Writing History Under Erasure:
Radical Historiographical Practices in Lebanese Postwar Art

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Author's Declaration

This thesis represents partial submission for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the Royal College of Art. I confirm that the work presented here is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

During the period of registered study in which this thesis was prepared the author has not been registered for any other academic award or qualification. The material included in this thesis has not been submitted wholly or in part for any academic award or qualification other than that for which it is now submitted.

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the artistic practices of Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Rabih Mroué, Walid Raad and Akram Zaatari, Lebanese artists of the so-called *jil al-harb*, or the war generation, whose work is characterised by a conspicuous engagement with questions of history writing, mostly, although not exclusively, in relation to the events and the continuing legacy of the Lebanese civil wars (1975-1990). In this dissertation I consider how the works produced by this group of artists attempt to critically problematise and deconstruct the structures and conventions of dominant forms of historiography, and how the foregrounding of such epistemological concerns in their works, rather than signalling an escape into postmodern relativism, is crucially connected to a politics of truth. The dismantling of historicist and positivistic models of history writing by such artists, as I argue, does not seek to destroy the truth-claims of history or the possibility of historical knowledge as such, but to reconfigure the task of historical inquiry as a process of critical reconstruction and interpretative disclosure. Accordingly, this dissertation considers how the above artists' "radical historiographical practices" attempt to articulate a dynamic understanding of history and the archive as an incomplete and open-ended project, wherein our understanding of the past is always made and re-made from the standpoint and urgencies of a specific historical present. A primary point of focus is the way in which such practices interrogate and reassess conceptions of the referential and testimonial power of the document, especially the photographic image, analysing the technological forms and media through which the past is recorded and accessed. The introduction provides a critical survey of the major debates on artists coming out of post-civil war Beirut, addressing issues around the politics of memory in a society characterised by "state-sponsored amnesia" and sectarian fragmentation; the problematisation of historical representation and the re-invention of documentary forms; and the destabilisation of established boundaries between "fact" and "fiction". Chapter 1 looks at the production and unearthing of photographic documentation in the aftermath of the civil wars. Examining Hadjithomas and Joreige's *Wonder Beirut* (1997-2006) and *Lasting Images* (2002), and a number of selected files from Raad's Atlas Group archive, I consider how these works attempt to re-conceptualise the indexical referentiality of the photographic document in order to address the latent traumas and violence that afflict the post-conflict reality of Beirut; specifically, the suspended ontological status of the forcibly disappeared, and the violent processes of war and spatial abstraction that underlie the reconstruction of Beirut city centre. Chapter 2 explores the place of the archive as a mobile and living space from which, history – animated by the urgencies of the present – can be written and re-written. Focusing on Zaatari's work with photographic and other archival material drawn from the collections of the Arab Image Foundation, the chapter reflects on issues of preservation, media transfer and the semantic instability of the photo-document, as well as Zaatari's critical relation to the AIF as an institution. Chapter 3 investigates the narrativity of historical knowledge in the age of information, analysing Mroué's and Raad's performative re-invention of the seemingly obsolete tradition of storytelling. In particular, I focus on the re-narrativization of the informational forms of news media and the deconstruction of the chronicle as a form of history writing in Mroué's multi-media plays and non-academic lectures, and the emergence of a mode of analytical storytelling in Raad's lecture-performances. Chapter 4 turns to the topic of art history as a specialised field of historical research. Examining Raad's multi-volume project *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow. A History of Art in the Arab World* (2007 - ongoing), the chapter interrogates the complex historiographic problems that have arisen as a result of the burgeoning retrospective interest in art in the Arab world, as well as how these problems intersect with an emerging field of global art history.

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Introduction

> "History, or history writing, becomes a project that perpetually reconstructs itself and is hence in direct opposition to a certain kind of historical writing that prevails in this region and probably everywhere in the world, that seeks to establish a fixed and transhistorical 'identity'; or rather, to establish a series of essential identities, each at war with all the others. In that sense, remembering and forgetting becomes beside the point."[1]

> "The historiography that is no longer concerned with recovering the past as it really was suggest[s] a notion of reading that is not epistemological but political – in the sense of being deliberately interventionist and strategic."[2]

This dissertation examines the work of a number of Lebanese artists of the so-called *jil al-harb*, or the war generation – Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Rabih Mroué, Walid Raad and Akram Zaatari – whose work is characterised by a conspicuous engagement with problems of history writing, mostly, although not exclusively, in relation to the events and the continuing legacy of the Lebanese civil wars (1975-1990).[3] By unearthing and collecting vernacular audio-visual and photographic documents, and by delving into existing archives or constituting entirely new ones, these artists have contributed to the production of an alternative historiography. While exploring both real and fictional stories, events and experiences typically left out of official historical accounts and narratives, they have also sought to complicate empiricist notions such as 'evidence' and 'fact', as well as positivist approaches to history writing and to the archival document.

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[1] Tony Chakar in Stephen Wright, "Territories of Difference. Excerpts from an E-mail Exchange between Tony Chakar, Bilal Khbeiz and Walid Sadek" in *Out of Beirut*, ed. Suzanne Cotter (Oxford: Modern Art Oxford, 2006), 64.

[2] Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism and the Colonial Context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 162.

[3] The expression *jil al-harb* is used to indicate the generations of Lebanese who, born in the period from the 1950s to the 1980s, had been either adults or adolescents during the civil war. Born in the 1960s and 1970s, the artists I look at grew up during the war. This generation is said to "have a particularly close relation with the war, in that it shaped their formative years." For them, "introspection and examination of the past had a personal dimension to it, which generations born after 1980 could find hard to relate to." Sune Haugbolle, *War and Memory in Lebanon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 99.
In this dissertation, I will however mostly refer to these artists as the postwar generation and to their art production as postwar or post-civil war art, as they started making work in the aftermath of the war.

The postwar generation comprises a larger group of practitioners including Ziad Abillama, Tony Chakar, Lamia Joreige, Bilal Khbeiz, Bernard Khoury, Marwan Rechmaoui, Lina Saneh, Walid Sadek, Jayce Salloum, Jalal Toufic, and partners Paola Yacoub and Michel Lasserre. Working across the fields of photography, video, film, live performance, writing, architecture and urban intervention, this generation has become well known for its experimental, multi-medial and trans-categorial practice, which transgresses the fixed boundaries of genre and discipline, introducing an ontological rupture with the art production of the earlier period. Emerging out of what Stephen Wright has termed a "proto-institutional" environment,[4] a network of informal institutions such as the Ayloul Festival and Ashkal Alwan, The Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts,[5] many of these artists came to international prominence in the late 1990s.[6] This dissertation does not seek to perform a complete survey of the post-civil war art scene in Lebanon, nor the ways in which this scene has been institutionally received internationally - although I do explore some of the issues around the historical and institutional reception and framing of modern and contemporary art in Lebanon and the Arab world in chapter 4. Among the diverse group of practitioners that make up the postwar generation, I focus specifically on artists who have developed post-conceptual and research-based practices that deconstruct conventional forms of historiography and the workings of archives.[7] These artists have become a key point of reference in any discussion of archival art

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[4] Wright, "Territories of Difference", 58.

[5] The Ayloul Festival was a multi-disciplinary art festival particularly interested in experimental theatre and video practices. Founded by Pascale Feghali, it was held every September from 1997 to 2001.

[6] In 2002-03, the work of many of these artists was included in Catherine David's landmark exhibition *Contemporary Arab Representations. Beirut/Lebanon*, first presented at Fundació Antoni Tàpies in Barcelona and later at the Witte de With in Rotterdam and the BildMuseet in Umeå. A smaller version was included in Francesco Bonami's "Dreams and Conflicts: The Dictatorship of the Viewer" at the 2003 Venice Biennale. See: Catherine David (ed.), *Tamáss. Contemporary Arab Representations: Beirut/Lebanon (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies,* 2002); and Catherine David, "Learning from Beirut: Contemporary Aesthetic Practices in Lebanon", in *Home Works: A Forum of Cultural Practices in the Region,* eds. Christine Tohme and Mona Abu Rayyan (Beirut: Ashkal Alwan, 2003), 32-38. Another important exhibition in the construction and establishment of the international reputation of the Lebanese art scene was *Out of Beirut*, a group show curated by Suzanne Cotter, in collaboration with Christine Tohme (director of Ashkal Alwan), that opened at Modern Art Oxford in May 2006. See Suzanne Cotter (ed.), *Out of Beirut* (Oxford: Modern Art Oxford, 2006). For a compelling discussion of the problems and paradoxes of geographically or regionally based forms of curating see: Sandra Dagher, Catherine David, Rasha Salti, Christine Tohme and T. J. Demos, "Curating Beirut: A Conversation on the Politics of Representation", *Art Journal* 66, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 98-119.

[7] While this generation of artists is mostly known for their research-based practice, an important early strand of post-civil war art in Beirut consisted in works of public art and installations aimed at reclaiming a common and shared

practices. Walid Raad, together with Lamia Joreige, was included in Okwui Enwezor's 2008 landmark exhibition titled, after Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*; and Raad, Akram Zaatari and Jayce Salloum feature prominently in Charles Merewether's 2006 publication *The Archive,* which collates a number of critical texts about archival art practice.[8]

It has by now become commonplace to consider art practices coming out of post-civil war Lebanon as implicated in issues related to the representation of the war, the politics of memory in a sectarian and highly fractured society, and the (im)possibility of writing history. While these artists' works certainly do foreground epistemological fissures and the difficulty of knowing anything certain about the past conflict – a difficulty compounded by processes of repression and removal of traumatic experiences – this widespread reading reveals, as this dissertation seeks to show, only half of the picture. Whereas art critics have mostly attended to the critical labour of deconstruction in post-civil war Lebanese art, the more positive and (re-)constructive aspects of such artistic practices, particularly their attempt to critically re-articulate historical narratives, has often been overlooked. The former interpretative framework, predominant especially in the analysis of Raad's work with the Atlas Group archive, yet also extended to the work of his compatriots as well, is encapsulated in Carrie Lambert-Beatty's following remarks. The documents of the Atlas Group, the art historian argues, highlight

> the problems of history-writing (the patchiness of documents, the "unreliability" of even first-hand accounts, the work of interpretation that goes into making sense of them); traumatic experience and the ways it both compels and disallows speech; and the particular epistemic conditions of the Lebanese civil war, with its multiplicity of combatant groups, its unreliable sources of information, and its nightmarishly extended duration (indeed historians disagree in determining the year the war "ended").[9]

public space in a highly divided city that was undergoing massive plans of redevelopment. Among the practitioners associated with such practices are Ziad Abillama and Walid Sadek. Similarly, the first curatorial projects organised by Ashkal Alwan were interventions in public space: the Sanayeh project (1995), the Sioufi Gardens project (1997), the Corniche project (1999) and the Hamra Street project (2000).

[8] See Okwui Enwezor, "Archive Fever: Photography between History and the Monument", in *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (Göttingen: Steidl Verlag, 2008), 11-51; Charles Merewether (ed.), *The Archive* (London and Cambridge, MA.: Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, 2006). Raad and Rabih Mroué's works also feature in Markus Miessen and Yann Chateigné eds., *The Archive as a Productive Space of Conflict* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016).

[9] Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility", *October* 129 (Summer 2009), 75.

Lambert-Beatty rightly points out the epistemological problems, both internal to the historiographical discipline and arising from the historical specificities of the civil war, that Raad and his fellow Lebanese artists ostensibly thematise in their work, and which are a critical feature of this dissertation. My analysis, however, also importantly diverges from this account, in that I understand the work of epistemological critique exhibited in such practices not as a disavowal of history as such, but as a refutation of a particular positivist form of history writing – or what we might refer to as a contemporary version of historicism. Accordingly, this dissertation considers the ways in which the artists I look at consistently advance in their work and practice a re-conceptualisation and reconfiguration of history and history writing. A central part of these alternative historical practices is the attempt to articulate a dynamic understanding of history as an incomplete and open-ended process, in which the past is always made and re-made from the standpoint of a specific historical present. In other words, I do not simply examine the alternative and *different* histories that these artists document in their work, but I look at how they attempt to write history *differently.*

An important factor in my decision to focus on the above artists, then, is their explicit and affirmative, albeit critical, interest in the concept and the discipline of history, which is tied to, but also crucially different from, questions of memory. The goal of Raad's Atlas Groups archive, as clearly stated in the organization's mission statement, is "to research and document the contemporary history of Lebanon."[10] His later project, *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow. A History of Art in the Arab World*, focuses programmatically, as the subtitle clearly states, on the history of art in the Arab world. Talking about the Arab Image Foundation, the photographic archive he co-founded in 1997, Zaatari has described the conceptual shift from the initial intention of producing a history of photography and photographic practices in the region, to the more ambitious project of reconstructing and writing the history of the region *through* photography.[11] Hadjithomas and Joreige have both spoken of the surfeit of memories in post-civil war Lebanon and the absence of the mediating operation of historical consciousness.[12]

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[10] See The Atlas Group website: http://www.theatlasgroup.org/

[11] Akram Zaatari and Mark Westmoreland, "Against Photography", *Aperture* 210 (Spring 2013), 61.

[12] In a catalogue interview with curator Okwui Enwezor, Hadjithomas remarks: "We have never thought that there is a problem of memory … We think that there are too many images, too many memories. … And there's a difficulty, maybe, with writing history, but it has nothing to do with memory." Okwui Enwezor, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, in *Two Suns in a Sunset: Joana Hadjithomas, Khalil Joreige*, eds. Okwui Enwezor, Hoor Al Qasimi, José Miguel G. Cortés, Marta Gili (London: Koenig Books, 2016), 41. The same point was made by Joreige during a symposium that

Often treated as synonyms, the terms history and memory point to two markedly different experiences of the past. Historical knowledge, in Paul Ricoeur's understanding, requires a transition from the phenomenology and experience of lived memory to its reified entrance in the transgenerational space of the archive.[13] However, such a transition does not eradicate completely the living, oral memories, as manifested in the resurgence of the aporias of memory that haunt, at every stage, the historiographical operation. Yet, the movement of (spatial and temporal) distancing and the de-personalization that comes with the reified inscription of the living memory are both crucial to the construction of history.[14] In Ricoeur's words, "[h]istory continues to be born from this taking of a distance which consists in the recourse to the exteriority of the archival trace."[15] It is the attempt to perform what Ricoeur terms an "acculturation" to this externality or otherness of the historical past, as it is represented in the externality of the archival document or image, that becomes the vital point of departure for all of the artists I consider.[16]

Writing History Under Erasure

For about fifteen years (1975 - 1990), Lebanon was ravaged by brutal internecine struggles, sectarian strife, foreign invasions and occupations (most notably by Israel and Syria), and the external political and military interference of several local and international players. The events that are commonly identified under the heading of 'Lebanese Civil War' frustrate historical reconstruction and analysis, and resist traditional narrative tropes such as the establishment of chronological markings and linear chains of causality. The use of the plural 'Lebanese Civil Wars', that some commentators tend to prefer and that I will myself employ, registers the intermittent

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took place on the 15th October 2015 in London as part of the exhibition *Autonomy of the Self: Rejecting Violence with the Lens in Former Ottoman Territorie*s, curated by Joy Specey (11 September – 31 October 2015, P21 Gallery, London).

[13] Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting,* trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 147-160.

[14] Following from this distinction, this dissertation does not consider the testimonial documentaries of Lamia Joreige, which are more concerned with pointing up the aporias of living memory, rather than in foregrounding the constructive work of historiographical research.

[15] Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 139. In the archives, as Ricoeur elsewhere writes, "narrative can be detached from its narrator." Ibid., 166.

[16] See Peter Osborne, "Information, Story, Image: Akram Zaatari's Historical Constructivism", in *The Postconceptual Condition: Critical Essays* (London and New York: Verso, 2018), 156-157.

character of the conflict, punctuated by ceasefires and protracted periods of lull, as well as the fragmented and unstable composition of the warring blocs, made up of several factions, militias and splinter groups representing contending sectarian identities and political ideologies. At many junctures, the stakes of the conflict and the balance of forces were reshuffled as a result of the repeated shifts of alliances, the fast mutating roster of combatants, and the meddling of local, regional and international powers each pursuing their respective interests. Without intending to fully summarise or provide a univocal explanation for the conflict – an endeavour that, as we will see in the analysis of Mroué's play *How Nancy Wished That Everything Was an April Fool's Joke* (2007) in chapter 3, is doomed to failure – it is however useful to point up a few important historical details.

The outbreak of the civil wars signalled the breakdown of the fragile balance on which Lebanon's confessional system of parliamentary democracy was based. This system of governance, introduced on the eve of Lebanon's independence in 1943, determined the distribution of political and institutional power among the country's major religious sects, which was based on a 1932 census of the population and favoured the Christian constituency.[17] However, in light of important demographic changes, the left-wing, Pan-Arab Lebanese National Movement (LNM), headed by the Druze leader Kamal Jumblatt, voiced the need for a radical readjustment of the sectarian ratio. The long-standing tension around this inherently flawed system of representative democracy was aggravated by the growing presence of Palestinian refugees and, in particular, by the increasing zeal of the Palestinian armed resistance (PLO), whose right to organise military operations against Israel from Lebanese territory was highly contended.[18] The Ayn al-Rumana massacre of 13th April

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[17] This unwritten agreement, known as the National Pact (*al Mithaq al Watani*), allocated seats in Parliament and positions in the government bureaucracy according to a 6-to-5 ratio of Christians and Muslims. In addition to the majority in parliament, the pact additionally gave the Christians control of the presidency and command of the armed forces. The Taif Agreement of 1989 changed the parliamentary ratio to half and half, and reduced the power of the Christian Maronite president. Yet the allocation of the high-ranking public offices according to religious lines has remained unchanged: the President must be a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim, and the Speaker of the Parliament a Shia Muslim.

[18] At the end of the civil wars, the Palestinians were scapegoated for the outbreak of the conflict, as evidenced by the refusal of the Taif Agreement to naturalise Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. However, as many historians and intellectuals have pointed out, the Palestinian question merely exposed a fundamental flaw of Lebanon's confessionalism and its failure to cope with upheaval caused by social grievances. As historian Fawwaz Traboulsi explains, the Palestinian issue was complexly intertwined with a number of "social frustrations and blocked social demands", which "gradually slipped towards sectarian and regional divisions." Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern*

1975, in which the Kataeb militia (Christian Phalangist Party) killed twenty-eight Palestinians, is generally identified as the beginning of the civil wars.[19] Fighting immediately broke out across suburban Beirut between the Phalange and the Palestinian resistance supported by LNM.

If the Palestinian question had destabilised the already precarious Lebanese internal politics, precipitating the escalation of violence, external pressures and direct involvement of foreign countries would remain a constant throughout the civil wars, starting with the intervention of Syrian forces in support of the Christian militias in 1976. Lebanon was later to endure two Israeli invasions in 1978 and 1982, as well as the intercession of a multinational task force (MNF), formed by the US, France and Italy. By the mid 1980s, the country had turned into the terrain of a proxy war, that besides the involvement of Israel and Syria, included the Cold War competition between Soviet and American interests, inter-Arab rivalries and the growing influence on the region of Iran through the rise of Hezbollah.

The Taif Agreements, signed in October 1989 in Taif (Saudi Arabia), brought officially the wars to a close, leaving behind a rough estimate of 150,000 casualties, 18,000 missing, and 800,000 internally displaced.[20] Orchestrated by Sunni business mogul Rafik Hariri, the accords, brokered under Syrian tutelage, provided for the disarming of all militias (with the exception of Hezbollah). This formal ratification, however, failed to address in any adequate manner a number of pending and pressing issues, first among which the political and social tensions that had ignited sectarian strife in the first place. Whereas the sectarian quota defining parliamentary representation was modified, the confessional system was left virtually untouched. Lebanese national sovereignty was further curtailed by the continuing presence of Syrian 'peace-keeping' forces and the Israeli occupation of the south of the country.[21]

The unresolved character of the civil wars and the lack of clear victors or losers, encapsulated

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Lebanon (London: Pluto Press, 2007), 174.

[19] The figure of the Palestinians who were killed in the Ayn al-Rumana massacre varies in different accounts. I take this figure from Samir Khalaf, *Civil and Uncivil Violence in Lebanon: A History of the Internationalization of Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 228.

[20] These are the figures that are usually cited, yet it is hard to come up with absolutely reliable estimates. Particularly hazy are the figures regarding the casualties of Palestinian refugees.

[21] The occupation of the South of the country continued until 2000, under the control of the South Lebanon Army (SLA), an Israeli proxy militia, with the pretest of providing security to the north of Israel.

Many of the artists I look at in this dissertation have produced experimental documentary works that deal with the Israeli occupation of the South. See in particular: Walid Raad and Jayce Salloum, *Up to the South* (1993), Akram Zaatari, *All is Well on the Border* (1997), and Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, *Khiam* (2000 – 2007).

in the formula *la ghalib la maghlub* (no victor, no vanquished), have led the postwar Lebanese government to actively discourage any public and collective act of remembrance and memorialisation, let alone any meaningful working through of the violences of the war that had just, at least formally, ended. On the contrary, the official governmental policy promoted, in the name of national reconciliation, the idea of a 'fresh start' or 'tabula rasa', according to which all memories or grievances related to the past conflict had to be buried or repressed so as not to break the fragile postwar consensus and instigate future outbreaks of violence. This attitude, which some historians have fittingly characterised as "state-sponsored amnesia",[22] was sealed with the controversial promulgation of an amnesty law that *de facto* exempted former militiaman from penal prosecution and left war criminals unpunished.[23] As a result, members of the political elite that during the wars had been notoriously implicated in killings, massacres and abductions, not only were spared of any public investigation, but continued to occupy important political and economic roles in postwar society.[24] Further, this law effectively foreclosed any official public inquiry on the fate of the estimate of eighteen thousand Lebanese who were reported missing during the civil wars. This climate of widespread and officially sanctioned amnesia was finally complemented by a massive project of urban redevelopment that, within a decade, would completely redefine the urban fabric of the city centre, erasing with particular solicitude all visible traces of the civil wars – a topic on which I will return in chapter 1.

The permanence of foreign occupying forces and the eruption of a series of lower scale or shorter conflicts in the postwar period cast doubt on the narrative of the war's closure, as well as the accuracy of the term 'postwar'. Although the Israeli occupation of the South ended in May

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[22] Sune Haugbolle and Sanders Hastrup, "Introduction: Outlines of a New Politics of Memory in the Middle East", in *The Politics of Violence: Truth and Reconciliation in the Middle East* (London: Routledge 2008), xiii.

[23] The law issued on the 26th August 1991 (Law No. 84) stipulates a general amnesty for all crimes committed during the civil war up until the 28th March 1991. Excluded from the amnesty provision are crimes committed against religious and political leaders.

[24] Despite the rhetoric of a clean slate and new beginning, as Elizabeth Picard argues, the transition to the postwar settlement was actually characterised by the continuation of practices of political and economic governance that had been consolidated during the war years. This "militia system", as Picard describes it, became the basis for the new order through the conversion of militiamen's military power into economic and political power. Rafik Hariri, the symbolic figure of the postwar arrangement, was himself a private entrepreneur who had participated in the wars by financing successively or simultaneously several rival militias. Elizabeth Picard, "The Political Economy of Civil War in Lebanon", in *War, Institutions and Social Change in the Middle East*, ed. Steven Heydemann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 292-322.

2000, the ongoing clashes between the Israeli Army and Hezbollah over this contended border triggered a month-long military conflict in 2006, known as the July war, that devastated much of Lebanon's civilian infrastructure.[25] The 2005 car-bombing assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, allegedly ordained by Syria, set in motion a series of civic protests, known as the Cedar Revolution, that were ultimately successful in forcing the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanese territory.[26] These episodes, however, polarized the country in two opposing encampments: the ruling March 14th alliance, a coalition of parties spearheaded by Hariri's son Saad Hariri, and the opposition March 8th alliance, led by Amal and Hezbollah.[27] The tensions between Sunni and Shia Muslims, respectively represented by the two coalitions, flared up into open warfare in 2008,[28] and continues to this day, especially around the dispute over Hezbollah's right to carry weapons. The current difficulty of Saad Hariri's Mustaqbal Party to form an executive because of the fragmentation of parliament and the lingering sectarian divisions, as well as the interference of Saudi Arabia and Iran, respectively in support of Hariri and Hezbollah, reveal the persistent conditions of instability that mar Lebanon's political life.

This brief summary is meant to give a sense of the intricacies of the civil wars, their "particular epistemic conditions", and the system of repression and erasure of memory on which the postwar settlement was premised. To this day, no common and shared narrative exists on the period of the civil wars, with history textbooks typically stopping in the early 1970s, when not earlier. While the government upheld the convenient fiction of a consensual agreement premised on repressing or actively forgetting the past, practices of remembrance have nonetheless been exercised in more unofficial channels. Throughout the fragmented national body of modern-day Lebanon, however, these practices have mostly resulted in an array of largely contradictory and unreconcilable accounts and interpretations. Unsurprisingly, the memory of the civil wars is highly fractured and contentious, ideologically instrumental and still entrenched in sectarian structures,

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[25] At the outbreak of the July War in 2006, Christine Tohme wrote: "I don't think we have ever lived through a postwar period. There is no 'post-war' in Lebanon, only pauses." Christine Tohme, "Under the Volcano", *Artforum* (October 2006), 245.

[26] The proximity to Syria and the ongoing Syrian conflict continues to be a destabilising factor on Lebanese internal politics due to the high influx of Syrian refugees and Hezbollah's active support of Bashir Al-Assad's regime.

[27] The coalitions are both named after the dates of the competing demonstrations, respectively anti- and pro- Syrian, that took place in downtown Beirut in the spring of 2005.

[28] The 2008 conflict was sparked by the government move to shut down Hezbollah's telecommunication network.

as is demonstrated by the persistence of divisive and competing versions of the events bolstered by different confessional and political groups. Artist and writer Walid Sadek has used the expression "protracted civil war" to describe how in a society that is still regulated through the same sectarian system, acts of witnessing and historical reconstruction continue to be embedded in the structures of sectarianism itself.[29]

Social historian Sune Haugbolle has introduced the notion of "memory cultures" to denote the plurality of memory discourses in post-civil war Lebanon, in distinction to the more monolithic sounding concept of "collective memory". In his opinion, the existent historiography on the civil wars, or at least that which was written during the conflict years, is so ideologically overdetermined to be "little more than another genre of memory culture." However, Haugbolle distinguishes two main strands of memory discourse in post-civil war Lebanon: an hagiographic and sectarian form that uses the past instrumentally to underpin or legitimise a particular political and confessional identity; and a counter-hegemonic memory culture elaborated by artists, intellectuals and cultural producers interested in meta-historical questions regarding how to memorialise the wars.[30] The latter strand comprises the artists whose work I analyse here, casted by Haugbolle as "the agents of young memory culture" who deploy a "postmodern artistic language learned in their Western exodus".[31] His cursory judgement on these practitioners, however, tends to overplay the rift and incommunicability between intellectual and popular forms of memory and cultural production, and mistakes for nostalgic and self-indulging, their critical engagement with the historical past, which is always grounded within a specific historical present or conjuncture.

In *Posthumous Images*, the first book-length study dedicated to the Lebanese artists of the (post-civil) war generation, Chad Elias convincingly debunks this attempt to dismiss such artistic practices as merely engaged in a form of postmodern play, analysing how the realm of contemporary art in Lebanon serves "as an essential site of political contestation."[32] The

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[29] Walid Sadek, "When Next We Meet, On the Figure of the Non-posthumous Survivor", *ARTMargins* 4, no. 2 (June 2015), 48-63. See also Walid Sadek and Nadia Bou Ali, "On Survivors, Translation and Their Next", *ARTMargins online* (15 June 2015), http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/interviews-sp-837925570/764-on-survivors-translation-and-their-next-a-conversation-between-walid-sadek-and-nadia-bou-ali#ftn_artnotes1_17

[30] Haugbolle, *War and Memory in Lebanon,* 8, 13, 9.

[31] Ibid., 130.

[32] Chad Elias, *Posthumous Images: Contemporary Art and Memory Politics in Post-Civil War Lebanon*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 16.

monograph provides a rigorous historical and socio-political contextualisation of the artworks it considers, as well as a sophisticated discussion of formal and artistic issues. These issues include: the politics of representation, the re-invention of documentary forms, questions of image-making in situations of conflict, the "reflective-performative problematisation of archival images", postsectarian acts of witnessing and the creation of counter-monuments.[33] Rather than reducing the self-reflective media practices of contemporary Lebanese artists as simply iterations of a Western postmodern artistic language, Elias shows how these practices are crucially placed at the intersection between memory cultures and visual technologies. Focusing especially on video and broadcasting media, he foregrounds how the lived experience of the wars and their memories were significantly mediated and constituted through images and other forms of media address. By highlighting how the civil wars were captured and represented in an expansive and heterogeneous set of media forms, and by analysing how these media inscriptions were later appropriated and deconstructed by artists, Elias argues that the events and experiences of the civil wars, albeit deeply conflicted and impervious to any facile resolve, are not ultimately unrepresentable. Contrasting widespread critical readings that have tended to one-sidedly emphasise the problematisation of representation in postwar Lebanese art production, Elias's work demonstrates how such problems of representation are inseparable from a politics of truth. The foregrounding of such a politics of truth in connection with the ways in which the events of the war were and are mediated and accessed through technological forms of representation and media is also a pivotal preoccupation of the present study.

From the perspectives of their respective disciplines – social history and art history – Haugbolle and Elias consider the ways in which civil war memories have been mediated through contemporary cultural production in Lebanon, paying particular attention to local practices of memorialisation as articulated by "memory cultures" or "communities of witnessing" outside "the dominant institutions of the archive and the museum."[34] While this dissertation is informed by such important studies, it also diverges from them in several ways. Firstly, my analysis is predominantly concerned with the spaces of the archive and the museum, which I consider not just as places of epistemological interest, but as crucial sites of critical and political intervention. The artists I examine, however, do not treat such institutions as neutral or settled spaces, but, as I detail, have worked in different ways to radically deconstruct or reconfigure the traditional and

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[33] Ibid., 25.

[34] Ibid., 10, 11.

hegemonic models and arrangements of such institutions.[35] Secondly, unlike the aforementioned studies, my research is not exclusively focused on questions of memory politics inherent to the experience of the civil wars, but considers methodological issues for writing a history of violence and conflict – as well as a history of photography and a history of art in a region marked by violence and conflict – as they can be inferred in the practices of a selected number of artists. My investigation is accordingly not strictly limited to works that directly and ostensibly deal with subject matter related to the events of the 'Lebanese civil wars', but extends the debates around history and representation raised by the wars to practices and works engaging with the broader history of the Arab world.

This expanded focus has led me to transgress the already contentious national borders of Lebanon as a frame, and to engage with the larger, and also far from uncontroversial, imagined geography denoted by the term Arab. For instance, in his work with the collections of the Arab Image Foundation, Zaatari both reconstructs a partial history of the medium in the region, and uses photographs together with other media fragments (videos, audio-recordings, diaries, letters) to write histories of the region that have either been sidelined or invalidated, bringing together narrative strands that are generally thought of in isolation. In *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow*, Raad foregrounds various issues and problems that haunt the writing of a history of art in the Arab world (including the geographical or regional framing), while at the same time pointing to the impossibility of sealing off such history from the disruptions and intrusions of a broader history of violence and conflict. Yet, far from articulating a totalising or monolithic vision of Arab culture, these 'regional' narratives consistently challenge essentialist or dominant constructions of ethnic identity, and are always approached or framed from the specific and particular standpoint of Lebanon.[36]

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[35] Zaatari sees the Arab Image Foundation as "a radical alternative to both the museum and the archive". The project of the AIF, as Zaatari states, endevours to "bury these models and erect over them something else that is more lively, useful, less of a monument and more of a social practice involving the art world and academia." He credits such an understanding to Catherine David's idea of a "post-museum condition". Akram Zaatari and Chad Elias, "The Artist as Collector: A Dialogue on the Possibilities and Limits of an Institution", in Akram Zaatari, *Against Photography, Exhibition catalogue* (Barcelona: MacBa, 2018), 43.

[36] As Zaatari explains, the AIF "never subscribed to a monolithic Arab culture. On the contrary, we saw the cultural diversity (especially in the ties of minorities in the Arab world to photography's history) as richness and as a challenge to the dominant constructions of ethnic identity within the Arab world." Ibid., 41. The importance of charting "territories of difference" against homogeneous constructions of the region is also emphasied by Chakar and Sadek in their conversation with Wright. See Wright, "Territories of Difference".

While, as outlined above, the Lebanese civil wars constitute an essential point of reference for the artists I look at, my dissertation also seeks to show how the specific problems of history and representation posed by the wars have formed the basis for works engaging broader issues of historiography. These works are not merely critical, but attempt to articulate new ways of writing history, presenting examples of what I term radical historiographical practices. Confronted with the conflicted, repressed and unresolved legacy of the civil wars, these artists, as I explore below have nonetheless found ways of writing a history *under erasure*.

I take the notion of "under erasure" from Jacques Derrida's practice of *sous rature,* a strategic philosophical device that consists in crossing out a word within a text, but allowing it to remain legible and in place.[37] The post-civil war climate in Lebanon can be understood as a palimpsest of multiple erasures and disavowals that inhibited the process of coming to terms with the past violences. Such erasures comprise both the official governmental policy of "state-sponsored amnesia" and the selective reconstructions of the past and different versions of historical events put forward by various sectarian groups. They additionally include, as I detail in chapter 1, the urban and architectural plans for the reconstruction of Beirut's historic centre, as well as the granting of a generalised amnesty for war crimes. Practices of erasure can further be seen in the disavowal of the *continuities* between forms of political and economic governance that emerged during the civil wars, and their consolidation in the postwar society, but also in the equally problematic disavowal of the *rupture* that the civil wars produced. The repression of traumatic experiences and the resulting psychic aftereffects are also themselves symptoms of erasure. However, contrary to the practice of *sous rature*, these forms of erasures are self-effacing, working to remove any mark or trace of what they have cancelled and repressed.

Seen within this context of self-effacing historical processes, the denial of visuality and the attack on representation that notoriously characterise much of the art production coming out of post-civil war Beirut, can be regarded as a way of making tangible such otherwise disavowed forms of repression. By producing or placing existing documents *sous rature*, that is, these artists draw attention to both the referents that these documents point to *and* the palimpsest of erasures that seek to remove them from public consciousness. However, while actively counteracting both the official repression and the sectarian divisions of memory discourse, these artists do not believe in

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[37] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology,* trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997).

the possibility to recover the past as a positive and full presence. Escaping the naïve empiricism that is based on what Derrida would term as a "metaphysics of presence", their works strive instead to mark the absence of a presence. The insistence on foregrounding absences can be found in the influential writings of Lebanese artists and thinkers such as Jalal Toufic and Walid Sadek.

Famously, Toufic elaborates the theory of "the withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster" to denote those intangible and immaterial effects caused by catastrophic events.[38] What distinguishes a "surpassing disaster" from a mere disaster, according to Toufic, is not the immediate material loss – the death toll and destruction of buildings, museums, libraries, temples and artworks – but a more insidious form of immaterial withdrawal that affects even those buildings and works of art that have not been materially destroyed. All the elements that constitute the "tradition" of a certain community, following a surpassing disaster, become unavailable and inaccessible to that community even though they are physically extant.[39] In the wake of the catastrophes of the Lebanese civil wars, artists sensible to the effects of such a surpassing disaster, find themselves "unable to access" certain novels and philosophical texts, as well as certain films, videos, musical works and paintings. They discover that they are unable to access, document and record even the still standing buildings and ruins that surround them. This unavailability is due to the fact that both buildings and artworks "belong to a history whose thread has been broken."[40] In this stage, the task of art becomes precisely that of making visible such a rupture, of revealing "the withdrawal of what we think is still there." In order to be accessible again, the referents (a term that Toufic often uses as a synonym for 'tradition') must be resurrected through works of art that make tangible their withdrawal.

In a text grappling with the problems to representation posed by the ontologically suspended status of the forcibly disappeared, Sadek proposes to charge missing persons or exhumed objects with an "operative uncanniness". Rather than objectifying the absence through the presence of a surrogate, what Sadek calls the "labour of the missing" is an attempt to represent the disappeared

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[38] Jalal Toufic, *The Withdrawal of Tradition past a Surpassing Disaster* (Beirut: Forthcoming Books, 2009). The concept was first introduced in Jalal Toufic, *Over-Sensitivity*, (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1996).

[39] The immaterial effects of a surpassing disaster touch only a determinate community, with the caveat that this community is reciprocally defined by the surpassing disaster. That is, rather than by common language and/or racial origin and/or religion, the community that Toufic has in mind is delimited precisely by its common sensitivity to the surpassing disaster. Among the catastrophic events that affected and thus delimited the community of Arab artists, Toufic lists the Palestinian Nakba of 1948, the Israeli invasion of West Beirut in 1982, the Hama massacre in Syria in the same year, but also the Anfal operation against Iraqi Kurds.

[40] Elias, *Posthumous Images*, 11.

in their state of "absent-hood". As he writes, "[u]pon unearthing the buried, disappearance continues to weight heavily on a successful excavation. Finding the missed is an act of hollowing out: it leaves an unfillable emptiness behind."[41] Formulations such as Toufic's notion of the "withdrawal of tradition" and Sadek's proposition for a "labour of the missing" make evident how one of the stakes of a non-positivistic historiography is that of making visible the absences and omissions that are otherwise covered over or naturalised in merely factual or empiricist accounts. For Toufic, "one of the limitations of history as a discipline is that the material persistence of the documents blinds it to the exigency of resurrection" – that is, blinds it to the historical rupture and withdrawal of tradition that this has generated.[42] In stark contrast to the operation of making visible as practiced in compensatory historiography, these artists, rather than filling the gaps, are concerned with showing absences *as* absences, omissions *as* omissions, as well as how these blind spots have a determining effect on historical reconstruction and the historical present.

Finally, there is another sense in which Derrida's concept of *sous rature* is useful to understand the deconstructionist thrust of the art practices under study. By placing metaphysical concepts under erasure, Derrida undermines metaphysics in philosophy, while continuing to use its concepts. For him, one has no other option but to continue using and thinking with the old contaminated concepts in their deconstructed state, which although inaccurate are seen as necessary. In a similar way, while the failures of verbal and visual language to record an history shaped by violence and trauma are consistently foregrounded in the artists I consider – especially in Hadjithomas and Joreige's and Raad's works – they continue nonetheless to produce inaccurate yet necessary representations. Likewise, the concepts and tools of historiography – the document, the archive, the narrative – are reclaimed and used in their deconstructed state.

Radical Historiographical Practices

Introduced by art historian Mark Godfrey in a 2007 essay, the figure of the "artist as historian" has since become a dominant trope within art critical discourse.[43] Godfrey clarifies that it is not simply the historical content of their work that makes contemporary artists worthy of comparison with

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[41] Walid Sadek, "Collecting the Uncanny and the Labour of the Missing", in *Archives, Museums, Collecting Practices in the Modern Arab World,* eds. Sonia Mejcher-Atassi and John Pedro Schwartz (Fernham: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 220.

[42] Toufic, *The Withdrawal of Tradition,* 15-16.

[43] Mark Godfrey, "The Artist as Historian", *October* 120, (Spring 2007), 140–172.

historians, but their *modus operandi*. Whereas historical representations are not a novelty *per se,* as the long-standing tradition of historical painting attests, the distinctive element of this new paradigm consists in the way in which the practice of an increasing number of artists "starts with research in archives" or deploys "archival form[s] of research."[44] In a later article titled "The Way of the Shovel", Dieter Roelstraete suggests the term *historiographer* as a more accurate description of current artistic tendencies. These late archival practices, as Roelstraete contends, are animated by the aim of "writing", or better "re-writing", history (*historio-graphia*); a form of historical revisionism that is typically achieved either through a deconstruction of long-standing official representations, or through a revelation of what has remained off the record: "the downtrodden, the neglected and the forgotten."[45]

The practices of the artists I look at are clearly motivated by a similar impulse to deconstruct existent narratives, as well as by a desire to unearth and recount stories that are missing from or neglected by the dominant culture. In opposition to both sectarian narratives framed around momentous events in heroic and tragic modes, and to the grand narratives that characterise much of traditional historiography, these artists use vernacular archival documents and deploy anecdotal storylines, both factual or fabricated, in a way that brings into focus the quotidian and banal aspects of daily life. It is especially photography's intimate relation to personal experience and its capacity to capture contingent details that are mobilised in order to rupture prevailing historical narratives. This investment in the everyday, in the particular detail and contingent snapshot as a key site of historical investigation contributes to the writing of a different kind of history: "a non-epic historiography" that does not mark out an absolute distinction between major and minor events.[46]

Admittedly, these artists seek to afford representation to subjects and experiences that have been marginalised or repressed in post-civil war public discourse, such as, for instance, the fate of the forcibly disappeared and their families in Hadjithomas and Joreige's *Lasting Images*, the

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[44] Ibid., 142-143.

[45] Dieter Roelstraete, "The Way of the Shovel", *e-flux*, no. 4 (March, 2009), http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-way-of-the-shovel-on-the-archeological-imaginary-in-art/.

[46] André Lepecki, "'After All, This Terror Was Not Without Reason.' Unfiled Notes on the Atlas Group Archive", *The Drama Review* 50, no. 3 (Fall 2006), 96. Lepecki quotes Benjamin's famous lines: "The chronicler who narrates events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accord with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history." Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History", in *Selected Writings, Vol. 4, 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 390.

experience of the secular left in Mroué's work, or the testimony of non-Western hostages during the so-called Western Hostage Crisis in Raad's apocryphal *Bachar Tapes*. However, as Elias contends, they are "quite skeptical of the possibility of writing an alternative history of the civil war period from the point of view of its victims." This is connected not only to the fact that it is difficult to draw any clear-cut distinctions between the wars' victors and vanquished – although some people evidently benefited economically and politically from the postwar arrangement – but is, more importantly, driven by a suspicion towards uncritical forms of representation (whether artistic, political or documentary) that claim to transparently and fully speak *for* victims of war, the disappeared, or the dead. If gestures of narrative recuperation that redress exclusions are undeniably an important part of these artists' practice, their work does not simply attempt to reverse the historical record with a reading from below. Rather, the structural reasons that have determined the exclusion of certain experiences and voices in the first place, as well as the instrumental ways in which subjects of speech are spoken *through* – especially in political propaganda and mainstream media coverage – are critically investigated and deconstructed.[47] In using the term 'radical historiographical practices', therefore, I do not mean to indicate only practices of historical revisionism that rectify, complicate or replace the historical *content* of existent narratives, but rather practices which endeavour to question and critique the forms and methods through which such narratives are pieced together and constructed.

An important touchstone for my reading of these radical historiographical practices are Walter Benjamin's methodological propositions for an historical materialism, most fully and programmatically expounded in his fragmentary theses, *On the Concept of History* (1940) – although, as with the artists I consider, Benjamin often encrypts his theoretical propositions in the form of parabolic figures, stories and images.[48] In this text, Benjamin outlines his famous critique of historicism by rejecting its dictum, attributed to the nineteenth-century historian Leopold Von Ranke, according to which the historian's principal task consists in recognising the past "the way it really was".[49] It is on this methodological injunction, that calls for the reconstruction of an

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[47] Chad Elias speaks of a form of political ventriloquism by which people are spoken through as subjects of ideology through the use of technological implements. Chad Elias, *Surviving Images: The Art and Media of the Lebanese Wars* (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2011), 16.

[48] Benjamin, "On the Concept of History", 389-400. See also Convolute N, 'On the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress, in Walter Benjam, *The Arades Project*, (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 456-458.

[49] The term 'historicism' has different meanings depending on the specific contexts in which it is deployed. I use it here, as Benjamin does, to designate the empiricist and positivist understanding of historical knowledge that was first

'objective' account of past events, that the scientificity of the modern discipline of history is premised. In opposition to the historicists' naturalist and philological reconstructions, Benjamin argues that articulating the past historically always consists in the capacity to think of it relationally, in constellation with the present moment. One of the main aspects that distinguishes historicism from Benjamin's historical materialism lies precisely in the different philosophies of time that underlie them. Conceiving of history as a series of events continually unfolding in time like the "beads of a rosary", historicism contrives the illusion of a linear and chronological continuity, what Benjamin terms "homogeneous empty time". By placing the historian in a transcendental position of timelessness, and attempting to restore an abstract continuity with the past in a naturalised and chronological form, historicism effaces the constitutive role that the present plays in its reconstruction of the past.[50] Unconsciously adopting the values of the present from whose standpoint he/she writes, the historicist, moreover, envisions history in the form of teleological progress. For Benjamin, as Peter Osborne writes, "history is an economy of violence dissembling as progress."[51] The signs of barbarism and blind spots that stain and mark history's documents – what Benjamin calls the "tradition of the oppressed" – are concealed and naturalised by historicism's progressivist narrative, which works to forget everything in the past that resists transmission as "heritage" and the "cultural treasures" of a victorious tradition.

Similarly, for the Lebanese artists I look at, the civil wars provide a paradigmatic model for considering history as constituted by violent catastrophes and irreparable ruptures, the broken threads of which cannot be simply restored or recovered. In the midst of the climate of nostalgia characterising the post-civil war period, replete with attempts to project a false continuity with the prewar era – as evidenced, for instance, by the widespread circulation of postcards depicting Beirut in the 1960s – works like Hadjithomas and Joreige's *Postcards of War* forcefully fracture the illusion of historicism's endemic fiction. The radical historiographical practices of the artists I consider instead work to convey the impossibility of reconstructing a continuous and objective picture of the events and experiences of the wars – whether because of limits of representational technologies, post-traumatic psychic displacements, and contradictory accounts – critically undermining historicist attempts to recover the past "the way it really was". In these practices, the unprocessed and unresolved character of the past resurfaces *in the present* in the guise of newly

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developed by the Historical School in Germany in the second half of the nineteenth century.

[50] For an exposition of Benjamin's critique of historicism, see Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 1995), 138- 144.

[51] Ibid., 141.

exhumed objects (photographic prints, Super 8 films, letters), which, in the light of new catastrophes and impending conflicts in the region (what, after Benjamin, we could call "a moment of danger") acquire new meanings and resonances. Accordingly, the present time of historical disclosure and reconstruction – the "now of recognizability" – is constantly foregrounded. Exemplary here is the use of double dates for the Atlas group documents and for several of Hadjithomas and Joreige's works, and the foregrounding of the moment and context of inscription and interpretation of documents in Mroue's performances and Zaatari's video works. This foregrounding of the present can also be witnessed in Raad's *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow*, which focuses on the history of reception of artworks and cultural artefacts in the Arab world, rendering visible the constructions of cultural history as a history of teleological progress, by highlighting its omissions, interpretative foreclosures and asynchronies.

An important concept in Benjamin's historical materialism that is connected to the question of the present of reception in the interpretation and construction of history is that of "afterlife". This concept – which I will return to in chapter 2 – offers a productive model for understanding history as one of change and rupture, rather than being based on continuity and the return to absolute origins. For Benjamin, the afterlife of an object, whether it be a historical document, a photograph or a work of art, is tied not to its origins (how it came into being), but to its inevitable transformation and renewal as "something living", which emerges and is revealed in the totality of the object's history.[52] This afterlife relies on deliberate acts of construction that set the historical object in constellation with a particular "now", that is uniquely capable of recognizing and revealing certain aspects of it. This complex and dynamic understanding of historical reception allows Benjamin to replace the antiquarian ambition to recover the past the way it really was with a constructive and interventionist approach. Rather than being "merely backward-looking", this new kind of historiography contains "the seeds of a new futurity."[53]

The afterlife of an object depends also on the new technological conditions in relation to which it enters. Throughout this dissertation, significant attention will be paid to the technological means through which the past is recorded and accessed in the present. The intersection between new and old media (broadly speaking analogue and digital technologies of image production) is

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[52] The idea of the "afterlife of works" is central to Benjamin's theory of criticism, translation, cultural reception, and historical materialism, and its resonances can be found in a number of his texts, most notably in "The Task of the Translator" (1923), the "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928), *The Arcades Project* (1927-1940), and "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian" (1937).

[53] Osborne, *The Politics of Time*, 142.

considered as a crucial factor in the contemporary reconfiguration of conceptions of historicity.[54] In his study of the modern category of history in relation to film theory, Philip Rosen defines *historicity* as the intersection between *historiography* and *history*: that is between a certain mode of writing (and thus, a certain conception of) history and "the actual past that the writing claims to convey".[55] Knowledge of the actual past (history) can only be constructed and conveyed through historiography. However, historiographic approaches and methods have themselves an history and largely depend on the technological means to record the past that are available in a certain historical epoch.[56] At any given period and context, as Rosen argues, there are consequently different historiographical approaches, with "only a certain mode or range of modes of historiography ... likely to be conceived as legitimate." In turn, "different modes of writing history often imply different ways of conceiving of or understanding history."[57] Against the postmodern techno-phobic argument that the introduction of new media – video and digital media in particular – brings about a "loss of historicity" (a position epitomized in particular in Friedric Jameson's writings on postmodernism), Rosen importantly reminds us that the development of modern historiography during the nineteenth century coincided "historically" with the development and diffusion of the mechanical reproduction of images (photography and later moving image).[58] The development of new technologies should accordingly be seen not as a "loss of historicity" *per se*, but as a moment in the transformation and reconfiguration of historicity.

However, for all its variability, one aspect of the historiographic enterprise remains constant: its referential ambitions. In Rosen's words, "the construction that is history is necessarily to be read against some standard of the real."[59] Despite the important theoretical shifts that the

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[54] The concept of historicity is particularly pertinent here. There are different philosophical uses of the term. French historian François Hartog uses the term to describe the way in which a determinate society conceptualises and treats its past. See François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, trans. Saskia Brown (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). For Tejaswini Niranjana, the concept of historicity includes the idea of change and encompasses the "effective history" of concepts, practices and technologies it makes use of. Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, 37.

[55] Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 6.

[56] Ibid., xviii.

[57] Ibid., 7.

[58] For a consideration of video technology as intrinsically amnesic, see chapter 3 "Video: Surrealism without the Unconscious", in Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 66-96.

[59] Rosen, *Change Mummified,* 7. For Rosen, historicity combines this insistence on asserting historical referentiality

discipline has undergone throughout the twentieth century, particularly following the influence of structuralism and semiotics in the humanities, the denotative claims and stakes of history remains constant. The critical awareness of the formal, aesthetic, figurative, rhetorical and narrative elements that vitiate the pretences of absolute scientificity and objectivity of the discipline, then, while laying bare its inevitable inadequacies, do not necessarily undermine the referential ambitions of any historical project.[60] It is this "referential moment", as Ricoeur insists, that "distinguishes history from fiction", even if historiography shares with fiction the rhetorical and poetic work of narrative configuration and emplotment.[61] Even if representations of history are not transparent or value-free, they are nonetheless tied to the *actuality* of something that happened in the past.

Documentary Fictions and the Photographic Document

One of the most remarked upon aspects of art practices coming out of post-civil war Beirut is the way in which they deliberately tend to confound the planes of reality and representation, fiction and documentary. Central here is the attempt to prompt a reconsideration of the nature and value of the photographic document. The evidentiary status of photographic documents seems to be put into question in the fictive re-inscriptions and narrativizations of the Atlas Group files and of Hadjithomas and Joreige's project *Wonder Beirut*; in the artistic appropriations of vernacular photographs in Zaatari's video works and photo-installations; and in the performative enquiries into the uncertain frontier between documentary and fictional images in Mroué's non-academic lectures. In parallel to the critique of historicist objectivism, these artworks seek to question the positivist understanding of the photograph as an unmediated and objective record of historical truth, which represents the past "the way it really was". Creating an enigmatic context for reading and interpreting photo-documents, these works foster what Caroline Jones has called an "hermeneutics of doubt", inducing skepticism towards the transparency and reification of documentary representations typical of mainstream mass media, as well as towards their

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with the constant potential for the forms and technologies of history writing to change.

[60] For a classic account of the figurative and rhetorical aspects of history writing see Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1973).

[61] Ricoeur, *Memory, History, and Forgetting*, 253.

ideological and instrumental deployment as political propaganda.[62]

In placing actual documentary images on the same plane as fiction and in repeatedly drawing attention toward the constructed character of both, there is, of course, the real danger that one might end up negating the referential power and the testimonial weight of the photo-document. Yet, in the art practices under study here, strategies of fictionalisation and the use of occluded or damaged photographic images rarely serve to destabilise the truth claims of photography as such, but rather offer a site where the (both direct and indirect) connections between photographs and their referents can be worked through and re-articulated.[63] That is, the deconstruction of representation and of the material constructedness of the photograph is never divested of its referential ambition, but is part of an effort to make sense of how actual historical events are mediated and shaped by different technologies and media. Accordingly, the dismantling of any positivistic notions of an unmediated relationship between the photographic referent and photographic truth does not destroy the truth-claims of photography; rather such claims are reconfigured as a *process* of "critical reconstruction" and "truth-disclosure".[64] It is in this sense, following Rosen's discussion of historicity above, that these practices can be said to critically engage in a form of historiographical research.

A key problem that has impaired a more nuanced understanding of the historiographical intentions informing such practices is the tendency of art critics to frame their readings through the reductive binary of fiction and nonfiction. This has led to sorting out those works that are viewed as being closer to more conventional documentary and archival practices – such as Zaatari's work with the Arab Image Foundation – from those that employ archival documents in a more playful and experimental manner – especially Raad's works under the moniker of the Atlas

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[62] Jones uses the expression "hermeneutics of doubt" in her analysis of the Atlas Group. In the context of the "war on terror" and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Jones champions the "aesthetic production of doubt" as a welcome counter to the "politics of fear" instrumentally mobilized by the US government and the Bush administration in particular. She further praises the "conceptual complexities" of the Atlas Group for their ability to stimulate thought and public discussion against mindless credulity and one-sided certainty. Jones is accordingly careful to distinguish doubt from postmodern ambiguity, writing that "truth is situated but not unattainable." Caroline Jones, "Doubt Fear", *Art Pap* 29, no. 1 (Jan/Feb 2005), 24-35. Jones's account is more nuanced and balanced than that of other critics who have spoken of a condition of "absolute cosmic doubt" induced by Raad's work. See John Menick, "Imagined Testimonies: An Interview with Walid Raad", *The Thing*, 25 March 2002.

[63] Elias, *Posthumous Images*, 179.

[64] John Roberts, *Photography and Its Violations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 30-31.

Group.[65] Whereas the photographs in the AIF "generally represent what they purport to represent", Raad "creates or appropriates and reassigns" photo-documents as part of his critical intervention into "the structures of authority that construct and legitimate history."[66] This simplistic distinction, however, has been forcefully rejected by both artists. According to Zaatari, the two archives of the AIF and the Atlas Group are better described as representing "different experiential approaches to history, neither fictional nor real."[67] The more recognizably documentary approach of the works produced out of the AIF's archive is not tied to an ambition to be less formally experimental and reflexive, and thus more factually accurate, but to the responsibilities that the Foundation has towards the donors that entrusted their collections to it. Indeed, the all-too neat separation between fiction and nonfiction tends to obscure how any photographic image contains both documentary and fictional elements. Photographs, as Zaatari's work attests, document a particular historical referent through various formal choices (such as framing and aperture), and their meaning can be further determined by being edited together with text or other images. Moreover, documentary forms (whether photographic or filmic) can be "intensely performative" and "highly constructed", and still retain their documentary status by virtue of their indexing properties.[68]

In a similar vein to Zaatari, Raad has affirmed that the objects and stories that the Atlas Group produces and collects "should not be examined through the conventional and reductive binary of fiction and non-fiction" as "this distinction is a false one – in many ways, not least of which is that many of the elements that constitute [its] imaginary documents originate from the historical world."[69] According to T. J. Demos, Raad's project works to challenge "the very basis of traditional notions of and oppositions between 'fact' and 'fiction', contributing to the invention of

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[65] Daniel Baird, "Radical Politics: Walid Raad", *Border Crossing* 24, no. 2 (May 2005), 40.

[66] Hannah Feldman and Akram Zaatari, "Mining War: Fragments from a Conversation Already Passed", *Art Journal* (Summer 2007), 56.

[67] Ibid., 57.

[68] This understanding is particularly widespread in film studies. See for instance: Erika Balsom, "The Fiction of Truth and the Truth of Fiction", in *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013): 149-184; and Gilberto Perez, "The Documentary Image", in *The Material Ghost: Films and Their Medium* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1998), 29-49. Perez notably prefers not to use the term "non-fiction film", as "no film can avoid fiction." Rather, a "documentary" film, as Perez observes, "means establishing a certain relationship, a certain interplay, between the documentary and the fictional aspects of film so that the documentary aspect may come forward in some significant way." Ibid., 43.

[69] Walid Raad, "Interview with Alan Gilbert", *Bomb Magazine* 81 (Fall 2002), 38-45.

an entirely new episteme".[70] It is important to bear in mind that the fact and fiction divide is an historically and culturally specific phenomenon. As the historian of science Lorraine Daston has shown, the modern usage of the word 'fact' in the West is linked to the emergence of empiricism in the seventeenth century. In Daston's account, it is in the context of the reform of natural philosophy, especially at the hands of British empiricist Francis Bacon, that facts are given the modern definition of "deracinated particulars," constituting "the indubitable core of knowledge, more 'certain and immutable' than axioms and syllogistic demonstrations"; whereas forms, as Bacon famously claimed, "are fictions of the human mind."[71] Facts are valued for being, in Daston's turn of phrase, "nuggets of experience detached from theory." In the seventeenth century, in a period characterized by insurmountable divisions in the scientific community due to the proliferation of rival theories, the existence of something indisputable and independent from theory such as empirical facts, allowed philosophers to sidestep divergences in the name of an enhanced academic civility and so to promote cooperative knowledge-making ventures.

In opposition to this empirical tradition, that forms the unacknowledged basis of positivistic approaches to both knowledge and image technologies, the Atlas Group advances a very different understanding of what constitutes a 'fact'. It is worthy to quote here in full a lengthy extract from an interview that can as well be considered as a sort of mission statement or declaration of the Group's poetics:

> The truth of the documents we archive/collect does not depend for us on their factual accuracy. … we are not concerned with facts if facts are considered to be self-evident objects always-already present in the world. Furthermore, we hold that this common-sense definition of facts, this theoretical primacy of facts … must be challenged. Facts must be treated as *processes*. One of the questions we find ourselves asking is: How do we approach facts not in their crude facticity but through *the complicated mediations by which facts acquire their immediacy?*[72]

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[70] T. J. Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 191.

[71] Lorraine Daston, "Baconian Facts. Academic Civility and the Prehistory of Objectivity", *Annals of Scholarship* 8 (1991), 345. See also Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007); and Mary Poovey's discussion of the fact as deracinated particular in *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 94-95.

[72] Walid Raad, "Let's Be Honest, the Rain Helped: Excerpts from an Interview with The Atlas Group", in *Review of Photographic Memory*, ed. Jalal Toufic (Beirut: Arab Image Foundation, 2004), 44 (my emphasis). The excerpts of this interview consists only of answers, whose questions have been lost.

Two points made in this statement deserve particular attention. First, facts are considered not as deracinated particulars, already-formed entities or "self-evident objects", that the historian or documentarian simply pick up *as they are.* Facts are rather to be seen and treated as *processes,* and thus as the outcome of specific practices, situated conventions and relations of power. Second, Raad places emphasis on the complex operations of mediation through and by which facts "acquire their immediacy." Rather than being an intrinsic attribute of facts, this immediacy is understood as the product of socio-historical relations that have become second-nature. Likewise, in documentary representations, immediacy is a codified *reality effect*, part of an established set of conventions that have crystallised into a recognizable style. Against the empiricist demands for an immediate turn to 'facts', Raad's use of fictional strategies serves to foreground the ways in which facts and documents are not simply found, but (socially and institutionally) constructed. As Raad's work suggests, our knowledge and understanding of the world is not reducible to the mere classification and calculation of empirical facts, but requires reflection on the complex mediations of which they are part.

Accordingly, the role of fiction in post-civil war Lebanese art has been critically re-assessed in a way that emphasises this constructive, rather than relativistic, approach to truth. Far from signalling "postmodern escapism or relativism", and a "disavowal of truth and referential meaning", for Demos, fiction figures in these practices as "a medium for the construction of truth."[73] An important influence on this re-evaluation of the concept of fiction have been Jacques Rancière's writings on what he terms documentary fictions. Tracing the concept of fiction back to its etymological roots in the Latin word *fingere,* Rancière points out how the primary meaning of fiction is not "to feign", but "to forge".[74] For Rancière, fiction denotes the operation of building "a 'system' of represented actions, assembled forms, and internally coherent signs", that can be put to use within a documentary work to achieve a better understanding of a specific historical reality.[75] Similarly, in his analysis of the Atlas Group, Peter Osborne describes the process of

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[73] Demos, *The Migrant Image*, 191.

[74] Jacques Rancière, "Documentary Fiction: Marker and the Fiction of Memory", in *Film Fables* (New York: Berg, 2006), 158. Rancière has written on the work of post-civil war Lebanese artists, most notably Hadjithomas and Joreige. See Jacques Rancière, "Entretien avec Jacques Rancière", *Les Inrockuptibles*, no. 679 (December 2008).

[75] Rancière, "Documentary Fiction", 158. In his work on historiography, *The Names of History*, Rancière critiques the attempt by historical positivism to separate history from questions of poetics, showing how the attempt by scientistic historical discourses to signify their status as science is inherently tied to deployment of various literary (poetic and

fictionalisation as that by which documentary materials are transfigured into art without losing their referentiality. Fiction is not simply a deceptive strategy for creating a hermeneutics of doubt (although that does play an important role in the experience of the Atlas Group), but a constructivist principle through which Raad stages the process by which history is constructed, that is "pieced together out of elements that have been severed from the subjectivity of individual subjects."[76]

Fiction in such practices, therefore, is inherently tied to questions of narrative: to the techniques of configuration and emplotment that work to present real or imaginary events in the form of a story. As both Rancière and Ricoeur argue, and as outlined above, narrative emplotment is common to both historiography and literary fiction, with the caveat that historical narrative is distinguished from fictional narrative (just as documentary can be distinguished from fiction), in its referential ambition. The employment of narrative modes of storytelling is an important component that features prominently in the works of all the artists I look at in this dissertation, particularly in Mroué's and Raad's performances, which I analyse in chapter 3. Drawing on Benjamin's reflections on the form of storytelling, I show how fictional and narrative strategies are employed to create an interpretative space for the spectator to reflect on the material presented; a space that is notably in contrast to the amnesic pace of communicational and mass media forms of information.

Chapter Plan

The plan of the chapters of this dissertation is loosely based on Ricoeur's tripartite scheme indicating the phases of historiographical research, as outlined in the second part of *Memory, History, Forgetting*.[77] Ricoeur distinguishes three methodological moments: first, the documentary phase in which testimonies and living memories are inscribed on a material support and deposited in the archives; second, the phase of explanation/understanding in which historians interpret and make sense of documentary proofs by putting them in relation to each other – an operation that

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rhetorical) techniques and procedures. See Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge*, trans. Hassan Melehy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), xii.

[76] Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), 193.

[77] Paul Ricoeur adopts, with variations, this triadic structure from Michel de Certeau, "The Historiographical Operation," in *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 56-113.

typically takes place in the space of the archive; and finally the moment of representation in which historical knowledge is made communicable and intelligible most often through the use of narrative forms that, as noted above, borrow poetic and rhetorical devices from literary fiction and storytelling traditions. Clearly these three phases are not chronologically distinct but interwoven, and their separation serves here for the sake of analysis. Further, while the three moments are obviously combined in the artists' individual practices, in my reading I chose to bring out one aspect for each: the documentary phase in the work of Hadjithomas and Joreige, and in Raad's Atlas Group; the archival phase in Zaatari's work with the holdings of the AIF; and the narrative phase in Mroué and Raad's performances. Methodologically, this dissertation provides close theoretical readings of individual artworks, with a focus on how they critically intervene in a specific political and historical situation. By considering the works as sites of research in their own right, I intend to illuminate their methods and approach to history writing.

The first chapter "Indexing Wars: Missing Referents and Photography After the Event" looks at the production or the unearthing of photographic documentation in the aftermath of the civil wars, analysing the truth-value of such photo-documents through a consideration of issues of referentiality and indexicality. In the first part of the chapter, I look at Hadjithomas and Joreige's saga of the pyromaniac photographer *Wonder Beirut* (1997-2006) and their later work *Lasting Images* (2002) as projects that mobilise the melancholic affect of the indexical trace. In the second part, I consider the documents contained in the Atlas Group archive, examining how they bring out a different meaning of the word 'index': the performative and ostensive function of deixis, that is, the gesture of pointing at something. The figural and digital manipulations of documents in works such as *Secrets in the Open Sea* (1994/2004) or *Let's be honest the weather helped* (1998/2006)*,* as I argue, oblige the viewer to attend to an overlooked or invisible reality (respectively the people who went missing during the wars and the involvement of international powers in the civil wars) only indirectly figured in images. This chapter analyses how the turn to questions of referentiality in both Hadjithomas and Joreige, and Raad are connected to the specific problems of representation following the traumas of a post-conflict reality. In particular, I examine how complex systems of indirect referentiality are put to use to substantiate the suspended ontological status of the forcibly disappeared, and the violent processes of spatial abstraction that underlie the reconstruction of Beirut city centre. In all these works, we are confronted with a reconfiguration of the relationship between photography and the (historical) singular event. By producing documents after the event, and thus injecting a cognitive delay into their apprehension and interpretation, the photographic document becomes a privileged site for a discursive extension of the event and a

process of historical disclosure.

The second chapter "Archive as Afterlife: Akram Zaatari's Work with the Arab Image Foundation" considers the archive as a constructive space in which the constitutive lateness of the document lends itself to a re-fashioning and re-reading of history from the standpoint of an ever-shifting present.[78] I will consider Akram Zaatari's work in parallel to the evolution of the Arab Image Foundation, charting the key issues around which the practice of the artist and the institution have converged or departed from each other – including questions of preservation, decontextualisation, media transfer and the semantic instability of the photo-document. The AIF functions as both an archive and set of artistic materials for new research-based art practices. Operating according to a post-digital logic, the uniqueness of the original copy is open to the multiple materializations (in artworks, research projects, publications, exhibitions etc.) in which it is inscribed.[79] The archive, therefore, rather than appearing as a static entity, can be better understood through the prism offered by the concept of morphology.[80] Each materialization is a momentary configuration in an ongoing morphogenetic process of transformation, whereby images acquire new layers of meaning as they pass through different contexts. In Zaatari's video practice, photographs drawn from the Foundation's collection are used in an ever-renewed project of writing and re-writing history, that is animated by present urgencies. It is in this constant process of reconfiguration that Derrida's remark that the archive is "a movement of the promise and the future no less than a recording [of] the past," acquires a more concrete and defined meaning.[81]

The third chapter "Towards a New Narrativity: Storytelling in the Age of Information"

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[78] I take the title and some of the insights developed in this chapter from Peter Osborne, "Archive as Afterlife and Life of Art" in *The Postconceptual Condition: Critical Essays* (London: Verso, 2018), 123-131. Osborne considers the changed role of the archive and the collection in contemporary art practice and the contemporary museum through a sustained reading of two different but related texts by Benjamin on collecting practices: "Unpacking My Library: A Talk About Collecting" (1931) and "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian" (1937).

[79] Ibid., 131.

[80] The concept of morphology is significant in the discursive framing of the exhibition *Akram Zaatari: Against Photography – An Annotated History of the Arab Image Foundation,* Macba Barcelona, 7 April to 25 September. Zaatari has notably described the work of producing a history of the foundation and its materials as an "exercise in morphology."

[81] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 29. As Derrida writes elsewhere: "what is no longer archived in the same way is no longer lived in the same way." Ibid., 18.

analyses the public staging and narrative unfolding of historical events and experiences, looking in particular at the re-invention of storytelling in the age of information. Departing from Mroué's *Looking for a Missing Employee* (2003), a work that uses newspaper clippings to reconstruct the story of the aforementioned missing employee, I consider how this re-narrativization of the news engenders a reversal in the historical progression of forms of communication as traced by Benjamin, in his famous 1936 essay *The Storyteller.* Whereas Benjamin thought that storytelling had been finally and irremediably replaced by information as an effect of the fragmentation of experience typical of modernity, here oral narrative is mobilised once more as a strategy "of departing from the dominant cultural logic of disconnected signifiers."[82] Such an effort of re-narrativization of disconnected and fragmented accounts is, as I show, related to the specific context of Lebanon where, as Sarah Rogers remarks, the national media outlets, "conventionally perceived of as reliable source of information", served "as a propaganda machine for the numerous political and religious factions" during the wars.[83] In the performances by Mroué and Raad that I examine in this chapter, the traditional form of storytelling is re-invented through the incorporation of pieces of information sourced from different media (newspaper clippings, VHS tapes, television broadcastings, propaganda posters, videos uploaded on the Internet). Far from offering monolithic, univocal or certain accounts, the stories create an interpretative space, full of gaps and contradictions, which must be worked over by the reader or spectator – something disallowed by the amnesic pace of information. I additionally attend to the format of the lecture-performance or the non-academic lecture – which, despite its popularity in the field of contemporary art has not received sufficient attention as a form.[84] The trans-medial form of the lecture-performance becomes a privileged site for deconstructing and interpreting media images (in the case of Mroué) and unpacking the discursive formations of subjectivity and power (in the

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[82] Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*, 164.

[83] Sarah Rogers, "Forging History, Performing Memory: Walid Raad's The Atlas Group", *Parachute* 108 (October/November/December 2002), 72. As Khalil Joreige remembers: "During the war, every militia had its own media station, television, newspaper or radio." See Chantal Pontbriand, "Artist at work: Joanna Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige," *Afterall Online*, 12 September 2013. https://www.afterall.org/online/artists-at-work_joana-hadjithomas-and-khalil-joreige#.XEBoiM_7Q0o

[84] Existing literature includes: Rike Frank, "When Form Starts Talking. On Lecture Performances", trans. Helen Ferguson, *Afterall* 33 (Summer 2013), 4-15; Patricia Milder, "Teaching as Art: The Contemporary Lecture-Performance", *PAJ: Art Journal of Performance and Art* 33, no. 1 (January 2011), 13-27; Jenny Dirksen, "Ars Academica: The Lecture between Artistic and Academic Discourse", in Kathrin Jentjens et al. eds., *Lecture Performance*, Exhibition catalogue (Berlin: Revolver Publishing, 2009), 9-16.

case of Raad).[85]

The fourth and final chapter "History as Paratext: Walid Raad's Critical Construction of the History of Art in the Arab World" concludes this exploration of radical historiographical practices through a consideration of the field of art historiography. Examining Raad's latest body of work, the multi-volume project *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow. A History Art in the Arab World* (2007 - ongoing), I consider the burgeoning retrospective interest in art in the Arab world, situating it within the currently emerging field of global art history. As I detail, Raad's project explores the institutions, economies, concepts, historiographical forms and pedagogies made possible by the construction of a new massive infrastructure for the visual arts in the region – epitomized in the controversial example of Saadiyat Island, Abu Dhabi's new cultural district. This interest in the history of 'Arab Art', as I show, emerges as a retrospective (re-)construction in which the modern is framed through the lenses of the contemporary – that is from the standpoint of an increasingly interconnected, global condition. Provocatively, the art historiographical effort produced by Raad results in a proliferation of paratextual material (a translator's introduction, several prefaces, footnotes, an index and a prologue) that refer to an absent manuscript. Taking a cue from Gérard Genette's study of the paratext[86] and Derrida's discussion of the function of the preface,[87] I articulate the conceptual stakes contained in Raad's work and the challenges that they pose to the discipline of art history.

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[85] For a discussion of the lecture-performance in the specific context of Lebanon, see Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, "Lecture as Performance," *Aperture* 221 (Winter 2015), 50-56. Next to the names of artists of the post-civil war generation, Wilson-Goldie mentions younger artists such as Haig Aivazian, Ali Cherri, Rayyane Tabet and Marwa Arsanios who have likewise often worked with this format.

[86] Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge, MA.: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[87] See "Outwork: Prefacing", in Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone Press, 1981), 1-61.

Chapter 1. Indexing Wars: Missing Referents and Photography After the Event

"Beirut is photogenic. Always has been. Always will be. Ironically, the war made it even more so."[1]

"How provincial 1992 Beirut would be were it not for its war and civil war ruins."[2]

In the fall of 1991, in the aftermath of the civil wars, six internationally renowned art photographers – one of whom was the Lebanese photographer Fouad Elkoury – were invited to Beirut to document the old *Burj*, or Central District, left in a state of decay and ruination after the rival militias were evacuated.[3] One of the main battlegrounds during the wars, the downtown area was witness to violent conflicts among several armed groups, who were attempting to take hold of the financial, administrative and commercial hub of the country. When the Green Line – the three mile combat zone cutting across the city centre and separating predominantly Muslim West Beirut from predominantly Christian East Beirut – was officially opened in the fall of 1990, Beirutis were confronted with an almost unrecognisable cityscape: a jumble of disfigured ruins taken over by vegetation. This was an "unrepeatable moment" in the history of the city, as Gabriele Basilico, one of the invited photographers, recalls: a temporary juncture between the cessation of fifteen years of gruelling wars and the city's much-heralded rebirth and urban reconstruction. The six photographers were called to seize an image of the city in a moment of crucial transition. Three years later, in the summer of 1994, when reconstruction work began in earnest, it became clear that the plans for urban regeneration were premised on the demolition of large portions of the old city. Entrusted to the Lebanese Company for the Development and Reconstruction of Beirut, better known by its French acronym Solidere, the rebuilding entailed, as we shall see in more detail below, a complete refashioning of the architectural and social fabric of the city centre, as well as

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[1] Miriam Cooke, "Beirut Reborn: The Political Aesthetics of Auto-Destruction", *Yale Journal of Criticism* 15, no. 2 (Fall 2002), 393.

[2] Jalal Toufic, "Ruins", in *Tamáss: Contemporary Arab Representations: Beirut/Lebanon*, ed. Catherine David (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 2002), 20.

[3] The other photographers were: Gabriele Basilico (Italian), Rene Burri (Swiss), Raymond Depardon (French), Robert Frank (Swiss-American), and Josef Koudelka (Czech).

Figure 1. Cover of *Beyrouth Centre Ville*, ed. Dominique Edde, 1992.

the programmatic effacement of all the traces of the previous fifteen years of war.[4]

An enterprise not devoid of political interests, the photographic project organized by Lebanese writer Dominique Edde, was financed by the Hariri Foundation, an agency set up by the billionaire Rafik Hariri, founder of Solidere and Lebanon Prime Minister between 1992 and 1998 and then elected again in 2000. The photographic survey, made during a period running from October to December 1991, culminated in the publication of a coffee-table book entitled *Beirut City Centre* (Figure 1).[5] Featuring an introductory text by Dominique Edde and a poem by renowned Syrian poet Adonis, the elegant volume presents 130 photographs of the incinerated downtown environs, arranged into individual portfolios, each reflecting the particular sensibility of its author. The photographers were granted complete liberty of expression; only the topographical area for their documentary action had been marked out. As Basilico remembers, their task was not "to produce a report or a photographic inventory but to reflect 'the state of things', a direct experience of the place through a free and personal interpretation."[6] Spectacular, elegiac and often eerily beautiful, the images depict mostly unidentifiable ruins, bombed out buildings and façades scarred with bullet holes (Figure 2). Devoid of any captions or toponymical information, the stunning black-and-white shots are associated only to anonymous place-markers such as 'Tree',

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[4] The acronym stands for Societe Libanaise pour le Developpement et la Reconstruction du Centre-Ville de Beyrouth. The company was funded in 1994 by the Saudi-backed businessman Rafik Hariri.

[5] Dominique Eddé (ed.), *Beyrouth Centre Ville* (Paris: Éditions du Cyprès, 1992). The survey was also the subject of an exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, in 1993.

[6] Gabriele Basilico, "Beirut e la Pelle della Città", in *Archittetture, Città, Visioni. Riflessioni sulla Fotografia,* ed. Andrea Lissoni (Milano: Mondadori, 2007), 71. (My translation)

Figure 2. Gabriele Basilico, *Beyrouth*, 1991.

'Steps' and 'Wall' listed at the back of the publication. There are, however, some recognisable landmarks, as all photographers took at least one photograph of Martyrs' Square (Figure 3). Shrouded in a veil of mournful contemplation and tragic acquiescence, the photo-book presents a curiously trans-historical picture of the wars, eliciting an impression of ideological neutrality. Reading Basilico's account, one perceives the photographer's intention to "make familiar" the unknown city, "softening the dramatic effects connected to its history", and avoiding the "photogenic of destruction". Conscious of the powerful allure of the ubiquitous ruins, he tries to refrain from "formalist" compositions or "strong" images, that would result in creating "false 'documents'", choosing neutrality over dramatic effect.[7]

These precautions notwithstanding, in a critical analysis of the photographic enterprise, Miriam Cooke contends that it is precisely the "aesthetic and impartial" presentation of the post-civil war landscape in *Beirut City Centre* that evokes a specific form of reified memory that enables erasure rather than remembrance.[8] Cooke sees these photographs as part of a broader cultural process of removal and amnesia, a sort of ritualised memory cleansing. The plan of inviting mostly foreign art photographers for a short period of time offers the appeal of an apparently objective and unbiased look, dispensing locals with the thorny issue of self-interrogation and self-enquiry.[9]

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[7] Basilico, "Beirut e la Pelle della Città", 85, 86, 88, 89.

[8] Cooke, "Beirut Reborn", 393, 395.

[9] Fouad Elkhoury had documented Beirut also during the years of the war, producing most notably the series entitled

Figure 3. Raymond Depardon, *Martyrs square*, Beirut, 1991. Fouad Elkhoury, *Kaak seller. Martyrs square*, Beirut, 1991.

Yet, the captionless photographs, filtered through an idiosyncratic and subjectivist perspective, foreclose the possibility of a collective narrative reconstruction and of a discursive extension of the event (or series of events) whose aftermath they register. A typical example of aftermath photography or photography-after-the-event, these mournful images of a post-conflict landscape convey a sense of ineluctability with regards to the recent past, while serving as a melancholic seal announcing its definitive closure. In so doing they fail to register the lingering aftereffects and unresolved legacies of the wars that still haunt the city. The lateness of these photo-documents does not amount to a problematisation of the temporality internal to the document itself, nor to a foregrounding of a cognitive complexity appropriate to the understanding of a layered historical reality. Failing to engage with the complexity of the historical event that they are called to depict, the six photographers end up producing, in spite of themselves, aesthetic occlusions rather than aids for the production of knowledge. It is not simply that the beautified and elegiac images of the rubble in downtown Beirut return an aestheticised and depoliticised picture of the civil wars. The photographers are also mostly oblivious of the ideological role they are made to play by documenting the city centre for the last time before its complete destruction. They fail to grasp that "war by other means" or "war on the traces of war" that, according to Jalal Toufic, "signals that the war is continuing."[10] As Cooke recalls, after the photographers left, the bulldozers came, "they razed the ruins to the ground and then pushed them into the sea. The square was covered

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Civil War (1977-1986). Later he continued to document the transformations of the city in the series *Traces of War* (1994-1997). For an interesting series of portraits of militiamen, shot in Beirut in the winter of 1980, and who were also extras on Volker Schlöndorff's *Circle of Deceit* (1981), see Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, "Fouad Elkhoury", *Aperture* 231 (Summer 2018): 104-107.

[10] Toufic, "Ruins", 22.

over with concrete and tarmac and the empty sidewalks were planted at intervals with saplings. Indeed, it is hard to remember what lies under the slabs of concrete".[11]

A project like *Beirut City Centre,* an exemplary case of officially sponsored photographic documentation of the postwar cityscape, offers an ideal backdrop against which to consider the remarkably distinct approach to the photo-document foregrounded in the practices of a number of Lebanese artists of the post-civil war generation. In this chapter, I examine a series of interrelated projects by the artists-duo Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, and a number of selected files from Walid Raad's Beirut Al-Hadath archive and the Atlas Group archive, that articulate a radically different kind of aftermath photography. These artworks differ from *Beirut City Centre* not only because they were made independently of and often in opposition to ruling political agendas; they also foster and mobilize a different understanding of photography and its value as a historical document. Departing from a similar problem of representing a city ravaged by civil war and undergoing massive cycles of demolition and reconstruction, projects like Hadjithomas and Joreige's *Wonder Beirut* and Raad's topo-photographic surveys make an innovative use of the photographic medium to create remarkably different, internally complex images.

Produced or unearthed well into the aftermath of the civil wars, the photo-documents that Hadjithomas, Joreige and Raad retrospectively re-inscribe in their artworks, indicate, through various forms of displacement and deferral, the irresolution of the past violences – rather than relegating these to a closed past as in the stills of *Beirut City Centre*. Besides articulating a different relation between the event and photography that is predicated on the necessary lateness of the latter (photography of the event can only be after-the-event), these photo-documents are themselves temporally complex, embedding in their very structure elements of anachronism and anticipation.[12] Often bearing a double date, these works signal the elapsing of a certain amount of time between the occurrence of a (traumatic) event and its conscious apprehension and elaboration. Focusing on psychic slippages, post-civil war political developments, and unsettled issues – chief among which is the controversial reconstruction of the city centre and the legally and

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[11] Cooke, "Beirut Reborn", 393.

[12] Chad Elias employs the term "posthumous image" to describe the specific ways images function in the practices of post-civil war Lebanese artists. The term is used to refer "to the ways in which certain images appear only after the presumed death of their referent." Elias focuses in particular on the photographs of martyrs or the missing and the way in which they inhabit "a space that unsettles the ontological boundary between life and death", "troubl[ing] the distinction between states of presence and absence, past and present." Elias, *Posthumous Images*, 19, 20.

juridically unresolved status of the eighteen thousands Lebanese who went missing during the wars – the defective documents stage the unavailability of the knowledge inscribed in them, and point towards a future in which such knowledge may become accessible again.[13] By injecting a cognitive delay, the artists also indicate the unstable afterlife of the photograph as historical document, whose meaning depends upon contingent readings – a process that is inherently incomplete, contested, and contradictory.

Both Hadjithomas and Joreige, and Raad use strategies of fictionalisation in their works, attributing actual photo-documents to invented characters and inscribing them within imaginary narratives. Both attack the iconic dimension of the photograph, through either iconoclastic gestures or figural manipulation, thus frustrating the legibility of the image and problematising representation. As we have seen in the introduction, a by-now commonplace interpretation of this artistic production tends to regard such epistemological fissures – the blurring of fact and fiction, and the denial of visuality – as modes of casting critical doubt on the veracity of historical sources. As it has been remarked, the artistic production coming out of Lebanon is mostly concerned with "the reassessment of the role and place of documentary evidence in constructions of historical truth."[14] While this is surely the case, one needs to clarify that such a reassessment never slips into the trap of a dangerous relativism that eradicates the possibility of truth, but rather expands the notion of truth beyond its reductive empirical, positivistic or legalistic versions.[15] Rather than considering these artworks within the framework of a postmodern critique of representation or a parody of the documentary genre, they should rather be seen as attempts to construct epistemological structures and forms of representation that would be commensurate with the post-traumatic reality and the state-sanctioned politics of amnesia that overshadowed post-civil war Lebanon.

As Chad Elias rightly points out, the overemphasis that art historical scholarship has placed on the instability and manipulability of (visual) evidence in Lebanese artistic production has impeded and obscured "a more concrete engagement with its historical sources."[16] In this chapter,

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[13] In an interview with Caroline Jones, Raad (speaking as a spokesperson of the Atlas Group) acknowledges that "we're trying to establish a model for how this history can be written" in a plausible but not certain future. Raad quoted in Jones, "Doubt Fear", 30.

[14] Feldman and Zaatari, "Mining War", 51.

[15] For a similar understanding of these works as expanding reductive notions of truth see Demos, *The Migrant Image*, 190; and Paolo Magagnoli, "A Method in Madness", *Third Text* 25, n. 3 (2011), 313.

[16] Chad Elias, "The Libidinal Archive: A Conversation with Akram Zaatari", *Tate Papers* 19, 12 March 2013:

I accordingly analyse Hadjithomas, Joreige and Raad's artworks while keeping in the forefront the particular historical and political context to which they consistently refer. Strategies of fictionalisation, de-figuration, abstraction and the radical untimeliness of the photo-document are read not as an attack on the referential and evidentiary power of photography *per se*, but as a way of producing a complex system of indirect referentiality. Far from the free-floating signifiers of postmodern textualism, I contend that these artworks always maintain a productive tension with their historical referents, yet that such a connection can be neither direct nor straightforward. The problem is not in the inadequacy of language and image to represent an unrepresentable historical trauma; the problem lies in the reality itself: it is the historical referents that are missing, or that, in Toufic's parlance, have withdrawn.

The photo-documents that I analyse here deal mainly with two thorny questions of the postwar settlement: the controversial reconstruction of downtown Beirut in the 1990s and the juridically suspended status of the Lebanese missing. During the wars, as pointed out in the introduction, an estimate of eighteen thousand Lebanese civilians were reported missing.[17] Kidnapped and likely murdered, the fate of the majority of the disappeared remains still uncertain in the absence of an absolute proof of their death. Far from investigating or juridically clarifying the status of the missing, the state's response to the issue has been largely inadequate. The highly contentious Amnesty Law approved by the Lebanese government in August 1991 granted complete amnesty for political crimes committed before 28th March 1991, including homicide, kidnapping and torture. This legislation has thereby *de facto* curtailed proper investigation on thousands cases of probable abduction and murder committed by all the militias and armed groups, in spite of the widespread rumours of the existence of mass graves scattered in various sites in the city.[18] Indeed, the absence of any official legal mechanisms for investigating or exhuming suspected burial sites has intersected with the proliferation of unregulated construction sites, whose unscrupulous developers have been given licence to cover up evidence of the hidden

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https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/19/the-libidinal-archive-a-conversation-with-akram-zaatari.

[17] The accepted official tally of 1992 is 17.415 – a figure from the Lebanese Ministry of Interior, quoted in Amal Makarem (ed.), *Memory for the Future* (Beirut: Dar Annahar, 2002), 50.

[18] Recently, some hope was sparked by the passing of a landmark law (approved by Parliament on 12 November 2018) which provides for the setting up of an official commission of enquiry and, more importantly, gives the families of the disappeared the right to know their fate, including place of burial, as well as the right to exhume and identify them. Roberto Prinzi, "I desaparecidos del Paese dei Cedri", *Left*, 7 December 2018, 44-46.

mass graves.[19] The apparently unrelated instances of Beirut's amnesic urban reconstruction and the fate of the missing appear thus to be intimately entangled in the ghostly fabric of Lebanon's capital.

Within this context, to create images that signal full presence – even the spectral presence of the ruins as captured in *Beirut City Centre* – would amount to producing counterfeit documents, that fail to acknowledge the ontologically suspended status of their referents. In the practices of the Lebanese artists that I consider here, such referents are not denied but placed under erasure. As we have seen in the introduction, Derrida's concept of *sous rature* designates a form of erasure that allows what it cancels out to be read. By placing their referents *sous rature*, the artists are thus able to draw attention to both the referents (either the destroyed buildings or the disappeared) *and* the palimpsest of erasures (traumatic symptoms, legal prohibitions and urban demolitions) that seek to remove them from public consciousness. Derrida famously uses *erasure* as a deconstructionist strategy that serves to undermine metaphysics in philosophy, while still leaving the possibility to read the metaphysical concept underneath the cancelling line that has struck it out. For Derrida, one has no other option but to continue thinking with the old contaminated concepts in their deconstructed state. In a similar way, Hadjithomas, Joreige, and Raad's use of photography, a medium whose evidentiary power and truth-value have been thoroughly deconstructed, can be seen as a way to reactivate its testimonial capacity without renouncing the important critique of its fabricated and reified aspects.

In this chapter, I consider Hadjithomas, Joreige and Raad's works through the theoretical prism offered by the concept of indexicality: the property that is generally taken to be the base of photography's evidentiary power.[20] In this I follow film scholar Laura U. Marks who has pointed out

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[19] Elias, *Posthumous Images*, 105.

[20] The notion of indexicality was introduced by American philosopher and logician Charles Sander Peirce as part of his semiotic theory. In addition to the index, Peirce's tripartite system of signs includes icons and symbols. Whereas the icon and the symbol signify, respectively, through resemblance and convention, the index is never arbitrary but directly connected in a physical or causal way to the signified object. In virtue of its necessary relation of contiguity to a specific referent, and the existential connection that binds them together, the index constitutes an irrefutable proof of the existence of such a referent. This power of attestation, however, does not depend on iconic recognizability. That is, indexicality does not imply anything necessary about form or likeness, although, as Peirce concedes, indexes do sometimes assume some degrees of isomorphic similarity to their referents. Partaking in both relations of contiguity and resemblance to their referent, photographic images are composite signs that hold characteristics proper of the index, the icon, and in a more lateral sense, the symbol. However, Pierce subordinates photography's iconicity to its

that "[t]he awkward regime of signs" in post-civil war Lebanon "is definitely a regime of indexes" in opposition to icons.[21] Whether they are distorted scraps of evidence or abstract marks in digitally re-touched photographs, these signs do not allude to their counterpart in reality by virtue of a recognizable likeness or resemblance. These aniconic or abstract indexes point to their referents on account of a relation of contiguity, causality or ostensiveness.

The category of indexicality has become a crucial pivot in recent debates on the analogue/digital transition. The digital turn as well as the introduction of computer generated images, have unleashed a series of epistemological anxieties with regards to the referential status of photography, arising mostly from the much feared potential for manipulability that lies in the binary basis of digital media.[22] On one side, these debates typically misconstrue and overemphasize the ease and speed with which digital photographs can be manipulated or reconstructed in comparison to their photochemical correlates, inferring from such a strictly technological analysis the loss of the index as such. On the opposite side, and mostly in response to such exaggerated claims of complete loss, the notion of indexicality has seen an important critical reconsideration, precisely on the basis of its "privileged relation to the real, to referentiality and to materiality", all aspects that seem to have been undermined in debates around digital media.[23]

What becomes increasingly evident when examining such debates is that the question of the index cannot be posed in purely technological terms. The recent praise of indexicality, as Erika Balsom acutely notes, far from being a simple acknowledgement of a technological property, is part of a broader cultural and social discourse, and symptomatic of the current state of

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primarily indexical character. Resulting from the registration of light on a photochemical surface at a particular point in space and time, photographic images preserve the trace of a past presence through time – hence their particular allure and evidentiary power. See Charles Sander Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, Vol 1, ed. Nathan Houser and Christian Kloese (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); and Rosen, *Change Mummified*, 18.

[21] Laura U. Marks, *Hanan al-Cinema: Affections for the Moving Image* (Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press, 2015), 78.

[22] For debates on the state of the photographic index in the aftermath of digitalization see James Elkins (ed.), *Photography Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2006); and the special issue edited by Mary Ann Doane "Indexicality: Trace and Sign", *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies,* 18, no. 1 (2007), which focuses on film and moving image.

[23] Mary Ann Doane, "The Indexical and the Concept of Medium Specificity", *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies,* 18, no. 1 (2007), 132. Doane has gone as far as to venture that today "it is the indexicality associated with the analogical, chemical base of the image that emerges as the primary candidate" in the reconfiguration of film's specificity as a medium. Ibid., 130.

technological change.[24] In the present climate of epistemological anxiety, the political stakes invested in the index in photography theory have shifted from attack to defence. If, under the combined pressures of digitalization and certain strands of poststructuralist critique, the "representational link between sign and reality has been severed", such a link, and the politics of truth associated to it, must be reinvented or re-established on different grounds.[25]

Ariella Azoulay, one of the most outspoken advocates for a renewed commitment to photography's affirmative power and capacity for making truth-claims, has articulated such a proposition mainly on ethical terms, championing the idea of a "civil contract of photography" that binds the viewer "in a commitment to the referent of photography." However, she clarifies that such commitment should not make one forget "the prejudice of photography – the fact that it borders on the deceptive."[26] This means that a renewed investment on the referentiality of photography – its ability to tell us something about a past reality and to participate in the construction of new social and political relations – must not be divested from a continued and vital critique of photographic transparency and unmediatedness. If the truth-claims of photography are worth defending against the would-be indexical crisis of the medium, such a defence should not try to restore a false idea of the photograph as a gate of unmediated access to the past reality. For Azoulay, photographic images require attentive reconstruction through the spectator's exposure to other images and through the patient labour of interpretation. The truth of the photograph cannot be disentangled from this process of truth-disclosure. A recent and cogent defence of photography's truth-value, which hinges on the index's imbrication in the social and the political, can be found in John Roberts's *Photography and Its Violations*. As Roberts importantly contends: "[d]igitalization does not destroy the truth-claims of photography; rather it makes such claims an explicit condition of critical *reconstruction*."[27]

This chapter is divided in two parts, in which I look at two meanings associated with the photographic index: the index as trace and the index as deixis. In the first part, I consider Hadjithomas and Joreige's saga of the pyromaniac photographer (1997-2006) and their later work *Lasting Images* (2002) as meditations on the technical apparatus of photography and film. I explore here the melancholic affect of the indexical trace and the psychic investment in the idea of historicity as something grounded in the materiality of the medium. In the second part, I consider

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[24] Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*, 79.

[25] Demos, *The Migrant Image,* xxi.

[26] Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 285.

[27] Roberts, *Photography and Its Violations*, 30.

the documents contained in the al-Hadath and the Atlas Group archive according to a different meaning of the word index: the performative and ostensive function of deixis, that is, the gesture of pointing at something. The figural and digital manipulations of documents in works such as *Secrets in the Open Sea* (1994/2004) or *Let's be honest the weather helped* (1998/2006), will be analysed in virtue of their interruptive power and ability to force the viewer's attention to an overlooked or invisible reality: namely, the people who disappeared during the wars and the involvement of international powers in the arms trade. In both cases, we are confronted with a reconfiguration of the relationship between photography and the historical event. The last part of the chapter will look at the value of lateness in photography as a space for a discursive extension of the event and a privileged site for a process of historical disclosure.

1.1 The Pathos of the Index in the work of Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige

"Let us merely note in passing that the Holy Shroud of Turin combines the features alike of photograph and relic."[28]

"Scars of damage and disruption are the modern's seal of authenticity; by their means, art desperately negates the closed confines of the ever-same."[29]

Between 1997 and 2006 Hadjithomas and Joreige worked on a long-term, multi-part project titled *Wonder Beirut*.[30] Comprised of three interconnected chapters – *The Story of a Pyromaniac Photographer,*[31] *Postcards of War* and *Latent Images* – the series centres on the invented character of Abdallah Farah, a Lebanese commercial photographer employed at studio Wahed, his father's photographic studio.[32] The narrative of which he is protagonist is a constitutive part of the

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[28] André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image", in *What Is Cinema?,* trans. Hugh Gray, (Berkley: University of California Press, 1967), 14.

[29] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory,* trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 32.

[30] Although the project is generally dated 1997-2006, it was further extended with the publication of a limited-edition artist book by Rosascape in 2010 and a performance during the 56th Venice Biennale *All the World's Futures* in 2015.

[31] An alternative title is *The Novel of a Pyromaniac Photographer*. In both cases the piece makes a claim towards the literary and narrative dimension. Suzanne Cotter refers to the story as a "fable" or "moral tale". Suzanne Cotter, "Stranger Than Fiction", in *Joana Hadjithomas Khalil Joreige*, eds. Clément Dirié and Michèle Thériault (Zurich: JRP|Ringier, 2013), 103-104.

[32] As Sarah Rogers has suggested, the name "Abdallah Farah" is a potential play on the name of a well-known,

artwork, and plays a crucial role in lending intelligibility to the installation of objects and artefacts. It is thus necessary to relay it in full.[33]

Before the wars, as the story goes, Farah worked on a commission for the Lebanese Tourist Agency to produce a series of twenty-four postcards of Beirut, as well as twelve illustrations to be used in the official calendar of 1969. The brightly coloured postcards portray a series of popular tourist attractions: we see the St. George Hotel, the Phoenicia Hotel and Place de l'Etoile, the souks, Martyrs' Square, and the bank districts, the modern infrastructure and the new skyline. The set unequivocally promotes the state-sponsored and tourist appealing image of Beirut's modernity and cosmopolitan exoticism. Although Farah was certainly not the only one who produced postcards, his work had been considered amongst the most distinguished and was therefore regularly reprinted and imitated. After the civil war broke out in the spring of 1975, the studio was destroyed, but Farah was able to rescue some materials – a fraction of his negatives, including those of the postcards and hundreds rolls of virgin film. Later, three years into the wars, seeing the destruction all around, he realized that his postcards had lost all referential grip on reality: they depicted something that was no more. So he patiently started burning the postcard negatives, "firing his own shells, punching holes and gaps in them, thus making them closer to him, conforming better to his reality."[34] Rather than directly capturing documentary images of the unfolding violences, closed in his studio, Farah created a new referential system by superimposing the destructions of his present onto the glossy and idealized image of the past (Figure 4). Charred areas and twisted searing effectively update the photographic signs so that they come to correspond once more to their actual counterparts in the photographer's present, or as André

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nineteenth century Armenian photography studio: the Abdallah frères, or Abdallah Brothers (active between 1870s and 1890s). In the same way as the fictional character Farah was commissioned by the Ministry of Tourism to document Beirut's twentieth century urban modernity, so the Abdallah frères studio in Beirut was commissioned by Sultans Abdul Aziz and Abdul Hamid II to photograph the infrastructural achievements of the Ottoman Empire – railroads, ports, hospitals, and other civil architectural projects – as signifiers of the Empire's modernization. As Rogers points out, the photographic medium was itself a signifier of the Empire's modernity. See Sarah A. Rogers, *Postwar Art and the Historical Roots of Beirut's Cosmopolitanism* (PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2008), 58. See also Engin Özendes, *Abdallah frères: Ottoman Court Photographers* (Istanbul: Yapi Kredi, 1998).

[33] This account is a collage of different versions, gleaned from various publications or interviews with the artists, each of which adds more or emphasises different details and aspects of the story.

[34] Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, "Tayyib Rah Farjîk Shighlî (OK, I'll show you my work)", trans. Jalal Toufic, *Discourse* 24, no. 1, (Winter 2002), 89.

Figure 4. Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, *Wonder Beirut. Postcards of War*, 1997-2006.

Bazin would say, so that the "ontological identity of model and image" is restored.[35] The prints of the mutilated negatives, as their title 'Historic Processes' suggests, are still motivated by the intention of producing accurate historical records, systematically charting key events such as the battle of the hotels (1975-76). As the wars carried on, however, Farah did not limit himself to merely copy the devastation of the city onto his postcards. Getting caught up in his own game, he started making burns that were not dictated by any real episode, but simply by his own compulsive projections. In this second stage, titled 'Plastic Projects,' the accurate system of indirect referentiality drifts away from the actuality of its referents, exploding, as if in a prophetic apocalyptic vision, into a series of future catastrophes.

The story is not over yet. We are told that, beside mutilating his own old works, Farah continued taking photographs of his everyday environment. He used the virgin rolls of film he had salvaged from his studio, but since he was short on products, fixatives and paper he never developed them. He nonetheless started the habit of taking accurate notes describing the content of each undeveloped picture in his personal diary: a chronicle of banal and dull details of a secluded everydayness. One reads of self-portraits in the mirror, close-ups of the horoscope in the paper, a workman on a crane etc. After the end of the wars, when paper and fixatives were once again available, Farah continued nonetheless in the habit of not developing photographs, revealing that more complex reasons than material scarcity lingered behind his decision. As time went by, the undeveloped spools, neatly stored and classified, began to pile up in his studio, as if the right moment to reveal them had not yet come.[36] The images, however, do exist in textual format: as a set of dates and concise descriptions (Figure 5). Farah calls these peculiar artefacts "invisible

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[35] Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image", 10.

[36] The artists report the formidable figure of 6452 undeveloped rolls of photographic paper.

Figure 5. Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, *Wonder Beirut. Latent Images,* 1997-2006. Contact sheet film and Drawer of films.

images"; Hadjithomas and Joreige prefer to call them "latent images".

In its materialization in the gallery space, the saga of *Wonder Beirut* consists of the prints of burned postcards (*The Story of a Pyromaniac Photographer*), a stack of the same postcards that the visitors can take away (*Postcards of War*), prints showing drawers full of undeveloped rolls, and panel-size captions with the descriptions of the latent pictures (*Latent Images*).[37] Yet, these artefacts become intelligible only through the narrative that binds them together, and that is recounted in the exhibition's press release and in an array of critical texts, often written by the artists themselves under overt pseudonyms.[38] Through its elaborate fiction, the story-parable powerfully condenses the difficulties and deadlocks that the artists themselves had experienced as producers of images in the aftermath of the wars, as well as their wariness towards dominant visual representations of the conflict.[39] Acting as a stand-in for the artists, the character of Farah

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[37] The series was first exhibited in the Galerie Janine Rubeiz during the Mois de la photographie, Beirut, 1998. In later iterations (most notably at the 56th Venice Biennale *All the World's Futures* in 2015), the "latent images" were presented in the form of a book: each chapter presenting the captions of a film roll. Some of the pages, however, remained stuck together, leaving it up to the viewer to cut them open – another veritable manifestation of the figure of latency.

[38] Particularly interesting in this sense is the text "OK, I'll show you my work", which contains a fictional interview between the artists and Pierre Menard, a character from Jorge Luis Borges's short story "Pierre Menard: The Author of Don Quixote".

[39] The artists say that "they documented these fictions very thoroughly in order to enable a reflection on this history." Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, *Aida, Save Me* (London: Gasworks, 2010), 26. In this sense, the fictions can be considered as the result of an exercise in speculative thinking that departs from real materials and situations in order to unravel and magnify inconsistencies and symptomatic or neglected details.

permits them to foreground and self-consciously reflect on their role as image-makers. T. J. Demos has seen the intermediary figure of Farah as a "cipher" used "to problematize representation."[40] While this critique of representation clearly plays an undeniable part, I suggest here that the series of works does something different at the same time. Although decidedly moving away from the iconic-indexical regime associated with photographic representation, I argue that these works are nonetheless animated by a desire to reinstate the indexical bond to the real in which photography partakes – a desire that can be fulfilled at the expense of figuration. The attack on both the photograph-as-picture (the postcard) and the photograph-as-window (the documentary snapshot), by fire and withholding, oblige the viewer to consider the photograph-as-trace. In other words, rather than denying the referential power of photography, the idea of reference is allegorically figured.

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In the critical literature on *Wonder Beirut*, curiously, little has been written about the series's specific engagement with its medium. In spite of its trans-medial presentation – in installations, book-form and performance – the story of the pyromaniac photographer is conceptually tied to the technology of analogue, chemical-based photography. Negatives, film rolls, fixatives, postcards: all the objects that appear in the story and that compose the installation embody an obsolete regime of image registration, apprehension and distribution. They are relics of a technical apparatus caught in a moment of transition and transformation, when it has been superseded by and has repositioned itself in relation to a new dominant apparatus: digital photography. The role of chemical photography as a source of historical evidence – with the array of conceptual metaphors, cultural practices, and social discourses it lends meaning to – is explored and mobilized in the precise moment of its fading.

It is symptomatic that the ideas of indexicality and material inscription – properties seen as specific to the photochemical image – surface time and again in the artists' commentaries on the work. Talking about the act of burning negatives, Hadjithomas and Joreige have explained how they "wanted to return to an ontological definition of these images: the inscription of light by

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[40] Demos, *The Migrant Image*, 186. Demos is not referring here only to the work of Hadjithomas and Joreige, but to a strategy of fictionalization common in post-war Lebanese art.

burning."[41] It is through this process, that always allows for an aleatory and contingent outcome, that the "'damaged' images appear like new photographs;" in them "an indexical rapport is recreated."[42] And elsewhere, they point out how once "removed from overwhelmingly 'iconic' images, [one] develop[s] a new way of interrogating the indexical nature of the image."[43] Farah refers to the notebooks of textual descriptions of the latent images, as contact sheets (the pages containing all the photos of a film roll, printed at the same size of the negative but in positive colours), evoking the process of photochemical development and connotations of tactility. The very notion of latency, the conceptual framework that the artists have used as an interpretative key to their works can also be seen as one of the basic operating mechanisms of analogue photography.[44] A latent image is the invisible image produced by the exposure to light of a photosensitive material, which becomes visible only after having been developed. Latency denotes this delay: the time elapsed between the impression of the image and its consequent disclosure. It could be further argued that latency is the key distinguishing feature between analogue and digital photography, not the distinction between chemical light inscription and digital binary code, or the ease of manipulation that the latter affords, as it is often assumed. That is, it is the experience of having the image captured immediately available for scrutiny that seems to be what is most distinct about digital camera technology.[45]

The trope of the latent image often recurs in psychoanalytic theories concerning traumatic experiences, an association that the artists themselves avow when defining the latent as "the repressed and the hidden."[46] Especially in his early writings, Freud often used the analogy of

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[41] Hadjithomas and Joreige, "OK, I'll show you my work", 90.

[42] Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, "Latency", in *Home Works: A Forum on Cultural Practices in the Region: Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine and Syria,* eds. Ghenwa Hayek, Bilal Khbeiz, Samer Abu Hawache, trans. Tony Chakar (Beirut: Ashkal Alwan, 2002), 41.

[43] José Miguel G. Cortés and Marta Gili in conversation with Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, in Enwezor et al. (eds.), *Two Suns in a Sunset*, 73.

[44] Hadjithomas and Joreige make this link explicit in their text "Latency": "The latent image is the invisible, yet-to-be-developed image on an impressed surface." Hadjithomas and Joreige, "Latency", 40.

[45] As Geoffrey Batchen has remarked in connection to the inherent latency of analogue photography, the negative is "truly the repressed dark side of photography's history." For, as he points out, in the cases in which there is a delay between exposure and print, we tend to "privilege the date of exposure over the date a photograph is made manifest and put in the public sphere." See Geoffrey Batchen, ""Still Searching: 'the dark, repressed side'," part of the series "Photography and Dissemination", *Fotomuseum Winterthur* (September-October 2012): https://www.fotomuseum.ch/en/explore/still-searching/articles/26931_still_searching_the_dark_repressed_side.

[46] Hadjithomas and Joreige, "Latency", 40.

photography to explain the relations between the unconscious and consciousness. The unconscious is the place where bits of memory are stored until they are developed, like prints from black-and-white negatives, into consciously accessible recollections.[47] However, as Freud explains in his *General Theory of Neuroses* (1932), in the same way as not every negative is selected for positive development, so not every unconscious mental process turns into a conscious one. The experience of "some vicissitude," submitted to defensive mechanisms of resistance and repression, remains latent. In psychoanalysis, latency denotes thus the period during which the effects of an experience are not apparent yet, but in a state of *potentia,* waiting to be, as it were, developed. As Hadjithomas and Joreige have it, the latent "can manifest itself at any given moment."[48] That is, latency always implies the possibility of a return of the repressed, according to the Freudian notion of *Nachtrackglichkeit,* or deferred action.

The structure of delay built into the photographic event – in the gap existing between the taking of a picture and its sensible apprehension in a visible form – finds parallel in the latency of the traumatic experience, that is in the distance between the occurrence of an event and the experience or understanding of it. Trauma theorist and historian Cathy Caruth, elaborating on Freud, explains how trauma and the pathologies associated with it, can neither be defined by the event itself (the source of trauma) nor by its distortion, but "consists solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time [of its occurrence], but only belatedly."[49] Traumatic events are not fully perceived or comprehended in the moment in which they happen, but only ever experienced indirectly and in a mediated form in

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[47] Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 2002), 9. Although, as Baer suggests, he became dissatisfied with the photographic analogy, Freud nonetheless continues to use this analogy also in later writings, such as *General Theory of the Neuroses* (1932) and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939). For a discussion of these texts in relation to photography see Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light: Theses on the Philosophy of History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 97-100. Other important discussions of Freud's use of the metaphor of the camera can be found in Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning With Desire: The Conception of Photography* (Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press, 1997), 187; Sarah Kofman, *Camera Obscura of Ideology*, trans. Will Straw (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 21-29; Kaja Silverman, *World Spectators* (Palo Alto, CA.: Stanford University Press, 2000), 75-101. Laura Mulvey also makes a parallel between the storage function of cinema (and photography) and the unconscious, reminding of how both the marks of trauma and the marks of light have the attributes of the indexical sign that can be deciphered retrospectively across delayed time. See Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 8-9.

[48] Hadjithomas and Joreige, "Latency", 40.

[49] Cathy Caruth, "Introduction", in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995), 4.

a later moment. As Caruth writes, "the fact of latency" is not simply "a forgetting of a reality that can hence never be fully known," but, rather, it is exactly "in and through its inherent forgetting" that the event "is first experienced at all."[50] Importantly for our present discussion, Caruth argues that the experience of trauma and the inaccessibility of the event do not necessarily occlude the possibility of historical knowledge. The *literal* return of the event after a period of latency, and the insistence of this return, remain absolutely *true* to the event. Traumatic symptoms are not a "pathology of falsehood and displacement of meaning"; they are rather a "symptom of history".[51] These symptoms do nonetheless defy a conventional model of history, based on traditional notions of experience and reference, and require instead a different epistemological model, "which is no longer straightforwardly referential." A history of trauma, for Caruth, is referential only and precisely to the extent that the event to which it refers is neither perceived fully nor experienced directly as it occurs. If poststructuralist criticism, and in particular deconstructionism, by questioning the notion of direct referentiality, have raised epistemological problems that have in turn lead to political and ethical paralysis, Caruth contends that a "rethinking of reference" remains nonetheless an essential requirement for a history of trauma. Such a rethinking does not tend towards the elimination of history, but rather permits "*history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not."[52]

Caruth's analysis of the indirect referentiality of history as a history of trauma shares some affinities with Lebanese writer and artist Jalal Toufic's own thinking around the unavailability and inaccessibility of referents in post-civil war Lebanon. As we have seen in the introduction, Toufic formulated his influential theory of "the withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster," to denote those intangible effects, caused by catastrophic events, that are usually overlooked. For Toufic, all the elements that constitute the "tradition" of a certain community, even though they are physically extant, become unavailable and inaccessible to that community following a surpassing disaster. In the same way that a traumatic event, registered in the unconscious at the time of its occurrence, reveals itself to consciousness only latently, so the event of the withdrawal of tradition passes unnoticed, and its absence must be made tangible. In such a moment, Toufic explains, the task of art becomes that of revealing "the withdrawal of what we think is still there."[53] Before the missing referents can be accessed once again, artists need to make visible their

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[50] Cathy Caruth, "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History", *Yale French Studies,* 79 (1991), 187.

[51] Caruth, "Introduction", 5.

[52] Caruth, "Unclaimed Experience", 182 (emphasis in the original).

[53] Toufic writes: "art acts like the mirror in vampire films: it reveals the withdrawal of what we think is still there."

withdrawal and, at the same time, continue to take photographs that will be available as referential and documentary pieces only after the resurrection of the referents. In fact it is precisely this act of revealing and recording what is absent, a form of indirect or refracted referentiality, that, according to Toufic, paves the way for the future resurrection of the referents.

> There is going to be "a time of development" of the chemically developed photographs taken during the latter stages of the war. The documentation is for the future not only in the sense that it preserves the present referent for future generations, but also in that it can function as a preservation of the referent only in the future, only when the work of resurrection has countered the withdrawal.[54]

Toufic makes here a distinction between the technical process of chemical development of the photographs and another, quasi-messianic, eschatological, form of development, that will make referential relations possible once more.[55] This distinction is clearly inspired by Hadjithomas and Joreige's *Latent Images*, an artwork that Toufic interprets as a contribution to the resurrection of the withdrawn referents, and therefore as a referential piece.

Toufic's concept of the withdrawal of tradition offers us a cue to understand the common

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Nonetheless, "one should record this 'nothing', that only after the resurrection can be available." Toufic, *The Withdrawal of Tradition*, 57.

[54] Ibid., 58.

[55] Toufic's theories have a theological base in Shiite mysticism. Shia Islam holds that the Islamic prophet Muhammad designated Ali Ibn Abi Talib as his successor (Imam). Adherents of Sunni Islam believe that Muhammed did not appoint successors and consider Abu Bakr (who was appointed Caliph through a *shura*, a community consensus) to be the correct Caliph. After the murder of Imam Ali's son Hussein at Kerbala in 680, for Shiites, the true meaning of the Quran was occulted (or withdrawn) because there was no longer a spiritual leader on earth until the coming of the Madhi (a quasi-Messiah). Shiites, in fact, distinguish between an exoteric or literal meaning of the Quran, plainly available to everybody, and an esoteric meaning that only a spiritual guide, the Imam, can interpret, giving absolute primacy to the latter. Shiites believe in "cycles of occultation" (adwār al-satr) during which the esoteric meaning is concealed behind the exoteric one. The Twelver Shia (the larger branch of Shia Islam) believe also in the occultation of the messianic figure of the Mahdi, who was born but disappeared and will one day return to fill the world with peace and justice. Toufic also refers to the Judaic movement of the Sabbatians, emerging in Poland in the second half of the seventeenth century, who advocated the systematic violation of the Torah (distinguishing between two Torah: that of the unredeemed world, and that of messianic time). As for the notion of resurrection of the referent/tradition, the resurrection of the dead is a standard eschatological belief in all Abrahamic religions. Toufic's film practice directly refers to the Shiite tradition. See: *Âshûrâ:This Blood Spilled in My Veins* (2002), which shows the annual commemoration of the assassination of Hussein.

tendency in Lebanese post-civil war art to stage a representational withdrawal and to negate visuality, of which *Wonder Beirut* is one of many instances.[56] It invites us to interpret aniconic, defective, damaged, abstract or imageless artworks not only from a formal point of view,[57] but prompts us to read them as symptomatic responses to the specific cultural and social context of post-war Lebanon.[58] The task of recording things whose referent has withdrawn, Toufic warns, is in fact bound to the concomitant risk of producing extremely formal images: images in which facets relating to the subject matter – historical reality – might be easily mistaken for purely formal ones.[59] To clarify this point, in *Forthcoming* (2000), Toufic tells the story of an unnamed Lebanese photographer who, during the fightings, had become accustomed to see things and take pictures "at the speed of war." At the end of the conflict, he waited for two years until he learned "to look again at a leisurely pace." This precaution notwithstanding, after this period of adjustment, his

[56] Other examples include the majority of documents in Walid Raad's *The Atlas Group* (that will be discussed in this chapter); Tony Chakar's walking tours of Beirut, *A Window to the World (An Architectural Project)* (2005) and *Sky Over Beirut* (2009); Walid Sadek's *Love is Blind* (2006), an installation that reproduces only the informational labels of Mustafa Farroukh's landscape paintings, leaving empty surfaces of white wall in correspondence to the spots where Farroukh's missing canvases should have been placed. Farroukh was a prominent Lebanese artist in the late 1930s and 1940s, who painted mainly in the style of Academic European art. After the civil wars, not only the urban and natural landscapes he depicted had – due to the destruction of the wars and the disfigurement of the urban fabric by new buildings – physically changed, but also the very culture that Farroukh's practice inhabited had by then disappeared. Both the referents to which Farroukh's paintings referred and the tradition in which he worked, are no longer present, even though his paintings are. The refusal of showing them serves precisely to make present this absence, to make tangible this intangible withdrawal.

[57] For a different concept to that of Toufic's that is related to similar issues, see Laura U. Marks's notion of "enfoldment," which derives from her synthesis of some secular strands of Islamic thought, Deleuze's philosophical reading of Leibniz, and David Bohm's writings on quantum physics. In Marks's view, "enfoldment" is a more fluid concept than the "withdrawal of representation" that acknowledges different manners of enfolding of which aniconism or complete enfoldment is only one. See Laura U. Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press, 2010), as well as Marks's "Introduction" to *Hanan al-Cinema*.

[58] As Toufic explains elsewhere, in Lebanon, there seemed to be a felicitous "concordance around anomalous subjects, figures, spaces and architectures etc. by artists, thinkers, writers, film and video makers who [did] not know each other, revealing these anomalies as symptoms of the culture with which they are dealing." While Toufic was elaborating his theory of withdrawal and writing the parable of the Lebanese photographer (see below), Hadjithomas and Joreige created the character of Abdallah Farah. They did not know each other at the time, but belonged ideally to what Toufic calls a "community of strangers". Jalal Toufic, *Two or Three Things I'm Dying to Tell You* (Sausalito, CA.: The Post-Apollo Press, 2005), 114.

[59] Toufic, *The Withdrawal of Tradition*, 57, 58.

pictures of Beirut still looked as if "they were taken by a photographer lacking time to aim since in imminent danger".[60] Toufic points to the striking similarities between the photographer's images and the formal photographic experiments of artists such as Vito Acconci and Michael Snow, only to then resolutely deny such juxtaposition.[61] In the Lebanese photographer's case, "the out-of-focus and/or haphazard framings" are not the fruit of a deliberate formal strategy, as in the case of the American and Canadian artist; they are rather the consequence of "the withdrawal and thus unavailability to vision of the material."[62] In other words, the photographer's lack of focus or its random compositions were not meant to address the structural properties of the medium, but derived from the real absence of the referent in the traumatic context of postwar Lebanon. "The foregrounding of the material nature of the medium," as Paolo Magagnoli puts it in his commentary of the story, "is not a pure formalist act of reflection on the specificity of photographic and filmic images; rather it is a realist device that is aimed at translating the displacement of trauma and its deferred temporality."[63]

Toufic's reading of *The Pyromaniac Photographer* and *Latent Images,* presents a similar pairing to and differentiation from an art historical antecedent: in this case Hollis Frampton's *Nostalgia* (1971) and *Poetic Justice* (1972).[64] Once again, Toufic debunks the formal similarities, explaining that "*Wonder Beirut* has to do not only with matters relating to the medium as such, but is also a reaction to the incendiary wars" in Lebanon and "the withdrawal of many images past a surpassing disaster."[65] He bases his distinction on the specifics of the historic situation in Lebanon and on the element of documentary referentiality that is to be located under the modernist

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[60] Jalal Toufic, *Forthcoming* (Berkley, CA.: Atelos, 2000), 70.

[61] The artworks mentioned by Toufic are: Vito Acconci's *Fall* (1969), a series of photographs that Acconci produced by clicking his hand-held camera as he reached the ground while repeatedly falling forward; Michael Snow's *Venetian Blind* (1970), twenty-four snapshots Snow took with his eyes closed, each showing his blurred self-portrait against an accidentally framed section of Venice; and Snow's *Seated Figures* (1988), a film of the road made without looking through the viewfinder.

[62] Toufic, *Forthcoming*, 70.

[63] Magagnoli, "A Method in Madness", 320.

[64] In *Nostalgia* Frampton slowly burns, one at a time on a hotplate, black-and-white photographs that he had taken during his early artistic explorations, while the soundtrack offers personal comments on the content of the images (read by Michael Snow). Each story is heard in succession before the related photograph appears on screen, creating a discrepancy between sound- and image-track. In *Poetic Justice*, Frampton places on a table, in between a potted cactus and a cup of coffee, one after the other, 240 papers bearing the descriptions of just as many different shots.

[65] Toufic, *The Withdrawal of Tradition*, 75.

formalist appearance.[66]

Without returning to a formalist notion of medium specificity, the category of medium and the question of form posed by *Wonder Beirut* should rather be considered in connection to historical conditions, both artistic and extra-artistic. Further, medium specificity is an historically variable category, reconfigured by technological change and depending on the constant interaction with other media. As Erika Balsom has argued, in the last decades and, as a consequence of the advent of digital imaging technologies, there has been a profound reconfiguration of the specificity of the medium of film and photography. One of the most visible effects and, at the same time, symptoms of such reconfiguration has been a shift in artists' attention from the apparatus and the phenomenology of spectatorship to "an exploration of history and the obsolescent."[67] This new articulation of medium specificity entails a reinvestment in the historical referentiality of the analogue photographic technology that was conversely deflated by structuralist filmmakers's emphasis on the materiality of the apparatus and the refusal to document anything external to it.

In *Wonder Beirut*, this reinvestment in the referentiality and testimonial power of photography, is explored not simply at the level of the photographic image, but in a more contextual way, by investigating how, in specific historical conditions, practices and processes of image-making can, directly or indirectly, register or index such conditions. Toufic is surely correct in distinguishing *Wonder Beirut* from a limited formalistic concern with artistic mediums, given its referential impulse oriented towards a historical reality. Yet, in engaging with the medium of analogue photography for its capacity to register and preserve a trace of pastness, and its ability to store for the future traumatic events that have not yet been fully experienced or understood, the series is fully implicated in the current re-articulation of the specificity of photography as an index of history and trauma.

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In order to better understand *The Story of the Pyromaniac Photographer* is important to know that

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[66] Analogously, curator Achim Borchardt-Hume has also speculated that the historical experience of the civil wars and their legacy might "have both enabled and conditioned a new approach to image-making." Achim Borchardt-Hume, "In Search of the Miraculous" in *Walid Raad. Miraculous Beginnings*, ed. Achim Borchardt-Hume (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2010), 16.

[67] Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*, 68.

the 1960s postcards around which the story of Abdallah Farah is built, were still being sold in bookshops, kiosks and stationaries in the late 1990s, even though the city they depicted had been dramatically transformed by the civil wars and urban reconstruction. In his study on the function of postcards in relation to the memory of the civil wars, literary critic Saree Makdisi has defined these anachronistic remnants as "prosthetic devices" that rather than rekindling collective memories of lost times and places, simply replace them. In his view, these postcards "express neither nostalgia nor amnesia," but rather more dramatically eradicate "the possibility of history."[68] Revealing a distinctively postmodern anxiety about the conditions of waning historicity in a situation of advanced technological capitalism, Makdisi expresses a profound suspicion towards the visual and the image as deceptions that interfere with the narrative reconstruction of history.[69] Tellingly, alongside the postcard's mythified representation of the past, the other major target of Makdisi's critique is the gleaming anticipations of the future that are projected in billboards, guidebooks and additional advertising materials for the postwar reconstruction of Beirut Central District, sponsored by the already mentioned Solidere. In his Baudrillardian analysis, Makdisi sees both the postcards and Solidere billboards as simulacra or commodity-signs, unmoored from reality and inscribed in a regime of equivalence and indifference. Certainly, if they depict something that did exist, they do so through an ideologically overdetermined filter. The idyllic pictures of a late 1960s cosmopolitan and thriving Beirut ('the Paris of the Middle East', as it was often called), hide the tensions and contradictions that were already present in the Lebanese pre-war society and that

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[68] Saree Makdisi, "Beirut, A City Without History?", in *Memory and Violence in the Middle East and North Africa*, eds. Ussama Makdisi and Paul Silverstein (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 204. For Makdisi, the image-simulacra rather than constitute an element in the reconstruction of history, becomes a substitute for it. Two projects that fall pray of Makdisi's criticism are the Arab Image Foundation, particularly the project *Mapping Sitting*, and Walid Raad's Atlas Group. It is interesting to notice how Makdisi sets up a confrontation between images and narratives, in which the two are mutually exclusive. He writes: "images, or really heaps of images unconnected to each other and to an overarching narrative of redemption or reconciliation, may eventually come to supplant other forms of memory, and eventually other forms of history itself. As such narratives start to fade away, history will increasingly take the form of unnarrated images." Ibid., 205. And again, in Debordian fashion: "The danger here … is that image fetishism (surely the postmodern analogue of an earlier era's commodity fetishism), in taking the place of narrative, makes the task or even the possibility of historical understanding, let alone reconciliation, that much more remote. In being frozen in visual form, history threatens to become an aesthetic object, a commodity, a spectacle, rather than a narrative, a process or a struggle." Ibid., 206. Makdisi seems to be completely unaware of the narrative and probing dimension of the artworks he is discussing. As I will discuss later on, images are never used as pure or uncontested documents, but are always implicated within a discursive process of truth disclosure, consisting of interpretation and narrative.

[69] The other non-explicit source in Makdisi's text is Jameson's *Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.*

would explode shortly thereafter.[70] Yet, the fact that these simulacral vestiges gained popularity in the immediate post-civil war period also testifies to the existence of a fantasy and its obstinate permanence.

Hadjithomas and Joreige's iconoclastic gestures literally explodes this enduring myth and its phantasmatic collusion with the present reality. As Elias contends, "Farah's act of pyromania *indexes* not only the physical destruction of the city but also the damage that the civil war inflicted on the Lebanese imaginary."[71] Acting directly upon these reified images that serve to perpetuate the idealised vision of Beirut's past, the gesture of burning negatives can be read as an attempt to short-circuit the possibility of their uncritical reproduction and recycling. As in the Adorno's epigraph to this section, the closed confines of the ever-same, or the recursive logic of the commodity (the postcards are in the last instance commodities themselves), are interrupted by inflicting literal scars of damage and disruption. Caught between the mythical image of an invented past and Solidere's shiny digital renderings of an imaginary future, the artists inscribe the past violences directly on those illusory projections that seek to disavow them.

In a statement that seems to echo Makdisi's concerns, art critic and curator Suzanne Cotter has identified a deep-seated "mistrust of the image as a reliable document of history" running through the work of many Lebanese artists of the postwar generation, including Hadjithomas and Joreige.[72] Rather than reading *Wonder Beirut* simply in terms of a poststructuralist critique of the simulacral image, however, such a mistrust, should be understood against the grain of Lebanon's visual culture (including old postcards and architectural plans) and fraught mediascape. The poststructuralist lesson that the meaning of images depends on their context, that they can be politically manipulated, and that objectivity and transparency should always be treated with suspicion, is something that many Lebanese artists have experienced first-hand. During the wars,

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[70] Sarah Rogers contends that far from functioning as a signifier of trans-national universality, cosmopolitanism in Lebanon served as an "ideological tool used to entrench internal ethnic boundaries, referencing a particular correlation between Lebanon and Europe and constructing a national vision historically tied to the Maronite Church of Mount Lebanon." In other words, cosmopolitanism, here, signified the orientation towards the West that was sustained in large part by one of the confessional groups of the country, the Christian Maronites, excluding other anti-Imperial, trans-national or international alliances, such as those represented by Third Worldism or Pan-Arabism. Rogers, *Postwar Art and the Historical Roots of Beirut's Cosmopolitanism*, 19-23. For an account of the deteriorating social conditions in the decade preceding the wars see Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon,* 156-186.

[71] Elias, *Posthumous Images*, 163 (my emphasis).

[72] Suzanne Cotter, "Beirut Unbound", in *Out of Beirut*, ed. Suzanne Cotter (Oxford: Modern Art Oxford, 2006), 30. According to Cotter "the mistrust of the image" is the defining feature of post-civil war art from Beirut.

there was a proliferation of independent and unofficial media stations each serving one of the numerous military, sectarian and political groups involved in the conflict. As Joreige remarks, "every militia had its own media station, television, newspaper or radio. There was a real war of images. Audiences or publics had to learn to deal with these images. We as artists became critical about the use of these images."[73] Such an unchecked influx of TV and radio stations was not suppressed, but regulated and integrated in post-civil war Lebanon, so that the polarized and pluralist media system came to mirror the confessional political system.[74]

Next to Télé Liban, the state-run television, the major broadcasting stations in Lebanon are: al-Mustaqbal TV (Future TV) and Al-Manar (The beacon), respectively affiliated to the Future Movement, the political party led by Rafik Hariri and later by his son, Saad Hariri, and Hezbollah. Established in 1989, Al-Manar is the crowning of a strategy of media presence in the country that Hezbollah has cultivated since its formation, officially announced in February 1985, by launching a weekly newspaper *Al-Ahed* (The pledge) in 1984, and a radio station, Al Nour (The light) in 1988. Self-labelled 'the Resistance Channel', Al-Manar came to dominate the country's broadcasting environment with its representations of the South under Israeli occupation and the struggle of liberation. Even before the founding of Al-Manar, thanks to the availability of handheld video cameras, Hezbollah started to record their guerrilla actions against Israeli military targets in the South and to distribute tapes on national and international media outlets. Later Al-Manar's media campaigns systematically covered all major military incursions and confrontations between the resistance and the Israeli occupation forces, producing a particular rhetoric of patriotic heroism to which all media readily complied.[75]

The closely interwoven relationship between the media and political or militant groups has led to the production of instrumental images that tend towards the celebration of violence. Direct representations of violence and the glorification of martyrs are part of the everyday grammar of Lebanese media broadcasting, a violent spectacle that demands to be looked at, without eliciting

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[73] Khalil Joreige in Chantal Pontbriand, "Artist at work: Joanna Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige".

[74] For an extensive examination of the Lebanese media scene and its historical evolution, see Zahera Harb, "Mediating Internal Conflict in Lebanon and Its Ethical Boundaries", in *Narrating Conflict in the Middle East: Discourse, Image and Communication Practices in Lebanon and Palestine*, eds. Dina Matar and Zahera Harb (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 38-57. For an explanation of the seemingly paradoxical functioning of the "polarized pluralist model" of media, see Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, *Comparing Media Studies: Three Models of Media and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 89-142.

[75] Zahera Harb, *Channels of Resistance in Lebanon: Liberation Propaganda, Hezbollah and the Media* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

either awareness or understanding. This situation has only worsened with the emergence of social networks, and their hijacking by terrorist and jihadist groups.[76] Within such a media context, practices of documentary and the photojournalistic reportage need to be radically reinvented if they are to evade both the liberal-humanist trope of victimhood or the agit-prop, post-mortem glorification of resistance-fighters.

Hadjithomas and Joreige are not interested in producing images of violence, but investigate what violence does to images and to a particular imaginary. The wilful production of scopic and epistemic frustration in their work and that of other Lebanese post-civil war artists should be seen within this framework. As Elias convincingly argues, these works act as a necessary counter to the "everyday reification of documentary practices," particularly when these are used "as instruments of juridical evidence or journalistic truth," and, we may add, of political propaganda.[77] They operate in opposition to both the depoliticized formatting of international mass media reportage, and the partisan production and use of images by militia groups. Artists either critically investigate existing images and visual evidence, or stage the images' allegorical or actual withdrawal. Abdallah Farah's saga is a poignant example of both. However, one can hardly class these practices with Makdisi's resolute indictment of the image and the visual. For all their mistrust, Hadjithomas and Joreige – as with many other artists of their generation – continue to work with ostensively photographic images, and consider them as an aid, rather than an obstacle, for coming to know and understand the past. In spite of their work to foreground impasses and paralysis in reading and making images, photography is nonetheless held to provide a crucial way of engaging with contemporary and historical reality.

In a visual culture predicated on the perpetual availability of images and on their distracted consumption, their withholding attempts to offer a new way of seeing. Damaged, absent or latent images produce an interruption in the smooth flow of visual communication which obliges the viewer to attend to the way in which images both disclose and dissimulate what they purport to

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[76] John Roberts, *Photography and Its Violations,* 161-162. Susan Linfield has described the continuum of representational violence in popular Arabic TV stations such as Qatar's Al Jazeera, Dubai's Al-Arabiya, Hamas's Al-Aqsa TV, and Hezbollah's Al-Manar. She distinguishes two main sets of images: documentary footage of dead and wounded civilians from the wars in Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, Kashmir, and especially the occupied Palestinian territories; and the propaganda videos of suicide bombings, tortures, and beheadings. This second group of images, depicting violent acts deliberately performed for the camera, has become more widespread after 9/11. See: Susan Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 162.

[77] Chad Elias, "The Libidinal Archive: A Conversation with Akram Zaatari".

represent.[78] Through the withdrawal of photographs from circulation, Hadjithomas and Joreige articulate a different relation between the photograph and the event, far removed from the instantaneous coverage and real-time mapping associated with networked electronic communications. The withholding of images of the event that, as we have seen, becomes a mimetic device for telling a post-traumatic history, injects a cognitive delay in understanding the event which can only begin to be registered in the aftermath. It is in this sense that we can see Abdallah Farah's practice as a "photography of the event *after the event*."[79] This is so not just because Farah's photographs can be accessed only after the event, but also because he carries on his peculiar photographic practice after the end of the civil wars, documenting the lingering after-effects of violence in the ordinary continuation of everyday life.

The series of *Wonder Beirut* forces our attention towards the process of production and reception of photographic images, what Ariella Azoulay calls the "event of photography" in distinction to the "photographed event". In *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography*, Azoulay characterizes the event of photography as an open-ended "series of encounters" unfolding in time among several participants, including the photographer, the photographed subject and the viewer who comes across the photograph.[80] The "event of photography", Azoulay explains, takes place at least twice: firstly, with the mediation of the camera; and secondly, with the mediation of the photograph. It is this second event – open to the contingency of unpredictable future readings

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[78] Here one feels compelled to turn to Serge Daney's distinction between "the visual" and "the image". For Daney, the visual "is the optical verification of a procedure of power (technological, political, advertising or military power)", a procedure whose only aim and commentary is "reception perfect". The image, conversely, has the ability to disturb and interrupt the smooth flow of visual information. For Daney, sometimes this interruptive function of the image also materializes a "missing image" or images, of which Hadjithomas and Joreige's latent images can be considered a fitting example. See Serge Daney, "Before and After the Image", *Discourse* 21, no. 1 (Winter 1999), 181-190

[79] John Roberts identifies the category of "photography of the event *after-the-event*" as a "photography of the event in which the event is displaced from its conditions of immediacy". Instead of considering this "lateness" as a drawback, Roberts sees it as the distinctive characteristic of a superseded and subordinate apparatus in relation to the new dominant apparatus (networked communications and digital imaging technologies). In order to re-invent its cultural possibilities as a subordinate apparatus, photography, according to Roberts, should "reposition its relationship to the event in order to establish a new reportorial role for itself by making a case for the necessary *lateness* of the photograph." Roberts, *Photography and Its Violations,* 107 (emphasis in the original). Similarly, David Campany characterizes "late photography" as "a kind of photograph that foregoes the representation of events in progress and so cedes them to other media." David Campany, "Safety in Numbness: Some Remarks on Problems of 'Late Photography'", in *Where is the Photograph?* , ed. David Green (Brighton: Photoworks/Photoforum, 2003), 123-132.

[80] Ariella Azoulay, *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography* (London: Verso, 2012), 21, 26.

– that prevents photographs from turning "into dead pages, stable references of concepts, or the categories that served to file them [in archives] and subsequently stuck to them as a second skin."[81] As such, the event of photography always exceeds the single photograph and its iconic content, and cannot be reduced to any prescribed reading of the image. Nonetheless, the normative, "instrumental-productive" approach to photography tends to obscure the open-ended nature of the event of photography, by submitting the photograph to strict protocols of what Azoulay calls "iconization." Iconization is the process of identification of the contents of a photograph, the act of assigning it a caption so that it is transformed into the "photograph of X".[82] It is at this point that photography comes to be wrongly associated solely with the "photographed event" and its meaning is conventionally fixed. Whereas a certain degree of iconization is necessary to handle photographs, Azoulay warns against processes of iconization that "violently constitute" the photographed event or subject through the use of distorting categories. As an antidote to this risk Azoulay proposes an "iconoclastic protocol," that consists in the destruction of icons, or more precisely of photographs-as-icons.

As we have seen with the project of *Wonder Beirut,* the iconic regime of the photographic image is constantly frustrated through various iconoclastic gestures; and yet, in the imageless captions that constitute *Latent Images*, what we are left with is precisely the empty shell of the process of iconization, separated from the icons they are meant to interpret. The text here has ceased to perform the function of anchorage that Roland Barthes had seen as the main purpose of the linguistic message in connection to the iconic message.[83] The captions do not elucidate, remote-control or repress the polysemy of the image, as there is no image whose projective power should be contained. Nor do the minimal notes that have come to replace the latent image, attempt to reach the impression of *plenum* given by ekphrasis: the vivid and often dramatic verbal description of visual works of art. The laconic notes, in fact, do not try to sate, but rather amplify the desire for the image. They lack photography's power of deathly resurrection, and cannot account for the desires and cultural anxieties invested in it.

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[81] Ariella Azoulay, "Archive", trans. Tal Haran, *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon* 3, no. 5 (Fall 2016): http://www.politicalconcepts.org/archive-ariella-azoulay-draft-finished/

[82] Drawing on Roland Barthes's *Writing Degree Zero* (1953) and *Camera Lucida* (1980), Azoulay defines the zero degree of iconization as the combination of two procedures: the indexical evidence of existence ("This was there") and the iconic identification ("This is X"), resulting in "X was there".

[83] Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image", in *Image-Music-Text,* ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 38-41.

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In March 2001, while conducting research on the people who were abducted and forcibly disappeared during the wars, Hadjithomas and Joreige found a Super 8mm film shot by Joreige's uncle, Alfred Junior Kettaneh, before he was kidnapped on 19 August 1985 while driving a Red Cross ambulance across the Green Line.[84] The film had been stored in a yellow pouched, surviving a fire that destroyed the house it was in and several other minor calamities. The undeveloped footage eerily reverberated with the artists' previous works and their long-standing exploration of the concept of latency. It was as if the fictional scenarios conjured up in their artworks had finally materialized in an object intimately bound to a personal history, with the allegorical collapsing into the existential and autobiographical.[85] The found-object confronted the artists with a by-now inescapable dilemma: should they develop the film, with the risk of losing the image it preserved in latency, or was it better to leave the reel undeveloped and the image safe but unavailable? And, in the case of the former option, what would this revelation of the latent do to the conceptual foundation or allegory on which an important part of their oeuvre had been built?

After some hesitation, in May 2002, Hadjithomas and Joreige finally decided to develop the film, to make manifest these other latent images. The result was a mostly illegible three minutes clip, "veiled and white with a barely noticeable presence that vanished immediately from the screen."[86] Drawn to that flickering apparition, by dint of correcting colours and adjusting the

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[84] The circumstances of Junior Kettaneh's disappearance remain a mystery. The family can only assume he was kidnapped and murdered, but in absence of witnesses and a body the possibility of a real closure for the relatives of the missing remains foreclosed. The spectre of uncle Junior haunts also the work of Khalil's sister, Lamia Joreige. At the end of *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere* (2003), a video in which the artist approaches residents of the neighbourhoods adjoining the Green Line with the simple question, "Do you know anyone who was kidnapped from here during the war?", Lamia has a chance encounter with a woman who knew her uncle. Hadjithomas and Joreige have dedicated a series of works to the representation of the missing, most notably the feature films *Ashes* (2003) and *A Perfect Day* (2005), and the lecture-performance *Aida Save Me* (2010). See: Hadjithomas and Joreige, *Aida Save Me*. For a thoughtful consideration of the artists' works as "an extended and fertile allegory on the disappeared and those who wait for them", see: Sadek, "Collecting the Uncanny and the Labour of the Missing", 216.

[85] Ibid., 216.

[86] Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, "Lasting Images," in *Home Works II: A Forum in Cultural Practices,* ed. Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, Masha Refka, Mohamad Hamdan, Yussef Bazzi, and Zeina Osman (Beirut: Ashkal Alwan, 2005), 142.

Figure 6. Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, *Lasting Images*, 2003. Super 8 mm film transferred on DVD, film still.

contrast, the artists were able to give a sharper definition to small variations and imperceptible movements, so that, through the foggy whiteness, images started to appear (Figure 6). Bluish, grayish and purple shapes emerge out of the creamy-coloured, heavily scratched background of the celluloid support, before fading back into it. We recognize the moving silhouettes of boats, the light-blue surface of the sea, a urban skyline, the roof of a house, and finally a group of four people surrounding a car, with the last apparition of a man blowing a kiss to the camera. Despite the bleached and disfigured nature of the image, we can still perceive small details such as the wind blowing through the woman's hair or the movements of the camera, panning across what we assume to be the port of Beirut and then suddenly zooming in.

The film, transferred to video, was shown in a continuous loop under the significant title *Lasting Images*, at the second edition of Home Works in 2003. It was presented as part of an annotated display that dispassionately and indirectly alluded to the details of its retrieval and the broader history of the Lebanese missing for which it acted as metonym. The installation, presented in a dark room, consisted of six luminous cases. The first presented the three-minute film, while the second contained images of the yellow envelop in which it was found. The remaining four cases displayed textual supplements that aided the viewer in making sense of the previous relics. These included the provisions of the Lebanese law relating to missing persons and in particular

pertaining to those kidnapped during the wars; an excerpt from Jalal Toufic's book *(Vampires): An Uneasy Essay on the Undead in Film*;[87] a citation from Nadar's autobiography *When I Was a Photographer* (1900);[88] and a short text reporting an abstruse belief, particularly widespread in the latter half of the nineteenth century (called Optography), according to which the eye "records" the last image seen before death, which is printed on and can be extracted from the retina.[89] This ensemble of texts point to the condition of spectrality as a common denominator between the legally and ontologically suspended state of the disappeared (neither dead nor alive, as per the curious juridical formulation) and the ontology of the photographic image – at least in its analogue variant.[90]

The provisions relating to the missing (article 33 to 38), included in the installation, were issued on 22 June 1995.[91] Besides providing a notional definition of the disappeared, the legal stipulations gave the families the right to declare their missing members judicially dead *in absentia*, if they had been missing for more than four years, and detailed what proofs (including publication of inserts in local and foreign newspapers) should be used in the legal procedures. Further, they regulated pending issues of inheritance giving the heirs' access to the disappeared's otherwise frozen properties and belongings. These terms were however reversed by article 38, considering the possible return of the disappeared within a period of five years from the official

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[87] Jalal Toufic, *(Vampires) An Uneasy Essay on the Undead in Film* (Sausalito: The Post-Apollo Press, 2003).

[88] This is the famous passage in which Nadar refers to Balzac's theory of spectres and, in particular the spectrality of photographic images. "Therefore, according to Balzac, each body in nature is composed of a series of spectres, in infinitely superimposed layers, foliated into infinitesimal pellicules, in all directions in which the optic perceives this body…[E]very Daguerreian operation would catch, detach, and retain, by fixing onto itself, one of the layers of the photographed body." Félix Nadar, *When I Was a Photographer*, trans. Eduardo Cadava and Liana Theodoratou (Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press, 2015), 4.

[89] The same theory is mentioned in Rabih Mroué's non-academic lecture *The Pixelated Revolution* (2012).

[90] On the condition of the missing person as a paradoxical and impossible coexistence of life and death see Hito Steyerl, "Missing People: Entanglement, Superposition, and Exhumation as Sites of Indeterminacy", in *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012) 138-159, as well as Hito Steyerl and Rabih Mroué's joint lecture *Probable Title: Zero Probability* (2012). To define such an impossible condition Steyerl reverts to quantum theory and, in particular, to Erwin Schrödinger's theorization of the state of indeterminacy.

[91] The provisions followed and complemented Law 434, passed by Parliament on the 15th May 1995. This Law offered legal procedures for the families to reclassify the status of their missing kin as dead without any evidence of their death or examination of the whereabouts of their remains. The families of victims of disappearance regarded this law as an attempt to buy their silence, ignoring the families right to know the truth and dismissing the possibility of finding missing Lebanese alive in Syrian or Israeli Prisons.

declaration of death. Forcing the relatives of the victims to take a psychologically unsettling decision, the provisions placed the full responsibility for investigating the missing on their families, failing to provide any systematic legal and political framework of inquiry (in this, they are perfectly in line with the Amnesty Law of 1991). In 2000, under the pressure of the Committee of the Families of the Kidnapped and Disappeared in Lebanon, the government of Salim al-Hoss finally set up the first Official Commission of Inquiry on the fate of the forcibly disappeared. Even though a second commission was established in 2001 and its mandate was extended till February 2002, the result of the investigations was highly disappointing. The issued report simply stated that the thousands who went missing during the civil wars were unlikely to be found alive, but the commission did not set in place any mechanism for the uncovering of gravesites and the exhumation and identification of the bodies. In spite of this sweeping decree, most families refused to declare their kin dead in the absence of absolute evidence.[92]

In this context, Hadjithomas and Joreige's development and display of Uncle Junior's film can be seen, as Elias suggests, as an "act of public witnessing and commemoration" in the face of the state's silence and inadequate response.[93] The artists' unearthing of the reel and their attempt to recover the latent image hidden "within the layers of the film itself" is analogous to the process of exhumation and identification of the victims that the state has failed to perform to this date.[94] Far from being a unique case of public commemoration of the missing, *Lasting Images* is one instance within a broader number of initiatives, promoted by both local family committees and international human rights organizations, that utilise photographs of the disappeared to summon them back into public consciousness. Yet, while such initiatives often use official ID photographs to play the ersatz role of the disappeared, Hadjithomas and Joreige present an image that formally evokes the elusive status of the missing referent, while resisting the sectarian compartmentalisation of identity enacted in ID cards.[95]

In spite of the decision to transfer the Super 8 stock to video (a choice presumably due to the willingness of preserving the original film), *Lasting Images* mobilises the emotional resonance and

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[92] See Michael Young, "The Sneer of Memory: Lebanon's Disappeared and Postwar Culture", *Middle East Report*, no. 217 (Winter 2000), 42-45.

[93] Elias, *Posthumous Images*, 94.

[94] Hadjithomas and Joreige, "Lasting Images", 142.

[95] It is important to note that the kidnappings were carried out mostly on the basis of the holder's identity card, on which his or her religious sect was printed. On the problematic use of photo ID cards in the exhibition *Missing* organized by UMAM in 2008, see Elias, *Posthumous Images*, 97-102.

affective power of the analogue indexical trace. The meticulously documented connection to the original, singular film-print allows Hadjithomas and Joreige to imbue even its digital copy with the sense of historicity and spectrality associated with the indexical capacities of celluloid. By developing the damaged reel, the artists took the risk, as they write, that "these latent images might reveal nothing".[96] The images that they were able to extract are in fact discoloured and barely legible; some sections of the stock are completely blank and the surface of the celluloid strip is strewed with cracks and scratches. When he does appear, the figure of Uncle Junior is as elusive as his current status as missing declares him to be: first he appears with his back turned towards the viewer; then we catch a glimpse of his profile. Further, Uncle Junior's disappearance is uncannily echoed in the fading of these fleeting images impressed on the fragile support of an ageing technology. The ghostly status of the missing person – a haunting presence neither dead nor alive – is mirrored in images that are themselves on the brink of vanishing. If *Lasting Images* assume an ersatz role, coming to replace the missing body, this can only return in the guise of a phantom-like apparition, always shot through with absence. Whereas the ID photographs used in many initiatives of public remembrance of the missing tend to generate an impression of presence, *Lasting Images* acts rather as a substantiation of loss. The desire for presence, that is, is frustrated in the partial return of washed out images suffused with absence and bathed in a distinctive halo of melancholy.

In *180 Seconds of Lasting Images* (2006), a later iteration of the piece, the artist-pair reviewed once again the film, frame by frame, and scanned the 4.500 photograms it was made of, as if urged by the desire to hold on to and fix these images even further (Figure 7). The stills were then arranged as a mosaic of freeze-frames: the unfurling temporality of the film spread out on a two-dimensional plane. This second transition from moving image to still photograph recalls Barthes's disfavour of cinema, for its relentless movement and the lack of temporal "engorgement" that the photographic still affords. It is the frozen temporality of the photograph in opposition to the impression of life generated by movement in cinema, that, according to Barthes, gives photography its spectrality and melancholic pathos.[97]

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[96] Hadjithomas and Joreige, "Lasting Images", 142.

[97] Barthes writes: "in the cinema, no doubt, there is always a photographic referent, but this referent shifts, it does not make a claim in favour of its reality, it does not protest its former existence; it does not cling to me: it is not a *spectre*. Like the real world, the filmic world is sustained by the presumption that, as Husserl says, 'the experience will constantly continue to flow by in the same constitutive style'; but the Photograph breaks the 'constitutive style' (this is its astonishment); it is without future (this is its pathos, its melancholy); in it, no propensity, whereas the cinema is

Figure 7. Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, *180 Seconds of Lasting Images*, 2006.

The images' scarce informative value does not lessen their affective power, which, if anything seems to be amplified by gaps and lacunae. According to Bazin, the ontology of the photographic image is always in operation, "no matter how fuzzy, distorted or discoloured" that image might be.[98] In fact, it is the time ravaged surface of the film strip that adds to the lasting images the appeal and the proof of their endurance through time. Bazin's ontology of the photographic image demands of the viewer an "irrational leap of faith", so as to transfer not just the impression, but the fact of reality from the person or thing to its reproduction. The affect of photographic images, therefore, does not depend solely on the technological properties of an apparatus capable of preserving the material inscription of a past reality. For Bazin, the sense of realism and authenticity that photographic images emanate relies also on the viewer's subjective desire to preserve and retrieve a trace of the past, an ancestral obsession common to all humanity, that he famously calls the "mummy complex."[99] Accordingly, one might say that in *Lasting Images* it is not just the images that refuse to disappear, as the title tantalizingly suggests, but it is also the artists (and us, in turn) who cannot let go of them. As Hadjithomas acknowledges, "images came back to haunt us. It was really important to try everything to bring them back. And by bringing back those images, we had

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protensive, hence in no way melancholic (what is it, then? - It is, then, simply, 'normal,' like life)." Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage Books, 2000), 89-90.

[98] Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image", 14.

[99] Ibid., 9. For an exposition of Bazin's conception of realism see Rosen, *Change Mummified*, 3-41.

to accept the idea that we could be haunted."[100] Yet, this sense of being haunted also raises the problem of the endless waiting, the existential limbo in which the families of the disappeared have been suspended for decades. Hadjithomas, thus, continues by asking a difficult question: "Should one keep waiting for someone who went missing long before, so keeping open the wounds of the war, or should one let go, put the ghosts to rest?"[101] By latching on the highly cathected trace that is Uncle Junior's film, Hadjithomas and Joreige not only produce a powerful depiction of the missing as haunting presences, but also enact in the viewer the sense of suspension and the thorny dilemma that torment those who remain.

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[100] Elisa Adami, Joanna Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, "On Photography, Images and Revelations", *Culture+Conflict* (November 2018): http://www.cultureandconflict.org.uk/views/joana-hadjithomas-and-khalil-joreige/
[101] Ibid.

1.2 Pointing to: War Documents in the Work of Walid Raad

Part One: Topographic Surveys and Spatial Abstractions

> "You don't do street photography in a city at war... [Doing street photography] assumes that you can stay in one place for 20 minutes, adjust your tripod and ensure that there's no sniper or bomb about to go off nearby. It also assumes that photography is neutral, the product of a predominantly aesthetic activity. But in a divided city, it's an intelligence document. Especially when people want information about the other side, taking photographs of buildings, streets and residents is very contentious."[102]

At about the same time when he was delineating the content and structure of the Atlas Group archive, Walid Raad created another fictional, but little known institution: the Beirut Al-Hadath archive. Appearing only as a photo-essay, which was published in a special issue of the journal *Rethinking Marxism* dedicated to Henri Lefebvre in 1999, the project prefigures many of the aesthetic and presentational strategies that will later become associated with the Atlas Group.[103] Like its successor, Al-Hadath is an imaginary foundation, a non-profit visual and cultural organization established in 1967, the year of Raad's birth. It includes a fake list of funders (among which we can find familiar characters like Mrs. Zainab Fakhouri, wife of the historian Fadl Fakhouri) and is introduced with an explanatory text written by a fictional expert named Fouad Boustani, said to be the director of the Beirut Photographic Centre. Interestingly, the name of the archive, Al-Hadath, means 'the event' in Arabic; a curious choice for a collection of remarkably uneventful shots, yet likely connected to the fact that many Lebanese tended to allude to the civil wars precisely with this non-descriptive colloquialism.

As with the files of the Atlas Group, only a tiny portion of the Beirut Al-Hadath archive is made accessible in the publication. This consists of eighteen small-scale photographic plates showing shop storefronts, all taken in the same section of Beirut at roughly the same time on 12 January 1977 (Figure 8). The grainy, black-and-white photographs are attributed to an anonymous

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[102] Quoted in H. G. Masters, "Those who lack imagination cannot imagine what is lacking", *Art Asiapacific*, no. 65 (2009), 130.

[103] Walid Raad, "The Beirut Al-Hadath Archive", *Rethinking Marxism* 11, no. 1 (Spring 1999), 15-29. Raad's early works, as well as some documents of the Atlas Group, were disseminated in intellectual and academic publications before entering the art circuit as objects or installations. Walid Raad, *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: Some Essays from the Atlas Group Project* (Lisbon and Cologne: Culturgest and Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther Köning, 2007), collects and reproduces many photo-essays originally published in journals such as *Public, Public Culture, Camera Austria, Cabinet, TDR/The Drama Review, Bidoun, Artforum*.

Figure 8. Walid Raad, *The Beirut Al-Hadath archive*, Plates 1 and 2, 1999.

group of one hundred photographers, recruited in January 1975 by Al-Hadath to produce an exhaustive photographic documentation of the city. The instruction "to photograph every street, storefront, building, sign, vegetation, moving vehicle, and other spaces of aesthetic, national, political, popular, functional and cultural significance in Beirut" bespeaks the intention of producing a colossal topographic survey – a sort of Borgesian fantasy in which map and territory perfectly coincide.[104] The encyclopaedic ambitions of Al-Hadath, in its desire to construct an archive coextensive with reality itself, announces a vision that resembles the telos of historicism: a comprehensive accumulation of details and the fantasy of total coverage. Yet, the outbreak of the wars in April of the same year shattered the dream of constructing such a perfect photographic replica, obliging the organizers to introduce some precautionary measures to ensure the security and physical integrity of the participants. Photographers were provided with a specifically manufactured and designed camera and instructed "to accompany each photograph with three addresses, only one of which corresponded to the actual place where the image was produced." The photographs were then distributed to "influential individuals, cultural organizations, and other

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[104] Raad, "The Beirut Al-Hadath Archive", 17.

institutions in and outside of Lebanon." This strict control on the production and circulation of photographs reveals an equally acute awareness of their variable meanings – "as commodities", "intelligence and aesthetic texts" – and an attempt to limit this semantic availability by controlling their use and exchange values.[105]

The distinction of the possible uses of the Al-Hadath photographs, explicitly brought out by Boustani in his introductory text, recalls Allan Sekula's famous analysis of the twofold significance of photographs once stored in an archive. Considering the vernacular collection of an archive storing photographs of coal miners and their families in Cape Breton, Sekula examines how these records can be studied either as "historical documents", praised for their informative value, or contemplated as "aesthetic objects" encapsulating an expression of subjective experience.[106] In the case of Al-Hadath, however, the retrospective value of the photograph as "historical document" is replaced with an instrumental and present-oriented interpretation of the photograph as a potential document of military intelligence, from which warring militias can gain useful information, and which must therefore be averted through the use of confusing captions. Both the neutrality of photography as a predominantly aesthetic activity, and the impartiality of documentary reportage are accordingly precluded in the Al-Hadath archive. *Flaneurie* and street photography are not possible in a city at war, as Raad remarks in the epigraph to this section. This deliberate obfuscation of the photographic document vitiates its informative value to the point that Boustani is drawn to reflect meta-critically on the relation between photography and history: "What do we come to know and how do we come to know anything from the pictures and from Al-Hadath's enterprise?", he wonders.[107]

Raad, through Boustani, writes that Al-Hadath "identifies a constellation of relations amongst the discourses of photography, geography, nationalism and war," and "critically confronts and examines issues of power, space, time, and trauma as they were and are manifested in the history of Lebanon and of the Lebanese civil war, in photographic and documentary practice."[108] The

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[105] Ibid., 18.

[106] Allan Sekula, "Reading an Archive: Photography between Labour and Capital," in *The Photography Reader,* ed. Liz Wells (London: Routledge, 2003): 443-452. For Sekula, both views are partial and problematic. The first option risks falling into the fallacy of historicism and positivism, cultivating the myth of "objective truth"; the second is fraught with a "covert elitism" and cult of "pleasure and expressiveness". Rather than choosing between the two models, Sekula construes them as torn halves in dialectical tension with one another.

[107] Raad, "The Beirut Al-Hadath Archive", 19.

[108] Ibid.

selection of photographs presented shows very little evidence of the wars violence – the privileged subject of photojournalism. In a way that will become a familiar cipher in later productions with the Atlas Group, and that is not unlike Hadjithomas and Joreige's displaced depictions of war, Raad omits direct representations of violence. The background of the unfolding wars can be inferred only from the conditions of danger and self-censorship under which the photographic utterances are said to have been produced. To tentatively answer Boustani's question, then, the (historical) knowledge one can infer from these pictures is not based on the documentation of actual facts or events.

The Beirut Al-Hadath catalogue of ordinary-looking storefronts evokes a number of formal photographic and artistic antecedents, such as Eugène Atget's photographs of *le Vieux Paris* and Martha Rosler's photo-conceptual work on the Bowery in New York (1974-75). Similar to these works is the choice of subject: working-class neighbourhoods, shop store-fronts and street stalls in popular, commercial districts. Similar too are the ways of framing them: completely bereft of any human presence, with asymmetrical perspectives, and contrasting lightings. The palpable influence of Atget is explicitly drawn out by Boustani himself and explained as a result of the earlier French colonial presence in Lebanon (1923-1946). The parallelism is pertinent. As Atget worked on the Commission du Vieux Paris, a project set up by the Commission des Monuments Historiques in 1897 with the aim to preserve the image of old Paris before its disappearance under modernization, so Raad and the Al-Hadath photographers are tasked with capturing an image of Beirut hovering somewhere between disappearance and renovation; a city "devastated by the civil wars" and "always being rebuilt."[109] In the same way in which Atget, while committed to the official directive of producing an encyclopaedic catalogue and rescuing lost landmarks, ended up subverting the patrons' scientific-positivist demands by privileging marginal subjects and low-key compositions, so the unassuming plates of the Al-Hadath archive, with their modest, vernacular subjects, betray the epic and celebratory impulses of the original initiative.[110] Using photography to record what is rapidly vanishing, both Atget and the Al-Hadath photographers confront processes of urban reconstruction that threaten to erase an important part of the past, because deemed incommensurate with the new ideas of progress and renewal.

Besides their spatial undecidability, the Al-Hadath archive's photographs are also temporally indeterminate. Supposedly taken in the period of the wars (1975-1991) but only revealed in 1999,

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[109] Ibid.

[110] For a discussion of Atget's resistance to the documentary demands of the state and its version of modernity, see Molly Nesbit, *Atget's Seven Albums* (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1992).

the hiatus in their reception places them in between two different processes of urban disruption: the damage caused by the fifteen years of shelling and house-to-house combat *and* the intensive program of demolition that anticipated the postwar reconstruction. In "Laying Claim to Beirut: Urban Narrative and Spatial Identity in the Age of Solidere"*,* an article published in 1997 and hence sketching out a scenario close to the context in which Raad made his piece, Saree Makdisi has thoroughly reconstructed the different phases that brought about the contentious initiative of rebuilding the Beirut Central District (or BCD, as it is generally referred to by real estate developers).[111] Far from uncontroversial, as he explains, the "reconstruction" was a lucrative business and an opportunity of "astonishing self-enrichment for the members of the government and their wide circle of business associates", starting from the multibillionaire engineering tycoon Rafik Hariri, who, as we have already seen, was elected Prime Minister in 1992.[112] Even before Hariri's election, the previous government had passed a series of laws and decrees that provided the legal framework for the constitution of a single private real estate firm to be entrusted with the rebuilding process. Formally established in May 1994, the joint-stock company Solidere was given full managerial control over the land in the central districts. By then, the centre had been almost completely razed to the ground, following massive cycles of demolition carried out with the pretext of cleaning up the rubble so as to enable reconstruction. As Makdisi explains, however, the demolition work was so disproportionate and extraneous to the much publicised needs of preservation, that more buildings were bulldozed in a single year than what had been ruined in the previous fifteen of war. As Makdisi details, "[n]ot only were buildings that could have been repaired brought down with high-explosive demolition charges, but the explosives used in each instance were far in excess of what was needed for the job, thereby causing enough damage to neighbouring structures to require their demolition as well." The destruction pressed on although no final reconstruction plan had been approved or defined yet. As Makdisi reports, it is estimated that "by the time reconstruction efforts began in earnest ... approximately 80 percent of the structures in the downtown area had been damaged beyond repair, whereas only around a third had been reduced to such circumstances as a result of damage inflicted during war itself."[113] In a

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[111] Saree Makdisi, "Laying Claim to Beirut: Urban Narrative and Spatial Identity in the Age of Solidere", *Critical Inquiry* 23, no. 3 (Spring 1997), 660-705.

[112] Ibid., 694.

[113] Ibid., 672, 674. Cycles of demolition had began even before the official end of the conflict. In 1983, when the war entered a period of lull following the Israeli withdrawal from West Beirut, OGER Liban, a private engineering firm owned by Rafik Hariri, took over the reconstruction project and proceeded to implement a series of demolitions,

similar vein, Lebanese novelist Elias Khoury blamed the destruction of Beirut's urban memory on the "huge machine that is reconstructing and regenerating the city," tearing down old neighbourhoods and "tossing the rubble of the old city into the sea."[114]

In order to allow Solidere to implement a coherent reconstruction plan, the government seized by "eminent domain" (also known as "compulsory purchase") most of the properties in downtown Beirut and handed them over to the private company. Ironically, those householders and shopkeepers that had managed to hold on to their plots throughout the civil wars, had their property rights abrogated by law and were compensated with shares in the company, instead of financial remuneration. Designed to address the fragmentation of property rights in the area, further complicated by the fact that some of the previous owners had either emigrated during the wars or were considered missing, the decree in effect erased the prewar social composition of the central districts, characterised by both class and confessional diversity. The staggering privatisation of the land made the area unaffordable for its former lower- or middle-lower class residents. The expropriation of previous owners was further accompanied by the mass eviction of families who had been squatting in the gutted buildings in the marginal zones of the centre, especially in Wadi Abu Jamil, the former Jewish quarter.[115] During this process, the state abdicated any role it could have played as a guarantor for the transparency and public outcome of the reconstruction. According to the detractors of the project, little was done, for instance, to ensure the recuperation of Beirut's former souks – the city marketplace – as an open and accessible space that favoured social inclusion and dialogue among different sectarian groups. Sacrificing public space to real estate development and short-term profit, the souks were instead turned into a "postmodern shopping mall": a destination for wealthy international tourists and businesspeople, and a first-class investment location attracting international corporations, banks, designer-brand stores and restaurant chains.[116]

For Makdisi, the Solidere project represents the centrepiece of the new political-economic

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among which were the unnecessary destruction of two old souks – Souk Al-Nouriyeh and Souk Sursuq – and large sections of Saifi. These demolitions were carried out in total disregard for the existing plan for reconstruction that had been approved in 1977, and that specifically called for the rehabilitation of the areas of the city centre along the lines of their traditional layout. Furthermore, unofficial and unauthorized clearances were executed in 1986, during another period of respite.

[114] Elias Khoury, "The Memory of the City", *Grand Street*, n. 54 (autumn 1995), 139. Miriam Cooke likens the Solidere project to a work of auto-destructive art. See Cooke, "Beirut Reborn".

[115] Elias, *Posthumous Images*, 137.

[116] Makdisi, "Laying Claim to Beirut", 686.

arrangement of postwar Lebanon. In the years following the wars, the erosion of public space and the marginalisation of the state, already profoundly compromised by the prolonged internecine struggles, continued under different forms through a neoliberal program of economic deregulation and rampant privatization. The intensification of the prewar system of free market economy went hand in hand with the predatory encroachment of private interests on public ones. Similar to the rhetorics of Reaganism and Thatcherism, Harirism, as Makdisi terms it (identifying such processes with their chief instigator, Rafik Hariri), was analogously characterized by a decline of expenditure in basic social services such as education, health care, social housing or sanitation – already extremely poor in Lebanon. Conversely, such measures included an increased public investment in the improvement of infrastructural conditions for the generation of private profit, founded on the hollow promises that these would induce a trickle-down effect on society at large. Together with the rebuilding of the city centre, the Hariri government financed huge reconstruction works including a national telephone grid, road network, electric power grid, and the expansion of the International City Airport, named after the Prime Minister himself. According to Makdisi, this development of communication networks served to position Beirut, and Lebanon by extension, squarely within the global transnational economic system, turning it into a privileged "node" for the circulation of capital in the region.

Departing from Manuel Castells's seminal study of the "informational city", Makdisi sees in the postwar reconstruction of downtown Beirut the emergence of a "dual city", whose boundary lines are marked precisely by the Solidere project. An intangible and invisible frontier separates the city centre, re-fashioned as a regional node in the transnational informational economy and especially designed for visiting businesspeople, from the rest of city (and country), now viewed as a "peripheral backwater" still fully bounded to the physical dimension of the "national" territory, militarily threatened both from outside (especially by Israel and Syria) and from within (mainly by Hezbollah). Makdisi accordingly argues that there are in fact two Lebanons living uneasily side by side: one based around the informal and unregulated economy that sprang up during the civil wars, and another that is dominated by equally unregulated multinational companies and linked up to what Castells calls the global "space of flows."

Based on the released plans and advertising material for the downtown reconstruction, at the time still at its outset, Makdisi examines Solidere project's peculiar relation to history, emblematically encapsulated in the slogan *Beirut: An Ancient City for the Future*.[117] Presented as a

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[117] The booklets and guides discussed by Makdisi are: "The Centre of Controversy" (1993) and "Beirut Do We Know It?"

project of preservation, the plan for *re*-construction was in fact, Makdisi claims, based on creating a simulacral pastiche of old downtown, selectively preserving certain historical buildings, while completely revamping the rest of the city centre. Following the public outcry aroused by the release of the 1991 master plan for reconstruction, which provided for the virtually total demolition of the city centre's remaining old structures, Solidere appointed a committee for designating historically valuable buildings for preservation. Yet far from being a neutral selection, most of the 265 buildings and monuments singled out for restoration, as Elias points out, dated back to the colonial period of the French Mandate.[118] Privileging one of the many historical-architectural layers that composed the old city's urban fabric, the developers fabricated a tendentious version of a past that never was, while passing it off as a sign of historical continuity. Moreover, in the attempt to sanitise the memory of the war years, much of the developers' attention, as Makdisi notes, focused on the restoration of the buildings façades, scarred with countless bullet holes.[119] While any trace of the civil wars was cosmetically wiped out, the archaeological richness of the central districts was valorised as a marketing asset for rebranding Lebanon's capital.[120] Although the efforts to preserve the city's archaeological and architectural heritage, done in collaboration with various Lebanese universities, were an undeniably commendable enterprise, the plans for redevelopment nonetheless belied a form of disavowal and an attitude of erasure in relation to the recent past, which was symptomatic of a waning historical

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(1994). For an analogous and more recent publication see Ayman Trawi, *Beirut's Memory* (Beirut: Banque de la Mediterranee, 2004). The book composed by Trawi, Rafik Hariri's personal photographer, juxtaposes images of the city centre at the time of the civil wars with photographs taken in 2002 after the reconstruction, underscoring the sharp contrast between the war-time pockmarked and shrapnel-scarred buildings and the restored edifices with their sandblasted façades. This contraposition is particularly striking on the front cover of the book, which uses an optical illusion known as "lenticular", whereby an image seems to change or move if viewed from different angles, so that "before-" and "after-" image continually morph into one another. The after-image, however, is a composite one produced through the digital superimposition of documentary photographs and architectural renderings. For a discussion of Trawi's book and the redevelopment of Beirut Central Districts in relation to the critical efforts made to represent Beirut cityscape in the aftermath of the conflict by Lebanese artists such as Ziad Antar, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, and Walid Raad, see Anthony Downey, "In the Event of Fire: Precarious Images, the Aesthetics of Conflict, and the Future of an Anachronism", *Ibraaz* 003, 13 July 2012, https://www.ibraaz.org/essays/30.

[118] Elias, *Posthumous Images*, 137.

[119] Makdisi, "Laying Claim to Beirut", 678, 704.

[120] The archeological finds uncovered in the city centre date back to the Stone Age and include remains of the Bronze Age, Canaanite, Phoenician, Greek, Roman, Persian, Byzantine, Arab, Crusader, Mamluke, as well as medieval and Ottoman structures.

consciousness. As Anthony Downey remarks, summing up the position of several critical commentators, the reconstruction plans "failed to acknowledge the city's vexed history" and to "provide space for both critical and social engagement" with the still unresolved legacy of the civil wars.[121] While the clearing out of this highly charged space was presented as a way to prevent the possibility of new escalations of violence, "the hasty erasure of the war's architectural traces", as Elias contends, left "the city haunted by the spectre of a violent and unprocessed chapter of its history."[122]

Seen within the context of the post-civil war urban reconstruction, the cartographic enterprise of the Al-Hadath archive can be read as a bid to negotiate two forms of violence and the marks (some less visible than others) they have left on the city's urban fabric. While the story detailing the conditions under which the photographers worked, points to the actual violence of the wars and their impact on image-making, their depiction of streets threatened by urban regeneration tangentially underscores the political and economic violence of the city's urban renewal project – a destructive violence which presents itself as reconstructive. The emphasis on the storefronts of family-run shops in a distinctively working class neighbourhood assumes a special significance when juxtaposed with the plans to remake the city centre souks in the image of a postmodern shopping mall.[123]

The Beirut Al-Hadath archive, as Alan Gilbert observes, prefigures the development of the Atlas Group "not only in terms of its general format but also in its growing obsession with architecture."[124] The conceit of the architectural photo-topographic survey is resumed in a

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[121] Downey, "In the Event of Fire".

[122] Elias, *Posthumous Images*, 138.

[123] From the enclosed map, one can infer that the published photographs were taken in the Hamra district in West Beirut. A lively intellectual and cultural hub, Hamra emerged in the postwar period as a sort of "counter-downtown". As Craig Larkin points out, "unlike the highly regulated Down Town, Hamra's lack of urban planning and official governance has enabled the development of a cosmopolitan, creative environ, which allows greater room for contested post-war visions and plural identities." Craig Larking, "Reconstructing and Deconstructing Beirut: Space, Memory and Lebanese Youth", *Divided Cities/Contested States*, Working Paper n. 8, 2009: http://www.conflictincities.org/PDFs/WorkingPaper8_21.5.09.pdf

[124] Alan Gilbert, "Walid Raad's Spectral Archive. Part II: Testimony of Ghosts", *eflux* 71 (March 2016): https://www.e-flux.com/journal/71/60536/walid-raad-s-spectral-archive-part-ii-testimony-of-ghosts/. Along with the already mentioned Atget, Gilbert identifies other formal influences on Raad's own architectural photography in "Walker Evans's terse formalism as well as Bernd and Hilla Becher's serial typologies."

Figure 9. Walid Raad/The Atlas Group, *Sweet talk: The Hilwé commissions,* Plate 278 and 473, 1992 2004/2004.

number of files of the latter archival project, most notably in *Sweet talk: The Hilwé commissions* (1992–2004/2004).[125] This second fictional attempt of producing an encyclopaedic and systematic documentation of Beirut architecture, however, bears a number of noteworthy variants from its precursor: the number of photographers was reduced from one hundred to a dozen, and the date shifted from the year of the wars beginning to the official date of its ending, 1989. The Hilwé commission comprises plates that are attributed to one of the participants: Lamia Hilwé, a dancer and photographer, who took photographs of the buildings in 1992, but submitted them to the archive fourteen years later. A further difference consists in the aesthetic quality of the images. Whereas the grainy black-and-white photographs of the Al-Hadath retain a recognisable documentary style, the images of the Hilwé commission have been cropped and digitally manipulated. The file is said to contain over 900 plates (although only a sample of 34 plates is available), each consisting of a cut-out detail, enlarged and colourized, of the façade of a building, along with a thumbnail black-and-white photograph of the same building in its entirety printed on the right margin (Figure 9). Abstracted from their original surroundings, the cropped fronts hover against a ghostly white background. This overt manipulation of the photographic document seems to go against the factual and reportorial function in which the medium is conventionally vested. John Roberts has usefully introduced the concepts of "figural" and "nonfigural" to denote respectively the "staged and digitally amended" elements and the "documentary" aspects of

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[125] All the files of the Atlas Group bear a double date. Here and in the following the first date is an attributions by the Atlas Group, whereas the second refers to Raad's production of the work.

photography.[126] Rather than considering the figural as the precinct of deception and the nonfigural as the sphere of truth, however, Roberts explains how both aspects are in effect implicated in the photographic process of truth-disclosure. That is, the fictive and figural modes of the photo-document, when combined with its indexical and nonfigural properties, participate in the truth-telling claims of photography by pointing to and offering a possible visualisation of complex and abstract processes that would elude a plain documentary representation.[127]

Through this conceptual prism, Hilwé's (or Raad's) digital extrapolation of urban façades can be seen as a figural gesture that calls up Solidere's perfunctory and cosmetic solicitude for the buildings' exterior appearance, which, as Makdisi insists, serves to cover up the developers' real concern with infrastructure. Floating mid-air and deracinated from their immediate context, these architectural fragments point to the intangible processes of urban refashioning of the city centre into "pure surface, ostensibly hardwired to the global circuits of transnational capital or to the space of flows."[128] While evidently fictive, Hilwé's photo-documents serve to convey both the planners' epidermal relation to Beirut's architectural heritage and the feeling of the city's inhabitants confronted with an almost completely barren landscape. As Jad Tabet observed, after the demolition, "[t]here is nothing but emptiness punctuated by sparse islands. It is a desert where a few preserved monuments float."[129] To be sure, not all the barely recognizable buildings in *The Hilwé commissions* are located in the redeveloped centre. Among the few identifiable structures, Plate 355 reproduces a cropped section of the Murr Tower, a half-built and pockmarked high-rise building in the Minet el Hosn district (Figure 10). Initiated in 1974, its construction was halted by the outbreak of the wars and, because of its height and strategic location next to the hotel district and on the western edge of downtown, el-Murr turned into an infamous battle ground and a prized spot for snipers. After the wars, although purchased by Solidere with the intention to redevelop it, the Murr Tower was left standing and untouched because of complications related to its demolition. The unfinished building remains as an impending presence in the Beirut skyline, a

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[126] Roberts, *Photography and Its Violations*, 3.

[127] The source material for both the Beirut Al-Hadath archive and the Hilwé commission is Raad's own street photography: a repository of thousands of negatives and digital files, dating back to the 1980s and reaching into the present. Raad envisions these ongoing series as self-assigned photographic commissions and has presented them dissociated of any fictional institutional framework with the title *Sweet Talk: Commissions (Beirut)* (1987 – present).

[128] Saree Makdisi, "Laying Claim to Beirut", 704.

[129] Jad Tabet, "La memoire des pierres" in *Memory for the Future*, ed. Jad Tabet (Beirut: Éditions Dar An-Nahar, 2002), 239.

Figure 10. Walid Raad/The Atlas Group, *Sweet talk: The Hilwé commissions*, Plate 355, 1992–2004/2004.

sort of involuntary monument to the wars.[130]

The combination of a documentary-cartographic impulse with ostensive figural gestures can be found also in the series *Let's be honest, the weather helped* (1998/2006). One of the two files in the Atlas Group attributed to Raad himself, *Let's be honest* comprises plates of annotated notebook pages each pasted with a black-and-white photograph that he took on the streets of Beirut in the early 1980s. The lopsided and off-centre images, showing pockmarked façades and bombed-out neighbourhoods, are overlaid with different-sized, many-hued discs (Figure 11). In the accompanying text, Raad explains that, like many other children during the wars, he used to collect shrapnel and bullets, and used photographs as visual annotations, with each coloured dot identifying the precise site – wall, tree or car – where he had found the spent ammunition after a night or day of shelling. Far from arbitrary, the choice of colours corresponds to the hues found on the bullets' tips. Later, he would realise that the colours indicate the national origin of the ammunition. He explains: "it took me ten years to realize that ammunition manufactures follow distinct colour codes to mark and identify their cartridges and shells. It also took me another ten years to realize that my notebooks in part catalogue seventeen countries and organizations that continue to supply the various militias and armies in Lebanon."[131] While Raad's narrative here

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[130] The Murr Tower is not the only ruin from the wars years that populates Beirut's cityscape, yet given its history and looming presence is certainly one of the most symbolic. At many intervals after the wars, it has been re-militarised. For instance it was occupied by the Lebanese Army the day after Hariri was assassinated. Many Lebanese artists have focused on this highly charged landmark. See for instance the project *Beirut Bereft,* with photographs by Ziad Antar and text by Rasha Salti (2009), or Marwan Rechmaoui's scaled down model *Monument for the Living* (2002-2008).

[131] Walid Raad, in *Walid Raad,* exhibition catalogue, ed. Eva Respini (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2015), 78.

Figure 11. Walid Raad/The Atlas Group, *Let's be honest, the weather helped*, Plate 001, 1998/2006.

foregrounds the retrospective intelligibility of the historical document, an aspect of temporal lateness that permeates all the documents of the Atlas Group and on which I will return at the end of this chapter, the figural dots sprinkled over black-and-white documentary snapshots, act as a deictic gesture that draws the viewer's attention to a web of relations that are not immediately visible in the photographs themselves.

If Raad's digital manipulations of photo-documents could be said to undermine their value as indexical traces, they nonetheless mobilise another, often disregarded, meaning of the index as famously defined by Peirce. Together with the indexical trace – the footprint, the fossil, the photograph – Peirce marks out various deictic signs, which index or signify 'here', 'now', 'this', or 'that'. Emblematically embodied in the gesture of the pointing finger, Peirce's conception of the index-as-deixis draws our attention towards the index as an operation of 'pointing to' a particular and individual instance, singling it out from the continuum of appearances. According to this two-fold meaning, photographs are indexical not only because light happened to leave a trace on a photo-sensitive plate, but more simply because they perform a selective operation.[132] The very act

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Although they are not titled, each plate contains the name of a country or international group such as NATO purporting to be the place of origin of the bullets whose damage is being marked. The countries and international organizations include: Belgium, China, Egypt, Finland, Germany, Greece, Iraq, Israel, Italy, Libya, NATO, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Switzerland, USA, UK and Venezuela.

[132] David Green and Joanna Lowry, "From Presence to the Performative: Rethinking Photographic Indexicality", in

of taking a picture indexes a selective choice made by the photographer at a particular moment to pick something out from the visual continuum. Yet, Raad's figural marks can be read as performing a further form of designation, which Roberts terms "indirect" or "secondary ostension". Indirect or secondary ostension, as Roberts explains, occurs when in pointing at something we are in fact pointing at something else, that is, relating it metonymically or allegorically to something else.[133] In a similar vein, Raad's figural marks can be understood as pointing to both what is inside and what is beyond the frame of the picture, asking the viewer to both look at and look away from what it does and does not show. This indirect or secondary ostensive gesture is ambiguous, since each dot, as Jeffrey Wallen notes, "is a deflection: it points to, but prevents us from seeing, the damage of war."[134] Yet, Raad's defective act of deixis – that shows and covers up at the same time – also allows him to use such photo-documents to direct the viewer's attention towards the more abstract political and economic dimensions of the historical reality, which the photographic images can only *indirectly* index, and which necessitate Raad's fictive and figural approach to be brought into view.

I conclude this overview of Raad's photo-topographic surveys of the city of Beirut, by considering a work that might at first seem distant from the above examples, both in terms of format and subject-matter: *Secrets in the Open Sea* (1994/2004). The latter work, the author of which is said to be anonymous, consists of six large monochrome prints of different shades of blue, each surrounded by a thin white border.[135] In the bottom right-hand corner of each is a tiny faded black-and-white group portrait (Figure 12).[136] In the text that introduces the piece, Raad explains

Where is the Photograph?, ed. David Green (Brighton: Photowork/Photoforum, 2003), 47-62.

[133] Roberts, *Photography and Its Violations*, 154-155.

[134] Jeffrey Wallen, "The Lure of the Archive: The Atlas Project of Walid Raad", *Comparative Critical Studies* 8, no. 2-3 (2011), 286.

[135] An earlier version of this work, entitled *Miraculous beginnings* (1997), predates the Atlas Group and exists as one of Raad's earliest publicly disseminated works. Attached to a different but equally fictional archive (the Arab Research Institute based in Beirut), the work consists of grey instead of blue monochromes. The work was published in *Public,* in the issue entitled "Entangled Territories" edited by Raad himself and Deborah Root. See Walid Raad, "Miraculous Beginnings," *Public* 16 (1997), 44–53; reproduced in Raad, *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow*, 6–15. As is often the case with the Atlas Group works, the title *Miraculous beginnings* is recycled by Raad for another piece: one of the two short films attributed to Dr. Fakhouri (1993/2003).

[136] The group portraits were cut out from several newspapers that had originally identified their subjects as attendees at gatherings such as corporate board meetings. See Janet A. Kaplan, "Flirtations with Evidence", *Art in America* 92, no. 9 (October 2004), 137. Noting that all the men and women in the photographs are elegantly dressed, Alan Gilbert speculates that they were members of the pre-war governing coterie. See Gilbert, "Walid Raad's Spectral Archive. Part

Figure 12. Walid Raad/The Atlas Group, *Secrets in the Open Sea,* Plate 16 and detail, 1994/2004.

that twenty-nine prints were discovered in 1992 under the rubble of Beirut's central districts during the area's massive demolition in preparation for rebuilding. Donated to the Atlas Group, six of the prints were sent to photo laboratories in France and the US (or the UK in some versions) for technical analysis. Remarkably, the laboratories recovered the latent group portraits beneath the blue surface. We are then informed that the Atlas Group proceeded to identify all the individuals in the exhumed photographs to discover that they all "drowned, died or were found dead in the Mediterranean between 1975 and 1991."[137] The piece powerfully condenses two events of erasure: the plight of the missing and the destruction of the old downtown area, which are allegorically conveyed through the blue colour of the monochrome prints. The Mediterranean sea, for which the colour blue stands, is in fact the place where the rubble of the old city centre was pushed by the bulldozers after demolition, as well as the rumoured gravesite where the bodies of many kidnapped and forcibly disappeared were allegedly buried. As I underlined in the introduction to this chapter, it is significant to note here how these two forms of erasure are importantly entangled in that the absence of a legal framework to investigate potential burial sites has allowed corrupt developers to build over suspected mass graves. As the head of ACT for the Disappeared, one of the many Beirut-based agencies set up to investigate the fate of the missing, speculates, "remains are being reburied under new buildings or even thrown into the sea."[138]

To explain the fanciful character of the Atlas Group documents, Raad has often characterized them "as 'hysterical symptoms' based not on any one person's actual memories but on cultural

II: Testimony of Ghosts".

[137] See the file "Secrets in the Open Sea" on the Atlas Group archive website:

http://www.theatlasgroup.org/data/TypeFD.html

[138] Quoted in John Owens, "Push to Find Lebanon's 'disappeared' Grows", *VOA News*, (28 November 2014):

https://www.voanews.com/a/push-to-find-the-disappeared-is-growing-in-lebanon/2538387.html.

fantasies erected from the material of collective memories."[139] *Secrets in the Open Sea,* in fact, draws on and reworks the uncertified, but fact-based rumours surrounding the Mediterranean sea, which many Lebanese consider to be an invisible mass grave, in the same way as *Let's be honest* deploys the widespread and problematic belief that the civil wars were in fact wars plotted by regional and international powers, summarised in the catchphrase *harb al-akhirin 'ala 'ardina* or "the war of others on our soil".[140] Yet if Raad's uses and plays with these psychological symptoms, rumours and collective fantasies in his works, this is not because he considers them as purely fictional or false, but as indirect indexes that point to a highly complex and conflicted socio-political reality and history.

In an analogous manner to *Lasting Images*, *Secrets in the Open Sea* mobilizes the concept of latency and the processes of photo-chemical extraction of a hidden image from a damaged plate, in a way that alludes to the mechanisms of repression and slow exposure in psychoanalytic therapy.[141] Yet, while the affect of Hadjithomas and Joreige's piece is based on the retrieval of an authentic indexical trace, Raad's series is constructed on the interplay of fictional inscription, displaced deixis and figural abstraction. From the formal abstractions of the cropped façades in the Hilwé commission and the chromatic dots in *Let's be honest,* here Raad makes a conceptual foray into the painterly tradition of the monochrome, a genre conventionally taken to signal the limits of art and the endgame of painting. While resembling colour-field paintings, the panels of *Secrets in the Open Sea* are not paintings, but large sheets of exposed photographic paper.[142] From this perspective, the piece could be seen as a reflection on photography's own inadequacy and limitations in evidencing and documenting a particular reality. This auto-critique of photography, however, does not lead into an aestheticist endgame, but is generative of new expressive possibilities. As Borchardt-Hume notes, the two registers of documentary realism and abstraction, conventionally construed as two separate strands in twentieth-century art, are constantly brought together in the documents of the Atlas Group. Yet rather than constituting an attack on the referential ties of photography to the real, as Borchardt-Hume contends, abstraction becomes an index of a very real socio-political and historical crisis, as well as a way to allegorically *figure* the intractability of such issues.[143]

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[139] Raad, "Let's Be Honest, the Rain Helped", 44.

[140] For a discussion of this myth see Haugbolle, *War and Memory in Lebanon,* 13.

[141] Rogers compares Raad's role to that of a psychoanalyst. See Rogers, "Forging History, Performing Memory", 77.

[142] Kaplan, "Flirtations with Evidence", 137.

[143] Achim Borchardt-Hume, "In Search of the Miraculous", in *Walid Raad: Miraculous Beginnings*, ed. Achim Borchardt-

Gilbert has similarly interpreted the monochrome abstractions as a mode of visualising the intangible processes of spatial abstraction that have disrupted and remade the urban fabric of Beirut city centre in the postwar period. Focusing on the narrative detail that places the discovery of the prints in the context of the postwar levelling of downtown Beirut in 1992, Gilbert sees the nonrepresentational monochromes as at the same time a reflection and negation of "the real estate speculators' linear blueprints."[144] Making use of Henri Lefebvre's terminology, Gilbert suggests that Raad's monochromes mimic and disrupt the rationally ordered "representation of space" imposed by the master plan of a new Beirut. In the tripartite distinction of spatial categories that Lefebvre proposes in *The Production of Space*, "representation of space" identifies the processes of production and reproduction of the built environment as determined by the state and the market; this is, in other words, the "abstract space" of urban planners, architects, technocrats and real estate developers.[145] In this sense, *Secrets in the Open Sea* can be seen as yet another instance of cartographic mapping that reveals processes of spatial abstraction in downtown Beirut, while suggesting the possibility of a more creative and active engagement with the production of space.

Hume (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2010), 16.

[144] Gilbert, "Walid Raad's Spectral Archive. Part II: Testimony of Ghosts".

[145] For Gilbert, Raad's monochromes are to be seen as "representational spaces" independently created, appropriated, adapted or imagined, both in private or public settings, using models derived from art and counterculture. See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

Part Two: Documenting After the Event: Towards a Poetics of Lateness

> LEPECKI: So, those horse-race photos in Volume 72 were clipped from the Lebanese daily Annahar, right?
> RAAD: Right.
> LEPECKI: Were the photos taken during the wars?
> RAAD: No. Years after.[146]

> "History run faster than horses."[147]

Presented as an *imaginary* organization committed to the research and documentation of the contemporary history of Lebanon, specifically the Lebanese civil wars, the Atlas Group (1989–2004) consists of an archive of *fabricated documents,* including films, notebooks, photographs and objects. Yet the project also includes the ensemble of its multiple formats and materializations, which span mixed-media installations, public presentations and lecture-performances, and image-text essays published in art journals and exhibition catalogues.[148] Although a fictional organisation consisting of fabricated documents, the Atlas Group archive contains important elements of actual documentation. Each file/artwork results from the formal manipulations of real, predominantly photographic documents, drawn from Raad's own personal collection, composed mainly of street photography and family albums, or taken from other public sources, especially the archives of

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[146] Lepecki, "'After All, This Terror Was Not Without Reason.'", 92.

[147] Etel Adnan, script for Jocelyn Saab's film *Letter to Beirut*, 1978.

[148] Raad explains that the works of the Atlas Group (and of *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow*) "are created with the assumption that they will have different formats: framed or unframed prints; projected images and sounds; and published documents (print and/or web). The works are also created with the assumption that they will be presented as installations in museums, galleries and exhibition halls; as scripts and slides for lectures and performances in black-box theatres, performance spaces, classrooms, lecture halls and community centres; and as pages for books, be it artist books, image-text essays published in academic and non-academic journals, on the web, in magazines, newspapers or catalogues…I am as committed to the image that appears on a computer monitor or is projected, as I am to the one that I print and frame, as I am to the one that I place in a page layout to be viewed in a hand-held volume." Quoted in Borchardt-Hume, "In Search of the Miraculous", 14-15. It is in this respect that one can speak of the Atlas Group in terms of the post-conceptual work of art, as theorised by Peter Osborne. For Osborne, the ontological structure of post-conceptual work consists in the relationship between a conceptual dimension and its multiple actual materializations, which contains an infinity of possible actualizations. Post-conceptual artworks, as Osborne writes, appear as "complex distributions of artistic materials, across a multiplicity of forms and practices, the unity of which constitutes a singular, though internally multitudinous, work." Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 117, 110.

newspapers and other supposedly reliable information media. Raad re-photographs or scans the original documents, modifies them through more or less evident digital manipulations, and finally mediates their presentation through lengthy, poetic and often enigmatic titles, whimsical stories, and scholarly-looking performances. The Atlas Group documents are consequently never intelligible as self-sufficient objects but are always embedded within a complex system of discursive and presentational frameworks. Their meanings are produced through what Eva Respini calls "literary acts": whether narrative wall-texts in installations, or monologues in lecture-performances.[149] Far from being a secondary or accessory element, these literary acts are an integral part of the artwork, and necessary for its interpretation. As in *Wonder Beirut,* the narrative is a constitutive component of the work. Positioning the photographic documents within complex structures and relations, texts serve to unfold the meaning of often cryptic images, rendering eloquent what would otherwise be mute documents. While the use of original photo-documents confers referential and documentary value on the Atlas Group, Raad's introduction of figural and literary mediations allows him to point to aspects of reality – whether "cultural fantasies" or invisible abstract historical and economic processes – that evade the representational limits of documentary realism.

The fabricated documents are attributed to a motley cast of fictional characters who in turn are said to have donated them directly or by proxy to the Group. The donors of the authored files (type A) include: Fadl Fakhouri, described as one of Lebanon's foremost historians; the Arab hostage Souheil Bachar, who, we are told, spent a brief period with American hostages during what is known in the West as the Western Hostage Crisis; the senior topographer in the Lebanese Army's Directorate of Geographic Affairs, Nahia Hassan; and Raad himself, presented as a simple donor of the organization. Other files are anonymously authored (type FD), such as those accredited to the mysterious secret agent Operator #17; others still (type AGP) were commissioned by the Atlas Group to external producers and advisors. To complicate even further this already entangled set of relations between the real and the fictional is the fact that two of these characters, Youssef Bitar, the Lebanese state's chief investigator of car bomb detonations, and Georges Semerdjia, photojournalist and videographer, are both real historical figures, although the research into a single car bomb explosion that is attributed to them is obviously made up.[150]

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[149] Eva Respini, "Slippery Delays and Optical Mysteries: The Work of Walid Raad," in *Walid Raad,* Exhibition catalogue (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2015), 29.

[150] The investigation into a car-bomb detonated in the Furn Ech Chubak neighbourhood of Beirut on 21 January, 1986, was undertook by Raad in collaboration with writer Bilal Khbeiz and architect and visual artist Tony Chakar. This

Although the strategy of fictional attribution is not dissimilar from Hadjithomas and Joreige's invention of Abdallah Farah, in the Atlas Group's case, the construction is undeniably much more elaborate, complicated through the double attribution to the donor and the group (given its complexity during public presentations Raad often shows diagrams of the archive's system of categorization).

One of the first pieces that Raad produced as part of the complex cosmology of the Atlas Group archive, *Notebook Volume 72: Missing Lebanese Wars* (1989/1998), is introduced by the following anecdote. "It is little known fact that the major historians of the Lebanese wars were avid gamblers. It is said they met every Sunday at the race track." The group which included Marxist, Islamist, Maronite nationalist and socialist historians, however, did not bet on the winning horse, but on the amount of distance between the horse's nose and the finish line, as captured in the image of the photo-finish published in the next day's newspaper. "It is also said that they convinced (some say bribed) the photographer to snap only one picture as the winning horse arrived."[151] The piece consists of 20 plates reproducing enlarged pages taken from Dr. Fadl Fakhouri's notebooks.[152] Taped on each notebook page is a photograph of the winning horse cut out from the daily newspaper *An-Nahar*, accompanied with Fakhouri's accurate notes describing the race's distance and duration, the time of the winning horse, calculations of averages, the historians' initials with their respective bets, and a short description of the winning historian along with the time discrepancy predicted by him (Figure 13). This openly whimsical story has often been interpreted as a metaphor of history-writing as a matter of gambling. As a desire to tame contingency and an "attempt to find a comprehensible logic in the laws of chance", gambling resembles "the manner in which historical narration desires to establish a coherent logic into a conglomerate of political happenings."[153] If the association might seem to ridicule historiography's claims to scientificity and documentary pretenses of accuracy, it also points to the necessarily

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resulted in the video *We can make rain but no one came to ask* (2003/2006) and a performance lecture with the same title. For a history of the use of the car bomb in Lebanon, see Mike Davis, *Buda's Wagon: A Brief History of the Car Bomb* (London: Verso, 2008).

[151] See the file titled "Missing Lebanese Wars_Notebook Volume 72" on the Atlas Group archive website: http://www.theatlasgroup.org/data/TypeA.html.

[152] The plates were also included in the 18 minutes video *The Dead Weight of a Quarrel Hangs*, 1998, and published as a photo-essay. See Walid Raad, "Missing Lebanese Wars", *Public Culture* 11, no. 2 (Spring 1999), i-xiv.

[153] Rogers, "Forging History, Performing Memory", 71.

Figure 13. Walid Raad/The Atlas Group*, Missing Lebanese Wars. Notebook Volume 72*, Plate 134 and 143, 1989/1998*.

speculative dimension of historical reconstructions.[154]

Missing Lebanese Wars functions as a sort of methodological introduction to what can be seen as the meta-historical approach of the Atlas Group archive. Raad's intention is not to write an unwritten history, to fill a gap in knowledge, but rather he is interested in the writing of history itself; that is, the ways in which past events do or do not get written down. If, as Paul Ricoeur has noted, the semantics of the word "history" designates "both the totality of the course of events and the totality of narratives referring to this course of events", Raad's interest decisively veers towards the latter.[155] Speaking as an intermediary of the association, he has said

> We do not consider "The Lebanese Civil War" to be a settled chronology of events, dates, personalities, massacres, invasions, but rather we also want to consider it as an abstraction constituted by various discourses, and, more importantly, by various modes of assimilating the data

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[154] The figure of the gambler is central to the writings of Walter Benjamin, who construes gambling as "a decayed form" of attempting to divine the future. See Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 514. As Mary Ann Doane notes, Benjamin's "obsession" with the figure of the gambler is also "an acknowledgement of modernity's investment in the concept of contingency." See Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 223.

[155] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Vol. 3*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 102.

of the world.[156]

As Alan Gilbert points out, this statement closely echoes Michel Foucault's genealogical approach to history. Foucault defines the archive as a discursive system or a set of rules determining the conditions of possibility for knowledge formation and models of subjectivity in a given historical period.[157] This Foucauldian interest in the abstract and aprioristic determinations of discursive systems allows Raad to take the distance from the partisan and instrumental logic behind the wars historical reconstructions, put forward by different confessional and political groups – an aspect to which he ironically refers by listing the historians according to their respective ideological affiliations.[158] While mocking the differing articulations of the wars history, Raad shifts his attention to the methodological procedures and conventions that underpin the historiographical endeavour, as well as to their limits and conditions of possibility. As Rogers observes, Dr. Fakhouri's notebook pages combine three methods of assimilating data and presenting information: statistics, photography and personal notes; methods that, as she continues, swing between the "subjective and objective."[159] Fakhouri's often witty, even mischievous personal annotations, intersect with the cooler and supposedly more objective registers of the photo-document and statistical calculations. However, as Mary Ann Doane

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[156] Raad, "Let's Be Honest, the Rain Helped", 44.

[157] Alan Gilbert, "Walid Raad's Spectral Archive. Part I: Historiography as Process", *eflux* 69 (January 2016): https://www.e-flux.com/journal/69/60594/walid-raad-s-spectral-archive-part-i-historiography-as-process/. For Foucault's discussion of the "historical apriori", see Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1972). Foucault maintained that "discursive practices are not purely and simply ways of producing discourse. They are embodied in technical processes, in institutions, in patterns for general behaviour, in forms for transmission and diffusion, and in pedagogical forms which, at once, impose and maintain them." Michel Foucault, "History of Systems of Thought," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1977), 200.

[158] This list of ideological affiliations mimics Lebanon's confessional system of government. In 1984, Ahmad Beydoun produced a seminal study of sectarian histories written during the civil wars, showing how they were ideologically tinged. See Ahmad Beydoun, *Identité confessionnelle et temps social chez les historiens libanais contemporains* (Beirut: Université Libanaise, 1984). The reference to Marxists and Socialists points to the presence of secularist leftist movements in Lebanon, such as the Lebanese Communist Party, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, and the Progressive Socialist Party. For an history of the influence of Marxism and especially Marxism-Leninism in the Arab world, see Tareq Y. Ismael, *The Communist Movement in the Arab World* (London: Routledge, 2005). In Chapter 3, I will discuss the process of Islamicisation of the secular left.

[159] Rogers, "Forging History, Performing Memory", 71.

demonstrated in her study of the concomitant emergence of statistical studies and photographic technologies of image reproduction at the end of the nineteenth century, despite their technical potential, both are unable to entirely domesticate and control the contingent and ephemeral.[160] While statistical methods and techniques attempt to fully control contingency, chance and the inherent openness of the future always haunt such desires for total mastery. Correspondingly, while the history of photography and cinema is driven by the desire to control and systematize the meaning of images (through textual, narrative and other organizing forms), such technologies simultaneously reveal a fascination for the contingent detail and unforeseen moment or combination. Sigfried Kracauer, an eminent theorist of both photography and history, saw a utopian potential in the capacity of the photographic technology to establish the contingent nature of social and historical relations, describing the "turn to photography" as "the *go-for-broke-game* of history".[161] To collect and combine photographic fragments is to introduce an image of time and change into the world, which, for Kracauer, represents a messianic wager on history as a process open to chance, re-configuration and re-articulation.[162] Following Kracauer, we can read the image of the historians' gambling on the gap between the horse and the finish line documented in the single photograph, as an allegory for history and history writing as an always open and forever incomplete process.

In his discussion of *Missing Lebanese Wars*, Mark Westmoreland has described the piece as a form of "epistemological critique," "mocking the inconsistencies of research methodologies and disputing the objectivity of realist modes of representation."[163] The allegory that the piece presents, he contends, highlights the unbridgeable tension between reality and representation, the fallibility of documentary proof. Certainly, the deconstructionist thrust of Raad's work with the Atlas Group cannot be understated, and Westmoreland goes to some length to illustrate the enabling side of Raad's critique, the alternative forms of knowledge and "affective" epistemologies that his project gives shape to.[164] The never-in-time photographs, shot always too early or too late,

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[160] Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time.*

[161] Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography", in *Mass Ornament* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 61.

[162] Miriam Hansen, "'With Skin and Hair': Kracauer's Theory of Film, Marseille 1940", *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 3 (Spring, 1993), 456.

[163] Mark R. Westmoreland, "Making Sense: Affective Research in Postwar Lebanese Art", *Critical Arts: South-North Cultural and Media Studies* 27, no. 6 (2013), 720.

[164] Westmoreland mentions Jayce Salloum and Akram Zaatari as two other fellow artists sharing the same effort of redefining the codes of documentary evidence along what he defines as an affective form of research.

stand in for unreliable sources that fail to capture the "event" as it occurs, so that the historians can do little more than "estimate the discrepancy between the event and its documentation."[165] As Westmoreland has it, the target is missed twice: the historians at the racetrack not only miss the wars in "idle wagering", but also the technical instruments of documentation they rely on constantly fail to hit the mark. Yet, as Westmoreland suggests, rather than being just a critique, this missing the point might be exactly the point.[166] Indeed, the act of deliberately missing the target appears time and again in the Atlas Group archive, most notably in *I Only Wish that I Could Weep* (1997/2002)*,* a six-minute video-compilation of sunsets shot from the Corniche (Beirut's seaside promenade), by Operator #17, an unnamed spy who keeps missing his assigned target by turning the camera towards the blazing globe of the setting sun.[167] In the documents of the Atlas Group, the deictical function of photography – its ability to designate an occurrence as an event deemed relevant and worth looking at – routinely confronts us with margins of error and chronic delays, unusual, vernacular subjects and futile pieces of evidence; the gesture of 'pointing to', that is, regularly misses its mark. Through diversions and elusions, the defective, off-the-mark documents therefore proffer a different articulation of the relationship between photography and the (historical) event.

The choice to use horse-race photos is particularly significant, and not just because the Beirut hippodrome became a literal battleground several times during the wars – a detail that will go lost on the majority of the viewers.[168] The photo-finish images pasted on the notebook pages further recall famous attempts, made at the end of the nineteenth century, to capture and study animal locomotion, such as Eadweard Muybridge's stop motion photographs and Etienne-Jules Marey's chrono-photographic experiments. These past examples, taken from a moment when the medium of photography was still in its infancy, conjure up the long-time fascination of the

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[165] Gilbert, "Walid Raad's Spectral Archive. Part I: Historiography as Process".

[166] Westmoreland, "Making Sense", 720.

[167] Part of the emotional resonance of Operator #17's attachment to the view of the setting sun derives from the fact that, like Raad himself, he grew up during the wars confined on the Eastern side of the Green Line, with no access to the Corniche in West Beirut.

[168] As often happens with the apparently mundane details of the fictional stories in the Atlas Group, the reference to the racetrack has a relevance that goes beyond the metaphorical level. The Palais des Paix is in fact "a racetrack like no other. Situated near Beirut's city centre and divided by the infamous Green Line, the track was a repeated theatre of war… Riddled with bullet holes, the track nonetheless remained intermittently open during the war." See Dina Al-Kassim, "Crisis of the Unseen: Unearthing the Political Aesthetics of Hysteria in the Archaeology and Arts of the New Beirut." *Parachute* 108 (Winter 2002), 147-154.

technology with instantaneity, as well as a scientific aspiration to fix and reveal movement down to the minutest fraction. It is not irrelevant that Muybridge's famous series of the galloping horse was itself the result of a wager, meant to confirm what is invisible to the naked eye: namely, that all four of the horse's hooves are off the ground at full gallop. Although chrono-photography is often cited as an anticipation and forerunner of film and other moving image technologies, the legacy of its desire to arrest movement by the quick shutter of the camera is equally connected to the tradition of much reportage photography throughout the twentieth-century, with its aim to freeze an unfolding event in the synthetic composition of the momentary snapshot.[169] Perhaps the best definition of such an ambition can be found in Henri Cartier-Bresson's powerful formula of "the decisive moment": the felicitous temporal conjunction in which the photographer seizes an event in a perfect composition, when all the formal elements of the observed scene logically cohere, so that the event is given its proper and necessary expression.[170]

It is interesting to note, that in his youth Raad had a passion for photojournalism and dreamt of becoming a war correspondent. He had a subscription to European photography magazines such as *Photo*, *Zoom* and *Photo Reporter*, where he saw the work of Cartier-Bresson among others, as well as owning a camera and having a self-made darkroom in his home.[171] In 1982, during the Israeli invasion of West Beirut, he snapped a series of pictures from the vantage point of the hills in the East side of the city where he lived; these were later used for the piece *We decided to let them say, 'we are convinced', twice* (1982/2004).[172] The photographs depicting Israeli soldiers at rest, fighter planes bombing West Beirut and crowds of onlookers observing military action taking place

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[169] David Campany, "Introduction", in *The Cinematic*, ed. David Campany (London and Cambridge MA.: Whitechapel Gallery and The MIT Press, 2007), 11, 12. See also Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 209.

[170] Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Decisive Moment* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952).

[171] Masters, "Those who lack imagination cannot imagine what is lacking", 130; Respini, "Slippery Delays and Optical Mysteries", 29.

[172] As he recounts in the short synopsis accompanying the file: "In the summer of 1982, I stood along with others in a parking lot across from my mother's apartment in East Beirut, and watched the Israeli land, air, and sea assault on West Beirut. The PLO along with their Lebanese and Syrian allies retaliated, as best they could. East Beirut welcomed the invasion, or so it seemed. West Beirut resisted it, or so it seemed. One day, my mother even accompanied me to the hills around Beirut to photograph the invading Israeli army stationed there. Soldiers rested their bodies and their weapons as they waited for their next orders to attack, retreat or stay put. I was 15 in 1982, and wanted to get as close as possible to the events, or as close as my newly acquired camera and lens permitted me that summer. Clearly not close enough. This past year, I came upon my carefully preserved negatives from that time, all scratched up and deteriorating. I decided to look again." See the file "We Decided to let them say, 'we are convinced', twice", on the Atlas Group archive website: *http://www.theatlasgroup.org/data/TypeA.html*

Figure 14. Walid Raad/The Atlas Group, *We decided to let them say, 'we are convinced', twice*, 1982/2004.

at a distance, are gathered in one of the two Atlas Group files attributed to Raad himself (Figure 14). Blown up in scale, these images reveal scratches and other signs of damage to the prints, as well as digital ghosting and flares obtained via the application of tones of blue, green and pink in a powerful blend of analogue deterioration and digital manipulation.

Upon moving to the U.S. in 1983, to escape forced enrolment in one of the warring militias, Raad had the opportunity to pursue his longstanding interest in photography at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), a program designed for aspiring photojournalists, rather than contemporary artists. If at the RIT Raad became proficiently conversant with the technical aspects of photographic image making, it was as a doctoral candidate in visual and cultural studies at the University of Rochester, that he was introduced to semiotics, Marxism, and psychoanalysis, as well as feminist and postcolonial theories. At roughly the same period, he started an important collaboration with Canadian-Lebanese video artist Jayce Salloum. Coming from a background in appropriation art, Salloum was mostly interested in deconstructing the distorted representations of Lebanon, and, by extension, the Arab world, circulating in the West. During a year-long stay in Beirut, they produced *Talaeen al Junuub/Up to the South* (1993) and *This is Not Beirut/There was and there was not* (1994): two videotapes that might be thought of as ideal companion pieces. The former is an attempt to 'map' the socio-political dynamics of South Lebanon – at the time still under Israeli occupation, and therefore inaccessible to the rest of the Lebanese population – through interviews with freedom fighters, former detainees, farmers, workers, foreigners, and intellectuals involved in the resistance;[173] the latter is a compilation and critique of stereotypical

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[173] In the 1990s and early 2000s, a number of experimental documentary works were produced that dealt with the Israeli occupation of the South and the Lebanese resistance. These include: Maroun Baghdadi's *The South is Fine, How About You?* (1976); Mohammad Soueid's *South (*1997); Akram Zaatari's *All is Well on the Border* (1997); Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's *Khiam* (2000 – 2007).

representations of Beirut made over the course of the last century. In both videos the two artists relentlessly question and interrogate their own position, motives and representational processes, often turning the camera on themselves.[174] This experience of working with the medium of video combined with his theoretical studies and work critically analysing mass-media representations, put into question Raad's former passion for photojournalism. If when at the age of fifteen he had recorded the Israeli invasion, he had felt, as he recounts, the need "to get as close as possible to the events", later the desire for spatial proximity and temporal concomitance ceded ground to an analytical and retrospective approach.[175] The idea of the "decisive moment" could now be recovered only in the negative, as a missed encounter.

While Cartier-Bresson's notion of "decisive moment" was to do with mainly formal and compositional concerns, Roberts has shown how this concept has been crucial in establishing the "syntax of photography's historicity". According to Roberts, the "decisive moment" has long defined the "temporal distinctiveness" of photography in its connection to the outside world: that is the capacity of photography to constitute the (historical) event as a "singular" instance, inscribed in punctual and iconic shots and distilled in a moment of "imagined convergence".[176] While in the past the photographic medium was the privileged mode of representation associated with presence and immediacy, today this is no longer the case. Accompanying the decline of photojournalism, as Roberts observes, there has been a "contraction in the temporal efficacy of the photo-document."[177] As David Campany explains, the role of relaying news has passed from reportage photography and print journalism to the newer mediums of television and the internet.

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[174] Jayce Salloum has defined his practice as a form of "reluctant documentary", using the resources of film editing – such as the expansive collection of found footage, the "splicing up of material", the juxtaposition of fragments, the disjunctive use of video and audio tracks, the deliberate weaving and layering of elements, the use of text in titles, intertitles, subtitles and headings – to produce a deliberate rupture of expectations, spectatorial frustration and the "suspension of belief". Jayce Salloum and Mike Hankwitz, "Jayce Salloum Interview", Framework 43 (2002), 90. For a discussion of Salloum's video work and other experimental documentaries on the South, see: Mark R. Westmoreland, *Crisis of Representation: Experimental Documentary in Postwar Lebanon* (PhD diss., The University of Texas at Austin, 2008), 187-195.

[175] See file the file titled "We Decided to let them say, 'we are convinced', twice", on the Atlas Group archive website: *http://*www.theatlasgroup.org/data/TypeA.html

[176] This does not mean that the photograph is a single, isolated object, as it is generally edited, cropped and juxtaposed to text or other images in a system in which meaning is produced relationally. Rather, it means that in photography history is frozen in a series of tableaux, or "singular events". Roberts, *Photography and Its Violations,* 96.

[177] Ibid., 97.

In the process the punctual depiction of the instant, marking the presence of the photographer at the right time and in the right spot, has been replaced with the videofication of the news and its real-time transmission. Unable to compete with this type of simultaneity, and especially in its passage from the cultural forms of photojournalism and the photo-magazine to contemporary art, photography has subsequently been employed to instead portray "slower representation(s) made after the world events have happened."[178] In the current age wherein communication takes on a quasi-instantaneous form, the role of witnessing in these cases is constructed upon a purposeful delay; a lateness that enables a form of hermeneutic labour to take place. As Roberts explains, these "new conditions of lateness" offer the photographer the possibility "to work *through* the representation of the event in ways that are internally complex", and to reconnect the photodocument "with its sequential and diegetic modes of presentation."[179] Under these conditions, the event is not construed as a singular instance, but rather becomes a "space for reconstruction and discursive extension."[180]

In the work of the Atlas Group, this form of "lateness" is manifest in the extensive process of fictive re-inscription and narrativization of photographic and textual materials, taken, as we have seen, from various sources and archives more or less directly related to the civil wars. As Rogers has pointed out, witnessing in Raad's work always occurs on two temporal levels: that of the event and of the event's later reconstruction.[181] This double temporality is reflected in the dating system of the Atlas Group in which each work has two dates: the first a fictional, attributed date, the second the actual date of production.[182] The radical untimeliness of the newspapers cut-outs of horse-race photographs, therefore, introduces us to the temporal aberrance and belatedness of the historical document, what Barthes famously defined as the "illogical conjunction between the *here-now* and *there-then*".[183] In the archive, we are always already too late to witness the event as it unfolds in reality; and yet this lateness gives us the possibility to reconsider the past in conjunction with the present. It is to the archive as such a space of belated historical disclosure that I now turn.

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[178] Campany, "Introduction", 12.

[179] Roberts, *Photography and Its Violations*, 112 (emphasis in the original).

[180] Ibid.

[181] Rogers, "Forging History, Performing Memory", *68.*

[182] The dates might vary in different versions or presentations of the same work.

[183] Barthes, "The Rhetorics of the Image", 44.

Chapter 2. Archive as Afterlife: Akram Zaatari's Work with the Arab Image Foundation

> "Historical understanding is the afterlife of that which has been understood and whose pulse can be felt in the present."[1]

In the video installation *On Photography, People and Modern Times* (2010), Akram Zaatari juxtaposes the two different lives that the photographs collected in the Arab Image Foundation (AIF) have experienced before and after becoming part of the archive. Once in the hands of their owners and now in the custody of archivist and preservation professionals, these photographs have migrated from a private and domestic space to a public and institutional context, an environment designed to guarantee their conservation. Inaugurating a formal style of inquiry that will be later resumed in *On Photography, Dispossession and Times of Struggle* (2017), a piece that can be seen as a companion of the former,[2] Zaatari's work conveys the photographs' split existence already at the level of its formal and technical composition. A stop-motion montage, the video is screened as a two-channel or split screen installation in which the two images, presented side-by-side, show the same scene framed from different angles.

Presented as a subjective story of the foundation, filtered through the artist's perspective, *On Photography, People and Modern Times* opens with a brief theatrical *mise-en-scène* of the AIF. A view of the cold storage room where the collection is housed reveals rows of bulky folders, ring binders, envelops and cardboard boxes lined up on aluminium shelves. The scene cuts then to a brighter room where a TV monitor, camcorder and a number of mini-DV tapes lie on a white table. This technical assemblage, viewed from above on the left image-track, immediately comes to life when a tape starts playing in the camcorder and is simultaneously screened on the TV monitor shown frontally on the right image-track (Figure 15). On this smaller screen within the screen appear, in succession, several interviews with unnamed men and women speaking mostly in Arabic. Meanwhile, in the background, the almost spectral presence of an AIF's archivist, of whom we never see the whole figure, is filmed in stop-motion as, with rigorously gloved hands, she handles and spreads out on the evenly-lit table materials from the collection: photographs,

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[1] Walter Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian", in *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings, Vol. 3, 1935-1938*, ed. Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 261.

[2] In the 2017 exhibition *Against Photography: An Annotated History of the Arab Image Foundation*, at MacBa, Barcelona, the two videos were projected consecutively on opposite walls.

Figure 15. Akram Zaatari, *On Photography, People and Modern Times,* Video stills, 2010.

negatives, photo-ID books. It soon becomes clear that the characters in the video-clips shown on the TV monitor are either the photographers or former owners of the archival images and objects that the archivist carefully extracts from boxes and envelops, displaying them under the bird-eye view of yet-another camera. The movement and sound-track of the video interviews stand in sharp contrast with the frozen and silent stop-motion images of the AIF's clinical and aseptic environment. Yet, akin to Harun Farocki's notion of soft-montage, the simultaneity of the double-projection does not produce a strict opposition or conflict between the two image-tracks, but

allows them to 'comment' on each other, the right image serving as a sort of audiovisual caption to the photographs we see in the left.[3] Providing a verbal commentary to the film, the interviewees – photographers, photographers' relatives and collectors – discuss their individual relationship to photographic practice and share personal memories apropos events occurring at the time when the photographs were taken. Exposing the discrepancy between visual documentation and oral testimony, these reminiscences bring to light additional layers of contextual information surrounding the images – stories, customs, beliefs – that would be difficult, if not impossible, to infer by simply looking at the photographs themselves. For instance, Saida-based studio photographer Hashem El Madani, a recurrent character in Zaatari's oeuvre,[4] tells of how his father, a Sheik, supported the son's choice of profession only after having checked that photography was not a sin, revealing the religious prejudices that still surrounded the practice during the first half of the twentieth century.

On Photography, People and Modern Times provides an exemplary illustration of the way in which Zaatari's practice and the work of the AIF are mutually imbricated. In particular, it embodies and exposes in condensed form the main tensions and paradoxes of the act of collecting photographs: issues of decontextualization, media transfer and semantic instability. The emphasis given to technical devices – which assume an almost subject-like status throughout the video – and the proliferation of different media formats suggest how media transfer is one of the crucial

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[3] See Harun Farocki, "Cross Influence/Soft Mintage", in *Against What? Against Whom?*, ed. Antje Ehmann and Kodwo Eshun (London: Koenig Books, 2009), 69-74.

[4] Zaatari met Hashem El Madani (Saida, 1928 - 2017) in 1999 and began his longest running project with the AIF, collecting Madani's photographs (taken from the early 1950s), and studying the social milieu around his studio, Studio Shehrazade in Saida (Zaatari's hometown). The projects produced around the figure of Madani and his work include: *Studio Practices (2004)*, focusing on studio photography and the performance and inscription of social identities; *Promenades* (2006), exploring the practice of itinerant or street photography made possible by the diffusion of lightweight cameras; *Itinerary* (2007), looking at portraiture in the workplace through a series of portraits of shop owners or workers standing at the door of their shop or workplace. For *Homeworks IV* (2008) Zaatari collected forty-one such portraits, framed and installed them at the site where they were originally shot, obliging spectators to go searching for the "artworks" in the streets of Saida. In *Objects of Study/Studio Shehrazade – Reception Space* (2006), Zaatari shifted focus from Madani's photographic production to his own workplace, photographing his own studio and his equipment. The film *Twenty-Eight Nights and a Poem* (2015), a sort of compendium of the long term project on Madani, moves seamlessly between Madani's studio in Saida and the Arab Image Foundation – now housing the majority of Madani's photographic collection. The film examines the changing sites, status and function of photographic practice and preservation through various analogue and digital media.

terrains on which archival activity plays out.[5] In a compressed overview of historical developments in technologies of image reproduction, *On Photography, People and Modern Times* displays black-and-white analogue photographs dating from 1860s to 1960s, next to mini-DV clips shot in the late 1990s, while the video itself is filmed using high resolution digital photography and is edited with the post-production technique of stop-motion montage.[6] The allure of the original photographic print or object is reflected and multiplied in a hall of mirrors of reproductions, representations and remediations. As Daniel Berndt notices, the film "puts photography and video – the two main media of Zaatari's artistic practice – in a reciprocal tension," rehearsing the dichotomy between still and moving images.[7] Accordingly, the digital takes on the role of a meta-medium, a plane of convergence on which various media formats and different material fragments of historical evidence are brought together. Such property is predicated on the capacity of new media to 'transcode' all old media into the numerical code of computerised data.[8] Although such a digital convergence seems to imply the dissolution of the specificities of old media, one could conversely argue that it is precisely the possibility of creating aggregate formations of different media that highlights their differences, as well as those remainders that resist acts of medium translation.[9] *On Photography, People and Modern Times* operates precisely in the gaps and fissures between such acts of transposition, depicting the "dialectic of the old and the new archival materials within the new archive."[10]

Bookended by two interviews that are in themselves a reflection on collecting, the video ponders over the paradoxes involved in the act of building institutional collections. In the first

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[5] Technologies of image and sound reproduction often take central stage in Zaatari's films, playing the role – at the expense of their human counterparts – of quasi-protagonists. Indeed, Peter Osborne has talked of the technical apparatuses that populate Zaatari's works as forming a separate "subject of speech", creating "a pluri-vocal ensemble" in which there is an "exchange between the *thing-like* and the *subject-like* aspects of the image." Osborne, *The Postconceptual Condition* (London: Verso, 2018), 142.

[6] The already mentioned *On Photography, Dispossession and Times of Struggle* (2017) registers a further evolution in the technologies of image visualization in presenting video-clips on tablets, iPads and iPhones.

[7] Daniel Berndt, "New Exposure: The Arab Image Foundation and the curatorial", *Stedelijk Studies* 5, (Fall 2017): https://www.stedelijkstudies.com/journal/new-exposure-arab-image-foundation-curatorial/.

[8] Lev Manovich identifies transcoding as one of the five principles of new media. See Lev Manovich, *The Language of the New Media* (Cambridge MA.: MIT Press, 2001), 45-47.

[9] This is the position held by Erika Balsom in her discussion of the dialectic of convergence and medium specificity in light of André Bazin's idea of "impure art". Erika Balsom, "A cinema in the gallery, a cinema in ruins", *Screen* 50, no. 4 (Winter 2009), 412.

[10] Osborne, "Archive as Afterlife and Life of Art", 131.

interview the Lebanese collector Mohsen Yammine confesses that it was the destruction unleashed by the civil wars that fed his collecting obsession and led him over the years to amass a ponderous photographic collection, now part of the AIF. Confronted by a situation in which the fabric of the country was demolished day by day, he felt the urgent obligation to, as he puts it, "collect pictures and through them, reconstruct the past and the present." The video concludes with Zaatari's attempt to convince Armenian-Egyptian photographer, Van Leo, to donate three additional photographs to the AIF.[11] Van Leo's hesitance and reluctance to answer reveal his fear of parting from the entirety of his collection. If Yammine's attitude of rescuing photographic fragments of the past in the face of dispersal and destruction can be seen as analogous to the foundation's preserving mission, Van Leo's reticent and hostile reaction conveys a destructive component that is part and parcel of the same collecting impulse: namely, the tearing away of the collected object from its living context. Providing a meta-commentary to the dilemmas afflicting the AIF, these two interviews bear on the dialectic of preservation and destruction that is implied in the removal of the collected item from its originary context, and in the resulting loss or distortion of its 'original' or intended meaning.

Focusing on the interviews with former owners, *Photographs, People and Modern Times* foregrounds the affective bonds and relations of proximity connecting the first two terms of the title – photographs and people – yet also reveals how these are effectively annulled once the photographs enter in the custody of the archive. Formally, it is the contrast between the freeze-frames showing the archival work in the foundation and the video interviews taking place in domestic settings or pre-digital photography studios, that renders the difference between the two principal modes of existence of the photographs, or of their life and afterlife. While the stop-motion images connote a sense of stasis and suspension, the severance of photographs from their life context and the artificial halting of time for the purpose of preservation, the video-interviews, the only moving images in the film, provide a counter-image of flow and fluidity, re-inscribing the photographs with meanings associated with the contingencies of their history and use, as well as a surplus of knowledge made of personal reflections and reminiscences, that are spurred by the images. Interestingly, however, we encounter these interviews not outside the space of the Foundation, but within it, as images playing on a TV monitor: they too have become archival documentation. These disembodied, technically-mediated testimonies show how in the archive, as

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[11] Van Leo (1921-2002) is another familiar character in Zaatari's oeuvre: see in particular the film *Her + Him VAN LEO* (2001) and the three diptychs of *Van Leo's Footnotes* (2017).

Ricoeur says, "narrative can be detached from its narrator".[12] It is here that, by entering in new systems of relations with other images, objects and narratives, these photographs achieve their value of historical intelligibility.

In this chapter I will consider Akram Zaatari's work in parallel to the evolution of the Arab Image Foundation, charting the key issues around which the practice of the artist and the institution have converged or departed from each other. After an historical excursus of the AIF, I will examine how the abiding conflict between the needs of preservation and access, protection and re-use, fidelity to the original and the liberties of artistic transfiguration, have constituted one of main nodes of dispute between the artist and the institution. Encapsulated in Zaatari's position "against photography", the artist's injunction on the medium conveys the refutation of a practice of archival preservation that freezes and crystallizes the meaning of the photographic document, glossing over the transformations that it undergoes at any change of context and configuration, and in response to the evolution of archival technologies, specifically the advent of the digital.

Considering instead photographic objects through the paleontological paradigm of the fossil, as Zaatari suggests and as I will attempt in the second section of this chapter, allows for a dynamic understanding of historical perception. Taking the retrospective exhibition *Against Photography: An Annotated History of the Arab Image Foundation* as a paradigmatic case study, I will consider what is at stake in the dynamic view of the photographic archive as an ever-evolving morphology. I will then move on to consider the already mentioned dialectic of preservation and destruction that is at the core of the act of collecting, zeroing in on the frisson between the photographs' de-contextualization and loss of originary meaning on one side, and on the other, the possibility to use these orphaned photographic fragments in an open-ended project of writing and re-writing history; a history that, as Benjamin writes, "is originary for every present."[13]

Needless to say, this reading is deeply informed by Benjamin's writings, from his characterization of the figure of the collector – in many ways a self-portrait of his own collecting habits – to his influential concept of "afterlife" (*Nachleben*), whose more systematic treatment can be found in his essay on Eduard Fuchs. The afterlife of an object, for Benjamin, does not consists merely in its survival, but contemplates the possibility of its inevitable transformation and renewal as "something living".[14] In what Osborne defines as Benjamin's "constructivist historical ontology",

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[12] Ricoeur, *Memory, History and Forgetting*, 166.

[13] Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian", 262.

[14] Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" in *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings, Vol. 1, 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus

the afterlife is predicated upon an act of construction that sets the historical object in relation with a particular "now", uniquely capable of recognizing it.[15] It is this complex and dynamic understanding of historical reception that the AIF and Zaatari's work in particular make space for.

2.1 Against Photography. For the Photographic Archive![16]

The Arab Image Foundation was formally established in Beirut in 1997 on the initiative of Lebanese photographers Fouad Elkoury and Samer Mohdad, and Lebanese artist Akram Zaatari.[17] Operating as a nonprofit organization, the foundation was created with the scope of collecting, studying and preserving photography from the Middle East, North Africa and the Arab Diaspora.[18] Conceived

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Bullock, Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 256.

[15] Benjamin's concept of afterlife shares an affinity with art historian Aby Warburg's interest in the afterlife (*Nachleben*) of cultural antiquity. However, as Peter Osborne has noted, the constructivism of Benjamin's historical ontology sets it at a distance from George Didi-Huberman's interpretation of *Nachleben* in Warburg and Benjamin as mere survival. See Osborne, "Archive as Afterlife and Life of Art", n. 13, 128; and George Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image: Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg's History of Art,* trans. Harvey Mendelsohn (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2016).

[16] The heading of this section combines the title of Zaatari and the Arab Image Foundation's exhibition *Against Photography: An Annotated History of the Arab Image Foundation* with the title of Margarita Tupitsyn's essay "Against the Camera, For the Photographic Archive", *Art Journal* 53, n. 2 (Summer 1994), 58-62. Tupitsyn's article is of course a play on Aleksandr Rodchenko's essay "Against the Synthetic Portrait, For the Snapshot".

[17] At the time of the establishment of the AIF, Zaatari was working between the fields of journalism, TV production (at Future TV), film-making and art. Fouad Elkoury and Samer Mohdad came instead from the world of press photography and photojournalism. They had divergent ideas about what the Foundation should be. In 1997, they received a research grant from the European Commission in Lebanon to travel through the Mashriq region over a period of two years. This acted as a prompt for constituting a legal entity that could sign contracts with individuals or organizations who donated photographs to the collection. The 1990s in Lebanon saw an increase in international investment and funding for cultural activities supported by a series of NGOs, that made possible the constitution of independent institutions working outside the patronage of the state, such as the AIF. See Hanan Toukan, "Negotiating Representation and Re-making War: Transnationalism and Contemporary Art in Post-Taif Beirut", in *Narrating Conflict in the Middle East: Discourse, Image and Communication Practices in Lebanon and Palestine, eds. Zahera Harb and Dina Matar (*London: IB Tauris, 2013), 58-84; and Hanan Toukan, "On Being the Other in Post-Civil War Lebanon: Aid and the Politics of Art in Processes of Contemporary Cultural Production," *Arab Studies Journal* 18, no. 1 (2010): 118-161.

[18] The AIF is an institution devoted to the preservation and study of photography *in* the Arab world and the Arab

with the intention of gathering knowledge and fostering recognition of the region's photographic culture, the AIF holds to date a collection of more than 500,000 photographs from the nineteenth century to the present, from Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Iraq, Iran, Mexico, Argentina and Senegal.[19] Ranging from vernacular snapshots to technically sophisticated studio compositions, from bureaucratic records to travel photography, from portraits to advertising campaigns, the archive yields a wide spectrum of visual representations of the Arab world, chronicling the impact of accelerated processes of modernization, political upheaval and turmoil, stories of internal displacement and diaspora as visibly inscribed on the unexceptional texture of everyday life. Through collecting and studying local photographic production, either professional or amateur, not only is an absent history of local photography produced, but a history of the Arab world more broadly is pieced together in the glimpses of contingent details captured by photographic lenses. In light of the colonial past of the Middle East, the photographic camera stands both as a sign of the infiltration of western modernity in the region and a tool to appropriate in order to revert the gaze. In contrast to the reified and unidimensional representation of the Arab world as framed by an external (Western) viewpoint, with its inventory of orientalist tropes and stereotypes, the visual history written by the AIF employs the alternative idiom of photographic self-representations.[20]

Certainly, the mission to acquire photographic collections from various places in the Arab world was in part triggered by an impulse to rescue and preserve similar to that described by the collector Mohsen Yammine. The foundation was established in Beirut within the climate of

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diaspora. However, the use of the adjective 'Arab' has come under scrutiny for its contentious meaning and history. As Zaatari explains, the AIF is not "set up to conceptualise Arab photography". From the outset, "the Foundation included the work of Armenian, Italian, French and Austrian photographers who worked in the region and became integrated within local photographic practices." The AIF, moreover, "never subscribed to a monolithic Arab culture" but was "keen in making visible the diversity of the region". The second book that Zaatari produced with the AIF, *Portraits du Caire* (1998), was published as a trilingual French-Arabic-Armenian edition. See Zaatari and Elias, "The Artist as Collector", 41.

[19] See the mission statement on the Arab Image Foundation website: http://www.fai.org.lb/Template.aspx?id=1. Argentina, Mexico, and Senegal are all countries with relatively large Arab communities of mostly Lebanese, Syrian, or Palestinian ancestry. The inclusion of Iran was due to the important research work conducted by Negar Azimi.

[20] Lynn Love, "The Picture Between", *The Saudi Aramco World* 52, no. 1 (January/February 2001): http://www.saudiaramcoworld.com/issue/200101/the.pictures.between.htm. As Zaatari observes, Fouad Elkhoury was particularly interested in this "modern" counter-image of the Arab world. Zaatari and Elias, "The Artist as Collector", 41.

amnesia and erasure that signed the fragile state of peace of the postwar years, in a city that had been heavily destroyed and that, as we have seen, was undergoing a massive plan of redevelopment. In the late 1990s, most commercial photographic studios in Lebanon as well as in other Arab states, had either been looted and demolished in the wake of armed conflict, or were closing down for lack of business. In Beirut, the majority of the studios located in the downtown area (specifically those of Gulbenk and Vahe), had been burnt down or wrecked during the 1975-76 war, a situation well portrayed in Hadjithomas and Joreige's series *Wonder Beirut*. In Jerusalem, following the Nabka in 1948, many renowned studios were either pillaged or destroyed. Paradigmatic are the cases of Garabed Krikorian's photographic studio and that of his former student and colleague Khalil Raad.[21] Both located in Jaffa Road, a street that turned into a no-man's land after 1948, the two studios were plundered by Israeli soldiers and citizens and their archives, both dating to the late nineteenth century, were largely scattered and dispersed. Among the Palestinians who witnessed the Nabka and were forced to leave their houses, a recurrent and common memory is that of personal photographs and documents thrown away in the garbage or out on the streets by the new occupants – an erasure aimed at making room for a rewriting of history in a different language and through different images.[22] Given the conditions of ruination and fragility of the photographic culture throughout the Arab world, and in the absence of state-initiated schemes of preservation and dissemination, the reconstruction and conservation of an endangered photographic heritage became a key part of the AIF's activities.[23]

This preservationist role, however, was not the original priority of the organization, which was initially constituted as an experimental artistic project, in which the aims of conservation were subordinate to the artistic outputs. As Zaatari remembers, "the AIF did not exist as an archive before individual artists expressed the desire to create a collection and work on it, with it."[24] It is precisely this intention to institute a photographic archive as a source of artistic materials rather than a sanctuary of dead objects, that sets the foundation in a dynamic and productive tension

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[21] Garabed Krikorian was an apprentice to Yessai Garabedian, the Armenian Patriarch of Jerusalem, who had set up the first photography workshop in the entire region at the St James convent of Jerusalem, after having been exposed to photography during his visit to Paris in the 1860s.

[22] See the interviews collected by Zaatari in *On Photography, Dispossession and Times of Struggle* (2017).

[23] If photographic prints are difficult to retrieve and were often lost or destroyed, things are even more complicated in the case of negatives, which were often sold for their embedded silver particles. The process of extracting the silver from the plates caused the complete erasure of the image. See Feldman and Zaatari, "Mining War", 56.

[24] Zaatari and Westmoreland, "Against Photography", 61.

with the requirements of a more straightforwardly preservationist mandate. In the first period, the organization functioned as a sort of "collecting mechanism": an empirical and erratic collective research project entrusted to the members' sensibilities, interests and chance finds. Over the years, at various times, many individuals have joined the organization in the role of members or collaborators. Mostly artists or cultural practitioners, these include figures such as Walid Raad, Zeina Arida Bassil, Lucien Samaha and Karl Bassil from Lebanon, Yto Barrada from Morocco, Iman Nassar from Palestine, Egyptian-Lebanese Lara Baladi and German-Lebanese Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh, Nigol Bezjian and Hrair Sarkissian from Syria, and Negar Azimi from Iran. The core of the archive is the result of research generated by both former and current members, and often tied to the realization of art projects – artworks, exhibitions and publications. The members' personal and idiosyncratic interests are thus easily discernible in the first nucleus of the foundation holdings. Some have focused on particular photographic genres or specific geographical zones; others, as in the case of Zaatari, have been interested in the work of certain photographic studios; others still have paid attention to particular geopolitical issues, such as Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh's work about life in refugee camps in Southern Lebanon.[25]

In the years between 1998 and 2002, Zaatari and Elkoury went on "field trips" throughout Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Egypt, targeting specifically upper-class families, on the assumption that in this milieu they would have been more likely to find photographs dating as far back as the nineteenth century, when photography was still a luxury item. During the research trips, the pair conducted numerous interviews with owners and photographers, recording them on audio or videotape. A form of annotation giving contextual information to the prints, negatives or glass plates collected, these are the video-clips that Zaatari would later use in *On Photography, People and Modern Times*. In the meanwhile, Yto Barrada and Lara Baladi conducted research with similar methods in Iraq, Senegal, Morocco and across the Maghreb. In his role of overseeing the AIF acquisition missions, Zaatari encouraged an experimental approach in which the appropriation of any collection was accompanied by "extensive fieldwork" and research, and often tied to the production of exhibitions.[26] Of all the AIF members, Zaatari is certainly the one whose practice is

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[25] The project is entitled *How beautiful is Panama! A photographic conversation from Burj al-Shamali camp* (2001-present). See Daniel Berndt, "In/distinction. Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh's 'A photographic conversation from Burj al-Shamali Camp'", *Ibraaz* 006, 6 November 2013. https://www.ibraaz.org/essays/75#_ftnref26.

[26] Since its inception, the AIF has produced fifteen exhibitions and eight publications in partnership with international museums, galleries and cultural institutions: most notably, *Mapping Sitting: On Portraiture and Photography*, a project by Walid Raad and Akram Zaatari exhibited at the Palais des Beaux Arts, Brussels, Belgium, 2002; and the already

more closely tied to the organization, not just because he has been one of its founding members, but mainly because his work has developed in parallel to his research and experience with the foundation. As Westmoreland has remarked, Zaatari's art practice and his research work with the AIF, are not two separate facets, but constantly converge.[27] Although his imprint is clearly recognizable in many aspects of the organization, the institution works independently from his will.[28]

In fact, over time, the collecting criteria, aims and methods of the AIF have changed considerably, not only expanding the reach of the collection, but also strengthening its preservationist profile. Whereas in the early days of its existence, with few exceptions, the AIF collected only photographs produced before the 1970s, thus excluding colour photography from its reach, this restriction was revoked in 2004 when Negar Azimi brought a number of collections from Iran consisting mostly of colour photographs and dating from the 1970s and 1980s. In the same period, given the increasing recognition of the AIF, more and more photographs were directly handed over to the foundation by individuals and professional photographers. Since then the high number of donations has assured the collection's steady growth, without the need for extended research and field trips. The AIF has thus turned from an experimental "collecting mechanism" into a more traditional institution of preservation. This transformation from active collector to repository of donations has arguably implied a dilution of the personalized nature of the initial core of the collection.

Considering such developments, Zaatari has recently described the AIF as a project that was born divided between two ambitions. The first, what we may term the 'artistic ambition', consists in "a particular mode of generating collections through artist's desire and the sampling of local photographic history". While admittedly more "limited in scope", this collecting attitude eschews comprehensiveness in favour of the close scrutiny of significant fragments, according to a quasi-monodological principle. Operating on a project by project basis, the artist-collector is open to

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mentioned *Against Photography: An Annotated History of the Arab Image Foundation,* which marked twenty years from the institution of the foundation.

[27] Zaatari and Westmoreland, "Against Photography", 60.

[28] Whereas the Arab Image Foundation has often been contrasted with Raad's Atlas Group on the basis of the latter's more prominent deployment of fictional strategies for narrating their respective archival materials, another key point of divergence lies in the institutional status of the two projects. Whereas the AIF is an actual institution, that has to comply with a series of extra-artistic constrains, and will hopefully outlive its founders, the Atlas Group is an individual artist project that claims to be an institution, with a limited lifespan (1998-2004), and thus free of bureaucratic actual issues.

contingency and experimentation. The second ambition, which I will call the 'institutional ambition', consists instead in the aspiration of making of the AIF "a repository of *all* photographic archives, institutional or photographers' archives, or at least of acquiring the rights to exploit electronic copies of them."[29] This approach, more systematic in character, has as its ideal goal the constitution of an exhaustive coverage of the photographic landscape in the Arab world, and tends to relinquish the allegorical interpretation of fragments in exchange for encyclopaedic completeness. In another text, Zaatari has investigated such a urge to achieve the ultimate perfection of the "full series" or what he suggestively calls "collection with a ceiling", pointing out how such ideals of completion, while applicable to certain collectible artefacts such as postcards, coins or stamps, remain utterly out of reach in the case of other objects such as fossils, photographs or manuscripts, whose accumulation can only be open-ended and "without ceiling".[30] These two different ambitions – the artistic and the institutional – while enriching and supplementing each other, do not easily cohere. According to Zaatari, they would require "different teams, different modalities of access, different communication strategies and different mission statements"; in short, they "simply describe two different institutions."[31]

Zaatari's assertion of incompatibility notwithstanding, it is undeniable that the AIF has a hybrid profile. Although not exactly identifiable with either one, the organization combines the "features of an institutional entity with the characteristics of a long-term collective artistic project."[32] As Berndt has rightly pointed out, "curatorial work" is a crucial part of the AIF mission, not simply in the sense of managing and safekeeping the collections, according to the original meaning of the word as care of the object, but also in that of making them visible and accessible to the public, and of arranging them in meaningful configurations. This is done through an online image database that makes accessible approximately 20,000 photographs; through the format of exhibitions, produced by AIF members and collaborators, travelling worldwide and often accompanied by in-depth publications; and through artworks that incorporate in various ways documents that belong to the foundation's archive. Even though the number of research missions has dropped, the foundation continues to function as a research platform for artists, making its

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[29] Akram Zaatari, "All That Refuses to Vanish", in *Against Photography,* Exhibition catalogue (Barcelona: MacBa, 2018), 103.

[30] Akram Zaatari, "The Full Story of a Missing Employee", in *Rabih Mroué: A BAK Critical Reader in Artists' Practice*, eds. Cosmin Costinas, Maria Hlavajova and Jill Winder (Utrecht: BAK, 2012), 116.

[31] Zaatari, "All That Refuses to Vanish", 104.

[32] Berndt, "New Exposure: The Arab Image Foundation and the curatorial".

photographic documents and collections available for research-based projects investigating the history of the region, as well as for curatorial initiatives or academic research.[33] Given such a fluid understanding of the collection and the potentials for dissemination it harbours, it is often hard, and perhaps beside the point, to distinguish the curatorial from the artistic. Nonetheless, an understanding of the organization cannot be disentangled from its specific genesis as an experimental art project, nor from the broader international context of contemporary art, in which it has had its most pronounced resonance.

Zaatari's conflictual position with the AIF, that he started assuming since 2012 when he temporally stepped down from the organization board, revolves around the increasingly preservationist attitude of the latter. As an artist, he has found himself at odds with the institutional policies of conservation that, in keeping photographic collections closed up in the cold storage room, have hindered their accessibility and their use for the creation of new works, forms or ideas.[34] Such a critical posture has coalesced in a series of artistic gestures, actions and propositions that can be summed up in the provocative expression "against photography" – a catchy slogan-like statement that Zaatari has used on several occasions.[35] This stance, however,

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[33] Besides Zaatari, the artists who have worked with material from the AIF's collection include: Janine Al-Ani, Marwa Arsanios, Lara Baladi, Yto Barrada, Ania Dabrowska, Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh, Fouad Elkhoury, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Naeem Mohaiemen, Joe Namy, Walid Raad. While not exhaustive, this list gives a sense of the variety of approaches and range of themes that can be investigated in the archive. Namy conducted research into the history of the photography of music, producing an annotated meditation *Red Filled the Intervals... Between the Musical Notes* (2012-2017); Mohaiemen's short film, *Abu Ammar is Coming* (2016), investigates the presence of Bangladeshi fighters in the PLO in Lebanon in the 1980s; Barrada studied vernacular photographic production in Morocco; Al-Ani looked at aerial photography of the region; Hadjithomas and Joreige retrieved photographs documenting the Lebanese Rocket Society (see the conclusion). Marwa Arsanios and Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh have tested the limits of the mandate of public use of collections, by producing collections that are not available for viewing (Eid Sabbagh) or that can be viewed only through the specific presentation of the artist's work (Arsanios).

[34] Paradigmatic is the case of the Photo Jack Studio (Tripoli, Lebanon), whose archive the AIF decided to preserve intact without developing the film rolls, leaving the spools unprocessed in the wooden drawers in which they were originally stored. The preservation of the whole fabric of the archive was thereby preferred to revealing its content.

[35] Among such artistic gestures is the performative piece *Time Capsule, Kassel* (2012), first realized for Documenta 13. In the latter, Zaatari buried a concrete-encased box containing small monochromatic paintings – a tribute to an unnamed photographer who was said to be losing his sight – in a hole dug next to the Fulda River in Karlsruhe. The piece was inspired by an episode of radical preservation that took place at the National Museum in Beirut. Unfavourably located on the Green line, the museum was turned into an actual battlefield during the civil wars. Anticipating such a scenario, at the outbreak of the war the museum director Emir Maurice Chehab and his wife, Olga Chaiban, devised a series of ingenious measures to prevent the looting of or damage to the collection. While the small

should not be read as an attack of the medium per se, but rather as an attempt to challenge its codification and crystallization through institutional practices that have arrested its potential of re-invention. The adverbial preposition "against" articulates the opposition to a set of conventions, protocols and customs that have historically served to tame and regulate photography. First among them is the "cult of the original" and the quasi-fetishistic attachment to the photographic print that, as Zaatari explains, have bound photography "on one hand to a market and on another hand to a tradition of conservation."[36] Photography hovers in between the fields of fine art on one side, and documentation on the other – in both the "sacred originals" are enshrined as evidence of authorial mark or historical veracity. Secondly, it stands against the myopic privileging of the photographic image over its material and presentational forms. This approach of focusing only on the photographs' recognizable content blinds the viewer to other types of historical information that nest in non-iconic signs such as annotations on the back or scratches and blotches. Finally, for Zaatari to be "against photography" means to find oneself at odds with the exclusivity that the normative preservationist discourse grants on the conservation and maintenance of the physical object, at the expense of the contextual aspects that surround photography: the web of social relations and affective bonds in which the life *of* photographs and the lives depicted *in* photographs are woven, and of which the interviews to the previous owners in *On Photography, People and Modern Times* offer us a glimpse.[37] As Downey more succinctly phrases it, it means to be against "the archival impulse [that] has decontextualized original images by taking them out of their social and political economy."[38]

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artefacts were sealed up in storerooms in the basement, the mosaics installed on the floor were covered with a layer of concrete and the collection of sarcophagus encased in wooden frames filled with concrete – similar to the one used by Zaatari in *Time Capsule*. This unconventional strategy of preservation saved Lebanon's national collection from looting or smuggling. Symbolically, Zaatari's gesture was meant as a provocative invitation to the AIF to radicalise even further its preservationist mission, by literally burying its archive. In 2013, Zaatari made a diametrically opposite move by proposing to return all the collections that the foundation had assembled, studied and organized over the years to their original owners.

[36] Zaatari and Westmoreland, "Against Photography", 64.

[37] Zaatari has commented: "I don't see the preservation of photographs as preservation of material alone. It would be interesting to determine what exactly is essential to preserve. If emotions can be preserved with pictures, then maybe returning a picture to the album from which it was taken, to the bedroom where it was found, to the configuration it once belonged to, would constitute an act of preservation in its most radical form." Akram Zaatari and Yves Aupetitallot, "Interview", in *Akram Zaatari: Time Capsule, Kassel 24/25.05.2012*, (Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2013), 34.

[38] Akram Zaatari and Anthony Downey, "Photography as Apparatus," *Ibraaz*, Platform 006 (Jan 2014): https://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/113.

While these three critical negations of photography – that is, the critique of the photographic original, the privileging of the iconic, and forms of archival de-contextualization – could be seen to stand in conflict with each other, together they all call for an expansion and re-invention of the photographic medium.[39] However, rather than considering the attack on the institutionalization of photographic preservation as an indictment against the archive *per se*, I want to argue, it is precisely the archive the place in which the re-invention and expansion of the photographic medium occurs.[40] This expansion involves, however, the demand for a re-configuration of the traditional archive itself, transforming it from merely a site of storage into a productive setting. The archive, in this sense, is the "expanded field" in which photography is re-invented as an "object of study"; as a fragment used in the open-ended project of writing history: a history that is constantly reviewed in the light of the historical present.

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In the last couple of decades, the field of contemporary art practice and culture at large has been diagnosed as being afflicted by an "archival impulse" or "archive fever".[41] The former term, introduced by art historian Hal Foster in a 2004 essay, has since entered into common use within

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[39] The importance granted to the material and presentational forms of the photographic object, for instance, reintroduces an idea of uniqueness that seems to be in conflict with the denial of the original.

[40] The logic of auto-negation of the medium as conducive to its re-invention in the "expanded field", is famously expounded by Rosalind Krauss. Krauss's analysis is rooted in the context of the historical transition from high-modernism (based on Greenberg's notion of the purity and separateness of various media) to postmodernism. For Krauss, photographic media, given their aggregate nature as an apparatus, enact a dissolution of the essential unity of the modernist medium. See Rosalind Krass, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field", *October* 8 (Spring 1979), 30-44.

[41] See Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse", *October* 110 (Fall 2004), 3-22; and Derrida, *Archive Fever*. Publications on the subject include: Sonja Mejcher-Atassi and John Pedro Schwartz (eds.), *Archives, Museums, Collecting Practices in the Modern Arab World* (Ashgate, 2012); Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009); Simone Osthoff, *Performing the Archive: The Transformation of the Archive in Contemporary Art from Repository of Documents to Art Medium* (New York: Atropos Press, 2009); Sven Spieker, *The Big Archive* (Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press, 2008); Merewether (ed.), *The Archive*; and Jane Connarty and Josephine Lanyon (eds.) *Ghosting: The Role of the Archive within Contemporary Artists' Film and Video* (Bristol: Picture This Moving Image, 2006). See also the issue of *Journal of Visual Culture* (December 2013) edited by Juliette Kristensen and Marquard Smith titled "The Archives Issue".

art discourse for its ability to designate an evident and widespread phenomenon.[42] Departing from theories of the archive as institution, place of state power or regulatory system of discourse,[43] Foster explains that "archival artists seek to make historical information, often lost and displaced, physically present. To this end they elaborate on the found image, object and text, and favour the installation format."[44] In a move that is meant to differentiate archival art from the form of the database and the "mega-archive of the Internet," Foster emphasizes the physicality or "recalcitrantly material" nature of archival art's sources.[45] In a nod to Benjamin H. D. Buchloh's concept of archival anomie, Foster's "archival impulse" betrays a similar preoccupation with the fragility of memory under the conditions of a waning historicity.[46] Yet, departing from Buchloh, Foster expresses a more optimistic vision: "anomic fragmentation" is a state "not only to represent but to work through" in order to elaborate "new orders of affective association." Disentangled from the task of producing what Buchloh had called a "collective social memory," however, such orders of affective associations are bound solely to the whims of the artist's idiosyncratic and

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[42] As Guy Mannes-Abbott has pointed out, Foster's purview is glaringly western-centric, focusing primarily on European and American artists. Given that many of his claims on archival art seem to be tailor-made for the Lebanese post-war generation, as Mannes-Abbott rightly observes, Foster "might have been bolder in his references" by including examples from "the MENASA region and Beirut in particular." Guy Mannes-Abbott, "This is Tomorrow: On Emily Jacir's Art of Assembling Radically Generative Archives", in *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East*, ed. Anthony Downey (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 109-128.

[43] In the *Encyclopedia Universalis*, archives are defined as "the set of documents that result from the activity of an institution or a physical or moral person" or "the place where historical documents and records are kept." Derrida traces the meaning of the archive back to its etymological roots in the Greek *arkheion*: the house of the superior magistrates and the place of state power. For Derrida the archive takes place "at the intersection of the topological and the nomological, the place and the law, of the substrate and the authority." Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 2, 3. Michel Foucault defines the archive as a discursive system or a set of rules determining the historical conditions of possibility for knowledge formation and models of subjectivity. In a reversal of common expectations, for Foucault, the archive should not be confused with knowledge itself, but should rather be seen as a key site of power that provides the conditions for knowledge. See Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, 142-150.

[44] Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," 4.

[45] Ibid, 4.

[46] See Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Gerhard Richter's 'Atlas' : The Anomic Archive", *October* 88 (Spring 1999), 117-145. Drawing mostly on Sigfried Kracauer's 1927 essay "Photography", Buchloh traces the transition from the faith in the ability of technologies of reproduction in providing the means for the construction of a collective social memory in Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*, to a postwar situation of fragmentation and anomie as evidenced in Gerhard Richter's own *Atlas*. Technologies of mechanical reproduction (mass cultural representations, in particular) are said to have in fact caused "the destruction of mnemonic experience and historical thought." Ibid., 134.

subjective vision, that in the will "to connect what cannot be connected", betrays a "hint of paranoia", as Foster himself acknowledges. For all the future oriented rhetorical invitations to "turn 'excavation sites' into 'construction sites'", the lonesome figure of the paranoid on which the essay symptomatically closes reveals the individualistic retreat of such a revolutionary impetus.[47]

A more pragmatic definition of archival art might be found in curator Okwui Enwezor's introductory essay to his landmark exhibition *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*.[48] Archival art here denotes the set of ways in which "artists have appropriated, interpreted, reconfigured and interrogated archival structures and materials." Archives figure as both primary resource for so-called "research-based practices" and structural devices to be mimicked, explored, or contested. Focusing primarily on the medium of photography and film, Enwezor points to the archival function of the camera itself, that is to its ability of "storing time," that makes of any photograph or film "*a priori* an archival object."[49] Yet Enwezor's intention is to move beyond the positivistic "exactitude of the photographic trace" exploring "new pictorial and historiographic experiences".[50]

While being a global concern and a common figure in international contemporary art practice, the conception and the actual articulation of the archive is said not to be universally homogeneous but rather regionally and historically defined. The anthology *Dissonant Archives: Contested Visual Culture and Narratives in the Middle East,* edited by Downey, focuses on the specificities of "regionally determined, historically localized forms of archived knowledge" in the Middle East.[51] Looking at the material and socio-political realities of institutional archives in the

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[47] Foster, "An Archival Impulse", 22.

[48] Enwezor, "Archive Fever"; and the exhibition of the same title at the International Centre for Photography. Enwezor's exhibition and essay covers a more geographically diverse purview than Foster, and includes, among others, works by Lebanese artists Walid Raad and Lamia Joreige.

[49] Enwezor, "Archive Fever", 12, emphasis in the original. For a historical theorisation of the relationship between photography, cinema and the archive see Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*.

[50] Ibid., 11.

[51] Anthony Downey, "Contingency, Dissonance and Performativity: Critical Archives and Knowledge Production in Contemporary Art," in *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East*, ed. Anthony Downey (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 14. As it is often the case with regionally-bounded studies, the strict focus on the Middle East is often expanded to include examples from North Africa and, sometimes, references to South Asia (see the use of the acronym MENASA). The volume includes a number of essays that were published on the journal *Ibraaz* as part of the platform discussion 006. The question asked to the contributors was: "What role can the archive play in developing and sustaining a critical and culturally located art history?" For an earlier acknowledgement of the pandemic of archival art in the region see H. G. Masters, "An Epidemic of Archive Fever," *ArtAsiaPacific* 69

region raises a series of problematics that, it is argued, have defined and informed to varying degrees artists' responses. To be underlined is the "systemic crisis in institutional and state-ordained archiving across the region", along with problems in accessibility and the presence of "significant gaps", that result in "epistemological fissures."[52] There is a widespread sense that the archive in its material form (as a collection of hard documents), is an endangered construct threatened by destruction, loss and precariousness in zones plagued by long-standing conflicts, political upheavals and economic instability. As Laura U. Marks has pointed out, "Arab culture is archived unevenly and difficult to access", to the point that "non-existent archives are the most common archives in the Arab world."[53]

While, one has to register the lack or weakness of institutional and state-sponsored archiving processes across the region, the presence of colonial administrative archives calls for a different kind of hermeneutic engagement, one able to detect the imperialist telos behind documents.[54] In this situation, the generation of autonomous and independent archival projects, as well as the re-inscription of already existent archival documents, become one of the privileged sites of political struggle.[55] It is not a coincidence, then, that the interest of contemporary artists in the archive in the Middle East has gone hand in hand with initiatives of establishing non-governmental and nonprofit organizations with a collecting mandate, of which the AIF is surely a paradigmatic example.[56] This tactical shift away from the oppositional confrontation with the institutional embodiment of the archive as a static entity and a site of power – a vision memorably conjured up in the opening pages of Derrida's seminal book – towards a strategic reclamation of the archive as

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(July/August 2010): http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/69/AnEpidemicOfArchiveFever. During the 2010 March Meeting of the Sharjah Biennale, as Masters reports, "the archive" was the dominant theme. "[A]ssembling, exploring or repurposing archives" emerged as symptomatic of "a collective, regional need to reconnect with cultural and political histories that have become marginalized, suppressed or forgotten."

[52] Ibid.

[53] Marks, *Hanan al-Cinema*, 171.

[54] On this issue, see Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain.*

[55] The emphasis on constituting new archives can be found in the first of the ten thesis on the archive written by the collective pad.ma "Don't wait for the archive". Not incidentally the thesis were written during a seminar that the group run in Beirut in 2010. See Pad.ma, *Ten Thesis on the Archive*, 2010 https://pad.ma/texts/padma:10_Theses_on_the_Archive.

[56] Other examples include: the Photography Archive of the Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs (PASSIA), founded in 1987 in Jerusalem; and UMAM Documentation and Research founded in Beirut in 2004. See: Mejcher-Atassi and Schwartz, *Archives, Museums, Collecting Practices in the Modern Arab World,* 13, 14.

a place of counter-production, critical re-appropriation and political resistance, has resulted in a series of projects whose character has been indeed more "institutive" than "transgressive".[57]

The control of the archive, however, is not reducible to a control of the contents alone, but should extend to the very structure and practice of archiving. As Derrida writes, "the technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future."[58] Therefore, intervening in the structure that archives (the *archiving* archive) yields the possibility to change the *archivable* content, by both extending the reach of what will be considered worthy of being archived and by revising the meaning of that which has already been archived. As Derrida quips, "what is no longer archived in the same way is no longer lived in the same way."[59] Rather than simply conserving the past as reproduction of the status quo, the archive can be mobilized to retroactively cast a new reading onto that same past that has already been read. It is in such a sense that, as Doane writes, "the archive is always a wager on the future": because it is preserved, this object *will* be interpreted; and this interpretation will possibly be displaced by a *new* interpretation.[60] This view of the archive that stretches out into the future – as a "movement of the promise and of the future no less than of recording the past"[61] – is in tune with Benjamin's historically dialectical method that integrates an object's fore- and after-history.

Because of its institutional structure and the archival methodologies it employs, and perhaps also in view of the increasing importance of archival practices in art, the AIF is often referred to as an archive. However, its members have frequently taken distance from the term because of its bureaucratic undertones and its problematic relation with state archives. Zaatari, in particular, has expressed a number of times his dissatisfaction for the use of such a designation to define both his multifarious individual art practice and the operations of the AIF. With regards to the former, he believes that this is better defined through metaphors that evoke an archaeological or paleontological imaginary, preferring terms such as "fieldwork", "excavation" and "fossil" to refer

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[57] Foster, "An Archival Impulse", 5. For a discussion of the archive as a space of counter-cultural production, see Roberts, "The Lateness of the Archive", in *Photography and Its Violations*, 113-115.

[58] Derrida, *Archive Fever,* 17.

[59] Ibid., 18.

[60] Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time,* 222.

[61] Derrida, *Archive Fever,* 29. As Derrida puts it elsewhere: "It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow." Ibid., 36.

to his research and the objects he collects.[62] In relation to the latter, he has conceded that if the AIF "is an archive, it is more an archive of research and collecting practices than an archive of photographic practices."[63] This distinction serves to highlight the artistic directive of the foundation and the importance of the post-production work of study, research, curation and exhibition, that constitutes the core of its activities. Not only does the archive contain readymade collections, but these were acquired through different research projects. In this sense, the AIF is not just an archive of photographic images or past photographic practices, but also an archive of the different iterations, presentations and projects that were realized in parallel to, or better as part of its development.

Further, it is important to recall the often overlooked difference between archives and collections. Whereas archives are either the result of institutional activity or the organized body of records produced or received by an institution with the goal of preserving them,[64] the collection is an accumulation of objects gathered for study, comparison, exhibition, or as a hobby, according to criteria of choice and selection that are animated by the idiosyncratic interests and taste of the collector. The formation of a collection is influenced by selective decisions that are subjective or even accidental, based on personal interests or on the identification of patterns connecting the newly found items to objects already acquired. In light of such distinction, the AIF appears as a composite entity, combining features of the archive and the collection alike.

Today the category of the archive has been extended to the point that the term is often used interchangeably and somehow indistinctly to designate such different formations as state and corporate archives, private collections or online databases. Whilst the proliferation of the term has often eroded important differences that constitute such archives – in particular, their disparate power relations – the term nonetheless registers the way in which political concerns and struggles of the past two decades have often played out around questions of archival inscription and mnemotechnic strategy. As Derrida anticipated, "the politics of the archive" have become "our permanent orientation."[65] This is why, in spite of Zaatari's antipathy for the term, and while bearing in mind both the valid resistance to its use and the semantic elasticity of the construct that

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[62] See Suzanne Cotter, "The Documentary Turn: Surpassing Tradition in the Work of Walid Raad and Akram Zaatari", in *Contemporary Art in the Middle East*, ed. Paul Sloman (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2009), 50-51.

[63] Zaatari and Westmoreland, "Against Photography", 61.

[64] Ricouer highlights three characteristics in the definition of archives: their institutional character, their mandate of preservation and the function of documentation they carry out. See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative. Vol 3*, 116.

[65] Derrida, *Archive Fever,* 4.

it defines, I maintain that this concept is still the best suited to describe the AIF's critical practice of re-writing history through photography. In the following section I further elaborate on how Zaatari takes a distance from the traditional view of the archive as a monolithic structure, by drawing on his deployment of paleontological metaphors which I will use to read not only Zaatari's individual practice but the work of the foundation at large.

2.2 An exercise in morphology: on Fossils and Photographic Formations

In the digital video *In This House* (2005) Zaatari directs and films a literal excavation. He has discovered that the photojournalist Ali Hashisho, a former member of the Lebanese secular resistance, buried a letter of gratitude in a mortar canister in the garden of the house in Ain-el-Mir where his group was stationed from 1985 to 1991.[66] Following the Israeli withdrawal from Saida in 1985, the small village of Ain-el-Mir became the new frontline in the war against the occupants. While its inhabitants were forced to leave, several groups of resistance fighters took up the abandoned premises and made them their military bases. More than ten years later, in October 2002, after the legitimate owners have returned to their homes, Zaatari knocks at the door of the Dagher family's house with the intention of delivering to them this sealed message from the past. He is met with circumspection and suspicion. After a month of negotiations, the digging finally takes place under the supervision of two policemen and two agents from the military intelligence. Except the gardener in charge of the digging, all the persons who were present on the day refused to be videotaped.[67] On the right image track of the split-screen, single channel video, we see an

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[66] Ali Hashisho was a member of the leftist secular resistance allied with the Democratic Popular Party. At the time the resistance against Israeli incursions in Lebanese territory was still nominally led by splinter groups of the Lebanese Communist Party and had not yet been fully taken over by Hezbollah.

[67] It is useful to provide a few contextual elements. The Israeli army withdrew from the South of Lebanon in May 2000. After that date many Christians who had collaborated with the South Lebanon Army (SLA) – the Israeli proxy militia – fled Lebanon fearing repercussions. In 2002, the Lebanese army was not officially present in the formerly occupied areas, yet these were surveilled by different intelligence groups, namely the army's intelligence and the state security (known as Amn Dawleh); the police, referred to as Darak; and, wherever Hezbollah existed, Hezbollah informants. Charbel, the patriarch of the Dagher family, at first categorically refused to let Zaatari dig in his garden. Yet, later he saw this as an opportunity to demonstrate his obedience to the state, and contacted different officers to supervise the excavation. Hashisho was not present instead. Hashisho and the Dagher family have incompatible ideological affiliations: the Dagher family is Christian; Hashisho defines himself as a Marxist Leninist. That piece of paper buried in the ground was the only possible avenue for a dialogue.

image of the gardener shovelling earth, shot with a stationary camera and tightly framed so that only he and the feet of the other participants are visible. We can nonetheless hear their off-screen voices speaking in Lebanese Arabic, and read their translation in the English subtitles, while a arrow indicates the speaker from a list of names occupying the upper right corner of the screen. On the left-hand side window, we instead see an interview with Hashisho intercut with an array of documentary, biographic and photographic materials – Hashisho's diaries, his personal photographs including childhood mementos and snapshots from the frontline, banal objects from the battlefield, photos he took for news agencies, and pictures of the house and its garden taken by Zaatari in 2002 – that are interspersed with explicative inter-titles (Figure 16). The two image-tracks are plunged in an expansive black leader over which different blocks of text – inter-titles, subtitles, the list of names – intermittently appear. The screen, as Osborne has pointed out, becomes a "a space of writing" wherein visual images are used as graphic elements alongside other properly graphic elements, with the text in turn appearing as an image-type.[68] The overload of textual and photographic information is compounded by Zaatari's spoken monologue in English, operating as a *trait d'union* which serves to suture the disparate materials through a narrative that recounts the genesis of the work.[69] Zaatari explains that his initial intention when he approached the press photographer Hashisho was to discuss the "dynamics that govern the state of image-making in situations of war." He ended up having to negotiate with some visual restrictions to make a film on the unearthing of a buried letter.

Towards the end of the video, the spent mortar case is finally exhumed and the letter read out in front of the crowd of curious neighbours and onlookers that has quickly gathered. Yet, the much sought after and by some feared revelation is remarkably anti-climatic: the content is hastily unveiled, the suspense and trepidation swiftly dissipated. Hashisho's story holds up: the letter, opening with an epigraph by poet Khalil Gibran, is a literate and humane message expressing the author's disapproval for the forced displacement of people, alongside a note of sincere gratitude and the assurance that he and his comrades did their best to protect the property and its olive trees from plunder and theft. Although its compassionate tone and unrestrained sentimentality serve to debunk the image of the freedom fighter as either heroic or monstrous, the letter by itself

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[68] Osborne, "Information, Story Image", 152. Zaatari has described film as a form of writing. See Akram Zaatari and Quinn Latimer, *Film as a Form of Writing*, Exhibition catalogue (Brussels: Wiels, 2014), 19.

[69] Usually commentary in Zaatari's films take the form of writing (in the form of subtitles or words typed on screen instead) rather than voice-over, as, for instance, in *Letter to a Refusing Pilot* (2013). In the film *In this House*, however, the overabundance of written information on screen made necessary the use of a spoken voice-over.

Figure 16. Akram Zaatari, *In This House,* Video stills, 2005.

is evidently not the centre of the work. Paradoxically, by matter-of-factly divulging its contents on

screen Zaatari dissipates the halo of mystery and uncanniness that had surrounded the object

before its disentombment.[70] The letter is rather a pretext for the activation of a performance by

which an object from the past is literally brought back into the present and invested with a new

function. The act of excavation – catalyst of action, curiosity, paranoia and ultimately revision of

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[70] See Walid Sadek's reading of the work in Sadek, "Collecting the Uncanny and The Labour of the Missing".

the recent past – should thus be seen as the real focus of the piece, more significant than the objects it unearths.

The image of digging is a recurrent trope in Zaatari's oeuvre and it can be seen as an emblematic metaphor for his working method. The archeological or paleontological imaginary that the trope of excavation conjures up, when construed metaphorically, can help to illuminate both Zaatari's understanding of historical documents and his work with the AIF archive. The earth, he has said, is the "ultimate archive, the ultimate recording."[71] By juxtaposing in the video the image of the excavation site with static shots of documents – personal photographs, diaries, letters, identity cards – encased on a neutral black background, Zaatari invites us to see the latter as exhumed artefacts.[72] Hashisho's letter, the only document that was effectively dug up from the ground, is in fact treated and displayed like all the other objects presumably pulled out of some drawers or boxes. Following the logic of the paleontological metaphor, Feldman has suggested that there is no better way to understand the material objects that Zaatari appropriates than to situate them as fossils. Fossils originate from the physical contact with an object and are subsequently preserved within a sedimentary layer of earth, gradually covered over with more layers until they are unearthed. Instead of disintegrating under the weight of successive strata, fossils harden and transform. As such, they are conserved in their integrity but also encode materially the traces of their transformations *over time*. Whereas the indexical nature of the fossil clearly resembles photography, their metaphorical reach, as Feldman holds, also "imputes to the object a history: it has not only been created but subsequently forgotten, and only later unearthed, rediscovered and endowed with a new sense."[73]

Fossils are not just frozen lumps of matter that preserve the trace of a particular past, but inconstant objects which bear the inscription of multiple temporal layers. When dug up and re-introduced into the present, these objects assume a new meaning. In turn, their re-surfacing fractures the relative coherence of the plane of the present, just as the stories they carry with them, when revealed, might unsettle existing conditions. Hashisho's letter is a case in point: its recovery not only points to the continued and disavowed persistence of old conflicts in the area, but it also troubles entrenched prejudices and received versions of the past. However, as Feldman

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[71] Zaatari and Westmoreland, "Against Photography", 65.

[72] The 2009 exhibition in which *In This House* was shown next to photographic reproductions of the exhumed objects was notably titled *Earth of Endless Secrets.*

[73] Hannah Feldman, "Excavating Images on the Border", *Third Text* 23, no. 3 (2009), 317. Feldman proposes the category of fossils in opposition to the customary art historical category of the readymade.

clarifies, this "redirection of meaning" is predicated on the "very fact of the object's dormancy" –
its withdrawal and consequent elapsing of time between its production and retrieval that
introduces a critical distance.[74] The cold storage room that lies at the physical and metaphorical
core of the AIF can be seen as analogous to the site of the letter's burial in the Dagher's garden.
Designed to preserve photographic collections and prevent any deterioration from occurring, this
room, in which time is artificially halted, is a place where documents lie dormant waiting to be re-
activated within artworks and exhibitions that will revise and update their meaning.

To rethink photographs through the metaphorical paradigm of the fossil allows for an
understanding of their material passage and transformation *through time,* as well as the
interpretative shifts that this involves. From this perspective, signs of wear or other forms of
damage – whether intentionally inflicted by humans or accidentally occurring as a result of
unfavourable atmospheric conditions – are not viewed as a disturbance that hampers the reading
of the photographic image, but as an additional layer of information, that gives an insight into the
life of the photograph as an object and, by extension, sheds light on the social and historical
relations in which it was embedded and circulated. Film scholar Laura U. Marks has used the
paradigm of the fossil to examine films and videos that excavate memories from objects.[75] Through
a multifaceted theoretical prism that combines Marxist theories of fetishization with
anthropological theories of exchange, Marks explains how "through their travels and through
being owned and used," objects – including mass produced commodities – "become singular,
gaining a biography." To those who know how to read them, such objects can divulge "maps of
their travels, the people who produced and came into contact with them, and the shifts in their
value as they move." They are material "distillations of history."[76]

Benjamin correspondingly characterises the figure of the collector as "the physiognomists of
the world of things".[77] The collector holds in the highest consideration the background story of the
collected item, or what Marks defines the biography of the object. All the details of its history –

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[74] Ibid.

[75] Zaatari acknowledges the influence that conversations with Laura U. Marks have had on his use of the metaphor of
the "fossil" to think of his appropriative practice. Other sources include: Janet Walker and Diane Waldman, *Feminism
and Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); and Shadi Abdel Salam's popular film *Al-
Mummia* [*The Mummy*] (1969), also known as *The Night of Counting the Years*.

[76] Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press,
2000), 96, 97, 104.

[77] Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking my Library", in *Selected Writings Vol. 2, Part 2 1931-1934*, Michael W. Jennings ed.
(Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 487.

from its origin and physical characteristics to the vicissitudes of its circulation and the circumstances of its acquisition – compose for the collector a "magical encyclopaedia" in which s/he can read "a world order" and gauge "the *fate* of the object." Knowledge of its history – from production to distribution and consumption – is able to pierce the fetish character of the object, that is, the occlusion or naturalization of the social relations embodied in it. Under the collector's gaze "which does not emphasise their functional, utilitarian value ... but studies and loves them as the scene, the stage, of their fate," the collected objects undergo a "renewal of existence".[78] Liberated "from the drudgery of being useful", they are integrated into a "new, expressively devised historical system", in which their historical value takes prominence. Benjamin at first distinguishes the collector from the allegorist, posing the latter as the "polar opposite of the former". The synchronous and affinity-based system of the collection is incompatible with the attitude of the allegorist that dislodges things from their context and sees them as "keywords in a secret dictionary" that only the initiated can grasp. Nevertheless, he quickly rectifies this statement to specify that "more important than all the differences that may exist between them", like the allegorist, the true collector is able to unravel the total history that is enfolded in the monad of the single object. Placed within the new system of the collection, every single thing becomes "an encyclopaedia of all knowledge of the epoch."[79]

The physiognomic attitude of the collector and the metaphor of the photograph as fossil are key to considering the large retrospective exhibition *Against Photography: An Annotated History of the Arab Image Foundation* (2017). Reflecting on the AIF's 20 year history through Zaatari's own personal perspective, the show presented an illustration of the growth and development of the AIF's collection alongside a panoply of artworks – mainly video-works and photographic installations – that Zaatari has produced over the years by drawing from its holdings. In preparation to the retrospective, the AIF members-researchers reconstructed the biographies of the collected objects, re-tracing their passage through time and the affective and historical reverberations that this had produced.[80] Going through institutional records, biographies and contracts with photo-owners and donors, research records and acquisition notes, they collated

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[78] Ibid., 487.

[79] See the section "The Collector", in Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 209, 205, 211, 205.

[80] For Zaatari, this work of annotation produces an "informed object." An informed object "is an object that is conscious of the material and processes that produced it, conscious of its provenance, its morphology and displacement over time, conscious of its history in the sense that is able to communicate it." Zaatari, "All That Refuses to Vanish", 103.

Figure 17. Akram Zaatari, *On Morphology,* timeline. Installation View of *Against Photography. An Annotated History of the Arab Image Foundation*, MacBa, Barcelona 2017.

extensive annotations, describing the content of each of the 300 collections in their custody and pinning down the circumstances of their acquisition. Presented in book format, such a painstaking reconstruction of two decades of collecting practices in the region was also diagrammatically visualized on a timeline drawn on a grey wall that run throughout the exhibition space, cutting it in to halves (Figure 17). Charting the key moments in the history of the organization, the expanding geographical reach of the collection and the main critical debates generated throughout its evolution, the timeline acted as a pivot around which the artworks were displayed, so that they resembled geological formations emerging out of the ground zero of the archive. Concurring with such a reading is Zaatari's distinctive terminology, framing this effort in the self-historicization of the AIF as an "exercise in morphology", and characterising the photographic objects on display as "photographic formations or emergences." The term morphology derives from Greek and means literally the "study of shape", and has been used in the context of different disciplines, from archaeology to linguistics and biology. Zaatari's use, however, more likely refers to the branch of geology that studies the characteristics, configuration and evolution of rocks and land forms.

As a retrospective, the exhibition included a compendium of different approaches to the reading and interpretation of photographs, ranging from anthropology, to the deconstruction of images inspired by visual culture studies, to the focus on the economic and social infrastructure of the photo-studios that proliferated in the Middle East in the 20th century. However, the dominant

Figure 18. Akram Zaatari, *The vehicle. Picturing Moments of Transition in a Modernizing Society,* 1999-2017.

attitude that informed the show suggests a decisive veering off from the attention to the photographic images and the context of their production towards their material supports, which are revealed to be in a process of constant change. This expanded approach to the photographic brings to the foreground photographs as material objects able to transmit and communicate information and stories that exceed what the images depict.[81] Negatives, films, glass-plates, and photographic prints are treated like fossils or archaeological artefacts. Such a shift of concern emerges for instance in the re-iteration of old projects, such as *The Vehicle: Picturing Moments of Transition in a Modernizing Society.*[82] First produced in 1999, the work aimed to explore the impact of two late nineteenth century inventions such as the camera and the motor vehicle on everyday life in the Arab world, by analysing a number of portraits of people posing in front of their cars, gleaned from various mid-twentieth century family albums. While the goal behind the original project was anthropological in character, the new version places a novel emphasis on the material object. Displayed in neatly arranged grids, both sides of the photographs are reproduced, so that the annotations on the back, written by both previous owners and members of the institution, gain unprecedented prominence and exposure (Figure 18).

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[81] Ian Benjamin and Akram Zaatari, "An Exercise in Morphology", a text part of the exhibition *Against Photography. An Annotated History of the Arab Image Foundation*.

[82] It is in the course of research for this project that, in 1999, Zaatari first discovered the work of Hashem El Madani.

Figure 19. Akram Zaatari, *The Body of Film*, 2017. Close-up of a 35 mm negative by Antranick Bakerdjan, Jerusalem, 1950s.

The new works on display make such attitude towards material culture even more palpable. Rather than dwelling on the legible content of the image captured by photographic lenses, the focus is set on the signs etched on the material substrate, so as to unravel the different stories that these may tell. In a series of prints presented on a LED-backlit display and suggestively titled *The Body of Film* (2017) photographic close-ups of 35mm and sheet-film negatives reveal signs of erosion, erasure and mishandling, as well as the different film brands inscribed on the edge – Safety Film, Nitrate, Panchromatic (Figure 19). The photographs were taken by Antranick Bakerdjian during the destruction of the Armenian district of Jerusalem, including his house, in 1948. In light of this knowledge, the cracks in the photographic emulsion assume new meaning and can be read, *allegorically*, as a an indirect index of war and displacement: that is, the "displacement of their maker and his darkroom" as an effect of the Israeli invasion of Palestine, and the displacement of the negatives themselves, brought from Palestine to Lebanon, via France, when Elkoury acquired them for the AIF. The deterioration of the image and the negatives' peripatetic journeys communicate the "instability of the historical context."[83] For Zaatari, "their

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[83] Fouad Elkoury and Sylvain Roumette used these negatives in the short film *Jours tranquilles en Palestine* (1998). A detailed reconstruction of the haphazard collecting process surrounding the acquisition of these negatives is related by Zaatari in "All That Refuses to Vanish", 101.

Figure 20. Akram Zaatari, *The Body of Film*, 2017. Close-up of a 35 mm negative by Antranick Bakerdjan, Jerusalem, 1950s.

disintegration, not their depiction of events, is their contribution to history."[84] On the surface of Bakerdjian's negatives, another sign is discernible: the serial number given by the AIF written by hand with blue permanent ink (Figure 20). This trace of an archival institutional practice adds a new layer of information to the marks left by wear and bad conservation, indicating that a new transition or displacement has occurred. Zaatari identifies both natural processes and archival procedures as "non-photographic practices" that "might leave a trace on the physical matter of a photograph or negative, sometimes to the extent of transforming the image completely."[85] In order to see them, one should learn to look beyond the image's explicit content, to be picture-blind as it were.[86] This stance is pushed to an extreme in the series *Against Photography* (2017), a set of 12 aluminium engravings produced from various weathered gelatin negatives that were put through a 3D image-blind scanner that records only surface texture. While the image withdraws, only the relief of scratches and abrasions is left behind.

Given the insistence on materiality and the investment in traditional media, the exhibition *Against Photography* could be mistaken as performing a mournful elegy grieving and commemorating what is at risk of getting lost in the analogue-to-digital conversion of the

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[84] Ibid., 102.

[85] Ibid., 102.

[86] Zaatari's interest in what lies beyond the recognizable visual content of the photographic image can be traced back to the introduction of the character of a photographer who is losing his sight in *Time Capsule*, *Kassel*, 2012.

photographic heritage. Surely the advent of digital technologies has greatly reconfigured and reshaped the way in which photographic archives operate. The digital storage and management of analogue photographs necessitates a process of remediation that while retaining some features of the older medium inevitably discards others, first and foremost their tactility.[87] The conversion of analogue photographs into digital files, that is, comes at the loss of a layer of information that is not reducible to visual content, but hinges on the photographs' material and presentational forms. It is doubtless that the AIF experience of digitalizing its collections has heightened the consciousness of what is inevitably lost in medium translation.[88] Once new collections enter the foundation, each photograph is carefully cleaned, numbered, scanned and then stored in a cold storage room. While the fragile prints are kept in a climate-controlled environment to avoid further damage and degradation, their digital reproductions are easily retrievable on the foundation website where they can be accessed and viewed at any given moment and place. This separation heightens the perception of a split between the photographic object (the singular photo-chemical print or negative entrusted to the foundation) and the photographic image (the digital, distributable file). Further it would be inaccurate to see the digital copies as perfect reproductions of their analogue correlates. In the online database, all images have been reformatted according to a uniform scheme of display, adjusted in size, colour and grayscale. The digitalized photographs, Berndt writes, "are reconfigured into a new image-form with modified structures, functions, and ways of presentation, which considerably affects the way they are perceived and interpreted."[89] The presentation of these photographs as digital files significantly occludes the layers of information discussed above, such as: indications of media history, technical formats and original supports; signs of erosion, deterioration or mishandling; traces of retouching; the marks of tape or

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[87] The term "remediation" was first introduced by Marshall McLuhan, and has been subsequently employed by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin in their work on the relation between new and old media. The latter define remediation as "the way in which one medium is seen by our culture as reforming or improving upon another"; it is "the formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms". Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge MA.: The MIT Press, 1999), 59, 273. Although Bolter and Grusin specify that remediation is not an exclusive property of new media, they underscore how the integration of older media into new media has reached today a higher degree of urgency in view of the fact that what is "new" about new media is precisely the kind of relation that they articulate with older media.

[88] The AIF has recently launched an extensive digitalization campaign that will eventually result in the complete conversion of its collections, so as to ensure public access to the full archive.

[89] Berndt, "New Exposure".

of the photographer's fingerprints; dedications or notes written on their back.[90]

It might seem natural then to ascribe the fascination with analogue technologies in the exhibition to a sort of reaction formation responding to the advent of new media, yet that would not be completely accurate. At a closer inspection, the engagement with superannuated technologies belies the resolute influence of the digital as structuring condition and operational logic behind the works. Not only does the materiality of old media come into relief when confronted with the apparent dematerialization of new media, but it is viewed and filtered through forms and modes of visualization that are enabled by the latter. In the series *The Body of Film*, for instance, the enlargement of photographic details of material erosion and their exhibition in large format is afforded precisely by the use of digital technologies. The tangible sense of decrepit materiality is magnified and provided by that very apparatus that is unable to retain those same aspects of deterioration. Further, as is the tendency in Zaatari's work, throughout the exhibition the viewers' attention is insistently called upon to attend to the processes of material and technological mediation of images. In the already mentioned companion videos *On Photography, People and Modern Times* and *On Photography, Dispossession and Times of Struggle*, the conspicuous presence of different technical devices of image production and visualization – ranging from 8mm film and TV monitors to tablets and smartphones – conveys a condensed overview of the history of the technological means through which the past is recorded and accessed. In the latter video black-and-white photographs briefly appear on the sleek screen of an I-phone, while the outline of the original negatives can be glimpsed on the back of the device. By working in the interstices between analogue photography and digital video, Zaatari actualizes the temporality and historicity of the former through the latter. In its ability to mobilize different, multiply mediated photographic fragments, the medium of digital video does not simply "re-mediate" photography by containing it, but it can be said to articulate "alternative configurations of intermedial relations in which the unstable specificity of one medium works to cite and interrogate the other."[91]

The exhibition thus lays bare the dialectic between old and new media within the post-digital photographic archive. Even though digital photography is itself not part of the foundation, the AIF employs digital technology as both a tool for archiving and as a way for allowing the integration of

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[90] As part of the digitalization campaign, the AIF is developing a new online database that will display photographs as both images and objects.

[91] Miriam Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Sigfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 38.

photographic documents within new works. While not suspended or abolished in its material form, within the post-digital condition the archive is subsumed under a different logic based on iterability, variability and distributability. By visualizing analogue photographs in different formats and on multiple technical devices, Zaatari communicates the distributable nature of the digitalized photographic image and, at the same time, the logic that subtends the AIF. In the same way that a digital image can be visualized on multiple technical supports without being bound to any in particular, so the 'original' copy entrusted to the AIF lends itself to a number of materializations and disseminations when inscribed in a series of artworks, research projects, publications and exhibitions.[92] This accretion of different iterations and inscriptions of the same objects – what, following Benjamin, we can call its *afterlife* – is itself integrated within the archive and acts retroactively to "illuminate" the pre-history of the original "as a continuous process of change."[93]

As a result, the archive of the AIF too appears as a permanently evolving structure. In the exhibition, in fact, while the photographic objects and collections are treated and conceived as fossils, the archive from which they spring forth, like the earth, is studied in terms of its ever-changing morphology. The meaning of the collections accumulated and the nature of the archive they inform are not stable and fixed, but continually reviewed and reconsidered in relation to both new acquisitions and the unfolding events of the historical present. Even collections that had been reclaimed by previous owners and do no longer belong to the archive, if not as digital simulacra, have been included in the morphological exercise, as they too left an imprint on the organization. In turn, each materialization of the contents of the archive – whether in artworks or in other exhibitions – is part of a constantly renewed effort to re-evaluate photography and collecting practices, as well as part of the perpetual project of writing and re-writing history through photography. Thus, the exhibition *Against Photography* itself can be read as presenting only a partial snapshot taken in a particular moment and framed through a specific sensibility. As noted above, morphology is not only a field of geology, but designates also a branch of biology dealing with the study of the form and structure of organisms. Such biological understanding of morphology reveals the generative dimension of the archive, akin to a living organism. Following from this biological notion, we can understand each individual artwork that arises from the contents of the archive as representing a momentary configuration in the archive's ongoing morphogenetic process of transformation – rather than as discrete and independent entities.

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[92] For Osborne both the digital image and the postconceptual artwork are "distributed forms", albeit in markedly different ways. See Osborne, "The Distributed Image", 135-145

[93] Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian", 261.

In the digital age, as Claire Bishop has noted, the artistic gesture of appropriation and repurposing is aligned with "procedures of reformatting and transcoding", construed as a "perpetual modulation of pre-existing files." In such instances, the critique of originality and authorship that exemplified postmodern appropriationist practices no longer occupies the focal point. Rather, as she continues, the emphasis is placed "on [the] meaningful recontextualization of existing artefacts."[94] For Zaatari, this practice of de- and re-contextualization is problematic insofar as it bases itself on a form of what he terms "pseudomorphology" – he gives the example of juxtaposing Van Leo's performative self-portraits with Cindy Sherman's art practice. While potentially stimulating, such a comparison risks, as he contends, "violently collapsing contexts and short-circuiting histories", ultimately resulting in "misleading analogies."[95] In the following section I will consider precisely how the de-contextualization and re-contextualization of materials from the AIF's collection in Zaatari's works avoids such pseudomorphism. Instead of being liberated as objects of pure form, free from any spatio-temporal specificity, the new configurations into which the photographs are put, as I show, are fully rooted in the historical context of their production and circulation, and articulated in constellation with a specific present, giving them their historical intelligibility.[96]

2.3 Writing History Through Photography

Any act of collecting is always haunted by a two-fold dialectic of "preservation and destruction".[97]

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[94] Claire Bishop, "Digital Divide: on Contemporary Art and New Media", *Artforum* (September 2012), 438.

[95] Zaatari and Elias, "The Artist as Collector", 42. Zaatari discusses the example of the exhibition *Surrealism in Egypt*, that displayed some of Van Leo's self-portraits and tagged them as "Photo Surrealiste", simply because they involve the use of double exposure and superimposition at the same time when Surrealist artists where active in Cairo. "I can't but ask what purpose it serves to see the work in these terms and whether it adds anything to the understanding of Van Leo's practice?" Ibid., 42.

[96] A parallel could be made here between Zaatari's critique of pseudomorphism and Hannah Feldman's critique of the aesthetic formalism of André Malraux's photographic art history project, *Le musée imaginaire*, which as Feldman argues, tends "to decontextualize the art object from the constraints of any spatio-temporal specificity and liberate it instead as pure form". See Hannah Feldman, *From a Nation Torn: Decolonizing Art and Representation in France, 1945-1962* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 21. Or as Buchloh puts it: Malraux's imaginary museum performs an "abstraction from historical context and social function in the name of a universal aesthetic experience". Buchloh, "Gerhard Richter's 'Atlas'", 124.

[97] Benjamin, "Fuchs, Collector and Historian", 28, 29. Instead of "destruction", Benjamin refers to this process of

If the collector liberates things "from the drudgery of being useful", as Benjamin puts it, such a liberation comes at a cost: it both presupposes and necessitates the destruction of "the context in which [the] object was only part of a greater, living entity."[98] In order to conserve an object, to protect it from oblivion and the ravages of time, the collector must blast it out of its original context, wrenching the item from the *living* social fabric in which it was embedded. The ability to preserve is thus predicated on its dialectical opposite: the power "to cleanse, to tear out of context, to destroy."[99] Allan Sekula, who has transposed some of Benjamin's insights on collecting to consider the particular construct of photo-archives, has similarly noted how the liberation of photographs from their affective or utilitarian functions results in "an abstraction from the complexity and richness of [their] use." When integrated into the new system of the archive or collection, the former meaning of the photograph – that which stems from its use value – is suspended or abstracted. Photo-archives, as Sekula writes, become "clearing house[s] of meaning" in which "a relation of *abstract visual equivalence* between pictures" is established, while the difference between an "informational" and a "sentimental" mode of address to the images subsides. Consequently, even if they are not offered for sale, in the archive photographs are subordinated to "the logic of exchange" through their "semantic availability", which reproduces the "same abstract logic as that which characterizes goods in the marketplace."[100]

In view of such considerations, the painstaking work of the AIF to reconstruct the social,

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"simultaneous preservation and suspension", through the Hegelian concept of sublation (*aufhebung*). Ignaz Cassar has recently used this same term to characterize the dialectic that is at play in (photo-)archives. He writes: "To archive is to put away, to shelter, to keep…The modality of *Aufhebung,* conventionally translated into English as 'sublation', ushers us into the space of the archive. The polysemic of the *Aufhebung* implies both preservation and cancellation." Ignaz Cassar, "The Image of, or in, Sublation", *Philosophy of Photography* 1, no. 2 (December 2010), 202. Ariella Azoulay takes issue with this reading, opposing the philosopher's archive – or what she calls the *abstract archive* – with the actual, concrete archives that one can visit and access – which she dubs *material archives.* For Azoulay, the dialectic of preservation and cancellation is a pure theoretical invention that sees the archive as an abstract concept devoid of the presence of human practice and use. I depart from such a view as I consider such a dialectic as something utterly concrete: namely the removal of an object from its originary context, the loss of meaning that comes from its use, and its inscription within a new system, in which it inevitably acquires a new function and sense. Having said that, I prefer to use the term destruction, rather than cancellation or suspension, as it emphasises the destructive element that is part and parcel of any act of collecting.

[98] Hannah Arendt, "Introduction" in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (London: Pimlico, 1999), 49.

[99] Walter Benjamin cited in Arendt, "Introduction", 43.

[100] Sekula, "Reading an Archive", 444, 445, 444.

political, historical, affective and economic context of the collected photographs as well as their biography *qua* objects, appears as an antidote to the abstracting and equalizing effects of the archive – effects which, as we have seen, are exacerbated by processes of digitalization. The compilation of extended annotations, as well as Zaatari's long-term study of Saida-based photographer Hashem El Madani and his Studio Shehrazade as a social milieu and economic business, provide a countervailing strategy to the deracination that goes with the act of collecting. However, such pursuits do not lead to a philologically accurate reconstruction of the past, the re-evocation of it "the way it really was", but are rather part of a conscious, selective effort of historical construction animated by present urgencies. The de-contextualization that the destructive element of collecting involves opens new possibilities of reconfiguration and recombination of the orphaned photographic fragments within new systems of relations that serve to illuminate rather than obscure their particular history (hence, their main difference from pseudomorphism). These photographic objects, that is, can be used as elements for the construction of historiographical narratives; mobilized as syntagms in the ever-renewed project of writing and re-writing history.

For Benjamin, the destructive moment is a necessary and crucial stage for any radical historical-materialist project. In the convolute N of the *Arcades Project,* in which he attempts to delineate his theory of knowledge, Benjamin specifies that what differentiates the *reconstructions* of the past typical of historicism from the *constructions* of the materialist historian is precisely the presence of the destructive moment: "'construction' presupposes 'destruction'". As he explains "the destructive or critical momentum of materialist historiography is registered in that blasting of historical continuity with which the historical object first constitutes itself."[101] That is, the destructive moment lifts the historical object out of the reified continuum of history construed in terms of a linear succession that threads together a sequence of events as if they were the beads of a rosary. The destructive moment has an "interruptive character", a "force of arrest".[102]

It is important to recall that the earliest goal of the AIF was, as Zaatari recollects, that of focusing on important moments in photography's history in the Arab region.[103] Paying particular attention to vernacular photography, the intention was to study the way in which the medium – a foreign import – had been adopted, adapted and transformed. However, what quickly became

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[101] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, [N7,6] 470, [N10a,1] 475.

[102] Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light*, xx

[103] Zaatari and Westmoreland, "Against Photography", 61.

evident was the capacity of photography to harbour personal and unexpected stories, and to capture remnants of historical experience that might expand, complicate or even contradict official or dominant narratives. The initial purpose of writing the history of the medium in the Arab world was thus replaced by the project of writing the history of the region *through* photography. Reversing Eduardo Cadava's formula according to which "there is no thinking of history that is not a thinking of photography", we might say that there is no thinking of photography that is not, at one and the same time, a thinking of history.[104] Zaatari mentions the works of John Berger and Siegfried Kracauer as two influential examples of how the act of looking at photographs can turn into a project of writing history.[105] If Berger's constructive and affirmative engagements with the medium, especially in his collaborations with photographer Jean Mohr, are well-known, the citation of Siegfried Kracauer is less self-explanatory.[106]

In fact, the German cultural critic and film theorist's appreciation of the medium and its relation to historiography, epitomized by his 1927 essay "Photography", has long been considered at best ambivalent, if not altogether negative. An exemplary case here, is Benjamin Buchloh's well-known essay on Gerhard Richter, which choses to emphasise how Kracauer's text is suffused with an "extreme media pessimism". Indeed in the first paragraphs of "Photography", Kracauer sets up an opposition between the photographic image and memory image, observing how the proliferation of mechanically reproduced images, instead of functioning as a prosthesis to memory, threatens to inhibit the possibility of mnemonic experience and, in Buchloh's construal, "of historical thought altogether."[107] While there is a truth to this customary reading, as Miriam Hansen's more nuanced and elaborate interpretation of the text has shown, the irreducible incompatibility of memory and technological reproduction appears as only the initial "element in

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[104] Cadava, *Words of Light*, xviii

[105] Zaatari and Westmoreland, "Against Photography", 61.

[106] On the 30th November and 1st December 2012, the Arab Image Foundation, in collaboration with the Centre Pompidou, and on the proposal of Zaatari and Clément Chéroux, organized a two-day symposium which took its title and starting point from Kracauer's 1969 book, *History: The Last Things Before the Last,* in which the German intellectual develops an analogy between the work of the historian and that of the photographer. Titled *History of the Last Things Before the Last: Art as Writing History,* the symposium invited artists, historians and intellectuals from Lebanon and France to discuss the writing of history, the role of the archive, and the development of historical narratives, reflecting on artistic practices that developed in Lebanon during the 1990s and 2000s. John Berger and Jean Mohr have collaborated on a number of books, including: *A Fortunate Man* (1967), *A Seventh Man: Migrant Workers in Europe* (1975) and *Another Way of Telling: A Possible Theory of Photography* (1982).

[107] Buchloh, "Gerhard Richter's 'Atlas'", 133; 134.

the rhetorical movement of Kracauer's essay", and is "part of a larger, more dialectical argument".[108] Certainly, Kracauer was very concerned with the ceaseless "blizzard of photographs" that elicited an attitude of structural indifference towards the meanings and history of the the things and events that the images depicted. "The flood of photos," he wrote, "sweeps away the dams of memory" and carries out an "assault" on understanding and cognition.[109] This dulling of critical and perceptive faculties leads into a condition of mindless social amnesia – or what Buchloh, after Durkheim, defines as *anomie*. Since the time of Kracauer the image saturation of our media environment has grown unabated to an exponential degree. The full coverage of the world, today boosted by real time broadcasting and user-generated contents contribution, has not however resulted in a deeper knowledge and understanding of the world itself. Kracauer's famous formula – "never before has an age been so informed about itself. … Never before has a period known so little about itself" – is as valid today as it was in the late 1920s.[110] Such a condition of information overload and scant knowledge is generally aggravated in situations of war and conflict in which the unchecked proliferation of sources diffused by media outlets attached to the various warring factions makes their verification a highly arduous task. As we have seen, this was certainly the case in Lebanon during the civil wars.

However, the target of Kracauer's critique is not the medium of photography *per se* but the way in which it was used in Weimar culture, particularly in the then flourishing mass-media forms of the illustrated magazine and weekly newsreel. Kracaeur was well aware of the fact that the invention of photography was historically coeval with the emergence of historicism in Germany; both were a product of nineteenth century positivism.[111] The telos of chronological continuity and temporal determinism typical of the historicist narrative found its perfect correlate in the impression of spatial continuity that a photograph could afford. In the same way that photography in the naïve realism of the nineteenth century was seen as a "mirror of reality", a faithful recording of nature equal to nature itself, so historicism was seen to mirror or photograph a past reality. Both, that is, effaced or naturalised the signs of their processes of selection and construction. Through the sheer accumulation and stockpiling of details, photography offers an image of

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[108] Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 32.

[109] Kracauer, "Photography", 47-64, 58.

[110] Ibid., 58.

[111] In her discussion of Kracauer, Feldman adds the museum to the list of nineteenth century positivist inventions that aimed to narrate the past and present in terms of a linear narrative of teleological progress. Feldman, *From a Nation Torn*, 24, 25.

extensive coverage; a "mere surface coherence" that excludes any element of contradiction or otherness that could puncture such a seamless representation. However, this homogeneous rendition of reality as a "spatial inventory" is not an inescapable flaw of the medium. It rather depends on the way in which photographs are displayed "without any gaps" in contiguous arrangements that inhibit, rather than kindle, "reflection on things in their relationality and history."[112] As Kracauer writes, "it does not have to be this way."[113]

In the closing section of the essay, Kracauer takes an unforeseen turn to his argument. His interest in the temporality and historicity of photographs leads him to explore the transformations that these undergo over time, especially when they outlive their referents and lose their effect of presentness. When outdated photographs that have escaped human control and freed themselves from the straightjacket of a homogeneous and univocal organization are warehoused in the "general inventory" of the archive, they start appearing "in unusual combinations which distance them from human proximity." It is precisely this distance, or what he elsewhere terms "alienation", that makes of photography the perfect medium for the study of (trans-generational) history. This is, notably, the main tenet that Kracauer will later develop in his posthumously published book *History: The Last Things before the Last* (1969), in which the analogy between photography and history is set precisely around their common capacity for estrangement and alienation.[114] The photographic archive as a jumble of homeless images becomes the place in which a past reality can be critically examined, at a distance, and reconfigured in new aesthetic and political combinations actualized through the use of filmic montage. This temporalization of the archive, as Kracauer writes, seeks "to establish the *provisional status* of all given configurations."[115]

Kracauer's characterization of an archival practice that, through the rearrangement of photographs into novel constellations, introduces an image of time and change into the understanding of history, provides a fitting model for analysing Zaatari's practice. Exemplary here is

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[112] Hansen, *Cinema and Experience*, 30.

[113] Kracauer, "Photography", 58.

[114] As Kracauer writes: "History resembles photography in that it is, among other things, a means of alienation." In Kracauer's epistemology of the "anteroom", both history and photography are praised because they occupy an "intermediary" area of knowledge. Unlike philosophy and art, which deal with ultimate truths, history and photography provide only a "provisional insight on the last things before the last." See Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things before the Last* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 5, 16. See also: David Rodowick, "Anteroom Thinking, or 'The Last Things before the Last'" in *Reading the Figural, or Philosophy After the New Media* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 162-170.

[115] Kracauer, "Photography", 62.

the video *This Day/Al yaoum* (2003), which mobilizes and juxtaposes disparate sets of images, scraps of information, digital debris and historical documents to thread a complex narrative addressing the history of image production and circulation in the Middle East and across its borders.[116] In a geopolitical area permanently ravaged by conflict and historical partitioning, the distribution of images and information is paired with the often obstructed movements of people across borders – in the video we glimpse disparate means of transport, such as camels, cars, aeroplanes. The video combines distinct, historically situated modes of dissemination of information: photographs, video, illustrated books, private diaries, TV footage, recordings from the radio, emails with attachments of digital images, and the Internet. These technologies correspond to different modes of apprehension and inscription of the historical experience that, in turn, enable different modes of writing history. Combined within the same documentary, they account for the mediation of history by technology, as well as the temporal variability of the latter.

The opening segment of *This Day* and one of the main narrative strands that run throughout the video*,* is structured around Jibrail Suhayl Jabbur's 1988 seminal ethnographic study of traditional bedouin life in the Arab desert: *The Bedouins and the Desert: Aspects of Nomadic Life in the Arab East*.[117] Jabbur was one of first Arab scholars who used photography to document the "vanishing" culture of the Bedouins. The photographs he took together with Lebanese-Armenian photographer Manoug in the 1950s were later used to illustrate his book. The initial scene of the video shows precisely such images: first as printed illustrations interspersed with text on the pages of a hardbound volume of the book (both the English and Arabic version), and then as the 'original' photographic proofs, now preserved in an archival box at the AIF. A pair of white gloved hands carefully remove from their protective sleeves the black-and-white pictures and negatives depicting Bedouin men in the desert, Bedouin women carrying jugs of water on their head, and a broken jeep in the middle of the desert. Spread out on a light-box, the archival images and negatives, cut loose from their previous arrangement, could be said to point to the *provisional status* of their configuration within the book, thus signifying the possibilities of plastic recombination that the archive yields (Figure 21).

Framed by the delayed apparition of a title-card that reads "East meets West", this section of the video intends to convey the "split optic that resulted from the encounters between European

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[116] The video was shot or relates to Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Palestine/Israel.

[117] Jibrail S. Jabbur, *The Bedouins and the Desert: Aspects of Nomadic Life in the Arab East*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995).

Figure 21. Akram Zaatari, *Untitled*, 2007. Photograph of Jibrail Jabbur's *The Bedouins and the Desert*, 1986; and Akram Zaatari, *The Desert Panorama*, 2007. 16 negative sheets, 33 contact prints, a tray of negatives and contact prints with white cotton gloves.

and Arab cultures."[118] Symbolically encapsulated in the photograph of a jeep that breaks down in

the desert – a Western vehicle unfit to extreme climatic conditions – this encounter is recounted

by Norma Jabbur, the Syrian scholar's granddaughter, while the camera digitally pans across the

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[118] Zaatari in Elias, "The Libidinal Archive".

Figure 22. Akram Zaatari, *The Desert Panorama*, 2009. Detail of a composite image made with seven photographs taken by Jibrail Jabbur and Manoug in the Syrian desert in the 1950s.

photograph, cropping out several details: men crouched underneath the vehicle attempting to repair it, other men standing by, camels, and the photographer's shadow casted on the sandy ground (Figure 22). The video then cuts to a present-day shot taken from the windshield of a car driving through the Syrian desert. Zaatari sets out to film the same locations and people that Jabbur and Manoug had photographed fifty years earlier. The re-enactment of their itinerary underscores the distance between past and present and the impossibility to fully reconstitute the past by starting from its documentary traces. Zaatari's intent is not to recoup the authentic origins of Arab culture through the vanishing figure of the bedouin. Already at the time of Jabbur's study, that tradition was fading away under the impact of modernisation and colonialism, and the ethos to document it, as Norma Jabbur comments, stemmed from a sensibility honed on western values. As Elias points out, the bedouins "had become an object of Arab nationalist consciousness at the very moment when nomadic ways of life were being displaced by notions of territorial identity that were themselves a by-product of the borders imposed on the region by the European colonial powers at the beginning of the twentieth century."[119] After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the region was re-mapped, partitioned and divided under British and French colonial mandate, before a number of nation-states formed and gained independence. When, in *This Day*, Zaatari finally succeeds in meeting a bedouin in the Syrian desert, he is unable to understand his dialect.

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[119] Elias, "The Libidinal Archive".

He finds out that the man has travelled to that part of Syria from Saudi Arabia in a historical moment when these two nations did not yet exist. A remnant of a time and a way of life not yet subject to the containment of cartography, the bedouin is an exception to the logic of partitioning that prevails in present-day Middle East, an anachronism captured by photographic lens, as well as an emblem of the *provisional status* of all configurations (here represented by geopolitical borders).

The violent tensions and conflicts that would result from and generate yet other borders and partitions are the focus of the second part of the video. On the 6th of June 1982, the Israeli army crossed one of such borders and invaded Lebanon for the second time after the beginning of the civil wars.[120] That day, a young Zaatari stood on the balcony of his family house in Saida, shooting pictures while Israeli jets dropped bombs on a nearby hillside and launched a missile onto a Syrian plane which immediately exploded. Twenty years later, he digitally spliced together six of these photographs to create a composite image of devastation (Figure 23). He then filmed this panoramic view of destruction with a panning videocamera, zooming in and out of details, and looped the footage synching it to a soundtrack of multiple explosions (over which the buzzing sound of the zoom is clearly audible). Existing as both a stand-alone piece and a sequence interpolated in the narrative of *This Day*, the eerie segment takes apart the representation of bombing and reconstructs it in a non-naturalistic manner.[121] The short loop of air strikes is set side by side with other records of Zaatari's everyday life during the wars and the Israeli invasion in particular. These include: photographs of warplanes, jeeps full of soldiers and destroyed buildings

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[120] The Israel Defence Forces (IDF) had invaded Lebanon for the first time in March 1978, with the declared objective of creating a ten kilometre-wide 'defence' cordon at the north of the border, to prevent Palestinian attacks against Israel. However, the IDF had advanced thirty kilometres further north, occupying around 12% of Lebanese territory. Following international pressures (UN Security Council Resolutions 425 and 426), Israel gradually withdrew from the country over the successive three months. Yet, taking advantage of Lebanon's divisions over the presence and rising power of the PLO, Israel was able to establish a proxy militia, the South Lebanon Army (SLA), to which control over the ten-kilometre belt of land north of the border was entrusted. The SLA consisted in an army of Lebanese individuals who worked at the service of Israel, often in exchange of economic benefits.

In 1982, following the Israeli invasion, members of the Lebanese Communist Party, the Arab Socialist Action Party, and the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party founded the Lebanese National Resistance Front (LNR), a left-wing, secular and pan-Arab military group that was operative in the South throughout the 1980s. However, the divisions and fragmentation of the secular left paved the way for the Islamicization of the resistance movement after the advent of Hezbollah in 1985.

[121] The independent piece, titled *Saida June 6, 1982,* was also screened on a small monitor as part of the video installation *Letter to a Refusing Pilot* (2013).

Figure 23. Akram Zaatari, *Saida June 6*, 1982, 2009. Composite digital image.

neatly arranged in a photo-album; records of sounds of war – air raids, mortar, the blaring of the curfew siren – and snippets of news reports and songs from the radio; pages of his diary. The brief entries in his journal, uncannily resembling the flash news of TV reports or the headlines of newspapers, contain descriptions of some of the worst days of fighting from 1982 to 1984, interrupted by more mundane matters such as titles of films, references to the weather, mentions of driving practice. Growing up during the fifteen years of the civil wars and often bound to domestic confinement, like many others of his generation, Zaatari developed at a young age what he would later name "habits of recording".[122] The photographs, diaries, records from radio and television, in which public events constantly mingle with private occurrences, constitute a large archive that the artist would harness in much of his later work, starting from *This Day*.

The final part of the video jumps into the present (2003) and revolves around a new set of images: low-resolution digital photos that were spread across the web and via email as a form of pro-Palestinian propaganda during the first two years of the 2000 al-Aqsa Intifada (also known as Second Intifada). In this section, the narrative is again constructed mainly through an accretion of disparate audio-visual documentary material: contemporary commercials from Lebanese television aimed at fundraising the Palestinian cause, Internet news reports on the Intifada, and emails documenting the Israeli invasion of the West Bank that Zaatari received on a daily basis. The digital images (sent as email attachments) show mostly pictures of violence and aggression perpetrated by the Israeli on the Palestinians, mobilizing the figure of the victim to solicit international support.

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[122] Zaatari and Westmoreland, "Against Photography", 65.

Yet, the linear chronology of the video is continuously unsettled by the irruption of fragments from the past. Zaatari's 1982 journal entries are juxtaposed with pro-Palestinian items circulating on the Internet. The photos of sufferance spread across the web cannot be dissociated from the montage of black-and-white portraits of *fedayeen* taken in Madani's studio at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, that appeared earlier in the video layered with a score of contemporary military anthems. Zaatari tries to make sense of the "flood" of captionless images that filled up his computer screen by going back to the moment of inception of a specific iconography of Palestinian armed struggle. At times playful, at times assertive, the portraits taken in Madani's studio move between self-conscious exhibition and light-hearted farce. Precursors of a certain stereotype of romantic machismo, when seen alongside images of abuse and persecution, these portraits let us glimpse the duality that will soon take hold of the image of the Palestinian: split between the identity of refugee and terrorist, victim and victimizer.

As Westmoreland observes the Arabic title *Al-yaoum* is normally translated as "today", yet Zaatari's explicit indication in the film inter-titles of "This day" as a preferred English translation grounds the generic temporal marker of an ever-vanishing present on the specifics of some particular day.[123] One could recognize this specific day in the 6th June 1982, when Zaatari photographed the Israeli invasion of Southern Lebanon from the balcony of his house, or with any other of the many dates whose facts and events he registered in his diary. Yet, it is perhaps more germane to see in the title a summoning up of the precise moment in which the video was made: the present time from whose standpoint the historical narrative is constructed. It is on *this* very day in 2003 that the images taken on *that* day – 6th June 1982 – appear in a new light as a result of their juxtaposition with the low-res digital images of pro-Palestinian propaganda. In turn the then present-day photos of the al-Aqsa Intifada cast a tragic halo around the portraits of smiling or proud *fedayeen* (or people dressed up as such) taken in Madani's studio at the end of the 1960s and then stitched by Zaatari into the fabric of his film. This day refers at the same time to the moment of inscription and the moment of reception in which the chain of images and events therein represented is illuminated by the unfolding of their after-history.[124] To use once again a Benjaminian concept "this day" stands in for the "now of recognizability", the particular time in which fragments of the past attain a new legibility in their friction with the present.

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[123] Westmoreland, *Crisis of Representation*, 1.

[124] I'm writing these lines in the midst of the 2018 Gaza border protests (or what the Palestinian organizers call the "Great March of Return"), a six-week campaign of protests initiated on the 30th March, which aimed to conclude on the symbolical date of 15th May (the 70th anniversary of Nabka Day).

Yet, an equally important element in the video consists in disallowing and short-circuiting the neat linear succession of images by exposing the means by which they were made and circulated. The editing room – the construction site of the film – so as the tools of post-production are laid bare. In one sequence, for instance, we see Zaatari reviewing the footage of an interview on a moviola, the images inscribed with the date of filming and the time code; in other scenes he records his act of training the camera on a TV set or of downloading images from the Internet. In the second part of the video, intertitles and commentaries are typed up by the artist on the computer screen. He also employs a number of video post-production techniques – speeding up, slowing down, freezing or overexposing the footage – which create a defamiliarizing effect. These strategies that Elias calls "distancing devices" force the attention to the mediation and framing of the technical apparatus, that is often occluded or naturalized in a media environment "that capitalises on the apparent immediacy and transparency of the digital image."[125] As Feldman has written, *This Day* tries to "'slow down' the stream of representation in order to ponder what the images communicate beyond the pure information coded as content."[126]

Such an objective to disrupt the uninterrupted flow of images typical of conventional media circuits places *This Day* in direct relation with Jean-Luc Godard and Anne Marie Miéville *Ici et ailleurs* (*Here and Elsewhere*, 1976), a film that Zaatari has repeatedly cited as an important source of inspiration for much of his video work.[127] *Ici et ailleurs* developed out of an uncompleted film project by the Dziga Vertov Group (Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin), made in 1970 at the invitation of Al Fatah, at the time the largest faction of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). Shot in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, the film, initially entitled *Jusqu'à la victoire* (*To Victory*), was intended to be a propagandistic documentation of the triumphant PLO struggle against Israeli occupation and imperialism, and a record of the Palestinians' final homecoming. Just months after returning to France, however, the filmmakers' political optimism was shattered by the unfolding of the historical events. In September 1970, King Hussein of Jordan ordered a massive military offensive against the Palestinians in Amman, resulting in the deaths of thousands of combatants and civilians – including many who Godard and Gorin had filmed – and the expulsion of all the Palestinian militias from the country.[128] After what came to be known as Black September, Godard

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[125] Elias, "The Libidinal Archive".

[126] Feldman, "Excavating Images on the Border", 322.

[127] See Feldman and Zaatari, "Mining War", 57-72; and Feldman, "Excavating Images on the Border", 320-322. Chad Elias has also analysed Zaatari's film *All is Well Along the Border* (1997) in relation to *Ici et Ailleurs.*

[128] By 1970, the Palestinian guerrilla groups, financially backed by other Arab states and the USSR, had established a

and Gorin's footage suddenly turned from dogmatic and confident depiction of an imminent revolution into a grim archival record of death. Four years later, Godard and Miéville re-worked the ten hours of 16 mm rushes of the abandoned project, self-critically scrutinizing and deconstructing the film's original ambitions. They show how the superimposition, via the film's soundtrack, of a dogmatic Marxist-Leninist scheme and an imported model of armed struggle had the effect of drowning out "the voice it wanted to produce from the image", thus failing to grasp the complexities and specificities of the situation depicted.[129] Refusing to speak on behalf of – that is silencing – the Other, Godard and Miéville set out instead to investigate those very structures that make their utterances possible in the first place.

As Miéville notes in the voice-over, the "inability to see or hear" the images of the Palestinian struggle is connected to the failure to understand the "here" of contemporary France, as our perception of "elsewhere" is always constituted by "our here". In the film, images of the elsewhere of Palestine are thus set in tension with the here of France, represented in the acted vignettes of a French family that often gathers around the television set of their house. Television becomes a key to understand how individuals receive and consume images of elsewhere. As the illustrated magazine and the newsreel in Kracauer's time and the Internet in Zaatari's (and ours), television is a media-environment that in its dominant form tends towards the levelling of individual images and the indifference to their content and relationality. Analysing the politics of media circulation in *Ici et ailleurs,* Godard and Miéville seek to make visible the system of relations within which images exist – the often elided link existing between "here" and "elsewhere" – but

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sort of state-within-a-state. After the hijacking of three civilian airplanes and a number of failed assassination attempts on King Hussein, the Jordanian Army attacked the refugee camps where the fedayeen were based, driving them out of the country. The most important factions fled to Lebanon where they re-organized and became one of the dominant military powers in the South before the Israeli invasion of 1982. According to many historians, the surge in presence of Palestinians refugees after Black September, and the demographic imbalances that this created on the already fragile confessional system of Lebanon, set the stage for the civil wars.

[129] The silencing of the images' voices is evidenced in a series of memorable scenes: the image of a hand turning up the volume on a stereo playing *L'internationale;* a scene shot near Jordan in June 1970 in which the voices of a small group of fedayeen discussing the dangers of liberating a river from Israeli machine guns, is muted by Godard and Gorin, who append a ready-made slogan about the relation between theory and practice (later, working with an interpreter, Godard and Miéville were able to restore the silenced voices); the image of a young girl reciting a poem by Mahmoud Darwish between the ruins of Karame. At the end of *All is Well Along the Border*, Zaatari cites this scene by filming a six-year-old boy enthusiastically reciting a speech by one of Hezbollah's leaders standing on a plastic chair at the centre of a school's yard. For an analysis of the scene see Elias, *Posthumous Images*, 72-75.

also the conventional and arbitrary associations in which they are placed. As Godard explains, daily images are "part of a vague and complicated system", or what he describes as chains of images. In the same way that history is a "chaining together" of events, so films are chains of individual stills (a concept illustrated in *Ici et Ailleurs* by actors filing past the camera, each holding a still photograph representing a section of the ill-conceived *Jusqu'à la victoire*). However, in *Ici et ailleurs,* as Deleuze writes, it is no longer "a matter of following a chain of images... but of getting out of the chain."[130] By rendering visible the "interstices" between images and the processes of linkage through the use of experimental montage techniques, the film disrupts predetermined relational chains and inserts the images within new formations and contexts.

This Day engenders a similar disruption to that performed by Godard and Miéville by bringing together different sets of images – illustrative, personal and propagandistic – revealing both their relations and "constructedness".[131] Attending to the circulation of images across space and time, Zaatari can be seen to set not only the "here" in relation with the "there", but, more importantly, the "now" with a particular "then". The fast-paced montage of the digital photos of the Second Intifada poignantly shows "images in a chain...each one the slave of the next." Yet, in breaking these images out of a reified continuum, and in liberating them from a predetermined meaning, *This Day* refuses to partake in such an "uninterrupted chain of images...over which we have lost all power" (*Ici et Ailleurs*). In the next chapter, I will look at other ways of breaking out of such uninterrupted chains of images, while building, at the same time, new meaningful relations between different media fragments through various narrative devices and strategies.

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[130] For Deleuze, the mode of construction of *Ici et ailleurs* is based on "the method of BETWEEN", rendering visible the "interstice" between images and images and sounds. See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema II: The Time-Image,* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 184-185.

[131] Feldman, "Excavating Images on the Border", 322.

Chapter 3. Towards a New Narrativity: Storytelling in the Age of Information

> "I believe it is necessary to try to understand the mechanisms of narrative if we are to discover different modes of story-telling rather than pursue an utopian and pointless project of dispensing with narrative altogether. Any counter-language must be preceded by a meta-language."[1]

In the play *Looking for a Missing Employee* (2003), Rabih Mroué, investigates the hazy circumstances surrounding the disappearance of R. S. (Rafat Suleiman), a fourth-level employee at the Lebanese Ministry of Finance, in 1996.[2] Announced by his wife's plea to the authorities, which was published in the dailies *as-Safir* and *an-Nahar*, the disappearance of the government employee was never properly investigated and his case, similarly to other such cases in Lebanon, ended without judicial closure. Mroué collected all the news items concerning the case that appeared in three of the main national papers – *as-Safir, an-Nahar* and *ad-Diyar* – meticulously collating and assembling the newspapers clipping in chronological order in a number of notebooks.[3] During the play, he runs through this daily register of what was made public in the newspapers and reads the reports, articles, comments, interviews and analysis that were published day-by-day. Beginning from the small announcement issued by an anxious wife, we follow the progression of the story till it ends up as a front-page headline announcing the finding of the employee's body a few months later. By trying to reconstruct the "full story" of the missing

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[1] Peter Wollen, "The Hermeneutic Code", in *Semiotic Counter-Strategies: Readings and Writings* (London: Verso, 1982), 41.

[2] *Looking for a Missing Employee* was presented for the first time at Al-Madina Theatre on the 4th and 31st November 2003, as part of *Home Works II*. The play was written and directed by Rabih Mroué, and starred Rabih Mroué and Hatem Imam, with a stage design by Samar Maakaron and Talal Chatila. It was presented outside of Lebanon for the first time in Brussels, as part of the *Kunsten Festival des Arts* in May 2004. I attended a performance on the 30th of March 2016 at the HAU Hebbel Am Ufer Theatre in Berlin, where it was staged as part of the program *Outside the Image Inside Us: A retrospective by Rabih Mroué & Lina Majdalanie.*

[3] The newspapers represent different parts of the political spectrum: *As-Safir*, which was in circulation up until December 2016, was described as a left-of-centre newspaper, with pan-Arab tendencies, close to Hezbollah and supporter of the March 8th alliance; *An-Nahar* is considered a right-of-centre newspaper, close to the government and supporter of the March 14th alliance. *Ad-Diyar* is a pro-Syrian, left leaning paper. Initially, as Mroué explains during the play, he had sourced his material only from *As-Safir* and *An-Nahar.* In 2000, however, feeling that the tale was somehow partial, he decided to consult the archives of *Ad-Diyar* to attain a more complete picture.

employee as it had been covered in the newspapers, Mroué discovers the incongruences and inconsistencies that mar the dailies' unreliable narrative. Although the latest news at times appear to strikingly contradict what had been reported previously, and the newspapers continuously and radically shift their position, no one ever bothers to issue a retraction or make an apology, as if the story was starting over again each morning.[4]

Looking for a Missing Employee presents not so much an attempt to resume this forgotten case (a case that is emblematic of the spirit of the period), to give it a fair hearing or a narrative closure; rather, it performs a dissection of the way in which media, and newspapers in particular, work to construct a specific form of forgetting, by means of writing about events via the form of a presentist narrative, that is undone and begins anew every day. Although the tone with which journalists relate the facts is always authoritative and self-assured, when read in succession, the news clippings appear closer to the logic of rumours and informal conversation, rather than the incontrovertible facts that they claim to reveal.[5] Through the simple ruse of reading several news items arranged in chronological sequence in front of an audience, Mroué envelops them within the narrative conventions of long duration and living speech associated with another form of communication that is closer to traditional storytelling, while simultaneously laying bare the hiatus that separates the two.[6] In translating the expendable and short-lived accounts of the news back into the longer and ampler tempo of the story, that is, he deconstructs and reveals the narrative tropes that subtend the presentation of information in the print media.

In his famous 1936 essay *The Storyteller*, Benjamin outlines what he recognizes as a major

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[4] The case of the employee's disappearance is soon complicated by the accusation of embezzlement of funds from the Ministry of Finance, attributed to Rafat Suleiman himself. The estimate of the embezzled funds, speculations on Suleiman's whereabouts, reconstructions of his biographical background, and even the very date of his disappearance are the object of continuous incongruences and contradictions. The case thickens when a new scandal concerning forged stamps is linked to Suleiman's disappearance, and new suspects, conjectures and leads emerge. The case of the missing employee becomes a stage on which the economic, political and moral corruption of the country plays out, as well as the institutional tensions between various competent authorities, exacerbated by the imminent national elections.

[5] Rabih Mroué, "Lost in Narration: A Conversation between Rabih Mroué and Anthony Downey", *Ibraaz* 002, 5 Jan 2012: https://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/11.

[6] For a different but equally compelling use of newspaper cutouts in book format, see Rabih Mroué, *Diary of a Leap Year* (Beirut: Kaph Books, 2017). The latter is composed of 366 collages made of cutouts taken daily by Mroué from Lebanese and international newspapers. A personal record of events unfolding in the present, the book constitutes an alternative way of reporting on acts of violence in the Middle East.

change in modern communicational forms, explaining how the advent of "a new form of communication" called information has brought about a crisis in the novel and storytelling, by shattering the tradition of which they were part and that made them possible in turn.[7] Benjamin composes the polarity between the form of storytelling and information mainly around their different "temporal dimension"; an observation that, as Doane points out, will be bequeathed to future examinations of later mediums of transmission of information such as television and digital media.[8] Benjamin's remarks on the disposable nature of information, that he chiefly associates with the cultural form of the newspaper, perfectly capture the mechanism of obsolescence intrinsic in the newspapers narratives that Mroué's play stages. "The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time." Information must be quick, promptly verifiable and "understandable in itself"; it must come, as Benjamin puts it, "already shot through with explanations." As Mroué's performative reading glaringly reveals, the brevity and self-sufficiency of the singular news item make it impervious to be placed within a system of relations with other such elements, vulnerable as they are to the test of time. Enslaved to the instant, information is transient and devoid of memorable content. A story, on the other hand, works differently: it "does not expend itself", but "preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time." Explanation and meaning are not provided readymade, but left open to the interpretation of the listener. The storyteller invites listeners to fill in the gaps and to draw their own connections between the various elements that are narrated in the story, thus achieving "an amplitude that information lacks."[9] Yet, the difference in temporality is not reducible to the brevity and transience of information in opposition to the longer and more enduring nature of the story, but also includes their temporal stretch. While the news covering a particular event come in a steady daily stream that extends over a certain period of time, so that their narrative

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[7] Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller. Observations on the Work of Nikolai Leskov", in *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings, Vol. 3, 1935-1938*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2006),147. Benjamin presents a four-stage schema of cultural communicational forms: the epic, the story, the novel, and information. The difference between such forms lies mainly in their structure of remembrance. The original mythic unity of memory that marks the epic breaks down into the multiplicity of memories that inform stories; the novel bears the inscription of a singular, individual recollection. In such a scheme, information figures negatively as the amnesic form that shatters the very possibility of historical experience. See Osborne, *The Politics of Time*, 135.

[8] Mary Ann Doane, "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe," in *New Media, Old Media: A History and Theory Reader*, ed. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Thomas Keenan (London: Routledge, 2006), 254.

[9] Benjamin, "The Storyteller", 148, 147, 148.

unfolding is customarily co-extensive with the temporal development of the event itself, the emplotment of the story, based on such event, habitually happens in retrospective, when the event has reached a more or less definitive conclusion. Whereas the narrative conventions of temporal condensation in the news serve to assure the economy of the form and its self-sufficiency, the temporal condensation operated in the emplotment of the story allows to distil, sum up and deliver the serial unfolding of the event all at once. Correspondingly Mroué's account of the case of the missing employee compresses the seriality of the news reports, that more or less regularly covered the case over a period of three months, into the two hours of duration of the play. When the everyday influx of news is interrupted for sixteen days, Mroué suspends its narration too and plays three minutes of music, in order to, as he explains, "feel the passing of time."[10]

Seen in the light of Benjamin's comparative analysis of cultural forms, *Looking for a Missing Employee* can be understood as an attempt to wrap the expired news into the ampler and more enduring mantle of the story. Whereas information has "gradually removed narrative from the realm of living speech", Mroué returns it to the sphere of oral transmission and shared presence that characterizes a theatre performance – albeit, as we shall see below, he does so in a highly mediated form that puts into questions the very idea of presence as an effect of the new technical means of its actualization. In line with Benjamin's characterization of the traditional storyteller, Mroué is not content with conveying "the pure essence of the thing" as an external event, but "sinks" it into his own personal experience, "in order to bring it out of him again."[11] His reading is selective: he skips over some newspaper clippings, while spending time to highlight others. In so doing he abandons the pretences of neutrality and objectivity of the report, while embedding the case into a personal narrative. At the opening of the performance, he recounts how he had come to learn of the story of the missing employee. Since 1995, he collected the photographs of missing persons that were published in the papers. He had thus stumbled on the story of R. S.'s disappearance and compulsively started to collect all he could find about the case. The missing, he explains, are trapped in a state between life and death and represent a "fertile ground for

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[10] Rabih Mroué and Göksu Kunak, "Theatre of the Present", *Ibraaz* 009, 28 May 2015, https://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/167. As Mroué explains, the dramatic device of using three minutes of music to represent the passing of sixteen days, serves to "highlight differences of temporality and how theatre condenses time – compressing three months into two hours, for example."

[11] Benjamin, "The Storyteller", 146, 149.

narrative, fiction, imagination and storytelling."[12] The storyteller, Benjamin would say, "borrow(s) his authority from death", as it is only at the moment of death that the story of a person "assumes a transmissible form." One of the reasons for the subsiding of storytelling, he holds, is precisely the waning of the omnipresence and vividness of death in the collective consciousness, and the suppression of its visibility through the relegation of the dying to "sanatoria or hospitals".[13]

It is important to remember that Benjamin considered the decline of the art of storytelling as a "concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history." The shock of modern life, mechanized industrial labour and technological warfare, one of whose first testing grounds had been the battlefields of the WWI, had made most experiences uncommunicable, thus depleting the stock of materials from which stories are made. Men who fought in the trenches, he recalls, had returned mute from the battlefield, "not richer, but poorer in communicable experience."[14] The fragmentation and incommensurability of personal experience (first epitomized by the emergence of the individualistic literary genre of the novel) was accompanied by a thinning out or dissolution of that communal social body that was the first addressee and the main vehicle of later trans-generational disseminations of the storyteller's tales: the "community of listeners". In its place, new, larger, anonymous, and often purely *imagined* communities emerged. In his theorization of "print capitalism" as one of the conditions of possibility behind the emergence and spread of nationalism, Benedict Anderson has shown how the newspaper has been, together with the novel, one of the crucial technical means to bring into being that "kind of imagined community that is the nation."[15] The act of reading the papers every morning – that "mass ceremony" that as

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[12] Rabih Mroué, "Looking for a Missing Employee", in *Home Works II: A Forum on Cultural Practices*, eds. Kaelen Wilson Goldie, Masha Refka, Mohamed Hamdan, Yussef Bazzi, Zeina Osman (Beirut: Ashkal Alwan, 2003), 134.

[13] Benjamin, "The Storyteller", 151. Haig Aivazian, in an essay in which he portrays Lebanese artist Tony Chakar as a storyteller, similarly quotes Benjamin, to remark that the omnipresence of death in post-civil war Lebanon has resulted into a proliferation of storytellers. See Haig Aivazian, "Tony Chakar: On Black Holes", *Afterall* 35 (Spring 2014), 32.

[14] Benjamin, "The Storyteller", 146, 144. Whereas Benjamin's essay appears as "a nostalgic reflection on modernity as loss" and "destruction of tradition", his argument that the capacity of telling stories, from which all forms of narrative derive, is coming to an end, should not be taken at face value. Rather, as Osborne maintains, the idea of a death of narrative is better seen as: first, a "narrative idea" itself, deriving from the model of "apocalyptic narrative"; and, second, a "regulative fiction", calling for a new articulation of narrative which "must seek its resources immanently within the temporal forms of modernity". The shattering of tradition by modernity, therefore, does not bring about the loss of narrative as such, but renders it problematic, requiring the construction of new forms of narrative. See Osborne, *The Politics of Time*, 134-159. We can see this updating of the tradition of storytelling in relation to the temporal and technological forms of the present in Mroué's work.

[15] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised Edition,

Hegel observed had come to replace the "morning prayers" – offers a "vivid figure" to envision that community of individuals who, although they will never meet and never know each other, feel connected by a sense of belonging together. Whereas the reading of the newspaper is "performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull", as Anderson writes, each reader "is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion."[16]

This eighteenth-century model of nation-formation, however, is not quite suitable to describe a nation-state like Lebanon, founded on the fragile balance of a highly-parcelled, sectarian and multi-confessional system of representative democracy. It is not accidental that, in his review of the re-issue of Anderson's *Imagined Communities* and his later book *Under Three Flags*, T. J. Clark takes the case of Lebanon and the rise of Hezbollah to be emblematic of the global phenomena of the dwindling of the nation-state as "a productive, history-making force," and its replacement by the "old", and once displaced, "model of togetherness" represented by religious communities.[17] The continuation of sectarian divisions in the post-civil war society, and the rise of competing para-state forces, make clear how in place of a "national" community, Lebanon is rather composed by a mosaic of confessional communities, each catered for by a different press or media outlet. Responding to such a context, and in open opposition to the practices of de-individuation typical of communitarian policies, much of Mroué's work strives to address his audience not as an homogenous mass of people but a group of free individuals. If the spectators of *Looking for a Missing Employee* are to be considered at all as a contemporary embodiment of the storyteller's "community of listeners", then, this is a newly formed, temporary and eminently transnational community, not united by common experiences nor shared language. The intention to transcend both the affiliations with sectarian and national communities (even in their pan-Arab version) is notably registered in Mroué's conscious decision to perform the play in English.[18]

(London: Verso, 2006), 25.

[16] Ibid., 35.

[17] As Clark writes: "Certain religions believe they are once again a productive, history-making force. They look on the nation as a dead carapace, which one day soon they may make armed and animate again. Or they may discard it, in favour of other unities. The relation of Hezbollah to Lebanon – 'a non-state within a non-state', as its supporters are fond of saying – is to be generalised. (Perhaps a better formulation from our point of view would be 'a non-nation within a nation all too typical of the breed'.)" T. J. Clark, "In a Pomegranate Chandelier", London Review of Books 28, no. 18, 21 September 2006: https://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n18/tj-clark/in-a-pomegranate-chandelier.

[18] Other performances are in Arabic, accompanied by English (or other languages) surtitles. The decision to perform *Looking for a Missing Employee* in English is motivated mainly by the particular set-up of the play, that, as we will see,

In the following chapter I will consider the way in which different units of information, each bound to a particular technology, media and cultural form – newspaper clippings, VHS tapes, television broadcastings, propaganda posters, videos uploaded on the Internet – have been incorporated and used by Mroué as a primary material in the construction of stories. If, as many have argued, there has been a resurgence of storytelling in contemporary art practices,[19] I am interested in analysing under which forms and modes has such a return taken place and how these novel forms take as their point of departure precisely those modern media that have rendered problematic the representation of (historical) events in story form. The gaps, distortions, inconsistencies and contradictions of the documentary records of a particular event often serve as a narrative trigger, if not the main focus of these stories. In this sense, rather than of a prelapsarian return to the tradition of storytelling, it would be better to speak of a re-invention of the form through the incorporation of the technical resources and cultural forms of the historical present.

As Osborne has rightly claimed, the re-coupling of story and information in contemporary art is often enacted in the medium of digital video, mostly through the incorporation of oral testimonies (he cites Zaatari's practice as emblematic of such a development).[20] As we have seen in the previous chapter, many of Zaatari's works have a strong narrative component. In this chapter, however, I intend to focus exclusively on the medium of performance in order to analyse how the 'liveness' of this art practice competes with and puts into question the 'liveness' and 'real-time' unfolding of the news in TV-broadcasting and digital communications. I will do so by first looking at a number of Mroué's multi-media performances and non-academic lectures; and will conclude by considering Raad's use of the form of the lecture-performance as one of the means to present the contents of the Atlas Group archive. A terminological specification is here required. Whereas Mroué's and Raad's 'lecture-performances' are often similar in appearance in terms of set up – the artists sit at a desk with a laptop computer and project images on the wall at their

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necessitates the technically mediated eye contact between actor and audience. Clearly, English is not a neutral medium, but it has by now become the *lingua franca* that subtends the circulation of contemporary art in an increasingly globalised field. For a consideration of the strategies used to foreground the "politics of language" through refusal of translation in Walid Sadek's works, see Rogers, *Postwar Art and Historical Roots of Beirut's Cosmopolitanism*, 61-67.

[19] See for instance: T. J. Demos, "Storytelling In/As Contemporary Art," in *The Storyteller*, ed. Claire Gilman and Margaret Sundell (Zurich: Independent Curators International and JRP Ringier, 2010), 83-107.

[20] Osborne, "Information, Story, Image", 136-146.

back – I will use the term 'non-academic lecture' when considering Mroué's work and the more widespread category of 'lecture-performance' in analysing Raad's presentations. The difference in these designations is not simply one of idiosyncratic nomenclature, but importantly registers the different genealogies of Mroué's and Raad's artistic practice: the former originating from the context of theatre, in which performances tend to question the physical space in which they take place; the latter originating from the tradition of conceptual and discursive art practices.

Whereas in the previous chapters, we have considered the question of reference in relation to the documentary phase (Chapter 1), and the question of the production of meaning through the juxtaposition of documents in the archival phase (Chapter 2), here the attention moves towards the narrativity of the historical knowledge, that is the presentation of historical experiences in a communicable and intelligible form. Narrative, as Hayden White writes, "might well be considered a solution to a problem of general human concern, namely, the problem of how to translate *knowing* into *telling*, the problem of fashioning human experience into a form assimilable to structures of meaning that are generally human rather than culture specific."[21] I will consider different narrative forms – stories, historical chronicles, anecdotes, parables – as they appear in a selected number of Mroué's and Raad's works, and I will examine how such narratives intersect not just with information media, but also with the system of discourses in the analytical frame of the lecture or in the technocratic space of the archive. In these artists' work, I will argue, atrophied historical experiences, as well as their reified media simulacra, are turned once again into an exchangeable currency and snatched from the instantaneous oblivion to which some want them destined.

3.1 Screens on Stage: Rabih Mroué's Narrative Theatre

For the entire duration of *Looking for a Missing Employee*, the stage remains empty, devoid of actors, as if to substantiate the absence of the eponymous character. The deserted set consists of two equally large screens, one on each side of the stage, and a wooden desk and a chair, painted white, placed in the centre facing the viewers. Behind the chair, on the same level of the desk, hangs a small white board. Here the image of Mroué (or Actor 1) is projected in real-time while he

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[21] Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality", *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1, On Narrative (Autumn, 1980), 5. Emphasis in the original.

Figure 24. Rabih Mroué, *Looking for a Missing Employee*, 2003. Performance at Ashkal Alwan, Beirut.

narrates the events related to the case of the disappearance, staring straight into a camera placed frontally at the level of his head. Vacated from the stage, where he is only admitted as image, Mroué sits in one of the seats that are usually reserved for the audience, transgressing the customary division between actor and spectator. Another camera is placed vertically above the desk on which he lays out and flips through the pages of a pile of notebooks; the image is transmitted directly to the screen on the left-hand side of the stage (Figure 24). The second actor, visual artist and designer Hatem Imam (or Actor 2), also takes a seat among the audience, in the front row to the right of the stage. He too stays in front of a small table with a white board on which he will draw and write the names and locations referred to in the performance, providing a

sort of visual diagram of the events, so that the viewers can follow the intricate story. The drawings appear on the right screen. This complex set up in which the eye contact between actor and audience can only happen through the mediation of a technical apparatus (camera, projector and screen) has been defined by the artist as a form of "oblique theatre" in which "convergence occurs through avoidance."[22]

Although print media are the ostensible content of the performance, the set up clearly mimics one of the basic technical properties of another communication medium: television 'live broadcasting'. The main purpose of live broadcasting is that of giving access to an event that is happening elsewhere – be it the World Cup football matches or the speeches of the Secretary General of Hezbollah addressing his gathered supporters from an unknown location[23] – by transmitting its image *as it unfolds* to a geographically dispersed audience. If theatre and the performing arts are characterized by their existence in the *here and now*, television's greatest prowess – common to other real-time tele-technologies – is its ability to be simultaneously *there* and *here* (both on the scene and in the living room), *now*. This spatial distance and temporal simultaneity affords the viewer with a vantage point from which to observe the events undisturbed. As Mroué explains, because it is impossible "to watch the event while being in the midst of it, the medium … transports us outside the event and allows us to follow it from a distance."[24] Analogously, in *Looking for a Missing Employee*, the event of the performance happens amongst the audience, making impossible or rather difficult for the spectators to assist to it; they have thus to turn towards the image projected on the stage in order to more fully apprehend what is taking place. Further, the very impression of a face-to-face connection between actor and audience is permitted precisely by the formatted plural singularity of the one-to-many system of televisual dissemination, in which staring in the eye of a camera is as staring in the eyes of each spectator alike.

Shortly before the end of the performance, when Mroué has concluded his narration, he stares silently at the camera, his image still lingering behind the desk in the middle of the stage. Viewers have learned to recognize that image, transmitted by a close-circuit television, as related to the actor's physical presence amongst them, and yet, Mroué is not there any longer. He has

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[22] Rabih Mroué, "Theatre in Oblique" in *Image(s), mon amour. Fabrications*, ed. Aurora Fernández Polanco (Madrid: Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo, 2013), 253. By virtue of such a performative engagement with the space of the theatre, Mroué would be more inclined to define this theatre piece as a lecture-*performance*.

[23] These are the two examples that Mroué gives in his text "Theatre in Oblique", 253, 254.

[24] Ibid., 254, 255.

discreetly left the stalls, while the image, which continues to be projected on stage, has changed from live transmission to its playback. It is only when the lights are switched on, announcing the end of the play, that the spectators notice the absence of the actor. At this point, the actor's body, that was already being displaced by his image throughout the whole performance, has been completely replaced by the mediation of a recording device.[25] Rather than regarding the hierarchic reversal and final substitution of the physical action by its image as a symptom of derealization or the replacement of reality by its virtual simulacra,[26] it is more fruitful to see this dramatic device as an exemplification of the all-too-real structural condition by which our first-hand experience of (historical) events happens today mainly through the images transmitted on TV screens.[27] Replicating this familiar scenario, Mroué confronts us not with the event itself, but with a *mediatized* event: namely an event filtered, framed and constructed by the medium which conveys it. By switching from real time broadcasting to recorded footage, he points then to the fundamental aporia of television's temporality: caught between the ideology of 'liveness' on one side, and its technical repeatability on the other.

Doane has described the temporal dimension of television as that of an insistent "presentness", a celebration of the instantaneous that can be described through the verbal tense of the present continuous *'This-is-going-on'* in opposition to the closed past of the formula *'That-has-been',* that Roland Barthes famously associated with photography. The technological base of television, as is exemplified in the play's set-up, allows for instantaneous recording, transmission and reception, thus serving as a ground for "the pervasive ideology of 'liveness'" through which

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[25] The total eclipse of the actor's body and its full replacement by technical devices can be observed in Mroué and Lina Majdalanie's play *33rpm and a Few Seconds* (2012).

[26] This extreme position can be detected for instance in the totalizing media pessimism of Jean Baudrillard. In a text entitled "The Murder of the Real", he holds that "in our virtual world, the question of the Real, of the referent, of the subject and its object, can no longer even be posed." Jean Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 62.

[27] In recounting the experience of the 2006 war, Mroué writes: "We witnessed the events first-hand on the screen in front of us; Israeli bombs would strike a neighbouring street and we would see them first on our TV screen, then look outside our window to make sure this was real. As if the image of the event was preceding the event itself". See Rabih Mroué, "Theater in Oblique", 250. For a discussion of the image that becomes event, see Jon Rich, "The Blood of the Victim: Revolution in Syria and the Birth of the Image-Event", *eflux* 26, June 2011. https://www.e-flux.com/journal/26/67963/the-blood-of-the-victim-revolution-in-syria-and-the-birth-of-the-image-event/. For Rich, the image-event is a strictly Syrian phenomenon, created by Syrian protestors during the first years of the revolution which has later turned into a war.

the medium makes its claim of realism and truth-value. Yet, this capacity of the medium for recording and relaying the present instantaneously, also instigates the compulsion to repeat – the endless replay – whose use is evident particularly in the case of televised catastrophes.[28] Further, the peculiar impression of immediacy and directness of 'live' broadcasts, as Derrida pointed out, makes one easily forget the mediations and fabrication of the technical apparatus that go into their *production,* or to use Walid Raad's phrasing the "complicated mediations by which they acquire their immediacy".[29] "Whatever the apparent immediacy of the transmission or broadcast," Derrida writes, this is always the product of selection, editing, performativity and a negotiation of choices and framings that precede the recording and transmission.[30] Derrida terms this complex process of "fictional fashioning" of the news, a matter of "artifactuality"; Mroué, in a text referring to another of his plays, defines it the "fabrication of truth."[31] *Looking for a Missing Employee* deconstructs not only the way in which stories are told in the print media, but through its formal set up, investigates also the way in which they are reported by television. Similar to that of a TV anchorman, his incorporeal image marks the divorce of live presence and direct embodiment.

If Mroué's work can be said to reactivate storytelling this is, clearly, not achieved through the wholesale return to a bygone tradition, but rather through its essential re-invention and re-articulation. In the specific context of the Arab culture, the traditional storyteller, or *hakawātī,* is a figure typically bound to a particular group: the tribe, the community, the family. The stories, exchanged among this restricted circle, tend to reinforce the sense of self-worth and attachment to the community by relating heroic deeds, acts of bravery, suffering, and oppression.[32] Transmitted from one generation to the other, the tales communicate the lore, commonplaces and historical

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[28] Doane, "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe", 251, 255, 258.

[29] Raad, "Let's Be Honest, the Rain Helped", 44.

[30] Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, *Echographies of Television: Filmed Interviews*, trans. Jennifer Bajorek (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 3, 4, 40.

[31] Rabih Mroué, "The Fabrication of Truth", in *Tamass: Contemporary Arab Representations* (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 2002), 114-117. In this text, Mroué discusses the performance-video *Three Posters*, made in collaboration with Elias Khoury in 2000.

[32] Present in Lebanon – especially in Saida, Tyre, and generally the South – until the 1940s and 1950s, the figure of the traditional *hakawātī* was supposed to entertain the people gathered in a café or other public spaces by telling stories he had heard or, preferably, experienced himself. Shrouded in a moral message or conveying general truths, the stories were tailor-made to suit the rank or social position of the listeners. See Samira Aghacy, "Elias Khoury's The Journey of Little Gandhi: Fiction and Ideology", *The International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28 (May 1996), 164.

self-understanding of the community, and often stage an antagonistic relation to the city, modernity and the urban experience. In stark contrast to this tradition, the stories that Mroué tells are radically different and consistently modern in both form and content.[33] Constructed by incorporating new technologies of representation and modern media as both formal devices and subject matter, his performances focus on historical defeats and failures, problems that remain without answers, and documentary records riddled with uncertainties, eschewing any moral judgement or finality.

Mroué's antagonistic relation with traditional storytelling and his interest for modern media can be mapped out on the artist's early formation. Trained in theatre at the Lebanese University in Beirut, he earned a degree in acting in 1989.[34] One of his instructors at the time was playwright, director and actor, Roger Assaf who, in the late 1970s, founded a theatrical group named Hakawātī. Promoting a revival of pre-war theatre through the reinterpretation of the *hakawātī* tradition, the theatre group's plays drew their subject matter from the unfolding political violences, and the everyday reality.[35] Whilst recognizing Assaf's influence on his practice, Mroué sees this in negative terms, as a model from which he has strived to take distance, being very critical of what he perceives as the regressive tendencies of the *hakawātī* movement. One of Mroué's first productions, the theatrical adaptation of Elias Khoury's 1989 novel *The Journey of Little Gandhi,* while still rooted in traditional *hakawātī,* can be seen as a first step towards the modernization of the form.[36] Khoury's novel, in fact, borrows directly from the popular tradition of *hakawātī,* embodied specifically in the figure of Alice, an ageing prostitute who relates a number

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[33] I am grateful to Mroué for pointing out this difference to me.

[34] As Mroué remembers, his education pivoted around twentieth century European drama. The curriculum was structured so that each academic term was dedicated to different acting techniques and theatrical methods of Western modern theatre (i.e. Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre; Constantin Stanislavski's 'system'; body theatre etc.). Rabih Mroué and Chad Elias, "Interview" in *In Focus: On Three Posters 2004 by Rabih Mroué*, ed. Chad Elias, Tate Research Publication, 2015, http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/in-focus/on-three-posters-rabih-mroue/interview-with-rabih-mroue.

[35] The theatrical vanguard of the 1970s, represented by figures such as Roger Assaf and Rémond Jebara, is in line with the contemporary development of the Lebanese novel, that according to novelist Elias Khoury was only born during the war and in response to it. This genre of experimental theatre, in the same way as the novel, was characterized by an interest in recording the quotidian, and transcribing the reality of the civil wars into a crafted narrative. Elias Khoury, "The Novel, the Novelist and the Lebanese Civil Wars", Fourth Farhat J. Ziadeh Distinguished Lecture in Arab and Islamic Studies, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilisation, University of Washington, Seattle 2006: http://depts.washington.edu/nelc/pdf/event_files/ziadeh_series/2006lebanon-eliaskhoury.pdf

[36] Elias Khoury, *The Journey of Little Gandhi* (London: Picador Paper, 2009).

of stories, among which that of the novel titular character, Gandhi, a shoe shine killed by a stray bullet on the day the Israeli invaded West Beirut in 1982. In the style of traditional *hakawātī*, Alice's stories, born out of digressions, are fragmentary and taken straight from her personal experience. These tales, sometimes already a re-telling of other characters' stories, are in turn reported by an intra-diegetic narrator, an unnamed young writer, who has learned them from Alice. By combining the traditional *hakawātī* mode with a "modernist multiple narrational technique and metafictional devices", Khoury's novel constitutes in itself a stylistic innovation of the form, meant to reflect a plurality of voices and registers and to represent the hollowing out of the monologic discourses put forward by different political ideologies.[37] Mroué's theatre rendition likewise transposes the polyphonic, dialogical structure of the novel – its complex system of telling and re-telling – by employing a number of staging experiments that serve to undermine and deconstruct the authority of the speaking positions.

To this more strictly theatrical background, we should add Mroué's working experience in the early 1990s at Future TV, the Lebanese television station where Zaatari was also employed, the profound impact of which can be gauged in his later theatrical practice. Responsible for a number of jobs including filming, editing and directing, it was during this period that he first started to experiment with video technology, while gaining a much better understanding of the ways in which the media fabricate a particular image of reality. This technical expertise coupled with a will to interrogate the mechanisms and functions of the media would later inform and animate Mroué's distinctive multimedia theatre, whose principal aim is precisely to question and deconstruct "the ideological roles assigned to images."[38] Its inaugural act can be located in the production of *Come In Sir, We Will Wait for You Outside* (1998), written by Mroué in collaboration with the artist and architect Tony Chakar and Adnan Khoury.[39] Produced for and staged during a three-month long cultural season curated by Elias Khoury to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Nabka,[40]

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[37] Aghacy, "Elias Khoury's The Journey of Little Gandhi", 176. However, in Aghacy's opinion, Khoury's attempt to construct a dialogic, or polyphonic, discourse is thwarted by the overbearing imposition of an authorial point of view, that the characters' and the narrator's voices simply serve to echo. In her words, in spite of the "diversity of voices and languages" presented, "it is the narrator who controls and manipulates them by pulling them into his own frame of reference", that is, in turn, the author's frame of reference as well. Ibid., 164.

[38] Mroué and Elias, "Interview".

[39] The play was staged and played by Rabih Mroué, Tony Chakar, Abla Khoury and Samer Qaddoura in the Théâtre de Beyrouth, Beirut, 3 – 6 July 1998. For the script of the play, see Rabih Mroué and Tony Chakar, "Come in Sir, We Will Wait for You Outside", trans. Tony Chakar, *Discourse* 24, no.1 (Winter 2002): 99–110.

[40] The program titled *50 Nabka and Resistance* comprised a series of lectures and presentations.

this play, that signals a clear departure from the forms of theatre he had been taught at university, has been described by the artist as one stage within a process of "unlearning" that brought him to question and rethink some of the most basic theatrical conventions.[41] In the play, openly contravening customary acting rules, the four actors employ microphones to project their voices, wear everyday clothes and act as themselves without using character names. Sitting on rotating chairs, at various points, they turn their back on the audience to watch the videotapes that are screened on three television monitors placed in niches on a fixed black wall at the back of the stage. Besides the TV monitors, the technical equipment of the play includes three video cameras, three VCRs, several VHS videotapes, a stereo, and a slide machine. While the videocameras, recording and projecting images of the actors (and the audience) in real time on the television sets, highlight the capacity of the medium for live transmission, the use of VHS tapes, containing, among others, television footage of pre-occupation Palestine and of the construction of the state of Israel, point to "the archival potential of video technology."[42] In a particularly striking sequence, Actor 4 reveals, step by step, how to fabricate an emotionally charged image, on which an external and ideological meaning can be appended. First, it is explained, one has to individuate the right subject (a close-up on a woman's face in her 60s); then select the right section of footage (when the woman wipes her face with a tissue); use the special effect of slow motion to obtain a dramatizing effect; and finally apply a music score (sad and sentimental music) and a male voice-over reciting few lines from a patriotic poem. Turning the stage into a sort of editing table, the actor shows and deconstructs the processes of *fabrications* by which a subject of speech is muted and turned into a silent screen over which the discourse of ideology is imposed, overdetermining the meaning of the image as a result.

In both *Come In Sir* and *Looking for a Missing Employee*, the action of the body on stage is either frustrated or de-centred, given over to technical devices. In a text significantly entitled "On The Theatrical Act: A Matter of Speech and Distance", Lina Saneh (later Majdalanie), Mroué's partner and life-time artistic collaborator, describes the trajectory that has led them from a practice "centred on the body of the actor" and his/her "physical work", as epitomized in early plays such as Mroué's *Extension 19* (1997) and Saneh's *Oviria* (1997), to works that privilege instead the speech (act) and the image. If the initial emphasis that they placed on the "play of the

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[41] Mroué and Elias, "Interview".

[42] Ibid.

body" disengaged from the requirement to imitate a coherent action was already meant to undo dramatic representation (or what Saneh calls the "literary", "academic", "bourgeois" or "psychological" theatre), it is through the prominence later given to speech and the technically mediated image that they come to replace dramatic with narrative representation.[43] By this I mean that in both their individual and collaborative works, actions are not performed and enacted by characters on stage, but rather told and reported through either the actor's speech or some technical apparatus, thus creating a critical distance from the deeds recounted and engendering a narrative situation.

Gilberto Perez makes some useful clarifications on the age-old and often unclear distinction between 'drama' and 'narrative'.[44] Traced back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, such distinction has often been construed, erroneously according to Perez, as the opposition between *mimesis* and *diegesis*, or the difference between 'showing' and 'telling'. Given that the word *mimesis* (as used by Aristotle) applies to any form of representation (including pictorial, musical, narrative and dramatic representation) and that the world *diegesis* has a similar wide scope designating such general a field as the world of the story, and hence the content that the *mimesis*, in whichever form, brings to light, the former opposition is clearly unfit to describe the difference between drama and narrative. As for the dichotomy of showing and telling, Perez reminds us that in Greek theatre, drama "is not about showing, but about speaking". The medium of both, narrative and drama, is therefore words, with the difference that: in drama, these words are wholly given over to dramatic characters interpreted by actors in a performance; while in narrative, these are the words of a

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[43] Lina Saneh, "On the Theatrical Act: A Matter of Speech and Distance", in *Homeworks II: A Forum in Cultural Practices,* ed. Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, Masha Refka, Mohamad Hamdan, Yussef Bazzi, and Zeina Osman (Beirut: Ashkal Alwan, 2005), 87. Saneh explains how in *Oviria* she had tried to "go to the end of the experience of the corporeal" by ridding the theatre of everything expect the actors' bodies, who moved until they collapsed for exhaustion. Yet, there was "nothing in their attitude to evoke heroism, modesty, or complacency." However, as she reflects, while in the past a theatre uniquely based on the body had been important for challenging the static conservatism of theatrical conventions, after thirty years of theatrical experiments in happenings or performance art, its uncritical reproduction risked to degenerate into "fatal sclerosis". Such reflections and considerations on the role of the body in performance art and its critical potential for the representation of the historical present form the subject matter of Mroué and Saneh's jointly-authored and performed play *Who's Afraid of Representation?* (2003 – 2004). For a consideration of the role of the body in Mroué and Saneh's plays, see Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, "The Body on Stage and Screen: Collaboration and the Creative Process in Rabih Mroué's *Photo-Romance*", *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 25, (Autumn/Winter 2010), 70-79.

[44] Perez, "The Narrative Sequence", in *The Material Ghost*, 59, 60, 63, 82, 83.

narrator, reporting the events, and occasionally giving them other to a character. The distinction between drama and narrative is thus better formulated as a distinction between enacting and telling, between a representation that imitates by action and speech, and a representation that takes the form of a report. In fact, as Perez notes, Aristotle's term for narrative in the *Poetics* is *apaggelia*, meaning "to report, to bring tidings." Perez uses such a distinction to analyse Brecht's 'epic theatre' as an anti-dramatic and narrative theatre. The 'alienation effect' (*Verfremdungseffekt*) in his reading consists not so much in a style of performance producing estrangement and dis-identification, but rather in the fact that the spectators are at any time aware, and constantly reminded of, that what they are presented with is not the action itself, but an account of it that, as any account, is inevitably partial and incomplete and can be supplanted, challenged or supplemented by other such accounts. In a similar vein, Saneh remarks: "any act, … any event, is not in itself representable. All representation, theatrical or otherwise will never be able to capture and reproduce the event, the moment, when it happens; it can only be an account."[45]

By dispensing with the illusion of presenting an event as a whole, Mroué (and Saneh's) plays function precisely as a narrative account: a way of reporting through partial re-enactment and a series of fragments, whose selection and construction is made plain as part of the work of representation. The action is not performed on stage by actors playing a role or character, but referred to, illustrated or dissected. Further by incorporating pieces of information sourced from different media – the modern harbingers of tidings – the narrative space in Mroué's multi-media plays and, as we will later see, in his non-academic lectures, fractures into a mosaic of reports, all partial and incomplete, which are played up alongside each other, deconstructed and analysed. The events that Mroué narrates can be considered as "modernists events" in the sense in which Hayden White intends this expression: events that resist "inherited categories and conventions for assigning [them] meaning". Modernist events are defined not only by their wider scope, scale and magnitude, but by the fact that they are reported through new technologies of representation that make them increasingly impervious to be represented in story form. Like Benjamin, White reflects on the "fraying" or "potential dissolution" of the cultural form of the story. Moving a technical stage further than Benjamin in his analysis of information media, White examines the impact that the "electronic revolution" has had on the very possibility of representing historical events through traditional storytelling techniques. The hypervisibility of historical events enabled by modern

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[45] Saneh, "On the Theatrical Act", 93.

media (later intensified by the digital revolution) produces an archive of "photo and video documentation" that, as White writes, "is so full of details that it is difficult to work up" into "a single 'objective' story." Moreover, in many instances, the spectre of manipulation that haunts such documentation discourages any effort to derive from it explanations of the occurrences it records. While traditional storytelling is deemed unfit to the task, the "stylistic innovations of modernism" provide, according to White, better instruments for representing such modernist events.[46]

Such "stylistic innovations" have often been conflated with anti-narrative tendencies. If instead, following Ricoeur, we consider them not as a refutation of narrative, but as "modifications in narrative form", we can see how, far from signalling the death of storytelling, they contribute to its innovation and re-invention.[47] Without pursuing a delusory *telos* of objectivity or the fiction of a single account, Mroué's narratives approach, or as Bruzzi would say "approximate", the events from many different, even contradictory angles and points of view.[48] By dissecting and scrutinizing the 'fullness' of the documentary records as well as their blank spots, and at the same time paying attention to photo-manipulations for the insights they can offer, Mroué combines and juxtaposes representations found in the media with personal stories, anecdotes, and enquiries.

3.2 History-Telling as Chronicle

If there are such things like modernist events, for sheer scale, duration, complexity and traumatic dimension, the civil wars in Lebanon can be surely included among them. As we have seen in the introduction, the enormous number of warring factions involved, including splinter groups within the larger blocs, the shifting alliances and fast mutating roster of combatants, the interplay of local, regional and international forces each pursuing their respective interests, frustrate traditional narrative structures establishing linear chains of causality or even chronological markings – a clear beginning and end. The unresolved character of the conflict, encapsulated in the

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[46] Hayden White, "The Modernist Event" in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modern Event,* ed. Vivian Sobchack (Oxford: Routledge, 2013), 21, 22, 23, 32.

[47] Paul Ricoeur, "Decline: An End to an Art of Narration?", in *Time and Narrative, Vol. 2*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 19-28.

[48] Hila Peleg and Stella Bruzzi, "Towards 'Approximation'", in *Rabih Mroué: A BAK Critical Reader in Artists' Practices,* eds. Maria Hlavajova, Jill Winder and Cosmin Costinas (Utrecht: BAK, 2012), 46-70.

formula 'no victor, no vanquished', and the persistence of divisive and competing versions of events bolstered by different confessional and political groups, render plain how difficult it is to summarize the wars, let alone arrive at any agreement as to their meaning and adequate representation. Further, modern media have played a vital role not just in the representation of the conflict, but *strategically* as a powerful weapon in their own right. As Elias has remarked, the "war fought in the streets was duplicated and intertwined with" a war waged through and over media images, including television footage, martyr posters and martyr's video-testimonies broadcasted after the accomplishment of the mission they were made to announce officially.[49] Commemorating actions that could not have been witnessed to directly, media images were often more effective in mobilizing specific constituencies than the actions themselves thanks to their capacity to amplify through its divulgation the damage caused to the enemy. The instrumental use made of information, however, turned it into an highly unreliable source of knowledge. As Rasha Salti remembers, "every warring faction had its narrative, its ideological discourse and system of interpretation. There were at least two versions to every incident, scuffle, exchange of fire. … we had to listen to several radio stations to synthesize real news, extract real facts."[50]

How to *tell* the (hi)stories of the civil wars then? And how to do so in a way that does not privilege one single point of view, personal memory or ideological perspective? How to avoid the nihilistic and trouble-free claim that the wars were an irrational and arbitrary phenomenon that defeats any attempt at comprehension, and that therefore such an attempt would only be a "futile exercise"?[51] Moreover, how to refrain from ordaining accidents in coherent chains of causality that foist an image of clarity and completeness upon a hopelessly vast and contradictory mass of documents and testimonies? How to emplot the events and the actions of characters without entrapping them in a univocal structure of meaning that, although imposed from the outside, is made to seem as if it had been immanent in the events all along? How to tell such (hi)stories without bracketing them in the illusion of a closed chronology that blinds one to the actual seepage of past sectarian and civil strife which still stains the present? How to conceive of a narrative whose ending does not amount to a closure, but rather leaves closure and resolution in suspension and opens even more questions where one is expecting to find answers? How to speak of subjective experiences that complicate and challenge the cohesive image submitted by

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[49] Elias, *Posthumous Images*, 16.

[50] Dagher et al., "Curating Beirut: A Conversation on the Politics of Representation", 116.

[51] Rabih Mroué and Fadi Toufic, "Authors' Note", in *How Nancy Thought That Everything Was an April Fool's Joke*, trans. Amal Issa (Beirut: Ashkal Alwan, 2012), 9.

communitarian or political affiliation, without at the same time leaping into an individual psychologism that prevents self-scrutiny and criticism? How to tell such (hi)stories without having to subscribe to the fiction of a consensual narrative, one that denies the right of different stories to co-exist and the agreement on which continues, unsurprisingly, to be postponed? To this day the national school curriculum for the study of history in Lebanon stops at the founding of the Republic in 1943. Although the reform and updating of history textbooks was prescribed as part of the Taif peace agreement, all attempts to collect and systematize conflict memories during the peace-building process have failed mainly due to the interference of powerful political interests.[52]

How Nancy Wished That Everything Was an April Fool's Joke (2007) can be seen as an attempt to tell such a story while grappling with the questions raised above.[53] Whereas in other works Mroué's focus tends to be latched on micro-narratives – such as the comparative small affair of Rafat Suleiman's disappearance – in *Nancy* the scope is distinctively larger, closer to the totalizing aspirations of historiography. Written in collaboration with Fadi Toufic, the script follows the meandering and at times dizzying logic of political transformations over a period spanning from 1973 to 2007 – the year when the play was first presented (note how such a temporal span exceeds the chronological markers 1975-1990 that are conventionally used to delimit and contain the event of the wars). The unresolved, disavowed, and still sensitive place that the civil wars occupy in the country's collective consciousness is made evident in the case of censorship that endangered the public presentation of the play in Lebanon. The Department of Print and Audiovisual Media of the Lebanese General Security, a censorship division of the Ministry of Interior, banned the performance of the piece a week before its scheduled national premiere without providing any clarification concerning the reasons of the ban. It was only thanks to intercession of the Minister of Culture Tarek Mitri, who took the case to the Council of Ministers, that the permission to present the play, uncensored, was finally granted.[54]

The title of the piece could be misleading as no character named Nancy actually features in

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[52] See Betty Gilbert-Sleiman, "The Reform of History School Textbooks in Lebanon: Collecting Conflict Memories in a Peace-building Process (1996-2001)", in *Archives, Museums, Collecting Practices in the Modern Arab World,* eds. Sonia Mejcher-Atassi and John Pedro Schwartz (Fernham: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 121-139; and Hassan M. Fattah, "Lebanon's history textbooks sidestep its civil war", *The New York Times*, 10 January, 2007: https://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/10/world/africa/10iht-beirut.4163377.html

[53] Produced by Ashkal Alwan, the play was first presented at the Masrah al-Madina Theatre on the 30th and 31st August 2007.

[54] Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, "Lebanon Bans Tale of Fighters in Militias", *The New York Times* (18 August, 2007): https://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/18/theater/18perf.html.

it; as for the mention of the April fool's day, that might be, as Jim Quilty ventures, an oblique reference to the Ayn al-Rumana massacre on 13th April 1975, that is generally identified as the trigger of the wars outbreak.[55] Albeit painstakingly accurate in the reconstruction of the extremely complex network of continuously shifting political and military alliances, and the conflicts that ensued among different Lebanese parties, as well as various other international organizations operating on the national territory, the play does not aspire to provide an objective and authoritative alternative history to revise or add to the cacophony of already existent versions. Rather than being reported by an impartial and detached voice, the events are narrated from the unreliable, openly biased and internal position of four Lebanese citizens and civil war militants – played by Ziad Antar, Hatem Imam, Lina Saneh, and Mroué himself – who fought in different militias and who, despite ending up killed at the end of each story they tell, never seem to die. As the story (or mosaic of stories) progresses, they come back to life just to be killed once more in the next battle, ambush or suicide operation.

After introducing themselves with their real names and places of provenience, the actors squash beside each other into a couch meant for three, and start taking turns recounting their experiences of the wars. While the actors' physical action is nil, their solipsistic (hi)story-telling drives the play. Speaking directly to the audience and always facing forward, the actors never address each other, expect from a few occasions when Saneh's character interjects different dates – whether to correct the temporal placing of one's anecdote or to highlight the historical recurrence of some events and scenes, such as the two Israeli invasions (1978 and 1982) and the sectarian battles between the Druze and the Maronites (1860 and 1983).[56] At times their tales overlap and interlock, as when one character appears to be the murderer of the previous storyteller. Yet, whilst representing the two (or more) sides of the same event, the characters never acknowledge the identity of their victim or killer beyond his or her political affiliation (a Phalangist,

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[55] Jim Quilty, "How Nancy Wished That Everything Was an April Fool's Joke", *Bidoun* 13 (Winter 2008): https://bidoun.org/articles/how-nancy-wished-that-everything-was-an-april-fool-s-joke.

[56] The 1860 Mount Lebanon Civil War was the culmination of a peasant uprising which began in the North of Mount Lebanon as a rebellion of Maronite peasants against their Druze overlords. The wars drew international intervention, most notably the French in support of the Christians and the English of the Druze. The 1983 War of the Mountain was a sub-conflict during the civil wars that saw the Christian Lebanese Forces militia (LF) and the official Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) against a coalition of anti-government leftist-leaning militias led by the Druze Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), backed by the PLO and Syria. As Traboulsi notes while analysing the 1860 civil war, history "has a remarkable knack for re-actualising past events and scenes." Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon,* 39.

Figure 25. Rabih Mroué, *How Nancy Wished That Everything Was an April Fool's Joke*, 2007. Performance at Masrah al-Madina.

a Communist or a Morabitun),[57] in the same way as they do not recognize the presence of the other characters onstage, but carry on unperturbed with their self-centred monologues. As if they were discrete and separate entities, and not mutually imbricated fragments of the same experience, the stories ricochet off one another. The different narrative strands weave a dense web of connections whose reach spreads beyond the confines of Lebanon connecting distant sites of war riven by similar sectarian strife – Afghanistan, Yugoslavia – through the smuggling of arms and of fundamentalist ideas.

Suspended above each actor's head is a microphone and a rectangular screen, featuring a larger-than-life political poster bearing the character's portrait and reflecting the different phases of his or her political and military career. Every time the character dies, a new poster, exhibiting the iconography and slogans of his or her latest political affiliation, lights up on the correspondent screen (Figure 25). Designed by Samar Maakaron, the posters are based on a collection of civil war era political posters compiled by graphic artist Zeina Maasri.[58] The posters fulfil the function of

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[57] Morabitun was an Independent Nasserist Movement fighting alongside the Palestinians.

[58] Zeina Maasri, *Off the Wall: Political Posters of the Lebanese Civil War* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009). Maasri is also the curator of the exhibition *Signs of Conflict: Political Posters of Lebanon's Civil War*, produced by Ashkal Alwan with the support of the Heinrich Böll Foundation in the framework of *Home Works IV: A Forum of Cultural Practices*, Beirut 12

memory aids, helping the audience – especially when less familiar with the intricacies of the Lebanese wars – to keep track of the four characters' multiple changes of ideological association. Besides such a practical purpose, these posters are an integral element to understand the articulation of the subject's identity through the mediation of the group formation. These political posters, indeed, as Maasri has amply demonstrated in her study, played an important role during the wars, serving as "symbolic sites of struggle over meaning and political discourse."[59] Martyr posters are a particularly affective subspecies of political posters buttressing the formation of a dominant model of heroic subjectivity. Resting upon an expansive notion of martyrdom, they commemorate anyone who, voluntarily or not, dies under enemy fire in the common cause, be it secular or religious, of the front in which he or she fights. As Mroué writes, "in Lebanon, almost anyone who is killed, anyone who dies an unnatural death, is called a martyr", and posters of them can be seen "everywhere".[60] Typically including the martyrs' photographs and quotes, and cloaked in a "rich visual and textual rhetoric" celebrating the party's specific cause, the posters function as "public obituaries" and perform the double role of paying tribute to the dead fighters and appealing to prospective martyrs.[61] Whether honouring murdered political leaders or ordinary fighters who died tragically, martyr posters are still a pervasive presence in the Lebanese landscape. Pasted on walls or hung up on street lamp-posts, they continue to stir up strong sentiments in both those who recognize themselves in their messages and those who forcefully reject them. It is thus not infrequent that posters become object of vandalistic attacks – including

April – 1 May 2008.

[59] Massri, *Off the Wall*, 7.

[60] Jessica Morgan, "Rabih Mroué: 1000 Words", *Artforum International* 48, no. 3, (Nov 2009), 193. Contrary to the Western emphasis on suicide bombers, in Arab culture both those who die in suicide attacks and those who die under enemy fire are described as *shahid,* martyrs*.* Didier Fassin explains how the term martyr "links to a militant rhetoric, the purpose of which is to generate a single condition of heroic victims who through their death, whether voluntary or otherwise, bear witness to their resistance to oppression". Didier Fassin, "The Humanitarian Politics of Testimony: Subjectification through Trauma in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict", *Cultural Anthropology* 23, no. 3, (2008), 541. Giorgio Agamben has pointed out the common root of the words witness and martyr in the Greek *martis*, a term indicating the person who attests to the existence of God by choosing to die rather than betray his/her faith: to bear witness through his/her sacrifice. Similarly, the Arabic word for witness, *shahid* (or *shaheed*), is also used to denote martyrs. Unlike the common witness figures of the survivor and observer who speak in the first or third person, the martyr bears witness without speaking, testifying through their sacrifice, and following their death through their venerated icons. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz. The Witness and The Archive,* trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 26, 27.

[61] Massri, *Off the Wall*, 87.

Figure 26. Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, *Faces*, 2009. Photographic prints with drawings.

bursts of bullets – at the hands of those who oppose their ideas. Yet, as Mroué observes, it is taboo to speak about them: their aura of sacredness makes them akin to "new forms of icons".[62] Given their widespread presence and symbolic power, and despite the reticence which surrounds them, it is not surprising that posters have attracted the attention of several artists and writers (Figure 26).[63] Renowned Palestinian poet Mahmood Darwish has described 1982 Beirut as "a factory for making posters", the "first city in the world to upgrade the making of posters to the level of the daily paper." It is worthy to quote his rendition at length: "Faces on the walls – martyrs freshly emerging from life and the printing presses, *a death which is a remake of itself. One martyr replacing the face of another*, taking his place on the wall, until displaced by yet another, or by rain. Slogans that change place with other slogans, or wipe them out."[64]

Darwish's compelling description conjures up the image of a transcendental subject position, as embodied in the martyr posters. By being subsumed under the collective identity of the group, the individuality of the martyr is effectively occluded and cancelled out as he/she turns into a replaceable figure in the ever-renewed assembly line of sacrificial death. The sense of "a death which is a remake of itself" is thus reflected in the structuring paradox at the core of *Nancy,* for which the dead fighters never die but return to the world of the living, to fight and to become

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[62] Morgan, "Rabih Mroué: 1000 Words", 193.

[63] See for example Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's installation work *Faces* (2009), Jalal Toufic's short-film *Saving Face* (2003), and Elias Khoury's novel *White Masks* (2010), trans. Maia Tabet (Brooklyn: Archipelago Books, 2010).

[64] Mahmoud Darwish, *Memory for Forgetfulness: August, Beirut, 1982*, trans. Ibrahim Muhawi (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 53 (my emphasis).

fallen martyrs again. The steady appearance of a new poster on a monitor signals the prompt appropriation of the martyr's body and death under the banner of the party, movement or militia. At times, this gives rise to tragic-comical or grotesque situations, such as when the body of Antar's character, a Southern Lebanese Communist of Shiite confession, is counted among the Palestinians, alongside whom he fought, and mis-appropriated as a hero-martyr by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine; or when Saneh's character, after she and her family have been slaughtered due to internal discords by her fellows party members in the National Christian Front, is celebrated as a martyr of that same militia.[65]

The characters are not given any psychological or moral depth; they mostly emerge as quick-tempered and impulsive types, heedlessly daring fighters, immediately ready to throw themselves in the battlefield and little inclined to critical reflection or self-scrutiny. Yet, in spite of their passionate and combative zeal, they are unlikely ideological mouthpieces: a fissure opens between the compact and mute image projected by the posters, overridden by ideological messages, and the character's garrulous and brazen monologues, not as easily co-opted. Too fickle and mercurial, the four fighters often lose their bearings, confused by the rapid progressing of the events, and indignant for the entrenched praxis of backstabbing, scheming, internal conflicts and divisions that beset each front and bloc. Whereas their political attachments wear off and their disenchantment looms larger, the characters' willingness to fight does not fade away and, more or less fortuitously, they find themselves eagerly serving in a different, even diametrically opposed, militia.

Although the four characters report tales of action, these actions are so mechanic, mindless or infantile to make them look like puppets, whose human agency is limited by their incapacity to think critically, outside of entrenched structures of reference. Their characterization does not leave any room for identification or empathy, and the merciless image they depict of each and any movement, party or political figure disallows the moral recuperation provided by retrospective explanatory models or rationales. Rather than as fully-fledged *dramatic personae*, these characters

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[65] Broadly speaking, during the first rounds of fighting, there were two main coalitions: the Lebanese National Movement (LNM), a front of leftist, pan-Arab and Syrian nationalist parties, headed by Druze leader Kamal Jumblatt and supporter of the PLO; and the Lebanese Front (LF), a coalition of mainly Christian, right-wing parties, among which the most prominent was the Kataeb Party (the Christian Phalangist Party), and whose main leaders were Camille Chamoun and Pierre Gemayel. While religious affiliations seem to indicate a clear-cut line of division between the two coalitions, a number of Christians militated among the ranks of the LNM. The National Christian Front was a short-lived experiment within the Syrian Social Nationalist Party meant to give a signal that not all Christians were part of the Lebanese Front.

function more as illustrations of social types and historical processes. In spite of the multiplicity and volatility of discourses, a number of patterns can be discerned. A point clearly made is how from the early secular and progressive pretences, the contending positions rapidly morphed into a distinctively sectarian and identitarian direction. This trajectory is well described by Saneh's character initially a member of the Syrian Socialist National Party, proudly holding on to her secular and Nationalist principles, who, after having being object to sectarian attacks by both her comrades and adversaries due to her Christian identity, decides to move to the other side both geographically (from the predominantly Muslim West Beirut to the predominantly Christian East Beirut) and politically by joining the Lebanese Forces.[66]

The other noticeable turn, one that for both political and biographical reasons is particularly significant for Mroué, is the process of Islamicization of the resistance and the defeat of the secular left, and the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP) in particular.[67] Antar's character is the prototypical representative here. Member of a Shiite family from the South, he starts off as a fighter and member of the LCP, and, after an extended militancy in the Amal Party, ends up as an Hezbollah martyr in the late 1980s. This likely scenario serves to bring out the historical failure and shortcomings of the secular left in Lebanon, an aspect that Elias has powerfully mapped out in his careful reading of another work by Mroué, *Three Posters* (2000).[68] Secular left-wing parties, such as the LCP or the Socialist Action Party, that up to the mid-1980s drew most of their constituencies from the disenfranchised and historically underprivileged Shia communities in the south, failed to dismantle the hegemonic confessional system of the country. Inhabiting the society's communitarian structures in a precarious symbiotic balance, these parties embraced practices such as martyrdom operations, replete with a religious rhetoric of sacrifice, in order to further nationalist and secular objectives. However, by failing to develop long-terms programs of education, the policy of the Lebanese secular left turned out to be short-sighted and ill-fated.[69] As sectarian hatred escalated and Shia parties such as Amal and Hezbollah consolidated their political

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[66] The Lebanese Forces were founded in 1976 as an umbrella organization co-ordinating all the right-wing party militias of the Lebanese Front.

[67] Mroué has been a militant of the LCP. Further, his grandfather Hussein Mroué was a prominent intellectual figure in the party and the author of two important books on materialistic tendencies in Islamic philosophies. He was assassinated in his home by two armed men in 1987. See Rabih Mroué, "Grandfather, Father and Son" in *Image(s), mon amour. Fabrications*, ed. Aurora Fernández Polanco (Madrid: Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo, 2013), 176-186.

[68] See Elias, *Posthumous Images*, especially chapter two: "Resistance, Video Martyrdom and the Afterlife of the Lebanese Left", 55-92.

[69] Ibid., 86.

and military strength, the Shia youth who had formed the power basis of the LCP quickly re-converted to their religious origins.[70] Catering to those same disinherited and downtrodden communities, that were further damaged in the internal displacement from the south of the country to the southern suburbs of the capital city, both Amal and Hezbollah were eventually more successful in spreading and rooting their powerful synthesis of Islamic values and social politics.

The episodic structure of *Nancy* is built upon a diachronic succession of battles, skirmishes, attacks, invasions, massacres, and political intrigues, for which accurate details such as date, place and the names of the main figures involved are dutifully and scrupulously reported. This choice, that according to the authors constitutes "one of the pillars of the narrative structure" of the play, on the surface level seems to comply with the canons of positivistic, empiricist historiography.[71] However, although seemingly conforming to that "settled chronology of events, dates, personalities, massacres, invasions" explicitly discredited as a model of historical knowledge for the civil wars by Raad in the Atlas Group,[72] such an adherence allows Mroué and Toufic to explode this model from within, to undo it, as it were, immanently. If the events are effectively recounted following a quite neat chronological sequence and joined together "like beads in a rosary", the continuous irruption in the narrative of incompatible points of view and aberrant elements – first among which the constant resurrection of the characters – disrupts any sense of causal concatenation and rational explanation immanently derived from the succession and sequencing of the events. To return to the already mentioned Antar's character, for example, he relates how, after he had been killed in 1976 in the Sannine mountains, the Communist Party "asked me to fill out an application to become an official comrade" so that they could "issue a black and white poster of me in the Party's name". A poster instantly appears on the screen bearing the slogan: "The Hero of Sannine, comrade Ziad Antar."

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[70] In 1974 the Iranian Imam Musa al-Sadr founded the Movement for the Disinherited, known as the Amal Party, advancing a populist discourse that combined social politics with an emphasis on sectarian (Shiite) and regional (Southern Lebanese) belongings. Hezbollah emerged informally around 1983 with small groups of armed men fighting under the banner of Islam. Its existence and the formation of its military wing, the Islamic Resistance, was formally announced in 1985 in a 'Open Letter to the Downtrodden in Lebanon and the World'. Around the same period, they began a bloody campaign against the Communist Party which then formed the backbone of the Lebanese National Resistance. See Elias, *Posthumous Images*, 63; and Rula Jurdi Abisaab and Maalek Abissab, *The Shi'tes of Lebanon: Modernism, Communism and Hizbullah's Islamists* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2017).

[71] Mroué and Toufic, "Authors' Note", 9.

[72] Raad, "Let's Be Honest, the Rain Helped," 44.

If chronology is retained as an organizing principle and primacy is reserved to events and proper names, what is either fractured or missing is the tight causal chain that like the string of the rosary threads the events together. Rather than present the form of a modern historiographical narrative, then, the structure of *Nancy* is closer to the model of the chronicle. The chronicler, in Benjamin's definition, is the "history-teller". Unlike the historian, whose "task is to *explain* in one way or another the happenings with which he deals", the chronicler "simply display[s] them as models of the course of the world." The chronicler records the events as they occur, but does not try or if he tries does not succeed in endowing them with a significance or a sense of purpose emanating from the authority of a moral position. Relieved from the "burden of demonstrable explanation", chroniclers are "concerned not with accurate concatenation of definite events, but with the way these are embedded in the great inscrutable course of the world."[73] If the chroniclers of the Middle Ages could rely on a "divine plan of salvation" to temper with such inscrutability, Mroué and Toufic certainly do not, and are wary of narratives that refer to such religious models of transcendence.

For White, what differentiates the chronicle from modern narrative historiography is the former's lack of a closure by which a light is cast back "over the events originally recorded in order to redistribute the force of a meaning".[74] Mroué and Toufic's play refuses precisely such retrospective recasting of meaning and the semblance of formal coherency, fullness and integrity that comes with a narrative closure. *Nancy*'s chronicle breaks off abruptly, in *media res*, just a few months before the first presentation of the play; its vanishing point is the present. It culminates on 25th January 2007, one of the high peaks of two years of protests set in motion by the car-bombing assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri on February 2005, and the success achieved by the resulting Cedar Revolution in effecting the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanese territory in April of the same year. These episodes, as we have seen in the introduction, divided the country in two opposing encampments: the ruling March 14th alliance, spearheaded by Saad Hariri's Future Movement, and the opposition March 8th alliance, guided by Amal and Hezbollah – coalitions which were both named after the dates of the competing demonstrations, respectively anti- and pro- Syrian, that took place in downtown Beirut in the spring of 2005. After the 2006 July War with Israel, divisions were further entrenched, aggravating the tension between Shia Hezbollah and the Sunni, pro-Western government. The sectarian clashes between Shiite and Sunni students that

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[73] Benjamin, "The Storyteller", 152, 153.

[74] White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality", 23.

erupted in January 2007 were a street-level enactment of such an institutional stalemate. Clearly, in such a context, an image of narrative closure would surreptitiously introduce a sense of resolution that real events do not actually possess.

Remarkably, *Nancy* problematises closure by both structurally disabling narrative completion through the eternal return of characters who never die, and by denouncing the falsifications of official governmental narratives of conclusion. As the four tales converge upon the same point in time, the characters gravitate towards the same landmark – the Murr Tower, the already mentioned infamous civil war-era sniper's nest and also, in a perfect circulatory manner, the locale of one of the first battles related in the play. The story concludes with the death of all the four characters in a final frontal shoot-out. Yet, to signal that this is just an apparent closure, typewritten surtitles inform us that the Lebanese Army found the four bodies on the rooftop of the tower, arrested and interrogated them after confiscating their firearms. The bodies were released on bail as all their crimes fell under the General Amnesty Law issued in 1991, at the end of the civil wars. The bitter irony of this non-resolutive ending has an unmistakably polemical intent: condemning the amnesty provisions that have exempted members of the militias from criminal persecution and that make possible for war criminals to occupy key places of power in the postwar political establishment. The failure or forestalling of any real attempt to reckon with the recent past and the persistence of the same old confessional system in the post-war society are the structural reasons that impede any exit from the looped structure of an history that continues to repress and repeat itself. While the actors leave the stage, the four screens synchronize on a single image, a panoramic view of Beirut, with the Murr tower menacingly looming at its centre: a charged symbol of how the same conflicts can erupt over and over again.

3.3 Performing Images: Rabih Mroué's Non-Academic Lectures

If in *Nancy* the characters are trapped into a history that is a looped repetition of sectarian strife, the 2008 non-academic lecture *The Inhabitants of Images* offers some cues as on how to break off the endless sequence of a "death which is a remake of itself".[75] The lecture is composed of three chapters, each centred on a different set of political and martyr posters, and a final epilogue. The

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[75] I attended the performance on the 26th March 2018 at the ICA in London, where Mroué presented a number of non-academic lectures.

Figure 27. Rabih Mroué, *The Inhabitants of Images*, 2008. Photograph of Hezbollah posters taken in the southern suburbs of Beirut, and photo-manipulation of Hezbollah poster.

second chapter focuses on the posters of the Hezbollah martyrs that appeared immediately after the July war of 2006 in Dahieh, the predominantly Shia suburb of south Beirut and stronghold of Hezbollah, that was the main target of the Israeli airstrikes. Attached on the top of lampposts, at about three meters from the ground, along the middle of a dual carriageway, the imposing posters are ideally meant to be viewed from a car in motion, so that the speed will erase and blend the individual features of each fighter into the unique cipher of martyrdom. This is how Mroué himself experienced these posters twice; yet the third time, he saw them at a leisurely pace, as still images on the screen of his computer. By scrutinizing closely these images found on the web (it is forbidden and extremely dangerous for a private citizen to take photographs without authorization in Dahieh), he discovers that each martyr has the same body. The posters are photomontages in which the faces of individual martyrs have been digitally superimposed onto an identical body, cladded in the same Westernised military outfit. The violence of their death is compounded by the symbolic violence of the cut that Mroué perceives as a very "sadistic act", a "crime without blood, committed with clean hands". Their faces have been forced onto the same unified super-body, and their images just as forcibly placed into a "connected chain" that spreads both out in space (along the middle of the wide boulevard) and back in history reaching as far as Hussein, the first Shia martyr (Figure 27).[76]

Yet, Mroué indicates a possible way out of the chain. Stopping and "standing fixed" under a specific image, he says, "will break this chain and halt the sequence of martyrdom". By "staring

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[76] Rabih Mroué, "The Inhabitants of Images", in *Image(s), mon amour. Fabrications*, ed. Aurora Fernández Polanco (Madrid: Centro de Arte Dos de Mayo, 2013), 350, 351, 352.

intently at one picture", an attentive and discerning gaze will be able to single out individuals under the de-individualizing pictures of sectarian propaganda, thus breaking the spell of unitary cohesion that the photo-manipulation creates. For this reason, measures are taken to avert such an inquisitive and probing gaze – namely, the height and location of the posters in the middle of a heavily trafficked lane with no pedestrian footpath, and their arrangement *en masse* to form what Mroué calls the "state of posters".[77] Mroué's lecture, however, gives his audience precisely the time and instruments to look at these images with a sharper gaze; it creates an interruption in the actual and metaphorical sequence of images – be they the belt of martyr posters unwinding along the street or the flood of images and information filling television and computer screens.

In the midst of "a war that is waged in the field of the media", as Mroué works and non-academic lectures underscore, we are obliged to learn how to critically read, decode, deconstruct, analyse, and interpret images. In this heuristic effort, no image should be neglected – no matter how fuzzy, illegible, or obviously manipulated it may be.[78] This explains the sustained attention that Mroué dedicates, in the first chapter of *The Inhabitants of Images*, to a curious poster on which he stumbled by accident in the summer of 2007, depicting Gamal Abdel Nasser anachronistically standing next to Rafik Hariri (Figure 28). Although the poster is clearly the result of a photomontage 'documenting' an impossible meeting between the Egyptian leader and the much younger Lebanese president, Mroué discards such a simple explanation to pursue a paradoxical line of thought: the meeting between the two did actually happen, he claims, but it took place after their death. It was an encounter between the two inhabitants of the images and not the two politicians in the flesh. Apparently a fanciful and absurd proposition, Mroué's decision to believe in the truth of a plainly doctored image, allows him to go beyond the surface level of its fraudulent denotative content, so to unlock its ideological connotative message, and the web of socio-economical and political relations in which the image is embedded and on whose behalf is made to speak.

Mroué's approach to any image is always dialectical: the awareness of the "fabrication of truth" (in this case digital photo-manipulation) does not prevent him from analysing the "truth of fabrication", namely the logic behind the apparition of that particular fabricated image at a certain

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[77] Ibid., 353, 352, 349.

[78] An exception here, however, are the graphic depictions of violence in ISIS propaganda videos, which in the non-academic lecture *Sand in the Eyes* (2017) Mroué refuses to watch because "watching them for the sake of watching them, that is exactly what ISIS would want."

Figure 28. Rabih Mroué, *The Inhabitants of Images*, 2008. Photograph of poster portraying a meeting between Rafik Hariri and Gamal Abdel Nasser.

moment in time.[79] As he moves along in his bizarre inquiry, Mroué unravels the subtext of the poster image. The self-effacing digital manipulation, the casual pose in which the two political leaders are portrayed, like "two fathers who have met on a day off", all serve to create the impression of a natural succession line running from Nasser to Hariri's son, the rightful heir of a pan-Arab tradition, who receives the dual blessing of his biological and spiritual fathers.[80] This revival of the pan-Arab project in 2007 was instrumental to reinforce the cohesion of the Lebanese Sunni community against the Hezbollah-led March 8th alliance, via the appeal to the faded optimism of the bygone dream of an alternative modernity. In this case, another chain is in want of deconstruction: that of an ideologically constructed and unthinkingly avowed line of succession, which projects a false simulacrum of continuity and glosses over the marked differences separating the two ideal forefathers.[81]

The lecture format allows Mroué to probe into the poster images with greater deconstructive thrust and analytical profundity than he did in *Nancy*, where the posters were

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[79] Rabih Mroué, "Reflections on Three Posters. A performance/video by Elias Khoury and Rabih Mroué", *TDR: The Drama Review* 50, no. 3 (Fall 2006), 182-191.

[80] Mroué, "The Inhabitants of Images", 342.

[81] Most notably, Nasser was an Arab Socialist and Hariri a liberal.

simply the albeit crucial backdrop of the actors' monologues. In the lecture, the images and their 'inhabitants' are pushed to the fore as actors on stage; their muteness is tested, interrogated, and speculated over. Acting as the images' selector, interpreter and commentator, Mroué re-assembles them into a narrative of his own device, while taking "the audience along in a process of investigating and questioning".[82] By way of complicating the documents' obvious meaning through unexpected juxtapositions, multiplication of viewpoints and an at times whimsical mode of reasoning, Mroué re-frames these images making them appear uncanny, strange, unfamiliar, or simply unstable. Yet, it is precisely such an effect of uncanniness or amused surprise that makes one move from a glance that dismisses the images as fake or unimportant to a gaze that turns them into figures of knowledge. That is, Mroué produces a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt,* an effect of estrangement or alienation that creates a distance from familiar conceptualizations and potentially opens up a space for a new understanding. "To make something look strange", as Jameson writes in his book on Brecht, means to pierce that "kind of perceptual numbness" that "prevents us from really looking at things."[83]

While the final hermeneutic task of reading and interpreting the images is entrusted to the viewer, the process of re-framing and re-contextualizing them passes always through the artist's subjective mediation, in a dynamic interplay of narrative anecdotes and analytical enquiry. The audience's understanding of the posters, as Bruzzi notes, is "consistently mediated through Mroué's responses to them". He does not assume at any point the objective and detached tone of a documentary voiceover, but speaks in the first person, recounting his own personal experiences and subtly mixing biographical details with fictional elements.[84] Every chapter in the lecture opens with a brief account of his personal and often thwarted first exposure to a specific poster. "Don't you know that is forbidden to take photographs here? Why this particular poster?" is the reproach of an officer in a security zone especially cut off for Saad Hariri.[85] Mroué interpolates himself in the narrative not only as a subject of speech, but as a testing ground of sorts: he personally embodies the figure of the Hezbollah martyr by photoshopping his own face onto the uniformed super-body, as a means of subjectively experiencing the violence of de-individualization. The third and shorter chapter of the lecture, further, concerns a chain of images in which he is directly and doubly

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[82] Maaike Bleeker, "Performing the Image: Rabih Mroué's Lecture-Performances," in *Rabih Mroué: A BAK Critical Reader in Artists' Practices,* eds. Maria Hlavajova, Jill Winder and Cosmin Costinas (Utrecht: BAK, 2012), 187.

[83] Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London: Verso, 1998), 39.

[84] Peleg and Bruzzi, "Towards 'Approximation'", 63.

[85] Mroué, "The Inhabitants of Images", 339.

Figure 29. Rabih Mroué and Elias Khoury, *Three Posters*, 2000. Performance at Ayloul Festival.

implicated – both as former militant of the LCP and as artist. Reviewing still frames of video-testimonies recorded by members of the Communist Party before their suicide missions, Mroué notes that "whenever someone dies, he or she becomes a picture on the wall behind the new person giving a testimony".[86] The last in this chain of *mise en abyme* of pictures is Mroué himself who in the performance-video *Three Posters* interpreted the role of the martyr Khaled Rahhal, while the posters of previous martyrs formed a tableau on the wall at his back (Figure 29). If this chain of images does not require breaking, as it has already been shattered – "these images exist only in lost video-tapes, in unknown places … the city refuses to offer them even a wall"[87] – it necessitates critical recouping and reckoning, as well as a reflection on the absence of the secular left in present day Lebanon.

The Inhabitants of the Images is one among a growing number of non-academic lectures that Mroué has produced since 2006.[88] Resorting to the set-up and format of the lecture to produce an autonomous and fully-fledged piece, he has freed himself completely from the

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[86] Ibid., 354. Mroué credits the discovery of this detail, that had always been under his eyes, from reading Maasri's book.

[87] Mroué, "The Inhabitants of Images", 355.

[88] Mroué's first non-academic lecture *Make Me Stop Smoking* was performed in 2006.

restrains of a theatrical practice centred on constructing and interpreting character-roles. While the *mise en scène* of the lecture serves to lend authority to his theorizing, the negative denomination 'non-academic' indicates the qualitative difference and incomparable freedom of a method of artistic research unfettered by institutional or disciplinary restrictions and codes. Mroué has indeed emphasised how the non-academic lecture is "an open form" which permits the artist to move freely between different disciplines and "to formulate a dialogue" with "other thoughts and practices – the visual arts, performance, video, literature," but "also psychology or philosophy."[89] As Bleeker notes Mroué's lectures are "not merely alternative modes of accounting for the results of his investigations (alternative, that is, to a journalistic or academic mode of reporting)", but "an alternative mode of producing knowledge and, by extension, an alternative mode of theorizing images."[90]

The main element in his lectures consists in fact in the act of *showing:* he projects images and videos culled from political propaganda, information media outlets and social media. Cut off from their instrumental immediate context of use and dislodged from their ideological underpinnings, these images are re-edited in ways that confer them a new and more complex level of legibility. For Bruzzi, Mroué's style of non-academic lectures "draws upon and brings together agitprop theatre, intellectual montage and contemporary forms of politicized video art."[91] Filmic devices and methods – editing, frame by frame footage review, zooming in and out, shot/counter-shot techniques, analysis of camera angle/point of view – play an important role in Mroué's dissection of images. While his computer desktop turns into a sort of moviola, his verbal comments – descriptions, observations, questions, speculations, postulates, comparisons, first-person storytelling motifs, fictional scenarios – re-frame and "approximate" the images, adding new meanings, perspectives, and interpretative layers upon the same image at any new viewing.

The principal technique in Mroué's special brand of intellectual montage consists in a comparative analysis that aims to bring an image into sharper focus by contrasting it with either an analogous or different one. Near the beginning of *The Pixelated Revolution* (2012), a lecture examining the unsanctioned videos that Syrian protestors uploaded to the Internet during the first year of the revolution, he makes such an operative procedure explicit. He informs his audience that he will juxtapose the protestors' pixelated and low-resolution videos with some professional

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[89] Rabih Mroué and Elisabeth Wellershaus, "truths – with a small 't'", *Journal Global Conflict* (29 June 2017): https://journal.hkw.de/en/truths-with-a-small-t/.

[90] Bleeker, "Performing the Image", 187, 188.

[91] Peleg and Bruzzi, "Towards 'Approximation'", 59.

films and videos, in order to create a *distance* "from emotion and immediate reactions" and to enable a critical understanding of such images. Rather than in the factual content of the videos (names, dates, places: the ABC of journalistic enquiry), his interest lies in their formal features, their filmic aesthetic. Collating "a list of recommendations and directions on how to film manifestations" that were exchanged and circulated on the Internet among protestors, he draws up a fictional cinematographic manifesto and compares it by similarity to the bare aesthetics championed by the Danish film collective Dogme 95.[92] Founded by Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg in 1995, Dogme 95 aimed at purifying filmmaking by refusing expensive and spectacular special effects, post-production work and other technical gimmicks. The formal similarities between the two sets of images, however, throw into sharp relief their distance in terms of content. Whereas in the case of Dogme 95, the raw and chaste style is the product of a deliberate artistic choice, in the case of the protesters' videos it is the result of a forced situation of danger and the technologically savvy survival techniques one must adopt. By juxtaposing a filmmaking movement producing fiction films in a quasi-documentary style with a documentary production whose aesthetic of violence brings the stamp of a situation of peril, urgency and scarce technical means, Mroué points to "that uncertain frontier where documentary and fiction meet" and whose porous borders one must learn to negotiate and interrogate.[93]

However, this exercise of formal deconstruction does not result by any means into a dissolution of the reality of these images of violence and death, as Mroué's sustained engagement with the videos of Syrian reporters recording their own death makes all too clear. In these unprecedented visual testimonies, the identification with the point of view of the victim becomes total, yet it is still mediated through a technical device and experienced at a temporal and geographical remove from the event. The investigation of the fictional – that is the constructed – aspects of the technically mediated image, is not meant to deny the reality of the facts recorded but to understand the way in which such facts have been inscribed in the image, and the kind of knowledge one can effectively extract from it. From a juridical point of view these images are frustratingly deficient: when Mroué enlarges the frames with the sniper's face to uncover his identity, all we can see is a featureless clot of pixels, a useless piece of evidence (Figure 30). Prompted by the simple question "How should we read these videos?", he tries to fathom out other possible methods of interpretation.

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[92] Rabih Mroué, "The Pixelated Revolution", *TDR: The Drama Review* 56, no. 3, (Fall 2012), 26.

[93] Perez, *The Material Ghost,* 49.

Figure 30. Rabih Mroué, *The Pixelated Revolution*, 2012. Performance at Staatstheater, Kassel, Documenta 13.

In another section of the lecture, Mroué places the shaky and blurry images shot by protestors on the run on their mobile phones side by side with the clear, sharp and stable images diffused by the state official media, taken with high-resolution cameras fixed on tripods. In this case both sets of images are documentary, both depict the same reality, and yet their representations differ vastly both in terms of content and form. Describing the mediatic warfare between the Baathist regime and the Syrian protestors as a "war between tripod and di-pod", a camera with three legs and a camera with two legs, Mroué's reading reveals how the differing visual features of these images accurately reflect the power relations within which they were produced.[94] The setting up of a tripod to stabilize the images requires time, and the control of time and space is exactly what distinguishes the regime of visuality of those who hold power from those who are dispossessed of it. This kind of analysis reveals how different "regimes of truth" – types of discourse, standardized procedures and privileged subjects of speech – are at work in each of these sets of images.[95] While the images diffused by the Syrian state media apparatus make the

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[94] Mroué, "The Pixelated Revolution", 31, 32.

[95] For Foucault, each society has its "regime of truth": that is, a set of rules and procedures, techniques and mechanisms which enable one to distinguish between true and false statements. These regimes of truth are in turn the result of scientific discourses and institutions, and are reinforced (or redefined) by the educational system, the media and political ideologies. For a discussion of Foucault's notion of "regimes of truth" in relation to documentary

claim of being truthful and reliable on the basis of their detached, impartial and unimpaired visuals, it is precisely the troubled genesis of the protestors' videos that serves to corroborate their impression of authenticity. Albeit originating outside the official networks of information, this kind of videos are now on high demand in international media outlets where they are broadcasted in their original state, without editing, disregarding traditional journalistic standards of verifiability of sources in favour of the illusion of raw immediacy that they seem to convey. Although anonymous and unauthorised, the increasing use of such sources has contributed to shift previously accepted aesthetic and epistemic norms regarding the credibility of images, even if, as Mroué notes, they are anyway adjusted to the hosting "institution's ideological purposes and calculations".[96]

While in *The Pixelated Revolution*, the blurriness of the protestors' videos is seen as an index of their makers' subaltern position within the murderous regime they are trying to topple, the blurry image is not in itself a guarantee of progressive politics. In Mroué's lectures there is no fixed or dogmatic standpoint outside the object in question; the theoretical, speculative framework of interpretation and analysis, that is, is built anew each time around the object at hand. In *Sand in the Eyes* (2017), for instance, the pair clear versus blurry image is articulated so as to assume a completely different meaning. Based on material obtained by German security services (the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution in Germany), the lecture considers the propagation of Jihadi propaganda through the Internet, looking specifically at the Islamic State recruitment videos. An extended section examines the depiction of the act of killing in the unbearably violent and obscene Isis videos of beheadings on one hand, and the surgically clean images of drone strikes carried out as part of the war on terrorism on the other. Without showing the videos in full but only a freeze-frame, Mroué sets the intentional and unbearable clarity of the former against the abstract blurriness of the latter (Figure 31). While the Isis videos aim at a full exposure of the act of killing as an aggressive message directed to the West, the blurriness of the drone strikes' images serves, conversely, to conceal and render acceptable to the western public opinion the act of killing, convincing us, as Mroué says, "that [they] belong to the world of fiction".[97] Such double standard in judging the undiscriminated killing of civilians are analytically considered as embedded in the formal features of these different sets of images.

For all their sharpness of insight, Mroué's lectures do not explain the images away or give

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production see Hito Steyerl, "Documentarism as Politics of Truth", eipcp, (May 2003): http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/1003/steyerl2/en.

[96] Mroué, "The Pixelated Revolution", 26.

[97] Rabih Mroué, *Sand in the Eyes*, script, unpublished, 2017.

Figure 31. Rabih Mroué, *Sand in the Eyes*, 2017. Performance at Hessiches Staatstheater Wiesbaden.

exhaustive answers to the many questions they raise. If anything, they magnify their incompleteness even further; they point to the fact that these images constitute solely a partial fragment of a complex reality whose (many) counter-shot(s) one must try and recompose. If Mroué's work, as he said, consists precisely in "an attempt to put the *champs* and the *hors-champs* together", such an attempt is neither uncontroversial nor can it be definitive.[98] In *Sand in the Eyes*, Mroué asks what the counter-shot of the blurry image of the drone strike could be. "Is it the drone itself, which fired the missile? Or the location of the hit, a shot from the ground? Or is it a shot of the soldier sitting in the control room, his hand on the joystick, his finger pressing on the trigger? Or the military headquarters where the commander-in-chief is leading the entirety of the operation? Or is it a shot of the American president sitting behind his desk and signing the order to invade Afghanistan or Iraq?" Or, he ventures, could it not be the Isis film itself? **"**Of course it's neither this nor that," he concludes, "And at the same time it's all of these elements working all at once and in coordination with one another."[99] The complexity of the historical reality, that which cannot be fit into a single image, is traced in the never fixed and contingent system of relationality between different images, that Mroué's lectures work to at least partially unravel.

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[98] Rabih Mroué and Bert Rebhandl, "The Inhabitants of Images", in *Berlin Documentary Forum 1, New Practices Across Disciplines*, (Berlin: Haus Der Kulturen Der Welt, 02 – 06 June 2010), 34.

[99] Mroué, *Sand in the Eyes*.

3.4 An Analytical Storyteller: Walid Raad's Performance-lectures

Although the format of the non-academic lecture or lecture-performance can hardly be considered as "unique to Beirut", according to Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, its "popularity and perseverance there ... may well be".[100] In the summer of 1999, Walid Raad presented for the first time in Beirut the lecture-performance *Fishing for documents: Case studies from The Atlas Group Archive* (1999-2001) at the American University (AUB), and a year later at the Ayloul Festival.[101] Since then the structure of the lecture or artist talk has been harnessed by several artists of the postwar generation including, as we have seen Mroué and Majdalanie, but also Hadjithomas and Joreige, and Tony Chakar, as well as younger artists such as Haig Aivazian, Ali Cherri, Rayyane Tabet, Marwa Arsanios, Mounira Al Sohl, Joe Namy, and Lawrence Abu Hamdan. Sometimes working in collaboration, these artists have used the form in different ways, exploring a scope of possibilities ranging from the most orchestrated performances (including scripted question-and-answer sessions with planted actors among the audience) to the most informal artist talk.[102] On a pragmatic level, the persistent lack of funding for the arts, especially in Lebanon, has made the form particularly appealing due to its inexpensiveness and affordability. On a formal level instead, according to Wilson-Goldie, the lecture-performance has bred new ways of thinking about art and photography, by allowing artists to present to an audience personal or sourced photographs – but also videos, images, documents – while embedding them in the framework of a speculative story. While necessary, she reflects, these documents are also, in themselves, "pointedly insufficient."[103] However, the purpose of these performative talks, as we have seen in the case of Mroué's non-academic lectures, is not to complete or explain away insufficient records, but to delve even deeper into their incompleteness. Rather than claiming the cultural specificity or even 'Lebaneseness' of the form – a claim that seems hardly tenable given its steady proliferation in

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[100] Wilson-Goldie, "Lecture as Performance", 54.

[101] This lecture-performance, later renamed as *The loudest muttering is over: Documents from the Atlas Group Archive* (2001-2005), was first presented in the summer of 1999 at the American University of Beirut, in a conference organized by the Centre for Behavioural Studies, and later at the Notre Dame University, hosted by the Department of Visual Arts. It was presented one year later at the Ayloul Festival, in the same edition as Mroué and Elias Khoury's *Three Posters*.

[102] For a discussion of the use of scripted Q&A in Raad's lecture-performances, see Lepecki, "'After All, This Terror Was Not Without Reason'", 97, 98.

[103] Wilson-Goldie, "Lecture as Performance", 55, 56.

different geographical contexts – a more productive approach would be to consider the possibilities that the format affords to articulate, narrativize and transmit a complex vision of history through the verbal re-arrangement of documentary audio-visual materials.

In this regard, while not representative of the variety of possible approaches, Raad's work with the Atlas Group is highly significant in its idiosyncratic specificity. Not only was Raad the first artist in Beirut to present lecture-performances, but, as Respini argues, such format "is part of the very fabric" of the Atlas Group project, not an ancillary component.[104] Whilst, as we have seen, the documents of the archive are presented also as installations in exhibitions or as articles in books and magazine, their public presentation in the context of talks and lectures constitutes a privileged mode of access that, through the voice and presence of the artist, unlocks and deepens the performative dimension already present in the narrative framings surrounding each document. Respini uses the term "literary acts" to indicate the narratives relayed in both wall-texts and performative monologues, yet it is only in performances that rely heavily on presence and orality, that the exposition of such narratives comes closer to an atmosphere associated with traditional storytelling (albeit, as we shall see, such tradition is substantially re-invented through the introduction of the bureaucratic framework of an archival institution).

Described as a form which undoes the containments and boundaries of genre and medium, in the art-historical literature on the field, the composite genealogy of the lecture-performance is typically located at the intersection of the visual arts, dance and performing art.[105] The first experiments with the format of the lecture are generally traced back to conceptual and minimal art practices of the 1960s and 1970s, with the work of figures such as Robert Morris, Robert Smithson and Joseph Beuys as illustrative cases. These artists have used the form to, as Patricia Milder puts it, "blur the lines separating art from discourse about art", and to implicate the beholder within the art object, transgressing the policed modernist "operational divide" between artwork and viewer.[106] With the successive critical and institutional recognition of discursive

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[104] Eva Respini, "Slippery Delays and Optical Mysteries", 33, 34, 29. It is interesting to note that, before developing a body of works for exhibition spaces, Raad performed the Atlas Group on the alternative theatre circuit and at independent film festivals. At the Whitney Biennial in April 2002, for instance, the Atlas Group was presented in the performance section, not in the exhibition. More recently, Raad has used the form of the gallery talk in *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: Walkthrough.*

[105] See Frank, "When Form Starts Talking"; Milder, "Teaching as Art"; and texts in Jentjens et al. (eds.), *Lecture Performance*.

[106] Milder, "Teaching as Art", 13. For the concept of "operational divide" see Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press, 1981), 240.

practices and the emergence of research-based art in the second half of the 1990s, from the initial impulse of art's self-definition, the scope of the lecture-performance has expanded to incorporate and work with various non-artistic disciplines and practices (scientific, social, juridical, forensic, philosophical disciplines etc.). Yet, the specificity of art as a structure of knowledge – its non-instrumental, open-ended, and heterodox character – works against its facile co-optation within the cultural industries or commodification as part of the "knowledge economy".[107]

The genealogy of Raad's lecture-performances seems to be firmly rooted in that rising convergence between art and theory, that progressive identification of art with discourse about art, that is linked to the emergence of conceptual art. As he remembers, language and discursive practices were a prominent part of his study programme at the University of Rochester; knowing how to speak about one's own work was a requirement in the training of the artist. Around this time he started to consider how such an explanatory moment could be turned into an independent performative gesture, an artwork in its own right.[108] If on one hand the form of the lecture-performance allowed him to give formal autonomy to the *parergonal* dimension of the artwork, on the other it turned out to be an ideal format to unpack the discursive formations, social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations that determine the production of knowledge.

During this same period, as he was touring with Canadian-Lebanese artist Jayce Salloum to present their collaborative documentary *Up to the South/Talaeen al Junuub* (1993), issues and contradictions besetting the representation of cultural alterity were very much in Raad's mind. As we have seen in chapter 1, this film was specifically made for Western (especially American and Canadian) audiences, supposedly unaware of or misinformed on the socio-political situation in Lebanon, and consisted of interviews with freedom fighters, former detainees, farmers, workers, intellectuals, and foreigners concerning the resistance against the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon, at the time still underway. Its aim was to challenge stereotypical representations and misperceptions by fostering a more complex understanding of events catalogued under the

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[107] See Tom Holert, "Art in the Knowledge-based Polis", *eflux journal*, no. 3, 2009. http://www.e-flux.com/journal/art-in-the-knowledge-based-polis; and Simon Sheikh, "Talk Value: Cultural Industry and Knowledge Economy", in *On Knowledge Production: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art*, eds. Binna Choi, Maria Hlavajova and Jill Winder (Utrecht: BAK, 2008), 182-197. On the *a*disciplinarity of art as a research program, see John Roberts, *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 2015), 116-122.

[108] This transition is explained by Raad in the seminar, *The Withdrawal of the Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster*, Day 2, United Nations Plaza, 1 February 2007: https://www.unitednationsplaza.org/video/8/.

generic rubrics of terrorism, colonialism, occupation and resistance. Its pressing informative value notwithstanding, the video incorporates a number of self-reflexive techniques that operate as a critique of a documentary practice that, in the arsenal of western ethnography, has often served as an extension of imperial regimes of knowledge/power. During the public presentation of the film, Raad and Salloum would often find themselves cast, against their will, in the role of cultural mediators, having to explain and contextualize the concrete experiences relayed by the interviewees. Raad's disinclination to 'speak on behalf of the other', as well as his wariness for the essentialism inherent in the construct of nationally or culturally based collective identities, eventually led him to build up the complex system of mediations and fictional forms of enunciation that make up the Atlas Group archive.

In Raad's performances, the semblance of a scholarly lecture is diligently mimicked in all its minute details, mannerisms and protocols: the desk furnished with a small lamp, a glass of water, and a laptop computer; the PowerPoint presentation; the Q&A period at the end. As it has been remarked several times, the authoritative credentials of such a carefully staged apparatus often make the audience forget Raad's opening statements – that the Atlas Group is an 'imaginary foundation' and that its documents have been produced and attributed to imaginary characters. While this only confirms, in Raad's words, the "weighty associations with authority and authenticity of certain modes of address and display",[109] a further element of authentication, that would be lost in the context of a gallery exhibition, is given by Raad's voice: his slightly exaggerated Middle Eastern accent qualifies him as a 'legitimate' speaker on the topic of the Lebanese civil wars. As André Lepecki has pointed out Raad's accent "functions as an authenticator", a signifier of cultural alterity that posits him as the "historian native", uniquely fit to narrate his own history.[110] While the need of this authenticator stems from well-meaning cautions and assumptions on who has the right to speak for and represent cultural alterity, it also reflects a situation in which the Arab artist, intellectual and filmmaker is increasingly tasked with "the burden of expectation to explain the region to Western audiences".[111] Raad's early lecture-performances are premised on and play with this logic of mutual expectations. Based on the presumed knowledge that the audience of a given geographical location could have "about the political, economic and cultural histories of Lebanon, the wars in Lebanon, the Middle East and contemporary art", and on his own "personal, historical, cultural and political considerations"

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[109] Walid Raad, "Interview with Alan Gilbert", 40.

[110] Lepecki, "'After All, This Terror Was Not Without Reason'", 90.

[111] Marks, *Hanan al-Cinema*, Introduction.

about that particular place, he was known to change some details or elements of his lectures.[112] This somewhat caricatural anticipation of the audience's reactions produced, as the artist himself admits, a sort of foreclosing, as it failed to acknowledge the personal histories of multiple dislocations that members of an audience could have. Yet, as Lambert-Beatty remarks, the geographically-based variability of the lectures' scripts, is "uniquely well-suited" for the conditions of a globalized art world that vies for both "local specificity and global inclusion", while articulating "tensions around legibility, audience, and language."[113]

While Mroué organizes his lectures in the category of the first person singular, in the public presentations of documents from the Atlas Group archive Raad assumes the most removed role of the intermediary or spokesperson of the foundation. Using the first person plural 'we', although he is the only member of the association, he shadows his personal identity behind the collective form of the group. Such plurality is further broadened by the polyphony of voices originating from the archive: each file of documents, as we have seen in chapter 1, is connected to a particular character or figure, who in turn is said to have donated it directly or by proxy to the Atlas Group. At the beginning of the lectures, a slide with the complex organogram of the archive shows such a labyrinthine system of attribution, including authored, anonymous and commissioned files. As Raad explains, he could not "produce documents without at the same time producing the *subject position* that authorized the document to speak."[114] Whether real – as in the case of Youssef Bitar and George Semerdija – or fictional, these characters are better understood as representing a set of discursive practices and institutional subject positions, or what Foucault calls "author-functions"; they are typically presented, that is, not as the "originators" of discourse, but one of its "variable and complex functions."[115]

Foucault defines the archive as the historically specific set of rules that determines the conditions of possibility for the emergence of certain kind of statements, and therefore certain knowledge formations and models of subjectivity. This means that individual subjectivities are simultaneously constituted and trapped within this system of rules, a process which tends towards

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[112] Raad would change details such as the year of the foundation's inception or the place of its headquarters.

[113] Lambert-Beatty, "Make Believe", 77.

[114] Walid Raad and Srdjan Jovanović Weiss, "Part one: 'Yes, Here It Is. Can You See It?'" in *The Archive as a Productive Space of Conflict,* eds. Markus Miessen and Yann Chateigné (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 604, my emphasis.

[115] See Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" [1969] in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979), 158.

the effective erasure of subjectivity. The characters of the Atlas Group correspond to specific typologies of subjects who occupy a determinate position within the discursive practice of historiography: the historian, the photojournalist, the onlooker, the hostage-survivor, the security agent, the official expert. Each has a defined role in the production and certification of historical knowledge around that discursive formation that are the 'Lebanese Civil Wars'. Raad is not interested in advancing claims of factual accuracy or empirical truth, but in unpacking the structures and paradigms that make certain statements possible and certain interlocutors legitimate. As he explains, the Atlas Group archive does not document what 'really' happened, but "what can be imagined, what can be said, what can be taken for granted, what can appear as rational, sayable and thinkable about the war."[116] By appropriating modes of address and authorship associated with different subject positions, as Maimon points out, he relates "the problem of knowledge to the allocation of roles", that is "to the question of who has the right to think and produce knowledge."[117]

These subject positions are inscribed within and determined by specific power relations, which in turn reflect geopolitical imbalances of force and power. As postcolonial scholar Gayatri Spivak has shown in her analysis of the conditions of the subaltern, some groups are excluded from social articulation and their voice, when it is heard, is nonetheless filtered through the code of the dominant cultural logic and, thus, structurally incapacitated.[118] In this respect, the testimony of the Arab hostage Souheil Bachar is a case in point. A displaced Southern Lebanese from the village of Houla (or, in an alternative version a low-level employee at the Kuwaiti Embassy),[119] Bachar was kidnapped in Beirut in 1983 and imprisoned for ten years in solitary confinement – expect for three months (twenty-seven weeks in the alternative version) in 1985 when he was held in a cell with five American hostages: Terry Anderson, Thomas Sutherland,

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[116] Walid Raad quoted in Rogers, "Forging History, Performing Memory", 77.

[117] Vered Maimon, "The Third Citizen: On Models of Criticality in Contemporary Artistic Practices", *October* 129, (Summer 2009), 97.

[118] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 2006), 28-37.

[119] The name Souheil Bachar is inspired by Soha Bechara a communist militant and prominent figure in the Lebanese resistance movement who, in 1988, attempted to assassinate Antoine Lahad, the commanding general of the South Lebanon Army. Severely wounded, Lahad survived, while Bechara was caught and spent 10 years in the infamous Khiam prison. See her memoir Soha Bechara, *Resistance: My Life for Lebanon* (Berkley: Soft Skull Press, 2003). The town of Houla was one of the main sites of the conflicts along the Lebanese-Israeli border which lead to the Israeli invasion of 1982.

Benjamin Weir, Martin Jenco, and David Jacobson. After their release, each of these five men published a book-length autobiographical account of their experience of captivity that, stripped of any reference to the socio-political context, effectively depoliticized the event turning it into an individual tale of transformation. Bachar's apocryphal hostage tapes can thus be seen as a unauthorized and belated response to these authorized tales of captivity as well as an alternative representation of the same historical event framed from the position of subalternity. Yet, through the surreptitious insertion of an Arab voice in the master narrative of what is, tellingly, known in the West as the Western Hostage Crisis,[120] Raad does not aspire to redress, amend or expand an overtly biased historical script; rather, as Elias writes, he asks us to think of this event "as a set of discourses that are unevenly distributed and subject to competing interpretations and ideological claims."[121] That is to say, the reactivation of an "historically invalidated speaking position" such as that of the Arab hostage, can only take place within a predetermined context; and its voice can never be fully recovered as a positive presence.

It is thus not surprising that in the prologue of his video-testimony, Bachar takes good care to give precise instructions for the tapes' public display, translation and dissemination, so as to assert a control over their afterlife. Out of the fifty-three existing videotapes, he allows only two, #17 and #31, to be screened in Europe and North America; the only two in which he directly addresses his relation with the Americans. As Lambert-Beatty points out, this specification "makes it impossible for the viewer to forget her own geopolitical location – or implication."[122] Yet most of Bachar's requests are thoroughly disregarded. Although he asks that his testimony be translated into the official language of the country were the tapes are screened, the only existing version is dubbed and subtitled in English (Figure 32).[123] Further, a number of small discrepancies between the Arabic original and its rendering in the English voice-over, cast doubt over the proficiency of

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[120] The Western Hostage Crisis (or Lebanon hostage crisis) refers to a systematic strategy of kidnapping foreigners, mainly American and Western Europeans, practiced by a group called the Islamic Jihad, that many believe to be a pseudonym for Hezbollah. Between 1982 and 1992, when the civil war was at its height, 104 foreigners were held hostages. In his doctoral dissertation entitled *Beirut... a la folie: A Cultural Analysis of the Abduction of Westerners in Lebanon in the 1980s*, Raad examined the proliferation of autobiographies published by American clerics and aid workers who had been held hostage in Beirut, side by side with interviews he made with former prisoners from Israeli detention camps. His textual deconstruction of these parallel captive narratives directly informed the production of *Hostage. The Bachar Tapes* (2001).

[121] Elias, *Posthumous Images*, 30.

[122] Lambert-Beatty, "Make Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility", 76.

[123] Lambert-Beatty's point raises the question of English as the art world global lingua franca.

Figure 32. Walid Raad/The Atlas Group, *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (#17 and #31) English Version*, 2001.

the translation. Although only an Arabic speaker, if careful, will notice these minor deviations, the

significance of such an act of mistranslation has been remarked by a number of critics and

scholars. Occurring at the significant segment when Bachar recounts an homoerotic episode which

took place in the cell, the translation reverses the power dynamic of the sexual encounter. In the

English voice-over, whose sound is predominant, one of the American hostages tries to penetrate

Bachar, while in Bachar's Arabic the roles are reversed. As Elias has convincingly argued such

mistranslations, which are both linguistic and technological (as evident in the several glitches of

the tape), far from being accidental, are one of the "constitutive" features of the work, meant to

question the aim as well as the possibility of lending voice to historically muted subjects.[124]

Souheil Bachar is a fictional character, an element which will appear more evident to a Lebanese audience as he is played by Fabi Abi Samra, a well-known Lebanese actor. For Maimon, his fictionality is a crucial feature as it serves to expose, in turn, "the fictional aspect of *any* collective form of belonging" – Anderson's *imagined communities* come to mind. A divided subject, Bachar is shown as internally split "between voice and body, speech and noise, actor and role, fictional figure and real event", and thus unfit to speak for a falsely unified collectivity, which is, internally, as split and divided as he is.[125] Yet, at the same time, this fictionalization seems to offer also a way out of the conundrum of who speaks and for whom that paralyses an entrenched identity politics. It may open up, in the words of Ghalya Saadawi, "an alternative position and place from which to speak."[126]

Among the mutterings of the Atlas Group archive, Bachar's voice is the only one that, although internally split and chronically dysfunctional, is able to put across intelligible utterances. As for the remaining files, they are introduced and explained by Raad. He takes time to describe how each document was acquired, produced, or donated to the Atlas Group, and successively examined, indexed and catalogued. These documents have already been scrutinized and their meaning somehow fixed through the overlaying of an interpretative layer. As Bachar did with his tapes, Raad explains which documents have been made available for public consultation and which have not yet been declassified. In this sort of Borgesian universe, with its labyrinthine structure and multi-layered system of cross-references, the archive, in its totality, is always out of reach, inaccessible if not in partial fragments and selected items. Further, as Lepecki highlights, all the documents in Raad's lectures are presented only as projected images, as copies, reproductions.[127]

The meticulous mimicry of historiography's formal apparatus, with the administrative aesthetics of the archive and the impersonal style of documents, as Maimon draws out, only apparently replicates "positivist forms of instrumental rationality". While she identifies formal similarities between the Atlas Group and Hans Haacke's particular strand of Institutional Critique,

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[124] Elias, *Posthumous Images*, chapter one "Captive Subjects: On the Geopolitics of Sex and Translation in Walid Raad's *Hostage The Bachar Tapes*", 27-54.

[125] Maimon, "The Third Citizen", 102.

[126] Ghalya Saadawi, "Not, not Contemporary", *Third Text* 26, no. 4 (2012), 382.

[127] Lepecki, "'After All, This Terror Was Not Without Reason'", 94.

Raad's mobilization of "the imaginary and the fictional", she claims, irremediably challenges Haacke's method of "tautological unveiling" premised on a Habermasian myth of rational communication.[128] Rather than unveiling facts and redressing mystifications, Raad's imitation of bureaucracy's frozen language serves to create ruptures, interferences and disturbances that short-circuit any possibility of smooth, immediate and transparent communication. In place of hard facts, statistics, data, figures, casualties, names, dates, battles and major events, one finds "hysterical symptoms", horse races, sunsets, signs of doctors or dentists' offices, blue monochromes, car engines, small watercolours, scratched photographs, colourful dotted plates. Instead of plausible statements, one finds, that is, implausible stories or negligible objects.

From the technocratic presentation of documents, Raad's expositions veers subtly but decidedly towards storytelling, while he continues to maintain the unperturbed tone and demeanour of the serious scholar. The haecceity of the stories he tells, with their poetical titles and enigmatic characters, betray an intention to narrate that goes beyond the deconstruction of discursive mediations. That is, a double transaction between analytical dissection and fictional narrativization is at play in the Atlas Group. After having, in a Foucauldian fashion, isolated analytically the various discursive structures and subject positions that make up the archive, Raad, acting as a storyteller, translates the archive back into individual life stories.[129] Unexpectedly, that is, stories emerge in the bureaucratic space of the archive. Such stories do not offer quick and fungible facts, but present riddles and open-ended enigmas that necessitate an interpretative labour to yield some meaning. It is by connecting cues that one may discover behind Operator #17's compulsion to film sunsets on the Corniche in West Beirut, diverting the camera from his assigned target, a yearning provoked by the experience of growing up, during the war years, in a city cut in two; or beneath the surface of the blue monochromes, the destiny of the thousands of kidnapped individuals whose lifeless body was thrown in the Mediterranean sea.

The need for verifiability and plausibility, on which positivist forms of knowledge and information are premised, implies a chronic distrust for the witness – the one who has lived through the event – and requires the juxtaposition of multiple witnesses' statements and

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[128] Maimon, "The Third Citizen", 100.

[129] I take inspiration for this comparison from Andreas Huyssen's essay on the German writer and filmmaker Alexander Kluge. See Andreas Huyssen, "An Analytical Storyteller in the Course of Time", *October* 46 (Autumn, 1988), 121. Influenced by the theoretical work of the Frankfurt School, Kluge looks at the crisis of subjectivity under the impact of fascism and modernization. Located in another geopolitical and historical context, Raad reflects on the crisis of the subject as bearer of experience and testimony in the aftermath of the civil wars.

Figure 33. Walid Raad/The Atlas Group, *Civilizationally, we do not dig holes to bury ourselves*, 1958-1959/2003.

perspectives to produce what is deemed as an objective and impartial account. As Josephine Berry Slater points out "informational communication explodes the subject of experience as the bearer of wisdom into a multiplicity of partial witnesses, none of whom can be trusted to give a coherent account of any event. … the storyteller ... is demoted from the position of knower to the unreliable object of doubt."[130] In the Atlas Group, the "multiple guarantors of facticity" are somehow recomposed through their montage and presentation within the archive, creating a veneer of objectivity. Pull out from photographic and textual traces, these fictional subjects spin out of the residues of subjectivity, doubly stunted by the traumatic violence of the wars and the depersonalization of the archive. One of the most fully developed characters, the historian Fakhouri is visualised in a collection of twenty-four black-and-white self-portrait photographs that depict Raad's father during a visit to Paris and Rome in 1958 and 1959 (Figure 33), filed under the puzzling title *Civilizationally, we do not dig holes to bury ourselves* (1958–1959/2003). As Gilbert perfectly puts it, "a significant family document is depersonalized before being snuck in as disguised autobiography".[131] This, however, does not imply the rebirth of a sovereign and

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[130] Josephine Berry Slater, "Epistemic Panic and the Problem of Life," *mute magazine*, 13 Feb 2014.

http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/epistemic-panic-and-problem-life.

[131] Gilbert, "Walid Raad's Spectral Archive, Part I".

undivided subject – a subject of discourse rather than subject to discourse.[132] Rather, as in the figure of Bachar, these subjects emerge in the never settled interplay between agency and determination.

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[132] In *The Return of the Real*, Hal Foster considers how "trauma discourse" has effected a "strange rebirth of the author." Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, MA.: The MIT Press, 1996), 168.

Chapter 4. History as Paratext: Walid Raad's Critical Construction of the History of Art in the Arab World

> "Historicism rightly culminates in universal history … Universal history has no theoretical armature. Its procedure is additive: it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous empty time. Materialist historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructivist principle. Thinking involves not only the movement of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly comes to a stop in a constellation saturated with tensions, it gives the constellation a shock, by which thinking is crystallized as a monad."[1]

On the occasion of the September 2012 inauguration of its new wing devoted to the Department of Islamic Art, the Louvre commissioned Walid Raad to produce over the course of three years a project in response to the museum collection.[2] Raad developed a mixed-media installation that includes a video showing some of the collection's objects undergoing an unforeseen metamorphosis, and a series of metal stencils cut-outs reproducing the contours of typical museum spaces, suspended from the ceiling. Floating in mid-air and hit by neon vertical lights, the silhouettes cast linear shadows of doorways and corridors onto the walls and the floor of the Salle de la Maquette (Figure 34). This spectral doubling of the museum architecture, dramatically intensified by the projected shadows, both echoes and highlights the framing function of the gallery itself, its important yet often occluded role in the definition of artistic and historical value.[3]

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[1] Benjamin, "On the Concept of History", 396.

[2] Although the Louvre has been collecting Islamic art since the 1830s and a 'Muslim art' section had been created already in 1893, before the construction of the new wing, these artefacts were not displayed in a discrete department, but scattered within several other departments such as the Department of Decorative Arts, the Department of Asian Arts and the Department of Near Eastern Antiquities. The construction of the new wing was largely funded through a $20 million donation by Saudi prince Walid bin Talal in 2005.

[3] The installation was, significantly, exhibited in the Salle de la Maquette, at the entrance of which is a large-scale model of the present-day Louvre, revealing different stages in the construction of the palace. The architectural project for the new exhibition spaces of the Department of Islamic Art, nestled between the restored facades of the Cour Visconti, was designed by Rudy Ricciotti and Mario Bellini. With its glass veil of undulating gold metal covering the courtyard, the design has been criticized for the way in which it perpetuates exotic and orientalist stereotypes: the veil, the tent, the flying rug. See Rémi Labrusse, "Des Arts de l'Islam au Louvre et de quelques ambiguites", *La Croix*, 19 November, 2012, https://www.la-croix.com/Archives/2012-11-19/OPINION.-Des-arts-de-l-Islam-au-Louvre-et-de-

Figure 34. Walid Raad, *Preface to the First Edition*, 2012. Installation view at the Musèe du Louvre, Paris.

Tellingly, this installation was titled *Preface to the First Edition*.[4]

Derrida famously discusses the irony of prefaces in the extended preface to his 1972 book *Dissemination.* A text written after but intended to be read before the main text, this form of anticipatory retrospection covertly belies the sequential progression that it apparently endorses. Derrida points out how prefaces seem to have always been written "in view of their own self-effacement. … Preceding what ought to be able to present itself on its own, the preface falls like an empty husk, a piece of formal refuse."[5] At once anticipating and recapitulating what one is about to read, the preface recreates or revisits an intention-to-say after the fact. Typically viewed as an external and negligible element, prefaces, both authorial or allographic, nonetheless perform an important function in extending and re-framing the body of the text proper. Multiplied from edition to edition, responding to demands dictated by "empirical historicity" including "occasional necessity", their existence as supplements, a term that within Derrida's oeuvre stands for both addition and substitute, produces an ungovernable excess: a *remainder* that may resist gestures of

quelques-ambiguites.-Remi-Labrusse-professeur-d-histoire-de-l-art-a-l-universite-Paris-Ouest-la-Defense-_NP_-2012-11-19-877835.

[4] The first part of Raad's project, *Preface to the First Edition,* was on show from 19th January to 8th April 2013.

[5] Derrida, *Dissemination*, 9.

recuperation within the unitary and totalizing structure of the Book.[6]

By calling his work a preface, Raad ironically points up the prefatory function of the museum's commission. Invited to supplement an historical exhibit in order to lend it contemporaneity, his work's presence, as a supplement, betrays the extraneousness of the present in its relation with the past. Yet the irony does not end there. If the conventional role of the museum has been to display historical objects in a positivist mode, presenting history in the form of a linear narrative unfolding across time rather than as written from the standpoint of a particular present, we can, in Derrida's sense, see the museum itself as a preface that seeks its own self-effacement. The institution, with its practices of collection, documentation and classification, its technologies of framing and display, presents the past in a way that suits a history written in the present, and yet by naturalizing such a presentation, cancels out its prefatory function. Raad's *Preface to the First Edition* does not provide us with a missing history of art that remains to be written; rather it is an ironic epilogue to a history that has already been written, and which underscores the lack of what could have been read.[7] It is an attempt to mark the absence of expressions of traumas caused by war and colonisation, as well as the absence of serious debate on and reckoning with the violent conditions under which a large part of the Louvre's collection – as with other Western collections of Islamic art – was acquired through what Ariella Azoulay has defined as "imperial plunder".[8] The museum as an architectural container, an institution, a sedimentation of professional practices and cultural dispositions, and as a crucial part of that "imperial spatiality" that, according to Azoulay, has created and reproduces a "breach between colonized people … and the objects they made", is an 'husk' that cannot be easily shrugged off.[9]

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[6] Ibid., 17. Derrida's main target here is the Hegelian sublation of the preface as a negative moment in the self-presentation of the philosophical concept.

[7] This reading of Raad's preface is indebted to Wendy K. Shaw's keynote speech as part of the conference "Troubled Contemporary Arts Practices in the Middle East: Post-colonial conflicts, Pedagogies of art history, and Precarious Artistic Mobilization", at University of Nicosia in partnership with the University of Birkbeck, 3-4 June 2016.

[8] In a lecture at Cooper Union on the 26th February 2018, entitled "Plunder: The Origins of Modern Art", Azoulay explores the ways in which plundered patrimony has shaped the aesthetics and legacies of modern art. See also: Ariella Azoulay, "Understanding the Migrant Caravan in the Context of Imperial Plunder and Dispossession", *Hyperallergic*, 29 November 2018, https://hyperallergic.com/473575/understanding-the-migrant-caravan-in-the-context-of-imperial-plunder-and-dispossession/?fbclid=IwAR3JTfcfcHMIAKE_CF8yTYplE3Fb4SIH_qJqQc6C5JHQXnrru75DIh6zFAI

[9] Ariella Azoulay, "The Right to Live Where One's Culture Was Museified", Verso blog, 10 March 2016, https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2551-the-right-to-live-where-one-s-culture-was-museified.

And yet, Raad's production of supplements, in line with Derrida's project of dissemination, astutely, serves to undo, from within, the master narrative of the art historical canon. The deluge of prefaces (currently there are seven of them, numbered from one to seven) not only serves to point up the prefatory function of the museum, but like an homoeopathic treatment that turns the poison into its cure, foils and thwarts attempts of epistemic mastery and containment.

Preface to the First Edition is part of a larger, multi-volume project that Raad has been developing since 2007. Titled *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow. A History of Art in the Arab World,* this miscellaneous corpus of works comprises an interrelated series of narratives, photographs, videos, sculptures, installations, theatrical stagings and performances. As one may infer from the subtitle, the project both proposes a personal and peculiar history of art in the Arab world, and looks at how that history is currently being framed and written. Initiated in parallel to and prompted by the construction of a new massive infrastructure for the visual arts in the Arab region, the project investigates the institutions, economies, historiographical concepts, taxonomies, chronologies and pedagogies that are being developed and elaborated as part of such an unprecedented historical process. Instead of the backbone of the archive, in *Scratching* Raad uses the device of the museum display, the curatorial voice and the gallery tour as means to question art historical narratives and museological practices.[10] Yet it is also important to note that each of the series of works that compose *Scratching,* is named after one of the different components of a virtual book – in all likelihood an academic publication. Besides a handful of sections of scattered chapters, one finds a disorderly profusion of those liminal devices that constitute the borderlands of a text: a translator's introduction, an index, appendixes, footnotes, several prefaces to a fast growing number of editions, two postfaces and a prologue. It is the pseudo systematicness of these titles, all pointing to or materializing fragments of the same imaginary manuscript, that suggests how the individually standing bodies of work that they identify, are in fact part of the same constellation. The manuscript, however, is never conjured up in its entirety: the text to which the various addenda refer is the blank centre of the project, the void of an impossible history. Any desire of completeness and mastery is frustrated by the uncontrolled proliferation of various kinds of paratexts, that in different ways present, extend, or re-frame the unavailable Text.

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[10] For the script of Raad's gallery tour, see Walid Raad, "Walkthrough, Part I", *eflux* 48 (October 2013), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/48/60038/walkthrough-part-i/; and Walid Raad, "Walkthrough, Part II", *eflux* 49 (November 2013), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/49/60016/walkthrough-part-ii/.

Paratexts denote all those peripheral elements – titles, prefaces, dedications but also book covers, illustrations, the name of the author and information on his or her account – that subtly but significantly influence the reception of the Text. Far from being insignificant elements, paratexts, as literary theorist Gérard Genette details, play a crucial role in the complex mediation between the proper Text of a book, and the author, publisher and reader. Although often overlooked, these quasi-external supplements perform an important hermeneutic function. As Philippe Lejeune contends, it is the "fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one's whole reading of the text."[11] Although it is not always easy to say if they are to be regarded as properly belonging or not belonging to the Text, paratextual elements, as Genette writes, "surround it and extend it, precisely in order to *present* it"; that is they serve "to ensure the text's presence in the world, its 'reception' and consumption." The "paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public." In view of their liminal status, of their being "neither on the interior nor the exterior" of the text, and yet such an important key to its access, Genette calls these elements "thresholds of interpretation".[12]

It is notable that one of the earlier pieces that comprise Raad's History of Art in the Arab World, the set of 54 plates of *Appendix XVIII: Plates 22-257* (2008), presents a scenario in which traces of the history of art in Lebanon are to be sought not in the artworks themselves but in that marginal paratextual apparatus that surrounds them, in those documentary ephemera that are more likely to be disavowed.[13] In this piece, which recalls many of the themes of the Atlas Group, Raad tells of the effects that the civil wars had on the art in Lebanon. Once again drawing from Toufic's already mentioned notion of the "withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster", Raad explains how not only were some artworks physically destroyed ("like burned books or razed monuments"), or removed from view ("like looted treasures or politically compromised artworks"), but all of them, even those "physically extant", were affected immaterially by the violence of the wars. Further, and more insidiously, Raad tells us that the wars have also inhibited, pre-emptively, the production of future artworks, by affecting and making unavailable to artists certain "colours, lines, shapes and forms." The latter artistic materials, "sensing the forthcoming danger, have deployed defensive measures: they hide, take refuge, hibernate, camouflage, and/or

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[11] Philippe Lejeune quoted in Genette, *Paratexts*, 2.

[12] Genette, *Paratexts*, 1, 2.

[13] These were first exhibited as part of the solo show *A History of Modern and Contemporary Arab Art _ Part I _ Chapter 1: Beirut 1992-2005,* at Sfeir-Semler Gallery in Beirut in 2008. This was Raad's first solo show in Lebanon and the Middle East.

dissimulate." The places where they take cover are an inventory of typographic units and paratextual accretions. As Raad writes: "they dissimulated as fonts, covers, titles, and indices; as the graphic lines and footnotes of books; they camouflaged themselves as letters, price lists, dissertations and catalogues; as diagrams and budgets." In short, "they hibernated not in but around artworks", in the documents that circulate around and beside them.[14] It is these very elements to which Raad turns his attention in *Scratching*.

The largely monochromatic, photographic plates result from the digital manipulations of graphic elements, signs and text taken from actual documents of exhibitions and other activities in the Arab world, and in Lebanon in particular (Figure 35). Raad has gathered and scanned exhibition and festival catalogues, art history dissertations, artists' indexes, museum proposals, posters, invoices, business cards, condition reports, floorplans, letterheads and invitations, and has then erased and rearranged their elements to create brightly-coloured and abstract A4 size compositions. Like in the blue monochromes of *Secrets in the Open Sea*, the geometric and highly-formalized patterns of these plates are sites hiding encoded information, that can potentially be inferred through hints offered in yet another paratext: the plates' titles. *Plates 22-24: A History of Venice I-III,* for instance, are made out of promotional material for the Lebanese Pavilion at the 2007 edition of the Venice Biennale, the country's first national participation to the international exhibition. *Plate 106: A History of a Budget* shows calculations and estimates in dollars floating around the words 'Beirut' and 'Cairo', itemizing the cost of cultural exchanges between these two Arab cities.[15] More vague and ironically universalistic are the titles of a number of plates – *A History of Art*, *A History of Exhibitions*, *A History of Museums, A History of Titles, A History of Essays, A History of Monographs* – that in their atomistic dissection of discrete objects of study underscore the occlusions that the compartmentalization of the discipline may produce by

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[14] Walid Raad, "Appendix XVIII", in *Walid Raad*, exhibition catalogue (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2015), 141. The exhibition *Past Disquiet. Narratives and Ghosts from the International Art Exhibition for Palestine, 1978* curated by Rasha Salti and Kristine Khouri could be seen as a concrete materialisation of Raad's unlikely story. The archival and documentary exhibition excavates the history of the International Art Exhibition for Palestine which was inaugurated in Beirut in March 1978, and was intended as a seed for a museum in exile. The exhibition comprised almost 200 works, donated by 200 artists from 30 countries. During the Israeli siege of Beirut in 1982, the building where the works were stored was destroyed. Starting from a copy of the exhibition catalogue, the curators reconstructed the story of the show and the important network of international anti-imperialist solidarity that it represented using precisely the archival and documentary traces of lost works.

[15] See for instance the exhibition *Missing Links* produced in collaboration with Ashkal Alwan at Townhouse in Cairo in 2001.

Figure 35. Walid Raad, *Appendix XVIII: Plates 22-257*, 2008. Clockwise from the upper-left corner: Plate 204 *A History of a Timeline*; Plate 188 *A History of a Biennale*; Plate 106 *A History of a Budget*; Plate 92 *A History of a Monograph*; Plate 91 *A History of a Dissertation*; Plate 218 *A History of Floor Plan*.

breaking down and sealing off its objects from the context and set of relations in which they have emerged. What becomes apparent, moreover, as Finbarr Barry Flood observes is the odd discrepancy between the universalizing claims made via these generic headings and the content of the original documents, that, although hardly legible, references mainly a specific Lebanese context.[16]

     It is important here to note that for Toufic not everyone experiences the withdrawal of the

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[16] Finbarr Barry Flood, "Staging Traces of Histories Not Easily Disavowed" in *Walid Raad,* exhibition catalogue (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2015), 172. Raad's work could be said to mimic and subvert the universal claims made by particular histories, which seek to cover over the fact that such universal proclamations always represent a particular standpoint or subject position. In contrast to the repression of such tensions in universal history, what is instead presented in Raad's work is a model of historiography in which the tensions between the multiple standpoints and presents from which history is articulated are amplified.

cultural inheritance, but only the community that has lived through and has been directly affected by the "surpassing disaster". Cultural artefacts as well as the blocks of the expressive grammar, remain available to the constructions of hegemonic histories promoted by victors or by foreigners on whose lives that *local* disaster did not have any direct impact. If those affected by the disaster want to access and use their own tradition again, they will have, in Toufic's words, to "resurrect" such heritage after having made manifest its withdrawal. In the exhibition walkthrough, Raad (somewhat cheekily) reveals that the colours, lines, forms and shapes from artworks are particularly fond of hiding in "dissertations, especially ones written in a foreign language about a native culture." *Plates 56-58: Dr. Kirsten Scheid's Fabulous Archive,* named after the American, Beirut-based art historian and scholar of modern Arab art, feature a number of blurry miniatures of reproductions of artworks.[17] Raad's displaced appropriation of the foreign art historian's archive can be seen as an attempt at "resurrecting" such a withdrawn tradition through its documentation.

In producing artworks out of the paratextual elements that surround artworks, Raad shifts our attention from the Text (the artwork) to its context; that is, the material, institutional and discursive infrastructure that, paraphrasing Genette, enables a work to become an *art*work and to be offered as such to its viewers and, more generally, to the public. Like in the Atlas Group, the meta-historiographical dimension of Raad's investigation leads him to privilege the frame over the framed. His works consistently direct our attention towards those interpretative frameworks that affect and control our perception and reading of artworks: namely the exhibition apparatus, consisting of accompanying texts (captions, brochures, wall texts, catalogues), display technologies (walls, vitrines, photography, audio, video), installation methods (sequence, height, light, combinations), layout, design and the museum's overall architecture. Whereas in the Atlas Group the focus was on the production of historical documentation – the fabrication of truth – here the attention shifts to the moment of reception. In classical reception studies, 'receptions' or 'reception events' encompass the ways in which material from a certain classical tradition "has been transmitted, translated, excerpted, interpreted, re-written, re-imagined and represented".[18] Virtually all the works composing *Scratching* can be seen as different instances of 'reception events', which are, however, chronically haunted by delays, withdrawals, obstructions, mistranslations, misinterpretations and inconsistencies.

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[17] Kirsten Scheid, *Painters, Picture-makers, and Lebanon* (Ph.D. diss, Princeton University, 2005).

[18] Lorna Hardwick and Christopher Stray (ed.), "Introduction: Making Conceptions", *Companion to Classical Reception* (Maldon and Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 1.

Following the trajectory of Raad's work – his organic transition from the Atlas Group to *Scratching,* from the history of the Lebanese wars to the history of art in the Arab world – this chapter considers that specialized field of historical research that is the history of art. In so doing, its aim is to continue that critique of historicism that we have so far pursued through the close reading of artworks that could be said to articulate and enact what Benjamin formulates as a materialist historiographical practice. Nowhere can Benjamin's "history written by the victors" be charted more easily then when considering that "persistent historicism" that, according to Hal Foster, is endemic to art history.[19] The tendency to seal off art history, or what Benjamin would call cultural history, from its broader historical, political and socio-economic context, misconstrues the discipline and its objects as a "closed unity", a separate field of human experience detached and unencumbered from circumstances that take place beyond its narrow boundaries. The inclination to treat artworks and cultural artefacts as objects of contemplation and to freeze them as fixed markers in a self-referential and teleological model of progressive development, occludes the important ways in which the ever shifting history of their reception – what we have come to see as their *afterlife* – affects the very idea of what that object is or has been. Raad's complex corpus of work is an insistent reminder of the impossibility to seal off the history of art in the Arab world from the disruptions and intrusion of a history of violence, whose consequences are both material and immaterial. Further, it makes impossible for us to encounter the artworks in isolation, without "the history which has allowed the work to come down to our own age", or which has enabled its production in the present.[20]

This chapter seeks to approach the individual elements or pieces that make up *Scratching* as a series of astute guides that, by poetically and allegorically pointing up conundrums, conceptual and methodological difficulties, urge us to reflect on the issues, challenges and potentials that concern the discipline of art history in the present conjuncture – especially in its new emerging variants of global art history or recuperative retrospective art histories. The problems of universal history return in fact today in the form global histories, whose construction is not simply "speculative", but grounded in the actualities of the historical process of globalization.[21] My aim is thus to articulate the conceptual stakes contained in Raad's work and, in particular, the challenges that they pose to the discipline of global art history. Further, I will consider how his self-reflective

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[19] Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 11.

[20] Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian", 262.

[21] See Peter Osborne "The Postconceptual Condition: Or, the Cultural Logic of High Capitalism Today", *The Postconceptual Condition: Critical Essays* (London and New York: Verso, 2018), 16.

and critical historiography might serve as a model that, in its witty sophistication, offers insights for collecting, curatorial and historiographical practices in the region.

The three sections of which this chapter is comprised are organised around three temporalities and the main problematics that they raise. The first section on the contemporary moment looks primarily at the building of a cultural infrastructure across the region, considering the controversies and potential of such a recent phenomenon. The second section focuses on historiographical debates regarding the retrospective incorporation of Arab modern art (and other non-Western modernisms) within a modernist canon that for long has been exclusively Euro-American centric. The third section considers the category and discipline of Islamic art history, and reflects on how an orientalist academic formation based on the spatialisation of temporality and denial of coevalness can be re-articulated in the present to mobilise a different reading of the past. As the chapter moves backwards in time, it should become clear that the contemporary constitutes the temporal condition structuring and informing our understanding of the past.

4.1 On Cultural Infrastructures: The Contemporary Moment

In 2008, Raad presented his first solo exhibition in Beirut, at Sfeir-Semler Gallery, a blue-chip art space which had opened just three years earlier. Located on the fourth floor of a former industrial building in the harbour area of Karantina (a neighbourhood that in 1976 was the site of one of the deadliest massacres of the civil wars),[22] the 800-square-metres gallery was the first white-cube dedicated to contemporary practices in the field of conceptual art to open in the Lebanese capital, anticipating a trend that was to grow exponentially in the following decade.[23] Raad's exhibition thematises and interrogates the development of such a cultural infrastructure, while problematising the reception of his own works within this mutated context. Presented as the first chapter of his history of art in the Arab world, the exhibition title singles out the city of Beirut and the temporal bracket 1992 – 2005 as its object. Alongside the already discussed *Appendix XVIII*,

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[22] Originally serving as a place of quarantine for its convenient location near the city port, the district of Karantina later became a refugee camp inhabited by Armenians (who had fled the 1915 genocide), Kurds, Syrians and Palestinians. In January 1976, Christian militias attacked the camp, razed it to the ground and massacred its inhabitants.

[23] The existing gallery system till that point was dominated by galleries exhibiting primarily paintings and sculptures, such as Galerie Épreuve d'Artiste, Galerie Janine Rubeiz, Aida Cherfan Fine Art, Galerie Alwane, and the Agial Art Gallery. Sfeir Semler Gallery has also a branch in Hamburg which was opened in 1998.

Figure 36. Walid Raad, *Section 139: The Atlas Group (1989-2004),* 2008.

among the works on show, Raad included a miniaturized *mise en abyme* of his own oeuvre, *Section 139: The Atlas Group (1989-2004)*. Displayed in a tiny model of a white-cube gallery, each single art piece, down to the videos, is faithfully reproduced at 1/100th of their original scale (Figure 36). The work recalls Marcel Duchamp's famous *Boîte en valise* (1935-41). However, Raad's small-scale retrospective deviates from the latter in the conceptual importance it attributes to the particular context in which it was first installed. In the accompanying text, Raad explains that the works on view are not miniatures, but actual artworks which shrank the moment they entered the art space in Beirut. "Something about Beirut's time and space", he elaborates, "makes an artwork shrink and inaccessible to the artist."[24] While such a ludic and absurdist narrative can be seen as yet another instantiation of Toufic's idea of withdrawal, *Section 139* can also be read as a probing into the new institutional conditions that have emerged in Beirut, and of which the venue hosting Raad's exhibition is a prime example. Although it refers specifically to the Lebanese context, the Atlas Group had not been shown in the country before 2008, and, as we have seen in the previous chapter, part of its contents were made playing with the presumed expectations of non-Lebanese audiences. The narrative of the works' shrinkage enables Raad to mark the event of its first exhibition in Lebanon, while speculating on the effects that the local reception will have on the meaning and nature of his work. Further, by being encapsulated within an exhibition devoted to the history of modern and contemporary Arab art, in a gesture of self-historicization, his oeuvre appears indeed to have grown smaller by effect of its placement within a broader historical trajectory.[25]

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[24] Walid Raad in H. G. Masters, "Those Who Lack Imagination Cannot Imagine What Is Lacking", 127.

[25] The figure of "shrinkage" plays a role in Benjamin's theory of reception, in which shrinkage is said to be the "law governing the transmission of works over time". As Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings observe, the "simultaneously destructive and constructive power of criticism, complementing the power of time, shrinks the artwork and packs it

By focusing on the institutional basis of artistic production and reception, Raad's work can be viewed as an heir of politicized art practices associated with institutional critique, as the insistent comparison with Marcel Broodthaers's imaginary museum suggests. On the one hand, his use of the term 'Arab' as a unifying cluster for a wide-ranging series of works and references can be read as a mockery of the growing popularity of the regional show as a format to curate non-Western art, especially in Western institutions.[26] On the other hand, his consistent focus on the current infrastructural developments across the Arab region, brings his work to bear on the local socio-political conditions within which these new institutions are emerging. While interrogating the processes of globalization of art institutions in the by-now seemingly boundless topology of the art world, Raad constantly brings back his analysis to local geopolitical dynamics that include power relations and problems of cultural hegemony. In this section, I offer a necessarily schematic overview of the institutional landscape in the Arab world, focusing in particular on Lebanon and the Gulf region. I move then to a consideration of the debates concerning the problems and possibilities provided by the new institutions, before returning to Raad's own commentary in the form of an artwork.

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into a 'microeon – a highly concentrated yet manifold reflection of the historical epoch in which it originated along with the epoch in which it is received and reborn.'" Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin. A Critical Life* (Cambridge, MA.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 344.

[26] One of the most famous instances of regional shows that deliberately mobilised the geographical marker 'Arab' was Catherine David's series of *Contemporary Arab Representations* (three exhibitions each focusing on a different geographical centre: Beirut/Lebanon, 2002-03; Cairo 2003-04; Iraq 2005-07). For a consideration of the specific cultural and historical genealogy conjured up in the choice of the term 'Arab', see Pablo Lafuente, "Art and the Foreigner's Gaze: A Report on Contemporary Arab Representations" *Afterall* 15 (Spring/Summer, 2007), https://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.15/art.and.foreigners.gaze.report.contemporary.arab.r; see also Edward McDonald-Toone, "The Exhibition and the Agora: Contemporary Arab Representations (2001-07)" in *Imperfect Chronologies: Arab Art from the Modern to the Contemporary. Works from the Barjeel Art Foundation,* ed. Omar Kholeif (Munich and London: Prestel and Whitechapel Gallery, 2015), 39-50. For a chronology of exhibitions of Arab art in the West since the early 2000s, see Media Farzin, "On the History of Contemporary Arab Shows" in *Here and Elsewhere*, exhibition catalogue, eds. Massimiliano Gioni et all (New York: New Museum, 2014). The listed exhibitions are mostly rooted in identity politics and use the geographic marker as the only discernible curatorial criteria to group together artists and artworks. The exhibition *Here and Elsewhere* (16th July – 28th September 2014), in spite of the self-reflective awareness – evident especially in the catalogue and in the three roundtables organized in collaboration with the magazine *Bidoun* – was not immune from such contradictions, betraying in its curatorial framework those very problematics that were discursively addressed in the symposia.

During the past two decades, the Arab world has witnessed the emergence of a large material and institutional infrastructure for the production, exhibition and distribution of art, with a particular emphasis on Arab artworks and artists.[27] Over the years, a number of cultural institutions, independent art organizations, commercial galleries, art fairs, museums, foundations, school programmes, workshops, art festivals, funds, residency programmes, prizes and journals, have cropped up in cities as diverse as Beirut, Cairo, Alexandria, Marrakech, Tangiers, Algiers, Amman, Ramallah, Jerusalem, Istanbul, Doha, Manama, Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Given the often very marked political, social, economic, and cultural differences between the various nations and regions of the Arab world, such infrastructural and institutional developments have taken distinct forms, assuming even strikingly divergent conjugations.[28] Such developments can be broadly separated into two main categories (although such a distinction is not always so clean cut): the emergence of non-profit spaces principally devoted to contemporary art on the one hand, and the construction of large-scale institutions and mega-museums, with a collecting mandate and a corporate profile on the other. Grassroots institutions like Darat Al Funun (1988) in Amman, Ashkal Alwan (1994) in Beirut,[29] Al Ma'mal Foundation (1998) in Jerusalem, Townhouse Gallery (1998-2015) in Cairo, and Platform Garanti (2001-2007) then SALT (2008) in Istanbul have had a crucial role in sustaining a local art scene and stimulating critical exchange. Envisioned as sociopolitical projects emerging out of a sense of contemporary urgency, these institutions were able to combine an engagement with current global art debates, with an attention for the concerns of local constituencies, addressed through extensive outreach and public programmes, community-based projects and educational initiatives.[30] Operating outside the orbit of state patronage and

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[27] While certainly unprecedented in terms of scale, the novelty of such phenomenon should however not be overstated: art institutions existed in the Arab world well before. Yet, their affirmation as globally-recognized centres of cultural production and exhibition is, arguably, a more recent development.

[28] For an excellent mapping of the art institutional landscape across the Arab region, see Anthony Downey (ed.), *Future Imperfect: Contemporary Art Practices and Cultural Institutions in the Middle East,* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), especially Downey, "Introduction: Future Imperfect. Critical Propositions and Institutional Realities in the Middle East", 14-46.

[29] Other important independent spaces and initiatives emerging in Beirut in the 1990s include: the Ayloul Festival (1997-2001), Masrah Beirut (or the Beirut Theatre), and the Arab Image Foundation (1997).

[30] For instance, Ashkal Alwan initiated the pedagogical programme Home Workspace Program in 2011. For a consideration of this program in relation to other educational initiatives in the Middle East, see Rachel Dedman, "Knowledge Bound: Ashkal Alwan and Alternative Arts Pedagogy in the Middle East" in *Future Imperfect: Contemporary Art Practices and Cultural Institutions in the Middle East,* ed. Anthony Downey (Berlin: Sternberg Press,

financial support, and occasionally suffering political censorship and repression, these organizations filled the void of a largely missing infrastructure, creating important networks of collaboration across the region, and attracting considerable international attention.

It is on the heels of such a growing international interest in cultural and artistic production in the Arab world, spearheaded by non-profit entities, that commercial galleries and large museums have rapidly popped up, quickly followed by the flourishing of a burgeoning local art market. The process of accelerated museification has been particularly visible in Beirut, where several institutions have opened or re-opened their doors in recent years. Among these are private, market-driven initiatives, tied to projects of real-estate speculation, such as the Aïshti Foundation: Lebanese businessman and collector Tony Salame's mega-mall museum, housed in a David Adjaye-designed building at the outskirts of Beirut. While it would be a gross error to conflate these different manifestations of the contemporary cultural infrastructure in Lebanon, they are, arguably, mutually imbricated. In 2015, twenty years after the foundation of Ashkal Alwan, reflecting back on the glaring transformation of the Beirut art institutional landscape, director and co-founder Christine Tohme observes: "one thing we need to realize, ironic as it may be, is that the current situation, in a way, is one we have created. By *we*, I mean Ashkal Alwan and its cohorts. We are some of the actors who participated in making all of these foundations and museums and galleries pop up."[31] That is, by contributing to turn Beirut into a recognizable and firmly established centre of contemporary cultural production, critical art institutions such as Ashkal Alwan have paved the way for the successive blooming of commerce-oriented institutions such as the Aïshti Foundation, which can claim their legitimacy based on the cultural maturity of the city's art scene.[32]

Yet, in terms of infrastructure for the visual arts, it is the current developments in the Gulf states that, for huge volume of investments and colossal scale, have been mainly in the international spotlight. In Doha (Qatar), two large-scale museums were built in rapid succession: the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA), designed by the Chinese-American architect I. M. Pei, was

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2016): 168-181.

[31] Christine Tohme, "Nouveaux Niches" *Artforum International* 53, no. 9 (May 2015), 322. Among the new spaces and organizations mentioned by Tohme are: the newly expanded Sursock Museum, reopened in 2015; the Aïshti Foundation, also opened in 2015; Beit Beirut, a new cultural centre managed by the City of Beirut in cooperation with the City of Paris, and slated to open in a historic building formerly known as the Barakat Building or Yellow House; the BeMA, Beirut Museum of Art currently developed by APEAL (the Association for the Promotion and Exhibition of the Arts in Lebanon); the holding group Saradar, which is working with local and international advisers on building a collection of modern and contemporary artworks.

[32] Dedman, "Knowledge Bound", 178.

inaugurated in 2008; while, two years later the Mathaf, Arab Museum of Modern Art, opened its doors in a school building of Doha's Education City, renovated by the French architect Jean-François Bodin. Dubai, one of the seven emirates forming the federation of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has fashioned itself into the buzzing centre of a bombastic art market, hosting branches of auction houses, like Christie's and Sotheby's, and the Art Dubai Fair, founded in 2007. In Sharjah, the emirate next to Dubai, a Biennial, launched in 1993 as a conservative display of mainly decorative art, has come to international prominence under the directorship of the British-educated Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi, daughter of the ruling sheik, who has begun to commission and exhibit the work of internationally renown, and even politically engaged, artists and curators. This tendency appears to be culminating in the ostentatious plans to construct a monumental cultural district on Saadiyat Island (Arabic for "Island of Happiness"), just off the coast of Abu Dhabi, the wealthiest emirate. If all goes according to the lavish plans stipulated in 2007, when completed, the island, intended as a multi-purpose commercial centre, tourist destination and high-end residential site, will also host the world's largest cultural district. Alongside the Jean Nouvel-designed Louvre franchise – the only museum that has effectively been built – the construction of other four globally acclaimed museums designed by as many leading star-architects was announced. For the latest instalment of the Guggenheim Museum, Frank Gehry has projected a behemoth that will dwarf its antecedent in Bilbao; the plans for the Zayed National Museum, named after the founding leader of the UAE, Sheik Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahayan (1918-2004), bear the signature of Norman Foster and sport a partnership with the British Museum. To complete what the Abu Dhabi Tourism Development & Investment Company (TDIC) describes as a "string of pearls" decorating the island coastline, will be a minimalist Maritime Museum care of the Japanese Tadao Ando and a futurist Performing Art Centre designed by the late, Iraqi-born Zaha Hadid.[33] While construction plans lag behind – Guggenheim Abu Dhabi was initially scheduled to open in 2012 – and widespread scepticism on the feasibly and even willingness to carry out the original plans in full has set in, discussion and debate have grown unabated.[34]

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[33] Andrew McClellan highlights the strategic choice of architects each representing one of the countries upon which Abu Dhabi will rely for expertise and object loans, and with which it wishes to establish political and diplomatic ties. Andrew McClellan, "Museum Expansion in the Twenty-First Century: Abu Dhabi", *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 1, no. 3 (2012), 277.

[34] The 2008 financial crisis and the outbreak of the Arab Spring are taken as the two main reasons behind the continuous postponing and scaling down of construction plans. See Cristina Ruiz, "Guggenheim Abu Dhabi should be postponed or downsized, says the man who launched the project", *The Art Newspaper*, 26 March 2017,

With its combination of private funding from Sheiks, franchise branding and triumph of star-architecture, Abu Dhabi's cultural district appears as a belated and geographically displaced iteration of the "late capitalist museum" described by Rosalind Krauss in her 1990s Jamensonian inflected analysis.[35] The rapid materialization of a contemporary art infrastructure has developed in the absence (and wishful anticipation of) a fully-fledged local art scene, compounding a sense of artificiality and detachment from the local background. In contrast to the grassroots vibrancy of contexts such as Lebanon, in the Gulf states, cultural initiatives are mostly part of a top-down, centralized system of management, in which museums serve as tools of cultural diplomacy and soft power. Much of the criticism, from mainly western detractors, has focused precisely on the political and economic motivations lying behind the unprecedented scale of investments earmarked for these grandiose constructions. In the official versions, the cultural ventures are presented as part of a preventive economic strategy aimed at diversifying the sources of national income in preparation for a post-oil economy. By offering what the Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority calls "luxury-based experiences", the goal is to turn the city into a destination for the global tourist elite, stimulating local businesses and the house market. Culture is harnessed as an engine of economic growth and urban renewal, capable of triggering gentrification and property development. In addition, as Karen Exell points out, these new cultural spaces constitute an "entry point into the global system through world culture branding that includes various elements such as the petitioning for UNESCO World Heritage sites, their election as cultural capitals, the hosting of major sporting championships and the construction of emblematic buildings."[36] On a political-diplomatic level, the 'civilising' cloak of culture is instrumental to burnish the UAE's international reputation, whitewashing human rights abuses behind the façade of a benevolent and culturally open government. The long-term partnerships established between Abu Dhabi institutions and western museums is generally presented under the umbrella of a 'bridge-building' mission, aimed at fostering inter-cultural dialogue and understanding.

Political scholar Alexandre Kazerouni, with whom Raad has collaborated, has linked the current constructions back to the new political order resulting from the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in

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https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/guggenheim-abu-dhabi-should-be-postponed-or-downsized-says-the-man-who-launched-the-project.

[35] Rosalind Krauss, "The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum", *October* 54 (Fall 1990), 3-17.

[36] Karen Exell, "The Global Spectacular. Modernity and Supermodernity in the Arabian Peninsula Museums", in Downey (ed.), *Future Imperfect: Contemporary Art Practices and Cultural Institutions in the Middle East,* ed. Anthony Downey (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 325.

1990-1991 – or what he dubs the Second Gulf War.[37] Shattering any remaining sense of pan-Arab cohesion, the Iraqi threat pushed the Gulf states to draft new defence policies by cementing alliances with western countries. Started off by the Emir of Qatar Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani's decision to erect the MIA in Doha, a plan conceived right in the aftermath of the Gulf War, the museums' construction rush is interpreted as a symbolic materialization of such westward looking policies, as a well as a concrete means to deflect attention from other forms of economic cooperation with the West, most notably the arms trade.[38] As Kazerouni points out, the new museums did not emerge from a barren cultural environment, as the French expression, used for publicity purposes, "Louvre des sables" (Louvre of the Desert) seems to imply. Rather, they displaced or replaced an already established indigenous model of regional museums, what Kazerouni terms the "heritage museum" or "rooted museum", that, in his opinion, is more directly tied to a native, Arab identity. In his view, rather than addressing the indigenous population, the new museums, aptly renamed "mirror museums", are targeted to reflect the West. The sleek and glossy buildings, he contends, are meant to produce a mirror effect, reflecting back to western audiences an image that suits and confirms foreign expectations vis-à-vis the contemporary Muslim world, while sanitizing potentially more controversial elements. Instead of focusing on the dichotomy indigenous-foreign, Exell highlights how the agendas of "social exclusion" on which the UAE mega-museums are based depend on a national legislation that severely restricts citizenship eligibility. Besides international (mostly western) tourists, the museums cater to an elite of citizens that represents just a minority – only the 20% – in a diverse population of western expatriates and especially foreign migrant workers with residency status only.[39]

While ostensibly endorsing liberal western values, albeit filtered through local religious and cultural sensibilities, the progressive and tolerant image of themselves that these cultural institutions have tried to paint has been irremediably stained by the emergence of a number of illiberal practices. Cases of censorship at major exhibitions, and especially reports on the

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[37] Alexandre Kazerouni, *Le Miroir des Scheikhs. Musée et politique dans les principautés du golfe Persique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2017). For Kazerouni, the first Gulf War was the war between Iraq and Iran (1980-1988).

[38] The constructions of Saadyiat Island were financed mainly with money deriving from UAE's arms purchases (foreign governments are obliged to invest in the UAE when they sell it arms, according to the Offset Program Bureau). See Anna Somers Cocks, "How offsets on arms sales into Abu Dhabi have helped finance its Louvre", *The Arts Newspaper*, 23 November 2017, https://www.theartnewspaper.com/review/how-arms-sale-offsets-have-financed-the-louvre-abu-dhabi.

[39] Exell, "The Global Spectacular", 325.

exploitation of millions of migrant workers employed for the construction and the maintenance of the buildings in Saadiyat Island has aroused much international outcry.[40] Since 2011, the Gulf Labour Coalition (GLC), an activist group composed of international artists, writers and scholars, which includes Raad himself, has denounced the systematic abuse and discrimination of migrant workers, amassed in labour camps and deprived of civil rights and the ability to move. The GLC's actions consists of a mixed-strategy, combining the making of artworks concerned with raising awareness of the issue with tactical boycotts, extensive research on the field, and union-style negotiations with the western headquarters of the imported institutions to ensure respect of migrant workers' rights. By pointing to the discrepancy between the UAE's forms of exploitative employment and the labour laws in force in the countries from which such institutions originate, GLC highlights the global division of labour that subtends to the globalisation of the art world.[41] This state of affairs, as Downey points out, generates a series of paradoxical situations. While the Guggenheim owns some of Raad's works and might decide to exhibit them in its new venue when and if this will be built, the artist has been denied the right to enter the UAE, because of his role as a GLC activist.[42]

Given the emphasis that the new museums place on collection-building, preservation and transmission of (a local) cultural and artistic heritage, as well as the resources they dispose of, they might appear uniquely well-placed as sites for the "construction of new art histories informed by regional artistic developments, and for institutional practices shaped by local sensibilities and

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[40] One such case of censorship was the dismissal of curator Jack Persekian as the director of Sharjah Biennial in 2011, following the inclusion of a piece found offensive to Sharjah's ruling Sheikh. See "An unwarranted dismissal in Sharjah", *eflux*, 11 April 2011, https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/35699/an-unwarranted-dismissal-in-sharjah/.

[41] Andrew Ross (ed.), *The Gulf. High Culture/Hard Labour* (New York: OR Books, 2015). See also Guy Mannes-Abbott, "Utopian Dust Versus Perfumed Amplification: Objects Lessons from Saadiyat Island and Gehry's Guggenheim, Abu Dhabi", in *Future Imperfect: Contemporary Art Practices and Cultural Institutions in the Middle East,* ed. Anthony Downey (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 292-308. The more conventionally artistic offshoot of the project can be found in *52 Weeks*, a year-long campaign in which artists, writers and activists contributed a work, text or action each week to highlight the deplorable living and working conditions of migrant workers in Abu Dhabi. In terms of union-style negotiations, the boycott of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi is emblematic, as artists promised to lift the boycott in exchange for the acceptance of reform, providing debt relief, wage increases and the right to independent representation.

[42] Downey, "Introduction: Future Imperfect", 37. See also: "An open letter from Walid Raad", *eflux conversations*, May 2015, https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/an-open-letter-from-walid-raad/1657.

interests."[43] Already in 2008, the editor of *Bidoun* magazine Negar Azimi reflected on the positive repercussions that the construction of a largely lacking cultural infrastructure could have not just on the Gulf region, but more generally on the Middle East. As she noted, the construction of museums entirely or partially devoted to the Islamic cultural heritage, such as the MIA in Doha and the Louvre Abu Dhabi, will reverse the "centuries-old trickle of antiquities from east to west"; whilst curatorial initiatives and educational programmes, if critically developed, have the potential to instigate a much needed "dialogue about historiography".[44] More affirmatively and emphatically, Walter Mignolo has hailed MIA's opening as an "enactment of de-westernization", whereby "western cultural standards" are not simply imitated but "appropriated and adapted to local or regional sensibilities, needs and visions."[45] Although the MIA, in both its architectural envelop and curatorial layout, faithfully replicates western models, and the discipline of Islamic art history, as we shall see, has a genealogy that runs deep into European intellectual traditions, the simple location of the museum in a non-western country, for Mignolo, seems to be enough proof of its emancipation from western cultural hegemony and of the advent of a pluriversal historical account. Yet the multiplication of art museums, that geographically mirrors the outline of a new multi-polar world order and is economically fuelled by the globalisation of capital, rather than unravelling a plurality of civilisational stories previously disavowed, seems to integrate them even more tightly within that "single story", originally fashioned in the West, that Mignolo would like to believe undermined.[46] His simple model elides the persistence of entrenched institutional practices and cultural assumptions, art historical categories, concepts and taxonomies that have obfuscated rather than enabled the critical "dialogue about historiography" invoked by Azimi. The geographical displacement of art museums out of Western capitals is not sufficient guarantee for the enactment of alternative art histories, if it is not accompanied by a critical rethinking of the implicit assumptions, methods and goals inherited from disciplines such as museology and collection studies whose academic inception is coterminous and implicated with the material

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[43] Exell, "The Global Spectacular", 326.

[44] Negar Azimi, "Trading Places", *Artforum International* 46, no. 8 (Apr 2008), 394.

[45] Walter D. Mignolo, "Enacting the Archives, Decentering the Muses. The Museum of Islamic Art in Doha and the Asian Civilizations Museum in Singapore", *Ibraaz* 006, 6 November 2013: https://www.ibraaz.org/essays/77.

[46] Mignolo's analysis is based on a de-coupling of Westernization (or Western hegemony) and capitalism. However, as Hanan Toukan has claimed, it is difficult to see how "a decolonial shift of knowledge" might occur when the production of such knowledge continues to be determined by "market constrains." See Hanan Toukan, "The Palestinian Museum", *Radical Philosophy* 2, no. 3 (December 2018), 10-22.

actualities of European colonialism and imperialism.[47]

A case in point is represented by the Abu Dhabi outpost of the Louvre, which opened its doors on the 8th November 2017. Born out of an intergovernmental agreement between the UAE and Agence France-Muséums signed in 2007, its collection features loans from major Paris institutions (comprising around 300 objects, rotated on a ten-years base), as well as a currently expanding in-house collection, whose creation is being supervised by a team of French curators. Besides the rental of artworks and French curatorial expertise, Abu Dhabi is also paying a huge fee for the Louvre's name – a 'brand' that, as McClellan points out, is "synonymous with French culture".[48] Describing the Louvre Abu Dhabi as the "first universal museum in the Arab world", publicity material on the museum website is keen to stress the fact that it is in no way "a copy of the French Louvre", but "an individual institution offering its own interpretation of a universal museum, reflecting its era and the local traditions of the country it lies in."[49] Yet, the museum's acquisitions, as McClellan notes, "reflect the familiar priorities of western universalism (with a French inflection)". While the exhibition design renounces the organization by school, technique or material, in favour of a theme-based display that draws connections between temporally and geographically distant civilizations and cultures, the chronological arrangement is implicitly suffused by a teleological narrative of progress that, from the ancient civilizations of Greece, the Middle East and Asia, culminates in "a European tradition that defines art for the modern era". Rather than challenging or de-centring biased paradigms, the approach of the Louvre Abu Dhabi is for McClellan a "testament to how universal western values have become, to how difficult it is to 'unthink' western taxonomies."[50]

Further the very notion of universalism on which the museum is based is highly contentious. According to Kazerouni, Louvre Abu Dhabi's emphasis on an anthropological and generic version of universalism based on common patterns of human behaviour, serves to deflect attention from the revolutionary and libertarian narrative behind the foundation of the Louvre, considered particularly dangerous in the wake of the Arab Spring turmoils in 2011.[51] Moreover, if the model of

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[47] See Sonja Mejcher-Atassi and John Pedro Schwartz, "Introduction: Challenges and Directions in an Emerging Field of Research", in *Archives, Museums, Collecting Practices in the Modern Arab World*(Fernham: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 1.

[48] McClellan, "Museum Expansion in the Twenty-First Century: Abu Dhabi", 282.

[49] See: https://www.louvre.fr/en/louvre-abu-dhabi

[50] McClellan, "Museum Expansion in the Twenty-First Century: Abu Dhabi", 284.

[51] Kazerouni, *Le Miroir des Scheikhs*.

Figure 37. Walid Raad, *Section 88: Views from outer to inner compartments*, 2011.

the universal survey museum or encyclopaedic museum can be traced back to the French Revolution and the storming of the Tuileries, its democratic mission quickly morphed into a showcase of imperial domination. Tellingly, the notion of universalism and universal museum has been recently revived to defend the conservative agendas of western encyclopedic museums, threatened by mounting demands of repatriation.[52]

Among the several works that compose *Scratching*, it is *Section 88: Views from outer to inner compartments* that most directly touches on the developments of a material art infrastructure in the Gulf. The work tells the story of the future opening of a museum of contemporary and/or modern art, sometime between 2017 and 2024, in an unnamed Arab country – more specifically identified as the Guggenheim Museum in Abu Dhabi or another museum in the Gulf in a GLC publication[53] – and of a proud local resident who rushes towards the entrance only to find out that it is inaccessible to him. Despite the open door, he feels that, were he to proceed he would "hit the wall." The video associated to the narrative shows a cascade of museum door-ways leading to a row of empty gallery rooms superimposed in a continuous loop (Figure 37). While bringing to mind Kafka's parable "Before the Law", Raad's story of unfathomable inaccessibility points to the social exclusivity on which the new museums in the Gulf are based, as highlighted by Kazerouni and Exell, while belying their false pretences of universal embrace. In this sense, *Section 88* can be seen as an artistic complement to Raad's direct political intervention and social critique as a member of the GLC. More subtly, and in keeping with a reading based on the literary concept of the paratext, the

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[52] In 2002, nineteen directors of leading museums issued a "Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums". See: Appendix in Andrew McClellan, "The Art Museum from Boulèe to Bilbao" (Berkley: University of California Press, 2008).

[53] Walid Raad in Ross (ed.), *The Gulf. High Culture/Hard Labour*, 117.

recurrent image of door-frames and hallways can be interpreted as a literalisation of Genette's metaphor of the threshold of interpretation. Raad reminds us that the art museum is not a neutral container that can be overwritten when introduced in a different context, but a technology of enframing that controls and determines our reading of its contents.

4.2 On Temporal Taxonomies: The Debate on Modernism

In parallel to the material and infrastructural developments in the region, Raad has further focused his attention on the "equally fraught" discursive efforts that have been made and are made, as he puts it, "to define, sort and stitch 'Arab art' along three loosely silhouetted nodes: 'Islamic', 'modern', and 'contemporary.'"[54] These nodes serve as periodising categories in the classification and study of artworks and cultural artefacts – 'Islamic', for instance, stands here as a synonym for 'tradition' indicating exclusively art produced before the 19th century, not influenced by the impact of Western modernization (I will return to the problematics involved in this use of the term in the next section). Such temporal taxonomies, however, are neither neat nor neutral chronological signposts in an uncontroversial stagist model of temporal succession. Rather, they should be viewed as modes of temporalisation that account for different structures of historical experience and that are grounded in different worldviews or ideological models of interpretation. Furthermore, in the current articulation of 'Arab art', it is the last temporal category in the series – the contemporary – that retrospectively has come to overdetermine the previous ones. As Chad Elias acutely notes, the recent international commercial and critical interest in modern artists from the Arab world was "propelled and mediated by the rapid ascendency of contemporary artistic practices from the Middle East."[55] In other words, it was the flourishing of international attention towards this regional scene of contemporary art that, in turn, stimulated the swell of concern for artists of previous generations, loosely organized under the header of 'modern' or 'modernist' Arab art. Not only has the rapid construction of a canon of modern Arab art, "composed of key figures, movements and styles", registered the predominance of market-driven criteria over critical

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[54] Walid Raad in Respini (ed.), *Walid Raad*, exhibition catalogue, 110.

[55] Chad Elias, "The Museum Past the Surpassing Disaster: Walid Raad's Projective Futures", in *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East,* ed. Anthony Downey (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 219.

scholarship in the production of value.[56] In a temporal reversal, this modern canon, as Elias continues, has been retroactively "framed through the lens of the contemporary", while made to appear "discontinuous with the forms, idioms, media and techniques of the present."[57] What seems to be at stake here is the belated canonisation of Arab modern art – and, as we shall see, of other non-western modernisms too – and the disavowal of the 'contemporary' as the standpoint from which such retroactive positing is made.

Elias finds an astute and witty exemplification of such a paradoxical predicament in Raad's *Index XXVI: Artists* (2008), an installation presenting a list of names of painters and sculptors who have worked in Lebanon over the last century. Written in Arabic characters and printed in white vinyl letters on the gallery white walls, the visibility of the names is purposely frustrated by the materials of inscription.[58] Inspecting the list more closely, an Arabic reader will recognise among the many obscure names a few that have recently earned international popularity, with major surveys exhibitions devoted to them outside of Lebanon, such as Saloua Rouda Choucair, Paul Guiragossian, and Etel Adnan. Through the gesture of indexing his precursors, Raad admits the framing and constitutive role that contemporary art practice plays with regards to the retrospective writing of a history of modern art in Lebanon and the Arab world more generally. The piece further highlights processes of cultural and linguistic translation that underlie such a revisionist historiographical effort. Raad sourced most of the artists' names from monographs, exhibition catalogues and art reviews written in French and English. The act of compiling the list has thus been matched by a process of retranslation that is not without pitfalls, given the different available systems of transliteration and transcription. In presenting the piece Raad informs us that

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[56] Ibid. See also Rasha Salti, "Around the Postcolony and the Museum: Curatorial Practice and Decolonising Exhibition Histories" in *Decolonising Museums* (L'International Books, 2015). Available online at: http://www.internationaleonline.org/bookshelves/decolonising_museums

[57] Ibid.

[58] Formally, Raad's use of the Arabic script references the tradition of Islamic calligraphy – one of the main genres of Islamic art – as well as its later transformation into an abstracted and secularised form in the work of a number of modern artists in the Arab world and beyond. Yet, its inclusion within a postconceptual installation that anatomises art historical processes of canon formation, seems to signal a rift with such tradition more severe than that introduced by modernism. See Palestinian artist and art historian Kamal Boullata, "Notes on Verbal Dominance and Visual Expression in Arab Culture" in Omar Kholeif (ed.) *Imperfect Chronologies: Arab Art from the Modern to the Contemporary. Works from the Barjeel Art Foundation* (Munich and London: Prestel and Whitechapel Gallery, 2015), 29-36. For an account of calligraphic modernism in the work of Sudanese artist Ibrahim El Salahi, see Iftikhar Dadi, "Ibrahim el Salahi and calligraphic modernism in a comparative perspective," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109, no. 3, (Summer 2010): 555-576.

Figure 38. Walid Raad, *Index XXVI: Artists*, 2008; and *Index XXVI: Red, blue, black, orange, yellow*, 2010.

when *Index XXVI* was first shown in Lebanon, an unsympathetic local art critic, self-appointed guardian of Lebanese modern and contemporary art, discovered that many names had been misspelled and took it upon himself to "correct" the orthography of one of them, amending the name of Johnny Tahhan, which had been wrongly transliterated into the more Francophone sounding Jean Tafan, with a red pencil on the immaculate white walls.[59] A later version of the same piece, *Index XXVI: Red, blue, black, orange, yellow* (2010), is composed of portions of walls (as if the gallery's walls had been broken up to be transported elsewhere) bearing other orthographic corrections sprayed in the colours listed in the title, as well as a collage of documents relating to the life of the artists whose names had been originally misspelled (Figure 38).

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[59] Walid Raad, "Index XXVI: Red", *eflux* 54, (April 2014): https://www.eflux.com/journal/54/59860/index-xxvi-red/.

To complicate this already tangled narrative even further, Raad tells us that he received these names telepathically from artists of the future. He then suggests that the names' misspellings are not to be attributed to telepathic noise or glitches, but that they were intentionally distorted by the artists of the future. These artists are not maliciously trying to thwart the writing of histories in the present; rather they are on the look out for colours that have immaterially withdrawn and are thus unavailable in the future (presumably as an effect of a future disaster), and hope to extract the pigments from the handwritten corrections that the errors will make necessary. Although it makes the story even harder to believe, this unlikely account, once again conceived under the sign of Toufic's theory of withdrawal, introduces a new temporal aberration that, while showing the inadequacy of a merely chronological approach to history, points to the constitutive role of the future in the re-readings and re-writings of the past, as well as the possible mistranslations that could be bequeathed in the reception of the artists' works.

Index XXVI can be seen as performatively enacting the recuperative gesture, typical of revisionist art histories, of inscribing forgotten names within an existing canon. Raad playfully mimics and anatomises art historical procedures of canon formation and revision, including corrections and amendments. The walls (or fragments of wall) materialise an encyclopaedic effort to write a complete history of modern art in Lebanon, which can be seen as just one splinter within the larger scope of an incipient discipline of global art history.[60] Thus construed, global art history appears as an aggregation of discrete and self-contained national or regional art histories, offering an image of totality by way of simple addition and accumulation. Raad's complex narrative installation, however, in his foregrounding of aberrant chronologies, transmission failures, mistranslations and corrective gestures, consistently reveals the fallacy of such a model of recuperative historiography. If based on a simple "additive procedure", this corrective strategy will merely produce a series of regional or national art histories as peripheral supplements to the pre-established, and largely Euro-American, script of modern art. Rather than simply remedying an historiographical exclusion with a broader inclusion, one must interrogate the reasons for which certain names and histories have been left out of the official record in the first place, and the contingent motivations pressing upon their current recuperation. Rather than suggesting correctives, Raad's work instantiates a form of radical (self-)interrogation that investigates the

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[60] For a survey of debates on global art history see James Elkin (ed.), *Is Art History Global?* (New York: Routledge, 2007). For a differentiation of universal and global in relation to art history, see Hans Belting, "Contemporary Art and the Museum in the Global Age" in *Contemporary Art and the Museum: A Global Perspective,* eds. Peter Weibel and A. Beddensieg (Karlsruhe: Hatje Cantz, 2007).

implicit constructive principles that underpin such a retrospective operation.

But what does it mean to say, as Elias does, that the modern canon of Arab art is "framed through the lens of the contemporary"? What are the full conceptual implications at stake in this statement? If we take the contemporary in the expression 'contemporary art' to be not merely a chronological periodisation used by art historians to designate current art practices or a qualitative attribute to signify their fashionability or up-to-dateness, but rather consider it to be a philosophical category of temporalisation, then the 'contemporary' comes to indicate a particular temporal condition that is distinctive of our historical present in the age of globalisation. This postulate, whose most persuasive and far-reaching articulation can be found in Peter Osborne's writings on contemporary art, is rooted in the expanded semantics of the very term 'con-temporary'. Con-temporaneity, in Osborne's words, denotes a "coming together not simply 'in' time" – sharing time with one's contemporaries – but a coming together "*of* times", "of *different but equally 'present'* temporalities".[61] These distinct temporalities, or different ways of being in time that are geographically situated and socially lived, are tendentiously brought and at times forced into mutual interaction through the economic integration of de-nationalized markets on the one hand, and through inter-connective technologies of communication on the other. This coming together, clearly, does not cancel out economic disparities and power asymmetries, nor ongoing social inequalities and relations of financial dependence, which appear all but sharpened by forms of neo-colonial persistence. The unification of different temporalities that the contemporary denotes is thus, by necessity, internally "disjunctive", inasmuch as it can only be articulated, socially experienced or imagined from different spatial, or better geopolitical standpoints. In short, contemporaneity can be seen as an embodiment of the temporal logic of globalisation.[62]

Elias's observation points to the crucial fact, so memorably illuminated by Benjamin, that the history of the past is not written in "homogeneous empty time, but [in a] time filled with the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]."[63] The *jetztzeit*, the historical present that frames the construction of a canon of modern Arab art, is a time that is witnessing profound geo-political changes wrought by processes of globalisation: that is, the progressive 'global' extension of relations of economic, political and cultural interdependence, enacted through the operations of an increasingly

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[61] Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All*, 17.

[62] Osborne, "The Postconceptual Condition", 15. He writes, "contemporaneity is the temporal structure that articulates the unity of global modernity."

[63] Benjamin, "On the Concept of History", 395.

transnational capitalism. To say that the modern is framed through the lens of the contemporary, therefore, means that the re-writings and revisionisms of the history of modern art are currently produced from the standpoint of an increasingly interconnected, global condition. Retrospectively, the hegemonic western canon of modern art is rewritten and 'corrected' through a geographically expanded scope that better reflects the current multi-polar world order.[64]

If the interest in modern Arab art can be seen as an after-effect of the globalization of capital and the opening up of new art markets in the Arab world, its historiographic systematisation follows a broader trend that has witnessed the revival, expansion, critical reassessment and complication of the discourses on the modern. This recent return to the temporal-critical category of the modern – displaced in the 1980s by the now-atrophied category of the 'postmodern' – has been characterized by a polycentric approach aimed at attending to the existence of 'multiple modernities'.[65] In the field of art history, a number of categories have been devised in order to expand and, more or less successfully, problematise the canon of western modernism – 'multiple modernisms', 'alternative modernisms', 'cosmopolitan modernisms' or 'modernism at large' to cite just a few.[66] However, the institutional drive towards all-inclusiveness has often ended up reducing difference and plurality to the tamed and economically profitable pool of multiculturalism.[67]

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[64] Andreas Huyssen writes: "Such alternative geographies of modernism have emerged on our horizon since the rise of postcolonial studies and a new attentiveness to the genealogy of cultural globalization." Andreas Huyssen, "Geographies of Modernism in a Globalizing World", *New German Critique* 100, (Winter, 2007), 190.

[65] See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Timothy Mitchell (ed.), *Questions of Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Dilip P. Gaonkar (ed.), *Alternative Modernities* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Shmuel N. Eisenstadt (ed.), *Multiple Modernities* (Piscataway: Transaction Publishers, 2002).

[66] Kobena Mercer (ed.), *Cosmopolitan Modernisms* (London and Cambridge, MA.: inIVA and The MIT Press, 2005); Huyssen, "Geographies of Modernism in a Globalizing World". The methodological value of such temporal-critical categories consists in their ability to illuminate the transnational dimension that has been inherent to modernism since its outset. British Ghanian art historian and cultural critic Kobena Mercer's notion of "cosmopolitan modernisms" is precisely intended to explore modernism's cross-cultural past. Similarly Huyssen's concept of "modernism at large" (clearly indebted to Appadurai) identifies "the cross-cultural forms that emerge from the negotiation of the modern with the indigenous, the colonial and the postcolonial in the 'non-Western' world." (194)

[67] A case in point here is Nicolas Bourriaud's curation of the fourth Tate Triennial in 2009, theoretically organised around the notion of "altermodern". According to David Cunningham, the generalised inclusivity and superficial pluralism of Bourriaud's notion of "altermodern", in which alternative modernisms are simply mediated by transparent operations of cultural translations – in the form of "universal subtitling" or "generalized dubbing" – flattens out difference and incommensurability, revealing a mere "conformity to the logic of fashion and the market." David

The challenge for such retrospective historiographical endeavour, as Elias clearly spells out, lies in the way in which it re-conceptualises forms of non-western cultural production that, in the west, have long been considered "out-of-synch", "derivative" or "inauthentic".[68] In his excellent study of modernist art in Muslim South Asia, Iftikhar Dadi points out how in western perception and narratives, non-western modern art has been construed either as "a belated and impoverished derivative response to Western modernism" or as a betrayal of a purported local aesthetic tradition, always invariably situated in the premodern era.[69] While Western modernism is perceived as an organic, albeit disruptive, response to Western tradition, modernism in the rest of the world is seen as disjunct from the local tradition and as a mere, second-rate imitation of a Western template or its sly, coded opposition. On the one hand, these narratives of belatedness and asynchronicity have been instrumental in reproducing a teleological model of history as progress grounded on the prejudicial premise of Euro-American centrality. On the other hand, ideas of a presumed cultural authenticity have served to fix the non-western artist into an essentialist and reified identity.

The aporias that haunt both the external (read western) reception and the internally-split construction of modern art in the Arab world are rendered as a play of reflections and shadows in two of Raad's prefaces – to the second and seventh edition respectively (both made in 2012). In *Preface to the Second Edition,* the artist captures the evanescent reflections that a number of paintings from the Mathaf's collection of Arab modern art cast on the polished floors of the museum. *Preface to the Seventh Edition* consists of a series of six paintings that, as we learn from the accompanying wall text, were for a long time regarded as "canonical examples of early twentieth century Arab abstraction" and exhibited as such in a hypothetical Emirati museum. Yet, the eventual discovery that each work was in fact a painting of a painting's shadow, and thus a crypto-figuration in the guise of an abstraction, caused their sudden removal from the museum display (Figure 39). Losing their status as paradigmatic examples of Arab abstraction, the paintings were crossed out from the newly formed canon. Raad's ironic quip on the misinterpretation of a figurative painting mistaken for a formalist abstraction could be read in two ways, each addressing one of the misconceptions surrounding the interpretation of non-Western modernism: the projection of an imaginary cultural continuity with the past on one hand, and the frictionless

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Cunningham, "Return of the Modern", *Journal of Visual Culture* 9, no. 1 (2010), 121-129.

[68] Elias, "The Museum Past the Surpassing Disaster", 222.

[69] Iftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 13.

Figure 39. Walid Raad, *Preface to the Seventh Edition*, 2012.

application of concepts and principles emerging from a reductive Euro-American version of

modernism on the other. While figurative art – in the form of portraiture and landscape painting –

is considered a Western import, the genre of abstract art is perceived to be more closely

associated to a local tradition of ornamental and decorative art characterised by geometrical

patterns, the arabesque, calligraphy and the stylised treatment of figuration.[70] The discovery of a

figurative inscription in what was hitherto seen as an original example of modernist Arab

abstraction creates a disruption that does not map smoothly in constructions of cultural continuity

with tradition.[71] Yet, the paintings of a painting's shadow also fail to line up with the criteria of

medium-specificity, anti-illusionism and self-reflexivity which famously constitute the hallmarks of

the Greenbergian version of formalist abstraction and modernist painting. The paintings of a

painting's shadow conform neither with narratives of an uninterrupted continuity with a past

tradition nor with Euro-American formalist constructions of modern art as an autonomous and

self-reflexive field. They can rather be qualified as "discrepant abstractions" that through their

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[70] According to Nada Shabout, what she identifies as the abstract school of modern Arab art "alternate[s] between a geometric pattern inherited from a traditional Islamic design and a cursive characteristic of Arabic script." Nada Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015). For a consideration of the twentieth century valorisation of Islamic art as an art of abstraction, see Markus Brüderlin, *Ornament and Abstraction: The Dialogue between Non-Western, Modern and Contemporary Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

[71] If we were to venture a more directly political interpretation of the piece, the reference to an hypothetical Emirati museum from which the paintings were removed, should not go unnoticed. In fact, as Maymanah Farhat remarks, in places such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States "heavy censorship has historically curtailed figurative representations out of fear of politically provocative content." Maymanah Farhat, "Nada Shabout's Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics", *Contemporary Practices: Visual Arts from the Middle East* (2007), 212: http://www.contemporarypractices.net/essays/volume4/NadaShaboutModernArabArt.pdf

incommensurability, disrupt monolithic versions of abstract modernism, pointing to the necessity of re-conceptualising the theoretical construction of the field by opening up the history of the genre so that it is made to bear upon different genealogies.[72]

In *Yet Another Letter to the Reader,* Raad mocks the presentation of modern Arab art according to contrived Western art historical narratives and taxonomies, while foregrounding the problem of how to mark the absence of artworks which were either looted or destroyed, as well as the failed or distorted reception of a tradition whose link with the present has been irremediably broken as an effect of the trauma of war, violence and major socio-political upheavals.[73] Presented as a collaboration with Palestinian painter Suha Traboulsi, one of Raad's fictional avatars, the work consists of an exhibition of copies of canonical paintings by Middle Eastern artists reproduced on 30 wooden transport crates. Featuring major Arab artists, including Khalil Gibran, Ibrahim el-Salahi and Marwan Kassab-Bachi, and spotlighting a range of styles, the crates are arranged in a way such as to highlight parallels with developments in Western art, tracing a trajectory that goes from Fauvism to abstraction and from figuration to Expressionism and Surrealism (Figure 40). According to the piece's sustaining narrative, the original paintings were acquired to form the core collection of Lebanon's first Museum of Modern Art, expected to open in 1975. Because of the outset of the war, the museum never opened its doors to the public and the paintings were stored in the depots of the Ministry of Culture. Over the years, Lebanese political figures illicitly donated a number of works to family members and cronies. Suha Traboulsi, who was chief registrar of public collections in the Ministry of Culture from the 1950s to the 1980s, helplessly witnessed the plunder. She started however to faithfully reproduce the stolen paintings on wooden storage boxes and shipped them to the countries where the works had been sent to, in the hope that one day the lost artworks would find their way back into the crates, and, ultimately, into a new Museum of Modern Art in the region.

Although this narrative is fictional (there never was a plan to open a Museum of Modern Art in Lebanon in the 1970s) and the artworks reproduced on the crates are not lost, but are in many cases part of important regional art collection (Marwan's painting, for instance, belongs to the famed Barjeel Foundation), Raad believes that these by now canonical works are "not yet ready to

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[72] Kobane Mercer (ed.), *Discrepant Abstraction* (London and Cambridge, MA.: inIVA and The MIT Press, 2006), 7.

[73] The work was first presented at the 11th Gwangju Biennale (2016). A different version, entitled "Postscript to the Arabic Translation", was presented at Beirut's Aïshti Foundation. See Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, "One Take: Postscript to the Arabic Translation", *Frieze* 178 (April 2016): https://frieze.com/article/one-take-postscript-arabic-translation.

Figure 40. Walid Raad, *Yet Another Letter to the Reader,* 2017. Installation view at Fondazione Volume!, Rome.

be displayed in a museum."[74] Foregrounding the original paintings' absence, he signals the profound rift that separates the present from the works' past and the impossibility of a simple return to the tradition they stand for. Such a return, as Toufic would say, could only be a return to a "counterfeit tradition, one characterized by reduction to the exoteric and lack of subtlety".[75] Tradition, according to the Lebanese writer, does not consists merely in "what materially and ostensibly survived the 'test' of time", but "becomes delineated and specified by the surpassing disaster."[76] It is only what immaterially withdraws and needs therefore to be resurrected by later artists, writers, and thinkers, through repetition and quotation, that is revealed to be part of that tradition which was affected by the surpassing disaster.

Toufic's mystical messianism and Raad's concocting of uncertain epistemologies and disruptive chronologies serve as an antidote against the risk of a positivistic and historicist approach to the writing of art history. By focusing only on the objects and artworks that have survived and are cherished as the sole measure for the writing of such history, one ends up drafting a celebratory script shaped around a teleological notion of progress, failing to register absences, voids, disinherited practices and historical traumas. By misconstruing history as progress and survival, historicism inevitably forgets everything in the past that resists transmission as "heritage" or "cultural treasure" of the dominant, victorious tradition. Rather than focusing on the region's cultural heritage *per se*, Raad, following Toufic, focuses on the conditions of possibility of its *transmission* – what Benjamin would call its "transmissibility"[77] – as well as the existing and

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[74] Anna Vakudin, "Yet Another Letter to the Reader. Walid Raad", *ArtAsiaPacific* (2017): http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/WebExclusives/YetAnotherLetterToTheReader.

[75] Toufic, *The Withdrawal of Tradition*, 29.

[76] Ibid., 64.

[77] For a consideration of Benjamin's concept of "transmissibility" in relation to the cultural heritage of a "sickening"

largely inadequate forms through which this heritage is currently been handed down. A materialist-constructivist counterpart to Toufic's mysticism, Benjamin's thesis on the concept of history warn us about the "barbarism" that "taints the manner in which" a document of culture is "transmitted from one hand to another", and impel us "to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is working to overpower it."[78]

4.3 On Islamic Art: The Denial of Coevalness, Metamorphosis and Strategic Anachronisms

The problematic nature of temporal taxonomies is particularly evident in the standard use of the term 'Islamic art' as a periodising category designating a particular subfield of art history. The discipline of Islamic art history delimits an improbably vast and, as aptly characterised by two of its practitioners, "unwieldy" field of study covering approximately 1,400 years and spanning across continents, from the Atlantic to the Tigris and beyond.[79] Unlike genres such as 'Buddhist art' or 'Christian art', Islamic art, in spite of its qualifying adjective, is not primarily considered as a religious art, but is rather seen as a cultural identification common to the extensive geographical area historically dominated by Islam.[80] This definition, however, is not to be found in indigenous Islamic intellectual or discursive formulations, but is a typical orientalist scholarly construction, forged during the age of colonialism.[81] Emerging in the mid-nineteenth century at the intersection of European archaeology and museology, philological Oriental studies and connoisseurship, the epistemological structure of Islamic art history reflects the "frisson of alterity" and the asymmetrical power relations upon which the reception of Islamic art in the West was originally predicated.[82] In recent years, the discipline has been subject to a growing self-conscious critique

tradition, see Rebecca Comey, "Testament of the Revolution (Walter Benjamin)", *Mosaic, an interdisciplinary critical journal* 50, no. 2 (June 2017), 1-12.

[78] Benjamin, "On the Concept of History", 391, 392.

[79] Sheila Blair and Jonathan Bloom, "The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on the Study of an Unwieldy Field", *The Art Bulletin* 85, no. 1 (2003), 152-184.

[80] For an analysis of the problems resulting from such a segregation of the religious from the cultural in secularised conceptualisations of Islamic art, see Wendy M.K. Shaw, "The Islam in Islamic art history: secularism and public discourse", *Journal of Art Historiography* 6, (June 2012), 1-34.

[81] Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia,* 2.

[82] Finbarr Barry Flood, "From Prophet to Postmodernism? New World Orders and the End of Islamic Art", in Elizabeth Mansfield (ed.), *Making Art History: A Changing Discipline and its Institutions* (London: Routledge, 2007), 31-35.

targeting a number of the biases intrinsic in its formation as an academic field, such as: the conflation of culture, religion and geography; the homogenization of a variety of cultural practices stretching across time and space; the erasure of the contribution of ethnic and religious minorities under Islamic rule; and the application of hermeneutic epistemologies grounded in Western modes of perception, that have obscured indigenous genealogies of meaning.[83] One of the most remarked upon problematics of the field consists, however, in its temporal framing that firmly places Islamic art in the premodern past. Its canon, created in the West, excludes art produced in the Islamic world after 1800, and therefore influenced by the impact of European colonialism and Western modernization. Whereas surveys of European art are plotted along a linear, teleological trajectory going from cave paintings to contemporary art practices, the abrupt interruption of the historical narrative of Islamic art reflects long-standing Western assumptions according to which non-Western artistic traditions have entered into crisis with the advent of modernity.

The location of Islamic art in a past severed from a "living tradition" amounts to a form of allochronism that presents a denial of its coevalness in relation to the art of European modernity. As critically examined by Johannes Fabian in his 1983 book *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Objects*, the denial of coevalness – generally associated with classical anthropology but evident in the framework of other disciplines studying non-European cultures – consists in "a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse."[84] In the field of Islamic art history, the temporal segregation of the scholar and its object of study is evident in the fact that the end of Islamic art is taken to be coterminous with the inception of its disciplinary study. Such temporal dissociation has served to reinforce narratives of decline and decadence of the Islamic artistic tradition as a result of the faltering reception of European cultural forms, effectively occluding the possibility of recognising local modernizing practices.[85]

In the last twenty years, especially since 9/11, the academic field of Islamic art has seen a critical reappraisal in the public sphere and the museum departments in particular, as it has been called upon with increasing frequency to perform a bridging mission between the West and the Islamic world. Yet, far from promoting a nuanced and complex understanding of Islam as a living

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[83] Shaw, "The Islam in Islamic art history", 10.

[84] Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Objects* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 31.

[85] Flood, "From Prophet to Postmodernism?", 34, 35. Provocatively, Dadi uses the word Islamic to analyse modern and contemporary art from Muslim South Asia.

tradition and a diverse set of practices, its characterisations as a fixed and monolithic entity have often reinforced, albeit unintentionally, crude cultural stereotypes and exacerbated latent perceptions of a 'clash of civilisations'. Inherited from an acritical reception of Islamic art history's foundational cornerstones, the notion of a prelapsarian 'golden age' of Islamic art irremediably corrupted by an inappropriate reception of European 'influence', ended up, as Flood points out, playing into the hands of "neoconservative discourses emphasising the failure of Muslims to make the transition to Euro-American modernity."[86]

Following the invitation of the Louvre to produce a purpose-designed exhibition for the opening of the new Islamic art wing, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Raad has devoted a number of prefaces to the field of Islamic art. While acknowledging his novice status to the discipline, Islamic art opened up for Raad a way to further problematise the "imagined geography" identified by the term 'Arab' – the placeholder that keeps together the unwieldy pieces that compose *Scratching*.[87] As suggested by Elias, the term offers "a useful counter to the latent privileging of the nation state as a locus for artistic production and exchange in the Middle East."[88] Alongside the metal stencil cut-outs reproducing the contours of museum spaces, Raad has developed a body of work that reflects on the history of the collection, its photographic documentation, practices of display and taxonomies of classification.

Studies of Islamic art objects have varied from descriptive accounts detailing each artefact's media and materials to iconographic approaches influenced by semiotic models, from dynastic perspectives emphasising stories of local political power to the increasingly common regionally defined studies. Similarly, museum displays of Islamic art have tended to focus primarily on the single object, while grouping the collection according to dynastic, regional or medium-based taxonomies.[89] This long-lived museological propensity to privilege aesthetic contemplation over

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[86] Ibid., 38. Both Flood and Shaw remark on how the quasi-mythical construction of an originary Islam corrupted over time, especially as a result of Western 'contamination', is common to both Western orientalists and Islamic fundamentalists. Strict interpretations and narrow definitions of Islam that favour origins over practice – for example, by excluding a variety of historically important practices such as Sufism – can be found both in Western scholarship from the nineteenth century onwards, and in Islamic revivalist movements.

[87] For the concept of "imaginative geography", see Edward W. Said, "Imaginative Geography and Its Representations: *Orientalizing the Oriental*", in *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 49-73.

[88] Elias, "The Museum Past the Surpassing Disaster", 223.

[89] For an overview of recent developments in the display of Islamic art objects, see Benoît Junod, Georges Khalil, Stefan Weber, and Gerhard Wolf (eds.), *Islamic Art and the Museum: Approaches to Art and Archaeology of the*

Figure 41. Walid Raad, *Postface II*, 2014.

contextualising information and to focus on discrete objects occluding stories of circulation and consumption, is evidenced in the architectural framings offered by the vitrines where the Louvre collection was displayed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Raad has sourced and scanned archival images of the old museum vitrines – most of which date back to the 1920s – and has digitally erased their contents (Figure 41). Overlapping the single vitrines onto one another, he has created a permeable and cavernulous structure, suggesting new approaches to the study and display of Islamic art, that consider the circulation, social use and shifting reception of the objects as they move across time and space, and in and out of different cultural traditions, modes of display and hermeneutic epistemologies.

The unexpected metamorphosis that objects undergo as they move from one exhibition context to another is at the centre of *Preface to the Third Edition* (2013). In this piece, Raad focuses on the much publicised loan of 294 canonical objects of Islamic art from the Louvre's collection of nearly 18,000 artefacts, to its Abu Dhabi branch. Raad believes that 28 of these objects will transform during the journey. He writes:

> While no one will doubt the subsequent changes, the nature and reason of their onset will be
> contested. Many will attribute them to the weather, asserting that the "corrosion" began soon after
> the exquisitely crafted, climate-controlled crates were opened in the Arabian Desert. Others will insist

Muslim World in the Twenty-first Century (London: Saqi, 2012).

they are immaterial and psychological, expressed only in the dreams and psychological disorders of non citizens working in the Emirate. And a few, the rare few, will speculate that they are aesthetic and came into view only once, in the enclosed 28 photographs produced by an artist during her Emirate-sponsored visit to the museum in 2026.[90]

The corresponding set of large photographic prints reveal the unexpected transfigurations: the handle of a seventeenth-century Egyptian dagger is overlaid with a floral panel from an Indian lacquer book-cover; a fifteenth-century jade wine cup from Iran is combined with a late-twelfth-century-to-early-thirteen-century sculpture from the same country; a metal helmet is embellished with the reflex of the translucent texture of a medieval rock-crystal vessel (Figure 42).[91] Some of these mongrel artefacts are further layered with semi-translucent coloured shapes extracted from Persian miniatures. The hybrid objects derive from the superimposition of images taken by the museum photographer Hugh Dubois as photographic documentation of the collection. In the original shots, the individual objects appear isolated, each situated within the precise coordinates of chronology, geographical location and medium-specific taxonomy provided by the catalogue entries. The two captions are likewise merged, so that only some parts of each are legible.

Disrupting the mirage of mastery given by epistemologies of positive classification, Raad's superimpositions undermine the historicist museological deployment of objects as exemplary representatives of singular epochs and spaces. In opposition to the normative art historical tendency to isolate objects in neat categories and non-communicating compartments, Raad's gesture unearths instead stories of intercultural exchange, translation, adaptation, hybridization and active reception of non-indigenous cultural forms taking place over a long period of time (*longue durée*). The artist seems to fulfil Flood's invite to rethink the discipline of Islamic art history by "adumbrat[ing] synchronic histories of intention and origin with diachronic accounts of circulation, consumption and reception." His composite objects resemble in fact what Flood calls a "strategic anachronism": namely a paradigm that "treat[s] the objects of Islamic art not as teleological markers in a master narrative that occludes the circumstances of its own production (and ongoing reproduction), but as contested objects within a disjunctive and tendentious

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[90] Walid Raad quoted in Elias, "The Museum Past the Surpassing Disaster", 228. For a slightly different version of the narrative see Respini (ed.), *Walid Raad*, exhibition catalogue, 148.

[91] Besides the photographic prints, Raad has also materialised these hybrids as sculptural objects printed with a 3D printer and recast in plaster and resin in *Preface to the Third Edition, Acknowledgements.*

Figure 42. Walid Raad, *Preface to the Third Edition*, 2013.

discourse."[92] By creating ruptures and interferences within long-established taxonomies, these blatant anachronisms give access to the multiple temporalities stratified within the same object. Further, rather than firmly placing the works within the context of their age of production, Raad puts on stage the age that perceives them – that is our historical present.

The caption or story that offers the necessary substrata to Raad's preface accordingly, shifts our attention from the object themselves – the artefacts of the Louvre collection – to the various types of labour circling around its exhibition: from transportation (metonymically indicated by the crates), to the construction of museums (referenced through a coded hint to the exploitation of non-citizens workers), to the critical museological practices planned as part of the museum program (the artist's Emirate-sponsored visit). The focus is once again displaced from the Text (artwork) to the paratextual elements that enable its transmission, reception and interpretation in the present moment.

The appropriation and the unforeseen metamorphosis that the Islamic art objects undergo in Raad's work can be seen as the latest instance of a longer history of cultural reception that has inevitably implied the transformation and the renewal of the originals. Benjamin's concept of "afterlife" – discussed in chapter 2 – offers us a useful model to articulate a theory of cultural reception predicated on constant change rather than absolute origins. While reductive histories of

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[92] Flood, "From Prophet to Postmodernism?", 44, 45. For an advocation of anachronism as a productive heuristic method for art historians, see Georges Didi-Huberman, "Before the Image, Before Time: The Sovereignty of Anachronism," in *Compelling Visuality*, eds. Claire Farago and Robert Zwijnenberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); and Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York: Zone Books, 2010).

reception tend to emphasise identity and continuity with temporal anteriority, Benjamin sees the work of art as an "evolving historical phenomenon, an oscillating 'force field' generated by the convergence and integration – the dynamic constellation – of the work's fore- and after-history."[93] The "afterlife" of the work depends on the interpretations, exegesis, citations, and re-uses performed by a set of readers over time, each embodying a stage in the work's continuing reflection.[94] These critical appraisals or receptions are always articulated in conjunction with a specific historical present, a particular "now" that is uniquely capable of recognizing and revealing certain aspects of the work.

It is important to remark that the transformation of the Islamic art objects in Raad's narrative is apparently precipitated by their move to the Louvre Abu Dhabi. This is the particular "now" in the historical constellation that triggers the transmutation and cross-fertilisation of the objects from the past. On the one hand, Raad's tale of transformation can be seen as an admonition against politically instrumental uses of art in regional constructions of a trans-regional heritage. It points to the fact that the so-called 'homecoming' of the collection will not restore an authentic tradition to its place of birth; rather, it functions as a warning of the risk of turning such an invented tradition into the icon of an imaginary cultural continuity. This putative 'return' is in fact an effect of the contemporary geopolitical order and a reflection of the new hegemonic balance of forces in the region. As Flood elaborates, it poses pressing questions about whether the art of a vast and complexly diverse region can be adequately represented in and by one single, now-hegemonic centre, based on its economic and infrastructural capacity to represent.[95] On the other hand, however, the unanticipated liberation of the objects from the shackles of rigid temporal and medium-based taxonomies expresses the possibility to reconsider the discipline of Islamic art history beyond positivistic and historicist accounts.

Overall, *Scratching* is a meta-historiographical work that engages in the complex geopolitical relations and art historical discourses, institutional infrastructures and ecologies that determine both whether and how certain cultural artefacts and works of art are received and interpreted. By focusing on the paratextual elements that, at different historical moments, shape and determine the reception of a Text (artwork), and by fashioning his own work in the guise of yet another paratext, appended to an ever-evolving series of historically situated reception-events, Raad invites

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[93] Eiland and Jennings, *Walter Benjamin. A Critical Life*, 547.

[94] Ibid., 547. Eiland and Jennings argue that by pointing to the importance of the moment of historical reception in determining the meaning of the work itself, Benjamin anticipates later post-structural reception theories.

[95] Flood, "Staging Traces of Histories Not Easily Disavowed", 174.

us to consider the historicity of the history of art as a process of constant change: a continuous writing and re-writing of prefatory notes.

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In counterpoint to the massive construction of museums in the Arab world, and in the Gulf area in particular, the background of political instability and staggering violence across extensive portions of the region have resulted in the destruction and erasure of a large part of its cultural and artistic heritage. A cursory and by no means complete list of museums and heritage sites hit by armed conflict and political turmoil should include: the ransack of the National Museum in Baghdad after the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003; the looting of the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities in Tahrir Square in Cairo during the Arab Spring in 2011; the serious damaging of the Museum of Islamic Art, also in Cairo, as a consequence of the detonation of a car bomb across the road in 2014; the destruction of the minaret of the Great Mosque at Aleppo in 2013; the Saudi-led bombardment of the Dhamar Regional Museum in Yemen in 2015; the destruction of numerous Shia shrines, Sufi sites and Mesopotamian relics by Isis forces in Northern Iraq and Syria, whose self-distributed images have become disturbingly iconic. Against this dismal backdrop, the monumental cultural temples arising in the Gulf can only house a partial canon, articulated around presence and survival, which is effectively oblivious of the gaps and absences that haunt the art historical record and the ongoing devastations.

In 2016, Raad, in collaboration with architect Bernard Khoury, a provocative figure of Beirut's reconstruction era, submitted a plan for the design of a museum of modern and contemporary art in Beirut in response to an architectural competition.[96] Entitled *A Proposal for a Beirut Site Museum: Preface* (2016-20--), the project is based on the premise that building a monument as a museum in Beirut with all its uncertainties would be a dangerously naive act. In place of erecting "yet another building that houses a counterfeit canon with its heroes, periods and isms", the duo proposed instead to dig a hole in the ground, to excavate the foundation of a building from which galleries would spread like tentacles underground, connecting the various

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[96] This architectural contest was issued by the philanthropic association APEAL (the Association for the Promotion and Exhibition for the Arts in Lebanon) for the construction of Beirut Museum of Art (BeMA). For a discussion of Khoury's architectural projects during the reconstruction period, see Elias, *Posthumous Images*, 147-158.

Figure 43. Bernard Khoury in collaboration with Walid Raad, *A Proposal for a Beirut Site Museum: Preface (2016-20--)*, 2016.

private collections that are said to be scattered throughout the city (Figure 43).[97] While rejecting the model of a celebratory architectural monument, the proposed design ironically turns the spotlight on the subterranean "private-princely-patron sector" that is behind the museum construction frenzy in Lebanon, and the potentially deleterious effects that such mainstream institutions can have on the precarious on-the-ground ecosystem of cultural production in Beirut, which has made them conceivable in the first place.[98] By placing the museum in the archeologically rich soil of the city, in a way that recalls the archaeological and paleontological paradigm proposed by Zaatari, Raad and Khoury offer this project as a preface or *ground zero*, "a clearance that makes room for what has yet to arrive", a place where to wait for "not-so-much the art, but the conditions that will make it possible for the political, art-historical, theoretical, curatorial, financial, administrative and architectural devices to do justice to Lebanon's modern and contemporary

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[97] See Bernard Khoury and Walid Raad, *Preface: 2016-20-- (Beirut Museum of Art)*:

https://www.bernardkhoury.com/project.php?id=317.

[98] Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, "Walid Raad and Bernard Khoury: Sfeir-Semler Gallery", *Artforum* (December 2017), 175.

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art."[99] While the pitch was unsurprisingly rejected, this unrealized project of paper architecture can be seen as an attempt to envision and write an alternative preface to the history of art in Lebanon.

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[99] See Khoury and Walid Raad, *Preface*.

Conclusion: Potential Histories

This dissertation has sought to illuminate the practices of artists Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Rabih Mroué, Walid Raad and Akram Zaatari, with a focus on their respective radical approaches to writing the history of Beirut, Lebanon, and, by extension, the Arab world. Such radical approaches to writing and representing history, as I showed, are importantly tied to the artists' autocritical employment of various visual, textual, and audio documents, especially photographic records. As I have detailed through my close analyses of a selected number of artworks, the photographic and audio-visual documents that these artists employ are not presented as self-evident facts or proofs, but are part of a critical process whereby historical truth-claims are always treated as a problem of reconstruction and disclosure. The historical truth-claims posited by photographs and other audio-visual media, that is, are always seen to be the result of an active process of interpretation. This process of interpretation includes a negotiation with the fabricated and constructed aspects of the document, as well as the media contexts in which they are read and circulated. Rather than neatly separating the factual from the fabricated, however, these works instead invite the spectator to discern the multiple mediations through which 'facts' and 'information' are encountered and consumed, and 'real' events are experienced. In situations of open or latent conflict, in which war is also fought over and through images, the patent fabrications of political propaganda – whether in posters, VHS tapes, or videos uploaded on the Internet – as these artists show, should not simply be dismissed as false, but taken seriously, critically decoded and intercepted, in order to interrupt the all-too-real effects of their unthinking reproduction. Yet the manifest transformation of documentary images through fictive inscriptions and various forms of figural manipulation, as I have argued, also serves to indicate complex historical processes and realities, which would otherwise remain imperceptible and inconspicuous. Acts of unmasking and construction, as I suggest, are both essential to reading and writing the social, political and economic mediations and forces of history.

In the present historical conjuncture, characterized by cynical post-truth politics and widespread anxieties concerning the circulation of fake news, art practices that confound the planes of documentary and fiction, with the scope of indicating the constructed nature of any document, are often seen to be undermining the evidentiary power of historical knowledge and scientific facts when their veridical value is in need of defence more than ever.[1] Such a climate of

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[1] Exemplary of such debates is a Bruno Latour's famous essay, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?", that Chad Elias

nihilistic relativism and self-serving skepticism has been further compounded by digital technology, which has resulted in a media environment in which the circulation, as well as manipulation and fabrication, of information and images take place at an ever greater quantity and speed. For Eva Respini, Raad's works, and that of his contemporaries, reflects on the conditions of the archive and of historical knowledge in a digital age characterised by:

> the easy access to information (if often dubious or unreliable information), the ubiquity of photographic images, the blurring of the distinction between amateur and professional image-makers, and the widespread understanding that any image can be manipulated to support any narrative.[2]

Yet, instead of pessimistically promoting this climate of cynicism and political indeterminacy, the art practices considered in this dissertation instead point to the necessary labour of interpretation and construction that goes into disclosing the truth-claims, however uncertain or contradictory, of any document or represented event. In this sense, as John Roberts remarks with regard to the photographic document, instead of "eroding realism and photographic truth, the malleability of the digital image" has had a markedly positive effect in prizing "photography away from the positivization and reification of realism and photographic truth as categories." Digitalization, as he contends, "does not destroy the truth-claims of photography; rather it makes such claims an explicit condition of critical *reconstruction*."[3] In other words, photographic documents – whether analogue or digital – are always part of a complex system of technological, social and cultural mediations that require discursive reconstruction and interpretation. These discursive conditions, which are inherent to the long history of positions critiquing the idea of photography as a transparently positivist or naturalist medium, have been rendered explicit by digitalization. If Raad's or Mroué's lectures engender the feeling of being in front of an unreliable narrator, serving to challenge the reliability and authority with which documents are

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cites in his discussion of the Atlas Group. According to Latour, the demistificatory zeal to detect manipulations and to unveil the ideological constructions which are passed off as facts has turned against the progressive political agendas to which critical practices were once bound up. Co-opted by neo-liberal conservatives, a popularised and debased version of the tools of social critique and of the hermeneutics of suspicion is now used to smash the credibility of "hard-won facts that could save our lives", such as the evidence of global warming. See Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern", *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004), 227.

[2] Respini, "Slippery Delays and Optical Mysteries", 33.

[3] Roberts, *Photography and Its Violations*, 30.

conventionally presented, it would be incorrect to read their works as merely gesturing towards an exposition of the fictionality or constructed character of documentary genres and forms. Indeed, part of the incisiveness of their works, as we have seen, lies in the fact that the conditions of fiction and construction that they endeavour to expose take on significance by being set against the documentary status of the records they employ or investigate, as well as their referential relation (whether direct or indirect) to real occurrences or events.[4] If the fictionality and performativity of their works departs from conventional documentary postures that ask spectators to accept what they see as 'the Truth', the hermeneutics of suspicion that they elicit is always troubled and complicated by their documentary status. As spectators, we are performatevely implicated in the negotiation of this often unsettled and uncertain relation between fiction *and* documentary.

Furthermore, in the radical historiographical practices that I have considered, and in particular in Zaatari's work with the collections of the Arab Image Foundation, the photographic document is not simply seen as a *mediated* historical record of the past, but as a material object with a history of its own. Inscribed on the photographs' material surface, or transmitted through the web of social relations in which they are circulated, are stories and layers of informations which accrete on and around visual documents, and which can be retrospectively extracted. As photographs enter new contexts and configurations with other documents, moreover, they acquire new meanings that, according to Benjamin's concept of "afterlife", retroactively change their fore-history as well. Far from its traditional conception as a static place of cold storage, the space of the archive for the artists I discussed offers a set of materials to be activated and re-articulated in the light of a particular present. While historicism views history as a settled archive of past monuments, these artists' radical historiographical practices reveal history as "an agonistic process still being made", which is "open to changing combinations of sense and signification."[5]

The concept of *afterlife* illuminates the complex temporality of the photographic document, which is otherwise occluded by historicist approaches that tend to assign to each event and object a settled position within a rigid unilinear chronology. Indeed, chronological inconsistencies

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[4] As Gilberto Perez notes, while a more conventional feature of fiction films, the unreliable narrator also appears in the history of documentary cinema. Perez discusses the example of Luis Buñuel's *Land without Bread* (1933), which, like the artists I consider, has often been read as a mere parody of the genre of the documentary travelogue, and celebrated for its fictionality; a reading which likewise fails to grasp that the film's significance is based on the ironic interplay between its fictional and documentary aspects. See Perez, *The Material Ghost*, 44.

[5] Edward W. Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 25.

typically feature in the works of the artists I looked at: from the trope of latency in Hadjithomas and Joreige's work to the proverbial temporal aberracies of the Atlas Group archive; from the juxtaposition of different temporal planes in Zaatari's videos to the chronological anomalies of posters and VHS tapes highlighted in Mroué's non-academic lectures. What is foregrounded in such practices is not only the anachronistic nature of the historical document, but its proleptic and analeptic capacities; that is, its ability to anticipate the future and to retrospectively cast a new light on the past.[6] Lifted out of the reified continuum of time, the photographic document and (as discussed in chapter 4) the artwork or cultural artefact are unmoored from their reductive role as stable temporal markers in a progressivist historical narrative.

The archive and the museum are crucial sites of political intervention which harbour a potential to change the way in which history has been recorded, thus planting the *"seeds of a new futurity"*.[7] Under the conditions of what Ariella Azoulay (echoing Benjamin) terms the *"constituent violence"* of history, the question becomes how to narrate or articulate the past in a way that does not partake in preserving that originary and foundational violence, *"a history that is not merely its reiteration."*[8] In order to do so, Azoulay claims, not only one must criticise the existing status quo, but work to *"reconstruct the possibilities that have been violently erased and silenced"* and *"make them present anew."* This method, which she calls "potential history", requires that one intervene directly in the collective imaginary, by creating "new conditions both for the appearance of things and for our appearance as its narrators."[9] This operation of historical intervention creates the possibility not only of recovering "past potential futures", whether disinherited practices and unrealised dreams, but it comples us to look at the ongoing constituent violence of history, and the possibility, however minimal or uncertain, of resistance and change in the present.[10]

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[6] For a discussion of the proleptic and analeptic capacities of the photographic document, particularly in relation to Hadjithomas and Joreige's series *Wonder Beirut*, see Downey, "In the Event of Fire: Precarious Images, the Aesthetics of Conflict, and the Future of an Anachronism".

[7] Osborne, *The Politics of Time*, 142.

[8] Ariella Azoulay, "Potential History: Thinking through Violence", *Critical Inquiry* 39, no. 3 (Spring 2013), 553. Azoulay identifies this general form of "constituent violence" with the foundation of Israel in 1948. Drawing from Benjamin's essay "Critique of Violence", Azoulay explains how such a constituent violence needs the "law-preserving violence" of the state in order to persist. Ibid., 550. My use of the term here is intended to point to the violence that re-constitutes and re-shapes a certain national or regional imaginary.

[9] Ibid., 553, 565.

[10] The notion of "past potential futures", articulated by the Otolith Group, has been discussed by T. J. Demos in *The Migrant Image*, 54-73.

In the archive, the evidence of certain experiences or occurrences might be "preserved unseen", until the conditions for their appearance and rediscovery are created.[11] This is, for example, the case of the remarkable story of the Lebanese space program: the initiative of a small group of mainly Armenian students at the Hagazian University in Beirut who, led by their mathematics professor Manoug Manougian, in April 1961, designed and launched the first rocket in the region. Initiated as an indipendent scientific venture, with no ties to the military or the government, the experiments of the Haigazian College Rocket Society soon attracted national attention. The Lebanese state and Army got involved providing funding, logistical support and a permanent launching base in Dbayeh, just north of Beirut. The project was renamed the Lebanese Rocket Society (LRS), and the colours of the Lebanese flag and the cedar (the national emblem) were used to adorn the body of each rocket. Between 1960 and 1967, more than ten solid fuel rockets were designed and launched, and their range increased steadily, finally reaching the termosphere. In 1963, Cedar IV crossed the Kármán line, the border separating the Earth atmosphere from outer space. The event was commemorated on a stamp, issued on Independence Day in 1964, that depicts a rocket, bearing the insignia of the cedar of Lebanon, flying across the moon (Figure 44). At a time when the great powers, led by the United States and the Soviet Union, were vying for supremacy in the space race, the achievements of a small scale project with limited funding in a peripheral, third-world nation were quite astonishing. However, as regional tensions dangerously heightened with the impending threat of an Arab-Israeli war, and as the Army's pressure to weaponise the project became more insistent, Manougian decided to leave the country. The last rocket was launched in 1967; after that the project was completely taken over

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[11] Azoulay, "Potential History", 550.

by the Army and the original nucleus of the LRS disbanded. Despite the popularity that the LRS had enjoyed in the 1960s, their story was rapidly forgotten, wiped out from collective memory by the chain of violences that subsequently shook the country and the region.

Hadjithomas and Joreige discovered the image of the stamp commemorating the launch of Cedar IV while leafing through the pages of the book *The Vehicle*, edited by Zaatari as part of the already mentioned project of the same name.[12] Puzzled by this incongrous image that they could not quite recognise nor locate – an image that, as they say, did *"not belong to our imaginary"* – the artists began conducting research. While parents and friends were oblivious and equally perplexed by the stamp reproduction, and a Google search for "Lebanese rocket" yielded only depictions of war – namely *"*Hezbollah missiles targeting Israel, and Israeli missiles targeting Lebanon" – they were eventually able to locate some useful information and records.[13] Significantly, their film *The Lebanese Rocket Society* (2013) does not simply recover and reconstruct this forgotten story, but consistently foregrounds the artists' process of research, interrogating the reasons and conditions that have determined such a gap in the national imaginary.

As the artists speculate, the lack of images documenting the story of the LRS explains, in part, its oblitaration from Lebanon's collective consciousness. In Beirut, they find an album of photos taken by Edouard Tamérian that were donated to President Fouad Chehab by members of the Lebanese Rocket Society. Ten more images, taken by photographers Assad Jradi and Harry Koundakjan, are discovered in the archives of the Haigazian University and the Arab Image Foundation (Figure 45). These are only a portion of a larger number of negatives that went destroyed during the civil wars. Jradi lost his negatives in 1982, when, following the Israeli invasion, his brother burned the negatives fearing that they would be mistaken as evidence of their involvement with the military. Koundakjan's negatives were destroyed when a bomb hit the Associated Press offices where they were kept. Yet, this condition of scarcity, that the artists took as the point of departure for their research, is reversed once they establish contact with Manougian in Tampa, Florida, and discover that he brought with him an entire film and photo archive of the project.

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[12] Akram Zaatari (ed.), *The Vehicle. Picturing Moments of Transition in a Modernizing Society* (Beirut: Arab Image Foundation and Mind the Gap, 1999).

[13] Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, "On the Lebanese Rocket Society", *eflux,* no. 43 (March 2013), https://www.e-flux.com/journal/43/60187/on-the-lebanese-rocket-society/.

Figure 45. Group portrait taken before the launch of Cedar 3, 1962. Image from the Lebanese Rocket Society Archive; and Assad Jradi, Photograph of the launch of the fourth Lebanese Rocket, Dabayeh, Lebanon, 21 November 1963. Image from the Arab Image Foundation.

Besides the absence of images, as Hadjithomas and Joreige reflect, the removal of the space program from Lebanon's imaginary is also a consequence of the violence that followed the termination of the project, namely the Lebanese civil wars and, earlier, the crushing Arab defeat in the 1967 war against Israel, euphemistically known as the Naksa (setback) in the Arab world. As Hadjithomas and Joreige point out, the development of the Lebanese space program coincided temporally with the apex of the secular pan-Arab project embodied in the charismatic figure of the Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, the leader who, as Tarek El-Ariss puts it, "restored Arab dignity and activated a narrative of historical agency." The Arab nationalist fiction affirmed by Nasserism projected an ideal image of modernity, "a narrative of the future, enlightenment and utopia", that was violently interrupted by the military defeat.[14] Explicitly associating the end of the adventure of the Lebanese Rocket Society with the collapse of the dream machine concocted by Nasser, the artists write:

> When the space program was halted definitely and suddenly sometime after the 1967 war, it was the end of a certain idea of the Pan-Arab project that was supposed to unite the region and inspire people to shape their own destiny. The end of this project shattered an alternative vision, a progressive and modernist utopia that promised to transform our region and the world.[15]

In this sense, the 1967 defeat can be seen as a form of ruptural violence (both real and symbolic) which has powerfully re-shaped the Arab imaginary, analogously to the way in which the Lebanese civil wars came to re-shape Lebanese collective consciousness, hindering utopian or progressive

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[14] Tarek El-Ariss, "Future Fiction. In the Shadow of Nasser", *Ibraaz*, no. 007 (26 June 2014): https://www.ibraaz.org/essays/95#_ftnref2.

[15] Hadjithomas and Joreige, "On the Lebanese Rocket Society".

narratives, and making inconceivable a project like the Lebanese space program.

Part of Hadjithomas and Joreige's project certainly consists in extracting from the past a series of unrealized possibilities and reactivating them in the present, a necessary condition for envisioning an alternative future. They therefore act on an atrophied imaginary making space for experiences and associations that have been suppressed. Their decision to build a scale replica of the Cedar IV and to install it in the courtyard of the Haigazian University is motivated by the aim to trouble a contemporary situation in which visual associations can only recognize rockets as military missiles. The animated "uchronia", designed by Ghassan Halwani, that concludes the film, visualises Beirut in 2025, imagining an alternative future in which the space program did not come to an end in 1967, but was further developed bringing prosperity and security to the country (Figure 46).[16]

However, as Chad Elias insightfully points out, Hadjithomas and Joreige's project is not merely "an idealistic effort to redeem a failed modernity", nor just an attempt to "prognosticate a set of possibilities that are otherwise unknown to us." More crucially, it consists in an attempt to imagine "what futures might emerge if history is emancipated from a progressive narrative."[17] Nasser's project of modernization was ultimately based on a unilinear "teleology", which, although critical of colonialism, unwittingly mirrored certain colonial practices and narratives – most famously through the televised reclaimation of the Suez canal, built by Ferdinand de Lesseps between 1859 and 1869.[18] While the defeat of the pan-Arab project explains, in part, the failures to register the experience of the LRS on the national and regional imaginary, by re-activating the memory of the space program, Hadjithomas and Joreige's research should not be understood as attempting to return or simply repeat the problematic articulations of Arab modernity promoted by and contingently imbricated with Nasser's revolution. That narrative, as El-Ariss writes, "was always fraught, utopian and tied to a colonial history" from which it was "unable to break."[19] Unmoored from these ideological and historical constraints, however, the anachronistic re-launch

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[16] Ibid. For an excellent discussion of Halwani's uchronia and the way in which this serves to cast doubt on whether the civil wars did take place in this alternative future, see Elias, *Posthumous Images*, 167-171.

[17] See Elias, *Posthumous Images,* 167, 165.

[18] For El-Ariss, the Suez canal embodies a "universal project of trade, exchange as well as world domination". Its nationalization, was not only an "act of anti-colonial resistance"restoring the canal to "its rightful owners – descendants of the million Egyptians who built it with their sweat and blood. It also activated a historical fiction that would" align Napoleon to Nasser.

[19] El-Ariss, "Future Fiction".

Figure 46. Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, (Left) Transport of *A Reconstitution* in Lebanon; (Right) Installation of *A Reconstitution* at the Haigazian University, Beirut; and The National Museum of Space, Beirut 2025. A drawing by Ghassan Halwani for the film *The Lebanese Rocket Society: The Strange Tale of the Lebanese Space Race,* 2012.

of the Cedar IV in Hadjithomas and Joreige's project, as with the other artworks examined in this dissertation, suggests possibilities of "negotiating" this problematic history in a way that does not uncritically reproduce the violence of the past, but attempts to create "new situations, new contexts, new meanings" in the space of the present.[20] Yet, unless it wants to turn into a flight of fantasy, the act of disclosing the historical potentials and possibilities of the present can not prescind from the historical past. For, as we have seen, it is only by working through a contested past, as well as through its opacities and blind spots – a process that is inherently incomplete – that a different image of the future might emerge.

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[20] Hadjithomas and Joreige, "On the Lebanese Rocket Society".

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