

WALID RAAD: A PERSONAL HISTORY

Cecilia Obiol

Walid Raad was born in Chbanieh, Lebanon, in 1967, and grew up in East Beirut. He lives in Beirut and New York where he is Associate Professor at the Cooper Union since 2002. He is a member of the Fondation Arabe pour l'Image (FAI) in Beirut, founded in 1996. His work includes photography, video, sculpture, essay, installation and performance dealing with the recent history of Lebanon, particularly the wars between 1975 and 1991. He has exhibited internationally.

In his series "Let's Be Honest, the Weather Helped" black-and-white pictures of bullet-pocked buildings are overlaid with brightly coloured dots, each colour corresponding to the bullets' tips representing the codes devised by manufacturing countries to mark their cartridges.

"Like many around me in Beirut in the late 1970's, I collected bullets and shrapnel. I would run out into the streets after a night or day of shelling to remove them from walls, cars and trees. I kept detailed notes of where I found every bullet and photographed the sites of my findings, covering the holes with dots that corresponded to the bullets diameter and the mesmerising hues I found on the bullets tips ...

... my notebooks in part catalogue seventeen countries and organisations that continue to supply the various militias and armies fighting in Lebanon: Belgium, China, Egypt, Finland, Germany, Greece, Iraq, Israel, Italy, Libya, NATO, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Switzerland, U. S. A., U. K. and Venezuela."

Walid Raad, *Let's Be Honest, The Weather Helped*, 2006 (1998)

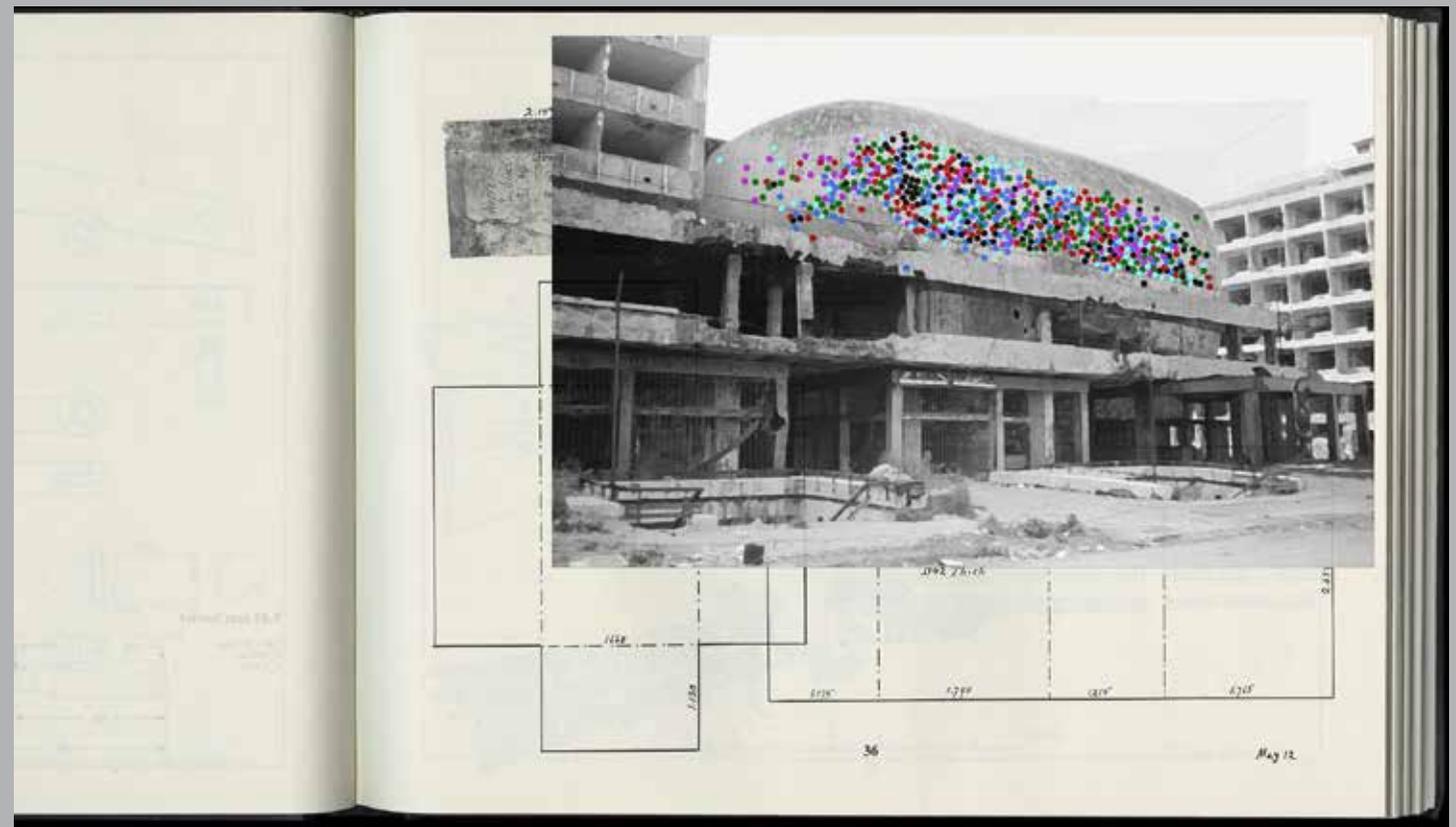
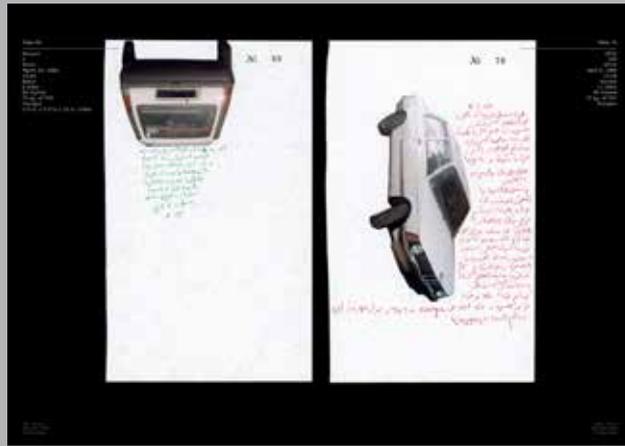


Plate 07 (Israel) of 17 plates, framed digital prints, 45 x 72 cm ▶



The Atlas Group/Walid Raad. *Already Been in a Lake of Fire*, 1999–2004; Archival inkjet print on archival paper, 111 × 198 cm



The Atlas Group/ Walid Raad. *We Decided To Let Them Say, "We Are Convinced"*, twice. *It Was More Convincing This Way*, 2005; up: Beirut '82, Plane I; down: Beirut '82, Onlookers. 2002/2006, digital prints, 110 × 171 cm



The Atlas Group/ Walid Raad. *Sweet Talk: The Hilwé Commission*, 1992–2004; PL288, PL534, PL562, 2005
Digital prints, 116 × 116 cm



The Atlas Group/Walid Raad. *My Neck is Thinner Than a Hair*, 2004; Plate 8 out of 100 plates, digital prints, 25 × 35 cm

General Charles de Gaulle once stated that “making politics in Lebanon was like stepping on eggs”. Tomás Alcoverro, correspondent in the Middle East since 1970, added in one of his reports that these eggs were all filled with bombs¹. Due to geopolitical circumstances of permanent instability Lebanon has been forced to build its History through overlaid stories, both collective and personal, both active and passive experiences of witnessing, interpreting and archiving. Such process, unavoidably subjective, writes and erases at the same time, configuring a palimpsest built over a naturally human blend of fact and fiction.

The work of Walid Raad is in his own words “in some ways made possible by the civil wars in Lebanon”. In a universe between history, journalism and fiction, where most people would barely find material for narrative, Raad documents artistically the chaos of his own context, apparently arid for sensitive perceptions and disturbing for formal interpretations. During the wars between 1975 and 1991 Beirut suffered a progressive transformation of its urban form. Amid the experienced destruction and the hopefully forthcoming reconstruction Raad recognised the potential of the chrysalis-like state of the city. At the same time he identified the global dimension of such destruction, demonstrating that like most of the wars the Lebanese conflict transcended the regional sphere. For instance, his series *Let's Be Honest, the Weather Helped* is a clear denouncement of the international reach of the armed struggle, which offered Raad nothing but the poetics of ruin. Through a particular system of registering data and gathering objects transfigured by armed conflicts, Raad reconstructs a new reality in a kind of documentary mythology forged by an imaginary collective under the name of **The Atlas Group**.

The documentary material collected by this made-up research foundation was often exhibited as donations by fictitious characters or found diaries attributed to names like Dr. Fadl Fakhouri, Souheil Bachar, Operator #17. The actual veracity of testimonies and statements is in fact irrelevant; they are “fantasies erected from the material of collective memory”² whose aim is not the literal description of the war but the latent potential they carry in order to build a wider perspective of the past. The artworks produced by the collective do not present immediate images of the violent conflicts but a layered portrayal of its consequences, forms and stories whose narrative transcends the war itself. The series *My Neck is Thinner than a Hair: A History of Car Bombs in the Lebanese Wars (1975–1991)* documents car engines that were discovered after the explosions all around the city of Beirut. Due to the force of detonations these pieces, the only part of the car that remains intact after the explosion, were released hundreds of meters away and found in such places as roofs and balconies. Raad gathered 100 pictures of them found in the Lebanese press and presented them repetitively as a critic to the banality of violence.

Raad's archive reprograms the observation of facts with a unique artistic sense extrapolating the eminently positivist condition of such systems to a free interpretation or fictitious recreation of reality. The virtual involvement of collaborators created by Raad and the ambiguity of files describe with poetical sharpness the historical process experienced by himself. Pieces of paper, notes, newspapers, pictures, videos and other traces of a chaotic reality shape the archeological substrate of an imagined scenery showing a dialectical relationship



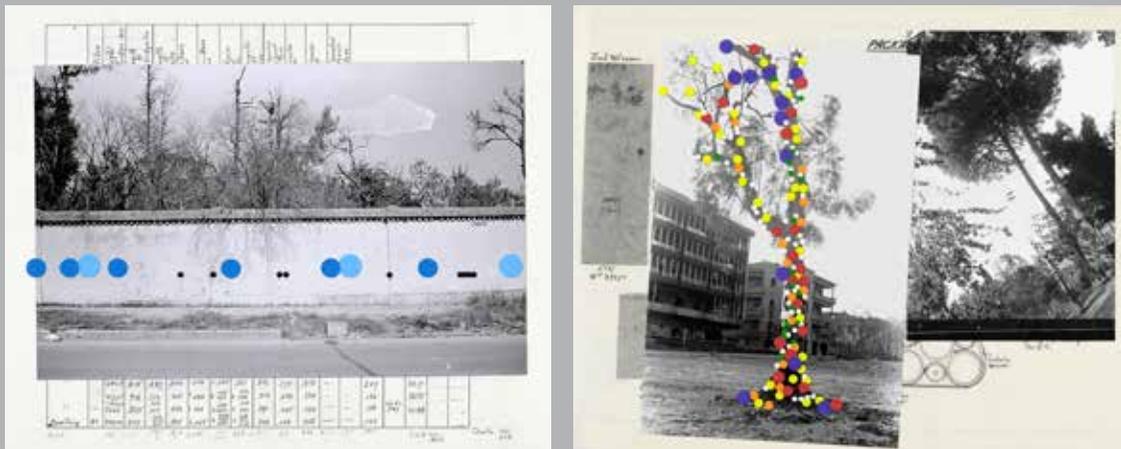
Installation view Walid Raad, *Miraculous beginnings*, Kunsthalle Zürich at Museum Bäreneggasse, 2011

between document and meaning. In a clear assertion about the subjectivity of history Raad extracts an imaginary of dense aesthetic system which doesn't represent an escape from urban reality. Like Piranesi, Raad focuses his eyes on the ruin; but unlike the Venetian engraver his interest is focused in the ruin itself and the fragment of reality attached to it. While Piranesi superimposes Roman ruins in order to construct a tragic archeology, Raad decontextualizes Beirut ruins in an ironically optimist approach where the future is widely open.

Yet, Raad in his methodical documentary action and systemic inventive interpretation of the harshness of facts and history, demonstrates the absence of linearity in the artistic breakthrough as well as the emergence of aesthetic sense in unlikely conditions. Challenging the univocal reading of history, his work marches in the direction of a polychromatic future.

- 1 Tomás Alcoverro, "The failure of the multinacional force in 1983", *La Vanguardia* (25.08.2006)
- 2 Walid Raad interviewed by Alan Gilbert, *Bomb Magazine* # 81 (Fall 2002)

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The Atlas Group/Walid Raad. *Let's Be Honest, The Weather Helped*, 2006 (1998); left: Plate 13 (Libya); right: Plate 05 (NATO) of 17 plates, framed digital prints, 45 × 72 cm

*"After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Think now
History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors
And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,
Guides us by vanities. Think now
She gives when our attention is distracted
And what she gives, gives with such supple confusions
That the giving famishes the craving. Gives too late
What's not believed in, or still believed
In memory only, reconsidered passion. Gives too soon
Into weak hands, what's thought can be dispensed with
Till the refusal propagates a fear. Think
Neither fear nor courage saves us. Unnatural vices
Are fathered by our heroism. Virtues
Are forced upon us by our impudent crimes.
These tears are shaken from the wrath-bearing tree."*

T.S.Eliot, *Gerontion* 33–47, *Poems* 1920