War, There, Over There.

Talaeen a Junuub (Up to the South) (Salloum/Raad, 60 min., 1993), *The Dead Weight of a Quarrel Hangs* (Raad, 18 min., 1996-1999) and *Missing Lebanese Wars (*Raad, 6 min., *1996)* were the videos that marked the start of Walid Raad's career, foreshadowing *The Atlas Group* that he would go on to found in 1999. Short video documentaries in the intellectual footsteps of Edward Saïd, these works questioned, to use the artist's own terms, the discourses (originating in the West and East) of terrorism, resistance, colonialism, politics, and expertise. Walid Raad sought to renew or indeed to explode the traditional documentary genre and to treat the issue of representation as a political and historical question. *Missing Lebanese Wars*, a three-part video, intended to "explore the possibilities and limits of the writing and imaging of the history of Lebanon's civil war." The video's soundtrack and screenplay constructed a parable of invisible wars (presented through their peripheries and their effects on the mind), showing on screen anodyne events (horse race photo-finish photographs, gamblers, everyday historians, busy with activities other than their main professional tasks) rather than violence itself. The video depicts the journeys of Zainab Fakhouri, who left, or was forced to leave, Beir Zeit, Beirut, Amman and Freetown between 1947 and 1971. *Missing Lebanese Wars* would become, in the form of plates and a notebook, one of the files in *The Atlas Group Archive*, deposited by Dr. Fakhouri, a celebrated Lebanese historian and one of the fictive legatees of the *Archive*. Here Raad sets down the themes that will recur in his entire œuvre: the wars we see, those we flee, those we live through and those we perceive; exile, collective and personal history; the impossible writing of the disasters of war; psychic drifts; images and their dismantling; art as a political space and political activity conceived through aesthetic engagement. These videos, constructed using the methods of montage, fragmentation and out-of-sync sound, laid the foundations of the formal and conceptual procedures of *The Atlas Group* (a project Raad describes as having unfolded between 1989 and 2004, and which has now been exhausted) and of Raad's next project on the history of art in the Arab world, *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow.*

Walid Raad belongs to a generation of artists who developed their artistic projects in the wake of a

certain kind of militant cinema which arose in Lebanon in the 1970s.[1] This cinema set out to bear witness and directly denounce the horrors of war and its absurdity.[2] Raad and his fellow artists turned to contemporary art (to video, installations, publications, and performances) in order to use it as a space capable of accommodating complex visual temporalities, narrative protocols, and cognitive procedures. This space facilitated the production of new epistemic and cognitive models that resisted spectacle and the spectacular, and that challenged the models disseminated by the dominant mass media industries. These artists did not occupy the field of contemporary art in order to set up the next stage in a history of forms. Nor did they intend here to validate, resuscitate or contradict any part of the history of art. They occupied this space in order to use it. In other words, they wanted to take possession of it as a field of possibilities and of specific poetic and political efficiencies.

Faced with the abuses of memory and commemoration that prevent real historical inquiry, Paul Ricoeur warned in *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*: "… to see one thing is not to see another; to tell the story of a tragedy, is to forget something else…."[3] Leaning on Henry Rousso's thesis about France after the Second World War, Ricoeur wrote of the "screen memory" of "resistantialism" (an official narrative depicting a nation in which a majority had resisted, deliberately forgetting collaboration). He stated: "The obsession is selective and the dominant narratives enshrine an obliteration of part of the field of vision; here again, filmic representation plays a role (*Shoah*, *Nuit et Brouillard*)."[4] The philosopher-historian thus defined artistic and documentary film production as efficient and necessary to the interstices of official historical narratives. Artistic activity does not only seek to represent history but also to supply it with new materials (images, testimonies, texts) and new modes of knowledge. In his essay "To Remember or not to Remember – That Is Not a Question" from his book *Undeserving Lebanon*, Jalal Toufic, a writer, artist and thinker with whom Walid Raad has worked closely for

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[1] Raad's contemporaries include Ziad Abillama, Tony Chakar, Khalil Joreige and Joana Hadjithomas, Lamia Joreige, Marwan Rechmaoui, Walid Sadek, Ghassan Salhab, Paola Yaacoub and Michel Lassere, and Akram Zaatari, among others.

[2] See the films of Borhane Alaouié, Maroun Bagdadi, Randa Chahal, Jean Chamoun, May Masri, and Jocelyne Saab, among others. ("Les créations artistiques libanaises d'après-guerre: tentatives de représentation d'un espace temps chaotique," http//www.ghassansalhab.com, 2009).

[3] Paul Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire l'oubli*, Paris: Le Seuil/Essais, 2000, p. 105.

[4] Ibid., p. 584. (Claude Lanzman's film *Shoah (1985)* testifies to the foundations and mechanisms of anti-Semitism in Europe and Poland in particular. Alain Resnais' *Nuit et Brouillard* [Night and Fog] (1955) depicts the concentration camps and deportation).

fifteen years, stated: "Against the prevalent post-traumatic amnesia encountered in post-war Lebanon, and which is exemplified by the unjust and scandalous general amnesty law that was passed by parliament on 28 March 1991 (Law No. 84/91) and that pardoned all political crimes prior to its enactment with the exclusion of 'crimes of assassination or attempted assassination of religious figures, political leaders, and foreign or Arab diplomats', writers and filmmakers should have devised affirmative scenarios and strategies either to remember or not to remember: Not remember – without forgetting."[5] In a context in which artists and thinkers need to confront iconic and lexical registers that are extremely powerful and distributed across the public urban audiovisual space (notably by Hezbollah, but also by The Lebanese Forces, and other political parties and militias in Lebanon); in a country riddled with inter-communal struggles and unable to write the history of recent conflicts and faced with the omnipresent ideological exploitation of memory, Raad's *The Atlas Group* is an indubitable "machinery", capable of questioning the mediation and archiving of information.

In his 1941 essay, "The Artist as Producer," and referring to Brecht's plays, Walter Benjamin wrote: "Novels have not always existed in the past; novels will not necessarily exist in the future; the same is true of tragedies; and of great epics." He went on to say: "A gigantic process of 'rethinking literary forms' in which many opposites in terms of which we have been in the habit of thinking could lose their impact." And, "… the concept of technique is the dialectical anchor point from which the sterile opposition of form and content can be overcome."[6] In Benjamin's and Brecht's materialist thinking, artistic forms are viewed as conditioned by the historical circumstances that frame their appearance. It is necessary as such to coordinate the forms and historical aims through "appropriate techniques."

"In the 1970s," as Benjamin Buchloh emphasized in his interview with Catherine David and Jean-François Chevrier, "an optimistic idea of art associated with the possibility of radical critical transformation was widespread." At that time, a genuine idea emerged, that of the possibility of a direct dialogue with the public through the methods employed by conceptual artists (diagrams, photographs, annotations) as pure techniques of communication standing outside aesthetic and

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[5] Jalal Toufic, *Underserving Lebanon*, 2007, PDF, http//www.jalal.toufic.com
[6] Walter Benjamin, "The Artist as Producer," a lecture delivered to the Institute for the Study of Fascism in Paris on 27 April 1934, *Essays on Brecht*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag. The quoted text is a translation of the French, Paris: La Fabrique, 2003, p. 122.

academic conventions. The public could grasp artworks directly with a "purity of procedure," a purity not unlike that implied by the notion of "use value." As Jean–François Chevrier noted, Douglas Heubler is explicit on this point: "Once a procedure is clear, anyone can use it. The artist produces models, procedures which can be reused, abolishing the frontier between author and receiver."[7]

Joseph Kosuth's Conceptual Art of 1965 was conceived as a self-reflective discipline (Art as Idea). But Lucy Lippard reminded us in 1973 that the era of Conceptual Art was also that of the civil rights movement, of the Art Workers' Coalition (AWC), [8] of feminist movements and of counterculture. The goal was to escape cultural restrictions and to use cheap, ephemeral, non-intimidating materials (video, performance, photography, stories, texts, actions) in order to dematerialize the artwork. As Lippard pointed out, while Minimalism argued for "less is more," Conceptual Art proposed to produce "more with less."[9]

Walid Raad is the son of a Palestinian mother, and a Lebanese Christian father. It was by leaving his country to study in the United States of America, in Rochester (New York) that he received the "education" that defined his political outlook. It was in the United States that he encountered the artists who were re-injecting in the 1990's historical and political elements into the post-minimalist and post-conceptual formal vocabularies: Dennis Adams, Hans Haacke, Martha Rosler, among others. These artists aligned themselves with a 1930's tradition of political photomontage (John Heartfield, Hannah Hoch) to pursue their critique of commercial culture, of the organisation of public space, and of the systems of mercantile and ideological domination. It was in this environment that Raad assimilated the theoretical, ethical, and moral postulates that came from the history of documentary photography and film. It was in this context that Raad began to use familiar Conceptual Art strategies (anonymity, neutrality, dematerialisation, lexical decentring, use of documents as artworks, display mechanisms) to construct his aesthetic vocabulary and visual and narrative techniques. It was also from his position as an emigrant that he perceived, from afar, the explosions of Lebanon's wars at the same time as he was discovering photography and American

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[7] Benjamin Buchloh, Jean-François Chevrier, Catherine David, "The political potential of art," *Politics poetics: Documenta X - the book*, Ostfildern, Cantz Verlag, 1997, p. 384.
[8] The Art Worker's Coalition was founded in January 1969 to protect artists' rights as well as to protest against the ongoing war in Vietnam.
[9] Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, Berkeley-London: University of California Press, 1997, p. X.

abstract painting. It was from his exiled position as an emigrant that he constructed a formal and conceptual system based on fragments, scattered information filtered through far-off transmissions, and of violence to be represented, imagined, and recomposed.

As Susan Sontag pointed out: "Harrowing photographs do not inevitably lose their power to shock. But they are not much help if the task is to understand. Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us."[10] The work of the historian or the artist should be to transform such "haunting" into writing, into knowledge and into embodied operations. Such are the objectives of *The Atlas Group*. Although he uses the Brechtian machine and the operative techniques handed down to him by his conceptual predecessors, Raad has combined these activist methods with Freudian theories to draw a map not of events as occurences, but of events with their psychic and affective weight and especially of the "traumatic blank" that follows the disaster of war.

In Western Europe after the Second World War, many artists, writers, and thinkers talked and thought about the impossibility of representation as a moral obligation. Horror, by its very essence, was viewed as impossible to represent and figure. Abnegation and powerlessness in the face of the world became thereafter de rigueur. The aim then was to "punish art, to discredit it, to bring it down definitively." 1960's Fluxus artists (Wolf Vostell, Nam June Paik, George Maciunas, George Brecht, Joseph Beuys) or Sigmar Polke in Germany, aimed to "struggle against retinal formalism" and even against the "possibility of making art," this discipline that had no trouble living side by side with Nazism and communist totalitarianisms.[11] Freeing us from this ideological and historical burden, Jacques Rancière stated in his 1997 essay "L'inoubliable," a moral and aesthetic study of documentary film published in *Arrêt sur Histoire*: "We need then to reverse Adorno's all too famous statement that art is impossible after Auschwitz. The opposite is in fact true. After Auschwitz only art is possible because art is always the present of an absence, because it is art's true task to offer the invisible up to be seen, through *the controlled strength of words and images*, joined or disjoined, because it is the only thing that can make vulnerable the inhuman."[12] This quote also helps us understand how artists since the 1990's have relied on theories of documentary film in order to think anew the question of representation and the affinities between art and history. And

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[10] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of the Others*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003, p. 89.
[11] Bernard Marcadé, "Sigmar Polke, Quel repentir?," *Sigmar Polke,* Paris: Museum of Modern Art - City of Paris, ARC, 1988, p. 10.
[12] Jacques Rancière, "L'inoubliable," *Arrêt sur Histoire*, Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1997, pp. 66-67.

conversely, this quote helps us consider how the space of contemporary art provided a privileged experimental domain for film, most notably for the building of what will be referred to as "third cinema," a form of cinematographic essay situated somewhere between documentary, fiction and apparatus theory.

In his essay, Rancière used as an example the *modus operandi* of Arnaud des Pallières in his film *Drancy Avenir*,[13] a film essay that tells the story of the internment camp in Drancy.[14] In this part-narrative, part-documentary, and part-testimony film, Arnaud des Pallières adopted a form of montage that juxtaposed literary and philosophical texts (Walter Benjamin's *On the Concept of History*, Maguerite Duras' *La Douleur*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* among others), alongside the testimony of former camp inmates (related with voice-over sound) and present-day images of the site itself. Like others of his generation (he was born in the 1960s), des Pallières was looking for a cinematographic form that would permit him to consider, over and above cinema's documentary nature, questions of memory, its transmission, and of witnessing. Taking a stand against all authoritarian mandates to witness and remember, the film also deals with the possibility of not-witnessing; des Pallières even invokes the case of David Nathan, a former inmate who refused to directly bear witness.

According to Rancière, "The fiction of *Drancy-Avenir* is constructed exemplarily as the very construction of the link between an idea of history and the *force of art*."[15] Viewers are never confronted in this film with images that might overwhelm them. Every shot is built around off-camera and latent elements. Horror is evoked and the viewer challenged by a structure composed of words, texts, and images. The texts do not comment on the images, and the images do not illustrate the texts. Rather, the various elements answer each other, and call each other into question. The aim is to shatter once and for all the idea of a complete and univocal representation. This involves working with the "essay form" which postulates a juxtaposition or a confrontation of heterogeneous elements in order to provoke thought.

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[13] Arnaud des Pallières, *Drancy Avenir*, Paris: "Les Films du requin" production, 1996.
[14] From August 1941 to 1944, the Drancy internment camp, often called just "Drancy," located to the northeast of Paris in the town of Drancy (the *département* of the Seine, now Seine-Saint-Denis,) was the logistical hub for the holocaust in France. The Drancy internment camp was one of the main points of departure for the Nazi extermination camps.
[15] Jacques Rancière, "L'inoubliable", *Arrêt sur Histoire*, Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1997, p. 66-67.

Jalal Toufic has put forward the concept of the "withdrawal of tradition passing a surpassing disaster." In the aftermath of *surpassing* disasters whose consequences exceed traditional material and psychological effects, Toufic writes that tradition "withdraws." The notion of tradition proposed here should be understood as "what conjointly materially "survived the surpassing disaster, was immaterially withdrawn by it, and had the fortune of being subsequently resurrected by artists, writers, and thinkers."[16] Tradition here can also be understood as the common ground on which, images and voices could emerge. In *Drancy-Avenir*, the literary and philosophical texts that are voiced and repeated form a cultural "clamour," a possible ground on which the witnesses' constructed story can take place.

[Images : tableau 1,2,3,4 (Drancy Avenir)]

In his essay "Forthcoming," Toufic writes that past a surpassing disaster, "art functions like a mirror in vampires films. It reveals the withdrawal of what we think is still there."[17] Georges Didi-Huberman ends his book *Images Malgré Tout* by quoting Siegfried Kracauer's celebrated comparison in his *Theory of Film* between documentary film and the shield of Perseus. The hero is able to cut off the head of Medusa without ever looking her directly in the face, but by seeing her through the mediation of the shield's polished surface. "The moral of this myth," Kracauer tells us, "is of course that we do not see, that we cannot see actual horrors because they paralyse us with blinding fear…. The cinema screen is Athena's reflective shield…. They (the images) call the spectator to take up and therefore to incorporate in his memory the real face of things, these things too dreadful to be beheld in reality."[18] As Didi-Huberman points out: "The Medusa myth reminds us first of all that real horror is a source of powerlessness for us…. This power annihilates the victim and petrifies, blinding or rendering mute those who look upon it with unprotected eyes. But horror reflected, escorted, reconstructed as image – not without reason as Godard did, think first and foremost of archive images – can be a source of knowledge, on condition that we engage our responsibility in the formal system of the produced image."[19] In both Toufic's mirror and Kracauer's

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[16] Jalal Toufic, "Forthcoming," *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster,* California: REDCAT, 2009, pp. 63-64.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film, The Redemption of Physical Reality*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2005, pp. 305-306, quoted by Georges Didi-Huberman in *Images Malgré Tout*, Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 2005, p. 220.
[19] Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images Malgré Tout*, Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 2005, p. 221.

shield of Perseus, we are presented with systems for seeing that function indirectly through the intrusion of a third element between the eye and the image. These systems demand an action, the action of thought whose engine is montage. The ethical and moral problems of montage as a mode of producing knowledge are one of the principal aesthetic strategies of *The Atlas Group*, where photographs, texts and documents are never offered at face value, but always trouble each other.

None of the documents proposed by *The Atlas Group* is inherently faked. The objects themselves (photographs, texts, traces) have not been manipulated. It is their assembly in a narrative system that propels them into fiction. This is the way in which Raad proposes and invents what he calls "hysterical documents." *Notebook volume 38: Already been in a lake of fire* in the file of Dr. Fadl Fakhouri in *The Atlas Group Archive* contains 145 cutout photographic images of cars that are the same brand, model, colour as the vehicles used in car-bomb attacks during the Lebanese wars of 1975 to 1991. The notes attached to the images specify the dates, locations and times of the explosions; the car's brand and model; type of explosives used; and number of casualties. The facts and the documentary elements referred to in this notebook are real and the events actually took place. What is fictional here is the piecing together through montage of the notebook page and the story attributed to the imaginary character, Dr. Fakhouri, the supposed author of these notes and annotations.

The French philosopher and historian, Michel de Certeau, who based his theory of history on Freudian concepts, wrote: "Taking the pieces organised in advance by the imaginary structures of his society, he (the historian) moves them about, adds others, establishes distances and comparisons between them, detects traces of other things from these clues, refers to a vanished construction. In short, he creates absences."[20] Didi-Huberman used this statement in his book *Images Malgré Tout* in order to clear a place for the question of the "imagination" in a political understanding of history. In Raad's works, all articulations between truth and image, between hysterical documents and narrative fictions, between information and fabulation, whether in *The Atlas Group* or in *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow* lean on and present latency, lapse and speculation as vectors for historical truth equal to those of verification, authenticity and proof.

The documents (videos, texts, photographs) in *The Atlas Group Archive* are never presented in

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[20] Michel De Certeau, "Le lieu de l'histoire," *L'écriture de l'histoire*, Paris: Editions Gallimard, Folio/Histoire, (1975), 2007, p. 67.

their original state. Scanned, mounted, multiplied, they are only shown in their digitally reproduced form. Their original state is lost in the layers of transmissions, exhibitions and repetitions, and metaphorically, in the *rumours* of history. Raad reveals only facsimiles. Indeed, it is not the materiality of these artifacts that needs to be verified and exhibited, but their transmission and imaginary structures. Film-based photography captures a light imprint which comes from outside. Digitally processed images come from the interior of a space and appear as its external translation. It is this movement from inside to outside that defines the dream image in Freudian theory.

Raad initially unveiled *The Atlas Group* and organised the mobility of his archive with lecture-performances in the early 2000's. The original support of this archive without place, created digitally and virtually, was the artist's voice. Publicly disclosed in sessions, in files and via screenings, it was only after its so-called closure in 2004 and the ensuing retrospective exhibition[21] in 2006 that the public had the opportunity to see the entire archive in a single place. This doubtless provided an opportunity to assess not only the plethoric and octopus-like sprawl of *The Atlas Group*, but also to view this archive in its autobiographic format. Each file is clearly the outcome of an individual investigation or collation of elements. The files are notebooks, registers and personal inscriptions. As a whole, these records form a vast journal of personal thoughts of the same order as those assembled by Hannah Arendt, Berthold Brecht or Walter Benjamin during their respective periods of exile. As Didi-Huberman says of Brecht's *Arbeitsjournal* (work journal), the task is to "contrast the (hi)stories of a subject (minuscule stories, after all) with the history of the entire world (History with a capital 'H'). It immediately offers up, like many other works by Brecht, the poem of historicity at the horizon of every question of intimacy and every question of actuality."[22] In *The ABC of War* in 1939, Brecht extracted elements from the real (press cuttings, journalistic images), taking them out of their initial context of production and distribution in order to reassemble them in "tabulations" (montages) along with other heterogeneous elements (texts, other images). The page here is a poetic space where new formulations and enunciations are possible. Montage creates a dialectic between reality and interpretation. It provides a way to combine the objectivity of facts with subjectivity. Using procedures such as montage and the

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[21] *The Atlas Group (1989-2004), A Project by Walid Raad,* Cologne: Walther König, 2006.
[22] Frederic Jameson, "Epilogue," *Brecht and Method*, London-New York: Verso, 1998, pp. 165-179, quoted by Georges Didi-Huberman in *Quand les images prennent position: L'Oeil de l'histoire*, Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 2003, p. 21.

disassembly and reassembly of fragments, the goal is to "take a position through dys-position."[23] The space of the notebook or that of the plate are privileged places for a play, one that enables the reconstitution of facts through the "imagination." This is why the notebook is the preferred ground for the exile's or the emigrant's writing, this writing which reconstructs events seen from the far distance. It is in this way that the notebook also became the preferred site for *The Atlas Group*'s investigations.

[Images : Brecht 1,2]

Frédéric Gros described "that bleak time, on this occasion the time of civil wars," when factions tear each other apart in countries with no structure. He writes: "We are constantly in year zero…. When the epic story of war described war as it unfolded, the long assembly of troops, the confused beginnings of the battle, followed by the tragic moment of decision: debacle or victory, the states of violence are confused: neither war nor peace nor decisive victory nor final defeat are possible, just an unending bogging down, with shifting roles."[24] The blast of an exploding car or the detonation of a bomb occur in the routine of unfolding events as a rupture of the present moment, as pure instants of violence, a definitive disruption of all rational, linear chronology. Each event contains its before, its now and its after. *The Atlas Group* transcribes these temporalities. As reconstitutions and investigations of events after the fact, *The Atlas Group* presents a web of potentialities, of what may have happened, of what may now happen and of what may come about again. This "extraordinary" time is drawn, for example, in *Oh God, he said, talking to a tree,* a series of plates showing the plumes of bombs that exploded over villages in South Lebanon in 2006. Digitally cut out, isolated, and reduced in scale to the very limit of legibility, these plumes appear as hallucinations. And in this rupture of the instant, the task is to think a difference between what is true and what is false, and moreover if possible, to think a difference between what it is to be alive and to be dead.

What the witnesses of violent events bear witness to (A large part of philosophy and theory of History have affirmed time and again) is not the approach of death, but the fact of being alive, of

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[23] Georges Didi-Huberman, *Quand les images prennent position: L'Oeil de l'histoire*, Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 2003, p. 231.

[24] Frédéric Gros, "En finir," *États de Violence: Essai sur la fin de la guerre*, Paris: Editions Gallimard, collection NRF/Essais, 2006, p. 239.

having survived. "On 20 July fifty years ago I experienced the joy of execution by firing squad," so wrote Maurice Blanchot to Jacques Derrida in 1997. During the Second World War, Blanchot was arrested by the Germans and placed against a wall to be shot. At the moment when his death was imminent, he was saved by a Russian soldier. In *L'Instant de ma mort,* Blanchot recounts this event in fictional form. Derrida describes this experience: "The witness testifies to his non-death…. We should understand correctly here: what happens to him is not dying but not-dying." Blanchot testifies to a moment in time that is neither past, nor present nor future, a moment that no longer belongs to any chronology, a moment that has tipped over into what Derrida terms as *achronie*: "Neither synchrony nor diachrony, a continuous anachrony in instant after instant. The *démourance* as achrony." And the story of this instant becomes embodied in fictional form: "I remember a young man," writes Blanchot referring to himself. And Derrida underlines: "The witness bears witness for a witness" at a moment when "autobiography becomes autothanatography," when death "arrives, when one is not yet dead but already dead at the same instant."[25] *My neck is thinner than a hair: Engines*, *Notebook volume 38: Already been in a lake of fir*e, *I might die before I get a rifle* are files from *The Atlas Group* whose titles evoke that tenuous instant between life and death. *The Atlas Group* comprises a complex deictic of authors, inheritors, photographers and characters who bear witness in their own names or in that of others, simply by the very fact of being miraculously alive. They are "divided subjects," to use Derrida's terms when speaking about Blanchot who writes about himself in the third person and in fiction. *Divided* as Raad might well be with *The Atlas Group*, his own miraculous biography*.*

I Got up, *I Wen*t, *I Read*, *I Me*t, *I am still alive*. These formulations are at the core of the conceptual protocols employed by On Karawa to articulate the passing time of his survival of the disaster of Hiroshima. This Japanese artist exiled in the United States tested the extenuation of painting in his *Date Paintings*, monochrome pictures painted in 24 hours and indicating no more than the date of their creation. Each *Date Painting* is contained in a box made in the same 24 hours. Each box holds press cuttings published on the day when the painting was done. It has never been made clear whether the boxes, although part of the artwork, should be exhibited along with the paintings. It is as if this packaging in newspaper print detailing fragments of topicality should remain secondary, behind the real subject of the work: the factual recording of the continuous thread of the

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[25] Jacques Derrida, *Demeure: Maurice Blanchot*, Paris: Editions Galilée, 1998, pp 60-87.

artist's existence. On Kawara uses radical conceptual means to represent an existential question. The dialectical and visual conceptual technique employed in *The Atlas Group* works also service a story related to a question of life.

[Images : On Kawara1,2]

In revolutionary thinking, vandalism is considered to be a political act. In *Villes en Guerre*, Christelle Sniter emphasizes that "these acts of vandalism are part of a strategy to control the ideological message mediated by signifying elements in the urban landscape, making such actions political and not destructive."[26] *The Atlas Group* works constitute an aggregate built from sources extracted and recomposed according to a reconfiguration of the public space of the exhibition and of collective memory. The coloured plates forming *Appendix XVIII: Plates 22-154* in Raad's *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow* come from documents (theses, invitations, posters, letters, certificates) related to the history of modern and contemporary art in Lebanon and the Middle East. Raad collected them in response to the current upsurge in cultural industries in this region of the world. He confirms that the repetitions, break-ups, erasures and strikes which he made use of on these documents are means to allow the lines, forms and colours to "be resurrected," "to be available once again" in order "to make them accessible again for the first time."

Jalal Toufic wrote that the remaking of an already existing artwork may be symptomatic of an attempt to counter the "withdrawal of tradition" following a "surpassing disaster." In *Drancy Avenir,* Arnaud de Pallières links his work on the memory of deportation with the true story of the opera singer Anne-Lise Nathan, daughter of David Nathan, who lost the use of half of her face following an emotional shock. The film is punctuated by scenes that show her relearning how to sing and rehearsing "Côme Imbroglio," an aria from Mozart's *Cosi Fan Tutte*. Arnaud des Pallières describes his intention: "Anne-Lise at work, this is a kind of metaphor for my project: someone who is learning how to make art, learning how to control her voice, how to sing louder or more softly."[27] The building of a common primer is crucial especially when one wants to think of the present, after a disaster, through a dialectical work about memory and its transmission. This is the primer that will

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[26] Christelle Sniter, "Propagande, vandalisme et oubli, La Statue d'Edith Cavell," *Villes en Guerre*, Eds. Philippe Chassaigne and Jean-Marc Largeaud, Paris: Armand Colin, 2004, p. 293.

[27] Arnaud des Pallières, "Contre le devoir de mémoire," interview with Nathan Réra, *De Paris à Drancy: ou les possibilités de l'art après Auschwitz*, Perthuis: Rouge Profond, 2009, p. 146.

make speech possible again. Art is a fundation of this primer.

[Image : Drancy-Avenir (_Singer)]

Giorgio Agamben described profanation as that which "deactivates the apparatuses of power and restores to common usage the spaces that power has confiscated."[28] According to Jacques Rancière, Marcel Broodthaers' striking out of every word in Mallarmé's work *Jamais un coup de dé n'abolira le hasard*, aims to "question the exchange surface of the poem," to "bring Mallarmé back into play," to make the poem's surface available once again for an "image."[29] The point is therefore to desecrate for a time the system of a thing, a poem, a story, a list of documents, in order to render their surface available to the community once again.

Walker Evans once defined his "documentary style" as that which brings out the "extraordinary in History."[30] He achieved this in part by working with an indexing and montage system that linked photographs with captions that only indicated the places and dates of the shots. It was in the gap between the image and the caption that Evans sought to create the space for his poetic thought, thus challenging the false dichotomy between the documentary and the pictorial in photography. For his series *Sweet Talk* Raad presents images of Beirut captioned with the same captions and following the same page layouts as those used by the Getty Museum in their 1995 book on Walker Evans.[31] It seems that in this journey among photographs of ruins, full-length portraits of local inhabitants and landscape details, and in the gaps between the words and the images, it is the extraordinary side of the violence of war that is on the point of breaking out, disrupting the peaceful routine of this photographic "road movie." But it is not without humour that Raad appropriates a system for archiving and indexing the real which comes from a great modern (photographic) artist and a prestigious American institution. A mischievous turnaround in a context in which the utopian and formal principles of various modernities and of Conceptual Art have become recurrent stylistic conventions in today's cultural industries' systems of recognition.

In *Index XXVI: Artists* from *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow*, Raad claims that the names of

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[28] Giorgio Agamben, *Profanazioni*, Rome: Nottetempo, 2005. French translation, *Profanations*, Paris: Payot et Rivages, Poche, (2005), 2006, p. 101.
[29] Jacques Rancière, *L'espace des mots: De Mallarmé à Broodthaers*, Nantes: Fine Arts Museum, 2005.
[30] Olivier Lugon, *Le Style Documentaire*, Paris: Editions Macula, 2001, p. 74.
[31] Judith Keller, *Walker Evans: The Getty Museum Collection*, California: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 1995.

artists on display on his broken white walls were transmitted to him telepathically. The torn-apart letters and words of the desecrated documents induce a confused reading at the threshold of hallucination. The artist transposes his project into a space that is "not only hypersubjective, but intersubjective, common" like that which Catherine Perret detects in Henri Michaux's drawings made under the influence of mescaline. Illumination, dreams and psychic drift are in the service here of a political project, that of finding the form of a language that belongs to the community (a common good). This language is located "outside the social field and is not instrumental."[32]

The Sfeir-Semler Gallery is located in Beirut's Karantina, a district that was the site of massacres during the civil war. Elegant and chic, the gallery is a white cube par-excellence. Initially regarded as an experimental space by the avant-gardes, the white cube has clearly become a spatial convention and a speculative feature, especially in this era when high art practices are ever more closely linked to finance and high-tech industries. An archive without a home, a virtual archive, *The Atlas Group* belongs to the realm of thought. This is the moral ground of its building. In 2005, invited to present his project at the Sfeir-Semler Gallery in Beirut Raad was confronted with the impossibility of *The Atlas Group*'s "coming back home". He organised what was simultaneously the project's "withdrawal," exile, and inventory, keeping a safe distance from the gallery's actual white walls. He placed *The Atlas Group* in a miniature white cube, in a fabulous other space of which scale is comparable to that of a notebook or a personal diary; there where play, the imagination, (political and ethic) thought and perhaps even utopia, could still take place.

Hélène Chouteau-Matikian

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[32] Catherine Perret, "Voir, Mimer, Dire," *Les Porteurs d'ombre*: *Mimesis et Modernité*, Paris: Belin, "Extrême contemporain" series, 2001, p. 231.