

The Atlas Group / Walid Raad

The Atlas of Explosions

As part of his project *The Atlas Group* (1989–2004), the Lebanese-American artist Walid Raad collected documents related to the contemporary history of Lebanon. Raad presents the results of *The Atlas Group* as a collective work, attributing joint authorship to several fictitious characters. One of these “contributors” is Dr. Fadl Fakhouri, who among other things is presented as the author of the series *Already Been in a Lake of Fire: Notebook Volume 38* (1991/2003), relating to 145 car bomb attacks, of which there were a total of 3641 with 4386 victims during the civil war in Lebanon in the years 1975–1991.¹ Highly mobile, readily available and treacherously inconspicuous, car bombs are a deadly war machine symptomatic of current urban warfare, where the line between militias and civilians is itself tactically blurred.

In *Notebook Volume 38*, Dr. Fakhouri pastes cut-out reproductions of vehicles on white sheets. He presents the cars as serially produced – technically reproducible commodities, much like photography. Selecting the same automobiles which were used as car bombs, he refers to the destiny of individual items, and the singularity of their fateful end as well as the uniqueness of the human lives lost in each explosion, or which were changed by it forever. The specific nature of the historical events in *Notebook Volume 38* is not mediated through photography, but through handwritten captions in Arabic detailing the circumstances, which serve as a framing device to each cut-out. These cite the brand name and make of the car, the place, date and time of the explosion, the total number of casualties, amount of explosives used, and sometimes even the perimeter of the detonation. The tension between the general and the concrete, between typology and catastrophe, between technical image and handwriting, takes Fakhouri’s notebook beyond mere documentary, turning into the impersonal diary of a protracted conflict.

With some pages, there is more than one cut-out car: this is the case of doubt regarding the brand of the car, or its type or colour. This doubt is reflected also in the accompanying caption: *Peugeot 404 or 504. Dark green or light green*. Similar to other projects done under the auspices of *The Atlas Group*, *Notebook Volume 38* bears a double dating. The first refers to the (fictitious) date of Dr. Fakhouri having created the series. The second dating denotes the date of including the document in the archives of *The Atlas Group* (that is, the date of its actual creation). Raad’s project

as a whole, as well as specific instances, reveal errors in chronology. These can be read as symptoms of their fictitiousness: the creative moment of reconstruction which constitutes the process of writing history. These lacunae betray the shortcomings of historiography as a form of knowledge, while at the same time bringing to mind the experience of loss. The faulty chronology reflects the discontinuous, fractured, repetitive temporality of the trauma of war.

According to a statement by The Atlas Group, the composition of *Notebook Volume 38* is not intended to “generalise suffering”, but instead to depict car bombs as “both the cause and effect of continuing political, military, economic and criminal conflicts that have defined most aspects of life in Lebanon over the last 30 years.”² Cars perpetuate the peculiar qualities of oil, which (the likewise fictitious) Dr. Hamid Parsani, as quoted by Iranian philosopher Reza Negarestani, describes as a lubricant, an undercurrent which renders the dynamism of global narratives, both political and ethical, whose complex plots intersect in the Middle East.³

Vojtěch Márc

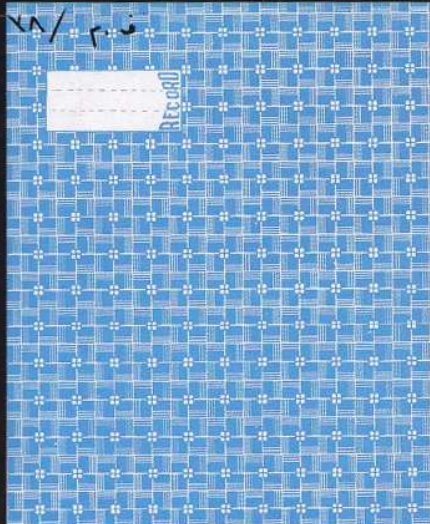
¹ *Car bomb*, in Arabic *سيارة متفجئة* is also referred to in the Anglophone context as *vehicle-borne improvised explosive device*.

² FAKHOURI, FADL. “Already Been in a Lake of Fire: Notebook Volume 38.” *Grand Street*, No. 71, Danger (Spring, 2003), p. 221 (215–221).

³ NEGARESTANI, Reza. *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials*. Melbourne: re.press, 2008.

pp. 33–37: Notebook volume 38: *Already been in a lake of fire*, 1991/2003, pigmented archival inkjet prints, 30 x 42 cm, courtesy of the artist and Steir-Semler Gallery, Beirut and Hamburg

Summary: This notebook contains 145 cut-out photographs of cars. They correspond to the exact make, model, and colour of every car that was used as a car bomb between 1975 and 1991. Each of the following notebook pages includes a cutout photograph of a car that matches the make, model, and colour of a car that was used as a car bomb, as well as text written in Arabic that details the place, time, and date of the explosion, the number of casualties, the perimeter of destruction, the exploded car’s engine and axle numbers, and the weight and type of the explosives used.



APPENDIX:

كل سيارة موزيلا ١٤٥
سيارة البردة في هذا
الكتاب تمثل سيارة
استعملت كمرة ناسفة
بين سنوات ١٩٧٥ و ١٩٩٠.

الطائف بن الصور ما
جمله كتي: بن الماركة
الى اللون الى سنة الصنع

Plate 55

Nissan
1140
White
May 23, 1985
24 hp
Beirut
55 killed
174 injured
300 kg. of TNT
Hexagon
200 meter perimeter
75 cars burned



٥/٢٤/٨٥
سيارة سفيد ٥٥ صليب ١٧٤٠ ليتر في ٢٣ مايو من بيروت (البحر) (البحر)
كلمة مهملة في زواياها في غير الأضراس - واجهت ٥٥ سيارة كما
بعد المسير المستمر في زواياها جدران الـ ٥٥ متر
ساعة في حينها في زواياها في ٥٥ كيلومتر مادة Hexagon

Plate 56

BMW
2002
Grey
June 14, 1985
15:55
Beirut
7 killed
89 injured
50 kg. of 200 kg. of TNT
2 120mm shells of Haugon



٧١٤/٨٥
السيارة رمادية على أي منطقة النيران
بعد أن شنت حاجتها في اقتحام البحر
السيارات وشنت في تلك المنطقة ما بين ٧١٤/٨٥
٧١٤/٨٥
سيارة رمادية في ١٤ يونيو ١٩٨٥
في تلك المنطقة من بيروت في منطقة
السيارة في ١٤ يونيو ١٩٨٥ في ١٤
٧١٤/٨٥ و ٧١٤/٨٥ في ١٤ يونيو ١٩٨٥

Plate 57

VW
820 or B30
Blue
June 19, 1985
21:52
Cerniche of the sea, Tyrol
79 killed
150 injured
150 kg. of TNT
Hexagon



١٧١/٨٥
سيارة زرقاء ٨٢٠ ليتر في ١٩ يونيو من بيروت (البحر)
كلمة مهملة في زواياها في غير الأضراس - واجهت ٧٩ سيارة كما
بعد المسير المستمر في زواياها جدران الـ ٧٩ متر
ساعة في حينها في زواياها في ٧٩ كيلومتر مادة Hexagon

Plate 58

Mercedes
200
Beige
August 14, 1985
17:30
Beirut, Mar-Takia
13 killed
139 injured
150 kg. of TNT



١٧١/٨٥
سيارة بيج ٢٠٠ ليتر في ١٤ أغسطس من بيروت (البحر)
كلمة مهملة في زواياها في غير الأضراس - واجهت ١٣ سيارة كما
بعد المسير المستمر في زواياها جدران الـ ١٣ متر
ساعة في حينها في زواياها في ١٣ كيلومتر مادة Hexagon

Plate 67
 Renault
 504
 White
 February 25, 1986
 13:04
 8 killed
 53 injured
 25 kg. of TNT
 Hexogen



Plate 68
 Volvo
 Brown
 March 8, 1986
 13:00
 8 injured
 3 killed
 53 injured
 25 kg. of TNT

Plate 69
 Renault
 5
 White
 March 25, 1986
 13:04
 8 killed
 53 injured
 25 kg. of TNT
 Hexogen
 0.4 m. x 0.8 to 1.25 m. crater

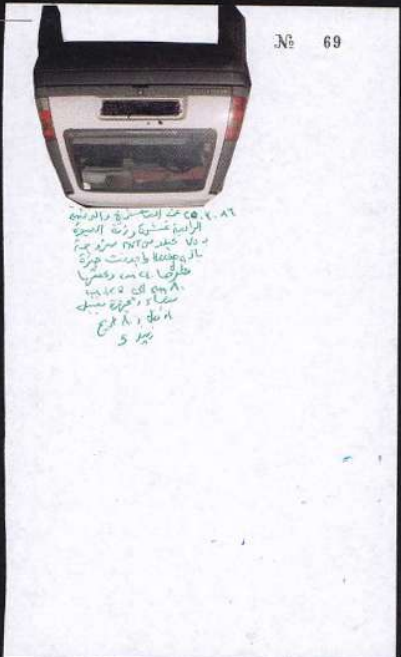


Plate 70
 Renault
 5
 White
 April 8, 1985
 13:04
 11 killed
 90 injured
 75 kg. of TNT
 Hexogen