

Archives of Dread and Colors

A Conversation between Walid Raad
and H el ene Chouteau-Matikian

H el ene Chouteau— You ended *The Atlas Group Archives* project in 2005. Can we talk about your current research and its connection with your previous projects?

Walid Raad— *I am still working on The Atlas Group even if the project is said to have folded in 2004. Today, I treat The Atlas Group not only as a project but also as a particular way of thinking and forming documents about the wars in Lebanon. When I form an artwork and find that its logic is that of The Atlas Group, I date it as having been produced between 1989 and 2004. For example, two works completed this year and belonging to The Atlas Group are attributed to the years 1989 and 1995.*

I also continue to work on my long-term project titled Sweet Talk: Beirut Commissions started in 1987 and which consists of photographic self-assignments in Beirut.

And my most recent project titled Scratching on Things I Could Disavow engages the history of art in the Arab world with particular emphasis on the history of the visual arts in Lebanon; the acceleration in the development of a new infrastructure for the visual arts in Abu Dhabi and Qatar and elsewhere in the Gulf; technological innovations in the areas of statistics, data mining, and finance as well as their manifestations in art databases and art funds; the development of the high-tech sector in Israel in the past two decades; as well as the books and concepts of Jalal Toufic. The form this project takes is an exhibition / performance. Moreover, I treat most of the works that I will be producing for this exhibition/performance as stage sets and as artworks.

HC— At the end of the 1990s, artists such as Hans Haacke, Dennis Adams, the collective Bureau d'Etudes or Mark Lombardi borrowed the aesthetic vocabulary of Conceptual Art and Minimalism and employed materials that came out of diverse fields (economy, geography, politics, history). It was a question of bringing a certain geopolitical complexity to light and rendering them accessible to a greater public in artistic

fields. For this purpose, cartography, diagrams, organigrams, associative ideas and montage were considered the most effective forms. You yourself used these visual techniques in a more distanced way, or even slightly-off. One thinks of the fictive organigrams of *The Atlas Group Archive*, the PowerPoint presentations of the conference/performance, and here, in the frame of that exhibition/performance, the presentation of your research about various art foundations and basic economic facts. I mean your work with citations and diagrams in images and videos.

WR— *Indeed, in some of my earlier works, particularly with The Atlas Group, I have used some conceptual and formal elements that are consistent with those used by the artists you mention. I have been interested for some time now in exploring how information functions as a form of knowledge and how it has been and remains a central element in the creation of images in artistic and non-artistic practices. It remains to me unclear, however, what one comes to know, think, feel, and experience through such images that deploy simple and seemingly complex charts, graphs, lines, and clusters. We can also think of a number of practices in the past few decades that have revolved precisely around modifying the definition of the datable, of the unit of knowledge, and in creating and forming different lines and shapes between datable elements. The Atlas Group, in some ways, proceeded along similar lines when it gathered photographs of car bombs, or videotapes of sunsets, or various shades of blue from Lebanon's audio-visual world. But the organization of the documents as The Atlas Group Archive was not so much to render more transparent a geo-political complexity as much as to lean on the seeming clarity of this form of display in order to insert yet another kind of image; yet another kind of unit; yet another kind of experience. Today, I very much doubt whether anything radical or unexpected can be explored with these forms, even as the number of units that can be accommodated by such visual systems has by now become quite vast; even as more and more layers of data are juxtaposed one on top/next to others; even as different qualities of data are fitted in a seamless manner into the same frame; even as different units of scale are introduced; and even as all these elements are*

dynamic, changing in real if not ahead of time. This method of creating seems to me to be quite exhausted, and may have been for a long time.

HC— Already in 2007 you had reflected upon the ambivalence of the use of these methods, and you concluded at the end of your conference lecture *I Feel a Great Desire to Meet the Masses Once Again*, you declared: "I have grown increasingly tired of projects that try to map this or that crime or scandal, identify and link players, uncover hidden motives, reveal progressive or reactionary ideological assumptions."

WR— *Yes, in many ways, I had already faced these limits not only with The Atlas Group, but also with this lecture/performance you mention that dealt with the kidnapping, detention, and torture of various individuals by state and non-state actors. I had concluded the presentation at the time with the following paragraphs:*

At various times in the past two years, I was hoping that the work of gathering this material, of putting these stories together would be more difficult. "This is too easy," I kept thinking to myself. "A few billion dollars spent on intelligence, so that an artist with an Internet connection and some free time can uncorer all this? This can't be!"

Eventually, skepticism gave way to paranoia. I was convinced that the information I was gathering was being fed to me. I was not finding anything. It was finding me. I was certain that I was being allowed access to information, to data that organized itself into a seemingly clear PowerPoint presentation, a neat story that could and would be digested with equal amount of ambivalence, pleasure and boredom by a sympathetic audience. Or, more likely, as I have been discovering, by an audience that is just about fed-up with yet another, most-likely sincere but ultimately flawed, self-congratulatory, empty and partisan grand-standing gesture: The by-now familiar liberal and not-so-liberal bashing of the Bush Administration and its policies in the war on terror.

As I was reminded recently by my friend Tom: "Is there anything more *de rigueur*," in fact, Tom went so far as to say, "Is there anything more fashionable anymore than to make public the contradictions at the heart of the US administration's war on terror? To assume that these things (state torture and kidnapping) go on only because not enough people know about them is itself a problem? I was told. What if these policies are effective not because they have not been examined enough? What if these policies are effective not because no one has bothered to show that they are shortsighted and ill conceived? What if those who kidnap and torture today depend on public exposure and visibility as part and parcel of what they do? In other words, what if these things can go on today because they are too clearly visible, broadcast live, entirely predictable, in fact, they have been announced outright in advance."

HC— The archives of *The Atlas Group* and their "hysterical documents" echoed the "white traumatic," the impossibility of locating the violence that occurs after the disaster. It was a way of registering the direct and collateral damages of war, beyond the immediate material and human accounts: fear, mental error, the internal dismantling of the structures of civil society.

WR— *The language of trauma, and some psychoanalytic conceptions of how violence is experienced was and remain central to The Atlas Group. Today, I am also interested in other ways of thinking about violence and its various effects. And my interest in these other ways is linked to certain encounters with spaces, economies, concepts, and people, among others. On this matter, the writings of Jalal Toufic have been central. Also, certain unusual experiences I had with my own works in Beirut, with The Atlas Group, pushed me to explore other ways of thinking about how violence affects bodies, minds, cities, and time.*

For example, in 2005, I was asked by Andrée Sfeir, the owner of a Hamburg and Beirut gallery, to exhibit The Atlas Group in her newly built white cube space in Karantina in Beirut. At the time, I refused, feeling intuitively, that The Atlas Group was no longer available to me, and that as such, I could not display the works.

HC— Can you clarify this idea?

WR— *I had a feeling that all the prints, videotapes, texts and sculptures that constitute The Atlas Group had been affected in some strange manner; I was sensing that if and when the works were going to be displayed in this gallery, that they would appear to me and possibly others at 1/100th of their original scale. I was convinced that the works would shrink once exhibited in Beirut. Or rather (and I realize that this may sound as the opposite of what I just said) that in order for my works to appear at their original scale, I needed first to reduce them to 1/100th of their original scale. And while it was unclear to me what this meant, it was a strong enough feeling for me to refuse to exhibit these works in 2005 in Lebanon. The work that resulted from this experience will be shown in the presentation *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow*. The work is titled *The Atlas Group (1989-2004)* and consists of *The Atlas Group works in 1/100th of their original scale, displayed in a space (a miniature model of a gallery or museum) appropriate to their new dimensions. The space itself, the scaled model, combines various spaces where I have exhibited The Atlas Group before: The Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin; Sfeir Semler gallery in Beirut ; and Culturgest in Lisbon.**

HC— In your exhibition/performance *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow*, you cite Jalal Toufic, an artist and theoretician close to you, with lists of summaries of his books and a video. In his writings, Toufic uses a difficult expression, “*withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing Disaster*.” The “tradition” is understood here not as what is transmitted by dogma and repetition but what constitutes a shared basis – a place where the word finds a space, where transmission is made possible.

In 1933, in his text *Experience and Poverty*, Walter Benjamin writes: “Can one still find people who are able to tell stories? Where the dying still utter imperishable words, transmitted from generation to generation like an ancestral ring? No, this much is clear: the course of experience took a plunge, and that in the generation of 1914–18 who lived through one of the most terrifying experiences of universal history.” Such is the way he described the impossibility of communication that takes

hold after the devastation of war, while describing the people as "not richer but rather poorer in communicable experience."

WR— *"The withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster" is a concept developed by Toufic in several essays in his books. His notion of tradition is the following: Tradition is not merely what materially and ostensibly survived "the test" of time: in normal times a nebulous entity despite the somewhat artificial process of canon-formation, tradition becomes delineated and specified by the surpassing disaster. Tradition is 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.¹*

The notion of tradition that he advances is clearly linked to his notion of the surpassing disaster, and to the community of those who are sensitive to how a surpassing disaster affects tradition in immaterial ways. For Toufic, there are some disasters whose effects surpass the short and long term, material and psychological limits we usually attribute to them. And tradition, as he formulates it, is not formed by the collection of cultural artifacts which survive the test of time; nor with what is identified by state and non-state actors as forming the « common heritage » of a community. For Toufic, and with this concept, tradition is defined in relation to the surpassing disaster and the subsequent resurrection of what was immaterially withdrawn.

HC— Your project *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Art in the Arab World* includes architectural interior views of empty modern museums that you show here in the form of three-dimensional holograms. Besides this you also expose lists of the names of artists who lived in Lebanon at the end of the 19th century and during the 20th. Are these lists there to evoke, or even resurrect a modern Lebanese tradition since forgotten? Do you consider these artists your precursors?

WR— *The work you are referring to consists of a list of the names of "artists" who resided and worked in Lebanon in the*

19th and 20th centuries. The names are displayed in three layers of white vinyl letters on a white wall. The names are not listed alphabetically, nor chronologically. The list begins with the word – and – and ends with the same word – and. In the artwork, I claim that artists from the future communicated these names to me via telepathy. I also claim that given my experience with the kind of noise that tends to accompany telepathic reception, I made the list public in the hope that any noise (whether orthographic or otherwise) would be identified. And indeed, it turned out that I had received some names misspelled. With this work, I leave it to others to notify me of such errors. The notifications can take different forms, such as an occasion in July 2008 when a so-called art critic corrected in red paint on my white wall the name of a painter whose name I misspelled. I view such corrections as an impetus to find out more about the artist whose name reached me in a distorted form.

Initially, I was convinced that the artists of the future had taken it upon themselves to remind me of my predecessors and of their works. But it turned out that they were involved in an entirely different enterprise when they telepathically communicated these distorted names to me. The artists from the future are more interested in resurrecting certain lines, colors, shapes and forms that they are in keeping alive the works of some of the painters, sculptors, photographers and filmmakers who lived and worked in Lebanon in the 20th century:

HC— And why is it more urgent to revive the forms, lines, colors (such as you expose them by taking extracts from books, posters or academic theses on the history of art in Lebanon), rather than the names and the works?

WR— *I should be a bit careful here as I am not exactly sure whether I am dealing with a resurrection of lines, colors, shapes or forms, or whether I am dealing with a re-animation, a resuscitation, or of a more simple making-available-again-for-the-first-time of these elements. But my overall sense is that indeed certain colors, lines, shapes and forms have been affected immaterially. These are not so much un-available for artistic creation; they are available but in distorted and camouflaged form, and/or are hiding. In this regard, I have*

tried to be attentive to the increasing number of catalogs, monographs, dissertations, and exhibitions about modern and contemporary "Arab" visual arts; to the number of associations, academic departments, collections and prizes dedicated to "Arab" art; to the accelerating efforts by academics, curators, gallerists, dealers, auction houses and numerous others to generate names and biographies of "Arab artists," their efforts to organize the chronology of genres, movements and ideas of "Arab" art, to the exhaustive work of gathering, preserving, indexing, and disseminating reproductions of "Arab art." I find such endeavors rich not so-much because of the knowledge they make available, but because they tend to produce the kind of noise that forces affected colors, lines, shapes and color to the surface.

1 Jalal Toufic, "Forthcoming," *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster*. (Los Angeles: REDCAT, 2009), 34.