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a creative conversation

Luc Tuymans | Manifesta 12 | Riga Biennial | Anna Bella Geiger | N. S. Harsha
Werner Büttner | Ištvan Išt Huzjan | Nathaniel Rackowe | Darn Torn | Zoe Preece

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Incidental City

Nathanial Rackowe's sculptural works respond to the layers of the city, using a material vernacular more usally associated with the brutal architecture of unloved urban spaces. Cameras in hand, Rackowe and **Ric Bower** took a walk through the darkened streets of Beirut, to put the artist's exhibition in context.

Making art in and for public space is not a strange proposition, well not in an environment that is relatively uncontested. Modern Beirut, however, does not have a tradition of such activity. There are no funders, poised to pay the artist, the fabricators and the installers, should one place an artist's work in a public space; no pots of money to recompense the government officials and police, who may or may not have been inconvenienced in the process of procuring the plethora of necessary permissions. For Letitia Gallery to undertake the commissioning, (and financing of), not one but two such public works, in this city, in conjunction with a gallery show, is without precedent.

One of the public works, *LP46* (2018), unveiled in conjunction with the gallery show, was conceived and fabricated in Beirut. It references the brutally functional and crudely constructed anti-parking contraptions particular to the city. The artist both imagines these humble, incidental devices on an industrial scale, and he imbues them with a surreal aesthetic, which supposes a strangeness of purpose that passing citizens could only guess at. Perhaps future modes of transport, unencumbered by gravity, would be deterred from levitating in the vicinity of *LP46*. The work is bolted and cabled on to the lip of a busy road intersection; it forces its presence on the drivers who weave chaotically past it.

Rackowe's practice is a meditative reflection of the city he is working in; he embarks on a considered process of reduction, a quest to expose the base vernacular of the urban environment. In 2009, he spent two months living and undertaking a residency in Beirut, so the city is not strange to him. Rackowe obsessively fetishises the crude functionality of the city's fabric, finding within it the undiscovered aesthetic that exists purely for its own sake. CMUs (concrete masonry units) form the skeleton of Beirut, a city devastated by 15 years of the civil war between 1976 and 1990. CMUs, perhaps formed of FBA (fluorosilicate-based admixture), possess properties in relation to their load-bearing capacity and their thermal conductivity; they have no aesthetic other than that which is incidentally defined by their function. Rackowe's sculptures, inspired by this material and their functional forms, come to land in Letitia's gallery space, becoming illuminated shrines to the CMU, and grand altarpieces of GRP (glass reinforced plastic).

Beirut itself is a phoenix, a miracle of reconstruction, permanently illuminated in a glow of artificial lighting; this is never more apparent than walking through the city at night. As we walk together, I ask the artist to talk about his obsession with cities in general.

Nathaniel Rackowe: I'm picking the city apart – random bits of street furniture, functional structures and materials. You can see it where we're walking, the difference between the space that is privately owned, and the space that forms the part of the 'uncared for city'; the contrast between the perfect stretches of paving and then the pot holes, and pavements that end without warning.

I love the hoardings that stretch around building sites, (they vary from city to city). Steel uprights with panels between them; a tilted bit at the top, where there'll either be the Lebanese flag, or some other brightly painted colours. I feel the language of these temporary structures; they form more organically than the 'deliberate city', they are not so considered.

Ric Bower: Can you describe what we're looking at now?

NB: A billboard with an advert for some crazy-expensive watch; but then there is the monumental support structure. It is enormous, because it's designed to be seen from a moving car; as a pedestrian, you barely see the advertisement, all you see is this hulking, sculptural form.

RB: And what are those beams it's made of?

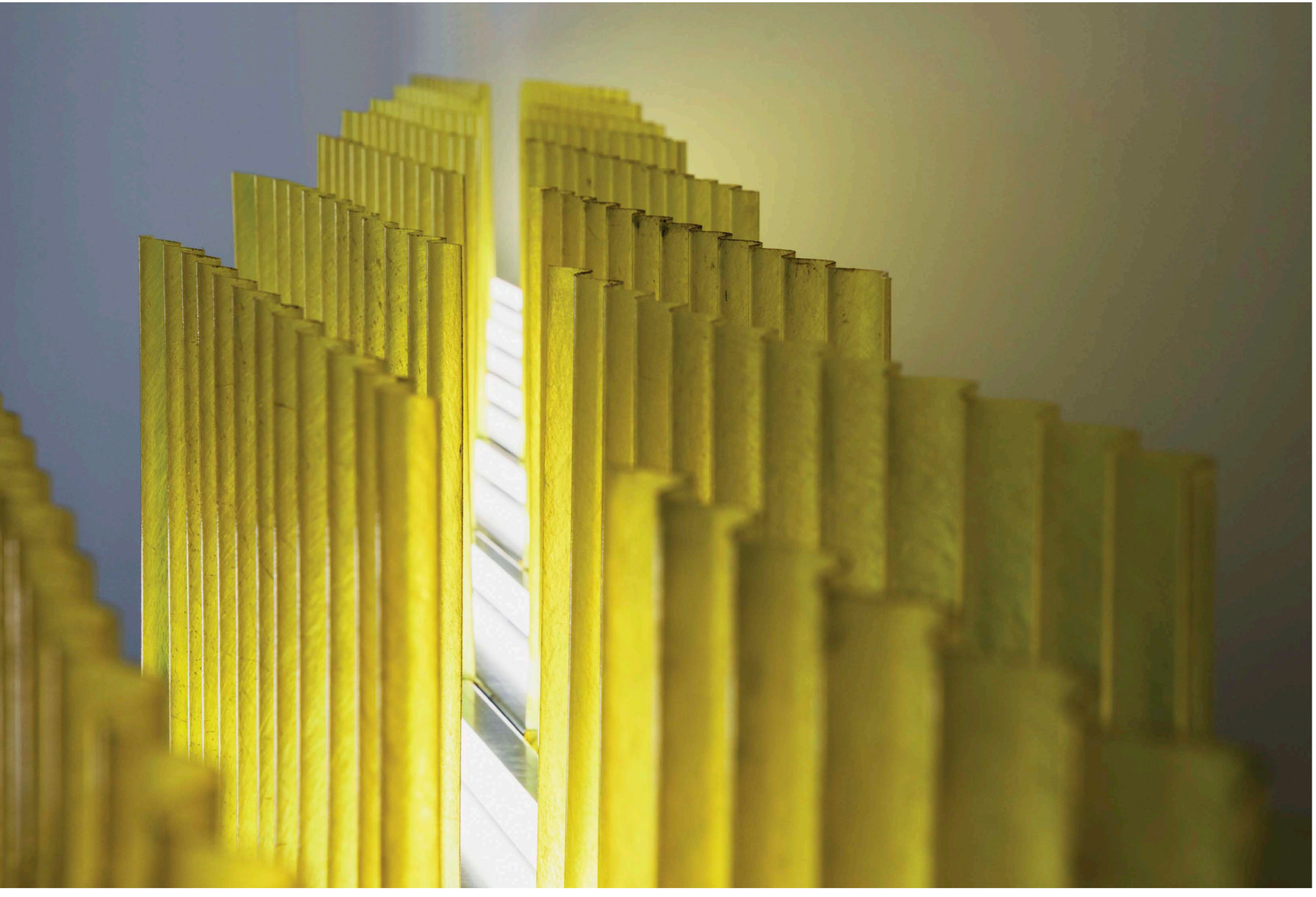
NB: They are steel I-beams; we're next to the sea, so there will be high winds that come on shore. The support structure needs to be very strong as the hoarding is basically a sail.

RB: Beirut, in the '80s was pretty much a by-word for a city that was in utter devastation. What awareness do you have of that time, and its legacy?

NB: I have developed an awareness by talking to people here – people who lived through it – I have begun to understand that you can read that history in the fabric of the city. I hope that, as we walk up here, we'll see some of the old French-style villas; not everything was razed during the war. You have the partly destroyed buildings, then the new ones right next to them; Beirut is like a heavily layered fabric.

RB: The city is dominated by this artificial light. Tell me about the lighting that you use in your work.

NB: The choice of the lights in my works reflects the use of light in the city. Some is fluorescent tubing, some neon, some LED, and then there are the metal halide lamps. These are essentially arc lamps – one of the brightest light sources available and similar to the ones in front of



that hoarding we looked at – they will be powered by a particularly heavy ballast, (transformer); they require a massive voltage to power them. If you take a metal halide lamp, and you look at it through a welding mask, you can actually see the arc of the electricity going through the metal halide gas... again though, like the structures themselves, with lighting, I'm more drawn to the incidental light sources.

RB: In your exhibition, at Letitia Gallery, you've many different kinds of CMU or concrete block objects. which have been specifically designed to receive pressure, while at the same time, being as light as possible. The form they project into the world is entirely dictated by these two functional concerns.

NB: And they are never meant to be seen; they form the base skeleton of the buildings we see. As we walk past some of these partially constructed high rise blocks, you'll see the raw and workaday manner in which they've been constructed; they are thrown together at top speed, and then they are faced in presentable, aesthetically pleasing, respectable materials. Peeling back layers, cutting into materials, exposing a structure is what I do. Gordon Matta Clark demonstrated that all kinds of space can be deconstructed. He famously cut a cone of negative space into the middle of a building in New York, in the '70s [*Conical Intersect,* 1975].
So, here we are at the old Holiday Inn, the famous one. It was abandoned – half constructed – and then used as one of the many snipers' nests in the war. It's too expensive to pull down and remains a bullet-riddled shell, a monument to the war.

RB: You are inscribing a new narrative, a palimpsest, across the modernism that first inspired you, There is something more human about your manner of engagement with materials than that of Dan Flavin, or Donald Judd, for example.

NB: When I was studying, I was completely in awe of Minimalism, and other modernist thinking. It really resonated for me, in its pure use of material, space.
I remember, even before I was at college, being in the garden, when I was young, and there was this stack of paving slabs my step-father had left out. I leaned and, balanced them, moving the slabs to create self-supporting structures. There was a need to understand space by manipulating structure, even before I went to college and learnt to formalise the process. Where we are walking now is quite close to where I had my studio, back in 2009, by the way.

RB: There is a luscious quality to paint, as a material, that lusciousness forms part of the romantic ideal associated with being a painter, with being an artist. When you go into a builders' merchant, do you have an intuitive connection with the materials of your practice, the concrete, the GRP, the steel bar?

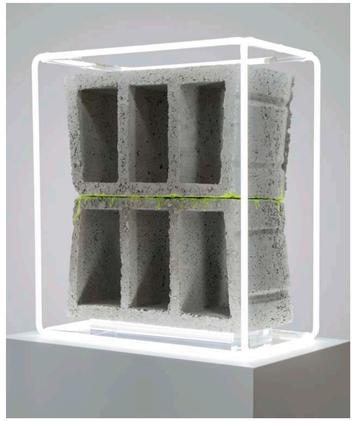
NB: I do, yes, and I tend to forget their function, and why they are there. The builders are looking at the same materials, selecting ones for their work, and I'm aware that I'm thinking about the materials in an expanded sense, a purpose beyond their intended function.

RB: So, you now have public sculpture in two places in Beirut, a city that doesn't really do public sculpture. One of the works, *Black Shed Expanded,* has travelled around the world I understand?

NB: It was originally made to show in Paris, a commission for a public space ...
Oh, this is really great, look, can you make out these arches, the LED strip there, I need to photograph it...

RB: Is there any sensitivity about taking photos here in Beirut?

NB: Yeah, I've had to have long conversations with people to explain what I'm doing... So, *Black Shed Expanded*, it went to various different locations after Paris – Parasol Unit, in London, they had it out the back on their terrace for about three months. It was at Canary Wharf for a while, then at the Gherkin as part of *Sculpture*



in the City, then Denmark, Perth, Dubai, and now it's here in Beirut. Oh, and it has a sister version, which is very similar, and is currently in Tasmania... [a passerby approaches and Nathaniel addresses him], 'Hi there, yeah, we're artists, taking photographs of the beautiful light...'

Passerby: What are you shooting for? Is that a...?

RB: ....It's a Sigma DP2 Quattro, a strange camera, the chip is made up of a number of layers of silicon.

Passerby: You're an artist?

NB: Yes, I've a show in Hamra, at Letitia Gallery, sculpture and painting, it opens tomorrow.

Passerby: I work as a second assistant cameraman, cinematic film cameras. I hate still photography!

NB: Why?

Passerby: I don't know, I just love moving pictures, the film industry is big in Beirut. So you came here from the UK to see his show?

RB: Yes, I'm a journalist, covering Nathaniel's show..

NB: Yeah, my work is about the city, light and materials; we're talking and walking, taking some photographs, it's interesting at night – the light, less traffic...

[they exchange details, passerby goes]...

RB: .....You talk about writing a new vision for a city as a whole, and you mention you're very much into sci-fi. How do those mesh together?

NB: You get contrasting approaches; so there's the classic one with, say, *Blade Runner* –the dystopian future, the recognisable city that is tearing itself apart, but is punctuated by screens and advertising. The city in *Blade Runner*, though, it's pretty much Bangkok. The Skytrain is an elevated monorail; it looks very futuristic, and you step out of its perfect bubble environment, then you go down to street level, where it's just this mad throng of stalls, people selling pirated DVDs, and there are amazing looking people; it's exactly the chaotic city that is portrayed in *Blade Runner*. I am interested in the contrasts that this kind of city holds.

And then there's the other sort of sci-fi, like Iain M Banks *Culture* novels, which present a seemingly utopian veneer...

Where are we? I don't know where we are, but I know we want to be going vaguely uphill...

So, sci-fi can also describe something quite hopeful about the future of cities as well; but I think there's an aesthetic that is described both in films and books – the use of movement, colour, technology, form – that I feed on, a retro sci-fi, maybe.

RB: So, you're looking at earlier visions of the future that have actually being surpassed now?

NB: I often employ familiar touchstones as an entry point, so they'll feel familiar because we've seen them on screen... Oh, look, we're about to meet the anti-parking structures. These small, welded together I-V structures were the source, in part, for the other public work in Beirut. With this functional street furniture, the decisions that were made in their design, the ones that dictated its form, are long lost.

RB: They are incidental objects.

NB: Yes, what I like to do is show people stuff that they know already so well, but they've never stopped to consider.

RB: Does this incidental vernacular change radically between cities?

NB: It does change, it's interesting trying to find commonalities though, because there are

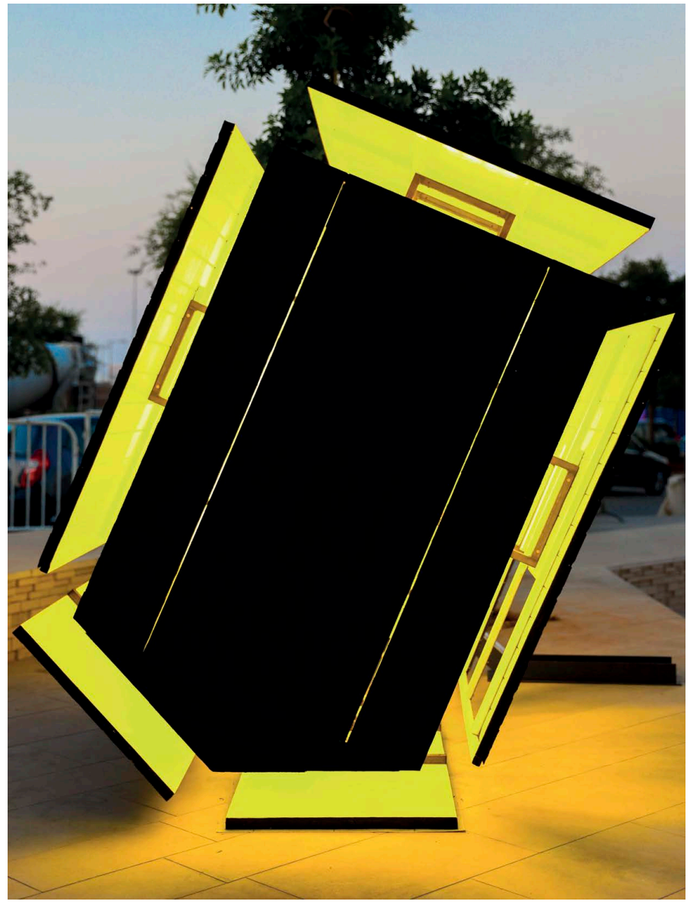
elements that are shared. In my petrol station paintings, I've stripped off the branding and the forms that seem to be particular; I've sought a universal elementality, one that is essentially a sculptural urban invention.

RB: There is an element of what you do that is speculative construction: sticking things together, creating systems, spaces, contraptions, almost like in a computer game.

NB: I loved the video game *Tomb Raider*, and of course the movie that inspired it, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* – the kinetic environments and the shifting puzzles, where the ceilings come down and the walls come towards you. That sculpture of mine where the grid of lights come down, I don't know how many artists would reference *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* from that, but it is in there somewhere. Space, structure and movement, creating environments that breed an awareness of movement, of physicality. I am looking for the roots of the city.

The Shape of a City, *Nathaniel Rackowe is showing at Letitia Gallery until 25 August 2018*
letitiagallerybeirut.com

spreads one to three:
(various works), The Shape of a City, **Nathaniel Rackowe,** 2018, glass re-enforced plastic sheeting, folded galvanised steel, white fluorescent lights and cement blocks; courtesy the artist and Letitia Gallery

current spread, left page:
LP46, (instalation view), **Nathaniel Rackowe**, 2018, steel, light, paint; courtesy the artist and Letitia Gallery

current page, right spread:
Black Shed Expanded, (instalation view), **Nathaniel Rackowe**, 2018, wood, paint, light; courtesy the artist and Letitia Gallery