

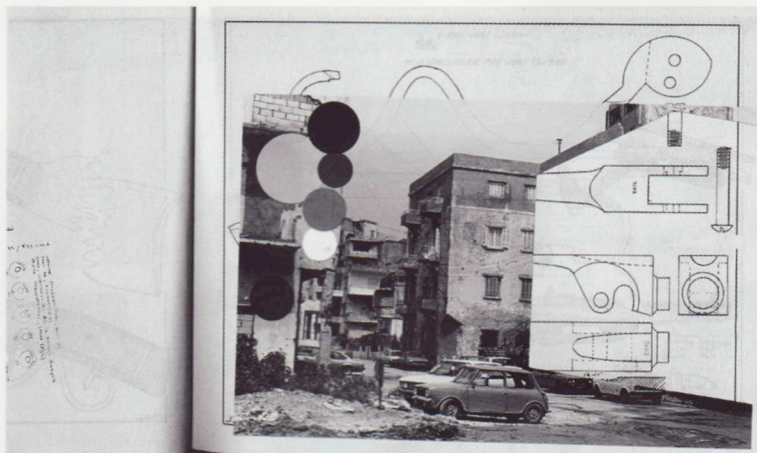
Walid Raad: Miraculous Beginnings

Whitechapel Gallery London 14 October to 2 January

The New York-based Lebanese artist Walid Raad uses the format of the archive to reflect on the conflicts that blighted his country from 1975 to 1990 and continue to poison its political structures. He draws on archival procedures most pointedly and effectively in the pieces he produced under the alias of The Atlas Group, which occupy the main ground-floor gallery in his show at the Whitechapel. In these works, the archive occasionally serves as a means of conveying information but also and more consistently as a way of examining the debilitating impact of violence on the efforts of artists, reporters and others to capture its effects. These pieces are plainly the work of archivists who are blind to the wider significance of their materials, obsessed as they are with inconsequential details, with quantitative rather than qualitative information and with their own taxonomic protocols. In other words, Raad views war through the eyes of witnesses who respond to its horrors by cataloguing them, exhibiting in the process a form of denial that is at once comically bureaucratic and obliquely revealing.

One piece here consists of photos of Beirut which are half-covered with coloured dots, each dot allegedly designating by its size and colour the diameter of a bullet that Raad found at the site, embedded in a wall, pavement or tree, and the country in which it was manufactured (*Let's be honest, the weather helped*, 1998/2006-07). Another is made up of large monochromatic prints in different shades of blue with, in the bottom right of each, a small and hazy photo of a group of people; the wall text deadpans that the small photos were discovered as latent images in the prints by laboratory technicians in France and the UK, and that the men and women in the images all turned out to have drowned or washed up in the Mediterranean during the war years (*Secrets in the Open Sea*, 1994/2004). These works allude to acts of violence but focus on their material residues, which are treated as data to be logged. The violence is overtaken and marginalised by the ingenious procedures (*Let's be honest*) and advanced technological means (*Secrets*) that are notionally used in the process of documenting it. And the works, as archives, insist on the pastness of the incidents they touch on. This is where they begin to expose their own pathological underpinnings, as the element of repetition, the sheer accretion of images and data, suggests that the archival impulse is – in this context at least – a neurotic compulsion and so intimates that for these archivists the past is alive in the present. That is the problem with denial: its evasions are too insistent, it gives itself away.

What is most troubling in these works is the part that Raad assigns to colour. The brightly coloured dots in *Let's be honest* recall the *pointillisme* of Georges Seurat and Paul Signac, the stroboscopic patterns of Victor Vasarely and Bridget Riley, and the dancing polka dots of Yayoi Kusama, while the prints in *Secrets* look back to the monochromes of Kasimir Malevich, Ad Reinhardt and others, the colouristic intensities and art historical allusions acting as further and particularly perverse distractions from the examination of conflict. As artworks these pieces open themselves to the charge of aestheticising violence, but as archives they brush the charge off, the wall texts inferring that the aesthetic qualities are simple givens, the incidental properties of the archival materials or the unintended effects of archival procedures. These works call on the viewer to account for his or her aesthetic reactions, which, implicitly, are



Walid Raad
Let's be honest, the weather helped
1998/2006-07
detail

doubly inappropriate – because they ride on the suffering of others and because the works pretend not to invite them. At the same time The Atlas Group hints at the uses of pleasure in times of conflict, insinuating that it may assist in the process of denial. But denial can cut both ways, as Raad plainly appreciates. It can work as a coping mechanism and a signal of powerlessness but it can also serve as a mode of refusal, blind and categorical, and then it becomes a properly political gesture, albeit one that is not in theory intended as such. In fact, the work on display in the ground-floor gallery is littered with passages of striking visual richness. The camera dwells on the sun as it sets over the Mediterranean in two video pieces while other works exploit the formal qualities of vintage photographs, Raad using the visual allure of these works to keep the posture of denial of his imaginary archivists on a knife edge between defeat and defiance.

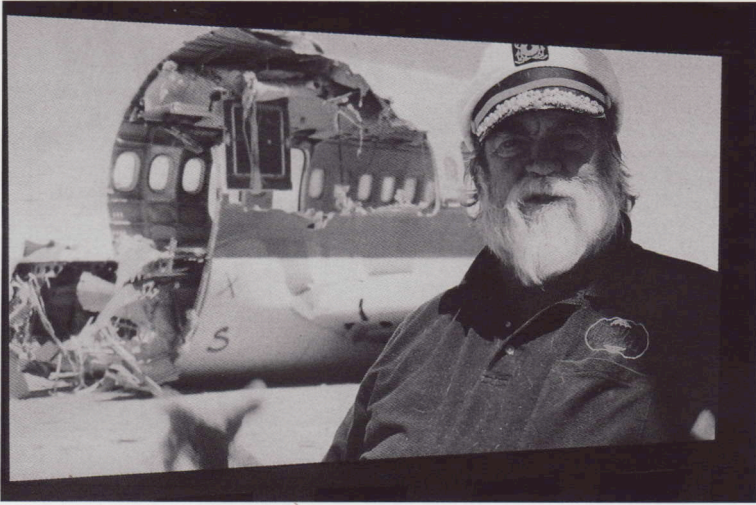
In the upper galleries are more recent works that are authored by Raad rather than The Atlas Group, including the multifaceted project *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Art in the Arab World*, 2008-10, which features a number of large prints that bear – half-lost in their fields of colour – small fragments of text: the index of a catalogue, the letterhead of a cultural officer, the outline of a budget. Next to the prints is an almost invisible wall text in white vinyl lettering that lists in Arabic, so a typically witty and suggestive wall text informs us, the names of artists who were active in Lebanon over the past century. In these works Raad swaps the role of the compulsive archivist for that of the art world interloper and code-breaker as he points to the hollowing effect of war on cultural infrastructures and on the careers of artists, while also implying that violent conflict works against a collective understanding of the role of culture and so erodes the very basis of art as an intelligible – indeed visible – social practice. These pieces are compelling but, without the mock-rigour of The Atlas Group's work and without its ambiguous, discomfiting appeal to the viewer, they also lose something of its teasing urgency. ■

MARCUS VERHAGEN is an art historian and critic.

Hito Steyerl: In Free Fall

Chisenhale Gallery London 4 November to 19 December

Financial crises, plane crashes, controlled explosions and globalisation are key themes in Hito Steyerl's latest film *In Free Fall*, 2010, set in a Californian Mojave desert airport 'boneyard'. So-called



Hito Steyerl
In *Free Fall* 2010
video projection

boneyards have been filling up with disused jets since the hikes in fuel prices and the onset of the latest economic crisis. An ageing airport owner, filmed in high definition before a mangled jet undergoing dismemberment in a sweltering panoramic landscape, remains philosophical: 'I'm thinking, is this for real? ... You're making money no matter what you sell!' Whether for scrap or the Chinese DVD boom, aluminium remains lucrative. There is big money to be made designing spectacular explosions for the movies. 'So recyclable! So recyclable!' echoes the film's refrain, rhyming with a host of aviation industry ads and jingles wishing clients 'a very pleasant flight', and it ends with a hot-air balloon dissolving into a pink sunset from a music video on YouTube.

Steyerl's film is a self-reflexive form of recycling, and the narrative function is largely given over to a DVD-player, lying in the dust – occasionally aided by a human hand switching discs and splicing genres. Its repertoire includes a variety of in-flight safety demonstration videos (perfect flight attendants fitting oxygen masks to perfectly smiling children), disaster-movie film clips (Palestinian sympathisers sequestering the Air France plane at Entebbe), music videos (Nancy Sinatra defying gravity in a hot-air balloon singing 'Up, Up and Away'; beware, you will be singing it for days), champagne being poured and occasional bombs being dropped. In the alternation between the non-time of the desert and the racy world of the DVD, causality and time become irrelevant. Potentially significant connections are offered for us to solder together as we please. Plane crashes peaked in 1929, coinciding with the Wall Street Crash, says Steyerl. But the collapse of the Twin Towers is notable for its absence from the film's catalogue of disasters. Perhaps it is re-enacted through a proliferating series of substitutes.

Documentary truth, too, descends into the precarious and hysterical. The film delights in the industry's many psychological tricks for convincing us that the outrageous exception is the norm, but it does so to make the point that people are less recyclable than jumbo jets. There is a fantastic moment when the vast claw of the demolition truck manoeuvres its way towards Steyerl's head and opens its jaws, preparing to scrap her. But she just fumbles on with her script, reading aloud, stuck in an 'off-screen' mode of human error, fortunately saved from the lumbering precision of the machine by the deliberately basic animation (recalling Marina Grznic's aesthetic). She then carries out an eerily deadpan safety demonstration, against the backdrop of a wind farm, suggesting that attempts to prevent ecological disaster may also prove too little,

too late. Animator Kevan Jenson, whose 'smoke paintings' serve as a prelude to the black box in which the film is screened, describes how during the downturn he was forced to put his aluminium-clad dream home on the market. For him, painting with smoke is about relinquishing control. Steyerl's montage technique is also about decentering the author: 'Who shot the images that we're watching right now?', she asks Jenson on Skype through cyberspace.

Steyerl draws on the materialist poet Sergei Tret'iakov's attack on the idealist philosophy that 'Man is the measure of all things'. Her film experiments with his call for a 'biography of the object': she reads outwards in concentric circles from the central figure of the Boeing 707-700 4X-JYI. There is an irksome moment near the end when Steyerl observes that Tret'iakov ended his life in 'free fall', falling down a staircase 'shortly before being executed as a spy'. If Steyerl were not a defendant of the idea of truth, her claim that he just 'fell', along with the leap from contemporary California to the Stalinist Terror of the late 1930s, might threaten to descend into total relativism; after all, Tret'iakov may have been pushed down the prison staircase. We should also ask who pushed the global economy into its current free fall. Steyerl's film shows a tangled parachutist triumphantly untangle himself as he falls to the ground, grabbing the handle at the last instant. The vertiginous moment of grace prior to impact is a long one. Perhaps, after all, there is still time to think about who pushed us out of the plane, and what to do about it, while we untangle our parachutes. ■

KLARA KEMP-WELCH is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at the Courtauld Institute of Art.

John Stezaker: Lost Images

Kunstverein Freiburg 17 September to 7 November

In Don Delillo's recent novel *Point Omega*, the narrator observes of Douglas Gordon's *24-hour Psycho*, 1993, that, 'The film had the same relationship to the original movie that the original movie had to real lived experience. This was the departure from the departure. The original movie was fiction, this was real.' It is a distinction that could also apply to the relationship between John Stezaker's 2m-high poster enlargements of promotional photographs of unknown B-movie actors and actresses from the 1940s and 50s, and his collection of the original found images, which he now presents in conjunction with each other at Kunstverein Freiburg. Both artists disorientate our habitual perceptions of cultural history by anatomising the images it has bequeathed to us. Stezaker's installation is indeed historically pungent, presenting war-time showbiz photographs under the auspices of the Kunstverein's grandly modernist Nazi-era architecture, originally a swimming hall built in the late 1930s. The ground floor, once the pool, is now brutally levelled out by concrete, an act of forgetting, or covering up.

This suggestion of a documentary function, despite the explicitly theatrical postures, is a departure for Stezaker, whose roots lie in surrealist photographic collage and its transformation of photography's specific testimony into detemporalised hybrids. He has been more concerned with how images cover up the past than how they reveal it. Covering up, for him, has macabre resonances. His 'Masks' series from 2007 superimposes postcards – showing paintings and engravings of landscapes and animals – onto the faces of photographic portraits of actors, the exact