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30.05.2015 6pm-10pm

the Imaginary School Program Sunday Begins on Saturday

A GUEST WITHOUT A HOST IS A GHOST Collection in Residence

Beirut currently hosts 23 artworks from the collection of the Kadist Art Foundation in Paris and San Francisco. Chapter One-The Exhibition presented the entire selection at *Beirut*, Townhouse Gallery and Contemporary Image Collective during May-June 2014. For Chapter Two-The Disposition, *Beirut* invited a number of Cairo-based artists,

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Stage Struggles: Film Soirée featuring "La Commune (Paris,1871)" curators and institutions to pick a work as guest and attend to it some way that shares it with a public audience.

Anneka Lenssen drafted this text-in-progress from the script of a talk given at *Beirut* in Cairo on June 19, 2014. Alongside its publication the author chose a work from the Collection in Residence to be installed in *Beirut's* library from October 2014 to January 2015: ATLAS GROUP / Walid Raad, Missing Lebanese Wars, Linguistic, 1996. Single print, inkjet on archival paper.

THE MEDIUM by Anneka Lenssen

My remarks revolve around the keyword "medium." This is a particularly salient term for an occasion like this one, the collection-inresidence A Guest Without a Host is a Ghost, which explores the possibility of extending temporary hospitality to someone else's collection of works rather than assuming stewardship of them. With hindsight (I have now taken the opportunity to review my comments and revise them slightly for the purposes of sharing them here), I can say that in proposing to think about medium, I was also responding to two small surprises in the event of the appearance of some famous works in Cairo art spaces: that the piece by Walid Raad from the celebrated series titled Missing Lebanese Wars (1988), which I have now shown to several groups of students in my university courses in a series of powerpoint slides, but which hung at the top of the stairs inside Beirut in May and June, did not look as I had remembered it. And, that I had difficulty deriving any "feeling" from my proximity with these pieces - in spite of their seemingly being real and present in the rooms of the galleries.

A medium may be many things. In the most general sense, the word "medium" simply means an intervening or intermediate agency or substance.[1] This meaning of "medium" is now material to any institutional description of a work of art, as appear on wall texts everywhere: video on DVD, archival photograph, stack of cardboard



06.-30.03.2015

the Imaginary School Program boxes, fresco, whatever. In these cases, we use the term medium to designate the specific format for the expression of the item, which, we understand, ensures certain formal characteristics and behaviors and precludes others. The inherent behavioral characteristics of one medium over another have not always been thought to be particularly significant to visual experience, however. Rather, at one time, "medium" was simply a necessary but somewhat neutral component in the process of human apprehension. In 1621, when Robert Burton, an English scholar, produced a lengthy study of melancholy in all its guises, he gave close attention to what he saw as the three-fold nature of the external, apprehensive senses as a source of melancholia.[2] Sight, he suggested, is a sequence requiring three things: the object, the organ, and the medium. The 'object' is that which is to be seen, not necessarily material substance as physical presence but rather its characteristics - colors, shininess, etc. The organ is the eye, as well as its bundles of nerves conveying sight to interior sense. The medium is illuminated air (for, as he observed, we cannot see in the dark, so need air to have particular illuminated qualities in order to effectively act as medium). Now fast forward four hundred years of development and usage, and the idea of "media" has acquired meanings that reflect capitalist instrumentalization. It is an industry. Already existing, organized systems for conveying objects to organs - for example, printed text on paper - have also been harnessed as means to deliver advertising. Newspapers are understood as "the media." Videos produce their own illuminated air, propelling it to organs.

The same term can have a quite different reference, however. It may also refer to *unusual* events and not at all the stuff of daily conveyance from outside to inside. A "medium" may also be an instance of the paranormal. As we know from the movies, when a "medium" takes human form, it looks like a clairvoyant in a turban and jewels. In these cases, a "medium" is a human body possessing a consciousness that has somehow been disabled, making it available to another being who is otherwise absent, and who sends messages through it. Raad's work harnesses the possibility for play between embodiment and disembodiment in such a mechanism for the resurrection of otherwise

March Session

26.02.2015 6pm

the Imaginary School Program A Discussion on the Politics of Organizing

> 25.02.2015 11am-2pm

the Imaginary School Program On Society and/in Moving Image II

> 21.02.2015 2pm-4pm

the Imaginary School

immaterial life, and he even claimed to assume the role of human medium in producing the iterative installations of his piece *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow,* which explores the peculiar status of artifacts of Arab art history, *and* for which he often claims to receive information from deceased Lebanese artists who convey their names to him – but only partially and with mistakes and transposed elements.

This last instance of medium, i.e. an anthropomorphized expression of the idea of intermediary form, clearly has a lot to do with the idea of the "ghost" – the disembodied invitation – that is central to the conceptualization and promotion of this exhibition.

A Ghost Without a Host is a Guest.

This would seem to be a spirit, invited in, who cannot stay and does not possess the authority that full material presence gives to all other things around us. Lacking equity.

The initiating idea for such an exhibition is that we possess a place and freely make it available to an object. We do not, and, for a variety of reasons, logistical or attitudinal, cannot possess the object in perpetuity.

Many people here might already know that Marcel Duchamp, the forefather of conceptual art, in 1953 composed a work out of precisely these same terms: ghost, host, and guest. That year, he printed the following sentence on foil wrappers for the caramel candies that were to be used as exhibition favors: A Guest + A Host = A Ghost. Interestingly, Duchamp's equation yields a different conclusion than ours, however. As Stephen Jay Gould had observed, this sentence takes two inputs and produces their negation. The combination of the two terms – the guest, and the host (each one necessary for the function of the other) – leads to their annihilation, their absenting.[3] Where once there were two bodies, there are none.

In Cairo, our mathematical sentence has been expressed differently. In

Program On Society and/in Moving Image I

14.02.2015 3pm-5pm

the Imaginary School Program On Liberalism, Islamism and What is the Political

> 13.02.2015 6pm-9pm

the Imaginary School Program On Wikipedia

12.-26.02.2015

the absence of a welcoming medium (the host), we find that the first input (the guest) simply remains absent (the ghost). Thus there is a dynamic in which providing an experience to others, an act here performed as an organization, requires the organization to become but a medium – a site of selfless receiving.

As we just explored, the act of giving intermediate form can hold quite divergent stakes. It seems to me that the key variable for determining the effect of being medium may be that of scale. When it is a substance providing a medium, the result is relatively prosaic and perceived as necessary. When it is a person, it is alluringly spooky and unusual. When an institution, it marks a withdrawal from the temporality of production. At all these scales of "medium," however, there remains one relatively constant metaphysical presumption in the use of the term: that our world is comprised of objects and subjects, with elements existing prior to and other than our perception of them. In this exhibition of works that originate from elsewhere and may only be temporarily invited in, the slightly unsettling supposition would seem to be that these works of art exist prior to we who receive them – and perhaps even only in parallel to us.

I call that supposition unsettling because it is quite far from the social art models that are currently dominant in contemporary art discourse – and to which I am largely committed. But this unsettling of that particular type of art world idealism is necessary and productive as well, for the "social art" that dominates contemporary taste has its own genealogy that must be recognized as specific and parochial rather than universal. My own specialization as a scholar is modern art of the Arab world, and I had initially thought I would try to trace another activated genealogy of modern art in Egypt and the Middle East, one that makes the meaning of a work of art entirely prior to any of its aspects, with both form and content understood as "medium" for higher truths about identity, and spirit.[4] But, honestly, I realized that I could not claim direct relevance for here, now, in this particular "hosting" situation. The works comprising A Guest Without a Host is a Ghost are borrowed, are inhabiting us from elsewhere. I think it is better to the Imaginary School Program February Session

Fakes & Double Feldmanns Nile Sunset Annex

> 31.01.2015 6pm-8pm

the Imaginary School Program On Egypt's Literary Scene

15.01.2015

devote the remaining time to examining the use of "medium" in the works by Walid Raad that are presently here in Cairo. These pieces are apt additions to the exhibition, for most of Raad's work unfolds around an elaborate evasion of all metaphysical claims. They also, I think importantly for understanding their stakes, evade the responsibility to produce solidarity or group feeling – that redeeming end which remains central to much critical commentary here in Egypt.

In the two pieces exhibited here, we find that Raad purposefully makes the medium unsettling. The framed prints in Appendix 18: Plates (2009), which was on view at Townhouse during the exhibition in May and June, are part of an ongoing series Scratching on Things I Could *Disavow*, begun in 2007. And they have emerged from his deliberately contrarian proposal (conveyed via wall text, artist talks, and exhibition catalogs) that formal characteristics are neither material nor symptomatic, and may instead be inhabited, thereby providing a dissimulating cover for other entities. The wall text for this work describes how part of the effect of the Lebanese wars is a material transposition within something otherwise thought to be formal: a preemptive exodus of some colors, lines, shapes, and forms from potentially compromised works and into unexpected places of refuge such as typefaces, diagrams, gallery price lists, covers - transforming all these materials, camouflaging them as other artworks.[5] In other words, it invokes a set of invisible origins that make the pieces on the wall into elaborate performances of hosting. It also asserts the temporary nature of the hospitality of ink, of photographic emulsion, of video. We learn that these materials have been made to hold someone else's collection, as it were. And that in doing so, they become unstable, convulsive, and ever more separated from immaterial energies. We are told that when we look at these surface forms, we are encountering something both enlivened and dead.

Raad's earlier body of work from the late 1990s into the early 2000s, which at the time was attributed to a fictional entity called the Atlas Group, often attributed the origins of these collections to an invented figure. There was a Dr. Fadl Fakhouri, for example, the "foremost



historian of the Lebanese wars," whose materials (photographs, notebooks, films) had been entrusted to the Atlas Group after his death. The notebook pages that appear in the Atlas Group/Walid Raad piece hanging upstairs, Missing Lebanese Wars (1988), are attributed to this Dr. Fakhouri. But, the notion of hosting did not end with such prosaic institutional stewardship. This collection was always and only "hosted" in the format of exhibited or published artworks and had no other form of presence. The power of the piece to destabilize one's sense of the historical real comes from its very conscious use of the "medium" as a translational element between realms of life and death. First, it foregrounds the products of an organized system for providing and instrumentalizing intermediary form, i.e. "the media." At the center of every page of Dr. Fakhouri's notebook, there appears a clipping from the horse race results that, it would seem, the Lebanese newspaper al-Nahar published all throughout the civil wars for the benefit of its reading community of gamblers (in fact, it should be noted, Raad clipped these photographs from issues of *al-Nahar* printed years after the Taif Agreement).[6] The explanation that Raad's texts provide for the notebooks is the following: the major historians of the Lebanese civil war (including Dr. Fakhouri) were also avid gamblers, and that a group of historians of every ideological stripe met weekly at the race track to place bets. They did not bet on the winner of the race, however, but rather how the winner would be given photographic representation in the news. They bet on the outcome of the track photographer's attempt to snap a picture of the winning horse as it crossed the finish line - an attempt that was never precisely successful as the photographs in the newspaper always showed the nose of the horse a hair before the line, or after having broken it. Each betting historian wagered on that deviation from the moment of the finish, i.e. precisely how many fractions of a second before or after the horse crossed the finish line would be shown in the photographic frame. Thus, around the photograph clipped from the post-race-day issue of the newspaper al-Nahar, we find notations on the race's distance and duration, the winning time of the winning horse, calculations of averages, and the like. We also see Dr. Fakhouri's idiosyncratic annotations about the personality of the winning historian. One result of



these burgeoning annotations on the surface of the notebook page, as becomes the single inkjet surface of the work, is that this "real" thing – i.e. a photograph appearing in the newsprint of a dated edition of *al*-*Nahar* – is treated as a medium for something else. The photograph in the newspaper does not function as news, but rather the site for the characteristics and urges of an invented group of historians who are cartoonishly unable to see the world for what it is.[7]

Even these reclamations of media do not exhaust the play with medium in the oeuvre, however. When I saw the Missing Lebanese Wars work in person here at Beirut, I realized that another transposition is also at work. When this piece is reproduced in the art press (i.e. one kind of media), its scale appears to be consistent. But in fact, it changes dramatically from instance to instance (i.e. another kind of media). I had previously seen these pieces, I thought, in the exhibition The Interventionists at Mass Moca in the US in 2004 or 2005. There, the prints were small and in a 1:1 scale with the referent - a notebook page; a newspaper clipping. But in the iteration of the piece shown here, the pages of the notebook are blown up to a monumental size. No photograph of the work that we might post online or print in the paper will show the discrepancy, of course. But the monumentality of this print has distinct repercussions for the testimonial value of the piece when we see it in the flesh. Most significantly, once blown up, the reproduction of the newspaper clipping and its internal measurements are no longer identical to those of the real newspaper clipping in the archives of the artist, or of al-Nahar. The relationship to the referent is no longer transparent and easy. The one thing that was indisputably real - the measurements of distance on the surface expanse of the photographic evidence of the horse race, as could be traced in pen on either the newspaper page or its replication in the notebook, regardless of the origin of either document - is not so. The interpretive effect of this shedding of the fidelity of scale in the reproduced work is difficult to assess. Once again, we may be required to acknowledge some kind of a split between a pre-existing work and the physical presence of any media that it might inhabit. To see the "original" in Cairo becomes less about communing with the original surface from which other prints



have been made, and more about enacting yet another unsettling inhabitation.

Conclusion I (about the work)

We can now return to the uses and abuses of "the medium" in *Appendix 18*, part of the project begun in 2007 titled *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow.* Raad has said that the works in this project explore the material effect of the various wars waged in the Arab world on culture and tradition. It does that by collecting material artifacts from the history of modern Arab art, then cleaving the medium – the colors, the surfaces, the columns of balance sheets – from the facts we (curators and historians) want them to contain and reusing them as media for other types of inhabitation.

The textual component of Raad's exploration of these purported "material effects," which, of course, he elaborately stages in exhibition settings, has made frequent use of the writings of theorist Jalal Toufic on the effects of the Lebanese civil wars on art. By way of glossing the feeling of inaccessibility to even the most proximate objects of shared heritage that his works elicit, Raad will often cite Toufic's notion of "the withdrawal of tradition" after a surpassing disaster.[8] As Toufic has written,

With regard to the surpassing disaster, art acts like the mirror in vampire films: it reveals the withdrawal of what we think is still there. [9]

For Toufic, the power to reveal vampiric live-death in the world actually determines the task of art made in conditions where the population has been divested of its continuity of heritage (i.e. the condition for Afghans, Bosnians, Iraqis). He writes that the urgent task is the presentation of the withdrawal; documentation of the referent is for the future. After a surpassing disaster, things may appear to exist and yet may not be accessible. This does not mean that one should not record them. To the contrary, the task becomes messianic. "One should



In no particular order Antonia Alampi record this 'nothing,' which only after the resurrection can be available." Toufic's exploration of this doubled-being of heritage over a variety of texts at times seems to further see the peculiarly immaterial quality of its withdrawal, i.e. the body without the blood, as a product of structural damage, one that may be noted in the divergences in the status of the real between countries in the West and "developing" countries. In the former, absence is affected with a mode of presence through telepresence and telesensing. In the latter, presence is affected with an absence through (negative) matting due to the withdrawal of tradition past surpassing disasters.[10]

Given this particular discursive context for Raad's presentation of his own work, as provided by Toufic's copious writings, I think the artist's contribution lies in its emphasis on the intermediary aspect of form, a move that has typically been interpreted as Raad's radical skepticism regarding truth but which may also be framed as a deep belief in prior, god-given ontologies such that art cannot be but a face to its actual depth.[11] This awareness of a division between the form of the work and its truth is operative in the works of others – I might cite not only the modern Egyptian artists Hamed Said or Mounir Canaan who were embedded in nationalist discourse in different ways, but also a contemporary work such as Surface of Spectral Scattering by Magdi Mostafa, which renders the sensory data of the real into a cosmic map in lights that acts as a relatively opaque system of representation of otherwise unrepresented life processes. Typically, "formalist" discussions about form understand form as self-identity, as replete and authoritative. But in Raad's Appendix 18 in particular, form is presented as completely other than self-identity. Visible forms are said to contain other forms. We are told to see form as sites to which colors run, "take refuge," embody and scramble other forms. One color becomes the medium for a line. The reason, as Raad would have it in his statements within the work, is that they are withdrawing past the surpassing disaster. Form appears to be still there, but it is not revealing bodies but rather disembodied entities.

The Medium Anneka Lenssen

12.10.– 16.11.2014

Photographs of Dr. Joseph M. Carrier 1962–1973 Danh Vo

> 19.–20.06.2014 20:00

On Absent Forms and Missing Wars Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rifky, John Menick Given these premises about the provisionality of form - its peculiar hospitality - which the Raad works have carried into the center of A Guest without a Host is a Ghost, can we draw any conclusions about the stakes of the hesitancy to collect works of art as a local heritage? One motivation for the collection-in-residence at Beirut would seem to be that the collecting impulse is absent or, at least, inaccessible. And here the question, which would seem to be about obligation and conceptions of good citizenship, may in fact need to change slightly. A 2013 issue of the German art magazine Springerin carried a highly relevant article by French theorist Catherine Malabou in which she explored conceptualizations of hospitality as constitutive to a kind of cosmopolitanism that opposes the homogeneity of globalization.[12] As she notes, Jacques Derrida had explored Emmanuel Levinas's conception of subjectivity as formed in the instance of the welcome of the other (rather than of the same), and its emphasis on hospitality. Derrida's description plays with the double meaning of the French word "hôte," which can signify both host and guest, and with which Duchamp's 1954 equation had also played. As Derrida noted by Derrida, the subject formed through hospitality is both host and hostage. Meaning, the subject comes only after the other has been admitted, and answers to this other. Derrida writes, "the host is a hostage insofar as he is a subject put into question, obsessed (and thus besieged), persecuted, in the very place where he takes place...a guest from the very beginning, he finds himself elected to or taken up by a residence before he himself elects or takes one up."[13] I cite Malabou and Derrida here not because I think we need to take recourse to this particular body of literature in order to think about the strange expulsion of the self from the experience of this exhibition. To the contrary, I think that the highly mediated quality of the hosted works their formats of VHS, dvd, inkjet print, postcard, and the like - already troubled the privilege we might otherwise accord to originals, and therefore killed any faint frisson of aura that might still be available to us. Rather, I cite their work because I want to highlight how the act of hosting may be thought to be simultaneously hospitable and destructive. Our question at hand is whether "hosting" - not owning the "stuff" of anything, and therefore also not owning one's body - is



The Anabasis Eric Baudelaire emancipatory or a hostage situation. In this case, it seems to me that scale again matters to the answer. In the living room that Levinas and Derrida imagine as the site of the hospitable behavior that preserves difference, we find a potentially valorous form of cosmopolitanism. The hospitality that a plastic artwork can perform is also its destruction, for it may be fully inhabited by another will to form, such that the ghost takes the body. And at the scale of the institution – well, I do not think we are entirely sure. The collection-in-residence has created a test. Perhaps we know what we want *Beirut* to be able to do as a presenting organization (and almost surely do not agree on that). But what about how it would do that? Here we get to see if it might achieve a kind of institutional subjectivity through answering to the other, or only capture ghosts in the absence of responsibility for the material and real.

[1] Raymond Williams, "media" entry, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society,* rev. ed (Oxford University Press, 1983).

[2] Robert Burton, "The Anatomy of Melancholy" (1621), reprinted (London: Chatto & Windus, 1927). Williams' *Keywords* entry cites Burton's usage, but provides no gloss on the nature of his study.

[3] Stephen Jay Gould, "The Substantial Ghost: Towards a General Exegesis of Duchamp's Artful Wordplays," *tout-fait* 1 no. 2 (May 2000). Available here.

[4] Clare Davies offers an excellent analysis of this conceptual structure in "Arts Writing in 20th-Century Egypt: Methodology, Continuity, Change," *ARTMargins* 2 no. 2 (June 2013). Davies highlights how, in Egyptian art criticism, Egyptian identity is posed as the "depth" for any surface – with matters of both form and content understood to be a piece of the 'face' of art apart from its metaphysical truth.

[5] It seems Raad recently took this camouflaging operation to a new



end in the exhibition *Here and Elsewhere* at the New Museum in New York, to which he contributed "paintings" (actually inkjet prints of forms recomposed from fragments of price lists, titles, covers, etc.) by an invented artist, Suha Traboulsi.

[6] As stated in an interview with André Lepecki, who reported it in "After All, This Terror Was Not Without Reason" Unfiled Notes on the Atlas Group Archive," *TDR: The Drama Review* 50:3 (Fall 2006): 88-99.

[7] See Raad's widely cited commentary on "hysterical symptoms" based on cultural fantasies erected from the material of collective memories. Raad has described how the various experiences that are constituted by and that constitute the Lebanese civil war present its subjects with a difficult epistemic project: the difficulty of thinking about and representing these experiences.

[8] Jalal Toufic, "The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster" (2009). Available <u>here</u>.

[9] Jalal Toufic, *Forthcoming* (2000), 2nd ed. (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014), 72. Available <u>here</u>.

[10] Ibid., 74.

[11] See footnote four.

[12] Springerin 2 (2013), "Unrest of Form" issue. English version of Catherine Malabou, "The Living Room: Hospitality and Plasticity". Available <u>here</u>.

I cannot resist mentioning that the cover of this issue was a photograph of a painting that Hassan Khan had appropriated for his work *Evidence of Evidence*, and from which fat chips of paint (i.e. concretized form) appear to be peeling.









