

Afterword

Walid Raad, one of the most original and unique contemporary artists who uses photography, has been granted the 2011 Hasselblad Foundation International Award in Photography. In his challenging works, Raad has developed innovative methods for imaging war and for exploring political and social conflicts in art. He has been widely acclaimed for generating original ideas about the relationship between photography, documentary practice, violence and history.

This volume, *I Might Die Before I Get a Rifle*, is being produced on the occasion of the exhibition titled “Walid Raad – 2011 Hasselblad Award Winner” at the Hasselblad Center in Gothenburg, Sweden. It includes some previously unpublished works from Raad's *The Atlas Group*, which spans most of his career to date.

Most of Walid Raad's works made with *The Atlas Group* relate to his experiences in Lebanon, where he lived until the age of sixteen before traveling to the United States of America to pursue his studies, and to escape the wars in his home country. He points out that his interest in photography and in photographing Beirut began at an early age: “I remember back in 1978, when I was eleven years old, going out with my father to photograph Beirut after an intense round of fighting. The camera allowed me to wander around and see the city in a way that I would not otherwise have done.” His commitment to imaging the Lebanese capital was subsequently shaped by his close study of Eugene Atget's and Charles Marville's photographs of Paris, Carleton Watkins', Lee Friedlander's, Robert Frank's, Berenice Abbott's, and Walker Evans' photographs in the USA, August Sander's, Karl Blossfeldt's and Bernd and Hilla Becher's work in Germany, among others. He has pursued his documentary work in Beirut over the past 25 years. *The Atlas Group*, as his principle art project, was formed and publicly launched in the late 1990's, and today complements his ongoing investigation of Beirut, its residents and spaces.

Raad remains closely tied to his native country, its people, landscape, light, and sounds. Until recently, his works were solely about Lebanon and his experiences there. His driving force has been a desire to visualize in stories and photographs his country's history and transformation. We could describe the importance of Raad's work using the words of Geoffrey Batchen et al in the introduction to the exhibition catalogue *Deadpan: Photography, History, Politics*: “[it casts] a gaze on a political issue that is crucial for all of us—the representation of history. [His body] of work engages this issue, and with it the creative capacities of photography as an historical medium.”

Raad's various art projects are strongly rooted in the craft and tradition of photography. He builds on his own personal experience, on solid, multi-faceted technical and intellectual knowledge, and on an exceptional creative capacity to combine it with curiosity, wit, and a sense of form. Raad's works with *The Atlas Group* present us with stories about Lebanon and its wars. Raad creates many of his stories by mixing different kinds of facts. He recently described his approach as follows: "I like to think that I always work from facts. But I always proceed from the understanding that there are different kinds of facts; some facts are historical, some are sociological, some are emotional, some are economic, and some are aesthetic. And some of these facts can sometimes only be experienced in a place we call fiction. I rarely think in terms of fact versus fiction. I tend to think in terms of different kinds of facts and the places that permit their emergence."

Raad never leaves anything to chance. He is very particular about how his work is displayed and presented, whether in catalogues and exhibitions or in performances and lectures. In exhibitions, he tends to treat display walls like book or magazine page spreads. Raad explains that this is in part a product of his photographic education in Beirut, of learning about photography and its history mainly from photography magazines and books, rather than in museums.

The choice of Walid Raad as the 2011 Hasselblad prizewinner, like the choice of Sophie Calle in 2010, expands the field of photography eligible for the award. Raad recently described his photography as follows: "I do not define photography only in terms of certain practices, figures, tools, traditions or movements. For me, it is also a way of thinking about, of being, feeling and experiencing the world. And as such, photography offers me an occasion to define anew what a camera can be, what light-sensitivity consists of, what a frame, a shutter, and a moment are. I tend to think photographically even when I am writing or creating a video or theatrical work, I "find" photography in more places than I expect, and that is why I relate to it as a way of being, feeling, living and thinking."

Translated by Michael Garner

Gunilla Knappe
Research Manager, Hasselblad Foundation