

## Chapter 26

# The Impossible Remembering in Walid Raad's Artwork "Secrets in the Open Sea" (1994/2004)

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Walid Raad engages with the traumatic events of the Lebanese war (1975–1990) in a personal and poetic way in his artwork 'The Atlas Group: Secrets in the Open Sea' (1994/2004). He repeatedly calls it a document exploiting the inherent traits of the photographic media, and elaborate storytelling to expose the gap between verification and comprehension of historical knowledge. The possibility of verifying this artwork as a document shatters quickly under the inquisitive gaze of a spectator; yet reading it in relation to the ethical understanding of history, as expressed in the philosophical works of Giorgio Agamben, reinstates Raad's work as an ethical platform.*

### **INTRODUCTION: MISSING AUTOBIOGRAPHIES**

Memory is history's way of staying alive. This type of living knowledge is stitched deeply into the subconscious affecting the beliefs and behaviour of people. It is, however, vulnerable and easily falls prey to different regimes. The rhetorics of the Second World War, for instance, are currently widely in use to justify the Russian invasion of Ukraine that took place on 24<sup>th</sup> February 2022. In addition to the propagandistic spin on the traumatic past of the post-Soviet societies, the government with ease dismisses all accusations of war crimes against Ukraine. When in March 2022 photographs depicting the Bucha massacre were released causing public outrage in European countries, Russian propaganda claimed that these images are fake. The strength of the conviction that the photographs are staged perfectly mirrors the sentiment of the people who have chosen to uphold the credibility of this evidence. Everything has changed and nothing has changed, depending entirely in front of which TV screen one has found oneself on that day. The implication, however, that there is a 'choice' to be made, a choice powerful enough to

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either obliterate or will the massacre into existence, is where the core of the problem lies. There are no witnesses to the massacre, for the true witnesses of this event are forever silenced and those who will attempt to testify on their behalf are unlikely to yield more credibility than the previously dismissed photographs. In other words, in order to stop the war, we all need to hear the missing autobiographies of the people who are forever excluded from voicing their own personal traumas. What can we do in their absence that shapes the future? Giorgio Agamben examining 'this lacuna' — a non-place of the testimony — in his book *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness in the Archive* (1998) proposes to 'listen to what is unsaid' for, according to him, it is directly connected to the place of ethics in historical knowledge and constitutes 'perhaps the only way' to have an ethical position (Agamben, 2002, p.14).

In the ideal world, the photographs of the Bucha massacre would automatically connect a viewer with what Okwui Enwezor (2008) in his essay for the exhibition *Archive Fever: Photography Between History and the Monument* called the 'principle of uniqueness' (p.11). 'Within that principle,' he writes, 'lies the kernel of the idea of the photograph as an archival record, as an analog of a substantiated real or putative fact present in nature' (Enwezor, 2008, p. 11). Due to the camera being an archiving machine its products automatically become archival objects and are therefore perceived as guarantors of a certain believable reality, since the connotations of official documents, evidence, testimonies, and recorded facts are deeply embedded in them. And yet, the only thing that the officially circulated photographs of the Bucha massacre have managed to prove univocally is that the faith in the credibility of the photography itself has been shattered beyond repair. In other words, the principle of uniqueness is unattainable. In addition, even if the images of the massacre were not instantly rejected, the subsequent routinisation of the Ukrainian war has demonstrated that their effect on the general public is short-lived. It is possible that the images were simply too overbearing and, eager to shield themselves from more of the bad news, people have chosen to turn away from them. Is there, however, a redeeming path for photography? What kind of photograph can capture a traumatic event so that it would be translated into a vulnerability that enriches memory? Can the absence of a true witness, in other words, be remembered as our own potential absence and can photograph play a role in this process?

Ukrainian war, however, is not the first war that has been denied its existence on the official level. While the Bucha massacre is, perhaps, one of the most recent tragedies, which existence is erased by the Russian government only to enable the continuation of the war, it is definitely not a unique experience of obliteration of historical violence from the officially recognised archives. Another war that has also been conveniently 'erased' is the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990). It would be important to clarify, however, what is meant here by 'erasing' or denying existence' of certain events. It is not that the information about them is entirely unavailable. According to Wilson Centre, the information on the Lebanese war exists in the archives, but it is not readily available, and the level of access is restricted (Byrne, 2020). On other hand, the information may be not sufficiently integrated into the core historical narratives under the current regimes. In other words, the recognition of these events is also highly problematic. For instance, the official discussions may be withheld, or like in Russia at present, punishable with imprisonment under the current legislation (Schulmann, 2022.) This creates a certain feeling of vacuum in response to which Walid Raad has started his Atlas Group project. The Atlas Group (1989-2004) is a fictional group of experts who are preoccupied with the Lebanese war account. Adopting archival techniques the group meticulously documents the contemporary history of Lebanon with a particular emphasis on its civil war. The range of works produced by Raad, who is a driving force behind the group, includes audio, video, and literary documents. Exhibited in the sterile spaces of the art galleries, these carefully organised hybrids of fictional and real documents expose and criticise the usual patterns

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