Walid Raad/The Atlas Group: the art of 'truth'

>   For the final promise of redemption from the bureaucratic, regulated field of politics was being made by an aesthetic fiction, namely the work of art. An entity defined precisely by not being true was   supposed to rescue history.
>   - Brett R. Wheeler[1]

>   […] The diasporan artist learns that reality is an artefact, in that it does not exist until it is made and like any other artefact it can be made well or badly, and it can also, of course, be unmade.
>   - Neery Melkonian[2]

Lebanese-born multi-media artist and academic Walid Raad, and the art practice he conducts via his fictional foundation The Atlas Group, has attracted notable interest in the last decade or so. [3] However, readings of his work generally focus on theories of the archive or the atlas, or relate it to 20th century Conceptual Art or the field of documentary aesthetic. It is this writer's charge that what is mostly avoided is an *in depth* exploration of the ways in which his 'documents' and performances are designed to enable a very particular kind of political inquiry informed by, and building upon, the lingering effects of 20th century cultural, social and political discourses and policies.[4]

Most recently, writers such as Vered Maimon have espoused a moving beyond the 'exhausted problem of the "politics of representation",' and looking at Raad's works as 'more than displaying a "clash of civilizations".'[5] These are valid propositions, and demonstrate a rightful desire for forms of critique to evolve. However, it is necessary to be mindful of premature dismissals, especially when much evidence supports the continuance, or unresolved

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[1] Brett R. Wheeler. "Modernist Reenchantments II: From Aestheticised Politics to the Artwork". *The German Quarterly* 75:2 (2002), 115.
[2] Neery Melkonian. "Between Heaven & Hell: Contemporary Art from the Middle Eastern Diaspora". http:www.aljadid.com/art/0319melkonian.html, accessed on 16/04/2008.
[3] See for example Kassandra Nakas, and Britta Schmitz eds. *The Atlas Group (1989-2004) – A Project by Walid Raad.* Berlin: Nationalgalerie im Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart, 2006; André Lepecki. "In the Midst of the Event: Performance and the Activation of Memory in The Atlas Group Archive". *The Atlas Group (1989-2004) – A Project by Walid Raad*, 22 September 2006 – 7 January 2007, Nationalgalerie im Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin; Pamela M. Lee "My Enemy/My Friend". *Grey Room* 24 (2006), 100-109; Rogers, Sarah. "Out of History: postwar Art in Beirut". *Art Journal* (2007), 8-20; Janet A. Kaplan. "Flirtations with Evidence". *October* (2004), 134-169.
[4] I see Raad's work being informed by the knowledge that 'the past,' as Fred Halliday explains, 'provides a reserve of reference and symbol for the present'which is why it needs to be consulted even while it will never exhaustively *explain* the present. Fred Halliday. "'Islamophobia' reconsidered". *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22:5 (1999), 895.
[5] Vered Maimon. "The Third Citizen: On Models of Criticality in Contemporary Artistic Practices*." *October* 129 Summer (2009): 99 and 102.

state, of certain epistemological modalities.[6] This present reading of Raad's The Atlas Group and the work *The Missing Lebanese Wars* (1998) signals to his practice's relationship to these unresolved tensions, and is aware of the need to preclude the impatient *de*politicisation of art theoretical critique.[7]

In the guise of The Atlas Group, Walid Raad's art practice performs an idiosyncratic critique of the historical and lingering discourses of Orientalism, and the polemic of Samuel P. Huntington's *The Clash of Civilisations.*[8] These paradigms and the politics of postcolonial representation as they pertain to the East-West[9] disconnect, have directly impacted on the context, production, reception and even the manifest form of The Atlas Group's documents.[10]

Although concerned with the specifics of a complex and turbulent set of historical and continuing socio-political relations in Lebanon, Raad's work does not – indeed, does not aspire to – escape the dominant narrative in which the grounds for recognition are still predominantly produced by the agents and machinations Western discourses. Although Raad's immediate visual and conceptual reference is always to the 'Lebanese Civil War of 1975-1990', what one

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[6] The recent writings of Amir Saeed, Fawaz Gerges and Tariq Modood seem to confirm that an 'ever-increasing body of research has argued that on the balance of images, representations and discourses relating to Islam/Muslims in mainstream Western media tend to be negative and hostile.' Poole & Richardson in Amir Saeed. "Media, Racism and Islamophobia: The Representation of Islam and Muslims in the Media". *Sociology Compass* 1:2 (2007), 444; The notion of the Orient as ontologically distinct from the West is being exaggerated by certain Western media, probably to the end where Bulliet predicts that 'We at some point are going to reach a threshold where people no longer need evidence to believe in a generic terrorist threat from religious Muslim fanatics.' Bulliet in Fawaz A. Gerges, "Islam and Muslims in the Mind of America". *America and Political Islam: Clash of Cultures or Clash of Interests?".* Cambridge, New York&Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 46.

[7] Raad has expressed in interviews the recurring occurrence of Euro-American audiences tending to lean away from the specifics of the politics and take umbrage with the superficial, formal, aspects of the work. According to Raad, this tendency is largely explained by the fact that in the US: 'There is very little knowledge outside of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. So the specificity of Lebanon as a historical, geographical space is automatically lost.' He has observed a trend for these audiences to avoid discussing the geo-politics of the Lebanese Civil War, or broader political contexts and dimensions. John Menick. "Imagined Testimonies: an interview with Walid Ra'ad." http://www.johnmenick.com/writing/imagined-testimonies-an-interview-with-walid-raad, accessed on08/09/2010.

[8] As Tony Chakar comments, this 'web of ideas,' is a 'direct descendent of old Orientalist discourse that *doesn't seem to subside*'. [emphasis added]; Tony Chakar. "Critical thoughts". http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/islamic_world/articles/2003/chakar, accessed on 26/03/2008. The prerogative taken in the present discussion is to situate the ontology of Raad's practice somewhere within the continuum extending to the present of the ideas, influences and impacts reverberating from the late Palestinian scholar Edward Said's 1978 articulation of Orientalism. *The Clash of Civilisations* theory proposed by US academic Samuel P. Huntington is a polarising but widely recognised and evoked socio-cultural polemic that has affected lasting damage on the way the West and Middle East view each other.

[9] Politicisation of knowledge begins with naming. Such crude names as 'East', 'Orient', and the 'West' are reluctantly relied upon in this article. In order to move past the use of 'scare-quotes' the West is intended to refer to people and places associated with Euro-American 'civilisations' and the terms 'East', 'Middle East' and 'Arab/Muslim world' signal to the geo-political area of the *mashriq.* Lynn Hunt, and Thomas R. Martin, Barbara H. Rosenwein, R. Po-chia Hsia, and Bonnie G. Smith eds. *The Making of the West – Peoples and Cultures, A Concise History.* Boston & New York: Bedfrod/St.Martin's, 2007, vii; and Sandra Mackey. *A Mirror of the Arab World – Lebanon in Conflict.* New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008, 3

[10] I interpret Raad's practice as existing in dialectical relationship to the discursive fields created by these influential theories. The commingling of these very prominent and philosophically very divergent theories consummates a discursive field that then allows us to conceive of specific politics of postcolonialism vis-à-vis the Euro-American West and an Arab/Muslim world. This is a politics which I propose is best expressed as an exchange of a 'troubled mutual gaze'

uncovers is a much wider commenting on the possibility, indeed likelihood, that knowledge, as it pertains to the Western and Arab/Muslim worlds' understanding of each other, is corrupted. For the most part history is still written by the West according to its logics, and the full implications for the rest of the world of this privileged historiographic position become clear when we consider Andre Lepecki's suggestion that 'historiography is the primary discursive tool behind any desire to ideologically control current political discourse and actions […]'[11] The suggestion here is that the antagonistic dynamics informing and discursively constituting contemporary relations between the West and the Middle East signal to a discursive field that is experiencing a crisis in truth, knowledge, representation and historiography.

It is this crisis that Raad analyses and critiques via his idiosyncratic aesthetic practice that takes to form of The Atlas Group. The material outcome of this practice is the production of particularly anti-monumental objects, which are intended to *recreate* the conditions of this crisis within the viewer, to induce an acute experience of the loss of the notion of settled truths or a common/coherent knowledge of the world. The Atlas Group can be seen as a 'game' devised to involve the audience in an infernal, and ultimately futile, search for some clear distinction between fact and fiction, truth and make-believe. Raad professes to having always considered the binary between fact and fiction to be a false one,[12] so it is patent that the internal logic of this game seeks a radical reconceptualisation of the perceived absolute importance of being able to differentiate between the two.   It is not so much 'what' The Atlas Group and the documents in its archives 'are', but rather 'how' they 'act' to mobilise and enable effects, and make possible critiques of certain phenomena.

The layers and forms of criticism, then, which Raad wields through The Atlas Group are not, despite his manifesto, restricted only to a critique of cultural-political history and discourse specific to Lebanon. Clarifying why the choice of Lebanon is astute and poignant for critiquing broader effects, Hannah Feldman and Akram Zaatari's assert that 'the specifics of Lebanese history and cultural production,' are representative in significant ways 'of the contradictions and divisions' of the region, reflecting a 'certain locality within a particular history of war and violence,' but in 'an explicitly internationalist idiom'.[13] When asked to comment on the apparent homology between 'the age of terror' and the art works to come out of The Atlas Group project,

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[11] André Lepecki. "After All, This Terror Was Not Without Reason. Unfiled Notes on the Atlas Group Archive". *TDR: The Drama Review* 50:3 (2006), 94.

[12] Walid Raad quoted in Wolf Jahn. "Atlas Group/Walid Raad". *Artforum* (Summer 2004), 261.

[13] Feldman & Zaatari. "Mining War: Fragments from a Conversation Already Passed". op.cit:50.

Raad proposes that 'Why wouldn't you ask somebody from Lebanon about these experiences? We've lived through so many of these events, we can prefigure some of the possible scenarios'.[14]

For Raad, the choice to single out the Lebanese wars of 1975-1990 as a critical 'site' from which to speak to and of other 'locations' resonates in a statement Jayce Salloum made about new Arab video in 2004: 'they speak from specific histories to non-specific locations […] Look closely – there is a locating, a siting [sic] taking place that is firmly rooted within a problematised field'.[15] Raad has clearly chosen to employ the specifics of Lebanon's history to expose and explore broader self-other interactions arising out of such contemporary interactions as 'the age of terror' or the troubled mutual gaze.[16] It is this multi-sited and oscillating topography over which Raad's critiques traverse.

On presence and absence of 'truth'

> The story one tells oneself and that captures one's attention and belief may have nothing to do with what happened in the past, but that's the story that seems to matter in the present and for the future.
> - Walid Raad[17]

It is not without reason that The Atlas Group's documents are often discussed in terms of being 'cerebral to a fault'.[18] In her article *Flirtations with Evidence* (2004) Janet A. Kaplan recounts the frequent incidence of audience annoyance at Raad's 'highly believable' lectures. Complaints of betrayal at learning of the fictional nature of The Atlas Group archives and most of its material are also common.[19] The sense of perfidy related by Kaplan is in keeping with

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[14] Amei Wallach. "The Fine Art of Car Bombing". *New York Times* June 20 (2004). http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C03E1DD1E30F933A15755C0A9629C8B63, accessed on 20/06/2008.

[15] Salloum. "in/tangible cartographies, new arab video". op.cit:31.

[16] Appropriated and expanded, this wording has been derived from Middle Eastern studies scholar Sherifa Zuhur's writings. Sherifa Zuhur. "Arab Culture" in Wim Melis (ed.) *Nazar: Photographs from the Arab World* Groningen: Stichting Aurora Borealis/Noorderlicht, 2004, 24. Zuhur suggests that the troubled mutual gaze is the image economy – the ethno-political polarisation and xenophobic cultural effects – via which the West and Arab/Muslim people imagine, image and speak of each other. Similarly, Negar Azimi has argued that this relational aesthetic is defined by the complicity of distinct power relations in formulating prevailing visual constructions that ultimately influence and define collective views. Negar Azimi. "Arab Photography". in Wim Melis ed. *Nazar: Photographs from the Arab World* Groningen: Stichting Aurora Borealis/Noorderlicht, 2004, 11.

[17] Kassandra Nakas. "Double Miss. On the Use of Photography in The Atlas Group Archive". *The Atlas Group (1989-2004) – A Project by Walid Raad*, 22 September 2006 – 7 January 2007, Nationalgalerie im Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin; exhibition curators Kassandra Nakas, Walid Raad and Britta Schmitz; catalogue published by Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Köln, 2006, 52.

[18] Isabelle Dupuis. "Walid Raad/The Atlas Group". *Flash Art* 39 (2006), 124.

[19] Kaplan. "Flirtations with Evidence". op.cit:136.

André Lepecki's notion of the recurring 'misfiling' that occurs when a viewer is confronted with the aporia of documentary 'evidence' and an earnest admission of lying.[20] This misfiling drives the blurring of boundaries between fiction and reality, a dichotomy Raad contends has always been a false one.[21] Britta Schmitz suggests that if in historical writing there is always a clear line separating truth from falsehood, Raad unequivocally sides with the possibilities of fiction where 'everything is at once untrue and truer than truth itself.'[22] Echoing one of the main ideas in Said's polemic, the realisation that The Atlas Group and its objects of knowledge are fake despite their convincing authenticity forces us to think that all knowledge may be, and probably is, contaminated.

Dealing with untruths is something Neery Melkonian perceives to be an essential part of contemporary Middle Eastern Diasporic aesthetics. It is an aesthetics that denies everybody the 'comfort of settled "truths" '.[23] Raad is not the only artist accused of subterfuge vis-à-vis the Middle East and representation. Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami insists that 'by fabricating lies we may never reach the fundamental truth, but we will always be on our way to it. We can never get close to the truth except through lying'.[24] Considering Michèle Cohen Hadria's suggestion that Western media mirrors the aggravated conflicts of the Middle East in an uneven, judgemental and mystifying manner, and promotes a 'low' version of an Orientalist literature,[25] it is not inconceivable that contemporary Middle Eastern artists would then be preoccupied with a 'reassessment of the role and place of documentary evidence in the construction of historical truth'.[26]

> Lepecki, who has written extensively on The Atlas Group's material explains:
> The Atlas Group is openly engaged in a sort of fakery of history,   namely in manufacturing "documents" after the fact […] all of the artwork is displayed as being contemporaneous and directly related to very real, and very painful, and very violent, events in Lebanon between the mid seventies and the early nineties.[27]

An open secret, a hiding in plain view, informs the narrative of The Atlas Group project. Raad is open about the 'fictitious', 'imaginary', 'produced' and 'attributed' nature of his work.

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[20] Lepecki. "After All, This Terror Was Not Without Reason. Unfiled Notes on the Atlas Group Archive". op.cit:93-94.
[21] Walid Raad quoted in Wolf Jahn. "Atlas Group/Walid Raad". *Artforum* (Summer 2004), 261.
[22] Schmitz. "Not a Search for Truth". op.cit:42.
[23] Melkonian. "Between Heaven & Hell: Contemporary Art from the Middle Eastern Diaspora". op.cit.
[24] Abbas Kiarostami in Melkonian. "Between Heaven & Hell: Contemporary Art from the Middle Eastern Diaspora". op.cit.
[25] Cohen Hadria. "Nothing new under the Western sun". op.cit:34.
[26] Feldman & Zaatari. "Mining War: Fragments from a Conversation Already Passed". op.cit:51.
[27] Lepecki. "In the Midst of the Event: Performance and the Activation of Memory in The Atlas Group Archive". op.cit.:62.

Kaplan and Lepecki confirm that Raad always introduces the project with the emphatic disclaimer 'I […] always mention in exhibitions and lectures that the Atlas Group documents are ones that I produced and that I attribute to various imaginary individuals.'[28] He also explains about the The Atlas Group that: 'It is a foundation in that it imagines the structure of a foundation […] So the idea is, let's call it a foundation and if we imagine it enough and work on it maybe it will become an actual think tank with collaborators and a building'.[29]

The Atlas Group project is grossly misconstrued if it is discounted or dismissed on the basis of its 'fakery'. Rather, the turn to invention is a considered attempt to avoid contributing to an image economy that has trapped representation in a vortex of diminishing returns. In the context of the troubled mutual gaze, Raad's approach in The Atlas Group suggests that 'value-added' comes in the form of allegory, substitution, chiasmus and prevarication. It is by further complicating the already tenuous relationship between fact and fiction that Raad aims to investigate the multifarious means by which different objects, events and knowledge come to be thought of as historical fact, and how such calcifications come to beget material forms and affect very tangible effects such as violence and war.

Missing Lebanese Wars

Missing Lebanese Wars (1996-1999) [Fig.1-Fig.4] is a collection of black-and-white photographs from the Lebanese daily newspaper *Annahar*[30] that have been neatly cut out and pasted onto lined notebook pages. Comprising *The Complete Fakhouri File*, the notebooks bearing these images are attributed to Dr. Fadl Fakhouri who was purportedly the most 'eminent historian' in Lebanon during the civil war.[31]

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[28] André Lepecki. "After All, This Terror Was Not Without Reason. Unfiled Notes on the Atlas Group Archive". *The Drama Review* 50:3 (2006), 93.
[29] Wallach. op.cit.
[30] Also spelt as *Al-nahar* (in Raad. *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: Some Essays from The Atlas Group Project.* op.cit:17); and *An-Nahar* (in Nakas & Schmitz. op.cit:96).
[31] Lee Smith. "The art of the Atlas Group/Walid Raad, Missing in Action". *Artforum* (2003), 125; Upon Dr.Fakhouri's death in 1993 his widow donated 226 notebooks, 24 photographs and 2 eight-millimetre films to The Atlas Group. Lepecki. "After All, This Terror Was Not Without Reason. Unfiled Notes on the Atlas Group Archive". op.cit:90.

The setting is the Hippodrome in Beirut.[32] Each photograph shows a race horse sprinting towards the finish line, or just a fraction beyond it. The images are annotated in Arabic on the original notebook page, with pencilled in notes on the amounts wagered, names of the gaming historians, calculations of the speed of the horses, distance run by the horses and the margin of error. An unnamed interlocutor has provided small typed English translations on a new background plate.[33] The accompanying narrative, which Raad delivers as part of his presentation for art shows, contends:

> It is a little known fact that the major historians of the Lebanese wars were avid gamblers […] Race after race, the historians stood behind   the track photographer, whose job was to image the winning horse as it crossed the finish line […] It is also said that they convinced (some say bribed) the photographer to snap only one picture […][34]

While 'Marxists and Islamists bet on races one through seven; Maronite nationalist and socialists on races eight through fifteen'. The winner would be the one who correctly hypothesise by how many fractions of a second the photographer would miss the exact moment of winning. These historians[35] betting on the margin of error, already know there will never be a photo-finish. The allusion in the title to this perpetual, damned, 'missing' is clear. As Laure Guirguis reminds us, even the compulsive notations and computations only serve to highlight how profoundly the uncapturable moment is missed.[36]   In Raad's words, this speaks of 'the inability to be present at the passing of the present';[37] and alludes to the fact of consciousness (and its various forms of documentation) being innately after-the-fact. Alan Gilbert concurs that *Missing Lebanese*

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[32] According to Laure Guirguis the Hippodrome on the southern side of Beirut is a symbol of 'both national unity and national conflict. It stands on what, during the war years (1975-1990), was the border between the city's eastern and Western sectors'. Laure Guirguis. "Beyrouth, figures de l'archive (Beirut, Figures of the Archive)". *Art Press* 330 (2007), 54.

[33] In Feldman & Zaatari, the 'English notations are, according to Raad's ventriloquy of Dr. Fakhouri's widow, Zainab, Fakhouri's short descriptions of the winning historian's personalities'. However, I have not encountered this explanation else where. Feldman & Zaatari. op.cit:52.

[34] Lepecki. "After All, This Terror Was Not Without Reason. Unfiled Notes on the Atlas Group Archive". op.cit:90.

[35] It is significant that Raad has imagined the gamblers as historians. Even though he admits that 'As far as I know there were no historians who went to the track and bet on the horse races […]' (Kaplan. "Flirtations with Evidence". op.cit:137). Conventionally it is historians who are 'allowed' to, and charged with, writing history, not artists. Further, in most modern societies it is a doctor who possesses the authority to legitimate, authenticate, diagnose and proffer, making the inclusion of Dr. Fakhouri essential to the implicit critique of how legitimacy is conferred, knowledge formed and truths forged.

[36] Guirguis. "Beyrouth, figures de l'archive (Beirut, Figures of the Archive)". op.cit:52.
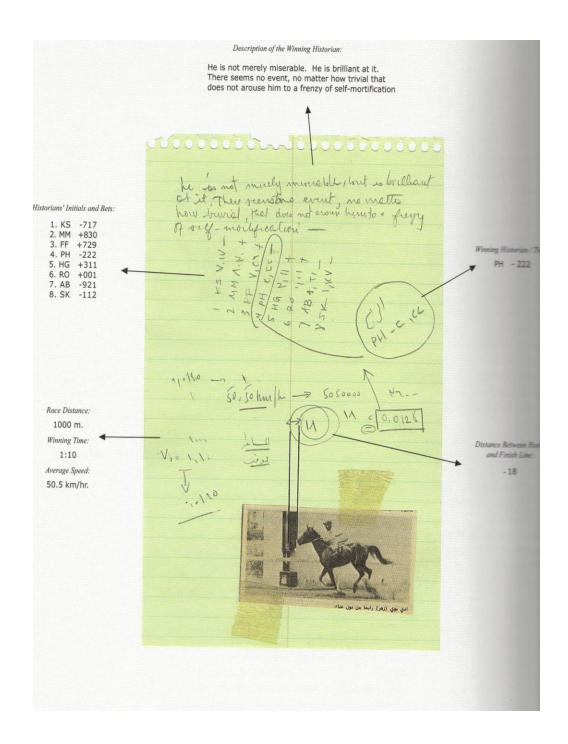
[37] Gilbert. "Walid Ra'ad". op.cit:40-41.

Fig.1 Walid Raad/The Atlas Group, *Missing Lebanese Wars*, 1996-2002, detail, archival inkjet prints set of 21 plates, each 33 x 25 cm.

Wars articulates an awareness of 'the inability to ever finally arrive – even in retrospect – at a true historical moment'.[38]

Readings of this work focus on this impossibility for the trackside photographer to capture the exact moment at which the leading horse's nose touches the finish line. I am however particularly intrigued by the evident genealogy which can be traced from Said's use of the Foucaldian power/knowledge rubric, to Raad's peculiar documentation in *Missing Lebanese Wars.* How is this work a symptomatic response to, and how does it disorient, the epistemological yoke of historical and contemporaneous Orientalising? How does it purport to ask the questions: 'How does one write a history of the civil war in Lebanon? How are the objects, thoughts, and emotions of the war apprehended?'[39]

Negation upon negation is the Foucaldian 'in the true' of The Atlas Group's modus operandi. It is fascinating to superimpose the psychosocial terrain of The Atlas Group documents onto the Foucaldian notion that forms of knowledge create representations within an accepted discursive field, and that representations are true if they conform to a 'society's regime of truth'.[40] As we have already encountered, The Atlas Group operates from a place of manifest dishonesty (the faux institution), and manufactures documents after the fact which function and discursively contribute to a regime of unknowables. As has been the case with Lebanon for much of the 20th century, what does it mean when 'forms of knowledge' significantly differ, and are scattered across multiple antagonistic groups, and where there is no nationally 'accepted discursive field' due to the absence of shared forms of knowledge and identity, and faltering feelings of 'national unity'? Or when the 'society's regime of truth' has been undermined by decades of sectarian violence, civil bloodshed and transnational politico-militaristic manipulation? This project needs to be seen in the context where even the seemingly incontrovertible 'fact' of the Lebanese Civil War having taken place between 1975-1990(1)[41] is widely contested and many favour the plural 'Lebanese wars' in order to account for the intense

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[38] Alan Gilbert. "Walid Ra'ad." *Bomb* 81 (2002), 42.
[39] Raad. *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: Some Essays from The Atlas Group Project.* op.cit:18.
[40] Michel Foucault (1980:131) in Hall. "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power". op.cit.
[41] The 1990(1) figure not only reflects the unfixity of dates in the methodology of The Atlas Group, but also 'an official' historical uncertainty about whether to date 'the end' to the wars in 1989 (The Taif Agreement) or 1991 (the year of a treaty granting Syria significant influence in Lebanon's internal affairs; Syria only withdrew its troops completely in 2005); Nakas. "Double Miss. On the Use of Photography in The Atlas Group Archive". op.cit:49.

external interference.[42] This is the deeply felt 'missing' in *Missing Lebanese Wars* – the missing consensus over what to call the event.

Lebanese history books end with independence from the French mandate in 1943.[43] In an effort to prevent a descent into another bloody and protracted dispute between the country's different denominations, an official silence and amnesia hangs over its recent history.[44] Schmitz likens researching or analysing Lebanese history to 'entering a minefield', and alleges that memory of the 15 years of civil war is 'rigorously suppressed'.[45]

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commonly referred to by the imprecise and perhaps revisionist moniker of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990)'; in Feldman & Zaatari. "Mining War: Fragments from a Conversation Already Passed". op.cit:49.

[43] Sarah Rogers contends that 'Rather than historicize the war, official and popular discourses recall an idealized, pre-war Lebanon – prompting the literary scholar Saree Mikdasi to ask if Beirut, in fact, is a city without history'; in Sarah Rogers. "Out of History: postwar Art in Beirut". *Art Journal* (2007), 10.

[44] Traboulsi. *A History of Modern Lebanon.* op.cit:240-246.

[45] Alternately, Sarah Rogers dates the end of official history to 1946 'after a committee of historians repeatedly failed to produce a narrative of the wars satisfactory to the country's sectarian factions'; in Rogers. "Out of History: postwar Art in Beirut". op.cit:9; Schmitz. "Not a Search for Truth". op.cit:42.

Appendix:

It is a little known fact that the major historians of the Lebanese civil wars were avid gamblers. It is said that they met every Sunday at the race track-- Marxists and Islamists bet on races one through seven, Maronite nationalists and socialists on races eight through fifteen. Race after race, the historians stood behind the track photographer, whose job was to image the winning horse as it crossed the finish line, to record the photo-finish. It is also said that they convinced (some say bribed) the photographer to snap only one picture as the winning horse arrived. Each historian wagered on precisely when -- how many fractions of a second before or after the horse crossed the finish line -- the photographer would expose his frame.
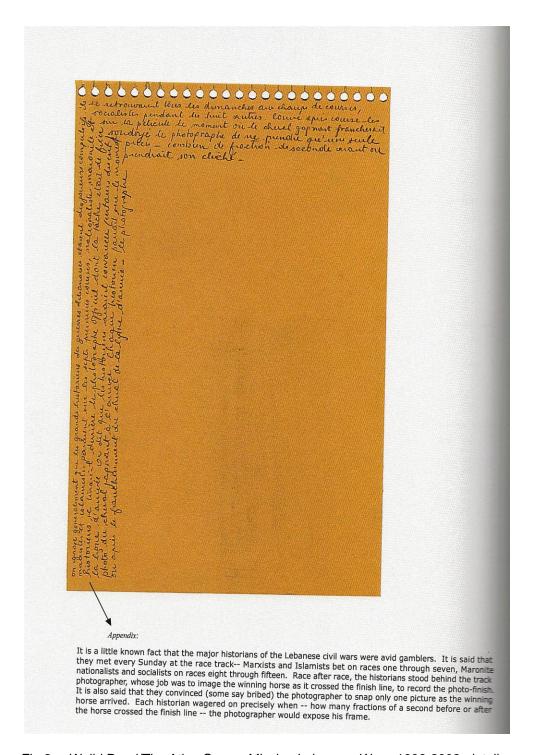
Fig.2   Walid Raad/The Atlas Group, *Missing Lebanese Wars*, 1996-2002, detail, archival inkjet prints set of 21 plates, each 33 x 25 cm.
Back of notebook page with French description of the betting system, and an Appendix translated into English.

That the civil war is elusively referred to as the 'events'[46] and that 'history' is what each culturo-religious community chooses to teach as the 'history of Lebanon', indicates the gravity and profundity of the notion of 'missing' in the Lebanon people's psyche. It is in this extreme and peculiar terrain of loss and absence that The Atlas Group's project of documenting, imaging and *imagining* the, quite literally, missing Lebanese wars starts to make sense. As Kaplan relates 'Raad emphasizes that this methodology is intended to demonstrate that history is unstable and that the elements of which it is constructed are malleable, fungible and open to interpretive invention'.[47]

The Orient has long been subject to, and the object of lies, fabrications and fantastical representations. Raad's assertion that the binary of non-fiction and fiction is a false one would no doubt resonate with many people and their experiences of representation. After all, Orientalist discourses made very few concessions to the true nature of things, favouring politico-economically motivated, and administratively efficient, (mis)representations instead. Thus 'truth' has evincibly always been a scarce commodity in East-West relations. The desire to question the 'how', the processes whereby things are given their historical place in the world (rightly or wrongly) is strong in The Atlas Group's programme. I believe this to point to the rhetorically imprecise, ethnocentric, reductivist and essentialising historiography of Orientalist discourses, and also indicate a critique of it. The move towards the production of 'hysterical documents'[48] becomes fathomable in the wake of the kind of structural Orientalising that has, according to Melkonian, caused the Diasporan artist to be 'distrusting [of] all who claim to possess absolute forms of knowledge, and suspecting [of] total explanations, or systems of thought which purport to be complete'.[49] Paraphrasing Walter Benjamin, Hal Foster writes:

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[46] This semantic imprecision, and linguistic eliding of the violent 'actuality' of these 'events' is significant for showcasing the psychological push to lose any trace – be it a historical, mnemonic or linguistic trace – of the civil war. The 'events' according to Kassandra Nakas is 'a label that at once places it under a taboo and conveniently simplifies its complexity'; in Nakas. "Double Miss. On the Use of Photography in The Atlas Group Archive". op.cit:50.

[47] Kaplan. "Flirtations with Evidence". op.cit:136.

[48] The Atlas Group documents are often discussed in psychoanalytic terms, not the least when Raad asks that his archive be read as a set of 'hysterical documents'. Schmitz. "Not a Search for Truth". op.cit:42. Alan Gilbert writes that 'In psychoanalysis […] archive takes the form of symptoms […] both symptoms and their interpretations are a part of a larger signifying chain. Symptoms are representations and metaphors are frequently personal or collective fantasies […] In this sense, a shared topography of symptoms may be a history'. Alan Gilbert in Biennale of Sydney (15th: 2006). "Zones of contact : 2006 Biennale of Sydney." Woolloomooloo N.S.W.: Biennale of Sydney Ltd., 2006, 80. What is pertinent here is being aware of the psychological propensity for saying something else in reference to something non-sayable, non-representable. Nakas & Schmitz, op. cit: 51.

[49] Melkonian. "Between Heaven & Hell: Contemporary Art from the Middle Eastern Diaspora". op.cit.

"To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it 'the way it was,'" Benjamin writes. "It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger."[50] Rather than reanimate and reorder tradition, Benjamin urges that its fragments be emancipated "from its parasitical dependence on ritual" and pledged to the present purposes of politics.[51]

The 'hysterical documents' that Raad 'archives' into The Atlas Group are memories seized as they flash up at a moment of danger.[52] In a country fatigued of danger and intensely averse to historicising, it would seem an outrage to approach its experiences of war, violence and loss 'in their crude facticity'.[53] Thus a work like *Missing Lebanese Wars* acts as an emblematic representation of symptoms of trauma that have been abstracted and are only implied.[54] The work signals to loss, absence and all the 'missing' that war brings – missing of loved ones, of old liberties, simple pleasures and security, the missed evacuation bus/train/plane, missing limbs…[55] It also speaks of forgetting, substituting, hiding behind the mundane, the trivial, the quotidian – the obscurity and opacity of the visual form of the work can be seen to betray a potent feeling of masked damage. In fact, as Alan Gilbert suggests, in conversation with Raad, 'there is a similarity in the form and content of your work to the way trauma can rarely speak directly, despite its gnawing desire to articulate itself'.[56]

Curiously, among the abbreviations and calculations surrounding the race photographs are particularly personal descriptions of the 'winning' local historian. One plate portrays the wager winning historian as 'He is 71. But for 6 years he was in prison and for 10 years he was under house arrest and in exile. So those 16 years should be deducted. Then he is 55.'[57] [Fig.3]

I believe that it is via the black humour and covert poignancy of this odd biography that Raad creates 'an approaching towards' an understanding of the psychological and physical scars

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[50] Walter Benjamin. *Illuminations.* Hannah Ardent ed. New York: Schocken Books, 1969, 255, in Hal Foster. "Archives in Modern Art". *October* 99 (2002), 89.
[51] Hal Foster. "Archives in Modern Art". *October* 99 (2002), 89.
[52] Raad clarifies this relationship between memory, fantasy and symptoms: ' "hysterical documents" in the sense that they are not based on any one person's actual memories but on "fantasies erected from the material of collective memories" ' in Gilbert. "Walid Ra'ad". op.cit:40; and it would seem that the most immediate danger, one that Raad and the Atlas Group are addressing in their idiosyncratic way, is perhaps the permanent loss of memories/accounts/histories/traces of the civil war.
[53] ibid. 40.
[54] Raad himself talks of the 'Lebanese Civil War' being an abstraction, and wonders whether, on the grounds that memories are abstractions, 'some of the events of the past three decades in Lebanon were actually experienced by those who lived them'; in ibid. 40 & 42.
[55] So as to temper the case I am trying to make it may be interesting to consider Lee Smith's comment that 'audiences typically associate this gesture with mourning or melancholia, but Raad's word for it, "missing", is a kind of a play on post-structuralism's "presence". " 'Missing' has this idea of longing for," Raad says, "yet the inability to arrive. It's as if you're always longing for what you have missed." '; in Smith. "The art of the Atlas Group/Walid Raad, Missing in Action". op.cit:129.
[56] Gilbert. "Walid Ra'ad". op.cit:40.
[57] Raad. *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: Some Essays from The Atlas Group Project.* op.cit: 24.

inflicted by war. Conveying irrecoverable loss and deep melancholy, this vignette seems to confirm that humour is often the best vehicle to convey the ironies, vagaries and traumas of the human condition.

Another such notation says: 'He always pointed the finger at assorted rogues, morons, neo-colonialists and an imagined conspiracy of Jewish currency traders who, he says are bent on keeping his country poor and servile'.[58] [Fig.4] This description suggests a fascinating twist. Rather than the vignettes being only eulogies for ghosts of a civil war, it is alleged by Lee Smith that Raad 'culled' them from passages in English-language newspapers.[59] The implications of this revelation are double. The first disclosure is the allusion to an irate, irrational Arab with a persecution complex; a man who is preoccupied with 'neo-colonialists' and a 'conspiracy of Jewish currency traders'. The vitriolic language of the politics of Postcolonial East-West representation is instantly recognisable in the tone of this text. The second critique arises out of the 'dubbing' of, albeit a fictional (but 'hysterically' real), Middle Eastern person with the words of a disembodied English speaker's voice from a newspaper.

Had the Lebanese doctor been allowed to speak his own words about his Lebanese historian friends, these notations would have undoubtedly sounded very different, and betrayed very different tones and preoccupations.[60]

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[58] ibid. 25.
[59] Lee Smith. "The art of the Atlas Group/Walid Raad, Missing in Action". *Artforum* (2003), 125.
[60] Relating to this thought is Jayce Salloum's meditation: 'Silence, like time, stretches eternally and when the Arab subject speaks, who listens and with what preconceived notions constricting the interpretation of the words and images?' Salloum. "in/tangible cartographies, new arab video". op.cit:27.
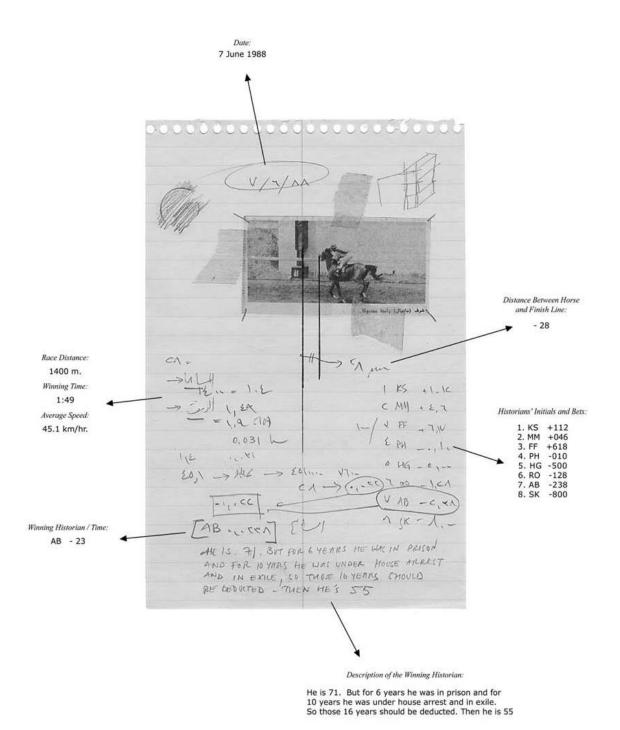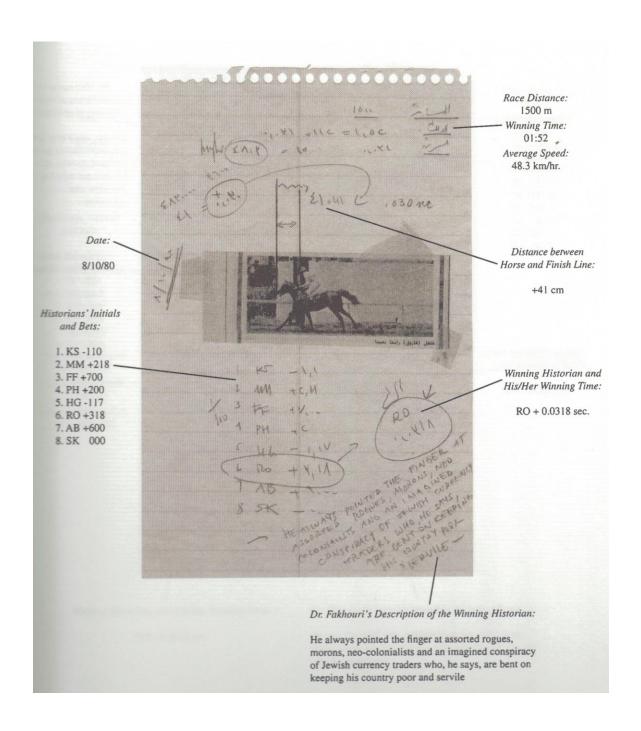
Fig.3 Walid Raad/The Atlas Group, *Missing Lebanese Wars*, 1996-2002, detail, archival inkjet prints, set of 21 plates, each 33 x 25 cm.

Race Distance:
1500 m

Winning Time:
01:52

Average Speed:
48.3 km/hr.

Date:

8/10/80

Distance between
Horse and Finish Line:

+41 cm

Historians' Initials
and Bets:

1. KS -110
2. MM +218
3. FF +700
4. PH +200
5. HG -117
6. RO +318
7. AB +600
8. SK 000

Winning Historian and
His/Her Winning Time:

RO + 0.0318 sec.

Dr. Fakhouri's Description of the Winning Historian:

He always pointed the finger at assorted rogues,
morons, neo-colonialists and an imagined conspiracy
of Jewish currency traders who, he says, are bent on
keeping his country poor and servile

16

The narrative accompanying *Missing Lebanese Wars* claims that these thoughts were noted down by Dr. Fadl Fakhouri. However once they are revealed as Western in origin it becomes apparent that Raad intended to hold up a mirror of the clichés, stereotypes and caricatures through which many Western people recognise Arab/Muslims. By looking to be complicit on neo-Orientalist representational and silencing violences, Raad paradoxically achieves the opposite: an expose of our ingrained Orientalising attitudes. By attributing a description to this particular historian that deems him to be enraged, paranoid and anti-Semitic; and by perpetrating a 'silencing violence' by privileging a passage of English-language origin, Raad points to the most evocative trope in the Orientalist critique: Said's notions of the Oriental not being able, or authorised, to represent him/herself; of the Western person knowing more 'about', and being in a privileged position to speak of and for, the Other.