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# “After All, This Terror Was Not Without Reason”<sup>1</sup>

Unfiled Notes on the Atlas Group Archive

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## A Theoretical Fragment

Filed under “Convolute N” in Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, we find some annotations by the German philosopher on the unorthodox epistemology and methodology he deemed necessary for his unprecedented, unfinished, and perhaps unfinishable experiment in creating a materialist historiography of the 19th century. Document [N 2,5] reads: “Overcoming the concept of ‘progress’ and overcoming the concept of ‘period of decline’ are two sides of one and the same thing” (Benjamin 2002:460).

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In order to write history without framing it as a succession of progressive and regressive eras, Benjamin would not only have had to radically reinvent the task of the historian, he would also have had to reevaluate what would constitute an historical event. Benjamin achieved such a reevaluation precisely by overcoming the classic conception of history predicated on viewing the passing of time as an epic oscillation between civilization's "progress" and "decline." By erasing the high peaks and low valleys in historiographic accounts of social processes, Benjamin flattened the historical field, thus spreading out the present toward the past, the past toward the present, and the future toward both.

This topographic operation carried with it deep consequences for the determination of which elements would be deemed to have critical and political value to the materialist historian: Benjamin's critique of progress reassigned new value to all that had been considered insignificant, imperceptible, and valueless by traditional historiography. Just as history should not be seen as constituted by periods of progress and decline, so should there be no object, act, or document that carries more or less relevance to the historian. As famously articulated in his 1940 essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History": "A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history" (Benjamin [1940] 1969:254).

To attune to the discarded elements in history is to refigure the very status of the historical event and of the historical document. The most minute and apparently negligible object, act, gesture, artifact, or text can now be seen as filled with historical force and historiographical content. Benjamin summarized his methodology for the *Arcades Project* as follows:

Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them. (2002:460)

It is well known that Benjamin saw history as a raging storm, a piling up of ruins dusted by that agitated wreckage "we call progress" ([1940] 1969:258). The task of the materialist historian would be to navigate in this horizonless storm, since "thinking means for him: setting the sails" (258). To navigate the ruins of history is not to lament them, not to represent them, but to find a way to tap into the historical energy trapped in them by *re-activating* them. This utilitarian approach requires from the historian a certain amount of violence, a "destructive or critical momentum" (Benjamin 2002:475) necessary for dwelling in the ruins of history, for showing history's violent logic, and for listening to history's wasted, long-muffled mutterings.

## Betting Historians

In the fall of 2002, as part of the performance series of that year's Whitney Biennial, New York-based Lebanese visual artist Walid Raad presented to an attentive audience gathered in a small room in the Whitney Museum's entrails a series of intriguing documents that, according to him, would illuminate and contribute to the creation of "a contemporary history" of the Lebanese civil wars. In a lecture titled *The Loudest Muttering Is Over: Case Studies from the Atlas Group Archive*, Raad introduced himself as one of the founders of the Atlas Group, "an imaginary foundation based in New York and Beirut, established in 1999, whose purpose is to collect, produce, and archive documents of the Lebanese civil wars (1975–91)."<sup>2</sup>

1. (facing page) A video still from the Atlas Group's scholarly lecture *My Neck Is Thinner than a Hair*, performed by Walid Raad, 2005. Versions of this lecture were presented in Norway, U.S., Lebanon, Belgium, France, U.K., Germany, and Switzerland in 2004/05. (Courtesy of the Atlas Group)

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1. A quote from Tony Chakar's book *The Eyeless Map* (2003). Chakar is a Lebanese architect and writer based in Beirut and a close collaborator of Walid Raad and the Atlas Group.

After briefly introducing the Atlas Group, and after projecting the organogram of its highly meticulous archive on a large screen next to the desk where he sat throughout the whole lecture, Raad presented a first batch of documents, filed under the reference Type A, Fakhouri File, Notebook Volume 72, “Missing Lebanese Wars.” Raad told us that those obscure documents were taken from the notebooks of a certain Dr. Fakhouri, whom he described as “the most renowned historian of Lebanon.” He added that after Dr. Fakhouri’s death in 1993, 226 notebooks, 24 photographs, and 2 eight-millimeter films were donated to the Atlas Group by his widow. In a PowerPoint presentation Raad projected the contents of Notebook Volume 72. The presentation was prefaced by the following text, read by Raad in a crisp, somewhat stereotypical, slightly exaggerated, Middle Eastern accent:

It is a little-known fact that the major historians of the Lebanese wars were avid gamblers. It is said that they met every Sunday at the racetrack—Marxists and Islamists bet on races one through seven; Maronite nationalists and socialists on races eight through fifteen.

Race after race, the historians stood behind the track photographer, whose job was to image the winning horse as it crossed the finish line, to record the photo-finish. It is also said that they convinced (some say bribed) the photographer to snap only one picture as the winning horse arrived. Each historian wagered on precisely when—how many fractions of a second before the horse crossed the finish line—the photographer would expose the frame. (2004a:15)

Accent, the grain in the historian’s voice, was the first indicator of the game of mirrors structuring that evening’s lecture—a lecture that veered slowly, hesitantly, yet never quite fully openly, toward performance. As I discovered later on by attending several of his lectures, Raad’s accent (which is almost imperceptible outside the performance frame) functions as an authenticator—it points at a theatrics of alterity while at the same time it legitimizes his talk as coming from a place of authenticity and therefore of *truth*. (This leap between authenticity and truth as indexed in the voice of the historian-native is a problematic Raad both addresses and critiques in his writings and interviews about the Atlas Group.) In his lectures Raad’s voice behaves in ways that satisfy a need to identify him as a “legitimate” speaker on the topic of the Lebanese civil wars. But, in a typically unsettling way, his voice also indicates that if there is a *place* from which to speak truth, that place is always ambiguously located. Raad’s accent operates both *geographically*—conferring on the expert’s voice the phonetics of an “authentic” Middle Eastern man; and *performatively*—his accent emphasizing the central role of the scholar’s vocal apparatus as an instrument for claiming and securing authorship and authority.

But what are those documents Dr. Fakhouri carefully produced, kept in 226 notebooks, and titled “Missing Lebanese Wars”? At the Whitney Biennial lecture, Raad projected 19 images from Notebook Volume 72. Each image represented a page from the notebook; each page displayed a pasted black-and-white photograph—clearly a cutout from a newspaper—of a racehorse reaching or crossing the finish line. We could also see, scribbled across the page

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2. In different lectures I have heard Raad introduce the Atlas Group in slightly different terms. I have heard him omit “imaginary,” and I have also heard him replace it with the word “fictional.” In Raad’s recent book *The Atlas Group, Volume 1: Truth Will Be Known When the Last Witness Is Dead: Documents from the Fakhouri File in the Atlas Group Archive*, he introduces the Group as a “project established in Beirut in 1999” (2004a). Not only does he omit New York, but he categorizes the work differently: there is a significant difference between a project and a foundation. In an interview with Alan Gilbert in 2002, Raad mentions that in 1999, when he first articulated his ideas about the Atlas Group, he introduced the group as a “nonprofit foundation established in Beirut in 1967” (in Gilbert 2002:40). A foundation whose goal is to archive documents from events that had yet not taken place is not irrelevant to the kind of understanding of the temporality of history Raad is proposing with this project. That Raad was born in 1967 is also not an irrelevant detail in the particular history of this foundation. In a way, in its first presentation, it was more evident that the Atlas Group was Raad and that historical discourse is always a construction of the historian.

Date:  
7 June 1988

*Race Distance:*  
1400 m.

*Winning Time:*  
1:49

*Average Speed:*  
45.1 km/hr.

*Distance Between Horse and Finish Line:*  
- 28

*Historians' Initials and Bets:*

1.	KS	+112
2.	MM	+046
3.	FF	+618
4.	PH	-010
5.	HG	-500
6.	RO	-128
7.	AB	-238
8.	SK	-800

*Winning Historian / Time:*  
AB - 23

*Description of the Winning Historian:*  
He is 71. But for 6 years he was in prison and for 10 years he was under house arrest and in exile, so those 16 years should be deducted - then he's 55

2. One of the many found documents, including notes and the photo-finish of the horse race, from the betting historian files. The Atlas Group, Missing Lebanese Wars, 1999. Color photograph. (Courtesy of the Atlas Group)

in pencil, several annotations in English and Arabic, containing the betting historians' names, their bets, average speed of the horse, distance between the horse and finish line, and a commentary by Dr. Fakhouri on the psychological character of the winning historian, among other comments (plate 2).

However, not one single photograph in Notebook Volume 72 captures what it is meant to document: the instant defining the winning event. No image shows the horse's nose aligned with the finish line; you either see the animal ahead of it or behind it. The photographer tries

to capture the significant instant. But the betting historians know better than the optimistic photographer: they know that no matter how alert the photographer might be, he will always fail to document the passing of the instant that marks the event. He will always be too late or too early in capturing the relevant moment when the horse's nose reaches the finish line. The historians place their bets and amuse themselves with the inordinate nature of their discipline, comprised in the following axiom: history seems never to be exactly where it is supposedly taking place.

Raad articulated this clearly in an interview in 2002:

What is fascinating about these images is that the horse is always captured either just before or beyond, but never exactly at, the finish line—the horse is never on time. *This inability to be present at the passing of the present* raised for us numerous questions about how to write, and more particularly how to write the history of events that involve forms of extreme physical and psychological violence. (in Gilbert 2002:40; emphasis added)

### **An Unfiled Note from a Conversation with the Author in New York, September 2005**

LEPECKI: So, those horse-race photos in Volume 72 were clipped from the Lebanese daily *Annabar*, right?

RAAD: Right.

LEPECKI: Were the photos taken during the wars?

RAAD: No. Years after.

### **Documentation after the Fact**

So, all those documents presented by the Atlas Group during *The Loudest Muttering Is Over* as pertaining to the Lebanese civil wars actually referred to facts taking place years after the historical event they supposedly document. At the core of the very possibility of documenting the violence of the civil wars, Raad identifies and foregrounds a constitutive temporal warp in the accounting of history.

It is important that these works filed by the Atlas Group are called *documents* (and not forgeries, hallucinations, representations, fakes). And it is important to note how most of the works filed in the Atlas Group archive (with a recent exception that I'll discuss in a moment) suggest that the most powerful documents of an event are those that arrive either before or after the fact; those constitutively incapable of participating contemporaneously with the event itself, those that reveal the event unfolding, reverberating, and acting years removed from the event.<sup>3</sup> Notebook Volume 72 suggests that events have so many unfoldings that they may very well anticipate and summon themselves from many different pasts and futures. Yet, despite their constitutive belatedness and futurity, there remains the political need to account for the new presents historical events generate. Thus, the ethical necessity to create and *produce documents* after the fact—as a means to tie in any new present with the past event, and, as Benjamin would want, as a response to the correlative political demand to “make use of them.”

In all documents archived by the Atlas Group, we see enacted the temporality Benjamin thought the materialist historiographer should account for: the temporality of the event not as bound to its instantaneous eruption as signifier of decline or progress, but as a force field whose effect ripples across space and time.

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3. This temporal schism is also what makes Raad's work so key to critical theories of trauma, an approach brilliantly explored by Sarah Rogers in her essay “Forging History, Performing Memory: Walid Raad's The Atlas Project” (Rogers 2002).

In the lecture *The Loudest Muttering Is Over: Case Studies from the Atlas Group Archive* all of the documents displayed have this temporal ambivalence. The only elements that could be considered as “refuse” or “rags” (to use Benjamin’s words) from the time of the civil wars do not even qualify as “proper” documents of the wars—Raad clipped them from the daily *Annabar* years after the end of the wars. However, what matters is that their utilitarian power remains intact: the historical forces dormant within the photographs are cracked open by Raad’s little drama of the betting historians, orchestrated by that elusive materialist historiographer, Dr. Fakhouri.

## A Note on the Ethics of the Situation

The blatant intrusion of the fictional into historiographic discourse performed by Raad that evening was particularly powerful in the context of the 2002 Biennial, which was taking place just over six months after the 9/11 attacks on New York City and the Pentagon. In 9/11’s aftermath vivid debates ensued on the appropriateness of art’s response to violence, on how to design future memorials, and on how artists had responded (or refused to respond) to the attacks. Also by the spring of 2002, it was quite clear that the Bush administration was gearing up to “shock and awe” the world with its illegal invasion of Iraq<sup>4</sup>—not without the help, support, and enthusiasm from the government of Iraq’s former colonial ruler, Great Britain—thus revealing the stubborn resistance of old colonial habits. And now, here we were being lectured that a fictional foundation with the improbable Orientalist name, the Atlas Group, was *producing* documents on wars past. For me, it seemed that for the first time since the attacks, something would actually be said, performed, theorized, uttered, and shown that could account for the ways in which the ideological production of the past is the primary mechanism for brutal political performances in the present—in the Middle East as well as in Europe and the U.S.

## A Note on Misfiling

By the time the deep temporal and documental ambiguity contained in the Fakhouri files began to sink in, things became even more complex in Raad’s lecture. The lingering effect of the photograph as index and proof of a “having been there,” allied with the persuasiveness of the historian’s articulateness, with his vocally indexical “authenticity” as a Lebanese national, and with the sheer visual power of the images being displayed as documents, all contributed to an interesting misfiling of information on the part of the audience—a misfiling I have experienced over and over again during the past three years that I have sat in on Raad’s presentations on the Atlas Group in the U.S. and in Europe. Raad’s prefacing words—that the Atlas Group is an “imaginary foundation” whose task is that of “producing documents”—subtly but definitely become a lost file in our short-term memory’s archive. In the hall of mirrors Raad produces with image, memory, language, and the authoritative comments performed in an historian’s voice, this misfiling of crucial information, this quick forgetting, further blurs the lines between reality and fiction. In an interview in 2002, Raad commented on this peculiar recurrence of forgetting by his audience:

I [...] always mention in exhibitions and lectures that the Atlas Group documents are ones that I produced and that I attribute to various imaginary individuals. But even this direct statement fails, in many instances, to make evident for readers or an audience the imaginary nature of the Atlas Group and its documents. This confirms to me the weighty associations with authority and authenticity of certain modes of address (the lecture, the conference) and display (the white walls of a museum or gallery, vinyl text, the picture frame); modes that I choose to lean on and play with at the same time. (in Gilbert 2002:40)

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4. On the illegality of the Iraq invasion in 2002, see Ronald Kramer and Raymond Michalowski (2005).



## Already Been in a Lake of Fire

As Raad's lecture unfolded on that fall 2002 evening, it became clear that he is highly invested in producing work that goes far beyond the usual scope of visual arts and performance. For the Atlas Group, images are part of a larger political dramaturgy of history as pedagogy; at the same time, the performance's force cannot exist without the sheer visual sophistication of the artwork it displays. This work goes alongside yet also beyond performance and visual arts while strategically using both, along with literature, film, photography, and video art. I see its theoretical success on three main levels: (1) it proposes and enacts a critical theory of history's relationship to performativity (Fabião 2006:1–57); (2) it unmasks the role of the historian as an author (moreover, as an authoritative author); and (3) it reveals the fundamental role of the audience as a crucial accomplice in the production of the historian's authority—the audience as a partner in the historian's many forgeries, reveries, conscious or unconscious manipulations, political desires, ambitious poetics, and feverish archival drive.

One year after the first anniversary of the 9/11 attacks in New York City, Walid Raad, by carefully, subtly, and clearly identifying and using every single mechanism and mannerism that informs the staging of a successful, scholarly "lecture" (the austere desk, the glass of water, the stack of paper, the Powerbook computer, the little lamp, the wire-rimmed glasses, the discreet suit—all necessary accessories for the respectable lecturer); and by consciously staging in high-profile institutions (such as the Whitney in NYC, or the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin) the unexplored and undertheorized theatrics of knowledge always embedded in scholarly presentations, displayed clearly how historiography is the primary discursive tool behind any desire to ideologically control current political discourses and actions—particularly when these take place in the context of open warfare.

## Meticulous Cut

The fundamental role of violence as a driving force behind Raad's archival impulse requires a certain technique of display for which electronic reproduction is an ideal tool. Thus, it is crucial that all the documents presented in Raad's lectures are presented only as projected images. Indeed, all of the Atlas Group's files are displayed to the audience only through electronic media. There are no tangible documents on Raad's desk that he can hold in his hand and pass around for us to see. Not a printed photograph, not one of Dr. Fakhouri's notorious 226 notebooks, not the manila envelope Operator #17 may have used to send his secret tapes to the Group. Rather, all documents exist only as lights and shadows, as pixels, as retinal beings. Which means that they exist only as afterimages, as elusive entities that complicate and disrupt some of the narratives Raad's voice meticulously weaves. When they are displayed as objects (as when Dr. Fakhouri's notebooks are displayed on gallery walls for instance), they lack the support of Raad's voice, which in an interesting way makes them lose their force as historical constructs. Every time I see hanging in galleries or museums the original works whose images Raad projects during the Atlas Group's lectures, I feel that their ambiguous status disappears. It is their presentation as virtual documents in the context of a lecture that adds performativity to their display, adding to them an ambiguous referential dimension—thanks to the theatrics of knowledge and authenticity created by Raad's performance.

## Large-Scale Constructions

The Atlas Group divides its documents into three major filing subgroups: Files A; Files FD; Files AGP—respectively, "Authored Files"; "Found Files"; and "Atlas Group Produced Files." In 2004, when I attended the European opening of Raad's *My Neck Is Thinner than a Hair* lecture, he explained to his audience that Files Type A are those that "contain documents that we produce and find and that we attribute to imaginary or real individuals"; Files Type FD are those that "We produce and find and that we attribute to anonymous individuals or





3. A still from the *My Neck Is Thinner than a Hair* lecture, juxtaposing a photograph of a Fiat used in a suicide bombing with the engine of a destroyed vehicle on the street (mixed media, 2003). (Courtesy of the Atlas Group)

organizations”; and Files Type AGP are those “We produce and find and that we attribute to the Atlas Group” (Raad 2004b).

The Atlas Group archive appears then as this forked pathway of subfiles arranged in suspiciously clear categories that nevertheless do not seem to follow a clear logic. (What is the difference between a document that the Atlas Group attributes to an “imaginary individual” and one that it attributes to itself, given that the Atlas Group is in itself, as we are told, “imaginary”?)

As Raad introduces different files in different lectures, he describes how each document was acquired, produced, or donated to the Atlas Group. He carefully explains how they have been indexed and catalogued, which ones have been made available for public consultation and viewing and which have not. Some documents—as is the case with the Bachar tapes [File Type A, Document Title *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)*\_#17 and #31] with which Raad closed the lecture I attended at the Whitney—even contain a prologue indicating how they should be viewed. In the case just mentioned, Suheil Bachar, a “low-level employee at the Kuwait Embassy in Beirut” produced the documents themselves (several videotapes) and donated them to the Atlas Group. As tapes #17 and #31 start rolling, we hear and read how Bachar carefully delineates very specific instructions for the tapes’ public display. Here, we no longer have the historian as organizer who has a final say in dictating the display of the document. Now, it is the document itself that voices the intentionality of its creator, outlining how it should circulate in its afterlife as image, as memory/trace, and as proof. Let me transcribe the subtitles that appear on a grey background as we listen to Bachar’s voice in Arabic:

My name is Souheil Bachar. I am 35 years old. I was kidnapped in 1983. I was released in 1993. I am from the village of Houla in South Lebanon. Please translate what I say in Arabic in the following video segments into the official language of the country where the tapes are screening. English for the U.S. and U.K., French for France, and Arabic for the Arab world, and so on. I also ask you to dub my voice with a neutral-toned female voice. Subtitle what I am currently saying. Let the subtitles appear on a grey background, or if you prefer...use a blue background... [at this point the image switches from grey to light blue; the voice concludes:] blue just like the Mediterranean.

This is a beautiful gesture, reminiscent of Benjamin’s desire for a historian who would listen to his or her object’s mutterings. But rare is the document that can resist the storm of

history; rare is the document that can delineate its own destiny. One year after first watching the Bachar tapes at the Whitney, I attended the same lecture by Raad, only this time in Berlin. The tape was shown with the text above, in English, not in German. At the end of Raad's presentation, during the question-and-answer session that always follows his lecture-performances, I asked Raad if there hadn't been a betrayal and instrumentalization of Bachar's wishes by the Atlas Group. Raad replied that the Atlas Group had not yet secured the necessary funds to satisfy Bachar's wishes, but that someday they hoped to do so. In any case, the historian always has the upper hand.

By 2003, I knew perfectly well that the Atlas Group and its documents were artifacts created by Raad, that it was all a game, that it all somehow had to do with knowing the secret of the performance's relationship to both fiction and nonfiction, yet I agreed to play according to its blurring rules. By this strange reversal of logics, the Lebanese wars become less of an abstraction, no longer an academic entity but a personal matter, a point of ethical positioning, an entryway for relating and discussing the politics of display, the sovereignty of the document, the integrity of the historian, the role of the passive audience, the function of the artist as authoritative voice, and the plaint of those who ask to be heard in their own voices.

Back to the voice then, to the grainy voice of Raad in a conference room at the 2002 Whitney lecture. As Raad displayed file name after file name, as he read their improbable catalogue index numbers, and as he located each file within specific subgroups, I became increasingly involved with the intricate logic of that smoothly functioning, elegantly displayed, virtual archive. The lectures on the Atlas Group archive and its historiographic mission elicit a sense of enchantment—a sort of magic realism, a Borgean atmosphere filled with endlessly bifurcated libraries, intricately self-referential texts and images, unanticipated characters, and an overarching blurring of the relationship between imaginary and reality.

This enchantment is akin to what Benjamin, in his essay "Unpacking My Library" (1968), identified as the driving impulse behind the collector, that particular brand of materialist historian who willfully levels the historical significance of the most negligible and the most prominent of objects: sunsets, horse races, doctors' offices signs, the color blue, solitary snapshots from a trip to Europe, car bombings, the Mediterranean sea.

## Miraculous Beginnings

Among the Atlas Group's real or imaginary contributors, Dr. Fakhouri seems to have been one of the men closest to Benjamin's description of the collector. Benjamin's collector shares with the materialist historiographer a particular mode of understanding objects in relation to history. First, this mode is a passionate one, privileging the *experience* given by the discarded, the minor, the refuse; second, this mode operates as if no one thing in history should be deemed more relevant than any other. According to Hannah Arendt:

The collector's passion [...] is not only unsystematic but borders on the chaotic, not so much because it is a passion as because it is not primarily kindled by the quality of the object—something that is classifiable—but is inflamed by its "genuineness," its uniqueness, something that defies any systematic classification. Therefore [...] the collector levels all differences. ([1968] 1969:44)

Thus, between 1975 and 1991—that is, during the official chronology of the "Lebanese civil wars"—Dr. Fakhouri would walk around with two eight-millimeter film cameras. With one, he would expose a frame of film every time he would come across the sign of a medical doctor's or dentist's office. He titled this film *No Illness Is Neither Here nor There* (2000). With the other eight-millimeter film camera, he would expose a frame of film every time he felt that the war had come to an end. He called it *Miraculous Beginnings* (Atlas Group Archive 398.5trb, Fadl Fakhouri Archive v77, Ref. TR680.S22613 986). This is where the passion of the collector, associated with a desire for a non-epic historiography of minor events, becomes infused with an

affect that traverses all of Raad's powerful visual work. The image is activated, through its fast-paced dynamics (as in the two Fakhouri films) or through a hyperbolic contemplative stillness (as in the Bachar tape #31: a two-minute-five-second shot of the glimmering silver surface of the Mediterranean sea) in order to produce in the viewer an affective impact: before the hyper-organized organogram of the archive, Dr. Fakhouri's films passionately search for profane signs of a historical turn in the wars. There is certainly beauty in those films, but laced with mixed feelings of impending peril, loss, disorientation, and an extremely vivid and overwhelmingly present absence—the void carved by those suddenly obliterated from the face of the earth by the blast of a car bomb.

## The Return of the Real

Beirut. Between 1975 and 1991, 3,641 car bombs exploded throughout the city, killing 4,387 and injuring 6,784. The wreckage provoked by those car bombs was meticulously documented by several photojournalists. Georges Semerdjian was one of them. On Friday, 5 January 1990, Semerdjian died while in the field. The last roll of images he took is a central piece in the Atlas Group's latest project. Not a fictional character, Semerdjian's death was quite real. The inclusion of this person and of his work into the Atlas Group archive indicates a recent shift in Raad's work.

Berlin. Summer 2004. Raad is presenting *My Neck Is Thinner than a Hair. A History of Car Bombs in the Lebanese Wars (1975–1991)\_Volume 1*, 21 January 1986.<sup>5</sup> In this lecture, Raad makes the following proposition: “The car bomb is a weapon, a technology, an event, and a form of discourse that has shaped public life in Lebanon for the past 30 years.” Thus, the photojournalistic images of the remains of the explosions become sites for further exploration of the status of documents in relation to the destructive event.

*My Neck Is Thinner than a Hair* explores one single car bomb explosion in Beirut on 21 January 1986, and draws from the singularity of this event its constitutive multiplicities. The lecture starts with a PowerPoint display of intricate history-lines running through a dizzying sequence of faces of the main political, religious, military, and paramilitary characters involved in the events leading to this particular car bomb. Thus, in this lecture, we are in a very different atmosphere than the one I had found at the Whitney in 2002. Here, faces of real political actors are tied to identifiable events—no racing horses tricking betting historians. It's almost as if the brutality of the bombings hammers in the need for a concrete anchoring of discourse and references, real players and their real names.

Yet...after naming in detail those dozens of male faces, after explaining each man's political function, his social status, then and now, Raad presents something entirely different. Document AGA\_AGP / Neck\_Volume 1 [21 January 1986], titled “We can make rain but no one came to ask,” operates precisely by suspending what seemed like an unstoppable flow of faces and names and convoluted political ties by presenting a city without people. On this video, we see Beirut from a high viewpoint: cars everywhere, bustling streets, large avenues, and roundabouts. But of people: just one or two furtive glimpses of furtive bodies. What's eerie is not that we see images of a city without its people, but that we see a city that goes about its business thanks to the permanence of architecture and the stubborn motility of cars. The same architecture and the same cars that, despite also being subjected to blasts, seem to be the only survivors of the wars.

It should be mentioned that an extremely important part of Raad's lectures is a Q&A period that inevitably follows the presentation of the last tape or document. As Raad once told me, the Q&A session is a fundamental element of the theatrics of academic lectures. Without it,

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5. As this essay was in production, I saw a very different version of the same lecture at the New School in New York, in November 2005. I want to make clear I am analyzing here the 2004 version, which I find more interesting.

the whole thing would become too much like a performance, with a fixed ending, begging for applause. So, Raad always wants to have this moment of conversation with the audience. Occasionally, some of the questions are boring or not conducive to dialogue; more frequently though, the questions are quite to the point, provocative, urgent. However, it would often happen that Raad would only find the appropriate answers to those questions hours, sometimes even days, after the lecture was over—missing the mark, just like a betting historian. So, in order to preempt the challenges placed by his questioners, to avoid the delay, Raad decided to plant questioners among the audience and to rehearse his answers. Usually he will have two or three members of the audience planted, each with one or two questions for him.

In Berlin, by the end of the presentation someone asked (I am almost sure it was a plant): “How come there are no people in the long panoramic video takes of Beirut you shot?” Raad:

In fact this is something that surprised us as well because when we photographed this area of Beirut there were quite a number of people in the streets; it was a busy time of the day. But when we developed the film we were surprised to find that none of them appeared. We didn’t know what to make of this situation, especially since it happened time and time again. [...] This phenomenon caused in us a great deal of anxiety. [...] The same thing happened in a different neighborhood where we filmed cars on the streets. When we viewed the videotape, we noticed that the cars were also disappearing. After a while we came with the notion that maybe time and place are operating in this neighborhood in ways so that this universe exist. (2004b)

A universe where people and cars suddenly disappear into thin air. As if such a world were possible! As if the creation of such images would testify to the truth-value of Raad’s vision of Beirut. As if contrived documents would be less fantastical than Raad’s actual images shot in today’s Beirut. For instance, Georges Semerdjian’s last roll of film, documenting a devastating car bombing, which is scrolled in its entirety halfway into *My Neck Is Thinner than a Hair*. This piece of blatantly marked “real” (as Raad explained in the Q&A period in Berlin) defined the object of study for this latest project. For Semerdjian’s photos reveal not the event itself but the “negative image” of a city whose network of relations has been disrupted by daily violence, brutally exposing all that is deemed private.

It is at this point of exchange between inside and outside, public and private, life and death, factual document and post-factual document that the real returns to the Atlas Group. It returns in order to disclose unexpected historical forces contained amidst the ruins—ready for the historian who sees major events in minor stuff and who unleashes all their political power—to just “make use of them.”

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