

# MATERIAL MEMORIES

CHOREOGRAPHING  
DOCUMENTAL  
BODIES

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# ABSTRACT

This essay investigates the performance practice of the Lebanese artist Walid Raad in its entanglements with the writing of history, the transmission of tradition, and the construction of collective memory. Understood as particularly vulnerable and material, these processes can encrypt trauma as a symptom, as a physical distortion of the visible and sayable. On one side, I highlight the different performative strategies Raad employs in his projects to re-evaluate collective spontaneous memory over official historical narratives. On the other side, I aim to shed light on some core concepts of Raad's practice, such as *aesthetic fact*, *hysterical symptom*, *location*, or *withdrawal of tradition*. I will demonstrate how Raad's complex and context-sensitive artistic devices are able to re-enact collective memory around some of the catastrophic events of contemporary Lebanon, creating an impressive and everchanging choreography while critically embodying the idea of the archive.

# ABSTRACT

Il'articolo indaga la pratica performativa dell'artista libanese Walid Raad nel suo intreccio con la scrittura della storia, la trasmissione della tradizione e la costruzione della memoria collettiva. Intesi come particolarmente vulnerabili e materiali, questi processi possono trattenere il trauma come sintomo, come distorsione fisica del visibile e del dicibile. Da un lato, intendo evidenziare le diverse strategie performative che Raad impiega per rivalutare la memoria collettiva spontanea rispetto alla narrazione storica ufficiale. Dall'altro lato, miro a far luce su alcuni concetti centrali della pratica di Raad, come *aesthetic fact*, *hysterical symptom*, *location*, o *withdrawal of tradition*. Come dimostrerò, i complessi dispositivi artistici di Raad sono quindi in grado di rimettere in scena la memoria collettiva riguardo alcuni degli eventi catastrofici del Libano, creando una coreografia impressionante e in continua evoluzione, incorporando criticamente l'idea di archivio.

## KEYWORDS

performativity, collective memory, choreography, documentation, trauma

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performatività, memoria collettiva, coreografia, documentazione, trauma

The intricate intertwining of memory and performance is becoming ever more visible as an increasing number of performing artists show inventive ways of engaging with troubled pasts and established histories (Schneider 2011; Lepecki 2010; Magris and Picon-Vallin 2019).

## Engaging the Bodies of History: Walid Raad's Art Practice

One crucial aspect of memory, which nonetheless has long been overlooked because it seems counterintuitive, is its inherently material nature. Either when it is measured in bytes, simply regarded as fragments of remembrance, or even when bridging human and non-human entities, memory can be understood as *embodied information*. Through reiteration or overwriting, a set of data and impressions are preserved in a material substrate (organic or inorganic), as suggested by different areas of study, such as so-called 'Embodied Simulation Theory' (Giannachi 2016), performance studies (Jones and Heathfield 2012), and digital media theory (Broadhurst and Price 2017). Situated at the crossroads between memory studies and a renewed interest in materiality, a burgeoning field of research has recently begun to delve into the specific relationship between memory and materiality (Murakami 2017). On the one hand, this research tends to focus on the correlations between technological mnemonic media, memorisation techniques, or modes of memorialisation (Yates 1996; van Dijck 2007; Assmann 2011), often rendered more complex when paired with anthropological insights (Severi 2018); on the other hand, this dialogue is nurtured by contemporary philosophical thinking on materiality that intends to reduce the ontological distance between organic and inorganic entities (Barad 2003, 2015; Ernst and Parikka 2012). Thus, memories may be ephemeral, but surely never immaterial.

It is the ghostly materiality of memory that harbours the recursive nature of memory apt at blurring the line between past, present, and future (Muñoz 1996). It is also here where its performativity resides, in the specific posthumanist conception of the term as elaborated by philosopher and physician Karen Barad. Barad redefines performativity as what ‘allows matter its due as an active participant in the world’s becoming, in its ongoing “intra-activity”’ (Barad 2003: 803). ‘Intra-activity’ stands for a non-hierarchical layout of agential interactions between different actors and is related to Barad’s aim to develop what she calls an ‘ethico-onto-epistemology’ (Barad 2007: 185), which relies on the radical re-interpretation of the relationship between object, subject, and action. Following Barad, the boundaries between these three elements can be blurred so that we start to see every ‘object’ as well as every ‘subject’ as a specific material arrangement, located within a certain spatio-temporal context. Every ‘object/subject’ is then a temporal configuration of matter endowed with agential power. Or, put otherwise, every object/subject emerges within a performative and dynamic intra-active fabric, which according to Barad (2003) is the world but which can also be extended to artistic practices.

As already theorised by Henri Bergson in his seminal *Memory and Matter* ([1896] 2002), the temporality of memory is anything but linear nor easy to grasp logically. Non-linearity is a prominent topic in the practice of artists working with the social appearance and relevance of memory, who thus come to treat memory as *a process of becoming*, by which it can also turn into history (Giannachi 2016: 55–92). In Lebanon, artists belonging to the so-called ‘post-war generation’ (Rogers 2007) hold a unique position in this reworking of memory as well as in processes of memorialisation. These memories can be emotionally charged, individual experiences, but also widely shared memories of generational events. As such, they should be differentiated from what I call ‘memorialisation’, which refers to those processes by which collective

memory is construed through institutional operations with a more or less precise or explicit political intent. Several artists who were born or trained in Beirut but migrated to the West because of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) have developed a consistent aesthetic that is often traversed by the interest in historical documents and their relationship with power and institutions, including the partial manipulation documents may undergo.<sup>1</sup> Their practices cover a significant span of different disciplines (such as photography, video art, and theatre), formats (such as installations or lecture-performances), and artefacts (such as photographs, books, sculptures, or monuments). Still, they all share the preoccupation towards what disappears from documents and historical narration; what is forgotten but may return. They turn to all the information, events, and data that, rather than becoming a document as a remaining source for historical narratives, are left behind and remain unheard and buried (Rogers 2007; Elias 2018). This preoccupation may emerge as the backlash of everchanging political regimes, the persistence of colonial dynamics, and the effects of globalisation which strongly affect the Middle Eastern regions, jeopardising the possibility of building lasting and reliable histories and collective memories.

One of the most compelling confrontations with the process of redefining and re-actualising collective memory and heritage in the contemporary context of the Middle East can be found in the work of the Lebanese artist Walid Raad. His two main projects, *The Atlas Group* (1989–2004)<sup>2</sup> and the ongoing *Scratching on things I would disavow* (2007–), inquire of the possibilities and the limits of the writing of

1. Among these artists we can name, for example, Tony Chakar, the partners Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Lamia Joreige, Bilal Khbeiz, Bernard Khoury, Rabih Mroue, and Lina Saneh.

2. Despite having a closing date, the project is still ongoing. All the works produced in ‘a particular way of thinking and forming documents’, which is typical of *The Atlas Group* project, are retrodated and go under this name (Chouteau-Matikian 2011: 41).



history, and of the dynamics of displacement and cultural appropriation; processes that lie at the basis of Western culture and identity. *The Atlas Group*, as I will discuss at length below, is a majestic remediation of the archive within contemporary artistic practices, while the more recent *Scratching on things I would disavow* is recomposing the fragmented, apparently haphazard, art history of the Arab World, reflecting the postcolonial dynamics that still shape the contemporary cultural environment and art market in the Middle East. In these works, the artist assumes a critical position that *overturns* two important Western ‘technologies’ for cultural accumulation: the archive in the case of *The Atlas Group* and the museum (or the museal collection) in the case of *Scratching on things I would disavow*. At the same time, playing with the archetypes of the West’s cultural institutions may point at their incapability to incorporate a type of public art dealing with history and collective memory.<sup>3</sup> Raad investigates the phenomena of displacement of cultural objects and their consequent unreadability.<sup>4</sup> His works rely on ‘dispositives’ — such as the archive, the collection, or the museum — in order to highlight their power to work performatively as normative entities or to critically repurpose them as new generative infrastructures.

Raad’s projects are in a constant symbiosis with different types of *bodies*: they appear and function in an open posthuman perspective in which human bodies, architectural bodies, ‘undead’ bodies, and bodies of traditions all take part. In this essay, I will analyse the workings of Walid Raad’s projects, reading them as a posthuman choreography of organic and inorganic ‘bodies’. For this expanded notion of the term ‘bodies’,

3. Raad’s interest in cultural institutions and documents is not limited to his artistic practice but has also been expressed in the artist’s early contribution to the Arab Image Foundation; see further at [stories.arabimagefoundation.org](http://stories.arabimagefoundation.org) [accessed 10 November 2022].

4. Due to the nature of Walid Raad’s works, even some of the text and video documentation on which this article is based is no longer available on the Internet or has been radically altered.

I draw on Karen Barad’s broadening of the category of ‘objects’, although I use the term ‘bodies’ to highlight their material component. In light of Barad’s understanding of performativity and objects/subjects, bodies are a specific configuration of matter expressing presence and agentivity. In Raad’s artworks, these bodies participate as documents that are both present and absent, and within in the same space-time, capable of summoning different temporalities while also making different forms of presence and agentivity appear.

## An Archive for Scattered Documental Bodies

Raad achieved international fame with the Whitney Biennial in 2000 and reconfirmed it in 2002 with his participation in *documenta11*. Ever since, several scholars and critics have appreciated Raad’s work, along with a renewed interest in the generation of Lebanese artists of the post-war period. Born in 1969 in a Maronite town in Lebanon to a Palestinian mother and a Lebanese father, Raad spent his adolescence in Beirut, where he began to cultivate an interest in documentary photography. His models were western photographers such as Eugène Atget, Diane Arbus, Helmut Newton, and Henri Cartier-Bresson. In 1982, when the vicissitudes of war forced him to expatriate, he continued his education in photography in the United States at the Rochester Technology Institute, where he later obtained a doctorate in visual and cultural studies. His training at an American university had at least two major consequences for the artist: not only did it help him to develop his own aesthetics, strongly indebted to twentieth-century photography as well as conceptual and post-conceptual art, but it also led him to problematise

the idea of a seemingly obvious belonging to the Lebanese and Arab culture due to his provenance. It was only in 1992 that Raad began to return to Lebanon for longer periods and initiated his artistic production in collaboration with some of the artists who later would be called the ‘post-war generation’ (Rogers 2007). It was during these years that he created The Atlas Group project.

*The Atlas Group* project aims at building an archive of historical documentation that sheds new light on the Lebanese Civil War period. Its core objective is to identify, preserve, and study documents or artworks on the recent history of Lebanon. These sources might include audio, video, or written pieces of information, but also artefacts or maps. Next to collecting existing documents, Raad also *produces* them, as openly stated on the project website.<sup>5</sup> This operation reveals the most crucial feature of the project: its relationship with fiction. *The Atlas Group* works as a fictive institution collecting and producing historical documents with the help of real and imagined contributors. The project takes various public forms, including mixed-media installations, single-channel screenings, as well as visual and academic essays. Lecture performances always accompany major exhibitions and can be seen as re-enactments of the whole body of documents on display. By means of dense storytelling linking different documents, the artist allows for various initially unseen aspects of the exhibited works to emerge from these encounters between various representations of facts, events, and data related to the Lebanese Civil War. Throughout their different phases and shapes, the various instantiations of *The Atlas Group* consistently engage with collective memory and cultural traditions. These are no longer *normative* entities, but open spaces of encounter and conflict. To highlight these aspects, the artist must dig under the naturalised

perception of history and unmask the fictive features of the historical data. These are strictly related to the artefactual nature of documents: they are, in fact, the result of a complex set of operations and contingencies that make them an opaque object, rather than a transparent index.

The fictitious archive created by *The Atlas Group* contains a series of documents and artworks that could also be grouped in ‘files’.<sup>6</sup> These files, which can also be regarded as subprojects, address the production of historical narratives and cultural heritage by critically accounting for three central topoi: the archive, the museum, and academic or intellectual discourse. Because the overarching aim is to re-enact the authority and power of these topoi through a complex form of imitation, *The Atlas Group* project may be seen as producing an *anarchive*. The concept of the ‘anarchive’ has been explored in both media theory (Ernst and Parikka 2012; Zielinski and Winthrop-Young 2015) and dance studies (De Laet 2020) as a means to question the standardised tenets of the archive as we traditionally know it. As Timmy De Laet points out, the idea of the ‘anarchive’ could be useful to ‘reconsider the alleged (in)commensurability of the body and the archive’ because ‘it leaves behind the classical archival principles of order, accessibility, and tangibility in favor of regeneration, submediality, and embodied memory’ (2020: 178).

Within his ‘anarchival’ project called *The Atlas Group*, Raad employs different strategies to redefine historical narratives and highlight the fictive nature of documents. One important strategy consists of renaming historical facts in order to stress their hidden features. Because Raad could not fully identify what events, data, and people fell within the broad label of the so-called ‘Lebanese Civil War’, he proposed to speak of plural ‘wars’, emphasising the intricate and multifarious

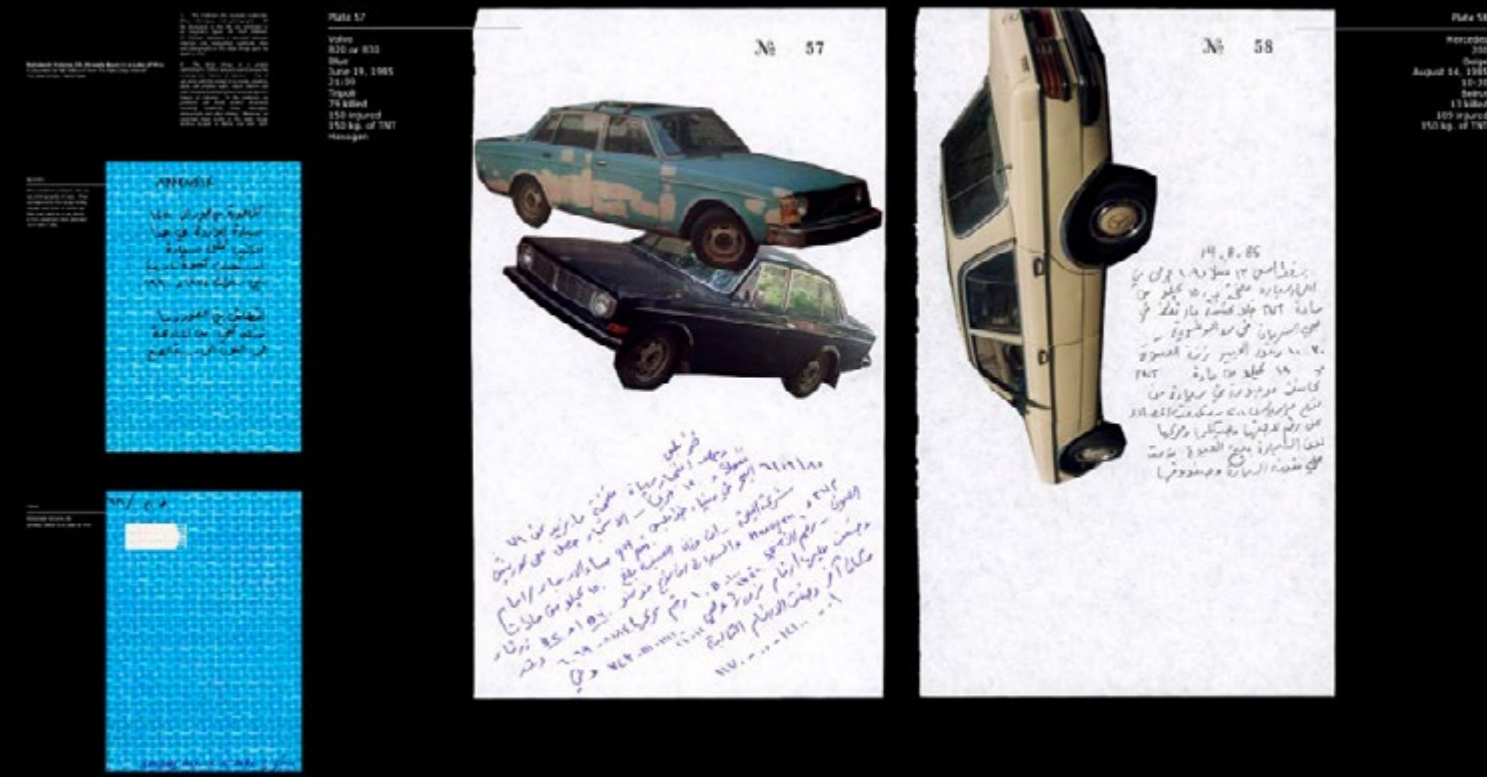
5. A selection of the works is visible on the project website: <https://www.theatlasgroup1989.org/> [accessed 10 November 2022].

6. The division into files is no longer available on the project website, while it remains visible in earlier versions of the archive structure in past publications on the project (Respini 2015).

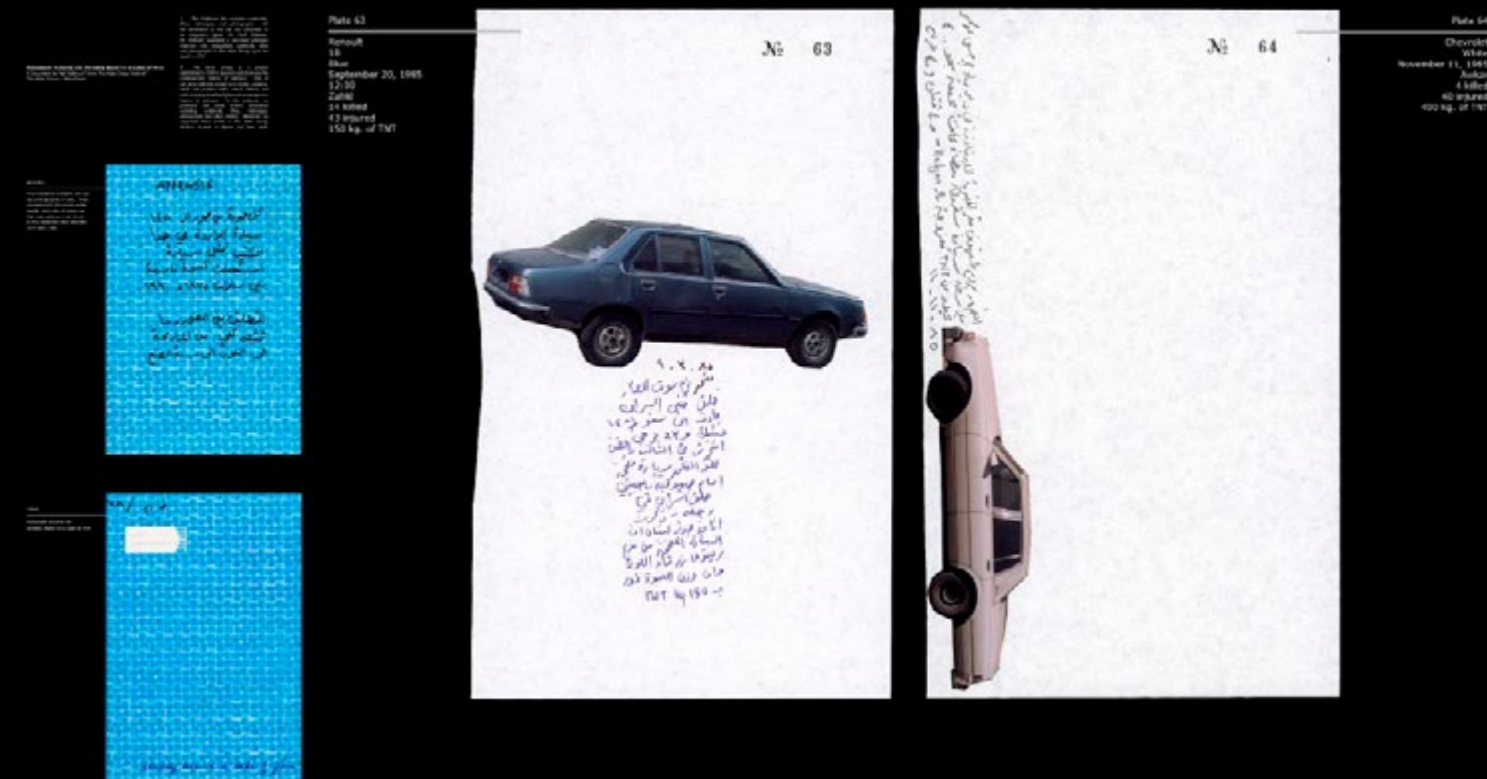


nature of this traumatic period in Lebanese history. These wars, as Raad explains, are not ‘a settled chronology of events, dates, personalities, massacres, invasions’, but rather ‘an abstraction constituted by various discourses, and, more importantly, by various modes of assimilating the data of the world’ (quoted in Gilbert 2016: para. 1). Another strategy is to consciously blur the line between biography and history. In the case of *The Atlas Group*, for example, the starting date of the entire project fluctuates depending on the different occasions or *locations* where it was shown and ranging from 1948 (the date corresponding to the Palestinian Nakba), 1967 (Raad’s birth date), 1975 (the beginning of the civil war in Lebanon), to 1989 (the year when the Ta’if Accords were signed, ending the formal war) (Lepecki 2006: 90–1). This fluctuation stems from the context-sensitive nature of the documents as well as from the ‘anarchive’ Raad aims to create: as the beginning dates of the project and the dating of the documents differ from location to location, these changes address how the understanding of documents is transformed according to changing socio-cultural environments.

Related to the ever-fluctuating dates of presumed beginnings, another strategy of Raad consists of a playful game with the seemingly infinite seriality in the classification of documents. The titles of the different files or subprojects within *The Atlas Group* play with scattered numberings and non-consequential production dates (e.g., *Notebook volume 38*, 1991; *Notebook volume 57*, 1992; *Notebook volume 72*, 1989; and *Hostage: The Bachar tapes #17 and #31*, 2000), or their content openly refers to a series of pieces of documentation from which some are missing (as with *My neck is thinner than a hair: Engines*, 1996–2001 or ‘*Oh God, she said, talking to a tree*, 2004). This technique critically alludes to the administrative exhaustiveness generally pursued by archival institutions, and, at the same time, it indicates how serial accumulation does not immediately imply mastery of historical knowledge. Thus, one of *The Atlas Group*’s salient features is the programmatic impossibility of



Walid Raad/*The Atlas Group*, *Notebook volume 38: Already been in a lake of fire*\_Plate 57-58, 1991/2003. Archival inkjet print mounted on aluminum anodized, 44 x 78 1/4 in. (111.8 x 198.8 cm) © Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.



Walid Raad/*The Atlas Group*, *Notebook volume 38: Already been in a lake of fire*\_Plate 63-64, 1991/2003. Archival inkjet print, 44 x 78 1/4 in. (111.8 x 198.8 cm) © Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

reconstructing the ‘authentic’ dating, the ‘original order’ of the documents involved, and — by consequence — of the entire project. This impossibility leads to another strategy that questions the canonical and supposedly unproblematic transcription of historical data. Just like the different phases of the Civil War, *The Atlas Group*’s varying chronology is deliberately difficult to date, which indicates how these chronologies must be understood as primarily rhetorical devices: because they refuse to give reliable information on the documents allowing us to place them into meaningful relationship with other pieces, they instead say something about the processes by which they become ‘pieces of evidence’. Put otherwise, the changing dates hint at the mediated nature of all records, rather than marking a chronological or causal consequentiality. While we observe a phenomenon, we also *produce* that given phenomenon: facts and their representations, as Karen Barad highlights, are discursively *and* materially imbricated (2003: 802–11).

Traditional historiography seems to understand records as ‘two-dimensional’, overlooking their bodily nature. For Raad, however, bodies of various sorts (human, organic, or inorganic) have a particular significance. These can be the bodies of buildings (*We can make rain but no one came to ask*, 2004), the bodies of hostages (*Hostage: The Bachar tapes #17 and #31*, 2000), the bodies of horses and historians (*Notebook volume 72: Missing Lebanese wars*, 1989), the bodies of car bombs (*My neck is thinner than a hair*, 2001), or those of people drowned at sea (*Secrets in the open sea*, 2004). As previously stated and in line with Raad’s poetics, I use the term ‘bodies’ to highlight both the material and the agentive quality of these records, and their tendency to behave relationally when exhibited together. The possibility of unravelling the complex discursive *and* material architecture in which (documental) bodies are caught is one of the central focuses of Raad’s performative work. The artist shows with his practice how documents, propagating in different infrastructures and forms of distribution, undergo a radical

renegotiation with their meaning: not only do they change in terms of their title, shape, or narrative framing, but they even change in terms of their subject. Once again, the documents-as-artworks featured in *The Atlas Group* are extremely context-sensitive: they performatively rearrange their appearance and their signification according to the location where they appear. Explaining how he sees his role as ‘artist-archivist’, Raad describes his practice as follows:

I say different things at different times and in different places according to personal, historical, cultural, and political considerations with regard to the geographical location and my personal and professional relation with the audience and how much they know about the political, economic, and cultural histories of Lebanon, the wars in Lebanon, the Middle East, and contemporary art. (quoted in Gilbert 2002: para.1)

The documents collected or produced by Raad can be photographs, notebooks, catalogues, or maquettes, and they address various complex historical events or facts. Sometimes they look like collages; at other times, they are clearly distorted in their main features. Photographs can be out of focus, or altered, or with notes and scribbled upon. This indicates how Raad treats these documents as *hysterical symptoms*, as he highlights how they relate to a broader condition of trauma with which they are materially connected. For Raad, this trauma is clearly an after-effect of the Civil War, but it does not only affect an individual body or psyche. It is collective too, and it also touches upon the non-human elements composing the environment that was subjected to the traumatic experience of the war.

The documents featured in *The Atlas Group* have the same status as symptoms indicative of trauma. That is, if we imagine trauma as an experience trapped in a body temporarily unable to properly express the





Walid Raad/The Atlas Group, *Hostage: The Bachar tapes\_English version*, 2000.  
Single channel video and sound, 16 minutes, 20 seconds © Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.



Walid Raad/*The Atlas Group*, *We can make rain but no one came to ask*, 2003/2006. DVD projection, color, 18 minutes. Dimensions variable; as shown at PCG: 22 1/2 x 91 3/4 in. (57.2 x 233 cm) © Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

initial traumatic event, these documents-as-artworks convey in their materiality a similar inability to narrate, to make sense of what they appear to represent. The symptomatic documents, however, cannot be traced back to a trauma experienced in the first person, to personal memories; rather, they are based on cultural fantasies, constructed from the material of collective memories. Therefore, symptoms are not to be understood in a strictly psychological sense. Raad himself

acknowledges how his artistic practice is progressively moving away from a psychological model towards ‘a more phenomenological model. It is the world itself that acts this way and I’m just present. It’s no longer about mediation’ (quoted in Masters 2009: 134).

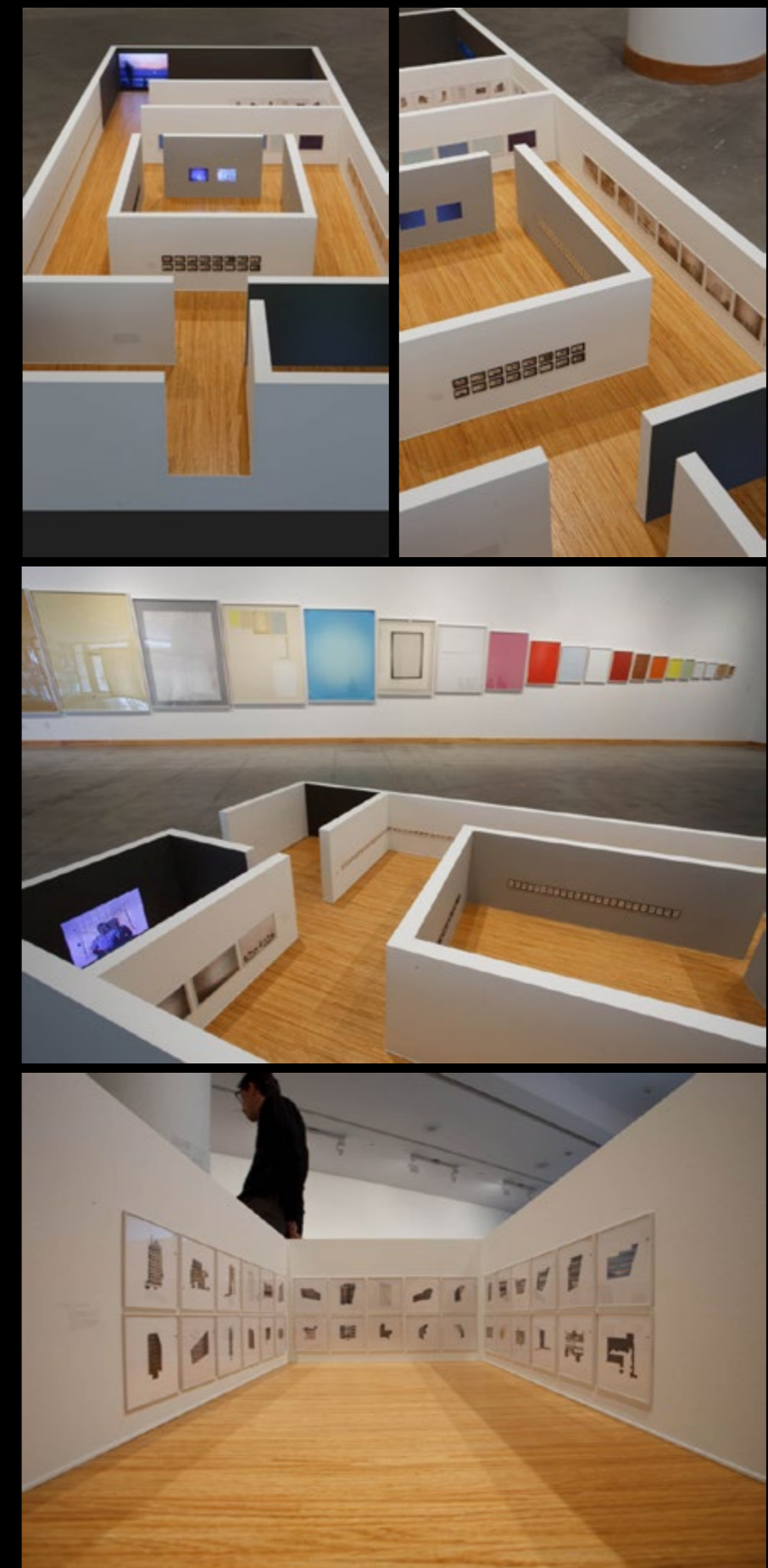
The format of the lecture performance is particularly well-known and widespread within so-called ‘new documentary theatre’ (Bardiot 2019). Performance helps artists to underline the agentive quality of the objects and bodies they are working with, highlighting the capacity to express new meanings solicited in relation with other objects and/or bodies. Raad’s performative work includes a first level of critique addressing the place (and the person) who holds authority over knowledge production, and a second level, critiquing methodologies of transcription and historiography. In addition to constructing a fictitious institution, there is also the creation of characters, whose existence is plausible. From time to time, they are presented as producers and donors of documents or as interlocutors through whom the information and documents in *The Atlas Group* archive are collected and catalogued. Raad explores the constant slippage between the historical dimension and the fictional rewriting of facts and events by the imaginary and real contributors to the archive. Weaving his narrative into a performance lecture, he produces what Eva Respini, curator of the major retrospective devoted to the artist by MoMA in New York, calls a ‘performance of memory’ which ‘resonates deeply with our own experiences of remembering and understanding the images, documents and stories that are integral to our own lived experiences’ (2015: 34). As such, Raad highlights the *poietic* dimension of narration and imagination linked to the fabrication of collective history through memory.

Raad’s performance relies on a strategy of manipulating the body that is articulated on two interconnected levels: through its disguise (that is, the construction of a *persona*) and through the highlighting of the



patho-biographical role that the artist's body entertains with the archival documents and, above all, ultimately with history. The construction of the persona within the performance occurs through a parodic disguise of the artist, who stands before the audience as a kind of scholar, ambiguously positioned between the figures of the professor and the archivist. He introduces himself to the audience with sober attire, a bottle of water, and a PowerPoint presentation that accompanies the lecture. The presentation is always followed by time for questions from the audience, some of which are carefully planned and part of the performance script. As for the second level of the artistic strategy structuring the performance, the lecture is modified according to the context in which the artist is performing: dates, names, and works are reconfigured according to the historical and cultural tensions to which the artist is subjected. The artist's body appears during the performance as connected continuously to the population of objects constituting this unique and context-sensitive archive represented within the exhibition. The body must then be understood not only as a biological and material body but also as a prosthetic body, symbiotic with multiple devices and informed by various techniques and discourses.

The lecture performance shows how the artist's body can reactivate the documental bodies, reorganise and reanimate them through a new context-sensitive configuration of symptoms. The documental bodies that constitute the artworks respond autonomously to social, cultural, economic, historical tensions and power configurations to which they are subjected, depending on the geographical location where they are exhibited, the kind of institution hosting them, and the cultural background of the audience. As stated by the artist, the meaning and the appearance of the artworks may change if exhibited in an important Western cultural institution, in front of a culturally homogeneous public, equally uninformed on the history of contemporary Lebanon or in a Lebanese gallery in the centre of Beirut. This effect was blatantly visible in 2008



Walid Raad, *Part I\_Chapter 1\_The Atlas Group (1989–2004)*, 2009. Gallery walls and understructure; acrylic sheet with latex paint. Floor: red oak veneer with polyurethane. Photos: resin, latex paint, polycarbonate and archival inkjet prints. Video installation: 4 LCD screens, 12 1/2 x 110 3/8 x 41 in.  
© Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. Photo: Scott Groller.



when Raad was asked to exhibit his works in Andrée Sfeir-Semler's gallery in Beirut. Returning *The Atlas Group*'s works to Lebanon meant subjecting them to a highly charged context. The work presented there was titled *Part I\_Chapter 1\_Section 139: The Atlas Group (1989–2004)* (2008) and consisted of a wooden model of an imaginary gallery with a scaled-down version of *The Atlas Group* works on display along the walls. As Raad said during the lectures, this was not a miniature, but the works simply 'shrunk once they entered the space', they were distorted: 'Something about Beirut's time and space makes an artwork shrink and inaccessible to the artist. This is not a psychological encounter, nor is it a metaphor for some condition' (quoted in Masters 2009: 127). Location seems to determine and to interact with the availability of the artwork. How this happens will become clearer in the last section of this essay, through the thought of Lebanese philosopher Jalal Toufic.

## Beyond Fact and Fiction: Aesthetic Facts

The archive in the case of *The Atlas Group* and the museum (or the museum collection) in *Scratching on things I could disavow* contribute to the formation of these artistic projects in two ways: by providing a theoretical framework and, at the same time, by constituting visualisation devices that build what Hélène Chouteau-Matikian refers to as 'artificial memory' (2011: 131). These devices count on several objects that combine multiple languages and media. During the various public exhibitions, Raad assembles the pieces (including photographs, prints, collages, site-specific installations, films, publications, and *objets trouvés*) into ever different *choreographies*. Choreography is that discipline concerned with organising bodies in space and time through movement sequences.

As Guy Cools says, choreography is about 'how bodies relate to space and how this relationship constantly transforms and changes depending on the historical, geographical, economical, and social context', engaging 'craftsmanship of dance', 'somatic skills and knowledge', and 'spatial skills' (quoted in Wookey 2021: 31). In recent years, the scope of the term 'choreography' has expanded to include forms of movement organisation that do not include human movement (Foster 2016). In addition, choreography has also been conceived as a critical 'thinking tool', as a 'theorization of relationships between body and self, gender, desire, individuality, community, and nationality', showing 'how the crafting of moving bodies into a dance reflects a theoretical stance towards identity in all its registers' (Foster 1996: x, xii). I suggest that an expanded notion of choreography could suit Raad's performative practice and could be an appropriate label for the compelling material reciprocal relationships between the documental bodies, the body of the artist/archivist and (partially) of the audience implicated in the ongoing attempt to make memory and history. This choreographic aspect does not refer only to the document, but it is visible also in how multiple media relate performatively to each other, contributing to the same document or 'file'.

Raad's exhibitions are not only choreographic in nature but also a significant example of what media theorists describe as 're-mediation' (Bolter and Grusin 1999). This term indicates the tendency of media (particularly foregrounded in so-called 'digital media', such as digital photography and filmmaking, video games, 3D animation, and virtual reality) to nestle into each other or to re-incorporate aspects of earlier media (such as painting, photography, and film). In Raad's practice, re-mediation can be associated with 'immaginazione intermediale' or 'intermedial imagination', as described by Pietro Montani (2010). According to the philosopher, intermedial imagination refers to how certain types of artistic works can relate to images and stories steeped

in violence, seeking to bring out their testimonial value. It is not a matter of reconstructing history in a linear way, but of making it resonate critically by integrating the constitutive fragmentariness of every document and every testimony, without invalidating their authenticity. The works to which Montani refers make use of techniques such as montage (between related media) and remediation (between heterogeneous media), where the interstices between fragments are seen as the place where the imaginative potential of the viewer, to whom the appeal of the testimony is addressed, can be grafted (Montani 2010: 67).

Raad too uses different forms of montage and remediation in order to process the conflicted histories and memories of Lebanon. One of the greatest difficulties lies precisely in the quantity and fragmentation of actors and parties involved in the course of the Civil War (or wars, Raad would say), which in itself made its linear reconstruction difficult. Moreover, to the already intricate events of the Civil War, a long period of peace restoration must be added. In 1999, the Amnesty Law was installed, with the aim of restoring the country and civil society. The law exonerated all Lebanese citizens who were guilty of any crime during the period of the Civil War, regardless of which militia or armed group they belonged to. This law inhibited the possibility of any transitional justice process and promoted what scholar Sune Haugbolle refers to as ‘collective forgetfulness’, which ended up creating a ‘gap between personal memory and collective amnesia’ (2010: 72). In any cultural context traversed with profound socio-political tension after civil conflict, the sole re-affirmation by the public authority of the supposed ‘historical truth’ does not automatically restore justice or bring reconciliation, as shown from many transitional justice processes (Hamilton et al. 2002). This is where Raad’s artistic practice wants to intervene, providing within his choreographies the space for a shared re-writing of history, as it happened, but also as it was forgotten and imagined. In order to address the intricacies of memory and trauma, Raad constructs

‘complex, mediated and difficult forms of testimony’ that open possibilities of recognition and mediation with the past ‘outside a juridical economy of truth’ (Gilbert 2016: para. 4). As such, his work presents an alternative to the truth processes of official institutions such as a court of law, proving itself more capable of taking into account the emotional, bodily, and social aspects of the traumatic events.

While some critics describe Raad’s works as ‘parafiction’, it is precisely his understanding of the relationship between fiction and historical truth (and the possibility to reconcile both) that distances his practice from this genre. Carrie Lambert-Beatty, who was the first to theorise parafiction, defines it as an artistic practice in which ‘real and/or imaginary personages and stories intersect with the world as it is being lived’ (2009: 54). Referring to the works of artists such as Yes Men, Michael Blum, or Eva and Franco Mattes, she adds that ‘[p]ost-simulacral, parafictional strategies are oriented less toward the disappearance of the real than toward the pragmatics of trust’ (ibid.). Nonetheless, in parafictional oeuvres, the delusion and the consequent return to the truthful reality are essential elements, whereas what interests Raad is the nature of fiction as *intrinsically* entangled with reality. Raad interrogates the mediated nature of every record, representation, and documentation. As the artist once said: ‘I work in fiction. Some things can only become manifest in fiction and nowhere else’ (quoted in Masters 2009: 132). And fiction requires its own rules and laws, its own time and space. Fiction is indeed part of the material of which our reality is made: it represents part of reality’s fabric while it is also a bridge to ‘the imaginative realm’, ‘the world of the possible, the thinkable, the speculative’ (Wynants 2020: 10). Or, as Hayden White highlights, ‘the process of fusing events, whether imaginary or real, into a comprehensible totality capable of serving as the object of a representation is a poetic process’ (1978: 125). Consequently, historical narration too can be thought as a special kind of fiction, the result of multiple mediations and representations.

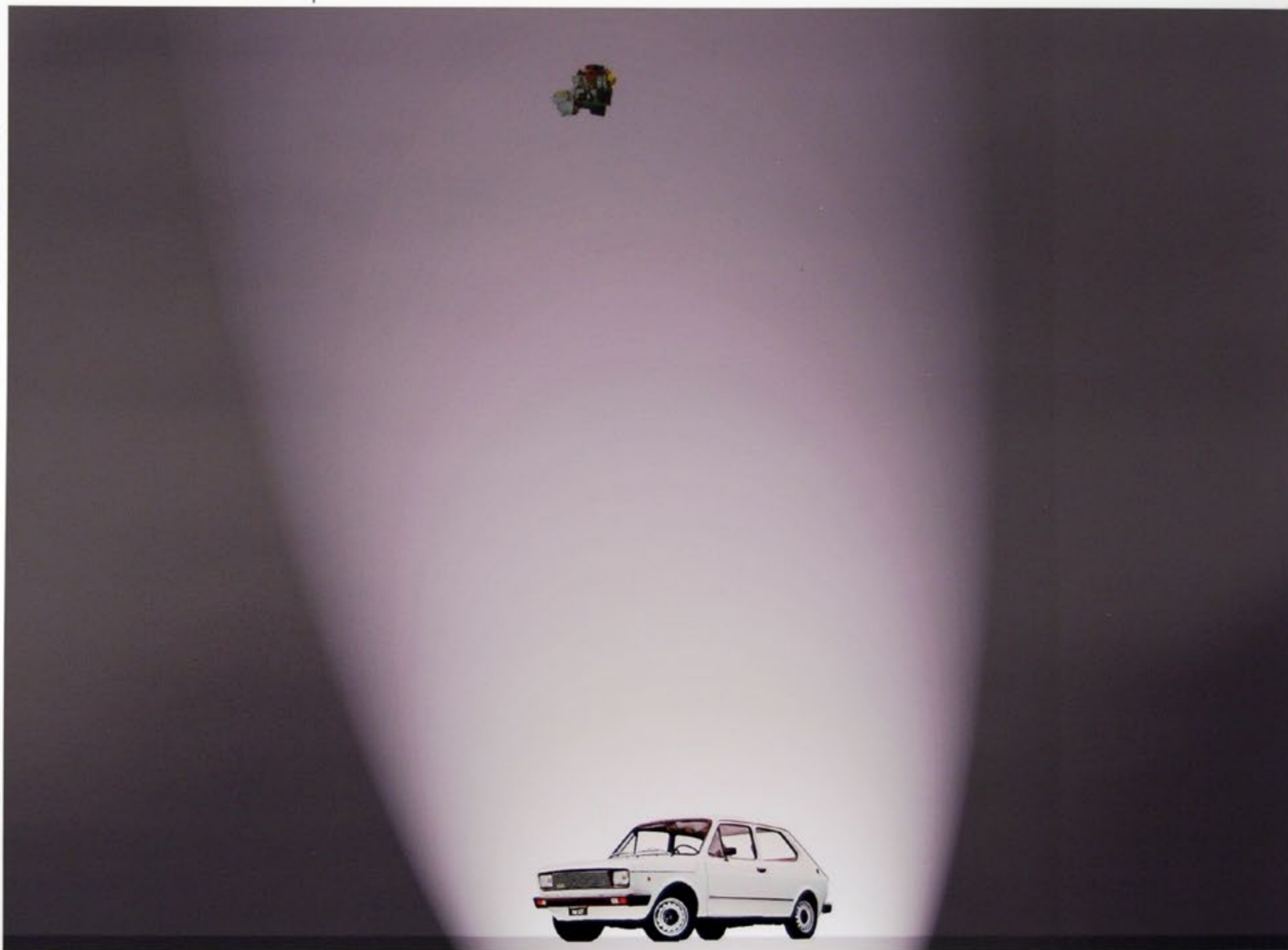
# A Choreography for Documents and their Archivist

The production of historical narration is never neutral, but always politically and ideologically situated: it entails exclusions, blind spots, and amnesia (Hamilton et al. 2002). Raad enquires of the impossibility of recovering memory fully as well as the impossibility of compensating those events or people that have been swept away and excluded both from history and memory. At the same time, what makes Raad's work so precious and subtle is the absence of all nostalgia, moralism, or pathos (as both 'sym-pathetic' and 'em-pathetic') over the facts, events, and characters he evokes. Neither war, violence, nor destruction is part of the imagery mobilised by the artist, favouring instead a poetic irony that fosters a critical distance to what is being told. The intervention on the historical data never takes place at all levels (form, content, and presentation), to prevent it from becoming unrecognisable. The document embodies a specific resistance, and how it manifests itself strictly depends on its material being. Creating real artefacts — such as notebooks, maquettes, or catalogues — testifies to the necessity for Raad to develop specific kinds of documents that can relate to *other kinds* of facts. As Raad explains during the performance *My neck is thinner than a hair*, he names these facts 'aesthetic facts' (Olmo 2009: 59): while historical facts relate to the documents, *aesthetic facts* may relate to different kinds of artefacts, like artworks. The reflection that Raad carries out with his audience during his performances is not aimed at a more conscious or critical return to reality, as in parafictional art. He rather looks for a process of collective elaboration of the *missing* and the *latent* elements of some historical chronologies through his imaginative choreographies of documental bodies.

The emblematic work that marked the passage between *The Atlas Group* and *Scratching on things I could disavow* is *My neck is thinner than a hair*. This project is a complex constellation of documental bodies: images, videos, objects, characters, and the artist's own body. Consequently, my description of this constellation too is based on several sources, corresponding to Raad's tendency to multiply levels of understanding by crossing different devices, points of view, and narrators. These sources include the archival documents in the *Thin Neck* folder of *The Atlas Group* archive, the publication *The Atlas Group: Volume 2. My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair*, and Raad's lecture performances (Raad 2006).<sup>7</sup> Raad's performances reactivate the 'documents' of which Lebanon's history is made, as it has been, or could have been. They address the limits of experiencing history and consequently of producing collective memory, within a present traversed by unprecedented violence. His works represent testimonies that can account for a community's pathic and biographical experience, not limited to a unique and univocal subjectivity. The document's capacity to address collective memory stems from the mediations they undergo. As seen above, the documents produced and choreographed by Raad work at different levels. They represent the production of a critical, aesthetic, and poetic reflection on the facts and narratives of historical events in contemporary Lebanon. This is possible because the documents are not a static and indexical representation of events as they occurred, containing instead both fictional

<sup>7</sup> The performances took place at the Walker Art Center on 26 October 2007 and at the Architectural Association School of Architecture on 29 February 2008. Video documentation of both lectures was available online until the beginning of 2020.





Walid Raad/*The Atlas Group*, *My Neck is Thinner Than a Hair*, 2003. Archival inkjet print, 9 1/4 x 17 1/2 in. (23.5 x 44.5 cm) © Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

and non-fictional elements that ought to generate active reflection on the part of those who encounter the documents.

All of the documents are based on biographical experiences or notations, but through the creation of plausible characters and a multitude of partial, subjective perspectives, Raad creates space between himself and his documents. *My neck is thinner than a hair*, for example, retraces Raad's investigation on car bombs during the Lebanese Civil Wars. He collaborates with both real and fictitious characters: two Lebanese artists, Tony Chakar and Bilal Khbeiz, and two historical figures, the explosives expert Youssef Bitar and the photojournalist George Semerdjian. They consider car bombs on different levels: in their purely historical and factual existence, as a technology of destruction and a strategy of power in the context of war, and as a recursive event that, through its repetition over time and its violence, is capable of permanently altering the environment within which it takes place. During the lecture performances, Raad shows the different documents and unfolds on the screen of the video projector the faces, places, data, information, schemes, and maps that visualise the artist's investigations. As Raad explains during the performance: 'I began with very simple questions about each of the more than 3000 car bombs: What facts are available about these detonations? Who was behind the crimes and why?' But later new questions emerged that deal with the political and social dimensions of the practice of car bombings during the civil conflict: 'What happens in and to cities when residents, buildings, streets, and neighbourhoods are exposed to the constant threat of assault? Where are these changes manifest, and what are the forms that express these changes in the present?'

This interweaving of crude facticity and a more philosophical inquiry is characteristic of Raad's analysis of the events he documents. The first series of documents in the *Thin Neck* file is titled *My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair. A History of the Car Bomb in the Lebanese Wars (1975–1991)*,

*Lebanese Wars\_Volume 1–245 (January 21 1986), 2004–5*. The series consists of a collection of 104 photographs, coming from existing archives, the *An-Nahar* newspaper, and the Arab Documentation Centre. The images picture the same subject over and over: an exploded car engine, often the only part to survive the bombing of the vehicle. Even if composed of several photographs, Raad thinks of it as one document, for the relevance of the document is evident only from the repeated accumulation of the same topic. It is therefore not a documentation of every single car explosion in Beirut; rather, it represents a meta-analysis of the phenomenon of using car bombs in itself. In the lecture performance, Raad unravels the steps and questions that led to the creation of this document, inviting the audience to reflect on its nature: the photographs are not serving as pieces of evidence, but rather depict the ultimate effect of a chain of events that cannot be tracked back to a clear or singular beginning, at least not through one of these images. Alongside the official — and 'real' — sources, the lecture performance shows documents from the private archive of explosives expert Youssef Bitar. In Bitar's archive, original copies of the reports he used to write for the government on each of the explosions are meticulously collected, along with all the information and graphics of the crime scenes that were drawn by him, and which turn out to be more reliable than photographs. We thus witness a reversal whereby the private archive of Bitar is where the actual truth is preserved, while the media and state archives represent and circulate ideologically manipulated information. In this manner, Raad works against the rhetoric of truth and transparency as well as its concomitant ideals of authenticity, reliability, and objectivity, which are often also attributed to the photographic image. He wants to consider the materiality of the media and devices he is working with, and he is particularly interested in the seemingly *unmediated* nature of photographic images. This is precisely why in Raad's practice these images may undergo tangible fabrication and manipulation before being exposed to an audience as documents.



The second document of the *Thin Neck* file, *I was overcome with a momentary panic at the thought that they might be right*, consists of a scale model reconstruction, initially created by the topographer Nahia Hassan. The scale model was intended to map the 3641 detonations that occurred in Beirut during the long period of the Lebanese war, visualising the explosion sites through craters as they would have appeared if they had not been filled in. This document analyses the impact of this guerrilla technology on the urban environment of Beirut by visualising how the city's ground would have looked. As Raad makes clear during the lecture performance, the purpose of the investigation was at first to shed light on some facts in the history of the Lebanese war. However, he very soon faced the impossibility of reaching this goal: 'We had faith that if we gathered the facts, the trial will take place and these people will be put in jail. What we didn't know, we didn't know all long, was that the people who ordered these car bombs are currently ministers and they are not about to order any of these investigations into their own, into acts that they've done.' The discovery that the politicians who had determined the political life of Lebanon in the 1980s and who committed those crimes were still in positions of power is accompanied by the insight that this investigation is incapable of shedding light on the obscure facts related to the car bombings. Nonetheless, Raad's investigation does generate a palpable understanding how these recurrent explosions affected the city. Car bombs, as stated by Raad during the lecture performance, 'had in fact altered time and space in these neighbourhoods in a way that was very difficult to intuit and detect, and it became our job to kind of become sensitive to how the spatiotemporal dimensions in these ghettos where car bombs were detonated had been altered'. This investigation is carried on in the last document of the *Thin Neck* file, the video *We can make rain but no one came to ask*, which constitutes the imaginary collaboration between explosives expert Yussef Bitar and photoreporter George Semerdjan. This collaboration is imaginary because Bitar actually never existed, and Semerdjian died on the field while documenting

the civil war. With the help of the architect Tony Chakar and artist Bilal Khbeiz, Raad fabricated this document to imagine how this collaboration could have looked if it had happened. The video offers experimental imagery that points to the condition of profound alteration to which the buildings, cars, and people of the city of Beirut have been subjected during the war. The fictive document, conceived as a symptom, is able to detect the trauma imprinted on the bodies that were part of a history of repeated extreme violence in the course of the civil war. Within this fictional account of historical events, intact buildings appear gutted, open shops appear closed, and crowded streets appear deserted.

## The Withdrawal of Tradition

Through the images he produced, Raad repeatedly found himself registering the alteration of the environment, including its subjects and objects. This alteration is understood by Raad as a kind of 'withdrawal', a condition of unavailability in which part of the environment resides. Buildings, cars, people, or characters are not available with the result that they cannot rejoin the historical narrative from which they have been excluded. As such, they correspond to what philosopher Jalal Toufic, who also collaborated with Raad, calls the 'withdrawal of tradition' (2009). Toufic understands tradition as that set of cultural, artistic, or folkloric elements in which a group of people belonging to the same culture recognise themselves and which serve to build their cultural identity. In his book *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster* (2009), Toufic addresses Lebanon's Civil War as a connotative experience in order to elaborate its direct and, above all, implicit consequences. To this end, he introduces the concept of the 'surpassing disaster', which he understands as a catastrophe that not only materially



affects bodies (be they human beings, buildings, books, or statues), but also determines their immaterial disappearance, which is the ultimate condition of withdrawal. This means that these bodies are physically present and visible, while their cultural and historical signification is missing, not available, ungraspable. Thus, the community, the group of people referring to this tradition for producing their cultural identity, is the direct target of its withdrawal, even without realising it. The community can no longer reconnect with its cultural identity, orphaned of the very bodies and symbols that helped keep this identity alive.

For Toufic, the withdrawal of tradition is the symptom of a trauma, which is not a subjective symptom. If trauma configures as an experience imprisoned in a body, as mentioned earlier, for Toufic these bodies are the bodies of tradition. This is how Toufic explains the sense of disassociation and uprooting that affects not only individual people, but an entire cultural group with all its symbols, works, and architecture. These phenomena are not exclusively psychological ones: to understand this kind of trauma, it is necessary to travel from an individual psyche's traumatic experience to a collective one. Escaping the condition of withdrawal requires the interventions of artists, thinkers, and writers, who can perceive it and make it visible through artworks that can express the symptom of this condition to their community. Their task is thus to indicate the immaterial withdrawal of tradition in the bodies of history that are physically present and then attempt its 'resurrection', meaning their coming back from the status of withdrawal. For Toufic, then, tradition 'is not merely what materially and ostensibly survived "the test" of time', but 'what conjointly materially survived the surpassing disaster, was immaterially withdrawn by it, and had the fortune of being subsequently resurrected by artists, writers and thinkers' (2009: 63–4). Thus, in *We can make rain but no one came to ask*, Raad organises a narrative of Beirut as it is not, as it could have been, as it will not be. It visualises aspects of the environment both present in collective

memory and absent in the actual world, and vice versa. Raad's documents relate to facts that, due to their symbolic, artefactual, or ephemeral nature, cannot be interpreted as simply historical, social, or economic facts, but as aesthetic facts. Nevertheless, they are crucial to reconstruct complex historical processes, because they may address more volatile aspects of history, which in the end only an artwork is able to document.

## Conclusion

The *Thin Neck* portfolio, and in particular the video *We can make rain but no one came to ask*, represents a turning point where Raad faced a crucial aspect of *The Atlas Group* project. As the artist explains during his performance lectures, while participating in the contemporary art trend to use archive and documents for the production of artworks, he was confronted with the risk of treating the production of history as a sort of formal game that would result in the creation of increasingly self-referential maps and configurations. Raad wanted to distance himself and his practice from any loose or even arbitrary use of archival modes and objects (Baldacci 2016). Raad refers to the tendency of art projects using archives to organise documentation without a justified or rigorous relationship between the documents: they only relate because the artist sees them as such. In these cases, documents, data, facts, and information become *commodified*: because they are available, they can be used, combined, and displayed in a new archive, following the need of a given art project, yet completely overlooking their material tensions, which can be physical, cultural, and economic. Every piece of information is a product of some system or infrastructure which also suggests a specific use and interpretation of them. Even facts are never solid and always already part of a process of *becoming* facts. This process must be acknowledged when working with the archive.

For Raad, in fact, the most fundamental information documents contain concerns their *availability*: there are precise conditions within which some objects and bodies *become* available to us so that they can be collected and, maybe, choreographed. Raad is critical of the tendency to create archival art that reorganises the structure of available data into increasingly ‘idiosyncratic’ (as Raad defines them) formations, forging links between these data without taking a stand on *how* the links are created. While claiming to offer a critique of power and how it informs certain institutions, these artistic archives perform a mere imitation of the same mechanism of producing ‘naturalised’ history and knowledge. It just replicates the modalities of official archives, promoting the understanding of documents as mere data, much like new models of digital archives (or rather databases) do, yet not without presenting major ethical and political problems. Treating documents, facts, and data as something simply available in the world does not acknowledge how the production of history is indeed a normative process, which excludes many voices and stories. The challenge of *The Atlas Group* project is precisely not to fall into this self-referential loop that collapses on the sole autobiographical dimension of the artist, but rather to create generative dynamics that involve the audience in reflecting together on this process of producing history and de-naturalising it. It is not sufficient to only change the algorithm that organises the data in order to have a critical framework: you need to acknowledge the ethical-political dimension in which it is fully embedded. As Raad says during his performance lectures, for him, the artwork is precisely ‘a place where one can engage multiple kinds of facts in their continuity and complexity. It is one of the few places: I would not expect this from journalism, from activism, but I would expect this from an artwork’. Documental bodies as aesthetic facts cannot represent historical events as indexes of what truly happened, but neither are they mere idiosyncratic abstract data. These documents embody the marks of history within their materiality, and they are able to repurpose them when activated within

a performative framework, when choreographed. As collective *hysterical symptoms*, they work as mediators of the process of memory.

We can therefore conclude that Raad’s projects represent the hypothesis of a collective historical narration that does not disregard the role of bodies, but rather makes them — with their organic and inorganic materiality — the fundamental key to the interpretation of history and the preservation of memory. Documental bodies, in their open relationship with the artist and the community, can embody ephemeral, vulnerable, and fictional aspects of history that are not *immediately* visible but can be *mediately* choreographed. Instead of giving rise to an entirely autobiographical, self-referential, and idiosyncratic archive that would repeat the exclusive and normative dynamics already present in official historical narrations, Raad’s choreographies propose a rigorous and corporeal investigation, collective and mediated, disclosing how any kind of historiography is always temporary and subject to rewriting. To open this possibility to interrogate history and to point at its mediated nature is a necessary exercise to inscribe oneself again into the present, to acknowledge that our contemporary time is still pregnant with catastrophic past traumas that cannot simply be forgotten. It is to reclaim tradition and events in a state of withdrawal, awaiting their resurrection; that is to say, enabling them to participate in the fabric of collective memory. •

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