Walid Raad/Atlas Group, *We Decided To Let Them Say "We Are Convinced" Twice. It Was More Convincing This Way, Beirut '82, City V*, 2005
Courtesy: the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg/Beirut.

After Images

by Fionn Meade

Archival photographs are widely employed in contemporary art. Fionn Meade analyzes the work of artists who have managed to go beyond the merely documentary use of images from the past. Artists like Danh Vo, Akram Zaatari, Walid Raad, William E. Jones, and Lucy Skaer, whose processes of obliteration, repositioning, and decontextualization have extended the critical potential of images, generating more incisive interpretations of historical events.

* * *　　What does it mean to consider the insufficiency of images today, to underscore the impending demise and overt pastness of the analog image, only to manipulate and thereby reassert and extend its critical possibilities? How might a gestural and affective emphasis on working with archival imagery step beyond the vague discourse of blurring fact and fiction to offer more acute questionings of historical narrative, cultural identity, and the auratic potential of objects, images, and artifacts? And what kind of agency arises when strategies of abstraction, obfuscation and irrationality weaken and displace the indexical status of documentary imagery?

Within Autoerotic Asphyxiation, a recent installation by Berlin-based artist Danh Vo at Artists Space in New York, historical photography from the Vietnam War is re-animated into a highly choreographed display that quickly destabilizes any presumed post-colonial discourse. Gestural participation from the viewer was required through installing a series of modestly scaled black-and-white photographs behind sheer white curtains that lined the windows and walls of the gallery. Placed at varying intervals throughout an emptied-out exhibition space, the voyeuristic images of young Vietnamese men became visible only by actively parting the veil-like partitions. Captured in various moments of work, rest, leisure, onlooking, and outward physical affection, verité glimpses into the past revealed discreetly erotic scenes, including soldiers walking down the street hand in hand, a young man looking out from a balcony over a gray-scaled sea, two men napping side-by-side in an empty marketplace, and a group of bathing boys observing the distant trace of an ammunition cloud on the horizon.

Danh Vo, *installation view from "Autoerotic Asphyxiation", Artists Space, New York,*, 2010
Photo: Daniel Pérez.

Exemplary of Vo's unique style of ethnographically appropriating other people's archival materials and autobiographical content, these particular photographs were willed to the artist by Joseph M. Carrier – an American employee of the RAND Corporation who lived in Vietnam from 1962-1973 before being fired for his homosexuality. The expectation of

"auto-" or "self-" revelation implied by the exhibition title is sidestepped in Vo's circulating a vestigial and fragmented representation of post-colonial subjectivity as viewed by an outsider. Replacing the context of war and Vo's own autobiography – both of which are present but barely visible – is Carrier's desirous picturing of young men.

Born in Vietnam in 1975 but displaced along with his family to Denmark at the age of four following Communist victory in Southern Vietnam, Vo limits any representation of his own narrative to the appearance of such legal, administrative documents as the codicil that explains how he came to be the legal guardian of Carrier's photographs (which maintains opacity as to Vo's personal relationship with Carrier) and a passport photograph of Vo at the age of five. But it is Carrier's erotic gaze that stands in to enact an occluded narrative. Positioned behind embroidered curtains bearing a white-on-white pattern based on engravings of southern Chinese and Tibetan flowers by the 19th-century French missionary and botanist Jean-André Soulié, Vo's staging of the past via Carrier is affectively dispersed into every material choice of exhibition design. The partial telling of yet another fragment of colonial history provides another example of Vo's cultural reversal as the last letter of Thomas Venard, a French missionary priest active in Vietnam in 1852, is copied out by the artist's father Phung Vo and placed on the wall. Beheaded for refusing to cease his proselytizing, Venard's description of impending glory in the face of death is transposed and transcribed with an overt intentionality that is displayed without providing any further context. The affect of Venard's belief is conjoined with Carrier's voyeurism, the administrative presence of legal codes, and displaced artifacts and anecdotes to abstract, obscure, and fragment biographical representation and historical narrative.

Adopting related tactics, Beirut-based Akram Zataari's Video in Five Movements (2006), also recently on view in New York, arises from an ongoing project involving the Arab Image Foundation (of which he is a co-founder) and the archival materials of Hisham El Madani's commercial photography Studio Shehrazade, which opened in the 1950s in Saida, Lebanon. By actively collaborating with El Madani, who was born in 1928 and ran a commercial photography studio for more than forty years, Zataari has used the negatives in El Madani's archive to produce art works that explore the varying and highly subjective histories of photography in Lebanon. Projects over the past ten years range from Zataari's speculations upon the use of Madani's Shehrazade studio by a local politician to fabricate voter identification cards to a sampling of theatrical depictions of young Lebanese men and women playing out sexual fantasies and trans-gender scenarios within the safety of the studio.

Video in Five Movements, however, reconfigures super-8 footage shot by El Madani himself on holidays in the 1960s and early '70s at tourist sites in Lebanon and Egypt. Featuring Madani and his friends and family members, the historical backdrop shifts while the choreography of the footage remains oddly the same. In each of the five sections, smiling participants slowly advance toward the camera while holding their upper bodies still, an awkward gesture that attempts to translate the pose of a still photograph into moving images. The clearly coerced repetition of the gesture begins to unmoor the various historical sites, evoking an uncanny out-of-time similitude that competes with the otherwise banal normalcy of vacation footage. Whether crossing the plaza of Montazah Palace or descending a slight

incline in the pine forest of Dahr el Ramleh, the advancing figures obtain the cumulative effect of ghostly apparitions, despite the obvious humor of having to indulge Madani's obsession with the stillness of studio portraiture.

William E. Jones, *Killed*, 2009
Courtesy: David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

Zataari's editorial emphasis on gestural estrangement manages to re-insert a peculiar kind of critical nostalgia into the historical consideration of pre-war Lebanon, a strategy that translates over into his own image production. His photographic series "Perfect Timing" (2006), for example, focuses on everyday moments during the summer of 2006 when war broke out between Hezbolla and Israel. Vertically displayed diptychs of everyday abstraction convey a quotidian state of anxiety: green and red stoplights appear one above the other, foregrounding rainswept views of empty streets; the geometric red square of a ceiling light offsets the image of a construction crane looming over a desolate cityscape; water runs down a kitchen sink below a vacant city street; and a computer screen reveals part of an incoming email message with the subject "Churches are shelled now too?" placed above an image of the artist's datebook left open on a table. Zataari slows down representation to a still montage of everyday gestures, one over the other. The abstract signs of urban infrastructure – "go" and "stop" – appear to sign on and off for an invisible populace, as the public sphere is evacuated by the time of war.

In contrast, the color-coded chart that inflects New York-based Lebanese artist Walid Raad's *Let's be honest, the weather helped* (1998/2006/7) deploys a more systematic use of abstraction to weaken the presumed stability of documentary imagery. Digital circles of brightly hued colors are overlaid onto black-and-white photographs of shelled buildings taken by the artist during the height of the Lebanese civil wars. Purporting to trace the various foreign suppliers of ammunitions at play among the competing military factions, each hole and groove of the riddled buildings receives a colored dot that corresponds to the caliber of ammunition the artist was able to find on site and the country of origin he was then able to track down through ballistic research. Visual narrative intervenes upon the surface of the image as the analog index and its fixity are altered and displaced by digital treatments and the bracketed conceit of research. In elaborating his evidentiary conceit of forensic veracity (which happens to coincide with the contour of an attractively designed abstract image), Raad withholds his images from being readily consumed as records of past events.

Akram Zaatari, *Video in Five Movements*, 2006
Courtesy: Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut/Hamburg.

Included in a mid-career survey of Raad's work, Miraculous Beginnings, currently on view at Whitechapel Gallery, London, *Let's be honest, the weather helped* also evinces Raad's approach to digitally altering analog images in order to further call into question the indexical

notion of the photograph as a historical document of the real or actual. As with We decided to let them say, "we are convinced," twice (2002/06), Raad's practice will often date a given image to the moment when Raad decided to include it within the archive of his long-term project The Atlas Group (a fictional platform that presented much of Raad's work and invokes a social network of philosophers, research scientists, and academic experts) and to the moment in time when the image is finally produced and presented in an exhibition context, thereby introducing a further rift in the historical continuity of his work. For instance, We decided to let them say, "we are convinced," twice deploys a grid of oversized photographs that include images of smoke trailing behind fighter planes, Israeli soldiers napping next to a tank, and a crowd of onlookers observing a military action in the distance; taken as a teenager by Raad in 1982 during the Israeli invasion of West Beirut, the blown up scale of the images in 2006 reveals damage done to the negatives over time but also betrays a digital ghosting of the images via applications of blue, green, and pink tones that are not remarked upon in the text accompanying the work. Displaced from a strictly historical time, Raad's images depart from the customary attributes of war photography or archival documentation. Equally insistent upon both abstraction and representation, the work oscillates in between, disturbing the reception and impact of historical narrative and photographic representation.

Two recent works by Los Angeles-based artist William E. Jones further amplify a consideration of how re-animating archival images might favor gestural tactics over essayistic means. Berlin Flash Frames (2010) parcels out footage from an unedited film found in the National Archives of the United States and labeled with the provisional title "Berlin, 1961." Produced by the U.S. Information Agency, Jones' re-edit features distanced shots of the Berlin Wall under construction alongside propagandistic scenarios featuring actors on stage sets. For instance, a journalistic photo-op of then Mayor of West Berlin (and future Chancellor of West Germany) Willi Brandt and an African delegation visiting Checkpoint Charlie is countered with a field shot of citizens waiting in line for relocation to West Berlin. Tacking back and forth between highly constructed scenes and offhand footage, Jones' emphasis on the sudden flare of light that occurs just before the film runs out begins to take precedence over historical accuracy or discursive explication. Overexposed frames that flare up between takes provide a rhythmic repetition in Jones' editorial treatment, collapsing the various contexts and preventing any predominant reading of the contradictory material. The flares begin to structure the film along with moments when the actors visibly relax toward the end of takes, as well as the identifying shots where numbered slates are held up by the cameramen to identify the beginning of a given shot. Shifting focus from historical sleuthing to the repetition and increased velocity of structural transition, Jones manages to capture both the false surety of propagandistic staging and the sense of unease that pervades the footage.

Walid Raad/Atlas Group, *We Decided To Let Them Say "We Are Convinced" Twice. It Was More Convincing This Way, Beirut '82, Plane III*, 2005
Courtesy: the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg/Beirut.

The force with which repetition undoes context and opens up interpretation is even more apparent in Jones' video Killed (2009), a digital animation of rejected images from the Farm Security Administration. Led by the aptly named Roy Stryker, the project oversaw a phalanx of photographers that attempted to document the social conditions of American society during the Great Depression, including the likes of Walker Evans and Ben Shahn but also many lesser-known practitioners. Upon sending their negatives back to Washington, D.C. to be processed, Stryker and assistants routinely "killed" images they found unsuitable or too suggestive by punching holes in the offending 35mm negatives. Working from high-resolution digital scans of these images made available on the website of the Library of Congress, Jones edits down and re-sequences the rejected files of analog images into a loop that puts a once censored view of American life back into circulation. Forlorn and comic images are brought together by Jones as the perforation of Stryker's hole-punches pulses and picks up speed, becoming a montage of garrulous billboards and dime-store solicitations, aimless crowds, street performers, and omnipresent images of the unemployed. Detailed views of the down-and-out commingle with pleasure seekers wanting to forget, and the staid and stoic view of American life most commonly associated with FSA imagery is undone, swapped for the unruly, embodied, sexualized, and fraught poignancy of Jones' melancholy, democratic vision.
In Lucy Skaer's recent exhibition at Location One in New York, an analog aesthetic is also revitalized through an intentional weakening and puncture of its presumed efficacy.

Enigmatically titled Rachel, Peter, Caitlin, John, the installation features three 16mm film portraits of highly auratic subjects – a detailed view of a surviving copy of the Gutenberg Bible from the New York Public Library's collection, a vacillating portrait of two Mark Rothko paintings housed in German museum collections, and the restive eye of a cat's animal gaze. Triangulated into projections on separate walls, each of Skaer's loops reveals intermittent sequences of punctured footage, rupturing the incipient portraits with pulsating intervals of abstraction. Using various ticket-punching devices purchased online (from train lines, for example), Skaer interrupts the mesmerizing potential of her own footage, imposing the canceling gesture of economic invalidation to make absent and impossible a unified response to the potentially auratic object or subject.
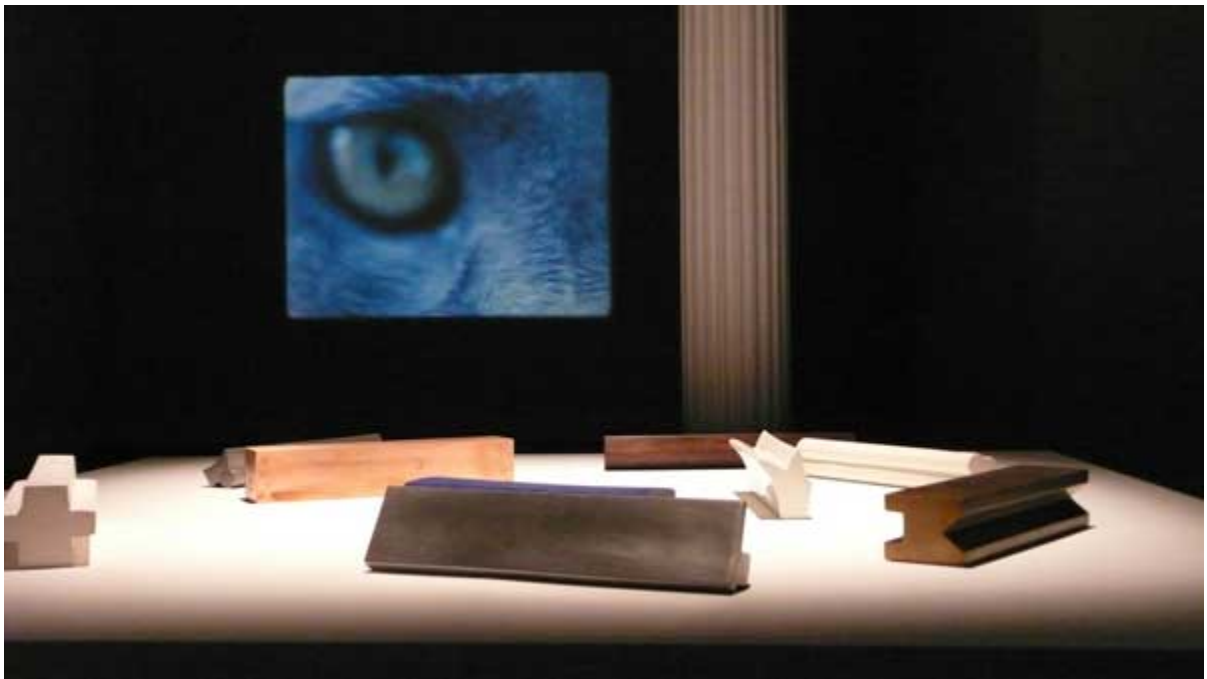
Lucy Skaer, *installation views from "Rachel, Peter, Caitlin, John", Location One, New York,* 2010
Courtesy: the artist and Location One, New York.

Superimposed over the ethereal footage of two Rothko color field paintings, for instance, the intermittent punctures gesture toward a rudimentary syntax that might extend to each of the films. Indeed, the desire to read and receive an encoded proto-linguistic message arises, is acutely felt, but ultimately falls mute. The abstract shapes, enlarged via projection, include the contour of the letter M, a frond shaped like the club from a deck of cards, and the simple geometry of a square, all of which are then rendered into three-dimensional forms Skaer places on a central platform in the exhibition space. Like ingots awaiting further transformation, the flat profiles of the puncture-forms become absurd, iterative prototypes made of porcelain, bronze, copper, tropical hardwood, and plaster. Abstraction attempts to speak through recalcitrant representation. As with all of the projects under review, the significant image alone is increasingly insufficient, it seeks refuge in the company of gesture,

sequence, material affect, and stuttering narrative.

Lucy Skaer, *The Good Ship Blank and Ballast (after Brancusi)*, 2010
Courtesy: the artist and doggerfisher, Edinburgh. Photo: Matt Carter.

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