

...Technology and the University of Rochester, Raad is now an assistant professor of art at Cooper Union in New York. He created The Atlas Group in 1999 in order to "research and document the contemporary history of Lebanon," and The Atlas Group's exhibits involve excerpts from their accumulating files, which include photographs, videos, texts, collages and even sculptural models. Raad also does performances in the form of slick PowerPoint presentations of The Atlas Group's work, as if he were the director of an academic research foundation or even an NGO. Walid Raad has received a remarkable amount of attention over the past few years: Atlas Group projects were exhibited at Documenta XI, the 2002 Whitney Biennial and the 2003 Venice Biennale, and he currently has a show touring Canada, "I Feel a Great Desire to Meet the Masses Again: Documents from the Fakhouri and Nasser Files." Raad is also a member of the Arab Image Foundation, and he has recently collaborated with the artist Akram Zaatari to curate "Mapping Sitting: On Portraiture and Photography" for New York University's Grey Art Gallery, using the Arab Image Foundation's historical archive of Arab photography.

The images in Raad's The Atlas Group exhibits are either culled from newspapers, magazines, press and police files, or else shot by Raad himself during his frequent trips to Beirut, and both are given elaborate fictional histories. While Raad insists that he never seeks to deceive his viewers, the subtly disorienting quality of his installations depends upon an uncertainty as to where fact ends and invention begins. Yet Raad does not merely collapse the distinction between fiction and nonfiction. Rather, he places them in dynamic tension in relationship to the knowledge and experience of history's violence and trauma. "It is evident in Lebanon and elsewhere that 'The Lebanese Civil War' refers to an abstraction," Raad commented in a 2002 interview "We proceed with the project from the consideration that this abstraction is constituted by various individuals, groups, discourses, events, situations, and, more importantly, by modes of experience." Raad's most affecting work, like *Miraculous Beginnings* and *No, Illness Is Neither Here Nor There*, captures delusional instances of desperate, private longing. *I Only Wish That I Could Weep*, 2000, for instance, consists of shamelessly gorgeous, even kitschy colour photographs of the sunset, viewed from a seaside walkway in West Beirut. In Raad's story, this boardwalk, called the Comiche, was a favourite meeting place of political pundits, religious fanatics, spies and double agents, and Lebanese security forces set up surveillance cameras along the strip. Every afternoon, the anonymous operator of camera #17 turned the camera from its fixed position and focussed on the sun setting over the water, a sight from which he was excluded during his years trapped in war-ravaged East Beirut. Both Fadl Fakhouri and the operator of camera #17 seem to need the mechanical apparatus of the camera to document and memorialize their own private experiences, as though they had ceased to trust them. Raad's fictions restore private experience and fantasy to a history that has otherwise been reified.

If *Miraculous Beginnings*, *No, Illness Is Neither Here Nor There* and *I Only Wish That I Could Weep* are raw, sentimental, embarrassingly personal works, then the photographs of the wreckage from car bombs, which form the core of *My Neck Is Thinner than a Hair: A History of Car Bombs in the Lebanese Wars (1975-1991)*, Volumes 1-245 (2003-) adopts a broader, yet still idiosyncratic, perspective. The photographs in *My Neck Is Thinner than a Hair* are small, dark and grainy, with high, washed-out contrasts, and are accompanied by hastily scribbled notes indicating the place and date of the bombings. The centre of these images is the engine of the pulverized car, which, according to Raad, is the only part of the vehicle that remains intact after the explosion. It is often projected far from the original site, onto neighbouring streets and even rooftops. In one, there is a curiously undamaged engine on the sidewalk of a busy street, cars passing in the background. In another, a group of investigators and police officers stands in a semicircle behind a lone engine in what amounts

to a formal group portrait--they are wearing suits and uniforms and gaze directly at the camera. And in still others, dazed, exhausted men sift through charred rubble. In Raad's story, during the height of the wars, photojournalists would compete with one another to be the first to photograph the engine: not the scene of the bombing, the ruin and carnage, the scattered body parts and hysterical survivors, but the metal object that remained intact. The engines in these photographs become, for the viewer but more so for the fictional version of the photographers themselves, metaphors of power, glamour, survival and beauty.

The historians, photojournalists, security agents and investigators Raad places behind The Atlas Group's documents are ineluctably drawn away from the reality of the wars, the unfolding catastrophe of history, toward moments of beauty and redemption, and in all of Raad's works, the way in which this effort fails can be sensed. In *I Was Overcome by a Momentary Panic: 1986, 2003*, attributed to Yusef Nasser, there are sharply defined black and white photographs of gaping, water-filled bomb craters, as well as a plaster floor sculpture in which the shapes of the craters are moulded. According to Raad, Yusef Nasser was the chief munitions expert who investigated car bombings during the Lebanese wars. He was, in a way, a tragic figure: despite his knowledge of the bombs, their origins, their magnitudes, he was never able to defuse a single bomb, nor was he able to bring a single bomber to justice. In the photographs, the isolated craters transcend fact and, like the engines, become absorptive metaphors, at once devastating and seductive. They are absences, savage ruptures in the world's illusory continuity, and they stand for a kind of violence the mind is unable to encompass. The pressure of a mind can be felt--the viewer's, Yusef Nasser's, Raad's--trying to make that absence coherent and meaningful. It might be thought that characters like Fadl Fakhouri and Yusef Nasser embody irresponsible, perverse, purely personal fantasies that warp a very real political history and do not take into account their impact on viewers--according to one of Raad's colleagues, the students who helped fabricate the craters ended up confused and traumatized. What Raad's work does, however, is project viewers into the temporality of experienced history that cannot be documented, even by first-person narrative, while at the same time fashioning a critique of the way history, and especially the history of the Lebanese wars, has been conceived.

One of the most unsettling sequences in Raad's work is *Missing Lebanese Wars, 1999*. "It is a little known fact," Raad writes, "that the major historians of the Lebanese wars were avid gamblers." Raad imagines that the venerable Fadl Fakhouri and his fellow historians--Marxists, Islamists, Maronite Nationalists, Socialists--went to the track every Sunday. Instead of betting on the horses, they gathered behind the official track photographer and gambled on how many fractions of a second before or after the winning horse crossed the finish line the photographer exposed his frame. Set on ragged, tom-out notebook pages, *Missing Lebanese Wars* consists of post-race photographs clipped from issues of the daily *Al-Nahar*, Dr. Fakhouri's calculations of the bets and punchy descriptions of the winning historians. "Uncivil and sullenly rude," one reads, "haughty and rude." These are historians who are not so much cynical as despairing of the possibility of representing history. Whereas in *Miraculous Beginnings*, Dr. Fakhouri impulsively exposes a frame of film every time he imagines the wars have ended, in *Missing Lebanese Wars* he bets on the failure of the photographer himself. Victory, like death, has no image.

We live in an era of obsessive visual documentation. One of the many astounding features of the attacks in New York on September 11th, 2001, was the extent to which they were documented, in both still photographs and videos, before anyone had any idea of the significance of what was happening. The archive of the present will be nearly infinite, and perhaps for that reason numbing,

deceptive and abstract. The Atlas Group's archive of imaginary documents is an anti-archive that, while remaining close to the course of actual events, opens a gap between the outward facts of recorded history and the traumatized interiority of its participants. For *Already Been in a Lahe of Fire*, Raad cut out 145 colour photographs of cars of the same make and model as those used in bombings between 1975 and 1991, and collaged them onto sheets of paper along with handwritten notes on the time and magnitude of the detonations. Cars may be commodities, but they are also signs of status and freedom, especially among the poor; they can equally be instruments of havoc and misery. And *Civilizationally, We Do Not Dig Holes to Bury Ourselves*, 2002, consists of what are purported to be snapshots of Dr. Fakhouri touring Europe during his student days. In front of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, on steps in Rome, he is young, handsome, confident and innocent. The hole has yet to be dug.

Walid Raad's work under the guise of The Atlas Group may elide what he has called "the reductive binary of fiction and nonfiction," but his involvement with the Arab Image Foundation is of a different order. The Arab Image Foundation's archives are real archives, documenting the history of the representation of Arabs by regional photographers. Since Raad typically works with found images or with images presented as found, and since he is not so much interested in composition as in photographs as artefacts with histories, curatorial projects like "Mapping Sitting" are an illuminating extension of his practice. In one piece, Raad and his co-curator Akram Zaatari cover a wall with thousands of old id photographs for passports, licences and the like, all reprinted from negatives found in boxes in the flood-damaged studio of Antranik Anouchian. Set against blank backgrounds, these are generic images of men in suits and men in military uniforms, nuns in habits and women in traditional headscarves, self-conscious teenage girls and young boys--an entire cross-section of Lebanese society attempting to assert their identity, to make themselves visible and recognizable. In another piece, Raad and Zaatari use "photo surprises" of people shot unawares in Tripoli's Tell Square in the 1950s by Agop Kuyumijian's Photo Jack Studio, and turn them into a haunting video. Luminous, translucent, steely grey figures of men in suits and hats, of soldiers, women, children walking hurriedly, chatting, holding hands, all skitter and disappear like disjointed memories against the frozen background of the square. There is no pretence to the streaming illusion of life. It is a fleeting, fragmented vision of a world that preceded the ravages of the wars.

In works like *My Neck Is Thinner than a Hair* and *I Was Overcome by a Momentary Panic*, the fictions that elaborate the photographs direct the viewer's attention away from the images toward the inaccessible consciousness of the photographer, and the true stories behind the photographs in "Mapping Sitting" have a similar effect. It is surely no accident that neither Antranik Anouchian nor Agop Kuyumijian was Arab. They were Armenians driven from eastern Turkey during the Armenian Genocide of 1919, and they were part of an Armenian exile that extended across the Middle East to Europe and North America. Walid Raad's work is undertaken from the point of view of an exile who is at once inside and outside the history that has informed him. That is what gives this evolving body of work, which might otherwise seem cool and cerebral, an air of subdued but smouldering hysteria, melancholy and loss. It is Raad's combination of intimacy and distance, charged emotion and conceptual analysis, that allows him to hone in on issues that are personal to him yet broad in their implications: the trauma and fragmentation of the irresolvable history of the present.

#### ADDED MATERIAL

Daniel Baird is a writer and editor who divides his time between Toronto and New York. He is currently Art Editor for *The Brooklyn Rail*.

*No, Illness Is Neither Here Nor There*, 2004, Inkjet colour print, 30 × 40 cm. Courtesy: The Atlas

Group, Sfeir Semler Galerie, Anthony Reynolds Gallery.

I Only Wish That I Could Weep (still), 2002, DVD. Photographs courtesy: The Atlas Group, Sfeir Semler Galerie, Anthony Reynolds Gallery.

My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair, 2004, Inkjet print, 20 × 25 cm. Courtesy: The Atlas Group, Sfeir Semler Galerie, Anthony Reynolds Gallery.

Civilizationally We Do Not Dig Holes to Bury Ourselves, 2003, Inkjet print, 23 × 28 cm. Photographs on this page courtesy: The Atlas Group, Sfeir Semler Galerie, Anthony Reynolds Gallery. [Text incomplete in journal] [Text incomplete in journal]

I Was Overcome With a Momentary Panic at the Thought That They Might Be Right, 2004, Inkjet colour print, 45 × 300 cm. Courtesy: The Atlas Group, Sfeir Semler Galerie, Anthony Reynolds Gallery.

Walid Raad and Akram Zaatari, detail, video installation of photo surprise, photographs from Photo Jack archive dating from 1950s (Tripoli, Lebanon), 2002, DVD, 45-second loop, from "Mapping Sitting: On Portraiture and Photography," Grey Art Gallery NYU. Installation view. Photo: James Prince. Courtesy Grey Art Gallery.

"Mapping Sitting: On Portraiture and Photography," Grey Art Gallery, NY, installation.

Walid Raad and Akram Zaatari, detail of installation of ID photos from Studio Anouchian dating from 1935-70 (Tripoli, Lebanon), 2003. Photographs: Antranik Anouchian (1908-1991). Courtesy Grey Art Gallery, NY.