ANYWHERE OR NOT AT ALL

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Philosophy of Contemporary Art

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Contents

Introduction 1

1 *The fiction of the contemporary* 15
Together in time? – three periodizations of contemporary art – idea, problem, fiction, task – the global transnational, or, the contemporary today – Joseph Bitar – fictionalization of artistic authority/collectivization of artistic fictions: a First Transnational

2 *Art beyond aesthetics* 37
Art versus aesthetics (Jena Romanticism contra Kant) – periodization as historical ontology: postconceptual art – a speculative proposition – an image of romanticism (Benjamin, Schlegel, Lewitt) – fragment and sentence – information and series – process and project

3 *Modernisms and mediations* 71
The double heritage of the modern in art – artistic modernisms: aesthetic, specific, generic – mediations after mediums: nominalism and genre, isms and series – everything, everywhere? Polke and Richter

4 *Transcategoriality: postconceptual art* 99
Smithson and medium (or, against 'sculpture') – the 'interminable avalanche of categories' – ontology of materializations: non-site – conceptual abstraction and 'pure perception'

5 *Photographic ontology, infinite exchange* 117
Distributive unity – the photograph: metonymic model of an imagined unity – digitalization, art and the real (or, anxiety about abstraction) – the visible, the invisible and the multiplication of visualizations

6 *Art space* 133
Non-places and the textualization of art – architecturalization: three questions – construction and expression – art as displaced urbanism: capitalist constructivism of the exhibition-form – transnationalization: art industry – project space

7 *Art time* 175
Attention and distraction: boredom as possibility – distracted reception (duration and rhythm) – memory or history? – testimonies: three works – expectation as a historical category (critique of Koselleck) – expecting the unexpected: puncturing the horizon

Acknowledgements 213
Notes 215
Bibliography 255
Image credits 271
Index 273

The global transnational, or, the contemporary today

And increasingly, the fiction of the contemporary is primarily a global or a planetary fiction. More specifically, the fiction of a global transnationality has recently displaced the 140-year hegemony of an internationalist imaginary, 1848–1989, which came in a variety of political forms. This is a fiction – a projection of the temporary unity of the present across the planet – grounded in the contradictory penetration of received social forms ('communities', 'cultures', 'nations', 'societies' – all increasingly inadequate formulations) by capital, and their consequent enforced interconnection and dependency. In short, today, the contemporary (the fictive relational unity of the historical present) is transnational because our modernity is that of a tendentially global capital. Transnationality is the putative socio-spatial form of the current temporal unity of historical experience.[35]

As Gayatri Spivak has argued, 'demographic shifts, diasporas, labour migrations, the movements of global capital and media, and processes of cultural circulation and hybridization' have rendered the twin geopolitical imaginary of a culturalist postcolonial nationalism and a metropolitan multiculturalism at best problematic and at worse redundant. Rather,

> What we are witnessing in the postcolonial and globalizing world is a return of the demographic, rather than territorial, frontiers that predate and are larger than capitalism. These demographic frontiers, responding to large-scale migration, are now appropriating the

> contemporary version of virtual reality and creating the kind of parastate collectivities that belonged to the shifting multicultural empires that preceded monopoly capitalism.[36]

Territorial frontiers or borders (basically, nation-states) are subject to erosion by 'globalization' in two ways. First, they have an increasing albeit still restricted physical 'permeability'. 'Borders are easily crossed *from* metropolitian countries, whereas attempts to enter from the so-called peripheral countries encounter bureaucratic and policed frontiers, altogether more difficult to permeate.'[37] People mainly cross borders from the so-called periphery to the metaphorical centre only as variable capital – including as art labour. (Art is a kind of passport. In the new transnational spaces, it *figures* a market utopia of free movement, while in actuality it embodies the contradiction of the mediation of this movement by capital.) Second, informational technology makes possible the constitution of new social subjects, and – equally importantly – the reconstruction of the unity of fragmented older ones, across national frontiers, in a new way.

But how is this geopolitically complex contemporaneity to be experienced or represented? And, in particular, how is it to be experienced through or as art? The issue is less 'representation' than 'presentation' (less *Vorstellung* than *Darstellung*): the interpretation of what is, through the construction of new wholes out of its fragments and modalities of existence. This is as much a manifestation of the *will* to contemporaneity – a will to force the multiplicity of coeval social times together – as it is a question of representation. Art is a privileged cultural carrier of contemporaneity, as it was of previous forms of modernity. With the historical expansion, geopolitical differentiation and temporal intensification of contemporaneity, it has become critically incumbent upon any art with a claim on the present to situate itself, reflexively, within this expanded field. The *coming together of different times* that constitutes the contemporary, and the *relations between the social spaces* in which these times are embedded and articulated, are thus the two main axes along which the historical meaning of art is to be plotted. In response to this condition, in recent years, the inter- and transnational characteristics of an art space have become the primary markers of its contemporaneity. In the process, the institutions of contemporary art have attained an unprecedented degree of historical self-consciousness and have created a novel kind of cultural space – with the international biennale as its already tiring emblem – dedicated to the exploration through art of similarities and differences between geopolitically diverse forms of social experience that have only recently begun to be represented within the parameters of a common world.[38]

If art is to function critically within these institutions, as a construction and expression of the contemporary – that is, if it is to appropriate

the de-temporalizing power of the image as the basis for new historical temporalizations – it must relate directly to the socio-spatial ontology of its own international and transnational sites and relations. It is at this point that the critical historical significance of the transformation of the ontology of the artwork, effected in the course of the last fifty years (our second periodization of contemporary art, above), from a craft-based ontology of mediums to a postconceptual and transcategorical ontology of materializations, comes into its own.

This leads me to my main thesis, which at this point I can do no more than baldly state: it is the *convergence* and *mutual conditioning* of historical transformations in the ontology of the artwork (Chapters 2 and 4) and the social relations of art space (Chapter 6) – a convergence and mutual conditioning that has its roots in more general economic and communicational processes – that makes contemporary art possible, in the emphatic sense of an art of contemporaneity. These convergent and mutually conditioning transformations take the common negative form of processes of 'de-bordering' (the Germans would say, *Entgrenzung*): on the one hand, the de-bordering of the arts as mediums, and on the other, the de-bordering of the national social spaces of art. More positively, one might say that these de-borderings have opened up distinctive new possibilities for the practices of a generic 'art', on the one hand, and those of an in-principle-infinite exchange, on the other.[39] This has been an extraordinarily complicated and profoundly contradictory historical process, in which artists, art-institutions and markets have negotiated the politics of regionalism, postcolonial nationalism and migration, in order to overwrite the open spatial logic of post-conceptual art with global political-economic dynamics.

But how can 'art' occupy, articulate, critically reflect and transfigure so global a transnational space? Only, I think, if the subject-position of its production is able to reflect – that is, to construct and thereby express – something of the structure of 'the contemporary' itself. The work of The Atlas Group (1999–2005) is emblematic here because it focuses attention on two distinctive and related aspects of this construction of a subject-position of the contemporary: fictionalization and collectivization.

Joseph Bitar

Joseph Bitar, we are told in the opening section of a 2004 video work by The Atlas Group/Walid Raad entitled *We Can Make Rain but No One Came to Ask*, 'lives in Beirut and is the city's only resident explosives expert . . . [He] has been injured several times in his long career and was decorated in 1952 by Guy Mollet. Booby traps, mines and other murderous or incapacitating devices have no secrets for Joseph, who has plenty to do in today's Beirut.'[40] The text is laid over a photograph – we are

Fig 1: The Atlas Group in collaboration with Walid Raad, Bilal Khbeiz, and Tony Chakar, *We Can Make Rain But No One Came to Ask*, 2006

invited to presume of Bitar – credited to Laurent Maous of the Gamma agency, and provided with the classification number, 197880 (Fig. 1).

The figure of Bitar frames and gives narrative meaning to the video that follows, which is largely made up of disjunctive footage from a panoramic camera located at a road junction in the Beirut suburb that is pictured above Bitar in the opening montage. The footage documents the passing of cars and the transformation of the bomb-damaged built environment. Looking out at us as we look onto the suburban panorama, and back at him, a subtle transfer of gazes effects the displacement of Bitar's look from us to the panorama, providing our gaze with his eyes. As a result, the rest of the work appears to us, in large part, through Bitar's eyes – the eyes of someone with expertise in explosives.

This way of presenting contemporary Beirut and, more broadly, the recent history of Lebanon, from the dual standpoint of a fictional character and a documentation of explosions, is familiar from earlier work by The Atlas Group. It dates back to what is labelled 'Volume 38' of the Notebooks in the Fakhouri File in The Atlas Group Archive, *Already Been in a Lake of Fire*: 145 cut-out photographs of cars, allegedly corresponding to the make, model and colour of every car used as a bomb in the twenty-five years of wars in Lebanon between 1975 and 1991.[41] It is probably most familiar from various presentations of material from the Group file, *Thin Neck*; in particular, *My Neck is Thinner Than a Hair: A History of Car Bombs in the Lebanese Wars, Volumes 1–245* (Fig. 2), parts of which were shown at the 2003 Venice Biennale, for example. One hundred four mixed-media works from this document make up the whole of Volume 2 of The Atlas Group's collected

works.[42] In these linked series of works, including the more recent, but rather different, 'A Disclosure' (2007) – about the assassination of the Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri on Valentine's Day 2005 – the last three decades in the history of Lebanon is condensed into a history of exploding cars. Bitar's surprisingly long life – decorated fifty-five years ago, but still with plenty of work in 'today's Beirut' – encompasses this history, acting as a further condensation: a condensation of the history of the Lebanese car bomb into the figure of Bitar.[43]

The character of Fakhouri (compiler and annotator of the earlier cut-out photographs of exploded cars) was established at the outset of

Fig 2: The Atlas Group in collaboration with Walid Raad, *My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair*. Document attributed to the Atlas Group. Date (attributed): 2001. Date (production): 2003.

The Atlas Group's activities in 1999, in a transitional work that was first attributed to Walid Raad (when it was published as a project in *Public Culture*) and subsequently appeared in the name of the group: *Missing Lebanese Wars* (Fig. 3), a collection of newspaper clippings of the winning horses in weekly races allegedly bet upon by 'the major historians of the Lebanese war'. These are taped into a notebook and embellished by Fakhouri with details of 'the race's distance and duration; the time of the winning horse; calculations of averages; the historians' initials with their respective bets; the time discrepancy predicted by the winning historian' – they were betting not on the winners, but on the timing of the track photographer's photograph of the winner, relative to the winning line – along with 'short descriptions of the winning historian'. Fakhouri had previously appeared in the acknowledgements to an earlier work, *Miraculous Beginnings* (published in 1997), attributed to the Arab Research Institute in collaboration with Fouad Boustani and Walid Raad, in the foreword by Boustani, director of the Beirut Photographic Centre.[44]

In the presentation of *Missing Lebanese Wars*, Fakhouri is claimed to have been 'the most renowned historian of Lebanon', to have died in 1993, and 'to everyone's surprise' to have 'bequeathed hundreds of documents to The Atlas Group for preservation and display'. This surprise was perhaps not least occasioned by the fact that he died some six years prior to the formation of the Group. Systematically aberrant chronologies are a distinctive feature of all of the narratives presented in The Atlas Group's work, and the main sign of their fictional status.

Fakhouri is one of three characters to whom files are attributed in the Group Archive – the other two being Souheil Bachar (a Lebanese man held hostage for ten years between 1983 and 1993, who is said to have spent a brief period with the famous British and American hostages) and Operator #17. Souheil Bachar is heard on the soundtrack of the two videos *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes*, #17 and #31 (two of a purported fifty-three short videos made by Bachar, and the sole items in his file), which narrate a secret erotic dimension of the hostages' relations with their captors. Operator #17 is a Lebanese security agent who regularly turns his surveillance camera from the promenade in Beirut towards the sunset, producing a video document, which The Atlas Group entitled *I Only Wish I Could Have Wept*.

Fakhouri's identity is fixed by a series of twenty-four photographs of him on a trip to Paris and Rome in 1958 and 1959. Yet in 2006, he returned from the dead to collaborate with The Atlas Group, on a project called 'Vituperative Speeches', published in the NYU drama review *TDR*, which also published his correspondence with its editor.[45] As will already be clear, a significant proportion of Atlas

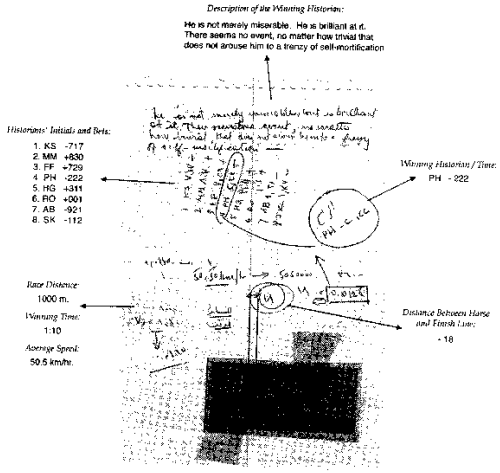


Fig. 3: The Atlas Group in collaboration with Walid Raad, *Notebook Volume 72: Missing Lebanese Wars, Plate 132*. Document attributed to Dr Fadl Fakhouri. Date (attributed): 1989. Date (production): 1998.

Group work has its public origins in intellectual publications, and only thereafter in art spaces.

On brief inspection and reflection, the division of The Atlas Group Archive into the 3 categories of A (for authored), FD (for found documents) and AGP (for Atlas Group Project documents) is thus clearly fictional – since all are actually different types of Atlas Group Project documents. But despite the numerous, albeit at times subtle, markers of the project's overall fictitious character, its documentary apparatus and forms, combined with its significant actual documentary content, continue to persuade viewers of its factual status. This is sometimes true even under extreme provocation, as shown by the audience reaction to Walid Raad's performance at the 2006 Biennale of Sydney, for example, when it seemed that no fictional exaggeration, however extreme, could undermine the presumption of factuality.

Joseph Bitar, then, is the latest of a small cast of fictional characters used by The Atlas Group (to whose own status I shall return) to

transfigure documentary material into art by means of fictions, posing, via the documentary form, as facts. There is a double movement here: these are fictional documentaries, but they nonetheless carry important elements of actual documentation within the art. History thus appears here both within and via art, in different ways, as a complex transaction between 'documentation' (as both an indexical and an institutional process) and fiction, in which fiction is the guiding hand.

Fictionalization of artistic authority/collectivization of artistic fictions: A First Transnational

Fictionalization works at two levels here and takes two main forms: the fictionalization of artistic authority or what, adapting Foucault, we may call 'the artist-function', and the fictionalization of the documentary form, in particular, the archive. In the work of The Atlas Group, this dual fictionalization corresponds to and renders visible the fictitiousness of the contemporary itself. It also renders explicit a certain general fictitiousness of the post-conceptual artwork, which is an effect of the counter-factuality inherent in its conceptual dimension, and imparts to it a structurally 'literary' aspect. Each material work, or materialization, can be understood as the performance of a fictive element or idea. In this respect, as we shall see in Chapters 2 and 4, below, the generic post-medium concept of art reincorporates 'literature', returning it to its philosophical origins in early German Romanticism: postconceptual art articulates a post-aesthetic poetics.

Historically, the fictionalization of the artist-function is, of course, not an uncommon authorial strategy. It represents an extension of both the strategy of pseudonymity (prevalent under conditions of censorship and the need for social dissimulation of various kinds) and the 'impersonality' of an Eliotian modernism. Theoretically, it is best conceived in terms of Foucault's analysis of the author-function, which was itself in many ways (like much of post-structuralism) a theoretical generalization of the implications of the practice of the modernist avant-gardes. For Foucault, the replacement of the concept of the author by that of the author-function was 'a matter of depriving the subject (or its substitute) of its role as originator, and of analyzing the subject as a variable and complex function of discourse . . . [by] grasp[ing] the subject's points of insertion, modes of functioning, and system of dependencies'.[46] The construction of an artist-function named 'The Atlas Group' is in many ways a precise application of the terms of this analysis to the production of artistic authority. Its primary characteristic is its dissemblance of a documentary practice.

This dissemblance is dependent upon, first, its creative use of anonymity, within pseudonymity, via the 'Group' form (pseudonymity, one

might say, is a condition of *historical* fictionalization); and second, the exploitation of the documentary, simultaneously, as indexical mark and pure cultural form. More deeply, it relies for its productive ambiguity upon a general ambiguity in the relationship between historical and fictional narratives, through which it achieves both its philosophical and political force. On the one hand, this ambiguity is constitutive of a practice that uses fictional historical narratives for critical ends; on the other hand, a rigorous internal demarcation between the indexical and purely formal (that is, fictional) use of documents is marked by systematically aberrant chronologies and narrative contradictions – a procedure that is at times applied to the narration of the formation of The Atlas Group itself, variously specified as 1999, 1977 and 1986–99 (1999 was the actual year). It is through the relation between the anonymous collectivity of the fiction of the Group itself and the national specificity of its fictions ('Lebanon') that the 'contemporary', global, *trans*national character and political meaning of its practice are constructed.

Artist collectives (fictional and actual) are fashionable once again. For over a decade now, they have been proliferating like wildfire through the international art community, whether in purportedly singular form ('Claire Fontaine') or explicitly collective guise (Raqs Media Collective). And there is now a revisionist historiography of such collectives' recent past.[47] There are a variety of reasons for this, mostly to do with the attempts to refashion the modes of effectivity of the relations between politics and art. My thesis is that artistic collectivism has a new function here tied to its fictionalization, at the moment of global transnationalism. The recent spate of collectives (fictional or otherwise) are its generally unconscious manifestation.

The collectivization of the fictionalization of the artist-function works, once again, at two levels: the collectivity of the Group, and the collectivization of authority inherent in the (in this case fictionalized) documentary form – at its limit, the material 'collectivity' of indexicality itself, the signifying power of nature. The link is anonymity. It is through the combination of anonymity and reference inherent in the pseudonym 'The Atlas Group', with its global connotations, that its fictive collectivity comes to figure the *speculative collectivity of the globally transnational* itself.

I claimed earlier that currently it is only capital that immanently projects the utopian horizon of global social interconnectedness, in the ultimately dystopian form of the market: only capital manifests a subject-structure at the level of the global. Yet capitalist sociality (the grounding of societies in relations of exchange) is essentially abstract; it is a matter of *form*, rather than 'collectivity'. Collectivity is produced by the interconnectedness of practices, but the universal interconnectedness and

dependencies that capital produces exhibit the structure of a subject (the unity of an activity) only objectively, in their product, separated from individual subjects and particular collectivities of labour, in the self-development of the value-form. Historically, of course, nationalism (the cultural fiction of nations) has filled this lacuna. Nations ('imagined communities') have been the privileged social subjects of competing capitals. But the subject-structure of capital no longer corresponds to the territorially discrete entities of nation-states, and other societies outside the nexus of global capital are being drawn inexorably into it. In this respect, the immanent collectivity of capitalism remains, and will always remain, structurally, 'to come'; hence the abstract and wholly formal character of its recent anticipation as 'multitude'.

The fictional collectivity of *The Atlas Group* and its narrative 'characters' is a stand-in for the missing political collectivity of the globally transnational, which is both posited and negated by capital itself. As such, it corresponds, at a structural level, to the work of such 'authors' as Luther Blissett and Wu Ming in the field of literature.[48] Politically, one might say, such work represents, by virtue of its effective relations to the philosophical history of capital, the continuation of the intellectual tradition of Marxist internationalism by new transnational artistic means. The Atlas Group could be construed as the artistic representative of a kind of 'First Transnational'.

But what then of the specifically *national* focus of the Group's work, its exclusively Lebanese fiction? The transnational is not the non-national, but it changes the status of the national, which was in any case famously only ever an 'imagined community'. Here, the fictionalization of 'Lebanon' – through the fictionalization of the evidence of its existence – effects an emblematic fictionalization of the national itself. Furthermore, this fictionalization of the national acts as the *de*-nationalizing condition of its *trans*nationalization; a transnationalization that is effected via the socio-spatial structure of the artwork/artworld. This is not transnationalism as the abstract other of the nation, but transnationalization as the mediation of the form of the nation-state with its abstractly global other. On the horizon of this movement, we can glimpse something of the radical-democratic aspect of Foucault's projection of a possible replacement of the conventional author-function (tied to relations of ownership) by some form of anonymity. It evokes the rhetorical question that closes Foucault's essay: 'What difference does it make who is speaking?'[49]

Everything, everywhere? Polke and Richter

I have written about the strategic, postconceptual character of Richter's paintings and their relations to mediums and genres elsewhere.[27] Here, I shall concentrate on the meta-critical moment of Richter's practice, the assemblage of photographs, collages and sketches entitled *Atlas* (1962–97), alongside the selection of Polke's paintings and drawings from 1998–2003 exhibited in 2002–04 as *Sigmar Polke: History of Everything*.[28] Each collection displays an aspiration to the artistic

mediation of a comprehensive totality – call it 'world' – in its spatial and temporal aspects, respectively; a quintessentially Romantic displacement of the philosophical desire for the absolute animating the heritage of German idealism. Within the terms of this aspiration, this desire – essentially, the desire that art might continue to perform its archetypically modern metaphysical function of world-mediation, under the changed conditions of the present – three issues stand out: 1. the character of this whole, the world, which this art aspires to mediate; 2. the specific character of the mediation offered by *Atlas*, and why it has become so important – increasingly important, I shall argue – to the critical redemption of Richter's œuvre; 3. the ontological status of *Atlas* in its relations to the postconceptual structure of contemporary art more generally: in particular, the way in which *Atlas* is inscribed within that dialectic of art and non-art that became constitutive of the critical structure of modern art in the wake of the historical avant-gardes.

In asking these questions of world-mediation and post-conceptuality of *Atlas*, in the context of the problem of the critical function of mediating forms, I am concerned to take my distance from an increasingly institutionally consolidated interpretative paradigm governing the reception of Richter's work. This paradigm views Richter's works in terms of three central themes: *epistemological scepticism* (a staging of doubt about 'the real'); *historical remembrance and mourning* (painting 'after the end' of painting); and *'painting' as redemption* (an affirmation of the ontological power of the act and medium of painting, despite, against, and ultimately through its fallen historical condition). Furthermore, it is often implied, by redeeming painting, Richter thereby, more fundamentally, undertakes a redemption of the human subject *through* painting. It is a dialectical redemption, to be sure – redemption via painting's scepticism about redemption – but it is a dialectically *positive* (affirmative) redemption nonetheless.[29] These three themes set the terms within which, ten years ago, Richter was somehow incorporated into the canon of American modernism, in the exhibition *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2002.[30] Richter's paintings appeared there as the nationally displaced afterlife of an American Painting retrospectively enlivened by the recognition of the underlying affinities – indeed, the ultimate unity – of Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art. This has been a complex ideological operation, of considerable subtlety in its appropriation of an existing critical literature, in which Richter himself has no doubt been deeply complicit. However, I am not concerned here with the legitimating function of Richter's critical self-consciousness; or at least, I am no more concerned with it than with other critical perspectives. (The unreflective privileging of statements by Richter about his work continues to

distort the critical literature). Rather, I am interested in the ongoing question of the senses in which Richter's work is, and is not, 'critical'. That is, I am interested in the senses in which it continues – and the senses in which it fails (perhaps, the predominant senses) – to sustain and extend the modern metaphysical, post-Romantic and, today, 'post-conceptual' conception of 'art' into new areas and forms of experience.

The openness of this question is important, since it is only by being radically open to failure that contemporary art succeeds, on the rare occasions that it does. Interpretations that wrap up Richter's work in the garb of a definitively established critical achievement ('the redemption of painting') are thus, ironically, the greatest threat to the afterlife of his work. It is perhaps an intuition of this fact that accounts for both the internal growth of *Atlas* during the 1990s (162 sheets added between 1995 and 1997) and its expanding exhibition history. Having remained unexhibited for thirteen years between 1976 and 1989, while it was in a private collection – the years of Richter's deepening painterly interest in abstraction – it has received numerous outings, in selected and complete form, since the 1995 Dia show in New York. *Atlas*, I shall suggest, acts as a critical element within Richter's œuvre, open to non-art elements, safeguarding it against the increasing closure and 'success' of his paintings. It represents a moment of genuine openness to the world 'outside' art. But what is the world that Richter's art aspires to mediate? And is it the same one mediated in Polke's work? Sigmar Polke: Richter's old comrade of 'capitalist realism'.[31]

The first thing to note here is that the 'world' of world-mediation is not, first and foremost, an empirical one. To use an early Heideggerian distinction, 'world' is not primarily 'the totality of entities which can be present-at-hand within the world' (the everyday, Kantian concept of 'world' as the totality of possible appearances). The title of Polke's show notwithstanding (it was named after a painting; two paintings, in fact), neither 'world' nor 'everything' denotes 'every thing', or 'every possible thing'. Rather, the 'world' of world-mediation is primarily an existential-phenomenological concept denoting, in Heidegger's awkward phrase, 'that "*wherein*" a factical Dasein as such can be said to "live"'.[32] The world of world-mediation is thus, first and foremost, the world of being-in-the-world, in which, in Heideggerian terms, entities appear practically, as *ready*-to-hand. It is only secondarily, and derivatively, the Kantian world of theoretical objectifications, some of which nonetheless present themselves immediately as 'objects', present-to-hand.

The world ready-to-hand for Polke and Richter in Düsseldorf, in the Federal Republic of Germany, in the early 1960s was, famously, primarily a photographically 'given' world. The visual forms of their being-in-the-world were dominated by the relative novelty of

photographically illustrated newspapers and magazines, in which the narration and documentation of events – especially via portraiture – and the advertisement of commodities formed a seamless visual continuum. This was the incipient homogeneous whole of de-realized imagery, yet at a point at which it still remained primarily a world of photographic object-images, in which 'the photograph' still prevailed over the photographic.[33] To rewrite the beginning of Marx's *Capital* yet again, we might say that the visual wealth of their society appeared to them as 'an immense collection of photographs; the individual photograph appeared as its elementary form.'[34] Photographs and their means of production were ready-to-hand: ready-to-hand to be 'remade' as paintings.

Atlas is a highly selective fragment of this 'immense collection of photographs', which, in archetypical philosophically Romantic fashion, uses its title to refer to that figuring of the absent totality that the fragment performs, negatively, via the specific mode of its completion/incompletion – as we saw in Chapter 2, above. If an atlas is an organization of geographical and astronomical knowledge in book form, Richter's *Atlas* maps Richter's world. It is post-Romantic in its necessarily individualistic and fragmentary character – not every place, every thing, every photograph, can appear; yet, on the other hand, there is also something more epistemologically primitive, something 'early modern' about the accumulative and classificatory character of its empiricism, on a scale which is at once grand (thousands of images) and hopelessly, minutely, pathetically partial. (This is a condition that affects all contemporary photography in its relations to the totality of the images readily available at the press of a few keys. Compare, for example, Wolfgang Tillmans's exhibition at Tate Britain, London, *If One Thing Matters, Everything Matters*, 1980–2003 – another reflection on 'the one and the many'. Over 2,000 images: so many, but also so few! A mere drop in the ocean of images.)[35] Epistemologically, this form of accumulation offers an inductive knowledge closer to Bacon's procedures than to Galileo's, closer to the gentleman amateur of colonial fossil-hunting than the professionalized science of hypothesis formation and experimentation. Yet its specimens are more emblems than instances. One might posit a kind of reversal of the anthropological relation of early colonialism here, as, after the move from East to West, Richter becomes a collector of the naturalized image-artefacts of the European capitalist metropolises.

Atlas, one might say – at least to begin with, up to 1972 – offers a kind of domestic, idiosyncratic *natural history* of the photograph. Its temporality is largely a temporality of stasis, a temporality of the preservation of transience, a temporality of the dead, of mere simultaneity

(rather than contemporaneity), of the 'non-contemporaneous', and hence an essentially spatial form. It is not a narrative temporality of historical forms. There are no almost 'events' in *Atlas*, in the narrative sense, in which they might be connected to each other via a history of subjects. It is an amnesiac articulation of the temporality of modernity (the eternity of the transient), in which, as Benjamin Buchloh has argued, the peculiar 'banality' of the images marks the anaesthetic function of consumer culture in the repression of historical memory in post-war Germany. However, like Richter's early work as a whole, the early sheets of *Atlas* stage – rather than merely participating in – this 'anomic banality', which is not so much 'affectless' as the carrier of a specific set of affects and, more generally, a certain pervasive existential mood, a kind of psychic deadening.[36]

And they stage this anomic banality in a highly formal manner, through largely pre-established, but also mixed, categories of genre: portrait, cityscape, landscape, seascape . . . are one set of categories (the bulk of the sheets from 24 to 200); photographs from albums, newspapers, books and magazines (the categories of the first twenty-three sheets, classifying by source) are another. Importantly, the latter self-consciously fails to name the images from the concentration camps and pornography that appear alongside each other (sheets 16–23), between some forensically displayed everyday images (sheet 15) and the portrait of Volker Bradke (sheet 24). (The failure of the concentration camp/pornography pairing to function other than as a kind of mutual voyeurism importantly marks a withdrawal from historically and politically explicit content, broken only by the anomalous *October 18, 1977* series from 1988, from which so many of the claims made for Richter's work as remembrance ultimately derive.)

The key to *Atlas* lies, I think, in the character of this 'staging', which is at once a mere staging/re-presentation of artistic materials *and* (via this staging) the production of a highly individual type of artwork, which holds open the boundary between art and non-art in a novel way. I will briefly address this staging in two ways, before returning to the broader issues of world-mediation, criticality and post-conceptuality: first, via the question of the character and cultural form of the object (Is *Atlas* an archive of artistic materials or a work of art?); second, via the spatiality of the display, and its display of spatiality: not simply the mounted sheets (a staple of early conceptual art), but the architectural sketches for installations and rooms, and the presentation of photographs as 'models' (Sheets 289 and 290 – Figs 4 and 5). These are crucial aspects of *Atlas* that register a difference from its simple archival function. They raise the issue of the relational character of the meaning of the elements in Richter's œuvre, and

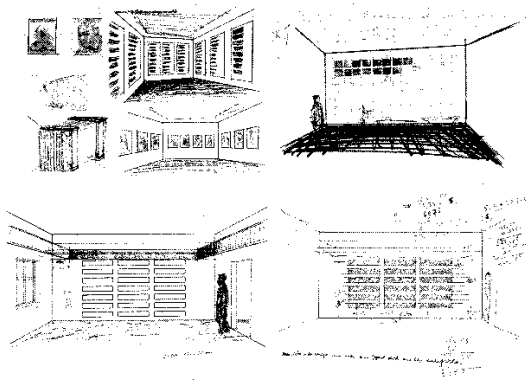


Fig. 4: Gerhard Richter, *Atlas*, 1962–97, Sheet 289

thereby that of the constitutive function of its serialism for the meaning of any particular work.

If one asks the question of precisely what Richter's *Atlas* is, the answer must be, I think, that it is a structurally ambiguous cultural object. At the level of its logic of production, at least, it is at once an archive of sources, a documentation of procedures, and a formal, self-contained result. It is not so much that what is essentially a work of classification is itself unclassifiable 'within the typology and terminology of avant-garde art history'.[37] (This may be so, but the same applies to most important work after 1964). Rather, it is its particular combination of cult-value, exhibition-value and education-value that makes it ambiguous, a combination that is sustained via its connections to Richter's other, more readily classifiable work, the paintings in particular.[38] These connections are of two kinds: external ones, dependent upon the recognition of the images as sources for photo-paintings (this is one of the games the knowing viewer cannot but play in viewing *Atlas*); and internal or immanent ones, where the image is marked in some way to signal its status as a preparatory material: either by being mounted with adhesive tape, within a broader than usual visual field, being marked up in some way; or framed with a sketch for installation, or some other perspective device. In each case, the non-art status of the image as 'artistic material' is secured in contrast to the implied work (whether it came to exist or not).

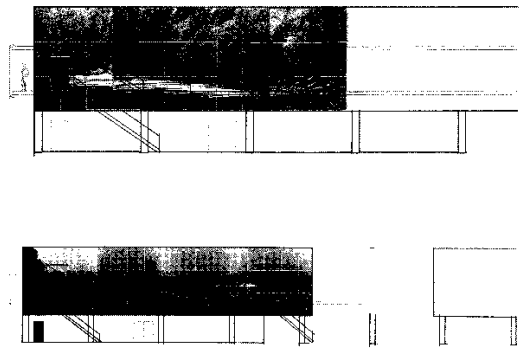


Fig. 5: Gerhard Richter, *Atlas*, 1962–97, Sheet 290

The educational-value predominates over the exhibition-value; or rather, in this case, the exhibition-value *is* its educational-value. Again, this is a staple strategy of early conceptual art: extending the work 'backwards' into its process of conception, as suggested by LeWitt in his 'Paragraphs on Conceptual Art'. However, crucially, these 'marked' photographs are mixed in with others that are displayed without intimation of such relations; or at least, without intimation beyond that conveyed by the contiguous presence of source images. Such images thus present themselves 'for themselves', so to speak, and reciprocally implicate the source images in this aesthetic mode of display. An immanent structural ambiguity thus pervades the whole display. It utilizes, but complicates, the classical avant-garde strategy of displaying 'non-art' as art; and by implication it highlights the 'non-art' aspect of the photo-paintings themselves. This is the respect in which it contributes to their criticality, since, following Adorno, one can associate the (ever-shifting) non-art element of modernist art with that constitutive moment whereby it secures a critical autonomy by breaking with the illusion of autonomy, which it nonetheless also maintains on a new basis. This is one of the deepest dialectical moments in Adorno's account of modernist art.

The structural ambiguity arises out of aspects of the spatiality of the display: the didactic formalization of the mountings on sheets, the

architectural sketches for installations and rooms, and the presentation of photographs as 'models' all work both functionally and formally. Furthermore, the references to other works, other practices, make this more than a mere *display* of functionalism. It is quite different from, for example Susan Hiller, *Dedicated to the Unknown Artists* (1972–76): a set of over 200 photographic postcards of seascapes, each bearing the inscription 'Rough Seas', mounted on fourteen boards, along with charts and maps, organized in such a way as to analyze different aspects of the images. As we saw in the previous chapter, this well-known work of mid-period (or 'second generation') Conceptual art in Britain has become, for some, a model of conceptual art's ability to deal with 'Romantic subject matter'.[39] Yet, formally, it lacks the breadth of the system of references, both within itself and outside, whereby *Atlas* constitutes itself through its relations to a series of absent totalities: the totality of *Atlas*, the totality of Richter's œuvre, the totality of the photographic, the totality of the world. This returns us to the issue of seriality and world-mediation. Each totality figures the others and each image signifies via its relations to these four levels of totality.

Each of these totalities is an open totality – open to additions, subtractions and modifications. This is crucial to the critical function of *Atlas* within Richter's œuvre: its openness stands in opposition to the traditional, closed forms of Richter's other individual works – the paintings. Where once it was the negativity of the relationship between painting and photography within Richter's photo-paintings that was the critical, conceptual and 'open' aspect of his works (as paintings of negations),[40] now, since the late 1980s, and since Richter's increasingly affirmative embrace of large-scale abstraction and classically composed photography alike, it is *Atlas* alone that provides the moment of reflection – reflection upon the art/non-art relation – that is essential to the critical claims of the œuvre. Richter's paintings have become increasingly self-sufficient and affirmatively pictorial: 'normal, again' as he has described it.[41]

Polke, on the other hand, has maintained what was once a common strategic approach to the painterly mediation of the visual forms of media culture, while continuing to develop its formal means in new ways. In the works in the exhibition *History of Everything*, this involved a new use of transparent resins (alongside the familiar variety of fabrics) to transform the wooden frames supporting the canvases into an integral grid-like element of the work (Fig. 6). These 'machine-paintings' from the Dallas/Tate show maintain both a technologically based connection to media forms and a polemical relation to the social content of the now-global media. In the first case, pixelizing the images through the massive enlargement of print-processing errors. In the latter case,

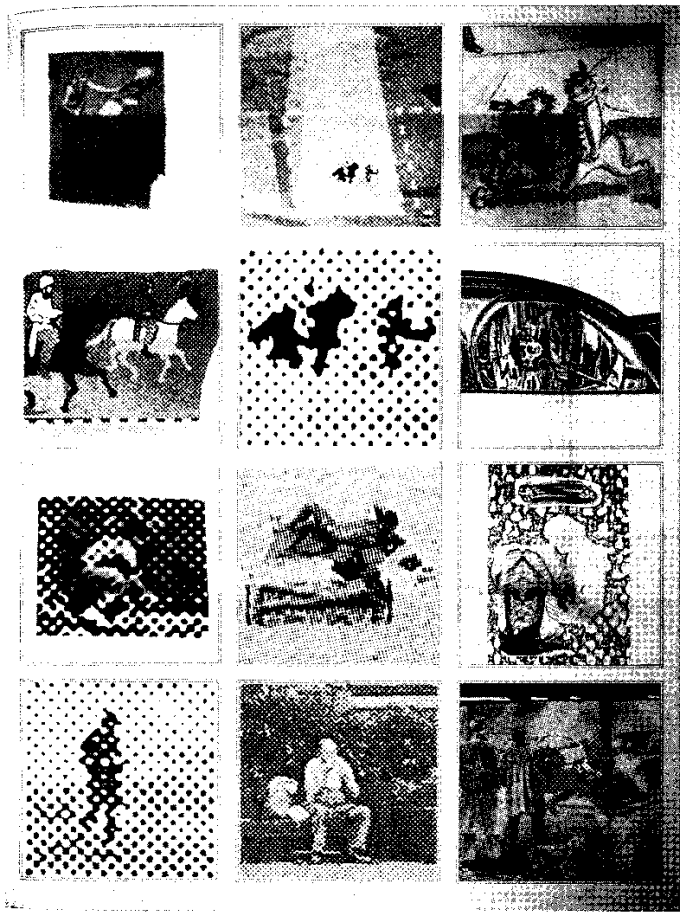


Fig. 6: Sigmar Polke, *History of Everything II*, 2002

Fig. 7: Sabrina Hardman and Manadel al-Jamadi, Abu Ghraib prison, Iraq, 2004

by a return to photojournalistic source images: *The Hunt for the Taliban and Al Qaeda* (2002), an investigative journalistic diagram, for example, and *Risk Game* (2002), a machine painting on fabric of American marines playing the board game of world domination, Risk, on a ship in the Gulf of Aden.

In fact, the compositional possibilities of digital imaging (enlargement and simplification, in particular) place press photography itself close to photo-painting, since early photo-painting was less about paintings of photographs themselves (it was not photorealism) than about painting *reproductions* of photographs. This continuing reliance on the compositional structure of the source image, in Polke, produces a kind of auto-representation of history, in line with the displacement of professional photographic journalism by participant photography, or 'citizens' journalism'. The paradigmatic example of such participant self-representation is to be found in the images of the abuse of Iraqi prisoners taken by US troops in Abu Ghraib. These are images that, in certain compositional respects, look more like classical conceptual photo-paintings than simple photographs: grotesque versions of John Baldessari's 1969 *Commissioned Paintings*, in which hand gestures at once identify the object of the image (here, the bodies of the prisoners) and celebrate its reduction to an object (Fig. 7).

Richter exited the formal space of media imagery some years ago now, in favour of classically composed photography and resolutely domestic image-making. Even the ongoing land-, sea- and skyscapes are broadly domestic in their articulation of cultural space: the space of reproductions

of Romantic paintings. As media has become more global, Richter's images have become more private. In the context of this turn, the inflection of the multiple meanings of the title *Atlas* has begun to turn inwards, becoming medium-based, 'a kind of book', a volume in a private library, away from the outward-looking sense of geographical expansiveness associated with a 'map of the world'. In their essential domesticity, the main theoretical issue raised by Richter's works of the 1990s and immediately beyond – other than *Atlas*, but also in *Atlas* – is that of kitsch. There is a very interesting relationship to kitsch in the baby pictures, in particular. 'Family' has always been one of the main mediations for social and political history in Richter – most famously, *Aunt Marianne* and *Uncle Rudi* (both 1965), the photo-paintings of an aunt killed in the Nazi eugenics programme and an uncle in his Wehrmacht uniform. But where it was previously 'family' as a readymade social form, objectified and ironized, by being viewed at a historical distance through the reproduction of received photographic forms, now the photographer (Richter himself) is implicated in the construction of the forms.

However, just as in 1987, the *October 18, '77* Baader Meinhof series suddenly and stunningly fractured Richter's apparent developmental tendency towards affirmative abstraction, so in 1999, the Reichstag painting sketches fractured the domesticity of *S. mit Kind* – reintroducing concentration camp images into *Atlas*. But the final, flag-based version of that work can hardly be held up besides *October 18, '77* as a piece of historical art. While *September* (2005), Richter's subsequent quiet, domestic painting of the Twin Towers collision on 9/11, appears at first sight as a straightforward acknowledgement of the *inadequacy* of painting to that event[42] – although one might view it more dialectically as an anticipation of the deadening of affect produced by a historical distance to come; or even as a marker of the distance of 'old' Europe from the world for which this was an event on a world-historical scale. The fact that Richter himself was on a flight en route to New York that day, diverted to Canada – cited curatorially to add affect to an effectively affectlessness work – functions in actuality further to highlight the radically disengaged character of the work itself. Just four years on from the event, Richter views 9/11 from a greater cultural and historical distance than he viewed the Nazism of the early 1940s in the mid 1960s.

All of this suggests that the aspiration to world-mediation evoked by the title *Atlas* must be pursued, not in the content of that work, or of the œuvre for which its ambition is metonymic, but rather in the possibilities opened up by the artistic ontology it sustains against Richter's own countervailing tendency to revert to an affirmative return to 'normal' painting: the ontology of a postconceptual art.

The question of the contemporary in 'contemporary art' is the question of the definition of the qualitative novelty of this historical present – that is, the question of the new – and its constant reforming, reframing and reconfiguration of the political meaning and possibilities of social subjects. In relation to the historical and political meanings of works of international contemporary art, everything thus depends on one's sense of what collectivities are implicitly being represented through the constitutive role in the ontological structure of this art played by the inter- and transnational character of the new art spaces. The critical point here is that the forms of collectivity projected by the model of 'art as memory' (primarily, various forms of either *communal*, *national* or *regional* culture) are in contradiction with the forms of social relation that constitute the space of their representation (namely, the new forms of transnational interconnection). Furthermore, the social relations constitutive of these new spaces are in many ways exemplary of the main economic developments constituting the global post-communist historical present: the contradictory penetration of existing social forms (communities, cultures, nations, societies – *all* increasingly inadequate formulations) by exchange relations and their enforced interconnection and dependency. However, as we argued at the outset, in the emergent historical present, new *speculative collectives* (non-national or 'parastate' collectives) are starting to be glimpsed on the basis of the new technological and geo-economic forms that are affecting a radical re-spatialization of social relations. The most artistically effective (that is, art-critically and historically effective) art of the new inter- and trans-national art spaces projects such speculative collectives as its imagined recipient, and even, in the best cases, as its absent but possible producers. It is only within this context – constructions of the speculative collectivity of the historical present – that the problem of the relationship of memory to history in contemporary art can be adequately posed. We can see what this means more concretely by comparing some recent works in which the question of the relationship of memory to history is explicitly posed, via the presentation of testimonies.

The art of The Atlas Group (1999–2005) is once again emblematic of the critical thrust of the argument here, which might be summed by the title of Volume One of the Group's works: *The Truth Will Be Known*

When the Last Witness Is Dead. This is a profoundly subversive and dialectical phrase. It stages the auto-destruction of the memory model of historical experience, since it takes the identification of historical consciousness with the totality of testimony to its absurd conclusion: the truth will be known only at the completion of testimonies, at which time it will have become wholly uncertain, since by then even 'the last witness' will be dead. One might call this *the antinomy of testimony*. This phrase places The Atlas Group, definitively, *against* the memory model. It recalls Walter Benjamin's famous remark: 'Truth is the death of intention'.[56] It is because truth is at stake in art, that art is itself a death of intention. Yet all three works articulate a critical relationship between memory and history, in one way or another.

Testimonies: Three works

Amar Kanwar's *The Lightning Testimonies* (2007) is a four-wall video documentary video work first shown at Documenta 12 in Kassel, Germany, and subsequently in a rather different, less claustrophobic and less spectacular way, at the Indian Highways show at the Serpentine Gallery in London (December 2008–February 2009). The work presents testimony of the abduction and rape of women at critical moments in Indian history, from the 1947 partition up to the present. In the course of 1947, 75,000 women were abducted. The most recent footage, from 2004, is of a demonstration outside an army barracks by Manipuri women, against the rape and killing of a Manipuri girl by the Indian army. The main intervening events narrated in the work relate to the post-1957 conflict in Kashmir (the footage is from the post-1991 upsurge of the separatist movement) and the ongoing Naga insurgency (for which oral testimony of women's three-week captivity in an army camp accompanies footage of the victims' families and friends in the village where they were attacked). In Benjaminian terms, there is a constellation of specific 'then's, each of which appears as part of a dialectical pairing with the same 'now'. A narrative voice-over represents this 'now', suturing the historically disparate narrative elements into the disjunctive synthesis of a series (Figs 17 and 18).[57]

Kanwar presents documents directly *as* testimony, with a multiplicity and plurality of voices that serve not to question, but to reinforce its evidential value, and hence its unity as truth. However, the focus of the piece, critically and politically, is as much on the consequences of this truth as the presentation of the truth itself: the contradictions and tragedies of a reconciliation that involves the arbitrariness of a governmental 'righting' of wrong, which mirrors the original wrong of enforced displacement. Such at least appears

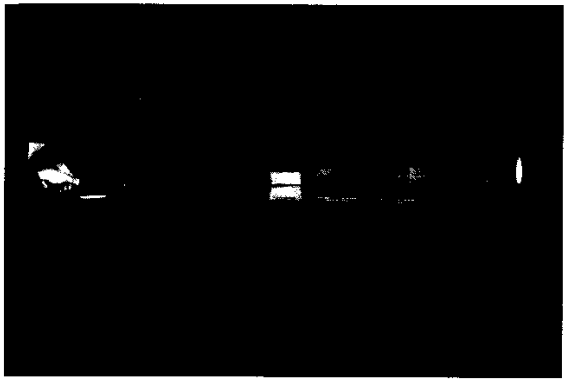


Fig. 17: Amar Kanwar, *The Lightning Testimonies*, 2007

to have been the result of India's 1949 Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act.

The Lightning Testimonies is not naïve about memory. It both explicitly problematizes remembrance and uses simple but highly formalized means to present the documentary material. The opening voice-over asks, 'How do *we* remember? What remains and what gets submerged?' And later, in relation to legal testimonies, 'How does *one* remember? How does *one* tell? That you were raped.' The indeterminacies of subject and narrative are cut through by the simplifying power of a factual 'that' (the fact of the rape is not in doubt), allied to the impersonality of legal form. Yet this is itself a narrative *effect*. The main formal means are threefold: a montage of discrete film genres, repetition and a distinctive use of sound. The genres are those of the archival, the documentary and the everyday (trains, washing, rain). Most of the two-screen segments appear six times in five-minute cycles. The sound – of trains, thunder, rain and an atonal dissonant musical score – reinforces the experience of repetition as at once an external imposition and appropriated bodily rhythm. The work is thus highly constructed, but in such a way as to appear as if its truth and affect (force) derives from the factual content of the subjective knowledges of the testimonies themselves; the fragmented character of which evoke a post-traumatic fragmentation of the self. The contradictions of a 'reconciling' relocation appear as exclusively governmental – the result of the very same centralization of violence within a formally federal constitution which perpetrated the

Fig. 18: Amar Kanwar, *The Lightning Testimonies*, 2007

initial violence. The subaltern position appears as a pure outside. This is the ideological function of the quasi-anthropological use of the documentary genre.

Navjot Altaf's *Lacuna in Testimony – Version 2* (2005), shown at the 2006 Sydney Biennale, represents an alternative strategic response to what I take to be the problem motivating Kanwar: namely, the adequacy of testimony to historical events, and the modes of representation through which it is constructed as historical meaning. (An earlier, 2001, installation work by Altaf is entitled *Between Memory and History*.) *Lacuna in Testimony – Version 2* is a nine-and-a-half minute 3-screen video of breaking waves, across which forty-eight windows successively appear, containing both film and still photographic images related to traumatic events in the history of India, and elsewhere; forty-eight corresponding mirrors on the floor completed the installation (Fig. 19).

Lacuna in Testimony is 'about' a single specific event: the communal riots in the state of Gujarat in India in 2002 at the height of the rule of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the right-wing Hindu nationalist party, which led the national government from 1998 to 2004. The riots were precipitated by events in the Muslim border town of Godhra, following the burning of a bus. The video focuses on the city of Ahmedabad, where transit camps were set up for displaced Muslims. However, it seeks to give

a wider historical meaning to these events, analogically, through comparison with other murderous moments, not only in Indian history (again, the 1947 partition, but also the Sikh riots in Delhi and the 1993 Mumbai riots), but within a Westernized twentieth-century world history, and in particular, a sequence of traumatic historical events: European fascism, the Holocaust, Hiroshima and 9/11. This is the function of the windows. Images are progressively overlaid within each window until the frame is 'frozen' by a slab of ice. This is thus a heavily symbolic and allegorical piece, which relies upon certain very well-known historical imagery for an analogical construction of historical meaning. The work is addressed to a Western gaze, within whose pre-established terms a claim is made for the genocidal character of the events in Gujarat. Analogy fills the evidential gap, the 'lacuna in testimony' (figs 20–23).

We may contrast these constructivist, and more lyrical and metaphorical approaches to documentary, respectively, with The Atlas Group's fictionalizing but nonetheless objectivistic approach to Lebanese history – its unitary fictional narration of documentary evidence – in *We Can Make Rain But No One Came to Ask* (2004–06), the piece discussed in Chapter 1, above, in the context of the fictional status of 'the contemporary' itself. The features of that work relevant here, once again, are, first, its use of fictional characters to narrate – and hence to unify – a constructed but nonetheless documentary history; and second, the anonymous fictional collectivity of the artistic persona (The Atlas Group, which is actually a pseudonym of the Lebanese-American artist Walid Raad). This dual fictionalization functions to undercut the claims

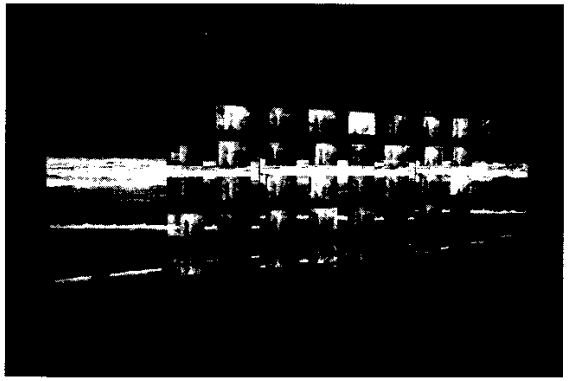
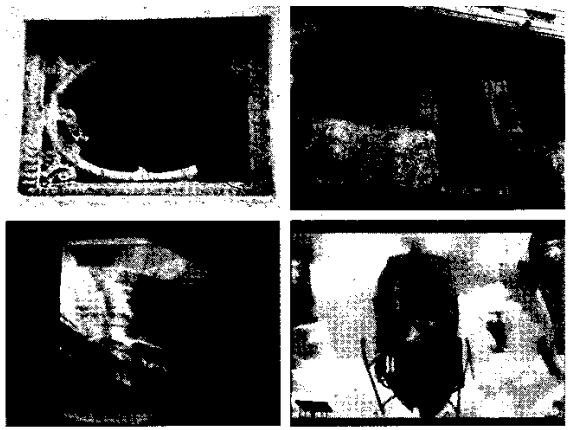


Fig. 19: Navjot Altaf, *Lacuna in Testimony – Version 2*, 2005



Figs: 20–23. Navjot Altaf, *Lacuna in Testimony ~ Version 2*, 2005

of witnessing, in favour of a scepticism (much emphasized in the critical literature – overemphasized, in fact) which is nonetheless counterbalanced by the indexical objectivity of the documentary elements of the work, through which meaning is constructed artistically, rather than being reconstructed from the subjective claims of actual witnessing subjects. The work itself thus becomes the subject of the utterance, rather than functioning as the relay, in one way or another, for 'authentic' testimonial voices, although the idea that there are such voices is the *fiction* through which it takes its distance from them.

Each of these three works thus deals with the problem of the 'inadequacy' of testimony in a different way. Kanwar, through the multiplication of documented voices and a post-traumatic fragmentation of narrative; Altaf, through emblematization and historical analogy; The Atlas Group, through philosophical critique and a radically constructivist, fictionalized alternative. Yet they also share certain formal features: they are all video works; they all use multiple tracks or split screens as indexes of narrative 'layering'; and in particular, they all use sound rhythmically to register a more somatic, pre-symbolic level of memory, as a device to ground visual representations in a more embodied perceptual experience – be it traumatic or 'everyday': breaking waves (Altaf), thunder and rain (Kanwar), traffic (Atlas Group). Indeed, Geeta Kapur has suggested that there may be something

intrinsic in the very medium of video that 'corresponds' to 'the *already disassembled* nation', which furnishes the geo-political context for each of these works: specifically, its democratic availability, facility and the ease with which it can be used to de- and re-construct images.[58]

Yet each of these three works makes a different strategic use of these formal features. Kanwar's environmental eight-screen surround mimics the 'immersion' of traditional aesthetic appreciation, but in the non-contemplative, engaged mode of a viewer forced actively to construct the relations between different kinds of testimony and representation. Altaf's three-channel, three-screen installation with mirrors and multiple moving video windows both symbolizes (the sea) and allegorizes (the windows) forgetting. The Atlas Group's single-channel but split-screen address figures a unitary narrative projection split from within. *The Lightning Testimonies* is the most powerful in its immediate emotional affect, the most didactic, and the closest to the 'non-art' form of the documentary. *Lacuna in Testimony* is the most ambitious in its range of historical references, and also the most self-consciously poetic, but it is also thereby simultaneously the most academic and rhetorical; the most problematic in its straining for an affect that risks becoming divorced from form. There is a danger in its analogical generalization of a certain historical levelling or indifference – a resigned humanism. *We Can Make Rain But No One Came to Ask* is the most explicitly conceptual and least explicitly 'affective': it gives the greatest amount of reflective determinacy to the fictional aspect of history and the speculative character of collectivity. For all these differences, however, each piece works – in so far as it works – not as an artefact *of* cultural memory, but as a *constructed* history; a staging of the disparity between memory and historical experience through a subjugation of memories to artistic form.

Symptomatically, there is far less contemporary art presented in the temporal mode of expectation than of memory. Western capitalist societies (and their transnational cultural prostheses) have come to expect less and remember more – or at least to surround themselves with representations coded as memories, of one sort or another. However, to insist on the constitutive function of the future (a different future) within the extended present is not necessarily to insist on expectation, in the sense in which it has been understood since Augustine. In fact, a certain conservatism may be detected within the concept of expectation itself, inherited from its Christian pre-history, and reproduced by the phenomenological notion of the 'horizon of expectation'. A critique of expectation as a historico-temporal orientation is thus necessary if the possibilities of a more radically futural aspect to contemporary art are to be grasped.