

The Politics of Display: Lebanon's Postwar Art Scene

Sarah Rogers, 2006

The international art world's curiosity in postwar Lebanon followed almost a decade after the 1989 Ta'if Accord brought an official end to the War (1975-1989). In particular, critics have focused their attention on a group of mixed media artists whose practices interrogate the memory the War. This body of work has been featured in exhibitions such as Documenta (2002), DisORIENTATION: Contemporary Arab Artists from the Middle East at the House of Cultures (2003), the Venice Biennale (2003), and the premiere of Catherine David's series, Tamass: Contemporary Arab Representations (2002). In addition, these artists have graced the pages of Flash Art, Parachute, Art Forum International and Bidoun. Over fifteen years of civil strife has thus produced one of the region's most notable contemporary art movements. This configuration of violence as a culturally regenerative force is not unique to art history- one need only recall Picasso's 1937 work, Guernica. Yet critics locate aesthetic value in the event of the War rather than experimental strategies, which engage contemporary debates on the status of visual as evidence. In other words, the works are made to display a politics of identity rather than a politics of the visual. This paper thus begins to consider the implications of awarding the War the primary role in reinvigorating Beirut's art scene.

Despite- or perhaps because of- Lebanon's official policy of postwar amnesia, a group of artists have stepped forward and initiated a series of projects which critically examine the War in its aftermath. Recounting stories of historians, photographers, martyrs, and hostages- some fictitious and others real- the artists bring together archival documents from the War. The visual material- photographs, videos, and scrapbooks- is presented as found, titled, and filed regardless of its historical veracity. Despite the occasional accusation of artistic trickery, this work has generated much acclaim in its blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction. In particular, critics have framed this body of work as a metaphor for Lebanon's current political, social, and cultural situation. This characterization would seem especially fitting considering the black and white signs simply stating, "the truth," which have come to decorate Beirut's visual landscape following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. Yet as I hope to demonstrate through a reading of two projects- Walid Ra'ad's The Atlas Group and Lamia Joreige's Here and Perhaps Elsewhere- this body of work implicates itself within a history of the War in order to provoke broader questions concerning our expectations of visual representation defined as both "art" and "history."

Since the inclusion of his work, Missing the Lebanese Civil Wars: Documents from the Atlas Group in the 2002 Whitney Biennial, much ink has been spilled in Lebanon, Europe, and the U.S. over Walid Ra'ad. Through lecture format, Ra'ad introduces his audience to The Atlas Group, a non-profit institution with the mission of serving as a visual repository for the Lebanese War. Identifying himself as a founding member, Ra'ad claims he will present several recent projects without critical commentary. Each project represents an individual's documentation of the War- scrapbooks, home movies,

and video testimonies- which have since been donated to the Atlas Group. In fact, the institution and its contents are Ra'ad's creations. Alluding to the work's fictitious nature, Ra'ad states in the beginning of his lecture, "These tapes do not document what 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 wars." Yet he proceeds on in documentary fashion to introduce us- and not without a degree of humor- to those stories which might have taken place in the shadows of the War's main events. One such character is Dr. Fadl Fakhouri. According to Ra'ad, Dr. Fakhouri is 'the foremost historian of the Lebanese Civil Wars,' who recently passed away and entrusted his notebooks to The Atlas Group. In one notebook, Dr. Fakhouri meticulously documents the activities of the major historians of the Lebanese Civil War who met every Sunday at the racetrack. There, the men would bet on how many fractions of a second before or after the winning horse crossed the finish line that the track photographer would shoot his photograph. Each page of Dr. Fakhouri's notebook obsessively records the following information: the historians' initials and bets, the calculation of averages, the time of the winning historian, the photograph from the newspaper, and a short handwritten description of the winning historian. Three methods of assimilating data are thus included: statistics, photography, and text. Ironically, however this work documents the inability of photography-often ascribed the status of the real- to capture on film the moment the horse crosses the finish line. Instead, the photograph is always fractions of a second off: a metaphor for history's inability to seize the absence of the past in the present. Moreover, the act of gambling can be read as a metaphor for historical narration in its desire to instill coherency into contingency.

Sharing Ra'ad's interest in questioning agency and authenticity is Lamia Joreige's film, *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere*- a title lifted from Jean-Luc Goddard's 1976 documentary. In the work, Joreige walks along the Green Line asking individuals, "Do you know anyone who was kidnapped here during the War?" Along the way, she encounters a variety of answers: those who are excited to participate in what they assume is a documentary made by a reporter, those who curse Joreige for raising the hope of families whose relatives are missing, others who demand to know why this question is being asked after the fact when Palestinians are disappearing right now, and of course, the obligatory invitations to coffee. Joreige's question triggers memories and in doing so, initiates the process of historical narration- both in its construction and repression. As we learn at the end of the film, Joreige's uncle was kidnapped in this neighborhood during the War (interestingly enough, her brother is also an artist in whose work the missing uncle makes an appearance). The work is situated on the cusp of historical and fictional narration because as audience members, we are not quite sure if this is in fact a documentary. In other words, as viewers, we are taken through a journey which does not end in either information or answers- a ghost hunt of sorts. The different responses determine neither the name of those who were kidnapped nor those who did the kidnapping. Furthermore, Joreige herself has acknowledged in an interview the difficulty in securing funding due to the work's disciplinary uncertainty.

In this brief discussion of these two projects, I hope to have demonstrated the ways in which they are conceptually and formally united in their performance of the documentary aesthetic. Both artists deploy those media- video and photography- which allow representation to overtake reality in order to bring to the forefront the disciplinary uncertainties haunting the process of historical narration. The artists thus confront the conflicting task of the visual: both to capture and question history. Ironically, in doing so, they archive the aftermath of the War. The artist, in other words, has assumed the

role of the critical historian. Yet the question remains, is the War the sole benefactor of these emerging practices?

In the decades before the War, the debates over Lebanon's national identity failed to register visually. In fact, the art historian Sylvia Naef has characterized the modern art movement in Lebanon- in contrast to Egypt and Iraq- by this very lack of a politically engaged art. No art collectives were formed and no manifestoes were written. This is not to claim that art and politics operated in separate realms; they never do. And this was certainly not the case during the sixties when Beirut assumed the role of cultural capital of the Arab world from Cairo and Baghdad. For example, Cesar Nammour and Wadeh Fares, founders of Contact Gallery (1972) recall curating an exhibition in the summer of 1972 by a Vietnamese artist protesting the Vietnam War which had been rejected by its initial venue at the Kennedy Center in Beirut- not too surprising. According to Fares, the exhibition was so successful that it was extended by 2 months. Moreover, art centers were established with the specific agenda of bringing together aesthetics and politics. One such example was Dar al-Fan, the House of Art, which Janine Rubeiz opened in 1967 in response to the lack of support for the arts from the public sector. In her unpublished memoirs, Rubeiz recounts that although there were other active cultural centers in Beirut at the time, they were run by foreigners. Consequently, Rubeiz and her circle felt the need for a center where, "nous sentions chez nous," (we felt at home). Quite active, the center held 240 conferences over an eight-year period in addition to poetry readings, musical concerts, exhibitions, film showings, and plays. Acknowledging the potential for nostalgia, one notes in Rubeiz's memoirs that the conferences often resulted in intense debates due to the number of opinions included on topics such as the role of oil in the region, confessionalism in Lebanon, the role of creativity, and gender. Yet this political activism did not translate explicitly into formal terms in Lebanese art; perhaps this is a result of a market, which- to this day- is dominated by paintings sold for the domestic setting. Emerging postwar practices therefore stand in contrast to the work of the previous generation in more ways than choice of medium.

Despite refutes that they are not a collective, the postwar generation of artists have become at the very least, a loose association of artists, colleagues, and friends whose work shares similar representational strategies. With few exceptions the majority left Lebanon during the eighties to attend universities in Europe and the U.S. Joreige, for example, studied graphic arts in France and cinema and painting at Rhode Island School of Design. Ra'ad also studied in the U.S., receiving his Ph.D. in Cultural Studies from the University of Rochester after deviating from his medical studies at Boston University to pursue photography. Following the end of the War, they returned to Beirut and since then, have become individually and collectively associated through the curatorial projects of Ashkal Alwan. Established by Christine Tohme in 1994, Ashkal Alwan is one of the few non-profit arts organizations in Lebanon and has gained a reputation for sponsoring projects in public spaces throughout the city and abroad. Some of the artists were friends beforehand whereas others were introduced to each other through Tohme. With little separation between producers of art and critics, many artists write about their work and that of their peers and the footnotes are littered with references to Sigmund Freud, Fredric Jameson, Walter Benjamin, and Jean Baudrillard among other prominent European and American theorists. Moreover, much of the funding for both individual projects and those of Ashkal Alwan come from outside of Lebanon. Yet this type of seemingly banal information is often excluded from the current criticism and thus we are left with a somewhat romantic vision of over fifteen

years of destruction. Perhaps it is not only a national policy of postwar amnesia but also an art historical one.

The point is this: emerging artistic practices in Lebanon do not derive solely from the context of the War. Instead, these works engage in the project of writing a local history while partaking in the global market of culture. Because in the end, the war in Lebanon was the not the first in which Truth was a victim.