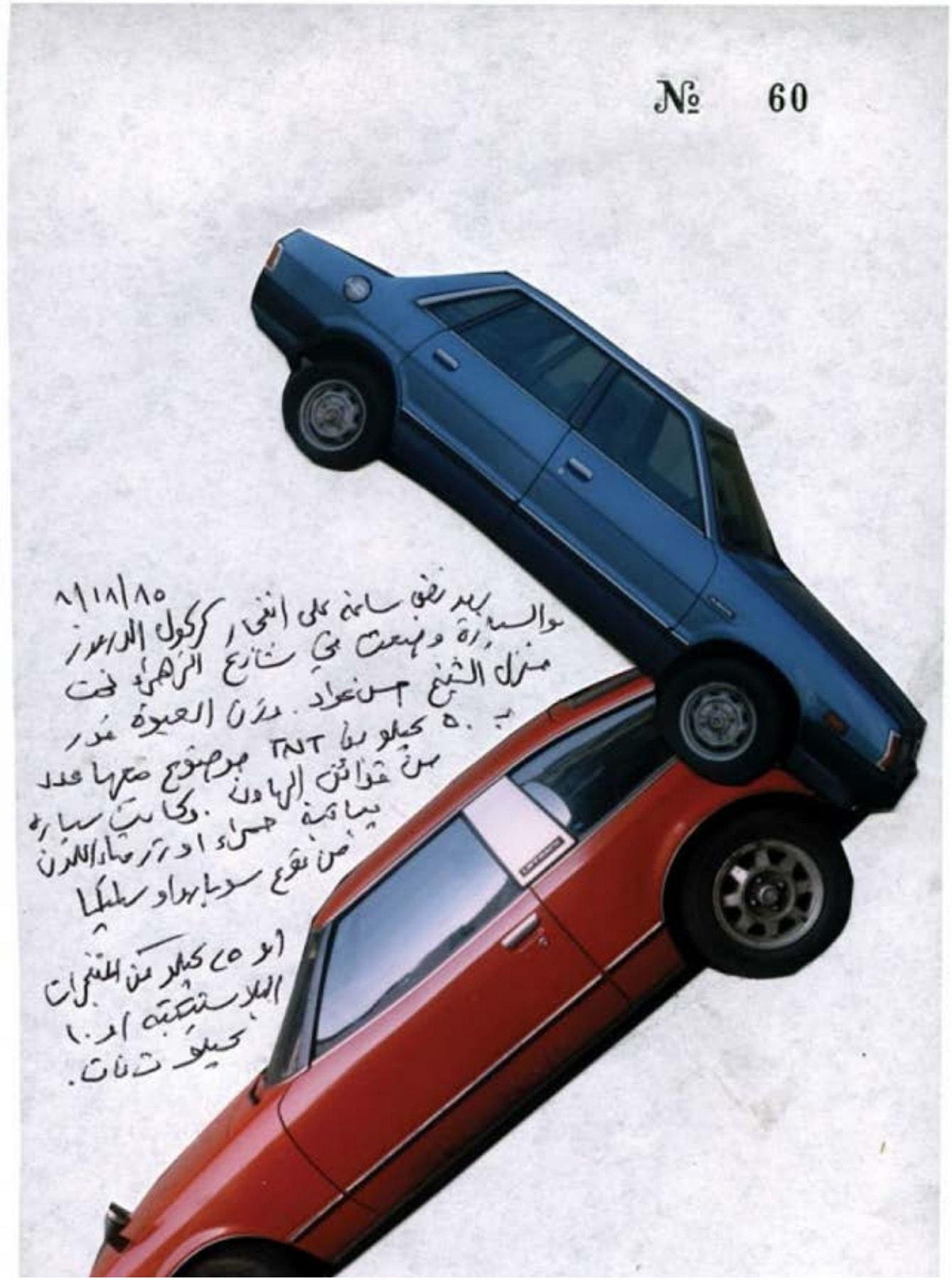
Walid Ra'ad by Alan Gilbert



Dr. Fadl Fakhouri/The Atlas Group, *Notebook Volume 38, plate 60, Already Been in a Lake of Fire*, 1975–2002. All photos courtesy of The Atlas Group/Ra'ad, 2002.

Even though—or perhaps because—it's such a small country, Lebanon has been swept up in a number of major geopolitical encounters over the past 200 years. From its seeds in the Ottoman Empire, its brief tenure under a French mandate and, more recently, 15 years of civil war among various Lebanese political parties and their militias (Lebanese Forces, Mourabitoun, Amal, Hezbollah, Communist Party, and Progressive Socialist Party, among others), armies (Lebanese, American, French and Israeli, among others) and additional Arab militias, armies and parties (Palestinian, Syrian, Iranian, Libyan, Iraqi, and Saudi, among others), Lebanon has witnessed sophisticated cosmopolitanism and horrific carnage, and now tenuous rebuilding.

If that last sentence seems somewhat dizzying, it only hints at the tangled historical knot that is the Lebanese Civil Wars of 1975–91. The many factions and their various backers, as well as the reasons and motivations for their decade and a half of internecine combat, may never become clear. Walid Ra'ad's work is an attempt to write this obscure history in images and text. But these images and texts are themselves made opaque in the process, for as much as his project is a kind of historical documentation, it's also an attempt to investigate how history gets imaged and written, thereby questioning the very idea of a definitive history. In this dual approach, Ra'ad's work makes use of certain conceptual art strategies as well as various experimental documentary modes, both of which are shared interests we've had many conversations

about during the past few years.

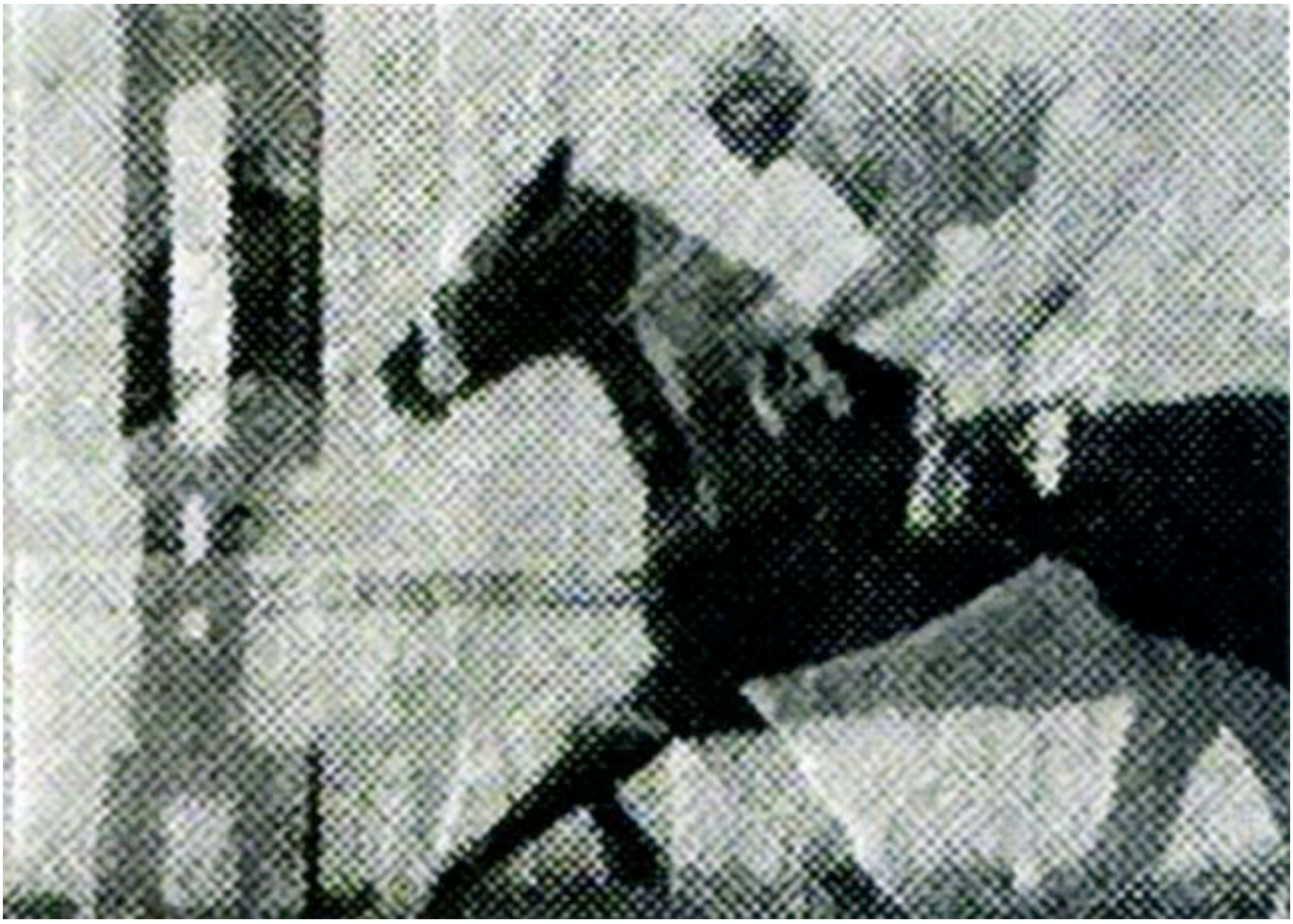
Ra'ad had to leave Beirut in 1983 as the fighting between rival factions became increasingly intense. He studied in the United States, at the Rochester Institute of Technology and the University of Rochester, and by fortuitous coincidence now lives a few blocks from me near a desolate stretch along the northernmost tip of Brooklyn's East River waterfront—that is, when he's not in Beirut during his summer and winter breaks from teaching. The following interview took place between Beirut and Brooklyn via email this past July.

Alan Gilbert All the work you produce is organized under the rubric of a fictional collective called the Atlas Group that's based, as you are, in New York and Beirut. Reviews of exhibitions that include your work may mention the Atlas Group but almost never mention you by name. Recently you've begun to emphasize your individual authorship of the work without abandoning the Atlas Group conceit. Can you talk about the tension in your work between individual authorship and the idea that the Atlas Group is collectively producing and accumulating anonymous and pseudonymous documents?

Walid Ra'ad It seems to me that this question concerns the authorship of the Atlas Group project and its archive—documents attributed to Dr. Fadl Fakhouri, Souheil Bachar, Operator #17, and the Atlas Group, among others. It is not true that I have recently begun to emphasize the individual authorship of the work. In different places and at different times I have called the Atlas Group an imaginary foundation, a foundation I established in 1976, and a foundation established in 1976 by Maha Traboulsi. In Lebanon in 1999, I stated, "The Atlas Group is a nonprofit foundation established in Beirut in 1967." In New York in 2000 and in Beirut in 2002, I stated, "The Atlas Group is an imaginary foundation that I established in 1999." I say different things at different times and in different places according to personal, historical, cultural, and political

considerations with regard to the geographical location and my personal and professional relation with the audience and how much they know about the political, economic, and cultural histories of Lebanon, the wars in Lebanon, the Middle East, and contemporary art. I also always mention in exhibitions and lectures that the Atlas Group documents are ones that I produced and that I attribute to various imaginary individuals. But even this direct statement fails, in many instances, to make evident for readers or an audience the imaginary nature of the Atlas Group and its documents. This confirms to me the weighty associations with authority and authenticity of certain modes of address (the lecture, the conference) and display (the white walls of a museum or gallery, vinyl text, the picture frame), modes that I choose to lean on and play with at the same time.

It is also important for us to note that the truth of the documents we research does not depend solely on their factual accuracy. We are concerned with facts, but we do not view facts as self-evident objects that are already present in the world. One of the questions we find ourselves asking is, How do we approach facts not in their crude facticity but through the complicated mediations by which they acquire their immediacy? The Atlas Group produces and collects objects and stories that should not be examined through the conventional and reductive binary of fiction and nonfiction. We proceed from the consideration that this distinction is a false one—in many ways, not least of which is that many of the elements that constitute our imaginary documents originate from the historical world—and does not do justice to the rich and complex stories that circulate widely and that capture our attention and belief. Furthermore, we have always urged our audience to treat our documents as "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."



Walid Ra’ad, still from *The Dead Weight of a Quarrel Hangs*, 1998, single-channel video, 18 minutes.

AG You work in a variety of mediums (photography, collage, video, digital, performance), and individual pieces migrate among these mediums: a photograph may be taken of something originally pasted up in a notebook, and these photographs are then incorporated into a video that becomes part of a PowerPoint presentation shown during a performance. Similarly, the objects, individuals, and histories represented in your work always elude direct representation, however obsessively you represent, follow, or record them. There’s 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. The obsessive and repetitious serial form of your work gives this away, as do the references to war and devastation: car bombs, hostages, disappeared persons, subjects under surveillance. Notwithstanding these details, it’s impossible to reconstruct a history of the Lebanese Civil Wars from your project. If you can speak about

historical and experiential traumas that remain partly unspeakable, can you talk about your work's linking of image, history, and trauma and how they might interrelate for both individuals and larger social formations?

WR You point out correctly that it is impossible to reconstruct a history of the Lebanese Civil Wars from this project. It is evident in Lebanon and elsewhere that "The Lebanese Civil War" refers to an abstraction. We proceed with the project from the consideration that this abstraction is constituted by various individuals, groups, discourses, events, situations, and, more importantly, by modes of experience. We began by stating, "The Atlas Group aims to locate, preserve, study, and make public documents that shed light on some of the unexamined dimensions of the Lebanese Civil War." Soon thereafter, it became clear that it is difficult for us to define precisely what this proposition means, and as a consequence we stated, "It is difficult for us to speak of the Lebanese Civil War, and we prefer to speak of the wars in Lebanon." Today, we refer to "the history of Lebanon of the past 50 years with particular emphasis on the history of Lebanon since 1975." We have also realized that our concern is not with documenting the plurality of wartime experiences as they are conditioned by manifold religious, class, ideological, and gender locations.

It is important to note that Dr. Fadl Fakhouri's Notebook Volume 72, titled "Missing Lebanese Wars," raised for us troubling questions about the possibilities and limits of writing any history of the recent wars in Lebanon. The notebook recounts the story of some Lebanese historians who bet on photo-finish horse-race photographs as they were published in the Lebanese daily *Annahar*. Apart from the historians' bets and some calculations of averages, the notebook's pages include cutouts of the photo-finish photographs as they appeared in*Annahar*. What is fascinating about these images is that the horse is always captured either just before or beyond, but never exactly at, the finish line—the horse is never on time. This inability to be present at the passing of the present

raised for us numerous questions about how to write, and more particularly about how to write the history of events that involve forms of extreme physical and psychological violence. The notebook forced us to consider whether some of the events of the past three decades in Lebanon were actually experienced by those who lived them.

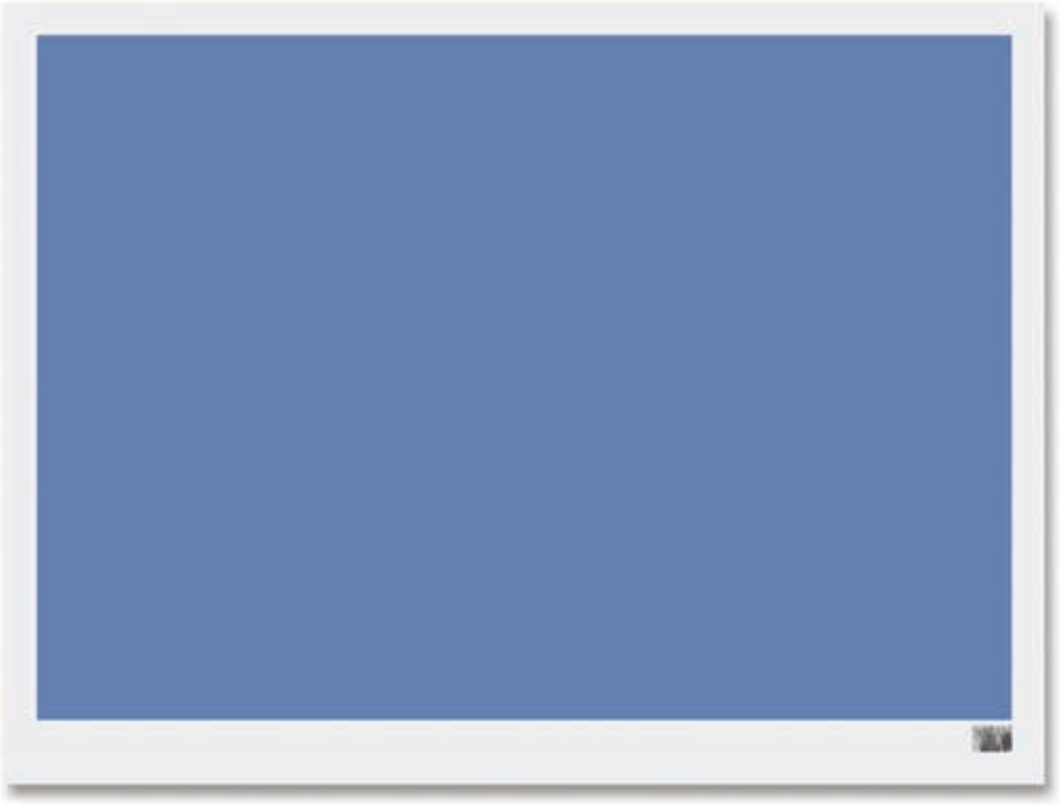
AG This notion of history as never on time saturates almost every aspect of your work and I think is one of the keys to the subterfuge it employs. Moving on from the exhausted postmodern trope of the uncoupling of the sign from its referent, you turn this into a larger historiographical and even political issue. While there's a sense of despair at the inability to ever finally arrive—even in retrospect—at a true historical moment, it also appears to be a liberating awareness for you; hence the strategic misdirections in your work. But it's a liberation emitting a mournful tone for a lost and impossible object. Your recording of sunsets from Beirut's seaside promenade at the end of your video *Missing Lebanese Wars (in three parts)*, 1996, and your haunting series of photographs Secrets in the Open Sea, 1996, are good examples. At first glance, the latter appear to be beautiful, pure blue abstractions, with a black-and-white thumbnail photograph situated in the bottom right-hand corner of their white borders. The imaginary narrative accompanying these blue photographs is that they were found in 1992 under the rubble of demolished buildings in the Souks area of Beirut and given to the Atlas Group for examination. Using a lab in France, the Atlas Group was able to extract grainy black-and-white photographs embedded within the varying fields of blue. These photographs were of small groups of women and men—all of whom, it turned out, had been found dead in the Mediterranean Sea. The sense of mourning in these photographs inflects much of your work.

WR I think there may have been a sense of despair (even as it appears to be a liberating feeling for us, as you note), especially with the works produced between 1991 and 2001. We no longer feel this way. In this regard it has been productive for us to read and think about Jalal Toufic's

books *Over-Sensitivity* (Sun & Moon, 1996) and *Forthcoming* (Atelos, 2001). The absence of the referent in our earlier works, our treatment of the documents we were finding and producing as hysterical documents, was not the result of a philosophical conviction imposed on our object of study. It may have been due to the withdrawal of reality itself as a result of what Toufic identifies as "the withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster." Our project titled *Sweet Talk: Photographic Documents of Beirut* is related in this regard. The blurred, never-on-time, always-to-the-side images we produced in this project between 1987 and 1999 are indicative of this withdrawal.

It is difficult for us to say where we are today, but we have noticed a shift in the documents we are finding and producing and in our conceptual, formal, and critical approach to the writing of the history of Lebanon. As Toufic recently suggested, "It may be that a resurrection has been produced." This is clearly a question that requires further elaboration.

Anonymous/Atlas Group, *Secrets in the Open Sea, plates 17, 18, and 19*, 1998–2002.



Anonymous/Atlas Group, *Secrets in the Open Sea, plates 17, 18, and 19*, 1998–2002.

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AG In his *New Yorker* review of Documenta 11, Peter Schjeldahl made the interesting comment that the rift between institutional and commercial art worlds is enormous right now. Over the past couple of years your work has been well supported by cultural institutions in Europe (you were in the same Documenta Schjeldahl couldn't generate much enthusiasm for) and to a somewhat lesser degree by their US equivalents (the most recent Whitney Biennial). On the other hand, your work has been completely absent from any kind of commercial gallery environment. What's the view from inside the point Schjeldahl makes?

WR Let me say that some of the Atlas Group project was begun ten years ago, and it proceeded for eight years with a minimum of commercial support. As a full-time teacher, I have been able to finance most of the Atlas Group productions, and I anticipate being able to do so for a long time. But to return to your point—I find it difficult to make sense of the idea of a rift between institutional and commercial art worlds. I think it important to avoid hasty generalizations about what it means to talk about the institutions and commerce of art production, distribution, and consumption, be they private or public. When we talk about these institutions we are not just talking about museums, festivals, biennials, auction houses, and galleries. We are also talking about banks, manufacturers, law firms, conventions, schools and universities, residencies, foundations, alternative spaces, conferences, journals and magazines, curators, collectors, scientists, humanists, historians, critics, clerks, organizers, funders, philanthropists, politicians, technicians, students, and teachers, among others. We are talking about institutions and individuals with bodies, languages, and histories. And some of the individuals and institutions in question are progressive, some are reactionary, some are honest, some are liars, some are exploitative, some are generous, some are opportunists, some are committed, and some are simply hard to describe.

It would be difficult to draw a distinction between the institutionally and

commercially supported aspects of our work. In the past few years, we have been awarded grants from public and private foundations; we have exhibited and performed in schools, universities, conferences, festivals, museums, meetings, and alternative art spaces; we have published in magazines, newspapers, and journals; we have appeared on commercial and private television and radio. We have been paid for our presence at festivals, conferences, and theaters; for our writings in magazines and journals; and for our products, in that a production fee was paid for our photographs, videotapes, website, and slides. We have sold some videotapes through our distributor. We have not exhibited in a commercial gallery, and we have not directly or through a gallery sold works to collectors.

In any case, as far as we are concerned, there is no doubt that spaces such as universities, galleries, and museums do not operate outside the industrial, financial, scientific, information, and service sectors of the economy, and as such they are part and parcel of the same capitalist organization of labor, its services, and its products as the commercial art world.

Operator #17/The Atlas Group, *I Only Wish That I Could Weep*, 1999–2002, color video.

AG Regardless, I think you have certain hesitations concerning the decontextualizing effect that might result from showing your work in a commercial gallery space, along with the ever-present dilemma of having the value of the work depend on sales figures. Added to this is the fact that you tend to produce in series, sometimes extended ones. For instance, your notebook/series of photographs *Already Been in a Lake of Fire*, 1999–2001—which collects an image as well as textual information on the make, model, color, and serial number of every car bomb exploded in Beirut from 1975 to 1991—consists of almost 150 pages/photographs, with one car bomb per page/photo.

Somewhat curiously, at least half of your invitations to participate in art exhibitions are for performances. You were invited to participate in the performance component of this year's Whitney Biennial, and I was slightly surprised when I realized your video work wasn't also included in the video programming. I say "curiously," because it's my understanding that you don't really have a background in theater or performance studies. What's it like being a visual artist out there on the performance and alternative theater circuit?

WR I'll give you another roundabout answer. In my graduate studies at the University of Rochester in visual and cultural studies, language figured prominently, in the sense that I was expected to and wanted to read, comment, speak, and write about culture, politics, and the arts—and that held true even if one identified himself or herself as a visual artist. There is no doubt that the emphasis in this training was on the history of art, culture, and thought and on the question of how meaning is produced and consumed. This training was not unlike that of many graduate programs in the arts and humanities in the US over the past three decades.

The number of visual artists who can make a decent living from the sale of their artworks is very small. Grants and residencies are competitive and rarely provide enough money to live. Artists do any number of things to generate income. Full-time teaching can be one of the best jobs around, but the limited availability and the difficulty of getting a tenure-track teaching job has been well documented.

I am fortunate in that I was able to get such a position. As a college professor, and as someone who makes short experimental videotapes and other works, I find myself and other faculty members who are in more or less similar situations doing certain things: we read books and essays; we attend meetings; we prepare lectures that involve videotapes and slides; we teach students how to read and write; we write essays about

the events of the world, as well as budgets, grants, proposals, synopses, introductions, résumés, and narrative biographies. We also speak about the world and about our works in private and in public; we subscribe to newspapers, magazines, journals, associations, and societies; we make slides and videotapes of our works; we cut out, save, and distribute reviews of our works in the press; we send files of our works to interested institutions and individuals; we keep receipts; we pay taxes.

We also attend conferences and festivals. At academic conferences we often present written papers and answer questions about their content. At video festivals, we answer questions about our works after their screening. In both situations, we are expected to speak. Some of us speak about personal experiences and/or about the films and videotapes we watch, the books and essays we read; some of us refuse to speak; some insist on being anecdotal, others scholarly and/or academic. Some appear assertive, others shy. We sit behind a desk or at a table with other speakers. We face an audience. We stand with or without a lectern. We encounter technical difficulties with the equipment at our disposal. In question and answer periods, we face difficult, stupid, vague, challenging, and wonderful comments and questions. Our answers may be equally difficult, stupid, vague, challenging, and wonderful.

Walid Ra'ad, T*he Dead Weight of Quarrel Hangs*, 1998, single-channel video, 18 minutes.

Of course, this is somewhat of a caricature, one that I am certain some will recognize. But this is the caricature that partly informed the "performance" dimension of the Atlas Group's lecture/presentation titled *The Loudest Muttering Is Over: Documents from The Atlas Group Archive*. This ongoing, always-in-progress 70-minute lecture/presentation looks and sounds like a college lecture, an academic conference presentation, or an artist talk. I sit behind a rectangular table facing the audience. I show slides and videotapes on a screen to my left. I

speak into a microphone. There are a glass of water, a notebook, a pen, and a lamp on the table. I wear a light shirt and dark dress pants. I encounter technical difficulties. I am interrupted by people I have planted in the audience, who also ask questions during the question and answer period. I also answer nonscripted questions.

The first manifestation of this work was in the context of an academic conference in Beirut in 1998, and the second in the context of an artist talk at the Ayloul Festival in Beirut in 1999. I was not surprised by either invitation, given that part of the work for me emerged from my thinking about the format and culture of conferences and artist talks. I was surprised when I was invited to present this lecture/presentation in the performance and alternative theater circuit, but my surprise was due to the fact that I knew very little about experimental theater and performance art. I soon found out that others in the performance and theater circuit—in Lebanon, the US, and Europe—are thinking along similar lines.