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Walid Ra'ad/The Atlas Group, still from *Miraculous Beginnings/No, Illness is Neither Here Nor There*, 2-channel video, colour, each 1:43 min. Courtesy of the artist.

# Walid Ra'ad and The Atlas Group: The photograph and the archive in experimental documentary

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1  The work of New York based, Lebanese American artist Walid Ra'ad and The Atlas
2  Group (1994–2006) sits somewhat uneasily at the junctures between the disciplines
3  of art and history – and between the modes of experimental film and documentary.
4  While the official ring to the title 'The Atlas Group' may lend the project institutional
5  legitimacy, its authority is concurrently destabilized through Ra'ad's shifting descrip-
6  tion of its identity as any and all of the following: 'a non-profit organization found-
7  ed in Beirut in 1967', 'a foundation established by Maha Traboulsi in 1976' and 'an
8  imaginary foundation' established by Ra'ad, himself in 1999 (Ra'ad cited in Gilbert
9  2002: 40). Likewise, the details of individual sources for the work encompassed by
10 The Atlas Group Archive also shift. For example, in the story of a video surveillance
11 operator who regularly abandons his duties to shoot the setting sun, 'Operator 17'
12 becomes 'Operator 18' (or even '19') in different incarnations of the same narrative.
13 However 'imaginary' the foundation, however doubtful the origins of the documents
14 it produces, and however uncertain the status of the individuals it claims to speak with
15 and for, such fictionalized documents nevertheless attempt to get at the conditions
16 and experiences of a particular set of conflicts that are located in a specific geographi-
17 cal and historical period: the civil wars in Lebanon in 1975–1990. This is accomplished
18 through the presentation of a range of archival documents said to have been produced
19 by a collection of native informants, including prominent Lebanese historians, a
20 former hostage and an ex-president, among others.[1] While the work included in the
21 Atlas Group Archive sometimes draws on personal experiences and artefacts, Ra'ad,
22 like many artists experimenting with documentary today, has moved away from the
23 voice of authorial experience and the guarantees associated with personal history that

1.  I use the term 'native infor-
mant' purposefully here. The
'native informant' is figured
as both complicit in colonial
discourse and resistant to its
constraints, producing a speech
that speaks from both sides of
the mouth, at once compliant
and oppositional.

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figured so prominently in experimental identity politics documentaries of the 1980s
and 1990s. In place of the assurances implied by the authorial voice, Ra'ad and his
peers often purposefully fictionalize and destabilize the truth claims once implied by
the term documentary, even as they assert a commitment to historical specificity.

I have chosen Ra'ad's Atlas Group Archive as an example that illuminates some of
the concerns expressed in the larger field of contemporary experiments in documen-
tary since the mid-1990s. On one level, Ra'ad's work addresses fundamental and peren-
nial questions about documentary reference, namely the relation between fact and
fiction that all documentaries negotiate. On another level, Ra'ad's work is exemplary of
many artists' fictional experiments with documentary form in the past fifteen years, a
period marked by epistemological anxiety. This uncertainty about the ways in which
we know the world also can be seen in the work of artists like Tacita Dean, Omer Fast,
Marlon Fuentes, Elisabeth Subrin and Shashwati Talukdar, to name but a few. More
specifically, contemporary epistemological anxiety describes a pervasive cultural feel-
ing of uncertainty about the truthfulness of the images and information we encounter
on the Internet. This anxiety stems from our understanding of the ways in which digi-
tal media produce images, the ease and seamlessness with which they manipulate and
appropriate images, the multiplication of channels through which images travel, and
the sometimes uncertain conditions under which they are framed and received.

Ra'ad's fictional, experimental Atlas Group Archive marks a widespread shift in
what constitutes a documentary guarantee. By documentary guarantee, I mean the
ways in which documentaries produce their truth claims.[2] At the height of epistemo-
logical anxiety in the mid-1990s and early 2000s when the Atlas Group work was
made, there seemed to be a problem asserting any kind of definitive truth. At the
same time, Ra'ad's work seems to insist on the importance of producing an adequate
history of the Lebanese civil wars, a period marked by numerous warring factions,
widespread physical displacement and random violence. In the process of examining
this double-bind, constituted by both the impossibility of the documentary guarantee
and the necessity of producing an adequate history of a war-torn country, Ra'ad's work
explores two privileged forms: the photograph and the archive.

The photographic image (in a range of forms including chemically processed photo-
graphs, newspaper reproductions, videotape, super 8mm film) figures prominently in
the Atlas Group Archive. Ra'ad assembled the Archives at an historical moment when
the material specificity of the photograph was shifting from a physically developed to
a digitally structured index of the world. In that historical window, Ra'ad's Atlas Group
Archives intersected with both academic discourse and mainstream news discourse
on the future significance of the chemical photographic index. In the mid-1990s and
early-2000s, the proliferation of increasingly seamless digital editing software raised
culture-wide anxieties about the ease with which news organizations could manipu-
late photographs. In September of 1999, John Long, president of the National Press
Photographers Association, sought to assert the importance of the untouched image
in the following statement:

> We may be in a death-struggle but the end is worth fighting for. Real photos
> can change the hearts and minds of the people […]. They are powerful and
> they get their power from the fact that they are real Moments captured for all
> time on film. No one has the right to change these photos or the content of any
> documentary photo. (1999: n.p.)

This statement exemplifies a desire for indexical guarantees and ascribes to them an
emotional power derived 'from the fact that they are real Moments [with a capital
'M'] captured for all time on film'. This concern was nothing new. In 1982, *National
Geographic* was caught rearranging the spatial relationship between two pyramids

2.  I have discussed elsewhere
a number of writers who have
explored the question of what
constitutes a guarantee in
documentary film. See Taka-
hashi, Tess (2011), 'Experiments
in documentary animation:
Anxious borders, speculative
media', *Animation: An Interdis-
ciplinary Journal*, 6: 3, pp. 1–15.

1    using chemical photographic developing methods. In the mid-1990s, widespread
2    distrust of the photographic image was marked by an outcry over the darkening of
3    O. J. Simpson's skin on the 27 June 1994 cover of *Time* magazine. Ra'ad's combination
4    of fictional and factual figurations of the photographic image taps into the uncertainty
5    underlying Long's emphatic insistence on the power of the untouched image.

6        At the same time that the security of the photographic image was being discussed
7    in relation to mainstream news, the future of the index in the age of digital media
8    was critically challenged and discussed by a wide range of theorists like Mary Ann
9    Doane, Tom Gunning, Erkki Hutamo, Kevin Robins, Phil Rosen and Brian Winston.[3]
10    While Gunning reminded us that the chemically developed photograph could always
11    be manipulated by techniques like dodging, burning and superimposition, many have
12    noted that digital media considerably refined analogue's ability to modify an image.
13    For Winston and many other documentary theorists, the digital's effect on photo-
14    graphic indexicality produced a crisis for documentary, opening the door to 'complete
15    fakery'. Before long, 'in the form of a desktop personal video-image-manipulating
16    computer […] every documentarist would have access to the means for these decep-
17    tions' (Winston 1995: 6). In response to the epistemological anxiety that accompa-
18    nied these developments, Winston suggested that documentarians should turn away
19    from any intention to represent the 'truth' (1995: 258). Instead, he argued, the ability
20    of 'documentary to survive the widespread diffusion of such technology depends on
21    removing its claim on the real' (Winston 1995: 259). While this may seem like an odd
22    prescription, to a large degree, Ra'ad's experiments with documentary and those of
23    many of his contemporaries have done exactly that. Rather than facts, the 'truth' they
24    now attempt to represent is closer to emotional truth. This trend towards the depiction
25    of complicated emotional truths over 'facts' in documentary, which also can be seen
26    in Jay Rosenblatt's *Human Remains* (1998), Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joriege's
27    *Khiam* (2000–2007) and Liza Johnson's *South of Ten* (2007), coincides with a turn
28    within critical theory. The on-going denigration of vision in favour of embodied ways
29    of knowing, marked by thinkers like Martin Jay and W. T. J. Mitchell, accompanies a
30    concurrent shift towards interest in phenomenology and theories of affect.

31        Since the mid-1990s, artists experimenting with documentary modes have turned
32    increasingly towards fictional mediations, re-enactment, and animation, to name but
33    a few strategies that have re-emerged and proliferated in this time period. Art histo-
34    rian Carrie Lambert-Beatty calls this mode 'parafiction', which she describes as having
35    'one foot in the field of the real' (2009: 54). By this, she means that in parafiction 'real
36    and/or imaginary personages and stories intersect with the world as it is being lived'
37    (Lambert-Beatty 2009: 54). What is significant is that to a certain degree 'these fictions
38    are experienced as fact' by the spectator (Lambert-Beatty 2009: 54). I would argue that
39    amongst the range of fictions experienced as fact, the photographic image has crystal-
40    lized into an emblem of contemporary epistemological uncertainty. This uncertainty
41    about what photographic images can tell us constitutes the paradox of information
42    under which we currently live, and which Ra'ad's work in the Atlas Group Archive
43    emblematizes.

44        We have long been told by art historians like John Tagg, Alan Sekula, Geoffrey
45    Batchen and Victor Burgin that what makes an image readable is not just its material
46    qualities, but those discourses that surround and produce it, and through which it
47    reaches an audience. Photographs get their meaning, their reality, from 'definite tech-
48    niques and procedures, concrete institutions, and specific social relations – that is, the
49    relations of power' (Tagg 1988: 4–5). For theorists such as Tagg, the photograph has
50    neither ontological specificity nor stability in and of itself; its indexicality is predis-
51    cursively meaningless, in the sense that before it receives meaning through discourse,
52    it is no more than a 'paltry piece of chemically discoloured paper' (1988: 4). While at
53    first glance, Tagg's statement may seem absurd, his analysis constitutes one pole of

3.   For an excellent explica-
tion of the conversation on
photographic indexicality,
see Balsom, Erika (2009),
'A cinema in the gallery, a
cinema in ruins', *Screen*, 50: 4,
Winter, pp. 411–27.

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the paradox of photographic indexicality. On the one hand, photographic indexicality is figured as being of no consequence, its significance fixed through the web of discourses that produce it and captions that accompany it. On the other hand, the photograph's indexical capacity to capture what was once there is nonetheless figured as lending the image rhetorical and emotional force. I would suggest that photographic works such as those produced by Ra'ad under the auspices of the Atlas Group Archive dramatize these two seemingly contradictory ways of understanding the photographic image, as both meaningless and meaningful, and demonstrate that they function in mutually constitutive ways. Whether chemically produced or digitally rendered, the assemblage of image and discourse represented by the photograph can be said to simultaneously guarantee and challenge spectatorial belief.

Ra'ad's deployment of the photographic image suggests that while it may often point to nothing of any material consequence, it is capable of indexing the time and space of an individual's – or a people's – emotion. *Secrets on the Open Sea* (1994–2004) consists of large blue-toned squares that cover group photos clipped from the newspaper, all of whose subjects supposedly drowned or went missing during the wars. *I was Overcome with a Momentary Panic at the Thought that they were Right* (2004) is an installation of 100 photographic images as well as drawings and sculptures. Fifty of the images depict car engines, the only evidence remaining from a car bomb, one of the most common weapons of terror during the civil wars. They are paired with images of their reverse sides that show official stamps and marks. Fetishized by the Beiruti press, these pictures of engines point towards what is too horrible, too traumatic to be figured: bodies torn apart by the explosion of metal. However, these images also point outward to what cannot be figured at all – the grief of individuals for lost loved ones, the pain of wounded survivors and the loss of personal security as residents walk about on the streets of their own city. Ra'ad urges his viewers to approach such photographic documents and the stories that frame them 'as "hysterical symptoms" based not on any one person's actual memories but on cultural fantasies erected from the material of collective memories' (cited in Toufic 2004: 45). One could say that Ra'ad's Atlas Group Archive utilizes photographic images in an attempt to produce an 'archive of feeling' adequate to the history of a traumatized country.

For Ra'ad, the archive constitutes an important discursive formation through which he figures the photographic image. The Atlas Group Archive's continuing project between 1996 and 2004 was to produce an archival history of the Lebanese civil wars. The term archive usually indicates a collection by an individual, group, institution or government that, as Charles Merewether writes, 'constitutes a repository or ordered system of documents and records, both verbal and visual, that is the foundation from which history is written' (2006: 10). In other words, official archives are supposedly structured, logical, vetted and careful about the documents they house. In turn, they seek to guarantee official histories. However, Ra'ad's Atlas Group Archive contains a variety of photographic images that can be said to lie somewhere between a collection of artworks and an archive of 'Art-e-Facts', in that they are artworks that play with the line between fact and fiction.

Ra'ad's Archive emerged at a time when, like the status of the photographic, the function and significance of the archive was in transition. Today, of course, archives are both material repositories and digital databases. While the term archive once suggested the need for physical engagement with discrete material objects, the term database suggests a space in which anyone can employ search algorithms to access, view and retrieve information. Whether digital or material, all archives signal the discursive structures that frame the objects they house and give them meaning. It is this supposed order, these apparent guarantees, and the discursive structures that sustain them that Ra'ad, along with many of his contemporaries, have sought to question.

1   While Ra'ad's collection of idiosyncratic photographs, objects and testimony by
2   individuals interrogates the structure and purpose of official, governmental, material
3   archives, his very method of making and repurposing work evokes the function and
4   possibilities associated with the digital database. The fictional stories and construct-
5   ed 'documents' that comprise the Atlas Group's imaginary archive have appeared in
6   a remarkable variety of iterations across a range of media: as single channel works,
7   moving image installations, framed photographs and collages, web files and Power-
8   Point slides. Ra'ad has tended to take material from his collection and rework it into
9   pieces that, while sometimes very similar to one another, differ according to the venue
10  in which they appear. These physical spaces include the gallery, the museum, the pages
11  of magazines, the Atlas Group website (www.theatlasgroup.org), and Ra'ad's public
12  performances, which incorporate the genres of academic lecture, artist talk and para-
13  ble. In many ways, Ra'ad treats his source material, both photographic and narrative,
14  as malleable and modular, two qualities that exemplify the logic of digital media as
15  Lev Manovich describes it. The documents that comprise the Atlas Group Archive are
16  inherently intermedial, with content and images transferred from one form to another,
17  in ways that point to the malleability and instability of information. At the same time,
18  Ra'ad specifically investigates the physical materiality of the photographic documents
19  he examines: chemically processed photographs, videotape, super-8mm film, etc.
20  Individual works housed within the Atlas Group Archive often draw attention to their
21  physical qualities, as well as their material journeys through the world. Ra'ad's stories
22  depict photographic images as cut out of newspapers, pasted into notebooks, found in
23  drawers, and carried from city to city, each bearing the marks of its travel. Even though
24  shifted from one intermedial container to another, the material body of the chemically
25  developed photographic image remains a privileged, if troubled, form.
26  The remainder of this article focuses on Ra'ad's interrogation of photographic media
27  in two pieces housed within The Atlas Group Archive: *Missing Lebanese Wars*, a work
28  that chronicles a wager about a racetrack photo-finish among a group of invented
29  historians of the civil wars, and *Miraculous Beginnings*, a series of single frames taken
30  from an 8mm film supposedly shot by Lebanese President Elias Sarkis every time he
31  thought he had brought the war to an end. While both pieces encompass various itera-
32  tions, I consider them here as they appeared in the single channel moving image work,
33  *The Dead Weight of a Quarrel Hangs* (1998), at the Whitney Biennial of American Art
34  in New York in 2002.
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38  ## The gambling historians and the photo finish
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40  *Missing Lebanese Wars* addresses the photograph's relationship to the archive in order
41  to make visible the difficulty of connecting 'evidence' to any kind of reliable history.
42  Beginning with a horse race, a wager between historians and a photo finish, *Missing*
43  *Lebanese Wars* references a notebook of cut-out, grainy, newspaper photos of horses
44  crossing the finish line, a collection that is attributed to the fictional historian, Dr Fadl
45  Fakhouri. It opens with a succession of freeze frames pulled from a few seconds of
46  colour video footage supposedly taken of a racetrack crowd, framing an ear here, a
47  hand there, and the occasional blur of camera movement. It slows the image step by
48  step, possibly to allow for a better view of the scene, but revealing only disjointed and
49  meaningless details. Along with these images, a man's voice asserts that during the
50  civil wars in Lebanon, a rumour was circulating that the major chroniclers of the war
51  were avid gamblers who made excursions to the track every Sunday. Those who were
52  Marxists and Islamicists were said to bet on races from one through to four, while
53  Nationalists and Socialists put their money on races five through to eight. However, it

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was not the outcome of the race they witnessed with their own eyes from the stands that concerned them, but rather the position of the winning horse in the photograph printed in the next day's newspaper. Was the horse photographed before, after, or exactly at the finish line? The historians placed their bets on the horse's precise position at the moment the photograph was taken, not on which horse won the race.

Ra'ad's story about the photographic finishing line is a modern parable about the epistemological uncertainty that underlies the writing of all history, of which documentary is one form. Ra'ad's gambling historians, regardless of political and religious alliances, are described as petty, capricious and vain. Unlike the rest of the people at the track, they focus on a single, seemingly unimportant detail in the process of recording the finish. Such, the work suggests, is the process of writing history: the amalgamation of subjectively chosen details based on what can be seen, measured and counted in the material documents that remain after the event. The contingency of these choices, of what is deemed significant to be selected, archived and considered, seemingly undermines whatever guarantee the photograph might imply. The photograph captures the contingent moment, yes, but what, the work asks, is at stake in the gamble? What is at stake in the writing of history?

The work suggests that there are a number of gambles in play. The video image shifts from the segmented details of the racetrack to a slow motion, pixillated colour sequence of horses racing head-on towards the camera before shifting to black-and-white newspaper photos of winning horses in full stride as they crossed the finish line the day before, or even years before. Like all photographic images, each picture is understood to be singular, unique; that uniqueness is further guaranteed as the voice-over tells us that the finish-line photographer was bribed to snap only one frame. The editing and layering of still newspaper shots in Ra'ad's video makes the horses appear to run again years after their victories, the frames slowed to emphasize the disjuncture between each shot. These gaps point to what is omitted in the stories told and images that were captured, thereby exposing the gap between event and report, between the object and the history we write about it. This is a common strategy across Ra'ad's work and points to the claim that a photographic image, both then and now, captures no more than a moment, severing it from its material context and setting it adrift in a sea of discourse before it can be taken up and given meaning. This, the sequence suggests, is the gamble of history, what Siegfried Kracauer called the 'go-for-broke game of the historical process', in his 1927 essay on photography (1995: 62). Ra'ad's piece seems to argue something similar, that the writing of official histories is both an impossible and a necessary process, determined by the winner of a game whose outcome is decided arbitrarily.

The images of horses caught in mid-stride recall another wager, in which Eadweard Muybridge photographed galloping horses in quick succession to provide the answer to Leland Stanford's bet that all four of a horse's hooves left the ground at one point in its stride.[4] The idea that the photograph's indexical guarantee could reveal the truth, and thus put to rest the uncertainty at the heart of every gamble through the fixing of the contingent, returns us to questions that arose at the very beginnings of cinema. What truths can the photographic image capture? What can it tell us about the world? The photographic image's oscillating condition, between contingency and guarantee, also points to our current anxieties about the relationship of any image we encounter to the historical event it appears to reference. It is no surprise that Ra'ad's work would play with fictional deployments of the photographic image, for every photograph, while it may have one foot in the real, relies on narrative or rhetorical framing. Stories and captions tell us how a photographic document was made, by whom, and under what conditions. Captions seek to provide guarantees for images that have become detached from their material point of origin, digitally transcoded, compressed via various algorithms, posted, selected, downloaded, imported and circulated. As Walter

4. Of course, rather than just one shot, Muybridge employed a row of cameras in an effort to reveal the decisive moment. It was not left to chance, but 'scientifically' produced. It was not just one photograph, but many although there were only two decisive frames.

1  Benjamin once asked, 'Will not the caption become the most important part of the
2  photograph?' (1985: 256) However, captions themselves can be fictionalized. As I argue
3  below, Ra'ad's fictional framings of the photographic index produce it as a potent, if
4  vexed, marker of experience within documentary forms. At stake is the ambivalent
5  experience of a country traumatized by civil war.
6      'What is fascinating about these images', Ra'ad says in one interview on *Missing*
7  *Lebanese Wars*,
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9      is that the horse is always captured either just before or beyond, but never
10     exactly at, the finish line – the horse is never on time. This inability to be pres-
11     ent at the passing of the present raised […] numerous questions about how
12     to write, and more particularly about how to write the history of events that
13     involve forms of extreme physical and psychological violence. The notebook
14     [that captures the details of the gambling and which is attributed to the fake
15     historian] forced [the Atlas Group] to consider whether some of the events
16     of the past three decades in Lebanon were actually experienced by those who
17     lived them. (cited in Gilbert 2002: 40–42)
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19  Ra'ad is not saying that these events did not happen. So what does he mean? For Freud,
20  trauma is only belatedly narrated and assimilated by those who have experienced it.
21  To me, this suggests that the person exposed to the kind of 'extreme physical and
22  psychological violence' of the Lebanese civil wars certainly could have been mentally
23  'absent' at the time of the event. To say that events were not experienced by those who
24  lived them suggests the power that historical narration wields, even as it points to
25  the absurdity of the notion that any representation could be adequate to the suffering
26  undergone by the victims of war. This quotation also underscores the ways in which
27  official history legitimizes certain experiences and views of the world, requiring the
28  balance of another kind of archive, one that documents more particular, personal
29  and affective forms of experience. As noted above, Ra'ad and many other artists of
30  his generation have increasingly rejected the voice of subjective, authorial experience
31  associated with identity politics documentaries of the 1980s. Rather, Ra'ad's fictional
32  framings of dubious photographic images attempt to ground the photograph's guar-
33  antee in the emotional and psychological experience of a collective subject: the trau-
34  matized nation.
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38  ## The President's index
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40  'Miraculous Beginnings* is the second segment within Ra'ad's single channel *The Dead*
41  *Weight of a Quarrel Hangs* that I analyse here. It commences with a shot of the balco-
42  ny of what could be any apartment located in a tropical setting. Three male voices,
43  two speaking in Arabic, and one in English, contextualize what appears to follow, an
44  8mm film whose 28 seconds of footage they say is made up of single frames, each
45  one exposed by Elias Sarkis, the president of Lebanon from 1976 to 1982, every time
46  he thought the war was about to end. The narration describes this as an odd rumour
47  circulating during Sarkis's tenure in office, claiming that aides recovered the filmstrip
48  after his death in 1995. A quick tally of frames reveals that the film purportedly indexes
49  672 moments of hope and subsequent disappointment, which now can only be experi-
50  enced as an ungraspable flurry. The most ordinary and insignificant of images flit by in
51  a blur – shots out the window, views from the sidewalk, a table set for dinner, flowers,
52  passing cars, signs in shop windows and a few historically resonant images, including
53  the televised face of Henry Kissinger.

The 8mm film is introduced by countdown leader and concludes with the light 1
flares of the film reel's tail. The non-diegetic audio track layers the chirping of natural 2
birdsong and the countdown of a clock measured by a mechanical bird marking time 3
with a repetitive and humorous 'cuckoo'. The temporal countdown of the reel itself 4
suggests two countdowns, one to the end of the civil wars, but also perhaps another to 5
a period of yet more uncertainty. So how then is this any kind of a 'miraculous begin- 6
ning' as the title of the work suggests? The miraculous in this section is the hoped for 7
end to conflict that appears suddenly in a flash, a change that exceeds explanation, 8
which can be described but not accounted for. The idea of 'beginnings', in the plural, 9
points to the impossibility of establishing an originary site for the beginning of peace 10
and the arbitrariness of such a designation in a civil war with repeated starts and stops. 11
Every click of the 8mm camera, supposedly by President Sarkis, figures the possibility 12
of the beginning of a period of peace and reconciliation with the hope that there will 13
be no residue of past conflict. Here the irony attached to the possibility of the 'miracu- 14
lous beginning' is matched with a powerful desire for a viable future and ambivalence 15
towards what place the past will have in the world to come. 16

On one level, the relentless blur of images captures the impact of the never-ending 17
grind of the political conflict in the Middle East on a singular, if uniquely implicated, 18
individual, even though the story that surrounds the film's production and discovery 19
by the Atlas Group is a fictional one. As might be expected, the images presented as 20
shot by President Sarkis, were shot by Ra'ad himself on a digital camera. Initially, the 21
framing of this footage places the supposed indexical guarantee of each image under 22
stress by emphasizing the uncertainty regarding the conditions of its production. 23
However, this segment also attempts to produce a different kind of guarantee through 24
the arbitrary nature of the images captured as concrete evidence of the indescribable 25
feeling of conviction that supposedly flashed before President Sarkis every time he 26
exposed a single frame of 8mm film. In this way, Ra'ad's narrative figures the film- 27
strip as an archive of feeling. Even as the narrative that frames these images of tables, 28
sunsets and street signs empties them of the indexical value of their 'content', I suggest 29
that it makes them signify that which exceeds signification: the endless, unrelenting 30
hope, disappointment, frustration and responsibility of a President in the midst of civil 31
war. The averageness of these images not only humanizes the figure of the President, 32
but points to the experience of everyday people living under the same circumstances. 33
These quickly moving images operate as an abstract form of testimony that registers 34
not on the level of spoken language, but visually and on the level of emotion. While the 35
ordinariness of these images is important, their discursive framing asks that we look 36
through them to the emotion they index. In this way, they operate like any sign, which 37
we see through to the meaning behind it. 38

At one end of the spectrum, Ra'ad's story about the gambling historians points to 39
the photograph's inherent openness of meaning, the gamble taken at the moment of 40
the camera's click. At the other end of the spectrum, a work like *Miraculous Begin-* 41
*nings* infuses the image with emotional resonance, even as the literal content of the 42
captured images are rendered secondary to the emotion it indexes. Ra'ad's voice-over 43
framing of the photographic document lends the work its emotional force. The Atlas 44
Group engages, explicitly according to Ra'ad, not only with the 'discourse of photog- 45
raphy, but also discourses on video, documentary, nationalism and war' in an effort 46
to position the Lebanese civil war as the result of various discourses as opposed to 'a 47
self evident episode', or 'an inert fact of nature' (Ra'ad et al. 1999: ii–iii). In this way, the 48
work attempts to make visible the ways in which we approach 'the facts of the war, not 49
in their crude facticity', but in what Ra'ad calls 'the complicated mediations by which 50
facts acquire their immediacy' (2001). Discursive mediations are here represented at 51
two levels: firstly through their captions and the stories that frame them and secondly, 52
through the aesthetic manipulation of the chemically indexical photograph. Its image 53

is degraded in the case of the racing photograph and multiplied through the random seriality of the President's shots on 8mm, a medium intended to produce the illusion of coordinated movement rather than a blur of disjunctive images. Ra'ad's emphasis on the sometimes absurd modes through which images assume meaning recalls Foucault's genealogical approach to history, which focuses not on specific subjects or objects, but rather on the ways in which they become significant through historically shifting bodies of knowledge and discourses.

One could say that Ra'ad's fake historical project is based on a fake archive comprised of fake documents. However, in its attempt to displace the artist's personal voice, he tells emotional truths about the lives of a people in a country that underwent a decade and a half of civil war – and suffers still. Ra'ad's work is political, but it approaches politics indirectly through humour and play, drawing attention to both the absurdity and the pain of life under civil war. As Jamie Baron puts it, many recent documentary films that utilize structures of the archive adopt the form, if not the affect, of the joke (2007: 15). According to Carolyn Steedman, the joke employs 'the calculated naivety involved in the literal interpretation of a trope', thereby 'missing the point, in order to make another one' (quoted in Baron 2007: 11). Drawing on Freud's writing on the function of the joke, Baron notes that documentaries that engage the structure of the archive simultaneously engage not only 'anxiety', but 'play', which she sees as giving the writing of history and the making of documentary liberatory potential. Ra'ad's Atlas Group Archive takes part in a playfully serious meditation on the problem of producing any kind of useful public history that could be adequate to the representation of a period of such chaos, restriction and personal suffering as occurred during these civil wars. And yet, the work also insists that despite the inadequacy of representation, the writing of such a history is essential not only for the people who lived through it, but to those who learn about it in this way.

In the documents that comprise the Atlas Group Archive, Ra'ad frames the writing of this history of the Lebanese civil war as an impossible, but still necessary, project. Such an archive is necessary because the events of the civil war have been too quickly buried in a desire to move on to a period of renewal and reconstruction – to leave the past behind, and with it the tense conflicts between battling religious and political groups that created and sustained the conflict. As critic Laura Marks has stated,

the thing that has struck me lately among Lebanese artists working on the civil war and afterward is the shifting dialectic between memory and forgetting. As a friend who works with families of the disappeared tells me, people want justice to be done not so that they can remember, but so they can be free to forget. (2005: n.p.)

Ra'ad's use of the photographic image in the Atlas Group Archives from 1994–2004 functions as more than a substitute for a missing history. Rather, it operates as a meta-discursive project about documentary that points to a wider shift in documentary practices. Since the mid-1990s, documentary has expanded from the realm of single-channel film and video into the spaces of the gallery, the museum and the web. In this period, artists and film-makers alike have challenged the use of authorial voice, personal photographs and home movies that in the 1980s grounded experimental documentary video's concerns with identity politics. Instead, they increasingly adopt fictional characters, made-up narratives and creative re-imaginings of traumatic historical events that evoke the experience of a collective subject – a nation, race or group. These artists interrogate documentary rhetoric and form in an age of episte-mological anxiety, using strategies that include faked photos, imaginary archives and speculative animations. Such works demonstrate their uncertainty about documentary as an endeavour, often using the photographic image as both a site of enquiry and

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a metaphor. Among them, Ra'ad's Atlas Group Archives point to the entwined political and epistemological stakes of the photographic image, even as its technological base changes beyond recognition.

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