

Missing in action: The art of the Atlas Group / Walid Raad

Lee Smith. Artforum. New York: Feb 2003. Vol. 41, Iss. 6; pg. 124

Abstract (Summary)

Walid Raad is writing a history of contemporary events in Lebanon, a seemingly comprehensive essay using the video, the Internet, performance, collage and digital photography. Raad has enlisted help in the form of the Atlas Group, a foundation comprising various individuals and institutions, some of which exist independently of their relationship to Raad and some of which do not. The scope and nature of the project are discussed.

Full Text (2256 words)

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[Headnote]

THE ART OF THE ATLAS GROUP/WALID RAAD

Walid Raad is writing a history of contemporary events in Lebanon, a seemingly comprehensive essay using video, the Internet, performance, collage, and digital photography, not to mention prose in English, French, and Arabic. Given its scope and the obsessive nature of the cataloguing, it's not surprising that Raad has enlisted help in the form of the Atlas Group, a foundation comprising various individuals and institutions, some of which exist independently of their relationship to Raad and some of which don't. That is, the Atlas Group is real, but some of its components are made from a fictional fabric.

Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (#17 and #31) English Version, zoos, tells the story of Souheil Bachar, whose testimony deals with Western hostages kidnapped in Beirut in the '80s. Bachar addresses various dimensions of the crisis, like writing the experience of captivity and how Arab and Western masculinity is figured in the writing. The author of the work, who as it happens doesn't exist in reality, was given to imagining himself as the sixth and only Arab hostage. *My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair*, 2001-, a file devoted to the history of the approximately 145 car bombs detonated in Lebanon between 1975 and 1991, derives from the notebooks and photographs of a certain Dr. Fadl Fakhouri, who during his lifetime, according to Raad, was the preeminent historian of the Lebanese civil wars. But there is no Dr. Fakhouri, and the vehicles seen in the collaged sheets that comprise the work, though based on the actual cars used as bombs during the seventeen-year period, were photographed recently on the streets of Lebanon by Raad.

Missing Lebanese Wars, 1996-, presents volume 72 of Dr. Fakhouri's notebooks, a series of photographs of horse-race finishes cut out from the Lebanese newspaper *An-Nahar* and taped to yellow notebook pages. The story is of a group of Lebanese historians who gathered weekly at a Beirut track to gamble, although not on the races themselves: They bet on how far the winning horse would be from the finish line the moment the photograph was taken and whether the horse would have crossed the line or would be approaching it. Their notes, the winning time, the date, etc. are recorded. The aphoristic descriptions of the winning historian were ostensibly written by Dr. Fakhouri, but in fact they are composed of found passages Raad culled from English-language newspapers.

For all Raad's involvement, the Atlas Group is a collective, which includes but is not exclusive to the real author and imaginary ones. For instance, in the car bomb piece, it consists of, among others, those who will contribute architectural models and interview subjects who witnessed or were victimized by the bombs. Indeed, it even arguably includes

the various militias that used the car bomb to terrorize and kill, since their contribution is an indispensable "document" of the military, economic, political, and social history of Lebanon.

Raad's work has enjoyed international success this past year. Included in Documenta ii, he also was selected for the 2002 Whitney Biennial, where he presented a multimedia artist's talk in which some of the questions were scripted beforehand for planted audience members, as were some of the answers. Given the seamlessness of Raad's self-presentation, in his performances and his prose, and the amount of control he exercises over every detail of the project's composition and dissemination-continually retitling and refiling the work, revising biographies and histories-it's not surprising that much of the recent critical attention has focused narrowly on the nature of its authorship. The main story is commonly understood to be the Atlas Group itself rather than a further elaboration of the various stories the documents tell.

The conceit, after all, is undeniably a part of the work's appeal. The forged institution is part of the legacy of Conceptual art and literary modernism, kin to Broodthaers's Museum and Borges's library. Thus, there's certainly a temptation with Raad's work to see its central issues-which I take to be authority and authenticity-almost exclusively as markers for a certain style of writing and making that is a little suspicious of those activities.

The other critical temptation is to assert that the work, grounded in the realities of violence, the Middle East, and geopolitics, is an emanation of the really real, where authority and authenticity are taken for granted. Even if the prospect of a native Arab perspective is seductively urgent given the historical events of the past couple of years, this reading seems a little less plausible. To be sure, the Lebanese wars gave rise to the Atlas Group's various projects but we're also meant to see the wars as somehow participants in the constantly expanding collective of the Atlas Group. To take its foundations down to the real (politics, war, violence) or to the imaginary (Conceptual art, literature) seems just another way of asking, Who's really responsible for the Atlas Group? Another, maybe more useful question is, Who is the Atlas Group responsible to?

Raad was born in Chbanieh, Lebanon, in 1967 and raised in predominantly Christian East Beirut. The '80s were an especially rough period, beginning with Israel's 1982 invasion, and in '83, he fled the country. Western nations, particularly Canada and the United States, made visas available to Lebanese Christians, and Raad left to study medicine at Boston University before transferring to the Rochester Institute of Technology for photography, and then going on to the University of Rochester where he earned a doctorate in visual and cultural studies.

Raad, who now teaches at Cooper Union and lives in Brooklyn and Beirut, explained in a recent interview that the US wasn't just a sanctuary during those years. "I never got to learn anything about the history of the Arab world," he said of his school years in Beirut, "or the history of Lebanon in a serious way. That training was in the United States." Nonetheless, Raad is probably not wrong to assume that most of his American audiences don't know much about Middle Eastern history. Thus, to avoid seeming to stack the deck on this particular subject, he'll usually have someone in the audience planted to answer those questions. The one Middle East topic he will handle himself is Iran-Contra, a strategy that places Raad in a lively cultural-historical tradition.

In the disastrous, illegal Iran-Contra affair, the Reagan administration forwarded profits from arms sold to the Iranians along to the Nicaraguan contras. In addition to the exchange of cash

for weapons, the Iranians were to pressure their Lebanese clients, Islamic Jihad, to release the five Western hostages who had been in captivity for years; these men were included in *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes*. One of the hostages, Rev. Benjamin Weir, wrote after his release that during their captivity, "there became available a few books in English, provided not only for our recreational interest but presumably for our education. There was Edward Said's *Covering Islam*."

This is a nice scene, sufficiently literary for the Atlas Group's files (though I don't believe it's remarked upon there). It's hard to imagine the intellectual somersaults required of both the hostages and their captors to engage a metanarrative like Said's, which, as Weir succinctly put it, "dealt with the misunderstanding of Islam in the West." And yet the question isn't so much how, at gunpoint, there could be much mediated misunderstanding, but rather when does the other, Islam, the Arab world, stop seeing itself as the other and trying to explain itself from that position.

It would be difficult to overstate Said's influence during the last quarter century. His 1978 book *Orientalism*, arguing that Western representations of the Orient were in league with efforts to control and dominate the Orient politically, inspired strong cultural and academic work from the Middle East, Asia, Africa, Latin America, and various Western minority and diaspora communities to remake images of themselves after their own political desires. And yet only stewardship of the industry changed. It was no longer a case of, say, a white male Orientalist explaining the Orient, but the Orient was still the other, and the consumer, someone somewhere in the West, was essentially the same.

Moreover, and paradoxically in keeping with Said's thesis, Western cultural power, through its museums, universities, and press, made the Orientalist critique the dominant, international style of non-Western cultural production. As Lebanese Conceptual artist Walid Sadek said in a special Beirut issue of the Canadian art magazine *Parachute*: "A generation of students, apparently interested in issues of Arabic representation, spend their time and intellectual energy critiquing Western stereotypes and images of Empire ... rather than actually looking at and analyzing contemporary artistic production in the Arab world."

The Atlas Group should be seen in the context of Arab art redirecting its gaze inward, making its own work, its own audience, and its own institutions-like the Atlas Group. The fiction of the Atlas Group "creates a position that you can speak with authority about," Raad says, giving a very localized account here of authority. He believes that the official political histories of events in Lebanon could not account for much of what was experienced during the time of the civil war. The car bomb, for example, and what automobiles seemed most likely to be used as explosives, changed the way the people of Beirut related to their city, physically and psychologically reorganizing their home. The problem wasn't just how to write in the margins of the official histories, but, since the stakes are so high in getting the story right, who would be allowed to write it. "A historian who has written the conventional, chronological, geopolitical, biographical history," Raad says. "And then say that historian has seen the limits and ends up with stuff that he doesn't know what to do with, but that the Atlas Group received." A historian like Dr. Fakhouri. And who can speak with authority about captivity but a hostage like Bachar?

I think the larger, more general critique of authority and authenticity building in Raad's work is an attempt to come to terms with how much of the West, including its formulations of authority and authenticity, is part of the Arab world's cultural production. That is, the West

comes not just in the form of the influential wish list of the international art world, its museums, curators, and critics, which takes local work into a space where it will not be understood as such. I suspect the reason Raad will talk with American audiences about Iran-Contra and the US's role in it is to illustrate that the Arab world's putative other is already there as raw material for this local art, which due to the recent history of its source can't help but be international. The wars not only involved the active participation of, among others, Syria, Iran, Israel, the PLO, France, and the US, they also spawned a Lebanese nation in which 50 percent of its citizens now live abroad.

This is from where the Atlas Group draws part of its energy—the obsessive attempts to manage and take seriously what Raad calls the "hysterical symptoms of the war." He recognizes both the impossibility of putting limits to a local art and a need for, to borrow a term from geopolitics, nation building. For Raad one of the more exciting tasks Lebanese artists and intellectuals have undertaken is the development of a critical language in Arabic, a language distinct from Arabic's biographical, political, or art-historical vocabularies and one capable of encompassing culture and politics. A critical language, presumably, like Said's, but in Arabic and about the Arab world, not just Western constructions of it.

Raad has recently collaborated with members of the Arab Foundation for the Image, a nonprofit organization founded in Beirut to preserve and present visual culture, to produce *Mapping Sitting: On Portraiture and Photography* (2001), a book of archival images of the Arab world's twentieth century. Snapshots of Egyptian prisoners, Egyptian midwife certificates, Lebanese passport photos, group portraits of Jordanian army units, schools, families, sports teams: The Arab world began to think of itself in terms of its modern institutions by sitting for photographs of itself comprising those institutions.

One section in *Mapping Sitting*, "Surprise," is a sequence of hundreds of photographs of people caught walking on a Tripoli street in the '50s, with each photo framed by the same faded photomontage of the street. The construction gives the impression of physical movement, the movement of the past, and also the fragility of the present. It's a print variation on one of the most beautiful moments in Raad's work, the sunsets shot from a Beirut promenade in the video *The Dead Weight of a Quarrel Hangs*, 1996-99. The camera, progressively sped-up, is focused on the horizon line, and the view is increasingly obscured by people passing by until the sun sinks into the water. This affinity between vanishing and speed-racehorses, cars, explosions—is a sort of signature of Raad's, catching something by surprise, just after or just before its moment.

Audiences typically associate this gesture with mourning or melancholia, but Raad's word for it, "missing," is kind of a play on poststructuralism's "presence." "'Missing' has this idea of longing for," Raad says, "yet the inability to arrive. It's as if you're always longing for that which you missed."

The horse-race piece is the probably the best example of "missing." The strategy banks on the fact that everything's a little off, a little late, or a little early—and the attempt to manage what's already unmanageable.

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