

Alan Ruiz

Uneven Development: On *Beirut* and *Plein Air*

When viewing the 2016 Queens International, it seems impossible not to consider the exhibition against the backdrop of a vanishing environmental commons brought about by rampant forms of privatization and development. Collectively, the works in the exhibition produce something akin to a *structure of feeling*¹, toggling between the specificity of each work and their collective illumination of what it means to produce art under the global conditions of our social and political moment.

Manal Abu-Shaheen's photographs sharpen this focus – confronting the viewer with the hyper-development of an urban environment. Scenes of construction sites, and billboards serving corporate advertisements of touch-screens, white men, ice cream, and the eroticized female body dominate the field of her photographs. At first glance, these elegant images appear digitally constructed, as if they were renderings; their composited compositions evocative of a Retina display of windows within windows. And though these seemingly synthetic environments could easily present familiar non-sites — they could be any number of congested, aspiring global cities—Abu-Shaheen's titles reveal that these pictures are in fact documentation of Beirut, Lebanon.

As documentation of forms of display Abu-Shaheen's work belongs to a history of photographic practice documenting the urban environment. For instance, her work recalls the early 20th century photographs of Eugène Atget and his investigation of modernity through Parisian shop windows. In Atget's images, the storefront window is as architecture instrumental in the construction of desire, producing perceptually ungrounding effects. The glass windows of Parisian storefronts function as both reflective and transparent screens in which scenes of Paris are collapsed onto the tableaux of the window displays, and vice versa. Similarly, in Abu-Shaheen's work, figure/ground relationships are also destabilized by images of commerce. For instance, in *View From Hotel Window. Beirut, Lebanon (2016)*, an empty hotel room is surveilled by a building advertisement bearing the face of a white male model. Framed by windows and billowing curtains, his voyeuristic gaze simultaneously looks over the city below and into the intimate space of the bedroom, collapsing interior and exterior space. Recalling the transparency found in Atget's pictures, the model's face is literally a screen we must look through in order to view the city beyond. In relation to the dominant visual character of cities-as-products, *View From Hotel Window* illuminates what Henri Lefebvre has observed: "sight and seeing, which in the Western tradition once epitomized intelligibility, have turned into a trap"². If Atget's work documents the intersection between modern urbanism and visuality, Abu-Shaheen takes this principle a step further by not only capturing but setting this trap for the viewer. It is not only Beirut and the bedroom that are surveilled by this domineering male gaze, but the viewer

of Abu-Shaheen's work as well. *View From Hotel Window* points to the way urban visibility is conditioned by the persistence of colonial forms of western patriarchy. Here familiar branding and advertising function not only as ideology, but as supraideological systems that shape both the look of global cities and the subjects who inhabit them.

As reportage, Abu-Shaheen's work depicts the material and mediated effects of neoliberal capitalism in which private interest and pursuits of individualist pleasure have become hegemonic western standards. Here the viewer is given access to the transformation of Beirut through the implementation of a repeatable spatial condition akin to what architectural theorist Anna Klingmann has called "brandscares". For Klingmann, "brandscares constitute the physical manifestations of synthetically conceived identities transposed onto synthetically conceived places, demarcating culturally independent sites where corporate value systems materialize into physical territories."ⁱⁱⁱ In *Nahawand. Beirut, Lebanon (2014)* an ice cream advertisement proclaims "The Pleasure Is All Mine" amidst a spatial matrix of luxury products. Here images not only sell a branded lifestyle but also demarcate the privatization and development of urban space, a recurrent condition in Lebanon's capitol. For the past two decades following the devastation of the 1975-1990 Lebanon war, the private corporation Solidere has largely dominated Beirut's redevelopment. Luxury shopping malls, historic street recreations, and a bronze medallion plated "Heritage Trail"^{iv} is among just some of Solidere's 200 hectare-spanning development portfolio. With the objective of reconstructing and revitalizing a postwar landscape through symbolic value, Solidere has also introduced forms of exclusionary zoning laws that have led to the expulsion of local residents and property owners – all under the auspice of restoring Beirut to its prewar glory. However, as David Harvey has observed, this type of development "brings in its wake all of the localized questions about whose collective memory, whose aesthetics, and whose benefits are to be prioritized."^v Abu-Shaheen highlights the way Beirut's infrastructure of images, or brandscape, is indicative of Western imperialism, and a form of "vigilantism under color of the law"^{vi} that might come gift-wrapped in incentivized urbanism^{vii} and luxury goods.

While Abu-Shaheen's images depict the mediated and spatial effects after the globalization of neoliberal development, Mark Tribe's series *Plein Air* presents speculative images of massive areas of land untouched by human activity. However, unlike romantic notions of nature characteristic of landscape painting and photography, *Plein Air's* simulated representation of the natural environment is spatially and temporally more complex. In these works, we are not only confronted with vast areas of unspoiled land, but massive assemblages of algorithmic data that invite the viewer to imagine an inconceivable time before and after human civilization, a period some scientists have referred to as the "anthropocene". Generally, the anthropocene is characterized as a new epoch of accelerated

destruction caused by human impact on the natural environment beginning roughly at the start of the Industrial Revolution. Yet rather than depicting the anthropocentric effects of technological change, population growth, and corporate consumption, Tribe's work envisions a tabula rasa. In a sense, *Plein Air* is thus a utopian invitation to speculate about what the earth might have looked like before land enclosures, hydraulic fracturing and, capitalist development, giving the work an almost sublime quality.

Using digital software, each image presents a topographical simulation of a specific location created through a process of suturing various images together that are then framed by an irregular polygon. Though the contours of these irregular forms are process-driven (the results of their digital manipulation), in the context of Tribe's project they become evocative of idiosyncratic territorial boundaries. This reading is compounded by the title of each work: *Mendocino*, *San Juan*, *Coconino*, each location the site of a form of U.S. colony. Indeed, Tribe's *Plein Air* assumes a type of perspective that has become increasingly synonymous with militarized visuality, geopolitics, and 3-D entertainment – notably the vertical perspective embodied by a floating spectator, drone, or aircraft. If the linear perspective of a horizon once represented a point of territorial conquest and the possibilities for infinite expansion, it is now the vertical perspective of air rights, satellite maps, and drone targets which have come to constitute our sense of the globe, shifting the terrain of occupation from the land to the sky. In her essay "Free Fall: A thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective" artist Hito Steyerl insightfully characterizes linear perspective as a system of representation historically tied to colonial expansion and linear progress. If linear perspective once represented the "position of mastery, control, and subjecthood"^{viii} as Steyerl proposes, vertical perspective has now come to occupy "a new subjectivity safely folded into surveillance technology and screen-based distraction."^{ix} In this sense, the gaze becomes automated and disembodied, as Tribe's software generated vistas illustrate. They fluctuate between the space of the virtual and the real, a space similar to Combat Flight Simulators, Google Earth, and urban sprawl prediction software – abstract systems of representation that in many ways have come to constitute our contemporary existence.

Though employing different optical media, both Manal Abu-Shaheen's and Mark Tribe's works prompt reflections on the contemporary conditions of our surrounding environment. Amidst the backdrop of an increasingly vanishing environmental commons brought about by global capitalism, the series *Beirut* and *Plein Air* both reveal contrasting extremes of spatial development through visual strategies of presence and absence. If Mark Tribe's works picture the world before anthropocentric destruction, Manal Abu Shaheen's picture its cacophonous aftereffects. Calling into question our perception of reality, there is productive and perhaps unresolved tension in the way these two projects position the way visual art interacts with existing structures of power. In *Beirut* the corporate infrastructure

of images appears at once artificial and naturalized, while the bump-mapped landscapes of *Plein Air* exist within a drone-surveilled uncanny valley. In an increasingly financialized world in which globalization exacerbates uneven development rather than creating conditions of uniformity, these projects offer alternative forms of visuality generated by these conditions, ways of seeing that might lead towards a perception of resistance.

ⁱ Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977. Print.

ⁱⁱ Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Malden: Blackwell, 1991. 76. Print.

ⁱⁱⁱ Klingmann, Anna. *Brandscapes: Architecture in the Experience Economy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2007. 83. Print.

^{iv} Solidere.com

^v Harvey, David. *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*. New York: Verso, 2012. 106. Print.

^{vi} Human rights lawyer Muhamad Mugarby's description of Solidere in Lebanon Daily Star. 2007.

^{vii} Easterling, Keller. *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space*. New York: Verso, 2014. Print.

^{viii} Steyerl, Hito. *The Wretched of the Screen*. Berlin: Sternberg, 2012. 21. Print.

^{ix} Ibid. 24.