Art is a lie that makes us realize truth: Walid Raad's abstract realism

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Dissertation

ART IS A LIE THAT MAKES US REALIZE TRUTH: VALID RAAD'S ABSTRACT REALISM

by

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ART IS A LIE THAT MAKES US REALIZE TRUTH:
VALID RAAD’S ABSTRACT REALISM

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ABSTRACT

Working across a range of media, the Lebanese-American artist Walid Raad severs and re-wires the links between reality, history, narrative fiction, and photographic indexicality, often by intervening in the presumed socio-political implications or technical aspects of canonical photographic forms. Raad relies on fiction to tell stories based on truths, merging visual abstraction and photographic realism to point to a dimension of reality that the documentary image alone cannot grasp. While Raad’s artistic project has typically been described as a fictional archive and thus a critique of history tout court, this dissertation aims to describe his work according to a revised rubric of realism. Drawing on the literature and theory of trauma, I argue that Raad constructs a new language to narrate the otherwise inaccessible history of Lebanon’s civil wars.

Raad’s projects to date have engaged two core topics: the disastrous period of conflict in Lebanon (1975 to 1991) and the rise of a powerful global art market. Focusing primarily on The Atlas Group—which includes notebooks, videos, installations, and photographs—this dissertation analyzes Raad’s use of photography to complicate the real events his works describe. Chapter One traces the combined effects of living through the early years of the civil war in Lebanon
and Raad’s emigration to and education in the United States, where he has lived since 1983. Chapter Two looks at the role of language in Raad’s work—from elaborate narrative captions and lecture-performances to the invention of an entire cast of fictional characters. Chapter Three examines several Atlas Group projects via their interrogation of photography’s historical conjunction of evidence and indexicality. Chapter Four continues this line of investigation, but does so from a seemingly opposite perspective, investigating Raad’s use of fiction, which he melds with an embrace of formal abstraction to echo the conceptual abstraction deployed in his narratives. In my conclusion, I consider Raad’s most recent series of artworks in relation to his involvement in the artist-run activist group Gulf Labor to address how his engagement with realism is directly bound up with the politics of the global art world.
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INTRODUCTION

*Those who lack imagination cannot imagine what they lack.*¹

Working across a range of media, including photography, film, video, digital composites, photo-montage, and collage, the American-Lebanese artist Walid Raad severs and re-wires the links between reality, history, narrative fiction, and photographic indexicality, often by intervening in the presumed social or political implications or the presumed technical aspects of canonical photographic forms. While Raad’s artistic project has typically been described as a fictional archive and thus a critique of history *tout court*, this dissertation aims to describe his work differently, under a revised rubric of *realism*. Raad relies on fiction to tell stories based on truths, and he merges visual abstraction and photographic indexicality to point to a dimension of reality that documentary cannot grasp. He has said, “It’s not about just telling stories or pointing out in the abstract that everything is mediated or constructed; it’s about the particular story being told.”² This comment, I argue, reflects both the realism and the politics of the work. Certainly, Raad’s work investigates the figure of the historian, along with the philosophical and political complexities of writing history. But his fundamental concern is not for the description of the past (however mythical, fantastic, hypothetical, emotionally lost, or politically fraught that past may seem), but rather about the accurate accounting for a present that seems to have eluded rational analytical tools. Raad’s approach to

realism, in relation to photography, performance, narrative, fiction, and visual abstraction, forms the primary consideration of this dissertation.

Raad’s two major, multi-year projects have engaged the trajectories of two core topics: the disastrous civil wars in Lebanon that took place from 1975 to 1991, and the rise of a powerful global art market, one in which Raad has found himself quite successfully inscribed. Both projects are still ongoing. *The Atlas Group (1989-2004)*, an archival foundation entirely of Raad’s creation, houses a variety of projects concerning the complex history of the Lebanese civil wars. The dates of 1989-2004 contained in the project’s title are essentially fictions themselves.\(^3\) The first work officially attributed to the Atlas Group was not produced until 2000, although several individual Atlas Group works were begun in the 1990s when Raad was a graduate student, only to be subsequently refined as the project grew in scale and complexity. Raad continues to make new Atlas Group works, backdating them to fit within the framing dates of the project’s title. Since 2007, Raad has embarked on a second multi-form series of works that take as their subject the often politically vexed growth, reception, and international development of art in the greater Arab world. These works have been grouped under the collective title *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Art in the Arab World (2007-)*. This dissertation analyzes the structure and contents of these two meta-archival projects (primarily *The Atlas Group*), which include photographs, videos, installations, and

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\(^3\) It should be noted that each individual Atlas Group artwork is given two dates: the first to indicate the year it was ostensibly produced; the second it its actual year of production.
performances. It seeks to contextualize Raad’s works within the parallel histories of documentary critique and conceptual art.\(^4\)

The core tensions of Raad’s practice are between factual data and formal, visual abstraction; between gaps in social history and the lived testimony of its witnesses; and between verifiable information and the implicit fictions of personal experience. Raad has often focused on the seeming unreality of real events. To test the boundaries of what can be recorded or recognized about them, he has at times presented fabricated information in the form of a plausible mimicry of a recognizable object, whereas at other times he has presented real information in elaborate structures seemingly too bizarre to be true. But it is in error to read such tactics as a simple inversion of the true-false dichotomy or as the whim of playful artistic prerogative. More is at stake than that. Raad has imagined archival documents that address the complex catastrophe of wartime trauma; he has also used fictional conceits (such as telepathic communication with artists from the future) to highlight the problematic nature of contemporary capitalism’s current interest in Arab artists. His fictionalized storylines are often embedded in forms traditionally presumed to be true, such as vivid, compelling eyewitness testimonies, first-person narrations, or photographic captions. Similarly, his objects take on the formal language of reliable, official structures: documents, artifacts, archival ordering systems, and the institutional language of museum displays. At first glance,

\(^4\) In the 1960s, Conceptual artists embraced photography for its non-art aesthetic and utilitarian purposes at the same moment as photography had finally won recognition as art. Yet, to this day, there remains a distinct split between documentary photographers and artists who employ documentary modes, and photography’s multiple roles (as art, as documentation, and as an economic market) continue to shape these conversations.
Raad’s works are visually mysterious and conceptually opaque, yet they are directly enmeshed in both art-historical genealogies and the concrete political realities of the Arab world. They examine the modes through which cultural experience can survive and be told.

Raad is the product of a mixed artistic genealogy. Part of the Lebanese diaspora, he has lived in the United States for the last thirty years. The specifics of Raad’s personal history shaped his work in ways both obvious and subtle. Raad spent his formative years in Lebanon and experienced the civil war first hand as a child and teenager. After moving to the United States (where he became an American citizen), he followed the second half of the civil war from a distance, through American media coverage and telephone conversations with family members still living in Beirut. Although art critics and curators often place Raad in the so-called Lebanese “post-war” generation, his artistic and academic training occurred in the United States. He was thus largely influenced by the Western canon and by teachings presented from an American perspective, studying postcolonial theory and Middle East history in America and only later applying this understanding to his own country’s colonial past. The art-history legacies with which his work grapples are Western, and as much as his work attempts to critically engage these references, this critical engagement has also served to launch his career as a global or transnational artist, because his visual vocabulary partakes of this history and can be recognizably interpreted as responding to the canon of Western photographic history and the legacy of conceptual art. When he returned to Lebanon in his twenties, Raad contended with these histories and with his own memories (and their gaps). Although Raad’s earliest work incorporated aspects of
his personal history, as his career became more established he began to remove such references from his work, and he has since refrained from explicitly mixing his biography with the works themselves, despite its clear influence on them. Any historian of Raad’s work must acknowledge this approach but must also challenge it and identify where the two histories overlap.

The complex interweaving of fact and fiction, the overlapping categories of the biographical and the fictive, the shifting first- and third-person narratives, and the combination of photographic and abstracted elements present fundamental challenges for any interpreter of Raad’s work. The historian’s task is further complicated by the lack of well-documented histories of the civil war period in Lebanon, and by the fact that Raad’s projects have come to speculate reflectively on their own involvement in global art history, weaving further layers of open-ended temporality into already fraught and self-reflexive objects. Thus, this examination proceeds thematically rather than chronologically.

The Atlas Group

Raad created The Atlas Group as a fictional archive and research foundation whose supposed mandate was to comment on the complicated history of the Lebanese civil wars of 1975-1991 and to reveal how their effects have been manifested in Lebanon’s collective psyche.5 Ostensibly storing, archiving, cataloguing, and disseminating the

5 Many Lebanese artists refer to the aggregated civil wars rather than a single war. “Some, especially those in south Lebanon, might suggest that the nation was actually not ‘postwar’ until after the 2000 withdrawal of Israeli military from the ten-mile-wide swath of Lebanese territory it had occupied as a ‘security zone’ for nearly two decades. Similarly, others would prefer the term ‘Lebanese Wars’ to indicate the importance of international factors, including the involvement of the United States.”
visual and material detritus of the war, the Atlas Group staged a history where none could be reliably determined. Across dozens of intricate sub-projects, the archive presents an eclectic set of “documents”: photographs, notebooks, films, videos, maps, charts, diagrams, blueprints, and so on. Each project is nested within a larger framework of attribution, with an elaborate narrative of its production (sometimes known, sometimes presumed), its provenance, and its arrival into the Atlas Group’s holdings. Typically, the Atlas Group is said to have received these various groups of documents through some ambiguous character or miraculous circumstance. All of these explanations are scenarios imagined by Raad, who has mapped each image or object type onto a corresponding testimony, account, authorship, or context.⁶

The “documents” were all produced by Raad and they derive from a vast pool of images he found, amassed, or photographed over the course of numerous trips to Lebanon since the early 1990s. By constructing new directions, contexts, and interpretations for materials otherwise grounded firmly in the reality of photography, Raad reanimates the potential for otherwise unknown histories to have occurred—from public violence to private, individual forms of traumatic experience. Some events or traces of the wars are unphotographable, because they are experienced internally as psychic trauma, regardless of how authentically they

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⁶ Raad’s archival system recalls precedents in conceptual art to indexing and mapping ideas. Raad’s project synthesizes Conceptual Art’s aesthetics of information with his own Ph.D. training and the 1990s wave of interest in archival materials as a counterpoint to the wave of interest in new media and data flows in computer art. The early archiving impulse in contemporary art from the 1990s was largely split between the realization of the potential of archiving everything online or via computer indexing and databases, on one hand, and the archiving of vast quantities of physical objects in response. See Charles Harrison, *Essays on Art & Language.* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001).
are experienced. The success of Raad’s work lies in articulating those stories in a language as if they had been visible. The goal of his project is not to trick viewers, nor to negate any of the real events that took place during the war. Rather, it is to demonstrate that fact and fiction, truth and falsehood, reality and imagination, or history and memory are not simple binaries but operate along a continuous spectrum. The cacophony of competing voices—along with all the untold stories, interwoven political rationales, still-open wounds, and the unaccounted guilt that they imply—shows any rational, comprehensive narrative to be impossible.

It can be argued that, in war zones, no truth is clear and many viewpoints create many truths, and that a particular catastrophe can produce an unlimited number of psychic responses from those affected. The intrinsic incongruity between war zones and everyday life makes representations of war a natural staging ground for artists like Raad who are concerned with the conceptual slippage between reality and fiction. The diverse visual styles and the often implausible stories that caption the works enact a core idea: trauma is idiosyncratically experienced and so it produces idiomatic forms. The Atlas Group work was grounded in Raad’s interest in (and personal experience with) life under wartime conditions and how such traumas can influence the personal perception of events and the writing of histories. But Raad has been at pains to keep his personal biography distinct from the works, even while his own firsthand experiences were anecdotally included in the projects.

7 Lebanese artists who share this concern include Ziad Abillama, Tony Chakar, Ali Cherir, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Lamia Joreige, Bilal Khbeiz, Bernard Khoury, Fouad Khoury, Rabih Mroue and Lina Saneh, Marwan Rechmaoui, Walid Sadek, Jalal Toufic, Nadine Touma, Jayce Salloum, Paola Yacoub and Michel Lasserre, and Akram Zaatari. Outside the Lebanese context, examples include Yael Bartana, Omer Fast, Harun Farocki, Emily Jacir, Hito Steyerl, The Otolith Group, Anri Sala, and others.
Fiction provided a mechanism to universalize the subject, allowing Raad to disperse his material into the minds and mouths of numerous characters and thereby giving the author distance from the works’ narratives.

The Atlas Group focuses on the multiple, overlapping Lebanese wars and their sprawling and entangled psychic aftershocks, formally enacting the subject’s utter resistance to narration. Raad’s work, like that of other Lebanese artists of his generation, emerged within the larger contest of meaning and history in Lebanese society. As such, the implied figure of fascination for Raad is the historian who would try to narrate these wars. The Atlas Group thus prompts a wider critique of the role of historians, examining how all historians are embedded in and affected by the narratives they construct. This interest intersects with a trajectory within academic history that originated with historian Hayden White, who proposed in his 1969 essay “The Burden of History” that an artist or a scientist could produce more dynamic and multi-dimensional modes of historical narration than a historian could. The artist can make leaps between narrative strands or propose connections among seemingly discrete events, since he or she does so from outside the constraints of the field itself and has access to external bodies of knowledge and discursive tools. White famously postulated that any form of historical narration intrinsically includes a dimension of historical content. Raad, it could be argued, participates in just this kind of historical thinking, but he refracts it further by suggesting that the historian’s own biographical involvement will condition the range of forms available

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9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
to him or her. In other words, the intrinsic content of the producer of the form is relevant to its production. In the Atlas Group’s dual thought-lines of photographic indexicality and the archive’s capacity to produce a coherent narrative or representation of a subject, we find an analogy between the photojournalist and the historian. These are vexed positions: despite the fact that each field is grounded upon a stable, neutral position from which to narrate or to witness, complete neutrality or objectivity is impossible. The storyteller’s own involvement changes the image, changes the story.

While the Atlas Group took on the often indescribable events of Lebanon’s civil wars and the nation’s subsequent tendency to engage in collective amnesia, *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Art in the Arab World* (2007-) picks up where the Atlas Group left off, taking up issues of traumatized displacement and artistic production in the postwar context. *Scratching* examines the rapid rise of a globalized art market, in particular a market of Arab artists and institutions, and the instrumentalization of art and artists across the region by powerful private agencies or governments. However obliquely, these works deal with the museum building boom in the United Arab Emirates and other Gulf nations, the hidden mechanics of the commercial art world and the systems surrounding its high-value assets, and the rapid reconstruction of downtown Beirut, which coexists uneasily with the scars and ghosts of the war years.

In his focus on the rise of museums in oil rich countries of the Arabian Gulf, Raad dissects the construction of regional, genealogical art histories and the needs of the art market, including the architecture and resources required to accumulate and house large private art collections. A matrix of oil revenues and tourism booms has
generated new mega-museums across many Gulf countries, providing reliable employment to star international architects as well as encouraging international labor practices fraught with human-rights abuses.11 These museums will presumably house growing collections and exhibitions of work by Arab artists, but their construction procedures often efface regional histories and local cultural production in favor of exhibitions of international, blue-chip artists. Raad’s own role in this unfolding narrative is implicated and inscribed in *Scratching*, which seeks to question and confound the dominant narratives of regional development. Different questions than those of the Atlas Group are posed here: How does history emerge through the filter of cultural institutions? How do the large-scale abstractions of politics, financial capitalism, war, and architecture affect and alter the production, reception, and collection of artworks, or the lives of working artists? Raad’s own prominence in the international art world has become an anchoring gesture. The difficulty of his personal entanglement forms the story of the creation of these more recent projects. In another reversal of his earlier work, the future becomes the pivotal lens through which one perceives the present: many of the narratives and works in *Scratching* demonstrate an engagement with an almost science-fiction mode of storytelling, conceiving of and critiquing the present as if it were already the past.

Across the Atlas Group works, personal memory is conflated with civic memory, and the past is the endless question inflecting any understanding of the present. As such, it can be parsed with theoretical tools found in the writings of

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11 As examples, consider the “Who Builds the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi” and “Gulf Labor” projects, which are discussed in the conclusion of this dissertation.
Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Gilles Deleuze. Derrida’s essay “On Fiction and Testimony,” printed alongside Maurice Blanchot’s *The Instant of My Death*, is helpful in reading Raad’s understanding of the overlapping categories of fiction and truth. Benjamin, in his 1936 essay “The Storyteller,” distinguishes the roles of historian from chronicler; I will build on this distinction in relation to Raad’s use of narrative in Chapter Two. Barthes’s discussion of the relation of text to image and the ostensible meaning of a photograph, and his focus on meaning as context-specific and dependent on the individual interpreter, provide insight relevant to the analysis of Raad’s use of spoken and written text. Finally, the multiple temporalities of which Deleuze writes in his discussion of time and cinema are particularly resonant with a late Atlas Group video, discussed in Chapter Four.

Special mention must also be made of Raad’s contemporary, the writer, artist, and theorist Jalal Toufic, whose work has been central to Raad’s practice. Toufic grew up in Lebanon during the war, and like Raad he completed his education in the United States, graduating with a Ph.D. in radio, film, and television

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from Northwestern University in 1992. Raad first met Toufic in the early 1990s, but
Toufic’s writing did not become important to Raad’s thinking and practice until the
mid-2000s, when Raad recognized in it many of the same concepts and responses to
postwar Lebanon at which he himself had arrived independently in his own work. I
also read Raad through the critical theorization of trauma studies and the notion of
the *spectral*, which describes the ghostly and echoing effect of the compounded,
layered coexistence of chronologies, economic frameworks, and technological
regimes. Raad’s work implies an overlap between the delayed psychic response to
trauma and the latency of historical legibility, recognizing the role of technical media
in that equation. He exhibits a postmodern distrust of totalizing, archiving systems
of knowledge, but maintains an interest in the archive’s communicative capacity
nonetheless—even at its contemporary twilight moment, as it is being replaced by
rhizomatic, cloud-based storage mechanisms. The archive is evacuated in his work
to the point of pure conceit: it becomes a framework that seeks to bring order to the
un-orderable civil wars. Ultimately, I perceive in Raad’s work a traumatic theory of
history, related to Benjamin but filtered through Toufic’s central concept of the
crisis of culture within the condition of a so-called *surpassing disaster*.17

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17 “Surpassing disaster” is Toufic’s term, and I will discuss it at length in Chapter Four. See Toufic, *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster.*
Archive and Document as Artistic Material

The burgeoning field of trauma studies has evolved over the last two decades, and what might have been identified as a pre-millennial anxiety in the 1990s gained currency as a discourse in the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001. Of course, neither trauma nor attempts to describe it are new, yet we are now witnessing an unprecedented attempt by those working in the visual arts, theory, and popular culture to address and come to terms with the many disastrous events of the past century. An important early contribution to this field is Elaine Scarry’s book *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985), which examines the inexpressibility of pain by drawing on literary, political, philosophical, medical, and religious texts and considers its real political implications.\(^\text{18}\) Starting from the viewpoint that acts of war (which she categorizes as “unmaking”) are immoral, Scarry argues that creative acts such as imagining and imaging (making) can be read as *moral*: “That we ordinarily perceive [creative acts] as empty of ethical content is … itself a signal to us of how faulty and fragmentary our understanding of creation is.”\(^\text{19}\) Scarry’s understanding of art and literature as creative acts has informed my approach to Raad’s projects as productive (world-making), artistic and political undertakings.

As early as 1996, in Hal Foster’s *Return of the Real*, trauma discourse was presented as a cultural form for artists to mine.\(^\text{20}\) As the field of trauma studies has

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\(^{19}\) Ibid., 22.

gained popularity, it has moved out of the realm of psychoanalysis and been picked up by novelists, artists, historians, literary critics, cultural philosophers, and journalists. What followed was the transformation of trauma from theory to trope. Recent studies on the traumatic in art have focused on the affective potential of documentary images, on one hand, and abstracted or fictionalized approaches on the other. Lisa Saltzman and Eric Rosenberg’s edited volume, *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity*, is an interdisciplinary anthology that looks at modern history and traumatic events, exploring trauma as a discourse that uses visual language to describe its condition. Despite the centrality of the visual to memory, most writing about trauma has looked at the phenomenon through language. But new approaches in trauma studies concede that “a potential space of trauma is that it exists between the visual and the verbal, between that which is seen and that which is said.” The authors continue, “[I]f we agree that trauma itself might emerge from the attempt to navigate that space—this being the very mandate of art history, the language of art historical inquiry might provide a model, however imperfect, for such endeavors.” The characteristics inherent to photography are also inherent to trauma, since they are always both only a trace of and part of a larger field of vision. Rosenberg productively compares photography to the traumatic when he writes, “painting is painting; architecture is architecture … but photography is quite simply

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23 Eric Rosenberg and Lisa Saltzman, “Introduction,” in *Trauma and Visuality*, xii.
24 Ibid.
a version of the world that no longer exists.”25 Rosenberg argues that trauma’s “achievement” is to “forever shuttle signification between banality and upheaval; the quotidian and rupture.”26

Cathy Caruth’s now-canonical interpretation of the 1959 film *Hiroshima mon amour*, directed by Alain Resnais and written by Marguerite Duras—which tells the story of two lovers, a Japanese man and a French woman, and their conflicting experiences and memories of the end of war—investigates the communication (or the incommunicability) of trauma.27 Caruth demonstrates how the film addresses questions of language and translation, what is ethical to tell, and how not to betray the past. Taking this film as an example of bearing witness and ethical encounter across cultural and traumatic difference, she shows how Resnais addresses the possibility of communicating trauma and history cross-culturally.28

The recent surge in artworks that are non-narrative and non-representational rather than testimonial in nature have led many to claim that art that contains fictional elements is more able to convey affect. In *Empathic Vision*, Jill Bennett examines how artworks that address trauma and memory can, by incorporating fictive elements, open up the question of what art might reveal about the lived experience and memory of trauma.29 Drawing on the writings of Gilles Deleuze,

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26 Ibid., 44–45.
27 Rosenberg, “Walker Evans’s Depression and the Trauma of Photography.”
28 Notably, this film has been important to both Raad and Toufic.
Bennett looks at art as a kind of visual language for trauma, perhaps more effective than verbal language. Bennett examines artists who have in some way witnessed or experienced trauma but do not present a personal account of it.\(^{30}\)

This dissertation locates Raad’s work in the merging fields of conceptual and documentary practices. His application of critical, deconstructive frameworks to the matrix of history, photography, and conceptual art should be contextualized within a group of international artists who have deployed these strategies since the 1990s, often guided by the writings of documentary theorists and practitioners such as Martha Rosler, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, and Allan Sekula. These thinkers questioned the evidentiary status of photography, its claims to indexicality and objectivity, and the role of the eyewitness.\(^{31}\) The dialectical separation between art photography and photojournalism polarizes these categories and reinforces the claim that, whereas art should be beautiful but need not be “true,” the opposite holds for photojournalism. Susan Sontag summed up this idea: “For the photograph of atrocity, people want the weight of witnessing without the taint of artistry, which

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 11. While my interest in Raad’s work stems in part from its fictional and abstracted elements, I do not share Bennett’s interest in the purely affective aspects of such works, or the view that feeling can be a catalyst for critical inquiry and that the affective qualities of art make it uniquely suited to representing trauma.

is equated with insincerity or mere contrivance.” Many critiques of documentary photography focus on its characteristic of allowing the viewer/reader a glimpse into what the original event must have been like, vicariously experiencing it after the fact. This tendency has often been seen as voyeuristic and as serving only to reassure the viewer of his or her own place of relative comfort. Such critiques persist, but this question of aestheticization in photographs of suffering as first elaborated in the writings of Rosler, Solomon-Godeau, and Sekula often results in an interpretive dead end: documentary photography fails to fully comprehend massive trauma, yet it is necessary to communicate world events. Thus, the use of images of victims to trigger affective responses violates the individuals represented. At stake here is whether such images take us further than mere sympathy once an affective connection is established, or whether trauma is reduced to merely shocking. A common theme in trauma theory as applied to art is that artists who refuse to show atrocities can actually help the viewer to have an empathic encounter.

In the wake of such critiques, artists like Raad have further interrogated the truth claims of the document and the archive, in a trend that has been termed the “documentary turn” and that encompasses the twin currents of history-minded and archive-based art practices. Oliver Lugon has shown that the contradictions

33 Ibid., 65.
35 Notable examples include Chantal Akerman, Christian Boltanski, Matthew Buckingham, Tacita Dean, Stan Douglas, Hans-Peter Feldmann, Emily Jacir, Amar Kanwar, Joachim Koester, Zoe
inherent in photography have prompted artists to explore a new interpretative potential, writing: “This ambivalent status of the photographic document is precisely what has made it such a productive genre for contemporary artists to mine.”

Given the increasing pluralism of artistic practices since Postmodernism, the attendant rejection of objective truth, and the rise of artists with advanced academic and discursive training, it is perhaps inevitable that the apparently irreconcilable poles of art and document would eventually merge. This is what we are witnessing today.

Hal Foster’s 2004 essay “An Archival Impulse” set the critical stage for the recognition of these forms of work, arguing that the work of Tacita Dean, Thomas Hirschhorn, Francis Alÿs, and others could be understood as engaging with archival materials, an interest in disappearing, outmoded technologies, and a goal of unsettling established historical narratives.

Although the focus of this study is not Raad’s archive as such, its origin in the discursive frameworks of both the atlas and the archive draws implicitly on the writings of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida.

In The Archaeology of Knowledge, Foucault describes an archive as “the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events.”

Significantly, this definition interprets the archive as an

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Leonard, Michael Rakowitz, Anri Sala, Eyal Sivan, and Hito Steyerl, among others.


39 The complete passage is as follows: “The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events. But the archive is also that which determines that all these things said do not accumulate endlessly in an amorphous mass, nor are they inscribed in an unbroken linearity, nor do they disappear at the mercy of chance external accidents; but they are grouped together in distinct figures, composed together in accordance with multiple relations, maintained or blurred in accordance with specific regularities; that which determines that they do not
organizational system within which meaning can be drawn from the collection of events and stories contained therein. In a Foucauldian reading, the archive is understood as “a representative historical form” (which Foucault called the “historical a priori”) whose methodological apparatus set “a condition of reality for statements.” Following Derrida in Archive Fever, it bears noting that, in addition to a physical place, the archive is also “an authority” on the information contained therein. The archive also conjures up images of a physical storehouse of documents or images, a place where historians and researchers “unearth and bring to light the stories of the past.” However, Raad’s archive is generative: it is not a place for historians to discover untold stories but is instead itself a collection of stories. Perhaps what Raad has grasped about the archive—in addition to the authoritative weight that the established archive lends to its documents—is, as in Derrida’s formulation, its inherent constructive potential: “the archivization produces as much as it records the event.”

By naming his mythical foundation the Atlas Group, Raad refers back to a whole history of the atlas in both the visual arts and philosophy. Katherine Palmer Albers’s dissertation, “Atlas/Archive/Album,” examines three case studies of artists working through personal experiences of wartime traumas who turn to

withdraw at the same pace in time, but shine, as it were, like stars, some that seem close to us shining brightly from far off, while others that are in fact close to us are already growing pale.” Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, 129.

41 Derrida, Archive Fever, 2.
43 Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, 17.
photographic collecting. Albers sets these terms against each other, providing a clue to reading the Atlas Group as both atlas and archive, two concepts that are historically related but distinct. In her examination of Gerhard Richter’s Atlas and Christian Boltanski’s Les Archives de C.B., she defines the traditional function of atlases as “non-narrative” collections that “communicate nearly entirely in images.” On the other hand, an archive—which as opposed to an atlas, is not necessarily image-based, though it may contain vast numbers of images—is defined as “a place where historical documents and other important records and artifacts are gathered, organized, and, most importantly, preserved for posterity.” In this formulation, although atlases may be “edited,” the purpose is not “to produce a personal story.” Albers continues, “Atlases claim knowledge of discrete subjects, from topography to botany to world history.” However, Raad’s Atlas Group works are decidedly personal. Raad’s atlas does employ photographic documents in a way that appears to follow the historical trajectory of an atlas, in which “photography’s … claim to objectivity has been a seemingly natural complement to this function” of historical truth. Yet this project runs counter to traditional definitions of an atlas in its reliance upon narrative to communicate and elaborate upon the stories contained within his artworks.

44 Albers, “Archive/Atlas/Album.
46 Ibid., 3.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid., 5.
Another rubric in which Raad’s work appears is the artist’s capacity to narrate history, as typified by Mark Godfrey’s 2007 essay “The Artist as Historian.” This text primarily concerns the American artist Matthew Buckingham, but it is nonetheless helpful in identifying several key trends, in photographic and filmic dimensions, of what Godfrey sees as artists acting as historians. Godfrey distinguishes between three types of artist-historians: those who perform searches in archives, those who approach history via their own biography, and those who investigate representations of the past. Accounting for the prevalence of this type of work, he writes:

[O]ne can identify a general and seemingly paradoxical situation concerning the status of historical consciousness in the wider global culture to account for the centrality of historical representation in contemporary film and photographic practices. On the one hand, globalized capitalist culture is increasingly amnesiac, increasingly focused on ever-newer markets, products, and experiences. On the other hand, this same culture produces ever more spectacular and romantic representations of the past—particularly in film. And in an era of political catastrophe, these representations appear more and more politically suspect.  

Godfrey also notes that some artists “turn precisely to fiction not in order to evade historical representation but to represent historical experience more adequately.” As his primary example he cites Walid Raad, commenting that “the Atlas Group is less interested in revealing the fallaciousness of the material it presents than in suggesting that only through fiction can an adequate image of the Lebanese wars be

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50 Mark Godfrey, “The Artist as Historian,” October 120 (Spring 2007): 140–72. The “artist as historian,” a category first proposed by Godfrey, is one into which Raad is often placed, but I do not believe that he belongs there, as I will explain later in this introduction.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid., 145.
created.”53 He concludes primarily that the artist-as-historian figure (again, chiefly Buckingham) is as concerned with the historical subject as with its forms; approaches history from outside academia, therefore enjoying tremendous methodological freedom in conducting research; and is at pains to make urgent critiques of master narratives. But Buckingham’s practice is predicated on the political capacity to open up new ways of thinking about the future by means of alternative narrations of the past. Thus, as Godfrey writes, “The point has not been to intertwine and confuse fiction and documentary modes of representation as much as to treat works of fiction themselves as historical documents that are as valid starting points for reflections on present conditions as conventional documents might be.”54 Although some of Godfrey’s conclusions intersect with Raad’s work, they do not account for the specific logic of his choices, or for the particular conditions (of Lebanon, its wars, or its diaspora psyche) on which his work is grounded.

A surge in critical activity surrounding the concepts of the archive and the document has coincided with numerous exhibitions on archival and documentary practices since the early 1990s. The 1997 and 2002 editions of Documenta in Kassel, Germany are the most obvious examples.55 French curator Catherine David’s
documenta 10 in 1997 focused on presenting the political context from which to consider globalized contemporary art practice, foregrounding the “relations of art to the real.”  

Five years later, Okwui Enwezor’s *documenta 11*—in which Raad and the Atlas Group presented several works—highlighted global currents (particularly in film and photography) that were committed to ethical and intellectual reflection on the possibility of rethinking historical procedures and grand narratives. Since then, other exhibitions exploring the use of documentary and archival practices in contemporary art have followed, including Enwezor’s own *Archive Fever* (2008) and *The Greenroom: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art* (2008), organized by Maria Lind, to name two of the most influential. In 2012, Raad was included in *documenta 13*, which focused on the role and capacity of material objects as cultural agents and which showed a large installation of the entire *Scratching project*.

Archival and fictionalized documentary practices are often treated together, eliding the different contexts and rationales for a diverse set of practices. Emerging terms such as “documentary turn,” “conceptual documentary,” and “documentary conceptualism” have helped to identify stylistic traits and interests in contemporary art, along with a larger contemporary reconsideration of realism.

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56 David and Chevrier, *Politics, Poetics*.
shows up in these analyses, none of the terms accurately describes the whole of his practice. The intersection of documentary photography, conceptual art, and globalization reveals how the “real” has once again become an important artistic problem. The notion of “conceptual documentary” describes a shift in documentary photography, characterized by a straightforward approach, but with a cool, distanced, and analytical aesthetic. Yet this term falls short of describing a wider investment in realism, and while Raad was trained in technical photography and does deal with documentary images, he is not generally viewed as a photographer. Similarly, media artist Hito Steyerl has employed the term “documentary conceptualism” to signify this overlap, but she locates this activity specifically in moving-image works. Again, Raad does not fit comfortably within this rubric, as his videos are often only specific examples of much larger production frameworks.

Catherine David was one of the early non-Lebanese curators to become interested in the artists of Raad’s generation. In 2002, David launched the three-part exhibition and catalog project Tamáss: Contemporary Arab Representations, which focused on Beirut (2002), Cairo (2004), and Baghdad (2006). Many of the participating artists were also making works about the civil wars and about the complexities of narrating, recording, or historicizing the events or consequences of

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60 Photographers practicing a conceptual approach to the medium include Nancy Davenport, Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer, An-My Le, Boris Mikhailov, Allan Sekula, Thomas Struth, and Jeff Wall.

61 Steyerl, “Politics of Truth: Documentarism in the Art Field.”

62 Catherine David, Tamáss: Contemporary Arab Representations (Beirut/Lebanon 1) (Barcelona: Witte de With/Fundacio Antoni Tàpies, 2002). Since this time, Lebanese artists have become increasingly prominent on the international biennial circuit, with special sections devoted to Lebanon in the Venice Biennale (2003), and in exhibitions DisORIENTation: Contemporary Arab Arts from the Middle East (Berlin House of Cultures, 2003), Out of Beirut (Modem Art Oxford, 2006), the Seville Biennial (2006), the Sao Paolo Biennial (2006), and most recently the 2013 Venice Biennale.
these wars. The Lebanese artists Ziad Abillama, Tony Chakar, Khalil Joreige and Joana Hadjithomas, Lamia Joreige, Rabih Mroué, Marwan Rechmaoui, Jalal Toufic, Paola Yaacoub and Michel Lassere, and Akram Zaatari all produced works in the form of personal collections or archives, using journals, photographs, letters, and audiovisual recordings to examine experiences of the conflict. Many of their works have been critically parsed through the same set of frameworks: the (quasi-)academic lecture, (fictionalized) archives, alternate histories, (quasi-)documentary strategies, the “implied versus” between fact and fiction, and the ghostly properties of technical media.

As Lebanese contemporary artists began to receive widespread international attention in large exhibitions, many new art institutions, artist-run centers, and commercial galleries were created in Beirut. This occurred in parallel with the influx of postwar reconstruction money and business into Beirut and the surging markets of a rapidly globalizing art world. Several non-profit institutions were established, including the Beirut Theater, the exhibition and education center Ashkal Alwan (whose biennial exhibition Home Works, first staged in 2002, established a prominent platform for Lebanese artists), the Ayloul Media Festival, the Beirut Art Center, and the regional image archives called the Arab Image Foundation. All these resources have helped to create a platform for experimental practices.64

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64 For a detailed look at these organizations and their origins, see Sarah Rogers, “Postwar Art and the Historical Roots of Beirut’s Cosmopolitanism” (Ph.D. dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2008).
Raad was an early member of the Arab Image Foundation (AIF), founded by Zaatari, Fouad Elkoury, and Samer Mohdad in 1997 to secure and archive the photographic legacies of the Arab world. It is the only regional photography archive with cold storage. With more than 600,000 photographs housed in its collection in Beirut, AIF is the largest archival holding of vernacular and historical collections (larger than official documentary holdings, such as those of the *An Nahar* or *As Safir* newspapers) of Arab photographic materials in Lebanon.

AIF collects, indexes, studies, and exhibits photography from the Arab world. AIF’s mission to acquire and preserve photographic collections from this region developed after it became clear that many of the documents and archives of commercial photography studios in Beirut, Saida, Tripoli, Damascus, and Aleppo had vanished. Often, these studios’ archives were destroyed after the studios closed. … The foundation functions as a traditional photographic archive, providing images for sale and production in publications, and so on; it also stages or makes itself available to staging art projects.

AIF is a project initiated by artists, but is not itself an art project. While it has a straightforward mandate to collect and preserve the photographic legacies of the region, it is also a subjective, intriguing, and subversively creative laboratory for the collection of materials of interest to the artists and curators involved in the

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foundation’s activities, including Raad, Yto Barrada, Lucien Samaha, Lara Baladi, and Negar Azimi.68

Raad’s involvement with the Arab Image Foundation is relevant to understandings of his work—not because the AIF stands as a real archive in relation to faux archives, but because it offers a parallel exploration of contested history by artists. Raad and Zaatarì collaborated on a research project and exhibition from the AIF collection, Mapping Sitting, which presented hundreds of photographic portraits to explore how studio portraiture operated in the Arab world. As Zaatarì and Raad write in the press release for the exhibition, “Collectively, the images convey the pluralistic and multifaceted communities captured by indigenous photographers—images far different from photos of the region circulating widely in the popular press today.”69 Early works by Raad were attributed to the AIF or cited as made in collaboration with the AIF, but this attribution is not accurate.

Postwar Lebanese art has begun to be addressed in scholarly discourse as well, including recent dissertations by Sarah Rogers (2008), Mark Ryan Westmoreland (2010), and Chad Elias (2011), which have provided crucial background information on postwar contemporary art in Lebanon. Rogers’s study, “Postwar Art and the Historical Roots of Beirut’s Cosmopolitanism,” argues that most contemporary art criticism paints Lebanon’s postwar generation as a local movement that emerged from a “historical vacuum created by the civil war,” and that furthermore, by focusing on the context of the civil war, most Western critics

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68 For more information on the AIF, see www.fai.org.lb.
ignore the “formal and theoretical complexity” of the works.\textsuperscript{70} Rogers uses the term *postwar generation* in order “to situate their practices historically rather than to identify them as a collective or a group.”\textsuperscript{71} Her analysis clarifies how Western art criticism ignores the effect of living under conditions of prolonged civil violence and exile on this younger generation, many of whose members were sent abroad in the 1980s and returned in the early 1990s after studying in the United States or Europe. Western critics have continued to frame Beirut as a “site of both cosmopolitanism (the Paris of the Middle East) and violence (the civil war).”\textsuperscript{72} Rogers notes that contemporary Lebanese artworks are rarely discussed on their own terms; instead, they are treated almost exclusively in relation to this trauma.

Westmoreland’s project, “Crisis of Representation: Experimental Documentary in Postwar Lebanon,” points out (like other critics) that many postwar Lebanese artists address the civil wars in their work, and he identifies the lack of a coherent history of the civil war as producing a similar lack of narrative cohesion in the works.\textsuperscript{73} He explains how these artists use a variety of tools to address the war in artistic terms: post-conceptual practices, institutional critique, a fascination with history and archives, and a melding of fictional and historical narration. Chad Elias’s dissertation, “Surviving Images: The Art and Media of the Lebanese Wars,” presents four case studies of Lebanese artists of the postwar generation, Walid Raad, Akram Zaatari, Rabih Mroué, and Joana Hadjithomas.

\textsuperscript{70} Rogers, “Postwar Art,” 16.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 63. The former expression, “Paris of the Middle East,” dates from the period after World War I when Lebanon was under French control, as the League of Nations had granted France a mandate in Lebanon.
\textsuperscript{73} Mark Westmoreland, “Crisis of Representation: Experimental Documentary in Postwar Lebanon” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2008), 211.
and Khalil Joreige.\textsuperscript{74} Elias considers the ways in which these artists examine how and “in whose interests these conflicts are pictured, narrativized, and granted institutional authority.”\textsuperscript{75} He focuses on their video works to demonstrate that the civil war was not “a unified or fully resolved event, but a series of intermittent and ongoing conflicts of varying intensities, enacted by multiple actors in different regions, involving distinct groups and interests.”\textsuperscript{76}

By the early 2000s, the fictionalized documentary projects common to this group of artists had come to be read as typical tropes of contemporary Lebanese work. Indeed, as Zaatari noted in a 2007 conversation, “[C]ritics from Lebanon and beyond have consistently noted, if not perhaps prescribed, that one of the most prevalent features of contemporary Lebanese artistic production is its preoccupation with the reassessment of the role and place of documentary evidence in constructions of historical truth.”\textsuperscript{77} But, although these practices are used to point out the limits of traditional documentary, they also suggest an implicit power in the authentic document, an aspect of this approach that has gone underexplored. That is, by focusing on the impossibility of representation, interpretive criticism of this work “threaten[ed] to trap representation in a cycle of diminishing returns.”\textsuperscript{78}

An example of such criticism can be found in Carrie Lambert-Beatty’s essay “Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility,” which considers Raad’s work

\textsuperscript{74} Chad Elias, “Surviving Images: The Art and Media of the Lebanese Wars” (Ph.D., Northwestern University, 2011).
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 13.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 15.
\textsuperscript{77} Feldman and Zaatarì, “Mining War,” 51. Also quoted in Westmoreland, “Crisis of Representation,” 22.
\textsuperscript{78} Feldman and Zaatarì, “Mining War,” 50.
alongside that of Pierre Huyghe and the Yes Men.79 This essay gathers together
discrete sets of conceptual and formal concerns, grouping them under the nominal
taxonomic umbrella that they all run parallel to reality but are not real (hence her
coining of the term “parafiction”). Lambert-Beatty thus elides Raad’s reasons for
employing fiction (the sustained trauma of war, diaspora, occluded memories) with
the very different motivations driving Huyghe (critique of semiotic capital and the
fluid, complex movements of capitalist spectacle) and the Yes Men (leftist political
activism, tactical media theory, and critique), forcing them into a single diagnostic
framework. Similarly, the English philosopher Peter Osborne reads fiction as the
“guiding hand” in Raad’s work, typifying a common interpretive response to the
Atlas Group projects. Although Osborne provides some insightful observations, he
overemphasizes the project’s fictional aspects and reduces it to a transfiguration of
documentary into art by way of fiction.80

By contrast, Feldman and Zaatari argue that critics and others responding to
such works must move beyond the mere acknowledgment that objective truth is
impossible. “Ironic, at the very least, that it takes one state’s illegal destruction of
another’s infrastructure to bring the cultural life of that nation not just to
international visibility, but to the sustained attention and complex contextualizing
that have always and precisely set the terms of its marginalization.”81 Lebanese
artists of this generation, and Raad in particular, are routinely discussed using the

51–84.
80 Peter Osborne, Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art (London and New York:
Verso, 2013). Osborne’s larger argument is that “to be contemporary [art] must be inscribed in the
globally transnational.”
binary categories of fiction and truth. Their work is considerably more complex than this, however, and Raad’s project has even evolved to address the very limits that critics have attempted to set. Critics have overemphasized the fictional aspects of his work at the expense understanding the context of the Lebanese war, characterizing Raad’s practice as merely a critique of representation, which ignores the reasons documentary reality needed to be critiqued in the first place. Raad’s work is not adequately described by either of the two major critical models that have been applied to it. He is neither an archivist filling in gaps in history (like Zoe Leonard or Joan Foncuberta) nor an artist acting as a historian, in the sense of accounting for a complex history in a new or innovative way (like Matthew Buckingham or Jeremy Deller). It is true that Raad plays with the capacities of both an archival researcher and a historian, modeling their practices while simultaneously critiquing them; however, I ultimately locate his practice in the very present-tense project of accurately describing reality.

**Abstraction and Realism**

Even Raad’s abstract, non-pictorial forms represent a specific external reality; what appear to be non-representational forms are precisely the opposite. For Raad, alternative (almost inverted) definitions of *abstraction* and *realism* are in play: abstraction can be seen as a formal mode by which to represent the real, while realism is not just verisimilitude of representation but the possibility of making

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82 In a 2007 talk at the United Nations Plaza in Berlin, Raad commented that anyone whose art focuses on exposing critiques is only an academic, and that critiques aimed against stereotypes (for example) are ineffective; in fact, they maintain stereotypes. Thus, critique in this sense is “only ostensibly critical.” Raad, “Seminar 3.” United Nations Plaza, February 31, 2007.
multiple storylines equally representable in their conflicting coexistence—in other words, it is the accurate representation of a complex and unknowable situation. Thus, despite being interested in real events and in realistic modes of representing them, Raad’s works are not “realist” in the sense of representational naturalism. Their formal play is always embedded in a story that is made possible by the scenario of the wars; in their sometimes-surreal mix of fact and fantasy, they imply specific realities for highly particular subjects.

It is important to see Raad as coming from within a paradigm of contesting documentary evidence through imagination and fabrication. But Raad’s project is more deeply involved in a kind of conceptual realism that moves beyond criticism of documentary image production, and for which notions of the real and the fictive are not binary intellectual categories but are intrinsically entangled in the visible world. I argue that, although his artworks demonstrate a mistrust of photographic truth, they still assert reality, even if by way of fabrication. In his recent book *The Migrant Image*, in which he explores contemporary art from North America, Europe, and the Middle East, art historian T. J. Demos deals directly with the documentary/fiction divide when he writes, “fiction may very well be the site where reality is forged.”83 In a chapter on recent practices in Lebanon, Demos relates this blurring of boundaries, in part, to the Lebanese experience of social dislocation, political crisis, and economic inequality, and he identifies such practices as both critically analytical and

creatively emancipating. “Rather than existing in a simple opposition to ‘truth,’ the resulting ‘fiction’ offers the building blocks of reality itself rather than defining an escape from it (as Rancière had been at pains to point out, and Deleuze before him in relation to the ‘powers of the false.’)”\textsuperscript{84}

Across Raad’s practice, the categories of fact, fiction, realism, and abstraction are not clearly opposed to each other, nor are they even clearly defined zones. Rather, they appear to operate in a web where nothing is ever entirely true or entirely fictional. This mixture can be seen in characters that are hybridizations of fact and abstraction, in the constructed backstories that accompany a group of photographs, and in the formal aspects of the works that are themselves a composite of conceptualized data and invented circumstance. Factual items like photographic documents or references to actual events are combined with abstractions of data (numbers, dates, categories, sizes) or visually abstract forms (sculptures, complex diagrammatic drawings, cut-out shapes of buildings floating on white backgrounds). The tension of the works comes from how these four terms simultaneously govern both the visual and textual aspects of each project. One frequent result is the systematic blurring of realism and abstraction, or sometimes, their complete inversion, as fictional or abstract elements of an artwork can sometimes appear more “real” than factually accurate or documentary elements.\textsuperscript{85} Likewise, factual data can buttress fictional claims or be represented in formally abstract ways. None

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{85} This characteristic is shared with Jean Baudrillard’s notion of the “hyperreal”—the seeming inversion of fact and fiction—but it does not derive from Spectacle capitalism or European media-theoretical critique. Jean Baudrillard, \textit{Simulations}, Translated by Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman, (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983).
of the artworks are purely realistic accounts of factual data, but neither are any of them entirely invented visual forms without a basis in reality.

Thus, I consider realism as a category of perception rather than an absolute condition, and certainly not as a category with an implicit mode of its own representation. Recent writing on realism in contemporary art by Alex Potts and John Roberts serves as a basis for staking out applications of the term *realism* to fictionalized and conceptual works. In claiming that even Raad’s most fantastic-seeming projects are a form of realism, I am following Potts, whose writing provides a framework for an expanded understanding of the term:

The conventional polarity between abstraction and realism is posited on a particularly narrow conception of realism, equating it with a spatially unified and naturalistic representation of things, of the kind that dominated Western theoretical understandings of art from the Renaissance until the twentieth century. … Realism in modern art is best understood as representing a constellation of concerns and impulses, rather than as a clear-cut category defining a single historical movement or artistic tendency.

Here, Potts does not consider realism as defined by “the referential, outwardly directed, representational aspects of an art work.” This allows him to identify a wide range of realist impulses at work throughout the twentieth century, including those exhibiting strong tendencies toward abstraction. Potts writes, “The commitment to abstraction at this juncture was not in any way necessarily anti-

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88 Ibid.
realist; rather, it was directed against naturalistic or illusionistic conceptions of picture and image making and of representational transparency to which no proper realist ever adhered anyway.”\textsuperscript{89} Crucially, Potts cites the use of non-representative forms to convey society’s changes—images that are recognizable but removed from their conventional norms, particularly in Dadaist and Surrealist work. Considering the montage work of Hannah Höch and Raoul Haussmann, for example, Potts writes: “a feeling of unreality was often crucial to the vivid sense being conveyed of some significant aspect of the world that evaded conventional picturing. \textit{Reality itself could be hallucinatory and unnervingly abstract.”}\textsuperscript{90}

In a similar vein, Roberts has argued that, in the move to deconstruct the legacy of Modernist photography-as-fine-art and documentary’s claims to truth, photography theory and history have become anti-positivist and, as a consequence, have pursued an anti-realist bias in discussions of the wider social implications of photography.\textsuperscript{91} But whatever their subject, photographs can only show partial truths or partial fictions. Roberts writes, “For instance, there is no such thing as the realism of a photograph … the ‘realist-effects’ and cognitive and aesthetic merits of such photographs will always be context-determined.”\textsuperscript{92} Similarly, given there can be no single external reality of events in the world, realism itself should be understood

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 24.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 28 (emphasis added).
\textsuperscript{91} Roberts, \textit{The Art of Interruption}, 4. Roberts notes the conflation between realism and positivism, observing that the rise of post-structuralist theories of photography in the 1980s devalued the notion of realism. He explains: “Since the 1970s, photographic theory and history have had two main targets: Modernism and positivism. There have been four main subject arcs within this: the photography and social power model (Tagg, Sekula); critical deconstruction (Krauss, Owens, Foster, Simon Watney, ASG); sociological critique (Bourdieu); and liberal historicism (Andre Rouille and Jean-Claude Lemagny).”
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid.
as, “a fallibilistic account of a transitive, stratified, and differentiated world” rather than as “a window on a homogeneous and present or phenomenal reality.” In an earlier essay, Roberts noted that appropriated images have embedded histories and can thus prompt powerful responses for collective and individual experience. Yet, although its practitioners are keenly aware of the limitations of the medium, they have not entirely yielded faith in the possibility of evidence. Artists today embrace photographic technologies precisely because they retain this very ambiguous relationship to the real.

The curator and critic Dieter Roelstraete has noted that throughout art history, realisms emerged during periods of economic, political, social, and cultural crisis, whether one has in mind the original nineteenth-century realism, socialist realism, documentary realism, capitalist realism, critical realism, photorealism, or even Surrealism. Echoing this theory, curator Maria Lind explains the renewed interest in social reality as a reaction to political and economic upheavals and to the mainstream media’s failure to adequately represent current events. “In the context of globalization, the representation of the real became once again an important problem in the field of art. Political and economical [sic] upheavals prompted a renewed interest for social reality and its documentary mediation.” Lind concludes that documentary as a form has been “reinvented and reinvigorated” as it has

93 Ibid., 6.
95 Roelstraete, “After the Historiographic Turn.” See also Dieter Roelstraete and Sarah Kramer, The Way of the Shovel: On the Archaeological Imaginary in Art (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2013). These texts have been widely cited as offering some routes out of archival or past-oriented artistic practices.
96 Lind, The Greenroom, 10.
incorporated forms and elements borrowed from contemporary and conceptual art practices.\textsuperscript{97}

Despite the important role that documentary works have played over the past century, their status as document and as art is constantly questioned. Raad is part of this wider reengagement with real life. Prompted by political and cultural crises, he professes a simultaneous faith in and mistrust of photographic technologies, demonstrating an interest in working between fact and fiction. He also displays a notable frustration with media representation, an effort to turn the indexicality of photography and film against itself, and an intention to employ abstraction and distancing techniques to represent global political events.

\textbf{Chapter Outlines}

This dissertation unfolds across different thematic interests and situates Raad’s practice within the current interest and fascination with artists from the Middle East and the Arab world. This fascination has been marked by hype and commercial speculation, similar to the features that have accompanied the promotion of Indian, Asian, and Latin American artists and regional art economies. While artists have become increasingly transnational, traveling around the world for exhibitions and residencies, their individual histories have often been conflated with those of their

national origin or ethnic identity. This is especially true of artists who hail from conflict zones. The trend is driven in part by art criticism’s tendency to generalize and contextualize, but also by the fact that the artists themselves often address these conflicts, traumas, or histories. The problem, as always, is that artists become limited by these reductionist categories and interpretations. The formal aspects of their works are often ignored or reduced to a kind of regionalism, making it difficult for their work to be seen in any context other than war or trauma or for any new work to be received without this layer of interpretation.98

I start by focusing on Raad’s engagement with history and narrative, identifying in his practice a form of storytelling. Chapter One examines the combined influences of Raad’s experience of growing up in Lebanon during the early years of civil war and his subsequent education in the United States, where he has lived since 1983. This chapter shows how the events of the Lebanese civil wars are directly taken up in Raad’s Atlas Group works. Presenting his work as a weaving together of many stories, I look at how Raad’s photographic and academic training in the United States, particularly his Ph.D. dissertation and the early Atlas Group video that grew out of it, has guided him to raise questions about history via his personal memories and lapses in memory. Chapter Two uses the framework of storytelling in Raad’s character formations and performances of the work, to examine the structure of the Atlas Group, his use of characters as alter egos, and the performative lending of the artist’s voice to make these fantastic stories believable.

98 A possible exception to this tendency occurs at large-scale biennial exhibitions, which often strive to include artists from as many regions and nationalities as possible. This method has its own shortcomings, however, as it frequently adopts a survey-type approach, according to which certain artists are repeatedly used to represent a particular country or region.
This chapter looks at how Raad exerts control over all aspects of the dissemination and reception of his work, from his precise use of language—including narrative texts and captions, wall labels, and the presence of his own spoken voice in the lecture-performance format—to his exhibition installations and artists’ books.

The remaining chapters take on the tensions between truth and fiction, realism and abstraction, and individual and collective trauma. Chapter Three examines the photographic—and ostensibly realist—aspects of certain Atlas Group projects, situating them within the rubric of photographic history by virtue of their interrogation of photography’s historical conjunction of evidence and indexicality. This analysis of Raad’s photographic projects demonstrates his approach to photography’s historically implicit realism and to its technical qualities as a medium. At times, Raad’s approach to photography appears more closely aligned with straight documentary modes. Photographs taken in the wake of the Lebanese civil war depict the surreal but all-too-familiar scenes of a city decimated by battle. These photographs of maimed architecture contain no human traces of war, focusing instead on architecture and landscapes to reveal the lasting imprints of trauma. The works respond to contemporary tropes of war reporting, blurring the codes of journalism with conceptual abstraction. While war photographers attempt to show it all, Raad intentionally withholds or adds information, presenting what is left over and focusing on things often overlooked. He prompts viewers to look closely at what is shown as a way to think about what is not shown, rather than accepting the photographs as complete and objective pictures of reality. He presents real events through fabricated and appropriated photographs and documents. Chapter Four continues this line of investigation, but does so from an apparently opposite
perspective. Here I investigate Raad’s use of fiction, which he melds with an embrace of formal abstraction to echo the conceptual abstractions deployed in his narratives. This chapter traces a transition in Raad’s interests, from the trauma theories of Sigmund Freud to the speculative philosophies of Jalal Toufic.99 In my Conclusion, I consider Raad’s involvement in the artist-run activist group Gulf Labor. This political work is examined in relation to the artwork Translator’s Introduction: Pension Arts in Dubai, a multi-media artwork and performance that addresses the politics of the global art economy in the Arab world.

CHAPTER ONE: MANY STORIES

*We do not take history to be this global and unified thing, an exhaustive and absolute truth. We should think in terms of histories, many stories. What kind of stories? Stories that represent a fragment of truth, at some moment, and for some people.*

Walid Raad’s artistic career began almost precisely with the end of the Lebanese civil wars in 1991. His artwork is entangled with the complexities of experiencing that protracted conflict, as both an insider and an outsider, as well as with its aftermath, and with the concomitant political, social, and cultural efforts at reconstruction. Raad took up directly the legacies of the wars and the fundamental difficulties involved in describing them. A foundational grasp of the history of modern Lebanon, particularly the country’s violent period of civil war, is therefore a prerequisite for a thorough understanding of the works’ complexities. Many of Raad’s projects derive from events that occurred during the war or make formal connections to specific categories of violence. These include car bombs (*My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair Engines*, 2001/2003), political kidnappings (*Hostage: The Bachar Tapes*, 2000), urban warfare (*Let’s Be Honest, The Weather Helped*, 1998/2006-2007), and foreign invasions (*We Decided To Let Them Say, We Are Convinced, Twice*, 2002/2006). *The Atlas Group* (1989-2004) further addresses the physical damage to Beirut’s urban environment and the city’s division into east and west halves along what became known as the Green Line.

Due to the erratic and overlapping violence, the sheer number of involved parties and stakeholders, and the still-raw political wounds, the Lebanese wars

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1 Jayce Salloum and Walid Raad, *Talaeen a Jumuub (Up to the South)*, Video, (Lebanon/United States, 1993).
present a challenge to historical reason. In this chapter, I examine how the complex saga of the Lebanese wars is a key to understanding Raad’s work, despite (or, more appropriately, because of) their fundamental resistance to narration. I argue that Raad is fascinated with the idea of a figure or system that can historicize this impossible story, an interest that led to his inventions of professional historians as narrative characters, and of a fantastic archive of images and objects brought into existence by the wars’ diverse, traumatizing logics. Raad’s work has been more thoroughly embraced outside of Lebanon than within it, partly because the open wounds of the war years have yet to find a cohesive, inclusive, and nationally accepted narration.

I will examine in detail how Raad’s graduate thesis became transposed into the video Hostage: The Bachar Tapes, the first Atlas Group project, and how this work synthesized his critical training in postmodernist theory with his formal impulses in narrative storytelling and video production. Hostage: The Bachar Tapes lays the groundwork for all subsequent Atlas Group projects by recoding actual historical narratives into fiction. The video ventriloquizes Raad’s own critical language into the mouths of invented characters, deriving its charged tension from the dynamic interaction between the believably real and the demonstrably imagined. Many of the central Atlas Group projects have their core narrative roots in this period. Raad initially conceived them while still a Ph.D. student, and he later enlarged and refined them to create the final artworks.
Biography

Walid Raad is a Lebanese-American artist who has lived in the United States since 1983. Although he is typically discussed in the Lebanese context, he is more accurately understood as a transnational artist. Raad was born on June 15, 1967 in Beirut, Lebanon to a Palestinian Muslim mother and a Christian Lebanese father. The Six-Day War (June 5-10, 1967), also known as the Third Arab-Israeli War, between Jordan-Egypt-Syria and Israel had just ended. Raad’s place of birth is usually given as Chibanieh, his father’s village, located 25 kilometers east of Beirut. This is common practice in Lebanon, so that votes are counted in the place that one’s family is “from” (otherwise, there would be very little representation throughout the countryside, since most people live in Beirut).² Raad’s parents were married in Cyprus because civil marriages were not performed in Lebanon at that time but those held in other countries were recognized.³ The first civil marriage within Lebanon took place in early 2013 after an extended legal battle:

Lebanon, a small nation with more than 18 different religious sects, had no institutional civil marriage. A decree issued in 1936 by the French mandate gives religious communities the legal administrative status and jurisdiction over personal status matters, including marriage. Mixed marriages are socially and religiously discouraged and interfaith couples ... who do not wish to convert to one another's religion previously had to travel abroad to get a civil marriage. Ironically, that marriage was then recognized and registered in Lebanon.⁴

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² Walid Raad, conversation with the author, May 2012. Raad was in fact born in Beirut, where the family lived, and spent summers and weekends in Chibanieh.
³ Conversation with the author, May 2012.
In Lebanon, religious affiliation is indicated on identity cards; this information facilitated the policing of travel at Beirut’s many checkpoints during the war.

Raad’s family lived in the primarily Christian, eastern side of Beirut. For a brief period in 1968, they relocated to Sierra Leone, where Raad’s father was working, but the other family members returned to Lebanon in 1969 and were rejoined by his father in 1973 or 1974. War broke out in 1975, when Raad was eight years old. In 1976, the fighting between Palestinians and Christians intensified. Given his parents’ different sectarian identities, this split was sensed, if not consciously understood, by Raad and his siblings at the time.5 In his work, Raad does not present specific political or cultural views, and he does not take a particular “side” in the conflict. He is instead careful to point out the complexities of the civil wars and the ways in which Lebanon was affected.

In 1976 and again in 1978, Raad’s family briefly relocated to Paris to escape the fighting, but they returned each time to Beirut. His parents ultimately divorced in 1981. In 1982, Raad’s older brother was sent to live in the United States so that he could not be recruited into one of the right-wing Christian militias, and Raad joined him in Boston the following year at age 15. His sister and parents remained in Beirut, but in separate residences, throughout the war.6

5 Conversation with the author, May 2012.
In the United States, Raad completed high school and briefly attended Boston University from 1984 to 1985. However, he soon turned his attention to photography. Raad’s father was a keen amateur photographer, and Raad himself had been a photography enthusiast as a teenager, even using a home darkroom in Beirut; for a time he had aspired to be a photojournalist. In Boston, an elective course at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts rekindled his interest in photography and art, and in 1985 Raad transferred to Rochester Institute of Technology to pursue a B.F.A. in photography, which he completed in 1989. The curriculum at RIT focused on technical photography training, with an emphasis on the twentieth-century, American photographic canon. This technical and formalist training remains important in Raad’s work to this day. At the same time, Raad also took courses on the history of the Middle East and was introduced to postcolonial theory, queer theory, and feminist theory. Raad became very interested in Palestine (more so even than in Lebanon) because the Palestinian conflict was then front and center in his studies on the Middle East, and because his mother’s Palestinian identity and family history had been largely suppressed. Raad’s studies in the United States gave him the opportunity to reflect on his own identity through his interaction with postcolonial and gender studies, postmodernist art practices, and learning about the Arab world from a Western perspective.

After completing his undergraduate studies at RIT, Raad enrolled in a Ph.D. program at the University of Rochester, in the Department of Visual and Cultural

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8 Conversation with the author, May 2012.
9 Ibid.
Studies (formerly Comparative Arts), a program for artists but of a historical and theoretical nature. His Ph.D. studies focused heavily on Marxist theory, cultural theory, psychoanalysis, semiotics, and postcolonial theory.\textsuperscript{10} Two of his classmates included the art historian Howard Singerman and media theorist Lev Manovich.\textsuperscript{11} Raad graduated in 1996, writing his dissertation on the literature of the Lebanese hostage crisis, “Beirut (à la folie).”\textsuperscript{12}

As a graduate student, Raad taught in the departments of Art History and of Film Studies and Art at the University of Rochester. He later taught in the Media Department at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts from 1995 to 1998, and in the Department of Media Studies at Queens College, City University of New York until 2002. Raad had access to video and editing equipment in these departments, and this fact partly explains why many of his early works were first made as videos and only later fully developed into photographic series. Since 2002, Raad has been an Assistant Professor of Art at The Cooper Union in New York City. Raad first came to major U.S. attention with his inclusion in the 2000 Whitney biennial in New York and to international prominence when he was featured in \textit{Documenta 11}, curated by Okwui Enwezor in 2002. Over the past fifteen years,

\textsuperscript{10} The art historian and cultural critic Douglas Crimp was one of Raad’s dissertation advisors. He took classes with professors Kaja Silverman, Norman Bryson, Keith Moxey, Craig Owens, Doug Crimp, and Constance Penley. Elissa Marder was Raad’s supervisor at Rochester.

\textsuperscript{11} Howard Singerman wrote about the training of the artist in the American university and the central place of language in that training. His dissertation, “The Discourse of the Artist in the University.” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Rochester, 1996), was later published as Howard Singerman, \textit{Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University} (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1999).

\textsuperscript{12} Raad, “Beirut (à la folie).”
Raad’s work has been featured in important group shows and biennials around the globe.\textsuperscript{13}

**The Lebanese civil wars (1975-1991)**

In Lebanon today, even constructing a most basic narrative of the wars is still a politically fraught proposition. Although the conflict is officially referred to as the Lebanese Civil War, many artists and intellectuals in Lebanon (including Raad, Akram Zaatari, Rabih Mroué, and others) choose to use the plural form to underscore the myriad of conflicts, invasions, and occupations that occurred.\textsuperscript{14} No officially accepted history of the wars exists, and the national education curriculum teaches Lebanese history only from the Crusades until Lebanese independence from France in 1943. Rogers explains, “The national curriculum concluded Lebanon's history in 1946 after a committee of historians repeatedly failed to produce a narrative of the civil war satisfactory to the country’s different sectarian factions.”\textsuperscript{15}

Most often, history subsequent to 1943 is gleaned informally from family members,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Since 2000, Raad’s work has been featured in the following major international biennials: the Whitney Biennial (2000 and 2002), Documenta 11 (2002), Venice Biennale (2003), Taipei Biennial (2004), Sidney Biennial (2006), Spain (2009), Seoul (2010), Sharjah (2011), Moscow (2011), and Documenta 13 (2012), among others. Significant group exhibitions about the function of the archival in art that have featured Raad’s work include *The Greenroom: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (2008) and *Archive Fever* (2009). Raad is represented commercially by Paula Cooper Gallery in the United States, Anthony Reynolds Gallery in the UK, and Sfeir-Semler Gallery in Lebanon and Germany. His artwork is in a host of major museum collections, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim Museum, Walker Art Center, the National Gallery of Canada, Centre Georges Pompidou, and the Hirshhorn Museum. A major retrospective, *Miraculous Beginnings*, was staged in 2011 by the Whitechapel Gallery (UK), the Kunsthalle Zurich (Switzerland), and the Bildmuseet, Umeå University (Sweden). Raad has received numerous prestigious awards, including a MacArthur Fellowship (1998), an Alpert Award for Visual Arts (2007), a Deutsche-Borse Photography prize (2007), a Guggenheim fellowship (2009), and a Hasselblad Award (2011).
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Hlavajova and Winder, *Rabih Mroué*, 15. Feldman and Zaatari, “Mining War,” 66.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Rogers, “Postwar Art,” 57. See also: Achim Borchardt-Hume and Walid Raad, *Miraculous Beginnings, Walid Raad* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 2010), 16.
\end{itemize}
neighbors, and religious education. For many years, it was claimed that this history remained to be written, and while in some ways this is still true today, it was certainly the case when Raad was making the artworks for which he is now famous.\(^\text{16}\) Despite the lack of an officially accepted national narrative of the wars, there do exist some excellent histories of modern Lebanon. Throughout this dissertation, I draw primarily on accounts by the American journalist Robert Fisk and the Lebanese historian Fawwaz Traboulsi, as well as studies by the Lebanese historians Samir Khalaf and Boutros Labaki. More focused studies by August Richard Norton on Hezbollah, Mike Davis on the history of the car bomb, and John Calamé and Esther Charlesworth on cities divided by civil conflicts have also helped to contextualize this history.\(^\text{17}\) Even though most of these accounts are accepted as factually accurate, they cannot be officially accepted in Lebanon or taught in the school system, because any accounting of responsibility would conflict with the general amnesty granted for political crimes during the war. The wars are thus hopelessely interwoven and nearly impossible to decipher, let alone amenable to

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\(^{16}\) The history of art in Lebanon ends with the outbreak of the civil war in 1975, and it resumes again in the late 1990s with the postwar period. For this history, see: Westmoreland, “Crisis of Representation,” and Kirsten Scheid, “Painters, Picture-Makers, and Lebanon: Ambiguous Identities in an Unsettled State” (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 2005).

a consensus interpretation: guilt cannot be reliably ascribed or justice carried out because many of those responsible still hold high political positions.

Lebanon has always been a diverse melting pot of religious and political affiliations in a historically polarized region, and it is located at the geographic crossroads of many wider religious and political conflicts. Bordered by Israel and Syria, with the Mediterranean Sea to its west, Lebanon has often been a staging ground for proxy conflicts and has been manipulated toward external political ends.18 The religious breakdown among Lebanese citizens is approximately 60% Muslim and 40% Christian; while the Muslim world in general is mostly Sunni, in Lebanon there is a solid mixture of Sunni and Shi’ite Muslims.19 There are eighteen officially recognized religious sects in Lebanon, six of them Muslim (Shi’a, Sunni, Druze, Isma’ili, Alawite and Nusayri) and twelve Christian (Maronite Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Melkite Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Syrian Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Syrian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Chaldean, Assyrian, Coptic, and Protestant).20

Relations between these various ethnic and religious groups were generally peaceful from the sixteenth century until the arrival of French colonists in the late

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18 As of this writing, the crisis in Syria has driven over one million refugees into Lebanon, and the country risks being further drawn into the conflict. In the words of Walid Jumblatt, current leader of the Lebanese Druze community, “Lebanon is not an independent country. We have the sea, we have Israel, and we have Syria.” Dexter Filkins, “After Syria,” The New Yorker, February 18, 2013, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/02/25/after-syria.
19 According to the U.S. State Department, the population breakdown is as follows: Muslim 59.7%, Christian 39%, other 1.3%. See U.S. Department of State, “Background Note: Lebanon,” December 1, 2011, http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35833.htm.
20 For a thorough accounting of the myriad internal factors at play during this period, see Fawwaz Traboulsi, A History of Modern Lebanon (London and New York: Pluto Press, 2012).
nineteenth century, during which time Lebanon was part of the Ottoman Empire.\textsuperscript{21} After World War I, the Ottoman territories were partitioned by the League of Nations and Lebanon and Syria were placed under French colonial authority, while Britain was granted an adjacent mandate in Palestine.\textsuperscript{22} The creation of Lebanon’s modern borders in 1920 merged several religiously disparate and geographically distinct communities. The area north of Mt. Lebanon was primarily Maronite Christian, with mixed Maronite and Druze communities to the south. The northern city of Tripoli and the coastal regions to the west, including the cities of Beirut, Sidon (Saida), and Tyre (Sour), were composed of mixed Christian and Muslim communities. Shi’ites predominated in the rural areas of southern Lebanon and the Bekaa valley in the east (Fig. 1.1).\textsuperscript{23}

In 1943, during World War II, Lebanon attained political independence from France and adopted a political system known as confessionalism. Under this form of government, political appointments are allocated according to the relative size of religious and sectarian populations.\textsuperscript{24} In 1943, an unwritten agreement known as the National Pact stipulated that Lebanon’s President is always to be a Maronite

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} France became heavily involved in Lebanon in 1860, when 12,000 Christians were killed during a Druze-Christian war. France sent troops to Lebanon to protect the Lebanese Christians (primarily Maronite Catholics), making this community dependent on French political and military support. See Traboulsi, \textit{A History of Modern Lebanon}, 35-40.
\item \textsuperscript{22} For the formation of Greater Lebanon under the League of Nations and the French Mandate period, see Traboulsi, 75-109.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Fisk, \textit{Pity the Nation}, 61–67. See also Rogers, “Postwar Art,” 20; Westmoreland, “Crisis of Representation,” 15.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Confessionalism is a system of consociational government, in which political and institutional power is distributed among religious sub-communities, with no subgroup holding a majority. In Lebanon, positions in the cabinet, parliament, the civil service, and other institutions are apportioned according to the relative sizes of the religious populations. Other examples of consociational states include Belgium, Switzerland, India, Spain, and the Netherlands. Imad Salamey and Rhys Payne, “Parliamentary Consociationalism in Lebanon: Equal Citizenship vs. Quotated Confessionalism,” \textit{Journal of Legislative Studies} 14, no. 4 (November 7, 2008): 451–73.
\end{itemize}
Christian, its Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim, and its Speaker of Parliament a Shi’ite Muslim; that pattern holds true to this day. Confessionalism reinforced a sense of ethnic and sectarian fragmentation rather than establishing a collective national interest.\textsuperscript{25}

In the mid-twentieth century, Beirut, Lebanon’s capital and largest city, was widely perceived as cosmopolitan, religiously diverse, and culturally sophisticated (the so-called “Paris of the Middle East”) and served as the country’s economic, intellectual, and cultural center.\textsuperscript{26} But this flourishing surface covered over a tense mixture of ethnic groups, religious factions, and political affiliations. A widening socioeconomic disparity exacerbated tensions between Muslim and Christian communities, particularly among the poorer Lebanese Shi’ites and the Palestinian (Sunni) Muslim refugees. These population distinctions were furthered mirrored in the city’s crystallizing geographic fault lines—primarily by the division of Beirut into a Christian sector on the east side and a Muslim sector on the west, at the sea’s edge.

Between 1945 and 1975, regional and national demographic shifts contributed to increasing sectarian tensions. The creation of the state of Israel in 1948 displaced hundreds of thousands of Palestinians (including Raad’s maternal grandparents), many of whom flooded into refugee camps throughout Syria, Lebanon, the Gaza Strip, and Jordan. In the late 1960s, Palestinian militias settled in southern Lebanon, an operations base geographically adjacent to Israel, entrenching a protracted conflict.\textsuperscript{27} The resulting sectarian-based power struggles led to shifting

\textsuperscript{25} Rogers, “Postwar Art.” 115.
\textsuperscript{26} For an insightful discussion on Beirut’s cosmopolitanism, see Rogers, “Postwar Art.”
\textsuperscript{27} This influx of largely Sunni Palestinians was initially welcomed by Lebanon’s Sunni community,
regional and international alliances. The Suez Crisis of 1956 (also known as the Second Arab-Israeli War) and the 1967 war with Israel helped to catalyze this chaotic overlap of religious, ethnic, and political ties; open violence first erupted in Lebanon in the spring of 1975.

While often characterized as a Christian-Muslim conflict, the Lebanese civil war was considerably more complex. The primary clash was between the conservative Lebanese Front (nationalist, pro-government, and primarily Christian), and the progressive Lebanese National Movement (leftist, primarily Muslim, and supporting Pan-Arab and rebel factions). Christian and Muslim paramilitary groups predominated, but each side had numerous subgroups with competing interests and shifting alliances. These local conflicts cannot be separated from wider regional ones, and the civil wars were prolonged and exacerbated by outside forces, most obviously by the direct involvement of Syria and Israel, both of which maintained proxy militias: Israel backed Christian forces in South Lebanon, while Syria and Iran funded the Shi’ite militia group Hezbollah. At the same time, Palestinian Sunnis forced out of Israel who had sought refuge in Lebanon formed their own militias, including some connected to the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). In addition, the decade from 1975 to 1985 saw the
intermittent involvement of American and other multinational peacekeeping forces (with their own various vested stakes), initially invited at the request of the fragile Lebanese government.

American historian Mike Davis describes the “Russian-doll-like complexity” of the competing relationships, alliances, and feuds that emerged during the civil war. He describes the conflict as a series of “factional wars inside civil wars, within confessional wars, inside regional conflicts and surrogate wars, within, ultimately, the Cold War.”\(^3\) Lebanese sociologist Samir Khalaf has estimated that there were at least 186 warring local and foreign factions throughout Lebanon during the civil war period,\(^3\) while Davis has identified fifty-eight different armed groups active in the 1980s in West Beirut alone.\(^3\) “Never in history has a single city been the battlefield for so many contesting ideologies, sectarian allegiances, local vendettas, foreign conspiracies, and interventions as was Beirut in the early 1980s,” writes Davis.\(^4\) The U.S. State Department estimates that over 100,000 Lebanese were killed, another 100,000 wounded, and up to 900,000 (approximately twenty percent of the prewar resident population) displaced, of whom perhaps 250,000 emigrated permanently.

\(^1\) Paramilitary organization to represent the Palestinian people. In 1970, the PLO was forced out of Jordan and set up headquarters in Beirut, planning and carrying out attacks in northern Israel. The PLO is recognized as the “sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people” by the United Nations and over 100 states with which it holds diplomatic relations, and it has enjoyed observer status at the United Nations since 1974. Until 1991, the United States and Israel considered the PLO to be a terrorist organization, but in 1993 the PLO recognized Israel’s right to exist in peace and rejected “violence and terrorism,” and Israel in turn officially recognized the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people.

\(^2\) Davis, Buda’s Wagon, 67.

\(^3\) Khalaf, Cultural Resistance, 208, quoted in Rogers, “Postwar Art,” 157.

\(^4\) Davis, Buda’s Wagon, 67.

\(^5\) Ibid.
whereas Lebanese historian Boutros Labaki puts the portion of displaced at closer to roughly forty percent of the population.35

The initial wave of violence escalated in 1976, with massacres of Palestinian and Christian civilians by various Christian and Palestinian militias.36 Downtown Beirut was by then divided. The Green Line followed Beirut’s main thoroughfare, Damascus Road, all the way through the city, from the historic harbor and Martyr’s Square in the north through the southern suburbs (which included both Shi’ite residential areas and Palestinian refugee camps). The authors of Divided Cities describe this area as a no-man’s land nine kilometers long and ranging between eighteen and ninety meters wide, reinforced throughout by “barricades, checkpoints, gates, and snipers.”37 There were only three official crossings.

Israel and Syria became involved in 1976, when Lebanese President Suleiman Franjieh (who held office from 1970 to 1976) requested the support of Syrian troops to restore order. However, when the Maronites called for Syrian forces to withdraw in 1978, Syria responded by shelling (Christian) East Beirut and solidified its occupation of the north of the country.38 In that same year, Israel invaded and occupied southern Lebanon to combat Palestinian guerrilla groups with whom it was at unofficial war, pitting a proxy militia of Lebanese Christians against both (Sunni) Palestinians and Lebanese Shi’ites.39 More outside involvement occurred in

35 Labaki, “Lebanese Emigration during the War (1975-1989),” 609. See also US Department of State, “Background Note: Lebanon”.
36 The fighting then intensified and spread throughout the country, and Palestinian forces began joining leftist-Muslim factions. U.S. Department of State, “Background Note: Lebanon.”
37 Calamé and Charlesworth, Divided Cities, 39.
38 Fisk, Pity the Nation, 140. Syria at this time was led by Hafez al-Assad, father of current leader Bashar al-Assad.
39 In the wake of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, its promise of worldwide Shi’ite revival exacerbated
1978, when President Elias Sarkis (in office 1976-1982) requested military support from American, French, and British multi-national forces (MNF), but their arrival failed to calm the fighting among the Syrians, Israelis, Israeli-backed militias, the PLO, and Lebanese militias. After three years of tense urban warfare, a ceasefire was called in 1981, though fighting continued in East Beirut, with young men being actively recruited into various militias.

In June 1982, under the direction of Defense Minister Ariel Sharon, Israel invaded Lebanon with the goal of destroying the PLO. Although Shi’ites in the south initially welcomed the Israeli presence, the occupation quickly led to resentment, catalyzing the formation of Hezbollah, a militant, Iranian-backed Shi’ite resistance group.\textsuperscript{40} The Israeli Defense Forces attacked Syrian forces in the Bekaa valley (in eastern Lebanon) and continued all the way to Beirut, deploying air, land, and sea attacks and holding the city under siege for seven weeks. Aerial bombs had destroyed at least 500 buildings in Beirut by the first week of July, and in August Israel began the indiscriminate saturation bombing of Beirut's Muslim district. Electricity, food, and water supplies were cut off, and Syrian troops and PLO guerrillas were forced to evacuate. In this power vacuum, Israeli-backed Christian militias then massacred hundreds of Palestinian civilians in West Beirut,

\textsuperscript{40} Westmoreland, “Crisis of Representation,” 19; Davis, \textit{Buda's Wagon}, 79; Filkins, “After Syria,” 50. Filkins provides a good summary of the current relationship between Hezbollah and Syria. Hezbollah is the most powerful force in Lebanon today. In 1980s, Hezbollah and Syria had a strained relationship and engaged in street fighting against each other, but in 1990 they recognized their common interests against Israel. Headquartered in southern Beirut, Hezbollah has been led by Hassan Nassrallah since 1992. Syria, Iran, and Hezbollah are often called the “Shi’ite Axis.” Over the past thirty years, Syria has “offered protection and facilitated a pipeline of money and arms from Iran.”
and the Mossad (the Israeli covert intelligence agency) began a series of targeted car bombings of Palestinians. (At age fifteen, Raad photographed the Israeli invasion and siege of Beirut and the aerial bombardment of the Muslim district of the city from a hilltop in the Christian sector. Shortly afterwards, he was sent to live in the United States. Raad would go on to use these photographs some twenty years later in the Atlas Group project *We Decided*, discussed in Chapter Three.)

The Israeli occupation coincided with the final term of President Sarkis, a cousin of Raad’s father, who left office in 1982. Unable to create a lasting peace between Lebanon’s warring Christian and Muslim factions, Sarkis stepped down with the close of the Israeli invasion.\(^41\) Before his presidency, Sarkis had been the governor of the bank of Lebanon and an academic. According to Raad, Sarkis was a technocrat with no political base who was elected by default and installed because he was the least threatening choice.\(^42\) The compounding difficulties of negotiating between rival militias, handling the influx of Palestinian refugees, and dealing with overreaches of the Syrian military (which his predecessor had initially requested) left him depleted and depressed. Already in poor health when Israeli forces invaded

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Lebanon in 1982, Sarkis was described as a man “visibly discouraged after years of failure,” one who “seemed no longer to have “the heart for the job.””

Sarkis’s seeming political failure left a strong impression on his young relative. Raad would go on to imagine the distraught psyche of President Sarkis in the early iterations of the Atlas Group projects, and eventually the persona of Sarkis was transposed entirely into the character of Dr. Fadl Fakhouri, the Lebanese historian whose idiosyncratic observations are found in Atlas Group projects like *Already Been in a Lake of Fire* (1991/2003) and *Missing Lebanese Wars* (1989/1998). In a personal interview, Raad said that he wished that he could have been more aware of the political situation during Sarkis’s time in office: “I’ve always regretted not having been ten years older during his presidency and having archived his paper or heard the kinds of stories that must have come out of his presidency.” Raad’s revisiting of his childhood memories sheds light on how he would, years later, reconstruct the truths of his limited memories into Atlas Group works.

Between 1982 and 1989, while Raad was living in the U.S., the war raged on. Urban warfare continued throughout the 1980s, and the use of car bombs became an extremely prevalent tactic of violence. The first recorded use of a car bomb in Lebanon before the civil war was the assassination in July 1972 of Ghassan Kanafani, a spokesperson for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, by Israel’s Mossad. In December 1976, a car bomb exploded near the home of Kamal Jumblatt, the leader of the Palestinian-Lebanese Left alliance, in an attempt on his life. Jumblatt’s followers retaliated by detonating a car bomb in front of the East

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41 Ibid.
44 Conversation with the author, May 2012.
Beirut headquarters of the (officially secular, but primarily Maronite) Phalange Party’s security service in the following month. In 1981 alone, more than 200 civilians were killed in 18 car bomb explosions in Beirut.\textsuperscript{45} From late summer 1981 through early 1983, there were sustained attacks using car bombs in West Beirut by Israeli-backed Phalangists attempting to evict the PLO from Lebanon. On April 18, 1983, the U.S. Embassy was hit with a car bomb containing 2,000 pounds of explosives, and on October 23, 1983, the U.S. and French Marine barracks were destroyed in two coordinated suicide car bomb attacks. In Davis’s analysis, these bombs “prevailed over the combined firepower of the fighter-bombers and battleships of the U.S. Sixth Fleet and forced the Reagan administration to undertake a humiliating retreat from Lebanon.”\textsuperscript{46}

Estimates put the number of car bombs detonated during the war years at well over 3,000 (Raad, quoting a 1992 article in \textit{Time} magazine, gives the number as 3,641.)\textsuperscript{47} This would be the equivalent of one car bombing a day for a decade, although in reality there were periods of calm and other periods with multiple bombings occurring every day. Davis notes that these low-tech weapons have many advantages: they are easily concealed yet very powerful; can be taken almost directly to a given target; are cheap, simple to organize, indiscriminate, and anonymous; and leave little forensic evidence. Davis has further observed that the car bomb, which he calls a “weapon of the weak,” is used by guerrilla groups and by governments alike.

\textsuperscript{45} Davis, \textit{Buda’s Wagon}, 68.
\textsuperscript{46} A Mercedes dump truck destroyed the U.S. Marine barracks using 12,000 pounds of explosives, which Davis compares to the mere 5,000 pounds of explosives carried by the Consolidated B-24 bomb. Moments later, a suicide truck bomb crashed into the French military barracks in West Beirut, with a blast so powerful it “lifted the nine-story building into the air and moved it 20 feet. The whole building became airborne.” See Davis, \textit{Buda’s Wagon}, 78.
and has become “the most popular clandestine instrument of terror.”Raad seems to have been particularly marked by these events, as is evident in the recurring theme of car bombs in his work. The 1982 Israeli invasion and the use of car bombs during the war years were two of the most violent experiences that an ordinary Lebanese citizen (not involved with one of the many militias) was likely to encounter during the civil wars. Given the prominent role that these subjects would play in Raad’s later art production, it can be inferred that they were also the most disturbing for Raad.

Another prevalent tactic of violence taken up by Raad was the systematic kidnapping of foreign hostages (see Hostage: The Bachar Tapes and also his dissertation). During the period that became known as the Western hostage crisis (1982-1991), ninety-six foreign hostages from Western countries (mostly the United States and Western Europe) were kidnapped and held hostage for political advantage. Hundreds or even thousands of Lebanese prisoners were also captured, but their stories were generally irrelevant to the Western press. Aside from giving his character the Lebanese name of Bachar, Raad does little to directly incorporate this narrative of Lebanese captives into his deconstruction of the dominant Western one. These Westerners were kidnapped by various groups, primarily Hezbollah or groups

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48 Davis, Buda’s Wagon, 8–11. Davis further notes that, compared to U.S. cruise missiles that cost up to $1 million each, car bombs often require no more than a stolen car and “$500 of fertilizer and bootlegged electronics,” yet can incur massive damage and casualties. Van and truck bombs can be roughly equivalent to a World War II–era B-24 air force bomb with a “long distance bomb load of 5,000 pounds,” while a vehicle with “10 cubic feet of cargo space can transport a 1,000 pound bomb.”

49 For example: My Neck Is Thinner than a Hair: Engines (2001/2003), Already Been in a Lake of Fire (1991/2003), We Can Make Rain but No One Came To Ask (2006), and I Was Overcome by a Momentary Panic at the Thought They Might Be Right (2004/2009).
related to it, although Hezbollah has denied involvement. 50 Iranian foreign policy interests, including the extraction of “political, military and financial concessions from the Western world,” are cited as one possible motivation behind the kidnappings. 51

Facing mounting public pressure in the United States, the Reagan administration negotiated a secret and illegal arrangement with Iran, which involved the covert sales of U.S. arms to Iran in exchange for the release of U.S. and other Western hostages and the reallocation of those funds to support the anti-Sandinista rebels in Nicaragua (1984-1986). 52 This became known as the Iran-Contra affair, and it coincided with the Iran-Iraq war (1982-1988), during which Iran’s army was illegally supplied with weapons from the United States. 53 Israel sold weapons to Iran on behalf of the United States, which in turn replenished the Israeli stock of weapons; at the same time, the U.S. began selling weapons directly to Iran at inflated prices and diverting the profits to support the Nicaraguan Contras. 54 The deliveries of weapons led directly to the release of hostages.

51 Ranstorp, Hizb’allah in Lebanon, 54.
52 Ibid., 147.
53 After the hostage-taking at Tehran’s American Embassy (the Iran hostage crisis of 1979-1981), America was no longer supposed to supply arms to Iran. Iran needed American-made parts, but could not buy them outright. At the same time, Israel was occupying south Lebanon and Hezbollah wanted to put pressure on the U.S., which was a sponsor of the occupation.
54 During a 2007 lecture at the United Nations Plaza in Beirut, Raad described the details of the hostage crisis and the Iran-Contra affair. However, the audience (likely a generation younger than Raad, and perhaps unfamiliar with this history) seemed unsure whether to believe him or not, chuckling along as he described the details of the negotiations. Raad, “Seminar 3,” United Nations Plaza, February 31, 2007.
After fifteen years of violence, the civil wars officially concluded on October 22, 1989, with the signing of the Document of National Understanding in Ta’if, Saudi Arabia. This agreement included political reforms that divided parliamentary seats equally between Christians and Muslims, but the posts of President, Prime Minister, and House Speaker would remain divided along sectarian lines, effectively keeping confessionalism in place. Fighting would continue nonetheless until 1991. In March 1991, the Lebanese parliament passed a general amnesty law that pardoned all political crimes. Sectarian militias were dissolved in May 1991 (with the exception of Hezbollah and the PLO), and the Lebanese Armed Forces once again became Lebanon’s only major nonsectarian institution. Syrian and Israeli armies remained locked in a stalemate from 1983 until 2000—almost a full decade after the end of the war—as each refused to withdraw from Lebanon unless the other did so first.

Beirut (à la folie)

Raad was concluding his Ph.D. coursework at the University of Rochester just as the Western hostage crisis was ending. He made a yearlong visit to Lebanon in 1991, after having lived in the United States for nearly a decade. In doing so Raad confronted his childhood war memories, many until then forgotten or repressed,

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35 Rogers, “Postwar Art,” 168. This peace agreement is more commonly referred to as the Ta’if Accord.
36 In this system the Druze are counted as Muslims even though Druze is considered distinct from Islam.
37 U.S. Department of State, “Background Note: Lebanon.”
38 Ibid.
with new criticality, particularly in light of his graduate encounters with Freud’s writings on trauma and repression.60 He met and became acquainted with other Lebanese artists, who would collectively become known as the “postwar generation.”61 Importantly, having studied Middle East history in the United States, and having followed the war through American media, Raad saw the aftermath firsthand, encountering very different narratives about the war from what he had heard in the US. This experience would significantly influence his dissertation and his first major artwork.

Then in his mid-twenties, Raad was collaborating with the Canadian-Lebanese artist Jayce Salloum on several projects, including a video about the Lebanese resistance movement in the south of the country, which had opposed the occupying Israeli forces in the early 1980s. Salloum was in Lebanon on a Canada Council grant and took a portable Hi8 editing suite with him, making video cameras and editing equipment available to other artists, writers, and filmmakers.62 Among the many young Lebanese artists Raad met through this project was Jalal Toufic, whose writing would later become deeply important to Raad’s work. Toufic used one of these cameras to make his first video, Credits Included, and gave Raad a copy of his book Distracted.63

Salloum and Raad spent the entire year filming Talaeen a Jumuub/Up to the South (1993), primarily around the village of Khiam in South Lebanon. The film

61 Rogers, “Postwar Art,” 52–60.
62 Conversation with the author, May 2012.
was edited in the United States in 1992, released in 1993, and screened in film
festivals and exhibition programs in North America, Europe, and Lebanon until
1996. *Up to the South* presents a varied set of responses from Shi’ites living in
southern Lebanon under the occupation, creating a complex picture of the
experience of war and resistance. The filmmakers were interested in making a film
for a Western audience that would examine the misrepresentation of the Lebanese
Resistance and bring to light the situation in which Israel refused to leave the south
until the resistance activities ceased, even though the Resistance itself had formed in
direct response to the Israeli invasion and occupation.

Salloum and Raad conducted numerous interviews with men and women
involved in the Resistance, and with former political detainees (some of whom were
involved in the resistance while others were not) who described their detention and
torture at the hands of Lebanese guards who made up Israel’s proxy militia. The
stories were told by Lebanese remaining in South Lebanon, many of whom
considered the very decision to remain in their homes an act of resistance against the
Israeli occupation. The filmmakers focused on people who had been detained at
Khiam Prison, which was notorious for its harsh treatment of prisoners, many of
whom were held and tortured based on mere suspicion of participating in the
resistance. The questions were guided by the idea that this history should be made
available to those not familiar with Lebanon’s history. Underlying these stories was
the conviction that outside of Lebanon and throughout the Western world,
Lebanese Shiites, South Lebanese, and the Lebanese resistance in general were
widely understood to be fanatical terrorists. The video was an attempt to show them
instead as individuals whose land and homes were under daily threat. In addition to
the specifics of the individuals’ stories—almost everyone they interviewed had been tortured—Raad became interested in the format of the interview itself and how the interviewees spoke about their experience of captivity.

This video has been characterized as an experimental documentary, employing tropes of the documentary form with a focus on oral history, but doing so without a narrative arc or contextualizing historical information. The filmmakers themselves are not shown. The video uses first-person testimony, oral histories, and the interview format—all documentary tropes that would resurface in Raad’s early Atlas Group work, especially *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes.* Based on oral histories, which are by necessity subjective interpretations of historical events, the video prefigures Raad’s later work. A concluding sentiment in the video reflects an idea that would become central to *The Atlas Group*: “We do not take history to be this global and unified thing, an exhaustive and absolute truth. We should think in terms of histories, many stories. What kind of stories? Stories that represent a fragment of truth, at some moment, and for some people.” This early artistic collaboration with Salloum was important for Raad and his later work, but while Salloum continued to work in a documentary mode, Raad would go on to merge documentary and fictionalized narratives. Its multiplicity of competing voices marks the genesis of Raad’s idea that a documentary need not be an authoritative distillation of a truth, but can consistent of “many stories.”

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64 For a look at the role of testimony in documentary in the Lebanese context, see Demos, "Out of Beirut: Mobile Histories and the Politics of Fiction, in *The Migrant Image*, 177-200.
Raad returned to the United States after his year in Lebanon, passing his
doctoral candidacy exams in 1993 and completing his dissertation in 1996.\textsuperscript{65} During
Raad’s time in Lebanon the media spectacle surrounding the Western hostage crisis
continued, and many former American and British hostages were publishing
memoirs about their captivity in Lebanon. After returning to the U.S., Raad was
surprised (“naively,” he says in retrospect), to discover little American interest in the
hundreds of Lebanese and Palestinians who had been detained, sometimes for years,
by the South Lebanese Army, Israel’s proxy militia in South Lebanon. Researching
the resistance, Raad found a mere handful of news stories about these detentions,
compared to the seven or eight thousand stories about kidnapped Associated Press
bureau chief Terry Anderson, who had been released in December 1991 when the
Western hostage crisis was declared over.\textsuperscript{66} Anderson’s \textit{Den of Lions} was just one of
many such captivity narratives published: by 1993, six books by former American
hostages were published, adding to five existing historical accounts, several of which
were subsequently developed into films, theater productions, and television
miniseries.\textsuperscript{67}

\textsuperscript{65} Raad, “Beirut (à la folie),” ii.
\textsuperscript{67} Raad cites the following hostage memoirs in his dissertation: David Jacobsen and Gerald Astor,
\textit{My Life as a Hostage: The Nightmare in Beirut} (New York: Donald I. Fine, 1991); Benjamin Weir et
of Lions: Memoirs of Seven Years} (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 1993); Brian Keenan, \textit{An
Evil Cradling: The Five Year Ordeal of a Hostage} (New York: Viking Penguin, 1993); Terry Waite,
\textit{Taken on Trust} (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993); Joseph Cicippio and Richard W.
Hope, \textit{Chains to Roses: The Joseph Cicippio Story} (Waco, Tex.: WRS Publishing, 1993); Sis Levin,
\textit{Beirut Diary: A Husband Held Hostage and a Wife Determined To Set Him Free} (New York:
InterVarsity, 1989); Peggy Say & Peter Knobler, \textit{Forgotten: A Sister's Struggle to Save Her Brother}
(New York: S&S Trade, 1991); Trevor Barnes, \textit{Terry Waite: Man with a Mission} (Grand Rapids,
of Terry Anderson} (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1988). Television productions include \textit{Hostages},
with Natasha Richardson, Kathy Bates, Ruth McCabe, Ciaran Hinds, and Colin Firth (HBO, 1993);
Raad’s dissertation, *Beirut à la folie: A Cultural Analysis of the Abduction of Westerners in Lebanon in the 1980s*, focuses on the accounts written by Americans, on the patterns of narrative and modes of representation they employed, and the matrix of identity and socio-sexual relations they implied. Although this study did not investigate the kidnappings of Lebanese citizens or the detention of Lebanese political prisoners at the hands of Israel via its proxy militias, it signaled Raad’s already articulated interest in using the language of art and art criticism as tools for a wider political critique. Raad examines a series of these prison narratives using a combination of semiotic analysis, postcolonial criticism, and gender studies to unpack their themes, structures, and socio-sexual aspects, as well as other cinematic and photojournalistic treatments of the war and its hostages. Carefully parsing these hostage memoirs as representations—as signs of the experience, and not as reported, verifiable facts—Raad demonstrates how they all repeated deeply entrenched conceptions and stereotypes about the Middle East. Raad highlights the tendency in such memoirs to present “the experience of captivity as psychological and individual rather than social or political.” The foreign captives each thought of themselves as exceptional and neutral to the overall conflict and context of the civil

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68 Raad pays particular attention to Terry Anderson’s *Den of Lions* and Brian Keenan’s *An Evil Cradling*, focusing on their similarities in structure, themes, and narration of the experience of captivity. Keenan, a teacher at the American University of Beirut, was held for just over four years, from April 1986 to August 1990. Anderson, the Middle East bureau chief for the Associated Press, was held for nearly seven years, from March 1985 to December 1991 (the longest of any Western hostage). Anderson’s negotiated release finally signaled the official end of the crisis.

69 Raad, “Beirut (à la folie),” 145.
wars, ignoring the historical implications of the Western presence in the Middle East and the larger frameworks surrounding their presence in Lebanon in the first place.\textsuperscript{70}

The striking reduplications found across each narrative point to such presumptions. Raad notes that Jacobsen, Weir, Cicciopio, Waite, and Anderson all begin their stories with an account of the abduction, the day itself, and specifically the weather. Consider the following accounts: “May 28, 1985 was a typical Beirut morning, swiftly brightening as the sun burned off the early morning mist” [Jacobsen]; “The morning of May 8, 1984, blended beauty with harshness. On that bright spring day in the Muslim section of the city, the sounds of birds coming from the untended garden plot next to our apartment building contrasted with the angry growl of distant explosions” [Weir]; “Beirut, 20 February 1987. When I awoke, it was dusk. For a moment, I lay still slowly, reluctantly returning to the conscious world. It was unusually quiet. A gentle breeze stirred the faded hotel curtains, bringing with it a hint of sea” [Waite].\textsuperscript{71} Focusing on the weather signals how each Western captive viewed his own abduction as accidental, an artifact of chance. Raad writes:

On the one hand, the emphasis in these beginnings on detailing the subjective perceptions of meteorological conditions in the city or the psychological state of mind of the hostage-to-be comes at the expense of some clarification of the socio-political context of Lebanon. By bracketing the very day, the very moment of their abduction from the socio-political context, the incident of captivity figures here too as an accident. The presence of westerners in Beirut during the mid-1980s is assumed to have no unusual significance, and Beirut

\textsuperscript{70} Raad also criticized the attention these narratives received in the Western media and their commercial successes as film, television, and theatre productions, particularly given their focus on personal experience rather than on the political context. Raad contradicts the authorial claims to exceptionalism by contextualizing each book’s \textit{a priori} premises. Ibid.

\textsuperscript{71} Raad is quoting directing from the hostage memoirs published by Jacobsen, Weir, and Waite. See Raad, “Beirut (à la folie),” 146-48.
is presented as any other city in the world, except for the “angry growl of distant explosions.” On the other hand, this emphasis falls on particularly charged markers, morning and daylight, and as such prefigures the trajectory of descent into the dark underground of Beirut (literally a fall) characteristic of the description of captivity in all the Lebanon narratives.\textsuperscript{72}

The first half of Raad’s dissertation is devoted to the Iran-Contra affair investigations, whereas the second focuses on the homosocial and socio-sexual aspects of prison encounters between Western hostages and their Arab captors, framed within the wider homoerotics of Orientalism. While in captivity, the men are forced into homosocial associations with the other male captives and, in order to articulate their heterosexuality, they discuss and later write about their fears of being raped by the Arab guards, a threat which never materializes.\textsuperscript{73} Nevertheless, these stories sexualize the Arab captors, and Raad suggests that “the drama of ... western men’s [captivity] revolves around containing the threat of sexual desire for men.”\textsuperscript{74} According to Raad, this heterosexual narrative is further emphasized by the inclusion of the accounts written by their wives and girlfriends, rather than contributions or perspectives by other family members or friends. Most of the books’ trajectories begin with an account of a failed marriage or relationship, which apparently prompted their trips to Lebanon. As Raad explains:

This theme of disrupted, strained, and unrealized marriages as a motive behind the westerners’ desire to go to the Middle East sets up another crucial distinction between the west and the Middle East. In this distinction, the west

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 147–48.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 253. Raad asks: “What allows the westerners to produce these fears and to live with the threat of being raped by their Muslim captors?” He explains that the men feared they would be raped, quoting from their memoirs. However, he notes: “[W]hile the hostages endured beatings, starvation, insults and threats, none were actually threatened with rape nor were they sexually assaulted during their ordeal in Beirut. This does not imply that the hostages arbitrarily imagined and represented the rape scenarios. These representations are partly informed by popular fictional and non-fictional literature and films on prison life and captivity.”
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 254.
stands as the locale of failed masculine relations to heterosexual domesticity, and Lebanon figures as the place that can and did rehabilitate the westerners so that they emerged from their captivity as the good husbands they ought to be.\textsuperscript{75}

Apparently, what had “driven [these men] to the Middle East” was their inability to have healthy relationships, and the disaster of their captivity provided them with time to think about how to be a better partner, thus finding a productive, even redemptive result of the experience of captivity.\textsuperscript{76}

The format of these hostage narratives implies that their multiple modes of narration (personal recollection and impressions; journalistic reporting; testimony from wives or friends) can be corralled into a coherent and truthful representation of an event. In interrogating this essential claim, Raad arrives at a crucial insight: there is a coefficient of fiction implicit in any personal retelling of experience. That is, the (assumed) neutrality of fact is effaced in its deployment by any narrator. While individual facts can be true or not true, the larger sociopolitical and cultural facts surrounding events are always subject to the translation, mediation, and personal biases inherent in any effort to make sense of them. Moreover, such events—vast, complex, multi-person scenarios like “the hostage crisis” or even the civil war itself—cannot ever be reduced to any singular definition; they are neither unified nor coherent.

Raad’s dissertation ultimately led to his understanding of how to apply new narratives to photographs, documents, and films as a way to frame alternate

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 218.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 216. Raad, quoting Cicciop: “I went through two difficult marriages, both to women I admire. I confess that my workaholism was the major reason for the difficulties. Now, in captivity, I was able to dwell on repairing the mistakes that had, in many ways, driven me to the Middle East.” The quotation is from Cicciop, \textit{Chains to Roses}, 30.
histories. It informed his larger investigation into the mutable relationships between photographic images, their materiality as forms of technical media, and their connections to unique personal narratives. This focus on semiotics and media representations provided the background and methodological tools for the critiques that he later elaborated—in visual, formal terms—in the works of the Atlas Group.\textsuperscript{77}

In 2000, Raad’s dissertation research was directly transposed into a fictionalized video called \textit{Hostage: The Bachar Tapes}, the first official project of the Atlas Group. Its protagonist, a character named Souheil Bachar, essentially synthesizes into one fictional character the two trajectories of Lebanese prison experience Raad had researched: the kidnapped Western journalists and a famous member of the resistance, a young woman named Soha Bechara whom Raad had encountered during the interviews and field research for \textit{Up to the South} and whose captivity narrative had captured Raad’s imagination, as it would a variety of other artists and filmmakers in his generation. Raad does not discuss Soha Bechara’s captivity narrative in his dissertation, as it was beyond the scope of his examination of American-centric hostage narratives.

\textbf{Hostage: The Bachar Tapes}

\textit{Hostage, The Bachar Tapes, #17 and #31, English version} is an eighteen-minute, single-channel video produced by Raad in 2000 (Fig. 1.2). The video tells the story of a fictional Lebanese captive, Souheil Bachar, supposedly a 35-year-old man from the village of Houla in South Lebanon. Here Raad is creating a fictionalized version

\textsuperscript{77} Westmoreland, “Crisis of Representation,” 202–3, examines the links between the video \textit{Hostage: The Bachar Tapes} and Raad’s dissertation.
of a Lebanese hostage, merging the character of Soha Bechara and others involved in the resistance in South Lebanon with the stories of other missing or kidnapped Lebanese citizens. This account is specifically created for his Western audience, to fill the gaps in the American narratives and thereby to correct what disturbed him about the American ignorance of Lebanese captivity stories. Bachar was allegedly kidnapped in 1983, held in solitary confinement for ten years (except for a period of twenty-seven weeks, when he shared a cell with the five Americans whose captivity memoirs Raad had examined in his dissertation), and finally released in 1993.\textsuperscript{78} In a constructed backstory for the video, published as an “interview” with Bachar, the reader is told that Bachar first met Walid Raad and the Atlas Group in 1999 at the Ayoul video arts festival in Beirut.\textsuperscript{79} After this meeting, the Atlas Group offered to help Bachar create a series of videos about his time as a hostage. Fifty-three short videotapes were ostensibly produced and screened in the Middle East, but Bachar claims to have allowed only two of these to be shown in North America and Europe, and he “refuses” to discuss the remaining fifty-one videos. In fact, there is only one

\textsuperscript{78} On the occasion of the exhibition, \textit{Tamáss: Contemporary Arab Representations}, organized by the curator Catherine David in 2002, Raad published a transcript of a purported interview with Bachar titled “Civilizationally, We Do Not Dig Holes To Bury Ourselves.” In this “interview,” Bachar claims to have been released on the same day as Benjamin Weir (September 14, 1985) as a result of the first U.S. arms shipment to Iran (via Israel), a fact that deviates from the narrative as told in the video. Walid Raad, “Civilizationally, We Do Not Dig Holes To Bury Ourselves,” in \textit{Tamáss: Contemporary Arab Representations--Beirut/Lebanon 1}, ed. Catherine David (Barcelona: Witte de With/Fundacio Antoni Tapis, 2002), 122–37.

\textsuperscript{79} In the above-cited “interview,” Bachar also states that he is from Houla, a village in south Lebanon, and that he was 42 years old at the time. However, the numbers do not add up if Bachar was 35 when he filmed the video, as he claims. In another discrepancy from the video, Bachar explains that of the ten years he spent in captivity, he was held for three months with these five Americans (as opposed to twenty-seven weeks as in the video). These factual “errors” within the fiction divert attention from the specific details of the narrative and onto the personal narration itself. Although easily missed, these discrepancies serve to point out the slippage of facts, as Raad constantly changes small details. By considering these memoirs as representations (the product of scarred, unstable memories) that reveal prejudices and assumptions about the Middle East, Raad is able to examine the meanings of representations rather than their factual accuracy.
video—made up of two parts, called Tape #17 and Tape #31—which focuses on the period of Bachar’s captivity with the Americans, and on the research he apparently conducted after his release on “the writing of the story of captivity” (a nod to Raad’s dissertation). Raad supplements the critical and formal language of the video itself with a second layer of critical discourse to both support and elaborate upon the issues addressed in the video. He uses formats fundamental to the art world (that of exhibition catalogs and artist interviews) to present the political motivations behind his critique.

In both the interview and the video, Bachar’s language is composed of notes and excerpts lifted largely from Raad’s own dissertation, as Bachar simply replaces Raad’s analytical, third-person explanations with first-person commentary. The following passage is identical in both Bachar’s interview and Raad’s dissertation:

The books written by the Americans relate a remarkably sordid account, and stand as a fascinating testimony to our [their] horrible ordeal in Lebanon during those years. Abducted and confined in detention centers, “dungeons,” cells, and prisons, we [they] all endured situations of extreme physical and psychological abuse. Beaten and blindfolded, gagged and taped, harangued, threatened, tortured, isolated, abandoned, half-starved, chained, ridiculed and harassed, we [they] suffered greatly at the hands of our [their] captors. And some of us [them] continue to suffer the physical and psychological effects of our [their] detention.80

The work takes the form of a video interview as Bachar sits in front of a camera and speaks directly to the viewer about his time in captivity. As Chad Elias has noted, Bachar is played by the popular Lebanese character actor Fadi Abi Samra. Thus, to a Lebanese audience, Bachar is instantly recognizable as a fictional character.81

80 Raad, “Beirut (à la folie),” 132. See also Raad, “Civilizationally, We Do Not Dig Holes To Bury Ourselves.” (Italics indicates original dissertation text).
In this form of direct address, Bachar mimics the format of hostage videos in which captives are compelled to offer “confessions” or to plead for their lives. However, in this case, Bachar is in control of the camera, holding the camera’s remote control and directing the actual filming of his own narrative. Segments in which Bachar narrates his story are interspersed with news footage and photographs of the hostages that circulated in the media.\(^2\) This format is also used in video diaries, in documentary films that rely on oral histories (as Raad and Salloum did in \textit{Up to the South}), and in recorded testimony in juridical investigations. But the mode of direct address to the camera also parallels both hostage videos (wherein hostages plead for their lives) and martyr videos (in which suicide bombers claim responsibility for the murders they are about to commit).\(^3\)

Echoing Raad’s dissertation, at the beginning of the video, Bachar points out that each of the Americans wrote a book after their release, noting how odd it is that five books telling what should be identical stories each found publishers and a wide audience:

In the 1990s, five books written by five men who were held in the same 10x12 foot room have been published. Why? Why was this story told five times? Why were five different versions of it published? Because the story is not the same, or as the hostages like to say, each man experiences captivity in his own


\(^3\) Lebanese artist Rabih Mroué’s video-performance \textit{Three Posters} (2000 with Elias Khoury) and the follow-up piece \textit{On the Three Posters: Reflections on a Video Performance by Rabih Mroué} (2004) were made in response to the war on terror when Mroué found that the reading of the work had become overly determined; Mroué found that his intention was often misinterpreted in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. In the video \textit{On the Three Posters}, Mroué states that the performance was created “with a Beirut audience in mind and foreign audiences could not be expected to be aware of the nuances of the history addressed, and our critique of it. Still the performance was well received and appreciated as a critique of simplified histories of the civil wars and Lebanese history.” Hlavajova and Winder, \textit{Rabih Mroué}, 15.
way. No doubt, this is true. True not only of the experience of captivity but of all experiences today... .

Bachar explains to his audience that the Americans began their stories with a description of the weather on the day they were kidnapped. Incredulous, Bachar asks, “The weather? Why did the Americans begin their story by talking about the weather? Is it because they want to present what happened to them as something that was natural and unpredictable? This would be unfortunate, but expected.”

As noted, *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes* is divided into two parts, Tape #17 and Tape #31, both of which begin with a strip of SMPTE Universal Leader, featuring the standard continuous digital countdown. My analysis focuses on Tape #17, which contains footage of Bachar speaking directly to the camera about the books published by the Americans, along with photographs and footage sampled from news reports of the “crisis.” Tape #31 is a two-minute static shot of the sparkling surface of the Mediterranean Sea, bringing a meditative quality to the work. It is followed by footage of a man standing by the seashore. Through inter-titles, the viewer learns that the previous segment was the same length as the “the average duration of all video statements I recorded during my [Bachar’s] captivity.”

Tape #17 opens with a male voiceover in Arabic over a black screen; white subtitles identify him as Souheil Bachar, who is then heard requesting that the subtitles appear instead on a blue background. As the subtitles “blue background” appear, the screen brightens to a blue video signal, and the subtitle reads, “blue just

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84 This is a quotation from Raad, “Beirut (à la folie),” 144. Commenting on this matter, Brian Keenan remarked that this multiplicity of books proves that “each man experienced his imprisonment in his own way.” Keenan, quoted in Tom Masland and Jennifer Foote, “Best Sellers in Chains,” *Newsweek* (May 31, 1995), 33.

85 Ibid., 144.
like the Mediterranean." Bachar also asks that his story be translated and read aloud by a female narrator, another oblique reference to Bechara. The screen goes to static, and when the feed resumes, Bachar is sitting in front of a white wall, to which is pinned a white sheet serving as a makeshift backdrop. Bachar is dressed in a grey T-shirt and blue jeans. He points a remote control at the camera as if to commence recording and begins speaking in Arabic, while a female voice translates: “Yes, our story is tragic. Yes, it is sordid. But you have to remember that it is first and foremost a story. And in this way, it is familiar to you.” So, from the start, Raad signals that we are participating in the (always already at least partly fictional) conventions of (any even ostensibly truthful) narrative. Raad is referring to the genre of captivity narratives, which conform to an identifiable structure, but also to the numerous memoirs published by men who were held captive in Lebanon in the 1980s, and whose day-to-day experiences in captivity would arguably be largely the same. This desire to tell one’s own version of a story, with its deviations and discrepancies from the main chronology and events, serves to demonstrate the uniqueness of experience rather than the political context.

The female translator alternates with an overdubbed male voice (which sounds like that of a newscaster but is really an actor’s voice) explaining, “In the summer of 1985, six men (five Americans and one Lebanese) were held together in

87 Bachar is actually paraphrasing Raad’s dissertation: “The story in itself is, as I have suggested, sometimes sordid, sometimes tragic, and sometimes even comic. But it is also a familiar story, and one that, it seems, needs to be repeated.” Raad, “Beirut (à la folie),” 55.
88 Ibid., 144: “In other words, the chronology of events for Anderson, Weir, and Jacobsen is more or less the same. The same is true of Keenan and McCarthy, who have both written and published their captivity memoirs and who spent most of their detention together.”
the same ten-by-twelve-foot room in the basement of a building, somewhere in the southern suburbs of Beirut, close to the airport.” An airplane is shown descending over a sunset view of Beirut’s suburbs. The five kidnapped Americans are then identified along with their profession: Benjamin Weir (a Presbyterian minister who had lived in Lebanon for 30 years), Martin Jenco (head of Catholic Charities in Lebanon), Terry Anderson (Middle East bureau chief for the Associated Press), David Jacobsen (administrator at the teaching hospital of the American University of Beirut), and Thomas Sutherland (dean of agriculture and food sciences at the American University of Beirut). These identifications are all factual. As their names are read aloud, photographs of the men appear one at a time along the bottom of the screen. Each is represented by a photograph taken by the kidnappers that had circulated widely in the media; the men are unshaven, dirty, and long-haired, and each one is holding the day’s newspaper. Alongside these so-called “proof of life” photographs is a similar photograph of the actor playing the fictional Lebanese captive, with “Souheil Bachar, a low-level employee at the Kuwaiti Embassy in Beirut” inserted directly into the narrative and timeline.

Grounding the story in real events, the photographs are superimposed on top of archival television footage that includes shots of President Reagan, Lt. Col. Oliver North (a key figure in the Iran-Contra scandal), newspaper headlines (such as “Reagan Tries To Silence Reports of Iran Arms Deal”), and video footage from the Americans’ release. To underscore the factual events, the narrator explains that these men were detained together during the arms-for-hostages negotiations that took place between the United States, Israel, and Iran in early 1985, and that the sale of arms to Iran resulted in the release of Weir, Jenco, and Jacobsen in 1985 and
1986, and then of Sutherland and Anderson in 1991. As their names are read aloud, their photographs vanish from the screen. Only Bachar’s photograph remains—an oblique reference to how the very real captivities of Lebanese hostages during this same period were invisible (or irrelevant) to Western media circles.

Bachar is actually a hybrid of two real people: Wajid Doumani and Soha Bechara. In performance-lectures and published “interviews” with Bachar about this work, Raad notes that the Americans had described an Arab prisoner with whom they had shared a cell. Raad claims that each American had described an Arab hostage named Wajid Doumani or Waj’d Domani, and that they weren’t sure whether he was a real hostage or part of Hezbollah. Raad explains that this man became, for the Americans, the focus and target of their fear and anxiety about captivity.89 He further claims that he tried to locate this man, apparently going as far as contacting Terry Anderson and Terry Waite for help in doing so, though why he thinks these men would know Doumani’s whereabouts is unclear. There was, in fact, a hostage by this name who actually worked at the Kuwaiti embassy in Lebanon: “[T]he daily newspaper An-Nahar reported that Kuwaiti Embassy press attaché Wajid Doumani, a 55-year-old Lebanese, was released Saturday following mediation by Shi’ite leaders and clergymen. The kidnappers were not identified but a relative of Doumani is quoted as saying they ‘treated him quite well.’ ”90 The script of Hostage is based, in part, on the descriptions of Doumani given by the Americans in their books. Unable to find him, Raad became interested in the story the Westerners had

89 Walid Raad, [Exhibition Walkthrough: Hasselblad Award], Presented at the Hasselblad Center, Goteborg, Sweden, November 11, 2011.
told and decided to “imagine” the man’s testimony, conflating the captivity narratives of the Americans he had studied with the Lebanese Resistance fighter he learned about while working with Salloum in 1992, so as to recreate the female Soha Bechara as the male character Souheil Bachar.91 This imagined experience merges Raad’s dissertation research on the sexual and gendered aspects of captivity narratives.

The actual Soha Bechara shares Raad’s birthday. She was born in Beirut on June 15, 1967 to a Greek Orthodox family from the Christian village of Deir Mimas in southern Lebanon.92 Deir Mimas is only a few miles from the first border station with Israel and came under frequent Israeli attacks in the 1970s before its occupation in 1982. In Beirut, the Bechara family lived in the southeastern suburb of Beirut called Shiyya (or Chiyah, a neighborhood near Sin el Fil and Furn al Chebak). When she was twenty-one, as a militant with the communist resistance to the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon in 1988, she shot General Antoine Lahad of the Israeli-backed South Lebanon Army. Lahad survived the assassination attempt, and Bechara was arrested and held for 10 years, six of them in solitary confinement, in the infamous Khiam prison. She was finally released on September 3, 1998.93 Bechara’s autobiography, *Resistance: My Life for Lebanon*, was published in 2003.94

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94 Bechara, *Resistance*. In 2011, Bechara coauthored the autobiography *I Dream of a Cell of Cherries* with Lebanese journalist Cosette Elias Ibrahim, who had also been imprisoned in Khiam from September 1999 to May 2000, when Israel pulled out of south Lebanon and the South Lebanon Army
Bechara moved to Paris after her release. In Salloum’s video, *Everything and Nothing*, he interviews Bechara the day after she had seen a screening of *Up to the South*; this was their first meeting. In the video, she tells him:

> My name is Soha Bechara. I was born in Beirut, from a village in South Lebanon that is under Israeli occupation. I was born June 15, 1967. I joined the Lebanese National Resistance Movement (Jabhat al Muquawama al Watanieh Lubnaniya) in 1986. On (November 7), 1988, I was captured following an operation that I executed against the symbol of collaboration Antoine Lahad. As a consequence of this operation I was detained and I spent the next 10 years in El Khiam detention center. It ended by my release on September 3, 1998.95

This statement mirrors the formulaic responses given by former prisoners to Raad and Salloum in interviews for the video *Up to the South* (as well as the format employed by Bachar). That is, they all conformed to a particular structure: all of them began by citing their name, age, and dates of their detention and release.96 As with the American captives, in *Up to the South* many of the stories concluded with a statement about how the experience of detention had been painful but also somehow cathartic.97 For Raad, the fact that former prisoners talked about their detention and torture in a consistent way meant that “there became a way to talk about how to write the history of Lebanon, of events of extreme violence.”98

Unlike Soha Bechara, who was viewed as a heroic figure in Lebanon, Souheil Bachar is identified as merely an employee at the Kuwaiti embassy in Beirut and

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96 *Up to the South* includes an interview with a former prisoner at Khiam who introduces himself as follows: “My name is Habib Ktaich. I am 26 years old. I am from Houla. I was kidnapped on December 30, 1986, and released on June 30, 1988.


(like Doumani) not a resistance fighter. The difference, of course, is that resistance fighters like Bechara were political prisoners of Israel’s proxy Lebanese militia, not Hezbollah hostages as the Americans had been. While Lebanese captives who were kidnapped during the war were often not members of a militia, some occupied strategic positions, came from wealthy families who could pay ransom, or were held for prisoner exchange.99

As Westmoreland has pointed out, by giving a voice to an Arab hostage, even a fictional one, Raad gives voice to the many Lebanese hostages whose stories were never told in the Western media. Further, by linking Bechara’s story to the Western hostages, Raad joins the narratives of these transitory Westerners “with the occupation of southern Lebanon and the captivity of its people.”100 That is, Raad reinscribes the Western narratives back into the larger historical and political contexts that their own testimonies had so blithely effaced. By placing this alternative story within the master narrative, Raad ruptures its integrity, performing a subtle critique of the dominant Western version.101

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99 This is also addressed in Raad’s photographic series, Secrets of the Open Sea (1994/2004). For other Lebanese artists who address this point, see Khalil Joreige and Joana Hadjithomas, “Latency,” in Home Works: A Forum on Cultural Practices in the Region, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria, trans. Tony Chakar (Beirut, 2002), 40–49: “The practice of kidnapping was common in Lebanon during the civil war. These kidnappings were carried out mostly on the basis of the holder’s identity card, on which the holder’s religious sect was printed. The kidnapped were then usually used for the purpose of exchange.” Joreige’s uncle was kidnapped: “My uncle was never found, and never returned. He is still reported as missing, and the circumstances of his disappearance remain a mystery. There is very little evidence to explain what really happened. 17,000 people disappeared this way during the war, and have yet to be found. A law issued on June 23, 1995, defines the status of the kidnapped. The onus is on the families to demand that the law becomes effective: A missing person can be declared deceased four years after the date of his or her disappearance. The families who have been put in this situation are confronted with a difficult choice: To declare someone dead without a trace, without the physical presence of a body, a corpse.”
101 Ibid.
In the character of Bachar, Raad has created the ultimate witness: someone who was present in the impossible space of captivity as it was imagined by its prisoners and then interpreted by Raad. Bachar as an artistic creation serves two roles: to give some restorative voice to the many Lebanese prisoners of these extra-legal captivities who were chronically ignored by the international media, and to enact and embody the historical position that Raad has developed through his dissertation. Bachar is himself a composite of many stories, which are all at least partially true, at any given point, for at least some group of people. And Bachar himself says as much.

No female captive would have been held with other male prisoners, so Raad navigates this consideration by having Bachar played by a man, but voiced (for his predominantly English-speaking audience) by a woman. Of course, both of these voices are stand-ins for Raad’s own; much of the voiceover and spoken script are taken directly from his dissertation. Through the character of Bachar, Raad discusses the sexualized subtexts of the captivity narratives and their relationship to Orientalist fetish. Bachar describes how the Americans acted toward and spoke to him, often in efforts to diminish his Arab masculinity. While the actual published memoirs describe the Arab captors in derogatory terms, Bachar claims that the Americans felt the same way toward him, their fellow captive. The use of a female voiceover serves several purposes: it subtly references Soha Bechara’s captivity while foregrounding the homoerotic and homosocial tensions expressed in the Americans’ memoirs, and it also refers to the tactic of including passages written by the hostages’ wives in the memoirs, which Raad reads as reinforcing the captives’ heterosexuality during their long confinement. Through the female narrator who
translates his voice—which thereby intentionally confuses the gender roles—Bachar explains that the Americans treated him as a sexual object and that, as an Arab, he was seen as more feminine, though he was also still a man. He claims that the Americans were therefore both attracted to and repulsed by his body. “They were clearly disgusted with my body, but they touched me all the time.” Bachar relates the events of one night in particular, “one very hot summer night when the room was filled with the stench of our sweat. As usual, we were all on the floor, sleeping or trying to sleep.” The video cuts to a black-and-white photograph of the actor who plays Bachar, and then to a split-screen image of a television screen with bad tracking, a fuzzy, distorted image of two people superimposed on each other, which can be read as a doubling of narratives or of confusion about what is communicated. Bachar states, “I felt someone’s ass rubbing against my crotch. Someone was rubbing himself on me. I became hard, and I don’t know why, but I pressed myself against his ass.” The image cuts to double exposures of images and interviews with released captives. Bachar continues, “It felt good. Seconds later he punched me in the groin, as if my hard-on had provoked him. I stayed quiet.” As Bachar speaks, the scene is abruptly replaced by a red screen—as though a portion of his statement has been censored, or alternatively as indicative of sex or violence—and then cuts

102 In the published “interview,” Raad notes that at times the voiceover in the video mistranslates what “Bachar” is saying. “Bachar” responds that he does his own translations but that he will not comment on their accuracy, again playing on notions of documentary truth. Raad, “Civilizationally, We Do Not Dig Holes To Bury Ourselves,” in Catherine David, ed., Tamáss: Contemporary Arab Representations (Beirut, Lebanon 1), 125. But this is an intentional diversion. Even this “admission” that some passages are mistranslated is an overstatement. In only one place in the video is there a reversal in meaning from Arabic to English. For an insightful analysis of translation in Hostage, see Elias, “Surviving Images,” 51–52. Elias further notes that the actor playing Bachar is speaking colloquial Lebanese Arabic and not standard Arabic. All the various voices participating in the video also cast a certain doubt on Raad’s own critical agency or aims. Raad now admits that he used to emphasize the mistranslations when discussing this work.
quickly back to Bachar. He explains that he felt sexually threatened, voicing the
implicit rape fantasy that Raad had detected in the captivity narratives. This
sexual tension is elaborated using the details of Raad’s research, often in fact using
the very words of Raad’s dissertation as Bachar’s verbalized account.

Throughout, Raad employs video noise—static, fast forward, poor tracking,
deliberately low-grade images—to reference the quality of the hostage tapes that
were being disseminated. Early on, as the words “blue background” appear, the
screen becomes a continuous blue signal. Later, the transmission cuts to vertical
color bars that usually indicate a lost signal, but these bars are made up of image
fragments sampled from earlier segments of the video, as if to represent a coded end-
of-broadcast signal. Elsewhere, a series of quick cuts between a black screen and
scrambled video footage is mixed with the sounds of a VHS tape rewinding. Raad is
referring to the language of video in general, but more specifically, the video also
“samples” these formal cues from the unintentional effects contained within hostage
videos of the Americans that circulated on television. The continual overdubbing of
the VHS tapes, recorded multiple times before broadcast, creates layers of analog
noise. When Bachar points the remote control at the camera to stop recording, the
signal is interrupted and the screen cuts to black, followed by static, tracking
adjustments, and finally back to black. The bad tracking and superimposed images
mentioned above are among the visual strategies that Raad employs to comment
editorially, much as he had previously done in his dissertation, but here by placing

103 Raad, “Beirut (à la folie),” 253.
104 Raad, “Seminar 3,” United Nations Plaza, February 31, 2007. See also Joreige and Hadjithomas,
“Latency.”
his ideas into a first-person account. These video effects also point back to a perpetually present meta-level narrator who is always able to control or adjust the scenario. This is a sly indicator of the instability of testimony, or even of Raad’s own presence as the author and mediator between the historical occurrences and the Bachar fiction. Raad later speculates (fantastically) that this noise was intentionally recorded by the captors, almost like a message from outer space.105

The video concludes in the same way as the crisis “ended” from the American media’s perspective. The newscaster intones, “On December 4, 1991, the last of the American hostages held in Lebanon, Terry Anderson, was released. The release was more than the end of a seven-year ordeal of the longest-held American hostage. It marked the end of a dark and painful chapter known as the Western hostage crisis.” The image of Bachar remains on screen, referring to his unresolved status. Hostage is already very didactic, as it includes basic background on the details of the Western hostage crisis and the Iran-Contra affair and cites long, analytical passages from Raad’s dissertation. But despite this, the tape only does half the work; the rest of the artistic and political communication has taken place elsewhere, as in the question-and-answer period following a screening, or in the published “interview” that supplements the work. In these contexts, Raad is able to elaborate on details about the Iran-Contra scandal and the Western narratives he criticizes. In doing so, Raad continues to create new discrepancies between these comments and the video, thereby referring to the unstable narrative of oral histories.

CHAPTER TWO: THE ARTIST’S VOICE

In postwar countries, fiction is too serious a matter to be left to “imaginative” people.¹

The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale.²

The theme of “many stories,” considered in Chapter One through the character of Souheil Bachar, is further developed in this chapter through a wider exploration of Raad’s approach to narrative multiplicity. Under the rubric of storytelling, I examine the organizing system of character types within The Atlas Group (1989-2004), the improbable tales of provenance and production that accompany each project, and the highly scripted, performative lectures about the Atlas Group that Raad has given since 2000. Despite their outward connection to the prerogatives and tactics of novelistic fiction, Raad’s focus on characterization and dispersed authorship is in fact evidence of a realist project: he finds “invented narratives”—in the form of seemingly extemporized stories—to be the mode of narration most appropriate for the recent history of Lebanon. Though Raad acts as a historian or an archivist, I argue that he does so as a storyteller, using these performances to activate the material by way of his voice.

Raad’s various fictionalized identities (which include entirely fabricated individuals, real individuals with new biographical attributes or invented characteristics, and partners in Raad’s various collaborative activities) allow him to

theorize different aspects of the civil war experience, and they enable the works to be
read as more than simply his personal response to tragic events during the war. Each
of these imagined personas derives from Raad’s own research or experiences, and
each is designed to enact a particular form of story. In the idiosyncratic output of all
Atlas Group contributors, we can see how each project triangulates a particular
narrative, a particular form of authorship, and a particular set of formal
characteristics.

At the same time, Raad’s own placement within this narrative space—as both
a character in the archive and the master narrator of its stories—frames his own
experiences as some of the “many stories” produced during the war years. They
appear as both authentic and self-reflexively critical by virtue of their inclusion
within this artificial system. The Walid Raad listed as the author of Atlas Group
projects like Let’s Be Honest, the Weather Helped (1998/2006-2007) is a different
color from the Walid Raad who performs the artist’s talk about his work
(wherein audiences routinely stumble over what is “true” and what is “made up”).
This person is in turn different from the Walid Raad who produced the artworks.
The calculated distancing of personas is the subject of this chapter’s analysis. Each
of his characters, including the artist’s very presence, should be read as alter egos.

The Atlas Group makes use of the apparent neutrality (and implicitly assumed
credibility) of the archive as a system of classifying information. The formal
notation of the work as “documents,” their categorization within carefully
delineated file categories, their purportedly precise preservation of seemingly minute
details, and the provenance stories attesting to their histories and acquisitions by the
Atlas Group foundation—all produce the impression of authority,
institutionalization, vetting and review processes, budgets and funding streams, and other signifiers of truthfulness. These assumptions, precipitated by Raad’s formal choices, make possible what is actually their critique, which is found by carefully reading the works against these supposed claims. We know that archives and their documents are not simple reproductions of reality, but reflect their construction and organizational systems, as well as their prejudices and aims. While recent writing on the theme of the archival in contemporary art have laid the groundwork for my initial understanding of the logic behind Raad’s project, neither the archive as such nor the act of collecting as an artistic impulse is the focus here.

Reading Raad’s work through a consideration of storytelling allows for deeper, more nuanced attention to their weaving of real events within fictional modes of telling, rather than a simple view of these narratives as fake, false, or fictionalized. Several narrative levels are in play within The Atlas Group. The primary story and the one that holds the rest together is that of the foundation itself—the collection’s holdings, its physical location in Beirut and New York, and its mandate to collect visual records made by traumatized individuals. Despite being composed of many smaller stories, overlapping and seemingly irresolvable, the Atlas Group is, nonetheless, an attempt at an honest rendition of Lebanon’s convoluted, implosive, and narration-resistant history.

The Atlas Group is an invented archive and foundation that is said to house a
collection of images, objects, artifacts, and documents relating to the history of the
Lebanese civil wars. Everything in the Atlas Group’s collection is, in fact, an
artwork produced by Raad. The Atlas Group contains of a wide variety of works—
Raad calls them “documents”—including photographs, video projects, sculptural
elements, and texts. Each work comes with an elaborate narrative of its production,
attribution, and acquisition by the foundation, including invented authors and
ancillary characters. The Atlas Group acts both as an archive that collects these
“existing” documents and as a producer of investigative documents, based on
research into the recent historical events of the civil war.

Although Raad refers throughout to various collaborators, contributors, or
other members of the foundation, he is in fact the only author; all the other
characters are his fictional inventions, although some of them are based on real
people.3 The Atlas Group projects are organized according to the type of
contributor to whom they are attributed—either a named character (Authored),
anonymous or unknown characters (Found Documents), or the collective identity of
the Atlas Group itself (Atlas Group Productions or AGP). Within these categories,
the works are grouped first by purported author, then by medium (photographs,
video, mixed media), and finally by project title (Fig. 2.1). This system foregrounds
authorship—confirmed through Raad’s attribution and supported by a chain of
provenance from the maker (typically via an intermediary) to the Atlas Group—

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3 The lone exception is the video We Can Make Rain but No One Came To Ask (2006), produced with
collaboration from the artists Tony Chakar and Bilal Khbeiz.
over the subject matter, medium, or production date. As will be shown, this conveys a core dimension of Raad’s practice: that the circumstantial ability to create a particular kind of work, as reflected in these various types of authorship, is the dominant determinant in what a work can mean. In all cases there is a triangular correspondence between the stories of how a work was ostensibly made, who authored it, and why it appears a certain way. Anonymous authors correlate to military or security-related materials, for example, whereas authored documents demonstrate various, individuated idiosyncrasies. That is, some forms of work can (or must) have known authors; others must be anonymously produced, since attribution would defuse the work’s purpose. Each type of file organization implies specific codes of interaction between its particular story of provenance and its particular visual language.

At present, the Atlas Group contains seventeen multi-part projects, which comprise photo-based print works, videos, and sculptures (see Appendix A). The “Authored” category is the largest of the Atlas Group’s file types. These works are attributed to one of five characters, each of which has a “verifiable” identity, at least within the logic of the Atlas Group. These include a remembered and reconstructed version of Raad himself as a teenager in Lebanon in 1982, before his emigration, along with four original, fictional characters: Dr. Fadl Fakhouri, Souheil Bachar, Hannah Mrad, and Nahia Hassan. The “Found Documents” file houses artworks

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4 This category includes three “notebooks,” two videos (listed as 8-mm short films, transferred to video), and several sets of digital photographs, variously attributed to any one of five characters. For a full list of works and contents, see Appendix A.
5 Raad deliberately choose common Lebanese names for his characters so that they cannot be linked to any particular religious or sectarian affiliation; for example, he uses Maha Traboulsi as a
attributed to anonymous or unknown individuals, including an intelligence officer known only as Operator 17, and a mysterious set of anonymous photographic prints, which were ostensibly found in the ruins of downtown Beirut and have an unknown (and untraceable) author.\(^6\) The final file category is Atlas Group Productions (AGP), which means that the Atlas Group, as a collective entity, produced the documents. AGP works refer to projects undertaken in the present and attributed to the foundation, and they include references to actual collaborators (including the artists Tony Chakar and Bilal Khbeiz) as well as to other (real) figures from wartime Lebanon who were not actual collaborators with Raad: the investigator Youssef Bitar and the photojournalist Georges Semerdjian.\(^7\) Two large projects make up this file: *My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair* addresses the traumatic effects of car bombs,\(^8\) while the still ongoing *Sweet Talk* addresses architectural photography within the context of the reconstruction of Beirut. The authored category allows Raad to express individual, idiosyncratic responses to the effects of war, while anonymous works contain sinister references to covert surveillance

\(^6\) The “Found Documents” file contains two projects: *I Only Wish That I Could Weep* (2002/1997), supposedly donated to the archive by Operator 17, and the photographic series, *Secrets in the Open Sea* (1994/2004), a set of six photographs apparently discovered under rubble in downtown Beirut (discussed in Chapter Four). A third project, titled *Fair People*, has recently been produced. Until recently, two placeholder titles are given to this project: *We Are Fair People. We Never Speak Well of One Another* and *Everyone Knows That I Am Not Used To Shooting Apples.*

\(^7\) The name of the file is *Thin Neck*, which includes a set of 100 annotated photographs of the sites of car bombings, titled *My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair: Engines* (2001/2003) (discussed in Chapter Three) and a video about the consequences of a car bomb in a particular Beirut neighborhood, titled, *We Can Make Rain but No One Came To Ask* (2006), discussed in Chapter Four. Sometimes included in this file is the sculpture *I Was Overcome by a Momentary Panic at the Thought They Might Be Right* (2004/2009), more recently re-attributed to Nahia Hassan in the Authored category. A fourth work in the Atlas Group that takes up the subject of car bombs is included in the Authored category and attributed to Fadl Fakhouri. This “notebook” is titled *Already Been in a Lake of Fire* (1991/2003).
operations or to citizens kidnapped and murdered during the war. Finally, the investigative projects of the Atlas Group’s AGP category address the impact of war on the city itself.

The almost endless suggested holdings of the Atlas Group make the archive appear vast and complex. The titles of the works and the project descriptions often implicitly refer to other works that do not exist. For example, Dr. Fakhouri’s file is said to include 225 “notebooks.” Of them only Notebook 72: Missing Lebanese Wars and Notebook 38: Already Been in a Lake of Fire actually exist as artworks, yet their titles and file numbers seem to substantiate the (false) claim that other notebooks exist. Even within these supposedly whole “notebooks,” only a select number of “pages” are ever exhibited. The plates in Already Been in a Lake of Fire, for example, are numbered 055-071, implying that other pages exist. Similarly, the video Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (2000) tells the viewer that of the supposed total of fifty-three videos, only two have been screened for Western audiences, prompting curiosity as to the contents of the remaining (and nonexistent) videos. Finally, when presented in exhibitions, wall labels always refer to the entire named series even if only a portion of the series is in fact on display.

The documents are all visibly mediated by their presence within the archive. Raad does not display them as actual, individual artifacts hand-created by their supposed authors. Instead, the works he displays are always reproductions. The

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10 It often happens that only a segment of a full work is exhibited, but the full listing is reproduced on the object label. For example, at the Kunsthalle Zurich show, the project Missing Lebanese Wars was still listed as: “21 digital prints, including 2 covers and 19 plates,” even though four of the prints were not shown (plates 132, 133, 134, and 148 were not included due to space restrictions).
diverse source imagery used in the Atlas Group works includes Raad’s own photographs and those found and collected from other sources, such as archives, newspapers, or family albums. These images are rarely (if ever) printed directly from the original photographic negatives. Almost without exception, the source images are scanned or otherwise imported into a digital environment, where they are altered, cropped, montaged, layered over with text or other markings, and organized and integrated into a new page layout, which is then printed in editions as either inkjet or digital c-prints. The visual language of a given project is the result of mixing the underlying story (itself already a fiction of his own making) with the photographs Raad has amassed, as if filtered through the institutionalizing form of the archive. The documents are placed upon a black or white background, and additional information (such as file numbers and/or titles) is digitally typed onto the new layout, which locates the missing original document within the new informational structure of the archive (Fig. 2.2 ). Raad’s early training in technical photographic processes at RIT is evident in his frequent references to studio processes: chemical darkroom experiments, digital scanning, retouching, manipulation, enlargement, reproductions, permutations across a series, numerical notations, and archive systems. In contrast to artists like Mark Dion (American, b.1961) who make their archives replicate nineteenth-century forms with precision, Raad calls attention to the layering of information and the works’ digitally produced nature.

Atlas Group works are created with the assumption that they will have multiple formats, including framed digital prints, projected images and sounds, published documents (print and/or web), slide presentations, installations in galleries
and museums, and books. To substantiate their apparent provenance, presentations of the works often include images of envelopes or film canisters that had, reportedly, originally housed the works and that stand in for the types of related ephemera amassed in historical archives. Further, these containers appear to bear the traces of their fictional authors, whose signatures or other “personal” notations are used to further authenticate them.

Over the years, Raad has shifted the dates bounding the Atlas Group and provided several alternative years for its founding, including 1967 (the year of his birth and of the six-day Arab-Israeli war), 1976 (the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war), 1989 (the signing of the Ta’if Accord that brought the war to a close), 1998, and 1999. Raad explains the various dates in this way:

I say different things at different times and in different places according to personal, historical, cultural, and political considerations with regard to the geographical location and my personal and professional relation with the audience and how much they know about the political, economic, and cultural histories of Lebanon, the wars in Lebanon, the Middle East, and contemporary art.11

Before Raad became well known, he could easily claim to be the foundation’s actual representative, but today audiences know he is the artist behind the works. He has thus adapted his narrative to maintain the internal coherence of the work, while still playing with the fictional aspects. The archive was once said to be active from 1998 until 2008 (which roughly mirrors the actual years of its activity), but Raad has now

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settled on 1989-2004 as its official years of operation (which reflects the period when he was most interested in the questions of trauma that influenced the development of these Atlas Group artworks). The first work to bear the authorship of the Atlas Group was actually released in 2000 (*Hostage: The Bachar Tapes*), even though Raad ostensibly began making work as the Atlas Group in 1989. Many of the ideas were being worked out in the early 1990s. Raad accounts for the various, willful discrepancies with characteristically mysterious straightforwardness, framing the choice as responsive to the context of each exhibition.

Despite his forthright explanation of the Atlas Group’s invented nature, many early viewers initially believed these artworks to be historical artifacts, gradually becoming aware, over the course of a talk or the viewing of a work, of their constructed nature. At the beginning of a performance, Raad states that the archives are imaginary, but he then proceeds to tell the stories as though they were all true; moreover, he often steps out of character to make comments about details of actual events in the civil war. Today, the original trend has reversed itself, with audiences approaching his work as though it were all an elaborate joke. This further complicates readings of his work because even the aspects of it that are indeed factually accurate, or the comments he makes with respect to real, present-day political situations, are treated with suspicion by audiences. However, as early as 2002, Raad stated:

I also 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.\textsuperscript{12}

The branching arrangement of the archive’s contents and Raad’s precision labeling
mechanism are just two of the modes borrowed from institutional archives, helping
to lend the project its “weighty associations with authority.” On one hand, the
author-based organizing structure of the project mirrors how many actual archives
index their holdings. On the other hand, Raad’s archive displays idiosyncrasies
typical of pre-digital collections.

Much writing on the archival in contemporary art uses the term \textit{archive} in a
very general sense to mean any impulse toward collecting.\textsuperscript{13} The 1997 exhibition
\textit{Deep Storage}, curated by Ingrid Schaffner, presented the first large-scale
investigation of how artists have explored the themes of collecting, storing, indexing,
and archiving, from historical examples like Aby Warburg’s \textit{Mnemosyne Atlas} and
Marcel Duchamp’s \textit{Boîte en valise}, through conceptual art and pop (On Kawara and
Andy Warhol), to the conceptually driven, photo-based projects of Gerhard Richter,
Hans Peter Feldmann, and Christian Boltanski.\textsuperscript{14} In contemporary artistic
explorations of the archive, it has become clear that photography and film have
emerged as the “preeminent forms of archival material,” and that the last century’s
considerable audiovisual media output—and its intersection with news journalism
and civic undertakings—has provided a fertile ground for investigative artistic

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 41.
\textsuperscript{13} See, for example, Hal Foster’s \textit{Archival Impulse}. In contrast, Albers’s dissertation,
“Archive/Atlas/Album,” is helpful here because it focuses the use of the three terms, while allowing
for overlap between these categories.
\textsuperscript{14} Gassner et al., \textit{Deep Storage}. 
practices.\textsuperscript{15} Okwui Enwezor’s 2008 exhibition \textit{Archive Fever} explored the appropriation, interpretation, and interrogation of archival structures and materials in contemporary art, identifying photography and film as “the principal vehicles of these artistic practices.”\textsuperscript{16} Enwezor likens the authority and truth values of an archive to its realism: “The archive achieves its authority and quality of veracity, its evidentiary function, and interpretive power—in short, its reality—through a series of designs that unite structure and function.”\textsuperscript{17}

The Atlas Group, however, defies typical definitions of an archive, even an artist’s archive. A useful comparison example, also featured in Enwezor’s exhibition, is Zoe Leonard’s \textit{The Fae Richards Photo Archive} (1993-1996), which imagines a mid-century photographic album of a black American film actor (Fig. 2.3). This “archive” (which actually takes the form of pages from a photo album) was produced in collaboration with filmmaker Cheryl Dunye. Dozens of actors are featured in the seventy-eight representative photographs, ostensibly ranging from the 1920s to the 1970s, which stage the photographable moments of Richards’s supposed life. Richards is shown as a child in Philadelphia, as a movie star in the 1930s and 1940s, in mid-life during the civil rights era of the 1960s, and finally as an older woman in the early 1970s. Enwezor notes,

Period authenticity is further augmented by giving the resulting photographs a treatment of patina—intentionally aged, ripped and serrated at the corners, cracked, or sepia-toned with a hint of solarization. These strategies are intended to enhance the believability of the overall work but, contradictorily,

\textsuperscript{15} Enwezor, \textit{Archive Fever}, 11.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 16.
they highlight its produced nature, not least because Leonard shows viewers the casting list of the characters.\textsuperscript{18}

Unlike Leonard’s archival imitations, Raad’s documents are more visibly legible as constructed, even though they are also more readily confused with actual documents due to the convincing (if bizarre) framing narratives Raad employs. The aesthetic and conceptual force of Atlas Group projects derives from their charged conjunction of idiosyncratic visual forms and the narrative data that supposedly account for them. Their peculiar inversions and formal idiosyncrasies are supposed to read as preposterously \textit{sui generis}, and as logical impossibilities under any truth regime. In other words, they are not designed to function as if they were real.

Another dimension of the Atlas Group’s archival logic that serves both conceptual aims and the work’s real existence in the art market is the dating system adopted by Raad. Each individual Atlas Group artwork carries two dates. The first indicates the ostensible year of creation by its fictional author; the second refers to the year of its actual production by Raad. This double dating system enables galleries and museums to keep track of production dates while also allowing Raad to maintain the coherence of the archive’s internal narrative.\textsuperscript{19} This artifice poses interpretive challenges for any historian of Raad’s work. While it is important to cast a critical eye on the artist’s own biography, Raad explains away his restless shifting of the project’s chronological timeline as simply an enacting of the project’s

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 45.
\textsuperscript{19} This has not always been the case, but it has become necessary to have an accurate dating method for art sales and record keeping. An alternate way of doing this would have been to indicate the attributed date as part of the title and then give the production date separately, but it seems important to Raad that the dates be given as actual. This double dating method is also commonly used with photographic reprints or editions, such as with the first date referring either to the date of the negative or the first edition and the second date referring to the year of the reprint.
conceptual logic—allowing mutable narratives to shift as needed in the absence of an official history of the wars.

The English philosopher Peter Osborne claims that Raad’s use of scattered, seemingly haphazard dates and obviously self-contradictory timelines is one of the most prominent public signifiers of the project’s fiction, designed to signal its constructedness.\(^{20}\) However, Osborne’s reading of Raad’s work as a whole overstates the fictional aspects of the Atlas Group, and it typifies a common interpretive response to Raad’s works when he calls fiction the Atlas Group’s “guiding hand.”\(^{21}\) Osborne writes that these projects “transform documentary material into art by means of fiction posing, via the documentary form, as facts.”\(^{22}\) Osborne is so concerned with fiction that he misses the truth contained within the project, calling Bitar, for example, a fictional character without realizing (as he could have discovered via a simple web search) that he is actually based upon a real person.

In any case, the variable dating of both specific works and the entire Atlas Group forces the question of how deeply a non-Lebanese art audience can understand the density of the Lebanese civil wars, which are in essence a prerequisite for a full understanding of the projects. Raad’s double-dating system also accounts for a formal dimension of the presentation, which is that each of Raad’s works are reproductions, never originals: “notebook” pages are scanned, marked up by hand, digitally collaged or otherwise layered, and then reprinted as a single, seamless

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\(^{20}\) Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 31.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 33.

\(^{22}\) Ibid. Osborne’s larger argument is that “to be contemporary it must be inscribed in the globally transnational.”
digital print.\textsuperscript{23} The works always refer to an absent original, but in this case it is one that never existed.\textsuperscript{24} This notion of a phantom original finds wider analytic currency in trauma studies. Ulrich Baer, who writes in the fields of trauma studies and comparative literature, cites the French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche’s observation that trauma is the failed translation of an unremembered experience, but adds, “Yet trauma is more than a simple failure of translation; it is also the result of the perplexing condition of a missing original.”\textsuperscript{25} Baer points out that the “originary traumatic event” is the memory of the encounter or event, rather than the event itself. That is to say, even the “original” trauma is itself a rendering of experience, a second-order abstraction; it is not a precise copy, but rather an artifact of the encounter. In trauma, there is no original.

Indeed, the notion that traumatic experience is defined by the perpetual failure to translate and render an originary event is a fundamental claim of trauma studies.\textsuperscript{26} Traumatic experience typically precludes describing, discussing, or coming to terms with it. As Eric Rosenberg writes in Trauma and Visuality in Modernity,

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\textsuperscript{23} In rare cases, there exist multiple versions that are actively exhibited, as in We Decided To Let Them Say “We Are Convinced,” Twice, or in the case of Sweet Talk, which is sometimes included in The Atlas Group and sometimes considered independently from it. This is why some later works attributed to the Atlas Group are sometimes included and sometimes excluded from this rubric. At other times, a variant was produced but deemed unsuccessful by Raad. In such cases, the original version has been “phased out” (as in alternate versions of the Fakhouri “notebooks”), while in other cases Raad has remade earlier works and the first version has been removed from circulation (e.g., I Was Overcome ...). The files also occasionally switch categories to reflect the changing nature of the archive and of history (e.g., they are attributed to a different character, or other details of the storyline, dates, or acquisition are changed).
\textsuperscript{24} Similarly, the projects often refer to other works in a given series, which also do not exist. For example, the inclusion of Notebook 38 and Notebook 72 in Fakhouri’s file indicates that the historian also made notebooks numbered 1-37 and 38-71, but no such notebooks exist.
\textsuperscript{26} See Cathy Caruth, “Trauma and Experience,” in Trauma: Explorations in Memory, 3-12.
\end{flushright}
trauma “disallows narrative closure.” While closure may be impossible, Raad’s entire project entails the creation of an archive of people whose encounter with trauma has unleashed tremendous creative, productive, communicative forces in them. In essence, every character in the Atlas Group, upon his or her own unique engagement with the devastation and violence of the Lebanese wars, became an artist.

The carefully delineated structure of the Atlas Group archive often masks the fictionalized nature of the project itself, which appears simultaneously logical and strange. As André Lepecki has noted, the project as a whole evokes “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.” Raad’s fictions and conceits sometimes seem to find notable parallels in literature and in film, more often than in the visual arts. Literary touchstones for Raad can be found in the work of the German novelist and essayist W. G. Sebald, writing after World War II, and the Indian-Pakistani British novelist Salman Rushdie, whose novels are set in partition-era India. Both authors’ works are responses to protracted traumas. Rushdie’s characters encounter fantastic and magical scenarios in the wake of India’s and Pakistan’s fractured identities, while Sebald weaves found photographs

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27 Rosenberg, *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity*, 41.
with quasi-biographical narratives of exile, grounding the images in newly imagined backstories, all under the shadow of Europe’s mid-century disintegration into war and genocide.

Sebald, a non-Jewish German born at the end of World War II, attempted to come to terms with Germany’s traumatic past by composing stories based upon grains of truth, personal history, and collective memory, creating partial fictions around the experience of exile. As Philip Schlesinger has shown, Sebald’s writing employed “indirect and tangential” information to reveal a history that is not ready to be confronted head-on.30 He illustrated his stories with purportedly found photographs, supposedly to authenticate his fiction, but the photographs often reveal inconsistencies or seem to contradict the location or object described. This contradiction becomes an agent of the works’ affective force. As Mark Andersen writes, “Sebald made an ethical point of not presenting history as a seamless, seemingly objective narrative of ‘real’ events.”31 Although the specific events described in his novels are unverifiable, they nonetheless allow his readers to imagine the condition and experience of exile and to consider historical detail and universal trauma simultaneously.

The wider notion that Raad enacts in his Atlas Group work—that replicas without originals might be the most authentic mode of conveying this history—finds an echo in a canonical film on traumatic experience, *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959), by Alain Resnais and Marguerite Duras. Cathy Caruth describes the ethical

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dilemma of the film: “the unremitting problem of how not to betray the past.”  
Originally commissioned to make a documentary about the bombing of Hiroshima, 
Resnais ultimately decided not to create a traditional documentary, even after he 
had spent months collecting archive footage for the project. Instead, the film is a 
narrative fiction that takes place in Hiroshima years after the end of the war. It 
revolves around an extended conversation between two lovers, a Japanese man and 
a French woman, who would have been on opposite sides during the war. The 
question of seeing as expressed in the film—“You have seen nothing in 
Hiroshima”—has been of particular importance to Raad. “The Japanese man insists 
that his well-meaning French lover had seen nothing in Hiroshima, despite the 
museums and monuments she had visited there, despite the books and films she had 
consulted, despite the testimonies she had heard.” Caruth writes, “In his refusal to 
make a documentary on Hiroshima, Resnais paradoxically implies that it is direct 
archival footage that cannot maintain the very specificity of the event.”

Raad’s own form of storytelling, a blend of novelistic fiction and 
documentary research, operates in the Atlas Group on several levels. Certain aspects 
of the stories are internal to the works, with handwritten and typed text physically 
embedded within the images, while other aspects operate in parallel with the physical 
artwork, as in the case of Raad’s titles, captions and spoken narratives, which 
provide additional layers of storytelling. These stories do not articulate a cohesive

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32 Caruth, “Literature and the Enactment of Memory,” in Rosenberg, Trauma and Visuality in Modernity, 190-191. 
34 Caruth, “Literature and the Enactment of Memory,” 191 (emphasis added).
narrative, but are woven together with internal reference to flesh out a reality of their own. They echo the claims made by Walter Benjamin in his 1936 essay “The Storyteller,” which made a case for embodied storytelling, with its culturally embedded wisdom and communicative symbolic system, over both the raw factual data of newspapers and print media and the isolated analytical experience of the novel.\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Stories} are cultural tradition: they maintain the past in order to make it legible to the present. Yet they are specifically contingent upon the person who tells them. Storytelling, Benjamin writes,

\begin{quote}
does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel. Storytellers tend to begin their story with a presentation of the circumstances in which they themselves have learned what is to follow, unless they simply pass it off as their own experience.\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

Whereas the historian’s task is to explain the events of history, the storyteller (or chronicler) need not be “concerned with an accurate concatenation of definite events”; rather he is free to make evident “the way these are embedded in the great inscrutable course of the world.”\textsuperscript{37} The artist is thus free to present events from history as fictionalized models of the world, in a way that the historian is not. Benjamin’s text illuminates two aspects of Raad’s use of stories. First, they rely on cultural wisdom to be legible, second, they function even when history (in the form of a coherent narrative account of the wars) does not. They are an alternative mode

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Benjamin, \textit{The Storyteller}, 361-378.}
\footnote{Ibid., 367.}
\footnote{Ibid., 370.}
\end{footnotes}
of narrating the wars, and they are arguably more realistic and accurately reflective of the experience than a factual, historical account would be.

**Character, Pseudonym, Alias, Alter Ego**

Through the range of named contributors in the Atlas Group, Raad’s apparent roles as archivist and historian are brought to the fore, while his role as the author-artist is downplayed. However, as we will see in this section, he is also a storyteller, although Raad’s authorship is creatively dispersed into various fictionalized identities. Each of these alter egos comes with an elaborate backstory, giving the Atlas Group an embodied existence while allowing Raad to theorize different aspects of the civil war experience. The multiple personae also allow the works to be read as more than simply Raad’s own personal response to witnessing or learning of tragic events during the war. His characters often experience internal conflicts, which point to the subjectivity of their experience but also avoid reducing them to simple types.\(^{38}\) This inherent complexity enables the works to move beyond sectarian divisions, as does Raad’s choice of names, which do not identify his characters based on religious affiliation (in Lebanon, one’s religious sect is still marked on identity cards, and the ambiguity of Raad’s characters can be read as a conscious effort against such identity tracking). As Sarah Rogers has pointed out, “By deferring artistic authority to imagined witnesses and fabricated documents, Raad disrupts the process whereby

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\(^{38}\) Demos discusses the “internal multiplicity” of Raad’s characters in *The Migrant Image*, 194.
representations (historic and artistic) acquire their disciplinary grounding and legitimacy.”

Raad’s Atlas Group has produced an entire cast of characters, all framed within a larger, invented structure. The conceit of fictional characters has also been a consistent feature for the other Lebanese artists of Raad’s generation. In *Wonder Beirut* (1997-2006), Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige refer to the work of a fictional photographer named Abdallah Farah, who made postcards of Beirut. According to the artists, his studio was destroyed during the war, but some of the images were salvaged. After Farah died, his son began burning the postcard images:

> Three years after the start of the war, and a few months after his father’s death, he began to damage his postcard negatives, burning them little by little—an intentional process of deterioration—as if seeking a way to have their states conform to his present.

In this willful act of destruction, he enacts a traumatized logic comparable to that of the Atlas Group. As the war raged around him, “[Farah] imitated the destruction of buildings, which were progressively disappearing before his eyes, ravished by bombardment and street battles.” But this burning can also be read as a creative act: the son alters the photographs in order to inscribe or *update* their indexical value. Hadjithomas and Joreige explain, “He spent his nights slowly burning his

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39 Rogers, “Postwar Art,” 52.
40 Rogers points out that this name is likely a reference to the Abdallah frères (or Abdallah Brothers, active from 1870 to the 1890s), a nineteenth-century Armenian photography studio. “The Abdallah frères studio in Beirut was commissioned by Sultans Abdul Aziz and Abdul Hamid II to photograph the institutional signs of the Ottoman Empire's infrastructural achievements—its railroads, ports, hospitals, and other civil architectural projects—including its projects in Beirut.” Ibid., 58.
42 Ibid.
calendar and postcard clichés, making them correspond to his shattered *reality*” (Fig. 2.4).  

This fictional conceit typifies the Lebanese situation, where visual abstraction of imagery (here, through its mutilation by burning) produces a more “accurate” rendering of experienced reality. Hadjithomas and Joreige’s character burns photographs to reinscribe them with *his* reality, inverting the indexical function of the photograph. T. J. Demos views this destruction as “productive engagement,” a way for “the traumatic aspects of the subjective relation to representation to be confronted, rather than repressed.” Inversion, in fact, is a common denominator for Raad’s characters, who are often presented with the swapping of the norms of a particular career path for their opposites: historians who gamble on inaccuracy, a surveillance operator who refuses to observe his target, a bomb investigator who does not trust photographic evidence, or army intelligence experts for whom photographs produce amnesia. These precisely inverted realities can be read as “hysterical symptoms” of the war, just as the obsessive production of these character stories might be read as Raad’s own hysterical symptom, his own response to the experience of the war years. By way of explaining his approach to fiction (as distinct from simply false), Raad explains, “Today, we find ourselves in a position where what we take to be true is what rings true at the level of the psyche.” Raad goes on to explain that the traumatized subject often invents fantasies and memories to narrate or explain a shocking event. Those fantasizes and memories cannot be

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41 Ibid.
43 Raad quoted in Demos, 190.
dismissed as merely fictitious and therefore meaningless, since they manifest the truth and reality of the subject’s state of mind. “I think the hysterical symptom then becomes, in a way, a document of something.”\(^{46}\)

Such reversals are highly visible as both a symptom of trauma and a marker of the fiction. Each character, in some way, is a projected alter ego of Raad himself, a version of who he might have been had he remained in Lebanon. The eminent Dr. Fadl Fakhouri and the teenage Walid Raad are close ciphers, (re-)visions of his past and of his alternative future. Others, like Souheil Bachar and the semi-fictionalized explosives expert Youssef Bitar, are projections of his mature research and knowledge about the war.\(^{47}\) Still others are poetic thought experiments, or vessels to frame formal experiments as in the characters Nahia Hassan and Hannah Mrad. Supposedly Lebanese Army experts in the fields of explosives and topography, respectively, Hassan created an abstract sculpture based on photographs of bomb sites while Mrad had lapses in memory due to her reliance on photographs.\(^{48}\)

These characters also represent a form of navigating the connection between the material and Raad’s own biography, which he has been at pains to keep separate from his art production over the years. Since Raad followed the second half of the civil war from the United States while his family remained in Beirut, his experience of war was largely imagined; that is, he had to recreate it based on media reports,

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\(^{46}\) Raad, quoted in Ibid.
\(^{47}\) For discussion of Bachar and Bitar, see Chapters One and Four, respectively.
\(^{48}\) Hassan is a former explosives expert in the Lebanese Army. Her contribution includes “Oh God,” He Said, Talking to a Tree (2004/2008), composed of thirty-one digital photographs and a floor sculpture titled I Was Overcome by a Momentary Panic at the Thought That They Might Be Right (1998). Mrad is a former senior topographer in the Lebanese Army’s Directorate of Geographic Affairs, whose file contains twelve large-format photographs of explosive devices, collected as I Think I Might Die before I Get a Rifle (1989-2008).
family news, and secondhand narratives. Thus, Raad’s process of appropriating a real narrative (or object) and channeling it into an imagined narrative tends to suggest an ideal form of authorship that reflects the secondhand nature of his experience.

Perhaps because these characters do not recognize their own condition, none perceive their stories as a form of testimony: their individual responses to events were ostensibly created as personal records, not intended to be shared with a wider audience. Their presence in the Atlas Group’s collection is presented as a fluke or a fortunate coincidence. Even if the characters were real, the viewer is no longer in a position to act on their stories, verify them, or somehow correlate the supplied narrative with the person’s particular response. The war is long over. These documents do not make any attempt to determine justice, victimhood, or legality: perpetrators are not named, political affiliations are not elaborated upon, and there is no judgment of right or wrong, victim or perpetrator. Raad’s resistance to these categories of description can be read as repudiations of their supposed value.

Let’s Be Honest

The character “Walid Raad,” a teenage photographer living in Beirut in the early 1980s, has a file in the archive’s Authored Documents category, containing two projects that he supposedly “donated” to the Atlas Group in 1998, though actually they were created later. Let’s Be Honest, the Weather Helped (1998/2006-2007) is a “notebook” composed of seventeen digital prints, each a scanned open spread from a meticulously kept journal, detailing bullet casings found in Beirut’s streets, collaged with photographs diagramming their ostensible damage to the
architecture.\textsuperscript{49} \textit{We Decided To Let Them Say, We Are Convinced, Twice} (2002/2006) is a series of fifteen black-and-white photographs of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon (discussed in detail in Chapter Three below). Of course, neither of these final artworks was actually produced when Raad was a teenager, but both hew closely to images or actions from that time period. The original negatives used in \textit{We Decided} were, in fact, shot by the fifteen-year-old artist, and the notebook spreads in \textit{Let’s Be Honest} are modeled on actual journals that he kept at the time, as well as his childhood fascination with found bullets. Raad was already an avid photographer by age fifteen, and had collected bullets and casings from nearby streets and buildings in the aftermath of explosions and gunfights, keeping notebooks with assembled information, images, and notes about the sites. In graduate school, Raad began revisiting these old negatives and his practice of keeping notebooks, and he ultimately recreated these materials into new works under the established logic of the Atlas Group, completing the works in 2006-2007.

The pages in \textit{Let’s Be Honest} are photographed from above, with the book set open upon a black background (Fig. 2.5). Each plate is composed of four elements: the open notebook page, handwritten notations and drawings, a black-and-white photograph of a building or street in Beirut, and brightly colored paper dots that have been pasted over the surface of the original photograph. The dots vary in size and color; some pages have multiple colors of dots while others have clusters of identical colors. According to Raad, the placement of the dots on the

\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Let’s Be Honest, the Weather Helped} was initially created in three parts: part one (Saudi Arabia, US, NATO, UK, Israel, Switzerland, China), 1984-2007/2006; part two (Finland, Germany, Greece, Egypt, Belgium), 1984-2007/2007; part three (Iraq, Italy, Libya, Romania, Venezuela), 1984-2007/2006 (alternate date: 1998/2006-2007).
photographs corresponds to the location of bullet holes, their size represents the relative scale of the ammunition in question, and their colors correlate the found shell casings with the bullets’ countries of production.\textsuperscript{50}

References to Raad’s childhood practice of collecting bullets are peppered throughout the Atlas Group, as in the video \textit{The Dead Weight of a Quarrel Hangs} (1999), when Dr. Fakhouri is said to have spent hours “re-arranging his son’s bullet collection.” According to Raad, he and his friends even traded bullets, as other youths trade baseball cards or stickers, to fill in the gaps when a particular size or color was missing from a collection. The project’s statement claims,

Like many around me in Beirut in the late 1970s, I collected bullets and shrapnel. I would run out to the streets after a night or day of shelling to remove them from walls, cars, and trees. I kept daily notes of where I found every bullet and photographed the sites of my findings, covering the holes with dots that corresponded to the bullet’s diameter and the mesmerizing hues I found on the bullet’s tips.\textsuperscript{51}

Raad later discovered that countries and manufacturers have color-coding systems for bullets. If, for example, as Raad explained at a lecture in 2007, he had in his collection an M16 bullet with a red tip, he could deduce where this bullet came from. By extrapolating from the colors, one could theoretically produce a list of countries that had supplied arms to various Lebanese militias.\textsuperscript{52}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{50} Countries or organizations identified in the work—implicated by the color-coded bullets, and thus having a stake in the black-market arms trade that pervaded the civil war period—are Saudi Arabia, the United States, NATO, the United Kingdom, Israel, Switzerland, China, Finland, Germany, Greece, Egypt, Belgium, Iraq, Italy, Libya, Romania, and Venezuela.
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\textsuperscript{51} theatlasgroup.org
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\textsuperscript{52} Raad, “Seminar 3.” United Nations Plaza, February 31, 2007. The United Nations Plaza was a forum organized by Anton Vidokle in collaboration with Liam Gillick, Boris Groys, Martha Rosler, Raad, Jalal Toufic, Nikolaus Hirsch, and Tirdad Zolfghadr. It took place in 2007 in Berlin as a series of talks presented by artists, writers, and theorists, and it was structured as a seminar and residency program.
\end{flushright}
What appears to be a purely formal interest can be read as information about the political economy of the war. Raad started imagining that he could identify all of these bullets, and that, as a young teen, he had essentially started to do so, taking photographs of the locations where he had found bullets and shrapnel and marking the precise sites of the discoveries on the photographs:

It took me ten years to realize that ammunition manufacturers follow distinct color codes to mark and identify their cartridges and shells. It also took me another ten years to realize that my notebooks in part catalogue seventeen countries and organizations that continue to supply the various militias and armies fighting in Lebanon: Belgium, China, Egypt, Finland, Germany, Greece, Iraq, Italy, Israel, Libya, NATO, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Switzerland, USA, UK and Venezuela.  

Years later, when he embarked upon the Atlas Group project, Raad imagined the notebook in which he would color-code his bullet collection. Let’s Be Honest reimagines this early impulse, but in the Atlas Group versions Raad used a munitions handbook as the backdrop for new montages. The photographs used in this series depict scenes such as a deserted boulevard, its concrete median riddled with a row of blue dots representing holes from a spray of bullets, or an apartment building covered with many colors, indicating multiple assailants and types of artillery.

In Let’s Be Honest (Egypt), the details of an apartment building are largely obscured by the accumulation of hundreds of small paper dots, ranging from tiny green specks to pale yellow circles nearly a centimeter in diameter. Seven distinct size and color combinations dot the surface of the image, abstracting a vast and violent spate of damage into a spectrum of colorful circles. While each photograph is itself a

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33 theatlasgroup.org
marker of violence, the colored dots transcribe the violence into a secondary level of markings or of analytical representations. They disrupt the surface of the image and make the scale of the violence more graphically apparent, if also more visually and viscerally abstract. The varying multi-colored circles both call attention to the damage they hide (by obscuring them) and also seem to be trying to cover them, as if in a hopeless attempt to bandage the buildings’ wounds. In *Let’s Be Honest (Israel)*, where the sheer number of colored dots reaches absurd proportions, the viewer can sense the psychic trauma of the war in Raad’s obsessive attempt to cover every single bullet hole (Fig. 2.6). Here, Raad appears to be symbolically patching holes and restoring the destroyed structure.

Formally, these dots call to mind Gabriel Orozco’s blown-up pixels in his series of enlarged sports photographs, or the playful compositions of John Baldessari’s famous dot paintings. In *Atomists: Jump Over* (1996), Orozco (b. 1962, Mexico) enlarged a sports photograph so that the grain is visible (Fig. 2.7). Dots are placed on top of the photos, and the dot colors are sampled from the background of the original image, echoing the dot grain of newspaper images and adding a geometric structure. The dots partially obscure the image below, canceling or, as Orozco intends, “reveal[ing] the photo in a different way.” As with Raad’s works, the *Atomists* series is shown as enlarged and seamless photographic prints, rather than as the original collages.

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54 I do not claim that Orozco’s work influenced Raad, but merely wish to note the similarity between the two artists’ means of canceling or highlighting aspects of a photograph.
Whereas the circles in Orozco’s works can be read as a formal play on photographic grain or digital pixels, the circular overlays in Baldessari’s photographic pieces from the 1980s have a different purpose. In Person On Bed (Blue): With Large Shadow (Orange) and Lamp (Green), (2004), for example, Baldessari (b. 1931, United States) covers the faces of characters from film stills with oil-painted circles, rendering the actors anonymous (Fig. 2.8). The Austrian curator Rainer Fuchs describes how Baldessari “divert[s] attention from individuating details and focus[es] it instead on the gestures and interrelationships of the separate figures.” In this way, Fuchs continues, “people become symbolic figures, but at the same time they point back to the fact that feature films represent the real symbolically, and actors are in essence disguised and masked players who conceal their own identities behind adopted roles.”

Fuchs compares Baldessari’s combining of “the different languages of painting and photography, of colorfully abstract dots and black-and-white media images” to what the Russian literary critic and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin’s referred to as hybridization, “a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter.” This is also a useful formulation for Raad’s work, which hybridizes the factographic capacities of documentary images with the open field of pure geometric abstraction: the color fields are made into carriers of

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36 Rainer Fuchs, “Uncovering the Hidden,” in John Baldessari et al., John Baldessari: Pure Beauty (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Munich and New York: DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2009), 244.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., 246. Fuchs quoting Russian literary critic and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin. Fuchs also quotes the German literary theorist Wolfgang Iser’s writing on blanks, noting that blanks “set in motion the interaction that takes place between text and reader, and to a certain extent they also regulate it.”
technical ordnance data and registers of degrees of damage, while the documentary photographs become the background of the theater stage—a set for a fictional narrative (though one that is built upon a memory and that, in essence, was historically true). In this way, Raad combines objective facts with subjective interpretation. By incorporating disparate elements into a seamless photographic image (one that appears to represent an actual notebook page), Raad enacts a dialectic between reality and interpretation. Although countries do have color-coding systems for munitions, it is not actually possible to decipher the type and origin of bullets from Raad’s diagrammatic images. Nor are the source photographs objective records of specific shelling sites: they are not captioned with the location, date, or other identifying information. As curator Helene Chouteau Matikian has rightly observed, the facts Raad presents “are never offered at face value, but always trouble each other.”

This teenage photographer named Walid Raad should be distinguished from the Walid Raad who is the author-agent of the car-bomb research projects *We Can Make Rain but No One Came To Ask* (2006) and *My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair: Engines* (2001/2003). I see the young Raad as distinct from the other fictional characters, from the separate characterization of Raad as an adult, and also from the actual, present-day Raad himself. By backdating his own artistic production, Raad bridges the spaces of fact and fiction, bringing his former self into the present

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60 *Thin Neck* is discussed in Chapter Three. See Chapter Four for a discussion of *We Can Make Rain and Sweet Talk.*
and extending the Atlas Group back into the past. These kinds of small slippages quietly allow the Atlas Group’s parallel universe to encroach upon our “real” one. By including himself as a contributor to the archive, Raad establishes and confirms his own links to Lebanon, which originally served to give him more credibility in his performances as the representative of the Atlas Group, because he could say, “I saw this,” or “I made this.” Raad also becomes a witness to the war, rather than merely an archivist with no firsthand experience of the events documented in the collection. Although collecting bullets after a firefight, seeing familiar buildings reduced to rubble, hearing explosions and gunfire, or seeing airstrikes from a distance may not be the same as witnessing physical violence, the evidence presented opens up the possibility, neither confirmed nor denied, that Raad also witnessed more traumatic incidents of death and destruction. Raad’s witnessing, from whatever position or distance, of the war also lends further credibility to the other fictional contributors to the Atlas Group. All Lebanese citizens living in the country during the civil wars can make a claim to have experienced the effects of war firsthand. One’s relative proximity to violent events impacting one’s immediate environment ought not to be questioned by any outsider claiming the right to determine whether or not this witnessing was valid or traumatizing.

Another central character in the Atlas Group is the fictional Dr. Fadl Fakhouri, listed as the author of the projects *Already Been in a Lake of Fire* (1991/2003), *Missing Lebanese Wars* (1989/1998), and *Miraculous Beginnings/No, Illness Is Neither Here Nor There* (1993/2003). Though he was allegedly a professional social scientist, Fakhouri’s notebooks, journals, films, and images (which the Atlas Group exhibits as archival documents) display paranoia,
repetitions, logical impossibilities, and hopeless, unprovable theoretical propositions: gambling over a repeated representational discrepancy, tracking down the make and model of every exploding car in the Lebanese wars, photographing every sign of medical offices in Beirut, or pausing to take a photograph every time (and only when) he believed the wars to be over.

Our first introduction to this character is in the 1996 video *The Dead Weight of a Quarrel Hangs*, which predates the Atlas Group and contains several early versions of what would become its core projects. In this prototype version of *Missing Lebanese Wars*, we learn of Dr. Fadl Fakhouri and his wife, Zainab Fakhouri, their subsequent divorce, and the historian’s death in 1993, a sequence of events loosely modeled on the lives of Raad’s own parents.⁶¹ Ostensibly drawing from Mrs. Fakhouri’s diaries, the video tells three stories. First, it explains that major Lebanese historians were supposedly avid gamblers who attended horse races during the wars and bet on the track photographer’s margin of error when capturing the winning horse as it crossed the finish line. The story of these gambling historians is told through voiceover, with background crowd noise captured during the races and a dissolving montage of crowd photographs at a racetrack, cropped tightly on the spectators, with dot-grain newspaper photographs of the horse races and short clips of animated footage of galloping horses.

Second, we are then informed that Zainab Fakhouri left her husband in 1981, taking seventeen sentimental objects with her which had accompanied her on a series of forced exiles: from Palestine to Jordan in 1947, from Jordan to Lebanon in 1967,

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⁶¹ In a personal interview in May 2012, Raad described how he later cut out the sections about Zainab and their divorce, deeming them too close to his own biography.
from Lebanon to Sierra Leone in 1969, and back to Lebanon in 1971. Six of these objects were apparently chosen because they appeared in photographs produced on the exact days when she left the cities of Birzeit, Beirut, Amman, and Freetown. Raad’s maternal grandparents had in fact left Palestine for Jordan in 1947, settling in Lebanon in 1967, and Raad and his parents moved to Sierra Leone temporarily from 1969 until 1971. In the video, this narrative is paired with cutout photographs of the objects, along with other footage of Lebanon and the original photographs before these objects were cut out. These photographs were taken from Raad’s own family albums. On his first trip back to Lebanon in the early 1990s, Raad encountered several old family photographs that contained objects that were familiar to him but which were not in his father’s house (where Raad and his siblings lived after his parents separated), because his mother had taken them with her when she left.\(^{62}\)

The third story tells us that Zainab left her husband after learning of his gambling and that he subsequently sought refuge in solitude, passing his days listening to his own lectures and rearranging his son’s bullet collections, while repeating to himself that “the impact of a bullet is never proportional to its physical dimensions” This is a veiled reference to Raad’s own childhood during the war, when he actually collected spent bullet casings as discussed above. The imagined, post-retirement isolation may or may not refer to Raad’s father or to former President Elias Sarkis, to whom some of Fakhouri’s works were initially attributed. As discussed in Chapter One, Sarkis was a first cousin of Raad’s father. Elected

\(^{62}\) Ibid.
around the outbreak of the civil wars in 1975, Sarkis ended his term in the midst of the Israeli invasion of 1982, having failed to create lasting peace between Lebanon’s warring Christian and Muslim factions. In an interview with this author, Raad noted that Sarkis’s presidency (1976-1982) coincided with the most crucial period of the civil war (from its beginning to the Israeli invasion) and that, after Sarkis’s death, Raad realized he had been too young to understand this and wished that he had been able to learn more about his presidency. Thus, Fakhouri’s notebooks and films can be read as Raad’s imagining of some of the disappointments and coping strategies that a man in Sarkis’s position might have felt, given his inability to help resolve the protracted and violent conflict.

In the transition from the video *Dead Weight* to the final Atlas Group works, Fakhouri grew into an independent and fully developed character. His background narrative was edited during the late 1990s and early 2000s and became less directly transcriptive of Raad’s own family story. Raad’s distancing of this character from its inspiration point was part of a general reimagining of his earliest projects away from his own biography. Fakhouri became less rooted in the imagined responses of a disillusioned Sarkis to the war, and he grew instead into an abstraction embodying the kinds of responses to wartime trauma that Raad insisted were possible. As Raad explained in a seminar at United Nations Plaza in 2007,

> It’s not about just telling stories or pointing out in the abstract that everything is mediated or constructed; it’s about the particular story being told. That matters tremendously to me. Not just in the abstract: that all facts are mediated and we should approach them all with suspicion, I don’t know if that’s true or not. I feel these are the stories I need to tell. … Of all the stories

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63 Conversation with the author, May 2012.
to tell, why this one? Why historians who bet on failures? Not simply that all facts are mediated.\textsuperscript{64}

Notably, Fakhouri is one of only two Atlas Group characters (along with Souheil Bachar, discussed in Chapter One) who are physically depicted within a project. In \textit{Civilizationally, We Do Not Dig Holes To Bury Ourselves} (1958-1959/2003), a young Dr. Fakhouri is seen on a trip to Paris and Rome in a suite of twenty-four black-and-white photographs (Fig. 2.9). Dressed smartly in a dark suit, he poses confidently in front of famous monuments and buildings, including the Notre Dame cathedral and the Eiffel Tower. In nearly every example, he is shown looking away—not only from the camera but also from the monuments themselves. These photographs were in fact photographs of Raad’s father on a European trip in the late 1950s. Again, this early characterization has its roots in personal, family experiences and imagery. According to the Atlas Group narrative, these “self-portraits” were made on Fakhouri’s only trip outside Lebanon, in 1958-1959. Supposedly “discovered” in a small brown envelope, they are the only extant photographs of him. The original photographs were scanned and reprinted as artifacts laid upon a plain white page. The year and location of each photograph are printed along the edge of the print, along with the file name. Based initially on Sarkis, a famous family member, and then depicted strikingly by found images of Raad’s father, Fakhouri can be read, at least in part, as a projection of who Raad might have become had he not left Lebanon. Fakhouri is an imagined future self (though set in what is now the past), just as the Walid Raad who authored the notebook \textit{Let’s Be Honest} is an imagined past self.

The artist Akram Zaatari notes that Fakhouri’s (and Raad’s own) obsessive collecting finds a parallel in the work of another Lebanese artist, Rabih Mroué (b. 1967). In *Looking for a Missing Employee* (2003) Mroué collected daily newspaper clippings about the case of a kidnapped civil servant, Ra’fat Sleiman, until his body was found some months later. As the story unfolded, “it seemed wise to him [Mroué] … —as it did to Dr. Fakhoury [and by extension, to Raad]—to delay the reading of the news until the case was closed.”65 Like Mroué, Raad had collected newspaper clippings of horse race photographs for over a year before turning them into the “notebook” attributed to Fakhouri, who then replaces Raad as the obsessive collector. Similarly, as Zaatari explains,

Mroué’s initial motivation was not one of a passionate collector, but rather of an artist interested in using documents of actuality to understand how and where rumors surface. … The artist becomes the new historian, whose notebook preserves mysteries and unresolved patterns that his tools of reason cannot yet decipher.66

The impulse in both Raad’s and Mroué’s work to collect these facts, whether newspaper articles or photographs, can be read as an investment in realism, even if it will later be warped through the lens of storytelling.

Raad’s interest in the overlap between his own memories and the wider Lebanese cultural memory was catalyzed on his first trip back to Lebanon in the early 1990s, when he noticed photographs from his childhood that contained familiar objects no longer at his father’s house. He realized that his mother had taken these objects with her when she moved out. At the time, Raad was reading

66 Ibid.
Proust, and he became interested in retracing the history of these objects. “And [these memories] only came back when I saw pictures of these objects that used to be in our house and that all of a sudden now had become in my mother’s house. I would look at family pictures … and I would ask myself: This object that I remember and that was in our house, where is it now?” Raad found that these forgotten or suppressed memories flooded back into his mind, loaded with emotional power, and thereby triggered his interest in voluntary and involuntary memory and in the idea of memory as historical. Raad wondered aloud to an audience in 2007, “Why do we treat our relationship to the past as inaccessible? What other ways can we think the structure of memory?” He came to understand that although the civil war was over, the general amnesty granted to militia leaders meant in effect that everyone was guilty, and that many in Lebanon had a pervasive sense that nothing good would come of revisiting painful wartime memories.

The uneven development of Raad’s characters and their roles as containers for different aspects of his production point to the complex connections between memory and trauma in his work. Significantly, Raad attributes his interest in these topics to his heightened sensitivity to a quite common experience, namely the perceived distance between an adult self and one’s childhood. “I have a very clear sense of why I became interested in trauma and it has nothing to do with the civil

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69 Ibid.
war in Lebanon—absolutely nothing,” he has said.\textsuperscript{70} Instead, for Raad this interest was related to his mis-remembering or forgetting significant family events that had occurred when he was a boy: “\textit{Once I asked my sister and brother about a specific family subject and they told me stories, and it was as if I were not there. Yet, I was there and we made decisions together on a specific subject.}”\textsuperscript{71} On the other hand, some memories that Raad believed to have been of his own experience were in fact based on events that had happened to his older brother. He reflected on this awareness of faulty memory, stating that “\textit{you have images, an odor, colors, but they are not yours, they are completely someone else’s. This had a bigger impact on me than the war.}”\textsuperscript{72}

At the same time, Raad explains his adult recognition that his childhood memories were embedded in wider political and historical forces. His naïve wonder at the discrepancies in his own memories was sharpened by critical assessment of how the world at large had shaped them. In a personal interview, Raad explained that, over time, his mother had come to identify as a Lebanese Christian rather than as a Palestinian Muslim. It can be inferred that this was, in part, because she had married into a Lebanese Christian family and was thus afforded privileges and rights unavailable to Palestinians in Lebanon, who are not granted citizenship or allowed to own property. As a child, Raad claims, he was either unaware of, had forgotten about, or had suppressed the knowledge of his mother’s Palestinian identity, his father’s conservative politics (which became more radicalized during the civil war), and the fact that during the war the family lived in an area of Beirut dominated by

\textsuperscript{70} Raad, “How Would You Not Ask?”
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid. The translation from Arabic is italicized in the original.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.
anti-Palestinian militias of the Christian right. In a published interview with the writer Jalal Toufic, Raad elaborated:

Now, when I thought about it further, I could see that it was related to when my family left Palestine; why it was that we did not know that my mother was from that country; why it was that my grandmother and grandfather, who were living in Lebanon, suddenly, in 1975, left, and why we didn’t know the reason they left. … At that time, in Christian East Beirut, the Lebanese forces would conscript the young men. These questions were occurring in the same period they were conscripting us and sending us to the mountain; you would go there to fight in order to regain your village where Druze were living at that point—actually they’ve always lived there. But because you were of that area, they would take you up there. … Now, you can’t say that you can separate this event from the war and Palestine—you can’t; it’s as if they were all one knot. But at twelve or thirteen, there was no way to split them: there is this thread and this thread and this thread …

So, while Raad’s primary interest in the workings of memory emerged directly from his own loss of memory, and from the recognition of the typical gulf between one’s adult and child self, his adult recognition of the social and political context of these memories crystallized in the Atlas Group, with its mapping of memory and trauma onto each other.

Hannah Mrad, a minor character in the Atlas Group, also experiences memory gaps, in this case directly linked to her reliance on photographs as memory aids. As noted previously, Mrad is a former “explosives expert” in the Lebanese Army whose file contains twelve large-format photographs of explosive devices titled I Think I Might Die before I Get a Rifle (1989-2008). She states:

After fourteen years in the Lebanese Communist Party I was folded into the Lebanese Army’s newly established ammunition and explosives division. Months into my new assignment, I found myself unable to remember the names of the thousands of explosive devices I was meant to master. I began to

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73 Raad, conversation with author, May 2012.
74 Raad, “How Would You Not Ask?”
75 Raad, conversation with author, May 2012.
photograph them hoping that the photographs would aid my memory. They didn't and I was let go. I still blame my photographs for my release.76

Another “expert,” Nahia Hassan, is listed as a former “senior topographer in the Lebanese Army’s Directorate of Geographic Affairs.”77 Similar to Raad’s Dr. Fakhouri, Mrad and Hassan are experts in their fields, yet the documents they produce run in contrast to their presumed function. Mrad’s photographs seem to erase rather than restore her memory. Hassan, in “Oh God,” He Said, Talking to a Tree (2004/2008), digitally traces the photographic contours of images of explosions during the Israeli bombardment of Lebanon in 2006, clipped from news sources reporting on the month-long war between Israel and Hezbollah. In the floor-based sculpture I Was Overcome by a Momentary Panic at the Thought They Might Be Right (1998), Hassan creates an abstract topographic map of the country’s car bombs that yields no discernible intelligence function.

While all Raad’s characters display individual responses to the events of wartime experience, the “Anonymous” works in the Atlas Group are specifically linked to secrecy, intelligence-gathering, and covert operations. These include the 1998 video I Only Wish That I Could Weep, attributed to a Lebanese military intelligence officer (Operator 17) who covertly produced the video footage, and Secrets in the Open Sea (1994/2004), a suite of mysterious photographs of unknown

76 These images are sometimes attributed to Habib Fathallah, who supposedly donated them to the Atlas Group in 1993.
77 The sculpture I Was Overcome by a Momentary Panic at the Thought They Might Be Right (1998), originally included in the AGP category as a collaboration between Youssef Bitar, Walid Raad, and the Atlas Group, is also now attributed to Hassan.
origin that refer to anonymous victims, anonymous killers, and an anonymous author.  

*I Only Wish That I Could Weep* is composed of video clips from the Corniche, Beirut’s seaside walkway. The image looks out across the boardwalk toward the horizon; it is late afternoon, and the sun is slowly setting over the Mediterranean. When the sun has finished setting, a quick jump cut moves us to an almost identical scene: the same location, the same activity, but a different evening’s sunset, as confirmed by the digital date time-stamped on the video’s bottom edge. The remainder of the video is composed of a sequence of sunsets over the Mediterranean, played back at high speed as if on fast-forward. Each sunset is progressively more zoomed in than the previous one, and the video closes with a shot in which only the sun is visible until it disappears into the sea (Fig. 2.10).

Raad locates the genesis of this work in a story from his 1991 trip to Lebanon, when he encountered a newly reopened city, no longer divided into east and west. Raad was finally able to visit the seaside Corniche in West Beirut and to see the beautiful sunset views afforded from its walkway. Although it was now ostensibly available to everyone, Raad could perceive that this new freedom to navigate Beirut was still tentative, and that one must visit “as a tourist.” In an anecdotal description of the roots of this project, Raad describes a conversation that took place on the Corniche with a friend in the early 1990s. Apparently, Raad was explaining (in either English or French) his compulsion to film sunsets when his friend reportedly responded by suggesting that they speak Arabic to avoid drawing

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78 *Secrets* is discussed in Chapter Four.
undue attention to themselves. While the Syrian army (which had been present in Lebanon since 1978) had begun to withdraw from Beirut in the wake of the wars, a rumor persisted among residents that Syrian intelligence agents maintained outposts in the various fruit and vegetable stands and cafés along the Corniche. “The Syrian army may have withdrawn, but in fact, all these people selling you coffee are Syrian intelligence agents,” Raad’s friend joked. The innocence of watching the sunsets was “ruptured” by this story of camouflaged intelligence, and the logic behind the video suddenly became apparent. Explaining the origin of this project’s story to an audience at the Walker Art Center in 2007 Raad said, “This story came to me: OK, so this is the person who would shoot sunsets. It’s the person in this mini-van. … I grew up in East Beirut and was denied these sunsets for 20 years.” This is something of an overstatement, since Raad did not live in Lebanon from 1983 until the end of the war. However, he likely would not have emigrated in the first place had it not been for the war and he was unable to visit the Corniche between the outbreak of war in 1976 and his departure in 1983 and on his return visits until the early 1990s. This context is retained in the work’s intertitles, which allude to Syria’s continuing presence in Lebanon: one of them explains that although the Corniche is “now a pleasant place to walk, jog, and hang out,” in the postwar period Syrian intelligence agents supposedly still conducted surveillance from inside the minivan-cafés that line the boardwalk.

Formal dimensions of this seemingly simple work frame the layered tension between specific factuality and the implicit abstraction of the rumor of Syrian spies. While the video data stamp implies an insistence on cataloging each individual sunset, the repeating edit structure pushes towards a pure formalism, almost an optical abstraction. The glowing circle of the increasingly zoomed-in sunsets overtakes both the optical foreground and the political background, only vaguely hinting at the historical and spatial politics of Beirut in the 1990s. Thus, a highly aestheticized image is tinged with the sinister dimension of postwar espionage, yet the surveillance function is thwarted because figures are shown only in silhouette. The fast-forward effect also renders the factual into a different descriptive register, since, as one watches these tape recordings on fast-forward, the passersby on the Corniche are rendered nearly invisible. While this of course is easily explainable, for Raad it reads as a sign that people in Beirut were not yet ready to have their images taken. This speeding up also formally reverses the effects of long exposures similarly unable to record their human subject.

In Raad’s fictional narrative, the operator of camera #17 apparently shifted his gaze from his assigned task (the surveillance of people on the Corniche) toward a personal experience, the pleasure of watching a seaside sunset. He was “dismissed” for his activities, most of his footage was “confiscated,” and the rest was “donated” to the Atlas Group. The everyday event of watching the sunset acquires political resonance when situated within the divided city, as residents of East Beirut were not able to visit the western side of the city. *I Only Wish That I Could Weep* places

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81 Raad, “Seminar 3.” United Nations Plaza, February 31, 2007. This is the “aesthetic fact” of the work; see the discussion in Chapter Three.
footage from the Corniche into a fictionalized context, typifying Raad’s method of taking a familiar experience or scenario, imagining an atypical response, and attributing it to a fictional character. As an anonymous character, Operator 17 can more readily represent an ordinary citizen of Beirut. This is one way in which Raad distances his own experience during the war from the story told in the work, in which intelligence gathering coalesces with the wistfulness of a reclaimed sunset.

Finally, the Atlas Group itself is a character in its own universe, an agency headed by Walid Raad that produces new (real) research or material on Beirut in the present rather than “documents” from the past. These productions point to the Atlas Group as a living, contemporary research foundation. In some cases, in addition to involving fictional Atlas Group contributors, these projects also relied on actual collaborations with other artists or researchers and are cited as such. They are speculative works in that they attempt to produce a history rather than posing as historical documents. One such Atlas Group production, the video We Can Make Rain but No One Came To Ask, is discussed at length in Chapter Four, under the rubric of photographic critique. However, the Atlas Group itself can also be read as a character in that it is yet another of Raad’s alter egos.

The Artist’s Voice: Raad as Storyteller

If Raad’s characters are all alter egos, then the artist named Walid Raad who shows up in person to present the work of the Atlas Group is perhaps the artist’s ultimate character: he is the author of the foundation, an actor within it, and its sole narrator. Raad states that the Atlas Group archive is located in Beirut and New York, a duality that mirrors the artist’s personal history but actually implies only the sites of
his production, not a site of physical storage. In his talks, Raad presents events from the point of view of various Atlas Group protagonists, weaving together the first and third persons, acting as protagonist, participant, and observer. He speaks for his characters, and they thus seem to speak through him. This is not due, of course, to fractured identity or psychosis, but rather because Raad has subsumed the format of the “artist’s talk” into the array of media configurations in which his documents can exist. What appears to be a place where the veil has been dropped, and where the “truth” is easily identifiable as such, is actually just another realm within the logic of the work. Again, though, I argue that to see the quotient of imagined information in these talks as simply “untrue” or expressly duplicitous is to miss their wider and more nuanced critique of truth, falsehood, and the context of postwar Lebanese culture.

The imagined authors, unlikely formal conditions, fraught circumstances of production, labyrinthine tales of provenance, diverse display formats, and mysterious referential titles of each Atlas Group project all come most fully alive in Raad’s spoken narration. Atlas Group objects are fundamentally referred to as

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82 The Atlas Group “archive” is largely virtual. This aspect of the project is masked in museum exhibitions but becomes more apparent when considered through Raad’s presentations, and via the foundation’s website (theatlasgroup.org).
83 Raad’s titles are often drawn from news clippings and occasionally from literature. Many evoke the space or instant between life and death. The circumstances surrounding each title are often not specifically relevant to Raad’s works. For example, My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair could refer to the tension between visibility and invisibility in both experience and in representation. This phrase was likely lifted from a story in the New York Times, which contained the following quotation: “As I stand before the law, my neck is thinner than a hair.” Elaine Sciolino, “The Case of the Teheran Mayor: Reform on Trial,” New York Times, July 1, 1998, sec. World, http://www.nytimes.com/1998/07/01/world/the-case-of-the-teheran-mayor-reform-on-trial.html. Thin Neck could also be a reference to the Persian expression that originally comes from the story The Garden of Saadet, in which Shaman said: “My neck is thinner than a hair in your court and your orders are my commands, but don’t ask from me something that is beyond the reach and out of my control.” This means that the sentiment, “neck is thinner than a hair” has a genealogy as a concept.
documents, and, as Bettina Schmitz reminds us in reference to Raad’s works, “It is no coincidence that the concept of the document originally comes from the corpus of juristic terminology … [as] the basis of a generally accepted procedure for establishing truth.”84 A document is proof of something, and Atlas Group works are proofs of the presence of traumatic responses behind the formal constraints in the works themselves. They document the unreal conditions of war and the opaque cultural loss that comes in its wake. They are “proof” of the stories Raad tells and of the contorted psychologies of his characters. Employing a form of oral history (first taken up in his video collaboration with Salloum), Raad’s spoken presentation testifies to the truths (and fictions) implicit within each project. That is, while these

referred to the status of the accused or the servant before the expansive force of the law. Also drawn from the New York Times was the title Already Been in a Lake of Fire; a story on the bombing of an abortion clinic in Birmingham, Alabama in 1998 contained the passage, “Someone wrote that she would die in a ‘lake of fire’ because of her work at the clinic. ‘I’ve already been in a lake of fire,’ Mrs. Lyons said.” Rick Bragg, “Birmingham Journal; Altered by Bombing, but Not Bowed,” New York Times, June 18, 1998, sec. U.S., http://www.nytimes.com/1998/06/18/us/birmingham-journal-altered-by-bombing-but-not-bowed.html. Let’s Be Honest, the Weather Helped was originally called Let’s Be Honest, the Rain Helped, from a phrase that appeared in the New York Times on May 30, 1983, in an article about the acquittal of a Florida policeman who killed two young black men, at event that police had feared would lead to riots. Larry Rohter, “Tension Surrenders to Relief as Miami Reacts to Verdict,” New York Times, May 30, 1993, sec. U.S., http://www.nytimes.com/1993/05/30/us/tension-surrenders-to-relief-as-miami-reacts-to-verdict.html. Civilizationally, We Do Not Dig Holes To Bury Ourselves refers to the colonial history of France and Britain in the Arab world, as well as to cultural misunderstandings. The Indian politician Jaswant Singh stated that U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright’s comment that India had “dug itself into a hole” was a cultural insult: “I must point out that, civilizationally, we, in India, do not dig holes to bury ourselves, even metaphorically speaking. Therefore, this observation exemplifies yet another fundamental lack of comprehension about the Indian state and about addressing Indian sensitivities.” Strobe Talbott, Engaging India: Diplomacy, Democracy, and the Bomb, rev. ed. (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2006), 82. Still other titles are taken from expressions or from current events that quote or refer to history or literature. Raad has also referred to the work of other Lebanese artists in his titles. For example, the contemporary Lebanese painter Walid Sadek (b. Beirut, 1966) has referred to the prominent twentieth-century Lebanese painter Moustafa Faroukh (1901-1957) and his path to art as a “miraculous beginning.” For more on Faroukh and Sadek, see Rogers, “Postwar Art,” 60. Similarly, an installation piece by the Lebanese video artist Rabih Mroué (b. Beirut, 1967) was titled I Feel a Great Desire To Meet the Masses; Raad co-opted this title for a 2007 performance about the kidnapping, detention, and torture of people by state and non-state protagonists, entitled I Feel a Great Desire To Meet the Masses Once Again. This line is also reproduced in the Thin Neck photographs.

documents verify things that did not actually happen, his testimony verifies the documents.

Theoretical backing for the idea that any first-person narrative of testimony lies beyond the true-false binary can be found in Jacques Derrida’s essay “Demeure: Fiction and Testimony,” which analyzes at length a short but dense text by Maurice Blanchot, *The Instant of My Death.* In his work, Blanchot describes an episode from World War II when a young man—presumably Blanchot himself, but this information is significantly left unspecified and signaled only by the use of “my” in the title—is nearly executed but benefits from an accidental, last-minute reprieve and survives the war. From this tale, Derrida derives two analytical frames that can be applied to Raad’s mode of storytelling. First, he proposes an intrinsic connection between all witness accounts and fiction:

> [A]ny testimony testifies in essence to the miraculous and the extraordinary from the moment it must, by definition, appeal to an act of faith beyond any proof. … When one testifies, even on the subject of the most ordinary and the most “normal” event, one asks the other to believe one at one’s word as if it were a matter of a miracle. Where it shares its condition with literary fiction, testimoniality belongs *a priori* to the order of the miraculous. This is why the reflection on testimony has always historically privileged the example of miracles. The miracle is the essential line of union between testimony and fiction.

That is, the truth of testimony must be taken on faith, as no one can verify the details presented by the speaker or his or her own inner proof of the story being told. This belief in the narrative is structurally similar to that which prevails in fiction. The miracle here, of course, is the artwork: both the fact that it emerged

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from such tortured circumstances, and that (as with any artwork) it was created at all.

Second, Derrida proposes that even such fictions can have the weight of truth:

For in the hypothetical case of false testimony, even one that was false through and through, and still in the hypothetical case of a lie or a phantasmatic hallucination, or indeed a literary fiction pure and simple—well then, the event described, the event of reference, will have taken place, even in its structure of “unexperienced” experience, as death without death, which one could neither say nor understand otherwise, that is, through a phantasmaticity, according to a spectrality that is its very law. This spectral law both constitutes and structures the abiding reference in this narrative; it exceeds the opposition between real and unreal, actual and virtual, factual and fictional. The death and the demourance of which the narrative speaks have taken place even if they do not take place in what is commonly called reality.87

Thus, following Derrida, even Raad’s imagined events, once articulated in the form of a story, take on a concreteness as narrative that has nothing to do with whether it was fictionally invented or authentically witnessed. As we see in the above passage, such witnessing is itself already suspect: “It is here that false testimony and literary fiction can in truth still testify, at least as symptom, from the moment that the possibility of fiction has structured—but without a fracture—what is called real experience. … Here, in any case the border between literature and its other become undecidable.”88

87 Ibid., 91.
88 Ibid.
The Loudest Muttering Is Over

In the early 2000s, before his artworks had become widely known, Raad’s lecture-based performances and stand-alone artist talks became the substantiating force of the works, assembling them in collected series and explaining how they came to be in the Atlas Group’s collection. These performances have evolved over time. Initially, Raad did not always state outright that the foundation was imaginary. In some instances, Raad presented the Atlas Group as an actual foundation, only later revealing the imaginary and fictive nature of the documents.\footnote{See Lepecki, “After All, This Terror Was Not Without Reason,” 88-99.}

Raad’s talks were structured somewhat differently based on the presumed familiarity of his audience with the events described. For example, in his 2002 performance *The Loudest Muttering Is Over*, at the Middle East and Middle Eastern American Center (MEMEAC) of the CUNY Graduate Center in New York, Raad presented the Atlas Group as though it were a real institution until the question-and-answer period, when he was prompted to acknowledge the partial fiction. Similarly, a performance inside Lebanon in 2000 made a strong impression on the historians in the audience. “One performance piece, still reverberating in the minds of some Beirut scholars, saw Raad appear before an academic conference at the American University of Beirut to present the preliminary ‘findings’ of some Atlas Group research.”\footnote{Jim Quilty, “One Artist’s Version of Not Getting the Picture,” *The Daily Star* (Beirut, Lebanon), August 9, 2008, p. 10.} During this presentation, according to Beirut-based art critic Jim Quilty,
Raad’s stories were met with indignation: “Evidently, there was a scholar or two at Raad’s presentation who didn’t get the point.”

In these early performances, Raad employed an exaggerated Middle Eastern accent (which he has since abandoned) and a stylized academic persona when describing the various projects of the Atlas Group and their nesting within a network of stories and characters, many of which are linked with real historical frameworks. In these calculated performances, Raad’s various subjectivities—as historian, writer, professor, archivist, artist, photographer, contributor to the Atlas Group, and its spokesman—come into play, and the logics connecting forms of authorship, tales of provenance, and the visual language of each document become most alive. As Westmoreland has pointed out, “Since Raad hints at his disguise, his performances become a self-reflexive effort to trace the transformation of artworks into documents and documents into facts.” In part, this is due to Raad’s deft storytelling, the conviction and expertise with which he delivers his talks, and the breadth of his recall, but also because so much “meta-data” are present in each project that only the works’ author could possibly articulate it all.

These stories often remained convincing, however, because of Raad’s performative authority as speaker. “The original support of this archive without place, created digitally and virtually, was the artist’s voice,” writes the curator Hélène Chouteau-Matikian. But aside from a few very early performances, Raad has always referred to the Atlas Group as an imaginary foundation, stating

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91 Ibid.
92 Westmoreland, “Crisis of Representation,” 204.
93 Hélène Chouteau-Matikian, “War, There, Over There,” 105.
explicitly: “The Atlas Group was a project undertaken by Walid Raad between 1989 and 2004 to research and document the contemporary history of Lebanon, with particular emphasis on the wars of 1975 to 1990. Raad found and produced audio, visual, and literary documents that shed light on this history.”

Typically, when Raad gives his PowerPoint presentations of the Atlas Group, he does so from behind the lectern, as a representative of the Atlas Group foundation, but only after having stated that it is actually an artwork he created. Although the archival structure of the project complicates the question of authorship, Raad clearly states, “These are artworks that I produce and attribute to imaginary individuals.” But despite the opening assertion that the Atlas Group is an imaginary foundation, in the midst of a performance he often steps out of character, as it were, and states that a certain thing actually happened. In fact, he steps similarly in and out of character repeatedly, referring to the project as imaginary while making critical or explanatory comments about the (very true) events depicted in the works.

In a 2002 interview, Raad commented on the formulaic nature of typical artist talks, noting frankly how he had already begun to exploit their predictability:

This ongoing, always-in-progress 70-minute lecture/presentation looks and sounds like a college lecture, an academic conference presentation, or an artist talk. I sit behind a rectangular table facing the audience. I show slides and videotapes on a screen to my left. I speak into a microphone. There are a glass of water, a notebook, a pen and a lamp on the table. I wear a light shirt and dark dress pants. I encounter technical difficulties. I am interrupted by people I have planted in the audience, who also ask questions during the question-and-answer period. I also answer non-scripted questions.

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95 Gilbert and Ra’ad, “Walid Ra’ad.”
Raad’s interest in the format of the artist talk can be traced, at least in part, to conversations with the art historian Howard Singerman, who was Raad’s colleague in graduate school. Singerman’s dissertation, “The Discourse of the Artist in the University,” looked at the success of the M.F.A. as a terminal degree and the training of artists in the university, and in particular at the role of language and what it means to speak about being an artist.6 In his examination of the academic training of artists, Singerman focused on the critique and the artist talk, the two spaces where artists learn to articulate (and defend) their work through seemingly approved modes of artistic discourse. Art students are required to speak about their work, which leads naturally to the function of the visiting artist (in an economy where more artists are being trained every year than can reasonably support themselves by selling their work in the market). The academically trained artist is therefore, by definition, one who speaks about his work.

The underlying assumption of any artist talk is that its contents are true, presumably operating under the same rules governing the wider academic setting. The audience expects factuality, revelation, and explanation; after all, we are away from the auratic veil of the work itself, and we often assume that we are privy to a special glimpse behind the scenes. Singerman writes, “Before the performance, as the performance, or after it, in the gallery in front of an installation or with a slide carousel in a nearby classroom, the visiting artist discusses his or her work, puts it in the context of older work, answers questions about its relation to other art by other

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6 Singerman, “The Discourse of the Artist in the University.”
artists, or to current issues and concerns.”97 Audiences assume that artists welcome this kind of platform, at last, to speak about themselves without the distortions of critics and curators or the constraints of exhibition formats.

Drawing on Rosalind Krauss’s “Notes on the Index,” Singerman likens the presence of the artist to the index: it is a trace of something that was once there, but is now an absence. Following Derrida’s writings in On Grammatology, Singerman explains that this “plentitude enriching another plentitude,” enacts a supplemental doubling, whereby “the supplement adds itself.”98 That is, the physical presence of the artist (and of the artwork about which he speaks) is “supplemented by a spoken text.”99 In the artist’s talk, via language, that absence is filled with presence: “The artist’s presence is a supplement to the work of art, at once completing and substituting for it.”100 Raad’s presence in the artist talk functions in this way, but moves beyond it: his talk completes the work, and at the same time can substitute for it, but Raad has also made the realm of the talk another space where the conceit of his project is operative. Through his artist talk, Raad provides a supplement to the works, expanding on certain themes, clarifying aspects of wartime Lebanon, and guiding viewers through the artworks as he wants people to experience them. Raad is thus able to exert control over the interpretive frame of the artworks themselves. His stories complete the works by reinforcing or elaborating aspects of the political or historical context to which they refer.

97 Ibid., 401.
98 Ibid., 400.
99 Ibid., 396-97, quoting Krauss.
100 Ibid., 400.
In other words, Raad’s talks essentially serve as extended “captions” for the works. I interpret this function through Roland Barthes’s discussion of the distance between caption and image in his 1977 essay “The Photographic Message.” Barthes writes, “Text constitutes a parasitic message designed to connote the image, to ‘quicken’ it with one or more second-order signifieds. … Formerly, the image illustrated the text (made it clearer); today, the text loads the image, burdening it with a culture, a moral, an imagination.” This interpretation of how the proximity of text to the image affects the viewer-reader’s understanding of the image, and whether one is aware of the influence of the text upon that understanding, is significant to understanding the subtle influence that Raad’s texts exert on viewers. Barthes continues, “[T]he effect of connotation probably differs according to the way in which the text is presented. The closer the text to the image, the less it seems to connote it; caught as it were in the iconographic message, the verbal message seems to share in its objectivity, the connotation of language is “innocented” through the photograph’s denotation.”

Barthes notes, for example, that in the case of a newspaper photograph, the caption, article, and headline have different relationships to how meaning is constructed. But by doing such “real” explanatory work while having already recursively bracketed himself as author, narrator, and actor within the Atlas Group,

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102 Ibid., 529.
103 Ibid.
104 Ibid. Barthes states, “The caption probably has a less obvious effect of connotation than the headline or accompanying article; headline and article are palpably separate from the image, the former by its emphasis, the latter by its distance; the first because it breaks, the other because it distances the content of the image. The caption, on the contrary, by its very disposition, by its average measure of reading, appears to duplicate the image, that is, to be included in its denotation.”
Raad in his talks extends the fictional and propositional conditions of the works he
discusses. Facts become confusable with fictions, and vice versa. The interpretive
difficulties and demands presented in Raad’s works extend also to his presentation,
frustrating the audience’s presumption that Raad will show his hand.

In fact, though, Raad has said quite openly that he considers the artist talk as
just another of the multiple formats through which his image-and-narrative
configurations can exist. His interest in the performance-lecture emerged from his
education as an artist in an American university. “I was intrigued by the central
place of language (spoken and written) in that training. Moreover, I have always
paid attention to how artists worked in the world, especially with the form known as
the Artist Talk where the artist is invited to present his/her works.”105 This format
has become scripted and crystallized over the years of the Atlas Group’s existence.
In his 2011 walkthrough at the Hasselblad Award exhibition, Raad elaborated on
his feelings about the artist talk.106 His comments are worth quoting at length for the
detailed consideration they reveal regarding all aspects of his presentations:

… [there is always] a podium or table; a slide or video projector; table with
glass or bottle of water; an often inadequate introduction of the artist or
speaker followed by a lecture which is inevitably interrupted by some
technical problem that may or may not be resolved; at the end of the lecture
either enthusiastic, polite, or no applause; someone who announces there is
time for questions followed by an awkward moment of silence during which
the artist and/or audience fears and/or wishes that no questions are
forthcoming; a good/bad question is asked followed by a good/bad answer;
time runs out; the audience leaves while a few people approach the artist to
ask him/her more questions; everyone is escorted out. The artist is invited for

105 Walid Raad and Achim Borchardt Hume, “In Search of the Miraculous,” in Miraculous
Beginnings, 15, 21. In the same volume, Raad stated: “I am as committed to the image that appears
on a computer monitor or is projected, as I am to the one that I print and frame, as I am to the one
that I place on a page layout to be viewed in a hand-held volume.”
106 Raad, [Exhibition Walkthrough: Hasselblad Award], 2011.
a drink or dinner where a polite conversation takes place; email coordinates are exchanged; the artist is dropped off at a mediocre hotel with an equally mediocre and expensive internet connection. You get the picture. I have always found this form interesting and decided that it was not accidental to what artists do but part-and-parcel of what they do. I integrated it with The Atlas Group as a way to expand the way I make public my documents.¹⁰⁷

That is, even his descriptions *about his interest in the artist talk* are rehearsed and tactical. This does not make them any less true; it only verifies the fact that Raad has claimed the territory of the artist’s presentation as further space for the location of his work *as work*. What Raad says in public is not untrue; it is simply not the truth that the audience is typically expecting. Even where details are fabricated, they are noted as such, which should clarify their truth claims.

Oddly, the easiest way to discern which aspects are true and which are false is to take Raad at his word. Raad does actually indicate which events are real and which are not, often saying something like “this character is fictional” (but then proceeding to speak of him as though he is real) or “this person is real” (though he then tells strange anecdotes that seem cast doubt upon this truth). When he discusses real events, statistics, or historical figures, he also clearly states that he is now talking about a real person, whether it is an actual car bomb investigator (Youssef Bitar) or the actual site at which a real car bombing took place during the war (such as the Furn el-Chebak neighborhood of Beirut). This can be confusing for an audience, which, after hearing that the first part is fictional, often assumes that the point of clarification is also fictional. Conversely, the emphasis on the real references

¹⁰⁷ Here Raad even goes beyond the scope of the lecture to include the conversations that follow as part of the experience. Walid Raad, “The Loudest Muttering is Over,” Presented at the Hasselblad Award Ceremony, Hasselblad Center, Gotteborg, Sweden, November 11, 2011.
contained within the work sometimes serves to erase the audience’s memory of the
original statement. So, while Raad is actually quite straightforward, his
presentations rarely feel that way, as he refuses to behave according to an audience’s
presumptions and expectations.

Since audiences have grown accustomed to Raad’s complicated stories, some
have started asking him to “convince us that this is true.”108 Whether or not Raad
finds this misunderstanding amusing or frustrating, such questions clearly miss the
point. His typical response seeks to explain that such questions assume that Raad
himself knows the difference between truth and fiction. As he has said, “I don’t
proceed from the assumption that a story is a non-historical event. Or that fiction is
opposed to the ‘historical world.’ … I am more convinced than ever of this
continuum [of fact and fiction]. There’s no between. It doesn’t make sense to me
anymore.”109 But even here, in attempting to explain the field in which he sees the
work operating, Raad cannot do so without the audience chuckling or smirking, as
though this explanation is itself an elaborate joke. Perhaps he has “cried wolf” once
too often. His audiences are cautious about being “fooled” again.

Even at his most candid, Raad insists on the internally derived logic that
makes a work possible, while simultaneously admitting that the works themselves
exist in the space of fiction. I would argue that the obsessive production of recursive

108 It is interesting to see how audiences respond to his presentations. At United Nations Plaza in
2007, for example, Raad was very candid about how his thinking about his projects has changed over
the years. Surprisingly (or perhaps not), it is when he is most candid about these changes and the
fictionalized aspects of the work that audiences seem to have the most trouble following his
narratives. Although this was an academic forum in which he should not have been expected to
present the perfect façade of performance, nevertheless it was here that he received the greatest extent
109 Ibid. Emphasis added.
narratives within and around the Atlas Group, and their control, rewriting, and frequent reformatting and rephrasing across different exhibitions and publications, can be read as Raad’s own “hysterical symptom” of his traumatic experiences of the Lebanese wars. This claim seems to meet all of his own criteria: it is an essentially *productive* response to trauma, as it is for all his characters, and it arrives belatedly, continuously, long after the actual traumatic events. In this case, then, the entire Atlas Group is simultaneously both his artistic production and a *model* of his artistic production. That is, Raad’s experience of the wars turned him into a person who generated all these oblique aesthetic artifacts, which exorcise traumatic compulsions through their focus on the peculiar inversion of facts. This is a precise description of what Hannah Mrad and Nadia Hassan and Fadl Fakhouri are also doing. As such, the Atlas Group is a self-reflective model of production—and this claim is made even stranger by its inclusion as a model within Raad’s subsequent project on the history of art in the Arab world, called *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow* (2007-present).


But if audiences have difficulty believing the stories told in the Atlas Group, then this more recent project (*Scratching*) goes even further. Here, the goal is no longer to maintain a semblance of credibility, as instead narrative fictions are pushed to their limits (while in most cases still containing factual elements at their core) to reveal new questions. In *Scratching*, Raad employs the form of the artist-led exhibition walkthrough as his mode of performance. Whereas *The Atlas Group* uses Lebanese history as its framework, this later project examines the construction of the history
of contemporary Arab art by projecting works into an imagined future. Performances of this work are more theatrical, and many of the artworks become life-sized props or stage sets for Raad’s stories, while others seem to shrink and become self-contained worlds that operate according to a strange narrative logic. This marks a shift from Raad’s use of characters to lend credibility to a fictionalized artwork toward the production of self-authorship with increasingly fantastical stories. In these performances, the artworks and their narratives merge in the moment of viewing.

This work picks up where the Atlas Group left off, and even includes a miniaturized, to-scale sculpture of the ideal exhibition version of the Atlas Group project titled Section 139: The Atlas Group (1989-2004). It employs a precise narrative to situate its reception, contextualizing itself and the Atlas Group within the new project. This sculptural model is a crystallization of the entire Atlas Group project, as well as an artwork within Scratching—that is, Scratching essentially includes a “chapter” on the Lebanese art foundation called The Atlas Group. A miniaturized retrospective, Section 139 is a kind of boîte-en-valise. This project immaculately reproduces all of Raad’s photographs at miniature scale, with fully working video screens, inside a perfect white cube gallery space with white walls and hardwood floors (Fig. 2.11). This self-inclusion reflects an apparent desire to control all aspects of production and contextualization of the works. Section 139 employs a precise narrative to account for its form and original reception, which situates the Atlas Group within the new project through a fantastic conceit. Raad further includes this work in his lecture performance, where his voice takes on the role of the text, adding a level of earnestness to the story:
Between 1989 and 2004, I worked on a project titled *The Atlas Group*. It consisted of artworks made possible by the Lebanese wars of the past few decades. In 2005, I was asked to exhibit this project for the first time in Lebanon, in Beirut’s first-of-its-kind white cube art gallery. For some reason, this offer perturbed me and I refused. In 2006, I was asked again. I refused again. In 2007, I was asked again. I refused again. In 2008, I was asked again. I agreed. Weeks later, when I went to the gallery to inspect my exhibition before its opening, I was startled to find that all my artworks had shrunk to one-hundredth of their original size. I subsequently decided to build a smaller white cube befitting my works’ new dimensions, and to display them there.\footnote{Walid Raad, “Scratching on Things I Could Disavow,” Presented at Documenta 13, Kassel, Germany, July 10, 2012.}

The viewer “enters” the space at one end and encounters the title wall with an Atlas Group map on the left. To the right is a screening room with the Bachar video. The main space opens with a double row of framed prints: *Let’s be honest*. Along the left main wall is a single row of all one hundred prints in *Thin Neck*. Facing this on the right main wall are the large prints of *We Decided*. The far wall contains all six blue prints from the series *Secrets*. Within this main space is a smaller gallery: this gallery contains Fakhouri’s films *No, illness/ Miraculous Beginnings*, the portraits *Civilizationally*, and the notebook *Already Been in a Lake of Fire*, placing Fakhouri’s work at the very center of this gallery. As the “viewer” proceeds through the gallery, the next room contains *Sweet Talk* prints, hung in double row. The final gallery is painted dark, contains *Overcome* floor work and the videos *Rain* and *Weep*. All of the works are perfectly miniaturized: small individual photo prints are mounted and framed with tiny wall labels. Even the video works are perfectly reproduced. Small video screens have been created within the walls of the model gallery, and the videos play on a loop.
In performances of this work that I have seen, at Paula Cooper Gallery in New York in 2009 and at Documenta 13 in Kassel, Germany in 2012, Raad claimed—without yielding any earnestness to the preposterousness of this claim—that the artworks he shipped to Beirut had actually, physically, shrunk upon their arrival, as if the objects themselves could not exist in Lebanon in the same way as they do elsewhere. Raad insists that these miniatures are indeed the works he shipped to the gallery, and that it is an obvious fact—evident to all who can see the works before them—that they had simply been transformed into miniatures.

In this way, the Scratching works enact a larger move in Raad’s practice, from a personal or psychic model of trauma to one of collective trauma in which society as a whole is affected. While these shrinking artworks may at first glance seem to exhibit a form of “hysterical symptom” (like the psychologically damaged Fakhouri’s projects), Raad’s justification suggests that the traumatic response of the objects is equally visible to everyone; this rules out idiomatic responses to trauma, as it cannot be a hysterical symptom if everyone is experiencing it. Raad notes in his performative walkthrough of Section 139 that “no two individuals have ever experienced the exact same psychotic episode.” Such comments allow Raad to ask, in other contexts: “What constitutes the nature of traumatic experience? Can one characterize the experience of the war as necessarily traumatic?”

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112 Ibid.
to make a different case from that of the Atlas Group, namely, that the effects of the wars have been rendered into the fabric of reality itself.

In Raad’s direct address via the artist talk, the academic lecture, and the exhibition walkthrough he acts as a storyteller. His approach recalls Benjamin’s observation: “Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn.” Raad tells these many stories, but (via the effect of displaced authorship) the stories also tell of Raad’s own experiences and musings, some of which he found to resonate with those of other Lebanese. Much as Benjamin finds information to be “incompatible with the spirit of storytelling,” because information must appear “understandable in itself,” it is in Raad’s fantastic account of shrinking artworks that his role of storytelling is most convincing. Looking at Raad’s use of language as performative foregrounds the creative—that is, constructive—nature of his work and allows it to be read not merely as a series of fictions, but rather as stories that bring into being the events that they name.

\[114\] Benjamin, *The Storyteller*, 362. He continues: “And among those who have written down the tales, it is the great ones whose written versions differ least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers.”

\[115\] Ibid., 4.
CHAPTER THREE: DOCUMENTING ABSTRACTION

*Reality can have metaphorical content—that does not make it less real.*

The evident contradictions in Raad’s simultaneous roles of photographer, historian, archivist, critic, and storyteller ultimately provide his works their fundamental aesthetic and conceptual charge. The ambiguity of Raad’s subject positions runs in tandem with his inversion of the categories *abstraction* and *realism*, the one category often acting as if it were the other. In this chapter, I clarify the ways in which Raad performs archival research. I chart the shifts and movements of this historical material as it becomes visually and conceptually abstracted within the fantastic logic of his projects, projects that subvert the presumed objectivity and truth of the original images. The photographic activities examined in this chapter deeply engage reality, but the final works do not represent reality as such. Raad’s conversion of factual data into abstract visual elements allows us to read the works as unique signifiers of individually experienced events. These works point to the core reality of the experience; often they are far too complex to be coherently deciphered by any single image or artistic gesture.

Photography’s dual existence as both *image* and *object* implies that any photograph must also contain indexical, chemical, or contextual histories in addition to the information encoded in the image. Different photographic formats imply specific possible narratives of their production. Technically, the formats reflect a specific photographic technique or how its artifacts were used. Historically, we see what kinds of images were viable with a specific film format in a specific place and

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Photographs also accumulate meanings and associations as they undergo changes in context, such as when they move from negatives to prints, notebooks, albums, newspapers, archival storage, photographic books, or artworks. Images are always embedded in material networks, and these networks have an implicit bearing on what the images can mean, and even on how they can mean it.

In this chapter, I argue that by intervening in this materiality of photographic production, Raad turns photographic rules and conventions into a mechanism by which to present the psychic aftershocks of the war and the entangled state of reality and fiction in postwar Lebanon. Seizing upon the particular formal characteristics of photography, Raad treats the photographic *material* as distinct from the image, leveraging these potentially discrepant histories to make interpretive, fictive, and propositional gestures with otherwise real materials. Often, Raad weaves narratives of provenance for the one that militate against the grain of the other.

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2 Barthes, “The Photographic Message,” 530. The connotation of a photographic message is historical and social because it is dependent on the society and the interpreter.

3 The diverse source imagery used in the Atlas Group works is a combination of Raad’s own photographs and images from other sources; the latter items are scanned from archives, clipped from newspapers, or appropriated from family albums. These images are rarely (if ever) printed directly from original photographic negatives. Almost without exception, the source images are imported into a digital environment, where they are altered, cropped, montaged, layered over with text or other markings, and organized and integrated into a new page layout, which is then printed in editions as either inkjet or digital c-prints. During this procedure, formal photographic elements and new narratives are combined to produce the language and form of a given project. Raad’s early training in technical photographic processes at the Rochester Institute of Technology is evident in his frequent and routine visual references to studio processes: chemical darkroom experiments, digital scanning, retouching, manipulation, enlargement, reproductions, permutations across a series, numerical notations, and archive systems. Sources: Raad draws from an enormous pool of his own photographs, taken over a twenty-five-year period beginning when he was a teenager still living in Beirut in the early 1980s. He also uses photographs taken in Lebanon in the postwar years, and produced new photographs and video footage for specific Atlas Group projects. At times, Raad has collected unattributed photographs from newspapers for a specific project while in other cases, he collected images simply because he found a particular type compelling, without a particular use for them in mind.
Despite rupturing photography’s presumed sense of continuous realism, I still read Raad’s work as fundamentally *realist* in orientation. I do so because the projects are based on real events, they derive from documentary photographs, and, most importantly, they have a mandate to describe a certain reality. On this notion of realism, I am following a line of argument laid out in Alexander Potts’s book, *Experiments in Modern Realism*, which allows that even highly abstract works can be read as operating within the logic of Realism.⁴ Potts writes,

> Shared by many modern artists and critics of more experimental persuasion was the belief that only through a thoroughgoing reconfiguring or negation of accepted representational strategies would it be possible to convey a sense of the more significant realities of the modern world. … Many artists felt that it was only through the deployment of non-representational forms that they could successfully convey something of significance about a society that was transforming itself beyond recognition.⁵

Potts notes that photo-montage, in particular, allowed for a “break-up and transformation of conventional pictorial forms” while highlighting the disruption of overtly realist photographic components Potts cites Berlin Dadaists as early examples of artists employing photographic imagery to negate its own indexicality while still maintaining a link to the real.⁶

In this chapter, I examine two major Atlas Group projects that perform this inversion: one by intervening in the system of record keeping, the other by intervening materially in the physical and aesthetic properties of the photographs. I will focus my examination on *My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair: Engines* (2001/2003) and *We Decided To Let Them Say, “We Are Convinced,” Twice* (2002/2006).

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⁵ Ibid., 24.

⁶ Ibid., 24-25.
Looking at these two examples, I argue that by inverting the crux of the form—by substituting visual abstraction for representational naturalism—Raad subverts the canonical presumptions of photographic indexicality and realism. I present a comparative analysis of the differing formal strategies Raad employs (Photoshop manipulation, page layouts, image selection, and sequencing) to convert factual image-data into formal abstractions. In referring to, and then departing from, the tradition of photojournalism, both projects demonstrate that photographs alone, even if accompanied by captions or factual notations, can reveal only a limited range of information.⁷

**Thin Neck: Engines (or, A History of Exploding Cars)**

One grave subject taken up by the Atlas Group is the use of car bombs during the civil war period. The constant threat of exploding cars left Beirut’s citizens traumatized, whether or not they witnessed such an attack firsthand. Given that Raad grew up in a city in which thousands of car bombs exploded, and that even after he left his family continued to live there, it is hard to ignore the level of anxiety he must have experienced for their wellbeing. The Atlas Group includes four separate projects related to the use of car bombs in the Lebanese wars. The first three—*I Was Overcome by a Momentary Panic at the Thought That They Might Be Right* (2004/2009), *Already Been in a Lake of Fire* (1991-2003), and *Thin Neck: Engines* (1991/2003)—are discussed here. Chapter four takes up the fourth, *We Can*

⁷ Barthes, “The Photographic Message,” 529-30. This can also be read as a deployment Benjamin’s argument in “Author as Producer” in that Raad is both the photographer and the caption writer. Raad sets the image and the caption in tension. The realism of the work is a measurement of the textual claim and the visual evidence.
Make Rain but No One Came To Ask (2003). Raad has described these projects collectively as a “research project by the Atlas Group about the uses of car bombs in the 1975-1990 Lebanese wars ... [which] investigates the public and private events, discourses, objects and experiences surrounding the 3,641 car bombs that were detonated during this period.”

Each of these car bomb projects is highly abstracted, but in different ways. Raad uses photographs, video, and sculpture to address traumatic violence and its psychic aftershocks. He also explores the intrinsic limitations of documentary media in conveying facts, information, and archival records about the violence. His photographs show, but do not explain. The various visual forms involved (personal notebooks, photojournalist’s plates, abstract sculpture, urban landscape images, architectural schematics and blueprints) open up numerous dimensions of the larger phenomenon—or social meta-trauma—of the repeated, random, and violent ruptures caused by exploding cars.

Although Raad is known for playing with facts, none of the information he provides about any actual car bombings is itself false. Regardless of the narrative or formal adjustments Raad makes—such as attribution to fictional characters or rendering the information visually illegible—or the bizarre responses his characters might have, this disastrous and very real subject matter gives a viewer no reason to doubt its importance to Raad. Consider the fictional notebook Already Been in a Lake of Fire and the large, floor-based sculpture I was Overcome by a Momentary Panic. Both attempt, or at least claim, to be comprehensive: one is the traumatized

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8 Raad, quoted in Schmitz, “Not a Search for Truth,” 41.
9 This phenomenon is termed the surpassing disaster by Jalal Toufic; see Chapter Four.
response of the fictional Dr. Fakhouri, the other is an abstract map based on actual archival research into car bombings in Beirut. We can read Fakhouri’s notebook as a delusional historian’s attempt to make sense of these car bombs, as a manifestation of an intense fear and suspicion of parked cars, and as an attempt to traumatically reconstitute the destroyed vehicles and the human casualties they imply (Fig. 3.1). However, the idea that historical knowledge can be gathered according to visual symptoms runs the risk of reducing it to formal play.

We may consider Overcome as a response to this challenge, though it is itself highly formalized (Fig. 3.2). This model purports to encode a topographical rendering, crater by crater, of every car bomb detonated in Lebanon during the civil war years. We cannot rightly read this abstracted model cannot rightly be read as a

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10 An earlier version of this work bore the same title but was dated 1998-2004. This first version was created in 2004 and attributed to the Atlas Group as a collective entity (category AGP for Atlas Group Productions), whereas the second was completed in 2009 and more commonly attributed to the fictional Nahia Hassan, still in the AGP category. The first version was a series of three, low domes each 5.5 feet (170 cm) in diameter and roughly one foot high. In this iteration, the work was attributed to the Atlas Group and Walid Raad in collaboration with a “fictional” Yussef Nassar, whom Raad identified as a Lebanese explosives expert who had investigated most of the car bombings in Lebanon during the war. Nassar is in fact a clear reference to the famed Lebanese explosives investigator Youssef Bitar, who also figures prominently in the video We Can Make Rain but No One Came To Ask. In later years, Raad amended this reference to include Bitar’s real name in the accompanying statement, but the work is still always attributed to the Atlas Group. Although Bitar’s actual life work and Raad’s conversations with him informed the project, Bitar was not the work’s author and Raad only attributes works to fictional characters, to himself, or to the Atlas Group as an organization. The project statement read: “A project by The Atlas Group and Walid Raad in collaboration with Yussef Nassar: Until his retirement in 1994, Yussef Nassar was the Lebanese army’s most senior explosives and ammunitions expert, the leading investigator of all detonations (primarily car bomb explosions) in Beirut between 1977 and 1993. … Throughout his years as an investigator, Nassar produced and preserved a number of texts, photographs, diagrams, sketches, and drawings. These form the basis of the collaboration between Nassar and The Atlas Group. In this exhibition, The Atlas Group and Yussef Nassar present a three-dimensional work inspired by Nassar’s diagrams and photographs.” The newest, revised statement for this project explains that the character Nahia Hassan (supposedly a former senior topographer in the Lebanese Army’s Directorate of Geographic Affairs) is the author of these works. The original had apparently been destroyed after it was presented to “the Lebanese parliament’s Committee on Development and
map: there are no directional markers, identifying topography, or city landmarks, nor does it provide viewers with information about the bombsites themselves, or their relation to one another. Instead, this aerial view of car bombs conflates fifteen years of explosions onto a single surface: each is rendered as a laser-cut hole of proportional size, plotted out across a large, powder-coated, Masonite disc ten feet in diameter. The holes refer to specific individual events, but they are not labeled, dated, or otherwise decipherable. Raad reduces an overwhelming amount of information to a visual abstraction—holes punched in a pristine white surface. In this case, the only text used is in the accompanying statement; unlike in other Atlas Group works the text is not integrated into the work as a design element. This work does not include any actual photographs, although archival photographs were used in its making. Here, Raad’s act of collecting images of cars and details of explosions becomes the basis for a statement about the availability of information, rather than an investigation into the traumatic traces of these events.11

The “realism” of Overcome is evident in the new, detached attention to the kinds of questions permitted in the postwar context, instead of attention to the war’s residual psychic effects. Although abstract, the accessibility of information that went into making this sculpture marks the arrival of the postwar period. During the war, of course, such research was not possible, because the photographs would still have been viewed as evidence or intelligence. The very ability to go to an archive in

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11 Raad, “Seminar 3.” United Nations Plaza, February 31, 2007. Interestingly, the Green Line is the least damaged section because it was a no man’s land.
Lebanon and conduct research into these car bombings indicates the war is over. *Thin Neck: Engines* (2001-2003) considers the archival systems governing news photographs from the popular press and intervenes in the ordering logic under which they are arranged and displayed (Fig. 3.3). *Thin Neck* presents a selection of 100 unaltered news photographs depicting scenes from car bomb explosions during the war years, culled from the photographic research archives of two respected Lebanese newspapers: the secularist *An Nahar* and the leftist *As Safir*.

According to Nabila Bitar, head of the photography department at *An Nahar’s* Research and Documentation Center, Raad visited the center approximately three times between 2000 and 2003, during which time he spent full days going through the computer database, negatives, and print boxes. He had explained to Ms. Bitar that he was making an artwork about the car bombs during the civil war and asked permission

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12 These are the two leading Arabic language daily newspapers in Lebanon. *An Nahar* (The Morning or The Day) is Lebanon’s oldest newspaper, founded in 1933 by Gebran Tueni, and still run by the Tueni family. *As Safir* (The Ambassador), was founded by Talal Salman and first published on March 26, 1974, as a left-wing, pan-Arabist political daily. *An Nahar* established its Research and Documentation Center in 1967 to house its photographic archives, which hold more than three million images dating back to the 1930s. In 1981, *As Safir* established its own image research archive, the Arab Documentation Center (ADC), which also includes a collection of thirty-six other newspapers and twenty journals and magazines in Arabic, English, and French. Both archives are located in downtown Beirut, *An Nahar* in Beirut’s central district and *As Safir* in Hamra. Both departments organize their photographs in roughly the same way: first by subject, then by date. *An Nahar* stores its negatives in manila envelopes in filing cabinets, and files the photographic prints in envelopes stored in bankers’ boxes. *As Safir*’s ADC stores its photographs in envelopes organized in filing cabinets, though in most cases it does not keep the original negatives. At the ADC, I was allowed to search the physical prints by subject (car bombing) and by dates that I requested based on the photographs used in Raad’s project, and I was able to locate roughly a dozen photographs used by Raad in their files. In 1992, *An Nahar* began to digitize its archives, which are currently indexed, scanned, and stored on CD-ROMs. The newspaper is available on microfilm for the dates 1933-1997, as an indexed daily from 1990-2003 on CD-ROM, and through a local intranet database.

to use the images in his work. Of the thousands of bombings and many thousands of photographs, Raad selected at least 115 images (later whittled down to a final 100) to represent the history of car bombs in Lebanon. Each black-and-white image depicts the wreckage and investigation of a car bomb explosion, and their dates range from December 12, 1976 to March 29, 1991, covering nearly the entire period of the civil war. After Raad requested permission to use the photos in an artwork and paid the required reproduction fees, the archives provided him with digital scans of the rectos and versos. The images are not manipulated or altered. Raad’s artistic gesture appears in his selection, arrangement, and presentation of the photos.

In *Thin Neck* Raad presents straightforward, unmanipulated digital scans of the recto and verso of photographs from news archives. His intervention, rather

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14 While researching at *An Nahar* Raad was allowed into the stacks and granted “unlimited access to pictures.” Since then, the archive has been digitized and the natural process of accidental discovery has changed. At *An Nahar*, I was granted permission only to search using the computer database, which contains records of all the photographs published by the newspaper. However, the unpublished images are viewable only by searching through the print files or the negative files. I had little success in finding the prints Raad used when I searched the computer database by date, likely because many of the images Raad selected were not published in the newspaper and therefore had not been digitized. In some cases, it is also possible that the dates recorded on the back of each print reflect the date when the photograph was taken, and not necessarily the date of the bombing itself, whereas the photographs themselves are filed according to the date of the event. At *An Nahar*, I found it more productive to search by the photographer’s name, such as Georges Semerdjian, whose photographs appear several times throughout *Thin Neck*.

15 Raad included 115 prints and stated that there had only been 245 car bombs during this period in Walid Raad, “‘My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair: A History of the Car Bomb in the 1975-1991 Lebanese Wars’, a Project by The Atlas Group in Collaboration with Walid Raad,” *Cabinet*, no. 16 (Winter 2004): 26–31. Several plates previously attributed to the *As-Safir* newspaper are now credited to the Arab Documentation Center (*As-Safir*’s photo archive), perhaps to ground the research even more firmly in a historical archive. In Walid Raad, *The Atlas Group, Volume 2. My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair: Documents from the Atlas Group Archive* (Cologne: Walther König, 2005), the entire series has been cut to 100 prints. Further, small changes to the exhibited prints include the substitution of “Tripoli” for the general location “North” for the events of March 4, 1982, and February 1, 1985; also, on February 9, 1987, Beirut is replaced by “Southern suburb.”
than formally photographic, is instead schematic and methodological. Every plate in *Thin Neck* shows an individual news photograph, carefully presented as a specimen. The recto and verso sides have been scanned, reduced in scale, carefully arranged side by side, and reprinted as a final seamless photographic print. The scanned photographs are reprinted on the left, while their versos are reprinted on the right hand side of Raad’s larger page layout. Many of the versos bear stamps or markings that indicate the location and date of the bombing, the name of the photographer, and the newspaper’s official seal. Because most of this information is written in Arabic, Raad’s prints are annotated with the basic information from the print versos, in English, at the bottom of the plate: the archive, the photographer (many of whom appear repeatedly, having been freelancers on numerous assignments or on contract), the date and location of the explosion, and any other notes on the object’s verso, all typed neatly at the bottom edge. These notes also indicate the file category to which the image was assigned, revealing the logic of the housing archive. For instance, if the photographer’s name was written on the back of the print, this information is provided in the summary; otherwise the photographer is listed as “unknown.” Photojournalists credited with multiple photographs reproduced in this project include Ismail Sabrawi, Hampak Nargoisian, and the better-known photographer George Semerdjian, who was killed in 1990. Raad did not add additional information about the explosion from outside sources, nor even from the accompanying newspaper articles. Using the images on their own terms and as records of the photographic bank from which they originate, Raad provides only information that was available on the print’s verso, the document itself, as a physical object: that is, not information from the *image*, but from the *document*. 
The photographs that appear in *Thin Neck* depict investigations of the incidents. Only secondarily do they record the physical effects of the bombs. Although some critics have commented on the grisly details in the photographs, Raad shows no dead or wounded bodies. However, the wreckage looks disturbingly human, and Raad has noted how the engines started to look like body parts, a mixture of human and machine.\(^\text{16}\) The images show investigators on the scene, examining the wreckage, attempting to recreate and understand the event. Politicians pose at the sites of the explosions, as proof that the bombings were being investigated—though, due to the prevalence of stolen cars, even the recovery of an automobile serial number rarely enabled investigators to find the parties responsible.\(^\text{17}\) In the flood of data, there is little to be learned about particular explosions. Instead, these images point more towards to the authority (and impotence) of the state as the emergency response infrastructure, to its method of data collection at disaster scenes, to the news reporting system surrounding the situations, and finally to the archive now housing the records. The violent events themselves are thus outlined through the bureaucratic systems that develop in its wake. Raad avoids the depiction of human damage or psychological torment: if there are people in these images, they are investigators or curious, rather than visibly traumatized, bystanders (Fig. 3.4).

During my visit to the *As-Safir* and *An-Nahar* archives in July 2012, it became apparent that many of the photographs not selected by Raad show destruction on a much larger scale, including craters, fires, and injured persons.


\(^{17}\) Raad, “The Loudest Muttering is Over,” Walker Art Center, October 25, 2007.
None of the hundred photographs in *Thin Neck* depict the killed or wounded, traumatized and distraught citizens, emergency medical workers, or frantic searches for survivors. Although Raad’s choices certainly depict destruction and wreckage, he resisted showing some of the most physically devastating explosions or drawing from the most colossal attacks. For example, there are no images of the U.S. or French Embassy bombings of 1983, which were among the most destructive in terms of architectural damage and explosive tonnage. The images chosen describe the damage to buildings and the force of the blasts—by showing twisted metal or engines blown clear of the blast site—but they reveal little about the circumstances, motivations, claims, or targets of each bombing, or the human consequences.

Several more violent images do appear in Raad’s video, *We Can Make Rain but No One Came To Ask* (2006), which will be discussed in Chapter Four. But even these are hard to read, as the video’s repeated dissolves tend to occlude the clarity of the picture.

There are some chronological and geographic overlaps in the selection of *Thin Neck: Engines* images. This is not surprising, as dozens of photojournalists covered the wars for multiple publications, and as sometimes multiple car bombings occurred on the same day in different Lebanese cities. Several photographs also depict the same specific investigations but were taken by different photographers or found in different archives. For example, on May 13, 1981 an explosion in the Shiyah neighborhood of Beirut is represented by two images, one from each archive. The *As Safir* image was taken by an unknown photographer and depicts the investigator Youssef Bitar gingerly stepping around the wreckage of a pickup truck
flipped onto its side, whereas the image from *An Nahar* shows the same truck but from a different angle, taken by Harout Jeredjian.¹⁸

Raad creates a new structure for seeing and understanding these photographs, one that disrupts and recreates the organizational logic in which they actually exist. Raad did not alter any of the images, instead, his sequencing of them is the central gesture of the project. Initially, the aggregate effect is overwhelming: hundreds of newspaper photographs of car bomb wreckage, in seemingly random order. But whether installed in an exhibition or printed in book form, the plates in the *Thin Neck* series are always presented in a peculiar order. Rather than chronologically (by year, month, and day), they are organized first by the day of the month (from 1 to 30), next by month (January to December), and finally by year. For example, the first four plates in this project depict explosions that occurred on February 1, 1988; July 1, 1988; July 2, 1988; and August 3, 1990; the last four explosion dates are May 29, 1981; July 29, 1986; January 30, 1989; and July 30, 1980. This order can be deduced only by reading the fine print of every plate and parsing the numerical progression; the order is not openly captioned as such.

By reconfiguring these images according to numerical data, Raad accomplishes a number of critical tasks. First, he forces the institutional logic of the archive, and its typical insistence on calendar order, to reveal its own presumptive neutrality as both constructed and deeply limited, in terms of the dimensions of

¹⁸ This is not the only example. On August 3, 1990, Ismail Sabrawi photographed an investigation in Tyr (in southern Lebanon) for *An Nahar* and an unknown photographer recorded the investigation for *As Safir*. Similarly, an explosion on March 8, 1986 is represented with two examples, one by *An Nahar* photographer Hampak Nargoisian, showing a group of military investigators with the engine, and the other by an unknown *As Safir* photographer, showing two plainclothes investigators (one in a suit, the other in light jacket) examining another engine.
experience that it can contain or convey. An orderly progression of calendar dates would hamper an empathic understanding of the relentless, chaotic, and unpredictable nature of this particular kind of violence. It would also implicitly suggest that Raad’s project is somehow comprehensive, providing a photograph for each explosion, which would essentially reduplicate the existing newspaper archives. By presenting the bombings under the rubric of individual days in seemingly capricious order, Raad enables the unpatterned frequency and scale of the damage to be more easily grasped in human terms. That is, the damage is less easily viewed as a topic of investigation than as a messy and psychologically damaging series of events. The notion of a car bombing is thus abstracted from a series of isolated news events into a unified category of experience through this accumulation of its repeating scenarios and consequences. Raad could have organized these images to show progressive damage or grouped them by location, target, or casualties, but such systems would inevitably provoke accusations of bias, and in any case they would still be incomplete: he would merely have substituted one type of arbitrary archival knowledge with another.

Raad’s system, while just as neutralized by numerical sequencing as the calendar itself, is a more accurate rendering of the random distribution of these events. Time warps in the wake of a tragedy: the number of calendar days between particular bombings is irrelevant when one is suffering or still traumatized by a previous event. While car bombings did not occur every single day, Beirut’s citizens must surely have felt them as though they were a constant presence. Raad’s arrangement here renders the abstraction of that trauma in comparable terms, as a seemingly unceasing wave of attacks—unpredictable, intermittent, randomized, and
yet certain to recur at some point. Caruth notes that the American Psychiatric Association defines trauma as an event “outside the range of usual human experience.” But how does one come to terms with multiple, recurring traumatic events in war zones? It is not hard to imagine a car bomb as traumatic, but what happens when this is an almost daily occurrence—when a conflict is so protracted that car bombings become a usual, everyday experience?

Raad’s juggling of the archive’s logic forces a confrontation between the truth claim of the documentary photograph and the abstraction and opacity of an archival collection of such photographs. By grouping the images in serial but non-progressive order, appropriate to a random, chaotic, repeating subject, Raad reorganizes the connection between a set of facts and their possibilities for representation. In doing so he unlocks experiential information in the material that is sublimated by the standard presumptions of institutional, archival logic. But even once this order is understood, new obstacles reveal themselves: it is impossible, for example, to see all the bombings from any given month, year, location, or photographer at the same time.

**Post-Documentary**

Conventional photojournalistic representations of war and violence tend to focus on victims and physical destruction; this emphasis can obscure the actual political circumstances underlying the events. By their very nature, photographs exclude that which is outside the frame, and therefore they exclude other possible depictions,

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19 Caruth, “Trauma and Experience,” 5.
other understandings of an event, or (in the case of war and trauma) other victims. Yet war photojournalism typically purports to represent a traumatic event or situation accurately, from the position of a neutral witness, and typically through the direct imaging of violence, its immediate aftermath (including various forms of victimhood such as physical injury, grieving families, and displaced communities), and the physical destruction of cities and homes. But the elision of context inherent to photography and the intrinsic falsehood of an ethically removed witness-author point to the insurmountable limits of photographic representation.

In the 1970s, documentary theorists and practitioners like Martha Rosler, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, and Alan Sekula began to question the evidentiary status of photography, its claims to indexicality and objectivity, and the role of the witness.\(^{20}\) The dialectical separation between art photography and photojournalism had polarized these categories, reinforcing the claim that while art should be beautiful (but need not be “true”), the opposite applied to photojournalism. As Susan Sontag has famously commented, “For the photograph of atrocity, people want the weight of witnessing without the taint of artistry, which is equated with insincerity or mere contrivance.”\(^{21}\) Rosler defined two “moments” of the documentary photograph; the first relates to the original news value of an image, and the second refers to the “aesthetic-historical moment” that occurs in the

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museum, where the viewer begins to appreciate the “aesthetic ‘rightness’ or well-formedness of the image.” She continues:

This second moment is ahistorical in its refusal of specific historical meaning yet “history minded” in its very awareness of the pastness of time in which the image was made. This covert appreciation of images is dangerous insofar as it accepts not a dialectical relation between political and formal meaning, not their interpenetration, but a hazier, more reified relation, one in which topicality drops away as epochs fade, and the aesthetic aspect is, if anything, enhanced by the loss of specific reference (although there remains, perhaps, a cushioning backdrop of vague social sentiments limiting the “mysteriousness” of the image).22

These were important critical questions regarding the position of the photographer in relation to his subject, but they have led to some overly determined arguments against the role of aesthetics in documentary. Revisiting and revising such critiques in 2003, David Levi Strauss described the problem as one of photography’s intrinsic conditions, and of its inseparability from the act of photographing: “To represent is to aestheticize; that is, to transform. It presents a vast field of choices but it does not include the choice not to transform, not to change or alter what is being represented.”23 This transformation occurs on multiple levels. “Reality” is first transformed into an image through the act of photographing; the photograph is further transformed by its placement in various contexts. But the unrepresentability of trauma has become a truism, if not a trope.

A common theme in trauma theory applied to art is that artists who refuse to show atrocity can help the viewer to have an empathic encounter.24 In 

24 Bennett, Empathic Vision. For example, artists like Doris Salcedo attempt to convey not the position of the body in pain, but the position of the mourner by creating works that reference the
Vision, Jill Bennett looks at the failure of documentary photography to comprehend massive trauma, arguing that the use of images of victims to trigger an affective response violates the individual represented. Bennett illustrates the disparity between journalistic representation and what has come to be seen, in art-trauma discourse, as a more “ethical” form of witnessing. A related case is presented by Mark Reinhardt to compare the photographic practices of the war photographer James Nachtwey and the artist Alfredo Jaar.25

In such discussions, despite the photojournalist’s (Nachtwey’s) moral stance and his goal to incite outrage and provoke change, his photographs show victims as victims, stripping them of agency. A common criticism of photojournalism, voiced by Rosler in a 1981 essay, is that it “testifies, finally, to the bravery or (dare we name it?) the manipulativeness and savvy of the photographer, who entered a situation of physical danger, social restrictedness, human decay, or combinations of these and saved us the trouble.”26 In Nachtwey’s case, not just the “aestheticization” of the image is seen as the problem, but the specific kind of aestheticization: by relying on tropes of Christian imagery to evoke sympathy, such photographs fail because they do not ask their viewers to address their own complicity. Such visual cues are employed to make a given conflict intelligible to a Western audience and to make its victims seem “more like us.” The idea is that this will provoke a stronger emotional

duration of pain and trauma. In doing so, Salcedo shares a space with the mourner and shows the gap between the mourner and the viewer. Loss is evoked abstractly. This, for Bennett, exemplifies empathic vision.

26 Rosler “In, Around, and Afterthoughts,” 308.
response on the part of the viewer. This, of course, also covers over the sentiment that such religious references may be inappropriate given the religious dimensions of some of the conflicts depicted.

On the other side of this equation is Jaar’s *The Rwanda Project* (1994–2000). In late August 1994, Jaar documented the Rwandan genocide, taking thousands of photographs: aftermaths of massacres, the refugee camps, and cities in ruin. Faced with these images, he ultimately decided not to show them, but to “bury” them. To address the limits of representation, Jaar gathered but withheld from view his images from Rwanda, so as to express the unrepresentable experience of suffering. It can also be inferred that Jaar was reluctant to present the horrifying scenes he recorded in Rwanda in art context because the images were simply too terrible or, less likely, because he feared they would undergo some “aesthetic” transformation and come to symbolize the horrors of war in general rather than the particulars of the conflicts.

Jaar selected sixty images, produced as slides, and placed within black linen boxes, which were then arranged to form “monuments” that resembled headstones or grave markers. The linen boxes are inscribed with typed descriptions of what the images depict (Fig. 3.5). Strauss has commented that in this project “the tables are turned—images are buried in order that history might again be made visible and legible. In this way, it is a work of heresy. It is also heretical in its refusal of visual representation, in saying no to the image. … It is meant to bear witness to the impossibility of presenting the unpresentable.”27 By withholding traumatic images,

Jaar does not attempt to be a witness to the event, but instead to give voice to his subject.

No trauma can be represented neutrally, as photojournalism fundamentally attempts or even claims to do. In contrast, Atlas Group works engage trauma without fetishizing violence, victimhood, or the material destruction of the built environment. In fact, Raad categorically avoids standard depictions of the Lebanese war. Considering that his practice is so deeply rooted in the history of a bloody and protracted conflict, his projects are remarkable for their absence of depicted violence. Rather than any “realistic” recreation of experience, aimed at giving the audience the sensation of having lived through it, Raad’s projects show us the complex mental and emotional demands that follow traumatic events. Instead of taking a documentary or photojournalistic approach to acts of violence or their physical traces, Raad makes visible their psychological traces. Raad does not attempt to tell the stories of Lebanese victims, because he recognizes the implicit complexities of any represented victimhood and the difficulties that such representation would present. In a 2004 interview, Raad said,

> There is a constant identification of these historic events with the victims. … So, the World Trade Center becomes about naming all the victims, showing the faces, telling the narratives, because that kind of victimhood gives you the right to speak and to be listened to with awe in a way that no other subject position permits. We’re not sure that we can yet listen to those positions, let alone make them manifest and say those are the people who died, these are their stories. They can be listened to but they will not necessarily be heard.\(^\text{28}\)

Raad’s rethinking of the visual vocabulary—or tropes—of war photography can be read as an ethical and aesthetic critique of photojournalism. But more than that, it is an engagement with realism.

The critique of photojournalism that undergirds the Atlas Group’s conceptual arrangements has its roots in Raad’s earlier academic work. Looking at representations of supposedly objective journalism and photojournalism, he drew on such critiques to argue that representations of conflict in the Middle East tend to falsely naturalize the condition of conflict as such.29 The second chapter of Raad’s dissertation, entitled “Bayrut Ya Bayrut: Maroun Baghdadi’s Hors la vie and Franco-Lebanese History,” focused specifically on French filmmaker Baghdadi’s 1991 feature film Hors la vie and examined how France’s historical interventions in Lebanon had affected French thinking about and representation of the civil wars. Baghdadi’s film was inspired by the real-life story of Roger Auque, a French reporter-photographer kidnapped in Beirut in 1987 and one of eighteen French hostages kidnapped in Lebanon between 1985 and 1991.30 Raad’s central critique is that the film presents its photojournalist protagonist as heroic and Lebanon as a site of anarchy and destruction.31 Citing the writings of cultural critic Mary Louise Pratt, who has described colonial photographers as adventure-seeking travelers, Raad likened war photojournalists to tourists who, unlike Beirut’s residents, have the option to leave.32 Rehearsing and deconstructing the commonly held notion of the

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29 See Raad, “Beirut (à la folie),” 124.
30 Ibid., 83.
31 Ibid.
32 Raad links the figure of the photojournalist to “the moral underpinnings of documentary photography, and to France’s colonial history in the Levant and American imperialism in the
war photographer as heroic and moral, Raad argues that photojournalists are not simply neutral observers recording human struggles or tragedies, and most do in fact believe that their coverage transcends the sociopolitical context.33

In an extended semiotic analysis of the film, Raad establishes how the practice of documenting itself elides the background conditions of both the scenario being photographed and the very presence of the photographer:

*Hors la vie* relies on [the] semiotic quality of the photograph in order to ideologically neutralize and ontologically naturalize the French photojournalist’s relation to the Lebanese civil war. … Establishing a correspondence between the photojournalist’s eyes and his roll of film … confirms once more the ideological neutrality of his photographic documentation; visual testimony is here represented as the photochemical imprint stamped on the Frenchman’s [the real life Auque/ the character Perrault] eyes by the Lebanese civil war, equivalent to and as natural and neutral as the photochemical process that sensitizes.34

The film’s imagery focuses on the destroyed Beirut streets surrounding the Green Line, an area that “bore the brunt of the fighting between the militias that lined the rival banks of East and West [Beirut].”35 Popular media images of the Lebanese civil wars similarly focused on scenes of the city’s destruction, effectively obscuring “the ideological, social, and political differences between the warring parties,” and constructing a highly selective view of Beirut.36 As a result, a viewer ends up unable to distinguish between the warring militias, which Raad argues is a tendency that

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33 Ibid., 88.
34 Ibid., 91. Raad’s later analysis of the Auque character’s imagery also draws on Homi K. Bhabha’s argument that postcolonial photographs “construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction.” Raad, “Beirut (à la folie),” 102; 126.
35 Raad, “Beirut (à la folie),” 106.
36 Ibid., 98.
“naturalizes the violence” of the Lebanese civil wars, and in the Middle East in general. ³⁷

Having absorbed and built upon the critiques of documentary photography that have been ongoing since the 1960s, contemporary artists identified as participating in the “documentary turn” represent the contemporary trend to work between conceptual and documentary modes in various media, though typically rooted in photography. In this sense, works focusing only on critiquing the shortfalls of photojournalism do little to offer an alternative; they simply reinforce the rote oppositions of truth and fiction, so-called objectivity and aesthetics. ³⁸

Raad’s captions and text employ intentionally neutral language, avoiding terms typically reserved for trauma such as terrifying, appalling, damaged, or scarred. While this descriptive neutrality and degree of visual remove push the works toward abstractions of war, the war itself becomes less abstract through these idiosyncratic, often surreal representations. Fields of colored dots; diagrammatic, architectural line drawings; abstract washes of color; or cut and collaged renderings of buildings are used to represent spent bullet casings, dilapidated buildings, geographic locations of bomb craters, or the personal artifacts of missing individuals. The curator Achim Borchardt Hume has noted the prevalence of this dynamic for many artists in the wake of traumatic experience: “[The] polarity between abstraction and representation, and the blurring of their presumed boundaries, seems to have been a

primary concern especially for artists who either witnessed or worked in the direct aftermath of a great historical crisis which resisted a single authoritative account.”

In postulating the loose interplay between these poles, both conceptually and visually, I draw on a theoretical formulation by art historian Eric Rosenberg, whereby abstraction is the visual counterpart to the experience of *trauma*. Rosenberg has argued that since the world continues beyond a photograph’s frame, photography’s only real form is infinity. This, he claims, is also true of *trauma*. Raad’s creation of entire worlds around each artwork, further enhanced by his routine references to still larger groups of works that ostensibly exist in the Atlas Group holdings, echoes Rosenberg’s logic about the unbounded nature of both *trauma* and photography. That is, the implicit suggestion of a vast archive that is largely invisible in any single instance is itself an “accurate” representation of the traumatic artifacts that the Atlas Group archive purports to hold. Atlas Group works refer to other Atlas Group works; the numbered sequences imply the existence of other items beyond the exhibited series; the archive refers to other films and works that are part of the collection but never exhibited. Rosenberg explains that recording violence is very different from showing trauma, because trauma cannot be shown directly. He writes, “Trauma … is to representation as abstraction is to narrative, or perhaps realism. … [Trauma] disallows narrative closure.” That is, abstraction interrupts the clarity of standard visual forms in the

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40 Rosenberg, *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity*, 40.
41 Ibid., 41.
42 Ibid., 39.
43 Ibid., 41.
same way that trauma fractures coherent narrative representations. Abstraction can thus be a realistic representation of trauma. This is the key formulation moving us between and within the narrative-based, literary fictions of Raad’s titles and character backstories and the idiomatic visual abstractions of his works. The inversion and interweaving of visual abstraction with real data in Raad’s work is the core tactic of his wider critique of photojournalism; abstraction is the genre’s ostensible polar opposite and so offers possibilities for self-reflexively enacting photography’s inability to depict the unrepresentable.44

We Decided (or, Aesthetic Facts)

The critique of war photography’s visual tropes and its sometimes cynical manipulation of emotion that Raad first expressed in his dissertation appears again, years later, in We Decided. The images in We Decided were taken from a single roll of film showing the Israeli bombardment of Beirut in 1982, whereas the large collection of images in Thin Neck, culled from Lebanese newspaper archives, shows the aftermaths of urban car bomb attacks. Both projects intervene in the conventions of war photography: one generates images from the Lebanese field of battle, and the other reimagines the mode of archival recordkeeping. Both projects employ the language of photojournalism, yet they force a triangular confrontation between the facts of the historical events, the abstraction of their violence, and the clarity and rigor of Raad’s modes of presentation. That is, both employ documentary images from Lebanon, yet the actual historical facts of the events at

44 For a discussion of the unrepresentable, see Scarry, The Body in Pain.
stake are impossible to discern. Finally, both, while firmly grounded in real histories and using real images from Beirut as their constituent pieces, are constructed using language, structures, and narrative modes more common to fiction than reporting.

In *Thin Neck*, Raad uses media pool images taken in the aftermath of car bombings from 1976 to 1991, rearranging and re-presenting them in a gridded, archival formation. In contrast, *We Decided* uses images of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon that Raad himself photographed as a fifteen-year-old still living in East Beirut; he rediscovered the photographs in 2002 and incorporated them into this finished work in 2006. The young Raad was able to observe the attacks in 1982 because they were sustained and ongoing, whereas car bomb explosions are immediate and unpredictable and must be viewed through the work of professional photojournalists (unless one is unfortunate enough to be in proximity of the attack). Raad, in fact, had wanted to be a photojournalist when he was a teenager; the works under discussion here constitute his mature questioning of this impulse. In *We Decided*, he presents digitally manipulated prints made from his old negatives, exaggerating their material degradation in storage.

For the purposes of this analysis, I will distinguish between the original photographs taken by the teenage Raad in 1982 and the images as they were rendered two decades later in *We Decided*. The original images fall into several categories: the Beirut skyline, smoking under bombardment; planes or missiles (it is difficult to discern which) streaking through the open sky; Israeli soldiers (and their tanks and weapons) at rest in East Beirut; and small crowds of local onlookers, staring intently at action outside the frame. All the photos were taken from the relative safety of a hilltop in East Beirut, the section of the city considered aligned
with the attacking Israeli army. During the siege, Raad walked around with his mother, calmly photographing smiling Israeli soldiers at rest beside their tanks and troop carriers. As Raad later realized, this interaction was particularly strange in view of his mother’s Palestinian identity.  

Raad has created two versions of the project, both with the same title. The first version, *We Decided* (2005) is a series of fifteen large-scale digital c-prints (44 x 67 inches each); the second, *We Decided (1982-2007)* (2007), is a suite of nineteen smaller inkjet prints (17 x 22 inches each) composed of paired images from the same roll of negatives (Fig. 3.6 and Fig. 3.7). Despite the evident damage to the images, Raad’s project statement claims that the negatives had been safely stored and that the original 1982 images are, in fact, in good condition. Raad explains:

In the summer of 1982, I stood along with others in a parking lot across from my mother’s apartment in East Beirut, and watched the Israeli land, air, and sea assault on West Beirut. The PLO along with their Lebanese and Syrian allies retaliated, as best they could. East Beirut welcomed the invasion, or so it seemed, and that much is certain. West Beirut resisted it, or so it seemed, and that much is certain. One day, my mother even accompanied me to the hills around Beirut to photograph the invading Israeli army stationed there. Soldiers rested their bodies and their weapons as they waited for their next orders to attack, retreat or stay put. I was fifteen in 1982, and wanted to get as close as possible to the events, or as close as my newly acquired camera and lens permitted me that summer. *Clearly not close enough.* This past year, I came upon my carefully preserved negatives from that time. I decided to look again.  

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45 Raad, conversation with the author, May 2012.
46 In Walid Raad, *The Atlas Group, Volume 3. Let’s Be Honest, the Weather Helped: Documents from the Atlas Group Archive* (Cologne: Walther König; Seattle, Wash.: Henry Art Gallery; Arles, France: Rencontres d’Arles, 2007), paired images from this series were presented on the lower half of each page, with the top half of the page left blank. The second version recreates this book layout so that two paired images appear in the lower half of each print.
47 Quoted from the project statement for Raad’s 2005 exhibition *We Are Fair People: We Never Speak Well of One Another.* Emphasis added. At other times, Raad has variously stated that the negatives were “all scratched up and deteriorating,” or that the negatives were fine but the prints were damaged. In actuality, the negatives are fine and the appearance of damage was added by Raad.
In the first version, these images are highly enlarged and appear severely degraded. In the second version, the images are presented as pairs; each print includes two images of the same scene, with subtle differences that call attention to this doubling while still presenting degraded images. In both, Photoshop has been used to dramatically exaggerate and artificially increase any actual damage that may have naturally accrued on the original negatives, which had been stored for two decades without proper archival treatment. The grainy images are covered with scratches, stains, fingerprints, and dust. They are unevenly faded and display cracks in the emulsion. Though originally black-and-white, the images have undergone a color shift in the digital printing process, taking on green, magenta, and blue discolorations that spot and stipple across the surface, accentuating the scratches. Most of the photographs are lighter in the center and vignetted at the edges, as though made with an especially poor lens. The negatives appear to have been severely scratched in all directions (horizontally, vertically, and in short random scratches); in the images of the sky, it is difficult to distinguish between a smoke contrail and a scratch on the negative.

Images of people constitute the first and last works in each series. The projects open with Christian citizens of East Beirut and close with Israeli soldiers, with cityscapes and aerial attacks forming the central images. Like Raad, the East Beirut spectators observe the attacks on the Muslim west. Their so-near-yet-so-far position reflects their physical and psychological distance from those under attack, along with the cultural divisions inherent in Beirut’s geography. The photographs

show Beirut erupting in smoke and thunderous explosions. In the foreground, milling around on the hilltop next to Raad, we see groups of men observing the spectacle of the attacking warplanes. They stand with their hands on their hips, waiting and watching. The images appear to have been taken only seconds or moments apart, as the onlookers’ postures have changed slightly but their locations have not. (Fig. 3.8) The sky is a field of grey smoke. Though it appears that the original black-and-white 35mm negatives are faded and scratched, the scenes are clearly interpretable. Large clouds of smoke rise up from the skyline in the central part of the images, appearing grey against a pale sky; a halo of brightness surrounds the explosions, while the edges of the print are slightly darker.

These images of the city under bombardment retain a legible pictorial space due to their architectural details, but the deteriorated image quality and the damaged buildings seem to mesh, obscuring what damage the buildings have actually sustained. Pink markings on various images appear to be fingerprints. In some instances, strange spots seem to have dripped onto either the negative or the print; they look like chemical stains from the development process, but their form also suggests a cascade of cluster bombs raining down upon the city (Fig. 3.9). In the cityscape images, we see the same buildings under a progression of explosions, with clouds of smoke expanding beyond the frame. Television antennae and small rooftop satellite dishes are the sole markers of habitation; the sky above is increasingly thick with smoke across the series. Two images taken seconds apart are both blurry, and the buildings appear as ghost-like shells.

Clearly, Raad’s claim that these negatives were carefully preserved is inconsistent with the appearance of the final works. The photographs that depict the
aerial attacks seem very abstract. In these, Raad appears to have pointed his camera straight up into the sky, searching for missiles or fighter jets flying overhead. These images are barely interpretable; the planes (or missiles) appear as small, dark marks with contrails of smoke, surrounded by an otherwise blank field of grey sky, without any stabilizing horizon line. Incoming missiles trace downwards as they curve and plummet. The surface of a digital print is typically pristine, as the Photoshop toolbox allows for the erasure of all imperfections in a photographic print. In contrast, Raad has used these same tools to add layers of dust, fingerprints, and chemical streaking, which imply poor chemistry practices, clumsy handling in the enlarger, a dusty, unclean darkroom, and/or careless storage methods—exactly the problems that once plagued the amateur darkroom enthusiast.

The last images from this group focus on the Israeli infantry presence in East Beirut. Unlike the preceding photographs, they were taken at a very close range, when soldiers were at rest in the encampment. These images are sharper and clearer, with much less accrued damage than in the hilltop scenes of explosions. Generally, the photographs depict Israeli weaponry: an armored personnel carrier (APC) is shown from two slightly different angles, with apartment buildings visible in the near distance; an APC is then photographed at close range, showing two roof-mounted, pivoting machine guns. One pair of images presents an anti-aircraft gun or rocket launcher though the open hatch, while a shirtless and barefoot soldier takes a nap on the back of an armored vehicle. Both the soldiers and the weapons appear languid and inert; an assault rifle is temporarily discarded on the grass, and others are stowed on the side of the vehicle. A second napping soldier is curled up on a stretcher while other soldiers relax under the shade of their vehicles, sleeping or
reading the newspaper. Some make eye contact, even smiling at the camera (Fig. 3.10).

Despite this work’s apparently fictional quality, Raad has made a point to state that he always works with “facts.” In a 2010 interview, Raad claimed, “In my works, I proceed from and try to keep alive in their full complexity all sorts of facts: historical, social, political, critical, economic, technical, and aesthetic. I treat them as existing on a continuum. In my artworks, I relate to an “aesthetic fact” in the same way that I would to a historical fact.” Facts, for Raad, are not just individual constituent pieces of knowledge or evidentiary data. Facts are conditions that shape the horizon of possibility in a given scenario at a given moment for a given actor. They are contingent pieces of experiential knowledge, sometimes experienced in different ways by different receivers, but always authentically true for each one. They are not ontological, but the result of cultural and historical forces working on the material of the present.

In his use of the term aesthetic fact, I interpret two related meanings: the visual artifacts produced by internal or external factors and the material conditions limiting the possibilities of formal expression. Take, for example, the amount of time available to stand still safely in a war zone and photograph something. Consider the formal consequences of such a limiting condition; the photographs may come out blurry because of the rush. An aesthetic fact can affect production, but it can also be a visual artifact of production. That is, the form of a photograph must be in response to what the subject and conditions allow. In a certain sense, the synthetic

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connection between the conditions surrounding a given photograph and its ultimate form, as described under the notion “aesthetic fact,” is similar to the synthesis between form and content.

Raad’s choice of visual forms and formats—his connecting of narrative strands with photographic modes—is governed in part by the conceptual interplay between the types of facts a specific formal choice will enable. Invoking the notion of a continuum, Raad claims that various types of facts do not operate or exist independently of one another. Instead, presumptively real or objective facts (technical, historical, statistical) commonly interact with fictional or subjective ones (aesthetic, subjective, emotional). A particular historical fact might not be visible, let alone resonate as emotionally true, until a certain aesthetic fact is applied to it, one that can make this historical fact conceivable or intelligible. Aesthetic facts traverse the distance between the seeming preposterousness of a caption’s claim and the manifest physical form of the work.

We can read as aesthetic fact the graphic layer of constructed deterioration in *We Decided* and its obvious discrepancy with the project’s statement of careful preservation. The formal manifestation of the experience of trauma is a gesture that opens the work to interpretive possibility. We can also read the damage accrued by the images as a marker of Raad’s reflection on his own subjectivity: first as a signpost of the trauma he sees in the event and second, the distance he now feels from his younger self, the dislocated and lost author of these images. This trauma is twofold: the initial shock of watching an aerial bombardment, and the later shock of re-discovery upon finding his teenage images.
Raad’s admission that he “wanted to get as close as possible to the events,” but was “clearly not close enough” is a clear reference to Robert Capa’s famous dictum, “If your pictures aren’t good enough, you’re not close enough.” In Raad’s conceptual restaging of the now-canonical episode of Capa’s ruined negatives, he is asking what close enough would look like, implicitly pointing out the fallacy of proximity or distance as criteria for producing a sensitive, communicative image. The visual effects in We Decided also allude to Capa’s photographs of the Omaha Beach landing on June 6, 1944. Capa’s negatives were damaged in the darkroom during processing, but the grain, blurriness, and high contrast of the resulting images became the representation par excellence of the intense emotion and tension of the battle itself (Fig. 3.11). The damage to Capa’s negatives was an accident that came to be understood as making the images more effectively true than they would otherwise have been. The damage can thus be read as the aesthetic fact of Capa’s images: a formal artifact of their conditioning circumstances; the critical aesthetic pin on which their interpretation rests. This understanding of Raad’s term distances the visual impact of an image from the author’s original intention, placing the work of aesthetic interpretation on the viewer, as well as encompassing the dimension of accident involved in all aesthetic production.\(^\text{50}\)

\(^{49}\) Raad even quotes Capa in his dissertation, on page 124, footnote 16 (though with a mistaken attribution to Cornell Capa). But, in a conversation with this author in May 2012, Raad stated that this was a reference to a Harun Farocki film, Images of the World and the Inscription of War, 2003.\(^{50}\) In comparing Raad’s photographs with Capa’s, I do so only to draw a parallel between how the images formally communicate the intensity of the event. By now, the damage in Capa’s Normandy images—and its connection, in the popular consciousness, with a high degree of truth-value and authenticity of reportage—has become a trope of photographic history. Paradoxically, the visual unintelligibility (of Capa’s photographs) seems to reinforce their status as the most accurate and authentic representation of the invasion. Raad plays on this to show that the abstracted images in We Decided likewise point to a reality of the experience in Beirut.
We Decided extrapolates a wider claim from this episode: that as a photograph degrades, its ability to maintain an accurate truth can also degrade. The quality of the image itself can sometimes conflict with the truth claims of the image. What is at stake here is the logic by which Raad’s original photographs become the project We Decided. The fictive space between the images and their supposed backstory suggests several possible interpretations. Perhaps Raad ruined these negatives as a teenager in his darkroom (with or without realizing it) and had since preserved them carefully, damage and all. Or Raad thought his negatives were carefully preserved (in his own memory of having preserved them) but in fact, upon discovery and enlargement, found that the prints revealed extensive damage to the negatives. It is also possible, within the fantastical logic of the Atlas Group, that these scratches and streaks are what Raad actually took pictures of—that the trauma of the attacks imprinted itself directly onto the images as they were taken—or that the damage seeped into the negatives over time, while they were in storage, just as the emotional damage has manifested itself in the minds of the witnesses and the victims. The implicit suggestion here is that one cannot make a photograph of something so devastating without the image itself incurring some wound.

Perhaps Raad is suggesting that foregrounding his psychic distance is the only way meaningful way to reflect on the moral dimension of the indiscriminate violence of aerial bombing.\(^{31}\) When I interviewed Raad in 2012, he explained that when he rediscovered these 1982 photographs twenty years later, he had completely

\(^{31}\) The doubling of images in the second version further underscores the distance between the original event and the revisited images. It also seems to point out the way that history seems to repeat: in 2006, Beirut was again under bombardment by Israeli warplanes, the subject of yet another Atlas Group work, Oh God, he said, talking to a tree.
forgotten having taken them and was struck by how odd it was that he had been able to approach and photograph the Israeli soldiers so closely.\textsuperscript{52} He was unsettled by the realization that, at fifteen, he had been more interested in the act of photographing the soldiers and the air assault than he was concerned for the safety of his neighbors in West Beirut. In retrospect, he was equally surprised that his Palestinian mother had accompanied him and allowed him to approach and photograph these soldiers.\textsuperscript{53} Raad also confessed his surprise at how well the images had survived.\textsuperscript{54}

While some critics might contend that even Raad’s apparently candid responses to an interviewer’s questions could be just another piece of the elaborate fictions surrounding his work. This betrays an anxiety at having been taken in by the works’ narratives. The response is to shore up one’s defenses by disbelieving everything Raad says outright. Nevertheless, the task of interpretation should not simply be to determine precisely which aspects of an artwork exist in “fiction,” but rather, what insights such fictions can offer about reality. This tension between real events and partially fictionalized narratives, is, after all, what make Raad’s work so powerful. Put another way: if every aspect of Raad’s projects were fictional, they would lose their critical traction and conceptual charge. Fiction, after all, is only meaningful insofar as it reveals something otherwise invisible in the “real” world. At some point, something Raad says must be worth believing, or else the rest has little meaningful value.

\textsuperscript{52} Conversation with the author, May 2012. This story is consistent with what he has told other interviewers: See also Westmoreland, 215.
\textsuperscript{53} Conversation with the author, May 2012.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
The photographs in *We Decided* also record Raad’s lack of critical thought at the time, and seeing them again shocked him. In this way, we can see the overlay of digital damage as an attempt to insert this needed criticality, separating his young self from his current self. Mark Ryan Westmoreland, a visual anthropologist and documentary filmmaker, has offered thoughtful commentary on these images in his dissertation:

Showing photos taken by a young Raad of some Israeli soldiers sitting around a military tank as well as images of bombs falling on West Beirut illustrates a commentary on the estrangement he now feels to a self that took these photos without concern for his city and the people living in it. The implicit schizophrenia of this photographic event traces the social fracture in Lebanese society that enables him as a Christian teenager to blithely photograph Israeli soldiers, while the Israeli Defense Forces are besieging the Muslim sections of the city. His proximity to these occupying soldiers stands in contrast to his distance from his countrymen and women under siege across the city.  

By adding layers of damage, Raad also acknowledges that he could not simply present his 1982 photographs as artworks without somehow intervening upon them physically. The photographs show, albeit from a distance, the anonymous deaths of other Beirut residents. They show the apparent indifference of the young Israeli soldiers and Lebanese Christians alike. They depict the deaths of Lebanese Muslims as apartment buildings come under attack in West Beirut. Although the addition of damage in some ways “aestheticizes” the images, in that they can be seen to possess a sort of “eerie beauty” that might contradict the apparent “shock” Raad felt when he rediscovered them, the damage also adds subjective distance. They thus record Raad’s attempt to reconcile two positions as a distanced observer, first as a teenager calmly recording dramatic events and now, as a critically informed adult, reflecting

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on his younger self. Memory is fallible, but the rather unflattering account of this unsophisticated teenage photographer provides another reason to believe Raad’s story of rediscovery.

**Conclusion**

Another Lebanese artist, Akram Zaatari (b. 1967), also photographed the Israeli invasion of Lebanon as a teenager in 1982, from his home in the coastal city of Saida (Sidon), as forces advanced up the coast to Beirut on the very first day of what would become a seven-week-long siege. Zaatari’s work, *Saida, June 6, 1982* (2003-2006), is a digital composite of six photographs made when he was first learning photography using his father’s Kiev, a Soviet-made medium-format camera (Fig. 3.12). Zaatari’s work indicates the degree to which Raad’s practice is not unique, but embedded in a generational history. Many Lebanese artists who were teenagers in the early 1980s were marked by the experience of war and of the Israeli invasion; many have returned, as adults, to the images they made at the time and parsed them as part of their mature practice. Zaatari’s *Saida, June 6, 1982* provides a specific counterpoint to Raad’s *We Decided* photographs, as they resonate so strongly in mode and experience. Zaatari’s work suggests the ambient blur of traumatic memory in its compositing of a day’s worth of bombardments into a single photographic space. “The delay recalls the workings of latency,” writes Demos, “but here the motivation for the postponement—whether it owes to the psychological barrier of bringing to life an image of the horror, or to mere accident—remains
unclear.” However, unlike Raad’s work, the manipulation does not conceptually foreground the distance between the time of the event and the time of viewing, or the implied distance between the two artistic selves involved. While there is a material latency for Zaatari as well, there does not seem to be a psychic latency.

These interpretations rely on the notion of a belated reaction to the original event, however formally or structurally it might manifest itself. This belatedness is in keeping with trauma theory’s definition of a traumatic experience. As Cathy Caruth writes, the traumatic is “a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts, or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event.” The intervening years between when Raad took the photographs and when he “looked again” can be considered, following Freud, as the “incubation period” of trauma. According to Freud, “the time that elapsed between the accident and the first appearance of symptoms is called the ‘incubation period,’ a transparent allusion to the pathology of infectious disease. … It is the feature one

36 Demos, *The Migrant Image*, 188.
37 Caruth, “Trauma and Experience,” 4-5. Caruth continues: “This simple definition belies a very peculiar fact: the pathology cannot be defined either by the event itself—which may or may not be catastrophic, and may or may not traumatize everyone equally—nor can it be defined in terms of a distortion of the event, achieving its haunting power as a result of distorting personal significance attached to it. The pathology consists, rather, solely in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event. And thus the traumatized symptoms cannot be interpreted, simply as distortions of reality, nor as the lending of unconscious meaning to a reality it wishes to ignore, nor as the repression of what once was wished” (p. 5, emphasis added).
might term latency." This latency is inherent in the experience of trauma; only after a period of latency do belated symptoms manifest. Caruth explains, “since the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time.” Raad’s revisiting of his old photos directly engages this belatedness, the latency of the trauma that was psychically recorded but emerged (developed) only much later.

*Thin Neck* and *We Decided* deal with specific historical events: the 1982 Israeli invasion and occupation of Beirut and the prevalence of car bombings throughout the civil war period. These were two of the most violent categories of experience that an ordinary citizen was likely to encounter during the civil wars. Given their dominant presence in these works, we can infer that they were also the most disturbing for Raad. The project descriptions correspond to Raad’s own experiences, and both works dismantle authoritative historical structures and self-reflexively upend Raad’s own subject position. *Thin Neck’s* arrangement of aggregate data shows the viewer how real scenarios can be perceived as opaque abstractions, while *We Decided* uses formal abstraction to point to the difficulties in each person’s subjective experience. One draws from publicly accessible archives, the other from an individual roll of film taken by the artist as a young man. Both, by attending to the conventions of photojournalism, extend the academic critique of photography’s claim to truth. Finally, both projects present real photographic images within idiomatic frameworks of production and display crucially intertwined

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58 Caruth quoting Sigmund Freud. Ibid., 7.
59 Caruth, “Trauma and Experience,” 8.
60 This notion of latent trauma will be revisited in Chapter Four.
with the work’s accompanying narratives. This conditioning of visual form dictated by the work’s sometimes fictional backstory is central to Raad’s method.

While working on the car bomb research projects and noticing the ways that access was controlled around the city, Raad began to understand that while Beirut’s residents had been individually affected by the wars, so had the society at large. In the 1990s, Raad found he was newly able to walk across the city when looking for a car to photograph, for example, while creating the “notebook” _ Already Been in a Lake of Fire_. This freedom was more important to him than finding the car, because it signaled the advent of a more open city. However, in 2005, with the assassination of Rafic Hariri by a targeted car bomb, Beirut’s citizens once again found themselves living in ghettos defined by the logic of suspicion.61

As discussed above, _Overcome_ attempts to render the city as an abstract form one cannot navigate safely without understanding the code by which it operates. Living in a city constantly beset by the fear of car bombs seems to scramble time itself: the possibility of an explosion anywhere in the city, on any given day, or at any time, affects the ability of its inhabitants to carry out everyday activities. Raad has described how, for example, an individual may decide to stay home during rush hour; but, if all the inhabitants of a city change their daily patterns, everyone is affected and normal city life becomes impossible. In response, various neighborhoods in Beirut seemed to develop specific coping strategies, leading to the

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61 In summer 2006, during the Israeli bombardment of Beirut, Raad again found himself in a city limited to his immediate neighborhood (at least when photographing). “As soon as people stopped recognizing who I was, I was unable to carry a camera. So, the mere ability to produce photographic documents about any city is contingent on the kind of intelligence information available. There’s nothing neutral about that gesture.” This limit could be felt whenever someone asked him why he was photographing, or even looked at him suspiciously. Raad, “Seminar 3,” United Nations Plaza, February 31, 2007.
development of what Raad calls “a particular space and time of these ghettos that were created during the war” and which persisted even after the wars were over.\textsuperscript{62}

The transition from the individual character-based investigation of the explosions by Fakhouri into one that tracks their social effects points to Raad’s transition from an interest in individual trauma to cultural trauma. Chapter Four will address this issue in relation to Raad’s use of fiction.

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid. He has elaborated on this elsewhere, explaining that Beirut’s neighborhoods came to have a de facto militia authority; but there was no faith left in the ability of either the state or the militias to maintain security. Before the war Raad knew some of his neighbors; during the war he came to know all his neighbors and what cars they drove. “When the shelling starts, if you live on the top floor you need to know the neighbors on the first floor so you can seek safety,” he explains. But, he continues, “this only works in the immediate perimeter. Anyone outside this becomes a complete stranger.” Raad describes how, during the war, his neighborhood was defined by an area “200 meters from his home to the basketball courts.” Raad, “The Loudest Muttering is Over,” Walker Art Center, October 25, 2007.
CHAPTER FOUR: REAL FICTIONS

*How many bombs will it take to produce, in Lebanon, not just holes in buildings, but a hole, however small, in reality? A tear in reality itself so that it would no longer be seamless?*

In the context of postwar Lebanese culture, there have been a number of articulations of the “relay” between truth and fiction that any accounting of the Lebanese situation seems insistently to demand. For a generation attempting to cope with extended internecine violence, catastrophic physical destruction, the severing of civil law, and traumatic psychic aftershocks, the material of this period far exceeded the capacities of traditional documentary forms, with their typical insistence on rational description. The blurring of the real into the fictive, and a wider engagement with the limits and possibilities of documentary modes, are apparent in the work of Raad’s peers, including Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Rabih Mroué, Walid Sadek, Elias Khoury, and Jalal Toufic. The wars resisted documentation, and for this whole generation of artists, a complex entanglement between the documentary and the fictive seemed to offer the only meaningful way to describe the present.

This condition finds confirmation in the academic literature on trauma, as shown in Chapter Three. Whether individual or cultural, the depiction of trauma tends toward the fictional: the effects of trauma often manifest as fantastic or hallucinatory responses, and thus cannot be directly pictured. Trauma itself cannot

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2 Toufic calls for a relay between documentary and fiction in *Vampires*, 74.
be shown directly; only its causes and effects. Thus far, I have demonstrated how Raad’s work maps storytelling (in his extended project statements and performances) onto various forms of visual abstraction, as ways to chart the historical, imagined, or presumed effects of the wars on the Lebanese psyche.

While I recognize the typical structural dichotomy between truth and fiction, I contend here that the fantastic stories recounted in Raad’s artworks operate outside this simple binary, performing the “relay” between them characteristic of the post-war generation. Composed of photographs, resting on the implicit presumptions of photographic truth, and affirmed by Raad’s narratives to be based on real events yet produced by imagined characters, the works disturb the viewer’s expectations of clearly ordered categories. I examine Raad's reliance on, and conceptual dismantling of, the language and conventions of photography: concepts such as proof, evidence, and latency. I focus on the early photo-based projects *Missing Lebanese Wars* (1989/1998) and *Secrets of the Open Sea* (1994/2004), and the film project *Miraculous Beginnings* and *No, Illness Is Neither Here nor There* (1993/2003). I show how these works are emblematic of a Freudian, individuated model of trauma and the hysterical symptoms that often emerge in response.

Critical reception of this work has often overemphasized its narrative fictions. Writers have tended to reduce the Atlas Group to its fictional components, casting doubt on the veracity of Raad’s sources and arguing that his interrogative, open use of historical photographs within imagined contexts is untethered to a

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3 See Rosenberg, Caruth, et al, as discussed in Chapter Three. Accounts of or responses to the traumatic tend toward some quotient of fiction, both in literature and in visual art (where fiction manifests as abstraction).
political or social logic. This line of critique, which implies that the fictive is always intrinsically opposed to and mutually exclusive from the real, precludes an understanding of—or a meaningful critique of—these works. To understand precisely how Raad operates within the space of fiction, I will examine here the kinds of information fiction allows or creates that standard historical accounting does not.

I will also trace in this chapter an overall shift in Raad’s work: from an early understanding of traumatic experience as personal, individual, psychic, and Freudian, to that of widespread cultural trauma, which was catalyzed by his encounter with the writings of Jalal Toufic. This evolving understanding of trauma corresponds to changes in both Raad’s narrative captions and his aesthetic language: early Atlas Group works (until about 2004) present obsessive investigations of photographic truths, in the form of imagined notebooks, vernacular photographs, and home movies. While still relying on photographs, later Atlas Group projects use a dispersed narrative framework and deploy an increased formalism.

These more recent works seem to offer a representation of a new form of reality, one marked by cultural trauma in the wake of the civil war in Lebanon. They chart a bizarre new reality in which the fabric of time and space has itself changed under the accumulation of traumas, resulting in what Toufic calls a “surpassing disaster.” Of course, they are still fictionalized representations, but their logic communicates a collective experience rather than an individual one. Here, I read Toufic’s notion of “surpassing disaster” as an expression of cultural trauma and discuss Toufic’s writing in relation to the notion of cultural trauma as found in two

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4 See in particular Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*; and Lambert-Beatty, “Make-Believe.”
of Raad’s projects, the photographic survey *Sweet Talk* (1992-2004), and the video *We Can Make Rain, but No One Came to Ask* (2006). Far from being trickery or deception, Raad’s work means to reveal this oscillation between states, using multiple formal aspects. As with Raad’s use of abstraction to express reality, here, fiction is invested in the project of *realism* because it is trying to describe reality.

The first model of trauma is recognizable in psychoanalysis by the manifestation of “hysterical symptoms.” For Freud, such symptoms are psychically induced but physically manifested in such conditions as blindness, paralysis, nervous ticks, and shouting. In contrast, Luce Irigaray has linked hysterical symptoms to compulsive behavior, like Fakhouri’s obsessive collecting. To take an example from literature that blends both forms of trauma, in Toni Morrison’s novel, *Beloved*, we can read the character Sethe as a traumatized subject. After escaping from slavery, Sethe kills her two-year old daughter rather than allow her to be recaptured. This trauma is repressed, only to return years later: first as a haunting and then in the form of a young woman called Beloved, a revenant of the murdered child. As a novel, *Beloved*’s fiction is apparent and hardly needs mentioning. It is only in the space of fiction that Beloved is able to return. It is in this novelistic sense of fiction that Raad’s work should be understood, rather than in the sense of false or fabricated. Emma Parker reads Beloved’s return as a hysterical symptom (of Sethe and of the larger community) as well as a traumatized subject herself. While on the

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6 Parker, “A New Hystery.” Parker reads Beloved’s obsessive and excessive behaviors, such as “her insatiable desire for sweet foods and her cannibalistic behavior toward Sethe,” as hysterical symptoms.
one hand, this conforms initially to the individual trauma model, *Beloved* also provides an expression of cultural trauma. As a hysterical symptom, Beloved should only be visible to Sethe, however, other characters in the novel can also see her.\(^7\) Parker convincingly reads the Beloved as “a manifestation of mass hysteria, a hysterical symptom conjured up by the whole African American community.”\(^8\)

While psychoanalysis and trauma theory have largely focused on individually traumatized subjects, there is a growing acknowledgment of the workings of collective memory and cultural trauma. As the theological psychologists Alexander Veerman and Ruard Ganzevoort explain,

> [C]ollective trauma shatters not just an individual’s frame of reference, but the symbolic order of a community. As this symbolic order provides the structure of individual meanings, a major number of individuals in the community may lose their orienting system. This may determine their behavior, demanding an instant creation of a new story. These demands, however, intensify the meaning of the event, often beyond the immediate effects.\(^9\)

Cultural history allows that wider, systematic forms of violence can have deep rooted effects that manifest as cultural trauma. The history of slavery in America and the Holocaust are prime examples. Such systematic forms of violence affect not

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\(^7\) This can be read, in psychiatric terms as the induced paranoia known as *folie à deux*. Coined in 1877 by the French psychiatrists Ernest-Charles Lasègue and Jean-Pierre Falret, it designates cases in which the madness of one brings another into madness and who experience the same delusions. This “shared psychotic disorder” operates via “induced delusive ideas.” In such cases, “a delirious paranoid subject convinces another (or others) of the reality of his hallucinations and, therefore, the sane individual does not consider the paranoid either delirious or insane.” Andrés Romero Jódar, “Bram Stoker's "Dracula". A Study on the Human Mind and Paranoid Behavior,” *Atlantis*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (December 2009), pp. 23-39 (32).

\(^8\) Parker, “A New Hystery,” 13.

only those who directly experienced the events but also their relatives, descendants, and others with a shared history and culture.

**Missing Lebanese Wars**

As images are appropriated and rewired to alternate histories within Raad’s projects, they begin to imply histories that were often politically disallowed or culturally impossible and thus have no photographic record of their own. This original lack does not, in Raad’s world, make the speculative histories or narratives he uses necessarily *untrue*. Raad’s imagined accounts of the war are proxies for those that cannot be written, either because the evidence or data do not exist, are no longer available, or could not be agreed upon or deciphered in the first place. That is, the political and social catastrophe of the war has precluded these stories. Just as two facts can conflict over a central interpretive truth and yet be individually true, so a photograph and the narrative of its production can conflict over the implications of their combination and yet be individually true. In the arbitrariness of material circumstances and their photographic timing, sequencing, chemistry, and accident, Raad finds the entanglement of the materially true and the possible to be visually manifest.

However, unlike other contemporary photographers who are also interested in staging documents that would upend photography’s traditional truth claims, Raad’s formal language does not mimic a “real” object within a photographic archive. Each work’s knowingly preposterous formal and narrative cul-de-sac is supposed to read back on itself, hinting to the viewer that it is *imagined*. In Zoe Leonard’s *Fae Richards Photo Archive* (1993-1996), for example, the viewer, while
perhaps aware of the fiction of the work, can nonetheless be impressed by the realistic nature of the photographic objects (period costumes, worn edges, faded prints). If Richards had been real, then these photos provide a convincing vision of what her photographic record might have looked like. But in most cases, Raad’s works do not attempt to mimic known forms. Even Civilizationally, for example, which features old photographs of Raad’s father, includes them only as reproductions: the photograph is placed upon a backdrop, a system of information is added, and the convoluted narratives and resulting image-forms give the impression of logical impossibilities under any truth regime.

In his arrangement, graphic layouts, printing techniques, or publications, Raad frequently references canonical nineteenth- and twentieth-century photographers, including Eadweard Muybridge, Eugène Atget, Walker Evans, and Robert Capa. He also makes use of twentieth-century avant-garde strategies, including appropriation, collecting, collage, and political photo-montage. But Raad’s transposition of these historicized visual techniques (and their Eurocentric histories) into the traumatized space of wartime and postwar Lebanon creates a charged tension between the image-form and the narrative content, where each formally animates the other and casts new light upon its historical antecedents. Contemporary digital production is able to efface these long-held connections between what a photograph looks like and how it must have been made. Using these tools and surveying photography’s canonical and developmental histories from their widest margins, Raad makes photographs that are historically accurate vessels for his invented, speculative histories; the forms of the works are tied to the stories of their production, in the triangular relationship discussed in Chapter Two. He
manipulates his photographs to give them a greater impact as elements in a fiction. Thus, Raad adjusts Roland Barthes’s contention in *Camera Lucida* that the tense of all photographs is future anterior. Instead, the combined “this will be” and “this has been”\textsuperscript{10} becomes, for the Atlas Group, a form of the future subjunctive pluperfect: “this perhaps would have been” or even “this might as well have been.”

Raad’s combination of appropriated photography, contextualizing information, and fantastical narratives coalesces into a succinctly closed system in *Missing Lebanese Wars* (1989/1998), perhaps his best-known work (Fig. 4.1). *Missing* is emblematic of the logic of many Atlas Group projects. Composed of a series of photographic plates (digital inkjet prints, 32 x 25 cm each) that appear to be individual pages torn from a handwritten, spiral-bound notebook, *Missing* is attributed to the fictional Lebanese historian Dr. Fadl Fakhouri. These purported notebook pages provide a background account for a set of newspaper photographs that Raad collected over the years. The pages are digitally created, and in each printed plate they hover over a blank background, as if each page had been scanned as an individual archival specimen. The notebook pages appear to be the hastily collaged recordkeeping of an avid horse-racing fan: a newspaper image of a race’s finish is taped to each page, with handwritten annotations by the notebook’s author. These include various bits of data, diagrams, measurements, short sentences, and calculations, recorded on and around the race photograph itself. Digital type in a clean sans-serif font overlays each archival specimen, translating some of the Arabic

\textsuperscript{10} Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 96.
and notating the object’s place in the wider collection. Notably, in each newspaper image, no horse is ever shown actually crossing the finish line.

Ostensibly produced by Dr. Fakhouri (supposedly the “foremost Lebanese historian of the civil war”) during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, these materials were “donated” to the Atlas Group after the historian’s “death” in 1991—fortuitously, the same year in which the fighting in Beirut ceased and the war finally ended.\(^1\) The notebook pages record Fakhouri’s racetrack socializing and casual gambling with a small group of his fellow historians. In Raad’s account, this group included Muslims, Marxists, Christians, and Islamists, who, despite their religious and political differences, maintained a standing social engagement at the track, where such tensions were suspended. In the lengthy narrative accompanying the work, we learn that these historians would routinely bet not on which horse would win the race, but on the distance by which the track photographer would miss this “decisive moment” of victory:

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 or after the horse crossed the finish line—the photographer would expose his frame.\(^2\)

Each of the notebook pages includes a photograph supposedly clipped from an issue of the real newspaper, *An Nahar*, on the day following the race. Surrounding this

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\(^1\) The Ta’if agreement was signed in 1989, but fighting continued until 1991, thus the Lebanese civil wars are typically dated from 1975 to 1991 even though the peace agreement was signed in 1989.

\(^2\) From the project statement, available at theatlasgroup.org.
image are handwritten records of the race distance and duration, the winning time, the historians’ initials and respective bets, and calculations of the time discrepancy predicted by the winning historian. Each page also includes a short paragraph in English about the winning historian. The dates written on these notebook pages correspond to the years of the civil war. Therefore, although Raad has invented the story of these gambling comrades, it is nonetheless intimately entwined with the historical realities of Beirut.

The racetrack, known as the Beirut Hippodrome, was literally on the dividing line between East and West Beirut. A statement made in 2008 to BBC News by Nabil Nasrallah, the Hippodrome’s general manager, supports Raad’s indication that the racetrack provided an opportunity for people from East and West Beirut to congregate: “It was one of the few places where people from both sides could mix freely during the war, without problems.” The racetrack continued to operate during the early years of the war but was forced to close in summer 1982, when the

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13 The other historians are not named, but their initials are references to actual historians, which Raad used to emphasize the reality of the narrative. The participating historians are known only by their initials: K.S., M.M., F.F. (Fadl Fakhouri), P.H., H.G., R.O., A.B., and S.K.. However, it is not clear that these are always the same characters: the historian with the initials A.B. wins four of the bets and is referred to twice as her and twice as him, while historian K.S. is referred to once as her and three other times as him. Notes on historians refer to two individuals who bear the initials A.B., who again is sometimes described as a man and sometimes as a woman. Historians M.M. and F.F. (Fakhouri) appear to be rather bad gamblers, for neither wins any bets on the nineteen races (though of course it is conceivable that pages documenting their wins were simply never submitted to the Atlas Group). Oddly, one of the races has an “unknown” winner, although the original bets show F.F. to be closest, guessing −87 (just beating K.S.’s wager of −88) whereas the winning distance was −51. However, in the English transcription of the bets, F.F.’s is written as +87, ostensibly making K.S. the winning historian. Furthermore, it is unclear whether the “unknown” notation in the transcription occurs because the notebook page itself does not indicate the winner (on all other pages, the winner’s initials have been circled), although there is a description, perhaps of himself: “He could stand insults as long as they are couched in courteous terms.”

14 The Beirut National Museum is also located on the former Green Line and sustained heavy damage during the war.

violence finally became too intense. When Israeli rockets hit the Hippodrome and destroyed the old grandstand during the Israeli siege of Beirut, its managers finally decided that it had become too dangerous for races to continue.¹⁶ According to Ahron Bregman, a British-Israeli political scientist specializing in the Arab-Israeli conflict:

On 4-5 August IDF [Israeli Defense Forces] forces entered the Hippodrome, thus increasing the pressure on the besieged forces, and on 9 August an intense military barrage on Beirut was accompanied by massive IAF [Israeli Air Force] attacks on the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra, Shatilla, and Bourj el Barajneh. Three days later on 12 August, the IAF conducted yet another massive air bombardment, which lasted for more than twelve hours; unofficial reports put the number of people killed in what became known as “Black Thursday” at 300.¹⁷

Notably, the race images pasted in Fakhouri’s notebooks do not correspond to the actual race dates or to the dates inscribed in Fakhouri’s notebook, since Raad was in the habit of clipping photographs from the newspaper without keeping track of the race dates.¹⁸ The actual photographs were taken after the war, and the dates written on Dr. Fakhouri’s notebook pages include races from July 7, 1978 to October 5, 1992, but in reality this was not possible, since the Hippodrome was closed in 1982 when the Israeli army occupied it during the siege of Beirut.¹⁹

Even though this chronological discrepancy would be unnoticeable to most viewers (except for some Lebanese), what is one to make of this inconsistency? What can be interpreted from Raad having made Fakhouri gamble during a time when

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¹⁶ Ibid.
¹⁸ The dates that Raad associates with the photos are not real and presumably chosen at random. The fact that some of them are from dates when the track was closed, of course, also hints at this fact.
¹⁹ Race dates contained in Missing on which the Hippodrome was actually closed include May 16, 1984; March 20, 1985; April 2, 1987; November 25, 1987; June 7, 1988; and April 18, 1989.
there was no gambling? Where, precisely, within this chain of narrative has the fictive aspect manifested itself? Some speculative interpretations can be offered. Of course, we know that Fakhouri’s pages are fictional and constructed entirely by Raad. But if we follow the Atlas Group logic, it might be possible that the pages themselves are real, and that Raad found them and invented an author named Fakhouri to take responsibility for them. Or perhaps these pages were real for Dr. Fakhouri (fictional or not) before the track closed in 1982, but he continued to produce these pages alone, without a track to attend or colleagues with whom to bet. That is, the notebook production could have been a hysterical symptom of Dr. Fakhouri’s, part of his own response to the war. Perhaps it is even possible that all these fictional historians came together on their own, even after 1982, and pretended to wager on races, using images from old newspapers; in this case the documentation represents simply Fakhouri’s imagined record of the group’s friendship. It is, finally, possible that Fakhouri himself invented his friends and retroactively produced all these pages annotating his relationships with them in order to fill the time that he had lost while the track was closed. The fact that these race photographs always miss their decisive moments might also be understood as the root aesthetic fact of this work: at the (imagined) time of the work’s (imagined) production in Lebanon, a horse’s race finish could not be accurately captured by the race photographer. If it could, our historians would have nothing to gamble over.²⁰

Fakhouri’s notebooks reveal intense observation and analysis of mysteriously ordinary phenomena, mixing subjective and objective elements—not the sort of

²⁰ For more on this project, see Chapter Three.
records one expects from a historian. Instead of “factual” quantitative research or qualitative analysis of events, his notebooks and films reveal deeply personal responses to the trauma around him. Raad’s various characters’ delusional and often irrational behaviors are “hysterical symptoms” of the overarching trauma of the wars, and their formal rendering cannot help but seem invented, bizarre, unreasonable, and too strange to be true. Raad himself can also be seen as also suffering from these symptoms in his obsessive creation of multi-layered fictions, though he does not ascribe such symptoms to works directly attributed to “Walid Raad.”

The first published version of *Missing Lebanese Wars* was in the journal *Public Culture* in 1999. The following statement was printed alongside the images:

> This work … compels us to consider the war not only as an established chronology of events, dates, personalities, massacres, and invasions, but also as an abstraction constituted by various discourses, and more importantly for Dr. Fakhouri, various modes of assimilating the data of the world. … We urge you to approach them as we do, as “hysterical symptoms” based not on any one person’s actual memories but on cultural fantasies erected from the material of collective memories.

Atlas Group projects are intended to indicate how the personal nature of trauma and the subsequent repetition of its idiomatically experienced hysterical symptoms produce strange, surreal forms. In a 2007 talk in Berlin, Raad discussed what constitutes the nature of traumatic experience, and whether one can characterize the experience of the war as necessarily traumatic. He defined trauma as cognitive and internal, a problem of the psyche, whether individual or collective. Significantly, he

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21 See Chapter Two for a discussion of Raad’s use of characters.
noted it is not the quality or scale of an event that makes it traumatic, but rather the belated nature of experiencing that event—its subsequent haunting of the subject, visible in the person’s repeated behaviors or compulsive obsessions. Likewise, fiction is always experienced after the events described, even if they are based on reality. This understanding has conditioned the core Atlas Group projects: even though the war has been lived, it has not yet been experienced or comprehended. In creating these artworks, and in deciding upon their narratives, forms, and attributions, it seems Raad proceeds first by imagining what those symptoms might be and then deciding what kind of life experience could have allowed the war to catalyze such symptoms. Thus, there is of course a dimension of fiction—“feigning, counterfeit, dissimulation, pretense”—in the assembly of Atlas Group “documents.”

In the early 1990s, Raad began collecting horse-race photographs printed on Mondays in Beirut newspapers with the weekend’s race results, though without a particular project in mind at the time. He noticed that these race photographs rarely showed the winning horse actually crossing the finish line, and that the images were commonly a few fractions of a second off from the precise finish. Nonetheless, they were still regarded as confirmation of a victory, which Raad found notable, even odd. Raad started imagining a group of historians going to the track and betting on the time discrepancy between the photograph and the actual finish. Several years

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22 Conversation with the author, May 2012.
24 Conversation with the author, May 2012.
later, Raad realized what had made these photographs so compelling: he began to conflate the photographers’ time errors with the unrecognizable experience of the present: “This temporal shift in the photo became for me symptomatic of the experience of the war itself: one was never on time, always too early or too late.” The temporal displacement of this belated trauma was mirrored in the temporal displacement of the race images, which themselves mirrored the complexities and limits involved in attempts to write the history of contemporary Lebanon. Not being on time for the image meant not being present for the passing of the moment. If that history is necessarily traumatic, Raad concluded, it would not be constituted by a chronology of dates, but would rather be a gathering of hysterical symptoms of these events, and it would contain traces of their being lived, but not being experienced. These race photos—which can be read as a symbol of this feeling of displacement and anomic, or perhaps to Raad, as “hysterical symptoms” themselves—then crystallized into the form of Fakhouri’s gambling notes.

Since all the photographs depict the missed moment of an actual photo finish, if they are viewed outside the context of Missing they appear almost interchangeable. An interesting inconsistency in the project, besides these missed victories, is a subtle repetition that occurs in plates 143 and 144, which depict the finish of the same race as presented in two different newspapers, making the photographs seem even more interchangeable (Fig. 4.2). In Missing Lebanese Wars these photographs are given different race dates: April 2, 1987 and October 5, 1992.

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In each plate, the newspaper caption is printed below the image, demonstrating that they were obtained from different sources.28

These horse-race photographs respond to an early moment in the history of photography: Eadweard Muybridge’s studies of animal locomotion, most famously those of galloping horses from the 1870s, with which Raad was familiar from his undergraduate studies in photography (Fig. 4.3). Muybridge’s images were foundational to the notion that photography was a mechanism of proof: not just that horses galloped with a specific gait, but that the optical mechanism of the camera was a neutral arbiter of reality. However, since none of the Beirut race images ever show an actual winning moment, Raad views them as a different kind of proof: one of photography’s persuasive power, even when it obviously fails to articulate a truth. Recontextualized, these images now exist within a fictionalized tale of gambling professional historians—comrades intellectually, though divided politically and socially—who are wagering on different versions of the implied truth of each photograph. Here is a sly metaphoric parallel for history’s perpetually open interpretability, and specifically for the unsettled nature of official Lebanese history and the difficulties of ever trying to settle it. This image-form (the never-quite-accurate photo finish) and this narrative conceit (the Lebanese historians who come

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28 Conversation with the author, May 2012. Raad showed me the clippings and explained that each plate in the series used an actual clipping from a newspaper, and that he did not intentionally use images from the same race. The most likely explanation is that two different newspapers ran different versions of the same photograph to report on the results of a race, and that Raad clipped both sources. Since Raad clipped dozens of photographs and did not systematically store or organize them in any way (he kept them simply as cutouts in an old photo box), it is plausible that he simply used this pair of images without realizing the relationship between them. It is also possible that he used the two photos of the same race intentionally when he first created the work, but that this was not a major feature and he forgot about it over time.
together over their failure to agree on an official truth) form the tension of the project.

As discussed in Chapter Three, the “pathology” of trauma is said to consist “solely in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it.”

Missing makes use of a Freudian model of trauma, while we can ascribe the dimension of fiction in the work to the character’s repeated and belated experience of trauma. The fluctuating variables of interpretation inherent to “fiction” mime the messy, opaque, and seemingly contradictory claims, made by the competing agendas of diverse citizens that arise from any attempt to engage in “honest” discussion surrounding the war.

**Miraculous Beginnings**

The twin films *Miraculous Beginnings* and *No, Illness Is Neither Here Nor There* (1993/2003) are also authored by the fictional Fakhouri (Fig. 4.4). Each film is one minute and forty-three seconds long, and they are typically screened side by side, in a loop, either as a double-monitor installation or as a double projection. Within the archive, the films are given the file name “[Cat. A]_Fakhouri_Films_238-239” to indicate that Fakhouri ostensibly produced hundreds of films, each of which was presumably created according to some other form of internalized, traumatic logic. In

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29 Caruth, “Trauma and Experience,” 4-5. Caruth adds: “The historical power of trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through this inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all. And it is this inherent latency of the event that paradoxically explains the peculiar, temporal structure, the belatedness, of historical experience: since the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time.” Ibid., 8.
fact, Raad made only these two films as Fakhouri, and their numbering system is thus also fictional.\textsuperscript{30}

These two silent films offer a glimpse into the imaginary historian’s troubled psyche. Fakhouri supposedly carried two 8mm film cameras with him at all times, and with each camera he produced simultaneous, ongoing film projects. \textit{No, Illness} was made by exposing a single frame of film at every sign for a doctor’s or dentist’s office that Fakhouri saw. For the second film, \textit{Miraculous Beginnings}, Fakhouri exposed a single frame of film every time he thought the war had ended, resulting in a random assortment of domestic scenes and images of Beirut city life; it is as if, upon hearing news of a ceasefire, Fakhouri dropped whatever he was doing and exposed a frame.\textsuperscript{31} The images in \textit{No, Illness} do in fact depict signs for medical offices, photographed by Raad on visits to Lebanon in the early 1990s. The images that make up \textit{Miraculous Beginnings} are a compendium of disconnected photographs taken by Raad and as well as lifted from his own family albums that depict household interiors, personal objects, landscapes, street scenes, and many other features.

When projected at cinematic speed, these collections of individual images fly past the eye in a dense, almost unreadable accumulation, each one present on the screen for a fraction of a second, producing a blurred, frenetic visual fabric. In their

\textsuperscript{30} This is also true of the video \textit{Hostage: The Bachar Tapes #17 and #31}, which refers to an additional fifty-one videos that are not shown (and which do not exist).

\textsuperscript{31} When reproduced in publications, the films are illustrated as film strips. For example a set of three images as if on a roll of motion picture film is presented on the printed page, sprocket holes visible at the right margin: a pink rosebush, a kitchen countertop, Beirut’s ruined cityscape. Or, in the case of \textit{No, Illness}, a sign for an orthodontist hangs before a yellow building; a sign in French and Arabic signifies a doctor of internal medicine; and a pediatrician’s sign in French and Arabic stands in front of a set of windows and a green railing. Alternatively, they are depicted with a photograph of the two film canisters, the envelopes in which they are housed, and a still from each film.
accumulation of fleeting, individual images, these films reveal an obsessive and psychically disturbed author. They are testaments, in a sense, to the experience of living in a constant state of war. The images in Miraculous Beginnings that are clear or striking enough to be perceived in the viewer’s mind are Beirut street scenes and domestic scenes, like the pale pastels of a tile kitchen floor contrasted with the dark green color of vegetables or fruits. These banal and familiar images take on a shocking nature, however, as they are set within the manic and desperate pacing of the film. Some of the individual images are more easily recognizable than others: cityscapes, domestic interiors, friends and family, dinner tables, street signs; such images create momentary points of interest and tease the viewer with an expectation of continuity. The images are assembled frame by frame in the film without regard to content; some are even rotated sideways, or upside down (Fig. 4.5).

This method speaks as much about their real author (Raad) as it does about their fictional one (Fakhouri). It could even be said that Fakhouri’s use of a cinema camera as if it were a still camera, purportedly shooting one frame at a time (when in fact Raad made this film out of individual photographs), is itself a “hysterical symptom.” The image-memories contained in Miraculous Beginnings are hard to grasp and pass almost before they can be perceived. The film becomes a record of how a trauma persists in memory long after the event. Substituting images of daily life for the depiction of traumatic conditions becomes a cipher enabling Raad to convey actual trauma. The attempts to capture moments of peace and beauty add up to a difficult viewing experience of loss and longing. The scattered images in Miraculous Beginnings represent many supposed ceasefires, although these photographs do not correspond in any chronological way to the many temporary
ceasefires that took place during the Lebanese civil wars. The collection of images in the film claims to show every time the war was over. But what does this say about the nature of the fifteen years of civil war if the many ceasefires and periods of peace can be captured in a film that is only 103 seconds long? The fleeting moments of hope for a miraculous new beginning that came with each announcement of a ceasefire are betrayed by the ultimate form of the work: in projection, these individual elements merge into a fragmented, deflating experience.

In *No, Illness* Raad pushes our visual limits still further: dozens of practically identical street signs for medical offices seem to combine with each other, frame after frame. As with *Miraculous Beginnings*, although the eye can see each photograph and individual elements are immediately recognizable, the brain cannot process each frame separately, and each image seems to superimpose itself on the next. The signs are written in Arabic, French, and English, and their sequencing creates a visual tension (due to both their short duration and issues of translation) between the abstract and the nearly legible. The mix of languages also testifies to the pluralistic nature of daily life and culture in Beirut, which was arguably also one cause of intra-ethnic conflict. As the viewer’s eyes struggle to adjust to the rapid transitions, the sheer number of signs for various doctors and specialists also suggests the many injured and traumatized bodies that the entire Atlas Group project obliquely

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32 The title of this work is lifted from Salman Rushdie’s novel *Midnight’s Children* and links Raad’s practice to the literary genre of Magic Realism. Later Rushdie wrote, “Reality can have metaphorical content; that does not make it less real.” Salman Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children*, 200. A comment by Rushdie about his novel serves equally well to describe Raad’s work: “History is always ambiguous. Facts are hard to establish, and capable of being given many meanings. Reality is built on our prejudices, misconceptions and ignorance as well as on our perceptiveness and knowledge. The reading of [the protagonist] Saleem’s unreliable narration might be, I believed, a useful analogy for the way in which we all, every day, attempt to ‘read’ the world.” Salman Rushdie, "Errata," in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 25.
references. The tension created by the constant juxtaposition of diverse images creates a truly disjunctive collage in which the viewer’s expectations are thwarted throughout these very short films.

Despite Raad’s apparently methodical approach to his subject—as exposing a single frame at a time would normally demonstrate a systematic and considered way of recording the present—when the films are replayed the visual experience becomes unreadable, as the frames flicker past at high speed, each image practically invisible in itself, producing a blur of frames. Fakhouri’s films are thus also about the threshold between absolute stillness and extreme speed. Raad’s works often thwart chronological time, making the narrative, or the project’s fiction, difficult to locate in both time and space. Testing the limits of visual perception, they recall early abstract graphic films of the late 1920s and the “flicker films” of the 1950s and 1960s, which were also composed of single frames of disconnected material. Such materialist or structuralist film works, sometimes Marxist but always anti-illusionist, sought to build visual experiences out of cinema without referential images or narratives. Although “flicker films” were adamantly non-narrative, Raad’s is resolutely narrative; even if the narrative of Fakhouri’s obsessive gathering of images is external to the film itself, it is the armature that gives the film its motivating structure. In their arrangement within the linear, presumptively progressive form of a film, each photograph, while illegible on its own, still helps the whole work to accumulate narrative force.

Roland Barthes’ essay “The Third Meaning” offers a provisional theory of the “film still,” suggesting that a single extracted frame from a film carries a different ontological signification from a single photograph:
The still, then, is the fragment of a second text whose existence never exceeds the fragment; film and still find themselves in a palimpsest relationship without it being possible to say that one is on top of the other or that one is extracted from the other. Finally, the still throws off the constraint of filmic time; which constraint is extremely powerful, continuing to form an obstacle to what might be called the adult birth of film ... The still, by instituting a reading that is at once instantaneous and vertical, scorns logical time (which is only an operational time); it teaches us how to dissociate the technical constraint from what is the specific filmic and which is the “indescribable” meaning.  

Even though a film still is in material terms a photograph, it is also part of the larger narrative: it is chronologically situated in the texture of the film from which it was drawn, and it derives meaning from that relationship. It is representative of this larger experience and not simply an image. Raad’s rapid-fire, twenty-four-images-per-second approach to film inverts the cinematic and photographic, running a rapid succession of perfectly banal photographs at a speed where they collapse into an illegible heap of flickering light. On its surface, this is another example of Raad’s disruptive weaving between the concepts of abstraction and realism; in this particular case, he achieves almost their complete inversion. But more specifically, since the film is a staggering accumulation of images, following Barthes we can understand each individual photograph of a doctor’s office as a vessel of this larger cinematic fabric. The whole film is in essence a story of frantic, traumatized vision; each medical sign is a unique symptom of this wider psychosis.

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Secrets in the Open Sea

A signal Atlas Group project that exemplifies what it means to exist in fiction rather than as fiction is the photographic series Secrets in the Open Sea (1994/2004). With roots in Raad’s pre-Atlas Group years, this project crystallizes a host of prominent issues at play in Raad’s practice. Like all Atlas Group works, Secrets weaves historically real things (technical photographic procedures, the thousands of people kidnapped during the war and whose bodies were never found, the postwar reconstruction of Beirut) with fictional propositions (a fantastic technology for recovering latent photographic images, even after their development) into a hybrid narrative that is located in a historical time and place but refuses to operate according to the traditional rules of history.

The dynamic between the historically verifiable and the individually perceived has been a fundamental aspect of Raad’s work, but the logic underscoring his play with the relationship of these two concepts has changed over the years, from an understanding of the individually traumatic to a more speculative, dynamic theoretical basis rooted in the wider surrealities of culture under the condition of sustained war and damage. Raad’s work postulates that the fictive and the historical are not fundamental opposites, but that the fictive moves alongside the historical and that each allows for different modes of narration, different visual forms and languages, different ways of describing and accounting for lived experiences. History follows a set of rules laid down by the civic, public, ostensibly neutral, Enlightenment-based tradition of social-scientific research; these rules are external to any individual and accessible by anyone. But history is thus limited in the dimensions of experience that it can convey, as it disallows individually mediated,
ephemeral, experiential, or psychic data. Fiction allows different rules of relations among scenarios, narratives, and images, which are not necessarily in contradistinction to the historical. Raad has said:

I don’t view fact as opposed to fiction. I think fiction is a place where things happen, it’s not the opposite of facticity. It’s the same thing with history and aesthetics, I don’t think that history is on one hand and aesthetics is the opposite. … So most of the work of The Atlas Group is experiences, events, and documents that manifest themselves in fiction, so it is not a work that is about fiction. It is documents that emerge in fiction. But I always work from facts, but I treat an intuitive fact the same as I would treat an historical fact, as least in The Atlas Group. 34

This understanding prompts an important question: “Why do certain images appear in fiction while others appear in history?”35 Thus, while Raad acknowledges the importance of fiction to the Atlas Group, he rejects the label of fictitious, with its connotations of artificiality, deception, and dishonesty. He instead claims that the works are truthful, or at least rooted in truth, though they are made possible by the connective and narrative pathways of fiction:

We are not saying that history should not include [facts]. … We are certainly saying that history cannot be reduced to this. … Traditional history tends to concentrate on what really happened, as if it’s out there in the world. Most people’s experience of these events is predominantly unconscious and concentrates on facts, objects, experiences, and feelings that leave traces and should be collected. 36

Rather than telling a particular narrative in many different ways—a practice critiqued by Souheil Bachar in Hostage, as we saw in Chapter One—Raad here is

34 Raad, “The Loudest Muttering is Over,” Hasselblad Center, 2011.
35 Ibid.
36 Raad, quoted in Wilson-Goldie, “The Atlas Group,” Bidoun, 22-23. The curator and critic Hélène Chouteau-Matikian has also tried to pinpoint this difference, locating the dimension of fiction in the wider “archival” construct of Raad’s putative Atlas Group. She notes that the Atlas Group documents are not inherently faked—the photographs and other elements have not been manipulated or staged—rather it is “their assembly in a narrative system that propels them into fiction.” Chouteau-Matikian, “War, There, Over There,” 104.
telling multiple stories, which may conflict factually with each other but each of which is sufficiently true on its own.

_Secrets_ is a series of large-format, monochromatic, rectangular blue fields, printed nearly to the edge of the photographic paper, with a thin white border (Fig. 4.6). Although the project statement claims that there are twenty-nine prints in the file, only six actually exist. According to the Atlas Group, these blue photographs were “discovered” in the rubble of Beirut’s commercial district in 1992, which was then undergoing a massive reconstruction effort in the immediate wake of the devastating war years, and were “entrusted to the Atlas Group by the Lebanese government for preservation and analysis” in 1994. The prints were supposedly then sent to French and American (or sometimes British) laboratories, where testing revealed small, black-and-white photographs somehow still latent within the blue prints. These allegedly latent images are said to depict groups of men and women who were later identified by the Atlas Group as people who had died (the explanation redundantly describes them as “drowned, died, or were found dead”) in the Mediterranean Sea during the war.

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37 The archive states that there are twenty-nine prints in the file; the six prints that Raad has actually created are numbered 16 through 21, as indicated in the file name [Cat.FD]._Secrets_Photographs_016-021. See www.theatlasgroup.org.
38 Project statement, accessible at theatlasgroup.org.
39 An early description of the work suggests the developing fiction of its provenance: “Between 1975 and 1990, the Lebanese army found a number of large blue photographic prints in the intelligence headquarters of the warring militias that had been active during the civil war. The images were confiscated and subsequently handed to a Lebanese research institute for analysis. In 1995, the research institute requested, and was granted permission, to send ten of the prints to laboratories in the U.S. for analysis. The laboratories uncovered ten black and white images from the blue prints. The black and white images represented group portraits of men and women. The individuals were identified and belonged to one or another of the militias.”
The Atlas Group presents each blue plate along with a small copy of its latent, inner double reproduced as a faded and grainy black-and-white image, with a size of approximately 4 x 5 cm, at the lower right corner of each blue image. Thus, the large fields of blue are each seemingly footnoted by the tiny black-and-white images. Close inspection reveals somewhat banal news photos of local Lebanese politicians, meeting in various domestic interiors or offices. These images have the casualness of snapshots, but they exhibit the dot pattern of offset printing. In fact, Raad clipped these black-and-white images from Lebanese newspapers beginning in the early 1990s, and here he has assigned them to a new, fictional story, much as he did with the horse-race photographs used in Missing Lebanese Wars. These newsprint images are completely anonymous and are neither dated nor otherwise identified. They do not (of course, they could not) actually show those who were indeed kidnapped, drowned, or mysteriously murdered during the war, but they do point to the involvement with these militias of many Lebanese politicians, who were later absolved of all crimes.

In the “latent” image shown in Plate #16, for example, four middle-aged men are seated together on a large sofa and appear to be chatting and laughing amiably. Somewhat awkward in its frontality, the photograph shows the men lined up and facing straight at the camera, distanced from the viewer by a large coffee table with an elaborate flower arrangement (Fig. 4.7). But these banal, supposedly latent images do nothing to elucidate the strange story; in fact, they make it even less plausible. Under what circumstances could a group of people, all of whom subsequently died mysteriously, all show up in the same photograph? If each photograph depicts people who had died, does their simultaneous presence in a
group photograph imply that the photograph caused their deaths? If they died together, was the photograph spontaneously generated at the time of their death? Were these targeted assassinations based on the “intelligence” gathered from the image? What could explain how these groups of people all died at sea during the war unless the camera was guided by something more sinister?

That the blue monochrome images themselves appear to have been spontaneously generated (seemingly out of the blue) implies the tragedy of the disappeared lives and also the ever-present psychic imprint of the Mediterranean Sea, which was geographically so close but for many (specifically, for all those living in East Beirut during the civil wars) inaccessible. Toufic has described Secrets as “photographs taken by nobody … but developed.”40 In this characterization, these traumatic images have manifested themselves upon the photographic paper through some unknown photochemical or optical means, perhaps as a kind of silent, anonymous memorial to the unknown victims.41

As we observed in Chapter Two, the Lebanese artist duo Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige also employ the idea of latency in their works and theoretical writings.42 Joreige’s uncle was kidnapped during the war and is still reported as missing.43 Invoking these missing persons as latent, they write: “Understood from the perspective of Lebanese society, and the memory of the thousands who remain

40 Toufic, “Lebanese Photography between Radical Closure and Surpassing Disaster,” in The Withdrawal of Tradition, 75-76.
41 For a discussion of this series in relation to Raad’s early darkroom experiments while a student at RIT, see Achim Borchardt-Hume and Walid Raad, “In Search of the Miraculous,” 12-14.
43 “On the 19th of August, 1985, my uncle, Alfred Kettaneh Jr., was driving a Red Cross ambulance when he was kidnapped.” Ibid. [Joreige and Hadjithomas, “Latency,” 14.] The artists have also begun research on an undeveloped 8mm film that used to belong to Joreige’s uncle, who disappeared during the war.
missing even as the civil war is over, for us this raises the issue of the body, and how its presence is often necessary for the community to heal and regroup after a conflict, a catastrophe.”44 During the war, 17,000 Lebanese were kidnapped and remain missing. According to a law passed in 1995, the family of the missing may ask to have their relative declared officially dead four years after the date of disappearance. Hadjithomas and Joreige write, “The families who have been put in this situation are confronted with a difficult choice: To declare someone dead without a trace, without the physical presence of a body, a corpse.”45

Of course, the notion of latent images is intrinsically photographic, and Secrets further evidences Raad’s interest in the potential of presenting a meaningfully narratable dimension of the war’s physical damage through negatives and prints. It is a clear example of Raad’s style of tying narrative fiction to the objective materiality of the photograph. I read in this work a deployment of the concept of latency as a photographic process, a verifying signature of traumatic experience, and a conceptual armature for a theory of history. In his famously unfinished Arcades Project, Walter Benjamin often relied on photographic processes as a metaphoric basis for the unfolding of history. In one brief note, Benjamin wrote: “The past has left images of itself in literary texts, images comparable to those which are imprinted by light on a photosensitive plate. The future alone possesses developers active enough to scan such surfaces perfectly.”46

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41 Hlavova and Winder, Rabih Mroué, 84
42 Joreige and Hadjithomas, “Latency,” 47.
In *Secrets*, Raad’s Freudian reading of trauma as intrinsically belated overlaps with Benjamin’s notion of historiography as an always delayed decoding of events that can never be fully comprehended in the moment when they occur. *Secrets* suggests that in the postwar Lebanese context, these two forces are the same: because historical narration is so politically fraught, events persist in the mind even though they are insufficiently described or historicized, and thus insufficiently dealt with as traumatic triggers. They await some technical or social apparatus that can, from whatever distance, finally decode them. *Secrets* proposes that the labor of historical narration and that of healing are the same, albeit always suspended in perpetual deferral into the future. This is posed by the form of the work in the moment of viewing: instead of disbelieving the backstory outright, a viewer is inclined to puzzle out its photographic mystery and perhaps even to wonder whether some new digital or optical technology might actually exist that could enable the recovery of latent images from ruined photographs.

Raad’s multi-layered conceit—that the blue prints were found under the rubble, holding latent images of people who had died violently; that somehow these latent images were developed; and that the Atlas Group was able to identify the people in those images—makes it emblematic of Atlas Group “documents.” These mysteriously aesthetic objects have been found, recovered, donated, traced, tracked, researched, captioned, and finally presented publicly, where those analytical and authorship questions are framed within the works themselves. *Secrets* is the first file in the Atlas Group’s anonymous “Found Documents” (FD) file category, and the anonymity of this authorship is not to be glossed over: no one is responsible for the salvation of these images, just as no one was ever held responsible for the
disappearance of the people in them. This visual abstraction and enigmatic latency are linked to actual events and the real history of disappearances as well as to the postwar reconstruction of Beirut. On their face, many of the formal properties used by Raad are absurd: home movies with no frame rate, images of color fields supposedly incorporating latent photographs, horseracing notes from a time when the track was closed, and notebooks made by a teenager containing advanced technical knowledge about military ordnance.

Raad has stated that he became interested in how photography can be limited by the social and cultural conditions of the location where it is practiced. For instance, in a war zone or a postwar zone, issues related to surveillance and intelligence make street photography, as canonically understood, impossible. There are simply too many risks. So Raad’s interest in photographing Beirut upon his return in the early 1990s stemmed from the fact that he found it difficult to do so without being approached by officials or asked to stop.47 This limiting condition became a part of the work: in a more self-conscious, performative approach, Raad would photograph the city each day, stopping only when somebody questioned him. This became the limit of the city for him:

In the late 1980s in the midst of the Lebanese wars, I committed myself to producing photographs in Beirut. I titled this commitment *Sweet Talk* and referred to the various photographic self-assignments as “Commissions.” *Sweet Talk* concentrated on Beirut’s residents, its buildings, streets, storefronts, gardens, and other objects, situations, and spaces in the Lebanese capital.48

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47 Raad, [Exhibition Walkthrough: Hasselblad Award], 2011.
48 Conversation with the author, May 2012.
In a 2012 exhibition walkthrough at the Hasselblad Center in Sweden, Raad described how, at various points in the postwar period, he was once again able to photograph freely in Beirut without being stopped by anyone, because the war had ended. However, after the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri, tensions again ran high and Raad could “barely go a hundred meters before somebody would ask [him] what [he] was doing,” at which point he ceased photographing.\textsuperscript{49} He also professed an interest in how the sociopolitical context of Beirut proscribed his ability to photograph the city, even though he did not attempt to visit places that were off limits, take photographs surreptitiously, or otherwise seek to go beyond acknowledged boundaries.

It is important to contextualize this work within the rebuilding efforts in Beirut, undertaken by the development company Solidere, founded in 1994 by Hariri, then Lebanon’s Prime Minister and a billionaire.\textsuperscript{50} Solidere was roundly criticized for proceeding without sufficient care or attention to the possible forensic or historical value of the rubble it was rapidly clearing, and for the outright damage caused to still-habitable and structurally sound buildings in the vicinity. In the rush to reestablish a prominent global city, much evidence from the war years was washed away. In 1994, Solidere promised an optimistic program of massive rebuilding—promoted in polished style by a public-relations firm—called \textit{Beirut: An

\textsuperscript{49}Raad, [Exhibition Walkthrough: Hasselblad Award], 2011.
\textsuperscript{50}Hariri was Prime Minister of Lebanon from 1992-1998 and from 2000-2004. Solidere is a joint stock company that is partially government-owned. Solidere is an acronym for the French So-Li-De-Re—Société libanaise pour le développement et la reconstruction de Beyrouth (Lebanese Society for the Development and Reconstruction of Beirut).
Ancient City for the Future. Valuable studies by Saree Makdisi and Sune Haugbolle have shown the intersection of politics, private capital, architectural history, and urban planning within the larger framework of Beirut’s reconstruction. Powerful interests seized upon the architectural blank slate that the war’s devastation had essentially provided and began remaking the city without consultation with its residents. Solidere’s urban planning scheme (which dates back to the earliest reconstruction efforts, in 1976) has been accused of unfair land grabs and dubious rezoning schemes, as numerous buildings have been damaged or destroyed under the aegis of the reconstruction efforts. Makdisi writes, “Ironically, though, in the months since reconstruction officially began in earnest (summer 1994), more buildings have been demolished than in almost twenty years of artillery bombardment and house-to-house combat.” The war had devastated the city, and numerous ruined or partially obliterated structures still stood, bullet-ridden, in the central business district. Evidence of the war coexists alongside the new downtown core. Makdisi continues, “Partially destroyed buildings riddled with bullet holes,

53 Makdisi explains the timeline of reconstruction. Already in 1975-1976, a first phase of reconstruction began. In 1984, it was thought briefly that the war had ended, but intense shelling halted further planning and reconstruction efforts. In 1986, the war again appeared to be over, and demolition resumed unofficially in Beirut’s downtown. Makdisi, “Laying Claim to Beirut,” 661-705.
54 Makdisi, “Laying Claim to Beirut,” 674: “It is estimated that, as a result of such demolition, by the time reconstruction efforts began in earnest following the formal release of the new Dar al-Handasah plan in 1993, approximately 80 percent of the structures in the downtown area had been damaged beyond repair, whereas only around a third had been reduced to such circumstances as a result of damage inflicted during the war itself.”
such as the forlorn Murr Tower (which apparently is too expensive to tear down),
still hover over the city like watchful ghosts, acting as unofficial monuments to the
civil war.”55 The ongoing plan for downtown Beirut appears to be aimed at serving
other, more profitable communities such as tourists.56

The deliberative, methodical photographic practice that was effectively
impossible for Raad became possible for a handful of foreign photographers in 1992
when they were commissioned by Solidere to photograph Beirut.57 Raad took the
idea of these commissions as a structure for making his own photographs and
decided to “commission” himself to create a photographic record of Beirut. He then
wrote, in 1996, that the “Beirut Archive,” a fictional foundation that was a
forerunner to the Atlas Group, had recruited photographers in January 1975 to
photograph Beirut. In this early project, published in Rethinking Marxism in 1996,
photographs of Beirut (taken by Raad in the early 1990s) are presented with a time
of day and three possible locations. The images depict storefronts with plate
number, archive number, and collection. In this work, Raad was interested in the
Paris photographs of Charles Marville and Atget, which were taken during the
French Mandate at the height of French colonial presence in the Middle East. Raad
has further noted that given the economic ties between France and Lebanon, the

55 Ibid.
56 Ibid., 692. The statue in Martyrs' Square was also supposed to be repaired: “The most obvious and
striking potential war memorial (in a country that has all but forgotten its war), the shrapnel-scarred
statue in Martyrs’ Square, will be completely repaired, its bullet holes erased and covered over just as
the historical referents in the city center (and history itself) are being erased in the reconstruction.”
57 The idea of commissions, of course, is also a reference to French colonial photography in the
Middle East. Other Lebanese artists have also worked with the idea of commissions. In Hadjithomas
and Foreigé’s Wonder Beirut, the figure of “Abdallah Farah” could be a play on the name of a well-
known, nineteenth-century Armenian photography studio, the Abdallah frères, or Abdallah Brothers
(active from 1870 to the 1890s). See Rogers, “Postwar Art,” 58.
items in the windows of Atget’s Parisian storefronts might well have been imported from Lebanon.58

One of the photographers commissioned by Solidere was the Italian Gabriele Basilico (1944-2013), who made a series of impeccable, architecturally perfect, and ghostly urban landscapes of a devastated and largely depopulated Beirut.59 Clearly made with a large-format view camera, these photographs have a sublimely beautiful take on the collapsing infrastructure of a bombed-out, bullet-ridden downtown in the immediate wake of the war (Fig. 4.8). Employing the language of architectural photography, Basilico presents Beirut as a site of ruins in the archaeological sense, rather than as damaged buildings in the present. In 2007, in a talk at the United Nations Plaza in Berlin, Raad read these photographs as evidence that—echoing Duras and Resnais in Hiroshima mon amour—Basilico “saw nothing in Beirut.”60 That is, Basilico’s images do not reflect the reality of what has happened; they reflect only the aesthetic impulse of the photographer.

Amplifying and sharpening his critique (outlined in Chapter One) regarding the photographic naturalization of violence in postwar countries, Raad sees no evidence of a sensitive interaction between Basilico and Beirut. Of course, such an engagement would be incompatible with the notion of “neutrality.” Where the outsider sees abandoned buildings, Raad sees in them the haunted afterimage of a Beirut in which it had been too dangerous to make such extravagant photographs.

59 Basilico’s photographs were published in 1992 as part of the collection Beyrouth Centre Ville, from Éditions du Cyprès. The other photographers commissioned for this book were René Burri, Raymond Depardon, Fouad Elkoury, Robert Frank, and Josef Koudelka. The book also featured an essay by the Lebanese-born French novelist Dominique Eddé, who had helped to initiate the project. 60 Raad, “Seminar 3.” United Nations Plaza, February 31, 2007.
The ruined buildings are thus “unavailable.” In this same talk, Raad goes on to reflect on the more enigmatic work of Robert Frank, another of the photographers commissioned for the Beirut project. Raad admits that Frank’s asymmetrically overlapping Polaroid photographs present a more opaque view of Beirut, and that he cannot tell exactly what Frank was seeing or trying to see. Frank’s work suggests the (intriguing to Raad) possibility that the images were duplicates, and that in their awkward conjunction they are trying to limn some sense of before and after regarding a given place. This is precisely the challenge that Raad takes up in his We Can Make Rain video, examined later in this chapter.

**Sweet Talk**

Raad’s own photographs of Beirut have coalesced into several related projects, all of which fall under the general title of *Sweet Talk* (1992-2004). Together they constitute a massive photographic survey of Beirut’s urban fabric in the postwar years, with a specific focus on the architectural reconstruction of the city’s downtown. The hundreds of photographs taken by Raad include architectural images, domestic scenes, and urban life: people, families, interiors, and the common landscapes of the city. While *Sweet Talk* shares characteristics with the Atlas Group, it has run on a

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61 Ibid. The ruins were “available” to Basilico in a way they could never be for Raad, who had an actual personal stake in the city’s recent history. “Available,” in Raad’s sense, means visible to the photographer as what they are at that time—as collapsing ruins—and not as occluded or emotionally vexed by virtue of the artist’s awareness of their previous function in a social fabric. What, Raad asks, does Basilico learn in Beirut? What has transpired between the camera and the landscape that might affect or change the pictures’ form? Nothing. If, Raad says, “[Basilico had said that] ‘there were people, but they somehow didn’t appear in my images’ or ‘I took these in the future, in 2005, but it was the past that burned into the plate’ then he would be a sensitive artist.”

In *Sweet Talk: Commissions*, Raad has connected this imagery to the larger historical canon of urban and architectural photography, framing the images through references to Eugène Atget and Walker Evans. He not only transposes their modes and methods into contemporary Beirut, but also uses their catalog publications as templates for the presentation of his own works.

Beginning in the late 1980s, Raad began making photographs of Beirut on his return trips to Lebanon (first using them in *Miraculous Beginnings* and *No, Illness*). At this time, he began what he imagined would be a documentary photography project on Beirut, in the spirit of Atget, Evans, or August Sander, believing that Lebanon needed its own history of photography. Raad recalled thinking, “We need our equivalent [of those].” He continued:

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62 The various iterations of *Sweet Talk* evolved across a series of publications during the late 1990s, and by 1999 at least five published versions existed: (1) *The Beirut Archive*; (2) *Sweet Talk: The Beirut Archive*; (3) *Sweet Talk: Commissions, a Photographic Document of Beirut*; (4) *The Beirut Al-Hadath Archive*; and (5) *Sweet Talk Beirut: A Photographic Survey*. In 1999, Raad presented images from *The Beirut Al-Hadath Archive* in the journal *Rethinking Marxism*. Here, Raad listed a fictional board of directors, staff, funders, and even a post office box. The fictional Fouad Boustaní was listed as director of the Beirut Photographic Center and as signatory of the foreword, which stated, “Al-Hadath is a non-profit visual and cultural research organization that was founded in 1967 in Beirut to document Lebanon’s social, political, and cultural life.” This language is markedly similar to early Atlas Group statements, and Westmoreland (“Crisis of Representation,” 180-81) has called Al-Hadath a “prototype” for the Atlas Group. By 2000, *Sweet Talk* and the Atlas Group had more or less merged. In *Sweet Talk, or the Beirut Archive* (2000 or 2002), the Atlas Group claimed to have recruited a group of photographers and given them specially developed cameras that produced 43mm, circular positive black-and-white images. Ostensibly having carried out their work in 1980, these photographers were required to provide the time when each photograph was taken, along with three street addresses. This was supposedly done “to hinder the uses of its images by any of the warring parties,” because travel throughout the divided city was difficult and dangerous during the war years. Raad, “The Beirut Al-Hadath Archive,” 17.
Someone needs to initiate these projects in Beirut. So I will embark on a systematic photo project in Beirut, to be exhaustive and complete. At one point it no longer made sense to choose one over the other, so the only thing that remained was to make a short film made up of all of them. Photographic surface: each photo is not available to be seen let alone to be photographed: they need to be fleeting, maybe even faster.63

In Raad’s interpretation, he notes that Atget frequently framed his buildings from off to the side, and with extensive foreground. Raad attributes this to Atget’s discomfort with witnessing the enormous changes to the physical city of Paris: “He had a difficultly looking at the Paris that was being transformed. He couldn’t, I think, look a building straight in the face.”64 Art historians, Raad acknowledges, attribute this to the historical limits of Atget’s camera, lens, and his attempts to obtain the correct perspective. “But,” he wonders, “what if these foregrounds are not a technical limit of the camera etc., what if the photographer [Atget] couldn’t look up? What if all he could see was the expanse of the street?”65 In his performances, Raad has said that he, like Atget in Paris, was interested in preserving the old before it was lost, though in fact Raad’s images also included the newly rebuilt sections of the city’s downtown.

The first Commission (1987-present) is made up of sixteen large inkjet prints, each composed of multiple images of buildings, streets, and occasionally people (Fig. 4.9). These photographs were taken primarily in downtown Beirut, where the reconstruction efforts were destroying many buildings and historic areas, and they now stand as a record of the city at an earlier moment. The second Commission (also dated 1987-present) contains large-format, architecturally correct color inkjet prints

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64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
of buildings in downtown Beirut, taken in the period leading up to and during the demolition and reconstruction (Fig. 4.10). The shell of a building (a Hilton hotel scheduled to open just as the war broke out in 1975) that had been captured in panorama in the first Commission is here re-presented, this time carefully photographed. The third Commission (1991-1995/2010) is a set of eleven black-and-white inkjet prints of streets and alleyways in Beirut, many of which would eventually be demolished (Fig. 4.11). There are no people in these photographs, most of the buildings depicted no longer exist, and many of the streets have dead ends.

Raad has connected this imagery to the larger historical canon of urban and architectural photography. He not only transposes their modes and methods into contemporary Beirut, but also uses catalog publications of Atget’s and Evans’s photographs as templates for the presentation of his own works (Fig. 4.12). Raad describes being very affected by Atget’s omnivorous project of documenting the changing of Paris, as well as by his cessation of photography during World War I. Importing Atget’s methodical mode of documentation allows for a conversation with the history of photography and the genealogy of its technical exercise. But in the transfer of contexts and constraints, this project produced different results: from

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66 See Appendix B.
67 In another early version of Sweet Talk, titled The Atlas Group Archive: Sweet Talk: A Photographic Document of Beirut, a project by The Atlas Group and Walid Raad, a series of photographs of buildings and storefronts is presented in circular vignettes. Here, Raad employed file numbers taken from a Walker Evans catalog created by the Getty Museum, arranging his multi-image page layouts using the appropriated catalog template. “Walker Evans once defined his ‘documentary style’ as that which brings out the ‘extraordinary in History.’ He achieved this in part by working with an indexing and montage system that linked photographs with captions that only indicated the places and dates of the shots. It was in the gap between the image and the caption that Evans sought to create the space for poetic thought, thus challenging the false dichotomy between the documentary and the pictorial in photography.” Chouteau-Matikian, “War, There, Over There,” 107.
1996 onward, Raad began photographing Beirut in a haphazard way, making the photographs unfocused, even though outside Beirut he says that he was able to create carefully composed photographs. Raad’s *Sweet Talk* photographs were predicated on imagining things that he thought he would have done photographically had he been older during the war. The work is an attempt to come to terms with his own photographic inclinations, given what is (and was) possible to do in Beirut.

This logic becomes centrally inscribed in the related project, *Sweet Talk: The Hilwé Commissions* (1992-2004) (Fig. 4.13). In this series, Raad digitally corrected the perspective and renderings of a series of 35mm photographs of buildings that he had originally taken in Beirut in the 1990s. This revisiting of old photographs becomes a way of imagining what they would have looked like if they had been taken with proper architectural perspective. Although it was possible to make 35mm photographs in Beirut at this time, Raad felt that walking around Beirut with a large-format view camera and tripod (as Atget had done in Paris, or as Basilico had done in Beirut) was simply not possible for him. For *The Hilwé Commissions*, Raad claimed that in 1973 The Atlas Group recruited people to “photograph streets, storefronts, buildings, and other spaces of national, technological, architectural, cultural, political, and economic significance in Beirut.” Raad took the original 35mm color photographs himself, but attributed them to a fictional woman named Lamia Hilwé, who apparently produced and submitted a series of small black-and-

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69 Raad, “‘The Beirut Al-Hadath Archive’,” *Rethinking Marxism*. 15.
white photographs in 1992. In some accounts, Hilwé resubmitted “variation[s] of the same photograph[s] as a contemporary document of the same building[s]” in 2005, whereas in other accounts it was the Atlas Group that modified the originals. Each of the final inkjet prints includes a small, black-and-white, rectangular photograph of a building, along with an enlarged, digitally altered, color image of the same building from the same negative. The small black-and-white image is printed at the right edge of each page, with a file code typed vertically beneath it (for example: AGP-sweet talk-commission-pl355-1991/pl355-2005, indicating that this particular image represents plate 355 in the series, first photographed in 1991 and then enlarged and reworked in 2005). Centered on the page is a large color photograph of the building, with the sky and background removed. The perspective has been digitally altered, making its vertical lines plumb, as if it had been optically corrected by the camera lens. So, if the original photograph was taken off to one side, the second image has been digitally altered to correct this view (Fig. 4.14).

Rather than having the photographer return to the scene and take updated photos of the old building, Raad causes the retouched image to become the updated image of the building. Raad thus revisits his original photograph, not the place itself.

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70 An early version of the Hilwé project was published in 2002. Called *Sweet Talk or Photographic Documents of Beirut*, it was referred to as a collaboration between The Atlas Group, Walid Raad, and Zeina Traboulsi (another fictional character). This version presented eight black-and-white photographs and their colorized, digitally straightened and corrected enlargements (this time apparently “reworked by The Atlas Group”). In an “interview,” Traboulsi explained: “The photographs I sent to The Atlas Group between 1977 and 2001 as I was working (and continue to work) on *Sweet Talk: Photographic Documents of Beirut* are significant in this regard. My sloppy, haphazard, hit-or-miss compositions may be an indication of this withdrawal. It is difficult for me to say where I am today, but I have noticed a shift in the documents I am producing and in my conceptual, formal, and critical approach to photographing Beirut’s buildings and to my writing of the history of Lebanon. ‘It may be that a resurrection has been produced,’ as Toufic recently suggested. This past year, The Atlas Group has reworked my images. Their colored, cropped, and distorted images of buildings seem to me to be in rapport with my experiences in Beirut today. I recognize what they have done.” Here is a reference to Toufic’s writing as early as 2002.
The originals were in color, but are converted to black-and-white for the small reference images. The colors in the originals are heightened in the new enlargement to make the image appear as though it has been colorized. The excising of the building is done digitally, eliminating any reference to the location. This aspect is consistent with the earliest versions of *Sweet Talk*, which went so far as to list three possible locations for the buildings depicted.\footnote{Raad, “‘The Beirut Al-Hadath Archive,’ *Rethinking Marxism*, 15–29.}

Though the photographs in *Sweet Talk: Hilwè* are abstracted, Raad claims that he meant them to be referential: what they reference is the gaps implicit in his original photographs. After revisiting his own photographs and discovering their sloppy, seemingly haphazard engagement with architecture (that is, evidence of their withdrawal from him), Raad remakes them into new works that demonstrate the fact of this withdrawal. The original images were about the buildings; the *Sweet Talk* images are about the original photographs. Unlike Basilico or any of the other photographers invited to document Beirut, Raad cannot depict urban space itself; he can only present this very inability. Raad recognizes the risk that, when the photographs are digitally extracted and flattened onto blank backgrounds, there is no context for their existence, and they may seem to be purely formal exercises. Often this project has been dismissed by people otherwise interested in Raad’s work, to which he has replied, “I am not surprised that this is the work that is the least interesting [to] someone interested in my work. But I think it is the most resonant. Not even the least interesting, but it is dismissed.”\footnote{Raad, “Seminar 3.” United Nations Plaza, February 31, 2007.}
Surpassing Disaster

The above discussion of *Sweet Talk* provides evidence that, by the mid-2000s, Raad was moving away from an individuated, Freudian model of trauma and toward a more systematically felt social sense of cultural trauma. As part of this shift he began to draw more heavily on the writings of the Iraqi-Lebanese film theorist and artist Jalal Toufic (b. 1962, Lebanon), with whom Raad has worked closely for the last fifteen years. Raad has explicitly used several of Toufic’s essays to theorize his own work, and two of these essays have been reprinted in Raad’s own artist books as acknowledgments of this deep influence. Toufic is best known for conceiving several complex notions within the larger discussion of trauma, which are delivered in an abstruse and erudite writing style, reflecting his deep readings of continental philosophy, film theory, political theology, and religious studies.

In comparing Toufic’s notion of “surpassing disaster” to that of cultural trauma, my contention is not that Toufic is a straightforward theorist of trauma, whose models can be applied in the psychoanalytic treatment of patients, but rather

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73 Toufic grew up in Lebanon during the war and, like Raad, completed his graduate studies in the United States, earning his Ph.D. from the Radio, Television, and Film Department at Northwestern University. Raad first met Toufic in the early 1990s through Jayce Salloum, but Toufic’s writing did not become important to Raad’s thinking and practice until the mid-2000s, when Raad recognized in it many of the same concepts and responses to postwar Lebanon that Raad himself had independently arrived at in his work. Conversation with the author, May 2012.
75 Toufic’s concepts of particular importance to Raad’s work include the “withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster” and the notion of a “radical closure.” These concepts were initially articulated across a number of Toufic’s texts, specifically in the essays “Forthcoming,” “Lebanese Photography between Radical Closure and Surpassing Disaster,” and “Resurrecting the Arab Apocalypse STOP [THE WORLD].” Selections from each of these publications have been collected and reprinted as a single folio in an edition accompanying one of Raad’s exhibitions, titled *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster*, as a key to understanding Raad’s own incorporation of the terms “surpassing disaster” and “withdrawal of tradition.”
one whose writings provide insight into the cultural production of a community affected by trauma. Sociologist Ron Eyerman has defined cultural trauma as “rooted in an event or series of events, but not necessarily in their direct experience.”

As opposed to psychological or physical trauma, which involves a wound and the experience of great emotional anguish by an individual, cultural trauma refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion. In this sense, the trauma need not necessarily be felt by everyone in a community or experienced directly by any or all. While it may be necessary to establish some event as the significant “cause,” its traumatic meaning must be established and accepted, a process which requires time, as well as mediation and representation.

This is the form of trauma in which I interpret Toufic to be participating. Such trauma is also mediated by news reports and by artistic and literary forms, which introduce distancing elements from the direct experience of the events. As “mediators and translators between spheres of activity and differently situated social groups,” intellectuals play an important role in communicating this cultural trauma. Toufic is both affected by a cultural trauma and attempts to make sense of it for the larger community.

In the essay “Forthcoming” (first published in 2000), Toufic wrote of an unnamed, Lebanese photographer (referring to himself) who “had become used to viewing things at the speed of war”—that is, under the pressure to witness things furtively, carefully, tactically; to anticipate violence and protect oneself from it; and

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77 Ibid., 2.
78 Ibid., 3.
79 Ibid., 4.
to navigate temporary cartographies of roadblocks, rubble, or boundary fences that are enforced by unverifiable authorities. This photographer’s images took on visual characteristics due to these pressures: they were blurry, hastily composed, and off axis. After the war, he stopped taking photographs altogether until he could readjust to viewing things “at the rhythm of peace.”\textsuperscript{81} When this anonymous photographer resumed making pictures after the wars, he found that, while he could photograph normally when outside Lebanon, whenever inside Lebanon, “his photographs still looked like they were taken by a photographer lacking time to aim since in imminent danger, the compositions haphazard and focus almost always off.”\textsuperscript{82}

Here, Toufic offers a theorization of cultural trauma in more abstract, literary terms, which resonates with Raad’s experience. In fact, when Raad first read this description, he felt that Toufic had been writing about \textit{him}, so accurately did it reflect Raad’s own experiences in attempting to make photographs on his return trips to Lebanon.\textsuperscript{83} By this time, Raad had already begun \textit{Sweet Talk}, indexing the built environment of Beirut in the postwar years, and he felt a shock of recognition at the resonance between Toufic’s theory and his own photographic practice: the two had arrived, entirely independently and unbeknownst to each other, at strikingly similar conclusions.\textsuperscript{84}

\textsuperscript{80} Toufic, \textit{The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster}, 64.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 64–65.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 65.
\textsuperscript{83} Conversation with the author, May 2012.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid. As Raad has since borrowed from Toufic, so Toufic has used Raad’s work as a model by which to illustrate some of his theories about Lebanese photography. Across the various reprints of Toufic’s essays, Raad’s photographs have come to be used as illustrative examples, and Toufic has offered insights into Raad’s work. Toufic’s writing has been reproduced in expanded form in various volumes on Lebanese experimental visual culture, and it has also been republished by Raad.
Toufic’s hypothetical photographer had suffered from an encounter with what Toufic describes as the *withdrawal of tradition*: a theoretical and psychic scenario wherein extended trauma robs a subject of the ability to recognize the material objects and cultural legacies that predate the trauma’s arrival. That is, the extended catastrophe of the Lebanese wars produced not only physical devastation (evidenced in Beirut’s many urban ruins), but also a concomitant psychic and cultural devastation, which makes patterns of behavior and generational knowledge as unrecognizable as the now-ruined built environment. In the case of Toufic as photographer, the visual language produced by the pressures of war actually persisted beyond the time of conflict—even when that image-form was no longer dictated by the scenario of photographing—due to the conflict’s traumatic effects on the whole society.

In a Freudian, or an individual, psychic model of trauma, the reason this photographer’s work appears hastily composed and out of focus would be that he was psychologically traumatized, with the result that the lingering effects of the trauma were causing him to experience symptoms preventing him from making well-composed photographs. The reason being, perhaps, his eyes couldn’t focus, his hands shook, and anxiety overtook him. But in Toufic’s formulation, trauma is understood as taking place in the encounter with the collective and social realm, rather than in the psychic and individual realm. His photographer is unable to make classically composed photographs because it appears that *the building itself has withdrawn*, not because the problem is in his eyes or hands. Here again, one must not be too literal in interpreting Toufic: he is himself a “traumatized” subject, offering an internalized literary view of cultural trauma. By *withdrawn*, Toufic means
impossible to engage with, or impossible to see it as it is—in other words, that the physical structure is obscured from view by its wider suffering, by its compounded history, which is still at work in the present. For Toufic, the entire fabric of reality is ruptured and new realities emerge. What appears to a viewer from outside the community—or one outside the space of radical closure, as Toufic calls the place that has been subject to such a disaster—as a partially destroyed building might instead appear, to someone who had lived through the wars, not as a static ruin but as a moving object oscillating between the original undamaged façade and the present-day building in mid-collapse. This is a haunted landscape, and these hauntings make themselves visible in art. These traumatic conditions cannot be understood as “hysterical symptoms” if an entire community is experiencing them. Again, this is closer to the notions of cultural trauma and folie à deux (or folie à plusieurs), also known as “shared psychotic disorder” or “induced delusional disorder.”

For Toufic, the withdrawal of a tradition in the wake of a surpassing disaster is an identifiable phenomenon far beyond modern Lebanon; in fact, it is a recurring symptom throughout history. Surpassing disasters (cultural traumas) are cataclysmic and destructive events, whose aftershocks alter the forms of cultural life that are possible in their wake. The Holocaust, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the genocide in Rwanda, and the current crises in Syria and Gaza are all clear instances of surpassing disasters. But a surpassing disaster is defined not by the quantity or scale of physical damage, but rather by the persistent psychic effects and

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85 Toufic, Withdrawal, 11.
the degree to which they alter the subsequent horizons of cultural thought. Toufic writes, “Whether a disaster is a surpassing one … cannot be ascertained by the number of casualties, the intensity of psychic traumas and the extent of material damage, but by whether we encounter in its aftermath symptoms of withdrawal of tradition.” In an American context, surpassing disasters certainly include the American Civil War and the entire history of slavery. By withdrawal of tradition, Toufic means that the past catastrophe has a lasting impact in terms of limiting thought. Once a physical infrastructure has collapsed, so too do patterns of social behavior; regional cultural traditions become illegible, and ultimately identity becomes less grounded.

A central conclusion from this line of argument is that, under the withdrawn conditions after a surpassing disaster (in Beirut, specifically), the real is already participating in the fictive. Raad, in a presentation with Toufic in 2007, described conditions that push beyond the boundaries of reason to such an extent that they require descriptive terms from fiction. He gives the example of a family sitting at their kitchen table: a car bomb explosion had blown away the exterior wall of their apartment, but they continue to sit at their kitchen table as though there were a wall. In fact, Raad says, “There is a wall; it is invisible.” The only way, he concludes, to make an image of this is through constant flashbacks of walls that are there and not there. This superimposition of before and after—seeing a familiar building in one’s mind when confronted with its destroyed ruin; seeing ruins where there is now a rebuilt structure; seeing the original buildings when confronted with the ersatz

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86 Ibid., 11–12.
87 Ibid.
stylistic duplicate now recently constructed on the site—seems to be the only appropriate way to document this experience. Raad finds recognition of this dilemma in the works and thinking of fellow artists of his generation.88

If the disaster is surpassing, cultural tradition itself withdraws and hibernates, and certain artworks and documents are no longer culturally legible or transmissible, even within the community that had originally produced them. This does not mean that the objects are lost in a literal sense; they are still present, but they cannot be read or understood in the way that their authors or initial audiences imagined.89 To retrieve such forms and objects into legibility again, Toufic argues they must be resurrected by use and examined within the changed cultural circumstances.90 In their use by artists, writers, and musicians, the withdrawn objects are set in dialogue with their own history, and thus their particular absences or dimensions are identified by outline. Toufic writes:

With regard to the surpassing disaster, art acts like the mirror in vampire films; it reveals the withdrawal of what we think is still there. … Does this entail that one should not record? No, one should record this “nothing” which only after the resurrection will be available. … We have to take photographs even though … they will never be referential … with the associated risks that facets relating to the photographs might be taken as purely formal ones.91

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88 Ibid. Other Lebanese colleagues of Toufic and Raad have made conceptual use of these same phenomena. Filmmaker Joana Hadjithomas has stated, “In our approach to photography, we first began to inscribe the traces and memories of war in our work, insisting on the ruin, but also on the inscription of these modern ruins in the city, on the modes of perceiving the city and its evolution, on the urban issues and their mutations. We were also re-oriented towards a re-reading of our contemporary history and its representations, which shape us.” Hadjithomas and Joreige, “Latency,” 41.
89 Toufic, Withdrawal, 32.
90 Ibid., 34.
91 Ibid., 16, 58. See also Toufic, Forthcoming, 72.
Thus, Toufic argues that the task of artists in this position is to document this withdrawal (i.e., holding a mirror up to the vampire to show its absent presence) by engaging with urban ruins, or with now-opaque cultural objects, in order to demonstrate the fact of their alienation in this particular social moment.

We can understand Toufic as claiming that only an artistic mode that tracks back and forth between the document and the fictive could possibly describe this kind of reality with any faithfulness. And because this engagement with fiction is now critical for apprehending Beirut’s postwar reality and “resurrecting” its cultural legacies, writes Toufic, “fiction is too serious a matter to be left to ‘imaginative’ people.”92 The figure of the vampire (which sprang from his cinema studies background) becomes Toufic’s metaphor for Beirut’s present-yet-invisible condition: the there (for me, when I see it), but also the not-there (in the mirror, look—there’s nothing after all). He writes, “the ghost or vampire is fiction, not because it is an imaginative creation, but because fiction provides the main loci for his appearance.”93 That is, because Toufic identifies phenomena in Beirut and across Lebanon—much like the “hysterical symptoms” identified by Raad and his cast of Atlas Group characters—that previously have been registered only in fiction, he concludes that therefore Beirut itself is participating in fiction. By this, I interpret Toufic to mean that, until now, only in fiction could such descriptions (of the hallucinations as real rather than imagined) could be fully articulated. Here, Toufic

92 Toufic, “Ruins,” in Vampires, 73-74. “Vampires” was Toufic’s Ph.D. dissertation from Northwestern University in 1992. His interest in vampires as a theoretical metaphor for Beirut comes is in sync with the so-called spectral turn in critical theory, which appeared in the 1990s and continues today. See: Maria del Pillar Blanco and Esther Peeren, eds. The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013). Toufic’s idiosyncratic theories have colleagueship with the writings of Giorgio Agamben, Anthony Vidler, and others.
93 Toufic, Vampires, 74.
is by no means saying that other cities, countries, communities, etc., that have experienced destructive wars or their own surpassing disasters have not been affected as grievously as Lebanon during the civil war. Rather, he is saying that the trauma that such disasters register on the citizens and communities that experience it seem to take the form of bizarre/fantastic/fictional metaphors or hallucinations—that is, the part of fiction. It is clear that Raad agrees with Toufic, and his artworks enact this same logic: they are not “fake” despite their many inventions, but rather their fictions allow a truth to be told.

**We Can Make Rain, but No One Came To Ask**

A critical link between Toufic’s writing and Raad’s work can be found through reading Toufic’s theorization of the “ruin” alongside Raad’s video *We Can Make Rain but No One Came To Ask* (2003/2006), which deals with the physical reconstruction of Beirut’s urban fabric in the wake of so many bombings (Fig. 4.15). As Raad and Toufic had independently arrived at similar conclusions about the nature of space, trauma, and memory, the video’s multiple temporalities all

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94 The title comes from the story of Abba Chilkiah, the “Rain-maker,” in the Talmud (*Taanith* 23 a-b): “We call him the ‘Ruin-maker,’ but, of course, he did not make rain, for only G-d makes rain. Abba Chilkiah only brought the rain down when it was needed. … After the meal, Abba Chilkiah called his wife aside and said to her: ‘I know that these scholars came to ask me to pray for rain. Let us go up to the roof and pray; perhaps G-d will accept our prayer and send rain, so they will not have to ask us anything, or feel obliged to us.’ Abba Chilkiah and his wife went up to the roof, and each stood in a separate corner praying to G-d that He would send the blessing of rain to His distressed children. Hardly had they finished praying, when rain clouds began to gather, and presently the long awaited rain began to pour down. To the surprise of the two messengers the rain clouds did not appear from the direction of Abba Chilkiah’s corner, but from that of his wife’s! Abba Chilkiah returned to his visitors and said to them, ‘Revered masters, why have you come to see me?’ They replied, ‘The sages sent us to ask you to pray for rain.’ Said he, ‘Blessed be the Merciful One who spared you from having to rely on Abba Chilkiah.’ But the scholars replied, ‘We know that the rain came for your sake. However, now that the rain has come, we have nothing to ask you but to explain to us your actions which surprised us,’ and they went on to ask … .”
resonate with Toufic’s thinking. *We Can Make Rain* grew out of research conducted into a car bombing that occurred in the Furn Ech Chubak neighborhood of Beirut on January 21, 1986.\(^5\) Raad collaborated on this work with architect the Tony Chakar and the poet and political writer Bilal Khbeiz, in the same period as his research for *Overcome*, the sculptural mapping of car bombs in Beirut.

The premise of the video is that it “*imagines* a collaboration” between two real people: the car bomb investigator Youssef Bitar and the photojournalist Georges Semerdjian.\(^6\) As discussed in Chapter Three, the real Bitar (1928- ) was the chief explosives and demolitions specialist in the Lebanese army and became its lead investigator of the thousands of bombings that occurred during the civil wars. He also briefed the press daily on the progress of the investigations.\(^7\) Semerdjian (1948-1990) was a photojournalist for the Lebanese newspaper, *An Nahar*, who died on February 3, 1990 after suffering a targeted shot to the head several days earlier, while working in the Harb el ilghe district of Beirut. The figures of Bitar and

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\(^5\) This bombing targeted a militia headquarters and was particularly destructive. “A dozen passing motorists were killed in their cars by the fireball that engulfed the street. Witnesses said scores of pedestrians and shoppers were cut down by shrapnel or turned into human torches by blazing gasoline that sprayed over a 50-yard radius. Blood-splattered Red Cross squads clawed through the smoldering wreckage of eight buildings, under a dark cloud of smoke and ashes that hung over the scene. Officials said they feared the death toll would climb.” “Car Bomb Kills 22, Hurts 102 in Beirut,” Los Angeles Times, January 21, 1986, http://articles.latimes.com/1986-01-21/news/mn-31105_1_christian-heartland.

\(^6\) Raad also produced a small artist’s book of the same name: an accordion book of images. The images unfold to depict a portrait of Semerdjian, a portrait of Bitar, and the photo’s verso with Semerdjian’s stamp.

Semerdjian are invoked by their likenesses, and *Rain* cuts back and forth between photographs taken in the immediate aftermath of the bombing, and photographs and video footage recorded years later by Raad.

The video opens with a thin, horizontal band of blurred colors, scanning across an otherwise black screen. It appears to be a thin strip of film being pulled back and forth across a light source; the colors flicker and the images appear to move. This strip is made of pixels sampled from video footage recorded by the first videographer on the scene of the explosion. The audio track sounds like heavy breathing, or waves lapping at the shore. Gradually, the sound of thunder is heard, and the screen brightens to reveal a panoramic-format video feed. It continues to lighten to a grey field, revealing a horizon of ocean and sky. This view melts into an aerial cityscape of Beirut before breaking up into several panoramic components.

Sounds of wind and surf are replaced by traffic and car horns; they increase in volume and become a clamor of fires burning, voices yelling, and sirens. The screen goes to black, and a grey, smoke-like area slowly starts to take shape as thousands of dust particles, almost like a celestial event, appear and slowly transform before crystallizing into a schematic diagram of engine parts.

The image refocuses on a fragment of microfilm, the verso of a photographic print whose caption describes the investigator, Bitar. The caption reads, “Joseph Bitar lives in Beirut, certainly not part of the very tranquil profession; he is the best

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99 Ibid. Two types of audio are used in the video. First, one hears the wind and the chirping of crickets and birds. This is a rural logic because the insularity of the neighborhood reminded Raad of his father’s village. The audio that follows is lifted from a videotape made at the scene of the car bombing, immediately after the explosion.
expert on explosives in the city; killing mechanisms, bombs, and engines of war have no secrets from him.” A portrait of Bitar fades in, superimposed with photographs of the investigation taken from An Nahar’s archive. In the portrait, Bitar stares out at the viewer as images of the investigation and destruction fade in, as if we are seeing it through Bitar’s eyes (Fig. 4.16). These photographs recall the investigations depicted in Thin Neck.100 This section is followed by color video taken by Raad himself, who used a series of cameras and digitally stitched together the material into an elongated rectangular format, so that the buildings and streets partially overlap and dissolve into one another at the edges of each video frame, creating a segmented panorama (Fig. 4.17).

These street images are gradually replaced by a sequence of overlapping still photographs of the aftermath of a car bombing. Two drastically different photographs serve to introduce Semerdjian: a smiling head shot is followed by a photograph of his body, lying in the street after he was shot. As these photographs fade out, they are replaced by photographs taken by Semerdjian, including graphic depictions of the post-bombing recovery efforts, of the sort not included in Thin Neck: Engines. The images dissolve into each other: a tire, medics carrying away an injured man as spectators look on, a gruesome shot of a man who burned to death in a car, more wreckage, the explosion’s crater in the street, another body, more spectators. Although violent, the photographs are shown only briefly (Fig. 4.18).

100 Thin Neck does not include any photographs from the date of this bombing, January 21, 1986. Nor does it include the photographs of Bitar and Semerdjian, or the image of Semerdjian on January 31, 1990 after he had been shot.
Once again the city returns in small slivers of image: a blurry color shot of the neighborhood, city shots with no people, empty streets, perfect stillness. These overlapping temporalities of the particular site are reminiscent of Gilles Deleuze’s concept of the “crystal image,” where virtual temporalities (those felt in the mind of the viewer, of the activated past) and real temporalities (the concrete engagement with the present) seem somehow to coalesce into a single visualizable instant.\textsuperscript{101} Deleuze describes the crystal image in this way: “The indiscernibility of the real and the imaginary, or of the present and the past, of the actual and the virtual … is the objective characteristic of certain existing images which are by nature ‘double.’”\textsuperscript{102} Raad employs this logic not only in the use of archival images refilmed and restaged in the present-day location, but by overlaying schematic architectural data onto the urban infrastructure. The present and the recalled, the real and the virtual, are presented as if they were facets of a single image.

In a performance at the Walker Art Center in 2007, Raad stated that over a period of three years Bitar, then in his late seventies, had agreed to converse with him about his life and work, sharing diagrams and drawings from his many investigations.\textsuperscript{103} While Raad’s stories about their encounters are theoretically verifiable through the real Bitar, they have not been independently corroborated. Regardless, it is clear that Bitar became a pivotal figure in Raad’s thinking. In public lectures, he quotes from Bitar’s biography and personal history, telling strange, idiosyncratic anecdotes about his preference for distinctive white safari suits (as he is

\textsuperscript{101} Ian Farr, Memory (London: MIT Press, 2012), 23; Deleuze, Cinema 2, 69. Memory (Whitechapel, Intro, 23).
\textsuperscript{102} Deleuze, Cinema 2, 69.
\textsuperscript{103} Raad, “The Loudest Muttering is Over,” Walker Art Center, October 25, 2007.
depicted wearing in the investigation photographs included in *Thin Neck*) or his preternatural and boisterous heroics.\textsuperscript{104} It is never entirely clear whether the Bitar whom Raad describes is the real or an imagined one, though all the stories Raad tells about him appear to have a factual basis. In what is perhaps an apocryphal story, Raad describes how Bitar was recruited to the profession:

[I]n the 1940s, under French mandate [and during] the 14\textsuperscript{th} of July Independence Day parade, [Bitar] set off a fireworks display in the path of the French army, causing a tree to fall in their path. He was chased away, but later talked into joining the Lebanese army’s newly established de-mining and explosives division.\textsuperscript{105}

According to Raad, Bitar kept copies of his more than 3,640 official investigative reports, which included photographs of the bomb craters, cartoons he collected, and his on-site drawings. The photographs and drawings that Bitar ostensibly produced are not actually included in Raad’s artworks, but are merely alluded to in Raad’s performances. While it seems plausible that Bitar drew the scenes of bombings, the claim that he did not trust photography because he found it “insufficiently veridical” seems perhaps too close to the thinking of Raad’s other invented personas to be true.\textsuperscript{106} When filtered through Raad’s opaque and perhaps fanciful narratives, Bitar has almost become another Fakhouri: a man obsessively acting out his traumatic response to the devastation around him by endlessly attempting to account for its details, even if that account has no connection to

\textsuperscript{104} For example, in his talk at the Walker Art Center, Raad described how Bitar had lost parts of fingers when defusing a bomb. Ibid. [Raad, “The Loudest Muttering is Over,” Walker Art Center, October 25, 2007.] This is confirmed in Kenaan, “Thousands Alive.” Raad also comments on other items within the photographs, such as Bitar’s clothing.

\textsuperscript{105} Raad, “The Loudest Muttering is Over,” Walker Art Center, October 25, 2007.

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid. The characters Mrad and Hassan don’t trust photographs either.
positivist knowledge or authentic justice. It may be that Raad no longer knows exactly which details are true and which he has elaborated into new “truths.” While Fakhouri is entirely fictional (though originally inspired by an imagined version of Elias Sarkis), Bitar and Semerdjian are real people. This is likely why Raad feels free to attribute works to Fakhouri, whereas he does not claim that Bitar and Semerdjian actually co-authored any Atlas Group artworks, but rather that Rain merely “imagines a collaboration” between the two men.

The real Bitar was doubtless a tough, committed, and eccentric person. Given the exigencies of his profession and times, it is not surprising to learn (from Raad and from actual newspaper reports) that his role in the wars seems to have been beset with some bitter frustrations. In some ways, Raad can be read as creating a fictionalized Bitar to comment on these frustrations. Despite his tireless efforts and his “strictly technical and non-partisan investigations [that] earned him the trust of militias,” Bitar’s findings rarely resulted in the prosecution of those responsible. This was because during the war it was nearly impossible to track down guilty parties, and after the war a general amnesty absolved all parties of responsibility.

Raad has explained that he (along with Chakar and Khbeiz) tried to randomly select one of the innumerable explosions as the subject of investigation, so as to avoid accusations of bias, and then began visiting the site and the surrounding neighborhood, talking with politicians and investigators, and conducting research in

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108 Kenaan, “Thousands Alive.”
110 Raad comments on the significance of this historical fact: “[W]ar crimes were swept under the carpet under the general amnesty program that was meant to move the country forward, sinking with it all longed-for juridical prosecutions and the killing of at least 5,000 people, men, women, and children, in these car bombs alone.” Ibid.
archives. The selection was not completely arbitrary. Furn El Chubak is a Christian neighborhood, one in which Raad still felt comfortable. This sense of being comfortable in Furn El Chubak proved to Raad that the city was not yet fully united, and that there were still places in Beirut where he would not go. Expanding on this realization, Raad explained, “I would have been more reluctant if it had been a southern suburb, Hezbollah stronghold.” Along with his collaborators, Raad assembled the facts, “every single fact, hidden or known, about this car bomb,” and sought to identify those responsible. Raad claims that, like Bitar, he originally thought that such investigative work was necessary and could have an impact, but the evidence he and his colleagues eventually presented was repeatedly met with either dismissal (“we already knew this”) or denial (“it could not be who you say it is”). After years of research, Raad claims that they were able to name the people “directly and indirectly responsible for this explosion,” but ultimately “this mattered very little.” Those responsible still hold political positions and are able to shield themselves from juridical prosecution given the general amnesty. In Raad’s view, the indifference to identifying perpetrators was evident in the practice of immediately covering the craters left by car bombs. Beirut’s residents came to lose faith in the juridical process because they knew it would never lead to prosecutions or the dispensing of justice. Crucially, Raad ultimately came to understand, apparently

111 Conversation with the author, May 2012.
113 Ibid.
with Bitar’s help, “that the details might not matter; that they have been folded into an abstraction known as the civil war.” Raad is not saying that the details are substantively insignificant, but that they have no practical usefulness because the information unearthed can never lead to justice or even be accepted as truth, given the amnesty.

**Conclusion**

Central to Raad’s early engagement with Toufic’s writing is Toufic’s theory of the ruin. Toufic’s own experience of living in Lebanon contributed to this theory, which might be glossed as follows: once a building is ruined, it is always a ruin, even after it is rebuilt. Physical damage is not the measure of a ruin, nor is reconstruction; the trauma of an initial destruction marks the structure forever. Toufic writes of fleeing Beirut under Israeli bombardment in 1982; his family’s apartment became a ruin to him the instant his family left, “not [only] because it was severely damaged and burned during the last days of the offensive: even after it was restored, it remained a ruin.” The trauma surrounding the building’s destruction becomes inherent in the structure from then on, with far-reaching psychic aftershocks.

In the essay “Ruins,” Toufic theorizes the sensation of simultaneous, discontinuous temporalities plaguing the minds of many of Beirut’s citizens in the

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119 Toufic, “Ruins,” in *Vampires*, 67. Toufic continues, “The usual explanation of why what was damaged during the continuing civil war was most often not fixed or replaced is that people were reluctant to spend a large sum on what could any moment be damaged again or totally destroyed. But should we not invert the way we consider what was taking place? It was because these houses had become ruins by being deserted that the war got extended until they began to turn explicitly into ruins, to manifest their being already ruins.”
postwar years.\textsuperscript{120} Having grown accustomed to a built environment bearing the scars of thousands of car bombs, many were uneasy with the speed at which the Solidere reconstruction took place in Beirut’s Central District. Irregularities and discontinuities of the rebuilding process heightened this unease, as many war-damaged buildings were left standing while seemingly undamaged buildings were razed in order to reuse the property. Toufic compares this sense of missing structures overlapped by strange, new construction with a kind of spectral haunting: an experience of otherworldly interruptions in Beirut’s psychic landscape. He describes an imagined architecture student, who participates in a class trip to the destroyed city center of Beirut but who later could not remember what she had seen at the site, because her old memories had superimposed themselves upon the new reality:

The too-many stimuli with which she had to deal during the excursion left the whole episode in abeyance, making it very difficult to take stock of what occurred. Later, in her home, she tried to recall what she saw. Instead of the destroyed, deserted city center, it was the city center of the memories of her parents, the colorful, populated city center that sprang to her mind. It was with difficulty that she could recall the destroyed city center and superimpose it on the prewar city center. … It was only by the third or fourth visit to that area that she really felt that the destroyed city center was the reality——what facilitated this realization was her noticing the presence of refugees in some of the destroyed buildings.\textsuperscript{121}

The disjunction expressed in Toufic’s story is the fundamental coexistence of multiple temporalities. The coexistence of the war-damaged buildings of Beirut’s Central District with Solidere’s massive rebuilding project. He speaks of “the myriad concrete buildings that are being constructed in the rest of Beirut with no regard for urban planning” and sees it as emblematic of how the remembered ruins counter the

\textsuperscript{120} Toufic, “Ruins,” in \textit{Vampires}, 70-71.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.
new buildings, overlapping with them in real space just as they do in people’s consciousness. When downtown Beirut was destroyed, the city’s residents were still convinced that they could see the old, alive city center. Later, when it was being rebuilt under politically and socially dubious circumstances, they felt that they were still seeing ruins rather than the new, tourism-friendly reconstructions of Solidere’s reconstruction.

Although the government attempted to unify the city by removing roadblocks and rebuilding damaged buildings and infrastructure, Raad sees the city as still fractured. In the making of the photographic project *Sweet Talk* and the video *Rain* it became evident to Raad that “time was non-sequential and space was not continuous,” allowing for an overlap of past and present, similar to what Toufic had described. Raad apparently found confirmation of this logic in books widely sold in Lebanon displaying a fascination with what Beirut looked like before, during, and after the war. He asks, “Why insist on time as sequential? Why insist on the continuity of past-present-future unless time is actually fractured?” For Raad, such images do not show a past or present. Rather, he proposes they are two images of the event in the same time; they are flashbacks, alternating between the now rehabilitated buildings and their previously damaged shells.

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122 Ibid., 72-73.
123 Ibid. At one point, Toufic proposes that it might be necessary, once Beirut has been completely rebuilt and the traces of war erased, to project life-size images of destroyed buildings onto the newly constructed ones in order to render this phenomenon visible and thus make it comprehensible. Toufic even goes so far as to predict that, “when war-damaged buildings have vanished from Beirut’s scape, some people will begin complaining to psychiatrists that they are apprehending even reconstructed buildings as ruins.”
125 Ibid.
126 Toufic, “Ruins,” in *Vampires*, 73.
While conducting research for *Rain*, Raad claims to have interviewed numerous neighborhood residents about this particular bombing. While he and his collaborators (Khbeiz and Chakar, *not* Bitar and Semerdjian) were able to establish a host of factual and forensic evidence, even to the point of establishing guilt; the results of their investigation were evidently met with quizzical, stubborn apathy, as if the concrete details supporting a truth claim had been absconded into the generalized haze of the “civil war period.” The neighborhood seemed resigned to let this specific bombing vanish into the cloud of the thousands of other wartime bombings. From this, Raad made what he calls an “even more fundamental discovery.” He states “What was shocking was that these car bombs—3,600 of them—had altered time and space in these neighborhoods, in a way that was hard to intuit and detect.” 127 That is, that the abstraction of the war years had superimposed itself onto the culture at large. Time is non-sequential, and, in the minds of Beirut’s residents, the urban fabric seems to exist in built and ruined phases simultaneously. Culturally, traumatized memory occludes a true accounting of history. For an individual subject, this might be described as a hysterical symptom. For a collective subject, trauma theory had yet to supply a term. Toufic’s notions of surpassing *disaster* and *radical closure* are the conceptual counterparts to Raad’s visual practice, as these terms effectively name the condition Raad had encountered. Raad’s increasingly abstract and schematic visual language maps trauma back onto this collective, social subject. These profound, aggregate traumas seem to have undone

the categories of truth and fiction, because narrative categories are overrun by the
immensity of the catastrophe they aim to describe.
CONCLUSION

We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand. The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies.¹

That’s all. That is, all is not all.²

Raad has claimed various sets of dates for the Atlas Group foundation’s activities, in different catalog publications and different exhibitions, but has ultimately settled on the group being founded in 1989 and ceasing production in 2004. (In fact, Raad has continued to produce new Atlas Group works, which are retroactively dated back into its specific chronology.) I read “2004” as indicating a turning point in his thinking: the moment after which he moved away from an individual, Freudian understanding of trauma, to the social and material effects described by Toufic’s withdrawal of tradition. This new logic enabled him to expand his practice to address an expanded range of interests. Since 2007, Raad has been working on the multi-part project, Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Art in the Arab World (2007- ), which expands, and even amplifies, his use of fictionalized narratives, photographic abstraction, fantastic characters, and elaborately conceived performances, albeit under broadly different aesthetic parameters. Some of the Scratching works concretize Toufic’s notion of the withdrawal of tradition, visualizing the immaterial effects of the wars; other projects examine the wider influence of oil-rich Gulf Arab states on the art market, and the networks of money,

² Jalal Toufic, The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster (Berkeley, Calif.: Forthcoming Books, 2009), 70.
tourism, and infrastructure that sustain high-profile collections and museums in the Gulf region. The following quote by Raad places three phases of his artistic interests:

I have known and I have seen how the Lebanese wars of the past four decades have affected Lebanon’s residents physically and psychologically—from the one hundred thousand plus who have been killed, to the two hundred thousand plus who have been wounded, to the million plus who have been displaced, to the even more who have been psychologically traumatized. I have also seen and I have known how the Lebanese wars of the past four decades have affected Lebanese cities, their neighborhoods, buildings, and streets. But what I had not considered was how the wars can also affect colors, lines, shapes, and forms.³

The first portion of this statement concerns psychological trauma and corresponds to the early Atlas Group works, like Dr. Fakhouri’s notebooks and Raad’s recreated notebooks. The second (“cities… buildings, and streets”) corresponds to the surpassing disaster and its effect on architecture, taken up in We Can Make Rain and Sweet Talk. The notion of “colors, lines, shapes, and forms” signals the works in Scratching, where Raad concretizes the psychic effects of the war on even immaterial things, like perception, vision, and aesthetic culture.

But beyond simply a shift of inner artistic logic away from trauma, the projects in Scratching are the result of Raad’s own dramatically different circumstances. His increased prominence in the global art world has provided the resources, support, and exhibition demand to create increasingly ambitious artworks. This prominence also revealed to Raad the power structures of the art

market, and its newfound and expedient focus on a rapidly growing Arab art world. In tandem with Raad’s career arc, *Scratching* grew to include a second mandate beyond visualizing the warped immaterial realities of post-catastrophe Lebanon. This was to narrate the history of *contemporary* Arab art: a history that is unfolding under the pressures of the market and one in which he is firmly, and prominently, inscribed.

Under this widened conceptual purview and increased financial resources, Raad’s works have grown towards the theatrically scaled and elaborately formalist. In some cases, they have no recognizable pictorial content at all, and can appear to concern purely aesthetic questions. This highly formal visual vocabulary is attended by extended narrative captions that often require an even greater suspension of disbelief than those of the Atlas Group. That audiences have come to expect such intricate fictions from him, and now approach his artworks and performances with skepticism and humor, poses challenges for Raad, because, while the formal mechanisms of *Scratching* have become more elaborate and visually complex, the works are even more resolutely focused on the institutional and political realities of the present. In some cases, the story attending a work borders on the science-fictional (such as communicating telepathically with artists from the future), which can occlude its critical diagnosis (of building market-driven regional art histories), and prompt a misreading as merely a visual artifact of some preposterous condition.

In 2010, Raad co-founded Gulf Labor, a political action group that advocates for the rights of migrant workers in the United Arab Emirates, where the current construction of a Guggenheim museum has drawn intense international criticism. In concluding this dissertation, I examine the ways whereby Raad has
engaged ethical and political questions aesthetically and personally. His activism and political work seem at first to be in stark contrast to his artistic practice; in fact, they operate in symmetry. His career and persona are mutually entangled within the very history of Arab art that his work is effectively narrating—and thus participating in at the same time.

**Translator’s Introduction**

The artworks in *Scratching* employ a numbered but non-sequential titling system, which include the prefixes “section,” “preface,” “index,” and “appendix” (as in *Section 139: The Atlas Group* (1989-2004); *Section 88: Inner to Outer Compartments*, or *Preface to the 2nd Edition, Index XXVI: Red*; and *Appendix XVIII: 22-257*). These works, comprising seemingly abstract color photographs assembled in salon-style, large sculptures made of dismantled gallery walls, animated digital renderings of empty museum interiors, and video projections of architectural renderings that take up entire gallery walls concretize Raad’s contention that surpassing disasters can affect even basic aesthetic properties such as *colors, lines*, and *forms*. Covering this broad swath of richly imagined objects, the project statement for *Scratching* contains an apparently straightforward summary of its main ideas:

> In 2007, I initiated an art project about the history of art in the Arab world. My project was motivated by the recent emergence of large new infrastructures for the visual arts in the Arab world. These developments, when viewed alongside the geopolitical, economic, social, and military conflicts that consumed the region in the past few decades, shape a rich yet thorny ground for creative work. The artworks and stories I present with this

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4 This of course, is similar to the Atlas Group titles that refer to file numbers. See Appendix B for full list of artworks in *Scratching*.
project were shaped by encounters on this ground with individuals, institutions, economies, concepts, and forms.\(^5\)

The procedures of collecting, notating, and arranging photographs and found documents, digitally mimed in the Atlas Group (for example, hand written commentary transcribed into typed notes, or source images reproduced adjacent to updated photographs), are, in *Scratching*, enacted on materials at exaggerated physical scale. The artworks demonstrate Raad’s notion that surpassing disasters can affect the world materially (as with the mysterious shrinking artworks of *Section 139*) as well as immaterially (as with the textured color fields, tenuously hiding in plain sight, of *Index XXVI: Red*, and *Appendix XVIII: 22-257*).\(^6\)

Having grown to almost theatrical proportions (or in the case of 139, shrinking to the scale of an architectural model), the *Scratching* works now function as backdrops for Raad’s performances, which have shifted from the professorial artist talk of the Atlas Group to the polished, exhibition walkthrough of a prominent artist. This artist-led exhibition tour offers a first-person narration of the works in *Scratching* and is itself titled “Walkthrough.” Following a particular choreography through the exhibition, Raad uses the artworks as props, or ciphers, for a suite of connected stories. This narrative has also been published as a two-part essay and an artist’s book, both of which are also titled *Walkthrough*.\(^7\) Guiding his audience through the exhibition enables Raad to condition the viewing within his own overarching narrative about how the artworks came to be made. It is clear that

\(^5\) Raad, “Walkthrough, Part 1.”
\(^6\) For a discussion of *Section 139* see Chapter Two.
Raad remains interested in shaping and controlling the narrative according to which his works are discussed and understood: he has even folded his own earlier work into this history of Arab art, which is itself narrated retrospectively from a setting in the future.

Only the museum setting itself prompts the recognition of Raad's implicit acknowledgement of his own participation in the very market that his works calmly attempt to diagram and criticize. Indeed, the dramatic enlargement of scale is a testament to his market success, as much as a new conceptual ground for his narrative logic. His now internationally recognizable artistic persona has also been folded into the performances: he can no longer humbly claim to be the representative of an obscure research foundation. Instead, he readily announces his role as creator of the works, gesturing towards them as he explains their various details, yet he manages to filter this persona through its live presentation.8 Raad seems to view these parallel formats as extensions of his projects:

I try to approach the exhibition as a whole, as one installation. I treat many elements inside and outside the exhibition space as part and parcel of the artwork: from the printed or projected image to the frame, color of the walls, captions and wall texts; from the lights, walls, floor and ceiling, security guards, docents, catalogue, press releases, newsletters, public displays and signs, curator or director statements, logos and entrance tickets to any interviews or conversations I am asked to conduct with journalists, students or the general public, and so on and so on.9

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8 In the artist book, *Walkthrough*, the order and narrative are controlled by splitting the narrative and the works. Book A contains the narrative of the performance; Books B1-B3 present Translator’s Introduction: Pension Arts in Dubai; Book C – Section 88: Inner to outer compartments (world is flat); Book D – Section 139: The Atlas Group (1989-2004); Book E – Index XXVI: Red (Johnny Tahan); Book F – Appendix XVIII: 22-257 (colors lines and forms). In published form, the project takes the form of three fold-out posters that allow viewers to examine the elements more closely.

9 Raad, *[Exhibition Walkthrough: Hasselblad Award]*, 2011.
As with the Atlas Group’s performance-lectures, “Walkthrough” makes the intricacies of the artworks intelligible to the viewer. Although highly scripted, in Raad’s expert delivery the story appears extemporized. The details are hard to follow and the viewer becomes swept up in the story. Raad figures as a character within his own narrative and he is careful, rhetorically, to balance his character’s incredulity with his calm insistence as the works’ narrator on the particular details of his stories. In effect, Raad is once again translating or interpreting the artwork for the viewer. When Raad is not present to do so, this role is filled by wall text or an interpretive guidebook; without any of these aids, the works are quite difficult to connect to concrete source material.

The first artwork encountered in the 2012 Documenta performance of “Walkthrough” is Translator’s Introduction: Pension Arts in Dubai (2012), a large-scale, wall-based tableau composed of text-heavy collages, overlaid with projected video animations, security camera footage, and schematic graphics (Fig. 5.1). The main topic addressed in the artwork and its related performance is the international investment company Artist Pension Trust (APT), which was established in 2004 as a retirement fund for artists. APT essentially capitalizes on the art market’s capacity for wild financial appreciation, rhetorically framed as an artist-friendly hedge against the uncertainties of an art career. APT has eight regional trusts, in Berlin, Mexico City, Mumbai, New York, Beijing, London, Los Angeles, and Dubai. Each trust is capped at 250 artists, who are invited to join APT by a network of curators contracted by a branch called APT Intelligence (now APTGlobal.org). Member

\(^{10}\) With the exception of Pension Arts in Dubai, the Scratching works themselves contain very little text. This is in marked contrast to Raad’s Atlas Group works.
artists are contractually obligated to donate twenty works in as many years to their regionally relevant trust. When APT decides to sell one of these artworks—which it has obtained free of charge—40% of the profit goes to the artist, 32% is redistributed among the other artists in the trust, and the remaining 28% goes to APT.\textsuperscript{11} In “Walkthrough,” Raad observes that, given 250 artists in eight trusts, APT will eventually have 2,000 artists under contract. Based on contractual obligations, over the next twenty years these artists will give APT 40,000 artworks, making APT “one of the largest [contemporary art] collections in the world, all without having to buy a single work.”\textsuperscript{12}

In the artwork and related performance, Raad traces the origins of this trust, and the quietly manipulative ways it mediates between the non-profit realm of public institutions and exhibitions, and the private world of art collections.\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Pension Arts in Dubai} serves as the visual presentation of this research, tracing the company’s origins and operations:

\textsuperscript{11} Raad notes that this is a classic technique of risk management, which APT is simply applying to the art market.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid. One of the more problematic aspects of APT’s business model is the perceptive way it has found to play both sides of the market. The curators in APT Intelligence are tasked with ensuring that the collection’s artworks enter into wider circulation, which raises the profile of its artists, and in turn raises the value of the whole collection. APT funds its own exhibitions and catalogs, organized by its own curators with its own artists and artworks, all of which Raad notes, serves to “increase the value of the artists, the curators, and the artworks of the contract.” Other collectors and museums have also been called out on this practice. See Deborah Sontag and Robin Pogrebin, “Some Object as Museum Shows Its Trustee’s Art,” \textit{The New York Times}, November 11, 2009; Eugene Kan, “Skin Fruit: Selections from the Dakis Joannou Collection Curated by Jeff Koons,” \textit{Hypebeast}; Raymond Hu, “Skin Fruit: Selections from the Dakis Joannou Collection Curated by Jeff Koons Recap,” \textit{Hypebeast}. 
To determine whether to join APT Dubai, I found myself asking who was funding APT and MutualArt, and why was APT launching a trust in the Middle East? This led me to look into technological innovations in the areas of statistics; risk management concepts in finance; art as an alternative asset class; culture as an engine of economic growth in the Arab world and elsewhere; text, data mining and face recognition algorithms; and the Israeli military and its links to the Israeli hi-tech sector. All of which led to the tableau presented here, which I regard as a stage set for an accompanying oral presentation in which I narrate my findings.14

The piece details, obsessively, the intricate and murky underside of the global trade in fine art, schematizing the networks of funding, collecting, and promotion of Arab artists and collections.

Two of the three collages that make up Pension Arts in Dubai are addressed directly in the performance, while the third collage is addressed more obliquely in a different portion of the talk. The collage elements—line drawings based on photographs and text clippings from legal contracts and newspaper articles, lists of names, companies, and financial data taken from online sources—are pasted directly onto the gallery wall. The overall shape of these collages recalls coastlines or marinas, not dissimilar from the constructed coastlines of Dubai’s World Islands, an artificial archipelago composed of 300 private, man-made islands. The bulky, spiraling shapes of the static paper collages are overlaid by looping video segments of surveillance footage, while textual and diagrammatic elements in primary colors highlight aspects of the collage below. The work appears to mix the clumsy physicality of a paranoid technician’s computer print-outs with the complex multiscroll arrangement of digital surveillance data, familiar from the military and police fantasias of Hollywood film.

14 See project website: scratchingonthings.com/works/001.
Visually, *Pension Arts Dubai* is a manic, obsessive, flickering display of diagrammatic information overload, whose most recognizable art-historical relative is the work of American artist Mark Lombardi (1951-2000). Lombardi’s schematic drawings finely mapped the political scandals of the 1980s in spare, minimalist, but elaborate and self-referential diagrams of the interconnections of money, politics, and the military—often focusing on unofficial projects from the Reagan administration. Lombardi recorded information from his research on over 14,500 index cards. The artworks evolved from this research, as a way to keep track and make sense of the massive volume of information he was recording.  

Lombardi then translated his research into large-scale diagrams that trace global “networks of transactions, spheres of influence.”  

Drawn by hand, they consist of textual elements (including names of people, organizations, corporations, and dates) that are linked using lines and arrows to other parties to trace constellation-like mappings of financial interactions and political outcomes. The art historian Robert Hobbs has called Lombardi’s work a “new type of realism,” one that is shared by political motivated conceptual artists.  

For example, in *Oliver North, Lake Resources of Panama, and the Iran-Contra Operation, ca. 1984-86*, Lombardi links American, Iranian, Lebanese, Israeli, and Nicaraguan government activities, diagramming the same information that Raad explored in his dissertation, the video *Hostage*, and his Atlas Group performances (Fig. 5.2). This work connects the

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15 “I was getting into information from a number of sources which I was beginning to get confused by, I couldn't really keep the stories straight … [so I] began doing sketches of corporate organizations, hierarchies and various political structures to keep the information at hand.” Lombardi quoted in Ann Landi, “Mark Lombardi: Global Networks,” *ARTnews* 10, 4 (2004): 122.  
16 Zdebik “Networks of Corruption,” 69.  
17 Hobbs, *Global Networks*, 34.
activities of Colonel Oliver North, Vice President George Bush, and others in the Reagan Administration to the illegal supply of weapons to the Nicaraguan Contras by importing cocaine from Panama and selling weapons to Iran during the Iran-Iraq War. Comparing the facts outlined in *Oliver North*... to fiction, Hobbs writes that the reality it presented was one that was “far less convincing than a Tom Clancy novel, because it did not require the clear grounding in reality that credible fiction demands.”

Although all of the connections mapped out in Lombardi’s diagrams are true, they appear fantastical and take patience to decipher. The same is true of Raad’s work, when for example the most straightforward facts appear utterly bizarre, couched as they are within circuitous narratives.

Raad opens his narrative by divulging that he was invited to join APT in the fall of 2007. Though he is not in fact a member of APT, this admission provides a backdrop for his narrative presentation of the research he conducted on the company. In his presentation, Raad feigns surprise upon discovering that the market for artists from the Arab world was already so well developed that APT had found the requisite 250 artists from the region to “build an economy around them.”

His story centers around a man named Moti Shniberg, an Israeli technology developer and entrepreneur. In 2004, Shniberg partnered with Dan Galai—referred to by Raad as a “risk management guru”—to create APT as a “retirement fund for artists.” In the tableau, drawn portraits identify Shniberg, Galai, and two women identified only as November and Pamela, APT curators who also figure in Raad’s narrative. Also included are images of the curators of the eight regional trusts, text clippings

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18 Ibid., 79.
from the APT artist contract, as well as exhaustive lists of the artists already participating (many, of course, are also well-known names). The text projected in the video overlay further highlights key aspects of APT, such as the company’s Intelligence branch which is responsible for curatorial and market research, the names of the various trusts and key players. Photographs of these curators are taken from the company’s website APTGlobal.org. Their names and short biographies are also listed on the website, and Raad is simply representing information readily available online.

Lombardi called his drawings “narrative structures,” writing, “each consists of a network of lines and notations which are meant to convey a story, typically about a recent event of interest to me... One of my goals is to map the interaction of political, social and economic forces in contemporary affairs.” Like Lombardi, Raad’s works engages viewers on both visual and textual levels. The text clippings in the collage also come from real sources, some of which Raad refers to explicitly. This project is more directly connected to the “real” than some of the Atlas Group works in that the people it names are not fictional characters invented by Raad. In the published text of *Walkthrough* (though not in the performance itself), Raad is careful to note that these stories are to be understood as fictional creations of the

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20 Raad notes that curators like the idea of APT intelligence, as it provides a structure by which they are remunerated for their expertise and advice: “They are compensated for their previously undervalued information and labor.” Ibid., 2

21 The two APT curators Raad had direct contact with are Pamela Auchincloss and November Paynter. The collage lists curators involved at the time of his research as well as text clipped from a sample artist contract. Pictures of people mentioned or linked to Raad’s narrative are taken from aptglobal.org. This information was current as of the year taken from website but has since been updated with new curators.

22 Ibid., 47.
artist. However, all the details Raad cites regarding APT, its founders, and their prior companies and entrepreneurial efforts, are in fact true and independently verifiable.

The second narrative in Raad’s performance concerns the corporate backstory of APT’s parent company, MutualArt. This British Virgin Islands-registered company also owns a website of the same name that provides a sophisticated tracking of art sales and values. Raad describes that the Israeli software developer Ronen Feldman—who coined the term “text mining” in 1995—was responsible for designing the algorithms for this website. As is generally true of the Israeli commercial technology sector, Shniberg, Galai, and Feldman have connections to the Israeli army, specifically to its intelligence and computing

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23 This may seem initially to be a reversal of the Atlas Group in that the characters are true but Raad states they are a work of fiction. In fact, I see this as a much more straightforward measure to avoid a potential, if unlikely, libel suit. As published in e-flux, Raad notes “This text is (here and there) a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental,” Raad, “Walkthrough (Part 1),” e-Flux, 9; “Walkthrough (Part 2),” e-Flux, 5.


25 This information is available on Feldman’s own website: http://ronenfeldman.wordpress.com/2013/03/25/biography/
technology units: Talpiot, Unit 8200, MAMRAM, and Lotem. Raad pointedly notes that these links pose ideological and political problems for him. Professing concern for the safety of any Arab artist who becomes involved with APT, he notes that Israel is still officially at war with Lebanon, and that “in Lebanon, any link between an Israeli person and a Lebanese person, or an Israeli institution and a Lebanese institution, will spell trouble.” It is through examples of this sort of commentary that Raad is able to re-link the everyday workings of an international corporation back onto the history of the wars in Lebanon.

Raad concludes this portion of “Walkthrough” by describing a meeting he arranged with Shniberg, and the deft ways that Shniberg defused Raad’s critical investigations: to all of Raad’s concerns (the apparent links between funding sources, the military, the market index, and the real concern for artists), Shniberg had highly polished answers that followed a “well rehearsed and oft-told story.” In this 2008 meeting, Shniberg had cagily refused to name APT’s funders, responding simply that they included investors from the UAE who wished to remain anonymous. Interpreting this response for his audience, Raad infers Schniberg to mean that since Arabs are themselves involved in this Israeli-backed company, Arab artists should have no problem.

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26 Talpiot is an elite Israel Defense Forces training program; Unit 8200 is an Israeli Intelligence Corps unit; Lotem is Israeli Army’s Information Technology unit; MAMRAM is the Israel Defense Forces’ central computing system unit. While researching APT and MutualArt.com, Raad discovered Shniberg had also founded two other companies linked to Israeli military intelligence: ImageID and Face.com. The first is a software company that optically scans barcodes and made millions in the 1990s in Israel, while the second developed facial recognition software that was recently sold to Facebook. Raad, “Walk through.”
27 Raad, “Walk through.”
28 This is not dissimilar to Raad’s carefully rehearsed stories.
All of this information is schematically rendered in the tableau. Feldman’s association with Talpiot is visualized by linking his picture to a number of quotes about Talpiot and Feldman’s work. Several portraits of Shniberg—shown in profile, three-quarter view, and facing the camera—point to the way that facial recognition software is able to scan faces from different angles. The pictures of Shniberg are surrounded by quotes from his astounding application to trademark the phrase “September 11, 2001,” filed on September 11, 2001 (Fig. 5.3). These images are overlaid by blurry footage extracted from surveillance video. The tableau then traces the financial interactions and connections between MutualArt and Image ID, Shniberg’s previous venture into facial recognition software. However, this information is virtually indecipherable—it consists largely of arrows connecting text balloons and company names.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari write, “We wonder if there are not thresholds, for example aesthetic ones, which mobilize knowledge in a direction that is different to that of science, allowing us to offer a definition of a pictorial work, while remaining with the discursive practices to which they belong.” This formulation led Deleuze to the conclusion that “science and poetry are equal forms of knowledge,” a sentiment that could likewise be applied to Raad’s practice,

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29 Proof of this can be found at the US Patent and Trademark Office website: http://www.uspto.gov/web/offices/com/sol/foia/ftab/2eissues/2006/78083495.pdf


particularly in the manner in which his diagrammatic artworks combine facts and aesthetics.

**Gulf Labor (or, Who Builds the Guggenheim?)**

Raad devotes a significant portion of “Walkthrough,” to discussing the role of the United Arab Emirates in the global art world. He notes that the Emirates’ sovereign wealth fund is valued at more than $700 billion, and itself generates more annual revenue than the direct sales of its oil and gas combined. Despite (and through) this enormous reserve of capital, Abu Dhabi has been “diversifying its economy away from this hydrocarbon dependence,” by developing other sectors of the economy, including arts and culture. The primary example of this is a $27 billion construction project currently underway on Saadiyat Island, which will include international branches of museums like the Guggenheim and the Louvre, along with Abu Dhabi branches of New York University and the Sorbonne, all designed by world-famous architects.\(^{32}\) The international public image of this project has been marred by human rights abuses of its guest worker populations, mostly impoverished Southeast Asians brought in as construction laborers. While Abu Dhabi’s tremendous oil wealth should allow guest workers to be paid a living wage, multiple labor violations have been confirmed by Human Rights Watch.\(^{33}\)

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\(^{32}\) For more information on cultural institutions on Saadiyat Island, see: [http://www.saadiyatculturaldistrict.ae/en/saadiyat-cultural-district/partners/](http://www.saadiyatculturaldistrict.ae/en/saadiyat-cultural-district/partners/)

The third segment of collaged prints and video graphics in *Pension Arts in Dubai* is only obliquely addressed in “Walkthrough,” but this collage corresponds to Raad’s narrative about the development of the arts in the Arabian Gulf and visually links the two other collages discussed above. This branch of the work illustrates the museum projects on Saadiyat Island, showing drawings of the proposed structures, and publicity images of the architects who designed them. The architects’ disembodied heads hover over their designs: a portrait of Frank Gehry floats above the Guggenheim, which is connected by a wavy line to a portrait of Zaha Hadid that seems to merge with her own design for the Performing Arts Center. Jean Nouvel is similarly linked to the Louvre, Norman Foster to the Sheikh Zayed National Museum, and Tadao Ando (along with three faceless men in keffiyehs) to the Maritime Museum (Fig. 5.4). These and other faceless figures might allude to the anonymous investors that Shniberg had refused to name in his 2008 meeting with Raad. The collage winds downward with newspaper clippings related to cultural development in the region, with headlines that read, for example: “The Next Ten Years of Contemporary Art in the Middle East.” The collage culminates with a list of the new museums and a series of recognizable portraits of political players in the region and throughout the Arab world, including those dubiously (and perhaps fictionally or only regionally) linked to Abu Dhabi, all arranged in a script-like curve.\(^{34}\)

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\(^{34}\) Faces include: former Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad; Libya’s former de-factor leader, Muammar al-Gaddafi; Egyptian President, Abdel Fattah El-Sisi; and the Chairman of the Abu
The thicket of data presented in *Pension Arts in Dubai* and the expanded narrative recounted in Raad’s performance all point towards another aspect of his current practice: his role in Gulf Labor, a coalition of artists working as an activist organization to improve the labor and living conditions of migrant workers in Abu Dhabi. Gulf Labor was founded in 2010, after a panel about Saadiyat Island (organized and moderated by Raad) at Ashkal Alwan in Beirut. This panel engaged the social, historical, economic, cultural, political, and philosophical dimensions of this massive new infrastructure for the visual and other arts in the Arab Gulf.

The core issues addressed by Gulf Labor are worker debt and coercive recruitment fees. Most of the migrant workers in the UAE come from small cities or villages in South Asia and recruitment agencies charge airfare and transportation fees; these fees are supposed to be reimbursed but rarely are, instead, they come directly out of the employees’ wages. The workers often end up working for much less money than promised and become heavily indebted to these agencies. In most cases, the two years needed to pay off the debt also conveniently corresponds to the two-year work visa workers are granted. Human Rights Watch notes that accumulated debt is central to the migrant labor system because it forces workers to

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Dhabi Tourism Authority, Sheikh Sultan Bin Tahnoon Al Nahyan. Venues on this list include Saadiyat Island Cultural District, Qatar Museum of Art, Sheikh Zayed National Museum, Guggenheim Museum, Centre Pompidou, Tate Britain. Another list near the top of the collage cites newspaper headlines, for example: “How to achieve the Bilbao effect.” Yet another list provides names of Arab artists including Yto Barrada, Doa Ali, Ziad Abdallah, Emily Jacir, Joana Hadjithomas, Walid Raad, and Akram Zaatari.

accept whatever wage the employer decides, and means they cannot quit without losing homes or property bound up in the debt. Labor conditions include eleven-to-twelve-hour workdays, six to seven days per week, with mandatory overtime. The workers’ passports are taken away, which is illegal. Finally, the living conditions at the labor camps are often overcrowded and unsanitary.  

Once organized, Gulf Labor initiated conversations with the Guggenheim Foundation over workers’ rights, which was followed by a boycott of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi. In June 2010, Gulf Labor sent a letter signed by 143 artists, curators, academics and cultural workers to the Guggenheim Foundation urging it to protect the rights of workers involved in the construction of the museum’s Abu Dhabi outpost. In meetings that followed with Richard Armstrong, Director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Foundation, and Nancy Spector, Deputy Director and Chief Curator, Gulf Labor was assured that the Foundation was taking steps to develop fair employment policies with The Abu Dhabi Tourism and Development Investment Company (TDIC). In March 2011, after little progress, Gulf Labor decided to make its petition public. The petition stated:

We, the undersigned, are writing to demand that the Guggenheim Foundation obtain contractual guarantees that will protect the rights of workers employed in the construction and maintenance of its new branch museum in Abu Dhabi. Human rights violations are currently occurring on Saadiyat Island, the location of the new museum. In two extensive reports on the UAE, Human Rights Watch has documented a cycle of abuse that leaves migrant workers deeply indebted, poorly paid, and unable to defend their rights or even quit their jobs. The UAE authorities responsible for developing the island have failed to tackle the root causes of abuse: unlawful recruiting

fees, broken promises of wages, and a sponsorship system that gives employers virtually unlimited power over workers. These violations, which threaten to sully the Guggenheim’s reputation, present a serious, moral challenge to those who may be asked to work with the museum. No one should be asked to exhibit or perform in a building that has been constructed and maintained on the backs of exploited employees.\(^{37}\)

This petition called for an active boycott of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi that will continue until the Foundation “take[s] steps to safeguard the rights of the workers who will be employed in the museum’s operations on Saadiyat Island.”\(^{38}\) While some of the signatories are boycotting only the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, many are actively boycotting all branches of the Museum. New York University professor and founding member of Gulf Labor Andrew Ross has pointed out that the boycott has tarnished the Guggenheim’s brand name, and compared the Gulf Labor coalition’s


\(^{38}\) Ibid. Gulf Labor notes that Human Rights Watch should determine if and when “adequate monitoring measures” have been implemented.
work to the anti-sweatshop campaigns of the 1990s. He notes further that, as a
cultural institution rather than a clothing manufacturer, the Guggenheim
Foundation must be held to a higher standard of moral accountability.\textsuperscript{39}

\textbf{Conclusion}

Despite the lengthy narratives, neither \textit{Pension arts in Dubai} nor \textit{Scratching} as a
whole provide a full explanation of the works, and audiences seem unsure what to
make of these stories. In the published text of \textit{Walkthrough}, Raad leaves it open,
saying “that’s all,” as if to say that is all he has to say on the subject; that there isn’t
anything deeper than this truth itself. However, this “all” can also be understood to
imply that which is beyond it: “That is, all is not all.”\textsuperscript{40} Later, Raad reiterates this
statement, saying, “I just want APT to tell its artists whether this [the links to Israeli
intelligence] is true so that we can know what we’re getting involved in. \textit{That’s all.”}\textsuperscript{41}

In the end, Raad’s exhaustive, even paranoia-inducing research into the
relationships, people, organizations, financial resources, and markets can only arrive

\textsuperscript{39} Andrew Ross, “Belabored Podcast #53: Art, Academia, and Labor Struggles in Abu Dhabi, with
\textit{The New York Times}.

\textsuperscript{40} In the phrase “That’s all,” one can hear an echo of Toufic. In a passing reference to Godard’s \textit{New
Wave}, Toufic writes, “[T]hat’s all.” That is, all is not all.” By way of explanation, Toufic emphasizes
that in regards to a surpassing disaster, death is not the worst thing that can happen; death is not all.
“To any totalizing ‘that is all,’ we, laconic mortals, have the reaction, and not tautologically: ‘That’s
all.’ That which exceeds the all is this difference between \textit{that’s all} and \textit{that’s all}. The margin is the
difference between \textit{c’est tout} and \textit{c’est tout}. Every artist, every writer, certainly Shakespeare, knows
that we cannot be reduced to creatures who can bleed, laugh, and biologically die. They can make us
bleed, laugh, they can treat us like potential terrorists and kill us—that’s all. But is that all they can
do? Kill us—in the hundreds of thousands? Unfortunately, they can do worse: produce a surpassing
disaster and thus a withdrawal of tradition.” Toufic, \textit{Withdrawal}, 70. Emphasis in original.

\textsuperscript{41} Raad, “Walkthrough,” \textit{e-Flux}, 5. “Regardless of any other consideration, if word about this got
out on the streets of Beirut, it might actually be dangerous, and not just for me. This may be
dangerous for any Arab artist who joins APT. And I just wanted APT to be transparent about this. I
just want APT to tell its artists whether this is true so we know what we’re getting involved in. \textit{That’s
all.”} (emphasis added).
at the whimper of inevitability, rather than the bang of exposé. Links between business, government, and culture may seem insidious and secretive on the surface, but they are ultimately unsurprising, even banal, in our globalized and capitalist framework.

In fact, throughout the interwoven narratives of “Walkthrough,” the magical, science-fictional, or, as in the APT story, the apparently sinister, are all delivered by Raad as equally banal occurrences, as if each were just further evidence of “reality.” This matter-of-fact rhetoric is one of Raad’s signature tactics, whether applied to an utterly fantastic story or one that is factually accurate (although it seems too surreal to be true), and becomes catalyzed by the corresponding visual works in the exhibition.

Throughout this dissertation, I have claimed that Raad’s works are realist because they accurately represent some reality, however strange and distended it appears to be. In Pension Arts in Dubai this reality is the everyday mechanisms of power, capital, politics, and labor, but rendered in an obsessively schematic mapping that occludes as much as it reveals. Thus, as with earlier projects, the form of the work is in an inverse relationship to the reality being mapped. Here again, the dissonance between the visual language of the artwork and the claims made about it in the text signals to the viewer its embedded ethical critique.

By thematizing this problem—the recognition of the ties between culture and capital—Scratching evokes the questions of political efficacy and agency that Raad has taken up as citizen (though, one with particular stature and clout). Artists are
not typically thought to have much political power, but collectively the artists involved in Gulf Labor do have some leverage. A number of artists whose work would presumably form an important part of any museum’s collection of contemporary Arab art—including Raad, Shirin Neshat, Mona Hatoum, Akram Zaatari, Yto Barrada and Kader Attia, among others—have actively prevented the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi (and in some cases of all branches of the Guggenheim Foundation) from collecting their work until the labor conditions have been resolved. As reported by The New York Times, “A large part of the [Guggenheim] museum is intended to focus on contemporary Middle Eastern art, and if well-known artists in the group [Gulf Labor] … refuse to be involved, it could open with an embarrassingly thin Middle Eastern collection.”

These projects make visible the complex way that Raad’s high profile position in the global art world is precisely what allows him to enact his critique. By bringing his political engagement into his artistic practice, Raad is also participating, however intentionally, in his own inscription within the historiography of global

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43 Ouroussoff, “Guggenheim Threatened.”
contemporary art. If and when this boycott is successful, Scratching (and Pension Arts in Dubai in particular) will become part of the contemporary history of institutional critique and art as social action. This could, theoretically, prove advantageous for Raad in the end, providing The Guggenheim additional incentive to acquire artworks by Raad for its collection. On the other hand, such action could place the artist in a precarious position by creating an adversarial relationship with such an important international institution. However, by self-consciously intervening in his place in this (art) history, Raad demonstrates an awareness that future museum wall labels will assimilate his work into the institution’s own narrative. On an individual level, Raad is able to exert control over the reception and sales of his work in the present. However, once this matter is settled—or not settled, as it is by no means certain that this boycott will result in the desired changes—how long will Raad continue his act of refusal? On the secondary market, artists no longer have any control over their artworks, and once the building is complete, any political leverage will be lost, and each artist will have to decide whether to continue such a boycott indefinitely. This is the bleak inevitability that Pension Arts in Dubai seems to capture: the powerful connections between financial capital, international politics, and corporate greed are systemic and only too banal.
Figure 1.1 [Map of Lebanon]
rpt. in Robert Fisk, *Pity the Nation: The Abduction of Lebanon*, 2002, xxiv
Figure 1.2 Walid Raad, Hostage: The Bachar tapes, English version, 2000
Single channel video and sound, 16 minutes, 20 seconds
© Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Figure 2.1 Walid Raad, [Atlas Group Organization Chart]
© Walid Raad.
Figure 2.2. Walid Raad, *Notebook Volume 72: Missing Lebanese Wars*, 1989/1998
one in a series of 21 digital prints, 34 x 24.8 cm each
© Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Figure 2.3 Zoe Leonard, *The Fae Richards Photo Archive*, 1993-1996
(installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art)
© Zoe Leonard.
Figure 2.4 Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, *Wonder Beirut: The Story of a Pyromaniac Photographer*, 1998-2006
© Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige
Figure 2.5 Walid Raad, *Let's be honest, the weather helped_Egypt*, 1998
Archival color inkjet print, one of a series of 17 prints, 18 1/4 x 28 1/4 inches (46.4 x 71.8 cm)
© Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Figure 2.6 Walid Raad, *Let's be honest, the weather helped_Israel*, 1998
Archival color inkjet print, one of a series of 17 prints
18 1/4 x 28 1/4 inches (46.4 x 71.8 cm)
© Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Figure 2.7 Gabriel Orozco, *Atomists: Jump Over*, 1996

Computer generated print mounted on aluminum, 35.5 x 82.5 inches

© Gabriel Orozco, Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery
Figure 2.8 John Baldessari, *Person On Bed (Blue): With Large Shadow (Orange) and Lamp (Green)*, 2004
Three dimensional digital archival print with acrylic paint on Sintra, Dibond and Gatorfoam panels, 84 1/4 x 75 1/2 x 4 inches
© John Baldessari, Courtesy John Baldessari
Figure 2.9 Walid Raad, *Civilizationally, We Do Not Dig Holes To Bury Ourselves* (plate 922), 1958-59 /2004
one in a series of 24 digital prints, 25.4 x 20.3 cm
© Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Figure 2.10 Walid Raad, *I Only Wish That I Could Weep*, 2002/2001
single channel video (no audio), 7 minutes, 40 seconds
© Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Figure 2.11 Walid Raad, *Part I_Chapter 1_Section 139: The Atlas Group (1989-2004)*, 1989-2004
gallery walls and understructure: acrylic sheet with latex paint. Floor: red oak veneer with
polyurethane. Photos: resin, latex paint, polycarbonate and archival jet prints. Video
installation: 4 iPads. 12 1/2 x 110 3/8 x 41 in. (31.8 x 280.4 x 104.1 cm)
© Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Figure 3.1 Walid Raad, *Notebook volume 38: Already been in a lake of fire Plate 57-58*, 1991/2003 archival inkjet print mounted on aluminum anodized, 44 x 78 1/4 in. (111.8 x 198.8 cm)
© Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Figure 3.2 Walid Raad, *I was overcome with a momentary panic at the thought that they might be right*, 2002/2005
high density foam, 118 in. diameter (300 cm)
© Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Figure 3.3. Walid Raad, *My neck is thinner than a hair: Engines (4 March 1982)*, 2001/2003
one in a series of 100 archival inkjet prints, 25 x 35 cm
© Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Figure 3.4 Walid Raad, *My neck is thinner than a hair: Engines (22 June 1982)*, 2001/2003
one in a series of 100 archival inkjet prints, 25 x 35 cm
© Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Figure 3.5 Alfredo Jaar, *Real Pictures*, 1995
© Alfredo Jaar
Figure 3.6 Walid Raad, *We decided to let them say “we are convinced” twice*, 2005 (installation view)
15 digital prints, 111 x 171 cm each
© Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Figure 3.7 Walid Raad, *We decided to let them say “we are convinced” twice*, (1982-2007), 2007
19 digital prints, 17 x 22 inches each (installation view, Hasselblad Center)
Courtesy the author
Figure 3.8 Walid Raad, *We decided to let them say “we are convinced” twice (2002/2006), 2005* one in a series of 15 digital prints, 111 x 171
© Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Figure 3.9 Walid Raad, *We decided to let them say “we are convinced” twice (2002/2006), 2005* one in a series of 15 digital prints, 111 x 171

© Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Figure 3.10 Walid Raad, *We decided to let them say “we are convinced” twice (2002/2006)*, 2005
one in a series of 15 digital prints, 111 x 171
© Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Figure 3.11 Robert Capa, [American Troops Landing on D-Day, Omaha Beach, Normandy Coast], 1944, Gelatin silver print; 9 1/2 x 14 inches
Photograph by Robert Capa © Cornell Capa / Magnum, Courtesy Ford Motor Company Collection, Gift of Ford Motor Company and John C. Waddell, 2000/ Metropolitan Museum of Art
Figure 3.12 Akram Zaatari, *Saida, June 6, 1982*, 2006-2009
rpt. in Demos, *The Migrant Image*, 189.
© Akram Zaatari
Figure 4.1 Walid Raad, *Notebook Volume 72: Missing Lebanese Wars Plate 143*, 1998/2004
1 of 21 archival inkjet prints, 9.76 x 13.4 in. (24.8 x 34 cm)
© Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Figure 4.2 Walid Raad, *Notebook Volume 72: Missing Lebanese Wars, Plate 144*, 1998/2004
1 of 21 archival inkjet prints, 9.76 x 13.4 in. (24.8 x 34 cm)
© Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Figure 4.3 Eadweard Muybridge, The Horse in motion. “Sallie Gardner,” owned by Leland Stanford; running at a 1:40 gait over the Palo Alto track, 19th June 1878 1 photographic print on card: albumen

Courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division
Figure 4.4 Walid Raad, *Miraculous beginnings/No, illness is neither here nor there*, 1993/2003

Two channel video (no audio), 1 minute, 50 seconds

© Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Figure 4.5 Walid Raad, *No, illness is neither here nor there*, 1993/2003 (video still)  
two channel video (no audio), 1 minute, 50 seconds  
© Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Figure 4.6 Walid Raad, *Secrets in the open sea* Plate 16, 1994/2004
1 of 6 archival digital prints, each print 43.7 x 68.1 in. (11 x 173 cm)
© Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Figure 4.7 Walid Raad, *Secrets in the open sea Plate 18*, 1994/2004 (detail)
1 of 6 archival digital prints, each print 43.7 x 68.1 in. (11 x 173 cm)
© Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Figure 4.8 Gabriele Basilico, Beyrouth, 1991
rpt. in Beyrouth Centre Ville (Beirut City Center), 1992
© Estate of the artist
Figure 4.9 Walid Raad, *Sweet Talk: Commissions (Beirut) _ Plate 050*, 2010
archival inkjet print, 44 x 74 in. (112 x 188 cm)
© Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Figure 4.10 Walid Raad, *Sweet Talk: Commissions (Beirut) _ Plate 101, 2010*
archival inkjet print, 44 x 74 in. (112 x 188 cm)
© Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Figure 4.11 Walid Raad, *Sweet Talk: Commissions (Beirut)_ Plate 283, 2010*
archival inkjet print, 44 x 74 in. (112 x 188 cm)
© Walid Raad, Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Figure 4.13 Walid Raad, *Sweet Talk: Commissions (Hilwé) Plate 511*, 1992/2004
archival inkjet print, 44 x 74 in. (112 x 188 cm)
© Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Figure 4.15 Walid Raad, *We can make rain but no one came to ask*, 2003/2006
DVD projection, color, 18 minutes, dimensions variable; as shown at Paula Cooper Gallery
22 1/2 x 91 3/4 inches (57.2 x 233 cm)
© Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Figure 4.16 Walid Raad, *We can make rain but no one came to ask*, 2003/2006
DVD projection, color, 18 minutes, dimensions variable; as shown at Paula Cooper Gallery
22 1/2 x 91 3/4 inches (57.2 x 233 cm)
© Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Figure 4.17 Walid Raad, *We can make rain but no one came to ask*, 2003/2006
DVD projection, color, 18 minutes, dimensions variable; as shown at Paula Cooper Gallery
22 1/2 x 91 3/4 inches (57.2 x 233 cm)
© Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Figure 4.18 Walid Raad, *We can make rain but no one came to ask*, 2003/2006  
DVD projection, color, 18 minutes, dimensions variable; as shown at Paula Cooper Gallery  
22 1/2 x 91 3/4 inches (57.2 x 233 cm)  
© Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Figure 5.1 Walid Raad, *Translator’s Introduction: Pension Arts in Dubai*, 2011-2013
paper cutouts on wall, 2 channel video (synchronized and looped), silent, dimensions variable
© Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Figure 5.2 Mark Lombardi, *Oliver North, Lake Resources of Panama, and the Iran-Contra Operation, ca. 1984-86* rpt. in Robert Hobbs, *Mark Lombardi: Global Networks*, 2003
© 2004 Estate of the artist
Figure 5.3 Walid Raad, *Translator’s Introduction: Pension Arts in Dubai*, 2011-2013
paper cutouts on wall, 2 channel video (synchronized and looped), silent, dimensions variable
© Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York
Figure 5.4 Walid Raad, *Translator's Introduction: Pension Arts in Dubai*, 2011-2013
paper cutouts on wall, 2 channel video (synchronized and looped), silent, dimensions variable
© Walid Raad.
APPENDIX A
THE ATLAS GROUP

Cat A: Authored Files

Attributed to Dr. Fadl Fakhouri:

*Notebook Volume 38: Already been in a lake of fire, 1991/2003*¹
9 digital prints, 30 x 42cm each
[Cat. A]_Fakhouri_Notebooks_38_055-071
This notebook contains 145 cutout photographs of cars. They correspond to the exact make, model, and color of every car that was used as a car bomb between 1975 and 1991. Each of the following notebook pages includes a cut-out photograph of a car that matches the make, model and color of a car that was used as a car bomb, as well as text written in Arabic that details the place, time and date of the explosion, the number of casualties, the perimeter of destruction, the exploded car’s engine and axle numbers, and the weight and type of the explosives used.

[Cat. A]_Fakhouri_Notebooks_72_131-149
21 digital prints, 34 x 24.8cm each
It is a little known fact that the major historians of the Lebanese wars were avid gamblers. It’s 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 or after the horse crossed the finish line — the photographer would expose his frame. Each of the following notebook pages includes a photograph clipped from the post-race-day issue of the newspaper, An-Nahar. They include Dr. Fakhouri’s notations on the race’s distance and duration, the winning time of the winning horse, calculations of averages, the historians’ initials with their respective bets, the time discrepancy predicted by the winning historian. Written on each page is also a brief paragraph in English. Dr. Fakhouri’s widow, Zainab Fakhouri, has attributed these to her husband’s habit of including short descriptions of the winning historians in his notebooks.

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¹ Variant: *Already been in a Lake of Fire, 1999-2004* [1999-2002], Archival inkjet prints, 111 x 198 cm each
² Variant: *Missing Lebanese Wars, 1996-2002*, Archival inkjet prints, 112 x 127 cm each
Notebook Volume 57: Livre d’or, 2004\(^3\)
[Cat. A]_Fakhouri_Notebooks_57_plate numbers2004
Archival inkjet prints, 15 plates, 40x30 cm each
Between 1976 and 1978, Dr. Fakhouri was in the habit of carrying a photographic camera with him everywhere he went. He exposed a frame of film every time he came across the sign for a doctor’s or dentist’s office. The resulting trimmed photographs were pasted in Notebook Volume 57 and organized by medical or dental discipline.

Miraculous Beginnings and No, illness is neither here nor there, 1993/2003
[Cat. A]_Fakhouri_Films_238-239
2 channel video, color, 1:43 minutes each
Dr. Fakhouri carried with him wherever he went two Super 8mm film cameras. On one camera, he exposed a frame of film every time he thought the Lebanese wars ended. On the other, he exposed a frame of film every time he came across the sign for a doctor’s or dentist’s office. He titled the two films Miraculous Beginnings and No, illness is neither here nor there.

Civilizationally, we do not dig holes to bury ourselves, 1958-59/2003\(^4\)
[Cat. A]_Fakhouri_Photographs_962-986
24 digital prints, 25.4 x 20.3 cm each
The only available photographs of Dr. Fakhouri consist of twenty-four black-and-white self-portraits that were found in a small brown envelope titled, Civilizationally, we do not dig holes to bury ourselves. The historian produced the photographs in 1958 and 1959 during his one and only trip outside of Lebanon, to Paris and Rome.

Attributed to Souheil Bachar:

Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (#17 and #31) English version, 2000
[Cat. A]_Hostage_Videotapes_017031
Single channel video, color, sound, 18 minutes
Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (#17 and #31) English version is attributed to Souheil Bachar and is about the abduction and detention in Lebanon in the 1980s and early 1990s of Western men like Terry Anderson and Terry Waite by ‘Islamic militants’. This episode directly and indirectly consumed Lebanese, US, French, German and British political and public life, and precipitated a number of high profile political scandals like the Iran-Contra Affair in the US. In Hostage this crisis is examined thought the testimony of Souheil Bachar who was held in Lebanon between 1983 and 1993. What is remarkable about Souheil’s captivity is that he was held for three

\(^3\) Variant: Miraculous Beginnings, 2004, 15 archival inkjet prints, 40 x 30 cm each
\(^4\) Variant: Civilizationally, We Do Not dig Holes to Bury Ourselves, 1959-2002, Archival inkjet prints, 112 x 119 cm each
months in 1985 in the same cell as five American men: Terry Anderson, Thomas Sutherland, Benjamin Weir, Martin Jenco, and David Jacobsen. In 2000, Souheil collaborated with The Atlas Group to produce fifty-three videotapes about his captivity. Tapes #17 and #31 are the only tapes Souheil makes available outside of Lebanon. In the tapes, Bachar addresses the cultural, textual, and sexual aspects of his detention with the Americans.

Hostage: The Bachar Polaroids, 2000/2011
[Cat. A]_Bachar_Photographs_001-021
20 digital prints each 20.3 x 20.3 cm
During his ten-year captivity in Lebanon, Souheil Bachar was photographed over twenty times by his captors. From time to time, his captors would leave him some of the Polaroids they deemed unfit to release to the local and international press. In these images, and for some unknown reason, his body and face were always cut out. With the few brushes and colors available to him in his cell, Bachar decided to fill himself in.

Attributed to Walid Raad:

Let’s be honest, the weather helped, 1998/2006-7
[Cat. A]_Raad_Photographs_001-017
17 digital prints, 46.8 x 72.4 cm each
The following plates are attributed to Walid Raad who donated them to The Atlas Group in 1998. In the statement accompanying the donation, Raad noted: “Like many around me in Beirut in the late 1970s, I collected bullets and shrapnel. I would run out to the streets after a night or day of shelling to remove them from walls, cars, and trees. I kept daily notes of where I found every bullet and photographed the sites of my findings, covering the holes with dots that corresponded to the bullet’s diameter and the mesmerizing hues I found on the bullet’s tips. It took me ten years to realize that ammunition manufacturers follow distinct color codes to mark and identify their cartridges and shells. It also took me another ten years to realize that my notebooks in part catalogue seventeen countries and organizations that continue to supply the various militias and armies fighting in Lebanon: Belgium, China, Egypt, Finland, Germany, Greece, Iraq, Italy, Israel, Libya, NATO, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Switzerland, USA, UK and Venezuela.”

We decided to let them say “we are convinced” twice, 2002/2006
[Cat. A]_Raad_Photographs_001-015
15 digital prints, 111 x 171 cm each
The following photographs are attributed to Walid Raad who donated them to The Atlas Group in 2002. In the statement accompanying the donation, Raad noted: “In the summer of 1982, I stood with others in a parking lot across from my mother’s

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5 Variant: We decided to let them say, "we are convinced," twice, [cat. A]_Raad_Photographs_001-019, 1982-2007, 19 digital prints, 55.8 x 43 cm each
apartment in East Beirut, and watched the Israeli land, air, and sea assault on West Beirut. The PLO along with their Lebanese and Syrian allies retaliated, as best they could. East Beirut welcomed the invasion, or so it seemed and that much is certain. West Beirut resisted it, or so it seemed, and that much is certain. One day, my mother even accompanied me to the hills around Beirut to photograph the invading Israeli army stationed there. Soldiers rested their bodies and their weapons as they waited for their next orders to attack or retreat. I was fifteen in 1982, and wanted to get as close as possible to the events, or as close as my newly acquired camera and lens permitted me. Clearly not close enough. This past year, I came upon the carefully preserved negatives from that time. I decided to look again.”

Attributed to Nahia Hassan:

“*Oh God,*” he said, *talking to a tree*, 2004/2008
Atlas Group File number: [Cat. A]_Hassan_Photographs_2004
31 digital prints, 56 x 43 cm each
The following photographs are attributed to Nahia Hassan who donated them to The Atlas Group in 2004. Until her dismissal in 1994, Hassan was a senior topographer in the Lebanese Army’s Directorate of Geographic Affairs.

*I was overcome by a momentary panic at the thought that they might be right*, 19986
[Cat. A]_Hassan_Maps_1994p
Mixed Media, 330 cm diameter
Until her dismissal in 1994, Hassan was a senior topographer in the Lebanese Army’s Directorate of Geographic Affairs. Her scaled model of all detonations in Beirut between 1975 and 1991 was presented to the Lebanese parliament’s committee on Development and Reconstruction in 1994 and ignited one of the most heated and contentious parliamentary sessions in Lebanon’s recent history. The debate led to an overhaul and suspension of all reconstruction activities then under way. The model presented here is an exact replica of the original that was destroyed, some say vandalized, by parliamentarians in 1994.

Attributed to Hannah Mrad:

*I might die before I get a rifle*, 1989-20087
[Cat. A]_Mrad_Photographs_001-006
12 archival inkjet print on archival paper 160 x 212.5 cm

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6 Variant: *I Was Overcome By A Momentary Panic At The Thought That They Might Be Right*, 2005, 3 high density foam floor elements each 170 cm diameter and digital color photographs, varied dimensions
7 This project is sometimes attributed to Walid Raad rather than under the Atlas Group framework. The character Habib Fathallah of the Lebanese Forces is sometimes substituted for Hannah Mrad.
The following photographs are attributed to Hannah Mrad who donated them to The Atlas Group in 1993: “After 14 years in the Lebanese Communist Party I was folded into the Lebanese Army’s newly established ammunition and explosives division. Months into my new assignment, I found myself unable to remember the names of the thousands of explosive devices I was meant to master. I began to photograph them hoping that the photographs would aid my memory. They didn’t and I was let go. I still blame my photographs for my release.”

Cat FD: Found Documents

Attributed to Operator 17:

I only wish that I could weep. 2002/1997
[Cat. FD] Weep_Videotapes_001-006
Single channel video, color, and sound, 7 minutes
This document is attributed to Operator #17, a Lebanese Army intelligence officer who was assigned to monitor the Corniche, a seaside boardwalk in Beirut. From 1997 on, the officer decided to videotape the sunset instead of his assigned target. This videotape recounts the operator’s story and concentrates on the footage he was permitted to keep after his dismissal.

Anonymous/Unattributed:

Secrets in the Open Sea, 1994/2004
[Cat. FD] Secrets_Photographs_016-021
6 digital prints, 111 x 173cm each
This project consists of twenty-nine photographic prints that were found buried under the rubble during the 1993 demolition of Beirut’s war-ravaged commercial districts. The prints were different shades of blue and each measured 111 x 173 cm. In 1994, the prints were entrusted to The Atlas Group for preservation and analysis. The Atlas Group sent six of the prints to laboratories in France and the UK for chemical and digital analysis. Remarkably, the laboratories recovered small black-and-white latent images from the blue prints. The small images represented group portraits of men and women. The Atlas Group was able to identify all the individuals represented in the small black-and-white images, and it turned out that they were all individuals who drowned, died, or were found dead in the Mediterranean between 1975 and 1991.8

We are fair people. We never speak well of one another, 2014
9 inkjet prints (Archival inks and paper). 86 x 111.5 cm each

8 Earlier version of this text said, “No determination was made on their size or color.”
Everyone knows that I am not used to shooting apples
*this appears to be a placeholder title for a potential future work

**Cat AGP: Atlas Group Productions**

Attributed to The Atlas Group:

*My Neck is Thinner than a Hair: Engines*, 2001/2003

[Cat. AGP]_Thin Neck_Photographs_001-100

100 digital prints, 25x 35 cm each

My Neck is Thinner than a Hair: Engines is a research project by The Atlas Group about the uses of car bombs in the 1975-1990 Lebanese wars. With this project, The Atlas Group investigates the public and private events, discourses, objects, and experiences surrounding the 3,641 car bombs that were detonated during this period. The only part that remains intact after a car bomb explodes is the engine. Landing on balconies, roofs, or adjacent streets, the engine is projected tens and sometimes hundreds of meters away from the original site of the bomb. During the wars, photojournalists competed to be the first to find and photograph the engines. The following are 100 photographs produced by photojournalists and found by Walid Raad in the archives of An-Nahar Research Center (Beirut, Lebanon) and The Arab Documentation Center (Beirut, Lebanon).

*We can make rain, but no one came to ask*, 2003

[Cat. AGP]_Thin Neck_Videotapes_21.1.1986

Single channel video, 18 minutes

This videotape imagines a collaboration between Yusef Bitar, the Lebanese state’s chief investigator of all car bombs detonations, and Georges Semerdjian, a respected and fearless photojournalist and videographer, who, until his death in 1990, tirelessly chronicled the Lebanese wars of the past three decades. The videotape focuses on diagrams, note, videotapes, and photographs produced by Bitar and Semerdjian about a detonation in the Furn Ech Chubak neighborhood of Beirut on 21 January 1986.


[Cat. AGP]_Sweet Talk_Photographs_277-900

digital inkjet prints, 116 x 116 cm

In 1989, The Atlas Group initiated a project titled Sweet talk. The foundation recruited dozens of men and women to photograph streets, storefronts, buildings, and other spaces of national, technological, architectural, cultural, political, and economic significance in Beirut. The photographs that compose the following plates are attributed to Lamia Hilwe, a dancer and photographer recruited by The Atlas Group in 1990. Hilwe produced the small black-and-white photographs of buildings in 1992, but did not submit them to the archive then. Fourteen years later, she submitted over 900 plates, each consisting of a black-and-white photograph of a building, along with an enlarged, cut out, distorted, and colorized photograph of the same building.
Variously attributed to The Atlas Group and to Walid Raad:

*Sweet Talk: Commissions (Beirut)*, 1987-present
16 digital prints, 111.8 x 188 cm each

*Sweet Talk: Commissions (Beirut)*, 2010
11 black-and-white inkjet prints, 43 x 55 cm

*Sweet Talk: Commissions (Beirut)*, 1987-present
color inkjet prints, 109 x 134 cm

In the late 1980s in the midst of the Lebanese wars, I committed myself to producing photographs in Beirut. I titled this commitment Sweet Talk and referred to the various photographic self-assignments as “Commissions.” Sweet Talk concentrated on Beirut’s residents, its buildings, streets, storefronts, gardens, and other objects, situations, and spaces in the Lebanese capital.
APPENDIX B

SCRATCHING ON THINGS I COULD DISAVOW:
A HISTORY OF ART IN THE ARAB WORLD

Translator’s Introduction: Pension Arts in Dubai
Paper cutouts on wall, 2 channel video (synchronized and looped), silent
In 2007, I was asked to join the Dubai branch of the Artist Pension Trust (APT). As a private company established in 2004 by a savvy entrepreneur and a risk management guru, APT’s aims are to select and pool artists and artworks into investment and pension funds. APT which has thus far established eight regional funds, is owned by MutualArt, a British Virgin Islands-registered company whose assets include the website by the same name. MutualArt.com is a sophisticated user-customized database of information about art, artists, and art world matters in general.
To determine whether to join APT Dubai, I found myself asking who was funding APT and MutualArt, and why was APT launching a trust in the Middle East? This led me to look into technological innovations in the areas of statistics; risk management concepts in finance; art as an alternative asset class; culture as an engine of economic growth in the Arab world and elsewhere; text, data mining and face recognition algorithms; and the Israeli military and its links to the Israeli hi-tech sector. All of which led to the tableau presented here, which I regard as a stage set for an accompanying oral presentation in which I narrate my findings.

Plexi glass, high density foam, LCD panels, 4 DVD players, digital photographs, plastic, steel, MDF, electrical supply
33 x 282 x 104 cm
Between 1989 and 2004, I worked on a project titled The Atlas Group. It consisted of artworks made possible by the Lebanese wars of the past few decades.
In 2005, I was asked to exhibit this project for the first time in Lebanon, in Beirut’s first-of-its-kind white cube art gallery. For some reason, this offer perturbed me and I refused.
In 2006, I was asked again. I refused again.
In 2007, I was asked again. I refused again.
In 2008, I was asked again. I agreed.
Weeks later, when I went to the gallery to inspect my exhibition before its opening, I was startled to find that all my artworks had shrunk to 1/100th of their original size. I subsequently decided to build a smaller white cube befitting my works’ new dimensions, and to display them there.

Index XXVI: Blue and Green and Yellow and Red, 2010
Vinyl, pencil and 36 inkjet prints, dimensions variable
This work is based on the names of painters and sculptors who worked in Lebanon in the past century. Over the past few years, artists from the future have been sending me the names via telepathy.
Given my past experience with the “noise” that accompanies most telepathic signals,
I decided in 2005 to make the names public by displaying them in white vinyl letters on these white walls. I was seeking confirmation from kindred spirits about the spelling of the names. What I did not expect was for this confirmation to come to me from the least sympathetic source, a local renowned dancer who considers himself a guardian of Lebanese art.

Disregarding my telepathic claims as a fanciful conceptual conceit, the dancer unequivocally confirmed that the names displayed were those of artists and that many were indeed misspelled. He was unwilling to attribute my orthographic errors to telepathic noise, but blamed it on the impertinent attitude common to my generation of post-war Lebanese artists who not only can’t even spell the names of their predecessors but chose time and again to overlook their contributions. And with a blue, green, yellow, red and orange spray paint, the dancer “corrected” the misspelled names.

I was deeply moved by the dancer’s sharp rebuke and as a result I devoted the last few years to researching the misspelled artists’ lives and works. But all along, there was something that seemed to me deceptive about the dancer’s indignation. In time, I came to view it as a ruse distracting me from a more troubling scenario than merely ignoring predecessors and misspelling their names.

Today I am convinced that artists from the future intentionally distorted the names they communicated to me telepathically. Future artists are not hailing past painters, sculptors and their works but the colors blue, green, yellow, red and orange that surface in the dancer’s sprayed “corrections.” Future artists want or need these colors because they are no longer available to them.


5 archival inkjet prints, 150 x 200 cm each

I was recently taken aback by how most paintings on display in the Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha lack some (but not all) reflections. I decided to provide some with these works. I am hoping that the reflections in my photographs will eventually leave my works and attach themselves to the paintings in the museum.


In 2006, the artist Walid Sadek exhibited his Love Is Blind. The installation consisted of two parallel white walls on which Sadek placed five captions. The captions referenced paintings by Mustafa Farroukh, the founder of a national Lebanese art movement, and included Farroukh’s name, the title, date, and provenance of a Farroukh painting I expected to see displayed next to the caption, but was not.

In 2008, I asked Walid to borrow his installation for an exhibition. Walid refused.

His refusal was most appropriate.

Walid must have sensed that was fascinated me was not his installation, and even less Farroukh’s paintings. He must have sensed that what drew me to his work were the shadows that shaped his walls and captions. And that in this regard, I don’t need his permission because these shadows move independently of his Love Is Blind, and are prone to manifesting themselves here and there and in forms other than shadows.
Appendix XVIII: Plates 22-257, 2010
25 digital prints, each 162 x 129.5 cm
The Lebanese wars of the past three decades affected Lebanon’s residents physically and psychologically: from the 100,000 plus who were killed; to the 200,000 plus who were wounded; to the 1,000,000 plus who were displaced; to the even more who were psychologically traumatized.
It is clear to me today that these wars also affected colors, lines, shapes and forms. Some of these are affected in a material way and, like burned books or razed monuments, are physically destroyed and lost forever; others, like looted treasure or politically compromised artworks, remain physically intact but are removed from view, possibly never to be seen again. And yet other colors, lines, shapes and forms, sensing the forthcoming danger, deploy defensive measures: they hide, take refuge, hibernate, camouflage and/or dissipulate. I expected them to do so in the artworks of past artists. I thought their paintings and sculptures would be their most hospitable hosts. I was wrong. Instead, colors, lines, shapes and forms took refuge in unexpected places: they hid in roman and Arabic letters and numbers; in circles, rectangles and squares; in yellow, blue and green. They dissimulated as fonts, covers, titles and indices; as the graphic lines and footnotes of books; they camouflaged themselves as letters, price lists, dissertations and catalogues; as diagrams and budgets. They hibernated not in but around artworks.
These are the colors, lines, shapes and forms that compose the plates displayed here.

Section 88: Views from Inner to Outer Compartments, 2010-2011
Single Channel HD video, color, 14 minutes
At the opening of a new museum of modern and/or contemporary art in an Arab city, a proud local resident rushes the entrance only to find that he is unable to proceed.
Was it his casual wear at an event announced as a black-tie affair? No.
Was it the thugs that shielded the ruling dynasty attending the event en masse to showcase their benevolence and refined sensibilities, pubescent-future-rulers in tow that prevent his access? No.
He simply feels that were he to walk in he will certainly ‘hit a wall.’
On the spot, he turns to face the rushing crowd and screams: ‘Stop. Don’t go in. Be careful.’
Within seconds, he is removed from the site, severely beaten and sent to a psychiatric facility.
These events will take place sometime between 2014 and 2024. We will certainly read in newspapers the following day the headline: Demented Man Disturbs Opening - Claims World Is Flat.

Section 88: Views from Outer to Inner Compartments, 2010
Single Channel HD video, color, 14 minutes

Views from Outer to Inner Compartments, 2010
Wood, paint, 250 x 500 x 20 cm
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VITA

Judy Ditner was born in Canada in 1979. She received a B.F.A. in Photography Studies from Ryerson University in 2002, and an M.A. in Curatorial Studies from Bard College in 2005. In 2006, she entered the graduate program in History of Art and Architecture at Boston University, completing all course requirements in 2007 and passing the doctoral candidacy exams in 2008. Her supervisors were Professor Kim Sichel and Professor Gregory Williams. She was a Graduate Fellow for Professor Sichel’s History of Photography course in 2008 and for Professor Williams’s Contemporary Art 1980-now course in 2007. In Summer 2008 and Spring 2011 she was an Instructor of Record for History of Photography at BU. As a Ph.D. candidate at Boston University, Ditner received The Angela and James Rallis Memorial Award in 2012, The Edwin S. and Ruth M. White Prize, Boston University in 2012, a Graduate Research Abroad Fellowship in 2011, a Senior Teaching Fellowship in 2011, a grant from the Kate and Hall Peterson Fund in 2010, and a Presidential Graduate Fellowship, Boston University from 2006 to 2008.

In 2010, she worked as an Independent Research Advisor for the New Museum in New York and as Assistant Curator for the exhibition 10,000 Lives: The Eighth Gwangju Biennale, organized by Massimiliano Gioni in Gwangju, South Korea. From 2008 to 2009, she worked as a Curatorial Assistant and Public Programs Coordinator at the International Center of Photography in New York. Before beginning her doctoral studies, she worked as Collections Assistant for the Black Star Collection at Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada from 2005 to 2006, and as Collections Manager for the Carole and Howard Tanenbaum Collection from 2001 to 2003.