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200GRS SENDS RIPPLES THROUGH BEIRUT

Together, Rana Haddad and Pascal Hachem form the design studio 200Grs, where they make spectacularly simple design pieces in the heart of Beirut. These objects, however, are only part of their mission – their main project is Beirut itself, a place that was involved in a civil war for 15 years and has since fallen into the clutches of real estate companies that are busy creating divisions between the two social classes. Amid the construction bonanza, Haddad and Hachem are trying hard to save their city by means of artistic performance and design.

VEERLE DEVOS ([HTTP://WWW.DAMNMAGAZINE.NET/AUTHOR/VOS/](http://www.damnmagazine.net/author/vos/))

July 2017

Dummy number 011, 2017 / Beirut

The name of the studio is already telling: it refers to an ancient souk that was destroyed during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), where you would buy everything by weight – as in any market in the Middle East. “A souk is a very tactile place – you use your senses when selecting the goods. You touch, you feel, you smell, you taste. We wanted to introduce the same approach in our work; you have to manipulate the pieces, create a relationship with our designs.” Rana Haddad and Pascal Hachem established 200Grs in September 2013 after having worked together for many years. They regularly made installations and did performances in the public space. “Our starting point came from a basic need to re-establish a good relationship between everyday usability and the objects that are vital to us that can be found on nearly every desk. For instance, a double tape dispenser, which when the tape runs out you have to unscrew the container to replace it. This simple gesture means you really have to feel the wood, a living material, and you have to handle the object.” Many of the things they produce require a gesture that connects you

with it. A pencil box that you close by wrapping a string around it, for example. “We always invite people to relate to our objects.”

Haddad and Hachem like to experiment and collaborate with specialised craftspeople, in a kind of back-and-forth system. “Generally, we take a piece from one craftsman to another: one of them bends the metal, another welds it, and so on. Often there are many people involved, and the process usually demands a lot of effort. Since we are asking the artisans to do things they are not used to doing, we are challenging them and their machines. In order to discover new possibilities.” Effort and engagement also come from the duo. “A craftsman’s first reaction is often: this is impossible. So we have to sit down and talk. For hours and hours. Thus, we learn from each other and find solutions.” The design world might be very much in favour of 3D printing at the moment, but 200Grs considers working with craftspeople as precious added value. “Of course it takes time and energy, and we frequently embark on the most absurd conversations. But we believe that their knowledge should not be wasted; along with the presence of technology, there should be equilibrium and exchange.” Their quaint system of operating, devoting a lot of attention to detail and precision, certainly has them weaving a path through Beirut, of craftspeople lost in translation... “You know, we’re not only challenging ourselves. We go beyond the final result, touching upon all the different aspects in the process – we call it a performance!”



Pascal Hachem and Rana Haddad in the studio with one of the mirrors, explaining their latest product, 2017 / Beirut

Love for the city is what made them stay there during the entire war. “When it was finally over, there was suddenly a myriad of enterprises trying to take advantage of the situation. Many parts of the city were destroyed during that period”, recalls Haddad. “They were not rebuilding Beirut for its dwellers, they were trying to make it the Hong Kong of the Middle East. It was a great disappointment. The whole city became a real estate project.” That was the moment the pair became activists to save their city, each in their own manner.

With her architecture and design students from the American University of Beirut and the Academie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts, Haddad frequently makes installations in the public space. “Just after the war, I noticed that young

people didn't feel connected to the city at all, because – for their safety – their parents had always kept them off the streets. Doing installations at that time seemed to be the best way to engage them in their own city, so that they could discover what Beirut stands for.” Which was quite a tricky thing to do back then, as the government was imposing total amnesia on its citizens. One could get arrested for speaking out. It was, and still is, a delicate situation, because lots of money is involved. “In 2000, the Theatre de Beyrouth was about to close down, and we were invited to take part in the last edition of the Festival. It was in these premises during the war that the Arabic/Lebanese language specific to the theatre was born. So, for our contribution, we decided to take one chair from the theatre and cut it into two very slowly, every day from 1:00 to 1:30pm in the theatre’s vitrine. A huge crowd would assemble in the street, a much larger audience than there had ever been inside the theatre. They were asking questions, having suddenly noticed the existence of this building, and actually found themselves protesting against its destruction. Thanks to this action, we were able to extend its lifespan by an extra 18 months. “Although in the end the theatre was closed down, we believe that somehow the intervention played an important role and triggered a ripple effect.”



Alchemist, 2017 / Products / 200Grs studio / Beirut

In May 2016, Haddad and her students embarked on a project in Horsh Beirut, a public garden that had been closed for 20 years. “When it finally reopened, we saw that the authorities had positioned fences to maintain the social segregation that had existed in that neighbourhood during the war. Noticing that there was a playground on only one side, we chose to install a seesaw on the fence that separates the two areas. Kids took care of the rest. Since the main aim of children is to play, which has nothing to do with segregation, the fence disappeared and this became an actual playground for all, regardless of which side they were from. The action of the kids was loud and clear, and a great lesson to everyone.” The name of the intervention was Radio Silence. Three weeks later, Haddad and her students were asked to dismantle the seesaw. “It reflects very well our everyday situation. In the words of anthropologist Michel de Certeau: *là ou la carte coupe, le discours traverse*, an expression that applies so perfectly to Beirut – despite the fact that these installations have a short lifespan, they are creating a ripple effect by staying in people’s mind and hearts. Ultimately they’re bound to make a difference to our daily lives.”

As an artist, Hachem makes installations too, and is represented by Selma Feriani Gallery London/Tunisia, and by Federica Schiavo Gallery Rome/Milan. One of his installations was situated along the walls of the Dome Cinema, aka The Egg, an iconic venue in the heart of Beirut that had survived the war. There he placed huge hammers of the sort used to demolish buildings. “Citizens know these hammers, as they are commonly used to tear down heritage buildings.” Even though there were numerous public protests to save the edifices, the government didn’t take the citizens’ concerns into consideration. Together with the real estate companies and the mafia, it made and imposed all decisions. “During the war there was no urban planning; after the war it was mainly money that spoke. Trying to stop them destroying buildings was very difficult right after the war, given all the power involved.” The upshot is that the current urban centre is cut off from the rest of the city. “They made the gap created by the war even bigger. And we got used to it... In my piece, the hammers were pounding against the wall of the cinema slowly and softly. They didn’t destroy the war-damaged building, but everybody knew what they meant.” Hachem’s hammers were trying to wake up and empower democracy in Beirut.



The unlimited edition, 2017 / 200Grs studio / Beirut



200Grs studio, 2017 / Beirut

Even if daily life is a struggle and citizens are still not in the best position to conquer the omnipotent forces in charge; even if Lebanon's economy is failing big-time to provide enough work, housing, food, medical aid, and education to an estimated three million Syrian war refugees on top of its four million other inhabitants; even if the war has destroyed a lot of its heritage, infrastructure, and human capital, Beirut has managed to develop into an exciting creative hub in the Middle East. "Beirut is indeed booming!" And precisely because of the demanding circumstances, so it seems. "We all understand that we can only count on ourselves, not on our government. So you have to make your own survival strategy and you have to be flexible", Haddad and Hachem explain. "And we are. To start with, we speak various languages (officially, Arabic, French, and English), and there are many small workshops where gifted and well-trained craftspeople, designers, and other makers are performing miracles. There is this eagerness in people, wanting to push their work outside, to show it to the world. It's not easy, but we are used to much worse." The pair adds, "We don't have decent museums or any cultural infrastructure in this country, so the strength of the creative hub here is the grassroots: the spontaneously grown scene of makers who have been operating in the city for many years now, in an almost naïve way. We do have good schools, and alongside the industry there is often a lot of know-how and willingness to help out. Young designers from abroad even come to Beirut to get their prototypes made. Besides, Westerners consider us to be very exotic. We've always had the reputation of maintaining a wild nightlife – during the war, we used to party to feel like we were alive; now, in times of peace, the nightlife is still crazy. This adds to Beirut's attractions – many young people are coming to visit and also to live here."

It seems that if the going gets tough, the tough get going, and that is the basis of the revival in Beirut. Hachem nods. "We are all a product of the context in which we live. Many developments make our daily life here in Beirut more challenging, complicated, and difficult than it should be. We absorb this. We react. We work with it and we put it out there. We play with all the layers and share our thoughts and feelings in a constructive way, in order to establish something better."

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New series of mirrors under construction, 2017 / 200Grs studio / Beirut 2017



Radio Silence, 2016 Horsh Park / Beirut Photo: Mario Khoury Courtesy of Rana Haddad, Joanne Hayek, and Vertical Studio (AUB)



I'll race you, 2008 / The Dome Cinema (The Egg) / Beirut Courtesy of Pascal Hachem, Selma Feriani Gallery and Nadour Collection Photo: Pascal Hachem

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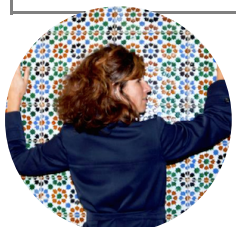
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