Rethinking the Witness: Art After the Lebanese Wars

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DECLARATION

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ABSTRACT

This thesis offers a critical investigation of art after the declared end of the Lebanese civil wars and their prolongation through various discourses and politics. This violence, insidious and structural, was said to have foreclosed certain forms of representation and of speech. The subsequent hijacking of time and space would demanded a rethinking of the witness, of representation, and of the politics of form in art. This rethinking asks what particular tactics in art, attentive to form and apparatus as much as to content, can oppose the ideologies in war and post-war discourse, but can produce and become the conditions of possibility for a politics of art. The declared end of the Lebanese wars coincided with the end of the Cold War and its concomitant muffling of a long history of revolution and counter-revolution, naturally also in the Lebanese post-civil war context. The thesis addresses how certain nascent artistic propositions challenged the crises of historical representation, legacies of witnessing, as well as the heart of testimony as fiction. It argues that certain Lebanese artists in the post-civil war era were attentive to form and to world in such as a way as to extend from waves of political modernism. Through tactics such as parody, direct modes of address, alienation effect, use of text and vernacular modes, to name but a few, they foregrounded an awareness of the ideologies of their apparatus, and brought forth a rethinking of witnessing as a political and historical position from which to speak.

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Chapter 5 - Fiction and Politics of Truth: The Atlas Group

ABBREVIATIONS & ACRONYMS

AA	Ashkal Alwan
AG	The Atlas Group
ANM	Arab Nationalist Movement
APEAL	Association for the Promotion and Exhibition of the Arts in Lebanon
APSAD	Association pour la Protection des Sites et Anciennes Demeures au Liban
BCD	Beirut Central District
BOT	Build-operate-transfer
CDR	Council of Development and Reconstruction
DFLP	Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine
AIF	Arab Image Foundation
HRD	Human Rights Discourse
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
LCP	Lebanese Communist Party
n.d.	no date
NGO	Non-governmental organization
no. / nos.	number / numbers
n.p.	no page / no pagination
OCA	Organization of Communist Action
OG	The Otolith Group
PFLP	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
PSP	Progressive Socialist Party
PTSD	Post-traumatic stress disorder
SLA	South Lebanon Army
SS	*Schutzstaffel* [defence squadron]; Nazi special police force
SSNP	Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party
STL	Special Tribunal for Lebanon
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

Part I

Background

A recent advertisement for a high-end rooftop bar in Beirut's rebranded downtown proclaims that in Beirut no one gets shot, they take shots; in Beirut we celebrate, even when there is no government; in Beirut when the sun sets, there are no political parties, just parties; in Beirut we all know somebody, who knows somebody, who knows somebody; in Beirut people do not stand in line, they cut them; in Beirut, revolutions are old-fashioned. All in English, the ad shows fast-moving clips of hundreds of people drinking across bars and clubs, Porsches and other luxury cars being parked in front of those very bars, aerial views of Beirut overlooking the sea, Martyrs' Square and other scenes from the downtown area of Beirut that was privately reconstructed in the 1990s, after the wars that destroyed it.

This is allegedly the same Beirut that saw nearly twenty years of civil war between various factions, causes, as well as proxy wars. So bloody and destructive were these wars that the term 'Lebanization' was conjured by media and international governments to reflect the allegedly unique, prolonged and ravaging character of that violence in Lebanon. A vicious series of wars that saw ebbs and flows between 1975 and 1990 was officially declared over by warring factions and their international watchdogs with a truce – signed in Ta'ef, Saudi Arabia, in 1989 at the close of the Cold War – under the name of the Ta'ef Accords. With it came amnesty. As we will see, some argue that this war has not truly ended. It continues in the neoliberalism of today, in forms hot and cold, latent and explosive, hijacked by a logic of transitional justice, memorialisation, privatization, reconstruction, as well as by old, divisive, polemical party politics, as Lebanon was and will remain a contested site of battle over broader geopolitical interests, just as it had once been a site of battle for real emancipatory causes, especially, if not essentially, that of Palestine.

This thesis, however, is not about Lebanon, nor is it about the different representations of Beirut (as city-state). It is, broadly speaking, about how the Lebanese condition can be a course for thinking about how to image and represent the experience and event of war, and the effects and symptoms of its protraction; how to rethink the position of the witness as it is implicated in the politics of art-making in such conditions. How does one consider the modes of representation and of address of the space, time and experience of war and post-civil war politics? How does one rethink the position of the witness without falling prey to the binding logic and dominant vocabulary of public discourse and power – their subjectification – without occupying the position of the subject of that subjectification, or speaking from a place of survival or victimhood? More specifically, how to do so aesthetically? Meaning, how can attention to the politics of form and to such aesthetic tactics as self-reflexive parody or fiction allow for a witnessing predicated on other terms, and what might those be?

Rethinking the witness means rethinking what comes with the conditions of witnessing in civil wartime and its concomitant prolongation; rethinking the position of the witness not from victimhood, nor from remembrance by a subject outside history, nor from perpetration, nor from explicit guilt; rethinking the witness not as a communication of traumatic events, or an impossibility to communicate those events, or as an ethical or pacifist position. It is rethinking the witness politically and aesthetically. It is thinking, thinking again, about the conditions and possibilities of representation without foregoing history or form. In fact, it is rethinking the politics of artistic forms and the politics of representation when those have been foreclosed and challenged in conditions of protracted and lingering civil war, when the past cannot be so easily rendered, and the present temporality suspended. ("Creation takes place in choked passages."[1]) Those conditions include being immersed in such discourses as those on human rights, transitional justice, post-war reconstruction, civil-war remembrance and amnesia, and the rhetoric that maintains the status quo of a 'cold' war with its attendant partisan and sometimes deadly policies. It is also rethinking the witness from an aesthetic point of view: not the politics of art or even political art per se, but what particular forms and tactics of making art, attentive to form as much as to

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[1] Deleuze, *Negotiations,* 133.

the world, can produce, instigate and become the conditions of possibility for – a witnessing that is not an eye-witnessing and, most often, not a long tradition of bearing-witness; but one that witnesses for the witness and for the conditions of witnessing.

Though the answers may not always be explicit or obvious, or are sometimes related to broader questions that are not answered within the purview of this thesis, it is hoped that a discussion of a set of artistic questions and practices on the stage of Lebanon from the 1990s onwards, will set in motion a kind of (re)thinking both about the work, its temporality, and what it was trying to critically address.

This thesis thus offers a critical investigation of a number of artistic practices in the time of the immediate post-civil war period up until the mid 2000s, in view of how some works and the ethos of a moment addressed and challenged the question of witnessing, directly or obliquely, to offer a rethinking of its position grounded in politics and history. These featured a politics of form, but also of denunciation, through new forms of address not to an unproblematized unrepresentability of trauma or commemoration. This was enacted through a number of moves, not always identical. Those positions can be teased out from the theoretical writing of some post-war artists, as well from the tactics and forms of artists' works as engendering modes of address to be reckoned with. We discuss both in detail.

Furthermore, it is safe to say that like 'Lebanization' as a term signifying a condition (even if sometimes appropriated to 'flatten' actual conflict) has travelled, it can also be said that particular historical events and ensuing crises in language, thought and political action, also travelled and became an organizing principle for others, in different epochs to consider, expound, problematize and reconfigure. The crises of representation in historical writing, documentary representation, and language itself (of testimony or otherwise), posed by the Shoah and by Hiroshima, can be read as one organizing principle for a generation of post-war Lebanese artists born mainly in the 1960s. In brief, for the generation preceding them, particularly that of Marxist intellectuals, resistance fighters and artists on the Left, events such as the destruction of Guernica in 1937 were used to find a parallel for the Israeli invasion and siege of Lebanon in 1982, and the utter destruction it wrought.[2] Moreover, the event of the

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[2] See Traboulsi, *Ghernika-Bayrut*; also published in English, "Guernica-Beirut: A City and a Painting."

Palestinian catastrophe, or *al-Nakba*, as well as the Arab defeats of 1967, and the internationalization of resistance against Euro-American imperialism and capitalism, were active points of reference for the causes of liberation and resistance, and of politically engaged art in Lebanon and the Arab World.[3] For, in their instance, the situation of the Jewish people, as it manifests in the Zionist project, is – alongside the far-reaching tentacles of European colonialism – the cause of *al-Nakba* and would thus have never been an active point of reference for intellectuals in their resistance against Israeli, US and European 'interests' in Lebanon and in occupied Palestine. The Lebanese war was for them (many of whom took up arms), not a traumatic category, but a political struggle. And aesthetic representations of and for that struggle were an intrinsic part of it.[4]

The 'generation' of artists we are interested in (and we use the term generation very cautiously) were born in this juncture and effectively came of age during the defeat and dissolution of leftist and internationalist revolution from the late 1980s onwards. For a moment in time, the openings offered by linguistic and post-structural turns in philosophy, history and art in Europe and the United States, formed as those were by the atrocities of World War II and the literature around the unspeakability and unrepresentability of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, in part forged some Lebanese artists' thinking and art practice. Compounded by the violence and protraction of civil war, this came along with the inherited disillusionment of Left that could no longer change the conditions of the infiltration of colonial and capitalist power, despite their voracious readings of those authors as well.[5]

Witnessing, therefore, is not only of a survivor or of a perpetrator and could be expanded to signify a meta-witnessing that includes a larger category of viewers, addressees and victims. Although there have been a number of perpetrator, political prisoner and victim and martyr testimonies, this thesis addresses another kind of witnessing and other speaking subjects – ones of slower release and that do not contribute to the spectacles of victory, suffering, pity or moral denunciation.[6] As such,

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[3] For a discussion of Palestinian art from the 19th century on, see for example, Boullata, *Palestinian Art*; and Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought.*
[4] See Maasri, *Off the Wall*. See also, de Laurot, "Composing as the Praxis of Revolution."
[5] Bardawil, "When All This Revolution Melts into Air."
[6] We take the inspiration for these three points from Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering.*

one of the arguments made throughout the last chapter of this dissertation is about the ways in which artists and writers re-articulated modes of address through various tactics such as parody, fiction, distancing, direct modes of address, montage, as well as through art forms that include text, photomontage, maps, documentary essays, installation, performance, conceptual photography, fictional foundations, and through the theoretical and essayistic discussions of witnessing by Walid Sadek and Jalal Toufic.

Terms

Before we present an explication of the coming chapters and discuss methodological approaches, it is important to consider the ways in which artists of the so-called post-war period were qualified or written about (a theme we return to in Chapter 3 and in the conclusion), and a reflection on some of the terms we use or are wary of.

Although there has been, to our knowledge, a considerable amount of journalistic and art writing on art in the period after the war, the academic literature on the matter has not been dense. We have relied on some of the more useful or compelling dissertations during the course of this thesis. Moreover, there are very few, if any, academic books dedicated to the study of post-war artistic phenomena, except in film and media studies. For better or for worse, there is no canonical corpus of any kind. There are publications (books, catalogues, magazines) published by art organizations, patrons and galleries, as well as book chapters in broader compendiums on contemporary art, and journal articles on specific artists or practices.[7]

In 2005, Kaelen Wilson-Goldie wrote an informative Master's thesis on what she referred to as post-war contemporary art practices. Shela Sheikh wrote her Master's dissertation in cultural studies on artist Rabih Mroueh's performance *Three Posters* (2000) and the videotaped testimonies of martyrs in suicide operations in South Lebanon, through a close reading of the work of Jacques Derrida on testimony. Sarah

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[7] These are listed in many instances throughout this thesis; see for example, *Parachute Magazine*, "Beyrouth_Beirut" (2002); *Tamass: Contemporary Arab Representations*, Beirut_1 (2002); *Out of Beirut* exhibition catalogue (2006); the *Art Journal* issue on Lebanon (vol. 66, no. 2, 2007); three editions of the Ashkal Alwan *Homeworks Forum* catalogue between 2002 and 2005; and magazines that since the 2000s have been dedicated to art and visual culture in or from 'the Middle East', including *Artforum, Bidoun, Canvas, Flash Art, Frieze* and, more recently, *Ibraaz.*

Rogers wrote her doctoral thesis on contemporary or post-war art through the prism of Beirut's cosmopolitan history; Mark Westmoreland in anthropology wrote about the crisis of representation and experimental documentary film, or what he called 'post-orientalist aesthetics' in Lebanon; Hanan Toukan wrote on the cultural politics and discourses of funding and art institutions; and, in 2013, Stefanie Baumann in philosophy wrote about the Atlas Group Archives as an 'anti'-archive and heterotopia.[8] In addition to this, as we will see, artists themselves and thinkers have written about artistic production of that period, most notable or prolific among those are Jalal Toufic and Walid Sadek.

Starting in the 2000s, post-war art was framed along rather similar, homogenous lines and, sometimes very problematically – a point we return to in Chapter 3 and in the conclusion. For the purpose of this introduction, we would like to note that although some of the signifiers used to talk about artists' practice have been necessary and interesting, especially at a given point in time, they are wanting, limited and basically descriptive. They tell us that artists were engaging in archival practices, or that artists were wary of grand narratives of the century past, or that they used to engage in experimental methods to do so, or that they were interested in rewriting history. We find that they rarely write about the work in ways that convincingly show us how and why they did so. Furthermore, they do not tell us how artists, albeit seen as belonging to the same said generation, may have done so in less compelling and rather problematic ways. We do not discard these written works – they are in the end what counter arguments have been built on, and they serve as useful documents – however we have not found them particularly useful to build on theoretically.

Rasha Salti attempted to trace a preliminary social history of Lebanese post-civil war art and discusses artistic production she identifies as "'alternative', 'critical', 'subversive', and/or 'counter-current'" within a matrix of class and hegemonic discourse. She speaks of a break in or from tradition in the "contemporary, yet alien" forms and vocabularies proposed by some of the artists we discuss, and that "beg an entirely different experience of deciphering and understanding from established convention".[9]

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[8] We reference these in detail later in this thesis. They exclude work written in Arabic and other dissertations written in French.
[9] Salti, "Framing the Subversive," 88.

Other accounts can be interesting, but are predominantly descriptive. Stephen Wright frames certain Lebanese post-civil war artistic what he calls 'experimental production' as difficult to categorize, fluid, implicated in the life of the city, navigating between constraints and limitation, "like a spy in a nascent era."[10] Later, Wright speaks about it as "post-conceptual" and politically motivated; while T. J. Demos labels a set of practices concerned with the documentary image, with fiction as a mode of construction of those documentary essays and projects (most notably Lamia Joreige and Walid Raad), as "postdocumentary".[11]

Moreover, as we see in the conclusion, questions of reception of works as it relates to the cultural and geo- politics of funding and the machinations of a globalised art world, as well as local reception, raise an issue regarding the kinds of terms used to talk about art made in Beirut in the period after the civil wars. Many formulations arose out of the former 'transnationalisation' of art and the desire to place 'contemporary' artwork from Lebanon as separate from more traditional painting or even Islamic art. Such appellations as 'cultural practices from the region', 'contemporary aesthetic practices', 'contemporary art in post-war Lebanon', 'experimental practices' abound. It is difficult to escape the particular significations that have come to be identified with the above terms as used by curators, art organizations or donors, therefore we use terms like 'aesthetic practices' and 'artistic production', yet we do so cautiously.[12] In referring to the period after the Ta'ef Accords, instead of 'post-Ta'ef' we use 'post-war' knowing that the post in the appellation is contentious and precarious. We try to avoid the title 'contemporary art', whether it refers literally to art today or more broadly to what has come to be known as a particular style or an economy (not foreclosing the need for a discussion of contemporaneity and art).[13] It will become apparent from chapters 3, 4 and 5 that we do not consider the works under discussion to be contemporary art as

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[10] Wright, "Like a Spy in a Nascent Era," 15.

[11] Wright "Extraterritorial Reciprocity/Mediterranean Conceptual Art?"; cited in Demos, *The Migrant Image*, 178 (see his chapter 7).

[12] If we refer to 'aesthetic' we do so in the way Jacques Rancière has summarized it (and elaborated on this term throughout much of his writings) as "[naming] a specific regime of identification of art, historically determined" (Ranciére, "A Few Remarks on the Method of Jacques Rancière," 121). See also Thierry de Duve on the shift from using terms such as metier, medium or even art, to using the term 'practice' in, "When Form has Become Attitude – And Beyond", 30-31.

[13] See Danto "Introduction: Modern, Postmodern, Contemporary"; also, for a much more critical approach, see for example Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated.* See also Sadek, "Peddling Time When Standing Still."

such, but rather as belonging to an extended modernism, or avant-garde period – one, in most instances, attentive to form, apparatus and content.

Layout

Stathis N. Kalyvas reminds us that most accounts of civil wars tell us that they are viciously hellish. He reminds us that there is violence in wartime *and* in peacetime, and that the two are not unrelated. For the violence of civil war that comes from ethnic sectarian class or other differences is not random. Nor is it chaotic. Nor is it accidental.[14] Understanding the oscillation and movement between violence in war and out of it, means understanding why and how it was there in the first place. Hence, we talk about war and protracted war not as totally separate or separable phenomenon. Witnessing and configuring the modes of address and representation of an 'eventful' catastrophe and protracted war, can be understood as contiguous. And perhaps here we can think of witnessing as a political position post a large and destructive event, and not only an ethical one, a truth-speaking one, or a communicative one.

We conceive of the political mainly as it relates to its embodiment and expression in artistic practice, and artists that are aware of the ideologies and discourses not only in the terms that constitute *realpolitik*, but also in the aesthetic apparatuses and modes of address they employ. As such, the specificity of this political rethinking of the witness as it manifests in a given set of aesthetic tactics and forms is that it does not (only) record events or conflicts, but critically engages in creating conditions for inhabiting positions and images that are part of another present and future. Their modes of address in effect are those other presents and futures. To see how this present is constructed; to keep a distance from it, all the while attending to its politics. They do so, we suggest, through various tactics and forms that can fall broadly into the category of political modernism, and that belong to an extended modernism.

Lebanese artist Walid Raad reminds us that:

"If we reduce the history of the Lebanese wars to the testimony of the witnesses then we are going to be in trouble – because that is what that episode helps you think. If you reduce the history of the entire struggle in the

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[14] Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War.*

South to, say, the testimony of someone in Khiam[15] or to the testimony of the fighter, of course you are going to end up with a banal history. Let alone the psychobiography of the political players like Amin Gemayel or Samir Geagea. So there was a way of saying, well, it's a little more knotty than this, the knots are more tightly bound [...]."[16]

It is precisely how or what that episode makes you think that we are interested in, and the ways of saying it.

As we map in detail in **Chapter 1**, the notion of the 'era of the witness' (or eras) seems like it has already passed and has been historicized as such. And there have of course been reformulations of witnessing as secondary (those of subsequent generations), as prosthetic (via objects, artworks, artefacts, memorials) as fantasy, and so forth. Moreover, the literature on witnessing was most often bound up with the uniqueness of the Shoah (and of Hiroshima-Nagasaki) and the difficulty (hear) impossibility of understanding, much less representing it as traumatic; as much as it has been with the Holocaust's capacity to have produced many witnesses, as well as images and documents. In turn, representing the Holocaust becomes about representing the past, about memory to override forgetting, and about the very writing of history as a project. Or as Peter Burke reminds us:

> "Is it possible to know the past? Is it possible to tell the truth about 'what actually happened', or are historians, like novelists, the creators of fictions? These are topical questions in the 1990s, both inside and outside the historical profession, though they are questions to which different people offer extremely diverse answers."[17]

The very fact that theorists and artists like Jalal Toufic, Walid Sadek and the other artists whose works we discuss were influenced by and appropriated the language, or rather the damage done to language after the Shoah and Hiroshima, in order to rethink the specificities of their cultural context and political space-time, is already a rethinking in process. Suspicious of calls to witnessing and memory, Sadek and Toufic both, in their

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[15] Khiam was an Israeli military prison and detention centre run by their collaborators, the South Lebanon Army (SLA), during the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon from 1985 until 2000, when the South was liberated. In the 1990s, both filmmakers Jayce Salloum and Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige made documentary films about the prison and its political prisoners. In the case of Salloum, the focus was on the figure of the resistance fighter Suha Bechara; see *Untitled Part 1: Everything and Nothing* (1999). Hadjithomas and Joreige revisited their first film in 2007, after the Israeli war on Lebanon in 2006; see *Khiam 2000-2007* (2007).
[16] Interview with the artist, November 2012.
[17] Burke, "Two Crises of Historical Consciousness."

very different ways, speak of the conditions of possibility of memory and of witnessing. Those categories are not simply unchecked as wanting or lacking, but rethought, borrowed or criticized through the development of their theoretical apparatuses ("the withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster" for example, in the case of Toufic, and the labours of missing, of ruin, of seeing by way of death, and of mourning in the presence of a corpse, in the case of Sadek).

We link this up with broader discussions about the relation between politics and art to pave the way for the argument that it is through an awareness of apparatus, form, and content that this rethinking was most crystallized in the Lebanese context.

In **Chapter 2**, our discussion of the history of the Lebanese wars is couched in the dominant discourses of discord and simultaneous consensual democracy based on sectarianism, and littered with military invasions and geopolitical battles. We suggest a Manichaean divide whereby differences are reduced to one. And this discourse of two, always-shifting camps – despite/and mad up of various factions, positions, and causes – has dominated the political vocabulary, and temporarily foreclosed other political possibilities and forms of sociality. The war continues by other means. The ruling consensus of the elite (despite disputes and stark differences over important matters ranging from sovereignty and national identity politics to public spending) in what manifests as a radically-opposed divide that is unbridgeable, is that they constitute and reinforce one another via consensus (as well as de facto enactment of their position as ruling elites) by agreeing to disagree along these very lines of vying for power.[18]

The Lebanese state has always been a defender of ruling economic elites, and the line that separates them from the ruling political elite is barely distinguishable. This reaches a zenith in the after-war years after the peace accords of 1989, and with successive governments, particularly those led by the late billionaire Rafik Hariri, reinforcing market-driven, liberal economic policies along with the government's

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[18] As we discuss in this chapter, this plays out for instance in the case of Hariri's discourse on reconstruction, which was highly criticized by his opponents, many of whom later formed part of the March 8 faction. Yet, a similar discourse (one of victory and invincibility in this instance) was initiated by Hezbollah after the Israeli war through their own reconstruction project called Wa'ed (Promise) to reconstruct the southern suburbs of Beirut after demolishment by the IDF in 2006. We see other examples in subsequent chapters. For a theorization of precisely how consensus and the consensual is the *contrary* of democracy, see Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*; and *On the Shores of the Political.*

campaigns regarding the country's alleged rise from the ashes; a form of state propaganda, especially through the reconstruction of Beirut's 'downtown' by private company, Solidere. There has always been a national myth and a source of national pride in differentiating Lebanon from other Arab countries, while the rest of the Arab world (Syria, Egypt, Iraq) was nationalizing. The trope was that Lebanon is the bastion of democracy, Arab in identity, but certainly West-facing, liberal and cosmopolitan. Yet, this Arab identity was fiercely fought for by the secular Left in Lebanon after the invasion and colonization of Palestine in 1948, and even as early as the previous century's Arab intellectual and political renaissance (*al-Nahda*), with its calls for different forms of Arab union.

The post-civil war period 'coincided' with the end of the Cold War in 1989, Lebanon figuring strategically in the US government's New World Order. The reigning order was that Syria would take care of Lebanese 'security', while Israel would remain occupying South Lebanon with a 'military buffer zone' (with continuing attacks on Lebanese infrastructure and daily violation of air space until the present day). The South remained the only place from which resistance to Israel was occurring outside Palestinian territory and embodied, or wanted to, the ideological, territorial, nationalist and political battles of the previous four decades. Much of this was, however, now couched in the discourse and weapons of the Islamic Resistance,[19] previously the site of the Palestinian and internationalist struggle for liberation.

The Oslo Accords in 1993 ended what international legitimacy there was for armed struggle for Palestine, whether inside or outside its territory. The Left in Lebanon and everything it had represented was now absent and dismantled through the logic of Human Rights Discourse (as proposed by Robert Meister) and transitional justice and reconciliation (as forced amnesty). The War on Terror from its inception included, confusedly, Hezbollah among its nemeses and its primary supporters, donors and facilitators in Lebanon: Syria and Iran. What better allies to seek than the Lebanese neoliberal elites, and their various allies. Thus were born the March 14 and the March 8 ruling camps after Hariri's assassination in 2005. One plus one equals, one.

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[19] Terminology to stand for Hezbollah and other factions that back the party's raison d'être of resistance against Israel even if not explicitly belonging to it.

It is in response to civil war and to its dire protraction in discourse and in violence that artists and critics think about and address the hijacking of the temporalities and spaces of the political.

In view of this and in order to pave the way for an in-depth discussion on artistic works, **Chapter 3** tries to answer the question of whether disillusionments with previous political and aesthetic projects posed a rupture in artistic practice. It tries to unpack how the forms and tactics of the artists we tackle reckoned with (or explicitly did not) the intellectual and aesthetic practices and the political projects that preceded them. War, the crisis of historical representation and political disillusionment proposed in Chapters 1 and 2 facilitate an understanding of rupture as a limit and as historically embedded, not as ahistorical. And with it, witnessing. The task becomes to think aesthetic conditions created by war, as well as by subsequent challenges posed to a particular kind of art-making: the debate between traditional or modern, on the one hand, and kinds of politically engaged art on the other. As such, the ways in which battles over narratives of 'continuity versus rupture' in art as well as more broadly can ignore other entanglements.

This brings us to **Chapter 4**, where we lay out some of the main nodes around which aesthetic practices in Beirut had been configured from the 1990s onwards. Those include such forms as video, film, photography, photomontage, installation, text- and booklet-based work. It is hard to say that Lebanese artists working in the aftermath of fifteen years of civil war were not engaged politically as artists. However, negotiating that engagement was precisely what was at stake. Particularly in view of the ways that engagement was laid out by a generation preceding them (and even by their contemporaries) as one used for the representation of a cause, for furthering the plight of a people, for making visible or available politically what is being obfuscated by power, and so forth. The terms of engaged art or political art, or even revolutionary art, are too broad to map out. However, in chapters 1 and 4, we highlight some roots, shoots, and strains in the history of art and video that is and was attentive to form and politics, or form and content, as inseparable in any discussion of the relation between art and politics.

In trying to map the aesthetics of some 'engaged' art practices, we suggest they can be understood through the vector of a political modernism as laid out by Sylvia

Harvey (through her work on Bertolt Brecht discussed in Chapter 1) and Steven Edwards in his writings on the conceptual photography of Martha Rosler. Rosler has argued that along with her collaborators (the San Diego Group of radically politicized conceptual, artists with roots in photography), she was aiming to do documentary differently and not to abandon it altogether for its problematic associations with social documentary, the politics of pity and sentimentality, among other things. This attention to the very means of representation in art, to form and medium as ideological apparatus, all the while engaged in addressing the political and social world, is what qualifies political modernism. Starting in the 1990s in Beirut, working through installation, text, photography, and performance, what can broadly be referred to as 'image-making', and other forms, some artists were in fact using parody, fiction, the readymade, direct modes of address to spectators, cuts and jumps in montage, and a near-absence of images altogether to do just that outlined above.

Framing artistic production from Lebanon as memorial or as interested in rewriting history, ends up obfuscating, if not perpetuating the very ideologies at stake in such projects. And doing so from a personalized speaking position, more literally using such personal effects as diaries and personal experience, is equally problematic at times. We critique and unpack this to further argue the points raised in the other chapters regarding the politics of the witnessing position in the Lebanese condition as being one concerned with history and with power, rather than with a memory project.

In **Chapter 5**, we dive into the labyrinth that is the Atlas Group: an art work composed of many parts and of many art works; of many characters and many temporalities, its fictional structure and modes of address the source of some of our arguments. Conceived by artist Walid Raad in various iterations, never stable, yet consistent in its structure of instability, the Atlas Group is a fictional foundation dedicated to the collection and fabrication of documents that relate directly and obliquely to the Lebanese wars. Through the chapter and a careful exposé of the works that emerge from the Atlas Group, we lay out the relation of experience to history and representation, of form to content, of method to archive and counter-archive, and of their relation to the politics of *détournement*, and, lastly, to the compelling and poetic power of the Atlas Group's fictional composition. We do this in the last section through attention to Jacques Derrida's work on the structure and essence of testimony as fiction.

We do not thematize, as is often done in contemporary art and in writings on the Atlas Group, fiction as a fictionalizing of the real, or as blurring fact and fiction, or as documentary pitted against fiction. Rather, we understand it as intrinsic to the form of the Atlas Group, as immanent to it and its utterances, and as outlining the fiction of the construction of documentary truths as true. This is where the witness and politics meet, through fiction as a position from which to speak, through fiction as a mode of construction of truth, through fiction that allows us to see the real and the actual, again.

Part II

Methodology

Jacques Rancière reminds us that a method is a path; not a path that is merely followed, but one that is constructed so that one can figure out as they are constructing what territory they are in, the places this constructions allows one to go, the ways it forces one to move, or the obstacles that get in the way. A method and its outcome, thus, can be understood as interventions in specific terrains and contexts. This intervention seems political insofar as it raises questions of a political nature ("Where are we? Who are we? What do we see and what can we say about that makes us a we, having a world in common?"[20]), and forces us to map situations, and to change and rethink the framework through which we see things. This 'method' therefore can only be concerned with the way ideas, as materialities, play out or work; not general ideas, but the ways in which ideas are voiced and staged through discourse and practices – including our own.

Perhaps when writing *about* a methodology, and trying to position oneself in a complex, messy cultural and political milieus, one is compelled to think about the role of the author and the storyteller,[21] the role of the voice (both written and spoken), the gaze and the gazed upon; or, more aptly, about the witness and the 'fiction' of form or device. For, in the case of this thesis, which did not rely on ethnographic methods per se, it was more a case of embodied implication, of being troubled by the same questions raised by the people, objects, and texts I write about, in the same contexts of enclosure

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[20] Rancière, "*A Few Remarks on the Method of Jacques Rancière,*" 116.
[21] See Walter Benjamin's rendition of the storyteller in "The Storyteller."

and violence – in other words, the 'ethnography' was well in place as lived life well prior to the conception, much less writing of this dissertation. And it had come from living life in Beirut. From having survived and borne witness to a civil war and many years of strife in the form of car bombings, political assassinations, Israeli and other wars; local, partisan clashes, and destruction and reconstruction discourse and their actual, very real effects on the city, all of which were experienced directly as well as highly mediated through television, newspapers and street life. I, too, had been disillusioned and thinking about what politics and political vocabularies in opposition, say, to *realpolitik*, the overbearing language of journalism, televised political analysts, and the generation of commentators on the failure of the Left or the failures of Arabism as they relate to the Lebanese condition, might mean – the witnessing subject looking for a (non-victimized) position from which to articulate became central.

This meant, moreover, frequenting Beirut's cultural and artistic life and being exposed to its post-war aesthetic responses to and engagements with political reality. It is at the conjunction of these formative experiences that I took certain positions in this thesis, ones that are also reflected in how and where I read, write, locate and interpret the politics of some artistic practices to be.

Yet this task was not simply one of observation or lived experience, but took years of unlocking and rethinking. Recently, students of mine proclaimed how difficult it was to understand what these Lebanese artists were thinking, writing or expressing and how they were struggling to make sense of some art works and propositions, claiming that they do not yet have the keys. Upon the end of the semester, one of my students came to me and said that he had no idea any of this was happening, that after every class on this 'post-civil war Lebanese art', he felt a 'revolution' was happening. Not only did I humbly feel that my task was done but, more importantly, I remembered when I too was in the same exact place, looking for keys with which to unlock the obliqueness and difficulty of some aesthetic forms, propositions, and essayistic writings, and feeling that a rethinking indeed seemed to be happening.

The way I confronted this difficulty, which I knew was calling me (as we see for instance in Chapter 5), was by deciding to delve much further into my material. What began as a general cultural engagement, as living in the time of what Boris Groys has

called 'the general run of things', became a project.[22] This meant first immersion, then isolation. First familiarity, then strangeness.[23] This familiarity and strangeness was manifold. Immersion came in the form of reading innumerable texts written in the post-war period, and written about art and artists as well. It meant reading what they were reading and referencing: critical theory, post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, political theory, art theory, sociology, literary criticism and so on. It meant looking attentively, methodically and repeatedly at what they were making and giving to see. This, however, was initially done from a position of acquiescence, by simply taking on and believing the propositions about, for instance, the 'unreprestentability' of violent events, the damage to language, trauma, absence, and so on.

However, like all familiarity, it begins with strangeness only to return to it. If familiarity can have a deadening effect, or reify existing knowledge, thankfully the anachronistic or de-synchronized time of 'the project', of criticism, of writing, allows a strangeness and a de-familiarization not only to occur, but to forge the very things being thought and written.[24] Here we like to think of strangeness, or estrangement, as a conscious exercise of an estranged (hear) exilic positioning in relation to times, spaces, actors, relations, structures, objects. Or as Fernando Renjifo has put it: "exile involves, fundamentally, the questioning – and renunciation – of given times and spaces, and of the values embedded in them: there is a spatio-temporal displacement which allows for another perspective and which has to do more with the gaze."[25]

The other level of the familiar and the strange refers to the way for instance Nikos Papastergiadis refers to the category of 'home'. Home is traditionally defined by its relation to what is not home, to the other, to order versus chaos, to tradition, to safety and to the nation. Understanding home as the static embodiment of culture and sameness, versus the wilderness and oblivion of exile, are common juxtapositions (in modernist literature) for Papastergiadis. Given global transmigrations, exile, diasporas,

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[22] Groys, "The Loneliness of the Project."

[23] See Atkinson, Coffey and Delamont, *Key Themes in Qualitative Research*; and the section on 'strangeness and familiarity', 25-47.

[24] I like to think here in parallel to Giorgio Agamben's small exposition about what constitutes the contemporary in *Qu'est ce que le contemporain?* In the time of research, distance from Beirut, and long periods of writing, I was perhaps embodying a certain contemporaneity by being out of sync. And from this closeness and distance to subjects, objects, milieus, I could see better what they were emitting and the discourses in which those were couched.

[25] Renjifo, "Poetics and Politics of Renunciation," 455.

postcolonialism and critiques of modernity and its ideals and structures of being and belonging, some questions arise: "We can always defend ourselves or even rebuild after the home has been attacked from outside, but how do you deal with that slow but determined process of implosion? What happens when our sense of home is filled with trauma?"[26]

The idea of home as tied to a place or an identity has been rethought, and a transformation has allegedly occurred from a 'knowable community' to an 'imagined community' (though the policing has far from been contained).[27] There are perhaps other forms of bonds that bind us. How do we inhabit a place and temporality we do not belong to, how do we belong to a place or time we do not live in? How does one do research in a 'home' one has left, one feels exiled in, or that one inhabits and is abandoned by? These questions are also asked by some of the artists, writers and works we investigate. I have tried to choose a position (or, shall I say, the position chose me) of homely exile, of strange familiarity, of complicity rather than seeking rapport from an 'outside'.[28] Furthermore, I wanted to avoid at all costs the trap of reifying the 'other' at home (exoticizing, orientalizing, subjectifying), and so I came back to a closeness, to writing from home, and a recourse to friendships with the artists, writers, historians I write about and for, to conversations, to vigilance, and to problematization.[29]

To a *Flash Art* editor once asking for an "overview of the important trends in contemporary art in the Arab world" alongside some glossy images, artist and writer Walid Sadek replied as follows:

> "You mention an 'overview' essay. To be honest with you, we are not really interested in figuring in such an essay especially since we strongly believe that geography must be rethought critically and that consequently differences will emerge as significant and crucial. Keep in mind that you are dealing here with three artists whose work is largely dealing with the impossibility of producing images in the region. We are sincerely uninterested in building an artistic

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[26] Papastergiadis, *Dialogues in the Diasporas*, 3.

[27] ibid. Papastergiadis takes the latter term most likely from Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*; or better yet, from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's notion of a people to come, a people that do not yet exist in *What is Philosophy?*

[28] Irit Rogoff also refers to these questions, processes or categories as un-belonging, or as "unhomed geographies". She alludes to Homi Bhabha's notion of 'inbetweeness', Edward Said's 'never being of anything', and Paul Gilroy's 'double consciousness' as sisters of the terms and stakes in this homely, placement and displacement. See Rogoff, *Terra Infirma*, 3, 7.

[29] Rabinow, *Foucault: Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth.*

career but we are rather engaged in serious debates which require different strategies for dissemination."*30*

We hold the same position and, as such, have tried to be wary of this while engaged in the process of researching and writing, one that does not, could not and did not hope to span the entirety of post-war artistic production, nor to offer an overview of artistic practice, but to remain alert to at the very least two things: firstly, to remain cognizant of the 'privilege' of the conditions and structures that made theorizing and writing possible. As Pierre Bourdieu reminds in a different context: "*When [...] unrecognized as privilege, it [scientific activity] leads to an implicit theory of practice which is the corollary of neglect of the social conditions in which science is possible.*"*31* And secondly, perhaps as Karl Marx had said, ideas are material forces and, as such, we remained acutely watchful to their problematization for *"[...] truth does not exist in the accuracy of its depiction of reality [...] but in the power of its production of reality [where] theory is not a passive representation of something else, deemed to be activity or practice, but is 'itself a mode of action in the world.'"*32*

Straddling and juggling these positions, propositions, and politics, we have, between witnessing and the fiction of the form of historical writing, tried to tell and rewrite a part of the story.

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30 Wright, "Territories of Difference," 58.
31 Bourdieu, *Outline for a Theory of Practice*, 3.
32 Deacon, "Theory as Practice," 134.

– Chapter 1 –
Witnessing, Representation
and the Politics of Form

1.1 Introduction

The epoch of the Lebanese civil wars, their duration, the officially declared end of those wars, and later protracted violence and peacetime, coincided historically with a number of shifts in thought on questions of witnessing and historical representation. In art history and theory, debates around of form and representation, art and politics, changed dramatically in forty years. Addressing the violence of war and its enduring structural violence raised questions regarding the conditions and possibilities of representation, and led to a reflection on the tactics and forms of such representation.

The literature on witnessing catastrophic events as much as ongoing wars is, in effect, the question of how we utter and represent our seemingly unrepresentable pain as well as the pain of others, the magnitude of events and the conditions of (structural) violence and injustice, and the commitment to political positions through form. These, in turn, raise questions: To whom and how do we testify if at all? What are the parameters of 'committed' art? How do we do this in ways that evade and undermine ideological apparatuses and structures? And if language is, say, contaminated, how do we work through it, or reappropriate it?

Writings on the crisis of historical representation after the 'linguistic turn', or what has broadly been called post-structuralism from the 1960s onwards, asked these questions in a slightly different key; or facilitated them. Language as a transparent carrier of a reality out there had been consistently challenged since at least the time of Saussurian structural linguistics, and prior to that in early 20th century Russian Formalism. Reality does not precede language, it is constructed by it and by the other language systems we inhabit (discourse, narrative, or text would come later). The primary role of language in the construction of historical reality is what occasioned a shift in consciousness. This posed challenges to positivist historiography and positivist

epistemology as a whole, and it was the postmodern turn that undermined history's so-called 'grand narratives' and influenced generations of theorists the world over.[33]

Post-structuralism and its various formations can be seen to be intimately connected with, and even contemporaneous with, theorizing on witnessing and testimony. The discourse around the difficulty – hear impossibility – of representing such catastrophic events as the Shoah and Hiroshima are a case in point, as are debates on the problems of foreclosing representation. They fold in with the problems of representation and image-making raised in the aftermath of the Lebanese civil wars. The crisis of representation in its manifold histories had an impact on the role, place and form of art after war, and on the relation between art and politics (the roots of those debates having already been in place with the rise of fascism and Nazism at the turn of the last century, as we see below).

These related to art in several ways that we abbreviate here and detail below: the ethics *and* politics of making art in the aftermath of extreme events themselves had their precedents in the leftist debates from the 1930s onwards between Georg Lukàcs, Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno, Bertolt Brecht and others of the subsequent Frankfurt school.[34] Those debates were foundational for thinking aesthetics and politics, autonomy and realism, committed and militant art in literature and film, and the later conceptual art of the 1960s. Around the same time, a bit earlier, the ethos of 'giving a voice to the voiceless' that arose from the democratization of media, and from the political protests and changes that swept Europe and the postcolonial world in the 1960s, was taking various forms. Some strains were couched in social documentary, militant film-making, and even photojournalism; while others could be seen as reactions against this, embedded in more formalist traditions (as well as in pop and conceptual art).

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[33] For a condensation and analysis of these ideas, see Spiegel, *Practicing History* and *The Past as Text*. See also Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*. For our purposes, see, among others, Jean-François Lyotard's explanation of the relation between the 'event' of Auschwitz and the rise of postmodern narratives. The crisis of representation and referentiality mapped as the linguistic 'turn' not only affected historical studies, but also was imbricated in philosophy equally (with Derridean deconstruction and Michel Foucault on discourse and knowledge/power, as we see in Gabrielle M. Spiegel). As regards the discussion of the 'geopolitics of knowledge', which explains these crises outside European thought, see Mignolo, "Geo-Politics of Knowledge."

[34] See Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics*; and Fredric Jameson's afterword in the same volume, "Reflections in Conclusion."

In the Lebanese context, these debates were in some instances not so dissimilar. The politically-engaged aesthetic practices of the 1960s and 1970s, from militant documentary film-making, to lyric, revolutionary poetry, as well as other forms of direct representation and resistance as poster and graphic arts, were reconsidered after decades of civil war. The structuralist then post-structuralist turns, which reconfigured theories of authorship and subjectivity, alongside the ontological and epistemological questions that undermined the truth-value of language and of direct 'unmediated' representation, informed the questions and the practices of artists and intellectuals at that juncture. We want to suggest that, in the context of Lebanon, these transformations pushed forth a rethinking of the witnessing position, through a reinvestigation of politics in art and art-theory writing.

After we present the literature and debates on witnessing and (un)representability, we look at the ways in which they have been revisited by such Lebanese writers and artists as Jalal Toufic and Walid Sadek. It is primarily Sadek's reconfiguration that proves to be the most useful for our purpose. Then we suggest the ways in which witnessing has been rethought and politicized; something we argue, occurred through a number of conduits. The first is a wave of political modernism in art as it emerged in the post-war years, with its concomitant awareness of apparatuses and form. The second is within what Derrida argues is the core of the testimony's structure, and that is the possibility of fiction. We suggest that the various aesthetic tactics associated with these addresses the past of bloody civil wars, and the political present and its ideological structures.

1.2 Witnessing: Etymology, Language, Critique

The 'era of the witness', as coined by Annette Wieviorka, came after World War II in the aftermath of the Shoah.[35] Wieviorka argues that the advent of the witness came in waves. The first was the annihilation of the ghettos and of those who did not survive, while their written testimonies compiled in memorial books did. With the second-wave came book-length testimonies written by the survivors of the camps who witnessed for those who did not survive (Primo Levi, Eli Weisel, Charlotte Delbo, and others) and

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[35] Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness.*

whose testimonials were also made possible by the passage of time after the Shoah. This wave, she claims, was followed by a number of manifestations, including television programmes, films and filmed archives dedicated to the stories of the Holocaust from the vantage point of the survivors; and, later, the onset of memory and trauma studies. There has also been a critique as well as a continuation of the literature on witnessing and its engagement with memory, trauma and victims, which include notions such as 'secondary witnessing', 'prosthetic memory', 'generation 1.5', 'fantasies of witnessing', or the 'seeing' witness. We return to these terms below.

For Wieviorka, the Adolf Eichmann trial that started in 1961 marked the advent of the witness, with its flood of survivors bearing testimonies and being given a voice on the stand in Jerusalem, and later across television programmes and filmed archives from the 1970s to the 1980s.[36] Not only was there a compulsion and a necessity to speak on the part of survivors, but Wieviorka also argues that, through the Eichmann trial and the subsequent systematic collection of audio-visual testimonies, the 'era of the witness' *produced* this very need, in a process that became indistinguishable.[37] Notably, she briefly historicizes the moment from 1970s onwards as part of a larger wave of the rather-vaguely termed "democratization of historical actors", which was formulated around giving a voice to the voiceless and the excluded, and later considered as constituting political action, especially after 1968.[38] The effort of the latter 'politicization' to take over public discourse, in academia and in activism as well as in cultural production, however, also spread to television and became populist, she claims, seeking the average man on the street. We can deduce on the part of Wieviorka though not elaborated on enough, a connection between the logic of the era of the witness (in its later waves) and cultural production that sought to politicize public discourse and 'empower the people'.[39]

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[36] See, for instance, Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah* (1985), featuring interviews with witnesses who had attended the Eichmann trial. Also see Yale Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, established in 1982. See also Steven Spielberg, *Schlinder's List* (1993), and Alain Resnais, *Night and Fog* (1955).

[37] Some have referred to this as an 'obsession with memory', but also as a 'memory industry' or further the 'Holocaust Industry'. See Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry*. Also see Sivan, *Izkor*.

[38] *The Era of the Witness*, 97. There might be a conflation of the emancipatory projects of the 1960s with the wave of Shoah testimonies. Although those two moments were contemporaneous, they come from different political standpoints.

[39] See Jane M. Gaines, "Political Mimesis."

In a more critical key, this epoch was also characterized by the rise of psychological readings of, and therapies for survivors and their kin, highly influential psychoanalytic readings of catastrophic events and their aftermath as traumatic, and the rise of memory studies as inseparable from theories on the witness and testimony.[40] This was also explained in a different tone in Robert Meister's critique of human-rights discourse (HRD), which we explore in Chapter 2. He argues that HRD is, in part, predicated on an ethics rather than a politics of witnessing, and on ethical condemnation of atrocity. The denunciation of atrocity as a condition of being human after the Holocaust became the condition for the shift in the ruling ideology of human rights as counterrevolution.[41] Before we begin to problematize the relation between witnessing and memory, and link it to our discussion on art in Lebanon, we will explore the roots of the term 'witness', its constituent interdictions and their reversal.

The Latin etymological roots of 'witness' and 'testimony' are the same. *Testis,* signifying the third party, is the witness and the testimony. *Superstes* is the person who has lived through an event and can bear witness to it. In both Greek and Arabic, 'witness' shares the same etymological root with 'martyr'; the one who sacrifices her/his life in publicly bearing witness to her/his faith – the passion. The witness in the *Old Testament* came to stand for the unknowable, as Aaron, Moses and the *Ten Commandments*. In Old English, the root 'wit' refers to 'mind' and 'understanding', and in Indo-European, to 'seeing' and 'knowing'. The witness is the one who was there, who saw and can utter what she/he has seen, or can utter for those who cannot.[42] In juridical terms, the witness is the one who, in signing a document, demonstrates that another signature/signatory is real and genuine.[43] In other words, the witness is she/he who can swear and vouch that we exist, where the witness in law has functioned as a testimonial to the truth. It is she/he who, by vouching for us brings us into being.

The act of witnessing could be said to be a highly intersubjective act. This intersubjectivity is also dependent on the institutional context or arena in which

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[40] Susan Rubin Suleiman, in *Crises of Memory and the Second World War,* claims that this 'era of the witness' is also more generally the era of memory. For a critique of what has been referred to as an obsession with memory, see Maier, "A Surfeit of Memory?"

[41] Meister, *After Evil.*

[42] See Guerin and Hallas, *The Image and the Witness*; and Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz.*

[43] Guerin and Hallas, *The Image and the Witness.*

witnessing takes place; testimony as a speech act. For Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, bearing witness is relational to the extent that it involves a witness-survivor and a witness-listener. For Jacques Derrida, in testimony, one passes from an 'I' to a 'you', and when I utter I am already assuming that at least someone is listening and is able to understand the language I am speaking – this is what begins to form the exemplarity and universality of the witness. A 'we' is formed from the outset with the one who speaks in this instant. "Thus: we are immediately more than one, as soon as I or an I speaks."[44] It does not presuppose an agreement as to the content, but it presupposes a 'we', which is a priori to any attestation or address.[45]

Moreover, the systematic extermination of European Jews, and the obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, are said to have posed a limit to what it means to be human. And on the side of the perpetrator emerged the notion of the banality of evil, or in some instances, the blurred line between the victim and perpetrator referred to as the "grey zone".[46] The violence against other humans, as well as the extreme conditions of the camps, raised the idea that the experiences of both survivors and non-survivors could henceforth *not* be imagined, communicated or represented. Language itself was proclaimed challenged and undone, as was any attempt at writing (lyric) poetry – referred to as 'the event that bore no witnesses', or the aporia of Auschwitz.[47]

Giorgio Agamben explains the structure of testimony and the constitutive lacunae it bears within it – that the events are irreducible to the elements that form them – trying to map what it might mean to reach the limit of the human after Auschwitz through the figure of the *Muselmann*.[48] He also maps testimony's erroneous and insufficient relationship to law, responsibility and to guilt, deconstructing the role of language in the relation between the sayable and unsayable, and the place of the subject within and constitutive of that crevice. Agamben recounts the ways in which many survivors spoke of their survival as necessary and desirable only "to avenge [themselves]

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[44] Blanchot and Derrida, *The Instant of My Death and Demeure*, 34.
[45] ibid. Also see Felman and Laub, *Testimony.*
[46] See Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, and Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 21.
[47] See Adorno, "Commitment."
[48] Muselmann literally refers to the 'the Muslim', or further "from afar, one had the impression of seeing Arabs praying", for they were the ones who had surrendered and looked like a staggering, bent over corpse from malnutrition and its deadly symptoms. See Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 43.

and bear witness",[49] whereby the only reason to pursue and endure was in order to survive and tell the world about that which is impossible to bear witness to, often to absolve themselves of the guilt of having survived: "[Primo] Levi does not consider himself a writer; he became a writer so that he can bear witness […]. He could feel guilty for having survived, but not for having borne witness."[50] Poet Paul Celan himself narrates: "I have written poems so as to speak, to orient myself, to explore where I was and was meant to go, to sketch out reality for myself."[51] Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub showed testimonial excerpts from the Yale Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies. A woman's testimony struck Felman in its narration of what she thought to be the line dividing life and death. The sole survivor in her family, she narrates her will to survive as having taken place in order to bear witness and give "the testament of how she survived in order to give her testimony".[52]

Kyo Maclear quotes a hibakusha (Hiroshima or Nagasaki survivor) and novelist who writes that, "amid the catastrophe of the atomic bombing, I was left alive. Since that time, both I and my writing[...] have been violently dislocated by something. Even if I were to die, I still wanted to put down on paper all the graphic scenes I witnessed."[53] In a different era, Judith Butler engages with poetry that emerged from Guantanamo Bay prisoners and describes them as stubborn traces of life.[54] She, like others before, asks what kinds of utterances are possible at the limits of suffering or catastrophic events. A compulsion to write and to speak, even and especially if it is (to express) an impossibility, becomes one of the driving forces of visual and textual production after the Shoah and later catastrophic events. This very paradox of representing 'the unrepresentable' is investigated and critiqued by many authors, as we see below.

The said impossibility associated with, and the crisis of witnessing is its lacunary aspect. Agamben marks this when he explains how the witness normally testifies for justice and truth, yet the value of the testimony lies precisely in what it lacks – at the

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[49] Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, 52.

[50] Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 16-17.

[51] Cited in Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 25.

[52] Ibid., 44.

[53] Maclear, *Beclouded Visions*, 56.

[54] Butler, *Frames of War*, 61; and also "Survivability, Destructibility and the Politics of War." In addition, see Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, where she proposes that certain photographs of suffering act like an appeal and thus propose a new civil contract in the space between the viewer and the viewed.

centre there is something that cannot be borne witness to and relinquishes the survivors of authority.[55] The *Muselmann* is the only true and complete witness – the one who could not in effect bear witness. The *Muselmann* is the one who lived on the edge between human and non-human, and lost such distinguishing features of the human as speech and will. Yet, the *Muselmann* and through him the witness become the condition for the possibility of knowing the unknowable. The witness can only bear witness to the impossibility of bearing witness and, hence, it was termed 'the event that produced no witnesses':

> "The Gorgon designates the impossibility of seeing that belongs to the camp inhabitant, the one who has 'touched bottom' in the camp, the one who has become non-human. The Muselmann has neither seen nor known anything, if not the impossibility of knowing and seeing […]. That precisely this inhuman impossibility of seeing is what calls and addresses the human, the apostrophe from which human beings cannot turn away – this and nothing else is testimony. The Gorgon and he who has seen her and the Muselmann and he who bears witness to him are one gaze; they are a single impossibility of seeing."[56]

Yet, Agamben return to this to say that in fact testimony rejects exactly the separation of survival from life and that witnessing testifies to the very fact that testimony is possible because there is a difference between human and inhuman, the living and the speaking being. Moreover, "its authority depends not on a factual truth, a conformity between something said and a fact or between memory and what happened, but rather on the immemorial relation between the sayable and the unsayable, between the inside and outside of language."[57]

This lacuna, the disjuncture between what is experienced and what can be told, and the one that is constitutive of testimony itself, is elaborated on by Felman and Laub, yet formulated under the sign of trauma in psychoanalysis, and later taken up by various memory models, as we see below.[58]

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[55] In the final chapter of *Remnants*, "The Archive and Testimony", Agamben proceeds to formulate a theory of subjectivity and authorship based on testimony's lacunary 'nature', whereby "testimony is thus always an act of the "author," 150.

[56] Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 54.

[57] ibid., 158.

[58] Within the literature on 'cultural memory', some authors focus on commemoration/monuments/memory-work in relation to national and cultural past. See, for instance, Till, *The New Berlin*, especially chapter 5 on the Holocaust Memorial. Also see Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*; Bal, Crewe and Spitzer*, Acts of Memory*, section III "Memories for the Present."

The difficulty in communicating what happened to the survivor whether in Auschwitz, Cambodia or Nagasaki is not the simple difficulty of relating our personal, intimate experiences to others. While what happened to the survivors in the camps appears as the only absolute truth, it is at the same time irreducible to the facts that are meant to constitute the event. "The aporia of Auschwitz is, indeed, the very aporia of historical knowledge: a non-coincidence between facts and truth, between verification and comprehension."[59]

1.2.1 Unrepresentable/Representable

At the root of the 'unutterability' and incomprehensibility associated with those extreme events is the act martyrdom in some of the early Christian texts as a form of perishing with or for a cause. Agamben draws a parallel to the irrational extermination in the camps and, hence, to their 'unimaginability'. He contests the term 'Holocaust' – signifying complete burning, found at the heart of sacrificial and devotional Biblical doctrine – claiming it is used to justify what was in fact a senseless death, a *perire sine causa,* not a punishment for sins, or further, not a form of death with a precedent. This reinforces the idea by many that the Shoah was unique to history. The 'unsayable', whose origin is traceable to the mystical incomprehensibility of God, had conferred onto Auschwitz a sense of uniqueness that has been contested. This mystifying can be critiqued for isolating the events in history forever more. Future war atrocities, atomic bombs and genocides should return Auschwitz into a location within the flow of history and enable, through its horrors, to see that witnesses were indeed produced, as were images. We return to this shortly, but first let us ask what kind of representation or images are in fact possible. How, or why would we transpose these questions onto another historical context such as that of Lebanon?

What do the ideas laid out above, and the conceptualisation of the Shoah as the event without witnesses, enable regarding questions of authorship, or of artistic production? Why not surrender the figure of the witness if the era of the witness, in its various iterations, was later subsumed and, in some cases, transformed into ideology or spectacle? As shown above, numerous commentators claim that not even the survivor

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[59] Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 12.

cannot bear witness 'completely'. Language has to give way to non-language in order to show or stand for the impossibility of bearing witness, as a way towards representation. In his "Bremen Speech", poet Paul Celan addresses the question of language:

> "Within reach, close and not lost, there remained, in the midst of the losses, this one thing: language. This, the language, was not lost but remained, yes, in spite of everything. But it had to pass through its own answerlessness, pass through a frightful falling-mute, pass through the thousand darknesses of death-bringing speech. It passed through and yielded no words for what was happening – but it went through those happenings."[60]

What is interesting to note in Celan's words is the notion of death-bringing speech and how it allows us to see testimony in its performative interior, a point we return to with Jacques Derrida below. Speech brought death back to life, or was already impregnated with it. For Celan here, language was inevitably stricken by what it sought to express. Speech went through those 'happenings'; language not being lost at all but rather, through speech, utterance brought death into existence and somehow constituted the events. According to Felman and Laub, through the imperative to tell and through narration, the survivors come to 'know'. It was not the loss of language, but a certain speech that brought the events into 'being'.[61] The act of bearing witness is not only a speech act but seems to situate language outside the subject, and through forms of speech, subjectivity and an event are constituted. Resonating with our earlier discussion on the crisis of historical representation, it allows us to understand a series of historical moments that, in the challenges posed by World War II and the later theoretical considerations of 1960s and 1970s, pose a crisis for witnessing violence and human catastrophe, the question of how to represent them, and for the subjects constituted by them.

Susan Rubin Suleiman would like to propose a moratorium on the idea of the 'unspeakable' when it comes to the Holocaust – or the failure of language that endures nonetheless – referring to its structure as fetishistic. The problem is not *if* something can be uttered or written, but *how*. This can be embodied for Suleiman, for example, in

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[60] Cited in Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 50-51.
[61] See Section 1.6. Also see Timothy O'Leary, *Foucault and Fiction*, especially chapter 3 in which O'Leary foregrounds some of Michel Foucault's writings on European avant-garde literature as constitutive of the world, not a faithful representation where language precedes (and supersedes) the rational, human subject, contributing to its dissolution.

fiction and in the form of repetition, in saying or writing the same thing each time a little differently.

In her work on novelist Raymond Federman (and other writers of what she calls the '1.5 generation of child survivors'), Suleiman refers to preterition as the contradictory idea of affirming and denying, of effacing while claiming, of writing while marking the inability to do so, where the very erasure forms part of the writing: "The subtle and necessary displacement of the original event (the story) towards its erasure (the absence of story)".[62] For instance, she claims Federman's use of 'X-X-X-X' marks the extermination of his family without naming. The x's repeat what has already been said ("exterminated deliberately") and are redundant, but are also signs of erasure and cover-up. They accomplish a displacement (of extermination), but under the sign of erasure as the elaborate structure of saying and not saying. Further, for a writer like Federman it is thus reading and understanding the form as the content that is crucial and compelling to the question of the knowability or utterability of an event like the Holocaust.[63]

Furthermore, this 'unrepresentability' was more recently at the heart of a heated debate in 2001 between Claude Lanzmann and Georges Didi-Huberman over the images taken by the Sonderkommando in August 1944 in Auschwitz. Didi-Huberman's book *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, which uses four surviving photos taken by the Sonderkommando as a point of departure, strongly resists the trope of the 'unrepresentable' and insists, among other things, that it was instead the project of the Nazis and their obliteration machines that sought to leave no trace and to be 'unimageable'. There must be a form to the said unimaginable reality, hence the four photos 'snatched from hell', and photography showed the fiercest will not to obliterate that.

The 'unsayable' paradigm does not bring us closer to Auschwitz, but relegates it to a mystical realm thereby repeating the Nazi horror. For Didi-Huberman, as for Hannah Arendt before him, if Auschwitz exceeds existing thought as such, then we must persist in our thought and not relegate the genocide to such absolute terms as 'unthinkable' and 'unimaginable'. The problem with expecting too little of images and, at once, too

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[62] Suleiman, "The Edge of Memory," 100; also see "When Postmodern Play Meets Survivor Testimony."
[63] See Federman, "The Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jewish Writer."

much of them – of being, in other words, inattentive to them – is a kind of hypertrophy. These are important questions for the historian, according to Didi-Huberman – who is essentially interested in the image as material, as having important and particular formal specificities – since the historian, in the paradigm of the unimaginable and 'unimageable', will continue to work as if the concentration-camp system was not 'illustrated', and that there exists no truths in the image (qua document). As such, the historian then manufactures his own unimaginable, like the SS.[64]

Richard Crownshaw, in the context of a critique of memory studies, also discusses the wide tendency of trauma and memory studies to perpetuate the trope around the impossibility of bearing witness, or that full apprehension of a disaster (such as the Holocaust) is always inadequate, claiming that this calls into question all historical narratives: "If the witnesses did not fully understand what was happening to them, why should subsequent generations?"[65]

In a different key, Dominick LaCapra, Gary Weissman and Amy Hungerford have also discussed the memory and trauma models of witnessing, facilitated by such various notions as the 'middle voice' (LaCapra), fantasies of witnessing (Weissman) and personification (Hungerford). Hungerford in particular, addresses a way of returning history into memory, whereby victims remain in the past (like death), rather than maintained alive, so that their radical otherness may be perceived.[66] For LaCapra, following Hayden White, the 'middle voice' (of writers, say) allows for a distinction between subjectivities and speaking positions (witness, victim, perpetrator) so that not all is collapsed into an undifferentiated scene of horror, where the only possible consideration is an ethics of the bad.[67] For Weissman, 'fantasies of witnessing' conflates experience with industries of memory, which allows for claims to trauma on behalf of those who did not experience it.[68] Furthermore, the 'fantasies' extend to the fact that

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[64] This in large part is in response to Claude Lanzmann and others' claims that there is an obscenity to the very project of trying to understand the Shoah. It is relevant to note Eyal Weizman and Thomas Keenan's elaboration on the rise of forensic witnessing of objects, the "emergence of the 'thing'" on trial and of scientists speaking on behalf of objects that arose, in part, to make up for the said fallibility and fragility of human witnesses, especially after the case of Josef Mengele's skull analysis (Weizman and Keenan, *Mengele's Skull*, 13).

[65] Gross and Hoffman, "Memory, Authority and Identity," 80; as cited in Crownshaw, "The Future of Memory," 8.

[66] Hungerford, *The Holocaust of Texts.*

[67] LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma.*

[68] Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing.*

the Holocaust was not transcendent or paradigm-changing, but a historical event that was and is indeed representable.[69]

For Paul Ricoeur, the horror of a 'uniquely unique' event, in fact, demands historical writing despite its potential unthinkabilty: meaning, the more it is explained in historical terms, the more indignation we experience. The more the horror of the event strikes us, the more we seek to understand it (we, the historians). There does not have to be a dichotomy between a history that dissolves the event in explanation, or emotional reactions that dispense of thinking (where "horror is inverted veneration").[70]

1.3 Witnessing: Lebanon

Theories of witnessing after World War II – insofar as they are informed by an unrepresentability of events, by psychoanalysis and trauma theory, as well as by critical theory – influenced the Lebanese post-civil war artistic context to some degree, and has been rethought by some artists, scholars and writers in order to critically and formally engage the experience of war in its symptoms, discourses, and legacies as well as its on-going outcomes, and the conditions of their representation.[71] These theoretical tools were used to comment on the various forms of structural and protracted civil violence. These included different kinds of engagements, however. For example, artist Walid Raad explains how the project of some post-war Lebanese artists had been to collect and document traces left by years of wartime trauma (something he would later reconsider and complexify). Accordingly, he clams, the experience of trauma leaves marks on one's unconscious that are often arbitrary and sometimes unrelated to the event or experience itself. The collection of these traces of violence, these "looks to the side" or the very "belatedness of the event", had become one of the organizing principle of some of their work.[72]

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[69] ibid.

[70] Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 188.

[71] See chapters 3 and 4. There (and below) we explore some of the vocabulary and references useful to Tony Chakar, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Lamia Joreige, Walid Raad, Jalal Toufic, Walid Sadek, Ghassan Salhab and others.

[72] See Gilbert, "Walid Ra'ad," and Saadawi, "Necessary Fables." Chapters 2 and 3 also explore the travelling of these theories and ideas, and present Walid Sadek's critique.

The oft-repeated phrase by the Japanese man to his French lover "you have seen nothing in Hiroshima. Nothing" in Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima Mon Amour* formed the basis of Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's film *Je Veux Voir* (2008). It is also informed by Jalal Toufic's use of this segment in one of the references to his notion of "'the withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster', in the context of the surpassing disaster that Lebanon may have become during and even after the 1975-1990 war."[73] But Toufic also employs this phrase more broadly in relation to the dearth of images after the 1991 Gulf War. He proposes a film in which a Durasian phrase such as this would be employed to ensure the performative creation of sight: "You have seen nothing in Iraq and the Kuwaiti theatre of operations, nothing", not because there were no images, he claims, but because what was given to see was unbearable and "somewhat unseen even as one looks at them, or because [...] war was a surpassing disaster, with a consequent withdrawal of some images."[74] We know the 1991 Gulf War was transmitted and communicated through US military-sanctioned images and mass-media images of embedded journalists, what Jean Baudrillard had contentiously called a 'virtual war'.[75] The perfect witness as the one who did not see, for Toufic in this instance, is the woman who recounts what she *has* seen in Hiroshima, but is countered with a "you have seen nothing", enacting the paradox of the witness in relation to experience elaborated earlier.[76]

On the subject of Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), Toufic differentiates between the voice-over and the voice-over witness. The former is a voice that narrates over the image in film. It is possible that a "*sur-vivant* can bear witness about a traumatic event only through the voice-over that appeared *ex-nihilo* to the other side of the event horizon."[77] This, he suggests, is akin to the memorial projects of museums that collect historical traces of an atrocity for future generations to remember that the systematic mass extermination of the Shoah, for instance, happened in the way that it did. Yet in order to bear witness, it is not enough to remember, to gather information about the

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[73] Toufic, "Post-War Lebanese Photography," 83. See Chapter 3 for an elaboration of this idea. Also see, Resnais, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), and Hadjithomas and Joreige, *Je Veux Voir* (2008).
[74] Toufic, *Over-Sensitivity*, 47.
[75] Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place.*
[76] Toufic, *Over-Sensitivity*, 47.
[77] ibid., 49-50.

past for remembrance or to be an eyewitness or a voice-over, because this implies having gone past the event, to the other side of the event horizon. I would add that this remembering or speaking on the other side of the event horizon, is not a 'neutral' phenomenon, and possibly operating ideologically, it would need to be understood and undone as such.

This must be accompanied by another operation for Toufic. If the experience of a traumatic event from which one cannot simply return, is to keep real its 'unreality' and monstrosity, "words have to reach a performative function and the voice carrying appears *ex-nihilo*",[78] and must be joined by a voice-over witness this side of the event horizon, although we are left without an explicit explanation of how this operates. Moreover, his notion of "the withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster" (discussed in Chapter 3) is an example of, and dovetails with, our later treatment of how a tradition of literature and thinking on catastrophe and representability was employed and reformulated in different terms.[79]

It is relevant to explain that the figure of the witness was undergoing shifts in the Lebanese context, not only on the level of how we read certain artworks, but also on the level of theoretical and essayistic writing produced by artists, as we showed with Toufic and will return to. Writer and artist Walid Sadek's critical project for over a decade – across his various essays and artworks (which, here, we do not yet elaborate) – has been, among other things, to rethink the conditions of witnessing and to structure a theory for a post-war 'sociality' within protracted war, in order to overcome it.[80] Although we revisit his contributions numerous times throughout the following chapters, it is necessary here to present some of his theoretical standpoints on the matter of witnessing and the 'labours' therein.

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[78] ibid., 50.

[79] It is interesting to think of and note Dipesh Chakrabarty's notion of 'provincializing Europe' and his discussion on European intellectual traditions being disputed, problematized, localized and reworked in postcolonial historical contexts (see Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*). Moreover, Jalal Toufic is a big intellectual and artistic influence on Lebanese artists Walid Raad, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Lamia Joreige, Lina Saneh and others.

[80] 'Sociality' is a term he borrows from the Lebanese Marxist sociologist and thinker Waddah Shararah, and in short biographies he sometimes identifies himself as "an artist who thinks art and sociality in protracted civil war" (Harris, *Globalization and Contemporary Art*, xvii); and it appears very often in "In the Presence of the Corpse," an essay manuscript the author shared with me in 2008.

Sadek's project considers the present legacies of the civil war to then, through theoretical writings, begin proposing and structuring 'conditions' to live through and beyond the protracted post-war period. His work, we suggest, addresses the position of the witness-survivor (even if as a secondary witness, as a witness commentator-critic or, as he claims, as "witnesses who know too much"[81]). It addresses the conditions of a living together (as "non-posthumous survivors"[82]) based not on a bearing witness, on vengeance, on sectarian logics, or on the remembrance/amnesia dispositif, but on an attempt – through his artworks, but also through what he posits as 'labours' – to rethink the very conditions of witnessing, the questions posed by post-war amnesia narratives, and the temporality of civil strife.

Over the past two decades, the conditions of making art have changed. In particular the making and exhibiting of art under the aegis of a transnational, globalizing art world bent on staging the Lebanese wars and their artists who "graduate from the tenuous position of survivor to the privileged onlooker who stands astride the wreckage and addresse[s] the world".[83] For Sadek, many artists consented, foregoing their critical role so much so that their work is directly addressed to the stage of this art world and its globalizing forces, as (images of) witnesses, or as victims. In an early essay, which already contends with the neoliberal forces of globalisation in a post-Cold War world within the Lebanese context, he claimed:

> "This second tear is the decisive indication [that], like ejaculation in pornographic films, [...] we have arrived at the heart of Globalization and have surrendered to its primacy. At this stage, our eyes attain their ultimate status and final function, and emigrate from their role as a sense for searching and examining to a position as an organ whose profession is one of consent and consensus."[84]

One may argue that Sadek's project started out by being couched in the terms brought forth by psychoanalytic theories, in accordance with much post-World War II literature on witnessing and trauma. His essays "Collecting the Uncanny and the Labour of Missing" and "In the Presence of the Corpse", both later reworked, are a case in

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[81] Sadek, "Peddling Time When Standing Still," 48.
[82] Sadek, "Next of Survivors," 10.
[83] Sadek, "Peddling Time When Standing Still", 43.
[84] Sadek, "Laissez-passer," 17-18. In Chapter 3 and in the conclusion of this thesis, we discuss Hanan Toukan's doctoral contribution to this debate.

point[85]. Although the 'labours' he formulates could be read in psychoanalytic terms of acting-out, working-through, mourning, [86] his early artwork and later theoretical frameworks, as we will see, anchor his work more firmly in the language of ideological and political critique, critiques of dominant Human Rights discourse, and places the figures of witnessing and surviving in other terms. The language of sitting in the presence of a corpse as acceptance of the incomplete work of mourning harks to Jacques Derrida's discussion of hauntology (as mobilized on the part of the deconstruction project in relation to history) with its appearance and incorporation of ghosts. Although the 'excess' corpse that one is intended to sit with and mourn through and the ghost are not identical figures, it is important to remember that to haunt (and the subsequent 'to be haunted') is to provide a home for. Haunting is a form of occupation both by the dead and by the living. Derrida reminded us that when mourning is not accomplished, there is no internalization, but an incorporation of the dead. Meaning, the dead do not become us, but are in us; they occupy a 'place' in our bodies, becoming a cipher for iteration, and can speak for themselves. Moreover, the ghost is a paradoxical figure insofar as it does not correspond to the dead historical figure it is said to have left. Their temporality is thus 'unique', and they become figures for thinking the historical past.[87] Sadek himself develops figures to reconceptualise the traditional category of witness and survivor, as well as elaborates 'labours' for their/our actions.

He does not assume the position of the witness himself, but differentiates the survivor as over-liver from the survivor as not an over-liver. In other words, between the 'posthumous survivors', such as those militia fighters who 'returned' to write book-length testimonies bearing witness to their experience of war and killing, and the non-posthumous survivor who did not return from their death, as it were. We return to these later. But first, in his work, the approach to witnessing and survival that rethinks the post-Holocaust literature is one of labouring in a protracted present. The 'labours' he

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[85] See Sadek, "Collecting the Uncanny" and "In the Presence of a Corpse," as well as another version, "Mourning in the Presence of a Corpse."

[86] See LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, for a discussion of these terms borrowed from psychoanalysis (without foregoing socio-economic and political analyses) in relation to trauma and the writing of history.

[87] See Buse and Stott, *Ghosts*; and Davis, "*État* Present." For a more historically and politically-grounded discussion of spectres in relation to Marxism, politics, 'the work of inheritance', see Sprinker, *Ghostly Demarcations*.

elaborates through text and art work – the labour of missing in the presence of a corpse, the labour of ruin, the labour of missing, and the labour of seeing by way of death – constitute a way to think, live with and address the intermittences in a protracted time of war that essentially erupt from an unfinished past. The 'labour of missing', for instance, is a call for an active transformation of time – the time of waiting for the disappeared who may or may not return – into an objectified presence that enters into conversation with/of those who remain, as well as an interment. Sadek sees the 'labours' as preceding witnessing:

> "One of the many insidious machinations of civil [...] war is the near interdiction of witnessing. In Lebanon, this is partly ascertainable through the dearth of testimonies by ex-civil war combatants. No more than six book-length testimonies are published and none of them carry the twofold weight of testimony: that of witnessing again rather than narrativizing the past and that of calling on the reader to partake in carrying the weight of the past as it over-lives in the protracted present. Accompanying this dearth one finds a cynical facility in presenting public apologies for unspecified violent deeds committed. I begin with these troublesome remarks to propose that the work of witnessing is blocked in situations of protracted civil war […]. What I propose is a labouring, which precedes witnessing and acts as its prerequisite. For without the labour of missing we could be fated to waiting and without the labour of mourning in the presence of the corpse we could become an audience to a slew of apologizers who accomplish nothing except a sinister erasure of the object of violence, namely the corpse."[88]

The rethinking of the witness also takes place through the category of 'survival'. For Sadek, survival, when it is grounded in privilege or opportunism, becomes about witnesses knowing too much (not too little or not at all), or "untargeted survivors"[89]. Citing as an example the 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon, residents of Beirut were in full knowledge that the bombs were not falling on them, but on their kin in the southern suburbs of the city, and they could hear the massive bombardments on a daily basis. Here, the televised death of the others and the knowledge garnered from hearing bombs rock the city become the 'mirror' through which we see our own survival. We read this as a problematisation of the mainstream literature on the witness.

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[88] Saadawi, "On the Labour of Missing," 547.
[89] Sadek, "Peddling Time," 50. Sadek calls them 'over-livers' or 'non-posthumous survivors' in other instances.

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We return to Walid Sadek's critique discourses of amnesia in the following chapters, and to how his 'labours' configure the temporality of war sometimes very differently from the work of his cohorts on the post-war moment.

1.4 Art, Political Modernism, Documentary

A critique of the representability of the Holocaust and other extreme historical events (or of cyclical and structural injustice, dispossession and colonialism), and the paradigm shifts and alleged annihilation of existing structures of understanding and language they caused, does not mean adhering to a position of 'pure' realism either. What some have called the 'realist position', or further, 'traumatic realism.'[90] Reading (and declaring) history as a series of exceptions and ruptures has its ideological underpinnings in the logic of postmodernism and late capitalism, following Fredric Jameson. We want to effect a reading that displaces the false dichotomy between representability and unrepresentability, of historical *coupures* and declarations of ends.[91] Saying an event is 'unrepresentable' versus 'representable', is not fruitful unless we also consider the how and what. The representation of extreme, violent events has to be embedded in a historical reading of systemic injustice, war and structural violence in relation to capitalism as a world order.

For Theodor W. Adorno, the limits and possibilities of artworks during and after disasters, their historical and aesthetic relevance, must always undergo consideration. He does, however, concede the need for art to engage the paradox that witnessing proposes:

> "I have no wish to soften the saying that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric; it expresses in negative form the impulse which inspires committed literature […]. Its own situation is one of paradox, not merely the problem of how to react to it […]. Yet this suffering, what Hegel called the consciousness of adversity, also demands the continued existence of art while it prohibits it."[92]

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[90] See Dabashi, *Palestinian Cinema*; and Rotheberg, *Traumatic Realism*. See also Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*; and Boltanski, *Distant Suffering.*

[91] See Jameson, *Postmodernism, and Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

[92] Adorno, "Commitment," 312.

This brings us to representation of war and violence more generally, and to art and documentary more specifically.[93] Questions about aesthetic and politics. The history of documentary in artistic practice is bound up with questions of representation and historiography. Although we cannot dwell on these points now, these were embedded in the documentary and film debates of the 1920s (in their very different positions, John Grierson, Robert Flaherty, Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, etc.), and the realism and anti-realism (or anti-illusionism) debates that date back to at least the beginning of the 20th century when, for instance, discussions raged regarding the avant-garde, formalism, social realism, and Russian constructivism. The German Marxist debates of the 1930s to the 1950s were deeply formative and heated exchanges occurring between Bertolt Brecht and Georg Lukàcs, among others, as a case in point.

Later, very similar debates and positions regarding how and whom to represent were taking place in numerous documentary traditions in film and photography throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Consider for instance those of the San Diego Group (composed of Alan Sekula, Martha Rosler, Fred Lonidier and Phel Steinmetz), the Dziga Vertov Group, the critics of cinema-vérité, the moralism and sensationalism of social documentary traditions, or of photojournalism. That moralism, Martha Rosler reminds us, has been wedded to the project of revolutionary politics, or at least to its rhetoric. She is rightly uncompromising, when she says:

> "The [exposé], the compassion and outrage[...] of documentary fuelled by the dedication to reform has shaded over into combinations of exoticism, voyeurism, psychologism, and metaphysics, trophy hunting – and careerism [...]. Documentary, as we know it, carries (old) information about a group of powerless people to another group addressed as socially powerful [...]. But which political battles have been fought and won by someone for someone else?"[94]

In her search for a different kind of documentary, Rosler outlines the genealogy of the discourse on certain forms of documentary photography and their discursive appropriation. What is no longer 'news' or newsworthy progressively becomes the testimony of the "bearer of the news", namely the documentarian or photographer who

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[93] See, for instance, Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented*; especially chapter 1, "Wreckage upon Wreckage: History, Documentary and the Wreckage of Memory." See also, Mark Godfrey, "The Artist as Historian."

[94] Extracts from Rosler, "In, Around, and Afterthoughts" In Stallabrass, Documentary, 124.

has entered restricted zones of danger and/or destitution.[95] Alan Sekula in turn also asks if (documentary) photography can become anything else in its mapping of the discourse of universality (and truth) as it relates to documentary photography.[96]

As we see in chapters 3 and 4, Steven Edwards does a compelling job of periodizing Rosler's work at the junction of the critique of social documentary traditions by conceptual photography, alongside tactics of political modernism.[97] 'Political modernism' is a term coined by film theorist Sylvia Harvey to denote the politics of form later taken up by film theory, but 'inaugurated' by Bertolt Brecht's project, resting on roughly three main principles that were to influence generations of playwrights, film-makers and artists to come: "The long dream of uniting or relating semiotic and ideological analysis, together with a desire on the part of some practitioners to combine a radical aesthetic practice with radical social effects, has resolved itself, or condensed itself into the term 'political modernism'."[98] As we elaborate further below, already at the turn of the century and in the 1930s, questions around the politics of form emerged under in the debates between 'realism' and 'modernism', then during later modernist about ideological and the 'tripartite relationship' of form, content and audience, and later still after waves of structuralism, post-structuralism and crises of representation coalesced around the question of language and historiography (the 'linguistic turn').[99]

To counter the claims of realism, that tripartite relationship and its anti-illusionism would crucially underpin breeds of political modernism that draw attention to their own means of representation using various devices as a way to not break radical form from radical politics, and to also allow spectator awareness of their engagement in, and judgement over one representation of reality. Hence, alienation, distancing, foregrounding the means of representation and the 'openness' to which Harvey refers, would allow audiences to make critical assessments. That attention to the means of

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[95] ibid., 125. These include, for Rosler, war photographers, slum or subculture photographers, photographers of the foreign poor, and photography of the 'past'.

[96] See Sekula, "The Traffic in Photographs." And in a slightly different vein that tries to recuperate the importance of (social) documentary photography and documentary practice more generally, from its stigmatization as aestheticizing of images, see Levi-Strauss, "The Documentary Debate."

[97] Edwards, *Martha Rosler.*

[98] Harvey, "Whose Brecht?" 48.

[99] ibid., 51.

representation is not divorced from 'the thing' to which the representation refers, the signified, and to the institutional forms within which these take place.

Steve Edwards revisits the neo-Brechtian moment of Rosler's conceptual photography more specifically to show how the avant-garde of the 1970s broke up the coherence of text and image, constructed and invented something 'artificial' within the real so as to challenge reality and effect a break in ideology. This was done also through various tactics and devices, and those included: "revealing the apparatus and laying bare the device, criticizing mimetic naturalism […], dislocating image and soundtrack, direct address to the beholder, breaking empathy or identification, dispersing point of view and displaying techniques by which the spectator was ideologically interpellated in the *dispositif*." [100] The move from 'the representation of politics' to 'the politics of representation' resounds with the now-famous Dziga Vertov Group's intention to make political films, politically, and to which we return in Chapter 4, and find crucial for a historical reading of our artists.[101]

Closer to the context of Lebanon, the question of historical representation and more specifically the practices associated with representing the Palestinian cause – both as *al-Nakba* and as ongoing struggle – had been very influential in shaping the Arab world's relationship to political art and documentary as a tool for restitution and resistance.[102] Some have claimed how the Palestinians, through visual and cultural production, had created a collective identity around victimhood and disposession, where trauma realism prevailed and crystallized around documentaries of people bearing witness and denouncing injustice. This "permission to narrate" had to be forcibly seized from the effacing Zionist, nationalist narratives, whereby the history of the Palestinian people had to be written, filmed, assembled and disseminated through the form of the documentary genre, among others.[103] The realism of this kind of art and documentary focused on the objective truth of the camera, as well as on the stories of injustice and real suffering told by those inside the image, often in the style of cinéma-

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[100] Edwards, *Martha Rosler*, 93.
[101] ibid., 94. See also Lesage, "Godard and Gorin's Left Politics."
[102] More recently see Sa'di and Abu-Loghd, *Nakba.*
[103] See Said, "Permission to Narrate"; Dabashi, *Palestinian Cinema*, Loshitsky, "Pathologizing Memory"; and Emmelhainz, "Before Our Eyes." Also see Allan and Zeidan, *The Nakba Archive.*

vérité and, later, in militant approaches to film-making,[104] mostly founded on the principles of conveying and communicating, information and (documentary) truth. Yet, as Georges Didi-Huberman had suggested, we ask too much of images (or too little of them). Thereby lies the possibility that we leave no room for distance, and most importantly, awareness of the ideology embedded in the very apparatus at our disposal.[105]

With regards to our discussion above, we would also like to connect how these questions – from the debates around representation after the Shoah, to the politics of art and documentary more generally – played out in relation to art in Lebanon after war.

1.5 Beyond Trauma and Memory

Our discussion of witnessing relates to trauma and memory studies insofar as conceptions of trauma have been used since World War I, alongside Freudian psychoanalysis, to relate extreme events and attempts at retelling them as foreclosing representation, all the while shaping the field of memory. As Dominick LaCapra reminds us, "trauma has been a prevalent preoccupation in recent [historical] theory and criticism", and memory has been theorized as a narrative construction in the present for the writing of history. [106]

Agamben has linked the understanding of witnessing as martyrdom in Greek to the verb 'to remember'. The witness, martyr and survivor's vocation was to remember, or as being unable *not* to remember. Yet, the flood of memory and trauma studies associated with such catastrophic events as the Shoah, and even the Lebanese wars,

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[104] For an ample discussion of these outside of the Palestinian struggle as well, see Eshun and Grey, "The Militant Image."

[105] See also Ranciere, *The Future of the Image*, for a discussion on the excess of the visual and the intelligible in the disjuncture between poiesis and aesthesis, which leaves no room for any relation between the seen and unseen, or the distances and proximities between what is seen and who is seeing, between stage and auditorium, and so on. Film critic Serge Daney, in relation to images of Palestine, has said: "[B]eneath the Israeli colony [which we see] there is, buried, covered over, a Palestinian village [which we do not see]. I also remember this because we are among the few at Cahiers du [Cinéma], to have always known that the love of cinema is also to know what to do with images [...] that are really missing" ("Before and After Images," 190; cited in Toufic, "Post-War Lebanese Photography," 83).

[106] LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, x; and also *Representing the Holocaust*. Moreover, see Leys, *Trauma*; and Radstone, "Memory Studies." Also see Bal, Crewe and Spitzer, *Acts of Memory*; and Douglas and Vogler, *Witness and Memory*. For a more recent edition of collected texts that compellingly lays out the debates, see Crownshaw, Kilby and Rowland, *The Future of Memory.*

cannot simply be traced back to the etymology of the word. There has been much criticism of emphasizing individual and collective memory after disasters, and of understanding the complexity of the paradigm of witnessing and testimony through the vector of trauma and memory, claiming that it elides an engagement with history, and that it focuses on the singular speaking subject rather than understanding conditions and structures of violence.

In the aftermath of both World War I and World War II, a rise in the assignment, explanation and treatment of trauma occurred.[107] Its classification and diagnosis as pathology had become all-inclusive, where everything and anything could constitute trauma.[108] Although an exact definition of trauma is disputed, there is consensus that a delayed or late response to an event or experience takes place, which can include repeated hallucinations, thoughts and behaviour stemming from the actual event itself. However, the trauma cannot be reduced to the event, since the relevance of the person's possession or haunting by related images and events is in the personal meaning and importance she/he attaches to it – in other words, its narrative form and construction. Although it appears to keep the subject 'intact' and not constituted by the trauma as it were, the pathology also insinuates that, within the structure of the experience of trauma, the subject is done and undone. The event is not immediately experienced or incorporated except after a delay, a gap, whereby the person is repeatedly revisited by traces of the violent or marking event. Thus, in these psychiatric and psychoanalytic traditions, there is a repeated belatedness that constitutes trauma; a temporal and memorial delay that prevents the event from being experienced in its immediacy.

Sigmund Freud – having dealt with the onset of 'war neurosis' in the 1920s, and the predecessor of these approaches to the pathology and psychology of the aftermath of violence – was puzzled to find that trauma could not be understood or treated within the paradigm of unconscious wish fulfilment, but was rather the literal return of the

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[107] The American Psychiatric Association acknowledged the phenomenon of trauma in 1980 under the diagnostic label of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). According to Cathy Caruth, although this classificatory acknowledgement of pathology created a potentially useful diagnostic criterion, it also risked encompassing everything around it as constituting trauma. This includes not only combat stress and natural catastrophes, but also rape and abuse, and even some dissociative memory-related disorders. See Caruth, *Trauma*; and Blocker, *Seeing Witness*.

[108] See Caruth, *Trauma.*

event against the will of the one it returns to. In other words, traumatic symptoms are not symbolic memories, and this is very literality what, for Freud, points to trauma's paradoxical core: a repetitive experience that can remain 'true' to the event despite the delay in coming to know the overwhelming occurrence.[109] This has given a rather large place for the memories of speaking subjects in (re)constituting real historical events. Cathy Caruth proceeds from Freud's discussion of neurosis to state that in as much as is known of the limits of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as pathology, then it is not so much a symptom of the unconscious as much as one of history: "The traumatised carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptoms of a history that they cannot entirely possess."[110] It appears in this formulation that trauma is a return (and a constitution) of history through a person's experience and retelling.[111]

Caruth and others suggest that trauma (and memory) *becomes* a narrative that offers itself up to the platitudes of a purported understanding of events, implying then that trauma had not taken place at all. The traumatic event is said to remain (insistent and unaltered) precisely because it has not been stored, remembered and eventually narrated. As long as it is a trauma, it is not a story. Contestably, it thus forecloses representation, cannot be told, and has no place either in the past or in the present. In other words, it cannot be fully incorporated into narrative memory.[112] This may be a key paradox that disallows the espousal of a memory and a trauma model to understand the Lebanese wars in their ongoing structures and temporalities – not as a 'unrepresentable' events – and, most of all, the witnessing position that comes with the experience of these conditions.

If trauma encompasses so many experiences (as Caruth reminds us), how can the argument for its exceptionality be maintained? In zones and temporalities of protracted civil wars, hot and cold violence, it becomes difficult to conceptualize the witness position as one of a traumatized subject, or a subject of memory, or of a victim or survivor. The act of 'bearing' witness cannot remain unchanged, as we saw in Walid

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[109] See Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*; and also the introduction he wrote to the 1919 publication *Psychoanalysis and the War Neuroses* (see Ferenczi and Abraham, *Psychoanalysis*).

[110] *Trauma*, 5.

[111] See also LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma.*

[112] See, for instance, also the work of Pierre Janet, as discussed by Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart in "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma" (Caruth, *Trauma*).

Sadek's work on the 'labours' and revisit later below, since the categories of survivor, 'the next of survivors', and the perpetrator, do not remain the same.[113] How do we reconcile the reluctance to tell on the part of survivors (due to the fear of not being believed, as in Primo Levi, Charlotte Delbo and others)[114], with the divulging, highly visible and audible witness described by Annette Wieviorka in her laying out of the various eras of the witness?

In relation to artistic practice in Lebanon, there has not been an overt critique of the memory model to our knowledge, except in a talk given by Peter Osborne about the Atlas Group and in the writings of Walid Sadek, where the latter moves away from conceptions of trauma (and pathology) as a way of understanding the Lebanese condition, emphasizing forgetting and various 'labours', over remembering. And although this is not the project of this chapter, we do follow Sadek and others in suggesting that trauma, or a memory model, is not apt for our discussion of artistic forms and practices in the Lebanese context and, in the following chapters, signal their critique and rethinking. In fact, one of the points we do want to suggest is that the critique of the memory/narrative model, whether explicit or implicit, is where the rethinking and politicization of the witnessing position in part occurs.

Walid Sadek has suggested that it is necessary to forget so that "normative living" can resume all while remaining reluctant to recommence this normative life, which then "opens unto a generation of a ruin, a making of a liveable living from the accumulated material of having lost and knowing that we did".[115] In the Lebanese case, Sadek insists, it is an interdiction on forgetting not amnesia that has occurred.[116] Lebanese historian Fawwaz Traboulsi also asks:

> "Why should we remember a civil war? Answer: So as not to have it repeated. [... W]hat should be remembered of a civil war? Certainly not all things can be remembered [...]. But many other things should be forgotten. Yes, forgotten. As you can only forget what you know. Hence back to memory. Forgetting is one thing, amnesia is another."[117]

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[113] Sadek, "Next of Survivors." LaCapra refers to those who are not victims of traumatizing events, or are born later, as "commentators" (*Writing History, Writing Trauma*, xi).

[114] Delbo, *Days and Memory.*

[115] Sadek, "The Next of Survivors," 12. See also Sadek and Fattouh, "Tranquility is Made in Pictures."

[116] We return to this in Chapter 2. See Haubolle, *War and Memory in Lebanon.*

[117] Foreword to Maasri, *Off the Wall*, xvii.

Cathy Caruth reminds: "The capacity to remember is also the capacity to elide or distort, and in other cases […] may mean the capacity simply to forget."[118] Yet, the memory model does not serve either to understand post-war politics and artistic practice in Lebanon, nor aids in the events not being repeated (as is often claimed), as in many cases the ambiguous discourse on memory, 'memorialization', and the future is itself the very one exercised by those in power.[119] Not to mention that in the Lebanese context, most witness testimonies have been those of perpetrators and, as such, the focus on memory in relation to the vast potential of the trope of the witness becomes risky if used to keep one's pathology (and founding myths) alive.[120]

For Peter Osborne, there is a problem with certain memory models that read artworks or cultural productions as expressive of personal or national experience.[121] The problem becomes that history starts to be lived as memory, as personal or particular experience (and art as a cultural memory), and this is a misconception of how historical meaning is produced, and includes not only a subjectivity pieced together from the subjectivity of subjects, but is also about the future as a whole; a speculative future that is key for separating history from memory. Osborne finds in the work of Lebanese artist Walid Raad/the Atlas Group an emphasis on history rather than memory; history as the past, present and future of an unspecified collectivity that exceeds personal memory and national commemoration. In the case of the Atlas Group, fiction becomes a mode of address or construction that takes it distance from actual speaking subjects, and goes as far as to undercut traditional witnessing trope in view of one that is garnered from the fictional mode of the construction of documentary truth and other material – much like history itself, as form. Through it, witnessing as an epistemological and ontological position can be revisited and critiqued; which brings us to our last section that will pave

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[118] Caruth, *Trauma*, 154.

[119] Critiques of memory (studies) have been far and wide and we do not have the chance to survey them all here. For a rich array of texts, see for instance, Crownshaw, Kilby and Rowland, *The Future of Memory*.

[120] For a discussion of this outside the Lebanese context, see for instance, Loshitsky, "Pathologizing Memory."

[121] Osborne, "'The Truth Will Be Known When the Last Witness is Dead'." Osborne transformed many of these thoughts into two studies of the Atlas Group (among others); see *Anywhere or Not At All* and "The Fiction of the Contemporary." For another take on narrative and history, see White, *The Content of the Form.*

the way for the importance of fiction in rethinking the witness position, as we show in Chapter 5.

1.6 Fiction: Reconfiguring Testimony

One can take the act of witnessing further to say it becomes a specific form of address through testimony; it is not a constative act of bearing witness, but a performative speech act.[122] And to take the matter further, it could be that this very structure does the reverse of foreclosing representation and allows us to rethink witnessing as a position that is not delimited. The act of bearing witness, or the locution 'I am going to bear witness, I am going to testify' becomes the testimony itself, the words enacting the utterance itself.[123] In this sense, in not being a constative, declarative report that confirms the alleged reality of events, it can be thought to produce only a moment of truth, and to embody that 'production'. For Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas, "the act of bearing witness is not the communication of a truth already known, but its actual production through this performative act."[124] Not only does the information recounted in testimony describe and inform, it does what it says in that instant. The past and future rush towards the present. For Jacques Derrida "when he testifies, the martyr does not tell a story, he offers himself. He testifies to his faith by offering himself or offering his life or his body [...], but his passion does not refer to anything but the present moment."[125]

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[122] We use the term 'speech act' as it implies performativity in the manner of J. L. Austin's elaboration on the term in *How to Do Things with Words*. We return to Jacques Derrida's problematization of performative speech acts (and ours on the Atlas Group) in Chapter 5. See also Judith Butler on performativity in *Gender Trouble.*

[123] In Shela Sheikh's work, she uses the intimate link between passion/martyrdom and witnessing in Derrida, the repeatability and substitutability of the locution "I am the martyr (x)", to suggest in part that it is both extra-ordinary and the story of language tout court. See Sheikh, "'I Am the Martyr (X)'."

[124] Guerin and Hallas, *The Image and the Witness*, 10.

[125] Blanchot and Derrida, *The Instant of My Death and Demeure*, 38. Derrida does make a distinction between testimony, the witness and martyrdom, where other literature does not do so necessarily. There is the noun 'the witness', the verb 'to witness', and 'testifying' does not mean being a witness ('eyewitnessing'), but attestation or bearing witness (not to mention the temporal dimension that lies therein). Also, in Arabic, there is a distinction between the *shâhed* (one who has witnessed, seen with his eye) and the *shahîd* (the martyr, a witness, the one who gives testimony and decisive information) and they are conjoined. See Toufic, *'Ashura'*, 57.

The witness technically has no obligation to prove anything. Since she/he is the only one able to attest. If the condition of testimony is that no one else can testify in our place, in this instant, then a condition of belief is also being established. The witness appeals to the belief of the listener to tell the truth. Bearing witnesses is historically and theoretically linked to the juridical, to law – at least in the European tradition – and is thus explicitly kept separate from and unrelated to literature, fiction or simulation. Contestably, normative conceptions of attestation, and similarly of autobiography, exclude fiction and art whereby the law dictates that a testimony is neither a work of fiction, nor of art.[126] Following Derrida, what we testify to at this instant is our secret, the condition of all testimony, and the reason why no proof or demonstration is necessary: "All responsible witnessing engages a poetic experience of language."[127] And this poetic experience is the possibility of the secret and the lie. In this sense, all speech is testimony insofar as it is uttered in the air of truth, even if, or *because* holding the possibility of the lie within it. A testimony that is confirmable is no longer testimony.

The rules of attestation are first that the witness be present, speak the truth or, at least, the promise of the truth; second, that the witness share knowledge and information, and that she/he is irreplaceable. The witness must be believed because she/he is irreplaceable, both singular and exemplary. She/he is exemplary only to the extent that she/he is universal. In proclaiming her/his singularity, her/his uniqueness, it is on the basis that the one is many. The irreplaceable must be allowed to be replaced, instantly. In stating that she/he swears to tell the truth, that she/he is the only one who is capable of attesting, what the witness is saying is that *anyone in my place* at that instant could have heard or seen and could repeat – what Derrida calls the 'exemplarily universal'. Does this mark a move away from the uniqueness of the witness developed in Holocaust and post-World War II literature? This faith in the truth-telling of the witness is precisely what connects it to lies, perjury and fiction or, at the very least, to

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[126] Not that law is concerned with truth and justice so much as with judgment. For Giorgio Agamben, the essence of law is the trial, it is a sort of hybrid creature and it is unclear whether it wants facts or rules, or it wants nothing from us per se: "The ultimate end of the juridical regulation is to produce judgment; but judgment aims neither to punish nor to extol, neither to establish justice nor to prove the truth. Judgment in itself [is] the end and this, it has been said, constitutes its mystery, the mystery of the trial" (Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 19).

[127] Derrida "Poetics and Politics of Witnessing," 66.

the possibility of those things through its link to the notion of the secret. As stated above, this possibility acts as testimony's limit, its threat and its opportunity.

How is a 'secret' testimony possible, one might ask. In commenting on Maurice Blanchot's *The Instant of My Death*, Derrida tries to answer by arguing that to bear witness is always ready to render public and, hence, it is always linked to openness and politics. A testimony, as it were, always involves a testimony to the absence of attestation, attesting to a secret without being able to reveal its heart. We attest, according to Blanchot and Derrida in turn, to an attestation not being possible, to the avowal of a secret having remained secret.[128] Similar to the ways in which testimonial enunciation presupposes a 'we', so too, do perjury and lies. A testimony can be false, can be imbricated in lie and deception, and still not be false testimony, as in deliberately deceptive. Therefore we can only really lie to someone who can understand us and hear us. This can be a second link to fiction.

Another condition of testimony's condition as fiction is the notion of repetition. If to testify is also to be present on a stand and to speak in the first person, one does this to testify to a present and indivisible moment.[129] According to Derrida, if an attestation is divisible – no longer a singular attestation to a present – then it is no longer considered reliable and loses its truth-value. The time and chronology of the testimony – the fact that it attests to that which has already passed in the present – renders it already destroyed by its own condition of possibility. This temporal order of bearing witness, the fact that sentences must follow one another in sequence, must be repeatable and reproducible, that it relate to a present that has passed, already carries the instant outside itself, divides it, destroys it. For Derrida then, the instant makes testimony possible and impossible, unites it and divides it (makes it true and fictional). As soon as a sentence makes sense and is reproducible, it already has been affected by technology through what he calls "ideality and prosthetic iterability", and this is also where the possibility of fiction, lie, and literature nudge themselves. It is in truthful testimony and autobiography (and their co-impossibility) that "the disturbing complicity

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[128] Blanchot and Derrida, *The Instant of My Death and Demeure.*
[129] For a thorough engagement with the notion of repeatability and testimony in the performance work *Three Posters* (2000) by Lebanese artist Rabih Mroueh and novelist Elias Khoury, see Sheikh, "'*I Am the Martyr (X)*'."

between fiction and testimony" comes to shore.[130] If testimony were only proof, information, certainty, archive, 'testimony' would lose its function as such:

> "In order to remain testimony, it must therefore allow itself to be haunted. It must allow itself to be parasited by precisely what it excludes from its inner depths, the possibility, at least, of literature. [… T]here is no testimony that does not structurally in itself bear the possibility of fiction, simulacra, simulation, dissimulation, lie, perjury – that is to say the possibility of literature".[131]

In Chapter 5, we will discuss how the work produced by the Atlas Group is neither hallucination nor representation, and could be said to embody testimony through fiction. In so doing, it also lays bare the apparatus through which the truth alleged to in testimony (through evidence, through documents, through archival material) is constructed. According to André Lepecki, the hall of mirrors that Walid Raad produces (staging of documents, fictitious institutions, manipulation of historical documents and audience roles) unmasks the role of the historian as author.[132] The multiple pathways, repositories, texts, photographs, characters – the machine that is the Atlas Group – do not blur fiction and reality, but give fiction a place, making it a position from which to speak, both about the condition of history and about politics.

In another timbre, in his short essay "Ruins", Jalal Toufic discusses the ruin not as a place, but as a labyrinthine space-time, and only in understanding it this way, can we come to think about, and reflect upon the demolition and 'reconstruction' of downtown Beirut and, perhaps further, the city as 'ruin'. He suggests that physical structures bound to demolition, deterioration or reconstruction, ruins are an instance of an architecture implicated with fiction. Despite the common urge to document or preserve them (via video, film, photography), he suggests, one cannot reach the reality of ruins as subjects of documentary.[133] Fiction becomes the condition of possibility of apprehending or revealing the space-time of ruin.

> "In post-war countries, fiction is too serious a matter to be left to 'imaginative' people. The ghost is often fictional, not in the sense that he is merely '1. a. An imaginative creation or a pretence that does not represent actuality but has been invented. 2. A lie' (American Heritage Dictionary); but in the sense that

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[130] Blanchot and Derrida, *The Instant of My Death and Demeure*, 29-30.

[131] ibid., 29. On a distinction we do not have time to enter into between *écriture* and parole, see O'Leary, *Foucault and Fiction*. For origins of these debates, see among others, Derrida, *Writing and Difference*.

[132] Lepecki, "After All, This Terror Was Not Without Reason."

[133] Toufic, "Ruins."

one of the main loci for his appearance is fiction, whether novels, short stories, films or videos."[134]

Toufic notes that there had been no spectres in Lebanese novels and short stories. But revenants have 'featured' in a somewhat direct manner in a number of post-civil war artistic works and films, however. For example, Ghassan Salhab's feature films, *Beyrouth Fântome*, 1998, and *The Last Man*, 200; in Lina Saneh's video, *I Had a Dream, Mom* (2006); in Rabih Mroueh and Fadi Toufic's performance, *How Nancy Wished That Everything Was an April Fool's Joke* (2007); and, one could argue, in Mroueh and Elias Khoury's *Three Posters* (2000), and more. If we follow Toufic's logic that a dearth of these (in the 1990s) is an indication that we were still living in a "collective post-traumatic amnesia"[135], then their rise signifies a move beyond this moment (if it were an amnesic or traumatic in the first instance) into a time where the conditions of speech, of fiction and of revenants can become a political place and condition from which to speak.

To outline the question of the relationship between history and fiction, Jacques Rancière cites the distinction between history and historicity, but also between fiction and falsity (i.e. the modes of intelligibility in the construction of stories and the modes of intelligibility to assess historical phenomenon). [136] Borrowing from Aristotle's argument in *The Poetics*, Rancière makes a claim: pretending is not fabricating illusions. The way actions play themselves out in a poem does not owe what it says and how it says it to a 'truth'. In principle, the space-time of poetics is not made of up verifiable statements or images, but of fiction. Here, fiction has its own status as a set of (historical?) arrangements. Further and not unproblematically, Aristotle conferred poetry a superior status to history – understood as a set of events presented in empirical (hear observable, verifiable) order. The Romantics, he reminds, had already fundamentally put into question the logic of the science of history – that the logic of facts is distinct from the logic of stories.[137]

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[134] ibid., 24. This essay was first published early on in Toufic's book *(Vampires): An Uneasy Essay on the Undead in Film.*
[135] Toufic, "Ruins," 24-25.
[136] Rancière, "Is History a Form of Fiction?"
[137] See our discussion of Walter Benjamin's "Storyteller" in Section 4.3.

– Chapter 2 –
Prolonging Wartime, Stealing Space and Time:
Histories of and Discourses on the Lebanese Wars

"Has the Civil War ended, or is the feverish building activity the preserving manifestation of its polymorphous process?"

Rodolphe el-Khoury[138]

"But if we're so oppressed, it's because our movement is being restricted, not because our eternal values are being violated"

Gilles Deleuze[139]

2.1 Introduction

In elaborating on the importance of rethinking the witnessing position in the context of post-civil war artistic production in Lebanon, as well as whether and how the works we discuss propose ways of undoing or reconfiguring ossified political and identity discourses, it becomes necessary to outline some of those key historical and discursive conditions in Lebanon's local and geopolitical context. It is relevant to note that the Lebanese 'situation' – what some have called 'Lebanization'[140] – is one of protracted civil strife, in hot and cold forms. It is one that structurally, by virtue of its institutional sectarianism, its neoliberal economics, geopolitical position, and the ways its ills are framed, has hindered fruitful, critical, ways out of ideological and violent quagmires – both politically on the ground and on the level of thought – that it is.[141] A crisis of

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[138] "The Postwar Project," 184.

[139] *Negotiations 1972-1990*, 122.

[140] 'Lebanization' or 'Lebanonization' entered the dictionary to designate the process of the internal disintegration of the State like that which occurred in Lebanon. It is, moreover, a projection of this crisis onto other situations and countries. It is argued this is a result of the ways in which US and other media have framed Lebanon since the 1970s as the epitome of destruction, hysteria, chaos. In the case of Lebanon's Lebanization of itself, as it were, this refers to its perception and enactment of itself as a non-agentive victim of demolition, or perpetual crises and divisions. Through this, Lebanese nationalism is kept alive, argues Rohit Goel, and in which its identity is reduced and essentialized ("War and Peace in Lebanon").

[141] We do not have the time to elaborate on this here, but these tendencies are also connected to what some have referred to as the disenchantment, failure and crisis of Arab thought on the Left in particular, and perhaps Arab politics in particular (related as these are to religious extremism/conservatism, Western and Israeli imperialism, successive dictatorships, the power of Gulf petrodollars). See Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab's *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*, and Fadi A. Bardawil's PhD thesis "When All this Revolution Melts into Air: The Disenchantment of Levantine Marxist Intellectuals", a detailed ethnography on the

imagination. We want to show how it is within this context of deadly wars, essentializing identity politics and hijacking of time and, thus, of history that certain artistic practices arose. And the 'Lebanese condition' as it were – condensing geopolitical, neoliberal, postcolonial, and civil-war debates – becomes a vector that sheds light on proposing forms of resistance or critique.

This chapter will be an attempt to sketch the terrain, various debates and events, which we deem relevant to this thesis's questions. It will do so through two main channels. First, we will propose a brief encounter with the historical background of Lebanese state structure and its repeated bouts of wartime, which helps to highlight how a dominant, Manichaean political rhetoric came to reign, despite the seeming diversity of sects and factions; in fact, how these divisions were precisely to determine the very coming-into-being of the post-French Mandate nation-state, and of national politics of belonging. In its different guises, Lebanon has always been split into roughly two dominant political projects/camps, both of which, although seemingly at war with each other, undergird the very body politic/state formation, which they simultaneously question and generate (both before and after the Cold War and 1989). We point to the way these are discursively maintained.

And this brings us to a discussion of the post-civil war, urban context of Beirut, its destruction, subsequent reconstruction, and continued construction and destruction. The focus on Beirut is to set the ground for how discussions of Lebanon often have been reduced to its capital, and also to ground our discussion on art that was produced primarily out of this city.[142] Beirut can be read symptomatically here. We focus on the politics of reconstruction of Beirut via the private, real-estate company Solidere, whose emergence coincided with the concomitant rise of global neoliberal discourses and interests. We present some of the key issues in the post-civil war period that have been eating away at almost any political, poetic or intellectual possibility of extrication from the reductive burden of quid pro quos and status quo or, if not then, inhabitation. This includes a critique of the question of memory and amnesia we alluded to in Chapter 1,

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disillusionment of the Levantine Marxist intellectuals. See also the 2012 issue of *Third Text* with Walid Sadek as guest editor titled "Not, not Arab."

[142] See Samir Kassir for a long, detailed history of Beirut in his vast volume *Histoire de Beyrouth*. The different myths and representations of Beirut are discussed, as well as its historically crucial place in the region's said modernity.

or how the post-war has for some observers taken on a form of forced amnesia under banners of administrative reform, nation-building and reconstruction, the question of the missing and the disappeared during decades of militia violence and, more recently, the reigning political camps of March 8/March 14 and their hijacking of 'public time' and the political landscape.

There are numerous discursive strategies for writing the history of Lebanon and its wars, not to mention how those very wars and the subsequent formation of the State of Lebanon and nationalism have been framed.[143] We use a few of those studies to highlight some of our arguments. Written historical accounts of Lebanon's history and wars are numerous. For historical background, and despite their differing positions, we rely on historians Fawwaz Traboulsi and Kamal Salibi, on Israeli historian Itamar Rabinovich, political scientist Farid el-Khazen, sociologists Samir Khalaf and Ahmad Beydoun, as well as Theodor Hanf and Usama Makdisi. We also had much recourse to films, artworks, artist writings, doctoral theses and numerous conversations. It is important to note as we did in the methodology, that being deeply embedded in the Lebanese context also entails regularly reading newspapers, watching television programmes and news, discussing with students, taxi drivers and others, navigating the city streets and engaging with the ways in which public discourse manifests itself visually, discursively and affectively.

Folklore, rumour, stories, popular culture, press, historians and other commentators frame the source and cause of Lebanon's plight in a number of different ways.[144] One was that the Ottoman-French, structurally faulty confessional system – initially set up as a means to balance power and, later, as a colonial tool of French supremacy/Christian community support – led to the incessant breakdown of the state and the lack of a peaceful co-existence. For such historians as Kamal Salibi, it was divergent, conflicting versions and myths of nationalism between Christian and Muslim

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[143] More recently, PhD students Rohit Goel (Anthropology, University of Chicago) and Jamil Mouawad (Political Science, SOAS) are dealing with the subject of the Lebanese neoliberal state as well as its discursive formation. See Jamil Mouawad, "Lebanon: The Negotiated State."

[144] As also garnered from daily life in Beirut, taxi conversations, conversations with older generations, daily newspapers, and as exemplified by playwright Ziad Rahbani's plays of the 1980s and 1990s, as just some examples.

inhabitants.[145] The causes of civil strife were symbolized in the oft-repeated popular phrase on the Right – "the wars of others on our land" – indicating that the civil wars were never between the Lebanese 'themselves', but that Lebanon was a victim of geopolitical conspiracy that included Palestine, the Arabs, the Americans, the Israelis and other powerful regional players. However, on the Right and on the Left, 'the events' of the civil wars were understood geopolitically within the broader context of the creation of the State of Israel and the Cold War. Lebanon was both victim and agent in the international game of jockeying for position in a global world order. Lebanon, and Beirut in particular, was seen to be straddling the 'East-West' divide (metaphorically and geographically) and, as such, came to be the playground for those wars.

There is also, like in many civil war contexts, the conventional position that speaks of the barbarism of war, and the more 'magical' position characterized by the romantic nostalgia for a past (that never existed), or for a future (that may never be) – a view, one could claim, that is espoused by the 'victims' and the 'common' people, who simply want the violence to end, and one in which Lebanon (as projection, as separate from its people) is simply cursed to repeat the same mistakes. Traditional Lebanese warlords and power brokers are to blame, while common folk are mere victims of this lot and want the hell to end.[146] What writer Walid Sadek has referred to as the 'ethic of despair'.[147] The logic of transitional justice meant that we have all suffered equally, and perhaps in some unknowable future evil will be well past, justice will come, and we will no longer be held hostages to internal sectarianism and international powers. So the myths go.

At the heart of much of these positions regarding Lebanon's miserly status quo, one observes a myopic nationalism-patriotism that – despite, or rather *because* of Lebanon's decrepit, indebted and weak state (the fact that this state allegedly does not care for its citizens, that the war was not dutifully memorialized, or that current factions have hijacked the nation) – perpetuates itself because of this said lack in the nation-

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[145] See Salibi, *Crossroads to Civil War*; and *A House of Many Mansions*, and Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism*.

[146] See Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*; especially chapters "Pathologies" and "Barbarism."

[147] Sadek, "The Next of Survivors." Or, paradoxically, in Ghassan Hage's understanding, the 'politics of hope' (*Migration*); but is also characterized by much francophone writing and poetry, including, say that of Nadia Tueni. See sociologist Samir Khalaf's more recent approach in *Beirut Reclaimed.*

state, and which, ironically, ends up itself acting to replace this lack through jingoistic manifestations or further party allegiances. Meaning, the less there is a state that can cater to citizens via functioning institutions and law-making, the more the desire to have a state, the more the nationalistic hope in the state is reinstated or reinforced through public discourse.[148] The common iteration '*ma fi dawleh*' ('there is no state'), for instance, is often followed by a nostalgic objectification of a poor, lost Lebanon. The nation comes to take precedence over the state in the absence of a functioning, reliable state apparatus. In other words, the desire for a strong state is reinforced by the lack thereof.[149] Here, bemoaning ironically acts like a vector for furthering, rather than undermining nationalist sentiment.

The Lebanese political elite, its discourse and machinations have perpetually set in place a split between two camps (opposition or pro-government, pro-Western or pro-Arab, anti-imperialist or anti-foreigner, under different guises) – a 'with-us-or-against-us' logic, well in place before the post-9/11 George W. Bush same injunction, remains a symptomatic embodiment of Cold-War and post-Cold War alliances — and has in effect paradoxically both barred *and* instigated polemic couched in the conventional grammar of realpolitik. Although those power brokers' alliances have been multiple, shifting and tactical, they have formed one overriding logic and dominant discourse.

2.2 From Ottoman Rule to the Fiery 1960s

The first round of the Lebanese civil war is a controversial date to set. Some claim it was 1860 (Druze and Christian massacres in Mount Lebanon); others 1958 (military

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[148] See for example, Karl Marx, *On the Jewish Question.* Two examples in the Lebanese context, which think of their conditions of possibility as existing *despite* the state or in the said absence of the state, but in fact their raison d'être *is* the state (an ailing, but existing one) and feeds into both state and nationalistic sentiment. The Lebanese Laïque Pride, a yearly parade/march that began in 2010 calls for the abolition of sectarianism and the implementation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, demands from the Lebanese government that it implement (not rewrite) the constitution, and places 'Lebanese' and 'Pride' in the same sentence. Another example is the film by the artist duo Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige *The Lebanese Rocket Society* (2012), which counterfactully speculates about Lebanon's past and future had Lebanon had a military missile project. Although differently, these same false choices are foregrounded in the debate over civil marriage in Lebanon. See for example, Ghalya Saadawi "Civil Marriage Fatwas, the Lebanese State, and Renegade Bacteria."

[149] For a more precise undertaking of this, see Goel, "Lebanon as Object-Cause of Desire."

coup/clashes by military leader-cum-president Fuad Chehab); 1969 (the Cairo Accords signed by various Arab states and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), permitting the latter to wage their armed struggle against Israeli occupation from within Lebanese territory; 1973 (the assassination of three Palestinian figures in Beirut by the Israeli intelligence; the fishermen's riot in South Lebanon, which was met with violent suppression by the Lebanese Army; alleged accounts of an assassination attempt on the Kata'eb party founder, Pierre Gemayel, and clashes between armed Palestinian *fida'iyeen* and the Lebanese army); and still others, 1975. A landmark day was chosen as 13 April, 1975, when a group from the right-wing Kata'eb party militias attacked a bus filled with Palestinians – opposed to their armed presence in Lebanon – in the mainly Christian neighbourhood of 'Ayn el-Rummaneh in Greater Beirut, which was allegedly sparked by the killing of four Kata'eb fighters earlier that day in the same neighbourhood.

The successive wars, with many ceasefires, lasted nearly twenty years, killing around 150,000 people, maiming and disabling more than 180,000, dislocating and uprooting around two-thirds of the population. By the early 1980s alone, Lebanon had sustained US$12-15 billion in damages; and 800,000 inhabitants had emigrated, in addition to the kidnapped, tortured, displaced and disappeared (the number of which is estimated at 17,000), the hundreds of car bombs and continuous political assassinations – daunting figures for a country of about 3.5 million inhabitants.[150]

The roots of the decades-long civil war run deep. Structurally, geopolitically intertwined, they can be dated to before the declaration of a nation-state, to the nearly five-hundred-year period of Ottoman rule before the Levant was cut-up by colonial forces, which was followed by the French Protectorate and Mandate. Lebanon was officially declared a state in 1920. The roots go back also to the 1943 National Pact and Independence; the creation of the State of Israel in 1948; subsequent Arab-Israeli wars and resistance movements allying with other internationalist, revolutionary movements across continents; dire economic and social inequality and a deeply skewed, neoliberal economy.[151]

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[150] Among others, see Khalaf, *Civil and Uncivil Violence in Lebanon*; Hanf, *Coexistence in Wartime Lebanon*; and Blanford, *Killing Mr. Lebanon*. Also see ACT for the Disappeared, http://www.actforthedisappeared.com (last accessed 2 December, 2014).
[151] For a discussion of the roots and 'invention' of sectarian violence – where peasants and others went from fighting oppressive powers and feudal lords to fighting each other – see Makdisi, *The Culture of*

There seems to be an agreement that, at least since Independence from the French, the country was more consistently split along two political lines or camps, and this despite there being a multitude of alliances, blocs and parties: Left-Right, Christian-Muslim, pro-government and opposition at any given moment, pro-Palestinian, pan-Arab, Socialist and nationalist (pan-Arab on the Left, versus pro-Israeli, pro-Western, Lebanese nationalist, separatist.[152] These internal, foundational rifts have always been supported, nurtured and funded by international forces and power brokers. This was, and certainly continues to be Lebanon's postcolonial, post-Cold War legacy in the form of the March 14 and March 8 factions in the present.

2.3 Colonialism and the Institutionalization of Confessionalism

During Ottoman rule (1523-1920), the territory known as Mount Lebanon was headed by either a ruling emir or, later, by local feudal lords and families who governed Mount Lebanon's confessional groups under two consecutive, administrative systems of rule: the *qa'immaqamiyyah* and the *mutasarrifiya,* set up in the first instance to quell inter-sectarian fighting; and, in the second, as an independent Ottoman province whereby a process of decentralization began, ceding power to local groups through this *mutasarrifiya* system. The different confessional groups in Mount Lebanon began vying for power as early as the mid-19th century, culminating in the Druze and Christian massacres of the 1860 civil war, where thousands died and hundreds of villages were burnt. Under European pressure for 'reform', the Ottomans had passed *Tanzimat* reform laws, which allegedly ushered a language of communal tolerance and equality, paradoxically seen as the instigator and initiator of higher levels of sectarian

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Sectarianism. For other accounts, see El-Khazen, *The Communal Pact of National Identities;* and *The Breakdown of the State in Lebanon, 1967-1976.*

[152] See also my MSc dissertation, which looked at militia-fighter narratives and social identities across a spectrum of political parties as belied a strong sense of nationalism over actual party identity. The discourse of ex-fighters was nationalistic insofar as they were involved in violence or took up arms out of a sense to a different image of the nation, and those tended to be distinctly two versions of that very nationalism (Saadawi, "Political Party Identity, National Identity and Intergroup Conflict in Lebanon."

identification where previously there was none; or, at least, a political consciousness and identity that began to congeal around notions of sectarian community.[153]

French and British colonial stakes in the area were high due to already-existing economic ties, a military presence and larger cultural, educational, geopolitical interests, especially with the Christian community. Through the Sykes-Picot agreement (1916), European powers won the war and took on the re-mapping and re-distribution of the Arab provinces in the Ottoman Empire amongst themselves. Lebanon and Syria would fall under the French Mandate.

The Greater Lebanon constitution was written up by the French in 1926, not unproblematically adapted from the old Ottoman one, with some such codes as the penal code remaining nearly intact until the present day. The cartographic state was carved up from the area of Mount Lebanon, the coastal cities of Beirut, Sidon and Tripoli, the Bekaa Valley and South Lebanon and their Muslim populations. The French decided to cultivate a discourse of Lebanon as a country of religious minorities – all the while maintaining the Christian community (particularly the Maronite then majority) as their primary cultural, political and economic allies.[154] In the 1940s, General Charles de Gaulle set up a treaty guaranteeing France's privileged position in both Lebanon and Syria in all matters cultural, military and economic. Beirut was the capital, and its centre designated as La Place de l'Étoile based on it Parisian sister.

Lebanon's Maronite Christians had begun distinguishing themselves from their 'Muslim' brethren genealogically and discursively by claiming their cultural roots as traceable to the Phoenician civilization and not to the Arab-Muslim peninsula, differentiating them and Lebanon from the rest of the Arab world and reifying the originally French, now bastardized saying, "Lebanon, Switzerland of the Middle East",

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[153] See Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism*, especially chapter 5 "Reinventing Mount Lebanon". In another account, Traboulsi claims that as early as the 1500s, the uneven social and economic allocations between Christians, Druze, Jews and Muslims (in the area that included present-day Syria and Palestine) would be responsible for "transforming social and political conflicts into sectarian conflicts" (*A History of Modern Lebanon,* 4).

[154] Although it was said that the Muslim population was of 405,000 and the Christian population 425,000 (Traboulsi, *History of Modern Lebanon*; Owen, *Essays on the Crisis of Lebanon.*

which is a riff off "Lebanon, pearl of the Orient", and other colonial designations.[155] Lebanon was to be their new, Christian homeland.[156]

2.3.1 Independence from the French, but not their legacy

The leaders of the Constitutional Bloc, Bechara el-Khoury and Riad al-Solh, declare independence from France in 1943 and are subsequently incarcerated. Later, independence from the Mandate is declared. The National Pact was written with a first article stipulating that "Lebanon is Arab in its identity and its association"[157] – a phrase not without consequences on the identity wars that ensued. It would be a system of checks and balances to allay Christian fears in a predominantly-Muslim region. The 1926 (Franco-Ottoman) constitution remained almost unchanged, and thus the country was to have two founding texts. With dire consequences, it stipulated that all citizens were equal before the state, yet institutionalized judicial and political rights based on sectarian belonging, and included a personal status law that disavows civil marriage and arranges inheritance, marriage, divorce and other laws in accordance with confessional belonging, leaving legal civic 'existence' outside the sect that one is born into impossible.

Furthermore, it reinforced a power-sharing system where primary political posts are allocated according to a said 'consensual democracy'. In brief, the division of power was as follows: the president of the republic is always a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, the speaker of parliament a Shiite Muslim, and the vice-speaker and vice-prime minister posts allocated to a Druze and a Greek Orthodox, respectively. The parliament is split halfway between Muslims and Christians (and their respective political parties). The Pact was a controversial act given its logic of the lowest common denominator. The confessional divisions and allocations, inexistent notions of

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[155] For brief illustrations of how this was used in the post-civil war period as a form of self-designation in reference to the Lebanon's alleged golden age of the 1960s to mask the horrors and divides that led to the war being possible in the first instance, see for example, Fisk, *Pity the Nation*; and Kassir, *Histoire de Beyrouth.*

[156] The term was purportedly first coined by French travellers comparing Mount Lebanon to its Alpine counterpart. Also, a group known as the New Phoenicians composed of intellectual, francophone, Christian bourgeoisie to distinguish themselves from the region by claiming a Phoenician or Mediterranean heritage and praising Lebanon not only as different from the Arabs, but also as the model for a liberal, outward economy. Other historical anecdotes recount the Maronite Christians in the Syrian hinterland and their subsequent fleeing to Lebanon in the hope of establishing a homeland there, as an affinity with the ideology of the Jewish-Zionist project.

[157] Clause B of the Preamble of the Lebanese Constitution.

secular citizenship, are all seen to be one basis for the country's years of bloody war, bipolar divisions and hegemony, nepotism and corruption.[158]

In 1948, the State of Israel was created in Palestine, leading to the murder, expulsion and fleeing of hundreds of thousands of refugees many of whom came to Lebanon, including the armed factions of the PLO.[159]

1960s-1970s Nasserism – pan-Arab, socialist nationalism heralded by the Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser – in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq and the Cold War was at its summit. This was a formative period of relations between ex-colonial powers, US foreign policy and Arab politics in economic terms, but certainly in the crystallization of local identity formations, revolts, political alliances and cultural politics. Lebanon was converging to become a microcosm of the camps and alliances of the Cold-War period, with groups allying themselves to a leftist, socialist, Soviet and pan-Arab discourse, while the others were espousing US and European interests on the ground.[160] The protagonists of the 1975-1990 war were already in the making. The country was to see a series of shifts in coalitions, or *renversement des alliances*, as well as episodes of relative tranquillity and negotiation: what some have coined 'the Lebanese civil wars'; or today, in alleged peacetime, a cold, protracted civil war.[161]

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[158] El-Khazen, *The Communal Pact of National Identities*. And for a very different account of the consensual and pluralistic democracy, see Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political.*

[159] To date, there are approximately 400,000 Palestinian refugees living in UN-run (armed) camps all over Lebanon. A large number of Palestinian bourgeois, Christian families received Lebanese citizenship in the aftermath of the Palestinian *Nakba*. As early as the 1950s, Palestinian resistance fighters and Arab countries were training and getting armed to fight the State of Israel. The struggle against Israel and colonial power became the pinnacle struggle of pan-Arab political identity, creating the platform for what was considered an internationalist leftist tricontinental struggle against oppression, US hegemony and capitalism. The historic Arab defeat against Israel in 1967 was a moment of rupture and disillusionment for many, leading Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt to resign. This, the Jordanian massacre of Palestinian fighters in what became known as Black September (1970), May 1968, propelled Palestinian guerrilla warfare to take place from Lebanese land via the PLO and its offshoot military wings, as well as globally (through figures like Carlos, airplane hijackings, Soviet support and funding, etc.). This split Lebanese parties, citizens and governments (roughly into Left, Soviet and Right, Western-backed) into those with and those against the Palestinian struggle for liberation.

[160] See Kassir, *Histoire de Beyrouth*; and Hanf, *Co-Existence in Wartime Lebanon*. For a more detailed discussion on state formation, see Nazih N. Ayubi, *Overstating the Arab State*. The political parties, which would eventually become armed militias (eventually referred to as the National Movement) including such pro-Palestinian and leftist groups as the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party, the Progressive Socialist Party, the Lebanese Communist Party, the Arab Nationalists, The Organization of Communist Action and others. The Phalange (inspired by Spanish fascists or Falangists), the National Bloc, among others, were seen to be the conservative, Right-wing camp given their mainly Christian composition and their pro-Western, anti-Palestinian positions.

[161] Rabinovich, *The War for Lebanon*, 110. As part of the *What is to be Done? Lebanon's War Loaded Memory* project, UMAM Documentation and Research (UMAM-DR) commissioned an independent

The 1960s was a period of rapid industrialization and so-called cosmopolitanism. Between international stars visiting Beirut and its mountain resorts, flourishing radical literary and intellectual movements, transnational spies and revolutionary movements, this was purportedly Lebanon's Golden Age. [162] In 1967, Arab armies, including Lebanon's, went for a second round of war with Israel to reclaim Palestine. They were severely defeated. Israel annexed more Arab land, including the Golan Heights, much of Jerusalem, the West Bank, the Gaza strip and surrounding lands it uses for settler and military outposts. The defeats of the Six-Day War would have massive ideological, military and historical repercussions on Lebanon and the surrounding region. [163]

2.3.2 Palestine, urbanization, social inequality

The *fida'iyeen*[164] set up bases in southern Lebanon and were welcomed by a large base of the Lebanese population and its leftist parties, angered and mobilized by the defeat of 1967 and the ongoing Israeli occupation. In 1969, after the Lebanese Army opened fire on pro-Palestinian demonstrators, the country entered into another round of political violence. The tension was resolved, only to be reignited shortly thereafter when various Lebanese groups signed the Cairo Accords with then-head of the PLO, Yasser Arafat, which was ratified by the Lebanese parliament, yet voted against by

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organization to run a series of surveys on a sample of ex-combatants who had taken up arms during the Lebanese wars between 13 April, 1975, and 13 October, 1990. They, too, framed the main protagonists as falling within two main camps despite this *renversements des alliances* that is a common feature of wartime and peacetime Lebanon: "The sample population was comprised of even numbers of combatants from both 'camps' in the conflict, irrespective of the name changes and control shifts that occurred within each" (*To the Death,* vii).

[162] In addition to the politically and militarily engaged leftist movements mentioned above, there was a flourishing artistic and literary scene with such avant-garde publications as *Shi'r*, *Al-Adab*, *Al-Tariq* and others. Journalism and publishing were practised with relative freedom with a number of independent daily papers and publishing houses, with the now famous saying being that books were "written in Baghdad, published in Beirut and read in Cairo". It was pictured as an idyllic time when intellectuals and revolutionaries met in cafes and bars, planning the revolution. See also Mohamad Soueid's melancholic documentary essay film *Nightfall* (2000), where he films his ex-comrades reminiscing over the old Fatah Brigade days, doused in alcohol to the point of oblivion, reading and writing poetry, knowing they were witnesses to and active participants in a revolutionary struggle now definitively lost. On that disillusionment, see also Bardawil, "All That is Solid Melts into Air." For another account, see also Fouad Ajami, *The Dream Palaces of the Arabs.*

[163] See Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought.*

[164] Armed Palestinian resistance fighters of PLO's armed wing Fatah, but also of its different fronts such as the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).

Christian blocs.[165] The agreement would officialize the Palestinian cause in Lebanon by allowing Palestinians to arm themselves on Lebanese soil, circulate freely to and from their bases, providing a quasi, extra-territorial status to the refugee camps, and recognizing the Palestinian Higher Commission in Lebanon.

It is relevant to take quick note of Lebanon's industrialization and structures of monopolistic laissez-faire. The resulting class inequalities were a significant dimension and rallying factor in the development of numerous political groups, slogans and ideologies. Cold-War divisions were being played out in Lebanon via popular adherence to such parties as the Lebanese Communist Party (LPC), the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), the Communist Labour Movement, and later Amal (the Shiite movement of the repressed), as well as culturally and intellectually through numerous publications, manifestations and meetings. And this bears some importance on our subsequent discussion of Lebanon's emergent art scene after the war and its relation to, and position within Left and Right politics as they played out in the country.

By 1969, an oligarchy of families controlled the economy and its structures of laissez-faire.[166] Rapid industrialization and rapid urban sprawl; various crises around agricultural monopoly; demographic changes and social mobility, foreign workers and high costs of living; and Lebanon's liberal capitalist economy all contributed to acute class and sectarian inequalities, setting the stage for an organic development of merchant, villager, student and petty bourgeois-turned militia fighter.[167] Around Beirut's southern suburbs lay a poverty belt where nearly a half-million, predominantly Shiite-Muslims, as well as Palestinian refugees, lived in squalor in makeshift housing and camps.[168] This social injustice, coupled with local 'political sclerosis' led intellectuals and

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[165] The Lebanese government was split into camps: the *hilf* and the *nahj* – a split that remains well in place under different guises and names. The former begot the name from a tripartite agreement between Christian groups that positioned itself anti-Nasserite, anti-communist and anti-Zionist, their aims geared towards ridding Lebanon of so-called 'foreign presence', of President Fuad Chehab's security services, and protecting the country's sovereignty.

[166] Surveys carried out in the early to mid-1970s showed gross inequalities, small groups of the same families owning huge amounts of wealth through companies, trade and markets; commercial monopolies enshrined in laws, and so forth. See Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*, especially p. 157. See also Dubar and Nasr, *Les Classes Sociales au Liban*. For more recent statistics, see: http://www.executive-magazine.com/millionaires-own-half-lebanese-wealth/ (last accessed 30 September, 2014).

[167] See UMAM-DR, *To the Death: A Survey of Continuing Experiences among Fighters from Lebanon's Civil Wars*, where fighters 'recount' via surveys the reasons for their participation in armed battle.

[168] See Salibi, *Crossroads to Civil War.*

students on the Left to mobilize within broader internationalist struggles for emancipation from Western capitalism, hegemony and imperialism.[169] By the early 1970s, a local leftist alliance by the name of the National Movement had formed between the PSP, the LCP, the Worker's Committee of the Organization of Communist Action (OCA), the Arab Nationalist Movement (ANM) and others.[170]

A central ruling troika (Maronite, Sunni, Shiite) was well in place, with only the faces changing between governments. The old za'ims (feudal lords) who were the main inheritors of powerful ministerial positions, created a political dynasty that was to become the material of the national political fabric.[171] Later, the Amal Movement of the Deprived and Hezbollah would follow suit.[172]

2.4 The Road to War and Back

The 1973 fishermen's uprising in South Lebanon which was quelled by the Lebanese Army led to deep tension between warring factions: leftist groups and Palestinian fighters on the one hand, and such right-wing forces as the Liberal Nationalists and the Kata'eb, otherwise known as the Phalange Party, headed by Pierre Gemayel, on the other.

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[169] The General Workers' Trade Union of Lebanon, worker committees and student movements threatened with strikes and revolts on university campuses, in the halls of trade unions and on the streets, demanding changes to labour codes and laws.

[170] The National Movement had become a powerful pro-Palestinian force by the mid 1970s and included the Nasserite and Arab nationalist parties, the Lebanese Communist Party, the Socialist PSP founded by Kamal Jumblat, the Amal Movement, the Sunni Murabitoun party, and others.

[171] Examples are the Sunni Salam family, the Druze Jumblatt family, the Maronite Franjieh and Gemayel families, the Shiite Asa'ad family and more. According to one source at least, out of the 400 or so elected deputies since 1920, more than half belonged to families of parliamentarians. The feudal political system was replete with wealthy businessmen, shareholders and benefactors of import monies distributed by the state. See Massara, *La Structure Sociale du Parlement Libanais de 1920 à 1973.*

[172] Harakat Amal or the Amal Movement was founded by Musa al-Sadr, a sheikh born in Iran who moved to Lebanon to advocate a predominantly open religious discourse under the banner of uniting the disenfranchised Shiite community against economic and social injustices as an alternative to both the traditional, aristocratic, leading Shiite families and the forces of the Left. The movement was purportedly given its name by Yasser Arafat. For an in-depth discussion on the changing faces, roles and politics of Hezbollah, see for example, Judith Palmer-Harik, *Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism*; and Hala Jaber, *Born with a Vengeance.*

In summary, the factors leading to the first 1975 episode of the civil war, which led to nearly two decades of internecine fighting, can be traced back to Ottoman rule, colonial and Cold War divisions, the Zionist colonial project in Palestine, the accentuation of nationalist ideologies and identities, and massive social inequalities, and to an alignment of these factors that we cannot go further here. Regional and international interventionist politics (including the supporting, arming and funding of different factions, in addition to pitting groups against one another within Lebanese territory) became widespread in the 1970s and 1980s – itself the very symptom of Cold-War manoeuvring and the legacy of colonialism from which there was no seeming escape, neither politically nor discursively. As the old Lebanese adage went: "When the clouds gather in the Arab World, it rains in Beirut."[173]

In addition to the Soviet Union and the United States, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Israel, France and Britain fought their own wars for the duration of Lebanon's precarious situation, with Lebanese and Palestinian players naturally seeking them as their respective allies.[174] Nasser of Egypt died, and another Arab-Israeli war was waged in 1973. By 1974, "hardly a week passed without some village or group of villages in South Lebanon being hit by an Israeli land or air raid. While the commandos, who more often than not came from Lebanon, continued to attack targets inside Israel, and while Israel insisted that Lebanon must suffer the full consequences of agreeing to act as a host country to the commandos [...]," sounding uncannily like the Israeli war on Lebanon of 2006.[175]

The 1975-1976 war's violence was characterized by massacres and abduction of civilians, snipers on rooftops, massive shelling, hotel wars and street clashes in a massive escalation between the National Movement on the left, and the National Front on the right. Syrian armed forces were asked to enter the country by Lebanese president Suleiman Frangieh in 1976, with the approval of the mainly Christian parties and the United States, in a battle against the PLO and its leftist allies. However, "the next phase

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[173] Makdisi, *Beirut Fragments*, 157. See also Salibi, *Crossroads to Civil War*, 15.

[174] "Each of the factions was able to enlist some outside power on its behalf. All this turned Lebanon into a miniature model of all the Middle East conflicts rather than, as it had been historically, a symbol of their resolution" (Khalaf, *Civil and Uncivil Violence in Lebanon*, 204; citing US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*. More recently, see also, Hirst, *Beware of Small States.*

[175] Salibi, *Crossroads to Civil War*, 79.

of the Lebanese crisis was governed by the second [*renversement des alliances*] – Syria's rapprochement with the PLO and the Lebanese [L]eft and its estrangement from the dominant groups of the Lebanese Front."[176] The Syrian armed forces would remain in Lebanon until 2005.

Although the shifts and tactics were multiple, the game appeared to be one. The Manichaean rifts that undergirded both a single logic, and a complex set of ideological and political battles, is stated here not in order to introduce relativism, or to flatten the political field of battle. And this can take many forms including a post-civil war historical relativism facilitated by the logic of transitional justice (the logic of evil having past and justice as on the horizon, of general amnesty, of 'national reconciliation', of taking a scapegoat in the figure of Samir Geagea, leader of the armed Phalange wing the Lebanese Forces, and incarcerating him for nearly a decade, and more). However, dominated by a more-or-less single logic, the players employed a nearly identical vocabulary embedded within polemics of victory and defeat, under a regime of merciless violence.

By 1978, Israel, with the help of its collaborators in the South who came to be known as the South Lebanon Army (SLA), had invaded South Lebanon; and by the summer of 1982, Beirut had been invaded and was under heavy Israeli siege and bombs for weeks. The state had collapsed and many of the traditional party leaders, including Kamal Jumblatt and Bechir Gemayel, had been assassinated. The Sabra and Chatila Palestinian camp massacres – not the first at the hands of Christian militias, including 'identity-card killings' at checkpoints practised by most protagonists[177] – took place that same year by the Lebanese Forces under the command of Ariel Sharon. There was shelling day and night. There was street fighting against the Israeli occupation. A renowned Communist poet, Khalil Hawi, committed suicide the day they entered Beirut in a final poetic gesture of victory and defeat.[178]

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[176] Rabinovich, *The War for Lebanon*, 110.
[177] The Lebanese wars were famous for their merciless checkpoint killings and kidnappings. The exact number of people killed or kidnapped at various militia checkpoints is not known, but it was common practice and often a result of holding the 'wrong' identity documents (as in a Christian in a Palestinian-controlled territory, or a Muslim in a Christian-controlled area). From personal experience, one was asked to stop on the right and demanded "Where are you from?" "What is that accent?" "Show us your ID papers", and so forth.
[178] Traboulsi, *'An 'Amal La Shifa'a Minhou.*

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The PLO leaders were on their way to another exile in Tunis. The 1980s saw local militias who were previously allies turning their guns on each other and against the refugee camps. The cities and towns of the country had been ravaged, the capital was still divided along the Green Line between East and West Beirut, the government dysfunctional, and hundreds of thousands killed, maimed or disappeared.

Following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, this period saw the rise of Hezbollah, which forcefully replaced most (if not all) leftist groups fighting against Israel in the South. Left-leaning groups were chased away and some key leaders and intellectuals liquidated. These moves were seen as the Islamic Resistance's successful attempt at hijacking the struggle and creating a monopoly on arms and on martyrdom.[179] The 1980s were also characterized by suicide attacks against the Marines and the infamous hostage crisis.

2.4.1 Ta'ef and the cold wars that lay ahead

Typical civil war experiences abound: Rubbish was piled on the streets, people lived with little water, scant electricity and broken phone lines; they spent days and nights huddled in shelters, and navigated through militia patrols and checkpoints. Kidnappings and sniper fire had become a common occurrence. The Israeli military regularly dropped cluster bombs and explosive children's toys across city streets and villages. The airport was closed for months on end. Bread shortages were rampant. There were thousands of displaced and homeless. Stray rabid dogs roamed the streets. People were tortured and thrown off towers. Families who could afford to leave packed their belongings and emigrated in huge waves, often by boat. When it was bad and the cause felt lost, the streets belonged to the armed, sometimes drugged-up, militia boys, especially as we entered into the middle of the 1980's.[180]

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[179] The assassination of Lebanese Communist Party intellectual Mahdi Amel is only one case in point. See for instance, Vishay Prashad, "The Arab Gramsci" and Samer Frangie, "Theorizing from the Periphery." See for instance Akram Zaatari's film, *All is Well on the Border* (1997), and Mohammad Soueid's film, *The Sky is Not Always Above* (2006).

[180] See Salti and Antar, *Beirut Bereft*, especially pp. 9-11. See also Bazzi, *Yasser Arafat Looked Up at Me and Smiled*; and Hatem, *Lebanon: From Israel to Damascus*. There were over a handful of testimonies by ex-combatants, including Sneifer, *Alqaytou al Silah*; and Saadeh, *Ana Al Dahya Oual Jallad Ana* . Other accounts include those by such prominent war correspondents as Robert Fisk and Thomas Friedman. In cinema, see for instance, Maroun Baghdadi, *Borhan Alawyie* and Jocelyne Saab's films

Each armed band protected their group's respective neighbourhoods like violent vigilantes. The country had in effect split into informal cantons.[181] The wars were backed and constructed through media and a political rhetoric. Even post-civil war memoirs that recount the long periods of war in terms more personal and testimonial have a whole glossary of crisis words and phrases used during the wars, an agreed-upon wartime vocabulary.[182] The country had become a place of viciously competing narratives of nationalist ideologies, hurried along by the strategizing of international players, drenched in the stench of death and refuse. And although the absence of the state could have provoked interesting experiments in self-governance, Lebanon instead was awash in international, humanitarian aid organizations and local militias providing for the needs for their constituencies.

The country saw one of the deadliest rounds of the wars in 1989 and 1990,[183] before the official signing of the Ta'ef Accords in the eponymous city in Saudi Arabia between militia leaders-cum-party officials, with Syria, the United States, Saudi Arabia and France dictating the terms of the agreement.[184] War was declared over. One of the most problematic terms in these accords was the general amnesty it bestowed: the

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of that period. See Danielle Arbid, *Après La Guerre* (1999); and Monika Borgmann and Lokman Slim, *Massaker: Sabra et Chatila par Ses Bourreaux* (2004).

[181] In Ghassan Salhab's feature film *Beyrouth Fantômes* (1998), which intercepts parts of the fictive narrative with frontal shots of the characters speaking as 'themselves' in documentary format. One of the leading protagonists, played by Darina al-Joundi, says straight to the camera that she felt life was better during the war; people were closely knit, looked out for each other, and life felt more like life. Post-war life is one of alienation. See also Khalaf and Khoury, *Recovering Beirut: Urban Design and Post-War Reconstruction*, especially chapter 2.

[182] Makdisi, *Beirut Fragments.*

[183] General Michel Aoun, then-head of the Lebanese Army, waged a war against the Syrian army in Lebanon in 1989, dubbing it the Liberation War. The now-divided army heavily bombed streets and civilian areas in West Beirut day and night, and the Syrians retaliated bombing Aoun's enclaves in East Beirut. Earlier he had waged war against the Lebanese Forces in East Beirut. The battles raged between Aoun, the Lebanese Forces and the Syrian army and led to huge urban devastation and a thousand civilian deaths in a few months. Aoun was eventually encircled in his Presidential Palace by the Syrians with US support and sought asylum in Paris until his return to Beirut in 2005. He is the current leader of the most powerful Christian 'secular' blocs in parliament, making alliances with Hezbollah and forming the March 8 faction.

[184] Signed in this Red Sea port, the accords divided power 50/50 between Muslims and Christians (instead of the previous ratio of 6:5) and gave executive powers to the Cabinet and away from the Maronite Presidency, also allocating more powers to the Sunni prime minister and the Shiite speaker of the House, effectively creating what they called a Troika. Between Damascus, Riyadh and Beirut, Rafik Hariri was a serious contender as first prime minister, and was known to have been heavily involved in planning the accords and drafting its 'working paper'.

official disarmament of existing groups[185] in the form of an official 'pardon' to political and militia leaders involved in the wars; the resumption of so-called 'normal living'. The terms and temporality of post-civil war 'reconciliation' – or prolonged ceasefire – was to be decided between the leading powers and parties. Unlike the post-war and post-genocide countries that underwent explicit processes of 'transitional justice' after the end of the Cold War, no truth and reconciliation commissions were established, no war monuments commissioned or built, no trials or public apologies from militia leaders (who were now leading politicians) took place.

While the 3,000-word long accords stipulated two new points, it remained loyal to Lebanon's rigid constitutional/political make-up. It can be said that it is these terms that kept the country and its actors locked in a perpetual war, with no radically different resolution, consenting to disagree or, rather, playing out disagreements on the grounds of an implicit agreement. Syria's military and political role in Lebanon was enshrined through these accords. It called for a distinguished, privileged relationship between Lebanon and its Syrian neighbour, remaining murky about issues of security.[186] The Syrian armed forces and secret services were to stay operational in Lebanon under the auspices and the approval of the-then Lebanese government. *Pax Syriana*. They remained occupying Lebanon with a Baathist fist until 2005, after the assassination of the former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri.

The eventual abolishment of sectarianism is also stipulated in the accords. This abolishment, were it to ever take place however, would have structural repercussions (as the political, sectarian and economic elites are tightly knit) that none of the groups in power who had now inherited the government would want to assume.[187] In fact, the very discourse of deliverance from it is what maintains the status quo of a prolonged cold war and ensuing structures and discourses in place. Walid Sadek reminds us:

"Crucial to add here that this protracted temporality, indeed protracted now, continues to be accompanied by a wishful discourse on the necessary future

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[185] With the exception of the outlawed Lebanese Forces, whose leader, Samir Geagea, was tried and sent to solitary confinement for 15 years. For a framing of this by Lebanese politicians, see the Al Jazeera documentary by Omar Al Issawi, *War of Lebanon: So that History Does Not Repeat Itself* (2004).

[186] For more details see, for instance, Joseph Maila, *The Document of National Understanding: A Commentary*. See also Blanford, *Killing Mister Lebanon.*

[187] See Toufik K. Gaspard's *A Political Economy of Lebanon 1948-2002* for a detailed discussion on and critique of how Lebanon's "unique laissez-faire condition" and liberal economy has had dire consequences on the country's economic and political present.

release from the binds of sectarianism labelled a false ensnarement to the past rather than recognized as a foundational structural component […]. The ill that is sectarianism will, according to this wishful discourse, be professedly eradicated by enlightened, *extra muros* processes […]. In palliatively accompanying the intermittent violence of protracted civil-war with this wishful discourse, the fatalism of the protracted now is clothed with a tragic form as Lebanese appear as if agonizing in seeking release from a morbid past that inhabits them. The pairing of actual violence with this longed[-]for future release, indefinitely deferred, generates an ethic of despair which appeals to a wholesale rejection and abandonment of the past in the name of a regeneration which posits that all have somehow suffered equally."[188]

The Ta'ef Accords offered the-once deadly militia leaders principal government positions: power would thus be shared by the warlords for whom all was, at least in appearance, 'forgiven and forgotten' by a general amnesty.[189] Yet another occasion to perpetuate the myth that Beirut – the phoenix – would once again rise from the ashes (not of history, but of the void).[190] The signing of the accords, and the later private reconstruction project, could be read as the institutionalization of a variant of amnesia or, better said, a hijacking and foreclosure of forgetting and of the possibility of change, which continues to operate until the present day, as embodied by the bipolar logic of pro- and anti-government coalitions. From the mid-2000s onwards, these took the form of March 8 and March 14, in the period following former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's assassination in a car bomb in 2005, and after the failed Israeli 2006 war on Lebanon and Hezbollah. This ethos was exquisitely embodied in the early 1990s by the private/government collaboration in the appropriation, destruction and reconstruction

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[188] Sadek, "The Next of Survivors," n.p.

[189] For example, Walid Jumblat, son of assassinated Kamal Jumblat, founder of the PSP and principal Druze chief, and his cronies were given key ministerial and parliamentary posts; similarly for the Lebanese Forces (despite being disbanded, and whose ex-leader and Sabra and Chatila massacre frontman, Elie Hobeika, become member of parliament and minister of state), other members of the Lebanese Front, in addition to Amal's Nabih Berri, Hezbollah leaders, and many others. See also Paul Ricoeur's phonetic and semantic connection between the words 'amnesia' and 'amnesty' in *La Mémoire, l'Histoire, l'Oubli*, 586.

[190] Beirut has been associated with the myth of the Phoenix since Phoenician times, claiming the city has allegedly been destroyed and rebuilt seven times, and this is often reiterated in highly nationalistic ways, especially by those who claim that Lebanon's roots and ancestry is in fact Phoenician, not Arab (a common trope that helped some Lebanese Christian communities differentiate themselves from their 'Arab' and Muslim brethren). See for instance, Nadia Tueni's poem collection *Lebanon: Twenty Poems for One Love*, and her somewhat popular verse "Beirut has died a thousand times, and been reborn a thousand times". For instance, some architects and artists such as Nadim Karam also perpetuated this myth in the post-war period with notions of reactivating the city and urban renewal. See for instance, his *Archaic Procession* sculptural series exposed in Solidere in the early 1990s.

of the bombed-out downtown of the capital, Beirut, as we see below.

Allegiance to sect through political party affiliation signified the position occupied vis–à-vis the geopolitics of US imperialism and Israeli, Gulf, Iranian, Russian and Syrian meddling, and to who or who does not, today, reserve the right to keep weapons. Yet, for instance, there is no real or profound disagreement in the state over Lebanon's neoliberal character, economy and state structure (but rather over who receives private contracts for the dilapidated public-cum-private services as telephones and electricity, over public posts, or electoral laws[191]); on its racist, discriminatory and homophobic laws; decrepit conservative penal code; or on the agreement to maintain a state of crisis as a raison d'être. Besides the geopolitical struggle for survival amid US and Israeli threats, as well as the spread of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Lebanon is as consensual democracy between nepotistic cronies.[192]

Possibilities for other political alternatives are blocked. And not only from above, as it were, but also through the internalised logic of post-war humanitarianism, reconstruction, consumerism, and the like. This is the state used as, or for political-party jockeying and hegemony; and the conditions created by playing interchangeably crisis and consensus, war and peace, with or against, and on hope.[193] Moreover, the primary modes of addressing injustice, as well as the years of past wars, have been for the most part ones of advocacy in the form of lobbying or forming non-governmental

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[191] Save for some internal disputes regarding allocations of administrative posts or wages for workers. Although at their inception movements like Amal and Hezbollah (certainly before they were integrated into government in 1992) and even the PSP and the SSNP wanted Lebanon to be a strong socialist or strong welfare state with more equitable taxation and benefit laws, while the big Sunni and Christian families were happy with Lebanon's laissez-faire mercantilism, this is not the case in the post-civil war period as we see further below. Those previously on the Left currently agree to every new taxation law imposed by successive governments, as well ensure they benefit from agricultural, banking, property contracts and investments. For up-to-date lobbying, see the worker's rights and tax debacle with now resigned, ex-Communist Party minister Charbel Nahas, http://charbelnahas.org (last accessed 4 December, 2014). See also Wimmen, "Over the Brink." As stated earlier and pushed forth by Fawwaz Traboulsi, the line between the economic and political elite is thinner than pretended.

[192] See Salibi, *Crossroads to Civil War*; and *House of Many Mansions*. In his introduction to the former, Kamal Salibi argues that in effect there is not real sectarian disagreement as to national identity (just to the historicity of that nationalism), and that at least during the war, there was an agreement on both sides (he refers to as Christian and Muslim) regarding the lack of a functioning state, permitting both groups to operate along, in some sense, already determined lines.

[193] For a compelling discussion on the way hope and social mobility are utilized ideologically to create a rising sense of paranoid nationalism in a world where capitalism is "going transcendental", see Ghassan Hage, *Against Paranoid Nationalism: Searching for Hope in a Shrinking Society*, especially pp. 9-20.

organizations (NGOs). The status quo and the jargon of crisis have been and are still mediated and mandated through the media arms of political parties, and through the absence of radical structural or discursive repositioning in the post-war period. This is compounded by the rescue, reconciliation or research logic of local and international NGOs in Lebanon, as well as policy organizations and think tanks. Although their empirical work presents itself as neutral and rigorous, the list of research studies, publications and surveys betrays the extent to which their rhetoric, too, is couched in already-existing terms of transitional justice, human rights and development; terms that not once advanced an radical critique of and alternative to the Lebanese neoliberal and post-war situation.[194]

Robert Meister explains the logic of transitional justice as one that roughly postulates that evil has past, justice is yet to arrive and, in between, lives are administered on the basis of a logic of transition to Western, neoliberal democracy.[195] This was the victory of the Right. In Meister's compellingly-long line of argumentation: the political and ideological battles of the Soviet bloc, its allies and those it supported, from Hanoi to Havana to the PLO, would soon become couched in a human-rights discourse (HRD) of humanitarianism, pity and reconciliation. As stated in his introduction, the categories of revolution and counter-revolution were nullified in so far as those terms were replaced by others in a now-altered game of victors, victims, beneficiaries and unreconciled victims who would get compensation, peace accords, military monies, NGO and NGO-like support – UN bodies, USAID, the International Criminal Court at The Hague, and the Oslo Accords, the Ta'ef Accords. And when this was rejected based on 'unreconciliation', the UN, NATO and US military would step up (think Yugoslavia, Rwanda and more). Lebanon could be found there in 1990.

Moreover, NGOs had long been the proxy state apparatus on a humanitarian level when the state had collapsed totally during the war, but also in the aftermath of Ta'ef when a flurry of funding from across the European Union, Arab countries and the UN descended on the country in the form of 'conflict-resolution', 'capacity-building',

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[194] For instance, see the development and policy language of the Lebanese Centre for Policy Studies, Information International, Save the Children, various UN bodies including UNDP and ESCWA, and many others.
[195] See Meister, *After Evil.*

'municipal twinning', 'transparency and accountability' and other programmes. These were all aimed at state building, reform, inter-group reconciliation and other development projects. This included World Bank aid to the Lebanese state and USAID educational and political projects across different regions. The actual causes and political struggles of the previous few decades were watered down, neutered and explained away. In the manner proposed by Meister, if the previously unreconciled victims were given their due part in a 'legitimate' project, they would (be forced to) give up armed struggle and play the game by the only remaining rules, post-1989. No categories of revolution, resistance or subversion were any longer thinkable or speakable, given the dominance of HRD on the very language of politics, justice and intervention. In the case of Lebanon and the Arab world, moreover, this was further accentuated after the events of 11 September, 2001, the 'War on Terror' and US State Department projects for a 'New Middle East'.

2.5 Destruction, Reconstruction, Memory: Dangerous Myths and War by Other Means

The conditions of post-civil war politics, economy and discourse were shaped by the appointment in 1992 of a Lebanese-Saudi billionaire prime minister – Syria's then-ally in Lebanon and controversial figure – Rafik Hariri, and the ensuing period of reconstruction. He was intermittently reappointed prime minister until his assassination in 2005 in a massive car bomb that killed twenty civilians.[196] Hariri was branded positively for not (explicitly) having taken part in decades of civil war (although he was implicated in funding groups from afar); for not coming from a feudal, dynastic family (although he would create a nouveau riche dynasty of his own); for pushing forth an ethos of social mobility and the myth of self-made man (in part by offering education grants as part of his Future Movement party); for 'cleaning up' the country, fixing its roads (almost exclusively in Beirut and his hometown Sidon, the second-largest Sunni city); for creating Sukleen, a private waste-management corporation, and Ogero, a telecom monopoly; for repairing old power plants and bringing back electricity (albeit

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[196] For a detailed and meticulous, albeit predominantly positive account, see Nicholas Blanford, *Killing Mister Lebanon.*

still under dire rationing today); and, last but not least, for revamping the Burj, or old city area of Beirut that had been severely demolished during the war through creating the highly controversial, real-estate company charged with reconstruction, Solidere.

Critics, however, had serious bones to pick with Hariri's reinvention and deeper entrenchment of a post-war neoliberal discourse and political economy, landing the country in over US$50 billion of post-war debt. Hariri's desire to immediately recover or invent Beirut's pre-1975 role as tourist destination, service hub and financial centre (a model of Gulf states in the Levant), was problematic.[197] His philanthropic foundations and political party, under the umbrella of his Future Movement, facilitated generous educational funds (giving out an estimated 30,000 student scholarships) in effect creating a strong, faithful electoral constituency. However, his government proposed no overhaul or restructuring of the dilapidated Lebanese educational system during his time as prime minister.[198] Beirut's infrastructure was prettied through controversial contracts between cronies, to the exclusion of a large portion of the country and its poorest areas. His coterie of ministers and administrative officials made their riches from owning stocks in the company, and from the numerous and sketchily priced reconstruction projects throughout the city, which they did all of price, approve and get remunerated for.[199]

The new ruling elite (Hariri's dynasty of nouveaux riches on the one hand, the then president and ex-Army chief's extremely well-paid employees on the other, along with a mafia of billionaire businessmen) exemplified and reinforced Lebanon's mercantile feudal past, where private and public interests always merged for the benefit

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[197] Here, for instance, we may be thinking of such elaborations on war as those by Carl Von Clausewtiz whereby policy and politics are understood to be an extension of war (even when the political object was the initial motive of war), especially when a country is already *at* war. He argues that times of peace can be understood as an extension of war and that therein lays no contradiction; on the contrary, in most wars, inaction occupies a large portion of the time and strategies of war. "Suspension of action in War must therefore be possible, that is no contradiction in itself" (*On War Vol. 1*, 15). In the context of Lebanon proper, both Nikolas Kosmatopoulous and Rohit Goel's PhD dissertations deal with this extension between the discourse of war, peace, 'crisis', 'conflict', 'state failure' as actual forms of power, governance, 'transition', serving certain interests and world views. See, for example Nikolas Kosmatopolous, "Pacifying Lebanon."

[198] Structurally, the electoral law can be manipulated so that one party (such as Hariri's Future Movement) can allocate several candidates to one list, effectively killing off competition. In addition, it was extremely common for people to report getting a phone call before election time and being offered bribes if they voted for entire lists (the Future Movement list).

[199] See Wakim, *Al Ayadi Al Sud*; and Blanford, *Killing Mister Lebanon*. For a discussion of the history and rise of the *nouveaux riches* in Lebanon, see Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon.*

of the ruling class, as well as the country's status and image as cosmopolitan, neoliberal hub. Saree Makdisi notes, where "state projects end and private projects begin can no longer be determined – not because this is a strong state that is organizing a command of the economy[,] but because capital has in effect become the state."[200] Nicholas Blanford and others have detailed how post-war mafias and a class of *nouveaux riches* was forming under Hariri's Gulf monies, lifestyle and aesthetic choices in goods or in architecture.

In addition, a post-civil war police state was growing rapidly via the Syrian intelligence services, the Lebanese Army and others. This included media monopolies and dynasties controlling airwaves and print, and as well as the kinds of information accessible during the period before the Internet.[201] Hariri and the Future Movement became the code for both corruption and nepotism, and for philanthropy as the charity of the rich. For many observers and critics, this seemed like a new epoch for Lebanon insofar as Hariri's years in Saudi Arabia taught him that money and despotism ran state affairs. This included his relation to Hezbollah and the Shiite resistance – with whom there were clashes in 1992 – to street protests, worker's unions, and to any other opponent. Solidere became the penultimate crystallization of how the nation fashioning itself on the terms of global multinational capitalism as part and parcel of its discourse on hope, reconstruction and reform, social mobility and the promise of a so-called better 'future'. Gulf petro-dollar states, architecture and lifestyles served as models, held together by the Syrian Baath's secret service steel grip. The logic of building the desert and making something out of nothing ('phoenix rising out of the ashes' once again), however, cannot apply in Lebanon and effectively neutered both opposition to its logic, as well as efforts at reckoning with decades of civil war. As elaborated by Sadek above, this in effect turned us into 'witnesses who knew too much'.

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[200] Makdisi, "Beirut/Beirut,"36.

[201] See Blanford's, *Killing Mister Lebanon*; especially the "Pax Syriana" chapter and for discussions on how media military mafias operated. During that period of the 1990s, each party bought rights to a television station of its own (with only one national TV station, Tele-Liban still on the air). For instance, Hariri set up Future TV, Nabih Berri NTV, Michel el-Murr MTV, and so on. In addition, Lebanon's visual, urban landscape has for years been eaten up by posters and large images of politicians or martyrs, as well as banners and slogans hung across poles espousing this or that ideology, leader, or new turn of phrase.

2.5.1 Solidere as symptom and discourse: Solid air

Hariri initiated a private, wealthy property-development company named Solidere, effectively destroying more buildings in the centre of the city than over fifteen years of fighting had done. Rebranded downtown Beirut Central District (BCD), or quite simply referred to as 'Solidere', the city centre was turned from a popular district of souks into a high-end glossy form of pastiche, transforming and abstracting its very material and properties into stocks. Hariri pushed the boundaries of conflict of interest when, as Prime Minister, he was the biggest shareholder in the company charged with what could be considered the largest coup of land appropriation by the private sector in the history of the region. In 1992, a law passed amid massive controversy, allowing the expropriation of chunks of land that would then be handed over to the private company. Solidere effectively took over privately owned and public lands (in return for shares) and demolished hundreds of buildings in the name of a unified, urban 'Master Plan' for the city centre; the erstwhile Burj.[202]

Hariri reinforced and ran the government's Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR), making it answerable to him directly as adjunct to the prime minister's office. It was charged with the US$18 billion reconstructions operation of over "1.2 million square metres of prime downtown real-estate [and] a further 608,000 square metres were to be reclaimed from the sea [...]."[203] Through this office, Solidere and official civil service sectors were circumvented. The government could then – through CDR – give Solidere the right to appropriate private properties of the central city area in exchange for giving owners company shares. Issues of property rights and land/property valuation remained unresolved and un-negotiated – they were imposed – with many of the original owners strongly protesting these policies of sequestering and demolition. Vitriol abound with regard to the rebranding of Beirut's old Burj into the Beirut Central District (creating its own proper font for writing the word 'Beirut' as *Beirut*). Claiming the city was being reconstructed for everyone, it also claimed the right

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[202] See Rowe and Sarkis, *Projecting Beirut;* and Sawalha, *Reconstructing Beirut.* See also Khalaf, *Beirut Reclaimed.*

[203] Blanford, *Killing Mister Lebanon*, 43-44.

to speak for the past and the future with its motto Beirut Ancient City of the Future. It was in fact a commodification of 'patrimony' and of an entire city.[204]

The Burj was once symbolically the heart of Beirut, bustling with street vendors, markets, ancient ruins and sites, and cabarets, but also an area that would then be transformed into a war zone and through which ran the Green Line, dividing the city into east and west. In the post-war, this part of the city was to become legally, architecturally, socio-economically separated from the fabric of its environs and the rest of the city, as it much as it tried to appear seamless. There was a rhetoric being set in place to legitimize Solidere's existence, demolitions, continuous construction activity, and its privatization of public space.[205] All that was solid melted into air: stocks, bonds, shares. The hijacking of public space and 'public time' had by then been firmly set in place.

Architect Hashim Sarkis, a key critic in the period of the early 1990s, facetiously wonders whether the entire endeavour of Solidere and capitalizing on public life was supposed to be what successive governments and common rhetoric refer to as 'national reconciliation'; a phrase consistently, yet vacuously repeated.[206] What then is still possible in the form of the public and the commons when the logic of capital interest and government cronies promote urban life for personal profit? In "Beirut/*Beirut*", Saree Makdisi argues that the city, through one of the most profitable, urban development projects in the postmodern world as exemplified and performed by Solidere and its hundreds of millions of US dollars in investments, came to embody the dislocations, ideological manipulations and contradictions of the global economy.[207] It

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[204] Associations to preserve Beirut's old heritage buildings began to spring up in the 1990s. Prominent among them was APSAD (Association pour la Protection des Sites et Anciennes Demeures au Liban, at whose helm was Mona Hallak, an architect who bravely managed to preserve a number of buildings, including the famous Green-Line Barakat building. Skeletal, yellowed and bullet-holed, it stands as an open-air monument to the war in the neighbourhood of Ashrafieh in Beirut. Hallak, the French government, the Lebanese ministry of culture and others are now transforming it into a war museum/house of culture, maintaining its war-eaten façade. The problem with such projects is that they tend to transform the war and its relics into commodities, tourist sites and vacuous symbols in the name of a collective memory that does and cannot exist. The 'victory' of keeping the Bararkat building from being demolished by officials only plays into the hands of those very officials who now appear benevolent.

[205] Angus Gavin reifies Beirut's mythology of destruction and renewal, as well as Solidere's so-called reintegration of the old 'Beiruts' into their (the company's) version of the new one in such texts as, for example, Gavin and Maluf, *Beirut Reborn*; and Gavin, "The Integration of Past Layers." See also Gavin, "Heart of Beirut," 217.

[206] See Rowe and Sarkis, "Introduction: Projecting Beirut."

[207] Makdisi, "Beirut/Beirut."

was never a case of state- and institution-building, but of the appropriation of public land, space and time[208] by private interest under the guise of build-operate-transfer (BOT) over fifty years: the creation of a gated community and a new private frontier on the old Green (demarcation) Line.

Although Solidere does not officially until years later, state its role as the purveyor of collective memory, or of the history of Beirut and its wars, its speaking position is always one of entitlement and licence, with the state remaining ambiguous in this domain.[209]

Since its inception, Solidere's motto has been "Beirut: Ancient City of the Future", speaking in the name of Beirut and of its time, its duration. The ancient and the future is theirs, side-lining any reference to *the*, or *a* present, much less the modern period or the civil war. It lays claim to the temporalities of the ancient past and the 'future' now present through a number of discursive practices: commissioned promotional films, booklets, the walking tours titled Heritage Trail Tour and its motto "Beirut the Multi-Layered City", and urban publications such as *Portal 9*.[210] It is convenient that Hariri's Future Movement and Beirut's future form a contiguous line. The time in between 'future' and 'past' is absent and capitalized upon; an abyss, or a present of unaffordable consumerism and doomed hope in the form of collective protests and sit-ins. It is at once ahistorical and messianic, and embodies part of the problematic logics of transitional justice.

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[208] For a discussion of the hijacking of 'public time', see El-Abdallah, Khbeiz and Sadek, *File: Public Time*.

[209] For example, in an interview in September 2009 with Amira Solh, head of Solidere's urban planning, she explained that Martyrs' Square was one of the areas that the Lebanese government wanted to retain under its jurisdiction with the intention of building a five-storey underground parking. Wanting to build an underground garage in the public space of Martyrs' Square after the bloodshed that occurred in the 'Burj' is itself not only a form of evading some pressing issues, but also an indication of a will to cater to consumers and high-end business people who work in the area (by both government and Solidere), and to the new bourgeois class that inhabit its environs.

[210] In the 1990s, they commissioned quasi-propaganda type films to bolster the reconstruction process, as example Beirut Ancient City of the Future (1994), available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkp8xa5valM (last accessed 28 August, 2013). Of late, Solidere has launched a glossy literary magazine called *Portal 9*. They began prepared a Heritage Trail Tour in 2009, which is a walking tour of downtown Beirut that they claim introduces people to Beirut's heritage. It spans ancient sites, Canaanite, Phoenician, Roman, Byzantine, Mamluk, Ummayad, and Ottoman history and architecture – all cordoned off and displayed. In deciding to narrate Beirut's history and include itself at the 'end' of that narrative, what Solidere has effectively done is set itself as the 'natural' purveyor of this linear progression of history, its existence thereby becoming naturalized and inevitable. For a critique of this, from 'after the future' in 2080, see my *After the Future Heritage Redux* (2013) performance-walking tour.

As Makdisi tells us, Soldiere's information booklet claims to want to "recapture a lifestyle formerly identified with the city centre and re-create a marketplace where merchants prosper and all enjoy spending long hours".[211] He notes that the "lifestyle" they refer to simply did not exist, because the term itself is a post-Fordist construction. There was no lifestyle to recapture, but a pastiche of what they image this lifestyle to have been. The BCD caters to high-end clients and not the souk-goers of yesteryear, while the recapturing refers to an image of mercantile Lebanon in 'the happy Lebanon of the good old days' – a fairy-tale Lebanon where political conflict and economic crisis do not take place, rather than the real "Lebanon that met its demise in the terrible war of 1975-1990, leaving a shattered economy, massive social upheaval, population transfers and a country in ruins."[212] The company enacts this not only in the vocabulary used in its booklet, magazines, public discourse, walking tours and architecture competitions, but also in its designs; its utopian, computer-generated images of streets, buildings and renovations polished to a squeaky-clean, French-Mandate allure. Not how they were, but an imagined how they were, or, as Makdisi puts it, a case of social and cultural engineering par excellence: "The politics of memory is an exercise […] in social engineering[. … T]he history which became part of the fund of knowledge and the ideology of the nation, state or movement is not what has actually been preserved in popular memory, but what has been selected, written, pictured, popularized, and institutionalized by those whose function it is to do so."[213]

2.6 Remembering and Forgetting: Stealing Time

The question of what to forget and what to remember is of course not specific to Lebanon, and since at least World War II there has been a proliferation of literature on the various dimensions of commemoration and collective (war) memory through such media as films, museums, anniversaries and monuments. Much of the analysis of

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[211] Makdisi, "Beirut/*Beirut*," 30; citing Solidere, *Solidere Information Booklet*, 25.
[212] ibid., 31.
[213] See Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition;* as cited in Asphant, Dawson, and Roper, *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration*, 10. In relation to Lebanon, see Volk, *Memorials and Martyrs in Modern Lebanon.*

commemoration has been raised within the orbits of either its relevance as a practice bound up with national identification, the project of the nation-state and (re)constructions of the past, and/or psychoanalytic frames of trauma, loss and mourning.[214]

In the Lebanese context it is said that a committee of historians met after the war to agree on a conclusive narrative history of the war and were unable to reach a conclusion, leaving official national history books unwritten, and Lebanon's national curricula hanging somewhere around 1946. The official story of history has been left to each sectarian faction, political party or family.[215]

> "Unfortunately, many of the public manifestations of nostalgia so rampant today in Lebanon have scant if any concern with [a] 'conversational relationship with the past'. Instead, they assume either the construction and embellishment of grandiose and monumental national symbols, or the search for roots, the longing to preserve or invent contrived and apocryphal forms of local and communal identities."[216]

The hysterical discourse of a Lebanon perpetually in crisis disallows anything else, as does the notion of transitional justice in the way Robert Meister explains the term, as we see below: of a time that is always in between times; between past evil and future justice, where in Lebanon slogans like "never again" abound, and where victims of the war are asked to live between remembrance and forgetting, nor longer in revolution or redress.[217]

The manufacturing of the time of the present through dominant discourse – whether it is amnesic or rests on too much remembering – a falsified, unjust, exclusionary, vengeful or absent present – is a problem. As the most common theories on memory tell us, holding the narrative keys to the past means, in effect, constructing

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[214] See Chapter 1 for a more detailed account.

[215] In another essay on Beirut, Saree Makdisi again asks if Beirut is not in fact a city without (a) history. See Makdisi, "Beirut, A City without History?" This becomes important for our discussion of how many artists and cultural practitioners from the 1990s onwards positioned themselves and their practice as being on neither side, or as being concerned not with history with a capital 'H', but with histories. This can be both a positive critical force, or one that in its emphasis on 'narrative', 'stories', and 'histories' actually obfuscates history with all its concomitant oppressions/struggles, bringing it back to questions of personal narrative, memory or found stories.

[216] Khalaf "Contested Space and the Forging of New Cultural Identities," 140.

[217] Meister, *After Evil*. In 2003, the Council of the Families of the Missing and Kidnapped launched the campaign *Tenzakar Ma Tenaad* (Remember: Not Repeat). See also UMAM-DR, *Memory at Work*.

and writing the future.[218] This is why, for instance, the debate over the Holocaust memorial in Berlin took years to resolve, or why thousands still flock to other sites of remembrance. Although Beirut does not have a memorial, a monument, an official history book, or commissions or tribunals to investigate the missing and the kidnapped during the war, power over temporality is practised through other discursive forms.

To reverse the dominant paradigm that the post-civil war purposefully instigated a form of local and dangerous amnesia – a wilful forgetting of the Lebanese wars – Lebanese artist and theorist Walid Sadek suggests that these acts are, in fact, an interdiction on forgetting and, thus, a continuation of war and wartime benefits. Sadek argues for the inverse of the rhetoric that the Lebanese state and its official amnesty (as well as the zeitgeist instilled by Solidere) have, in fact, instilled a post-war amnesia, calling forth acts and gestures of so-called 'remembrance'. The trope of amnesia in the Lebanese context, then, acts as replacement for something else; a misnomer with an ideological edge. Sadek's claims, we argue, are symptomatic of a critical counter-discourse to the dominant paradigms that frame the post-civil war period and through which (it is assumed) it can be resolved. Precisely because we are not in a 'post-':

> "In Lebanon, forgetting is prohibited. This prohibition takes on the form of various exhortations to remember, to archive, and commemorate: be it the general [amnesty] Law 84 promulgated on August 26, 1991 [...]; the neo-liberal repackaging of Beirut as an ancient city for the future; or leftist and humanitarian to commemorate various emblematic events such as that of the start of the civil war, the question is always one of narrativising a selective and inevitably exclusionary memory. As for forgetting – the political right to forget – it is much too dangerous and costly for all contending politico-sectarian discourses to allow. The exhortations to commemorate and the edicts of official amnesty all [...] seek to fix what is considered necessary to remember[,] rather than open history into a field of forgetting – or in other words, [so] a non-vengeful remembrance [...] can actively develop. The relation between forgetting and what I call non-vengeful remembrance lies in the possibility of a memory liberated from monuments, a memory that can forget because it is no longer tied and determined by a series of edicts [...]."[219]

When we do not actively remember, when we pretend like nothing terrible has happened, or do not choose to see the excesses of our acts, we are in fact in a continual

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[218] See Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Crises of Memory,* for an allusion to how the edicts of remembering so as not to forget began with George Santayana and, later, in the writing of Theodor Adorno.

[219] Sadek and Fattouh, "Tranquility is Made in Pictures," 58.

state of not forgetting as an outward performance of forgetting – and, as such, cannot forget. Yet, when we actively remember we also do not forget. "To forgive is to forget. A pessimist would add: to forget is to forgive."[220]

Sune Haugbolle's book on Lebanon frames post-war cultural production as centred on memory, claiming that through the representations and imaginations of artists of what he calls a "lettered middle-class", the so-called Lebanese public relives its past. He claims "'the age of physical reconstruction' […] that was Rafiq al-Hariri's first presidency from 1992 to 1998 produced a counterculture against amnesia driven by members of Beirut's middle classes and primarily expressed through media and cultural production."[221] Although we disagree with the assertion that cultural and artistic work about the war should be read as projects of public and historical commemoration, as shown in chapters 1 and 4, we are interested however in the fact that 'official amnesia' as a narrative circulated tout court, and that this was continuously asserted as a "the continuation of war by other means".[222]

This alleged amnesia refers to, we believe, how state actors/discourses and their younger sister, media, centred themselves by framing the war as a past evil and buttressed this with bids at peace, security, a regimented balance of power, and administrative and municipal reform (the waves of *daoulat al 'islah al 'idari* – or 'the state of administrative reform'), alongside the post-war rise of civil society and the NGO sector in encouraging so-called 'conflict resolution', 'sustainable democracy and development', 'transparency and accountability', and so forth (common catchphrases and feature of the post-1989 period).[223] The war may indeed be protracted and ongoing, yet this is neither motored nor resolved by using the language of amnesia or of trauma, or by calling for remembrance of the past and justice in the future so that the war is not repeated (or no longer continues, for that matter). We suggest this obfuscates the actual machinations and structures that allow protraction as the status quo. How can it not be repeated if it is seen as continuous?

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[220] Toufic, *Distracted*, 81.

[221] *War and Memory in Lebanon,* 64.

[222] ibid, 66. Moreover, the fact that there is no official commemorative monument, day of commemorations, or even a truth and reconciliation commission, has led to the production of such civil organization as Act for the Disappeared and UMAM-DR, which collect and use information and documents about the Lebanese civil wars in order to acknowledge and remember them.

[223] See Kingston, *Reproducing Sectarianism.*

'Amnesia', as practised through reconstruction and balance of power, was seen as the continuation of war by other means. This might be a pertinent claim for trying to think the present, yet, why call it amnesia or "state[-]sponsored amnesia"?[224] Why relate it to the allegedly unsayable in trauma? Ex-militia leaders and new billionaire leaders are not amnesic, nor were they amnesic when signing the Ta'ef Accords granting themselves rights, privileges and contracts. Moreover, as Walid Sadek reminds us, there is at least a handful of ex-militia fighters' testimonies, of politicians remembering and directly talking about the war years, and of families demanding to know where the disappeared family members are.[225] Is the model of amnesia not as loss of memory after all involuntary, often couched in individuals suffering loss of memory due to a traumatic incident? There are many problems with this.[226] The problem with this categorization is that it tends to perform the same gesture as the one it claims exercised by government when the latter practises 'amnesia' by creating a 'future'-oriented discourse through reconstruction, education and 'peace' initiatives. The position of seeing the present through the lens of state or otherwise 'official amnesia' emphasizes the importance of remembrance of the past, falsely assumes that *that* remembrance leads to reconciliation, suspends the present in a move akin to the logic of transitional justice, and makes demands from the very oppressors and instigators of war who are still in power. It is neither subversive, nor critical. In other words, this understanding is apolitical insofar as it does not take into account that both remembrance and 'official amnesia' are, and would have to be enacted through a number of practices, both on the ends of the same spectrum, both homogeneous, ideological practices associated with breeds of nationalism, or at least of nation-building.

With regards to dominant theories of trauma, as we have laid out, it is often about writing or speaking what we do not or cannot know about the aporia of violence. It is in some ways talking about ignorance. Not about a true version of history, but about the very fact of being able to rewrite or undo certain narratives. As Jane Kilby reminds

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[224] Haugbolle, 71. See also Kassir, *Ahwal al Thakira fi Lubnan.*

[225] See also Traboulsi, "Does Guilt Matter?"

[226] In this view, is the condition of official remembrance, which is allegedly missing, to be ideally embodied in the ethico-juridical legitimacy of truth and reconciliation commissions and unified Lebanese history textbooks, where perpetrators cum beneficiaries 'restitute' victims? For more on this see Meister, *After Evil.*

us, how can a field think about itself when its very condition of possibility is a certain demand to think of ignorance, failure or the loss of what can be counted as knowledge? Importantly, how can we think a politics that can remain faithful to its so-called cause, all the while escaping a final narrative? What politics can begin on the basis of unlimited storytelling? In other words, very few have shown how trauma theory, if at all might change our conception of politics. Moreover, most trauma and memory theory has relied on the neoliberal and messianic discourse of human rights to secure its own politics (reconciliation, restitution, forgiveness). Trauma theories need to at least be able to tell us something structural or otherwise about the kinds and natures of events that produce traumatic effects in the first place, since those are neither accidental nor out of context.[227]

The narratives produced by academic work like Haugbolle's, and across civil society and local politicians, is also produced in artist work and art world discourse to underline certain aesthetic forms, to frame the war as a rupture and as traumatic, while paradoxically claiming it is an "ostensibly endless war".[228] Alleged 'official amnesia' is thought to protract the war. Yet the notion of trauma and the need to rewrite history through memory in artistic contexts is not useful, structurally or discursively, in understanding what is at stake in the Lebanese context, nor does it help us understand artistic production that has worked precisely to address the violations, obscurities and impediments in governmentality and the discourses of or war – politically.

As we discussed in the introduction, the civil war, or wartime, as rupture or as trauma, was not the only condition that created a reckoning. The war diagnosed as protracted, continuous, as well as a 'cold civil war'[229] – embodied in a repetition of such events as car bombs, Israeli wars and political discourses, as well as the structures and conditions of protraction – was the terrain on which these practices were born and tread.

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[227] Kilby "The Future of Trauma."

[228] Demos, *The Migrant Image,* 179. T. J. Demos adds "[…] one was soon led to recognize what these artists had in fact been suggesting all along: the terrible conflict of the 1970's and 1980's had never actually ended. As [Christine] Tohme noted, 'I don't think we've ever lived through a postwar period. There is no postwar in Lebanon, only pauses'" (ibid., 178).

[229] Khbeiz, "Beirut's Costly Modernity," 120. Bilal Khbeiz has also in different contexts referred to the post-war period as a 'cold war'.

2.7 "Public Time"?

"Upon that event, the city entered a time that was not its own. Rising each morning with the world watching, the inhabitants realised, with the bitter belatedness of the deceived, that entering such a time was more oppressive than the event itself. What befell them was a public time they could not claim as theirs."[230]

The only assassination or event that led to a special tribunal in The Hague, one that is currently costing billions of US dollars, was Rafik Hariri's assassination in 2005.[231] Perhaps this suggests the idea that for those who supported and funded the decision to set up the Tribunal, it was with Hariri, his worldview, project and symbol of his death that Beirut's so-called 'present history' begins (or rather, the beginning of the future, a time put off, messianic, waiting for justice), and thus his killing is a landmark that sets it apart from other continually deadly events, political assassinations and stalemate.

The rhetoric around the time of his death holds more than symbolic value. The primary slogans, "The truth, for the sake of Lebanon" (*al haqiqa min ajl lubnan*), "The time of justice" (*zaman al 'adala*) circulated on banners throughout the country and became the motto for the March 14 faction. After his death, the advertising company Saatchi & Saatchi was commissioned to produce a logo for what came to be known as the 'Cedar Revolution'. It read "Independence '05" and frames the country's rebirth, its independence redux, after Hariri's death and on the occasion of Syrian military withdrawal, as if history began anew here and then. A prominent counter was installed on a key intersection, which counted the days from his death onwards into an unknown future: justice would be served and the truth known in a future time when, in some strange tautology, the truth will be known and justice will be served.[232] The truth they were seeking was, however, was already paradoxically known to them: Syria was behind

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[230] Cotter (Abdallah, Khbeiz and Sadek), *Public Time: A Symposium*, 8. The reading and subsequent book are based on the text-based work by Abdallah, Khbeiz and Sadek, *File: Public Time.*

[231] See Nashabe, "The Special Tribunal for Lebanon."

[232] Just prior to the Special Tribunal on Lebanon, the witnesses that led to the primary charges and to the incarceration without charge for a period of four years of four prominent military generals associated with the Syrian presence in Lebanon were said to have been implanted, giving false testimony, contradictory statements, or rather that they were not witnesses at all. Those were Mohammad Zuheir Siddiq and Husam Taher Husam.

the killing and the subsequent assassinations via a series of car bombings of politicians and the journalist and historian Samir Kassir.[233]

This would become public knowledge once the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) establishes its verdict. The raison d'être and politics of the March 14 coalition (which came to be known as such from the day of their large rally exactly one month after Hariri's death that 'toppled' the pro-Syrian, pro-Hezbollah faction) and their US allies had crystallized in this particular confirmation bias. It served as an embodiment and a daily reminder of the messianic, transitional values of the pro-Hariri, anti-Syrian factions, and as well as those of their opponents, the March 8 faction. From 2005 onwards, these two seemingly opposing groups, their various parties and geopolitical alliances would come to dominate the country's political, public, social, legal vocabulary and imaginary. Both were fighting for a different version of national identity, different foundational moments, for power from within a complicit understanding of the same rules. This was experienced as a replication of the stakes of the pre-war and wartime period. In actual fact, it made talking about politics impossible outside this charged vocabulary, and fuelled nationalistic and conservative discourse across the social field.

This paradoxically can be said to have had an apolitical effect in its spreading of disillusionment, powerlessness and indifference, creating the desire among many to either stand by one side uncritically (as supporters for both groups gathered in the millions for rallies and protests); or to reject both, but without an actual political stance or ground from which to critique. The long years of civil war had created the same atmosphere of exasperation, de-politicization and alienation. Witnessing becomes a question of not only being witness to the catastrophic event, but also to the structural violence and injustice of late capitalism, as exemplified in the Lebanese condition. This demands a rethinking of critique as that form of witnessing that looks at apparatuses of ideologies as far from being undone.[234] And it looks at them as the conditions of writing history, inhabiting a present, and stealing time back.

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[233] Since 2005, and at the time of writing, there have been ten political assassinations in car bombs across Beirut.

[234] See Rabinow, *Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth*; especially "Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations: An Interview with Michel Foucault," pp. 111-119. Important for our context, Foucault differentiates between polemics and problematization, whereby the latter is the "the domain of acts, practices and thoughts that seem to me to pose a problem for politics"; while the former is encased in privileges and power, authorizing the waging of war, as schematically present in a religious model, a judiciary

– Chapter 3 –
Ruptures, Continuities, Entanglements

"A memorial is, by definition, an object which serves to remind people of certain events. The function of a memorial is to create a continuity in the fabric of time, and it does so, ironically, by creating a spatial rupture, a rip in the urban fabric. Memorials preserve time and retain it, so that the present generation is constantly reminded of the accomplishments of past generations, and secure in the knowledge that future generations as well will be able to experience this continuity of time and connectivity of events. Memorials are the most vivid articulation of the language of the Victors, a precise language where everything means exactly what it should mean, leaving no space for metaphors or allegories. Memorials, and war memorials in particular, simply cannot exist in catastrophic space and time, where language is undone, where meaning is always besides itself and where signifiers are always illuminated from without; in short, in a space where everything can mean anything else, but never the thing itself, memorials are always already destroyed, even if they are physically intact[…]."

Tony Chakar[235]

3.1 Introduction: Modernities and Reactions

We want to suggest that decades of civil war in Lebanon, within broader geopolitical and ideological struggles during and after the Cold War, and crises of historical and aesthetic representation, ignited an anti-aesthetic rupture that was all the contiguous with 20th century political art discourse. Decades of civil wars had an impact on younger visual artists' relationship to the city of Beirut, to political life, to modes of addressing the atrocities and to the very practice of art. They allowed for the formation of artistic forms that, among other concerns, dealt with position of the witness, with testimony, with forging new sets of relationships between generations of artists and intellectuals, or at least posing new demands on them. By new here is meant not belonging to the generation before them per se, nor to an established canon. Here we attempt to periodize them within and outside older artistic canons where relevant, while suggesting that the war did not create a vacuum in artistic production but a shift in consciousness, in the means of representation, in the need for different rules of political engagement, aesthetic and historical representation, and understanding of art's function. And this as much on the level of content as on the level of form.

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model and a political model (ibid., 114). On the difference between power and intelligence (roughly proposed as not dissimilar from the above), see Jean Baudrillard, *The Agony of Power.*
[235] "The Impossible War Memorial," 31.

We do not intend that there was not a legacy of different kinds of artistic practices prior to, or during the war. As we've suggested, the violent conditions of the civil wars, the forced amnesty and subsequent divisions of power in their equally-violent aftermath, alongside a concomitant sense of disillusionment with the kinds of political struggles and ideologies that constituted them, posed a crisis for representation and the need for different speaking positions. The narrative of a break between generations emerging after the civil war coincides with what is regarded as the failure of certain aspirations and their art forms, ranging from the failures of Arab modernist projects and pan-Arabism, and failed Leftist projects associated with the struggle for Palestine and class equality, to sectarianism and partisan discourse about the future of Lebanon and its reconstruction.

We suggest that these breaks – concurrent with broader modern crises of representation raised as far as back as World War I, and more prevalent after World War II – required different terms for engaging with predecessors and with history. Broadly speaking, the art we address is, in most instances, about the war as event and the constellation of concerns, constrictions, ideological frameworks and moratoria it posed in its aftermath. It also relate to epistemological questions regarding how our ways of (historical and political) knowing become filtered through the partisan and/or the televisual as filters for neoliberal machinations. Yet, this is accomplished in ways that do not address the material as it was previously understood or addressed, raising other formal concerns, challenges, and strategies.

The artists we cover deal with the very event of the wars as both a rupture and as a protracted entanglement of violence exercised through dominant discourses within a neoliberal state. The space-time of war and post-war was departed from both as rupture and as endemic, we suggest, and both those positions (seeing the war as a rupture and as extended cold war) deal with the contours of what it means to bear witness, and also to what witnessing theoretically and aesthetically as a position is capable of. If it deals with formal concerns, it also deals with actual political questions. Said simply, what positions can one still occupy as an artist in the face of structural and eruptive violence, in the face of reductionist political and national identities, or in the face of artists, critics and thinkers who have not satisfactorily dealt with those questions?

Informed by the debates of modernism; of 20th century avant-gardes, conceptual art, political and social documentary traditions, and reinforced by suspicions of available local practices sometimes deemed folkloric, nostalgic, unreflexive, artists such as Ziad Abillama, Tony Chakar, Ghassan Salhab, Lina Saneh, Walid Sadek, Mohamad Soueid, Walid Raad, and others, we suggest, reckoned with questions of representation in art, and reconfigured the role of witnessing in the aftermath of nearly two decades of an unfinished war, and an ossified milieu under rampant neoliberalism that was neatly twinning state and private sector interest.

The crisis of representation outlined in Chapter 1 (associated as it was to World War II and to the later linguistic 'turn' in philosophy and other disciplines) was connected to the alleged passing of modernity into postmodernity, with the latter's suspicions of grand narratives, and their so-called ideological project. It also provoked, among other things, rethinking the 'era of the witness' and the making of art in 'post-conflict' societies.

In the case of Lebanon, the former literature and debates were inherited via different forms of diasporic and migratory movements up until the 1990s, as well as the travelling of structuralist and poststructuralist theory caused by the contingencies of the civil wars and post-Cold War periods. Both Walter Mignolo and Achille Mbembe remind us of this in different ways in different contexts. Mignolo, through 'geopolitics of knowledge' suggests that Western epistemology is inseparable from the West's colonial history of power and its exercise of effacing and distorting the non-European 'other' from the 15th century onwards, and through colonizing not only peoples, but also knowledge and how people construct their subjectivities. In order to understand (de-colonialize) this Euro-centric epistemology and its effects on the colonial world, the history of modernity is seen as inseparable from the history of coloniality, and the latter is itself not separate from the history of modernity.[236]

Mbembe's notion of entanglement refers to what he calls the condition of history in the postcolony. In large part a temporal analysis specific to Africa, the claim Mbembe makes is that 'age' in a postcolonial condition is a category of time, but also a configuration of events and relationships. "As an age, the postcolony encloses multiple *durées* made up of discontinuities, reversals, inertias, and swings that overlay one

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[236] Mignolo, "Delinking," and "Geopolitics of Knowledge."

another, interpenetrate one another, and envelope one another: an *entanglement*."[237] Preferring entanglement to rupture versus continuity, he reminds us that paradigms of rupture (in historicizing events and history itself) underpin the hypothesis of stability in Western modernity and the failures of the non-Western world to fully replicate this progression.

Some of the Arab world's narratives of modernity often revolved around either an acceptance of narratives of universal progress and innovation, internalizing the Western, colonial model (as we see below in the words of some Lebanese painters, and as we saw earlier in the Lebanese Maronite-Christian narrative regarding Lebanon's innate relationship to the West) or their rejection. The 19th-century Arab renaissance (*al-Nahda*) view focused in part on Western (capitalist) modernity as an ideological and colonial import that needed to be broken with in order to create a secular, national Arab identity, later leading to left-leaning and pan-Arab nationalism, breeds of Marxism, followed by the subsequent disillusionments and defeats of the 20th century. As inheritors of these worldviews, a post-war generation of artists (and fiction writers) in Lebanon are a result of these entangled modernities, which are also not confined to the nation-state.[238]

On the one hand, the crisis of historical (and aesthetic) representation was inherited through post-war artists having studied in European and American universities during the wartime, and thus reared in critical and post-colonial theory during their art education.[239] Lebanese post-Ta'ef artists also had to reckon with, if only by way of inheritance and general ethos, the legacies of pan-Arab and/or Marxist thought. On the one hand, those holding a nostalgic relation to past Arab glory while damning Arab civilizations' failure to modernize and to lead, and on the other, one that looked to the

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[237] Mbembe, "Introduction: Time on the Move," 14. Mbembe elaborates how this entanglement has also clearly to do with governance of people and subjugation. He also refers to 'this' time as "an interlocking of presents, pasts, and futures", as "this time that is appearing", and as "emerging time" (ibid., 16). It is noteworthy that this conceptualization of time – as well as Fadi Abdullah, Bilal Khbeiz and Walid Sadek's proposal "public time" in the Lebanese context – differs significantly from that of post-Cold War's "transitional time" as it relates to our discussion on transitional justice in Chapter 2. See El-Abdallah, Khbeiz and Sadek, *File: Public Time.*

[238] For instance, a project that aims to bridge the gap between the ideas and identities promulgated during *al-Nahda* and postcolonial and postmodern fiction is El-Ariss, *Trials of Arab Modernity*. For a recent PhD dissertation on the legacy and intellectual history of the Arab *al-Nahda* and its relation to language and identity formation, see Bou Ali, "In the Hall of Mirrors."

[239] Gathered from conversations with such artists as Walid Sadek and Walid Raad.

West, internalizing the liberal discourse on democracy and progress, cursing or praising colonialism while, paradoxically, wishing to progress like the West.[240] In other words, they were inheritors of a paradoxical Arab modernity at least politically, not to mention of silenced and betrayed leftist struggles for liberation, one that would continue into the present.

The reckoning with wartime as a rupture and failed political project, led some artists to divorce themselves from the concomitant artistic and intellectual projects, be those the humanistic or the militant ones. The changes in artistic practice were twofold. On the one hand, a break occurred from a generation of figurative as well as abstract painters and sculptors mainly associated with Lebanon's modern period until the war. On the other hand, it was a distancing from the edicts of communicability and representation, with the playwrights, film-makers, poets and intellectuals who represented engaged art, and who formed an integral part of the cultural production of the Left and its struggle for Palestine. That break took the shape of either explicitly ignoring those traditions, or later referencing them in a bid to make work that marks the incapacity to directly build upon their practice due to war and its continuing effects in the present era.[241]

We suggest these conditions posed a conundrum (knowingly or not) for a younger generation of artists working in image, text, performance, and conceptual art more broadly. Under a general suspicion with the communicability of art and its capacity to represent atrocity and the plight of peoples, some former aesthetic ideals were seen to be a mask for certain ideological operations, while never self-reflexively addressing their own apparatuses or modes of production, or even their 'salvatory' mission. That mission in brief, as we allude to below, was multiple and included the tropes of 'giving a voice to the voiceless', of exposing orientalism and imperial 'othering', or of showing the world the injustice of war and occupation.[242]

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[240] See, for example, Sharara, *Al-Wahid Nafsouhou.*

[241] For example, artist and writer Walid Sadek claims that, in the early 1990s, he and fellow-artist Ziad Abillama had actively decided not to look at any Lebanese artists who came before them, or to pre-war aesthetic models. Sadek, along with his with fellow-artist and collaborator, mentions this purposeful rupture in his talk "On the Other Side of Impatience."

[242] See, for instance, Said, "Permission to Narrate." See also Gayatri Spivak on the speaking position of the subaltern.

Thus, the need for other, specific (novel?) tactics and media was, in part, spurred by the need to question and re-determine the claims and underpinnings of strands of politically-engaged art (social documentary, social realism, etc.), while side-lining breeds of landscape and nude painting, modernist abstraction and even sometimes studio practices altogether. However, subsequent artistic practices cannot be read only through the binary of either historical rupture or continuity (associated with rupture *from* tradition, *from* authenticity, *from* history, etc.), but as temporal and historical complications and entanglements of these.

It is relevant to note that we find collaborations and cross-pollination, if not a very thin line that separates an older generation of artists, intellectuals, novelists, journalists, poets and writers from such artists as Walid Sadek, Mohamad Soueid, Rabih Mroueh and Lina Saneh for example. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, cafés on Beirut's Hamra Street, known as a centre of cultural and political life, were full of cross-generational meetings and conversations where this 'old guard' of the 1950s and 1960s mingled and collaborated with younger artists and poets. The new wave of such visual art manifestations and platforms as the Ayloul Festival (1997-2000) and even Ashkal Alwan (Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts, set up in 1995) were founded and included a variety of cultural actors from across generations.[243] For example, the literary guard also tried to make way for the new by dedicating several volumes of the modern Arab literary magazine *Al-Adab* to Lebanese post-war visual-art production, guest-edited by Jalal Toufic in 2000. Rabih Mroueh collaborated with novelist and fellow ex-Fatah Youth Brigade member Elias Khoury on the performance *Three Posters* (2000); Walid Sadek cites and builds upon the work of ex-Organization for Communist Action member and sociologist Waddah Sharara; Bilal Khbeiz straddled territories by being long-time co-editor of the established daily *Annahar* cultural supplement where, for decades, mainstream art criticism took place, by publishing poetry in Arabic and by collaborating with artists like Tony Chakar, Walid Raad and Walid Sadek on a number of artistic

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[243] Among many others were novelist and critic Elias Khoury, who co-founded the short-lived but formative Ayloul video and performance festival; poet, critic and ex-combatant Abbas Beydoun; Marxist sociologist Waddah Sharara; and journalist, poet and ex-combatant Youssef Bazzi. For a note on how this relationship most often was one of difference in perception between older critics and more recent demands, see Sadek's discussion on two reviews of the Ashkal Alwan Hamra Street project in 2000, in "Place at Last."

projects. Were the 1990's a picking up from the past and a making of a future that wasn't theirs to claim?

In a push-and-pull between rupture and continuity narratives, Sarah Rogers tries to embed these practices within Lebanon and the region's broader cultural and cosmopolitan histories, seeing cultural production as a continuous product of other forces and not as a 'renaissance', or the result of a wartime 'vacuum' in the arts.[244] Post-war contemporary artists have been written about as embedded in a broader urban and regional history, 'a cosmopolitanism', an Arab modernity. Rogers' work on contemporary practices in Lebanon can be located here, maintaining that they form part of Beirut's history of ideas and movements. She argues that cultural production (which is not exclusive to visual art) has always been connected to Beirut's history as a cosmopolitan, mercantile, Mediterranean port city and Levantine metropolis, and to its long cultural and intellectual history of painting, sculpture, art associations, galleries and bourgeois cultural life, as well as it being a literary and publishing hub of the Arab world in the modern period.[245] As the old adage goes, 'books were written in Cairo, printed and published in Beirut and read in Baghdad'.

In other words, 'contemporary artistic production' (we use this carefully) was not created out of the vacuum or rupture of the civil wars, but was embedded in a longer cultural history. Yet, when public art exhibitions, and video and performance festivals began blooming in the mid-1990s, they initially were not fully part of an older, most often bourgeois sphere of influence as the pre-war galleries and salons were.[246] Moreover, both Rogers and Kirsten Scheid have attempted to periodize particular practices as part of Lebanon's 'ambiguous identities' (in the era of the Mandate up until the 1980s, in the case of Scheid). They complexify the assignment of strictly national or Islamic identities to art and cultural production out of the Arab region,[247] and periodize

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[244] Rogers, "Post-War Art," and "Out of History."
[245] ibid. Also Scheid, "Painters, Picture-Makers and Lebanon."
[246] The Ayloul video and performance festival and Ashkal Alwan are two examples of artistic manifestations that started in the 1990s, as well as the short-lived Image Quest organised by Moukhtar Kocache and Rasha Salti. Organized with access to limited means, they initially relied on scant state funding, private sponsors and NGO or embassy support. Their early emphasis was on producing and showing video, multi-media performance and print work, and on public art.
[247] ibid. See also Salti, "Framing the Subversive in Post-War Beirut." For a periodization and discussion of modern Arab art, see Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*. In parallel, for a discussion on the legacy of both Ottoman and, later, European colonialism and art on the case of contemporary art in Egypt, see Winegar, *Creative Reckonings*.

Lebanese art within broader historical and cultural negotiations and trajectories – hear modernity – making the claim that it would not be possible to construct national identity out of art, nor the inverse, or even to understand artistic practice as shaped solely through the vector of a national category (Lebanon or the Lebanese state).

Meanwhile, there is no denying that there was indeed a new wave that introduced with it transformations in the way art was produced and received, the latter of which still has to be studied in more detail. The practices we emphasize can be said to have been part of an anti-aesthetic, occurring at a juncture between avant-garde modernism and conceptualism, and understood as a variant of what Sylvia Harvey, Steve Edwards and others have referred to as "political modernism" or second or even third-wave political modernism.[248] Their compelling (early) use of parody, vernacular modes, photomontage, textual work, social and political content, and estrangement, point to this.

The momentum and conditions that pushed these kinds of practices into being, alongside the ways in which they slowly coalesced into associations and platforms (later, institutions) could have turned into a consolidated force of social critique to be reckoned with, and did momentarily. This occurred for a short-lived period before being discontinued, or absorbed into globalizing and market forces. In view of the effects of a globalizing art world and its transnational logic, partly in the in the form of an increased interest in art from Lebanon and the Arab or Middle East region starting in the 1990s[249] (itself an additional apparatus to be reckoned with), practices changed in materials and forms, became more object- and gallery-based, turning more towards a pastiche of themselves and other eras of art. This, too, was another turning point, which we will return to in our Conclusion.

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[248] See Harvey, "Whose Brecht?", and Edwards, *Martha Rosler*, pp. 84-100.

[249] For a discussion on transnationalism and the transnational character of art spaces as defining features of contemporary art as it intersects with the art industry today, see, for instance, Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, especially from page 162 onwards under the chapter entitled "Art Space". See also Sklair, *The Transnational Capitalist Class* for a discussion of the non-state movements, actors, institutions and forces that make up the category of the transnational (global, international).

3.2 Rupture with Predecessors

If art in post-civil war Lebanon posed a break in aesthetic production from its predecessors, it was induced in part by what Walid Sadek had once referred to as the "abyss" of civil war and by our incapacity to resume 'normative living' in protracted violence.[250] This becomes an important point for those concerned with thinking a war that continues by other means, and the concomitant problems of representation.

Can an artistic canon, if ever there was one to build on, continue uninterrupted after atrocities viewed by many commentators as ongoing? Does such violence not have a constitutive impact on the nature of aesthetic and other forms of enunciation and visuality? As some artists and observers have conjectured, did the Lebanese civil wars create a 'traumatic rupture', or is the logic of protracted civil war different in its contours and consequences from the linguistic and epistemic ruptures elaborated in the aftermath of such mass killings (historicized as ruptures) as Auschwitz and Hiroshima, and from which post-civil war Lebanese artists have drawn?

Many younger artists were eyewitnesses to the events. A few were themselves ex-combatants or had been rallied to participate. Some had lost parents to the war, others had fled for fear of being drafted into the militias patrolling the city, a number had joined parties and trained with them, and still others had left altogether and finished their schooling abroad, while some had remained in the country enduring its bouts of siege and bombardment.[251] To name but a few examples: Rabih Mroueh was part of the youth battalions of the Lebanese Communist Party; Walid Raad was sent away to North America for fear of being rallied by the Phalange; Walid Sadek often reminds of his upbringing in a Christian, bourgeois milieu during the war, and the ways in which war was practised on the level of the everyday; similarly for Ziad Abillama, who also went

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[250] Email correspondence with the author in 2009. The phrase 'protracted civil war' is to be found in some of Lebanese sociologist Samir Khalaf's writings, as well as across the work and biographies of Sadek, alongside the notion of normative (sometimes non-vengeful) living.

[251] In addition to the subsequent wars, including the 2006 Israeli bombing of Lebanon when Sadek proposed we all were "witnesses who knew too much" (as opposed to the witness who cannot speak of the horrors) for knowing where the bombs were falling and feeling their reverberations, but not being their direct victims or survivors. See Sadek, "Peddling Time."

abroad for art study;[252] Mohamad Soueid fought with the youth brigade of the PLO's Fatah movement; and Tony Chakar lost his father to sniper fire as early as the 1970's.

Though not as clear-cut as it appears and not in a bid at biographism, however, we can say that artists and film-makers born in the 1950's and 1960's such as Walid Raad, Walid Sadek, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Ziad Abillama, Marwan Rechmaoui, Ghassan Salhab and others lived and studied in the United States and Europe at some point if not throughout the war years and had little mentorship from or connection to artistic lineage in Lebanon. Others, for instance, Rabih Mroueh, Lina Saneh, Tony Chakar, Mohamad Soueid, Akram Zaatari and Bilal Khbeiz, were educated in Lebanon and remained in the country throughout the war, leaving only later, possibly for further studies as was the case of Zaatari and Saneh.

Mroueh, a playwright and actor, and Saneh, had studied with established playwright Roger Assaf, only to break with that tradition and infuse Lebanese theatre with influences from performance art and the lecture-performance into their self-aware modes.[253]Mohamad Soueid worked for national television while producing essay-films and experimental documentaries that employed montage, voice-overs, sound-image disjunctures, popular music and cinematic references into a recognizable style. Although film-makers such as Jocelyne Saab, Heiny Srour, Bourhan Aalawyie, Christian Ghazi, and Maroun Baghdadi were very active during the war years in cinematic projects that belong to engaged film-making or, certainly, films about the war, Soueid was among the first to have characters and amateurs address the very presence of the camera while using non-linear montage and archival material, in a self-reflexive bid to bring attention to the act and apparatus of filming (although he worked primarily in video for lack of other means).

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[252] See Sadek's audio cassette and text work titled *The Last Days of Summer* (1997) where he prints a photo of himself and his brother as young children, dressed in military attire and bearing (toy) guns. For a short discussion on how Sadek's work deals with the contingencies of being born under war, the conditions of belonging and the "coincidence of birth", see Khbeiz, "Beirut's Costly Modernity."

[253] Assaf is known for the Hakawati (storyteller) Theatre project in the 1970s and 1980s, for running Théâtre de Beyrouth for several years in the post-war period, for his pro-Palestinian politics alongside the Amal Movement, and for his conversion to Islam during the war. For a political and cultural history of this theatre and its inextricable relationship to the city of Beirut and its militant past, see Hajj Ali, *Théâtre Beyrouth*; and Kassir, *Histoire de Beyrouth*, especially chapter 21, "Beyrouth ya Beyrouth", 595.

Ghassan Salhab, a film-maker born in the late 1950s also involved in the Palestinian liberation movements, employs a number of neo-Brechtian devices in many of his films, such as distanciation, amateur actors, dead pan humour and flat affect particularly in films such as *Terra Incognita* (2002) and *Beyrouth Fântome* (1998). As an example, in the latter film, Salhab abruptly cuts the narrative of the film in order to introduce a documentary format with the actors being interviewed as 'themselves' (following Ingmar Bergman) about their experience of war as a less alienating experience than life in the post-war.[254] In *Terra Incognita*, actors often directly address the camera, and the narrative plot, if there is one, is fragmented. In *(Posthume)* (2007), filmed after the Israeli war on Lebanon in 2006, enchanting or lyrically staged moments are interrupted by a cut, and actors from his fiction films feature as revenants looking straight at the viewer in close-up headshots. Salhab, Soueid, and Zaatari, are apt examples of a shift in film-making during the 'post-war' period, one marked by an awareness of medium and apparatus, as well as by a possible disillusionment with prior forms of representation in pre- and wartime Lebanese cinema.

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[254] More recently, but perhaps more problematic in its appropriation of references and parody, Marwa Arsanios employs this method that could be read as a borrowing from Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin's (Dziga Vertov Group) political films in which characters address the camera or proclaim political slogans with dead-pan affect. See *Becoming Jamila or How to Kill a Bear* (video, 2014), a portrait of both Djamila Bouhired, the Algerian revolutionary, and of the actress who plays Djamila in film-maker Gillo Pontecorvo's *La Bataille d'Algers* (1966). See also Hojeij, Soueid and Zaatari, "Disciplined Spontaneity."

Figure 1: Ghassan Salhab, still from (Posthume), video, 27min, 2007

During the war and the post-war period, evidently many several strands of art and artists coexisted. Some posed a serious shift in practice, while others were a continuation of canonical or established aesthetics and approaches, especially in the more established media of painting and sculpture. For instance, until the end of the war in the late 1980s, Lebanese painting had been in part academic, influenced by the beaux-arts traditions, with some modernist innovations in figuration and abstraction. The former's influences were multiple, including older Islamic traditions and forms, but also likely Soviet and European-inspired abstraction and formalism.[255] On the subject of modernity (in Arabic *hadatha*, also meaning 'novelty') and contemporaneity (*mu'asira*), Scheid argues in her paper on Lebanese modern nudes (in her work, it is painter Mustafa Farroukh, 1901-1957) that by 'appropriating' the Western and orientalist convention of the nude odalisque – a purposefully new and provocative subject of painting in a conservative Arab society – there was a bid to educate and en-culturate (in Arabic

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[255] For a discussion on the different strands of modern Arab art, not solely regarding Lebanon, see Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*. For modernist painter Paul Guiragossian (1925-1993), one task was to understand avant-garde traditions such as surrealism through their pharaonic, oriental and Islamic roots and, as such, not to emulate the West, but to understand that much of the art of the West comes from the East via legacies of colonialism. Art historian Nada M. Shabout notes how borrowing styles from Arab and Islamic traditions by European modernist painters goes unnoticed, while the referencing used by Arab artists of their European counterparts passes as historically worthwhile. This, in part, is due to the legacies of colonialism and Eurocentric modernity. See, for instance, Bardaouil and Fellrath's curatorial essay "Paul Guiragossian."See also Scheid, "Painters, Picture-Makers and Lebanon."

tathqif) society.[256] For Scheid, this can be read as an index of the formation of an Arab modernity via Western painting traditions.

This civilizing mission Scheid argues is an indicator of how artists could shape their modern era and that of their audiences – through, in this instance, reckoning with nudes – is understood somewhat differently by Octavian Esanu in his essay on the more controversial Lebanese painter, and contemporary of Mustafa Farroukh, Georges D. Corm (1896-1971).[257] The civilizing, humanist mission of modernist Lebanese painters in the aftermath of Ottoman rule and during the French Mandate, as well as after the declaration of Lebanese independence, takes on a rather dangerous face in the writings of Corm. Corm's espousal of the beaux-arts and academic painting – which he traces to the European Renaissance and its Christian, humanist ideals reinforced by European civilization – occurs at the expense and through the denigration of the history of avant-garde modernism, as well as Marxist struggles (equally and particularly in his home context of Lebanon), and places the mission of modern art squarely within a conservative, even right-wing "Lebanese painterly humanism".[258]

Esanu reads Corm's practice and the latter's controversial 1960 essay "*L'Art et la Civilisation de ce Temps*" in light of Lebanon's pre-war, 'golden' cultural age of the 1960s and early 1970s. This period was allegedly rife with an influx of European and American avant-garde musicians to festivals on the one hand, and left-leaning publications and cultural production, on the other. This strand of painting associated art with progress and European civilizational ideals – its mission was to save societies and protect them from the negative influences of Marxism, leftist struggles and militancy, the libidinal energies of psychoanalysis, and the avant-garde. The struggle over the means of representation of entire histories of modernism seemed disposable.

The polemic around representation and politics in art formed the cultural landscape that many of artists were born into, symptomatic as it was also of broader 'identitarian' clashes between the Right and the Left in pre-war Lebanon, as we briefly alluded to. It formed part of a modern zeitgeist, and for some, the war shattered some

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[256] "Painters, Picture-Makers and Lebanon."
[257] *Lebanese Painterly Humanism.*
[258] ibid. Also of note are such abstract painters and sculptors as Saloua Rawda Choucair, Shafic Abboud, Aref Rayess and others.

of those ideals.[259] Thus, some predominant artistic and political traditions and predecessors of the artists coming of age during the war were either being revisited, or altogether ignored.

Rabih Mroueh and Elias Khoury's performance *Three Posters* (2000), Mohamad Soueid's *Nightfall* (2000) and Akram Zaatari's *In This House* (2005) – all very different works – are a case in point. They take some aspect of leftist history as their point of departure – one, a videotaped testimony filmed prior to a military operation in South Lebanon by Lebanese Communist Party resistance fighter Jamal al Sati, staged, acted and 're-acted' by Rabih Mroueh; the other, an immersion into the disenchanted (and alcoholic) world of former Fatah Youth Brigade fighters, and Soueid's place within it; and the last, the unearthing of a buried letter by a former Democratic Popular Party combatant in South Lebanon – highlight the latent banality and paranoia around excavating the past in Lebanon, all the while underscoring the past, potent presence of leftist movements in today's terrain of Islamic resistance. We return to this in Chapter 4.

Figure 2: Rabih Mroueh and Elias Khoury, Three Posters, performance, 2000

In later years, Walid Sadek and Walid Raad both turn to an former generation of

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[259] Yet, those legacies continued in a younger generation that replicates much of the same slogans and aesthetics. See Chapter 2.

modern painters, marking that the event of the civil wars was not without effect on representation, and the incapacity simply to build a canon or access predecessors could not be without marking the difficulty inherent in the gesture, despite their (the past artists) *erupting* into the present. In a short essay on the modern painter Mustafa Farroukh (1901-1957), Sadek reminds us how Farroukh, in his autobiography, cherished the myth and role of the artist as civilizer (seeing himself as alien from his immediate family environment, art came to him like an epiphany) and, as such, looked to the Arabs' lost glory in Andalucia as a place from which to bemoan the fate of the Arab world and the degenerate state of art in Lebanon. Art and education could restore that glory and lead to a re-awakening – a typical plea regarding culture's civilizing mission (inherited from Western colonizers and their rhetoric of progress, as well as more distantly from socialist reform values) from the nostalgic vision of history in the Arab imaginary and its founding myths, and where the future lay in the glory of the past.[260]

This inherited disillusionment, passed down through generations, has itself become a founding myth. If only that past could be recovered or, as is often reiterated in the Lebanese context, if only Beirut could return to its glorious pre-war years – forgetting those were structurally the antecedents to years of internecine bloodshed. Despite alienation and exile from his kin, Farroukh was strongly attached to academic painting and opposed to the alleged degenerateness of the avant-garde; a paradoxical desire to conserve the status quo, all the while wishing it were different.

The figure of Mustafa Farroukh was to become an inspiration for Walid Sadek and the source of one of his compelling works, "Love is Blind" (2006); a work we discuss in Chapter 4 and that can be read as a late return to Farroukh's legacy. Sadek exhibits ten 'missing' paintings by the modern painter. The 'unavailable' paintings of ruinous Lebanese landscapes were painted between 1933 and 1952, with only their captions (date, title, medium) available to point to their existence. Sadek pens ten aphorisms, one for each missing painting. In one of the aphorisms from the installation, he points to how predecessors are symptomatically obliterated by cohorts and fellow-artists while, without nostalgia, it tries to articulate the present absence of those who came before: "In this city names lie abandoned on streets and sidewalks adrift like children. To them

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[260] Sadek, "In Health But Mostly in Sickness."

we beckon. They slumber and awaken only pronounced. Names like children are fated to sleep. All the while the city renames its places with the zeal of one who believes children will flee the onslaught of fresh names."[261] In this work, there is a shift from ignoring prior artists altogether, to a formal engagement with the fact that referencing the work of predecessors, or even 'borrowing' their style while making it inaccessible, making new work, could not occur without addressing the events of the civil wars.[262]

As we said, the claim of a break between generations often came from the artists themselves – in appearance a modernist claim similar to those made by historical and neo-avant-garde artists in Europe throughout the 20th century. As an indication of a desired, yet sometimes unwitting break, in an interview with Kaelen-Wilson Goldie, artist Walid Raad cites the well-known story of the young American artist Robert Rauschenberg who went to his teacher and established figure of American abstract expressionism, Willem De Kooning, to ask if he (Rauschenberg) could erase one of his drawings, to which De Kooning agreed. The result was the 1953 work *Erased De Kooning*: an index of a rupture with the past, all the while referring to the necessity of a predecessor to break with that very past.[263]

Although Raad's major project, the Atlas Group, erupted seemingly from 'nowhere' (as we see in detail in Chapter 5), it is only in his current work that he returns somewhat to the legacy of modern art of which he is the inheritor, while being convinced that this task has not been unaffected by decades of violence and disasters, including the global art world's interest in the categories 'Modern and Contemporary Arab Art'. And this is largely informed by Lebanese theorist and writer Jalal Toufic's notion of 'the withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster' we discussed above. One main proposition is that disasters do not and cannot amount to lists of car bombs, victims or material damage. The world, in Toufic's tenuous proposition, is also affected immaterially by protracted violence. Surpassing disasters create conditions for 'tradition'

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[261] Sadek, *Love is Blind*, Aphorism D.

[262] Historical events, or what William Sewell refers to as 'eventful temporalities' (in the context of capitalism), transform social relations and structures in ways that are different from incremental changes or gradual shifts. They may even break with previous relations or structures and produce new ones, without being ahistorical or couched in a narrative of an 'end', especially if observers become aware of their operations and effects. See Sewell Jr., "The Temporalities of Capitalism."

[263] Raad mentions this in two newspaper interviews: in Wilson-Goldie, "Generation Gap," where he also proclaims that "the question is not how to kill the father, but whether there is a father at all" (ibid., 4); and in Quilty, "One Artist's Version."

(books, artworks, religious texts, photographs, etc.), in its materiality, to withdraw and become unavailable to vision. In part, this can be diagnosed symptomatically through changes in the form and content of certain artworks. Earlier, Toufic writes about an imagined photographer who had been used to taking photos and "viewing things at the speed of war", and yet whose shots of ruins and buildings remained blurred, seemingly haphazard or out of focus even in times of peace "since in his work the out-of-focus and/or the haphazard framings were not a formal strategy but due to the withdrawal and thus unavailability to vision of the material".[264]

Sometimes what is resurrected in place of the withdrawal of works is their double or counterfeit, and it is the duty, following Toufic, for writers, thinkers and artists to resurrect culture, history, thought, even 'the truth' – what he broadly terms 'tradition' – through their work. "[A]fter the surpassing disaster, while the documentation of the referent is for the future, the presentation of the withdrawal is an urgent task of the present [... whereby] art acts likes the mirror in vampire films: it reveals the withdrawal of what we think is still there."[265]

The rupture after disaster occurs in the mode of address and of visuality, as reminds us Marguerite Duras' "you have seen nothing in Hiroshima", which Toufic duly borrows: "'You have seen nothing in West Beirut' or 'you have seen nothing in Iraq'".[266] 'The withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster' has been the heart of Walid Raad's work since 2005, especially the uncanny ways that the space/time of catastrophe acts on artworks (telepathy, information from the future towards the past, mistakes in the work found after the fact, problems with memory in the artist or other protagonists). The event affects our knowledge of time and the materiality of the world. With regards to our conversation about predecessors and lineage, not only has the relation been broken or affected by the event of war as 'surpassing disaster', according to both Toufic and Raad, but the accessing of those referents in subsequent work is affected. How to formalize or show the withdrawal symptomatically of that which has been affected?

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[264] Toufic, *Forthcoming*, 70-71.
[265] ibid., 67, 65. See also Chapter 1 of this thesis.
[266] ibid., 73.
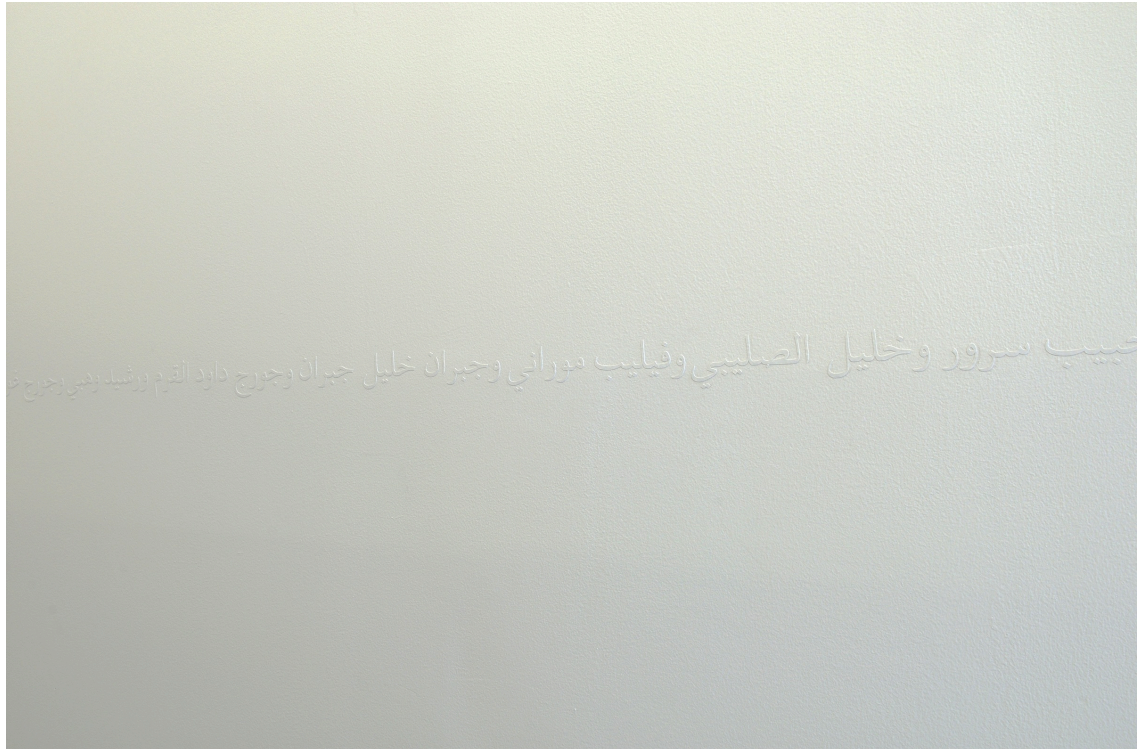
Figure 3: Walid Raad, detail from Scratching on Things I Could Disavow, Index XXVI (Artists), mixed media, 2.3 x 2100 cm, 2008

Raad explores this at length in his project, *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Modern and Contemporary Art in the Arab World Part 1_Volume 1_Chapter 1 (Beirut, 1992-2005)*.[267] In one small example of the works shown in Beirut in 2007, Raad decides to partly reckon with the legacy of Lebanese art and what he calls referents and predecessors. Yet, how to do so if they are unavailable or have been 'affected'? In a piece with the same title as above, followed by the suffix "index XXVI_artists 2007_white vinyl on white wall", Raad had affixed names of Lebanese painters working from the late 19th century up until 1990 all along three continuous gallery walls. One enters the room and sees nothing. The names are typed out in three layers of white vinyl

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[267] For detailed work description, see Sfer-Semler Gallery, http://www.sfeir-semler.com/gallery-artists/walid-raad/ (accessed 17 July, 2014). For more detail on this see Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Art in the Arab World: http://www.scratchingonthings.com/works/ (accessed 10 December, 2014). Raad's work on predecessors and Western museum collections and displays of Islamic and Arab art could also be embedded not with a Lebanese or Arab art tradition, but within practices of both institutional critique and artistic practices that were about using the museum as a repository of material (for example, Marcel Broodthaers's many museum works/shows and, more recently, Joseph Kosuth's "The Play of the Unmentionable," 1990, Brooklyn Museum). Although Raad displays and re-represents the work after it has been affected by surpassing disaster and, in that, it is not mere borrowing, but ancient artworks and Arab-Islamic traditions affected by decades of catastrophes.

on white wall and are not 'visible'. This materialises a double intent; the terms Raad and Toufic use to talk about surpassing disasters affecting our access due to the withdrawal, and, literally, as the white-on-white gives the effect of invisibility until the viewer, physically, walks up to the wall.[268]

In another register of rupture, some artists again broke off or engaged with another lineage – one that related to a new leftist (Arab nationalists and, later, political figures, as well as intellectuals, journalists etc.) support of Hezbollah as the primary figure of armed resistance.[269] The Party of God had been forcefully securing its place as the sole armed opposition to American-Israeli aggression and neo-colonial endeavours, and reconfirming its ideologies of victory, heroism and martyrdom. Former leftist figures had been violently declawed. The auto-ghettoization and militarization of South Lebanon and the southern suburbs of Beirut, especially following the expulsion of the Israeli Defence Forces from Lebanon and the defeat of Israel in 2006, as well as Hezbollah's post-2006 private reconstruction project Wa'ed (The Promise) was also the object of artwork starting in the 2000s.

In *God Created the World in Seven Days. This is the Eighth* (2008), Tony Chakar constructs and reflects on the notion of catastrophic space (his work following the 2006 Israeli war) in a lecture-performance, which uses materials amassed from the media, pop songs, philosophical and film excerpts, and images. Chakar follows a common trope: in order to be accessed, catastrophes must be described in the negative, 'by looking awry'.[270] In order to talk about them, we must talk about what they are not. Meaning, following Walter Benjamin, the catastrophic is allegorical: one cannot but live inside it; it escapes rationalisation, yet like a dream, it has a logic of its own. Chakar reads out texts written by survivors of Hiroshima in the aftermath of the atomic bomb in order to speak about Wa'ed. For the architect/artist, Wa'ed denies catastrophe precisely in its articulation of it. In assessing disaster in hectares of damage and statistics, their language is what paradoxically denies catastrophe and maintains a view of history whose temporality, spatiality and experience of catastrophe denies or postpones history.

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[268] The same exhibition borrows Sadek's "Love is Blind" to make a trompe l'œil. It is a reading of Sadek's empty walls as a sign or materialisation of the withdrawal of disaster.

[269] Sharara, *Dawlat Hezbollah.*

[270] First presented in April 2008 at HomeWorks IV: A Forum on Cultural Practices, Beirut, Lebanon. See also http://www.biennial.com/events/tony-chakar-the-eighth-day (accessed 20 October, 2014).

The private reconstruction initiative administered by Hezbollah is problematic for Chakar because its logics are weaved together by a simultaneously amnesic and homogenizing memory. In claiming that the urban planner must be like a tailor, Hezbollah misconstrues and instrumentalises what he calls catastrophic space as mere material destruction in presenting it as reversible, and their place as inevitable, especially following their 2006 victory against the Israeli aggression.

Furthermore, in showing the plans of the reconstruction sites, he argues their reconstruction discourse around modernization and the metropolis is similar, he alleges, to that of the Nazi era – a rather large, contentious claim that was met with counter-attacks. In other words, it strives for largeness, sameness and recognisability, and the creation of a place dominated by ideologies of resistance, martyrdom, and victory.

The critique 'inward' directed towards Hezbollah in this and other instances (e.g. the Solidere reconstruction project, the Hafez el Assad monument, or other forms in which the local political and social scene is produced and reproduced, or the way in which time is hijacked by competing March 8 and March 14 factions and the post-war time of capital in general) as both a formal aesthetic and a political concern here, is novel insofar as it is an interruption in the habitual mode of political and media analysis of imperialism and war as coming from the outside. It thus asked to be addressed formally as well as contextually.[271]

Furthermore, when we suggest that the war posed a rupture, we do not mean that there was no legacy of artistic practices prior to or during the war. We suggest that the conditions of the civil wars and their aftermath, and the concomitant disillusionment with the political present and vocabulary that constituted it, created the need for other forms of representation. We do not suggest that art production ceased altogether during the war, or imply that artists in the post-Ta'ef era formed what T. J. Demos calls a "veritable cultural renaissance".[272] What we do claim is that there were changes in form and medium (e.g the lecture performance, the text, the photomontage, the essay

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[271] See also Rabih Mroueh and Lina Saneh (2009) "Photo-Romance," and Mohamad Soueid "The Sky is Not Always Above" (2007).

[272] Demos, "Living Contradiction"; and *The Migrant Image*, 177. See also the description of the group show *Art Now in Lebanon* by prominent gallery owner Andree Sfeir-Semler. She claims that Lebanese artists have since the 19th century been copying the art of the Western canon, and only developed a distinctive Lebanese aesthetic voice in the post-civil war period of the 1990s (Sfeir-Semler, "Art Now").

film, the Atlas Group project) to painting, drawing collage, and sculpture, that reconfigured the ways in which artists represented the war, or dealt with its continuing material realities and consequences. Their self-reflexive modes of address, their engagements and scepticisms, and their aesthetic tactics permitted a rethinking of the authorial voice in so-called catastrophic times, and were politically modernist in that regard.

Artistic production never ceased throughout the war years. Galleries, institutions and artists remained active even in the midst of siege and bombardment.[273] Despite claims to the contrary, during years of wartime the local art market was still in bloom, as noted by Kristine G. Khouri.[274] Traditional landscape painting, such as those of Mustafa Farroukh and Omar Onsi, paintings of now-lost scenes of everyday life in Lebanon, and modern abstraction saw a hike in popularity (sold-out shows, high demand). With regard to the problems of representation faced by the wartime generation, for Khouri, artworks and artists did not *need* to represent the catastrophe of war as they were already enduring it. And in refusing to do so (represent it), they were refuting it since they, themselves, were witnesses to that history. "There was no need to paint the catastrophe. People were living it. Doing so would acknowledge the reality, in addition to memorialising it, documenting it. It was shameful, miserable and traumatic. Not painting the destruction was forgetting and refusing the situation."[275] She insists that simply because this work of the war years – particularly from the 1970s until the 1990s – had not been visible or accessible ("searching for these works [...] without a proper archive, may be comparable to an archealogical project"[276]), does not mean the period of the civil wars did not produce art, nor that there had been a sudden renaissance in practice. Or a sudden arrival of contemporary art, in whatever form.

Aside from the contradictions in Khoury's catalogue essay – the fact that the very exhibition she writes for is precisely a retrospective of wartime painting and artists' painterly representations of the war from the mid-1970s until 1991 – the argument we

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[273] For an example in painting, see the exhibition *The Road to Peace: Painting in Times of War 1975-1991*, curated by Saleh Barakat, 17 June - 14 July, 2009, Beirut Art Center.

[274] Khouri, "Looking for Lebanese Artistic Production."

[275] ibid., n.p. During numerous conversations, Lebanese artists talked about the then-urgency to produce in the face of the protracted war and the many urban, social, psychological and aesthetic problems that it has raised.

[276] ibid., n.p.

make is that the ways in which witnessing was reconceptualized and the very modes of representation (e.g. attention to and use of apparatus, the changes in media such as video, print and conceptual, documentary photography, etc.), were what posed a shift in an artistic canon and the intellectual project therein that would need to be reckoned with in the post-war period.

3.2.1 From 'representation of politics' to 'politics of representation'

The war's ruinous and neoliberal aftermath and its very historical timeframe – beginning with the 1960s and ending with the Cold War with its declared 'end of history'[277] – permitted a disillusionment with leftist liberation projects, and in art with the ways in which those were embodied in the instance of art as realism and socio-political engagement. As well as showing the failure of previous nationalist projects, the war provoked what can be read as a continuation of a 'crisis' of historical representation, which included within it a crisis of witnessing.[278] The 20th century rise of post-structuralism destabilized the notion of the 'real' and its meaning being already mediated by linguistic structures and discourse. This 'revisionary' moment, within the broader linguistic turn, produced a crisis of meaning wrapped up first in semiotic analysis and then in the view that access to reality had become constructed. This was entangled with a series of aesthetic debates and moves we explore below.

As we saw, the period of the war, its concomitant battles and how they played out ideologically coincided with broader epistemological, philosophical and historical shifts.[279] Epistemological questions regarding referents and meaning, and scepticism about the writing of history more generally, eventually were key for a new kind of historical writing (as per the work of such historians as Dominick LaCapra and Haydn White, for instance), much less our ability to know the world and faithfully access it, where the outside of the 'text' became indeterminate, sometimes lost.

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[277] Jameson, "'End of Art?' Or 'End of History?'", 81. See also the controversial and infamous essay and book heralding the end of ideology as the end of history by Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, as an elaboration of his earlier essay in *The National Interest*, summer 1992, under the title "The End of History".

[278] See, for example, Spiegel, *Practicing History*. For a discussion on the crisis of representation in art in the Latin American context, see Thomaz, "Crises of Representation." Also relevant is Gugelberger and Kearny, "Voice to the Voiceless."

[279] Keeping in mind that the civil war effectively began brewing in the late 1960s (1969) and, allegedly, ended with the 1989 Ta'ef amnesty.

The realist aspirations of certain strands of 20th century art, and their drive at political representation or spectator mimesis through the desire to create a kind of collective perception, had its roots in 19th century class struggles, and what would become known as 19th and 20th century debates over the autonomy of art, bourgeois disinterestedness modes of aesthetic contemplation, and art considered for its own sake. Strands of social realism in modernism sought, at least in part, that art's role be the provision of political consciousness and ideology critique through various modes that integrate art and life, or through pictorial or literary representation, conceived primarily on the basis of art's social function and for a rising, international proletariat.[280] The anti-aesthetic within the avant-garde would later be conceived as a break with previous and concurrent representational systems, especially those that relate to the bourgeois social order, all the while emerging from it.

Furthermore, the notion of collective perception or of a mass public sphere was always historicised as a double-edged sword. It could have related to state propaganda, as was the case in certain fascist and state-sanctioned iterations in Europe and the Soviet Union, and the mass culture after World War II in the United States in the form of mass commodification and the culture industry.[281] It also related to a rising, proletarian class from that instrumentalization,[282] and on paper, constituted by an opposition aesthetically as embodied in different 'vanguards'.

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[280] The notion of 'representing the people' or, rather, people representing themselves links up with certain art forms freeing people from ideology and false consciousness, often through understanding cultural production via dialectical historical operations, whereby the new proletariat would take hold of bourgeois means and methods of cultural production. Furthermore, cultural critics and social historians of art – from Georg Lukàcs and Theodor Adorno, to Meyer Shapiro, T. J. Clark and others – since WWII, if not earlier – have been grappling with the relation of class, ideology and art. See, for instance, Adorno et al., *Aesthetic and Politics*; Shapiro, "The Social Bases of Art"; Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*; Buchloh, "A Social History of Art"; and Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic.*

[281] Crow, *Modern Art in the Common Culture*.

[282] All these debates were taking place on the Left (before and during WWII), and even within the state and party apparatuses of the Left against intellectuals, who also situated themselves as Marxists. See, for instance, the deep disagreements between Georg Lucàks and Bertold Brecht in Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics*, especially pp. 60-85. Similar incidents were occurring in Lebanon in the 1960s, whereby the Baathist parties (Iraq and Syria) and other left-wing parties were threatening or taking out journalists and critics, also from the Left. For a brief account of this, see Kassir, *Histoire de Beyrouth*, especially pp. 596-8, but also other sections. This would later materialise with the assassination of leftist intellectuals in the 1980s and 90s by Hezbollah. And Kassir himself would be assassinated in 2005.

In the sphere of documentary or, more specifically, social documentary, the questions were raised in somewhat similar fashion.[283] Regarding the documentary image's relation to facticity and truth, film-maker and theorist Trinh T. Minh-Ha traces how the legacy of social documentary film-making is linked to epistemological (as well as early anthropological) traditions of understanding reality as a knowable object existing out there in need of representation, most often with that very representation and capturing rendered invisible. It was only, due to paradigmatic shifts, that it was later recognized that representation *itself* was an act of construction. As such, she suggests, within these other documentary modes, the relationship to 'reality' and content take precedence over form, or form is instrumentalized to depict the said truth.[284] "The socially-oriented filmmaker is thus an almighty voice-giver [...], whose position of authority in the production of meaning continues to go unchallenged, skilfully masked as it is by its righteous mission [...] What is involved may be a question of honesty (vis-à-vis the material), but it is often also a question of (ideological) adherence, hence of legitimization."[285]

Although potentially reductionist, films made about 'common' people are often also made *for* them, speaking on their behalf, Minh-Ha claims. For her, in almost too broad terms, this has its roots in a view of class, class struggle and social relations as always objective and predetermined, where the silenced, common folk cannot express themselves and their plight. As such, pointing a camera at/to them was thought to suffice in representing their voice and documenting poverty, destitution and states of injustice. Minh-Ha thinks particularly of colonial film in the anthropological and, later, the journalistic tradition. She cites British documentary film-maker John Grierson, considered one of the fathers of documentary realism: "The penalty of realism is that it is about reality and has to bother forever not about being 'beautiful' but about being right."[286]

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[283] See chapters 1, 4 and 5 for a discussion on Martha Rosler and Alan Sekula on this.
[284] See debates on form and content and on naturalism and realism between Brecht and Lukàcs, and the critiques against formalism in Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics.*
[285] Minh-Ha, "Documentary Is/Not a Name," 83-4.
[286] In Hardy, *Grierson on Documentary*, 249; as quoted in Minh-Ha, "Documentary Is/Not a Name," 85. She continues to explain how these so-called 'fathers of documentary' did, in fact, insist that this type of image-making was not reportage or mere information, but a "creative treatment of actuality" all the while remaining within the limits of factuality, or in other terms, truth.

As such, there were naturalistic film rules set in place in order to abide by the truth of actuality. These included, for instance, shooting in real time, avoiding manipulation or external voice-overs, synchronizing speech and sound, refraining from excessive use of the zoom as panning shots were seen to better represent the 'whole picture', and notably, including the personal testimony, or expert 'talking head'.[287] If manipulation is to occur, the mechanics of this must *not* be made visible. As in, the effect of 'documentary' must remain in place, while cinematic technology is seen to provide unmediated access to the real. This would, of course, be radically questioned by a subsequent generation of film-makers, including Minh-Ha herself (also, notably, Jean-Luc Godard, Straub-Huillet, Chris Marker, Alan Sekula, Harun Farocki and many others), who upheld a political art practice while remaining aware of their modes of representation and their apparatus, not to mention the very institutional setting and conditions of film-making.

By way of brief example, masking the ideology of the apparatus was remarkably challenged by Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin under the collective Dziga Vertov Group. Think, for instance, of their famously-declared desire to make 'political films, politically'; or of Godard's 1968 *Un Film Commes les Autres*, where he films hands, legs and bodies with distinct emphasis on an uninterrupted political conversation, clearly refusing to show heads talking *at* spectators in television-interview style.[288] In *Loin du Vietnam* (1967-68), Godard films himself filming (although we are not sure *what*, but we know he is 'far from Vietnam'), before turning the camera on us, the spectators, in a bid to once again – as he often does in his feature and Dziga Vertov Group films – make us aware that we are looking at a cinematic apparatus and embed the camera as (ideological) apparatus in the act of filming and viewing. Rather than engage with the impossibility of filming war and realizing that, far from Vietnam, he can film and do nothing, Godard declares that he will bring up Vietnam into all of his films, so that "Vietnam can invade us" and create a Vietnam within us. Instead of direct representation of the pain of others – "*notre coeur saigne mais cela n'a aucun rapport*

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[287] See Lesage, "Godard and Gorin's Left Politics, 1967-1972." We explore in Chapter 5 what it might mean to 'make political films, politically', or 'to be documentarians in a way documentarians had not been' following Martha Rosler, in view of the work of the Atlas Group, and also Wael Noureddine.

[288] See Chapter 4 for more details and tactics in this regard.

avec les corps blessés" – and in a bid to universalize the struggle against oppression (if in Chicago, with the blacks; if in Angola, against the Portuguese; if in Latin America, with the workers), he insists, through his long voice-over, which covers footage of him looking into the viewfinder of his camera for the duration of the film, that our struggles are connected and united through their distance.[289]

It is this breed of (political) modernism that interests us; one which "entailed an alignment of the modernist critique of illusionism with the critique of ideology in a way that shifted the concerns from 'the representation of politics' to 'the politics of representation'".[290] We leave the discussion of how other conceptual and documentary artists, including Martha Rosler and Alan Sekula, dealt with the question of representation in ways that connect to our Lebanese artists to chapters 4 and partly in 5. Some of the premises and aesthetics associated with this mission of art to either give a voice to the voiceless, or be a beacon of society's progress (despite the importance of social realism historically) were thus seen not only to mask ideological operations by not self-reflexively looking at their own devices and modes of production, but also their modes of address mimicked the discourses of power. It is safe to claim that the need for new tactics and forms was spurred by the need to question and re-determine, even implicitly, the claims and underpinnings of certain kinds of politically engaged art. We suggest that 'the turn' by post-Taef Lebanese artists within art, to the dense histories of modernism, as well as, relatedly, to conceptual art and documentary practices, was akin to an antidote to the spectacle of war and Lebanese politics more generally.

The conditions for artists coming of age in that moment and, for the most part, reared in a suspicion of the communicative mission of art, its capacity to represent the plight of peoples directly – speaking for them and giving them a voice – was co-extensive with speaking as victims themselves and supplying testimonies. [291] Hanan Toukan reminds us how the artists she interviewed in her research, which overlaps with the practices and artists we address, often insisted on the claim that they made politically-

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[289] Joris Ivens, William Klein, Claude Lelouch, Agnes Varda, Jean-Luc Godard, Chris Marker, Alain Resnais, *Loin du Vietnam*.

[290] Edwards, *Martha Rosler,* 94.

[291] See, for instance, the plays by Roger Assaf and Ziad Rahbani, the films of Maroun Baghdadi and others, the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish, and the chronicles of 1982 by Fawwaz Traboulsi.

critical art, not political art.[292] They seem concerned with critique, rather than a form of political art. This distancing from certain painting, photographic and cinematic practices, whether of a documentary nature or not, was associated for them with pity or victimhood.[293] The poststructuralist turn facilitated a 'postcolonial' turn whereby the state of subaltern peoples' ability to speak was in need of rectification, and colonial domination was understood as also, in itself, discursively re-produced. These are the overarching conditions that, less explicitly, also spurred some Lebanese artists and writers – being themselves scarred – to, symptomatically, both make and think about the very conditions of representations and subsequent modes of address. As we see below, the geographical and political constraints of being from Lebanon or 'the region' in a globalising art world would itself later pose new and problematic concerns.

3.3 War as Rupture?

As we tried to show, the crisis of representation, and more specifically of witnessing, continues in a protracted present where political life and the relationship to past and present are contaminated by the geopolitical alliances of March 14 and March 8, and Lebanon's neoliberal order. In the post-war period, this was materialised in a number of discourses, not least of which was around a so-called tabula rasa, or 'amnesia' discourse, as seen in our discussion of private reconstruction. Although we have mentioned how the discourse on amnesia played out in the political context of the post-war, we want to suggest again that the artists' works we deal with are not concerned with a memorial project. In other words, our reading of the politics of witnessing and representation was neither about amnesia, nor explicitly about trauma, but about history and politics. And if some (not all) artists borrowed from the vocabulary of both trauma and amnesia, it was in view of finding modes of art through a reconfiguration of the witness position, and of re-inhabiting and recuperating politics and history beyond mere remembrance.

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[292] Toukan, "Art, Aid, Affect."
[293] ibid.

The civil wars posed a fait accompli and a need to renegotiate social and political contracts. Many post-war Lebanese artists and writers did for a while position their work on the basis of this historical break posed by the atrocities of the war, and its effects on historical representation, image production and speech. This produced some artistic work that conceptualized itself around theories of trauma and witnessing, drawn in part – as highlighted in Chapter 1 – from the epistemological and philosophical literature of the post-World War II era, drawn around the 'unfathomability' of the atrocities, the language of survivor testimonies, the aporia of witnessing, and the dilemmas (so-called 'impossibilities') of representation.

What was understood as the historical rupture of World War II, crystallized in Auschwitz, Hiroshima and Nagasaki and much more, acted as a said limit to what is sayable and knowable about catastrophic events and systemic violence.[294] A set of Lebanese artists drew from the literature and the psychoanalytic language employed in the aftermath of these events associated with the impossibilities of telling and showing the horrors of what happened during, in this case, in the context of recurring internecine violence in Lebanon. This led to formulations and artistic strategies of allegedly gathering traces and hysterical symptoms, being interested in questions of latency and absence, and marking belatedness to the event. World War II was considered as having affected and undone language itself. This was influenced by Theodor W. Adorno's pronouncements about writing lyric poetry after Auschwitz being barbaric, Primo Levi's writings on the imperative to speak and the impossibility to speak, Claude Lanzmann's durational film on the Shoah, Maurice Blanchot on disaster, Ruth Leys, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub and others more recently writing on trauma – and thus, allegedly acted as both a constraint of their work, as well as one of its said aesthetic imperatives.[295]

The relationship to the European literature emerging after WWI and WWII was explicitly articulated in, for example, the essays and the lecture-performances of Tony Chakar, such as *God Created the World in Seven Days. This is the Eighth Day* (2008), and the text accompanying *Four Cotton Underwear for Tony* (2001); in the burned and undeveloped film rolls and films of Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's *Wonder*

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[294] We say 'allegedly' in reference to our discussion in Chapter 1 regarding, for instance, Georges Didi-Huberman's *Images in Spite of All*.

[295] See Chapter 1.

Beirut: Story of a Pyromaniac Photographer (1997-2003), feature films *Je Veux Voir* (2008), and *A Perfect Day* (2006) ; in the documentaries and installation work of Lamia Joreige, including *Içi et Ailleurs* (2003), *Nights and Days* (2006) and *Objects of War* (2000-2006); in the archival interests and personal diary art work of Akram Zaatari; in the video essay *(Posthume)* (2007) by Ghassan Salhab; as well as in some of the pronouncements by artist Walid Raad around the Atlas Group files.[296]

Many artists departed from both a dearth of images and possibilities of telling, and an excess of image and information – what architect and artist Tony Chakar referred to as "an audience's scopophilic desire to know more, to be informed more".[297] He continues: "Because talking about the thing itself will only make it banal and trivial – and in any case, what was experienced in 1975-1990, or its reappearance as evanescent images in 2006 and later in 2008, is too deep, too painful, too catastrophic to be verbalized or represented."[298] This frame of trauma as unrepresentable configured the war as a rupture that affected the very language, verbal and visual, of representation. What interests us, however, is how this 'unsayability' or alleged crisis of representation – that "language is undone"[299] – was and is sayable. Or, said differently, how the inability to capture or render certain horrors, the inability to represent, is itself representable. What is significant to the reconfiguration of the witness position and its politics is how the unrepresentable was made presentable through formal tactics, and through an awareness of the textual and imagistic apparatuses used for that very representation.[300]

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[296] We streamline and elaborate our discussion on artistic practices later. For more comprehensive articulations around the ways in which these artists (sometimes problematically) formulated the war as historical rupture or questioned their responses as artists to the conditions of trauma, see more recently Chakar, "To Speak Shadow." See also Gilbert, "Walid Ra'ad"; Rogers, "Forging History, Performing Memory"; or Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige's website descriptions of their work, most notable "Wonder Beirut".

[297] "The Eighth Day," 74.

[298] ibid.

[299] This and the above reference by Chakar (and others) refer to Adorno's much-cited phrase "I have no wish to soften the saying that writing lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric; it expresses in negative form the impulse which inspires committed literature" (Adorno, "Commitment," 312).

[300] Chakar adds: "But the past has a claim on us, and the destruction of language does not mean – cannot mean – that there is no possibility of talking about this past, of finding a language to speak the space of catastrophe; this language cannot be the language of facts, numbers and statistics" ("The Eighth Day," 77).

How is it that scenes from 1986 look like those from 1982, and 2006, and 1975, and 2005?[301] If trauma is exceptional, how can it be recurrent and extend to an entire political landscape or body politic? The same question can be posed for amnesia. During the many years of war, before the ceasefire settlements and amnesties of 1989 and 1990, the notion of trauma and the post-World War II literature that it referred to had, to my knowledge, not been referenced.[302] As we saw earlier, Beirut had been compared to Guernica as a sitet of destruction and massacre, and not to the Shoah and the writings in its aftermath on unspeakability, unrepresentability and the questions of form those begged.

Artist and critic Walid Sadek has been trying to re-conceptualize the figure of the witness by extricating himself from the rhetoric of trauma and memory studies, and withdrawal and absence, by studiously reading ex-combatant and prisoner testimonies, and developing a vocabulary of what he calls 'labours' in his artistic praxis, which includes his theoretical writings. As we have argued, the end of war was a repression of hostilities – not their resolution – where discourses of both amnesty and amnesia served to reinforce the neoliberal drive for reconstruction and balance of power, and the ethical drive of waiting out this period of transitional justice. Sadek conceptualizes what he calls specifically historical labours and their relationship to a possible, habitable future on the basis that the war may have been traumatic to individual subjects, but that it was certainly protracted on a more total scale. In a recent talk, his ideas of 'the labour of ruin' and the figure of the 'non-posthumous survivor' function in this vein; in other words, in order to get away from the now-unhelpful understanding of the civil war as traumatic, or understood in such psychoanalytic terms as 'latency', 'absence', 'hysterical symptoms', 'unrepresentability', and drawing from memory studies, he sets out a blueprint for how a liveable ruin is something temporal and historical that we build and inhabit together, and not a monument-type figure to and from the past.[303]

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[301] This is discussed in detail in Chapter 5 in the work of the Atlas Group, and was raised in conversations with the artist Walid Raad.

[302] In fact, as we see below, there is no Arabic equivalent of the word 'trauma' and the ideas associated with it; it only entered into local usage, particularly in the arts and in mainstream psychology, after the war through European and US education systems. As mentioned, the poetics of wartime in the form of actual poetry anthologies and memoirs centred on themes of loss, resilience and resistance, or guilt. For a later recounting of this, see Traboulsi, "Does Guilt Matter?" Ex-combatant accounts also do not speak of trauma per se, but they explicitly articulate experiences and tribulations.

[303] Sadek, "The Labour of Ruin."

The figure of the non-posthumous survivor is not a traumatized individual subject, but rather an active figure who comes with a terrible knowledge gathered from a context of war and resistance (and not the artist him- or herself as survivor) and, with this knowledge, can begin the historical labour of (our future) ruin that we will build and inhabit together as grounds for a collective, political futurity. For this to happen, 'the labour of interlocution' and conversation must also occur. However, these labours are nearly impossible when the figure of the survivor is what Sadek calls 'individualized', considered as living on after death (posthumous) and therefore "fixed as [a] wounded and quizzical [individual] who tarr[ies] on the edges of history and in the folds of protracted therapies. As posthumous, he simply enacts the failures of history and is thus instrumentalised as tangible evidence that vindicates the reconstruction of society along normative guidelines."[304]

Hence, trauma as a narrative of rupture is unproductive historically, 'psychologizing' what should in fact be politicized (e.g. witnessing), and is not useful in the Lebanese context as it obfuscates the ways in which war was and is practised on the level of the everyday, and the ways in which it is material and protracted. War, or civil war, is not (only) to be compared with irruptive conditions of one-time genocide beyond representation, or the language of unspeakability in the aftermath of concentration camps (in circulation even by Sadek himself for several years after the war). The wounded guilt of the survivor (in the tradition of Primo Levi) who, for instance, is incapable of representing what happened or is unable to speak, Sadek tells us, empties the Lebanese civil war of meaning and specificity, robs us of our ability to speak, making us unaware of how we ourselves practised the war. An injunction to return to history, politics and agency (not memory) can thus be read as the core of at least these labours that Sadek begins to develop, and can be understood as a call to regard the war as an eventful rupture that we can enter into discussion with not as traumatized subjects who need to recover or be recovered. Further, we would argue, this type of work and the art forms we will discuss later themselves form an eventful break with previous ways of apprehending both war, art and its role in politics.

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[304] ibid.

The aim (for Sadek and for us), therefore, is to embed our understanding of the wars and subsequent art in history, not out of it, the way some trauma theory can do. The effects of war are, in fact, determined, known and lived by their very persistence and effects, in spite of amnesties and alleged amnesia.[305]

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[305] Sadek contests the claims to amnesia and speaks of an interdiction on forgetting, rather than on remembering, in the Lebanese state. He also brings up book-length fighter testimonies as examples of the very 'speakability' in question, however without ever speaking duly of (their) form or of 'unspeakability' in its literal sense, but rather in its ontological – or at least constitutively paradoxical – meaning. Discourses that espouse amnesia as a reigning model of how the state conducts itself in the post-war period do need to be contested, since they provoke a commemorative, apolitical and vague logic of encouraging "remembering for the sake of not repeating" (a '13 April, 1975' commemoration-day motto) without specifying what needs to be remembered, for whom and why. As highlighted earlier, their purpose is similar to that espoused by governing sides to not address internecine atrocities for what they were, or politics in its specificities and, thus, serve the status quo. In other words, memorial calls have a normative function, flattening out some actual political positions, struggles and concerns in place both during and before war.

- Chapter 4 –
Beginnings and the 1990s: Content, Form, History

"This imitator never loses himself in his imitation. Never does he lend himself whole to the person he plays. He remains, disengaged, the one who shows."

Bertolt Brecht[306]

4.1 Introduction

The writer and artist Sadek "belonged to a core group of artists, writers, filmmakers and thinkers who effectively willed Beirut's contemporary art scene into being in the 1990s"[307]. In an email exchange with him this past year I wondered who were the primary, influential authors and artists affecting his work and his thinking, particularly during his art-school years. He told me a story of how he and young fellow-artist Ziad Abillama had spent three to four years following the Ta'ef Accords observing "the spectacle of Lebanese politics" and its newfound mass-consumerist values and neoliberal drives. That had been his education. Later, in a cynical move, he decided to spend an entire summer reading the whole oeuvre of Lebanese Marxist sociologist Waddah Sharara in a local McDonald's.

It is important to observe that the 'spectacle of Lebanese politics' was also being watched by a number of scholars, intellectuals and artists of the post-war period, and it was not unique to the artist in question. Much work was produced within the very fabric of this oppositional moment. Art forms started to emerge; video, essay film, conceptual photography, booklets and other printed media, and installation, that all drew from newspaper and television archives, from the ruins of an urban landscape, from real life testimonies, from the then art discourse, from personal experience as symptom – work that could be considered singular and eventful.[308]

We briefly alluded to and will revisit how some post-civil war art production had been received as, or disparagingly labelled postmodern. We want to show how some of

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[306] *On the Everyday Theatre* (1930); as cited in Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 89.

[307] Wilson-Goldie describing the artist in "Three Artworks in an Empty Gallery."

[308] In an attempt to trace a preliminary social history of Lebanese post-civil war art, Rasha Salti identifies this "'alternative', 'critical', 'subversive', and/or 'counter-current'" within a matrix of class and hegemonic discourse that "beg an entirely different experience of deciphering and understanding from established convention" ("Framing the Subversive in Post-War Beirut," 79, 88). See also, Wright, "Like a Spy in a Nascent Era."

art from the 1990s onwards could been as extending from what Sylvia Harvey and Steve Edwards and had referred to as political modernism, or in this case third-wave political modernism in the 1990s and early 2000's. As we elaborate in the following pages, it is one that utilized photomontage in photographic and poster forms, parody, dead-pan and direct modes of address; rethought form and apparatus in theatre, performance and film; circulated printed materials in such formats as mock newspapers and booklets; used techniques of alienation and distanciation, among others. Art historian T. J. Demos has called a handful of these practices out of Beirut "post-documentary";[309] yet, we prefer the characterization of documentary, in that documentary itself was being worked through and reformulated.[310]

In the 1990's, Arthur Danto pushed forth the idea that contemporary art, an art after what he called 'the end of the era of art', finds its definition in a 'style' that borrows and quotes from styles. "As a period defined by a lack of stylistic unity,"[311] whereby the recognizable style would be all or no styles – what in a different, certainly uncelebratory vein Frederic Jameson would call a "new depthlessness" and pastiche.[312] This is, in part, because the spirit of the historical moment in which the modern that contemporary art borrows from, imitates and re-enacts, is simply not available to artists in the contemporary era.

However, the period of the 1990s to the early-to-mid-2000s, the context of post-war Beirut was marked by collaborations and friendships, and something distinctive,

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[309] *The Migrant Image,* 179, especially chapter 7. Reflecting on the 2006 exhibition *Out of Beirut* at Modern Art Oxford, Demos characterizes Lebanese artists' work as confusing the relationship between fact and fiction or, further, as reinventing documentary ("post-documentary") modes of representation "as a way to negotiate global discord" (ibid.).

[310] In February 2009, Kodwo Eshun discussed the Otolith Group's work as "anti-documentary" prior to the screening of their film *Nervus Rerum* (2008) at the Tate Gallery Cross-Cultural Programme, *Status of Difference* series. The term 'counter-cinema' was initiated by feminist film theory and used also by the likes of Peter Wollen in, for example, "Godard and Counter-Cinema."

[311] "Introduction: Modern, Postmodern, Contemporary," 12. Danto adds that contemporary art is also posthistorical in that it emerges after the end of the history of art. The posthistorical, however, is an evidently problematic term and most likely derives from the even-more controversial idea of the 'end of history' put forth by Francis Fukuyama on the victory of Western neoliberalism over communism in his *The End of History and the Last Man*. For another genealogy of contemporary art, see, for instance, Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated.* For a more critical take, see Suhail Malik, *On the Necessity of Art's Exit from Contemporary Art.*

[312] Jameson distinguishes between parody and (postmodern) pastiche in art production. In brief, he argues that parody is associated with mimicry, satire and irony, and should be read in relation to a "healthy linguistic normality" of a political project and convictions; while pastiche is a postmodern, blank return or rendition of parody that has lost its referent (*Postmodernism,* 65).

even new did emerge. This distinctiveness – as alluded to in Chapter 3 – was a meeting point between what may be historicized and characterized as a late modern vanguard (using manifestos, printed matter, photomontage), as some artists moved away from studio practices through working collectively, towards anti-aesthetic, neo-Brechtian principles, undertaking as they did, the political and historical conditions of the post-war.[313] Form and content were conceived together. For some years, this range of practices formed, we argue, a(n extended) political modernism.[314]

In a twofold move, this breed of modernism came to fruition through an attempt at a reconfiguration of the witness position – itself an outcome of a certain era – and through an art practice's awareness of itself, its forms, and its media. The politics of the witness was thus contemporaneous here with a third-wave political modernism in visual art.

When we speak of political modernism we mean one informed by the legacy of a modernist critique of ideology concerned with the politics of representation, and in the context of Lebanon resuscitated by a post-civil war generation. In *Martha Rosler: The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems (1974-1975)* that we explored in Chapter 1 and turn to again, Edwards outlines the tradition of second-wave political modernism, which started in the 1970s indebted first to Bertolt Brecht and then to Jean-Luc Godard (and Jean-Pierre Gorin), and which paid particular attention to political subject formation, the apparatus and film's formal techniques. It was characterized by a faithfulness to radicality in both form and political content. It understood the subject as constituted by ideology, and an ideological image as interpellating a certain kind of subject (traditional documentary realism and Hollywood being understood as prime producers of this). The key became not 'to represent politics', but to foreground the 'politics of representation'. In this regard, films made by the Dziga Vertov Group (Godard and Gorin in their 1960's Brechtian mode) used direct modes of address, disjuncture

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[313] The relation between the modernist autonomy of art and the avant-garde has been written about extensively in Western art history canon by the likes of Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Peter Bürger, Clement Greenberg, Thomas Crow, and countless others. See Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde.* For other takes on art that returns to a grounded engagement with public and political life see Foster, *The Return of the Real;* and Wilson, *Art Workers*. Other genealogies include, for instance, Stimson and Sholette, *Collectivism after Modernism.*

[314] The term is traced to Sylvia Harvey in "Whose Brecht? Memories for the Eighties"; as cited in Edwards, *Martha Rosler.* See also Rodowick, *The Crisis of Political Modernism.*

between image and sound, unnaturalistic acting that prevented empathy and sentimentality, Maoist slogans, and other tactics interrogating film form and attention to the very filmic apparatus' relation to ideology through the way in which it structures reality.

For some, it posited a contrasted relation between traditional realism and modernism; the former, hides its own apparatus or mode of production, and is normative and ideological. "It is homogenous and non-contradictory; it offers, by extension, narrative resolution, tying up the threads of the plot and leaving no emotional or ethical dilemmas unresolved", grounded, as it is, to a mimetic and figurative understanding of art, as well as in 'naïve empiricism.'"[315] Political modernism, in Edwards' account, calls attention to itself, to the artifice of its form or the presence of its devices. Hence, it perpetually calls for self-reflexivity from within the work and as a call for critical spectatorship.

Despite claiming the importance of the early forms and tactics used by a handful of artists operating in Beirut from the 1990s, we do not aim at presenting a survey of art practices in the post-civil war period. In this chapter, we will situate these artistic forms, tactics and themes, and the conditions and histories within which they were being created. We will discuss the points raised earlier, suggesting that the compelling and critical works were ones that formally questioned themselves, and focused on having a practice grounded in history, not hand-waving the crises associated with its writing; that they existed at a juncture between rethinking the witness and rethinking formalist aesthetics and modernist debates. We argue that the very crisis of witnessing – in part brought about by the violent history of the Lebanon wars, and by reactions to forms such as traditional social documentary, photojournalism, and the telefactual – ushered a breed of post-war political modernism in visual art. It brought awareness to formal techniques while being grounded in social and political content.

The artistic work we focus on, despite their sometimes divergent practices, exhibited this attention to apparatus and form. We want to show how this attention to

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[315] Edwards, *Martha Rosler*, 95. Boal also traces the genealogy of this 'distance', which he associates with a freedom in form, to the theatre of Erwin Piscator, Brecht's contemporary, who first used it to undercut the claims of empathy and epic theatre (see Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*). See also Benjamin, "The Author as Producer."

form, coupled with faithfulness to a local, political context, problematized the conditions of representation and art making. A reconfiguration of documentary practice, even outside the conventional parameters of documentary, applies to some of our artists and echoes Rosler when she claimed, "we wanted to be documentarians in a way that documentarians hadn't been."[316]

4.1.1 Background redux

As we explained in detail in Chapter 2, it may be safe to say that a portion of the Lebanese body politic felt alienated by the Ta'ef Accords and the compromise that was the peace agreement, knowing it was to be the perpetuation or at best a pre-emption of conflict by other means, and a new balance of power. One could even note a post-war 'war nostalgia' stemming from this alienation.[317]

The post-war urban and televisual field was saturated in identity polemics through vying nationalisms and partisanship, under the umbrella of administrative reform and reconstruction. Television stations were progressively owned by political parties and acted as their mouthpieces and, similarly to wartime, banners and posters demarcated the various neighbourhoods and regions with leaders and post-war slogans.[318] Questions of security and sovereignty vis-à-vis Syria's military presence, the continued Israeli occupation, and reconstruction, were coupled with a moratorium on discussing the material, economic effects of war, and post-war debt. The liberation of South Lebanon from the Israeli occupation in 2000, the assassination of Hariri five years later and the Israeli war on Lebanon the following year, being cases in point. The language of heroism, martyrdom, national unity, victory and "the future" was adopted by most parties, even the bitterly opposing ones, effectively effacing and undermining any meaning to those terms.[319] A new class of partisan youth at university campuses –

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[316] Edwards, *Martha Rosler*, 77.

[317] I think particularly of a scene in Ghassan Salhab's feature *Beyrouth Fantôme* (1998), where two of the lead actors are suddenly filmed as if in a documentary interview sitting side by side, directly addressing the camera, proclaiming how they miss the war and how it had brought people together, while peace was tearing people apart. See also Hanf, "The Sceptical Nation."

[318] See Maasri, *Off the Wall.*

[319] For example, after Hariri's assassination and the subsequent car-bomb assassinations of anti-Syrian or opposition politicians, the March 14 coalition began calling these targeted victims 'martyrs' or, if they had survived the attack, 'live martyrs' – terms normally associated with the place of martyrdom in the Islamic Resistance (yet also with former leftist fida'i operations). Subsequently, when March 14

which had frequently been a microcosm of macro-state politics – was fighting in student-union elections over a replica of the debates and alliances fought over between dominant political parties, despite some new post-war leftist group formations.[320]

Post-war life was administered by a remaining sectarian power structure under the auspices of a neoliberalism. It was a post-Taef regime strengthened by an interdiction on remembering (but also on unresolved forgetting), and on a business-as-usual despite the effects of hundreds of dead or still missing in the Lebanese civil wars, continually dysfunctional public services, and massive public debt. The Israeli occupation of South Lebanon, the discourse and aesthetics of martyrdom and heroism among such parties as Amal and Hezbollah, the unapologetically neoliberal, consumer-oriented ethos of reconstruction and development projects, the NGO-ization of public discourse on war and memory, and the so-called end of grand narratives, here failure of leftists struggles associated with the end of the Cold War, were some of the matters preoccupying a handful of artists working in this climate.

A glance at descriptions of work and artist statements by Akram Zaatari, Lamia Joreige, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige very often include references to what they call history with a 'small h', suspicions of official history, a desire to bring to the fore stories that have yet been untold, or folding personal memories, stories, diaries, and experiences within larger trajectories, alongside practices deemed archival in the absence of an official archive.[321] Below we situate in more detail our criticism of this approach.

became the leading coalition, March 8 set up tents across the Solidere area and remained there for over a year. They donned only Lebanese flags and spoke of nationalism and sovereignty – a tactic that seems to appropriate March 14's emphasis on sovereignty through their ubiquitous use of the Lebanese flag and red and white scarves during the so-called Cedar Revolution of 2005.

[320] With the exception of the newer Red Oak, Secular Club and the Human Rights Club. The latter is essentially an apolitical group that brandishes human rights, and the former calls for secularism, while the Red Oak are the equivalent of the campus communists. There had been a number of post-war leftist formations, such as Najah Wakim's People's Movement (Harakat Al-Sha'ab) or the Democratic Left Movement, which were popular among non-aligned students, yet then slowly dissolved.

[321] On the subject of memory in the work of Lebanese artists, see Allain, "Liban: Entre Mémoire et Reconstruction." See also Enwezor's article "Archive Fever: Photography between History and the Monument" in the exhibition catalogue *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art.* Works by Lamia Joreige and Walid Raad were shown in that exhibition at the International Center of Photography in New York in 2008.

The political or sometimes pseudo-political preoccupations of certain artists was gaining momentum in a post-war cultural landscape dominated by television, popular and folkloric theatre, and the existing art establishment.[322] Certain aesthetic approaches sought to postulate positions that might contribute to a critical history of the present in the face of all this official certitude, while being wary of 'official' history as told in the language of political parties, religious sects, certain academic and historical accounts and, certainly, the televisual and mass media more broadly.[323]

From the early 1990s onwards, Beirut saw cultural and artistic manifestations in the form of festivals, and yearly exhibitions in public spaces and more established theatre venues. It was a time when artists, small institutional formations, and moving-image festivals began to claim to think through the legacy of the space and time of war, corrupted political life, and the rise of reconstruction projects and their urban effects.[324] Those ranged from interventions in public spaces to the yearly iterations of what would eventually become the biennial-seeming, Home Works Forum for Regional Practices by Ashkal Alwan (2002-present; the 'regional practices' subsequently dropped), preceded by public-space exhibitions in the Sanayeh Garden (1995), Sioufi Garden (1997) the

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[322] For varied examples, see the post-war Beiteddine Festival, the long-running Salon d'Automne at the Sursock Museum, the documentary-film festival Docudays, traditional theatre houses showing Arabic translations of 'foreign' plays, post-war skits and comedy shows, including *Théâtre de Dix Heures* (characterized by caricature and popular satire), as well as the rise of massively popular satellite-television stations as Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya and others, not to mention the post-war rise of local (partisan) television stations.

[323] In a conversation with artist Walid Raad in 2013, he relayed how in 1998 he had been invited to sit on a panel with Lebanese sociologist Samir Khalaf and historian Fawwaz Traboulsi who had asked him to present his research on horse races and betting historians (see Atlas Group, *When the Loudest Muttering is Over* or *The Missing Lebanese Wars*; Chapter 5 of this thesis; and Gilbert, "Walid Ra'ad"). This event is not documented, but he recalls their bafflement at, and rational inquiry into his stories, the vocabulary within which it was couched, his temporally distorted logic, the notion of the persistent belatedness to the event, and the historical deductions he was making through the likes of (fictional) historian Fadl Fakhouri – he, too, was taking a contemporary perspective on the Lebanese wars. However, Khalaf and Traboulsi could not understand Raad's signs, not even allegorically.

[324] Interestingly, the co-founder and director of Ashkal Alwan (AA), Christine Tohme, states in her introduction to the first public art exhibition held in the Sanayeh public garden that AA is absolutely not a political party or partisan in its emphasis on 'multimedia' (*tashkil,* a key word in the association's title, has several meanings in Arabic, among them 'variety'), but rather purely an art organization – a pertinent disclaimer in the immediate post-war climate. She also takes note of having to work closely with the local mayor, as well as the public garden's administrators and close circle of artists who supported this unique, early manifestation (a radically different state of affairs from the present, where AA has a warehouse-sized, permanent space just outside Beirut where it manages its art school and institution. It no longer uses public spaces or available theatres for its activities. It may be inconsequential but nonetheless, this first catalogue and the subsequent ones prior to the *Home Works* forum in 2002 were all written in Arabic (see Ashkal Alwan, *First Sanayeh Garden Meeting.*

Corniche (1999) and Hamra (2000). Meanwhile, the Ayloul Festival (1997-2000), founded by Pascale Feghali and Elias Khoury, produced and screened films, videos and performances, and facilitated book publications.[325] It is within this climate that artists made much text-based work (booklets, posters, maps), theatre-performances, lecture-performances, documentary essays, and other interventions.

4.2 Public Beginnings: Parody, Text, Image

There is some consensus among commentators and critics that the first public, site-specific installation took place in 1992 by artist Ziad Abillama. Fellow-collaborator, artist and writer Walid Sadek referred to it as "a sufficient condensation of ideas and methodological hybridisation for it to be considered a crucial event and a violent restart of the arts in the post-war period."[326] The work is now accessible through what others have written about it and through the scant photographs of the installation. It was left to decay on site, on a patch of ground cleared of rubbish and debris on the San Balech beach north of Beirut, in a semi-industrial area near the highway that spans the north-to-south coast of the country. Abillama enclosed the space with barbed wire, used generator-powered fluorescent lighting, placed metal scraps, discarded missiles and sculptures made out of missiles, and gadgets propped up and displayed either on a velvet cushion in a glass case, dumped in a large, rusty shopping trolley, or incorporated into cage-like sculptures amid hybridized, one-wheeled chairs. The work is 'accompanied' by a poster, an invitation card, and the artist made a video while on site that was not displayed.

The oft-repeated phrase on media networks and in private conversations across the Arab world, particularly reiterated by victims of oppression or bombardment across Palestine, Lebanon and Iraq, "Wherearethearabs?" is printed on the poster

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[325] From 1998 to 2007, Espace SD was a privately-run art space used for screenings, talks and exhibitions. Image Quest video and film festival took place in 1995. The Arab Image Foundation (FAI) archive was initiated in 1997, publishing books and collecting Arab and regional photographic practices of the 20th century. A host of pre-war theatres, including Madina Theatre and Théâtre de Beyrouth, were still in use screening various cultural manifestations, and were key venues for AA, the Ayloul Festival and others.

[326] "From Excavation to Dispersion," 68. See also, Salti, "Framing the Subversive in Post-War Beirut," who makes similar claims.

accompanying the installation. On it, there are disparate quotes from modern sculptor Constantin Brancusi, "Look at the SCULPTURES until you see them. Those closest to GOD have seen them" underneath his egg-missile shaped sculpture; from Florence Nightingale, "[...] a crowd of Arabs, the busiest and the noisiest people in the world, came immediately on board, frantically gesticulating, kicking, and dancing – an intermediate race, they appeared to me, between the monkey and the man, the ugliest, most slavish countenances"; and by F. T. Marinetti from the Futurist manifesto on speed, war and beauty; as well as the image of an upright shell and the background image of what appears to be a poor, beggar boy alongside the ambitious title "A Ziad Abillama Project: Towards a Reconsideration of the State of the Arts, Technology, Identity, Aesthetics."

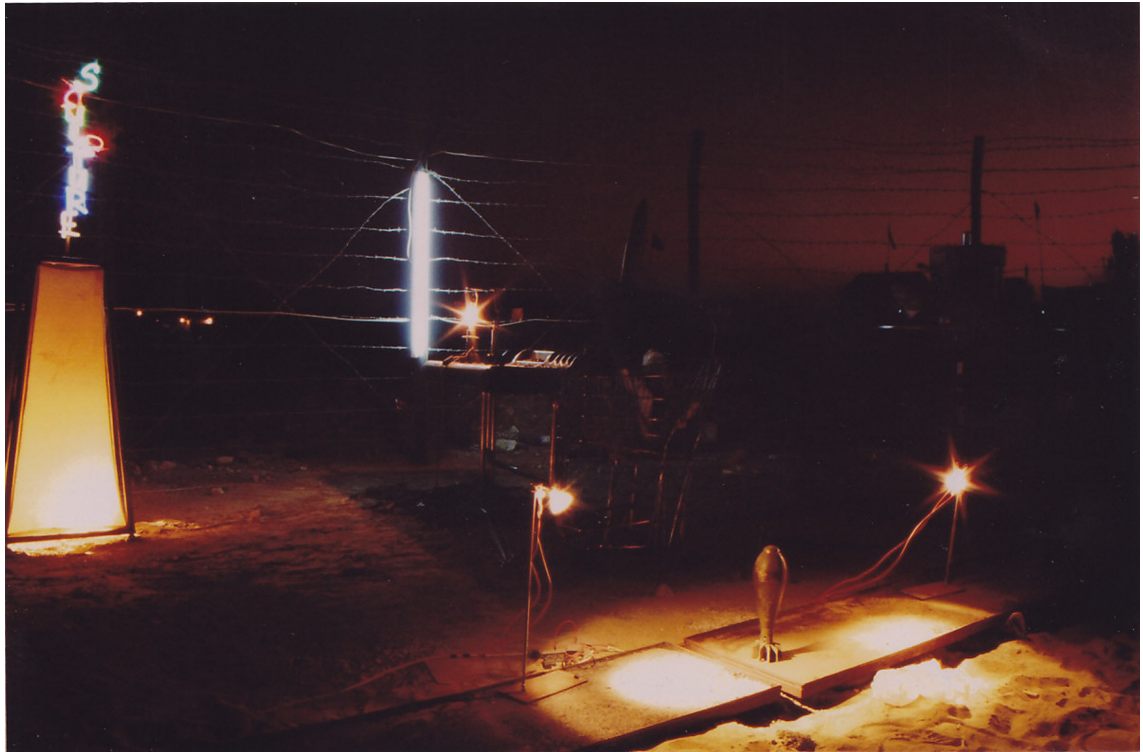*Figure 4: Ziad Abillama, San Belech, site-specific installation, dimensions variable, 1992*

Figure 5: Ziad Abillama, San Balech, site-specific installation, dimensions variable, 1992

Missiles and found objects act like readymades, Dada sculpture, as well as photomontage poster art reminds us of the parodies of John Heartfield in the 1930s; Abillama appears to be creating a quoting machine. Yet, this is not appropriation art that borrows an identifiable style. Rather, one could argue, Abillama quotes and borrows in order to revisit and critique through the very parody of borrowing, and sectioning off what he has done. He creates a 'solo exhibition' close off by wire, effectively impenetrable at first sight, of weapons and other wartime materials, as well as fabricated objects. He displays them in a *mise-en-scène* of display; a display of display that acts like an outdoor enclosed museum, or vitrine. The site-specificity itself a novelty in the Lebanese context, in this case in an abandoned public plot, in a working-class, industrial neighbourhood, on a public beach opposite the then new-to-be ABC Mall. All seemingly intended as dense class and regional signifiers.

According to fellow artist and critic Walid Sadek, Abillama understands the gesture of restaging discarded scraps of metal and weaponry in an overlooked public space as a reactivation of the *theatricality* of war's terror and steel, the post-war's effective cordoning off of the war's effects, while trying to perform how the war itself, and the effects and elements of said war (displayed old weaponry, barbed wire and

violent lighting powered by a generator associated with wartime and post-war power cuts), have themselves been relegated to the status of historical myth or nostalgic past, in national political discourse. Additionally, the work is left there to decay. Useless relics, remains and futuristic assemblages, Abillama parodies the aestheticization of violence, giving us to see the material of the war machine embedded within elements of consumer and mass culture (in the form of an oversized shopping trolley in one instance), and the mass production of objects of war. The anti-infatuation effect, as Sadek calls it, produced by the very loud generator and white light is a further fidelity to the fact that Abillama does not want us mesmerized by the spectacle; call it an alienation effect. A sculptural orgy of 'the spectacle of Lebanese politics', the installation, for Sadek as well as for Abillama, opposes the official discourse of war as a mere "passing illness".[327] Through "re-staging the theatricality of war's terror" the work presents the war through its elements, which Sadek views metonymically as figures of speech, and as parts that indicate a whole, commenting on how they were once used, or have turned into objects of amusement and consumption.

Through such parodic didacticism, as well as in the poster and the invitation card, the war is thus pushed forth as an inevitably part of "our historical becoming", not an absent-minded event of the past or mere phantasmagoria of war.[328] All the wordiness, the excessive critical speech is arguably to jolt readers and viewers out of an alleged state of infatuation and enchantment, as is the very loud-sounding generator providing the bold neon lighting at the entrance that equally turns into an alarm, Sadek reminds us. In line with our earlier reading, these tactics of distanciation and awareness of the apparatus are less a declaration of contemporary art's beginning than of a political modernism's unfolding. It seems as though this first installation of Abillama's wants to bring viewers into stark awareness of themselves, and to stage the spectacle of and discourse on both art and war as 'museoified' and locked away. This museological reading derives from the ways in which museums qua institutions have been utilized in

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[327] Sadek, "From Excavation to Dispersion," 68.

[328] ibid, 68. Sadek refers to phantasmagoria in the way that Adorno uses it in *In Search for Wagner* (on p. 85) in relation to the commodity as a phantasmagoric relation between things as separated (concealed) from their being the product of human relations/labour, and as "the point at which aesthetic appearance becomes a function of the character of the commodity" (Sadek, "From Excavation to Dispersion," 69).

art, at least since Marcel Broodthaers wanted to draw us into them anew. Instead of the museum's artefacts and replicas used as material for art, or for the directorship of the museum Musée d'Art Moderne (as was the case in Broodthaers), Abillama uses the material of the war displayed as it would be in an art as much as a military museum – except that, in Lebanon, there was neither at the time of this work, although the city itself acted like an open air museum from where he collected his debris.[329]

Abillama's second project, *Systeme FullFill* (1995), also deals with the machinery and imagery of the intersection of war and consumption. In an easily-to-circulate format, it was first an eight-page booklet/pamphlet shown during an exhibition in Martyrs' Square (now part of Solidere) in 1995 by the Société des Artistes et Décorateurs, a conservative art establishment existing at the time. The work, composed of humorous staged images of a missile in bed with a young son, or in the midst of a nuclear family, alongside wildly parodic texts referring to the 'systeme-full fill', hear, the eternal missile motif, as the purveyor ad fulfiller of security, harmony, unity. It was read as a desire to strike at the urban and metaphorical heart of Lebanon's post-war discourse of mass appeal, mass consumption and forgetfulness. Critic Kaelen Wilson-Goldie describes the relationship between *San Balech* and the new work: "The shape of the bombs, used again in a later work entitled *Systeme FullFill*, is disturbingly similar to that of a vibrator. This is weaponry as fetish object, weaponry as sex toy, weaponry as death drive."[330] With irony, the images in the booklet present the bomb/toy/object as a household item with many functions for the security, harmony and unity of the new, middle-class, post-war Francophone family (shot next to the wife, next to the migrant domestic worker, next to the little boy in bed, and so on). In the accompanying text by Abillama, this new 'vibromasseur'-weapon facetiously extols unity, freedom, security, harmony – all things aspired to for Lebanon and that litter socio-political rhetoric of the post-war landscape:

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[329] We can add that this work harks back to the Duchamp readymade, and the word for 'installation art' in Arabic also alludes to this as *tajhiz* can be roughly translated as 'readying', or 'further readying that which is ready'. This work, and even if in quick reference to Futurism, brings to mind Walter Benjamin's brief discussion of the introduction, use and aesthetics of war under fascism deployed to maintain the status quo of property relations, particularly as symptomatic of the rift between tremendous means of production and their inadequate utilization, which leads to war as the epitome of self-alienation "that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure" ("The Work of Art," 235). This is where lay the clear-sightedness of the Futurists for Benjamin (and, by extension here, for Abillama).
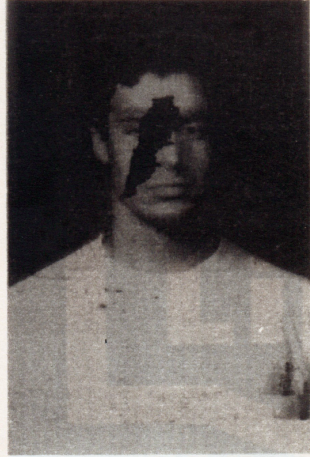
[330] "Digging for Fire," 74.

"Amis Libanais, amis Européens, frères Arabes. Le soleil symbole du génie, de l'énergie et de la volonté humaine se lève une fois de plus aujourd'hui, et après une nuit particulièrement sombre et difficile. Fiers de 6000 ans d'Histoire, jamais le futur ne nous a apparu si radieux, si prometteur. Ce grand destin nous appele, nous libanais modernes, à accomplir notre âme solaire: rayonner de tous nos feux, éclairer par nos actions puissantes les contrées les plus obscures[...]."[331]

Interventions founded on parody and provocation, confrontation and alienation, and quotations culled from various sources and repurposed, are at the heart of Abillama's very early work. During the *First Sanayeh Garden Meeting* by Ashkal Alwan in the autumn of 1995, Abillama proposed to fellow-participating artists partaking in the public exhibition that he be allowed to intervene in 30 sq. centimetres of their allocated exhibition space with whatever he deemed fit. It begins with the question: "[W]hat is the relation between art, the private (sphere), and the other?" He adds: "Can the artist do whatever he pleases within the space allocated or do you prefer to determine the subject matter of the work? Do you think artists constitute a family? 'What' or 'whom' might constitute the enemies of this kind of family? What is the role of the artist in making the nation?" [332] In a work that intended to deal directly with states of estrangement and exile, all the while rethinking those categories and certainly art's role in perpetuating them, Abillama cynically asks to be seen, to be included within the space of others – the sacred space of art and its institutions. One where the hosting art institution was suspected of perpetuating a peace discourse akin to that of the government's. Most of the artists approached refused, and the 'work' never took place. Abillama chose instead to intervene in the catalogue.

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[331] ibid, 81. The young Sadek and Abillama co-published a statement at the same event: "Territorialising our work. Claiming a stake for a production that is increasingly suspicious of Beauty. Bastard and unreliable, there grows a desire to slow down, to reconsider what has been discarded as stagnant and unproductive. Do not mistake this act of resistance as a call for an authentic Lebanese art. This politicisation of the territory aims at a deconstruction of that 'authentic instance': of what passes as proper familial, familiar, and inherent to a unitary Self (be it a subject, a family or a nation)" (cited in Sadek, "From Excavation to Dispersion," 74).

[332] Abillama catalogue entry in Ashkal Alwan, *First Sanayeh Garden Art Meeting Catalogue*, n.p. Translation mine.
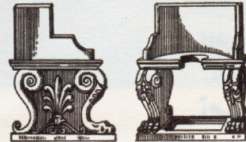
Il est arrivé quelque chose au dedans, à la demeure, au cœur et donc à la clôture en général: il y a une tache dans le tableau, quelque chose en lui de plus que lui. Un déchet impossible...
Gluant, opaque, elle empêche l'œil de percer, le "Je" de faire œuvre, de s'accomplir heureusement.

لقد طرأ على الداخل والبيت والقلب وعلى الحدود عموما. شيء. ففي اللوحة بقعة، شيء في داخلها يتجاوزها: نفاية مستحيلة. لزجة، كثيفة، تمنع العين من النفاذ وال «أنا» من الكمال.

لمى : إحكي زياد أنا بكتب .   زياد : عندي صعوبة أحكي بالعربي .
لمى : ليش هالصعوبة؟   زياد : لأنو في هجرة تأسّس من خلالها هالبلد .
لمى : شو يعني هجرة؟   زياد : يعني الانفصام يلّي حاول البعض إنو يتخطوا
من خلال التمييز الواضح بين داخل / خارج ،
نظافة / غربة ، فن / سياسة وغيرها . بس هالتمييز
مش واضح وممكن يعرّض لغربة inquiétante .
لمى : كيف معقول يصير الواضح غريب؟

هايلندر «was a moment of inspiration بيت بيوت »
Your moment of inspiration is an unsettled debt which makes me return as a living dead.

إذا صح أنّ كون المرء فناناً يعني كونه حرّاً، فالفنان accompli le politique laïque moderne.

كذلك فعنف السياسة المعاصرة يعلن عن نفسه – في ما هو يتوارى – عن طريق الفن: le bon art, le vrai, sera a-politique libre de consacrer l'Histoire des vainqueurs.

ولكن اليوم والى أجل فإنّ souveraineté الفنان هي ما يقطعه على نفسه من عهود فئوية، le lien politique désavoué qui en fait une espèce. Et à chaque espèce son zoo ou sa place.

«كن فناناً! كن سيدا! كن لبنانيا!» «Sois artiste! Sois souverain! Sois Libanais!»

Qu'en est-il des rapports entre l'art, le propre et l'étranger? ماذا عن مثلث الفن، الخاص / الخالص، الآخر / الغريب؟

وجهت هذه الأسئلة الى المشتركين في لقاء الصنائع:
«أحتاج لإتمام مشروعي الى شغل مكب يبلغ ضلعه ٣٠ سم على ان اعمل داخله كما ارى ذلك مناسبا لكن بدون اي خرق لحدود هذا المكب الطبيعية:
لن يفيض شيء عن حدود هذه المساحة.
١- هل توافق على إعطاء هذه المساحة؟
٢- هل تسمح للفنان ان يضع الحجم المتفق عليه في المكان الذي يحلو له بالنسبة الى عملك ام تفضل ان تعين له موضعاً محدداً؟   ١- يملك الفنان حرية اختياره. ب- أفضل ان أخصص له مساحة محددة.
٣- أتظن ان الفنانين يشكلون عائلة؟ «من» او «ما» قد يكون أعداء عائلة كهذه؟
٤- ما هو دور الفنان في كنف الأمة/الكون (Nation)؟

«ان التفير الوطني يحث من يخاطب بأن يدعوهم – وفي عداد من يدعو الفنانين – ان يكونوا هم وان يتجاوزوا انفسهم وهو يصدر في ذلك عن دعوة جمعية جوهرها جمالي محض، على هذا:
– هل يكون لقاء الصنائع إذا المثال الأعلى لرحابة الصدر الليبرالية الديمقراطية حيث يخلف كل فنان فضلاته الزكية دونما تعد على فردية زملائه.
– السياسة لوثة الفن.   – لا شميم للجمال.

L'appel au travail ou l'injonction nationale surmoïque est d'essence esthétique. Ou comment énoncer ces quelques maximes suivantes:
— L'Artiste moderne est un Nom Propre, mais «on ne se lave pas les mains sans maître».
— L'impasse politique terrible reste la questtion de la belle forme.

وظيفةُ المسترحات الحديثة أن تضاهي ثقوب السماء السوداء: أن تشهق عميقاً الأشياء جميعاً، أن تُحيلها أثراً بعد عين. لولاها ـ على ما يقول فلان ـ لما استمات أحدٌ دفاعاً عن بيته...
[...] lorsque l'on sait que le roi de France gérait lui-même les affaires politiques entre étrons pets et urine, bien installé sur son siège de porphyre percé.

زياد ابي اللمع، ١٩٩٥
مواليد ١٩٦٩

Figure 6: Ziad Abillama, First Sanayeh Garden Meeting, catalogue entry, 1995

The reluctance to make a work and exhibit it under his name seemed rather evident. Sadek reminds us in 2006 that Ashkal Alwan's *First Sanayeh Garden Meeting* in 1995 started with a call to resume what had been interrupted. The time of 'peace' before the war? Culture? Although he was among the participants in the exhibition, Sadek criticizes this call a decade later for its resemblance to the national call for a blank slate, as though one could innocently enter an impartial space in a city torn apart, and set up a simple parallel between the garden and the nation, between being citizen and being artist, which Sadek claims many artists were eager for. This is where, Abillama's intervention in Sanayeh embodies his "reluctance to join the party", being unable as he was to participate and be present without putting into question the very categories of

belonging or of making art "now that the civil war had been interrupted".[333]

In three intermingled languages, Abillama alludes to a number of sentiments in the catalogue entry: to his sense of exile and foreignness in relation to Lebanon the nation; to the sense that an artist is an impostor who does not, and does not want to belong; and to a mockery of 'good' or 'high' art, particularly as encapsulated in the proper name of the artist, enunciating the "I" required to make a work. In Abillama's intervention, this takes the literal form of a dark stain in the shape of the Lebanese state tarnishing the artist (Abillama's places a passport photo of himself with a black blotch in the shape of Lebanon across part of his face like an unfortunate birth mark).[334] This one-page entry is filled with excerpts from conversations or quotations in English, Arabic and French: "[…] *Gluant, opaque, elle empeche l'œil de percer, le "Je" de faire œuvre, de s'accomplir heureusement.*" Further below a snippet of a dialogue in Arabic: "Lama: Ziad[,] you speak I'll write. Ziad: I have trouble speaking in Arabic. Lama: Why this trouble? Ziad: Because this country is founded on emigration. Lama: What does emigration mean? Ziad: It means the separation that many have tried to gulf by distinguishing between inside/outside, clean/exile, art/politics […]".[335] In the immediate post-war, flooded by rhetoric of building national identity and unity (under conditions we have reiterated above), Abillama was wary of artists falling into the same trap within the confines of art exhibitions and their allocated spaces of exhibition under their own proper names, in the name of a particular breed of art that calls upon itself to "resume what has been interrupted." Untitled and poignant, this intervention as a set of questions, requests, unreferenced quotations, a 'scarred' passport photo and more, still remains just that – an intervention. And like much of Abillama's work at the time, is an

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[333] Sadek, "Place at Last," 38. This turn of phrase regarding the war being "interrupted" is not an accidental retort to AA's call to resume what had been interrupted – i.e., peacetime. By placing this in the text, Sadek hints that, in fact, it is the war that has been temporarily interrupted, not 'normal' living or peacetime. For another discussion of Abillama's gesture see Jalal Toufic, (Vampires), pp. 97-98.

[334] The legacy of the French Mandate in the form of francophone, bourgeois culture, and the currently dominant, American popular culture, English, Arabic and French are very often intertwined in everyday conversation with this type of code-switching being common. It is also not neutral, but often a source of mockery since it refers to bourgeois privilege and education, anti-Arab politics of those who are francophone (and, to a lesser degree, Anglophone), and to concomitant class and cultural divisions of those who were exiled or studied in Europe and America (like Abillama himself).

[335] Abillama catalogue entry in Ashkal Alwan, *First Sanayeh Garden Art Meeting Catalogue*, n.p. Translation mine.

intrusion that is transient; a set of stark remarks that pierce through the ideological fabric of that recent Lebanese history. This kind of output's very need for its context, embedded as it is in that indexicality, harks the co-extensiveness with political modernism in our discussion above.

The reaction to Abillama's work in the daily press was noted by Sadek. He positions himself and his cohorts as divorced from such mainstream, conservative art institutions as the Lebanese Artists' Association of Painters and Sculptors (LAAPS). In particular, he cites the reaction to *San Balech* by one member of the LAAPS in the cultural supplement of the national *Annahar* newspaper, which calls for "artistic purity and stresses concurrently the binding clarity of Lebanese national identity"[336]. Demands put forth by the them include that "exhibited works must be sculptures or monuments of value, made of solid materials that can resist time."[337] The ideals and values espoused by such foundations as the LAAPS, were what Sadek and some artists of his generation had initially worked against, at least by ignoring. As we discuss below, some of the pertinent work of the 1990s was, in fact, based on dispersed, text-based works that challenged those very notions of monumentality, autonomy, or calls for 'authentic' Lebanese practices. "It will appear that 'territorializing' our work is a resistive gesture which does not aim at producing 'Lebanese' or 'authentic' Art. It is rather a serious (yet playful) critical engagement with the political and philosophical situation of 'authenticity'," as Sadek and Abillama would remind us in an excerpt from their joint, unpublished manifesto.[338]

According to Sadek, Abillama's work (alongside that of others working during that brief period) operated on three levels. These include non-infatuation or non-enchantment with the post-war sheen of reconstruction and the newly packaged life on offer and, therefore, a critical consciousness against this particular breed of a post-war ideological project. These can be read as tactics that induce an alienation effect, in Brechtian terms, as we continue to argue. Excavation, which connects the work to a place and its specificities, and is the tendency of sorting and sifting through the official

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[336]*Al Mulhaq* weekly supplement, *Annahar*, 14 November, 1998, 7.
[337] Sadek, "From Excavation to Dispersion," 76; citing LAAPS, "A Statement by the Association of Lebanese Artists to the Lebanese Public."
[338] Abillama and Sadek, Unpublished manifesto, n.p

operation of reconfiguring Lebanese society economically, socially and politically, laying the groundwork for the relation between the artistic and the non-artistic through an installation that exposes its own theatricality. And transience, which seems to characterize work that is transitory and dispersive, contra the edicts to monumentalise and commodify, and thus left to decay as in Abillama's *San Balech* installation.

The tactics of textual appropriation (words, excerpts, quotations) and dispersion (interventions in non-artistic spaces with objects including billboards, maps, postcards and the newspaper format that could reach indeterminately large readers and audiences) act to imbalance the inherited meanings in the Lebanese spheres of production and consumption of art, of what artworks should do. They proposed what could be the resurrection belatedly in history of an anti-aesthetic, and challenged art's autonomy, here, perhaps understood naively as its commodification. They desired to give something back to a mass audience, bringing into being even. While alienating, it prodded and addressed them.

For instance, Abillama's futuristic booklet composed of sardonic texts and images of a now purposely fetishized missile (as we saw in San Balech) in various household contexts, *Systeme Full Fill* borrows from the writings of Walter Benjamin, Franz Fanon, George Bataille, Paul Virilio and others, on speed, on war, on revolution, on the end of the state and the laziness of the colonized as sabotage of the colonial machine. Although not explicitly plagiarism, the practice of vociferous quoting and repurposing systems of signification, as we see in Tony Chakar below, highlights Guy Debord's statement that "ideas improve. The meaning of words participates in the improvement. Plagiarism is necessary. Progress implies it. It embraces an author's phrase, makes use of his expression, erases a false idea, and replaces with a right idea."[339] And this not for gratuitous participation in art, but from the critique of critical theory.

It follows then that such works as *Systeme Full Fill* (1995) and *All That is Solid Melts into Air* by Tony Chakar (2000), among others, had their underlying basis in historical forms of critique: "[…] For the displacing of texts and quotes is not an operation critically directed back towards their primary sources and origins[,] but rather

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[339] *The Society of the Spectacle*, chapter 8, section 207, "Negation and Consumption within Culture," theses #190 and #191. *Systeme Full Fill* accompanied an installation.

it is a temporal/transient appropriation and borrowing of available speech[...] whose objective is the construction of a vocality for a besieged subjectivity in a moment of protestation that does not conceal the process of its own construction but rather exposes its sutures."[340] The use of theory, dispersion, distanciation, and the very act of bringing attention to the apparatus and sutures of one's work through parody, dead-pan, alienation effect and other devices – are intended to invert the subject of ideology against the rigid calls for a fixed, monumental, national art, or against existing art institutions and conventional places of display. They are not for sale or collection; they appear and become dispersed and distributed to a mass public; they engage with the status of the autonomy of the art object; they reflect on their status as commodities.

Figure 7: Tony Chakar, All That is Solid Melts Into Air, offset print poster, 2000

In *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (2000), architect and essayist Tony Chakar borrows texts from several unreferenced sources, which read seamlessly above a large, out-dated, reversed Ottoman map of Beirut. A large poster format – it needs to be opened in order to be viewed – it is printed in several copies and freely distributed. In a

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[340] Sadek, "From Excavation to Dispersion," 79.

nod to the Situationist International's notions of psycho-geography, instead of a legend Chakar types: "Legend: Psycho-Geographical and Temporal". In its being an out-dated and defunct map – save for thirteen circular 'keyholes' photo-montaged to 'pop' out and bring into focus the gridded front of thirteen modernist buildings in Beirut – it can be read as oppositional to the cyclopean and military-visual perspective of maps, usually very 'useful', with the concomitant alienating effect they produce of actual, embodied urban experience. The physicality of the map needs to be read with its 'content'. The excerpts in Arabic proclaim this reading, or anti-reading, of maps in the political spaces of catastrophe.[341] "Our understanding of geographical space always passes through the medium of the map, and it's a confusing understanding because it contradicts the experience of the body in space-time. Unitary time was imposed by law, unitary geography was imposed by the map [...] With the dissolution of the Empire, this map turned into a ruin […] that unconscious beauty of this abstracted ruination, that witnesses to the arrogance of Empire[...] All that is solid melts into air[;] all that is sacred is profaned. Everything that we know is about to end transforms into an image. This is as it shall be and as it once was. I observe in terror a past future whose currency is death. I am weary of a catastrophe that has already taken place."[342]

The limited-edition printed form of intervention was also practised by others, including Sadek; for instance, the temporary billboard left to yellow in the sun on the busy corner of Hamra Street and Sadat Street named, *I Don't Think People Leave Hamra Street* (in Arabic, 350x400cm), was shown as part of the Ashkal Alwan's *Hamra Street Project* (2000); the tiny 7x11cm booklet *Bigger Than Picasso* (1999) that we discuss below; Bilal Khbeiz and Sadek's *Al-Kasal* (Indolence, 1999), which took the format of a newspaper and stages a large photograph of a single man on each page lying down on his back or side, apparently sleeping (or dead) on an empty background. A few lines of text accompany each image. The accompanying texts provoke indolence in the face of newspaper actuality; laziness in the face of progress, consumerism, work. Sadek cites these types of works, from Abillama to his own collaboration with Khbeiz, as instances

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[341] A problematic Chakar frequently returns to. See also *Catastrophic Space* (2006), a guided walking tour on the periphery of the bombed-out southern suburbs of Beirut.

[342] Chakar, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*. Without referencing, Chakar quotes Jean Baudrillard, Roland Barthes, Karl Marx, Walter Benjamin, Shelly Rice and Erwin Strauss, all translated into Arabic. English translation mine.

of a public 'clash' between what constitutes art and what does not – a particularly new discussion in the post-war period and one for Sadek, as we saw above, whose terms needed to be set by post-civil war artists and their politics, and which return us to the question of an anti-monumentality as an anti-aesthetics, and a political formalism that bids self-reflexivity on the category of art itself and its representations, made urgent in the then current climate.

In a slight diversion, the ousting of the remaining Israeli armed forces from Lebanon and the liberation of the South was a victory for Hezbollah in 2000. It crystallized their hold on the Lebanese resistance imaginary and actuality, which had taken many forms. First, in the 1980's at their inception and during their systematic side-lining of Leftist, secular groups; then in the early 1990s with the deeply conservative hold of their leader Abbas al-Mussawi and the many manifestations and rallies across the capital in the post-war years; then, through the more seemingly moderate, tactical, yet larger-than-life present-day figurehead Hassan Nasrallah, whose images (along with most political figures, dead and alive, according to constituencies and neighbourhoods, with or without the excuse of elections) are enlarged and placed all over the country. The Islamic Resistance was considered not only to have infiltrated and destroyed the Lebanese Left but with its discourse on and images of martyrdom, heroism and victory, is said to have become an unquestioned, national myth, restricting the meaning and possibility of resistance to its own policies. Rabih Mroueh and Elias Khoury's performance *Three Posters* (2000) is precisely a case in point here, dealing with this legacy and loss in the present through the phenomenon of video-taped martyr testimonies, and the ways in which the latter is a form of image, acting, witnessing and representation.

The poster form, which has been a consistent format for the entire spectrum of political parties and formations from the 1960s onwards, was one also espoused by Hezbollah for its leaders and martyrs alike.[343] Sadek responds with a travesty. *Better Left Untitled* (2000) is a photomontage transformed into a 2x3m life-sized poster that Sadek hung only once on the street, and many years later destroyed. He creates a photocollage using an image of Nasrallah with Sadek's own head inserted into the nook of Nasrallah's

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[343] Maasri, *Off the Wall.*

forearm as though the latter was playfully wrestling him, or holding him down tightly yet good-naturedly in an impossible, paternal 'embrace': Sadek's small, smiling head facing the spectator directly, and Nasrallah large, overbearing, unaffected, his gaze seemingly surveying the lands ahead, in a possible nod to fascist state leaders' portraits in propaganda posters from the last century.
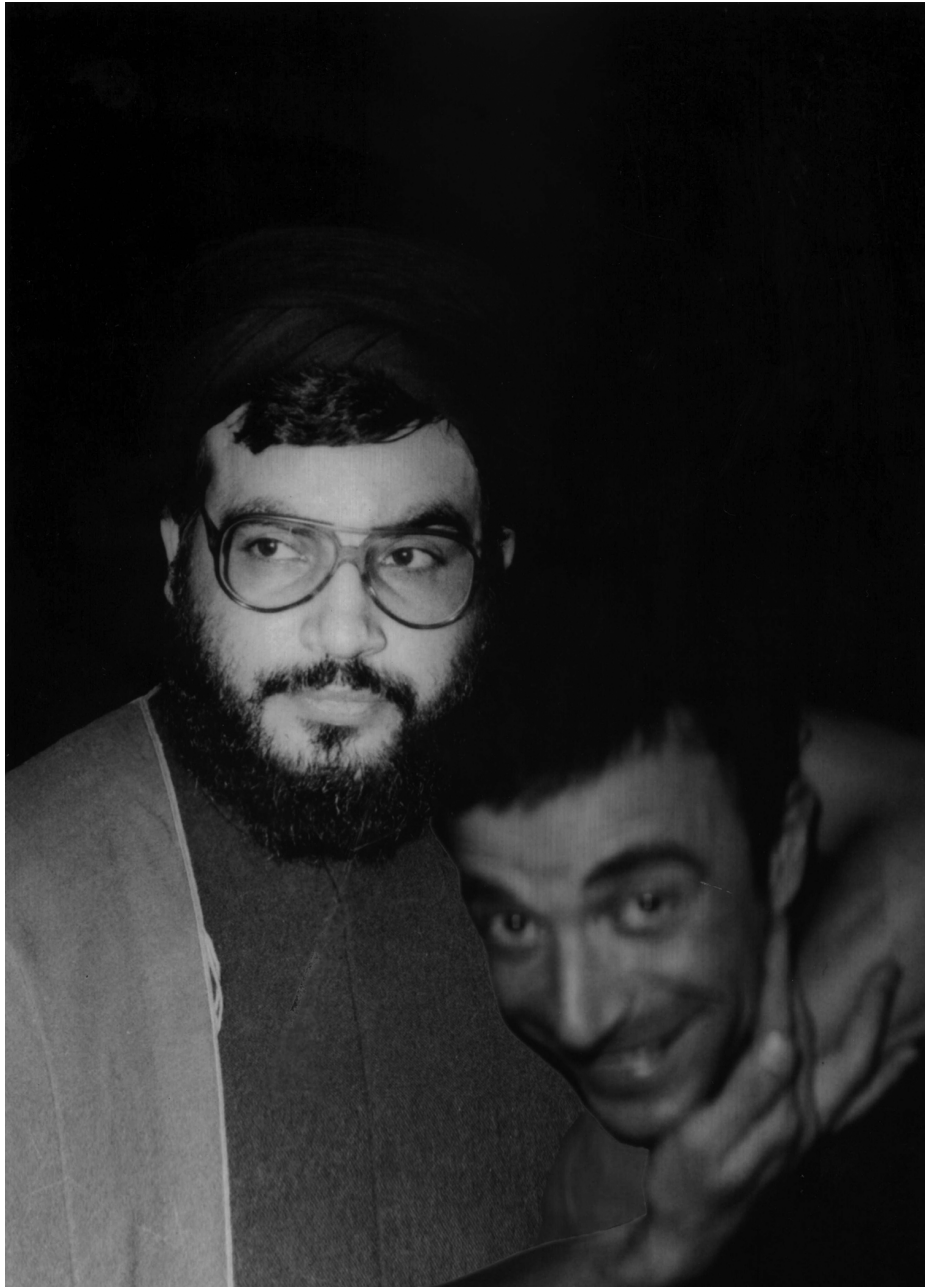

Figure 8: Walid Sadek, Better Left Untitled, photomontage poster, 2000

For Walid Raad, writing to Sadek in 2006, this work acts literally and metonymically as an impossible image to apprehend and, simultaneously, as a foreshadowing. Moreover, it is an image of a fan in the arms of an idol or an older uncle,

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someone with familial or familiar power; a parody, or further, a figure of speech. For Raad, what it foreshadows from the year 2000 is the 2006 war on Lebanon, and the party's subsequent further hold on the country politically and ideologically through myriad forms: speeches, television dramas, films, flyers, posters and banners filling the country with slogans of 'divine victory'. Critiquing these manifestations during this time was equal to siding with Israel, heretic accusations being rampant. In addition, Nasrallah's populist, sarcastic wit in televised speeches addressing Israel or Lebanese audiences (particularly during the 2006 invasion and bombings) are, by extension, performed here in Sadek's poster. He gazes across an imagined land off camera, while Sadek gazes directly at us.

Two images composing a third plane: the premise of early European avant-gardes surrealist collage by the likes of Max Ernst, and later used in the anti-Nazi and anti-fascist photomontage posters of El Lissitzky and John Heartfield.[344] The use of photomontage was a common tactic also among photographers like Martha Rosler, where the employment of photography with popular, vernacular images and products was not uncommon practice.[345]

Steve Edwards, writing on Rosler, reminds us that the marrying of photography (image) and text was common in late conceptual art and conceptual photography, with such artists as Robert Smithson, Dan Graham and Hans Haacke working in the United States from the 1960s. Rosler, however, places her lineage within pop art and its use of the vernacular mode. (Both can be traces for Edwards to Brecht's lineage and to second-wave political modernism). This was coupled with an "explosion of words in the art of the time [that] was also significant in breaking the modernist insistence on an art of

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[344] The late 1920s, the popular rise of both photography and technical reproduction facilitated this form of art and its reproducibility. "Mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual [… and] the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility", as Benjamin explains in "The Work of Art," 218. Ritual (and 'seriality', which was at the heart of much neo avant-garde work in both pop and conceptual art in their various iterations) here is used in contradistinction with 'direct politics'. This also links up more broadly with some of his arguments in "The Author as Producer."

[345] See, for instance, Rosler's photomontage series *Bringing the War Home* (1967-1972). In *Better Left Untitled*, Sadek created first a collage, then, via a form of printing on vinyl, the montage that ended up being the poster. In that sense, it is both collage and montage. A single copy was made and exhibited only once – during the Ayloul Festival in September of the year 2000, following the liberation of the South.

purely visual experience".[346] The vernacular was said to and configured to stand against abstraction, high formalism, as well as the transcendent claims of high modernist art. In our context, as we have seen, there were other forms of turning away from the tropes of the canonical nude, landscape, portrait and abstract modern painting within painting, and through the vernacular, and against social documentary through conceptual practices. Borrowing from popular and political culture, allying image and text (sometimes relying solely on text), deploying direct address to the viewer and working in serial form, were common features. Being symptoms of a critical consciousness, and certainly a shift in representational paradigms, we couple these in the case of Beirut with the dispersive forms of the map, the scarps (objects of war and commodity culture), the booklet, the poster, the postcard, and the performance art and lecture of such artists as Lina Saneh's and Rabih Mroueh's.

A final example that encapsulates some of the elements above is Walid Sadek's booklet *Bigger Than Picasso* (1999), measuring 7x11cm, in which he repetitively reproduces over the span of 31 minuscule pages the same photographic image. This photograph is of the Hafez al-Assad monument, which takes the form of an obelisk and was erected in Beirut for the late Syrian dictator in the late 1990s. Baath-Party rule was ferocious, and hundreds had been imprisoned and killed at the hands of the Syrian army in Lebanon since 1976. How to engage with the erection of a monument in Assad's honour in the capital city? Vandalize it? In Sadek's book, the angle of the photographic images are identical. It is night, there are no cars, and the obelisk appears a few meters away in the distance, illuminated. It appears as though there are slight variations in colour, which could be due either to low-cost printing (most images are black-and-white, while a couple are printed in colour) or to an intentional variation in printing or saturation that changes from page to page. This effect seems facilitated by the book's tiny size that allows flipping through it as though it were a (children's) flip book. In that sense, it is a book composed of photographic images of a still and static monument, but that can act or be 'read' as a moving image of the same image over and over. Yet, no actual action occurs. The reality of the singular monument is reduced to the vacuous repetitiveness of a recurring image. A monument is precisely, however, unique and

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[346] Edwards, *Martha Rosler,* 76.

monolithic. What may happen to it when you reproduce it, 'serialize' it? In this regard, even if obliquely, it is reminiscent of pop art and of Andy Warhol's seriality in his *Death and Disaster* series from the mid-1960s (based on newspaper photographs of burning-car accidents or electric chairs), where images are also reproduced in slightly different variations, though seemingly identical, on the same plane – obviously a signature style in Warhol's other early painterly oeuvres of icons and commodities.[347] Yet *Bigger Than Picasso* in not merely an image-based work, and alongside the miniaturized images are excerpts culled from books that quote historical incidents of vandalized artworks.[348]
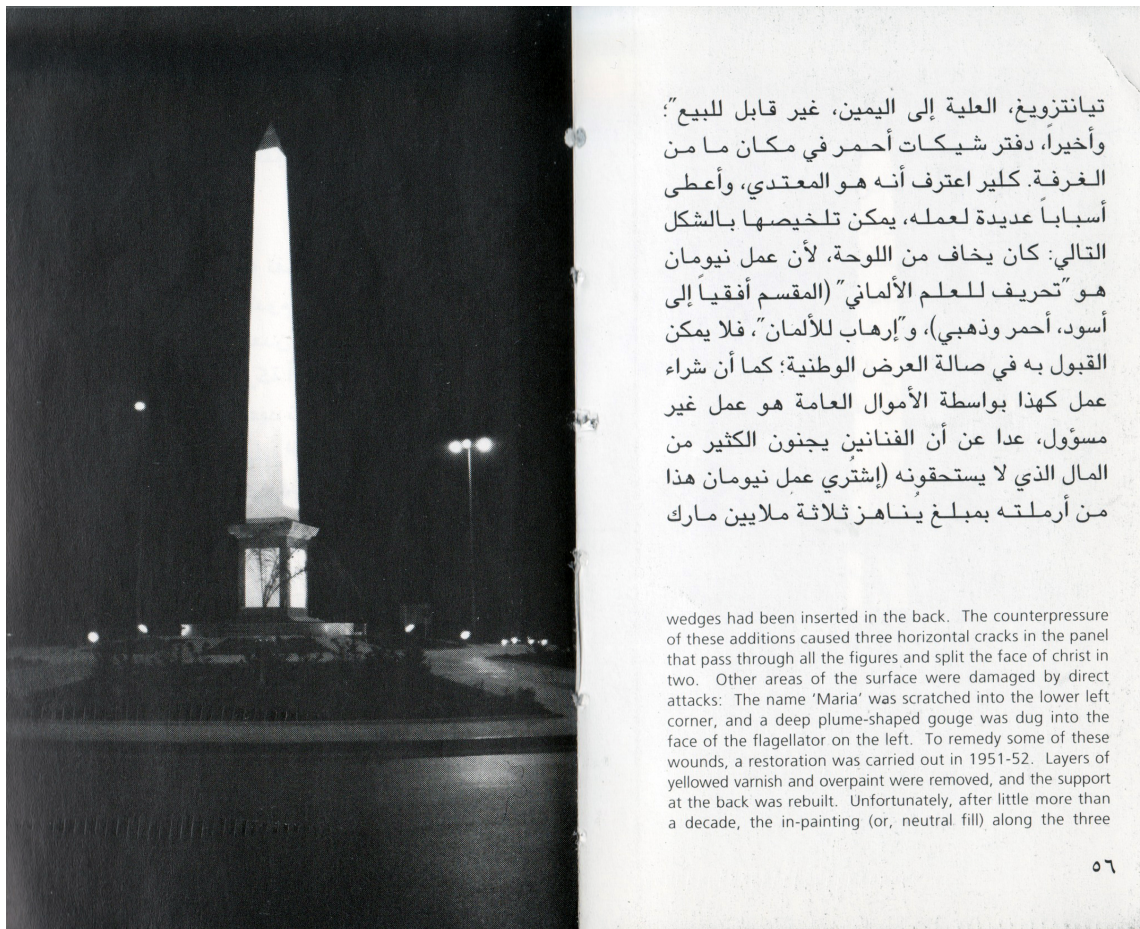
Figure 9: Walid Sadek, Bigger Than Picasso, booklet 7x11cm, 1999

Sonja Mejcher-Atassi reads this as an act of vandalism against the monument itself in the absence of other means. An insightful reading, yet one that could

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[347] Seriality here is associated with an opposition to the singular, monolithic piece, an approach used by pop art as much as by conceptual art.

[348] Not outright plagiarism, the works from which the excerpts are taken are cited in the beginning, "all rights are not reserved" and include an eponymous biography of Lebanese painter Khalil Saleebi by Sameer Saleebi, and Dario Gamboni's *The Destruction of Art.* As cited in Mechjer-Atassi, "Art and Political Dissent in Post-War Lebanon."

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disempower the compelling character of the work itself. For she gives primacy to the work being a substitute for the act, whereby the work could be, *is* the act, is the performative utterance. The monument would not have been vandalized by Sadek, for that would have further monumentalized it. The primacy, furthermore, lies in the written word and in what the text evokes as mental image juxtaposed with the monument. Meaning – upon seeing the photograph of the monument (or even the monument itself after having read *Bigger Than Picasso*) – one 'sees' the descriptions of different varieties of vandalism accompanying it, as Sadek locks them together. Those conjured mental images compete with the monolith and mutter louder. Small and secretive, the book was freely distributed (or for a negligible price) and printed in multiple copies. The format betrays the monumentality of the monument as Mejcher-Atassi rightfully reminds; the snatching of quotes stands in opposition to the "monument that claims perfection and consistency of expression, from which it derives its dreadful silence […] a monument, in a sense, is the authority of the dead and 'an art without observers.'"[349]

4.2.1 "Ceci n'est pas une image juste, c'est juste une image"

The notion of a so-called besieged vocality broached by Lebanese artists occurred through different conduits. The problem of representation, of thinking the relation between historical experience and representation, the suspicion of operating under the sign of victimhood and other concerns, intrinsically begged attention to the politics of form and image. It could be said that the question of the witness, as we undertake it, is also the problem of the relationship between experience and representation, content and form, events and their 'double' through testimony. The problem of the image as it relates to artists after the war refers to a number of things. It has in large part to do with a form of iconoclasm carried out by the some Lebanese artists with regards to the problem of representing experience, and its associated theoretical baggage associated with the inability and suspicion of images pertaining to

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[349] Sadek, "From Excavation to Dispersion," 79. Tactics of culling from sources with or without reference also are common in film essays and feature films. See the work of film-maker Ghassan Salhab, for whom Debord to Godard were influential, and who both used these formal tactics. See, for instance, Salhab's video in the aftermath of the Israeli war on Lebanon *(Posthume)* (2007) and his feature film *Terra Incognita* (2002).

extreme events, despite an insistence on images nonetheless.

This production *nonetheless* is itself informed by a number of image-making practices, the potential of both essay film (and video) and montage, the influences of modernism and of late conceptual art. It also had to do with the interest in and forced confinement by a 'global art world' bent on reading post-war Lebanese art practice within the parameters of Lebanese, or Middle Eastern, or Arab identity, as 'alternative' or 'subversive' with regards to the images it generates 'about' conflict, and the way artists negotiated this.

A short text by artist Akram Zaatari from a special issue devoted to contemporary Lebanese artists by the Arab literary magazine *Al-Adab* encapsulates part of this problematic.[350] Zaatari, a video artist, film-maker and, later, installation artist, gives the example of the delay between sight and sound when a bomb explodes. He recalls looking with the naked eye to the Sidon hills (region south of Beirut where Zaatari grew up and lived throughout the war, and from which his early documentation in the form of recordings and photos became the source of much of his later artistic practice) being bombarded by Israeli warplanes in the early 1980s, and remembers waiting on the balcony, watchfully, for the sound to reach them. He compares this to the images and sounds of bombardments in mainstream cinema, noticing how the two in fact always, falsely, occur together "with zero distance".[351] In doing so, it misleads viewers into the centre of the event, an impossibility, a manipulation that flattens the field of experience by effacing the very distance of experience. Unless one dies in the midst of the event – the explosion – experience always implies distance.

Zaatari's perspective (along with that of Walid Raad, as we see below) re-presents the ways in which the experience of war and its narration as configured as belated. It echoes our earlier deliberation of Maurice Blanchot's "inexperienced experience" of death as discussed by Jacques Derrida.[352] It is perhaps in that space and temporality of delay that Zaatari believes a story can be told – one that inches far closer to the event than Hollywood renditions of explosions that flatten the field of experience, vision and sound to zero, making a claim for a truth that is ideologically-driven and

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[350] Zaatari, "Farther than zero."
[351] ibid., n. p.
[352] Blanchot and Derrida, *The Instant of My Death and Demeure.*

spectacular. Those three axes (experience, vision, sound) also can be the conditions for the making of a film. In his early documentary film *All is Well on the Border* (1997) – referring to the Israeli border in occupied South Lebanon at the time, liberated in 2000 – Zaatari purports to do just that; by showing the distance through, among other means, a delay between sound and image when an armoured vehicle fires, he filmically performs this delay. Even if it appears like a fiction through montage, it also enacts the distance of that Israeli border – the war and occupation of South Lebanon raged even as life in the rest of the country was one of 'peacetime' and reconstruction – as opposed to its alleged closeness and familiarity as portrayed on a daily basis by local televised media.

In order to contextualize the questions emerging from a particular kind of image-production, it is useful to broaden the discussion to tackle the second part of our argument and to return to some issues raised in Chapter 1. In a conversation between Irmgard Emmelhainz and the London artist duo The Otolith Group (OG) about their film *Nervus Rerum* (2008), which is set in the Jenin Palestinian refugee camp, they had this to say to Emmelhainz, who was pressing them about what forms could still locate the possibility of speaking truth to power, or bearing witness to life the Israeli occupation of Palestine and life in the camps: "This phrase 'turning one's back to power' comes from a film by Reece Auguiste of the Black Audio Film Collective called *Mysteries of July* from 1991 concerning a number of unsolved deaths of young Afro-Caribbean men in police custody in [northeast] London in the late 1980's. We wanted to see what might happen if we mobilized that notion so as to open up a potential mode of address that was neither one of resistance nor of victimization – both of which tend to centre the frame around occupying forces in an image of absent presence."[353] Emmelhainz, meanwhile, who wrote her dissertation on Jean-Luc Godard's films and Palestine, reminds us that "the ethics of bearing witness that have prevailed since the 1970's [...] proved to be so ineffective."[354]

The OG work through what Édouard Glissant has called 'opacity'. As a tactic, for both camera and artist, they refer to it as a form of intimacy without transparency, a sort of closeness with distance whereby images can occupy an exemplary position. Art

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[353] Otolith Group and Emmelhainz, "A Trialogue on Nervus Rerum," 129.
[354] ibid.

historian Demos discusses *Nervus Rerum* in terms of resilience against surrendering to the transparency of images, to their ensnaring potential, to the prison of our habituated image-world. This technique, as well as choice of image, voice-over, montage, what is shown and what is not, and the ways this is embodied in their ghostly steady-cam, they call opacity. Following Glissant, this becomes a way to complicate habitual testimonial modes of address and the knowledge they allegedly produce, and to create opaque spaces within regimes of impenetrable autarchy.[355]

Film-makers like Jayce Salloum, Mohamad Soueid, Akram Zaatari and Walid Raad pondered the representation of Lebanon circulating in local press and the West on the one hand, but also stood apart from an older generation of Lebanese film-makers more directly engaged in filming the war and its effects.[356] Early on, such films as Salloum's *This Is Not Beirut (There Was And There Was Not)* (1992-1994) tried to grapple not with how to represent war, but how representations of the city circulated – from the 'Pearl of the Orient' to an incomparable war zone – and that the 'Beirut' they were seeking to capture and film, or even for others to film, was not to be found. It was a series of circulating myths, televisual images, American film tropes, historical scripts, words in novels, and absent on maps. As we hear In the voice off as an anonymous soldier leads Salloum to the top of one of the bombed-out hotels: "Representation of what? Representation of representations? There is no word in Arabic for 'representation'. I will invent one."[357] The film's first fifteen minutes are dedicated precisely to representing those frames. Using archival images from the Ottoman period, to a Beirut shown burning, caving in under bombs, to international television coverage of the war, war journalists' voice-overs, and tourist postcards and souvenirs, the film's underlying thread is a search – a film about a making a film. Filmed conversations between Salloum and co-director, a young Walid Raad – both having returned temporarily from Canada and the United States to ask questions about identity and *how* to even begin making a film – revolve a search for *how* and from *what position* to make a film about Beirut, its warring communities and meanings of resistance, of representation; a search for Beirut itself

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[355] See Demos, "The Right to Opacity."

[356] For instance, Maroun Baghdadi, who was making films during the war about the war, including *Little Wars* (1982), *War on War* (1984) and others. Other directors include Jocelyne Saab, Heiny Srour and Burhan Alawiya.

[357] Translation mine.

through trying to make apparent the fictions and images this name 'Beirut' has conjured. The war itself is produced and reproduced by these images as regulatory of the field of vision. "It is not a just image, it is just an image."[358]

Figure 10: Jayce Salloum/Walid Raad, This is Not Beirut (There was and there was not), video still, 1992

We find here that the Lebanese wars were perhaps 'over-representable' and over-represented, rather than un-representable. Unlike the situation of representation in/of Palestine that was characterized by the struggle for visibility, acknowledgment and justice due to Israel's colonization through persistent practices of effacement, and founding myths that infamously claimed 'a land without a people for a people without a land'.[359] For the likes of Edward Said, Hamid Dabashi, and even T. J. Demos in his writings on the OG, the need for visibility and vocality arose in Palestinian cinema and art in the aftermath of *al-Nakba* (the Catastrophe, or the day in May 1948 when the Israeli state was declared), forging its documentary aesthetic as focused on plight, victim

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[358] "*Ce n'est pas une image juste, c'est juste une image*" (Jean-Luc Godard in *Notre Musique,* 2005). Translation is mine.

[359] This phrase has been variously attributed to the early Zionist colonization of Palestine. Palestinian scholars Edward Said and Rashid Khalidi have traced the usage and implications of the phrase. See, for instance, Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity;* and Said, *The Question of Palestine*. See also, Muir, "A Land."

testimonies, continuous military occupation and Israeli state violence.

Jean-Luc Godard tells us in his film *Notre Musique* (2005):"In 1948 the Israelites walk on water to reach the Promised Land; the Palestinians walk on water toward their drowning. The Jewish people rejoin fiction, the Palestinians, the documentary. Shot and counter-shot."[360] What could he mean? Palestine, the land of Israel's Zionist dream, is actualized for them, and Israel's fiction is the negation of Palestine and the Palestinians living within it. The Palestinians join the ethically-/ethnographically-grounded tradition of documentary through being consistently portrayed as dispossessed victims; speaking and drowning qua victims. However, in the face of this 'under-representability' there have also been responses from within and outside Palestine that undercut the enumeration of the catastrophic, and favour fiction and a turning-away or a turning-one's-back (to echo the OG above).[361]

From Palestine to World War II. In Chris Marker's film *Level 5* (1997) Kinjo, a survivor of and a witness to the Battle of Okinawa in Japan (April-June 1945) recounts how he was choking with tears and anguish while killing his own mother. The now-Christian reverend tells how the young men around him at the time of the US invasion had also killed their beloved wives, siblings and children with makeshift sticks and bare hands, out of love and honour; immolation, but never death, at the hands of the enemy. Through combining first-hand witness testimonies, still and moving archival images from the time of the war and its aftermath, and a certain fictional Laura whose dead lover has left her a game she navigates to uncover the different aspects of the Battle of Okinawa – but never reaches the advanced levels, as though comprehension entails death – Marker examines the imaginary of war and the difficulties of making a war film,[362] particularly on the battle of Okinawa to which little official documentation and attention has been given.[363]

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[360] Godard, *Notre Musique*.

[361] There are examples of film-makers such as Elia Suleiman and others who have attempted to move past these modes of address, and there is a generation of young Palestinian film-makers and artists who have been asking similar pressing questions regarding representation, probing the continued military occupation and life in Palestine. These include contemporary artists like Emily Jacir, Yazan Khalili, Mahdi Fleifel and others. See also, Hamid Dabashi, *Dreams of a Nation.*

[362] In *Level 5*, a voice-over in an Okinawa war museum says: "[…] As long as there is no olfactory cinema like there is a spoken cinema, there will be no war film[; …] quite prudent actually[,] because at that moment there would be no more spectators" (1:21:16; translation mine).

[363] On the first page of the preface to *The American Occupation of Japan and Okinawa*, which explores Japanese fictional and artistic imaginary of the American military occupation, Molasky explains how

In connecting the imagery of this battle with other images and events past, present and fictive,[364] what Marker seems to investigate is the potential and place of the image itself. More specifically, the iconic status of the image (filmed witness testimonies, historical archival reels of US soldiers planting flags) as visual evidence and index of reality is put under scrutiny. Because the image is marked by ambivalence (but inevitably also by an indexical quality like a legend marking a present absence, and thus its alleged potential for agency),[365] the further montage of those images for Marker not only serves to reconstitute a lost past of the brutal US invasion, but also to interrupt and contest either absent or conclusive narratives as they are commonly presented in conventional documentary histories.

Essayistic film-makers as different as Jean-Luc Godard, the OG and the Black Audio Film Collective[366], have engaged similar techniques of non-linear montage, fictive interventions, archival images juxtaposed with composed ones, in trying to articulate political positions on history not as official or linear, but as enigmatic and oppressive, granting it meaning not merely as recuperation of the past, but as a constructive process that potentially re-invents it for the future.[367]

In addition, Marker interrogates the status of the document by reflecting on other filmic sources and on the films' own mode of construction, whereby the work becomes a meta-documentary or meta-film. In his aesthetic, he contests the illusion of film as conditional tool of reality; abandoning the use of the cinematic apparatus as that

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his "reading in Japanese literature and history had taught me virtually nothing about Okinawa […] where a massive U.S. military presence remained the most visible but overlooked legacies of the American occupation years" (ix).

[364] A tour of a local war museum, footage of tourists visiting the caves that hid non-combatants torched to death by the US army, grainy footage of women jumping off cliffs to avoid death at the hands of the enemy, images of soldier landings and the fictional character Laura who devises the computer game which, in turn, allows us access to witness accounts.

[365] See Gell, *Art and Agency* for a discussion of images and objects as indexes of social agency; and Belting, *Likeness and Presence.*

[366] Formed in 1982 by John Akomfrah, Lina Gopaul, Avril Johnson, Reece Auguiste, Trevor Mathison, Edward George and Claire Joseph. Its objectives were, in large part, to document aspects of (occluded) Afro-Caribbean history and blackness in Britain and the diaspora through critical film essays drawing on archival sources and their singular poetic style and montage. See also Godard's *Notre Musique* (2004), *Je Vous Salue Sarajevo* (1994), *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* (1988-1998), and of course the oeuvre of the Dziga Vertov Group. See, for example, OG's *Otolith I-III* and more recent works.

[367] See, for example, Cassagnau, *Future Amnesia*. She introduces the idea of a third cinema between fiction and documentary that is neither video art, nor experimental cinema, but manages to be both as it flanks archives with fictitious characters, scenarios with autobiography, past with present and future. See also, Marker's *La Jetée (1962)* and *Sans Soleil (1983)*.

which actualizes events and turns them into a narrative format, Marker takes the aporia and trauma of Okinawa and uses the cinematic mechanism to question orthodox and linear historicism, turning it into "a machine that quotes from the past, interrupts the flow of time, actively combines and recombines images ruptured and snatched from the past. The film assembles these quotations into a form of juxtaposition that provokes questions and thought rather than produces a seamless linear narrative." [368] This underlines a science fiction, where "the future is a better key to the present than the past"[369], a temporal theme we elaborate in the final chapter of this thesis.
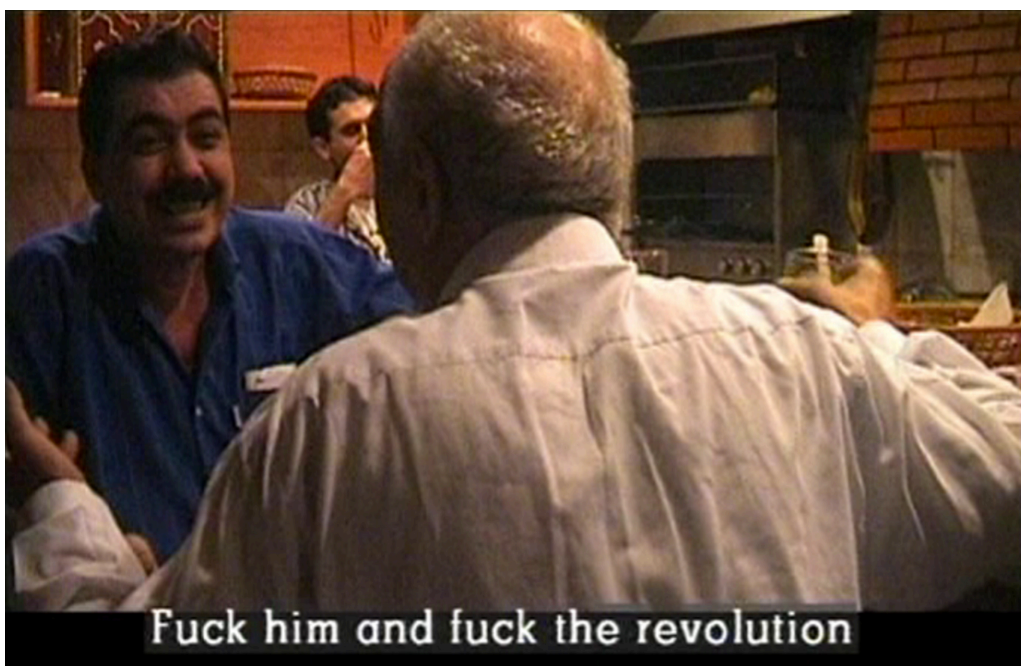
Figure 11: Mohamad Soueid, Nightfall, video still, 2000

Akram Zaatari, in conversation with two other prominent documentary and video artists, Mohamad Soueid and Mahmoud Hojeij, claims that even films made in the post-war era are, in fact, about the war; and the choice of video during that time seemed an obvious choice for artists weary of the television industry or the straight-narrative, feature-film form: "Here, in Beirut, in Cairo, or in Damascus, it is a conscious political choice to choose video over film or the television industry."[370] Although Zaatari claims to desire social change, he says "it won't happen through video, nor through art in general[...] If we agree that our goal is to produce personal documents of our era, then

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[368] Kear, "A Game That Must Be Lost," 139.
[369] Eshun and Dery, *Five Conversations*, 24.
[370] Hojeij, Soueid and Zaatari, "Disciplined Spontaneity," 83.

our audience is time,"[371] in order to contribute to an alternative writing of history.

In *Civil Wars* (2002) and *Nightfall* (2000) by Mohamad Soueid, *All is Well on the Border* (1997) and *In This House* (2005) by Zaatari, artists investigate the remnants and disillusionment of the struggles of the Left in the Lebanese context. These were confronted not by avoiding images altogether, but through and from within the medium of video and the format of the documentary essay, and not without an awareness of the very apparatus: "It is difficult to use interviews merely to provide a viewpoint without exploring the tool itself."[372] Soueid, more particularly, juxtaposes archival documents and images, and explores incongruity between image and sound, employing a non-linear narrative in what became a recognizable modes of montage and voice-over, with a heavy reliance on songs, music and elements of popular culture, dead-pan, tragicomic use of humour, and fictional interventions.[373] Sometimes, a tactic was to include the author him/herself in the narrative in order to bring to light the devices of traditional documentary film-making as allegedly objective and distanced from subjects all the while appearing ethnographic or journalistic.[374]

4.2.2 Still, image

The problematic of the image was not confined to documentary essays or video work, but equally to conceptual artistic concerns. Group Tuesday was a small informal gathering that met initially on Tuesdays (or so the urban legend goes) and was roughly composed of Walid Sadek, Bilal Khbeiz, Tony Chakar, Rabih Mroueh, Ghassan Salhab,

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[371] ibid.

[372] ibid., 85. It is important to remember that video was initially a default medium as Lebanese and Arab production of documentary or experimental film, and visual art was scant, if not non-existent in the 1990s, with film-makers relying almost exclusively on European production. Video was cheap and accessible, and many video artists and documentarians would use existing editing suites and rely on a network of friends and professionals.

[373] Eshun calls these tactics anti-documentary in reference to the essayistic films that the OG produce, inspired by the cinemas of the Black Audio Film Collective and Chris Marker. Zaatari and Soueid referred to their video work in the early 2000s as an "unclassifiable genre" in Hojeij, Soueid and Zaatari, "Disciplined Spontaneity," 90.

[374] This is also the case of Wael Noureddine's *July Trip* (2007) and *Ce Sera Beau: From Beyrouth with Love* (2005) that we discuss in Chapter 5 on the Atlas Group. On experimental Lebanese video and documentary practice, and what he calls 'post-orientalist aesthetics', see Westmoreland, "Crisis of Representation."

Marwan Rechmaoui and Fadi Abdallah (and others who wandered in and out) before making and showing a series of works under that same name with three protagonists, Sadek, Khbeiz and Abdallah. It set itself the task to unpack and confront precisely these questions of image-making and belonging to an Arab world, or a 'region', among other formal concerns. Sadek, speaking of Group Tuesday in the mid-2000s, explained: "We are very critical, even doubtful of images. Although we have not ceased writing about images. The image is pivotal. We do not entertain any notions about the primacy of written over the visual language. We are obviously disturbed by the prevalence of images. What we try to do when we write is slow images down. We try to give them weight. We who live in the [T]hird [W]orld experience that to be in an image, to be photographed, is almost like a death warrant. But we are equally uneasy about standing behind the lens. We work and live somewhere between the lens and the photograph."[375]

Walid Sadek, for many years, would place the category of the artist under scrutiny, claiming that he long ago had given up on being an artist. Although remaining very much on the margins, Sadek did state in the above-cited interview that the art world allows for a process of thinking and making not available elsewhere. Group Tuesday, therefore, was less about being an artist collective, despite having exhibited *Tragedy in a Moment of Vision and Knowledge of the Expelled* (2007) at the Sharjah Biennial. This reticence vis-à-vis images produced a self-reflexive take on the apparatus of showing and 'giving to see', whereby either the image is altogether absent, or it structures of support and possibility are made visible. And this remains intimately if not constitutively connected to the question of the Lebanese civil wars, but also to representation of violence more broadly. For instance, In *Tragedy in a Moment of Vision and Knowledge of the Expelled*, an image only appears when viewers follow instructions and place a white book (on which is printed a rather oblique essay by Bilal Khbeiz, written during the 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon) in front of a very small projector. What appears is the small image of the figure of a woman with her back to a television screen broadcasting Beirut being bombed.

The figure of Mustafa Farroukh was to become an inspiration for Walid Sadek

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[375] Wilson-Goldie, "Witness to Loss."

and the source of one of his most compelling works, *Love is Blind* (2006), which we briefly discussed in Chapter 3. Sadek exhibits ten 'missing' paintings by the modern painter Farroukh, who had begun influencing Sadek's own thinking about being an artist. The 'unavailable' paintings of ruinous Lebanese landscapes were painted between 1933 and 1952, and Sadek only displays their captions (date, title, medium) to imply their absent presence. Sadek deploys text to point to the act of looking without seeing; to, as it were, show the (future) ruins in Farroukh's work without showing them. He pens ten aphorisms, one for each missing painting. The aphorisms, although they can be read as fragments, can also be followed cumulatively as they speak of naming, forgetting and inhabitants bereft of place, and are metonymically inspired by the Roman story of Cimon and Pero – the starving, imprisoned father given secret sustenance from his daughter's breast. "Here, most people are blind. The city in their eyes is lime like aureoles on suckling lips. Here, most know the city well, for knowledge is always in the now, yet live uneasily for tranquility is made in pictures."[376] Or further: "This city is not here. Pilgrims will not find in it a shrine to circumambulate and to no avail will believers proclaim their divorce with places. Names are fated to be abandoned by us as we are fated to be abandoned by places."[377] The act of seeing is given back to the viewers, while the

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[376] Sadek, *Love is Blind*, Aphorism G.
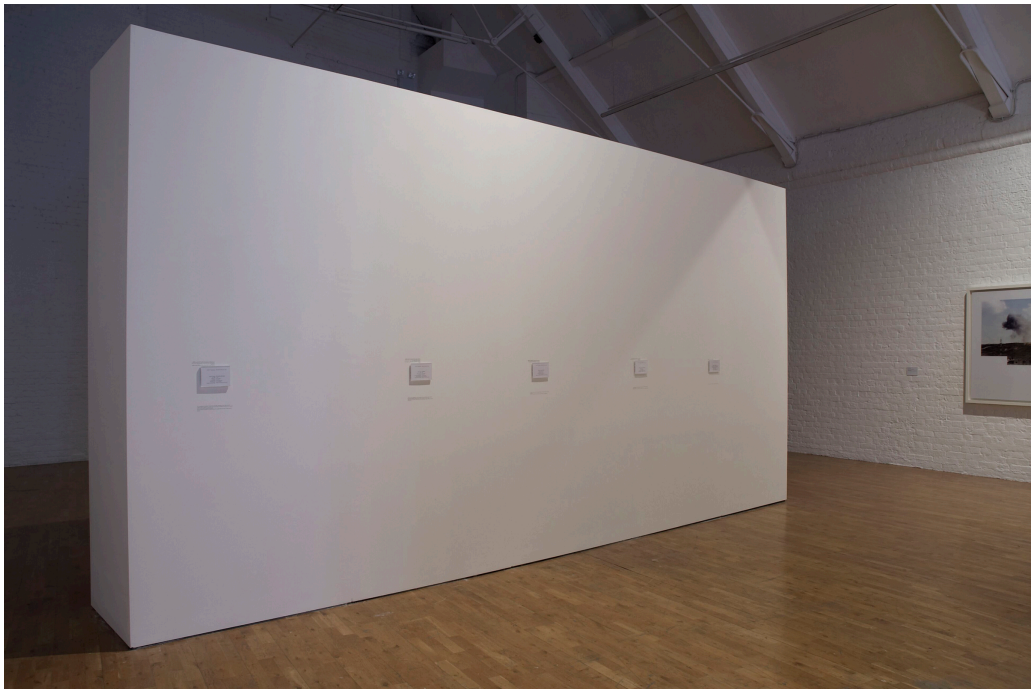[377] ibid., Aphorism I.

primacy of vision is diminished.[378]

Figure 12: Walid Sadek, Love Is Blind, installation shot, 2006

This display (reading, conjuring, imagining, searching, projecting, feeling alienated, probing all at once, are common activities evoked by Sadek's work) sets in motion a suspicion of the image and a simultaneous acknowledgement of its place in being able to image a future through the figure of the ruin.[379] *Love is Blind* manifests a desire to not operate within a certain narrative of overpowering, hegemonic reign of images (Lebanese landscapes and ruins, say), while indexing their presence. Sadek, in desiring to reconfigure and undo the importance allotted to understanding the history of the Lebanese situation in terms of trauma, historical rupture and absence as employed by many artists of his generation, explains that the absence of painting is not created by a literal absence or a traumatic break. Rather, the aphorisms, which converse with the paintings, bring the pictures closer, blindingly so, for they speak of an excessive living in this future-less city trapped in cycles of war: an excessive proximity that causes blindness. Farroukh, according to Sadek, represented Beirut and its environs from the privileged position of an academic painter who could posit a future for the Lebanese nation.[380] Yet, that paradoxical blindness generates for Sadek "an altered knowledge from which it is impossible to see the future that those paintings represented."[381] What we have, instead of an alleged traumatic historical rupture used to understand and materialize the Lebanese national narrative, is the absence of paintings of (then-future, now-present) ruins that represent the non-convergence of two excessive viewpoints.

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[378] For a broader discussion on ocularcentrism, see, for example, Jay, *Downcast Eyes*; and also Belting, *Likeness and Presence.*

[379] For an interesting genealogy of the figure of the ruin and its representations, see Dillon, *Ruin Lust* and *Ruins.*

[380] Again, for the relation of fine-art painting to the construction of identities, see Scheid, "Painters and Picture-Makers."

[381] Sadek and Fattouh, "Tranquility is Made in Pictures," 57. See also, Mondzain, *L'Image Peut-Elle Tuer?*

Love is Blind seems to try and probe what is possible from this position of blindness arising from proximity and protraction, and not from one of acting out or performing the lack associated with trauma.
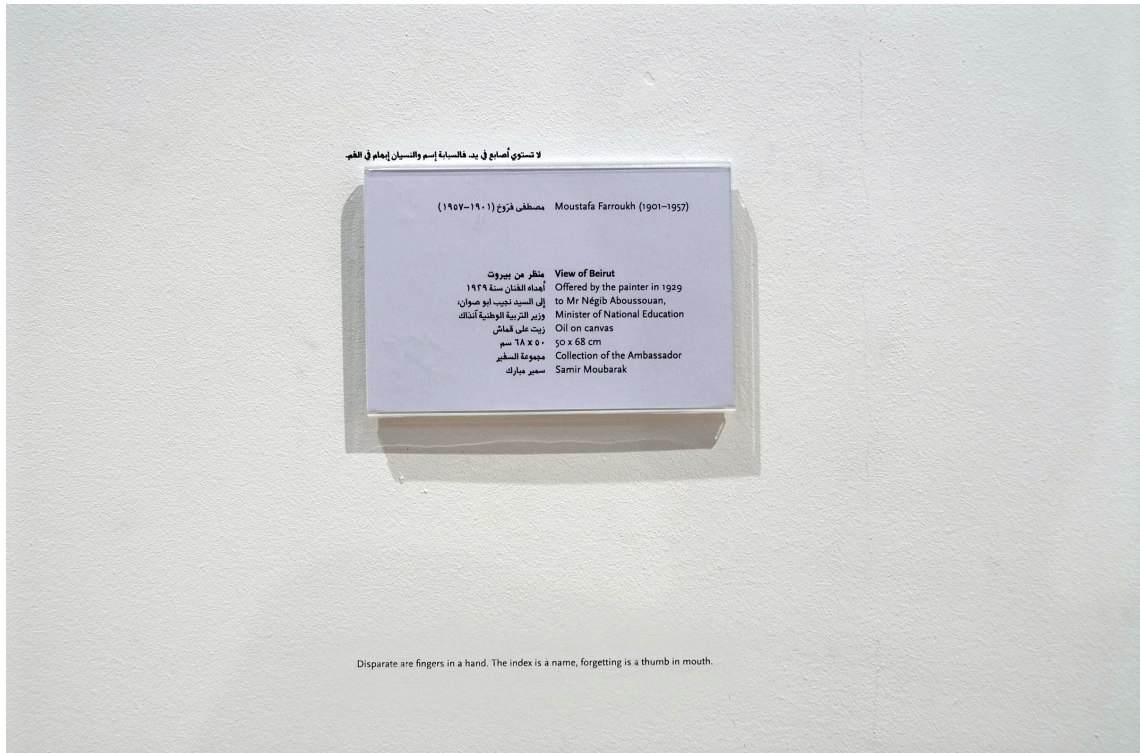
لا تستوي أصابع في يد. فالسبابة إسم والنسيان إبهام في الفم.

مصطفى فرّوخ (١٩٠١–١٩٥٧)   Moustafa Farroukh (1901–1957)

منظر من بيروت   View of Beirut
أهداه الفنان سنة ١٩٢٩   Offered by the painter in 1929
إلى السيد نجيب أبو صوان،   to Mr Négib Aboussouan,
وزير التربية الوطنية آنذاك   Minister of National Education
زيت على قماش   Oil on canvas
٦٨ x ٥٠ سم   50 x 68 cm
مجموعة السفير   Collection of the Ambassador
سمير مبارك   Samir Moubarak

Disparate are fingers in a hand. The index is a name, forgetting is a thumb in mouth.

Figure 13: Walid Sadek, detail from Love Is Blind, drywall, Perspex holder, 2006

We have discussed Sadek's more recent theoretical configurations of the legacy of the Lebanese civil wars on terms that are not those of trauma, or predicated on notions of historical rupture understood as amnesia and redressed as commemoration. Sadek's work on the four labours we mentioned earlier departs from the language of a number of artists of a similar generation preoccupied with the same questions: How do we witness? For whom? Through what forms? Sadek tries to invert the question of witnessing and articulates his later writing and artistic production around "witnesses who know too much", "the impossibility of witnessing", and figures referred to differentially as "non-posthumous survivors" or even "servivors".[382] This is approached through a critique of Human Rights Discourse and its distribution and language of perpetrators, beneficiaries, and victims, reaffirming a trauma model, and of the protracted and excessive temporality (of war) that causes blindness, paradoxically, from

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[382] See Chapter 1. These ideas are being developed through a number of talks and texts by Sadek, for example "On the Other Side of Impatience" and "Next of Survivors".

too much vision.[383]

Artists including Lamia Joreige, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, and Akram Zaatari (and, in rather different ways, the Atlas Group/Walid Raad and Tony Chakar), as well as theorists writing about Lebanese art, were frequently employing a set of psychoanalytic frameworks to conceptualize their work; latency, hysterical symptoms, belatedness and absence, sometimes configuring the war as traumatic or the post-war as amnesic.[384] For example, from the late 1990s and continuing for several years, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige have referred to their work as being informed by the notion of latency, particularly their series *Wonder Beirut: The Story of a Pyromaniac Photographer* (1997-2006) and, perhaps by extension, also such projects as *State of Latency*[385] and *Circle of Confusion*. In Sigmund Freud's latency stage of psychosexual development, a child's development is not dependent on a particular activity or bodily zone, but rather focused on the repression of traumatic (sexual or violent) memories from infancy in what can be understood as infantile amnesia. This process and vocabulary travels onto the post-war Lebanese situation, as well as to a conceptualization of some artist projects.

Wonder Beirut: The Story of a Pyromaniac Photographer is an imaginary narrative that tells the story of a photographer by the name of Abdallah Farah who, through a number of consecutive phases that correspond to those of the Lebanese wars, would selectively or arbitrarily burn the negatives of photos of Beirut he had taken and, in one last iteration of the narrative, stops developing the films altogether. And those photographs were of Lebanese tourist destinations for souvenir postcards. In other words, a parallel was being drawn in the work between the deterioration of Beirut and the deterioration of its image. A connection or juxtaposition between what was actual (the wars and bombs) and what was imagined (Farah burning his negatives), so that one affected the other. In other words, although the artist duo claims that their narrative of the fictional Abdallah rendered an aspect of the wars, their effect and their

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[383] Sadek's work on the notion of the excess is also exemplified by his sparse artworks on former Japanese Red Army Faction member *Kozo Okamoto resides in Greater Beirut* (2010).

[384] Hadjithomas and Joreige's early talk around their practice, "Latency", in Ashkal Alwan, *HomeWorks*. In a different vein that tries to think through the legacy of the wars through the prism of the witness not laden with the language of memory, amnesia or trauma, see Chakar, "To Speak Shadow".

[385] In Latour, *Iconoclash*. See also Hadjithomas and Joreige, "A State of Latency".

historiography more legible and sayable given the "dominant amnesia"[386] around the wars – it was, in fact, the reverse.

The destruction of Beirut makes their work more legible, and the fiction is not a channel onto the real, but the actual conduit that keeps the fiction separate from the real, but more legible through it. This is the reverse of the work produced by the Atlas Group (heavily involved in fiction as a mode of address and as a form), as we see in much detail in the final chapter. In this sense also, *Wonder Beirut* is the inverse of *Love is Blind* where the latter embodies the inability to show images stemming from excess vision and protraction, and the former shows many images attributing to a lack. One fetishizes Beirut in the same way that souvenir postcards do, the other makes it more visible in its terrible opacity. This quandary encapsulates some of the conflicting debates regarding the witnessing position and, essentially, the mode of address of the artist vis-à-vis destruction, ruination, abjection and, in an expanded sense, the place of fiction and documentary.
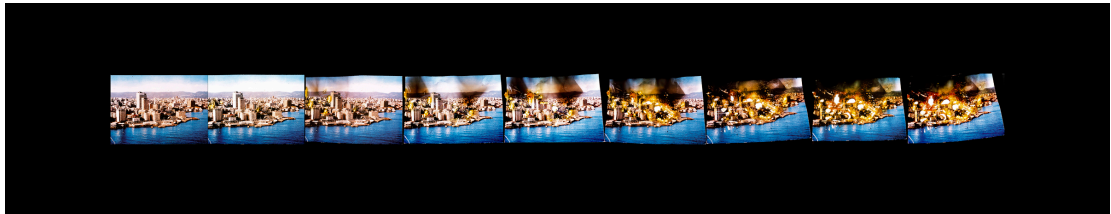
Figure 14: Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Wonder Beirut: The Story of a Pyromaniac Photographer, face mounted C-print, 1997-2006

4.3 Conclusion: The 'artist as historian'?

Practices that problematize image-production and, particularly, the epistemology associated with photography and documentary practices did not mean an interdiction on or a dearth of image production; often the contrary, as we saw above. Despite the alleged transparency and truth-claims of both photojournalism and some of the directly engaged work of social documentary, artists Alan Sekula and Martha Rosler, for instance, spent their considerable careers tackling precisely such issues both through image production and criticism. As we presented in Section 4.1, a handful of Lebanese post-war artists were in fact reacting against a number of traditions that artists like Rosler, Sekula and many others were before them within conceptual, photographic, documentary and essay-film traditions; namely sensationalism, moralism and the exoticism, or exposé associated with certain forms of social documentary and image-making.

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[386] Hadjithomas and Joreige, *State of Latency*, 40.

One could argue that the practices the Atlas Group, Walid Sadek, even some of the work by Akram Zaatari and the artist duo Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige who, in their different ways, aimed to 'trick the format' – to borrow a phrase from poet Mahmoud Darwish – of photography and image-making, and their implicit claims at truth.[387] However, it certainly is not that simple.

Artists associated with the 'documentary turn' in contemporary not modern art often positioned themselves in an engagement with the subject of 'rewriting' history, sometimes confusing documentation for historiography.[388] The decade of discussions on the role of artists as historians, at least in the Lebanese context, came to fruition during a conference in Beirut, co-organized by Centre Georges Pompidou, on this subject titled *History of the Last Things before the Last*. The synopsis made rather large claims: "The artists of this generation, now mostly in their forties, frequently employ the photographic medium or other derivative analogue technologies[,] such as film and video. They question national historical narratives, upsetting the very notion of narrative and the use of documents, while writing and re-writing history and memory, and confusing and blurring past and present. They raise fundamental questions about the power of documents and the political and plastic value of the archive. They seek to redefine 'truth' by liberating it from its factual ties, thus speculating on the fragility of historical 'truth'."[389]

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[387] See Darwish and al-Kassem, *Al Rasa'el* (*The Letters*). Much has been written about this. For a short but solid history, see for instance, Sekula's 1981 essays, "The Traffic in Photographs" and "The Body and the Archive."

[388] Curators Okwi Enwezor, Catherine David and Mark Nash coined the term the 'documentary turn' in the 2000s, at a time when art institutions began showing (buying, selling, writing about) much document-based work, especially from across the ex-colonial world. And surfing the Internet will bring up the names Raad and Zaatari in conjunction with the documentary turn in a number of places; for instance, http://fillip.ca/content/oh-inverted-world (accessed 10 May, 2014). These trends are produced and accentuated by such exhibitions as, for example, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, curated by Enwezor at the International Centre of Photography in New York in 2008. Works by both Raad and Lamia Joreige were included. This connection of photography to document to history is more often than not, in contemporary art, filtered through 'the archive' and its relationship to historiography. Hence, shows like *Archive Fever* and others figure documentary artists as essentially having 'archival practices'. We return to this in a different key in Chapter 5.

[389] Ashkal Alwan, *History of the Last Things*. The same synopsis claims that: "They [photography and history] entertain a dialectic relation with the real world, one that requires a dependence on it as much as on a certain distancing from it. The artistic practices that developed in Lebanon during the 1990s and 2000s seem to have absorbed, repositioned and elaborated Kracauer's ideas" (ibid.). We cite these as examples of the culmination of how certain Lebanese artists, grouped together in

In Lebanon, artists such as Lamia Joreige, duo Hadjithomas and Joreige, and Akram Zaatari have framed their work (or have had it framed) as a so-called 'counter-history' to official history and to post-war 'official amnesia'. Couched in a trauma discourse and postmodern historical trajectory, the work has been conceived as offering *narratives* that allow for the working through repressed war memories and experiences otherwise shunned from public discussion, piecing together a larger historical context (war, political struggles, failures, kidnappings, disappearances) from smaller stories, diaries, rumours, hidden facts, and individual and singular experiences, emphasizing the narrative form itself;[390] the intention being that this would give viewers insight into war and, thus, be a form of historical re-writing and representation. Their work becomes in some way epistemological they claim, sneering at grand narratives: we can only come to know through piecing together narratives, and what we come to know is most often disappointing or disillusioning. History with a 'capital H', the grand narrative, is supposedly crumbled with the smaller narratives that undo it. Sometimes this leads to direct, but unquestioned or confused links between narrative, memory and outright history; historicity over historiography; between processes of excavating untold small stories to tell a whole story, and actual historical struggles for causes of emancipation – irrespective of whether they have gone wrong.

For instance, Akram Zaatari's video *In This House* (2005) puts into play the search for, and excavation of a buried letter written by The Democratic Popular Party fighter in South Lebanon to the owners of the home he and his comrades had occupied in the 1970s and 1980s while waging battles against the Israeli forces. His solo exhibition of photographic and video works *Earth of Endless Secrets: Writing for a Posterior Time* (2009) addresses the figure of Nabih Awada, a resistance fighter from South Lebanon,

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unchecked ways, have been framing themselves and been framed as charged with the task of writing history.

[390] The idea of lack in the language of latency employed in Hadjithomas and Joreige's work serves as one example, as is their work on Khalil Joreige's kidnapped and disappeared uncle. Lamia Joreige's *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere* (2003) tackles the same question of the disappeared uncle, and also the broader question of the repressed memory of the kidnapped and missing in Lebanon's post-war. Lamia Joreige also frames an understanding of her art work as a making apparent what is not because "there are no words to express the devastation" (*Here and Perhaps Elsewhere*, n.p.) which connects us with our arguments earlier about how 'unsayability' had become a trope that belies the emphasis laid on narration. Furthermore, the category of 'history' is not always clear, but is considered 'fragile', blurred, and history with a capital 'H' is differentiated from history with a small 'h', and so on.

who was held in the Askalan prison in Israel and who wrote countless letters to loved ones.[391]

Zaatari's much-exhibited photographic work Saida June 6, 1982 – a composite photograph of multiple images from bombing campaigns by the Israeli forces of the hills visible from his family home in Sidon – as well as his film and installation *Letter to a Refusing Pilot* (2013) take his childhood recordings, photos and memories of the Israeli bombing of South Lebanon as a point of departure. From this highly-stylised 30-minute film came a photo series of granulated, large-format prints taken off of a newspaper image of an Israeli fighter jet circling over Zaatari's home city and school that same year of the infamous Israeli invasion (1982). Through a montage consisting of personal, childhood and newspaper photographs alongside a staged, but imagined and formalised re-enactment, the film narrates a rare incident whereby an IDF fighter pilot, Hagai Tamir, refuses a command to bomb a school in Sidon (as it happens, the school run by Zaatari's father for over two decades). He diverts the plane and drops the bombs in the Mediterranean, so the story goes, based on Tamir's account as well as on that of eyewitnesses.[392]

Figure 15: Akram Zaatari, In This House, video still, 2005

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[391] See, for example, the videos *Letter to Samir* (2009) and *Nature Morte* (2008); and the photo-series *Untold* (2008), *Learning Photography* (2009) and *Neruda's Garden* (2009).

[392] See Azimi, "A Pilot's Refusal, Reimagined."

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The refusing fighter pilot's account, admirable and brave as it was given Israel's record of incarcerating refuseniks and, likely, fighter pilots who disobeyed, is framed in Zaatari's work itself as the politics of refusal in what Kaelen Wilson-Goldie called a "decisive and generative act".[393] The title of Zaatari's work is an adaption of Albert Camus' "Letter to a German Friend" (1943, 1945) taking his habitual stance of non-violence. However, one wonders what the purpose would be of appropriating the title of a set of pacifist essays (written by someone not particularly well-known for his radical political positions on, say, Algeria and the French colonization) and addressing it to a single, disobedient pilot. In fact, this can be seen as an inversion of Camus' stance, whereby the latter addresses no one in particular, or rather everyone as a friend, whereas Zaatari is explicitly addressing a single exception in the figure of Tamir, not a situation and its dire consequences. The potentially historic refusal of the pilot is confused with refusal on the level of the work.

Disobedience and the politics of disinclination have a long sometimes radical history with some rather well-documented historical examples easily springing to mind such as Mahatma Ghandi's peaceful, civil disobedience, or during the US civil-rights movements, or even in the much-cited fictional figure of Bartelby in Herman Melville's eponymous short story. The power of these acts takes place if not in fiction as allegory, then on the level of collective political action and certainly not from within the corridors of the military, which does not seek to put itself into question. In other words, Tamir's act was a fluke. Moreover, it is hard to find in the construction of Zaatari's multi-media work a historically grounded refusal; and, if it is there, what is it *of* in actuality? Or is the narrative of an event (its glorification?) that has been confused with the task of writing history?[394]

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[393] "The Archeology of Rumor," n.p.

[394] See White, *The Content of Form*, especially the chapter "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality". Though White debates the value (or lack thereof) of narrativity in historiography over the form of chronicles and annals in the discipline of history, it seems relevant to this particular work of Zaatari's, as well as to claims by writers on Lebanese art and by the artists themselves, that narrativity in art can be equal to history and history writing, or at least presents itself evidently as such: "This value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary[. ...] Does the world, even the social world, every really come to us as already narrativised, already 'speaking itself'[, ...] or is the fiction of such a world, capable of speaking itself and of displaying itself as a form of a story, necessary for the establishment of that

It is at the heart of Zaatari's often compelling video practice to excavate stories and rumours, frequently untold and/or incongruent with official national or other narratives. One refusing pilot's account, the fact that he allegedly entered the IDF not because he liked war or machines, but because he wanted "desperately to feel what it would be like to be a bird"[395] maybe lends itself to a narrative story form. Zaatari's actual friendship and book project with fellow Israeli film-maker Avi Mograbi (in large part through whom an eventual meeting with Tamir was made possible) under the guise of 'fiction' due to the state of relations between their respective countries, is part of a larger problematization of a continuing state of enmity. However, individual encounters, friendships and memories, even refusals, are the stuff of epic Hollywood films, rather than of the structural and systemic violence that is the State of Israel as well as its then-consistent bombing and occupation of (South) Lebanon.[396] In this context, *Letter to a Refusing Pilot,* commissioned for the Venice Biennale, cannot be seen as itself enacting politics of refusal or of rewriting history.

Hence, the problems with such practices – aside from their aestheticization of war or of fighter jets, and of politics more broadly, while having essentially lost the referent of those struggles – is their emphasis on and misconstruction of memory as an alleged vehicle for historical writing, or even witnessing, justice or action. Work that claims to operate on the level of memory as history has become a problematic trope that blinkers actual historical and political struggles, or could act to obfuscate them.

Questions and practices of so-called remembrance and excavating memories are often concerned with remembrance, with posterity (whence the title of the above-mentioned Zaatari work). However, who does the remembering and for whom?[397] When certain strands of neoliberal discourse are centred on reconfiguring what the future or future fantasies might be, in the case of Lebanon, the discourse of the 'future' falls very much within both the logic of Lebanon's own species of transitional justice

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moral authority without which the notion of a specifically social reality would be unthinkable?" (ibid., 24-5).

[395] Azimi, "A Pilot's Refusal, Reimagined."

[396] What makes this kind of imagined re-enactment different, say, from the docudramas produced by Hezobollah (discussed in Chapter 5)? How can cultural production that alleges on the level of narrative to history-writing, or rather to historicity, differ from that which does not make those claims, but formally makes possible the conditions for thinking and problematizing historiography?

[397] See Crownshaw, Kilby and Rowland, *The Future of Memory*; especially "Introduction: The Future of Memory" by Crownshaw.

discussed earlier, and crystallized in, say, that of the Future Movement as it stands focused discursively and materially on owning a generation's future.

Surely the place of the storyteller and the chronicler, as Walter Benjamin reminds us, is not without importance in historical representation. In particular the oral tradition of storytelling – an embodied tradition of listening in the company of, and not of simply reading in isolation – versus say that of the novel. And this can be related with our discussion. Walter Benjamin connects the role of the storyteller to the ability to convey experience, especially when for instance "men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer but poorer in communicable experience".[398] He opposes, or rather traces the decline of the storytelling form to the rise of a new form of communication he calls "information" (news or mass media, against what Jacques Derrida refers to as "artifactuality" and "media time"[399]). And this is crystallized in the fact that the event and experience do not survive information and expire with it; whereas a story is structurally slow-release and, thus, is capable of emitting wisdom, counsel, and experience over time. The very figure of the storyteller herself becomes crucial to this process, as the story has to "sink into the life of the storyteller in order to bring it out of him again."[400]

Similarly to the witness, the storyteller either recounts what has been experienced or what has been recounted to her/him, or passes it off as her/his own experience. Thus, "his tracks, are frequently evident in his narratives".[401] This, by extension and in view of our discussion, can be read as attention to form and the self-awareness of the apparatus the very 'storyteller' is employing, versus an absence of cognisance of the very tools with which a story is being told, no recognition of medium. In this, we trace a contiguous relation between the witness and the storyteller, and the threefold elements that constitute them in their strongest form; moment of death, reflexivity and fiction.[402] This is the distinctive mark we assign to the fictional work of the Atlas Group and others in later chapters.

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[398] "The Storyteller," 84.
[399] Derrida and Steigler, *Echographies of Television*, 3-7; and also throughout the book.
[400] Benjamin, "The Storyteller," 91.
[401] ibid.
[402] Following Benjamin's text, one cannot think about storytelling without thinking about time, and one cannot think about time without thinking about eternity, and one cannot think about eternity without thinking about death, and one cannot think about death without, again, thinking about

Walter Benjamin then departs from the storyteller to trace a direct relation between chronicler and history-teller, differentiating between this latter term and that of historian. The historian explains while the chronicler/history-teller displays the happenings of the world as "models of the course of the world"[403]. Certainly, as we revisit Akram Zaatari and the other artists mentioned above, we see that the latter (history-teller) appears more sensible, if at all. It could be argued, however, that if a work is attentive to the form in which it is being told, if it is inseparable from *what* is being told, bringing into an explanatory and interpretative awareness of historical mechanisms and occurrences, then a mechanism of historical explanation or a figure of the artist as historian and her/his practice as history-writing *could* emerge. If we continue off Benjamin, however, then it is not sufficient to make a claim that artists who use documents, narrative forms, archives and personal diaries are historians, much less rewriting history.[404]

In Chapter 5, we follow this conversation, emphasizing the ways in which the task of the historian and the figure of the witness, function through the vector of fiction in the work of Walid Raad, the Atlas Group. In the context of Lebanon, we try to unpack how, through the formats of performance, lecture-performance and the machine of a fictional foundation, this practice compellingly explores time, death, representation and experience – crucial for our thinking through the politics and position of the witness.

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storytelling and the communicability of experience. With regard to the relationship between death, telling and testimony, as we visited earlier in Blanchot and Derrida, Benjamin says: "It is however characteristic that not only a man's knowledge or wisdom but above all his real life – and this is the stuff that stories are made of – first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death [. ...] Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death" ("The Storyteller," 93).

[403] ibid., 95.

[404] See also Benjamin, "Thesis on the Philosophy of History" for a more detailed and grounded discussion of history and historicism.

– Chapter 5 –
Fiction and Politics of Truth: The Atlas Group Files

"An act of resistance is neither information nor counterinformation […] what is the relation between the work of art and information? None whatsoever. The work of art is not an instrument of communication. The work of art has nothing to do with information. The work of art strictly does not contain the least bit of information."

Gilles Deleuze[405]

"The unpleasant thing, and one that nags my modesty, is that at root every name in history is I."

Friedrich Nietzsche[406]

5.1 Introduction

In 2004, I attended what I thought would be a talk of ongoing research into the 3,641 car bombs that had rocked Lebanon between 1975 and 1991, presented by Walid Raad, Bilal Khbeiz and Tony Chakar in a former silk factory in Greater Beirut's Armenian neighbourhood of Burj Hammoud. Organized by Ashkal Alwan, *My Neck is Thinner Than a Hair: A History of the Car Bomb in the Lebanese Wars Vol_1 January 21, 1986* would be my first encounter with the Atlas Group (AG) – artist Walid Raad's project "that was established in 1999 to research and document the contemporary history of Lebanon. The AG locates, preserves, studies and produces audio, visual, literary and other documents that shed light on this history."[407] This 'beginning' they said, would start with

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[405] "Having an Idea in Cinema," 18.

[406] *Selected Letters,* 347.

[407] "The documents are preserved in the Atlas Group Archive which is located in Beirut and New York. The archive is organised into three file categories: Type A (attributed to an identified individual); Type FD (found documents); and Type AGP (attributed to the Atlas Group)" (Raad, *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow*, 105). Definitions and descriptions of the Atlas Group (AG) vary across platforms and time periods. It might even be that it started as the "Arab Research Institute", the "Beirut Photographic Center", or "The Beirut Al-Hadath Archive" in 1967 (the year of birth of Raad and as it allegedly declared itself in the, probably fictional, journal *Rethinking Marxism*). The 'archive', which is occasionally altered, can be found online (http://www.atlasgroup.org). When accessed on 31 October 2014, the AG was described as: "based in Beirut and New York. It includes dozens of documents including films, videotapes, photographs, notebooks and other objects." *My Neck is Thinner Than a Hair* is part of the AGP Files. It bears the same name as the eponymous photographic works, but is not available on the online 'archive', where the number of total car bombs is 254, not 3,641 (see http://theatlasgroup.org; accessed 31 October, 2014). Also, see File Type A, *Notebook volume 38_Already Been in a Lake of Fire,* attributed to historian 'Dr. Fadl Fakhouri' and his investigation and notations of the exact place, date and time of each car bombing, make, model and

the car bomb that went off in the popular neighbourhood of Furn al-Shubbak in Beirut on 21 January, 1986.

What began as an austere and clinical PowerPoint-engineered lecture using elaborate diagrams and charts which illustrate the text being read in Arabic by Khbeiz, archival photographs and videotapes, and a meticulous, obsessive, chronological account of car bombs – more specifically detailing the Furn al-Shubbak car bomb, which occurred at 11:22 a.m., the number of dead and injured, the list and images of damaged storefronts and buildings, its targets and sponsors, the political, military and militia heads at the time, a silent video embedded in the midst of the large screen of diagrams showing the immediate aftermath of the explosion allegedly sent to the AG by the National Media Agency – was turning poetically strange. Each slide would repetitively begin with a refrain "on the 21st of January, 1986"; in the list of party leaders and security officers present at the scene, would be inconspicuously introduced the military expert 'Youssef Bitar' and photojournalist 'Georges Smerdjian' and later their mysterious video titled "We Can Make Rain But No One Came To Ask".[408]

It became increasingly clear that the performance was not merely a lecture intended to document the events of the car bomb. As they pronounced midway, "what we have arrived at is that there is nothing to uncover, no surprises, no facts that need exposing, no hidden things that we need to shed light on." What began as a rigorously researched investigation was slowly abandoned, becoming a list and set of connections being 'acted out'. Meaning, Raad, Khbeiz and Chakar were acting out the presentation of an investigation – a coming-to-the-limit of this kind of inquiry and stepping beyond it – not in effect presenting an analysis. The work points to how easy it could have been to have a sound juridical and legal process take place by the Lebanese state, but which remains wanting. Moreover, there is no bemoaning discourse about atrocity and victims, no morally-driven sub-text, no journalism or conference talk. It borrows those formats, while keeping its motivations temporarily uncertain until we surmise that it mimics the production of truth claims via these formats. It is important to note that much of what

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colour of the car(s) involved, as well as type of explosive, method of detonation and number of casualties.

[408] AG, in collaboration between 'Bitar' and 'Smerdjian', 2003 (2005).In interviews with Raad, he claims to have begun research in the late 1990s, to finally produce the work in 2005. We return to the issue of 'dating' works below.

goes into and constitutes Walid Raad's performances are both orchestrated and incorporated into the work: the glass of water, the small sidelight, the people present, the hall in which the performance takes place. In other words, the very apparatus of the lecture and the gathering of evidence as documentation of the production of truth are both put on display.

> "From the printed or projected image to the frame, colour of the walls, captions and wall texts; from the lights, walls, floor and ceiling, security guards, docents, catalogue [...] to any interviews or conversations I am asked to conduct with journalists, students or the general public[. ...] The same goes for the performances and lectures attached to the Atlas Group where I find myself quite sensitive to elements such as the lectern and table, chair and stool[; ...] the size and quality of the projected image; the position and sound of the projector in the room; the peripheral objects that are always in university lecture halls [...] to the question[-]and[-]answer session that will follow."[409]

The convention of the Q & A session following the lecture is not left unquestioned as a format through implanting provocative questions and scripted responses.[410] In this particular performance at the silk factory, implanted spectators asked pre-prepared questions regarding the Lebanese wars and if we had not yet had enough of discussing them; why the AG had decided to begin in Furn al-Shubbak (with a car bomb targeting a high ranking member of the right-wing Lebanese Forces in a predominantly Christian neighbourhood); and why it was that the video shown at the end was bereft of people and the images blurred and scrambled. Raad, Chakar and Khbeiz answered by opening up the biases inherent to such lines of inquiry, through a discussion of Solidere, of how the structural logic of car bombs embeds a permanent fear and suspicion of the other, or how the logic of the personal and of pity lies at the heart of usual ways of addressing the loss that comes from car bombs, or how the scenes shot had people in them that then vanished when the film was screened, and so on. Not only does this *huis clos* that the implanted questions pose, pre-empt, expose and belie the alleged openness of these kinds of formats (the lecture, the Q & A, certain uses of engineered presentations of documentary evidence by states) and the kind of knowledge they produce, but it also keeps the AG's line of inquiry tight and their mode of address lying on the edge of a truth that needs fiction to become aware of itself. The

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[409] Raad and Borchardt-Hume, "In Search of the Miraculous," 14-5.
[410] See Lepecki, "After All, This Terror Was Not without Reason."

full impact of this cannot be comprehended without understanding the broader machinations of the Atlas Group qua Atlas Group. We come back to this point.

This evasiveness is answered by the evident directness of the work itself and the setting in which it unfolds – as court cases and hearings do, with all the elements forming a part of the evidence and the performance of listening. In the work of the AG, these elements are acting in themselves, bringing attention to themselves and the setting in which they unfold.[411] So why was this fiction aware of itself, this fiction as mode of address, so offensive to some, yet so compellingly urgent?

Figure 16: The Atlas Group, My Neck is Thinner Than a Hair: A History of the Car Bomb in the Lebanese Wars Vol_ January 21, 1986, lecture-performance still, 2004

Before outlining the contours, structure and temporality of the AG, we want to continue with our anecdote to illustrate what the 'something else', the stopping-short that this lecture-performance and the AG's modes of inquiry might be. We discuss in detail below how the performative aspect of the AG's project *tout court* works to undo conventions and contexts from within; and how this is both a mode of address and a radical altering of the modes of address, thus becoming their condition of possibility. First, let us try and map why troubled reactions to the performance are symptomatic of broader political debates and disillusionments, and wider issues of the representation of violence, as alluded to in Chapter 3.

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[411] We return to this below. Thanks to Stefanie Baumann for this point.

Following this performance in Beirut, there were memorable reactions by two persons: "This is offensive, insulting and elitist. How dare they play tricks on us and on what we know? What about all the victims of the car bombings? Why are they speaking a language we cannot easily understand?" And so forth. These interlocutors came from what could be considered a militant, Arab nationalist background. They espoused the struggle for freedom from imperialism and from media misinformation (especially regarding the Arab world and occupied Palestine), in favour of transparency, counter-information, and other elements in the struggle against hegemony (be they in Palestine, Lebanon, or beyond). Those models for revolution were the internationalist, nationalist and sometimes leftist struggles for liberation across the continents of the South and the East that had characterized the middle and end of the 20th century; what has been referred to as "the multiple contexts of Tricontinental militancy",[412] and of which pan-Arabism was a considerable part. Opinions about art were formed on the basis of whether or not art was able to act a vector for those struggles, and communicative in its message.[413]

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[412] Eshunand Gray, "The Militant Image." The term 'tricontinental' is derived from the Tricontinental Conference of Solidarity of the Peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America, held in Havana, Cuba, in January of 1966, and setting the tone for what would become a defining feature of 20th-century struggle against imperialism and capitalism. Cinematographically, this militant, tricontinental, political film-making can, in part, be traced to Fernando Solana and Octavio Getino's famous "Towards a Third Cinema" manifesto (1970), a pinnacle text of the New Left movement in cinema; to Edouard de Laurot's *Cinéma Engagé,* and many other examples of such revolutionary cinema collectives and initiatives as Newsreel and SLON-ISKRA. As Steve Edwards points out, this ("other forms of Marxist and radical work, including Latin American cinema, neorealism, the New German Cinema, Third Cinema [...]") is to be differentiated from another breed of political art, or political modernism, as we saw in Chapter 4 (Edwards, *Martha Rosler*, 100).

[413] These are not the first deep-seated comments to be waged against Raad, either for not being political or in the right ways, for purportedly addressing a 'foreign' audience, or for making slight out of serious issues and lost lives. This was noted immediately after the performance in 2004, where the discussion got aggressive and disdainful, but also from my numerous formal and informal conversations between 2009 and 2011 with Marxist historian and ex-combatant with the Organisation for Communist Action during the Lebanese civil wars, Fawwaz Traboulsi, who often has called Raad "postmodern" and a symptom of globalization by addressing a foreign audience in English, and so forth. The attacks about using English are not uncommon and were waged also against an edited book published in Beirut in English and translated into Arabic. See Nawfal and Saadawi, "Untitled Tracks." See also Sfeir, "*Jil al Musiqa Al Badila: Sajjel Ana (Mish) 'Arabi.*" Sfeir's chosen title in Arabic is a play on words. First, it refers to the famous Mahmoud Darwish poem *Identity Card*, which includes a powerful, much-reiterated refrain "*Sajjel Ana 'Arabi*" ["Record! I am an Arab"] by inverting it into "Record: I am (not) Arab"; and, second, it mocks the translated title into Arabic "*Tasjilat Bila 'Inwan*" ["Untitled Tracks"] insinuating that these tracks record precisely what is not Arab.

Raad maintains that his art is not connected to cultures of political resistance; that he does not proceed from the premise of instrumentalizing form and putting it at the service of political resistance:

> "If artists or writers are interested in producing the forms that support or challenge this or that culture of political resistance [...] the complexity of a particular situation (be it the wars in Lebanon, Iraq, or what have you), then they might as well proceed from an investigation of how ideas become dominant in the first place, how ideas and signs are produced, distributed, consumed and believed; in other words, they might as well produce yet another study of the notion of ideology[. ...] For me, these are fascinating questions, but not the ones I am asking."[414]

Raad's work is also produced according to conventions and conceptual frameworks. Who is 'free' of that? In other words, if producing art is akin to producing a study of ideology, what would be the art that does not produce this? Perhaps one that is aware of its own modes of construction and apparatuses, and here the AG certainly fits.

This declared rupture with these traditions of making art can be summarized in Mark Westmoreland's qualification of post-war artist in Lebanon as being engaged in post-orientalist aesthetics.[415] This, as we said earlier, has to do with a politics of documentary film-making and *cinéma engagé* in relation to the anti-colonial, revolutionary traditions of the 1960s and 1970s. These positions have focused on certain speaking positions and audiences, and are in keeping with a tradition of needing and owning the right to defend the subaltern, as well as freeing people from false consciousness.[416] Raad does not acknowledge explicitly, however, that the AG, structurally and in terms of content, is in large part an anti-ideological artistic endeavour.

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[414] Cesarco, *Silvia Kolbowsi/Walid Raad*, 61-63.

[415] "Crisis of Representation," 6.

[416] See Chapter 4 for a discussion of this issue. A small illustration of these clashes is the debacle between Bilal Khbeiz and Tony Chakar (and others) against Norman Finkelstein, during his visit to Beirut in 2004 or 2005, and his outspoken support for Hezbollah. This episode is insightful in underlining how certain intellectuals present themselves as standing neither with the alleged fascism of the Islamic party and its leftist supporters in the post-war era, nor with the right-wing, pro-Israeli or pro-American parties in Lebanon; and, later, neither with March 14, nor with March 8. However, this division, or even the position of those that claim to a 'third' way, is not always clear-cut. This can be observed with recent cultural publications like *Kalamon*, and public figures occupying a controversial ground with regard to their disillusionment with the communist experience (the cases of Hazim Saghieh and Ahmad Beydoun, for example); and by artists and writers who, after 2005, no longer seemed intent on taking that unaligned stance. For instance, artist Rabih Mroueh's controversial work, *Photo-Romance* (with Lina Saneh, 2010) is clearly against Hezbollah as a political

What we hope to do in this chapter, however, is not dwell further on this particular question, or set up the AG and its politics of fiction in a an antagonistic relationship to the communicative spirit of militant art. Despite the fact the AG is conceived in opposition to the certitudes of these latter projects (as embodied, for example, in the works of Latin-American and Third-World militant cinema),[417] it does not relinquish its relationship to (actual) politics. We will return to these questions in the context of the Situationist International's notion of *détournement*, political modernism and Lebanese artist Wael Noureddine's film work as they relate, however obliquely, to the AG. We will elaborate how it utilises the classificatory and archival tactics (the way in which a politics of truth is constructed) used by mainstream media, government archivists, and certain historians, in order to unravel not only the ideologies and limitations at the heart of those approaches, but also to allow access to a formal poetics of the truth claim that we will argue is more effective.

Through laying-out the files and projects, temporalities and logics, and methodologies of the AG, this chapter can be the final embodiment of our arguments regarding the politicization of the witness through, in this instance, a generative fiction that structures the truth claims of the work made. Throughout, we pay attention to the ways in which the politics of the AG plays out not only through attention to the apparatus of fiction, testimony and a rearrangement of the representation of experience, but also via its relationship to context, to the obsessiveness of what looks like an archive (but is in its underbelly, an anti-archive), and through the problem of history writing.

5.2 On Time, Or a Bit Late

Before exploring the politics, configurations and representational rearrangements of the AG Files in detail, we want to begin by exploring the temporalities made possible through it. In 2012, I watched the video "We Can Make Rain But No One Came to Ask" from the *Thin Neck Files* for the second time. This particular viewing was in the aftermath of a bomb explosion in Beirut, killing eight persons and injuring seventy-

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formation, especially their mass rallies, as the performance is based on a film set in fascist Italy; and his more recent performance on the Syrian uprising, *The Pixelated Revolution* (2011-2013), marks a turn from the more critical and non-aligned politics of previous work.

[417] Cesarco, *Silvia Kolbowsi/Walid Raad.*

eight. The footage is edgy news cameras scanning frantically for victims; for something identifiable among the debris and smoke; for 'news'. Like a zombie on the prowl for blood, the camera catches a dismembered body here, fire there, broken glass; searching for a satisfying image. The sonic landscape of that hunt (non-diegetic) – of ambulances, screams, news commentators, journalists, fire fighters – occurs in very restricted visibility.
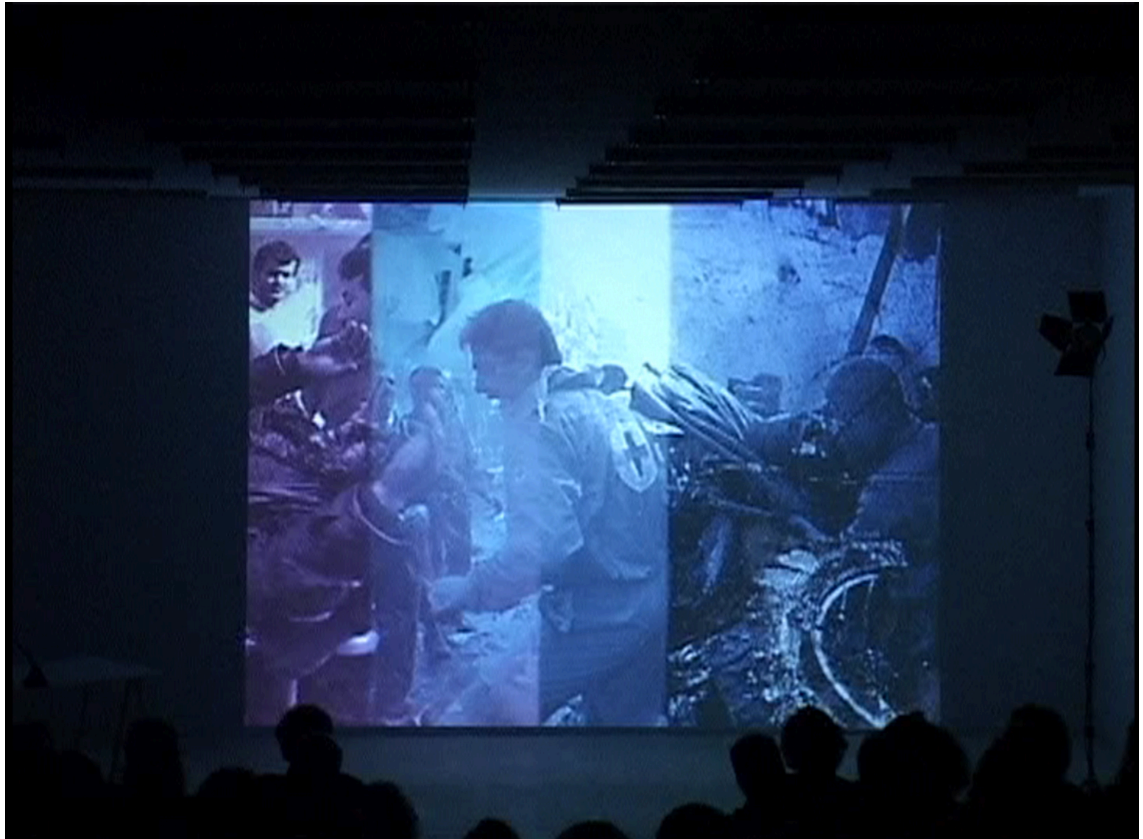

Figure 17: The Atlas Group, My Neck is Thinner Than a Hair: A History of the Car Bomb in the Lebanese Wars Vol_ January 21, 1986, lecture-performance still, 2004

The images described above only appear through a restricted, thin slither on an otherwise-black screen; we hear the sounds and see the frantic movements of news cameras panning the scene of 'the crime' of a car bombing, but we see nothing, or at least we make out very little. The camera moves side to side like a pendulum, merging this scene with black-and-white pixelated images, as we barely make out fire, smoke, smog and feet scrambling through a thin horizontal viewing window on the screen. Still horizontally laid out and barely distinguishable, the following sequence is a long tableau of still images of debris, destruction, corpses, military personnel at the scene of the explosion, followed by cold, diagrammatic images of car parts and machinery abstracted from the scene like ejected car engines, before all is transformed into an wide blue sea, then a grey nebula.

Filmed years after the explosion, a daytime panoramic shot of the streets and buildings where the explosion took place appears devoid of people. The one or two cars or persons that do appear are seen disappearing into the interstice between spaces created through a montage that constructs a panoramic view. The juxtaposition of the images of the streets around the bomb-site, characterized by these invisible vertical 'black holes', generates several space-times. The beginning of the video attributes the images of this investigation to a 'Youssef Bitar' (Lebanese state chief investigator/bomb expert) and a 'Georges Smerdjian' (renowned photojournalist) – both heteronyms who have appeared before in the AG Archive.
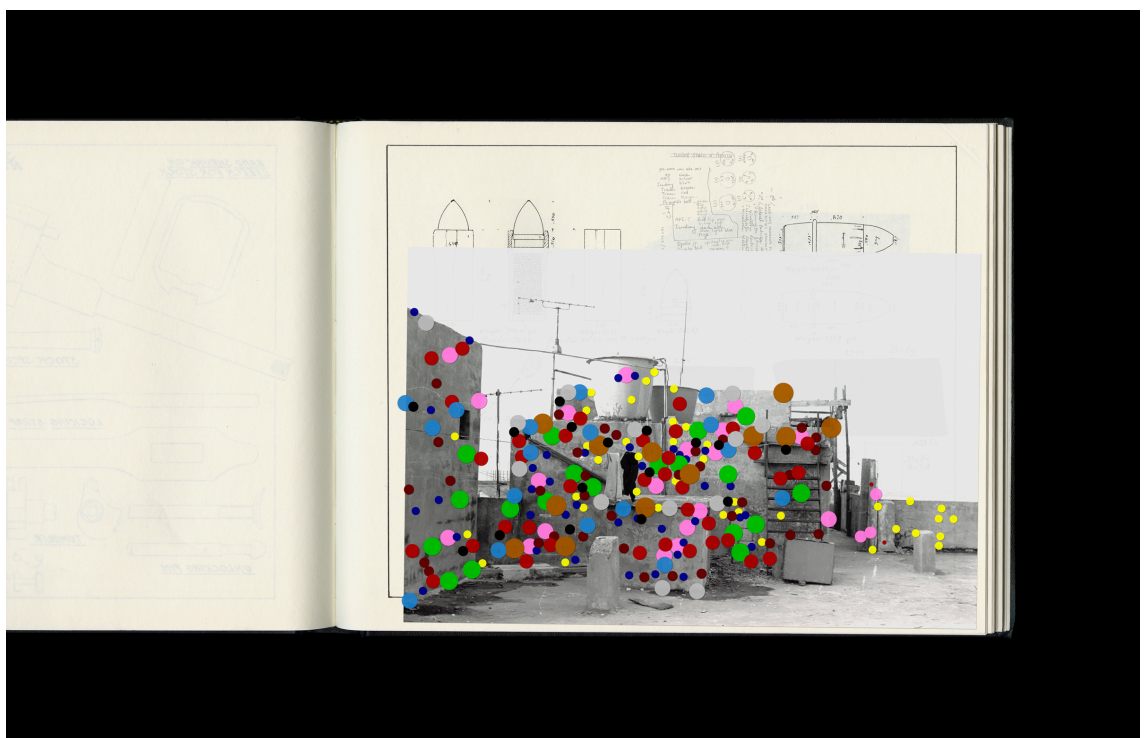
Figure 18: The Atlas Group, Let's Be Honest, the Weather Helped, United States of America, digital prints, 45 x 72cm, 1998/2006

First, the restriction of vision enacts a number of things in relation to overly mediatized car bombs. 'Seeing nothing' within an actual visibility embodies a certain version of belatedness and the paradox of witnessing discussed earlier, without an interdiction on images. We are always too late; so are the cameras and the journalists who are producing these news images 'live' or otherwise.[418] Second, the work is by AG

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[418] See Derrida and Steigler, *Echographies of Television*. See also, Lazzarato, "The Machine," especially the section "Subject constitution through communication and language", where Lazzarato discusses the ways in which the television format always subjects one as the subject of enunciation and as the subject of the statement.

as producer, which, as an entity, is dubious in the most literal sense; and, therefore, its authorial speaking voice is in question. In other words, the odd, fictional temporality from which documents are produced and characters appear allows Raad, for starters, to address the horror of events by avoiding habitual speaking positions. It shows the restriction of vision also through a restriction on *who* is doing the showing. Our vision of car bombings – and our testimony, too – is always-already restricted by a belatedness. And the details can never be the whole. Yet, what is that whole? Raad does not deny the possibility of representation, or claim deadly events to be unimaginable (as per dominant theories of trauma and witnessing outlined in Chapter 1), but he complicates that knowing and viewing. There were and are images, after all.

Watching *Al-Jazeera* on 19 October, 2012, and watching the video "We Can Make Rain But No One Came to Ask", that dates from 2005, in which Raad cites a car bombing that took place in 1986, does something to the experience of time for those who have an experience of war. Could the sounds and images become interchangeable? In 2006, under Israeli bombs and siege, Raad claims in his correspondence with fellow-artist Silvia Kolbowski that the "sounds, sights, images and words we are seeing and hearing are familiar. We saw them in 1982 in Lebanon and recently in Iraq and Palestine. It feels like 1982 and 1948 all over again."[419] What does this mean? If we follow Jacques Derrida's elaboration of the witness[420] as both exemplary and universal – if you were there, in my place, you would have seen and said the same thing, but I am the only who can say it, whereby I am speaking for you and not speaking for you simultaneously – what does this say about living in a protracted, yet unpredictable event of car bombings and threats to life, property and safety (not a singular traumatic event)? How can 1986 and 1982 be 2012? How can I, who was not there, speak as a witness without being an eyewitness? "In such traumatic circumstances, description and anamnesis are adequate only when conjointly words reach a performative function and the voice carrying them appears ex nihilo [...] it is not enough to be an eyewitness (and a voice-witness), one should also be a voice-over-witness."[421] What happens when time is contiguous in this way, and appears to collapse on itself? The dates change, but the sonic, visual, media

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[419] Cesarco, *Silvia Kolbowski/Walid Raad*, 34.
[420] Blanchot/Derrida, *The Instant of my Death and Demeure*.
[421] Toufic, *Over-Sensitivity*, 50.

landscape and sites do not seem to. This is not intended ahistorically to mean that nothing happened between those dates, or to collapse actual politics and events into an aesthetics of witnessing. In fact, as we see, the ways Raad manipulates temporalities in his work – repetition, recurrence, sameness, multiple dating of works and events – bring us back to history, or a historical aspect to time, not merely as a traumatic singularity.

Following André Lepecki's analysis of Raad's work as that of an historian and Alan Gilbert's essay "A Cosmology of Fragments", the latter notes how Raad's art:

> "Seeks to illustrate on an individual and social level the devastation wrought when the historical continuum is broken, yet his work also shows that this disruption can itself be the escape from a traumatic history. [... H]ow does one historicise a wound that has not closed? Or write a history blown open? [... I]n any case, this history can only be captured in the fragment, and therefore only partially".[422]

Although we have disagreed thus far with the premise of a solely traumatic reading of the Lebanese wars and subsequent art practice, Lepecki's reading of Raad supports the idea that war is rupture (even if protracted) and symptomatic of how representation of violence is rearranged.

In genres of science fiction, the narrative speaks from the future about the past/present, and from the present about the future as a commentary on the present. The AG applies a certain logic of dating works in multiple ways; for example, the date of the work, the date of 'donation' and the date the original images were taken are listed. This is the case in such photographic works on Israeli invasions and bombardments of Beirut as "We Decided to Let Them Say 'We Are Convinced' Twice" ((1982) 2002/2006), attributed to Raad and 'donated' to the AG; and "'Oh God,' He Said, Talking to a Tree" (2004 (2006) 2008), attributed to 'Nahia Hassan'.

Lepecki offering these as reasons for why Raad backdates his work, or gives works two or three dates (one referring to dates when things were given to the AG, one to dates when the actual work may have been produced by the AG, and/or one signifying a specific, relevant, historical date such as 1982) might be a bit lacking. Yet, it certainly is a compelling tactic that confuses the linearity of traditional historical accounts – if the

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[422] 116.

AG constitutes such an account. By doing so, it enacts a futuristic speaking position that performs the inability to pin the 'content' of a temporality already hijacked by factions or telefactuality, and creates another temporality from which to speak. The AG's breed of futurism, as we see, mimics the temporality of war, which, too, is hard to pin. It resonates with Walid Sadek's elaboration of creating a "habitable chronotope" which would "challenge or elude the predicament of living in Lebanon under the sway of two opposing and reductive conceptions of temporalities", creating this habitable chronotope "critical of the instrumental sundering of time and place by warring politico-military forces". [423] Sadek draws from Mikhail Bakhtin's essay 'Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel: Notes towards a Historical Poetics', which proposes that time (and place, in the novel), in order to elude "ideological flattening" and to remain in the time of human life and historical time, must become palpable and visible. The event can be communicated as 'event', but this does little and remains abstracted and instrumentalized. Yet, here "the event does not become figure. It is precisely the chronotope that provides the ground essential for the showing forth, the representability of events."[424]

Science fiction does not have to be conceived only as genre, but also as an utterance in time. Who is, in fact, speaking and about what collectivity, nation or 'present'? The future world, the 'speculative fiction' (of the works that speak backwards in time to the present) – peopled by those ejected engines, cut-out plumes of smoke, scarred photographs of skies marred by Israeli warplanes, the fictional-real testifying hostage, the fictional historians, photojournalists, topographers, the anonymous figures who drowned in the Mediterranean – is, thus, a time still contiguous with war.[425] What Peter Osborne has otherwise call "fiction of the contemporary" is internally disjunctive, it never seizes the present as present, as there is no present that is static, to be held still in relation to the heterochronic propositions of the AG.[426] If the present is saturated ideologically, if experience is always-already mediated, if war is both past and looming

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[423] Sadek, "Peddling Time," 48, 50.
[424] ibid, 51; citing Bakthin, "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel."
[425] See, for example, AG and Raad, "Secrets in the Open Sea 1994-2004"; Serven, *Oh God;* and Raad, *We Decided to Let Them Say 'We Are Convinced' Twice.*
[426] Osborne, "The Fiction of the Contemporary." See Chapter 1 for a brief discussion of the idea that in order for history to be understood, it must be fictionalized (Rancière, "Is History a Form of Fiction?").

and demands criticality and a habitable temporality, a time-sensitive aesthetics of witnessing seems key.

What position of showing is Raad occupying, and what speaking position does the AG hold via its forms, shifting temporalities and fabulated figures? What operation of time travel is Raad making possible if the present, the politics of an ineffable now, and the positions of journalism or telefactuality as such, simply cannot articulate the amplitude of events, or of experience? At the most literal level, there is a caesura between what happens and how it is represented, framed and co-opted, and this masks the magnitude of lost lives and the structures at the heart of these political machines. An interdiction on witnessing is exemplified by how quickly the event 'a car bomb' is co-opted for political party ends. Media time and, by extension, government rhetoric occupy one temporality and hijack all others. What occurs in the video "We Can Make Rain" (and in the AG's meticulously-detailed car-bombing project) in terms of viewing and speaking positions is not only a small, imagistic escape from the binary between the time of real event and its double in media coverage, or between the eyewitness, the victim and the spectator,[427] but also, through the very apparatus of the AG and its reconstitution of images and sounds, it makes possible 'another time' from which to view the neighbourhood of the bombing, the smoke, the terror, the crowds gathering, that do not belong to media time.

> "In fact, the only way for a person to make sense of all these television image-based reports is to actually turn away from them, to watch them with eyes wide shut. The images on which these reports are based come from another space and another time; they come from the space and time of the catastrophe. The catastrophe [in Iraq] is not the actual destruction itself, or the countless dismembered bodies; these are only the sole possible manifestations of the catastrophic on TV screens. The catastrophic could be anywhere really, and I'm sure that we've all had the experience of catastrophic space and time sometime in our lives."[428]

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[427] Rabih Mroueh said this during the period of the highly-televised Israeli war on Lebanon in 2006, and in his performance *Make Me Stop Smoking* (2006). Actor Fadi Abi Samra ('playing' himself) in Ghassan Salhab's post-2006 video *(Posthume)* also reiterates this.

[428] Chakar, "The Impossible War Memorial," 31.

We return in detail to the problem of experience and its relation to theoretical questions of context, and to the idea of *détournement*. In order to have a better grasp of those, we need to engage further with the AG's methodology and forms.

5.3 The Problem of Experience

In 1998 (or later, it is hard to say), 'Ziad Abdallah' and 'Farah Awada' of the Arab Image Foundation – in their foreword to an article that appeared in the journal *Public Culture* in 1999 about the project *Missing Lebanese Wars* by Walid Raad which shows reproductions of notebooks (volume 72) by 'Dr. Fadl Fakhoury' of Lebanese historians gambling – explain to us that the Lebanese wars are constituted by moving objects and sets of actions, actors and situations, and cannot be located in one de facto individual place, time or event. This narrative machine – as we are not sure 'Abdallah' and 'Awada' exist, the gambling historians probably do not, the foreword to the article in public culture is probably an invention – and its propositions and questions, set up a situation not of the wars or past as trauma, but of a kind of work in action, mirroring the action of wars but producing other effects and other discourses. The time and temporality of war here are not a rupture, but ruptures in movement. The now-famous AG fictional historian 'Dr. Fadl Fakhouri' asks, through 'Abdallah' and 'Awada' who speak for/through Raad:

> "How do we make sense of the experience of the civil war in Lebanon? […] How do we represent the traumatic events of historical collective dimensions when the very notion of experience is itself in question? […] What particular conceptions of experience […] can we presuppose when we speak of the physical and psychic violence of the civil war? What conception of time, evidence, testimony, history, and writing do we invoke?"[429]

What does the phrase 'history repeats itself' mean? What does feeling powerless in the face of the war machine mean?[430] What are the consequences of perpetually feeling that innocent streets are loaded, potential sites of explosion and danger? Raad could indeed have stopped his 'archiving' of car bombings in 1991 (though he in fact

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[429] Raad, *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow*, 18.
[430] See Kassir, *Being Arab*, where he discusses constructions and feelings of powerlessness and victimhood as part of 'Arabness' in a powerless and subjugated Arab 'people'.

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does not, but only claims to have, which confirms that what he has been doing was precisely not archiving, as we see below) since what happens afterwards seems like a continuously-familiar scenario; the event is always too large to be apprehended and naively communicated, the details do not make the whole, we are always too late, and events are immediately hijacked and exploited by either of the two or more 'warring' factions. It would appear to many observers that the past, present and future are not separate temporalities from this vantage point, but form some kind of contiguous thickness.
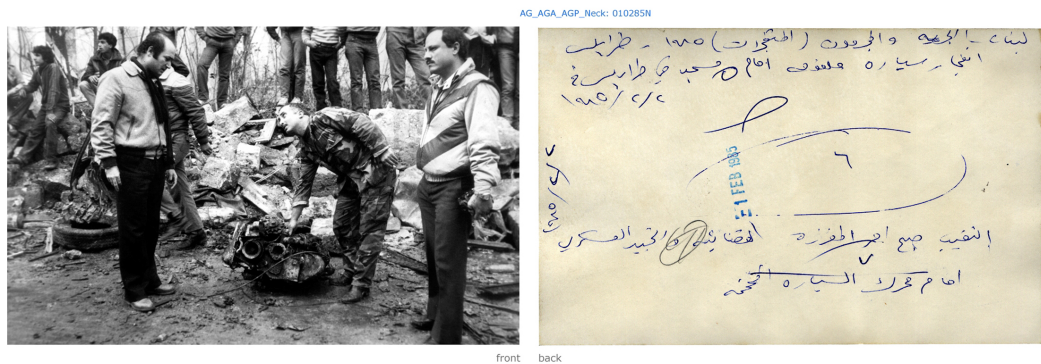
front   back

Figure 19: The Atlas Group, My Neck is Thinner a Hair: A History of Car Bombs in the Lebanese Wars (1975-1991) Volumes 1-254, Engines, digital print 20 x 25cm, 1985/2003

Within hours of the explosion on 19 October, 2012, press recourse to the 'cause' of the explosion waters down the massiveness of civilian destruction and terror; an prohibition of witnessing the graveness of the violence. As soon as it appears that Colonel Wissam Hassan (head of intelligence at the Lebanese Internal Security Forces) was the target of the bomb, political speeches on public television, realpolitik, take centre stage while all else, including victims and witnesses, recedes to the background. An immediate cut is performed between the event and its experience. The temporal dimension (the time) open to feel implicated, or to mourn, is shut out. Consequently,

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there is an immediate interdiction on experience (already never unmediated) and on mourning, akin to Walid Sadek's theorizing of the corpse.

There is a paradox observed in the tragic event of a car bomb in Lebanon in that it brings people together, gathers them while, simultaneously, separating them. The interdiction performs that break, where events seem always-already rhetorically predetermined or cordoned-off and, as such, block off experience, effect and the possibility of being together, eliminating the time to think this very being-together. Although we cannot hope to answer this here, can art in that regard ever be the intermediary between experience and event or gesture in that regard? What about experience in relation to such extreme, imaged violence as YouTube videos of ISIS beheadings and, on the other side, the structural violence of everyday life and reactions against it (e.g. unaccountable police shootings and stop-and-searches, say, or worldwide anti-capitalist protests, again highly imaged)?[431]

Hito Steyerl explores this notion of 'experience' through three documentary art works; *Waiting for Tear Gas* (1999) by Alan Sekula, *Get Rid of Yourself* (2001) by Bernadette Corporation and *Medium Cool* (1968) by Haskell Wexler.[432] She argues against Giorgio Agamben's conceptualization in *Infancy and History* that experience through situations is impossible. She explains that images of clouds of tear gas, as in Sekula's slides, are no more than metaphors for Agamben; situations akin to standing in a queue or visiting a local supermarket. In other words, shopping or tear gas qua situations do not allow for experience to be had. Although they might indeed provoke anger, agitation, excitement and the like, they remain surrogates. Experience qua experience is impossible in Agamben's hyperbolic account. Modernity, spectacle and the delirium of war might assault the senses, create an economy of sensations and affects, but do not deal in the currency of objects or experience.

Steyerl asks, "how do we address the problem of experience conveyed by documentary images? Can a photographic or filmic document convey an experience or, more precisely, a political experience?"[433] An inversion of this question could also be

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[431] See Rich, "The Blood of the Victim."

[432] "Look Out It's Real!"

[433] ibid., 41. The literature on experience, its 'impossibility', mediation and relation to temporality is vast but, for the purposes of the AG, see again Osborne, "The Fiction of the Contemporary" and

this: How is political experience image-ed? Her discussion of Haskell Wexler's film *Medium Cool* connects back to our discussion of the ways in which Raad in his work on car bombings and, later, Wael Noureddine in his film *July Trip*, stage themselves within television cameramen and photojournalists as they create the very spectacle of media within archival rigor that ends up staging its very shortcomings and loopholes. *Medium Cool,* Steyerl says, stages its fiction inside or within actual, real demonstrations. Even the scene of the film where one hears "Look out Haskell, it's real!" (warning the director of a tear-gas grenade), which one could initially read as a Brechtian, reflexive interruption of the real into the spectacle of fiction film, turns out to have been staged in post-production (similarly to the Q&A sessions in many of Raad's lecture-performances).

5.3.1 Method/form/content: Archive, counter-archive

In discussing the research process around the aforementioned car bombing of 21 January, 1986, (as one example of his entire oeuvre that more or less operates this way), Raad remarks how the forms and methodologies of the AG are partly informed by the insufficiencies observed on the ground, and the way information was organized by press and government bodies. He and his collaborators conducted interviews with eyewitnesses and others, and collated a mass of information on the dead, the injured and the destruction around the explosion. He notes how, in the archival photos and videotapes he viewed, bomb sites were most often immediately cleaned up and left as if no detonation had taken place (the clean-up operations being performed by local militias). Local residents knew that no prosecution or judicial inquiry would ever take place, but rather "that prosecution for these crimes was not going to be juridical but political", a distinction that indicates political agendas and militia alliances.[434]

Raad argues that the way detailed information and material were catalogued into databases and archives ("that then disguised [themselves] as history"[435]) led him to ask very specific questions in a desire to subvert the certainty of how this 'history' is written or amassed. He meticulously noted make and colour of the car(s) involved, type

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Anywhere or Not At All. Also, see a work that looks at Foucault's different conceptions of experience in O'Leary, *Foucault and Fiction*.

[434] Cesarco, *Silvia Kolbowski/Walid Raad*, 64.

[435] ibid.

of explosive used, gender and exact number of dead, size of the crater that was left by the blast, destroyed storefronts, visitors to the site, and so forth. These seemingly important, albeit essentially incidental markers of the event (and the experience of the event) become the core of the AG's research practice, and inform the method and *form* of what constitutes the *My Neck is Thinner Than a Hair* performance (and *Files*), not to mention much of the way the AG itself is structured. Insofar as the point of departure is archival, this is precisely what becomes problematized along the way *as* archive.[436] This is also important to reflect upon with regard to "the problem of the truth-teller, or of truth telling as an activity"[437] and the fact that the AG qua AG in effect turns from artist to producer. We return to this point.

The mere collection of data was not only about the past, but became progressively about being able to speak about the present and future – reaching the limit of that 'information' and pushing against it.[438] In other words, collating what was made known or available, the detailed inventory became the condition of possibility for doubting and exposing the limited and discursive knowledge produced by this kind of detailing. This is why it can be argued that the AG was not an archival project, or an archive per se, and does not produce the authority, neutrality or centralization that *the* archive alleges to.[439] The work of the AG here seems to undertake two stages/layers of research: one is preliminary, following an obsessive, inquisitive examination of information and data; the other, in its very amassing, is the performance or display of those exact modes of apprehending and mapping to not only let them go through the vacuousness that the lists become, but also in the way the 'information' is filtered through the AG's files, figures and projects. The fiction of the AG and its methodology exposes the very structure or method as construction of collating information and data in a traditional, forensic manner about a car bomb. It is as if by showing conventions,

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[436] See Foucault, "Fearless Speech" and "The Politics of Truth."
[437] Foucault, "Fearless Speech," n.p.
[438] See Foucault's discussion of Jorge Luis Borges' "Chinese Encyclopedia", a strange taxonomy of animals, real and imaginary, including laughable actions and descriptions classified together in a fictional register to counter the methodological of rational power as that is formed/exercised by the logic of archival classification. See Foucault, *The Order of Things*, especially the preface.
[439] Stefanie Baumann's PhD thesis is grounded on the argument that the AG is not an archive, nor does it operate like one. See Baumann, "Ceci N'est Pas un Centre d'Archives!"

they are no longer conventions, undone from inside themselves and made apparent[440] – another instance of the apparatus becoming apparent. This, we have been arguing throughout, is extremely different in register than the 'bearing witness' position in the face of catastrophic events, or the figure of the human, memorial subject. If anything, it is an agentive witness who is capable of allowing experience, even as mediated, to become possible again. Raad quotes Jalal Toufic:

> "To collect historical evidence and to preserve the relics and traces [... are] in all likelihood enough evidence to convince future generations that the Shoah happened and that it happened this way, refuting the revisionist questioning of the reality of the industrial-style slaughter[, ...] but it is not enough for one to bear witness, since one would then already totally be this side of the event horizon. Whenever an event has, for the one undergoing it, the tenor of a dream or nightmare, whenever it reaches, for the one undergoing it, the unbelievable "no, it is all too incredible" [...] in order to bear witness, remembering is necessary but not enough. To bear witness in such cases is a double operation: the most scrupulous historical research, the archaeological digging to reach the buried has to be complemented, because certain traumas as black holes – with an event horizon, beyond which we cannot go and return – by the created voice. [...] It is not enough to be an eye-witness (and a voice-witness), one should also be a voice-over witness[. …] What I dread when I am asked to bear witness [...is] that I am asked also to definitively forget in order to release, this side of the event horizon, the created voice that can tell about a created but true event."[441]

5.3.2 Institutional critique: A small detour

The history of institutional critique in conceptual art, the similarities it bears to the legacy of engaged art and film-making practices of the 1960s and 1970s, and its criticality more broadly bear resemblance to our above discussion of the conception of the AG and Raad's methodology.

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[440] This process does not originate in Lebanon, as this has been not only the legacy of the historical and neo avant-garde (conceptual art, pop art, institutional critique), documentary essay practices (like those of the Black Audio Film Collective, Harun Farocki and others); but also the alleged 'documentary turn', which artists in contemporary art very often document as a point of departure. However, we are outlining the AG/Walid Raad's specificity in the context of Lebanon and as inseparable from the entire fictional machine that is the invention of the AG. Lebanese performance artist Rabih Mroueh works in a similar, research-based fashion, employing a vast amount of newspaper clippings and images as the very material that constitutes the work before embarking on a performance in order to then leave this logic as the performance progresses into a fictional – hear critical – register. See, for example, *Looking for a Missing Employee* (2003), *How Nancy Wished That Everything Was an April Fool's Joke* (co-written with Fadi Toufic, 2007), and *Make Me Stop Smoking* (2006).

[441] Toufic, *Over-Sensitivity*, 45-46; as cited in Cesarco, *Sivila Kolbowski/Walid Raad*, 65-66.

In 1971, a solo exhibition by artist Hans Haacke to take place at the Guggenheim in New York, was censored due to the artist's intention to exhibit a work titled *Shapolsky et al., Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971.* One of the most discussed works of the 1970s, the piece brings together Haacke's research on 'slumlord' Harry Shapolsky's property holdings in Manhattan. A series of over 140 photographs of run-down blocks of residential buildings displayed with detailed data from public records clearly exposed the property-tycoon family's monopoly over those slums. The Guggenheim shut down the exhibition, deeming it inappropriate, and rumours circulated that Guggenheim trustees might have been implicated in those dodgy financial dealings work was an exercise in diligent excavation that indicates the complicity of board members of such powerful art institutions as the MoMA, the Guggenheim and others, but has since also become exemplary for the forms of institutional critique. Other similar works by Haacke include *MoMA Poll* (1970) and *Gallery Visitors Profile 1 and 2* (1972), as well as *A Breed Apart* from 1978, through which he connects the executives of British Leyland and the range of military vehicles by the prestigious Jaguar and Land Rover to imperial wars and apartheid in South Africa by using two images with captions that mimic car advertisements. Vered Maimon argues, following Benjamin Buchloh, that Haacke's *Polls* project and others, function on the basis of 'General Systems Theory', as developed by Jack Burnham, that enabled art to be seen not as self-sufficient objects, but as social relations and boundaries that explore the links between people and their environments. A materialism. And so, the art object became an 'information trigger' or, as Buchloh calls it, "factographic".[442]

According to Maimon, this method (and eventually, form) of working with statistics was not only emblematic of conceptual art strategies at the time (to do with seriality, repetition, documentation and archiving), but also became a way of enacting the so-called 'death of the author' by displacing expressionistic artistic gestures and styles towards "industrial forms of production and distribution".[443] This was intended to make visible the ways in which the status of the art object was not merely a question of

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[442] Buchloh, "Hans Haacke," in Maimon, "The Third Citizen," 88. See also, Bourdieu and Haacke, *Free Exchange*. For an account of artists as workers and activists in the same era, see Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers*; and of the artist as ethnographer, see Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer."
[443] "The Third Citizen," 87.

aesthetic, authorial intent; and that the way it was received, displayed or validated by art institutions made it imbricated in sets of power relations.[444] The form of the informative, the document and the statistical was intended to mimic capitalism's positivistic, instrumental, bureaucratic forms of rationality – a form of *détournement*, as we return to in Section 5.4, in its dialectical approach to critique. This fact-based format was intended to inform, educate and possibly even create a 'public', as well as to expose how this very form of rationality and positivist science have become extremely untenable under late capitalism, used corruptly at it was, for forms of governance and control.[445]

Maimon maintains that the type of work exemplified by Haacke, in these instances, relies on some epistemological premises: the first is that all critique in art or otherwise is a rational endeavour, and part of a process of rationalization; second, critique is about unveiling or unmasking appearance from fact, provoking a certain consciousness through fact; and critique is also showing how the distribution of a certain (cultural) consciousness masks false consciousness, the political and social consequences of that very distribution. It is precisely this idea of critical knowledge that requires to be questioned for thinking that it needs to be complicit with the way rationalization and instrumentalization operate through information and communication.[446] Although the AG, from what we have laid out thus far, appears to

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[444] Refer to our discussion in Section 5.4 of Marcel Duchamp and the readymade in relation to context.

[445] Influenced by systems theory, Haacke eventually denounces this for being complicit with the machinations and logic of the military-industrial complex. Later critics of this type of approach, including Buchloh, see this process as feeding back, through the artwork, into those very relations of power and processes of rationalization they are meant to be critiquing. This could be relevant to *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow,* Raad's post-AG project that could possibly be read within this tradition.

[446] In a slight diversion, it is interesting to look at this from the perspective of propaganda and counterinformation and how they also are tools that want to expose, 'for the people', what the enemy is doing. When counterinformation becomes dominant, it then needs counter-counterinformation. In the Lebanese context, it brings to mind Hezbollah's Mlita Museum, which arranges and displays captured IDF armoured vehicles, weapons and kitchenware as though they were readymades, as well as using lists and statistics to expose Israeli aggression. They, too, use the tools of display, commemoration and information that the very military power that oppresses them does. This form of party propaganda – which, in many instances, is empowering and a source of group cohesion – can thus be an example of the limit of the type of 'art' that also deals in communication, information and rationalization to directly engage with military and capitalist modes of power. Edouard de Laurot, the foremost proponent of *cinéma engage,* makes the following distinction: "Engagement for us is, in the first place, not propaganda, as Sartre's conception was often misconstrued to mean. Rather, for us engagement is the tending through artistic creation to achieve as much as possible a unity between consciousness and conscience. As a second definition,

operate only this way, we suggest that this is the point at which it possibly abandons this dialectic in large part through its existing in fiction and producing from a place of fiction. Therein may lie its species of criticality.

5.3.3 The politics and fiction of the Atlas Group

The above has dealt with how critique in art may expose the instrumentalization of information and communication by adopting those tactics to critique that very archiving, management, evasion and so on. Although this could be read as a demand that art directly comment on the conditions of politics, of power, and of the economy of both, as well as on life more generally – akin to human rights, or special governmental commissions detailing the bombing of schools, the use of cluster bombs and other banned weapons, the massacring of civilians in the hope that this information would affect public opinion and foreign policy, and thus produce social change – the situation is more complex.[447] What might be expected of a kind of art in its exposing of the truth is that it often may not realise that this demand constitutes its own 'politics of truth', its own staging and producing of truth claims resulting in a version of the truth that is constituted by political and social processes – in short, by power.

That convergence of governance/government and the use of documents in a regime of truth Hito Steyerl calls "documentality" (using Michel Foucault's "governmentality"), and indicating the ways in which the exercise of power happens through the production of certain truth claims. "Media productions can also assume the role of governmental structures and function as governmental 'hinges' between power

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no artist who is endowed with a conscience will express less than his consciousness embraces" (Brenez, "Edouard de Laurot," 63).

[447] The choice between two ways of making art or dealing with the past was utterly refused. One was the language of militant activism turned into a logic uttered under the hubris of human-rights discourse (ethics, memory, restitution, etc.). The second was the inherited, militant sentimentality as that of the famous Palestinian poet of the revolution, Mahmoud Darwish, or the Lebanese Khalil Hawi and others, who espoused the cause with intense, melancholic affect, usually imbibed in a beautiful, deadly imagery of ruination – the latter committing suicide when the Israeli army invaded Beirut. See, for example, first-hand poetic testimonies of this kind, in the case of the 1982 Israeli invasion and siege of Beirut and Lebanon, including Darwish's poetic oeuvre and his *Memory for Forgetfulness*; and Traboulsi, "Guernica-Beirut." In the tradition of the urgency to produce a historical narrative for those who do not have one – especially in the face of such fiats as those uttered by Golda Meir that the Palestinians do not historically exist – see Said, "Permission to Narrate" and others.

and subjectivation", as well as documentality, though usually the very use of that power through documents can also "mean an attempt to thwart and to problematize not only dominant forms of truth production, but also of government, for instance as in the attempt by the group *kinoki* to create a Soviet Red Cinematography."[448]

Power is exercised through discursive strategies that can efface 'the others' and their historical narratives (for instance, think of Palestine and Zionism in Chapter 4 but also of subaltern studies and postcolonialism, more broadly). And so was born the speaking for the voiceless, or of exposing power through the same techniques in a bid to be transparent. Yet, what we are attempting to address are the tactics and forms that can speak about, or obliquely address how this power is constructed and exercised through governmentality in the first instance. Walid Raad, we suggest, does this through the fiction that is the heart of the AG. Form and content cannot be separated in the machine he has set up. It is no wonder the AG has been distasteful and dangerous to some in its attention to form. In "Myth Today", Roland Barthes had underlined myth as a form of speech, an arrangement of signification, and reminds us that historical criticism would have been far richer had it not been so terrorized by the study of forms (under the Stalinist suspicion of formalism as petty, bourgeois individualism sometimes equivalent to a death sentence): "On the contrary, the more a system is specifically defined in its forms, the more amenable it is to historical criticism. To parody a well-known saying, I shall say that a little formalism turns one away from History, but that a lot brings one back to it."[449]

It is through fiction as form that Raad draws attention not only to how history gets written (or not), but how truth is constructed – not by telling *the* truth, by bearing witness, but by drawing attention to the apparatus of testimony as signification. The witness can be the embodiment of truth in the AG even if its utterances are fiction. We return to this with Jacques Derrida in Section 5.4.

Meanwhile, Trinh T. Minh-Ha reminds us:

"A documentary aware of its own artifice is one that remains sensitive to the flow between fact and fiction. Documentary, whether film or other practices, [...] reduced to a mere vehicle of the facts may be used to advocate a cause, but it does not constitute one in itself; hence the perpetuation of the bipartite

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[448] Steyerl, "Documentarism as Politics of Truth," 2.
[449] Barthes, "Myth Today,"112.

system of division in the content-versus-form rationale. Meaning can therefore be political only when it does not let itself be easily stabilized, and when it does not rely on any single source of authority, but, rather, empties or decentralizes it. Thus, even when this source is referred to, it stands as one among many others, at once plural and utterly singular. In its demand to mean at any rate, the 'documentary' often forgets how it comes about and how aesthetics and politics remain inseparable in its constitution."[450]

Documentary that is sensitive and effectively engaged is one that realizes the element of artifice in itself and in its mode of construction (and, thus, avoids being propaganda, journalism, or sloganeering). This filters back into the idea that the AG qua the AG is keenly aware of its staging, and performs its own artifice by definition. Indeed, the AG's work is, in many ways, a documentary practice, certainly if we follow Min-Ha's defining contours of what constitutes "sensitive" documentary insofar as it presents itself as such (documentary), yet also betrays this fidelity to the 'actual'.

It is important to note that we do not pit fiction against documentary or against truth. The AG's what we can call 'internal fiction', or even 'reticent fiction', is one that is evidently opposed to the convincing fiction of such docudramas, which also are 'based on true events'. For instance, *Tayf al Liqa'a* (2010) aired on Al-Manar, Hezbollah's official television station, shows in great detail one of their many operations against the Israeli occupation in South Lebanon. The one-hour film aims, through its rigid dialogue and its re-enactment of events, to depict things as *they really were*. Its temporality is retrospective, its linear narrative un-reflexive, its dialogues uncannily similar to traditional witness testimonies, though not spoken directly to the interviewer but told by and to the characters in the drama, including a woman talking about the loss of her son; a young fighter remembering his childhood fear of bombs and death, which turned into fear of thunderstorms. "To deny the reality of film in claiming (to capture) reality is to stay 'in ideology'."[451] Yet, this is an easy comparison. We continue to suggest below how fiction (as it complicates testimonial speaking positions), not as a special effect nor as a side show, can become the condition of possibility for utterance about real politics, real ways in which power exercises itself and real war, and in this, it is a politicized and reconfigured witness position.

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[450] "Documentary Is/Not a Name," 88-9.
[451] ibid., 90.

5.4 Image, Speech, Context, *Détournement*

"Unless an image displaces itself from its natural state, it acquires no significance. Displacement causes resonance."[452] This is true of the AG's use of horse race photos (*Missing Lebanese Wars_Notebook Volume 72*), car bombs and engines (*My Neck is Thinner Than a Hair: A History of Car Bombs in the Lebanese Wars 1975-1991 Volumes 1-245* and *Already Been in a Lake of Fire_Notebook Volume 38*), Beirut's buildings and store fronts (*The Sweet Talk File* in its different iterations), documentation of the Beirut hostage 'crisis' (*Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English version)*)), and more. In some sense, the AG's entire oeuvre rests on a fiction as displacement, and this is how it gains its reinvigorated meaning. This is compelling also in an entirely different context. In the opening sequence of Jean-Luc Godard's *Notre Musique* (2004), archival news and film footage of human disasters, wars and suffering are sequenced in such a way as to make us see them outside the frame of the 'new' event, or newsflash that structures them. What might this mean? The displacement that Shanta Gokhale speaks of sometimes requires the betrayal of a context precisely in order so that the context (wars, famine, injustice, etc.) might become 'seen', apparent once more.

What are some contours of a context? It is interesting to note briefly what Jacques Derrida says about context in relation to communication, a term that already stands on unsteady ground as regards its determinate content and meaning (that Derrida also questions at length). In his essay 'Signature Event Context', Derrida critiques J. L. Austin's notion of the performative speech act. Speech acts, according to Derrida's reading of Austin, always need a context, a stage on which they are understood as speech acts (the wedding hall, the courtroom), and that context is predetermined so that there is a unity of sense or meaning (for Austin)– what he calls 'total context'. These utterances are not to be understood semantically, as it were, but rather as movements or operations that produce an effect – that effect being an action. For Austin, these performative speech acts require some such prerequisites as a conscious, speaking subject who is uttering intentional things, others who understand what is being uttered, a certain necessary context in which these words are enunciated, and an understanding among, or by those implicated by what is actually going on. Nothing seems to escape

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[452] Shanta Gokhale; as cited in Minh-Ha, "Documentary Is/Not a Name," 95.

this total determination. In relation to works of art, Stefanie Baumann discusses Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) (as a readymade; an object that declares itself a work of art) as a performative speech act that, in fact, puts into question the very context that in the first instance produced such legitimacy as that which belongs to works of art. In other words, in order to account for the paradox inherent in the fact that a urinal is a regular object that can be transformed by gesture/'speech act' into an artwork, it necessitates the transformation of the criteria of what goes into and constitutes that particular context of art from within (by, say, putting a urinal in an art context, declaring it a work of art and having that declaration be a transformative action). The context, as such, is not an empty space (or signifier) with things being transported in and out of it without itself being affected (not to mention constituting those things that come in and out of it). In short, speech acts of this kind can change the context as much as they change the objects that go into it.[453]

Derrida adds that there can be acts of speech that act outside those predetermined spaces or places. An utterance (and language) is not an empty vessel whose so-called pure or inherent meaning that can be transported from context to context. And a context is not a neutral background that allows for smooth, neutral communication either, be it performative or not. Rather, speech acts enact sameness and difference simultaneously. They take the context out of its context, as it were. A speech act is not just uttered in a predefined, closed context that understands it. The very context has to be transformed from within for these performatives (that can be said to violate Austin's conception) to be effected.

When Walid Raad speaks through and 'parasites'[454] the speech of characters he has created, the AG, speech can no longer be said to rely either on speaker or on the context alone. For that speech to be assimilated and understood as fiction coming from a truth, it alters the context in which it is being uttered. That context is not simply the literal art space, courtroom or marriage hall. Consider the utterance of testimony: it can happen in the written word, the videotaped recording, the courtroom, the confession cubicle. The literary feat of Raad is that neither does he write a novel, nor an

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[453] See Baumann, "*Ceci N'est Pas un Centre d'Archives*!" Also see Derrida, "Signature Event Context."

[454] We borrow the word 'parasited' from Derrida's discussion of ghosts in Ken McMullen's film *Ghost Dance*, 1983, 100 minutes.

autobiography; neither is it poetry, nor live testimony. He (or, rather, the AG) has created the context through which testimony (the testimony of being implicated, of being a guilty-but-innocent bystander, of "knowing too much") can somehow occur without the defining constraints of a legitimate testimonial space or place, but rather of testimonial time, which he, in turn, creates.[455]

The point of departure for the AG as fiction, and their use of materials from actual events as an art practice that is about modes of address in order, in part, to show how exhausted those modes of address are, is, yet, not entirely a form of *détournement* (as itself, *détournement* is also a form of taking context out of context and of questioning the basis of modes of address/communication as exercised by power for oppressive end).[456] And it is also not, *not détournement*. The AG is not exactly, or not only *détournement*. We can have two simultaneous readings: the very thing that is being *detourné* is, in fact, 'true', was sometimes the point for the Situationists, where the message or the format is, at closer inspection, being *détourner*, where one sign is replaced by another within the same regime or distribution, as parody, mimicry or subversion. In addition, the conditions of its truth-ness or those conditions that make it apprehended *as* true are also being put into question in *détournement*. The AG is not entirely *not détournement* by its taking the context of news, the obsessive research and presentation of 'facts' from within them as 'true', and using them as a means, not as an end, thereby rearranging (their) representation. In this sense, there is and there isn't an Atlas-Group-ness. Their utterances do not conform to a status quo or become genre, but they use context as a means to testify to what the instability (and hegemony) of meaning in those means might refer to, and they do it in a way singular to the AG.[457]

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[455] Sadek, "Peddling Time," especially the section "Witnesses who know too much." Also see Sadek, "The Next of Survivors."

[456] *Détournement*, as alluded to in Chapter 4, is the Situationist International parlance for the appropriation of pre-existing forms (aesthetic, visual, material, etc.), (f)or a "subversive rewriting" (McDonough, *The Situationists and the City*, 146). However, we are not making the claim that the terms 'situations' and 'context' are identical.

[457] The line between recuperation (the process or mechanism exercised by power and by capital) and *détournement* is blurry, according to such observers as Sylvère Lotringer, Naomi Klein and Slavoj Žižek, in that irony can be a force of reification, not subversion. We alluded to this in our discussion of Jameson's parody/pastiche exposé. Surely, 'lecture-performances' filled with lies or fabrications are common currency among prominent politicians in Lebanon and the world over (Colin Powell's meticulous, but insubstantial presentation of Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction as one major case in point). But there it poses as truth and is used to justify policy. As stated earlier in Steyerl's notion of documentalism (governmentality and documentarism), Raad parodies the form of

Having said this, it is interesting to note that Guy Debord himself realized the complicity between *détournement* and its mirror: recuperation.

> "The literary and artistic heritage of humanity should be used for partisan propaganda purposes. It is, of course, necessary to go beyond any idea of mere scandal. Since opposition to the bourgeois notion of art and artistic genius has become pretty much old hat, [Marcel Duchamp's] drawing of a moustache on the Mona Lisa is no more interesting than the original version of that painting. We must now push this process to the point of negating the negation."[458]

To illustrate further our ideas about context and *détournement*, it might be apt to make a quick stop at Lebanese film-maker Wael Noureddine's *July Trip* (2007). Filmed in South Lebanon in the midst of the deadly Israeli siege and bombardment, the footage shows us the film-maker filming the press as they are filming; a gesture of bearing witness to how frames are produced, all the while producing them.[459] He shoots his car journey to the South while refugees pour out in the opposite direction, trucks carrying fleeing villagers carrying white flags; corpses; rubble; a candlelit floor with the diegetic sound of hovering drones and warplanes; and the film-maker himself chasing heroin and snorting what looks like cocaine, with the voice (and later image) of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah blares from the background television screen.[460] The film-maker tries to capture the furtive, incessantly shifty gaze of television cameras with its own rabid, breathless gaze and staccato, jumpy montage. It films the filming of war, more than war *itself* (if this is ever filmable). "There will only be a war cinema when there is an olfactory cinema."[461] What is the difference between Noureddine's camera and those of the reporters and news channels? It is evident at first sight that his filming position is immediately parallel to, or outside that produced by television.[462]

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such presentations, of such documentalism, but in ways that cannot be recuperated as truth or as power-speech. We wonder about the possibility that among the predecessors of the notion of *détournement*(in art) is the cannibalism of Oswald de Andrade, where notions of ingestion abounded in the anti-colonial imaginary ("Cannibalist Manifesto").

[458] Debord and Wolman, "A User's Guide to *Détournement.*"

[459] See Butler, *Frames of War.*

[460] Common during the 2006 war was Nasrallah's sudden appearance on television screens to update citizens on reprisals and attacks. The IDF was also – in a very different vein – interrupting radio airwaves to instruct citizens to stop supporting Hezbollah. These radiophonic interruptions are analyzed in Badran, "Radiophonic Voice(s)."

[461] Marker, *Level Five.*

[462] Noureddine's film seems to occupy multiple positions as a witness to war, as well as to how those media frames of war were being produced on a daily basis, and how that documentality was being produced. The film could be said to occupy a double position of critique against the war and against the way it is manufactured. It is important to remind again that documentary and aesthetic positions

"The journalists I saw pissed me off. They asked the same question 100 times and then finally kept the answer they were looking for to begin with[. ...] After all, they can say that my film is a documentary, but I would reply that it is an essay[. ...] I asked myself a lot of questions: should I keep the shots with the corpses? Especially since there were children among them and I did not want it to be a sign of pity[. ...] I tried to shoot a sort of 'making-of' on the attitude of journalists. The difference between cinema and journalism is that the duty of cinema – even if 'duty' is not quite the right word – is to show the 'hors champs'."[463]

What is different about Noureddine's film from some of those produced by Lebanese artists during or after the 2006 war is that it is one of the very few shot immediately during the events.[464] While many artists were discussing the 'filmability' of war, referring to either the interdiction on witnessing in times of catastrophe, or of knowing too much as witnesses, Noureddine pushed those questions and decided to fly from France precisely to 'capture' the said war on film. The film footage resembles documentary (or through which the image is reclaimed from documentary), yet is a visibly emotional and shaken account, literally in the way in which the camera is held and how shots are captured, but also because it is interrupted by words on screen – little poems that are similar to his previous work on Beirut after the Hariri assassination.[465] They belie the tradition that has produced them when Noureddine claims to 'liberate' the land with his camera, echoing Edouard de Laurot's famous claims that the camera is a weapon.

An awkward comparison, but how is it essentially different from what the AG does in "We Can Make Rain" or general, integral methodologies? Is using images of war (and images of how war is made through images) in the context of war as a form of *détournement* a sufficient model for the enactment (and a subsequent critique) of the way space-time is distributed in the representation of events of such magnitude? Noureddine's words are be more closely connected to the tradition of engaged cinema,

against photojournalism date back to at the 1960s and to such practices the San Diego Group (Sekula, Rosler, Lonidier and Steinmetz) became influential for. See also the 2009 seminar *Antiphotojournalism*, led by Thomas Keenan and Carles Guerra.

[463] Marcie, Noureddine and Bensouda, debate held at cine-club Objectif Cinéma; my translation.

[464] There were a couple of fiction films (Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, and Phillipe Aractingi) but for the documentary essay, see also Abi Samra, *Merely a Smell*. Film-makers who shot in the midst of war in the 1970s and 1980s include those mentioned earlier: Jocelyne Saab, Maroun Baghdadi, Borhane Alaouie, Heiny Srour and others. See also Shafik, *Arab Cinema;* and Khatib, *Lebanese Cinema.*

[465] *Ça Sera Beau.*

which believes that film and the camera are, in fact, weapons of the revolution (in this case in the presence or absence of one). Going back to Maimon, the criticality in art here is understood as occurring through perceiving critique as empowering spectators through information and visibility. It is believed that, through graphing the heart of machinations of war or real-estate (in the case of, say, Haacke), political critique happens – not becomes possible, but actually occurs.

It could be said that the AG treads on the condition of possibility of making 'political' art, as well as art that deals with politics (interfacing with these worlds ontologically, rather than espousing some transcendental version of reality). It is more interested in the occupation of several speaking and temporal positions that question what it might mean to have a political practice, and the conditions that make it possible to have an artwork that posits itself as critical or political. Who are the mysterious hands that write the notes behind the photos on "Let's Be Honest the Weather Helped" or in *Missing Lebanese Wars_Notebook Volume 72*? It is neither that attributed to the fictional historian, nor to Walid Raad, as it cannot be. It can only be unknowable to the extent that Raad is not himself, is outside himself when he makes these; has relinquished authorship, to some degree. 'Fadl Fakhouri' and the others do not exist, or better, they strongly exist only insofar as Raad has relinquished his own identity.[466] This poetics and politics, might we say, is precisely what allows us to read and see again those images, words and facts of war and violence, of life, that we became blind to from too much vision, following Walid Sadek.

The poetics of Raad's AG project and concomitant artworks, if we follow Derrida, is in the incessant possibility of lies and secrets in its propositions. The work is a poetics of testimony to the extent that it always masks *and* shows that very testimony, and the secrets it holds. As stated earlier, the possibility of the lie is what makes a certain kind of speech testimonial for Derrida, hence procuring the role of belief. The listener or viewer is in the position of having to believe, or not, what is being said (in the case of the AG archive, it is the whole project that solicits this, the lecture-performances being

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[466] Maurice Blanchot, in thinking about writing and death, muses that writers do not write what they write. Writing is not about skill, will or know-how; it escapes those determinations, hence the difference between '*œuvre*' and '*livre*'. See, for instance, Gregg, *Blanchot and the Literature of Transgression*; and Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*. See Chapter 1 for our discussion of testimony and fiction in Derrida.

specifically exemplar cases of this). An untrue testimony, in good faith, increases the poetics of this possibility of secrets in testimony. Raad, through the AG, is both actor of the witness and imperfect translator; or, at the very least, complicates those positions. The poetic experience becomes the non-proof of testimony and its obscure, multiple translations.[467]

The speaking position – visual and formal – of *July Trip*, is more autobiographically situated and 'immediate' than the AG's propositions, which stretch time so as to give it 'thickness'.[468] This depth of time, this position of uttering through the fiction of the testimonial position, as well as showing what was becoming less and less audible, visible and meaningful (in short, war, the way it is framed, co-opted, etc.), is what allows the AG productions to turn from 'mere' witnessing to a politics of witnessing, thereby allowing for another mode of inhabiting and viewing the temporality   of   war.

Figure 20: Wael Noureddine, July Trip, film still, 2007

Noureddine's images are self-involved, reflexive, and potent, yet still aim to be subversive and 'communicative'. The AG's oeuvre on car bombings, as one example, complicates the veracity and position of the speaker. In the end, car bombs, explosions

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[467] Derrida, "Poetics and Politics of Witnessing."
[468] Sadek, "Peddling Time."

not to mention wars, are events: current, violent, 'newsworthy' events. They produce eyewitnesses and are an opportunity for media owners, political analysts and political parties to reinforce (and create) their party line, ideological rhetoric and communitarian identifications. All eyes of the 'nation' are on these images. What is the difference, then, between an eyewitness and a witness, and is the former merely a un-implicated bystander, and the latter a survivor, or victim? Is the witness not also a limit, a symptom and a vector through which the events can be made legible? No one witnesses for the witness. Derrida's riposte was that the witness cannot witness for him/herself, and certainly not in the instant of their death. In a sense, a witness for the witness becomes a compulsory, political act. The AG, the work of Sadek and others are perhaps precisely the difference between witnessing and eye-witnessing, engaging with the very condition of possibility of witnessing, with fiction and the "voice-over", which allows another mode of audibility, visibility and consciousness to be interposed.

These artists are akin to investigators that (forcibly) always start the investigation from the end, after the fact, post-event, knowing too much and too little (dissimilar from say photojournalists who create actuality as it happens, from some 'start').[469] That moment of death – that of others – that they did not witness but, simultaneously, could have witnessed, becomes important. In journalism, one event is replaced by another, and the set of real-time news images are replaced by another set. What remains after the journalistic event? What history?

5.5 Let's Be Honest, the Weather Helped

The dark, murky times are not just the names and lists of 20th century tragedies, not the "genocides, purges, and hunger of a specific era. Instead, darkness refers to the way these horrors appear in public discourse and yet remain hidden."[470] Building on this, what about the violence of the state of things? Of systems, apparatuses and relations of

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[469] Similarly albeit differently to the work of Forensic Architecture. Given more space we would have elaborated their similarities and differences, especially with regards to investigative methods, the very aesthetics of investigation, the formal logics of their artistic forms, the wider political-humanitarian claims they make, and so forth.

[470] Berkowitz, Katz and Keenan, *Thinking in Dark Times*, 3.

the order of things, of the way things are: of capitalism as state system, world system, economic structure? This totality too is abstract and, as such, equally 'unrepresentable' (requiring 'cognitive mapping' for Jameson), and poses just as many important questions about violence and representation as do direct states of violence. As Alberto Toscano remarks in "Iconoclasm Today: The Tactics and Ethics of Negative Presentation", thinking representation (or even iconoclasm) is not just about the guilt of being faced with the pain and suffering of others from a position of privilege, then ethically deciding not to show (sometimes through showing that we do not show), but also about seeing through the entire matrix that makes these daily, global, insidious and invisible practices of violence, pain and cruelty possible.[471]

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[471]Toscano, "Iconoclasm Today." See the AG's "Let's Be Honest, the Weather Helped", which is a series of digital photographs of 'notebook' showing shelled-out buildings with differently-coloured dots indicating the countries selling ammunition and weapons to the Lebanese militias and, thereby, acting as material traces of the financing, arms cartels and global-military engineering. With more space, we would have discussed *the form* of the photographic-notebook work of the AG.

– Towards a Conclusion –

In our discussions, we did not pay close attention to the politics, structures and infrastructure of art after the Lebanese wars – the capital, institutions, discourses and ideologies that came to increasingly facilitate its existence – as that would have (and has previously) required an entire other doctoral thesis. It is important, however, to end on a sombre note and recall the conditions of the present, both in the contemporary art world and beyond its confines of so-called 'freedom', in the violent world of global capital where the conditions and terms of witnessing have changed in different ways.[472] And here we say art world in particular so as not enter into the long history of the debates around the autonomy of art.

The illusion of freedom of art in its self-constitution as standing beyond economic and governmental (sometimes in spite of) instrumentalization, bureaucracy and commodification was discussed and critiqued by countless theorists to the Left. As Julian Stallabrass, puts it, "this cultural enclave is protected from vulgar commercial pressures, permitting free play with materials and symbols, along with the standardized breaking of convention and taboo."[473] Not only does he critique this as difficult, or a pretension, but tries to lay out how the two systems– the economy of finance capital (including its former versions free trade, mass market, culture industry) and 'unpolluted' cultural freedom, or free art – are not opposing systems or terms, but complementary; one dominant, and the other its constitutive supplement.

It was primarily in the late 1990s and the onset of the 2000s that Lebanese and 'Middle Eastern' (hear non Euro-American) art manifested itself (even as a category) in what came to be known as the transnational global art world. As local art writer Kaelen Wilson-Goldie puts it:

> "Due to the general globalisation of the art world and the particular spike in interest in art from the Middle East since the events of 11 September 2001, artists, curators and arts organisers working across the region have had more occasions to share their experiences and resources, and to collaborate, whether through group exhibitions, festivals and conferences held in other

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[472] For thinking about witnessing in the aftermath of the Syrian revolution then civil war, with civilians filming their own deaths on mobile phones, see Jon Rich, "The Blood of the Victim."

[473] *Art Incorporated*, 3.

parts of the world or through the creation of joint projects within the region [...]."[474]

As we mentioned in Chapter 3, Hanan Toukan's compelling and detailed doctoral work was geared towards an explicit investigation of the ways in which, in the aftermath of Ta'ef, the Cold War and later 9/11, funding and infrastructure for the arts (through the discourse of artists, patrons, donors, cultural managers and so forth), particularly that art is considered alternative or subversive, as she puts it, can be understood as the soft arm of power and foreign policy, as cultural diplomacy, effectively nullifying whatever was left of the category of the subversive in capitalizing on it.[475] This, then, permitted a small group of artists who had begun in the 1990s to rise to fame in global art world networks of transnational galleries, collections, museums, exhibitions, biennials, compendiums, their names circulating.

As Raymond Williams had put it decades earlier, perhaps forecasting the coming of a postmodern turn in art, regarding the historicizing of modern art in the West: "These are indeed the rhetoric and specific authors of 'modernism', a highly selected version of the modern which then offers to appropriate the whole of modernity. We have only to review the names in the real history to see the open ideologizing which permits the selection."[476] This is not to say that the selection obfuscated some other compelling artists in hiding in the Lebanese context. It simply indicates that, among those who were 'chosen', some decided to go along. And their work changed decidedly thereafter, in content, in form, in mode of address, referencing their previous works through new work in a variant of postmodern pastiche that has lost its referent.[477] In short, it was no longer capable of doing the things it had done before. It was effectively neutralized and without a project.

Today, with regard to some Lebanese artists and cultural institutions, this is perceived more palpably and more than ever, not just thanks to the flood of international donors, market interests or funding institutions of the 2000s, but also by contagion, thanks to a large number of wealthy patrons and collectors who have shown

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[474]"On the Politics of Art and Space in Beirut," n.p.
[475] See Toukan, "Art Aid Affect."
[476] "When was Modernism?" 49.
[477]See Sadek, "Peddling Time When Standing Still."

an immense interest in Lebanese art and its institutions.[478] Paradoxically, those patrons and donors have facilitated the idea that these institutions can now run their cultural business 'independently' and that artists can have the 'freedom' to do their work, whereas both are imbricated in a web of economies, transactions and discourses both cultural and financial, from which there is little emergence. This would require altogether new aesthetic modes, tactics, forms if, at all, as Suhail Malik says, for art's necessary exit from contemporary art.[479] And it would require those in the context of Lebanon as it does transnationally.

The implications of capital and art had started with neo-colonial machinations and Euro-centric biases of early curators interested in the contemporary Arab world. And those are filled with problems that would then effectively alter the course of art after the civil war.

In a 2002 lecture at Ashkal Alwan in Beirut on her project *Contemporary Arab Representations*, curator Catherine David declares the precariousness of the Lebanese situation and the need for certain practices she declares experimental, marginal and critical to be protected, rendered visible and circulated. In an apparent denunciation – for fear of appearing patronizing, she says, or insinuating an understanding of this art as spontaneous, magical or unexplained – David explicitly states that she will refrain from referring to Lebanese works and their context as 'emergent situations'. Yet, David sites Sao Paolo and Bombay as 'emergent situations', reinforcing how this discourse lumps together the global South, while claiming not to do so.[480] 'Emergent' thus implies the problematic need for increased 'visibility' (more shows, publications, sales) – an ahistorical paradigm of rupture, as though that art is fledgling and in need of support, narrated by Western actors who posit themselves as Western and thus not in a position to speak. Many problems and ironies emerge with regards to how 'region' and 'identity' are constructed and negotiated in the discourse on what came to be called Lebanese contemporary art practices. The latter is likely an offspring, or variant of David's

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[478] See the list of donors and patrons of such organizations as Ashkal Alwan and the Beirut Art Centre, and to consider the organization APEAL (Association for the Promotion and Exhibition of the Arts in Lebanon) and the Metropolitan Art Society gallery by business tycoon Tony Salameh, and many other examples. See also the Beirut Exhibition Centre opened by Solidere in 2010.

[479] *On the Necessity of Art's Exit from Contemporary Art.*

[480] David, "Learning from Beirut, 34.

"contemporary aesthetic practices", a term she uses to distinguish between what she calls 'critical work' and 'dominant consumption'. One of the key actors behind the exportation of Beirut artists into the art world circuits of Europe and elsewhere, David is in a precarious position to speak about the negative effects of 'globalization' on art (a catch-all for the logic of late capitalism and concomitant art markets that opened east and southward). Without explaining how she is exterior to that, she claims that the forces of globalization in art have been accelerated in the case of Beirut, highlighting that the emphasis on difference or heterogeneity (by the West with regards to non Euro-American art), when it is presented as essential difference, can become more easily appropriated by the logic of global capital. So the idea, David unsurprisingly tells us, becomes to 'reveal' not to 'package' these works (and their geography).[481] And so the revealing began.

Much of the 'local' reception of what we can call conceptual and documentary art after the civil wars has either been eulogizing or damning. It certainly has not been without critics. Some aspects of the criticism can be read as evidence that these art forms and positions posed a break with tradition. In many cases, they were either read as globalized, postmodern or, sometimes, as a threat; or they were read as subversive, a cultural renaissance as we saw earlier, and in need of 'protecting'.[482]

The criticism that certain forms of art are threatening, and the idea that art is and should have a national or civilizational mission, was the conservative response to post-war installation and public art by an existing art establishment. In an early, important essay on installation art in Lebanon, artist and theorist Walid Sadek cites a virulent attack by former head of the Lebanese Artist's Association of Painters and Sculptors, Maroun El-Hakim, against the likes of him and Ziad Abillama, labelling this kind of art a foreign threat to the art establishment, unmonumental, and nearly deliberately 'degenerate'.[483] As part of Ashkal Alwan's *Corniche* public exhibition in 1999,

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[481] ibid.

[482] It was not uncommon to regard the 'novelty' of the avant-garde as kitsch or previously unseen forms as degenerate, be it in the time of Greenbergian high-modernism, or among Lebanese academic painters of the 19th and early 20th century, including Khalil Saleeby, Mustafa Farroukh and George D. Corm. For instance, see Farroukh's *Tariki Ilal Fen* [My Path to Art]; cited in Sadek "In Health but Mostly in Sickness." See Esanu, "A Lebanese *Rappel al'Ordre*: Georges D. Corm 1896-1971."

[483] Criticism of installation art being a foreign threat and un-Lebanese was also directed in 1999 by the former head Maroun El-Hakim in the daily *Al Mustaqbal*, as cited by Sadek, "From Excavation to Dispersion," 67.

architect, artist and essayist Tony Chakar's *A Retroactive Monument for a Chimerical City* – a gold-painted plaster Roman goddess facing the sea atop a pedestal with a rather didactic, sarcastic accompanying text – was condemned by the nearby mosque as a violation of traditional values, instigating a polemic and censorship.[484]

During the 2002 iteration of the now bi-annual (biennial), well-attended *Home Works Forum on Cultural Practices* initiated by Ashkal Alwan, Lebanese poet, cultural critic and ex-Communist combatant Abbas Beydoun launched an attack on "the internationalism of Lebanese art", which he claims is a direct inheritor of half a century of Western art and "open almost unconditionally to the world".[485] By inheriting modern art and what he terms the philosophical approach of art, Beydoun was referring to 'contemporary art' in its various forms in Beirut, which included the then novel forms of installation, video and performance art. For Beydoun, approaches to art-making are integral cultural responses in or to specific contexts, and, thus, cannot be exported as forms from one historical context to the next. Lebanese "internationalism" in art (likely meaning globalism), he argues, was therefore vacuous and qualified, as art without culture or without local, historical precedent.

Though perhaps necessary to hear, Beydoun's attack is imprecise. His blind spot is that the Lebanese wars, which he himself took part in, created the need for radically different forms and speaking positions in an art that precisely addressed local (as well as 'internationalist') politics. We also remain uncertain in his presentation if that internationalism means the effects of discourses of globalization towards the end of the Cold War, more prominently after 9/11, or simply a borrowing of Western forms in Lebanese modern and contemporary art history. He randomly accuses unnamed artists of citing Jacques Derrida and Samuel Huntington, playing with form and fragmentation,

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[484] The text reads: "I want to be what the official 'Corneesh' discourse wants me to be. I want to please the new Arab Lebanon, the public, the ministry of culture and organizing committee, of course. I want to be an artist." See Goldie, "Digging for Fire," 94. Local censorship is normally directed at artworks that deal with the civil war or political figures. For example, a scene in *The One Man Village* (2009) by documentary film maker Simone el Habre was cut by official censors at the very scene where an elderly couple are seen talking explicitly about the war and the way in which they were chased from their village, by whom, etc. The same applied to *How Nancy Wished Everything Was An April Fools' Joke* (2007), a performance by Rabih Mroueh and Fadi Toufik, for its being entirely based around a parody of an oral history of the civil wars up until the present day.

[485] Beydoun, "Culture and Arts; Re: The Actual," 24.

and heralding the postmodern without history.[486] The critique, though possibly needed had it been elaborated, remained rather nebulous, and symptomatic of a moment where a generation of predominantly-leftist intellectuals communicated their suspicion of the alleged importation of art from the West.

Beydoun adds: "We [the Lebanese] have often practiced forms and techniques in dismantling time, alienating narrations, composing in whites, and re-producing display, without seeing in that more than free forms and formal suggestions that we practice as stylistic suggestions only, unaware of their philosophy, culture and vision [...]."[487] Postmodernism. Chastising the 'internationalization' of art as a borrowing of form and not of content, an importation of style without the concomitant (i.e. Western) cultural, philosophical, historical trajectory is important and could later be true but it does not *explain* much. It also does not clarify the position of Beydoun regarding what he understands as local, traditional, original (questions of modernity as we discussed earlier with Kirsten Scheid). As we garnered, some of the artists dealt with were all borrowing from the Western canons they were taught, breaking with them and with local traditions, *and* responding with critical tactics and other modes of address within/to the context of Lebanon's on-going, albeit cold civil war.

Rasha Salti echoes this by proclaiming how "the cold estrangement from conventional language, its defiant contemporaneity and seemingly unprejudiced borrowing of form and vocabulary from post-industrial cultures has rendered the perception and judgment of conceptual art and its kind as imported, 'postmodern' forms unfit for expression within Lebanese society."[488]

In my numerous conversations with Marxist historian and cultural critic Fawwaz Traboulsi, he claimed that the art produced after the civil war – conceptual art, installation art, video art – was art made for the West, a symptom of globalization, the

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[486] For an interesting discussion on Beydoun's lecture, see Rogers, "Historical Glimpses into the Contemporary," 87-89. The understanding that the language and forms of art need to be bound up with national identity or geography is problematic and double-edged. It may serve to allegedly protect from imperial ingestion of local art practices, remaining 'authentic' and 'local'; it is also the same logic used for the display and commodification of that art by a global, transnational art world.

[487] "Culture and Arts; Re: The Actual," 24-25. Ironically, the art establishment also rejected contemporary conceptual and video art at first. Art mainstream or establishment means older, established galleries and collections like the Sursock Museum, Alwane Gallery, Galerie Épreuves d'Artistes to name only a few, but also to collectors, academic and mainstream painters, dealers, much newspaper journalism, the LAAPS, and even the broader public.

[488] "Framing the Subversive in Post-War Beirut," 88.

fetishization of the war becoming its common feature.[489] Traboulsi refers in large part, but not solely, to art later produced in English and visible/available for an 'international' audience, or addressees that speak the language of contemporary art, repeatedly calling it 'postmodern'.[490] Traboulsi's criticism and even Beydoun's, echo those of Terry Eagleton when he says:

> "What is parodied by postmodernism, with its dissolution of art into the prevailing forms of commodity production, is nothing less than the revolutionary art of the twentieth-century avant-garde [whose major impulse] was to dismantle the institutional autonomy of art, erase the frontiers between culture and political society and return aesthetic production to its humble unprivileged place within social practices as a whole. Postmodernism, from this perspective, mimes the resolution of art and social life attempted by the avant-garde, while remorselessly emptying it of its political content."[491]

It would require another dissertation to tease out the exact effects of all these changes on the way art is and will be conceived, made, displayed, and the ways in which the formal, social and political concerns were subsequently transformed into market dynamics, and the theme of 'post-war Lebanon' (with its trauma and archives) suddenly ossified, its actual wars, struggles and violence fetishized, or neutralized. Perhaps the political modernism of Mohammad Soueid, Ziad Abillama, the early Tony Chakar and Walid Sadek has come to pass. Perhaps the re-politicization of the witness after decades of civil violence and protraction now liquefied and sanitized (even though still explosive, threatening and unresolved), demands other modes of engagement and writing, other

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[489] These positions are also due in part to the lack of theoretical framework with which to read some of these artistic forms. This is also garnered from the dearth of art criticism by local critics and journalists about art, sparking the need for artists themselves to talk about their work and that of their cohorts. It is in this 'gap' that artists like Walid Sadek, Tony Chakar, Jalal Toufic, for instance, wrote about Lebanese post-war aesthetics. Asking Jalal Toufic to be the primary editor, the widely-circulated, Left-leaning modernist, literary magazine *Al-Adab* dedicated three issues to this group of Lebanese artists experimenting in video, cinema and installation art. It was the year 2000.This was seen as a significant step in 'bridging' a generational, and even an ideological one, in Arabic, to a wide, Arab audience.

[490] Conversations with the historian between 2009 and 2012. Although not directly alluded to, this clearly has affinities with Frederic Jameson's critique of art in his "Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism", particularly as self-referential, borrowing styles, and ahistorical, or similar in timbre to Jameson's argument regarding postmodernism's "depthlessness". Even further back perhaps to Walter Benjamin's questioning of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, whereby the copy comes to affect the original so much that the representation becomes the original. Debates around authenticity and Western influence were ongoing in leftist literature circles as early as the 1960s. By way of example, see discussion with Hazim Saghieh by Mirene Arsanios in Arsanios, "Comparative Notes on Cultural Magazines in Lebanon."

[491] "Capitalism, Modernism, Postmodernism," 91.

forms, or concretization of '*labours*'. In fact, it is this violence of another kind, insidious and structural, that would demand a rethinking of the artist, the witness, the politics of form that can and is willing to reckon with this world order.

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