How to Perform a Truth?

Created by artist Walid Raad, The Atlas Group (1989–2004) is an *imaginary organization* and archive of *fabricated documents* concerning Lebanon's recent history and, specifically, the Lebanese Civil Wars. Attributed to a motley cast of fictional characters, the documents in The Atlas Group archive manipulate real records, either drawn from Raad's personal collection (street photography, family albums) or public sources, especially newspaper archives. Bearing lengthy, poetic, and often cryptic titles, they are introduced through whimsical stories that we can read in extended captions in installations or on the foundation's website, and listen to in scholarly-like "lecture-performances." These "lecture-performances" tell us something about how we might tell a truth, how we might perform it, and how we might teach it.

In his performances, Raad mimics the lecture format by making use of its typical accoutrements and conventions: a desk furnished with a small lamp, a glass of water and a laptop computer; a PowerPoint presentation projected on the wall; the standard Q&A period at the end—including occasionally scripted questions from planted actors in the audience. Everything is carefully planned and arranged. Acting as the organization's spokesperson, Raad meticulously describes how each document—photograph, plate, film, notebook etc.—was acquired, *produced*, or donated to The Atlas Group, and subsequently examined, indexed, and catalogued. Files are presented with serial identification numbers, redacted information, and other elements that replicate the conventions of historical archives.

In such details, adhering almost too closely to archival mannerisms and protocols, we can glimpse the first way in which The Atlas Group "performs truth." By imitating modes of address and presentation that we have come to associate with authority and authenticity—the scholarly lecture, the archival display, the foundation's website—Raad foregrounds how truthfulness is always underpinned by a set of institutional norms and conventions. By literally performing truth, The Atlas Group reveals truth to always be something of a fabrication, a performance.

Yet, if we listen carefully to Raad's presentations, another idea of performing truth unfolds, one which is more closely associated with the practice of storytelling. In place of hard facts—the figures, statistics, and data we expect to encounter when entering the bureaucratic space of the archive—the artist tells us stories of horse races, sunsets, signs of doctors' and dentists' practices, blue monochromes, car engines, small watercolours, scratched photographs, and colour-coded bullets. Instead of plausible statements, we learn of implausible stories, mundane details, and insignificant anecdotes. Such stories do not offer readily comprehensible facts, but present riddles that require interpretation to yield some meaning.

Take *Notebook volume 72: Missing Lebanese wars*, 1989–1998, for example, which consists of twenty enlarged pages taken from the notebooks of (fictionalized) historian Dr Fadl Fakhouri. The archival file "documents" a group of eminent historians who, we are told, spent their time gambling at the horse race tracks during the Civil Wars. They did not, however, bet on the winning horse but on the amount of distance between the horse's nose

and the finish line, as captured in the photo-finish image published in the next day's newspaper. In this curious and patently fictional story, there are kernels of truth about the Lebanese Civil Wars: the Beirut hippodrome where the idle historians gather, for instance, was turned several times into a literal battleground. Yet the story can also be interpreted at a more abstract level, as a metaphor of the speculative task faced by historians who, in reconstructing the past, must rely on an often fallible, contradictory, and incomplete set of documents. The work's titular reference to "missing wars" indexes the inherent incompleteness of writing history.

The German philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin observed how storytelling as a traditional form of communication was, in the modern age, replaced by information and news media.[1] Contrary to the news, which promote novelty and rapid consumption, stories are more memorable and capable of releasing their meaning gradually. While news cycles provide easily digestible snippets of information, the storyteller leaves the meaning of the story open to the listeners' interpretation, inviting them to fill in the gaps and to draw their own connections. Raad's stories, with their puzzling plots and enigmatic characters, elicit a similar response.

For Senegalese philosopher Mamoussé Diagne, the memorability of stories depends on their oral "dramatisation" which "makes one retain one or several 'truths'" that would not be effectively remembered otherwise. Dramatisation—which we could also call performance— is not just a superfluous "envelope" but a crucial support for pedagogy in oral culture and practice.[2] In a similar vein, the stories that Raad performs are not just the outer envelope of the documents/artworks he produces, but an essential part of The Atlas Group's project. Their public presentation in talks and lectures turns the mere "telling" of truth into a pedagogical performance: a form of teaching that makes us rethink what "a truth" is.

How to perform a truth about traumatic and contested events such as those that go under the name of Lebanese Civil Wars? How to reconstruct a truth which has broken down into many fragmentary and contradictory splinters of archival evidence? How to recompose and reconcile the many truths coming from the many groups and militias that fought during the civil wars, each with their media arm—newspaper, radio, and even TV channel? How to convey the truth of what escapes documentation—psychological symptoms and emotions as ineffable as the exact moment when a horse crosses the finish line? Through performance and storytelling, Raad reveals how truth is neither definitive nor incontestable. He urges us to rethink what we understand as "the truth" and to reclaim the many other truths we might have neglected in its place.

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[1] Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller. Observations on the Work of Nikolai Leskov', in *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings, Vol. 3, 1935–1938*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006, pp.147 and 148.
[2] Mamoussé Diagne, 'Logic of the Written Word and Oral Logic: Conflict at the Heart of the Archive', *Afterall*, no.53 'Medium/Metaphor/Milieu, p.119.