

Bernard Khoury in Beirut

By Sofia Lemos

A Conversation between Charbel Haber and Bernard Khoury

To design a device implies an idea of architecture that is not about representation but friction. Bernard Khoury accused of catering to the society of spectacle by producing futile programs for entertainment and commercially oriented venues, is also touted as one of the most relentless critical architectural voices of his generation. Khoury is in conversation with the experimental musician Charbel Haber, vocals and guitar of Scrambled Eggs. Based in Beirut both tackle the city with a bold and pragmatic approach, giving us a luscious reflection of what the present in the Middle East might be. Between inquiries about the modes in which history is written in the TV series *Storage Wars* and quotes from the Cohen Brothers' *Big Lebowski* this is a conversation that goes beyond the morphology of things and sounds towards an intimate exploration of cultural identity in the Middle East.

In the process of re-politicising the practice of architecture, Bernard Khoury's early projects include B018 (1998), a dance club erected on a previous refugee camp, the surgically exposed Centrale restaurant (2001) and Yabani sushi bar (2002) built along the Green Line that separated East from West Beirut. The irreverent N.B.K Residence (2000) inaugurates a move towards the domestic where established housing typologies are critically unpacked. More recently Khoury has been working with film and installation, exploring new avenues for his work.

Charbel Haber started playing music after the death of Kurt Cobain. Over the years the musician has played in numerous bands such as *Johnny Kafka's Anti-Vegetarian Orchestra*, projects and festivals and frequently collaborates with artists and filmmakers.

Sofia Lemos: Bernard Khoury and Charbel Haber, it seems that what unites your respective practices is the motivation to comply solely with your own formulations of the present. If we were to appropriate military parlance, can we say that architecture and music are your theatre of operations?

Charbel Haber: We try to create our own universe in this little land in which we live.

We try to create a certain fiction to live in and we try to fuck around with history.

Bernard Khoury: Whether we will succeed or not, and I think Charbel shares the same intentions, we would love to take this beyond architecture as a sort of autonomous discipline or music, as another sort of autonomous discipline. What I mean by autonomous is in the very degrading sense of the word: when architecture only refers to itself it becomes a completely bankrupt practice or discipline. I can only find resources and enrich my understanding of the context the minute I get out of my very limited boundaries and into other ways of perceiving my environment and observing what is around me. It is very much dependent on the situations I confront, and those have to do with social and cultural instances and nothing to do with architecture. Architecture for the sake of architecture bores the shit out of me. It is tedious to master the syntax and produce good architecture that is very much in tune with the ongoing trends that our discipline deems the spirit of our times. I would rather look at buildings that are horrific but that produce meaning. I think the same applies to music; I'm not interested in music that is very typically the product of accepted trends.

CH: Mainstream, trends, pop culture and everything. What we are doing is trying to use a common ground. At the end of the day, through Bernard's architecture and through my music, through our respective disciplines we are acting as archivists of what is happening







around us.

BK: Archivists, who to a certain extent are perverse enough to manipulate the information that they encounter, try to pirate and deviate the dangerous simplifications of history that are being produced by the mass media and politicians.

SL: Bernard, your return as a young architect to Beirut in the post-war period was coupled with the absence of a reconstruction plan for the city. Despite a downright lack of confidence in the capacity of the public powers to further democratic urban structures, such as museums, schools, and hospitals, the city kept on being built, though principally through alternative means. How did your practice shift towards and become aligned with the private sector?

BK: In our context, and maybe this is has to do with the bankruptcy of our States, we have not been able to achieve any national project because of our inability to reach consensual definitions over it. The fact that we do not have a national political consensus makes it impossible for us local artists and architects to comply with consensual projects and definitions. I look at my colleagues in the West who build museums responding to institutional commissions—we never get those simply because there are no institutions as there is no consensus. None whatsoever. If you are building a museum in the suburbs of Paris, as much as you want to pervert the situation you have to acknowledge the powers that led to the circumstances in which the project is being built. At the end of the day there are fundamental values that you recognize once you respond to certain commissions. In the absence of a consensus we cannot produce consensual projects, this is why I have never built a museum or, in fact, any governmental or institutional commission.

SL: Your approach to design is erected upon the contingent and the contextual with an acute awareness of the specific conditions of each project. How do your designs bring about a redistribution of geopolitical consciousness in the Middle East? What role do semiotic elements play in this?

BK: Even in the case of the art world, there is a need of being contextual which can be a means to comply with the consensual definitions of what a territory is and its history. These thoughts dangerously simplify the history of the territory. This is why I am completely obsessed with the specificity of each situation, even though one might contradict the other. I only have the ability to contradict myself and I don't think a well-bred architect asked to perform in this context can do that on the account of the complex of the colonizer. I don't want to produce consensual buildings. When I liberate myself from consensus I might end up producing

and registering moments that are so specific that they become much more contextual than those who try to be contextual in a much more consensual sense of the term.

SL: Would you consider the blatantly historical violence associated with some of your earlier buildings and recent artistic commissions to be a 'shot of realism' on the organization of public space in Lebanon? Is the absurdity echoed in projects such as Centrale (2001) and Yabani (2002) a sort of cynicism, or does it operate on another level?

BK: Cynicism is not something to hide behind. I am not cynical at all. I celebrate the marvelous denial in which myself and other members of my community can be tempted by or fallen into with some sort of critical position. Being in denial is denying those absurdities. I am not in denial. By confronting and manipulating those realities one is no longer in denial. These projects are active apparatus, acting in the city. Nevertheless, these interventions are more than a decade old and I don't think I am embracing absurdity – instead I am recognizing and manipulating realities within the limits of the possible.

CH: Bernard's architecture commends the demise of the city. Like the Mexicans celebrate the Day of the Dead, he celebrates the downfall of the city through his architecture.

SL: Bernard, rather than submit to the authority of conventional spatial boundaries and logic, your designs create an architectural and urban syntax that departs from single-perspective knowledge. Could your architectural practice then be seen as a sort of micro-political action?

BK: I got out of school with a lot of positive thinking; I was trained and spent too much time in the cocoon of the academy, tackling architecture with a very politically correct approach—that is what the academy does to you. Beirut has taught me something else, and has taken me to extreme situations in which a lot of us would turn their backs to and refuse to tackle. Most of the contexts for my buildings are difficult, and sometimes force me to take positions that at the beginning may seem compromising. It is a very rough and difficult territory. At the end of the day, the problem is that intellectuals and artists always, no matter how complex the construction of the work is, have theoretical stances and even the questions they ask through their work generally turn into situations where they are basically above or outside of circumstances. Through observation they produce interrogations or manifestos or whatever it is. This ends up falling into theoretical stances. Theory usually produces consensual definitions. At this point I have completely given up on consensual definitions,



I think they are very dangerous and reductive. I am interested in the specific and I am very proud that I can contradict myself from one street corner to the other.

SL: You have mentioned elsewhere the Arab world has a conflicted relationship with modernity, where it became common for Arab countries (or at least its ruling élites) to comply with a romanticized, sugarcoated simplification of history. Countries such as Dubai and Kuwait that became famous for their monumental designs by 'starchitects' perpetuate what Edward Said called "Orientalism", the representation of a particular historical, intellectual and economic tendency. How do you perceive the present in the Middle East?

CH: We definitely do not have a simple explanation to what is happening in the Middle East, we have our own theories and we try to perceive things in different manners.

BK: It is very interesting to see how much of the art world does not exist in the present; the Middle East has completely given up on modernity, which is a very vast term. If you move back some 40 or 50 years ago Arab architects, in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria thought they could be part of a much greater movement and could contribute to a modernity in the making. They were not simply a product of the region. If you look at the making of our cities, none of these local architects produced modern buildings in the spirit of the times with the intention of being as modern as the Spanish, German or American architects. They were very much on the same territory, there was a global project in the making so at the time you could commission an Arab architect to produce a modern building, and a lot of those are still present in our cities.

Nowadays, as a developer, if you want a contemporary building you're going to look at the West. It is very interesting to see that some 40 or 50 years later, particularly in the Gulf cities, we see that contemporary buildings are no longer produced by Arab architects. Instead these are produced by American, British or Australian firms but certainly not by an Arab architect. There is not a single building in this area that has produced meaning, none. Nothing but consensual, dangerously simplified definitions of the territory through extremely superficial references that have nothing to do with the specificity of each one of these projects.

Arabs have given up on modernity. When the centre of Beirut was being rebuilt, the private company in charge had a motto: "A traditional city for the future". This sentence is very interesting because it talks about the past and the future but it completely bypasses the present. And what is the past and what is the future? The past is a scar project as far as Lebanon is concerned.

In fact, what we conserved as historical buildings were buildings produced up until the French Mandate. We have preserved six archeological layers that go as far as Rome, Phoenicia, Mesopotamia, and so on, all the way through the Ottoman Empire up until the French Mandate, this is the written history before the Republic. After 1943 nothing is preserved, which means that history is the product of those who invaded us, the passers-by. Then the future is also an imported product either from starchitects or usually big Anglo-Saxon corporate offices. We have completely given up on writing our own history. We preserve the history that others have left on our territory up until the Republic, we completely bypass the modern period and, then projected onto the sort of promised future that is an imported product, the present is by-passed; I am a man who lives in the present.

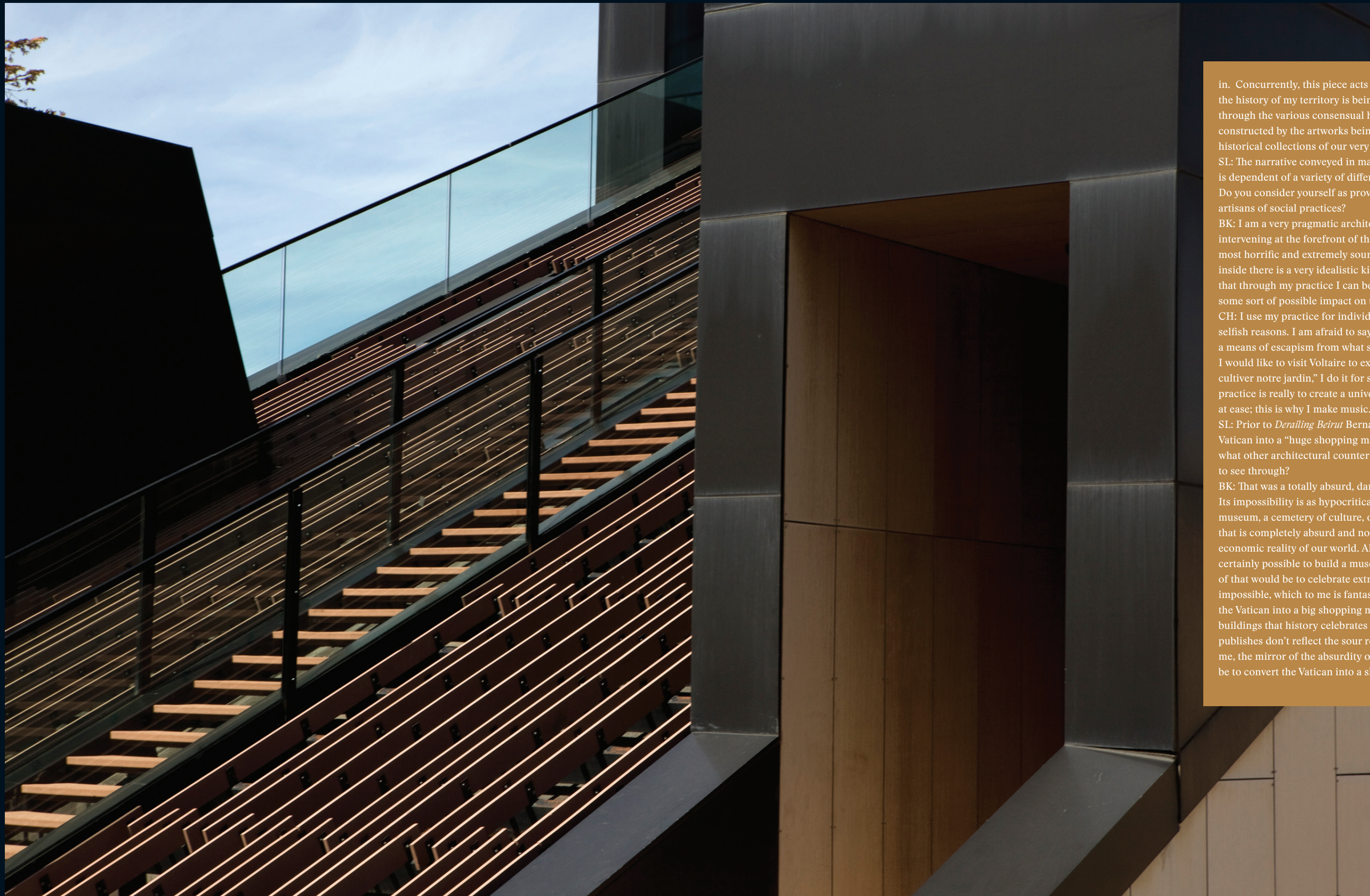
CH: We live in a society that is obsessed with results, one that is not interested in the process, they want the end, and they want monuments. On the other hand, Arabs look for the return of al-Mahdi. If we look at the Emirates, they have the end of things but not the process; they have the result and the museums but not the culture or the artists.

BK: Let's talk about art and let's look at what has been registered by the art world through the major art institutions and collections of the Western World relative to our territory in the last 10 or 15 years. It's very interesting to see what Tate, Pompidou, Guggenheim among other museums, collections and curators have selected as artwork because this is a way of writing formal history. What you will find most of the time falls into a very clear and limited territory, which usually has to do with colonial practices all the way to our political misery and war. For instance, in relation to Beirut, the trend of the last 15 years has been an exoticism about memory and war. We're getting to the end of that but yet there are consensual definitions that the art community tends to go towards, if you don't produce work that falls into this territory you are not an Arab artist.

SL: Is this enacted identity the context for projects such as *Derailing Beirut* (2010)?

BK: *Derailing Beirut* falls into one of my most theoretical projects. This project is an observation distinct from previous projects that were active interventions.

It was piece conceived for a cemetery of culture, a museum. It was a commission for the MAXXI Museum of contemporary art in Rome. Museums, in my opinion, are spaces where you show observations on the territory, not acts and interventions. These are critiques but nonetheless removed from the very rough territories and sour realities that deal with a completely different economy, which is precisely where I operate



in. Concurrently, this piece acts as a subversion of how the history of my territory is being written somehow through the various consensual histories that are being constructed by the artworks being selected for the historical collections of our very noble institutions.

SL: The narrative conveyed in many of your projects is dependent of a variety of different social practices. Do you consider yourself as provocateurs, or perhaps artisans of social practices?

BK: I am a very pragmatic architect who enjoys intervening at the forefront of the most difficult and most horrific and extremely sour situations. Deeply inside there is a very idealistic kid in me who still thinks that through my practice I can be constructive, or have some sort of possible impact on the city.

CH: I use my practice for individualistic and completely selfish reasons. I am afraid to say it but my practice is a means of escapism from what surrounds me as such I would like to visit Voltaire to explain myself, "Il faut cultiver notre jardin," I do it for survival means. My practice is really to create a universe in which I can live at ease; this is why I make music.

SL: Prior to *Derailing Beirut* Bernard converted the Vatican into a "huge shopping mall". Half a decade later, what other architectural counter-fictions would you like to see through?

BK: That was a totally absurd, dark utopian story. Its impossibility is as hypocritical as building a museum, a cemetery of culture, or something alike that is completely absurd and not in tune with the economic reality of our world. Although in Europe it is certainly possible to build a museum, here the mirror of that would be to celebrate extremes that are simply impossible, which to me is fantasizing about converting the Vatican into a big shopping mall. These great buildings that history celebrates and architecture media publishes don't reflect the sour realities of our cities. To me, the mirror of the absurdity of this consensus would be to convert the Vatican into a shopping mall.