

Flirtations with Evidence

The factual and the spurious consort in the works of The Atlas Group/Walid Raad. Using the conventions of information-based art, Raad questions the reliability of documentation in general. His projects, which take as their theme the protracted political instability of the Middle East, range in tone from satirical to elegiac.

BY JANET A. KAPLAN

The fact that people tend to flirt only with serious things—madness, disaster, other people—and the fact that flirting is a pleasure makes it a relationship, a way of doing things, worth considering. . . . Flirts are dangerous because they have a different way of believing in the Real Thing. And by 'believing in' I mean 'behaving as if' it exists. . . . There is always another story, one we haven't necessarily bargained for.

—Adam Phillips, *On Flirtation*, 1994



The Atlas Group: I Only Wish That I Could Weep, 2000, DVD, 8 minutes. Works this article courtesy The Atlas Group, Galerie Sfeir Semler, Hamburg, and Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London.

At the intersections of past and present, where does one look for the evidence that becomes history? Which stories are told, and who gets to tell them? What authority do photographs and archives carry? The artist known as The Atlas Group/Walid Raad addresses these questions in an ongoing body of photo-based work that engages a complex range of flirtations with visual and textual evidence.

A fictional collective under whose rubric much of the work is presented, The Atlas Group is one of the frameworks Raad has developed for addressing how evidence is used to conjure the beliefs that become history. On the one hand, The Atlas Group is real—a foundation with twin archives in New York and Beirut and a mission to gather, preserve and produce materials related to modern Lebanon, Raad's birthplace, and, more specifically, to the Lebanese civil wars that were fought between various religious, eth-

nic and political factions between 1975 and 1991.¹ On the other hand, The Atlas Group as an artists' collective is a construct, one that serves Raad in several ways. The guise of collectivity is a humorous nod to contemporary theory's critique of singular authorship. Yet it also confers on Raad's work the gravitas of an institution. And the contradictions inherent in the work of a "group" that is really done by one individual underscore the problematic conjunction of fact and fiction that is a central strategy in much of his work, which he presents in various public forms including mixed-medium installations, single-channel screenings and lecture/performances.

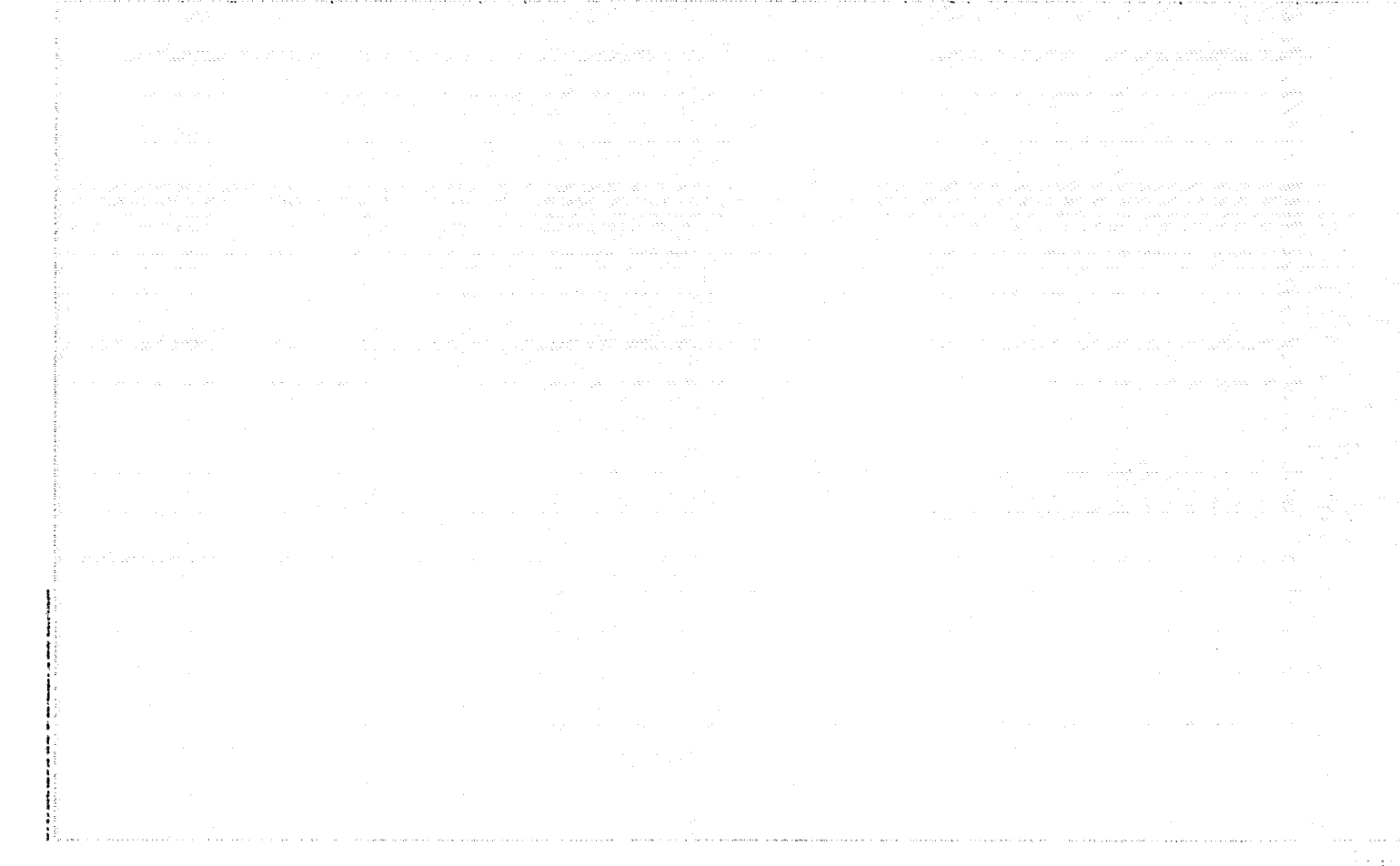
In Raad's photo-text series "I Only Wish That I Could Weep" (2001), a fictional character, Operator #17, is presented as having been hired by Lebanese security forces to train a surveillance camera on La Corniche—the seaside boardwalk in West Beirut that has been a favorite meeting place of everyone from political pundits and intellectuals to prostitutes, fortune-tellers and double agents. Each evening, however, Operator #17 is said to have turned his camera away from the strollers and redirected it toward the sun setting over the water—a sight that had been off-limits for those confined to the east side of the divided Beirut during the civil wars. Thus Raad invents a narrative for a series of video stills of simple sunsets marked by reddish skies that darken as the sun sinks below the horizon.

Raad's operator chose to turn the eye of evidence-gathering away from its official target. By addressing the volatile spectacle of the Middle East and Lebanon's civil wars through what we might otherwise conclude are unremarkable tourist photos, Raad similarly directs our attention away from the grand gestures and cataclysmic events that are the expected subjects of war documentation. Enacting a flirtation with the real, he invents fictions that hover near facts, offering alternative sources for the "evidence" that becomes history. As Raad explained in a recent interview, "The geopolitical history of contemporary Lebanon that was being written [in the years since the wars ended] was leaving out so much of what I considered to be my experiences of these events. The mere ability to be able to walk freely from West to East Beirut unhindered by checkpoints is not an experience one would have had 15 years ago. I wanted to make documents that were conscious of that."²

Born in Chbanieh, Lebanon, in 1967, of mixed Lebanese and Palestinian parentage, Raad was raised in Christian-dominated East Beirut, a charged vantage point from which to see his country begin its spiral into civil war. "I wanted to be a photojournalist as a young teenager. I would go to the front lines, take pictures, get caught a couple of times and go through horrendous questioning because the photograph was seen as a form of intelligence."³ In time, Raad came to appreciate that photographs could yield cultural truths well beyond the details of military information.



Still from *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes, 2001*, DVD, 18 minutes.



Secrets in the Open Sea, 2002, inkjet print, 43¼ by 70¾ inches.

Leaving Lebanon at the age of 15 as the situation for young men became increasingly dangerous, Raad immigrated to the U.S., where he eventually earned an MFA in photography from the Rochester Institute of Technology and a Ph.D. in visual and cultural studies from the University of Rochester. Drawing upon this training, Raad has developed a method that combines the theoretical study of the nature of the archive and memory with the material practice of making and gathering photographs. Presented in densely layered installations, his work interweaves video, Internet content, performance, collage, digital photography and prose in English, French and Arabic. Combining images collected from popular media such as newspapers and magazines with narratives that he concocts to explain their possible meanings, he explores the manipulation of evidence, the politicization of looking, the mutability of history and the authority ascribed to knowledge production, with special consideration of photography's effect on how modern Arab history can be understood.

While Raad often combines fact with fiction, his goal is not to trick or dissemble. In a frequently presented lecture/performance titled *The Loudest Muttering Is Over*, delivered in a formal academic style complete with lectern, microphone and water glass as well as staged technical difficulties and the occasional planted audience member who asks scripted questions, Raad is quick to introduce Atlas Group projects with an explanatory disclaimer. "While some of the documents, stories and individuals being presented are real, in the sense that they exist in the historical world, others are imaginary in the sense that I imagine and produce them. But all the material I present is informed by research in audio, visual, and print archives in Lebanon and elsewhere." In response

to audience complaints of betrayal on learning of the fictional aspects of these highly believable presentations, Raad emphasizes that this methodology is intended to demonstrate that history is unstable, and that the elements of which it is constructed are malleable, fungible and open to interpretive invention. As he said to several increasingly annoyed listeners at a Middle Eastern Studies Association gathering at the CUNY Graduate Center, New York, in September 2002, "The Atlas Group proceeds with the consideration that the Lebanese Wars are an abstraction. One troubling question is: Under what notion of facts can we operate in our construction of 'the history of' the history of Lebanon? How do we approach the fact of the war?"⁴

One approach for Raad has been to turn to unexpected sources with which to capture war's more elusive aspects. For example, photos of a weekly Beirut horse race published in the Lebanese daily newspaper *Annahar* provoked his photo-collage series "The Missing Lebanese Wars" (1996). Fascinated to see that the photos never quite captured the precise instant of victory, Raad built an absurdist narrative to account for the pictures that involves a group of "respected historians who were, it is said, also compulsive gamblers." Meeting every Sunday at the racetrack, they were reported to have convinced or bribed the track photographer to snap only one picture as the winning horse arrived. As Raad described it, "The Marxists and the Islamics bet on races 1 through 7, the Maronite Christian Nationalists and Socialists on 8 through 15," each wagering on precisely how many fractions of a second before or after the horse crossed the finish line the photographer would expose the frame. Each page in the series (which is credited in The Atlas Group archive to the notebooks of "the

famous Lebanese historian, Dr. Fadl Fakhouri") includes the photograph clipped from the Monday (post-race-day) edition of the newspaper crudely taped onto greenish lined paper roughly torn from a steno pad and marked with myriad penciled details: notations about the race's distance and duration, the winning time, calculations of averages, the historians' respective bets, the predicted time discrepancies and short descriptions of the winning historian—fat, bald, prone to drink, etc.

Such specificity of description and ludicrous focus on invented trivialities are all elements of Raad's strategy of reformulating history through multiple deployments of mundane detail. While slyly slipping in accurate information about Lebanon's wartime political factions and alliances, he also uses this tale to poke fun at the potential for mistakes and outright corruption that can cloud historical reporting. "As far as I know," he said, "there were no historians who went to the track and bet on the horse races, but this was the way that I could make sense of these real horse race photos. I invented Dr. Fakhouri as the source of these documents because artists are not allowed to write history—they need the authority of a credentialed historian. I also was interested in the relationship between history and time displacements and the notion that what we think of as experience is by no means settled. Like hysterical symptoms, the events depicted are not attached to memories of actual events but to fantasies (mine and others') erected on the basis of memories."⁵

Displacement of one kind or another—the embrace of documents at some remove from the action itself, invention of imagined characters, evidence supporting mistaken notions, memories rooted in fantasy—underlies much of Raad's work. Looking for raw material in popular media, Raad developed *Secrets in the Open Sea* (1999), a series of photo-collages that indirectly explore the psychological mechanism of

Raad combines a theoretical study of the nature of the archive with the material practice of making and gathering photographs.

substitution for loss. Here, variously shaded blue panels, of a generous 4-by-6-foot size visually related to color-field paintings, seem, at first glance, to be totally abstract. But they prove not to be paintings at all. Rather, they are large sheets of exposed photographic paper with tiny ½-by-¾-inch black-and-white portrait photographs neatly positioned in the bottom right hand corners of their white borders.

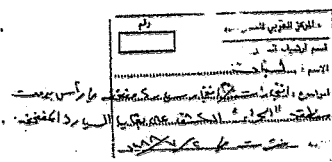
Although these rich blue panels are visually seductive, they would not yield their meaning without Raad's accompanying wall text, which presents them as having been excavated in 1992 from beneath the rubble of the postwar demolition of Beirut's ravaged commercial districts. Correspondingly, Raad's fiction was inspired by digging beneath facts, in this case the appearance in early 1990s Lebanese newspapers of scores of tiny black-and-white group-portrait photographs. Intrigued by the publishing of portraits so small that no individual could be recognized, Raad invented an explanation that involved sending the blue sheets to a French laboratory whose fictive technical analysis retrieved grainy photos that appeared as "latent" images embedded within the blue fields. While the photos Raad used actually had been accompanied in the newspaper by captions identifying the subjects as, say, attendees at an annual meeting of the board of directors of the Gillette corporation, in Raad's narrative, research "revealed" them to have been anonymous men and women who drowned or were found dead in the Mediterranean during the period of the wars.

My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair, 2003, inkjet print, 7% by 9% inches.

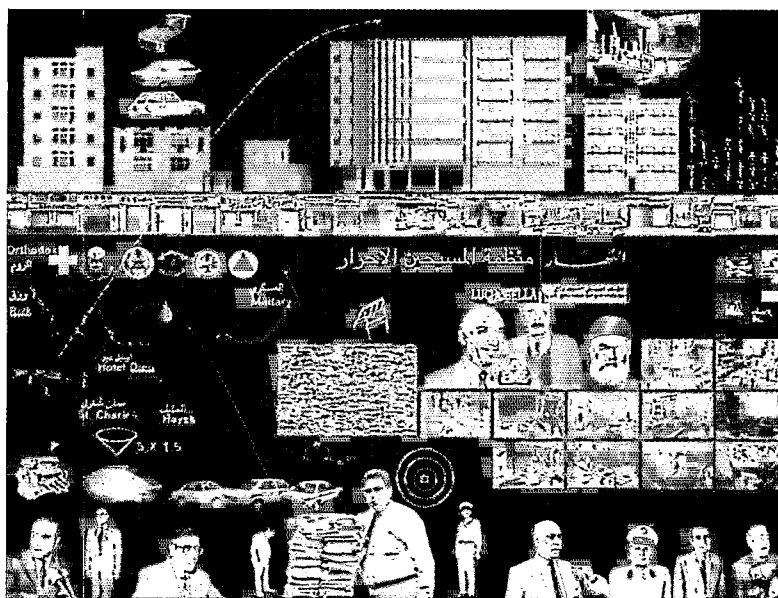


front back

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Specificity of description and a ludicrous focus on invented trivialities are elements of Raad's strategy of reformulating history.



My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair: Vol. 1, 21 January 1986, 1986-present, screen grab from digital presentation.

The visually elegant presentation of this tale of images of the dead recovered from nonobjective fields of color lends this work a kind of modernist artistic authority; the faux expertise of a European laboratory and forensic investigation adds Western scientific credibility. Relying on what he has described as “a commonly held suspicion” that new surveillance imaging technologies may well be capable of recovering even “latent” images,⁶ Raad interleaves complex suggestions of believability in this curiously moving meditation on the layerings of memory that surface and resurface around loss.

In other work, Raad seeks to destabilize ideas that are commonly taken for granted by locating his inventions within well-known and verifiable historical events. In *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)*, 2001,⁷ compelling video testimony is given by a character named Souheil Bachar, who is identified as the only Lebanese held with the widely publicized Americans during the hostage crisis in Lebanon. Speaking directly to the camera but positioned so low that he has to look up to the lens, thus placing the viewer in the position of an interrogator standing over him, “Bachar” offers up graphic details about cultural tensions and homosexual encounters that he describes as having developed among some of the hostages during a three-month period in 1985 when, as he presents it, they were all held together in a single 10-by-12-foot cell in Beirut. He is especially specific about his highly eroticized targeting as the only Arab in the group.

For a Western audience, Bachar's chilling report may provoke surprise at the very suggestion of there having been an unreported addition to the lionized group that included Terry Anderson and David Jacobsen, each of whom, it turns out, wrote a book about their hostage

Sweet Talk Commission, 2004, inkjet print, 15% by 11 1/4 inches.

experiences in which they do refer to an unnamed Arab held among them. The testimony surely has a very different impact on Lebanese viewers, who may well recognize the “hostage” seen in the video as a nationally known actor. Most significantly, Raad's project repositions the whole story of the hostage crisis from a uniquely Arab perspective.⁸

Hostage: *The Bachar Tapes* was one of a number of Atlas Group works included in Documenta 11, held in Kassel, Germany, in 2002. Curated by an international team led by the Nigerian-born, New York-based curator Okwui Enwezor, Documenta 11 was filled with vast quantities of visual and textual material documenting cultures from around the world [see *A.i.A.*, Sept. '02]. Amid that wealth of often didactic information, Raad's multipart installation insinuated its meanings gradually. For those who were new to his work, the slow realization that the meticulously recorded hostage testimony and the horse-race pages, among other materials, were not necessarily “true” proved highly provocative and engaging, garnering him wide international recognition. Raad's inventions of characters to whom real photographs are attributed, of actors employed to perform historical fictions and of imaginary narratives that explain real events all served to quietly undermine uncritical belief in the veracity of historical presentations. It was an especially bold artistic and curatorial move to insert this within Documenta's flood of straightforward cultural documentation. In that context, Raad's work effectively served as a gentle critique, suggesting that even the most earnestly presented information ought not be exempt from further inquiry.

Turning away from such artifice, Raad has embraced a photographic project in which questions of fact are not at issue. “My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair” (1999-the present) is an ambitious ongoing series centering on the subject of car bombs. Here his stated goal is to research and present “what was collected, said, believed, known and made public about the 245 car bombs that were detonated in Lebanon between

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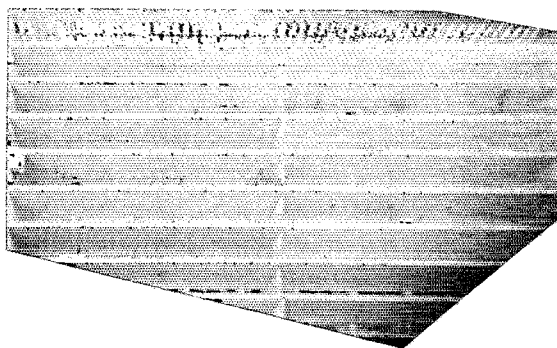


plate 7, Bachar / AG_MGP_ST: 170676/162042CP / 2002



plate 8, Bachar / AG_MGP_ST: 170676 / ad

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

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.

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

1 KS V, IV +
 2 MM A, IV +
 3 FF V, IV +
 4 PH S, EC +
 5 HG V, II +
 6 RO " " +
 7 AB " " +
 8 SK " " +

Winning Historian / Time:

PH - 222

PH - C ICE

Race Distance:

1000 m.

Winning Time:

1:10

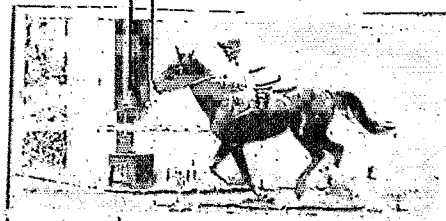
Average Speed:

50.5 km/hr.

$50,500 \text{ m/h}$
 5050000
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Distance Between Horse and Finish Line:

- 18



ادي بوي (زهر) رايحا من دون عشا.

Raad

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1975 and 1991 killing thousands, injuring tens of thousands, and causing vast carnage in the neighborhoods of Lebanon's major cities."

One completed segment of the car-bomb project was included in Documenta. Titled *Already Been in a Lake of Fire* (2001), it was developed in response to the coverage by Lebanese newspapers, which typically dispatched photographers to record the location where each bomb's explosion had propelled the destroyed car's engine to land—whether on some random street or a rooftop, or in a backyard garden. Raad created a series of collages with photographic cutouts of cars positioned on sheets of white paper as if tumbling through space. The cutouts correspond to the exploded cars according to information about each vehicle's make, model, year and color that was encoded on the engine. The accompanying texts, written—floating—on the page in a flowing Arabic hand, present more details about the place, time and date of each explosion; the number of casualties; the perimeter of destruction and the power of the explosive device. *Already Been in a Lake of Fire* is especially striking for the way in which it raises further questions about forms of historical evidence. In these alternative documents of war, there is no blood, no one shooting, no one running, no one dead or dying. Rather, there are images of autos, adrift in space, which could be regarded as a physical enactment of the semiotic concept of the "floating signifier."

Raad's move away from narrative invention was motivated in large part by concern that his work was being misunderstood. "It's not about treating the details as either real or fictional. Whenever either one happens, I'm disappointed. But it teaches me about the weight of this false binary between fiction and nonfiction and the difficulty of playing between them. The most disturbing part is the laughter of the audience that presumes to be in cahoots with me. That is *not* the point of the project."⁹

A year later, at the 2003 Venice Biennale, one came upon another segment of the project, *My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair: A History of Car Bombs in the Lebanese Wars 1975-1991 (Volumes 1-245)*. *Engines* (2003), in which four double-panel lightboxes and a large video projection loomed out of a dark cavernous hall. Part of the group show "Contemporary Arab Representations," curated by Catherine David, the lightboxes contained grainy photographic enlargements of black-and-white images taken from a Beirut newspaper that showed people gathered around a rubble-strewn crater or peering at mangled steel or the metallic chunks of a car engine.

These pictures of groups of men who had gathered to look at the aftermath of a car bombing are another aspect of Raad's larger project of examining the ways in which media images are always, by definition, at some remove from the events they are presumed to document. Seeking yet other ways to re-present the history of the Lebanese wars, Raad turned his attention here not to what "happened" but to what people look at in trying to make sense of what happened. Raad's emphasis is on the multiple layers involved in the very act of looking itself. Just as he chose news photographs that focus on people looking at the ensuing damage, he echoed this visual remove by directing our looking, as viewers of his images, to the photographer's looking . . . at people looking.

"My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair" is intended to eventually include photographic prints, actual cars and car engines, notebooks, videotapes, texts, mixed-medium installation and performance. Raad intends to build an archive of substitutes for what has been lost by collecting photographs of cars currently found on the streets of Beirut that match each exploded car. With hoped-for donations of replacements from manufacturers (so far he has received only one, a Fiat), he plans to expand the project to include an installation of engines with cars hanging overhead. Like a macabre madeleine (Proust is among his

favorite authors), each engine will serve as a memory trigger—gruesome and fascinating, exploded then silenced.

The subtlety of Raad's approach is brought home most movingly in a work that carries profound contemporary resonance. *Miraculous Beginnings* (2000) is a series of film stills credited to Raad's fictive historian, Dr. Fakhouri. Described in The Atlas Group archive as a wanderer in the streets of Beirut, Fakhouri is said to have exposed a frame of film "every time he thought the wars had come to an end." In fact, the resulting images of apartment buildings and shuttered storefronts are poetic traces made by Raad himself. Roaming through Beirut during the frequent return visits he makes each year, he regularly pursues the photographic practices that are at the heart of all his projects.¹⁰

Once again the focus is on looking—this time for evidence of what cannot be known, but only hoped for. Such obsessional marking of repeated frustration and uncertainty surely invokes the long years of Lebanon's civil wars. But it is also deeply evocative of the flirtations with elusive evidence that marks our condition of post-9/11 "endless war." Take a photo each time you think it is over. Add it to the archive of the unknowable and the longed for. In the context of our current geopolitical agony, *Miraculous Beginnings* reads as Walid Raad's most poignant work. □

Many thanks to Moira Roth for valuable counsel.

1. Raad has variously stated that The Atlas Group was founded in 1967, 1976 and 1991. He has also spelled his last name with and without an apostrophe. See interview with Raad by Alan Gilbert, "Walid Ra'ad," *Bomb*, Fall 2002, no. 81, pp. 38-45.

2. Walid Raad, interview with the author, New York City, Nov. 12, 2002.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Walid Raad, *The Loudest Muttering Is Over*, lecture/performance, Middle Eastern Studies Association at CUNY Graduate Center, New York City, Sept. 27, 2002. Unattributed quotes throughout this essay are drawn from edited transcripts of this lecture/performance and texts from The Atlas Group archives and Web site, www.theatlasgroup.org.

5. Interview with the author.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes* is listed in The Atlas Group archives as "53 videotapes of which tapes #17 and #31 are the only two that Bachar makes available outside of Lebanon."

8. An imaginary dialogue between Raad and Bachar complements the videotape. Excerpts from that text have been published in Gilbert, pp. 41-43; in Walid Ra'ad, "Civilizationally, We Do Not Dig Holes to Bury Ourselves," *Springerin*, Issue 2: Middle East, Spring 2002, n.p.; and in *Tamas*, a publication that accompanied the exhibition "Contemporary Arab Representations: Lebanon," at the Fundacio Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, Spain, 2002.

9. Interview with the author.

10. Raad currently works with other artists in the Arab Image Foundation, a not-for-profit organization established in Lebanon in 1996 by Fouad Elkoury, Samer Mohdad and Akram Zaatar, and in which Raad, Yto Barrada, Zeina Arida and Moukhtar Kocache are also members. Their goal is to promote photography in the Middle East and North Africa by locating, collecting and preserving images that document urban Arab life. A related goal is the analysis and promotion of contemporary Arab visual culture.

Works by The Atlas Group/Walid Raad were included in "The Future of the Reciprocal Readymade (The use-value of art)" at Apex Art, New York [Mar. 17-Apr. 17]; "Documentary 'Fictions'" at CaixaForum in Barcelona [Mar. 10-June 27]; "Witness" at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney [Mar. 12-May 16]; and "The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere" at Mass MOCA, North Adams, Mass. [May 30, 2004 through spring 2005]. A new work, titled My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair: Volume 1-21 January 1986, has been presented as a lecture at the Kunsten Festival des Arts, Brussels [May 13-16]; at the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris [May 26-27]; at the House of World Cultures, Berlin [June 4-5]; and at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London [June 7-8]. The Arab Image Foundation presented the photographic installation "Mapping Sitting: On Portraiture and Photography," a project by Walid Raad and Akram Zaatar, at the Musée Nicéphore Niépce, in Chalon sur Saône, France [Mar. 20-May 23], and at Centre pour l'image contemporaine—Saint-Gervais, Geneva [Apr. 30-June 20]. Another version of this installation will be shown at New York University's Grey Art Gallery [Jan. 11-Apr. 2, 2005]. The Art Gallery of York University in Toronto is currently presenting the work of the Atlas Group/Walid Raad at its home facility [Sept. 15-Nov. 14] and at Prefix Institute for Contemporary Art [Sept. 16-Nov. 27]. The Atlas Group/Walid Raad will also be included in "Borrowed Time," curated by the painter Luc Tuymans, at Pratt Manhattan Gallery [Jan. 27-March 2005].

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