

Personal and Institutional Practices in the work of The Atlas Group

Walid Raad is a Lebanese artist and teacher that attributed a compendium of works to an imaginary collective he named The Atlas Group. The Atlas Group Archive compiles Raad's production under a system invented by him that classifies 'documents' (works in the form of photographs, videos, installations and performances in art galleries and museums) in three different categories: *Authored Files*, *Found Files* and a third section named *Atlas Group Productions*. This system of classification hosts all of Raad's reflections, interventions, annotations, experiments, games, speculations and questions around the nature of the photographic image as a document of reality, notions of history recording and writing and the complex interchange of validity of an individual voice versus an institutional voice. Memory and the experience of being a citizen and artist in the midst of an urban civil war are also part of Raad's artistic reflections.

A fragment of a text that presents one of the group's exhibition reads:

The Atlas Group was a project undertaken by Walid Raad between 1989 and 2004 to research and document the contemporary history of Lebanon, with particular emphasis on the Lebanese wars of 1975 to 1990.

Information about the Atlas Group is often imprecise and subject to change. The artist has stated that dates and other facts about the creation of the works and methods of operation are often altered, depending on the context in which the project is presented. Fundamental notions about the origin and purpose of the project are consistent; some facts are constantly adjusted and expanded, redirected or reorganized. Such mobility of content may be seen as a problem from the perspective of an official version of History but appears as a valid method, since a project like this needs to be in constant re-arrangement, in the making, its speculative character maintained, in order to function. It claims to be a contemporary visual arts project that speculates and explores a real historical situation through the realm of fiction.

The Atlas Group Archive is like a bulletproof vest for Raad's collage, handwriting*, stamping and other pasting exercises. "The Group" collects images and classifies them as some of us do. Artists are in many ways archivists of their own world of images. *The Atlas Group Archive* works as an agent Raad created for his work to emerge. It is actually a network of many fictional agents and agencies that include operators, foundations, banks, laboratories, historians, researchers, even curators and art collectors. Raad has made up this world to construct a personal understanding of the conflict of his native Beirut, specifically of Lebanon, a city that has the reputation for being the most bombed city in modern urban history.

We have heard the saying “*war is a deadly game for adults*”. The Atlas Group’s findings are a truly playful account of that tragic affirmation. The group of images, namely the works, emerge in often absurd situations, some of them impossible, even ridiculous. This impossibility is a key to the work, since it underlines the imaginary almost surreal character of the structure of the works; it also draws on the absurdity of what actually produced them in reality. For instance it is said that some of the Group’s images have been found buried under meters of rubble. Excavating to find semi-destroyed photographs and objects of remembrance that don’t exist yet, are sometimes the inverted narrations behind Raad’s work. The artist’s response to war takes place through the analysis of existing images, their intervention and creation of new ones, added to the construction of a network, an imagined world invented to support and to give value to the new proposals.

Anonymity and a paradox of visibility-invisibility come often into play in the works archived by the group. Most pieces or documents, as they are often presented, raise questions about image making and what one specific image is able to record. Seen individually as isolated works of visual art, these experiments may lack the power that can be drawn from them when seen as a larger project, which *The Atlas Group Archive* is.

This clears out something about the work of artists, alas the importance of experiencing a body of work and not only one isolated work. Artwork is not made up of one piece. It is the existence of multiple works along time and space that provide sufficient layers of the artist’s vision of the world. It generally refers to a life. A life that is spread out in a series of visual works. Only existing in time and space art can be tracked, viewed and read about. No matter the practice, it is a series of writings, films, paintings, actions or interventions that we must see in order to grasp what we are being told. The Atlas Group reveals its intention of “shedding a light on the contemporary history of Lebanon” through their activity. It is in this transit between personal voice and institutional practice that I understand this unique way of dealing with national history.

José Tomás Giraldo

November 2011

* (this enigmatic arab script)