Mapping The Atlas Group Archive

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ABSTRACT

Mapping *The Atlas Group* Archive

Adrienne Connelly

This thesis explores Walid Raad's *The Atlas Group*, a fictional foundation started in Beirut in 1999. The study takes the video document *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)_#17 and 31* (2001) as a case study to examine Raad's two contradictory claims about his project: first that the documents in his archive should be considered as hysterical symptoms and second that the project examines the limits of what is sayable and thinkable in relation to the Lebanese civil war(1975-1991). Drawing on the writings of Sigmund Freud and Cathy Caruth, section one considers psychoanalytic conceptions of hysteria as a response to unprocessed traumatic experience. The second section looks at the exclusionary Orientalist discourse of the "Western hostage crisis," constituted in part by the captivity memoirs published by American hostages held in Beirut in the 1980s, and considers how Raad's video constitutes what Jacques Rancière terms an act of political subjectivization whereby Bachar's speech becomes intelligible. The third section looks at these issues in direct relation to the archive and the Iran-contra affair. This thesis argues that *The Atlas Group* archive is not hysterical, rather the documents are examples of the symbolization of trauma, which is a necessary part of healing, and that through the project, Raad demonstrates the potential of archives as both metaphor and model for contemporary artists interested in engaging with issues of history, memory, and politics.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

vi. List of Figures

1. Mapping the Atlas Group Archive

    7. The Hysterical Symptom

    15. The Sayable and Thinkable

    32. The Archive

    45. Conclusion: Archival Impulses

49. Figures

58. Bibliography

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Walid Raad, *The Missing Lebanese Wars, Notebook Volume 72* (Plate 132), 1989; colour photograph, 25 x 32 cm. Image from, http://theatlasgroup.org/data/TypeA.html (accessed March 29, 2012).

Figure 2. Walid Raad, *Secrets in the Open Sea* (plate 2), 1994; colour photograph, 110 x 183 cm. Image from http://theatlasgroup.org/data/TypeFD.html (accessed March 29, 2012).

Figure 3. Walid Raad, *My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair: A History of Car Bombs in the Lebanese Wars (1975-1991)_Volume 8*, 2003. Image from, http://theatlasgroup.org/data/TypeAGP.html (accessed March 29, 2012).

Figure 4. Walid Raad, *I was overcome with a momentary panic at the thought that I might be right*, 1998; mixed media. Images from http://theatlasgroup.org/data/TypeAGP.html (accessed March 29, 2012).

Figure 5. Walid Raad, *I was overcome with a momentary panic at the thought that I might be right*, 1998; mixed media. Images from http://theatlasgroup.org/data/TypeAGP.html (accessed March 29, 2012).

Figure 6. Walid Raad/The Atlas Group, still from *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)_#17 and 31*, 2001, single channel video, 16 minutes. Images captured from, http://theatlasgroup.org/data/TypeA.html (accessed March 12, 2012).

Figure 7. Walid Raad/The Atlas Group, still from *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)_#17 and 31*, 2001, single channel video, 16 minutes. Images captured from, http://theatlasgroup.org/data/TypeA.html (accessed March 12, 2012).

Figure 8. Walid Raad/The Atlas Group, still from *I Only Wish that I Could Weep*, 2002, single channel video, 5 minutes. Image from, http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/saltz/saltz2-14-06_detail.asp?picnum=4 (accessed March 12, 2012).

Figure 9. Walid Raad/The Atlas Group, stills from *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)_#17 and 31*, 2001, single channel video, 16 minutes. Images captured from, http://theatlasgroup.org/data/TypeA.html (accessed March 12, 2012).

Figure 10. Walid Raad/The Atlas Group, stills from *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)_#17 and 31*, 2001, single channel video, 16 minutes. Images captured from, http://theatlasgroup.org/data/TypeA.html (accessed March 12, 2012).

Figure 11. Walid Raad/The Atlas Group, still from *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)_#17 and 31*, 2001, single channel video, 16 minutes. Images captured from, http://theatlasgroup.org/data/TypeA.html (accessed March 12, 2012).

Figure 12. Walid Raad/The Atlas Group, still from *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)_#17 and 31*, 2001, single channel video, 16 minutes. Images captured from, http://theatlasgroup.org/data/TypeA.html (accessed March 12, 2012).

Figure 13. Associated Press, *Oliver North testifying at the Iran-Contra hearings in Washington, D.C.,* 1987. Image from Encyclopaedia Britannica, http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/418517/Oliver-North (accessed March 12, 2012).

Introduction

In the pages of the fall 2004 issue of *October*, art critic and historian Hal Foster declared a resurgence of interest in the archive in contemporary art. While Foster acknowledges that artists have long engaged with the archive – Dada, conceptual art, appropriation and institutional critique are examples – in "An Archival Impulse" he writes, "an archival impulse with a distinctive character of its own is again pervasive - enough so to be considered a tendency in its own right, and that much alone is welcome!"[1] Foster's point is well taken considering the proliferation of artists, exhibitions, conferences, and publications addressing the archive as a topic of aesthetic, political, philosophical, theoretical, and historical concern. In the years following the publication of his article, the interest in archives demonstrated by contemporary artists and theorists has continued, and indeed increased.[2]

This thesis examines the work of one contemporary artist working in an archival vein. The Atlas Group, a project by the Lebanese-born and New York-based artist Walid Raad, is an imaginary foundation established in Beirut in 1999 to research and document the contemporary history of Lebanon, with a focus on the years 1975 to 1991, which encompassed the Lebanese civil war. The Atlas Group structurally mimics or reproduces the logic of an archive. The materials in their archival *fonds* consist of photographs, films, videos, notebooks, sculptures, and texts.

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[1] Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 3.
[2] For example see Okwui Enwezor. *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*. New York: International Center of Photography, 2008.

The documents in the collection are classified into three categories. Type A are attributed to an identified individual, for example the series of 226 notebooks, twenty-four photographs, and two films purportedly bequeathed by the prominent Lebanese historian Fadl Fakhouri upon his death. According to The Atlas Group, every Sunday throughout the civil war, historians met at the racetrack. However, the historians wagered not on which horse would win the race, but rather on how many fractions of a second before or after the winning horse crossed the finish line the track photographer would snap his photo. The document *Missing Lebanese Wars, Notebook Volume 72* (fig. 1) is comprised of Dr. Fakhouri's documentation of these weekly wagers on the inadequacy of photographic documentation to capture an event. Type FD are found documents, presently consisting of the photographic series *Secrets in the Open Sea* (fig. 2). This series contains six photographic prints, each a different shade of blue, which were found buried under the rubble of Beirut's demolished commercial district in 1992. Laboratory analysis recovered a latent black and white portrait in each image, now displayed in thumbnail, picturing individuals who had been found dead in the Mediterranean Sea during the civil war years. Type AGP are documents attributed to The Atlas Group, such as the series *The Thin Neck File*, which uses video, photography and mixed media to record the foundation's ongoing investigation of each of the 245 car bombs detonated in Beirut between 1975 and 1991 (figs. 3-5).

All of the documents in the archive are accompanied by texts that establish their provenance; that is accounts of how they were produced and subsequently acquired by the foundation. All documents are, in fact, the creative product of Raad

himself, though this is not consistently acknowledged in their standard presentation. The collection is disseminated through exhibitions, publications, and lectures where Raad performs as a representative of the foundation discussing its activities and collections. In this way, Raad represents The Atlas Group in the persona of an artist named Walid Raad. Just as the documents slide between the fact of historical research and the imaginative of fiction, Walid Raad's artistic persona moves between these two registers. His persona allows him to activate the dialectic informing questions of how to produce a history adequate to a traumatic past.

The attention to and use of provenance in The Atlas Group demonstrates Walid Raad's knowledge of archival principles and practice. In part it is this nuanced approach to provenance that differentiates Raad's work from that of other contemporary artists working in an archival vein. In his text, Foster identifies three such artists: Tacita Dean, Sam Durant and Thomas Hirschhorn. In Foster's terms, archival artists are those whose work "not only draws on informal archives but produces them as well, and does so in a way that underscores the nature of all archival materials as found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private."[3] The artistic practices that Foster characterizes as archival, however, seem to me to share the methodologies not so much of the archivist, but of the historian. Whereas Raad maintains the principle of provenance (or imposes it fictionally) in his work, an artist like Hirschhorn, in sampling from the "archives of mass culture"[4] and recontextualizing those materials in the cosmology of an installation, simultaneously erases the original context in which that material appeared. Like a

[3] Foster, "An Archival Impulse," 5.
[4] Ibid., 4.

historian writing history from archival documents, the artists whom Foster discusses draw archival fragments into new constellations and interpretative arrangements, suggesting new historical connections and narratives. I would like to argue that Raad's approach with The Atlas Group, while interested in issues of historical narrative, is archival in a stricter sense of that term, for it preserves what Jacques Derrida refers to as the radical openness of the archive,[5] characterized by infinite possibilities for interpretation.

This thesis will examine, as a case study, one specific file from The Atlas Group Archive: File Type A, *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)_#17 and 31*. According to Walid Raad, Souheil Bachar approached The Atlas Group in 1999 after seeing Raad's presentation at the Ayloul Festival in Beirut.[6] Souheil Bachar, we are told, was kidnapped by Hezbollah in 1983 and held captive for 10 years. After a number of meetings they agreed to produce a series of 53 videotapes addressing Bachar's abduction and captivity experience in Beirut. The file documentation states that Bachar only makes tapes #17 and #31 available for viewing outside of Lebanon (fig. 6). These two tapes deal specifically with 27 weeks that Bachar spent sharing a cell with the Americans Terry Anderson, Thomas Sutherland, Benjamin Weir, Martin Jenco, and David Jacobsen (fig. 7), at the height of the episode known as the "Western hostage crisis."

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[5] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 68.
[6] Walid Raad, "Civilizationally, We do not Dig Holes to Bury Ourselves," in *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: Some Essays from The Atlas Group Project* (Köln: Walther König, 2007), 54.

In his persona as institutional representative, Walid Raad has consistently made two claims with regard to the documents in The Atlas Group Archive. First, addressing the viewing audience, he writes, "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."[7] Thus, Raad argues that the viewing audience should not consider the documents in the archive as part of the factual historical record; rather, we should think of them as the hysterical outbursts of a people wrestling with a yet unprocessed trauma. Secondly, he writes that the archival documents do not offer a record of what *actually* occurred during the Lebanese civil war, "Instead, they offer an image of what can be imagined, what can be said, what can be taken for granted, and what can appear as rational or not—as thinkable and sayable about the war and about the possibilities and limits of writing its history."[8] The archive, here, functions as an agent of the thinkable and sayable: of discourse.

This thesis considers Raad's two claims about The Atlas Group Archive, and is structured around what I see as an incompatibility between his two statements. The first statement implies that the archive is hysterical, hence outside of the symbolic order and the possibility of making meaning from the events of the civil war. His second statement suggests that The Atlas Group is about intelligibility and articulating, within language, previously unsayable experiences of the war. The first section of my thesis will consider Raad's first claim, and will ask: what does it mean

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[7] Walid Raad, "Missing Lebanese Wars," in *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: Some Essays from The Atlas Group Project* (Köln: Walther König, 2007), 18.
[8] Raad, "Missing Lebanese Wars," 18.

for a document to constitute a hysterical symptom? To answer this I will turn to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic conception of traumatic neurosis and hysteria. I will also consider Cathy Caruth's interpretation of Freud in the context of contemporary trauma theory, considering hysterical symptoms in relation to therapeutic acts of narration and witnessing in order to highlight the very different relations to language that these traumatic modalities entail. In this section I put forward the possibility that the documents in The Atlas Group Archive are not hysterical – not the persistent repetition of an initial traumatic experience – but are in fact engaged in the processes of testimony and symbolization that Caruth describes as central to healing.

In furtherance of this analysis, my next section turns its attention to Raad's second claim, in order to consider how The Atlas Group addresses specific issues of testimony and intelligibility in relation to the Lebanese civil war. Drawing on the ideas of Edward Said, I will consider how discourse is constituted, focusing particularly on the dominant Orientalist discourse of the Western hostage crisis. This section will look at how Raad's project challenges the limits of what is sayable within that dominant discourse, and how *The Bachar Tapes* not only tell a narrative that has been excluded from that discourse, but also establish a subject position from which that story can be articulated. Finally, I will discuss how the tapes constitute, in Jacques Rancière's terms, an act of subjectivization or an instance of politics proper.

In the third and final section I will bring the discussion back to the archive. In this section I will consider psychic trauma and discourse in their specific relation to

archival openness. My research began with a simple question: why, at this juncture in history, are so many artists interested in engaging with archives, and why are historians and critics interested in framing art works within an archival art discourse? In this section I will argue that artists are interested in archives because there is a growing consciousness that historical narratives are not a given, but rather something produced in part by an ongoing engagement with institutions like archives. Radical political upheavals of the past 30 years such as the end of apartheid in South Africa have brought to light the ways that those in power can instrumentalize archives to serve oppressive regimes. Such realizations make it no longer possible to believe in archival neutrality or in archives as passive institutions serving to preserve our past for the future. Theorists working both within and outside of the archival profession are increasingly recognizing archives as a terrain of historical, and therefore political, contestation. I will argue that Walid Raad's Atlas Group provides one model for how contemporary artists can draw on the archive as both metaphor and structure, to make work engaged with the politics of history.

THE HYSTERICAL SYMPTOM

When Walid Raad states that the documents in The Atlas Group Archive can be understood as "the hysterical symptoms of war," what does he mean? At the most basic level, Raad's claim functions as an assertion of the importance of exploring the psychical dimensions of reality when it comes to understanding violence, war and

trauma. This, for example, is the thrust of Raad's conversation with Silvia Kolbowski, in the A.R.T. Press series of interviews *Between Artists*. There, the artists discuss the lack of attention to the psyche in contemporary political theory because, in Kolbowski's words, "most despairingly – intellectuals feel embarrassed by looking at the psychical dimensions of national or group political and economic behavior."[9]

In her book on art and war, art historian Rosalyn Deutsche suggests that psychoanalysis may be the field to help make this necessary connection to understand "war as a specific social institution."[10] Turning to the psychoanalytic writings of Freud, Klein, and Lacan for an examination of how the unconscious processes and acts of group affiliation – along lines of racial, ethnic, and national identifications – allow people to turn internal fears and threats toward an external enemy, Deutsche writes that psychoanalysis "can help us understand the intimate connection between war and … psychic facts, which include our own aggressive impulses."[11]

Such psychical realities are rarely accounted for in the dominant narratives of conflict and war, which focus instead on individual events and overarching power structures. Yet living in a state of war, in a climate of daily violence, creates both ways of knowing and ways of doing. This is partially what The Atlas Group gives form to. The Lebanese civil war created a certain mode of being *in* and an embodied experience *of* Beirut, which Raad points to in the video document *I only wish that I*

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[9] Silvia Kolbowski and Walid Raad, *Between Artists* (Art Resources Transfer, 2006), 32-33.
[10]Rosalyn Deutsche, *Hiroshima After Iraq: Three Studies in Art and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 6. She borrows this phrase from Franco Fornari.
[11] Ibid., 5.

could weep (2002), from the Operator #17 file, document Type A. In contrast to The Bachar Tapes, operator #17's video document was submitted to the archive in its completed form and was not created in collaboration with The Atlas Group. I bring this document into the discussion because it addresses a different aspect of the war than The Bachar Tapes, and employs a mode of representation that is concerned with non-linguistic representation. The text at the beginning of the video states that the footage was shot by security camera operator #17, assigned to monitor post-war West Beirut's seaside walkway the Corniche, popular with walkers and joggers, as well as spies and double agents. Each evening operator #17 would turn his camera toward the sea to capture the setting sun. Growing up in East Beirut during the war years, operator #17 had always longed to see the setting sun from the Corniche, but was unable to because of the divided nature of the city along political, religious and physical lines.

What follows is the footage shot by the camera operator: grainy security camera images of the sun dipping below the ocean's horizon (fig. 8). In this video, the poetic yet benign footage of sunsets is reinvested with the emotive force of operator #17's experience during the war years. The piece adds another dimension to the consideration of war as a series of violent acts and occurrences. The video spatializes the war and points to how the conflict was (and still is) experienced by Beirut's residents as an embodied experience of urban space. The civil war redrew each citizen's map of Beirut into areas that were accessible and areas that were off limits. The war reconfigured how people moved through Beirut, how they experienced it, and their mental cartography of the city.

Wars thus create ways of being and ways of knowing. One of these modalities is that of being *haunted*. In the Lebanese artist and theorist Jalal Toufic's words, "It is too dangerous after a civil war or a war, which produce so much unfinished business, for there to be no ghosts both in reality (haunted houses) and in fiction."[12] Sociologist Avery F. Gordon has explored this problematic in her book *Ghostly Matters*. According to Gordon, the only two fields to have taken haunting seriously, the only two that articulate it and try to account for the experience, are fiction and psychoanalysis.[13] In both domains, she argues, haunting is a pathway by which traumatic experience can make itself present in the affective register. Such traumatic experience has also been taken up by the literary historian Cathy Caruth, who defines trauma as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena."[14] Trauma is manifested as ghosts, or, in the psychoanalytic language that Caruth prefers, hysterical symptoms.

To speak about hysteria is, of course, to resurrect the ghost of Sigmund Freud. Beginning in the 1890s and continuing throughout his career, Sigmund Freud wrote about hysteria, describing it as a symptom of traumatic neurosis. In Freud's model of traumatic neurosis the experience of a traumatic event bypasses the conscious mind and is stored in the unconscious. In this psychoanalytic model, the

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[12] Jalal Toufic, "Ruins," in *We Can Make the Rain but No One Came to Ask: Documents from the Atlas Group Archive* (Montreal: Leonard and Bina Ellen Gallery, 2006), 13.
[13] Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 27.
[14] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 11.

traumatic event that is not adequately incorporated – or in Freud's language, abreacted – into the conscious mind is repressed. The repression of trauma causes a bifurcation in the psyche of the patient who both experiences periods of normal life and moments of hysteria – neither state seemingly affecting nor being conscious of the other.[15] Traumatized subjects do not have direct access to the traumatic experience; they do not have the means to articulate that experience, and yet it is there. Traumas do not remain in the unconscious, but break through into the present through acts of hysteria and experiences of the uncanny.

The mode of hysteria is characterized by eruption; hysteric episodes erupt into the regular life of the patient. Because the event has not undergone abreaction– a process that Freud believed could be achieved through talk therapy – the hysteric experiences the trauma not as a memory situated in the past, but as an event and experience in the present.[16] In her book *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth describes trauma as an experience that "repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will."[17] Thus, the hysterical symptom not only interrupts the perceived reality of an individual, but is also a temporal disruption. Each hysterical outburst marks the reliving of the initial trauma as though it were happening again for the first time.

Hysteria, then, is the return of the repressed in its most primitive form and such a return dramatically marks Raad and Kolbowski's conversation in *Between Artists*, which took place primarily over email in the summer of 2006, while

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[15] Sigmund Freud, *Selected Papers on Hysteria and other Psychoneuroses*, trans. A.A. Brill (New York: Nervous and Mental Disease Publishing Co., 1920), 12.
[16] Freud, *Selected Papers on Hysteria*, 5.
[17] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 2.

Kolbowski was in the US and Raad was in Lebanon. Israel's bombing and invasion of Lebanon that summer overshadowed the conversation about their respective artistic practices. In an email to Kolbowski Raad observed, "The last time this happened, life in the city immediately returned to its hot-civil war logic," suggesting that the ways of being established through war may be forgotten during peace time, but do not go away. Part of what The Atlas Group project points to as a whole is the way that these things are always resting below the surface, ready to erupt and make themselves felt and known again.

Like many who have written about the Lebanese civil war, art critic Sarah Rogers observes that as a nation Lebanon has yet to deal with the trauma of the war: "Consuming the country for sixteen years, the shocking atrocities of the Lebanese civil wars, beginning in 1975, have rendered it one of those historical events considered too appallingly horrific to be remembered, represented or even named."[18] Rogers suggests that, in contemporary Lebanon, the civil war functions as a repressed memory, a traumatic event that has yet to be represented and articulated – a process that would signal steps toward healing. Walid Raad experienced these events first hand as a child and youth in Lebanon. To what extent, then, does his art perpetuate the traumatic return of the repressed? And is it possible that it may more accurately be considered not as a hysterical symptom, but as precisely its opposite: a moment in the process of recovery?

Cathy Caruth argues that symbolization is the key to processing trauma. In psychoanalysis, symbolization entails the traumatized subject telling the story of

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[18] Sarah Rogers, "Forging History, Performing Memory: Walid Ra'ad's *The Atlas Project*," *Parachute* 108 (2002): 68.

their experience and in doing so, externalizing the trauma by putting it into language. Extending this argument, art historian Griselda Pollock suggests that the symbolization of traumatic experience can be achieved not only through language, but also in artistic representation, employing Levi-Strauss' anthropological metaphor of "the raw and the cooked" to understand trauma. "The enigmatic core of trauma," she writes in her case study of Artemisia Gentileschi, "is the fact that a *raw* history inhabits the subject."[19] Following Caruth, Pollock posits that symbolic representation is the cooking agent or process that transforms events "into experience, memory and thus meaning."[20] Representation is the process that delivers events from their persistent and unconscious immediacy to memory situated temporally in the past.

The representation of trauma thus necessarily involves a departure from the original events, and in this departure a distancing. This departure often begins with testimony. Testimony, however, does not provide direct access to the trauma it describes; rather, "In the testimony of a trauma survivor, occurring only when some transformation has been begun, the analyst hears not the event but the survivor's incipient departure from its raw and overwhelming presence."[21] It is in the distancing from the rawness of original events that we find the ethical dilemma of representing trauma. Caruth perfectly describes this dilemma in her discussion of Alain Renais' film *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959). In the film, the central female character, an unnamed French woman, tells for the first time the story of the death

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[19] Griselda Pollock, "The Female Hero and the Making of a Feminist Canon," in *Differencing the Canon* (London: Routledge, 1999), 108.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.

of her German lover during the last days of the Second World War occupation of the town of Nevers. As soon as she has told her story she expresses a deep sense of having betrayed her former lover, "a betrayal in the forgetting imposed by the sight and understanding of a larger history."[22] While this forgetting of the immediate experience of the traumatic event and creation of distance through the exteriorization of the experience in representation is perceived by the French woman as a betrayal of her suffering, it is also a necessary part of processing trauma. Through this exteriorization the subject of a traumatic experience can situate the events within the continuous history of their life. Through the process of narrativizing trauma the subject can cook meaning and memory from raw experience.

In dealing with the kinds of knowledge that resist straightforward expression in language, The Atlas Group challenges the limits of representing traumatic experience. By characterizing his archive as a collection of hysterical symptoms, Raad seems to be encouraging the viewing audience to interpret the documents not as conscious articulations of previously repressed experiences of the war, but rather as part of the continuing repression of memories of violence, which can only be felt through the hysterical outburst. To consider The Atlas Group project as hysterical means understanding the narratives, experiences, and knowledge expressed by the project as part of a continued process of psychic bifurcation. If the documents are hysterical symptoms, then conceptually they must be incompatible with the conscious process of making narratives from the experiences of the civil war, and

[22] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 31.

consequently meaning from those experiences. In the following section I will argue that, as representations of unrepresented experiences of the Lebanese civil war, The Atlas Group Archive is not engaged in creating hysterical documents. Rather, Walid Raad is engaged in the processes of representation that allow the traumatic events of the war to be incorporated into a larger, evolving narrative history of contemporary Lebanon.

The Sayable and Thinkable

In Walid Raad's second claim about The Atlas Group Archive he asserts that the archive's documents "offer an image of what can be imagined, what can be said, what can be taken for granted, and what can appear as rational or not - as thinkable and sayable about the war and about the possibilities and limits of writing its history."[23] What Raad implies is that his archive is concerned with the limits of what can be articulated and understood within the historical and political discourse of the Lebanese civil war. *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes* provide an opportunity to examine how The Atlas Group intervenes in a particular aspect of the dominant discourse of the war. During the war years Lebanon was known to westerners, and particularly to Americans, as the site of the Western hostage crisis. As an event, the hostage crisis came to be known by the Western public through news coverage of the crisis itself, the Iran-contra affair and subsequent joint house and senate committee hearings into the scandal, and a series of memoirs published in the late-1980s and

[23] Raad, "Missing Lebanese Wars," 18.

early 1990s by the ex-hostages from the West, chronicling their captivity experience. These narrative representations constitute the discursive terrain that *The Bachar Tapes* work both with and against.

In his PhD dissertation, *Beirut… (à la folie)*, Walid Raad describes how, during the 1980s, images of westerners held captive in the Middle East occupied a primary spot on evening newscasts, and a central place in the imaginations of Americans.[24] Beginning in 1982, and continuing throughout the decade, the Shi'a militant group Hezbollah kidnapped and held captive in Lebanon 88 foreigners, 17 of them US nationals.[25] The hostages were journalists, clergymen, academics, military personnel, and diplomats, representing the full range of western foreigners operating in Beirut during that time period. The most prominent American hostages were the Associated Press journalist Terry Anderson, the Dean of Agriculture at the American University of Beirut Thomas Sutherland, the Reverend Benjamin Weir, Father Martin Jenco, and the director of the American University of Beirut's medical centre David Jacobsen. These five men spent much of their time in captivity sharing a ten by twelve foot room. Upon each man's release he published a memoir documenting his time in captivity in Beirut. With the release of Terry Anderson, the last American hostage, in 1991, the "Western hostage crisis" was declared over.

While the Western media and politicians characterized the hostage crisis as "Western," Hezbollah also kidnapped many Middle Eastern men – a fact mostly ignored by the West. The common practice was to hold Arab and Western men in

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[24] Walid Raad, "Beirut... (à la folie): A Cultural Analysis of the Abduction of Westerners in Lebanon in the 1980's" (PhD diss., University of Rochester, 1996), 103.
[25] Ibid., 130-31.

separate cells, with little contact between the two groups. An exception to this practice was the case of the captive Wadj Domani. Domani, an employee of the Kuwaiti embassy in Beirut, was kidnapped in 1985. In his memoir *Den of Lions*, Terry Anderson makes very brief mention of having shared a cell with Domani at one point in 1985.[26] The cursory treatment that Anderson gives to Domani, describing his presence primarily as the temporary irritation of "a pest" who "complains constantly,"[27] is surprising considering that Domani was the only Arab man that Anderson had contact with during his years in captivity, excepting his kidnappers and guards. After an unsuccessful attempt to locate Domani himself, Raad used him as the basis for the character of Souheil Bachar.

There is a fascinating and disturbing consistency in the ways that the Western hostages present their captivity experiences in their memoirs. In his testimony Bachar speaks about this commonality:

> After our release, each of the Americans wrote a book, and each book was published. In the 1990s five books, written by five men who were held in the same ten by twelve foot room, were 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 way. No doubt this is true, true not only of the experience of captivity, but of all experiences today.

Bachar's statement about the uniqueness of the captivity experience is tongue-in-cheek, for in fact, as he points out, each story is remarkably the same. Of course certain similarities are to be expected, considering that these men were writing about time spent together in a small, isolated space. It is expected that the

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[26] Terry Anderson, *Den of Lions* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1993), 100-102.
[27] Ibid., 101.

surface of each man's experience would overlap with his fellow captive's. Yet, of interest to my interpretation of *The Hostage Tapes*, are not the similarities in the events described by each Western hostage, but the consistencies in the ways that they each present their stories, structure them, interpret them, and the ways that they represent their Arab captors.

In his PhD dissertation, Walid Raad asserts that, in their memoirs, the Western hostages produce their identities as Westerners in contrast to Arab *otherness*. They construct themselves as Western, Christian, heterosexual men in opposition to the identities of their captors, who are described as base, stupid, naïve Muslims, and at least sexually ambiguous if not completely perverted. The perceived perversion consists primarily of suspicions that their captors are homosexual, and in their books "the hostages sexualize their captors, and insist on noting the marked distinction between Koranic teachings on sexuality and the captors' behavior."[28]

While these characterizations may at first seem to be based simply on first-hand experience and observation while in captivity, the portrayal of Arabs in the memoirs is consistent with Western representations of Arabs dating back centuries, as part of the well-established discourse that Edward Said calls Orientalism. It is therefore not a coincidence that these depictions overlap with the media representations of Arabs described by Said. He writes, "In films and television the Arab is associated either with lechery or bloodthirsty dishonesty. He appears as an oversexed degenerate, capable, it is true, of cleverly devious intrigues, but

[28] Raad, *Beirut… (à la folie)*, 239.

essentially sadistic, treacherous, low."[29] Whether consciously or not, Orientalism informs the way that the Western hostages represent their captors.

In its simplest description Orientalism is "institutional Western knowledge of the Orient."[30] Orientalism is a way of understanding, describing, and making intelligible the East, specifically the Middle East, for the West. The term designates a discourse, in the same sense that Michel Foucault uses that term. As Foucauldian discourse, Orientalism determines the kinds of statements that can be made about the Orient, and it is the through their iteration and reiteration that these statements gain their authority. Yet Orientalism is not primarily descriptive; as a discipline it doesn't seek to describe a real geographical place. Rather, Orientalist texts create the reality that they purport to describe.[31]

Orientalism is always comparative. The Orientalist does not attempt to understand the object of study on its own terms; instead, all analysis stems from comparisons between the Orient and the West. It is a way of accommodating newness by making it familiar.[32] The Orient is always presented in a symmetrical relation with Europe, but this symmetry is hierarchical, with Europe in a dominant position.[33] In the logic of Orientalism, the Orient becomes a poor imitation of European authenticity.

Central to the captivity narrative are the themes of personal hardship, overcoming, and subsequent personal and spiritual growth. Again we can compare

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[29] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Toronto: Vintage Books, 2002), 286-87.
[30] Ibid., 67.
[31] Ibid., 94.
[32] Ibid., 59.
[33] Ibid., 72.

this to Said's characterization of the Orientalist memoir exemplified by the eighteenth-century French writer Chateaubriand. "What matters about the Orient is what it lets happen to Chateaubriand, what it allows his spirit to do, what it permits him to reveal about himself, his ideas, his expectations."[34]

We cannot know what subjects the remaining (purported) 51 videotapes in the *Hostage* series address, but tape #17 centres on the sexual relations between the captives in their shared cell. Bachar describes his fellow captives as expressing simultaneous disgust and desire for the otherness of his Arab body. He states that the westerners were also obsessed with the sexuality of their guards, as a source of both repulsion and fascination. An interview between Walid Raad and Souheil Bachar appeared in the 2002 publication *Tamáss: Contemporary Arab Representations*.[35] In the interview Bachar says, "The threat of this desire for Arab men, emerges in the Lebanon captivity memoirs through the imagined scenarios of rape. The threat of the desire for other Western men is given expression in the loving and contentious relations among the westerners as it is recounted at length in the books."[36] In words that directly echo the arguments put forward in Raad's dissertation, Bachar states that in the memoirs, "this threat is ultimately contained through the literary contributions of the wives/girlfriends."[37] In his dissertation and through the character of Bachar, Raad argues that the passages written by wives/girlfriends in the memoirs do not only serve to distract from the

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[34] Ibid., 173.
[35] This interview was reprinted in Walid Raad, *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: Some Essays from The Atlas Group Project*. Koln: Walther König, 2007, pp. 53-67.
[36] Raad, "Civilizationally," 65.
[37] Ibid.

homosocial/homosexual environment of captivity, but that "the threat of male-male desire seems to be essential for the rehabilitation of the Westerners,"[38] who, having overcome the threats of emasculation in captivity, emerge as positively transformed men.

Raad argues that the presentation of captivity as a primarily personal and productive experience, an assessment that is applicable to all of the Western hostage memoirs, serves to depoliticize the kidnappings of westerners in Beirut, largely ignoring the greater social and political events that led to the Western hostage crisis. Thus, while the Western hostages present their captivity narratives as primarily personal and depoliticized experiences, their very attempt at depoliticization is political.

For Raad, the significance of the hostage memoirs is that they foreclose any analysis of the Western hostage crisis that might consider Hezbollah's political motivations for kidnapping and holding captive Western hostages. In framing their captivity primarily as a personal experience, the ex-hostages effectively erase the long history of Western intervention in Lebanon. They describe their guards not as having any genuine political motivations, but rather as being naïve extremists with an irrational hatred of the West. They describe them as men whose violent actions are natural expressions of a radical adherence to an essentialist Islam that has not changed since the Middle Ages. According to Said, in Orientalist discourse it is Islam that makes intelligible all the experiences of Islamic people.[39] Islam is the lens through which to understand the actions of Hezbollah, while the political grievances

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[38] Ibid.
[39] Said, *Orientalism*, 276.

that motivate such actions generally go unrecognized. The reliance on Islam to explain Middle Eastern global politics will be familiar to anyone who has followed the evolving discourse on the "war on terror." Mehdi Semati believes that while the contemporary figure of the "Islamic terrorist" was born in the Reagan era, the post-September 11th discourse "of Islam and Muslims is inextricably bound with issues of terrorism, which tends to frame all other issues concerning the Middle East." [40] The "you are with us or against us" binary logic of the "war on terror" shuts down any critical analysis of geopolitical realities as something akin to treason, instead applying to cultural explanations to explain geopolitical conflict. The contemporary resurgence of Islamophobia can be understood on the continuum of Orientalism as the emergence of a Neo-Orientalist discourse. The neo-Orientalist commentators argue that to understand the events of September 11th we must understand Islam, yet as Slavoj Žižek argues, "probing into cultural traditions is precisely not the way to grasp the political dynamics which led to the September 11 attacks."[41]

Raad and Bachar's 2002 interview in *Tamáss* is interesting not for any discussion about the specific narrative that Bachar tells in the videos – indeed there is no such discussion – but for rather what it reveals of Bachar's motivations for making the tapes. Here Bachar states that his main interest stemmed from a question about the Western hostage memoirs: "of all the ways the stories of captivity could have been written, why were they written this way?"[42] In his dissertation Raad describes the captivity memoir as a well-established literary

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[40] Mehdi Semati, "Islamophobia, Culture and Race in the Age of Empire," *Cultural Studies* 24 (March 2010): 259.
[41] Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, London: Verso, 2002, 34.
[42] Raad, "Civilizationally," 66.

genre, and perhaps the only genre native to North America.[43] Referring to captivity memoirs, from early accounts of European contact with indigenous people in America to stories of POWs in Vietnam, Raad observes, "particular themes and narrative structures have consistently shaped these narratives – themes and structures that have varied cultural, political, philosophical and literary meanings."[44]

In his interview with Raad, Bachar emerges as a character whose testimony was informed by a set of political concerns about the representation of captivity, and who made his testimony with the hope of raising particular questions through the contrasts between his story and the narratives in the American captivity memoirs. Where Bachar (and by extension Raad) argue that the Western hostage memoirs depoliticized the abductions through a focus on the personal and psychological aspects of captivity, Bachar's testimony is shaped by theory, politics, and history.

Near the beginning of *The Bachar Tapes* Souheil Bachar says the following in Arabic, with the English translation appearing in white subtitles against a black background:

> Please translate what I say in Arabic in the following video segments into the official language of the country where the tapes are screening: English for the US and UK, French for France, and Arabic for the Arab world, and so on. I also ask that you dub my voice with a neutral-toned female voice. Subtitle what I am currently saying. Let the subtitles appear on a black background, or if you prefer… use a blue background … blue just like the Mediterranean.

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[43] Raad, *Beirut… (à la folie)*, 133.
[44] Raad, "Civilizationally," 59.

Bachar's request that his words be dubbed in a monotone female voice can be interpreted in a number of ways. As previously discussed, Raad argues that the contributions of wives/girlfriends in the captivity memoirs serve to contain the threat of desire in the homosocial environment of captivity. The female voice over translating Bachar's speech can be read as a self-conscious parallel gesture serving to mitigate what the Western hostages perceived as the threat of the oversexualized Arab male.

While Sarah Rogers asserts that the gesture, "serves to distance the viewer's possible emotional identification in witness testimonies,"[45] I would argue that Raad employs the female voiceover not so much to distance the viewer from the content of the testimony, but to denaturalize the formula of testimonial itself. The female voice creates a disjuncture between the usually smooth, one to one relationship between the speaker and the translator; a relationship that mirrors the one to one, or in Walid Raad's words, "mimetic relation,"[46] that we expect between testimonial and experience.

The American woman's voice makes us aware that we are listening to an imperfect translation of Bachar's words and that in the translation the translator takes liberties following the conventions of their native tongue, sometimes sacrificing accuracy to avoid linguistic awkwardness. Furthermore, a speaker of both English and Arabic will be aware that at many points in the tapes there are discrepancies between Bachar's Arabic speech and the English voiceover, and at

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[45] Rogers, "Forging History," 75.
[46] Raad, *Beirut… (à la folie)*, 3.

times even outright contradictions.[47] In this way, *The Bachar Tapes* suggest that in performing testimony the witness is not articulating pure experience, but rather telling us a story based in part on the narrative conventions of testimonial. Indeed, it is questionable whether any witness *could* articulate any form of pure experience because one's awareness of how stories are told helps to structure the immediate understanding of experience.

The Bachar Tapes draw attention to the constructed nature of testimony by making evident the artifice of the tapes own production, or of the very fact that they have been produced. As Bachar dictates each particular technical specification for the tape, we see it enacted on the screen before us. For example, as he speaks the word "blue," the background behind the subtitles fades up to a bright, chroma-key blue (fig. 9.). The specificity of the videotapes as videotapes is built into the very structure of the piece. As we are made aware on the one hand of Bachar himself dictating the terms of the production of his testimony, we are also aware that he is dictating to a *someone* (presumably Walid Raad), a someone else behind the camera, a someone else in the editing suite, a someone else who has shaped the testimony in the final format that we are viewing. At their core *The Bachar Tapes* resist the naturalization of the video testimony form. If there is anything that the tapes make us constantly aware of, it is that narratives are not arbitrary, but are constructed and disseminated in particular historically constituted ways.

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[47] Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Make Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility," *October* 129 (Summer 2009): 76. Lambert-Beatty points particularly to the sexual encounter that Bachar describes between himself and an unnamed American. The roles of penetrator and penetrated, top and bottom, are different in each of the languages.

One of the central concerns of The Atlas Group project is thus the issue of representation, understood in terms of the ways in which we apprehend historical events. Raad asks, " 'How do we approach the facts of the war, not in their crude facticity, but 'through the complicated mediations by which facts acquire their immediacy?' How does one witness the passing of an extremely violent present?"[48] According to Rogers, "Raad's witnessing thus occurs on two levels: that of the event and of the event's representational reconstruction."[49]

In his interview with Raad, Bachar suggests that, in their memoirs, the Americans have failed in representing the captivity experience, yet, "in their failure they have revealed much to us about the possibilities and limits of representing the experience of captivity."[50] In the context of Orientalism, Said's contention is not that Western representations of the Orient are inaccurate or that they misrepresent a *true* Middle East, rather his theory asks, "whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything, or whether any and all representations, because they *are* representations, are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambiance of the representer."[51]

Representations within the televisual frame were central to the construction of the Western hostage crisis. Nightly news images of the hostage crisis varied from the counters tracking the remaining hostages and the number of days they had spent in captivity, to the passionate pleas of family members advocating for action on behalf of the government. With the release of each hostage came the almost

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[48] Raad, "Missing Lebanese Wars," 18.
[49] Rogers, "Forging History," 68.
[50] Raad, "Civilizationally," 136.
[51] Said, *Orientalism*, 272.

ritualized spectacle of flash bulbs, the weak but smiling liberated hostage shaking hands with dignitaries, and his tearful reunion with family and friends. Throughout the crisis there were the occasional videos, purchased from Hezbollah by American news agencies, showing the hostages in captivity.[52] These captivity videos showed the hostages, weak but still alive, reading prepared scripts pleading for the Reagan administration to negotiate with their captors in order to secure their releases.

Both tapes #17 and #31 address the captivity video in different ways. Both videos, while framed as separate works excerpted from a much larger collection, are always shown together in sequence, forming two aesthetically disparate pieces of a whole. Tape #17 is a testimony directed by Souheil Bachar, and yet in many ways it aesthetically resembles a forced captivity video. In the video Bachar is seated in a room in which all distinguishing details are hidden from the frame. We can hear distant traffic noises coming from outside, suggesting that the nondescript room is in an urban location. The backdrop changes, sometimes the white wall is bare, other times it is covered in a white or blue and white striped piece of cloth, haphazardly fastened in the corners with black electrical tape, and once he is shown closely cropped against a floral background (fig. 10). In his account Bachar discusses the common occurrence of being videotaped and photographed in captivity. He recalls that this was the only time that they were in the presence of their captors without blindfolds, but that "it's not as if we could see. We could not see because the video lights and the flash of the cameras they used blinded us." The technical quality of the

[52] Anderson, *Den of Lions*, 60.

tape also references forced captivity videos with the grainy low-quality image, technical glitches in image and sound, and the inclusion of periods of static.

Tape #31 marks a departure in structure and style from tape #17. In the short video, just over two minutes in duration, the screen is filled with an abstracted image that could be either static or the surface of the ocean (fig. 11). One senses that the image might come into focus at any moment, but it maintains this liminal quality, hovering in between waves of water and waves of static fuzz. Next we see a clear image of the sea with Bachar standing on the shore in the mid-distance (fig. 12). Subtitles, which seem to be in the voice of Bachar, state, "This is the average duration of all video statements I recorded during my captivity." This video is an equivalent to the videos that Bachar made in captivity - that he was *forced* to make in captivity. In tape #31 Bachar represents one traumatic aspect of the captivity experience without reproducing any of the tropes from those earlier videos. The correspondence is created not through visuality, but embodied in the experience of temporality and duration.

Orientalism, writes Edward Said, "asserts that the domination of reality by vision is no more than a will to power, a will to truth and interpretation, and not an objective of history."[53] To see is to have domination over, to define, and to control. Where the original captivity videos were about coerced exposure to the camera, clear display, the possession of the captive's body, and control over its appearance and representation, tape #31 is about obscurity. The image is not only somewhat abstract, but in resembling static it refers to the lack of image, and to the

[53] Said, *Orientalism*, 240.

interruption of the image's transmission. Where the original captivity videos are about an immediately accessible visible surface, Bachar's video is about a visual obscurity. In tape #31, Bachar employs a form of representation that challenges the Orientalist phenomenon of visibility, where Arabs *show* themselves to the West.[54]

The official narrative of the Western hostage crisis excludes the Arab hostage Domani – and by extension Bachar - and his testimony on many levels, starting at the most basic: the name by which that narrative has been designated. This raises a series of questions: How can we understand the position of an Arab hostage in the *Western hostage crisis*? Where does he speak from when the very name of the event renders him invisible? What does Bachar's testimony do to the discourse of the hostage crisis? How does it operate alongside, within, or against that established narrative?

In the critical literature on Raad's work, a common interpretation of Bachar's testimony is to understand his story as the interjection of a subaltern Arab voice into the dominant narrative of the hostage crisis. Sarah Rogers' analysis is in this vein. In "Forging History, Performing Memory," Rogers uses Foucault's notion of the "counter-narrative" to understand Bachar's position. In her interpretation, Bachar's is an "interventional testimony" that disrupts the discourse of the hostage crisis, and constructs a counter-narrative that exists alongside what the Western hostages have told us in their memoirs, and the narrative spun by the media.[55] Bachar's testimony serves to complicate the story and to add layers and richness to the single position from which we are used to hearing that story.

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[54] Ibid., 247.
[55] Rogers, "Forging History," 75.

Drawing on Vered Maimon's analysis in "The Third Citizen," I would like to contest the notion of Bachar's speech as simply the subaltern Arab's counternarrative, and instead argue that what Bachar does has far more radical consequences, both for the narrative of the Western hostage crisis and for the healing potential that altered narrative poses in the context of wartime trauma. Griselda Pollock addresses Artemisia Gentileschi's attempt to represent the trauma of rape using the legal and religious language of the seventeenth-century. She states that, "The metaphors were inappropriate to 'relieve' the woman, to give her the *jouissance* of allowing the pressure of traumatic injury to pass into discourse – to be put at a distance."[56] In Pollock's assessment, the discourse available to Gentileschi was inadequate represent her experience and to allow for the symbolic translation and distancing necessary for healing. Similarly, within the established discourse of the hostage crisis, Bachar cannot speak. This discourse has constructed the hostage-subject as a Western, Christian heterosexual, positioned in opposition to the Arabness, Islamicness, and pervertedness of their Lebanese captors. In such a context, Souheil Bachar's testimony is simply not intelligible. What he says and who he is while saying it are incompatible with the "Western hostage crisis" as such. In this way, dominant discourse effects an erasure that is tantamount to another traumatic episode, which compounds the initial trauma of war and captivity.

But of course Bachar's speech doesn't remain obscure and incomprehensible to viewers of the video. Bachar's testimony becomes intelligible because, in speaking, he creates the conditions of his own intelligibility. In his book *The*

[56] Pollock, "The Female Hero," 111.

Archaeology of Knowledge, Michel Foucault develops a methodology for analyzing discourse, which he identifies as the system determining the intelligibility of particular statements within a system of knowledge. Discourse, according to Foucault, is made of statements that share a particular modality of existence: a modality of existence that places the statement in relation to a field of knowledge and possible subject positions from which to speak.[57] For speech to have meaning, it must be governed by a particular discourse, however discourse is not fixed and changes over time. Jacques Rancière draws on Foucault's notion of discourse in formulating his concept of "the sensible," yet the sensible refers to all aspects of sensing and perceiving without privileging language as the primary carrier of meaning. Rancière explains this concept most comprehensively in his book *The Politics of Aesthetics*, in which the sensible is described as the system of divisions, boundaries and limitations that establishes what is visible and invisible, audible and inaudible, and therefore what can be perceived, known and articulated. In Rancière's terms, Souheil Bachar's speech erupts into the "distribution of the sensible" that constitutes the Western hostage crisis, and triggers a redistribution of that sensible.

A particular distribution of the sensible, and there are many that exist at the same time, determines not only what is intelligible but also who can speak and be recognized as a valid speaking subject. As Rancière writes, the sensible is "the delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, or speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of

[57] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge Classics, 2002.), 120.

experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak."[58] In the dominant discourse of the Western hostage crisis, Bachar is not a valid speaking subject. But when he speaks his testimony in Raad's video he not only demands that his speech be understood, but also claims the subject position of a valid speaker.

In this way, Rancière considers the disruption of the sensible to be an act of political subjectivization. Under the rubric of the Western hostage crisis Bachar is nameless, but, "those who have no name, who remain invisible and inaudible, can only penetrate the police order via a mode of *subjectivization* that transforms the aesthetic coordinates of the community by implementing the universal presupposition of politics: we are all equal."[59] For Rancière, the act of subjectivization that I am describing constitutes true politics and democracy. Rancière's democracy is not a political system or organizational structure, it is something that is produced through acts that create political subjects. Democracy exists through acts of political contestation. *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes* can be productively read as such an act of political contestation. The tapes are an instance of an act of political subjectivization, in which Raad creates the conditions – the speech and the subject position from which that speech can emerge – to radically alter the discourse of the Western hostage crisis. Therefore, Bachar's eruption into the sensible does not constitute an eruption of the hysterical symptom, as Raad has claimed. Rather, like the other documents in The Atlas Group Archive, *Hostage: The*

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[58] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2004), 13.
[59] Gabriel Rockhill in Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, 3.

Bachar Tapes represents the eruption of a new form of discursive symbolization. In this new discursive terrain, Raad is able to adequately represent previously unsayable, unthinkable, and unintelligible events and traumatic experiences, and engage in the process of healing from the Lebanese civil war.

The Archive

It remains to this analysis to take account of the particular structural frame of The Atlas Group. Why has Walid Raad employed the model of the archive to explore his concerns about the trauma of the Lebanese civil war? What is it about the archive, as a metaphor, a structure, a system, and an institution that makes it particularly suited to an inquiry into the political dimensions of memory and the processes of writing the history of a traumatic event?

The archive is, of course, an institution charged with the task of preserving memory, and the memory and history of Lebanon's civil war is still in the process of becoming. In fact, Emily Wroczynski argues that "without a definite start and end date for the Lebanese Civil War, the conflict is an incomprehensible and arguably ongoing catastrophe."[60] In his book *Archive Fever*, Jacques Derrida posits that the archive's relation to memory is not straightforward, suggesting that as an institution the archive is as much engaged with the processes forgetting as it is with remembering. Derrida quotes the Jewish religious scholar Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi: "'Memory is not an archive, nor is an archive a memory bank. The documents in an

[60] Emily Wroczynski, "Walid Raad and the Atlas Group: Mapping Catastrophe and the Architecture of Destruction," *Third Text* 113 (November 2011): 763.

archive are not part of memory; if they were, we should have no need to retrieve them; once retrieved, they are often at odds with memory.'"[61] Both Derrida and Yerushalmi further point to the contradiction between memory as a dynamic, changing, living experience, and the material of archives as physically static documents.

The drive to archive is to preserve documents from the past for future memory, but also it is to remove the burden of remembering from the individual. Derrida writes that, because of the exteriorization of memory in the archival document, the moment of archivization is different than that of spontaneous memory.[62] The archive carries the promise of preserving the past for the future but also potentially lifts the burden of responsibility to remember from the individual. Here we can find the parallel between the distancing from traumatic experience that we find in the representation of trauma, and the distancing from individual memory that we find in archival institutions.

There are also parallels between the organizational structure of the archive and the psychoanalytic model of the psyche. Provenance – also commonly referred to by archivists as original order or *respect des fonds* – is the central concept in modern archival organization. In his book *The Big Archive* Sven Spieker explains that according to the principle of provenance, which was first introduced in the German Privy State Archive in 1882, "files were to be arranged in strict accordance with the order in which they had accumulated in the place where they had

[61] Sven Spieker, *The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 4.
[62] Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 25.

originated *before* being transferred to the archive."[63] As an ordering principle, provenance differs from the conceptual and linguistic classification systems used by most libraries. The Dewey Decimal System, for example, arranges materials according to a numerical system that divides the entirety of human knowledge into ten classes ordered to represent the development of Western thought. Conceptually based classification systems are inherently, and transparently, ideological. In contrast to library classification models, Spieker writes that the modern archive is "oriented topographically rather than semantically, the archive arranged according to the PP [principle of provenance] collects not what exists in an extra-archival outside but what has already been collected, arranged, and organized *in another place*."[64] The archivist doesn't impose a conceptual arrangement onto the archive; rather the arrangement of the archive is almost cartographic, mapping the space and time of a *somewhere else* where and when the records were created and stored onto the space of the archive.

The principle of provenance serves two purposes. Firstly, maintaining the original order of documents allows researchers to not only interpret the content of single documents, but also to interpret meaning from relationships between documents that appear in context with each other. Secondly, arranging documents according to provenance also saves considerable time and intellectual labour on the part of archivists who are not required to engage with the detailed content of each individual record. Interestingly, the Society of American Archivists makes an exception to the rigid adherence to the principle of provenance in cases where the

[63] Spieker, *The Big Archive*, 17.
[64] Ibid.

archivist deems that the creator of a set of documents ordered them in a haphazard way, stating, "the principle of respect for original order does not extend to respect for original chaos."[65] Even within the supposedly neutral system of *respect des fonds* the archivist makes value judgments as to what is rational and irrational.

The fundamentally topographical nature of the archive arranged according to the principle of provenance gains another semiotic valence if, with Spieker, we recall that Freud's view of the psyche is also topographical.[66] "As an archive, the psychical apparatus is not a monolithic, unified site for storage but the interface between two distinct sets of data, one manifest and subject to observation, the other latent and visible only to the extent that it is imperceptibly woven into the first."[67] The link between these areas of the psyche is, for Derrida, the trace.[68] Like Spieker, Derrida suggests that the Freudian model of the psyche represents a model of the archive.[69] It is an archive that doesn't consist of indexes to events themselves, but surfaces bearing traces of those events. Just as psychoanalysis can access past events and traumas only through their effects on the psyche, so too the archive cannot offer access directly to the past but only to the traces that the past has left on materials still existent in the present.

Edward Said also employs an archival metaphor to explain the body of writings that constitute Orientalist discourse. The system of knowledge Said considers in describing Orientalism is European and American literature about the

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[65] Society of American Archivists, *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*, s.v. "original order" http://www.archivists.org/glossary/term_details.asp?DefinitionKey=69
[66] Spieker, *The Big Archive*, 36.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 11.
[69] Ibid., 64.

encounter with the idea of the Middle East. He writes that "altogether an internally structured archive is built up from the literature that belongs to these experiences."[70] Here he is following Foucault's use of archival metaphor to understand discourse. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault describes the archive as "first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events."[71] An archive, for Foucault, is not an accumulation of statements as such, but rather a structure that groups statements in, "distinct figures composed together in accordance with multiple relations maintained or blurred in accordance with specific regularities."[72] For Foucault, as for Said in his work on Orientalism, the archive is the relation of things said – and more, of things that are sayable – within a particular discourse.

As I have been arguing, the Western hostage memoirs constitute part of the Foucauldian archive of the Western hostage crisis. Walid Raad identifies another closely related part when, in the voice of Bachar, he states "that no event framed more publicly the abduction of westerners in Lebanon than the American scandal widely known as the Iran-contra affair."[73] A brief historical detour is in order here. Hezbollah, while operating in Lebanon during the 1980s, was based out of Iran and was supported financially and otherwise by the Iranian government. Therefore, when it came to the release of American hostages in Lebanon, it was with Iran that the Reagan administration negotiated. Their most notorious attempt was a covert arms-for-hostages deal, which came to public attention in 1986. While it is virtually

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[70] Said, *Orientalism*, 58.
[71] Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 45.
[72] Ibid., 146.
[73] Raad, "Civilizationally," 56.

impossible to definitively outline the events that constitute the Iran-contra affair (a point to which I will return in greater detail), the general outline is as follows. During the time that the affair unfolded, in 1985 and 1986, there was an embargo on supplying arms to Iran because it was considered to be a terrorist nation. With Israel acting as an intermediary, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the National Security Council (NSC) arranged to ship a series of Hawk anti-aircraft and TOW missiles to Iran in exchange for money and the release of American hostages. In a strange twist, the Reagan administration funneled a portion of the money from the arms deal to the contras seeking to overthrow the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, even though reports of human rights abuses committed by the contras had led congress to pass the Boland Amendment, which prohibited any further funding to the militant group. It should be noted that the covert arms-for-hostages deal did in fact lead to the release of the American hostages Benjamin Weir in 1985 as well as Martin Jenco and David Jacobsen in 1986.

In his dissertation, Walid Raad identifies three main events that brought Iran-contra to public awareness. First, on October 5, 1986, Sandinista soldiers shot down a small plane over southern Nicaragua. Under interrogation the sole survivor revealed that the plane's cargo consisted of an arms delivery for the contras, supplied by the CIA. Second, on November 3, 1986, a Lebanese magazine called *Al Shiraa* reported that in May of that year, National Security Adviser Robert "Bud" MacFarlane had taken a trip to Tehran, during which time he sold arms to Iran. Third, in November 1986, a memo was discovered in NSC staffer Marine Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North's office, which detailed the plan to divert funds from the Iran

arms sales to the contras. It was widely believed, though unproven, that President Reagan was not only aware of the arrangement, but had signed off on the deal.

As an event produced through, and for, the medium of television, the congressional hearings into the Iran-contra affair shed light on the archive in terms of the role that it played in the hearings, and the ways that archival equivocality shaped the unfolding narrative of the affair. The Iran-contra hearings were broadcast in their entirety in mid-1987. While both sides attempted to work the medium to their advantage, sociologists Michael Lynch and David Bogen suggest that Oliver North and his colleagues were most successful at exploiting the televisual frame. In his testimony, North and his team strategically activated a media space

> that makes creative use of a popular archive containing a diverse set of files, film clips, old scrapbooks, ethnic and regional stereotypes, and news clippings. Actors recite lines and pull citations reminiscent of the standard genre of courtroom drama, they draw from an open variety of available precedents and rehearsed repertoires, and they opportunistically insert disparate fragments into available discursive spaces to compose a pastiche of recognizable poses and speeches."[74]

To this end, North took on the persona of the all-American hero and maverick complete with swagger and direct quotations from John Wayne westerns (fig. 13). Again, these tactics directly addressed the televisual mode of the hearings' consumption and "the production of the hearings as sound bites that did not necessarily trace back to a coherent, determinate, and relatively stable structure of discourse."[75]

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[74] Michael Lynch and David Bogen. *The Spectacle of History: Speech, Text, and Memory at the Iran-contra Hearings* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 51.
[75] Ibid., 96.

As videos, *The Bachar Tapes* reference the televisual frame of the Iran-contra hearings. Just as North and his team sampled from the archive of popular culture, Walid Raad samples from the visual and aural material of the affair itself. In *The Bachar Tapes* an authoritative male voice with a British accent, reminiscent of the dispassionate voice of a newsreader, calmly reads a description of the abduction and captivity of Bachar and the westerners. As with Oliver North's rehearsed testimony, the voice is heard repeating at points throughout the video. Raad also borrows video imagery of North at the hearings, which he weaves throughout the video. The video that he appropriates, both of the Iran-contra hearings and the Western hostages, is technically reminiscent of VHS tapes from the 1980s, further situating *The Bachar Tapes* not in the media landscape of 2001, but of the Reagan years.

The Iran-contra hearings were concerned, primarily, with the archive in a number of ways. Visually, the piles of paperwork produced by government institutions played a key role in the televisual staging of the hearings, and spectators throughout were conscious of the transcribed verbal record that was being constituted throughout the process of the hearings. As much as Oliver North, National Security Advisor John Poindexter, and Bud McFarlane were the human actors in this courtroom drama, the paper archive itself came to play a role as a central character. Throughout North's cross-examination he and his legal team took considerable time consulting the paper archive, an activity that dulled the momentum for the prosecution, and made for boring television viewing for the audience at home.

Through its indeterminate outcome, Iran-contra stands as a powerful example of the impossibility of archival neutrality. The inability to pin down whether or not the President was fully aware of the arms for hostages deal, or to determine to what level he was complicit in the scandal, is representative of one of the most interesting aspects of the Iran-Contra affair. Despite five official government investigations and subsequent written reports, despite the nationally televised hearings it has remained impossible to produce a definitive chronology and authoritative narrative of the events that constituted the affair.

One of the central strategies used by the CIA and NSC to exploit the equivocal nature of archival documents was the internal record-keeping policy of "plausible deniability." Plausible deniability was designed for the CIA and officially prescribed as policy by Congress in the 1970s.[76] The term designates a collection of techniques used by an organization that predicts the possible future relevance of its actions and designs its documentation to facilitate denials and the production of multiple narratives should their activities come under scrutiny. Lynch and Bogen provide a succinct description of the policy:

> The term plausible deniability originated with intelligence agencies whose covert actions, together with the documentary evidence they produced, were designed to be equivocal. Such a design enabled the agents to deny involvement by using the self-same evidence to demonstrate the legitimate (or, at the very least, unremarkable) nature of their activities. The official investigation was complicated immeasurably by the acknowledged fact that many of the documents used by the committee for purposes of eliciting and verifying testimony were designed to enable deniability.[77]

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[76] Ibid., 63.
[77] Ibid., 10.

An interesting feature of plausible deniability is that it operates obscurely yet completely out in the open. In contrast to the Watergate hearings a decade earlier, which are the obvious cultural and political precedent to Iran-contra, Oliver North and his colleagues did not hide or deny their activities, which ranged from inventing chronologies and fabricating documents to shredding evidence. In fact in his testimony, Oliver North openly admitted that "rather than simply hiding their activities from scrutiny, he and his White House and CIA colleagues prospectively constructed a field of evidence to mislead future inquiries."[78]

As Lynch and Bogen write, "the public archive of the Iran-contra affair was itself shaped by the alleged covert activities it was being used to investigate and describe."[79] This is not unique to Iran-contra, and although plausible deniability presents a dramatic example of how documents reflect the institutions that produce them, all institutions have a certain sense of their historicity. Iran-contra points to the fact that historians working with archival records must engage in the double task of reading records for their historical information and also for traces of the "methods by which a historical record is constituted in the first place."[80]

The difficulties experienced by the investigators in pinning down a definitive narrative of events during the Iran-contra hearings speak more generally to the larger archival issues of extracting any definitive meaning from archival documents. The meaning of a document is, by nature, equivocal and open to change. In *Spectacle of History*, Lynch and Bogen argue that the committee's problems in writing an

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[78] Ibid., 21.
[79] Ibid., 10.
[80] Ibid., 61.

official history are related more broadly to the problems of writing any historical narrative when postmodernist thought has put the project of making 'master narratives' into question.

Iran-contra demonstrates that the meaning of archival documents is neither definitive nor transparent. The process that a historian must engage in, in order to interpret documents and from those interpretations build a narrative, is akin to producing literature. Walid Raad concurs that historical events, like wars, do not consist of self-evident facts and coherent objects, rather "the Lebanese civil war is constituted by and through various actions, situations, people, and accounts, some of which are manifest in this work."[81] In light of this claim, what is the role of fact and what is the role of fiction in The Atlas Group?

In the early years of The Atlas Group, Raad was ambiguous about the fictional nature of the project, although inconsistencies within the documents made the fiction apparent to the attentive viewer.[82] When I saw him perform a lecture at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in 2006 he was open about being the sole creator of the group's archival documents. In a 2010 interview with HG Masters, Raad said that the question of fact and fiction in relation to his project no longer interests him. He stated, "I work in fiction. Some things can only become manifest in fiction and nowhere else. These things also exist with rules and laws, notations of space and time. One hopes they are rigorous enough and that they hold up. The fiction-

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[81] Raad, "Missing Lebanese Wars," 18.
[82] For example in *The Bachar Tapes* the well-known Lebanese television actor Fabi Abi Samra plays the title role, making the fiction evident to anyone familiar with Arabic language television.

nonfiction issue is not interesting to me."[83] The Atlas Group Archive doesn't blur the lines between fact and fiction; rather, the project explores the role that the imaginary plays in the conception of any historical event. In Raad's words, The Atlas Group approaches the event of the Lebanese civil war "as an abstraction constituted by various discourses and … various modes of assimilating the data of the world."[84] As one of these modes, the historical narrative based on archival materials, is in large part a form of storytelling. Writing history is a process of selection, interpretation, and ordering from the raw material that archives provide. It consists of the telling of stories and the process of making meaning from those stories. History writing, like any other genre of storytelling, relies on particular narrative conventions that structure how stories unfold.

In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Jacques Rancière addresses the role of fiction in art and fiction in history. Rancière rejects the argument that all histories, by virtue of being narratives, can be considered fiction. This way of thinking maintains the opposition between conceptions of the real and the imaginary. Rather, Rancière says that we need to understand the ways that fictions, the telling of stories, rely on a particular mode of putting together signs (in language) in order to make the world intelligible. Cathy Caruth argues that the literary mode is particularly suited, or even necessary, to the articulation of traumatic history. She insists that trauma "must, indeed, also be spoken in a language that is always somehow literary: a language

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[83] H.G. Masters, "Walid Raad: Those Who Lack Imagination Cannot Imagine What is Lacking," *Art AsiaPacific* 65 (September/October 2009): 131-32.
[84] Raad, "Missing Lebanese Wars," 17.

that defies, even as it claims, our understanding."[85] The literary mode is capable of expressing trauma because "literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing."[86] It is this simultaneous knowing and not knowing that characterizes the archive. In all stories that come out of the archive, in every interpretation of a series of documents, there remains something unknown and untapped, and this unknown is what maintains the archive's inherent openness to new interpretations and new meanings in the future.

Conclusion: Archival Impulses

In her essay "Make Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility," Carrie Lambert-Beatty characterizes The Atlas Group as a "parafictional" project. In Lambert-Beatty's terms, parafictional projects are those that exist in the spaces between fact and fiction. They are projects that, while not technically being true, temporarily exist as truths for the viewer, based on their plausibility. The power of a parafiction is that, for a time, it can allow the viewer to believe that another world is possible.

Walid Raad's project, like those of his peers who also work in an archival vein, employs two seemingly conflicting systems of rationality, or economies of knowledge. On the one hand they work within the system of the archive, which deals in facticity. First, the truth-value (the primary value) of an archival document

[85] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 5.
[86] Ibid., 3.

is rooted in that document's indexical relation to true events and actual happenings. In fact, in archival theory archival documents must have a primary purpose – institutional, bureaucratic, and personal – which differs from its value as a historical record. The historical value is attached to the record once it enters the archive and takes on its secondary purpose. For archival purists, records that have been produced for posterity with their function as historical documents in mind, are excluded from the archive. The ideal of primary purpose exists to ensure a (impossible) level of neutrality in the records themselves. Records are an index of an action or event, and not an index of how one wanted them to be remembered.

The second economy that archival art projects deal in is that of art – the privileged realm of artifice. On the whole we accept that artists "take liberties" or employ "artistic license," and are not ethically bound, as is the journalist or documentary filmmaker, to tell the truth. This is because as Jacques Rancière points out, art does not deal in truth and lies, but rather *fictions*.[87]

In her essay, Lambert-Beatty discusses the double bind that enmeshes artists when it comes to truth, fiction, and the power of art to affect political and social realms outside of the scope of artistic discourse. She argues that while it is the artist's privilege to work from the imaginary to push boundaries and potentially imagine a different political order, the work is accepted, or receives little push back or resistance from those in power because it is "just art." When it comes to artistic methodologies, "You can speculate, make up facts, blend different types of facts, or

[87] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 35.

even lie in art because it is understood as a fundamentally frivolous zone."[88] Lambert-Beatty is essentially saying that the freedom that gives art its power to propose a different reality also cuts it off at the knees through the dismissal of art's potential to threaten the social and political order.

The Atlas Group Archive, while a contemporary art project, does not exist in a fundamentally frivolous zone. In this thesis I have argued that Walid Raad is engaged in the process of questioning the limits of what is intelligible in relation to the trauma of the Lebanese civil war. The Atlas Group operates at the intersection between trauma, memory, and the politics of historical representation. The project stands as an example of the artistic possibilities for articulating and representing traumatic experience, which is a necessary part of healing from the trauma of war.

In my analysis I have maintained that *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes* can be understood as not only addressing the politics inherent in the dominant discourse of the Western hostage crisis, but also in changing the very coordinates of that discourse. Bachar's speech tells us a different story while simultaneously claiming his validity as a speaking subject. In accordance with Rancière's theory of the distribution of the sensible, *The Bachar Tapes* can be understood as an act of political subjectivization; an act that is properly political in and of itself. My claim is that The Atlas Group is an example of the potential of archival engagement for contemporary artists interested in how historical narratives are constituted. This is particularly relevant in the context of Lebanon where there is a "lack of collectively agreed upon narratives of the nation's or community's past and [a] dearth of

[88] Lambert-Beatty, "Make Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility," *October* 129 (Summer 2009): 80.

institutions of communal remembrance."[89] Furthermore, the project provides an example of a specifically *archival* engagement with politics; that is a politics that deals with discourse at its constitutive roots.

The stories that we tell each other about others and ourselves shape our understanding of where we have come from and where we are going. Now entering the second decade of the twentieth-century, a century marked already by continuing violence and an increasingly divisive geopolitical discourse, we need artists to shed light on our contemporary experiences. We need artists to continue to question the limits of intelligibility, of what is sayable and thinkable, in relation to our unfolding histories.

[89] Michelle L. Woodward, "Creating Memory and History," *Photographies* (March 2009): 22-23.

FIGURES

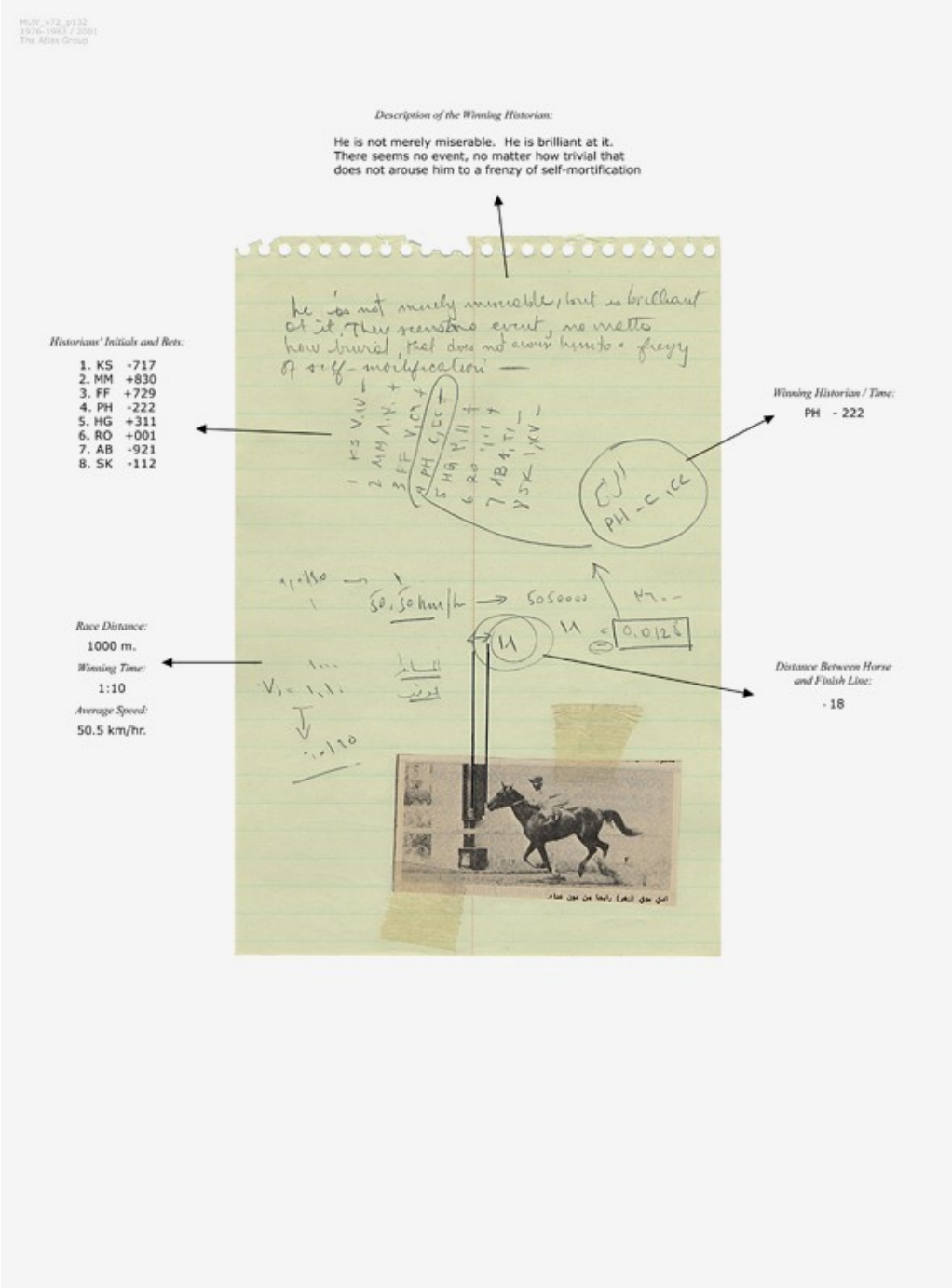

Figure 1. Walid Raad, *The Missing Lebanese Wars, Notebook Volume 72* (Plate 132), 1989; colour photograph, 25 x 32 cm. Image from, http://theatlasgroup.org/data/TypeA.html (accessed March 29, 2012).

Figure 2. Walid Raad, *Secrets in the Open Sea* (plate 2), 1994; colour photograph, 110 x 183 cm. Image from http://theatlasgroup.org/data/TypeFD.html (accessed March 29, 2012).

Figure 3. Walid Raad, *My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair: A History of Car Bombs in the Lebanese Wars (1975-1991)_Volume 8*, 2003. Image from, http://theatlasgroup.org/data/TypeAGP.html (accessed March 29, 2012).

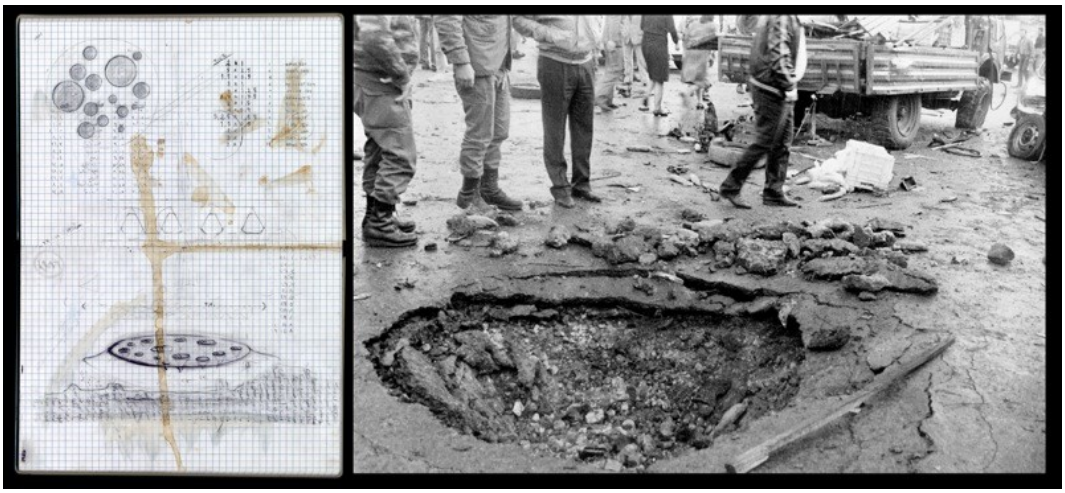

Figure 4. Walid Raad, *I was overcome with a momentary panic at the thought that I might be right*, 1998; mixed media. Images from http://theatlasgroup.org/data/TypeAGP.html (accessed March 29, 2012).

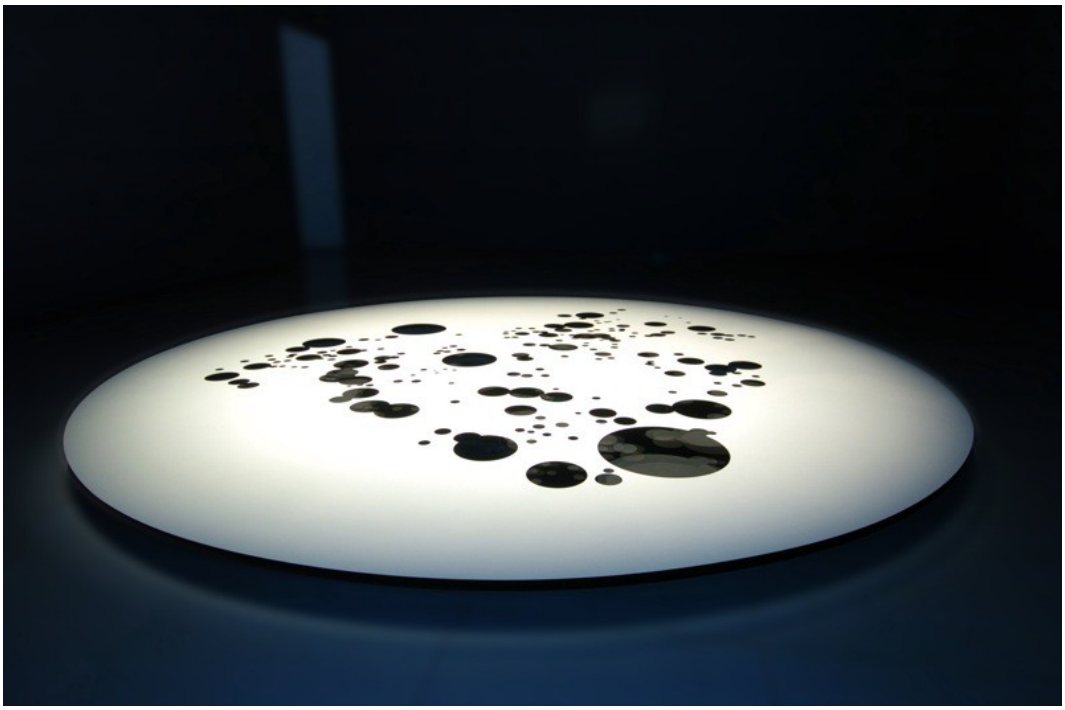

Figure 5. Walid Raad, *I was overcome with a momentary panic at the thought that I might be right*, 1998; mixed media. Images from http://theatlasgroup.org/data/TypeAGP.html (accessed March 29, 2012).

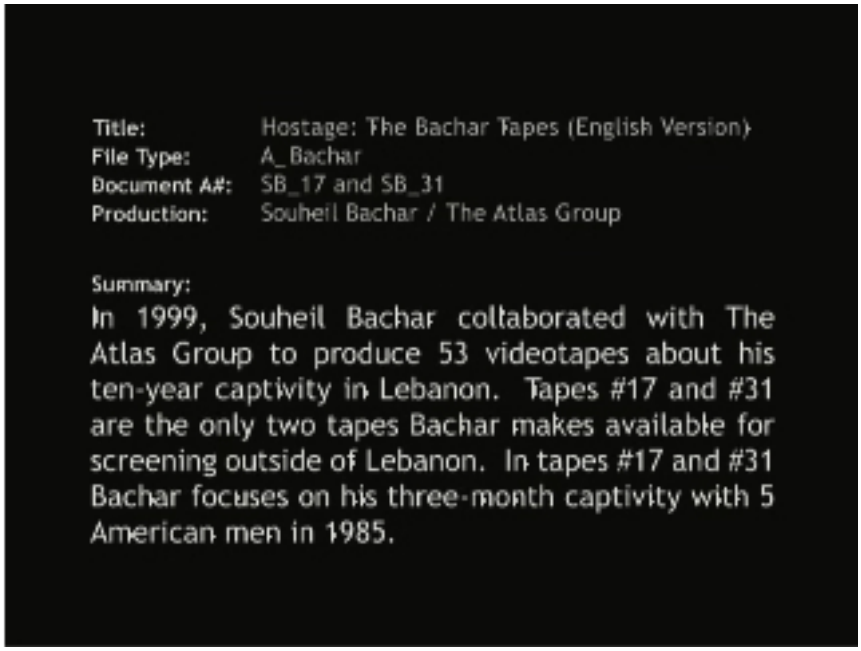

Figure 6. Walid Raad, still from *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)_#17 and 31*, 2001, single channel video, 16 minutes. Images captured from, http://theatlasgroup.org/data/TypeA.html (accessed March 12, 2012).

Figure 7. Walid Raad, still from *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)_#17 and 31*, 2001, single channel video, 16 minutes. Images captured from, http://theatlasgroup.org/data/TypeA.html (accessed March 12, 2012).

Figure 8. Walid Raad, still from *I Only Wish that I Could Weep*, 2002, single channel video, 5 minutes. Image from, http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/saltz/saltz2-14-06_detail.asp?picnum=4 (accessed March 12, 2012).

Figure 9. Walid Raad, stills from *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)_#17 and 31*, 2001, single channel video, 16 minutes. Images captured from, http://theatlasgroup.org/data/TypeA.html (accessed March 12, 2012).

Figure 10. Walid Raad, stills from *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)_#17 and 31*, 2001, single channel video, 16 minutes. Images captured from, http://theatlasgroup.org/data/TypeA.html (accessed March 12, 2012).

Figure 11. Walid Raad, still from *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)_#17 and 31*, 2001, single channel video, 16 minutes. Images captured from, http://theatlasgroup.org/data/TypeA.html (accessed March 12, 2012).

Figure 12. Walid Raad, still from *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)_#17 and 31*, 2001, single channel video, 16 minutes. Images captured from, http://theatlasgroup.org/data/TypeA.html (accessed March 12, 2012).

Figure 13. Associated Press, *Oliver North testifying at the Iran-Contra hearings in Washington, D.C.,* 1987. Image from Encyclopaedia Britannica, http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/418517/Oliver-North (accessed March 12, 2012).

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