. This building, known as the Yacoubian building, is named for the man who had it built, an Armenian from Syria who according to rumor once worked as a cake vendor but came into a great wealth when he moved to Beirut.

The building was erected in the Nasserite era, in the aftermath of Syria’s brief unification with Egypt, when members of the Damascene elite were nervous about the potential nationalization of their assets and shifted large amounts of capital into banks in Beirut.

At this time, a group of five Syrian families living in Beirut pushed for new legislation to be passed in Lebanon, which would allow the units of a particular building to be separated and sold. Previously, such legislation had applied only to undeveloped land. As a result, huge structures went up in Beirut’s residential and commercial quarters. The typical four- to six-floor apartment building gave way to tower blocs like the Yacoubian building.

A Lebanese architect named Rafik al-Muhib drafted the plans for the Yacoubian building. Yacoubian had commissioned him to design a deluxe housing complex for wealthy residents who would be living in close proximity to the sea and Beirut’s upscale, cosmopolitan nightlife district. Indeed, at the beginning, the building was used for that purpose. The legendary Venus nightclub was located beneath the parking lot, and every night that parking lot was filled with Rolls Royces and Ferraris.

But most likely due to the outbreak of civil war in Lebanon, the building’s original residents, whether they were from Lebanon or elsewhere, began to leave. They were rich, they could avoid the fighting, and they had other places to live anyway.

As the violence in Lebanon continued, new residents began to move in - refugees from other parts of Beirut and from South Lebanon, seeking to escape the first Israeli invasion of 1978.

Some of the older residents stayed on throughout the war. Some refugees from the South who decided to settle down in Beirut after the war eventually bought their apartments and stayed as well. Some refugees who had been squatting in their units moved out, and made way for another wave of new residents in the post-war period.

For a few years, I lived in this building, in a first floor apartment with a studio next door, my two windows located right above the entrance. What is interesting about this sprawling, two-bloc concrete structure is its challenge to the central tenets of modernity.

It was designed to be clean, rational, sleek, and sophisticated. For a time it was all these things. It resembled an architect’s maquette. But then everything broke down. Residents wrecked the facade by enclosing their balconies or throwing up tough colorful curtains. Businesses moved in hung exterior placards advertising their offices. The boy scouts established a base there, as did an Eritrean social club and dive bar much loved for its Che Guevara memorabilia.

The new inhabitants of the Yacoubian established their own ad hoc barriers and jerry-rigged boundaries between units. The spaces imagined by planners gave way to realities of how those spaces were used. New rules took hold. The rhythms of urban life were disrupted by the conventions of rural residents who lived in the Yacoubian building as they had in their villages.

“Spectre” is a concrete recreation of this building in miniature, with each unit exploded out for emphasis, a gentle rather than violent explosion. Pulling out each unit calls attention to the demarcation lines between them and highlights how they function, and how they allow a heterogeneous group of people to live together.

“Spectre” recreates every detail along these borderlines. It examines the traces people leave behind and explores how urban life is impressed upon a city’s surface. At the same time, it refuses to divulge what goes on in those people’s lives inside.

