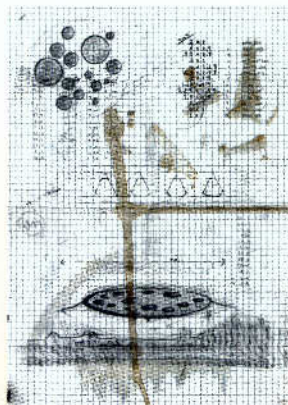


FIRST DEGREE

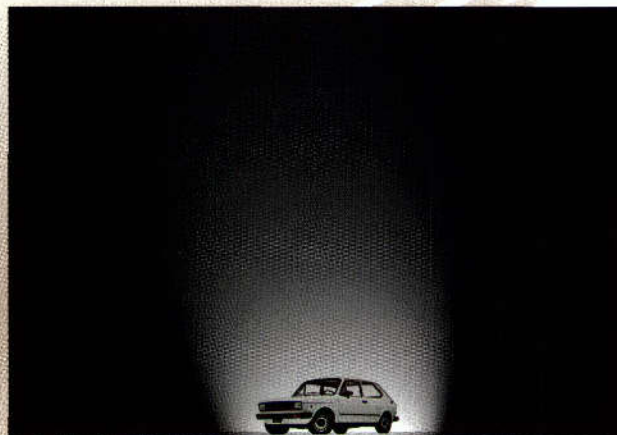
The Walid Raad Files

ANDREW MADRID



Walid Raad's fanciful, yet compelling enterprise both participates in and performs the rituals and representational trappings of globalization at the turn of the new millennium. Referencing real and/or produced events and other far-reaching and diverse practices, his work is a meta-semiology of sorts, one encompassing not only the fixed signs of disaster as rendered via the media establishment but, as Baudrillard, Derrida, and Foucault once divined, their semi-factual ramifications as well. Purposefully or not, one facet of Raad's strategy is to reconfigure history as dream or apparition. At once fabricated, fetishized, catalogued, collaged, appropriated, eulogized, and at bottom exhibited, Raad's overdetermined mega-structure leaves one with a queasy feeling of already inhabiting Orwell's futuristic nightmare.

Born in 1967 in Chbanieh, Lebanon, Raad apes the rhetorical and material strategies of both art collectives and cultural institutions alike, as evidenced by his multidimensional umbrella project, The Atlas Group, which he founded in 1999 to "research and document the contemporary history of Lebanon." For better (Red Cross) or worse (Halliburton) or both (United Nations), the present global network of transnational companies, private think tanks (including museum corporate franchising) and the military-



industrial complex warrants a methodology as equally monumental, complex, or unprincipled in return. Arming himself with abandon with what he calls "public forms," Raad records and displays government reports and other documentation via traditional techniques like drawing, collage, and sculpture alongside newer media like photography, "lecture/performance," and CG rendering.

In his work, such hybrid institutions as The Atlas Group function as a type of intervention carried out via the appropriation of the very fixtures Raad intends to disrupt, reenact, or bring into question. This is not exactly new aesthetic territory, but what makes Raad unique is his particular brand of nervous humor tempered with extreme sobriety. In his

sardonic *Commercial Portraiture for Individuals in Society* (1987), the artist, dressed in sundry college gear as "P.X. Chesterfield," poses for a series of school yearbook or ID photos. In each, the artist strikes a dissimilarly goofy pose, averting his eyes away from the aperture to the upper corners of the picture frame, all the while displaying an unflinching grin that seems oddly menacing for such a quotidian affair. As with Cindy Sherman, the act of recognizing Raad amongst his various incarnations unleashes an almost instantaneous resistance to all identity and identification.

As a riposte to Andy Warhol's car-crash series, *My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair* (2003-) has thus far documented 245 separate instances of car bombings



that occurred in Lebanon between 1975 and 1999. Raad's starkly symbolic series explores the limits of terror and good taste, synthesizing and literally blowing apart the telegenic fusion of "car" and "bomb" into a concerted, albeit participatory critique of the aesthetics of violence, as with *Engine* (2003) showing 100 photos of car engines left smoking in the street. These rigorous, though visually forthright exercises in the normalization of world disorder provide further evidence of the current level of apathy and even complicity in first world nations toward the spread of terrorism. As Raad rather matter-of-factly attests, terrorist acts have not only been made to look glamorous by military specialists, journalists, the media and their audiences, but also by terrorists and victims themselves. The shifts and turns of perspective entailed in these dossiers suggest an unsettling comparison to Terry Gilliam's hyperventilated *Brazil*. Though, since car bombings like the one that killed former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri on February 14 seem set to continue, this Atlas documentation points to the very real possibility that in the future only destruction will survive the process of media testimony.

For his 2001 "Mapping Sitting" show (co-curated with Akram Zaatari) at NYU's Grey Art Gallery, Raad exposed

photography's impact on truthfulness. *Group*, a 45mm DVD with images of Egypt and Iraq from the 1940s and '50s, eerily interweaves standard military group portraits in an unending loop of similitude. But it is principally with ongoing projects like The Atlas Group's imaginary "Sweet Talk" file (1973-), one of the collective's most Borgesian to date, that Raad rises to the postmodern challenge of representation in a discontinuous temporal sphere. Leading its virtual readers



into a labyrinth of model storefronts, buildings, streets, individuals, and other technological or cultural icons from Beirut circa 1973, "Sweet Talk" faces the impossible task of never being able to gather sufficient material to fulfill its own mandate, thus drowning in the unachievable. Like some quixotic time capsule, the file's burden of proof falls on an ever-accumulating mountain of evidence.

Other work that injects "rediscovered" images into complex framing narratives includes the "Type A" document *Missing Lebanese Wars* of 1999, consisting of several pages in Arabic and English plus a photo-finish gallery. These close-up pictures of horses taken at the races

just before and after crossing the finishing line reveal the extent to which photographic means are used in everyday life to establish winners and losers—invariably by a nose. A similar argument is posed by the "Operator #17" file, containing three notebooks and two short films. In one of the latter, *I Think It Would Be Better If I Could Weep* (2000), a government agent (a.k.a. historian "Fadl Fakhouri") inexplicably rebels against the role into which fate has cast him just to gratify a personal whim. Targeting the popular Corniche boardwalk running along Beirut's coastline, a spy camera hidden in a pushcart café under his control was diverted every afternoon from routine surveillance to the sun just setting behind the darkening horizon, a truly sublime moment recalling Proust's madeleine. For the nostalgic operator, this picture postcard view symbolizes a former period in Beirut when visiting the beach to see the setting sun was made impossible by the civil war, but for us the sunset is simply a beautiful yet meaningless oddity. Being unable to fathom the mindset that has refocused the camera in this way, perhaps we aren't transported but at least we become a captured audience. And isn't this what Raad wishes us to perceive?

WALID RAAD is an artist who also teaches at Cooper Union School of Art, New York. ANDREW MADRID is an artist based in New York.



WALID RAAD (TOP LEFT & MIDDLE). CIVILIZATIONALLY WE DO NOT DIG HOLES TO BURY OURSELVES, 2003 (DETAILS). INKJET PRINT, 23 x 20 CM. (TOP RIGHT) HOSTAGE, 2001 (DETAIL), STILL, DVD, 18 MINS. (MIDDLE) I ONLY WISH THAT I COULD WEEP, 2002, STILL, DVD, 8 MINS. (BOTTOM LEFT TO RIGHT) MY NECK IS THINNER THAN A HAIR (1-2-85H & 2-7-88S), 2004, INKJET PRINT, 20 x 25 CM. (OPPOSITE) MISSING LEBANESE WARS, 1999 (DETAIL), INKJET COLOR PRINT, 25 x 33 CM. COURTESY THE ATLAS GROUP/SFEIR SEMLER GALLERY/ANTHONY REYNOLDS GALLERY, LONDON. PHOTO © WALID RAAD.

Description of the Winning Historian:

He is not merely miserable. He is brilliant at it. There seems no event, no matter how trivial that does not arouse him to a frenzy of self-mortification

Historians' Initials and Bets:

- 1. KS -717
- 2. MM +830
- 3. FF +729
- 4. PH -222
- 5. HG +311
- 6. RO +001
- 7. AB -921
- 8. SK -112

Handwritten notes on lined paper:

he is not merely miserable, but is brilliant at it. There seems no event, no matter how trivial that does not arouse him to a frenzy of self-mortification

1 KS V.IV +
 2 MM A.V. +
 3 FF V.IV +
 4 PH C.I.C.C. +
 5 HG V.IV +
 6 RO V.IV +
 7 AB A.V. +
 8 SK V.IV +

PHI - C.I.C.C.

50.50 km/h → 5050000

$V_1 = 1,11$

$\frac{1}{1,11} = 0,9009$

18

0,0125

البي بوي (زهر) رايعا من نون عشاء

Winning Historian / Time:
PH - 222

Race Distance:

1000 m.

Winning Time:

1:10

Average Speed:

50.5 km/hr.

Distance Between Horse and Finish Line:

- 18

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