# "Beirut is back and it's beautiful"

Stéphanie Dadour

Randa Mirza's work discloses preexisting representations and identity-based issues in the urban fabric of Beirut. Through notions related to representations of sex and gender, Mirza aims to explore the Lebanese postwar conditions of identity constructions. Representations are to be understood as systems of production that convey meanings, depending on symbolic categories and having the possibility of manipulating and altering perceptions and significance (2).

Mirza's emphasis on gender shifts a great deal depending on the context of the work. In *On sex and gender* (2009, photomontage), *La tizi* (2009, photography), *I only have eyes for you* (2008, photography) and *Arab women at home* (2007, photoessay) she claims, through the use of references such as Judith Butler, the "performativity" of our identities, or the incorporation of a certain reality as natural. It highlights the way in which social agents constitute social reality, in which identity is constructed over time through social norms. The conditions of gender recognition are not determined by the body or its expression but culturally imposed by hierarchical, powerful and patriarchal forces through embodiment, performance and acting.
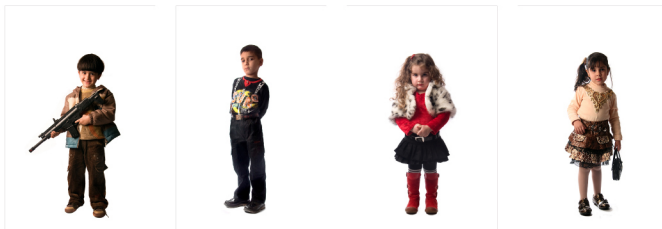
I only have eyes for you, a collaborative work between Randa Mirza and Amahl Khouri

Readings of body shapes (*On sex and gender*), of stereotypes regarding the ambitions of Arab women (*Arab women at home*), of the ambiguity of gender through the ass (*La tizi*) and apparel (*I only have eyes for you*) recount social constructions while questioning conventional and restrictive notions of gender that are historically contingent.

Beirutopia, a recent series of works that continue this engagement with gender, diverts attention from the human body and instead draws on representations of the built environment to probe and illuminate social and cultural belonging. In this realm, Mirza scrutinizes representations that act as agents of an on-going global system, one that transforms architecture along with its historical, cultural and social meanings into commodities. The analogy between gender and the built environment is rooted in the readings and interpretations of an order, that of *disciplined* gender or in this case, of the environment. Her critical point of view towards forms of normalization identifies the conditions of reification and reproduction of identities, the modalities by which they become controlling. This social control refers to mechanisms that regulate individuals through the internalization of norms and values. Marketing, advertisements and print media are some examples of mediums that participate in the implementation of those norms and values. Mirza questions this conformity by ingeniously emphasizing local and cultural codes, by giving meaning to images she produces blurring the values we tend to place on them.

In *Beirutopia*, Mirza aims to raise questions regarding the devenir of the city of Beirut, its representations and identities. What appear at the first place as being Beirut's urban landscapes are actually photographs of billboard images representing virtual buildings framed within the real environment. To promote and advertise buildings in construction, developers put on view large billboards in situ to reproduce the reality to come.

Mirza subtly includes within those photographs elements of reality that disturb the reading, thus adding a level of contradiction to the photograph and awakening the viewer. By clashing scales, it highlights two levels of readings: one given by the content of the billboard and its confrontation and synthesis with the real environment. The other mode operates by way of Mirza's framing; the photograph reveals the superposition of two layers, a *mise en abyme* referring to the experience of an image containing itself, in these particular cases a different self, never reaching a seemingly reality. Those displays are computerized *biopowerful* renderings simulating the building, its surroundings, its imaginary townspeople and their lifestyle while at the same time hiding the construction site.

The content of these billboards is standardized: similar images and slogans that refer to homogenised cultural and social values. The slogans, such as *designing inner beauty, evoking a sense of contemporary elegance, the essence of the Mediterranean, a sense of belonging, sexy has a new address*, are used interchangeably as titles of the project's photographs because they embody the uniform concept of luxury, dream lifestyle and ethos associated with these structures. Rather than representing a distinctive aspiration, this architecture acts as a medium for promoting a hegemonic way of life based on consumption under the *myth* of progress and development. By calling for a rapid modernization of the built environment, it confuses technical progress with human progress, aptly demonstrated in the project entitled *a unique blend of cultural history and exciting modernity*.

Mirza reveals through 80x120cm photos of those billboards an instance of the uncanny, a feeling of what is at the same time familiar yet uncomfortable. The identification of an uncanny effect results from the recognition, on her photos, of a familiar landscape however incorporating an incidental mark.

At first glance, the marks capture our attention and are represented by an additive layer, one associated with the environment where the billboard is located. Thus, it is the imbrication of two different scales' environments that reveals the ambiguity of the total setting, the picture.

Left, Mirza's picture – On the right, Mirza's picture modified, differentiating the billboard (black and white) from the environment where the billboard is located (color).

In this photo for example, there are two interpenetrated layers of environments: the building in construction rendered on the billboard and surrounded by vegetation whereas on the right corner, Mirza integrated part of the environment where the billboard is located. The *real* tree in the corner is not on the billboard per se, but in front of it.

The *real* tree, is the clue disturbing the reading of Mirza's work. In fact, it differentiates the future, that is the environment she is criticizing (the one in black and white on the picture on the right) to the existing one, represented by the branch of tree (kept in color in the picture on the right).

It is this indirect and finely integrated element that Mirza is actually reclaiming: the present, the real. The photographs emphasize the *augmented reality* of the virtual, represented not in opposition with the real, but on the contrary as its continuum. The urban passerby, just as the viewer of the photographs, both being immersed into a space exceeding the bounds of physical reality.

But furthermore, the billboard's representations replace the whole setting: very often that of ongoing demolition and constant construction. It softens the city and the visualisation it embeds removes all notion of time. The transformation of the past is hidden, the present is the amalgam between real and virtual, the medium, the billboard, and the future is the representation appearing on the latter. Through a critical eye directed at the relations between architecture, representation and society, Mirza questions the claim for a Lebanese identity, one that draws from the Lebanese eclecticism sources of adaptation and exchanges.

But isn't identity an imprisoning structure?

Although Mirza claims following an emergent call for the conservation and the preservation of a historical heritage that is being demolished, Beir-utopia is, in essence, the title of a counter-utopian situation, one that does not differentiate between illusory images and the pastiche narrative they embody. This confrontation allows for spaces to be redefined and their potential encouraged as new forms of identification arise and are re-appropriated within the wider social and architectural fabric of the city.

Rem Koolhaas's notion of *globalized blankness* puts pressure on Mirza's position. In the *Generic City* Koolhaas argues "Identity becomes a lighthouse – fixed, overdetermined: it can change position or the pattern it emits only at the cost of destabilizing navigation (Paris can only become more Parisian – it is already on its way to becoming hyper-Paris, a polished caricature)". For Koolhaas, liberating the city from its identity is an act of decentralization, of independence and rupture, that of a city with no history, where architecture must be functional, at the image of its society.

the essence of the Mediterranean exciting modernity

a unique blend of cultural history and

Within this perspective, Mirza's project aims for an active destabilization of norms related to contemporary challenges like that proposed in the *Generic City* rather than an effort to preserve and subsequently forge a fixed identity for Beirut. Mirza could have taken pictures of what is called in the local jargon, traditional houses, or pictures of demolitions to denounce the disappearance of a history. Instead, she questions reality through the scope of the rebirth of a city, for it generalization must mean something. A city that seems out of phase with its realities. *Beirut is back and it's beautiful* recounts and synthesizes the confrontation between the renaissance of the city and the gaze of an elderly man.

beirut is back and it's beautiful

Unlike artists of the "post-war generation", Mirza's relation to the past is not investigated through archives and documents of the past, but rather from and within actual sites. In this sense, she doesn't seek to differentiate Past and Present, nor to render particular or hierarchic territorial constructs, but to draw from the potentiality of their overlapping a space of expression that represents what can be Lebanese proper, as it is inscribe precisely in that context. *Beirutopia* becomes a form of narrative allowing us to think with a reading of the present. Mirza's photographs become a way of thinking about the real, her personal *tactics* (as opposed to the *strategy*) in reference to De Certeau. The *tactic* is precisely what departs from the system, in this case, the billboards, and that is reinvented in favor of surpassing its limits, exploiting cleverly the situation to create a parallel representation of reality: the one she wants us to question.

Starting with a stirring up of cultural models characteristic of the city, the project combines different sources and constitute a multi-referential thought process that eliminates confirmed categories in order to propose new ones, in a state of becoming. The formal language directs back to this hybridity and shakes one's point of view in order to bring into question the interpretations. In this posture, there is the emergence of an identity in-transit. If the billboard's purpose is to project a new fixed identity for Beirut, *Beirutopia* redefine it in order to allow an imbrication of spaces and times that questions reality.

In the vein of her work on gender, Mirza's process of work questions the social, historical and political dimensions of the Lebanese postwar conditions. Departing from existing situations, the representations she proposes translate intelligible structures that shiver normalized values. *Tactics* designate her construction of images, her manner of freezing a reality rooted in the marketing strategies of luxurious real estate.

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(1) The title of this piece refers to that of a photograph taken by artist Randa Mirza, borrowed from the billboard's slogan
(2) Hall Stuart (ed.), Representation. Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices, Sage, London, 1997, p.15.