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The Raadical History of Lebanon

“...art and literature do not provide us with the illusion of comprehending, of grasping, but allow us keenly not to understand, intimating to us that the alternative is not between comprehension and incomprehension, but between incomprehension in a gross manner...while expecting comprehension; and incomprehension in an intelligent and subtle manner”
- Jalal Toutic as quoted by Walid Raad¹

Professor and artist Walid Raad is the front man and most visible face of The Atlas Group, alternately introduced as a “foundation” and a “project” focused on “documenting the contemporary history of the Lebanon Wars.”² The foundation keeps work in three separate categories – as authored documents (A), found documents (FD), and works produced by the Atlas Group either by unattributed or outside characters (AGP). The Atlas Group focuses on the history of Lebanon’s wars through its details and intricacies; we learn from a hostage, kept for ten years, about his impressions of Americans and we see footage of a sunset that a bad soldier with a good eye managed to capture. We see where bullets and shrapnel punctured Lebanon’s beautiful Mediterranean structures, learn about the horse races that went on throughout the war, and see the faces of young Israeli soldiers in 1982, unaware that they were in the midst of an age old war and not on a vacation. Raad tells us how many car bombs exploded in Beirut (3,641) and what car model and make carried those bombs. He shows us small parts that together equal a greater whole. It is a view that is both endearing and irritating simultaneously, a

¹ Raad, “‘Oh God’ He Said, Talking to a Tree: A Fresh-Off-the-Boat, 1 Throat-Clearing Preamble About the Recent Events in Lebanon. And a Question to Walid Sadek” Artforum, New York: October 26. Vol. 45, Issue 2, ph 242

² <http://www.theatlasgroup.org/index.html>

view that allows us to ponder the sadness of Lebanon's history before moving on to the next tragic photograph or news clip. Except for one thing – Raad isn't showing us history; in fact, most of it isn't even true. There was never a hostage named Bachar, there were never groups of historians betting on horse races during the wars, and there is no such foundation called The Atlas Group.

Walid Raad uses historical documents, anecdotes, and scenes to jump off into a history of Lebanon that is infinitely more complicated and tangled than the normal historiography. The Atlas Group is the blanket umbrella for the authorship of his work, but is not registered with any government or museum and has no members aside from Raad. Everything that the Atlas Group – and hence Raad does – is a reflection on history and on what can and can't be called a legitimate historical account or fact. Raad, his work, even the concept of The Atlas Group itself, is one giant question about the types of evidence that make up the contemporary historiography and the ways in which we understand the past. The fiction of a collective group lends an institutional weight and strength to the work presented. At the same time, the contradiction of a group really being composed of one individual underscores the distance between fact and fiction that Raad reiterates in the work itself. Raad's work mixes fact and fiction to question the authority of history, of documents, of how easily an official fact is allowed, even expected to tell the full story – the whole story. What Raad creates isn't academic history, if anything it is a caricature or a parody of such history. But it is *a* history.

To Walid Raad, standard history is meaningless because in the end it can't answer the questions of chance in Lebanon or anywhere. Questions of why that neighborhood and not mine, why him and not me, that the most concrete piece of evidence can't answer

are the types of questions that Walid Raad attempts, not to answer, but to explore. Walid Raad uses his art to make the conceit of saying, “I know” or “I understand” to be an understatement and even, a lie. He says, “I begin from the conventional notion of what a fact is...I start with the conventional to see its limits...but I don’t want to reduce history to these simple facts...”³ To Walid Raad, the sum of history cannot be the tangible, provable evidence – history, instead, is the sum of our greater collective memory. His work is not meant to inform the historian, but to inform the individual. The choice is given to us, he says, to accept a lack of knowledge in “an intelligent and subtle manner.”⁴ In this paper, I will present several of Walid Raad/The Atlas Group’s projects and explain their significance in the greater context of Walid Raad’s work.

In "Hostage: The Bachar Tapes," the Beirut hostage crisis of the 1980's is examined through the firsthand testimony of Souheil Bachar. We are told that he was the only Arab to have been detained with the 5 Western hostages (Terry Anderson, Thomas Sutherland, Benjamin Weir, Marting Jenco, and David Jacobsen) kidnapped in Beirut in the 1980s. After ten years of confinement, Bachar was released and in 1999 collaborated with The Atlas Group to produce 53 videotapes about his experience. Only tapes 17 and 31 are available outside of the Middle East. Video 17 shows Bachar against a neutral background directing that this video should be dubbed over in the language of the country it is shown in, with the voice of a neutral-sounding woman. He begins to speak about the brief time that he was held with the American hostages and mentions that in the books all five wrote after they were freed, each begins by discussing the weather "as though being

³ Interview with the Artist

⁴ Artforum, Oct 2006.

taken hostage was a natural event."⁵ Bachar speaks about how the Americans were obsessed with sex, the way they were simultaneously attracted and repulsed by him, and the way their captors threatened them with death if they looked at them, and then seemingly begged them to look. As he speaks, the screen flashes through images of the American hostages, Ollie North testifying at the Iran-Contra affair, and Reagan announcing the hostage release to the American public.

Tape 31 begins with a shot of the Mediterranean Sea, though at first it looks like an old TV screen. The shot of the Mediterranean remains uninterrupted on the screen for two minutes and twelve seconds before an image of Bachar appears standing on rocks by the sea with a caption reading "This is the average duration of all video statements recorded during captivity." The contradiction between those two minutes that seem like an eternity and the realization of how short they must have seemed as the only bridge to the outside world is somewhat shocking.

But of course there never was a Bachar who contributed his memories to The Atlas Group. The man who represents Bachar in the work is an actor famous in Lebanon, but unknown in the Western world. Any Lebanese or Arab viewer would immediately recognize the actor and know, for sure, of the fictitious nature of the work. This seems almost to be an inside joke that Raad utilizes, along with a disparity between the captions on the screen and the words Bachar says in Arabic. The English translation ignores most of what Bachar says about the Iran-Contra affair and some of the sexual undertones in the work. "Hostage," in its critique of the Western hostages and of the Iran-Contra affair, has been read as a statement on Western Orientalism and a reaffirmation of the work done by

⁵ "Hostage" can be found at <http://www.theatlasgroup.org/>

Edward Said.⁶ But Raad himself dispels this.⁷ “Hostage” is instead a discussion of the historical documentation of captivity. The five Westerners held hostage wrote five separate books about their experiences, and while they were held captive, their wives and sisters also wrote, what became, bestsellers. The West was riveted by the drama of these five men. In the end, Bachar represents all the citizens of Lebanon - taken hostage for years by its different warring factions and the international forces that overran the country. Only tapes 17 and 31 feature Bachar’s interaction with the Western hostages, and only those tapes are available outside of the Middle East, in a recognition of one of the few times that the West was cognizant of the Lebanese Wars.

"My Neck is Thinner than a Hair" is described as an “ongoing investigation by The Atlas Group about the uses of car bombs in the 1975-1991 Lebanese Wars." As part of the greater “Thin Neck File,” “My Neck is Thinner than a Hair” is listed under the AGP section of The Atlas Group’s Archive, and is not attributed to a specific member of the group. The project itself is a series of photographs showing the destroyed engines of cars used as car bombs during the Wars, found by Walid Raad in the Al-Nahar newspaper archives. After a car bomb, the only portion of a car that remains somewhat intact is the engine, which can be propelled onto balconies or streets, sometimes hundreds of meters away from where it began. During the wars, journalists competed to find the engines first, so now a huge archive exists. The photographs, showing the mangled entrails of the engines surrounded by crowds, are pasted onto notebook pages and combined with notations in Arabic of where the engine was found, the date and time, the type of engines and explosive, and the number of casualties. Raad

⁶ Smith, ArtForum

⁷ Interview with artist

described this project as "[investigating] the public and private events, discourses, objects, and experiences surrounding the 3,641 car bombs that were detonated during [the wars]..." The work is presented either in book form or as 120 photographs displayed on the wall in a dizzying-grid. The photographs are authentic images from journalists, and the facts accompanying them are historically true - yet Raad feels these pieces of evidence only tell half the story. "We don't experience just the historical facts," he says, "we experience all these facts...all of the people who saw the car, who looked at it after, who heard it 10 miles away, who felt their building shake from the explosion - these people were affected too."⁸ These bystanders and witnesses are never listed as casualties or victims, Raad says, and their stories or impressions can't appear in the narrow confines of the historical narrative.

The title comes from an interview that Raad read with a survivor of a car bomb who described his feelings as "I feel like my neck is thinner than a hair." The thesis underlying almost all of Raad's work is epitomized in this project; the discussion of the shortcoming of typical historiography to fully explain what happened, and the academic indulgence in facts. This exploration of car bombs is arguably a search of what it means to know anything about war and anything about Lebanon. Included as artists in this project are the different militias that utilized car bombs. Their contributions, the engines lying around Beirut, serve as documents and memorials to Beirut more than any news story ever did.

Another portion of "My Neck is Thinner Than a Hair" is attributed to the fictional Dr. Fakhouri, described as the "foremost historian of the civil war in Lebanon" who has

⁸ Interview with the artist

"contributed" a large body of work to The Atlas Group. "Notebook 38: Already Been in a Lake of Fire" contains 145 photographs of cars, glued onto notebook pages. These photographs correspond to every car model ever used as a car bomb between 1975 and 1991. Corresponding text in Arabic details the exact date/time, place, number of casualties, the engine number, and the type of explosive used. One page reads: "Silver Volvo; August 20, 1985; 56 killed; 120 injured; 100 kg of TNT; 24 cars burned; 11 buildings burned."⁹ These captions are handwritten and the caption and photograph are arranged in almost a scrapbook like formation with its playfulness belied by the gravity of the content and photograph.

Like other works, "Already Been in a Lake of Fire" calls question to traditional historiography and facts by focusing on the details yet retaining a whimsical appearance in a parallel to the absurdity or missing answers in Beirut. Raad discusses this as saying that in Beirut, "you need to know about cars – not if they are right wing or left wing."¹⁰ Specific types of cars were routinely used as car bombs, and citizens of Beirut became accustomed to searching for a car's owner and walking farther from models known for exploding. At that moment, the creator of the bomb or its intended target was a side note to the "emotional" facts on the ground, but in the history books, the question of who sent the bomb and for whom it was intended, takes the prominent role.

Dr. Fakhouri's other work, "Notebook 72: The Missing Lebanese Wars," is a series of photo-finish horse race photographs cut out from the Lebanese newspaper Al-Nahar and glued to notebook pages. The photographs detail the history of the group of

⁹ can be found at www.theatlasgoup.org/

¹⁰ Interview with the artist

Lebanese historians (representing every ideological bend from nationalists to communists to the Islamists) who would gather every week at the Beirut racetrack to gamble on the races throughout the wars. They bet not on who would win, but on how far the winning horse would be from the finish line at the moment the photograph was taken, and whether it would have actually crossed the line or only be close to it. Along with every photograph, are details in Arabic about the time, the date, and somewhat cruel descriptions of each historian's appearance or personality.

The racetrack was one of the few Lebanese institutions to stay open throughout the wars, but no group of historians ever gathered to make seemingly absurd bets. The story is false, and somewhat ridiculous, but it invites reflection on the ways that we examine history. Raad articulated in a 2002 interview:

What is fascinating about these images is that the horse is always captured either just before or beyond, but never exactly at the finish line- the horse is never on time. This inability to be present at the passing of the present raised for us numerous questions about how to write, and more particularly how to write the history of events that involve forms of extreme physical and psychological violence¹¹

These historians are betting not on the straightforward idea of what will happen, but on the imperfect methods that the camera (or maybe the historian) has for recording history; on the accuracy of a future document and on how faulty the future record will be, is a thinly veiled jab at the existing system of documentation.

In "I only wish I could weep/#17," Operator 17, a Lebanese security agent is assigned to videotape activity along the boardwalk in Beirut looking for suspicious

¹¹ Gilbert, 40-42

characters. He constantly neglects his assignment to film the sun setting over the sea. As a citizen of East Beirut, #17 had never before seen the sun set over the water as it does in West Beirut, and he was fascinated by it.

According to the video, he lost his job, but was allowed to keep the tapes, which he then donated to The Atlas Group in 2002. The tapes themselves are visually beautiful shots of the sunset along the horizon. The footage is sped up over time and focuses on the horizon line, which is increasingly obscured by people walking on the boardwalk. This work seems simpler, calmer even, and in a way more sad and reflective than didactic or historical. Of course, there was no Operator 17. Walid Raad shot the footage after the war; but Raad also grew up as a citizen of East Beirut, and like many others, had never seen the sun set over West Beirut. The reasoning behind naming an “operator” or “agent” as the creator is ambiguous. Perhaps it was as a reminder that even in the time of (relative) peace, the shadows of the past were not far, or perhaps it was to lend an underlying strength of a concrete document and documentation to the work. Regardless, the simple sunsets shown in the film are breathtaking and deeply moving. Fiction here is employed, not to trick the viewer or mislead him/her into some false pretenses, but to show how little the hard facts of who, what, and where matter in helping us to enter into the mindset of Beirut.

"Let's Be Honest, The Weather Helped," attributed to Walid Raad explores the international involvement in the Lebanese wars. Raad collected bullets and shrapnel in the early 1980s and photographed the buildings where he found them. He covered the holes with colored bubbles that corresponded to the bullet's diameter and “mesmerizing hues” found on the tips of the bullets’. “It took me 10 years to realize that ammunition

manufacturers follow distinct color codes [on bullets]....[and] another 10 years to realize that my notebooks...catalogue 17 countries that continue to supply various militias and armies fighting in Lebanon.” The photographs look almost like cheerful pop art with the colorful bubbles appearing almost cartoonish. The beauty of the buildings in the images and the cheerful balloons contrast sharply with the somber evidence of violence; leading again to a revisiting of the contradictions in everyday Beirut.

"We decided to let them say "we are convinced" twice," is decidedly Raad's most straightforward work - and one of the most powerful. Raad took these photographs in the summer of 1982, during the Israeli incursion into Lebanon to dislodge the PLO. He writes of this work: “My mother accompanied me to the hills around Beirut to photograph the Israeli army stationed there. I was 15...and I wanted to get as close as possible to the events.”¹² The photographs show the skyline of Beirut marked with planes, bombs exploding, and smoke trails. Other photographs show close ups of young Israeli soldiers looking at magazines, posing for the camera, or sleeping underneath tanks.

Raad says that he found these photographs, ironically, only in the summer of 2006, during the second Israeli invasion of Lebanon. The actors had changed - 2006 saw the launching of Hezbollah katyushas into Northern Israel where from years before had come PLO fire. The situation was eerily similar however, in terms of the role of, and effect on Lebanese civilians. The title of this work is more obvious and didactic than any of Raad's other work and seems like a metaphorical shoulder-shrug of acceptance in what seems to be an endless cycle of violence. The photographs themselves are grainy and

¹² can be found at www.theatlasgroup.org/

scratched. Raad says that he simply found them like that years after they had been taken, and one can only imagine that these scratches are reflective of the scratches inflicted on, and visible in Beirut.

I have been forced to omit a great deal of Walid Raad's work due to the constraints of space and the vast amount of work he has created, but have included what I think is both the most relevant and the most interesting. Walid Raad normally presents his work as a scholastic presentation, introducing The Atlas Group sometimes as "imaginary," as "fictional," or simply as "a project established in Beirut in 1999." The presentation itself is used as a performance, with Professor Raad speaking in a heavy Middle-Eastern accent that is almost imperceptible when speaking to him normally. The heavy accent is a bit of theatrics, but also "legitimizes" his presentation as being "from a place of authenticity and therefore of *truth*."¹³ All of The Atlas Group's work is presented as "documents" and not by any other title. Most make the point that the most powerful of those documents were not created at the time, but "reveal the event unfolding, reverberating, and acting years removed from the event."¹⁴ This can mean a great many things, among them, the "ethical necessity to create and produce documents...as a means to tie in any new present with the past."¹⁵

In the end, Raad's work is a trip into the hell of Lebanon – the absurd, the entertaining, and the gruesome. He omits hard statistics like the 144,240 people dead; 197,500 wounded and the 50% of Lebanese who live outside of Lebanon. The pendulum

¹³ Lepecki, 90

¹⁴ Lepecki, 92

¹⁵ Lepecki, 92

swing between historical documentary evidence and pure fabrication in Raad's work alternates in being frustrating, illuminating, and confusing - much, it seems, like Lebanon itself.

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