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MAPPING THE DISASTER:

WALID RA'AD'S ATLAS GROUP
PROJECT AND THE
LEBANESE CIVIL WARS

BY DEBORAH ROOT

In the heart of the Lebanese civil wars, the celebrated singer Fairuz sang a song called *b'hebbek ya loubnan*: "I love you, Lebanon, even in your madness ... I love my country, strewn as it is with fire and dynamite." This song was a favourite of homesick Arab students in the 1970s, and I remember many parties at which people passed around the album cover in order to examine the beautiful, sad-eyed singer in the turquoise dress. One day, rumours began to flow: Fairuz's son had been killed by a car bomb in Beirut. Would Fairuz continue to sing? Someone found a Beirut radio station on short-wave, and there she was, singing *b'hebbek ya loubnan*. Everyone believed that, under the circumstances, Fairuz's willingness to carry on was



particularly heroic, and her bravery in the face of grievous loss seemed to echo that of Beirut itself. We eventually learned that her son had not been killed after all – the singer's house had been hit by a rocket, but no one was hurt.

The false news of Fairuz's son's death exemplifies the shifting nature of truth in extreme situations. When the relation between cause and effect is unclear, one comes to depend on partial information, rumour and gossip. Facts seem as unstable as the situation they claim to account for, and stories take on an enhanced status. Impressions appear as significant as official reports. There is no logic to a car bomb; even if it is set off with a particular target in mind, its effects are unpredictable. Money, power and celebrity become meaningless – anyone might be struck down. Individual agency is suspended, which means that a new system of cause and effect is constructed. The logic of the rumour takes on a life of its own. Whether true or not, it made a strange sense that Fairuz, who so loved Lebanon, should personally suffer the fate of her country.

Walid Ra'ad's Atlas Group project approaches the civil wars that inundated Lebanon from 1975 to 1991 from several perspectives, or more precisely, it constructs several imaginary sites in which the failure of logic to account for the wars is revealed and allowed to play out. The Atlas Group is an imaginary foundation that acts as a recording device for that unstable complex of events and experiences that comprise a lengthy civil war, and in Ra'ad's archive, hostages and experts, government bureaucrats and civilians do their best to go about their business and to grasp what is happening in their city. All experience the disaster differently, yet at some level, the contingent nature of their experience is the same, as are the inconsistencies of memory – or rather, the non-memory of trauma. Ra'ad's use of photographs, texts, video and performances underlines this indeterminacy of experience, as does his construction of an imaginary archive that mirrors the way rumours circulate in a civil war. The difficulty in determining who is responsible for what – the sudden alliances and betrayals – reveals a truth about the failure of historical facts to account for such events.

A central figure of The Atlas Group archive is Dr. Fadl Fakhouri, a historian whose notebooks, films and photographs comprise the Fakhouri file. I feel as if I have come to know Dr. Fakhouri through his handwritten notebooks cataloguing horse races, here entitled *Missing Lebanese Wars* (1998). Dr. Fakhouri painstakingly records the particulars of each race, including facts pertaining to the winning animals and information about the bets placed by the other historians attending the races. He constructs a barrage of seemingly pointless details that appear both in the notebook pages and in the explanatory remarks provided by the archivist. But the accumulation of facts cannot answer the more important questions: Are the rumours true that the races are fixed? Why is it that the photographs of winning horses never capture the precise moment of victory? Indeed, is there a way for chance to be systematized and accounted for? Dr. Fakhouri does what he can to control the accidental nature of the event, but his insistence on the collection of data reveals the impossibility of his larger historical project, and what happens next becomes little more than a guessing game.

In another notebook, *Already Been in a Lake of Fire* (2001), Dr. Fakhouri is concerned with the particulars of car bombs, and has pasted photographs of similar cars into its pages with notations in Arabic describing the make and model of the cars used in the bombings. Again, the information provided for each car, including engine serial numbers and other details that have nothing to do with the bombings, seems rather pointless. The viewer is inclined to think about what kinds of cars were turned into bombs rather than about the bombings themselves. Here, the historian seems increasingly desperate, condemned to employ tools of analysis that have become increasingly less able to account for the events they describe.

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Document Title: Never That I Remember
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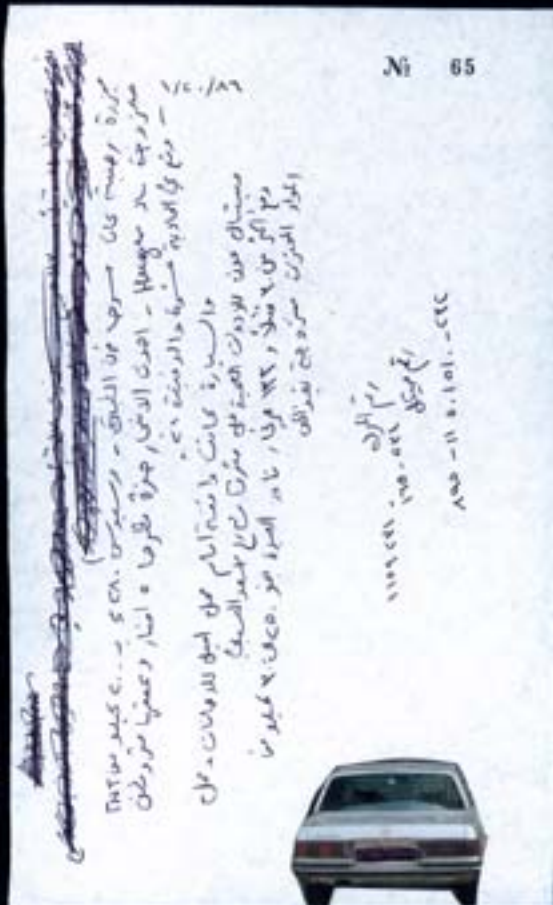
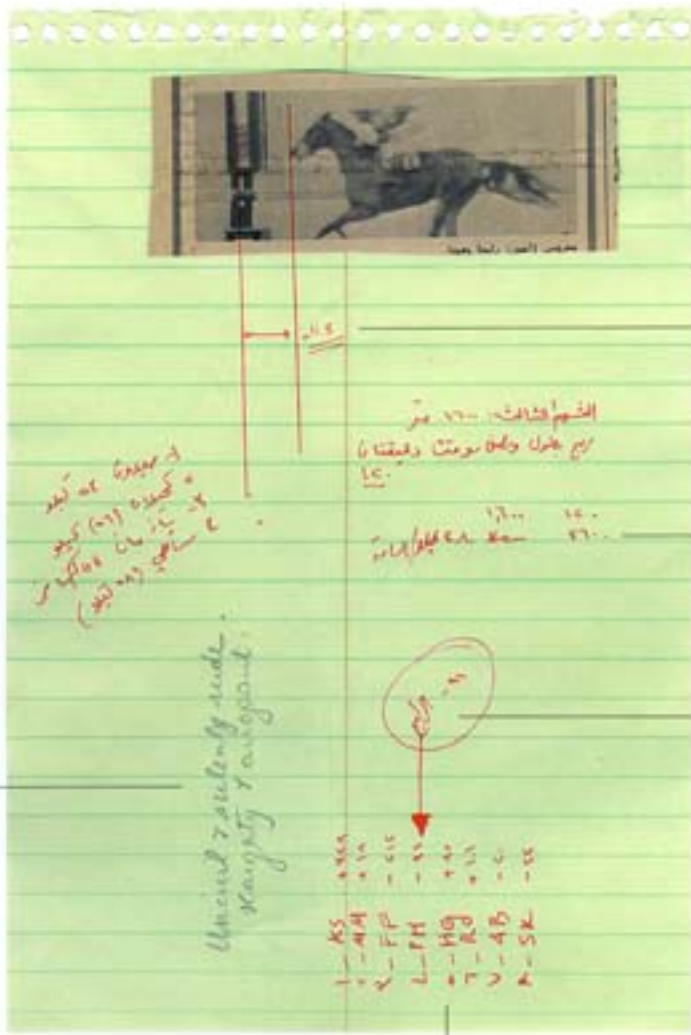


Plate 65
 Mercedes
 280 S
 Grey
 January 20, 1986
 11:21
 Fum El Chubak, Beirut
 30 killed
 132 injured
 200 kg. of TNT
 Hexogen
 5 m. x 1.5 m. crater



Plate 66
 Honda
 Civic
 Blue
 February 23, 1986
 9:55
 Saloumi, Beirut
 4 killed
 16 injured
 20 kg. of TNT



Distance Between Horse and Finish Line: -11.5

Race Distance: 1600 m.
 Winning Time: 2:00
 Average Speed: 48 km/hr.

Winning Historian/Time: PH -91

Description of the Winning Historian:
 Uncivil and sullenly rude.
 Haughty and arrogant.

- Historians' Initials and Bets:
- 1. KS +328
 - 2. MM +018
 - 3. FF 212
 - 4. PH -091
 - 5. HG +080
 - 6. RO +101
 - 7. AB -020
 - 8. SK -022

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Document Title: Secrets in the Open Sea

Type/Subfile: AG_FD_Secrets

Reference Number: AGA_FD_Secrets: 6

Original Document Dimensions: Blue Print (40 x 60 inches), B+W Print (21 x 31 inches)

Date: 1999



S21B

S21L



Although the character of Dr. Fakhouri remains enigmatic, he also seems strangely recognizable – perhaps because there is something in him that exemplifies the failure of modernity. *Never that I Remember* (2003) presents a file of snapshots from Dr. Fakhouri's trip to Paris in 1959 where, sadly, he is always alone as he visits restaurants and tourist sites. In this character's isolation and his fussy attention to detail, Ra'ad has created a kind of Nietzschean last man – solitary, consumed by pointless activities and small pleasures as he seeks to comprehend a violence that is incomprehensible. There is something disturbingly familiar about Dr. Fakhouri's focus on supposedly significant bits of information that mirrors the failure of the bureaucrat and the academic, but also reveals something we all share.

Understanding apparently random assemblages of events is extremely difficult, particularly in complex circumstances. During the Lebanese civil wars, there were many militias and factions – Phalange, P.L.O., Amal, Hizb'ullah, Mossad, C.I.A. – and the longer the list, the greater the seeming randomness of the destruction. Dr. Fakhouri's dilemma is our own, and as we contemplate the new Gulf war, rumour and metaphor seem as good as anything else to explain a situation that makes no sense. But does admitting our inability to fully account for such wars negate the events themselves and their effects on real people, as much as Dr. Fakhouri's collection of pointless facts? And is truth the same as detail, or as accuracy in documenting acts of violence and turbulent political histories?

When a bomb suddenly explodes in a public place, the moment of the event is necessarily transient. We see the consequences, and sometimes must live with them throughout our lives. But again, at the heart of such occurrences lies a failure of logic, which means that the event cannot readily be inserted into a coherent sequence of cause and effect. Like a terrible *memento mori*, the inherent conditionality of life is both revealed and enacted, and people have little choice but to consider this as they go about their daily business. But this is unbearable, and so the trauma generated by the apparently random explosions is driven deep inside the collective mind.

In another set of files, this time named as an Atlas Group project, the car bomb reappears. In *My Neck is Thinner Than a Hair* (2002), The Atlas Group seeks to account for all 245 car bombs exploded during the Lebanese civil wars. Again, details have been accumulated and assembled in dossiers, but here they are presented as an outgrowth of collective memory rather than as one man's collection of facts, and they are revealed, along with the dossiers that enumerate the explosions, through installation and performance. Each explosion is described in detail and documented with photographs of investigators, car engines and bomb craters, as well as with newspaper reports, notes and, in one instance, an engine suspended eight metres above a white Fiat. Here, fragments of detail and experience seem to mirror how war actually plays out on the ground, with the assemblages of disparate materials underlining both the random nature of the car bomb and the recognition that anything could happen – that no matter what one does, one could be dead in an instant.

In *Secrets in the Open Sea* (1999), the viewer contemplates six rectangles, each coloured a different shade of blue. Upon close inspection, tiny black-and-white photographs can be discerned near one corner of the rectangles. The viewer is informed that the photographs, reportedly discovered under Beirut's rubble, are group portraits of people whose bodies were found in the Mediterranean Sea. A trace of once-living individuals, the photographs become, through the fact of their recovery and the identification of the individuals pictured therein, a trace of the war itself. The various blue rectangles reflect the shifting colours of the Mediterranean Sea. They are richly coloured and profoundly still, but this sublim-



VIDEO STILLS FROM MESSAGE TO BACHAR
PARTS 11 + 12 (2007)



VIDEO STILLS FROM I AM P WITH PAUL
COULD WEEP (2002)

Cartographier le désastre.
Le projet du Groupe Atlas de
Walid Ra'ad et les guerres civiles
libanaises

Quand une bombe explose soudainement dans un lieu public, le moment pendant lequel se déroule l'événement est nécessairement fugitif. Même si nous en voyons les conséquences et que nous devons parfois vivre avec elles durant toute notre vie, l'événement peut ne pas s'insérer facilement dans une suite cohérente de causes et d'effets. Le désastre explose toujours dans le temps, observation que révèle avec intelligence le projet du Groupe Atlas de Walid Ra'ad. Dans cette œuvre, l'artiste construit des sites imaginaires dans lesquels se jouent les contradictions et les instabilités des guerres civiles libanaises de 1975 à 1991. Des otages et des experts, des bureaucrates gouvernementaux et des civils vivent le désastre de façon différente, mais à un certain niveau la nature accidentelle de l'expérience demeure la même. L'usage que fait Ra'ad de photographies, de textes, de vidéos et de performances souligne cette indétermination, tout comme les archives qu'il a construites reflètent la façon dont les rumeurs circulent dans une guerre civile et dévoilent une vérité quant à l'incapacité de la logique de rendre compte de tels événements. Son projet souève également des questions sur la nature fluide de la notion d'auteur et sur la manière dont les conventions de présentation cherchent nécessairement à aménager une matière historique complexe.

ity is paradoxical in that it reveals what has become an environment for dead bodies. If each death can be thought of as a violent event, then this work approaches the event from the outside, foregrounding the setting in which the dead were found and the way they looked as living people, rather than the corpses they became. In this way, the event becomes comprehensible only through its traces, forcing us to ask what remains after the disaster. *Secrets in the Open Sea* remains highly conceptual, but engages fully with real life. The ideas speak directly to that cluster of events that plays out in the real world and creates casualties of war, but are able to make use of an aesthetic vocabulary that illuminates rather than obscures or idealizes that world.

I Only Wish That I Could Weep (2001), one of the most poignant files in this collection, is a video that was mailed anonymously to The Atlas Group, apparently made by a security agent who had been charged with the task of operating a surveillance camera. For reasons that are unclear, the agent declined or was unable to take up this assignment, preferring instead to tape changes in the sunlight as it played across the sea, the empty roads, the vendor and his cart, the children playing in the dying light. Again, there is a sublimity to the images, a refusal to contemplate directly the ultimata of war, and the viewer wants to know more about this agent and why he became so distracted from the task at hand. But perhaps the agent reveals an answer to the questions posed by Dr. Fakhouri's failure. In the face of the disaster, we can refuse to participate; we can do our best to turn back to the everyday activities and images that sustain life.

In *The Writing of the Disaster* (1986), Maurice Blanchot reflects on the impossibility of accounting for events that are inherently unstable.¹ The disaster is always exploding in time – this is its nature, which is something Ra'ad reveals so well in The Atlas Group project. Ra'ad demands that we contemplate the nature of truth and its relation to history; the relation of facts to truth, both the truth of authorship and the archive that claims to systematize facts; and the truth of a disaster, such as civil war. The fictional nature of his archive underlines the fictional nature of the moment of explosion, but these are not fictional in the sense that the events did not happen – there was a civil war in which many people died – but as a way of marking the conceit of insisting on a single explanation for such events. The Atlas project reveals that war is inevitably experienced as a contingent series of fragments and that, while a seemingly inconsequential incident or image can illuminate the whole, it is impossible to predict what that incident will be. Dr. Fakhouri was wrong to think that fact-collecting would capture the truth, but right to pay attention to games of chance.

By underlining the fluid nature of authorship and revealing how conventions of recording events and histories necessarily seek to tidy up complex historical material, Ra'ad also issues a challenge to the contemporary art world and its protocols of display. The anarchic quality of the Atlas material reflects the instability of history and reminds us that complex events cannot be systematized. But most art shows (including Documenta 11, where The Atlas Group project was exhibited in 2002) utilize a formula in which spectators are conducted through the different points of the exhibit as they walk through the gallery. This creates not only a false sequentiality but also undermines Ra'ad's insistence that rumour has its place in the history of war. The strength of Ra'ad's work lies in his playful and incisive assertion that the truth remains messy, inherently disruptive, and best approached as a kind of disordered labyrinth.

Notes

¹ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster: L'écriture du désastre*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln NE: University of Nevada Press, 1986).