

# ARTFORUM

OCTOBER 2006

I N T E R N A T I O N A L

"OUT OF BEIRUT"

YTO BARRADA

BRICE MARDEN AND CHRIS OFILI  
IN CONVERSATION

\$10.00



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JAMES MEYER



BERNARD KHOURY



LINDA NORDEN



NICO ISRAEL



NANCY TROY

With this issue, JAMES MEYER, associate professor of contemporary art and criticism at Emory University in Atlanta and Robert Sterling Clark Visiting Professor of Art History at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts, becomes *Artforum's* newest contributing editor. The author of *Minimalism: Art and Politics in the Sixties* (Yale University Press, 2001) and editor of *Maximalism* (Phaidon, 2000), of Gregg Bordowitz's *The AIDS Crisis Is Ridiculous and Other Writings: 1986-2003* (2004), and of Car Andre's *Cuts: Texts 1959-2004* (2005; both MIT Press), Meyer recently penned a major text for the catalogue accompanying last summer's retrospective at Tate Britain of the work of Howard Hodgkin. In these pages, Meyer reviews "Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography," which was on view at New York's International Center of Photography last spring. PHOTO: WARY NOBLE OURS

Artist and architect BERNARD KHOURY is founder of DW5, a design production facility based in Beirut. A proponent of the reworking of war-damaged buildings in the Lebanese capital, he is perhaps best known for the design of the nightclub BO18 built on the site of a quarantine area dating from the country's civil war. Khoury's video work based on BO18 was selected for inclusion in Modern Art Oxford's summer exhibition "Out of Beirut." As part of this month's suite of essays related to that show, Khoury reflects on the ways in which recent events in Beirut might be figured in local architectural practices. Joining him is New York-based artist WALID RAAD, who has exhibited his installations, videos, and photographs both as a solo artist and as part of The Atlas Group, of which he is a founding member. His work was included in Documenta 11 and the Whitney Biennial, both 2002, and in the 2003 Venice Biennale. Also featured in "Out of Beirut," Raad here reflects on how the violence of July and August has charged perspectives on art in that city.

From 1998 until last June, LINDA NORDEN served as the first curator of contemporary art at Harvard University's Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts, where she organized exhibitions on the work of John Wesley (2001; Pierre Huyghe (2004, with Scott Rothkopf); and Sharon Lockhart (2006, with Joan Rothfuss); as well as the 2003 group show "Extreme Connoisseurship." Last year, she cocurated, with Donna DeSalvo, Ed Ruscha's "Course of Empire" for the US Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. Norden has written catalogue essays on numerous artists, including Ruscha, Cecily Brown, Bas Jan Ader, and Cy Twombly and recently authored a key text on Sarah Sze for the artist's monograph, forthcoming from Abrams next year. For this issue, she joins Paul McCarthy, Richard Jackson, and Daniel Birtbaum in remembering American artist Jason Rhoades, who died at age forty-one last August. PHOTO: LUKE JOYNER

Associate professor of English at Hunter College in New York, NICO ISRAEL is also a faculty member at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. He has written for *Artforum* since 1995 and has also seen his reviews and criticism published in *Bookforum*, the *Yale Journal of Criticism*, *Modernism/Modernity*, and *Vogue*. The author of *Ou'landish: Writing Between Exile and Diaspora* (Stanford University Press, 2000), Israel has written catalogue essays on artists such as Iia Lindman, Francis Alys, and Alexandra Wiesenfeld. In these pages, he introduces a portfolio of recent photographs by Moroccan artist Yto Barrada.

NANCY J. TROY, professor of art history at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, is the author of *The De Stijl Environment* (MIT Press, 1983), *Modernism and the Decorative Arts in France: Art Nouveau to Le Corbusier* (Yale University Press, 1991), and *Couture Culture: A Study in Modern Art and Fashion* (MIT Press, 2003). Coeditor, with Eva Blau, of the essay collection *Architecture and Cubism* (MIT Press, 1997), she is currently at work on *The Afterlife of Piet Mondrian*, a study of how the artist's reputation has developed in elite and popular domains since his death in 1944. In her first casting for *Artforum*, Troy considers the exhibition "The Société Anonyme: Modernism for America," which premiered at the UCLA Hammer Museum this past summer and is currently on view at the Phillips Collection, Washington, DC, through January 21, 2007. PHOTO: ROBERT WALKER

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# Waking Reality

BERNARD KHOURY

## ABOUT WHAT WAS DEMOLISHED

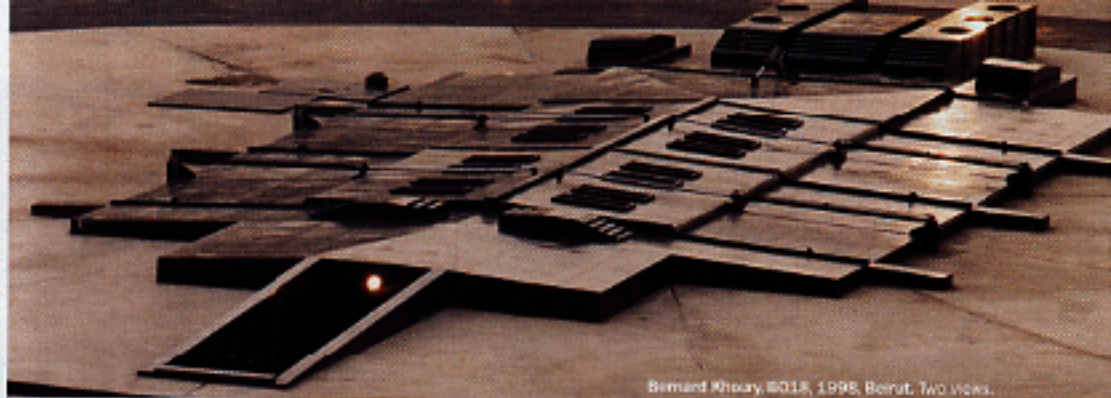
I recently spoke with a journalist who, commenting on how the situation may have changed in Beirut after this last war, concluded by saying, "Too bad that everything you accomplished in the past fifteen years has been destroyed." I thought about this for a few seconds, and I realized how wrong he was: In fact, while things might seem different from a distance, you have to understand that what have been portrayed as the major reconstruction efforts during the past fifteen years—the small sector of the Beirut Central District, the very few institutional projects that were built essentially within selected sections of the capital—were left basically untouched by this round of battles. In fact, most construction projects that were accomplished by the successive governments in the postwar period—that is, since the early 1990s—were not directly affected by this last conflict at all.

## THE SOUTHERN SUBURBS AND MY LITTLE WORLD

As for the southern suburbs of Beirut, which were actually hit hard during the conflict, I visited them for an afternoon right after the cease-fire was declared. The destruction is impressive. Nevertheless, I left the sector at the end of my visit, and it took seven minutes of driving to get back to our design studio, which had remained operational throughout the war—and I realized we were worlds apart. Beirut, like the rest of the region, is a small but complex environment where different forces have built up, independent of one another. At some point one radical project collides with another, and the implications are explosive. This was the case in 1958, in 1967, in 1973, in 1975, in 1982. It is the story of all our wars, and the story repeats itself. You have heard of Beirut as the wonderful tourist destination; the prosperous financial hub for banking; the revolutionary city for some intellectuals of the '70s; the city of complicated wars, of hostages and terrorism; and maybe you have also heard about its refugees and the displaced. There are too many stories and none of them simple. I often take visitors to Beirut on a tour of the Central District to show them the wonderfully manicured chunk of city created there in the last ten years or so. Most interesting is how we cross the district's border and immediately encounter the radically different realities of the rest of the city, literally just beyond the district's limits.

## THE RECONSTRUCTION

Most of the country will certainly be affected economically by the latest events, making unclear the implications of this last war for the various factions that constitute our political scene. Because of these complex political factors, it is also very difficult to foresee the mechanisms behind the reconstruction of what was demolished. In the early '90s, I remember, there were great expectations for the rebuilding of the nation. As a student at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard in 1991, I was concerned about the rapid and systematic knocking down of war-damaged buildings in what would become the new Central District. And so I worked on a scheme for Beirut, called *Evolving Scars*, proposing



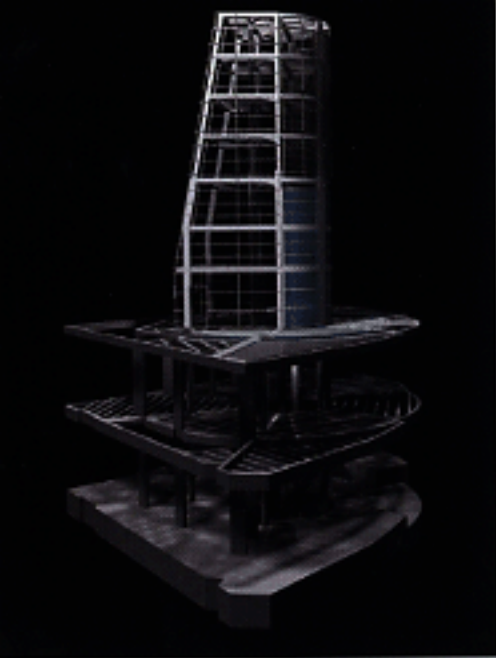
Bernard Khoury ©2018, 1998, Beirut. Two views.



a public installation that would make the demolition of the ruins itself an architectural act. *Evolving Scars*, like many other projects, remained on paper. In the meantime, a substantial layer of the city was wiped out, along with its references to our immediate past; the new master plan approved by a governmental decree was driven by a clear political agenda aiming to sterilize this sector of Beirut. When I finally came back to Beirut in 1993, I had, like many other young architects of my generation, naively believed that I could be one of the many soldiers who would take part in a collective reconstruction effort to rebuild our cities. It took me a few years, too much paper architecture, and many aborted projects to realize I was operating on the wrong front. The reconstruction project I was expecting never happened.

## PLAN B

It was time for a plan B, which was to work for the private sector. My clients today are involved in private ventures driven by finance and commerce, and this is where I operate: Simply put, I build for the rich. I don't do social housing; I don't do governmental projects; I don't build schools or museums, and I probably never will. I believe there is much to accomplish in the private sphere. Cities are built by the private sector through projects driven primarily by financial profit. This is the reality in Beirut, and this is the reality of every developing city everywhere. Denying this reality prevents us from taking part in the making of our cities. Relevant architecture should not be limited to exceptional programs such as schools, corporate headquarters of international companies, museums, and public libraries. In fact, most of what the architectural press and beautiful design books cover in polished and well-written articles does not affect me. The kind of environment I operate in, and the realities I am interested in, become very clear when you consider that I started my career working for the entertainment industry—with projects such as *Boys*, which appears in "Out of Beirut"—and that my second wave of projects came from the banking sector. Today, we have more than twenty-five projects in the



I am concerned about the very specificity of every single situation. My projects are not about the past, and they are not about the future. They are about specific instances existing in my present.

in. Sometimes the picture is not so pretty, but this is where I choose to be, and I don't want to be anywhere else. You never go to sleep in Beirut. It is a city that keeps you awake.

#### CONTEXT

I once described a commission of mine, the design of a building to exclusively house a restaurant called Yabani, as a project aimed at a "fraction of a society living in marvelous denial." I was not being cynical or moralistic in my assessment, but rather recognizing obvious political and social realities in Beirut. The site of the restaurant, a sushi bar, is a plot that was literally side by side with the ruin of a building in which refugees squatted, living without running water or even windows. Yabani was a difficult mission to accept—difficult because of the impossibility that such a highly visible entertainment destination, intended for the wealthy few, should exist in that location. But it was with such impossibility that the project took shape. To explain: If you look at Beirut, most buildings contribute to a continuous cacophony; their structures are most often just literal interpretations of archaic building codes, such that architecture becomes almost totally irrelevant as a practice. Add to this the fact that a building is rarely erected just to house a restaurant, and you grasp the importance of addressing the absurd presence of Yabani where it exists—the impossibility of its existence. So we exaggerated that aspect by making an uninhibited gesture. In the continuous and loud architectural cacophony of the surroundings, we planted something that didn't respond to the logic of construction generating all the buildings around it. We made an overly pretentious gesture, something almost glorifying its futile program: It is not an opera house or a palace of justice, but rather a sushi bar put where it doesn't belong. You penetrate the

pipeline, many of which are located in the Gulf region. I find pleasure in the complexity and the difficulties I encounter in the contexts I work

in Beirut—the Yabani project on the former demarcation line, the B018 project in the Quarantaine, and the Centrale restaurant at the edge of the Beirut Central District—are about recognizing and confronting different social realities and trying to make these issues visible. In that sense these projects are very contextual. I don't see my work as representational, mind you. I am concerned about the very specificity of every single situation. My projects are not about the past, and they are not about the future. They are about specific instances existing in my present.

#### TEMPORALITY

My three entertainment projects, the first I built, were undertaken with a predetermined and limited life span. They are temporary buildings. Their life spans were already fixed before construction began, which is an odd experience for an architect, and perhaps a little saddening—to know while designing your project that it will be bulldozed at a specific date in the near future. The nightclub B018, for example, was built in 1998 on a plot rented for only five years (although it has managed to stay operational until today, which, it turns out, is also the case with the other two entertainment projects). The temporality of these works is a result of the short-term nature of entertainment ventures. Entertainment venues can be frivolous and I will not be accountable for my architectural frivolity in such circumstances. I accept the liability for the short-term and temporary nature of my projects. All three entertainment projects are located in areas that were, at the time of their construction, still in postwar convalescence. What is possible during such periods of recovery is often not possible later. I would have liked to see this kind of spontaneous recovery happen in the reconstruction of the Beirut Central District project, which was initiated in the early '90s. This did not happen. As for the recovery of our southern villages and the southern suburbs of Beirut, I am afraid it will be too spontaneous. □

BERNARD KHOURY IS AN ARCHITECT BASED IN BEIRUT. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)



This page, from left: Bernard Khoury, Yabani, 2002, Beirut. Rendering: Bernard Khoury, Yabani, 2002, Beirut.

building through a tall, circular vitrine, which moves you down vertically one floor below street level. Once you're dining downstairs, you're completely removed from your surroundings. You have no contact with your immediate environment; your only contact with the outside world is the ceiling windows, through which you see nothing but the sky. Yet on the other side of the perimeter walls of the dining hall is a completely different world, another social reality.

This experience is somehow similar to my recent visit to the southern suburbs and their proximity to my little world; it's somehow the same thing. Of course, in this and my other projects I didn't bring the southern suburbs to the city center, or take the city center to the south-