Faits Divers
Notes on a Recurrent Figure in Lebanese Contemporary Art

| by *Stefanie Baumann*

Syrian astronauts talking to the nation's president by phone from outer space, security officers supposedly monitoring Beirut's seaside for spies and fortune-tellers but preferring to film the sunset instead, photographers refusing to develop their images or choosing to burn them, or journalists competing to find the engine, the only intact remnant of a car after a car-bomb: contemporary Lebanese artworks are full of weird happenings. If they were communicated through a newspaper instead of being presented in the framework of an artistic project, they would probably fit under a specific category, perhaps labelled "miscellaneous" or, in French, *fait divers*. Since its invention in the 19th century, this "category" is used in journalism for all sorts of events that do not fit under the usual categories of politics, culture or economy: strange incidents happening to ordinary people, minor events beyond the course of world politics, abominable crimes or inexplicable phenomena; in short, astonishing occurrences worthy to be told, but ostensibly detached from the course of socio-political reality. These narratives appear both trivial (lacking paramount importance), isolated (as they seem to occur on the sidelines of major events), and spectacular (because they are extraordinary, unexpected or eccentric).

According to Roland Barthes, the major structural characteristics of a particular *fait divers* lies in its immanence. Contrary to political events which are necessarily embedded in a broader context, "everything is given in the *fait divers*: its circumstances, its causes, its past, its outcome, without duration and without context, it constitutes an immediate, total being which refers, formally at least, to nothing implicit […]"[1]. Thus, a *fait divers* is a monadic, self-sufficient piece of information, which does not require any further knowledge and does not call for elucidation in the same way as other news items.

Yet, it is precisely *because* it is simultaneously decentred, disconnected and popular that a *fait divers* allows for a different way to analyse society and its underlying forces.

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1 Roland Barthes, "Structure of Fait Divers, in *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard, p. 185-195, Evanston: Northwestern Univesity Press, 1972, p.186-187.

Not only does it usually concern (and interest) ordinary people, thus providing access to the life and thoughts of the anonymous masses and the sphere of so-called common sense, but it also mobilizes disparate signs in an almost savage and always astonishing way: "[t]here is no *fait divers* without astonishment," Barthes writes, and "referred to a cause, astonishment always implies a disturbance".[2] By drawing attention to minor details, coincidental or enigmatic occurrences or intriguing anecdotes out of the ordinary, the *fait divers* interrupts the homogeneous flux of the common comprehension of things. While rational, categorized, integrated facts are quickly assimilated and assigned to a specific range of meaning, the *fait divers* proves to be, as Jacques Rancière puts it, a "crossroads of rationalities".[3] This openness to various possible significations gives access to a particularly elusive stratum of reality, one that remains latent to a society: its underlying antagonistic dynamics and its heterogeneous constitution, hearsay and the unsaid, as well as the implicit premises of moral and social customs. According to Rancière again, "the *fait divers* is a way of orchestrating the propagation of rumours or the power of the information machine."[4] In short, the *fait divers* approaches reality from its margins, thereby deflecting attention from established discourses towards those symptomatic elements in reality that disrupt or challenge them.

This peculiar constitution of the *fait divers* makes it interesting for contemporary artistic production in Lebanon, especially for the kind of art explicitly concerned with the highly complex political and historical situation of the country and the region. The *fait divers* proves to be capable of addressing a subversive critique without touching frontally on the conflictual issues. By shifting the attention from the overt scene of regional and world politics onto secondary events occurring on the margins, this critique is difficult to instrumentalize for partisan purposes and nor can it be subordinated to universalist claims – an important point for artworks endeavouring to problematize a constitutively heterogeneous society like the Lebanese one.

Another reason for the frequent use by Lebanese artists of a certain logic of *fait divers* might be the latter's direct association with mass media, or more precisely, with the medial construction of facts and their credibility. For the category *fait divers* refers not only to a particular kind of event, but also to a specific mode of representation. Its most common figure consists of a written or spoken text linked to images, for the most part indexical ones such as photographs, archival images or newsreel-footage, without subordinating one to the other.[5]

Thus, images related to *fait divers* are not only illustrations of a text, but elements in the construction of meaning, just as the written or spoken word is not only a specification of the visual elements, but an autonomous, complementary component. The montage of textual and visual aspects produces a kind of third figure, inciting the viewer to go back and forth in the consideration of its elements. By confronting visual and textual signs in this specific manner, the *fait divers* mobilizes a manifold of sometimes incommensurate meanings. Furthermore, "[t]he *fait divers* is not only a mould (a ru-

2 Ibid, p. 188.
3 Jacques Rancière, "Poétique du fait divers" in *Et tant pis pour les gens fatigués*! *Entretiens*, p. 395-406, Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2009, p. 396 (translation by the author).
4 Ibid., p. 402.
5 Cf. Emmanuelle André, "Diversité des forms et invention des faits" in *Tout contre le réel. Miroirs du fait divers*, ed. Emmanuelle André, Martine Boyer-Weinmann et Hélène Kuntz, p. 415-437, Paris : Editions le Manuscrit, 2008, p. 415.

bric, a spectacle, a murder), but a matrix (an event), a principle of creation (a *mise en scène*) and a momentum of writing…Because the representation of a fact pertains to its event, the resulting form relates in an ambiguous manner to the real, thus facilitating invention."[6]

Hence, the mediation of an event considered to be a *fait divers* through a specific form associated with its manifestation constitutes at the same time its very production as an event. The composition of a *fait divers* as both a specific kind of event and its particular media reproduction raises multiple questions: How are facts produced through specific forms considered as reliable? What conditions need to be fulfilled so as to consider something as objective? And how can the impact of mediation, in different situations and contexts, be problematized artistically? These and other related questions concerning the production of objectivity and its relation to subjective appropriation are crucial to many Lebanese artworks.

For instance Walid Raad, the creator and only member of *The Atlas Group*, states in an interview with Alan Gilbert: "We are concerned with facts, but we do not view facts as self-evident objects that are already present in the world. One of the questions we find ourselves asking is, How do we approach facts not in their crude facticity but through the complicated mediations by which they acquire their immediacy? *The Atlas Group* produces and collects objects and stories that should not be examined through the conventional and reductive binary of fiction and nonfiction."[7] Thus, *The Atlas Group* aims to elucidate not so much what has happened, but how something becomes an event and is acknowledged as a fact.

The Atlas Group is a curious, highly complex and intricate artwork. Presented as a research project concerned with the study and documentation of the contemporary history of Lebanon (with a special focus on the civil wars between 1975 and 1990 and the on-going postwar period), it problematizes allegedly objectivist approaches to reality, their authoritarian claims and standardized forms in various manners. Hence, it is significant that it appears in the form of an archive – an established structure associated with "serious" historiography, supposed to provide an objective, neutral access to facts from the past through the establishment and rational organization of accredited documents. By referring to this institution, *The Atlas Group* aims to associate with the project an aura of authority and trustworthiness. Yet contrary to "real" archives, *The Atlas Group* alters its appearance according to the public and the specific location where it is shown, and even more scandalously with respect to accredited institutional archives, it produces its documents itself. These "hysterical documents", which combine material traces of the past such as photographs, newspaper cut-outs, articles, or found footage with deliberately invented elements, are attributed to fictional characters, anonymous donors, or are otherwise presented as productions of *the Atlas Group* itself. Both the presentations of these contributors and their visual productions (e.g. notebooks, photographs, films) are accompanied by peculiar introductory texts which recall, by their monadic form and the strange effect they produce, the constitution of *faits divers*.

6 Ibid., p. 417 (translation by the author).
7 Walid Raad in an interview with Alain Gilbert, in: Bomb Magazine 81, Fall 2002, available online: http://bombmagazine.org/article/2504/walid-ra-ad (verified on June 1st 2017).

Dr. Fadl Fakhouri, for example, is presented as the most important historian of his time. He is said to have given, among other things, his personal notebooks to *The Atlas Group*, each of which dealing with his very particular and rather odd habits. Missing Lebanese Wars tells the story of a group of historians from different communities and/or political orientations, who gambled at the Sunday horseraces during the war. Instead of betting on the winning horse, they were interested in the gap between its arrival at the finish line and the photographic proof of its successful completion of the course. *Already Been in a Lake of Fire*, another notebook attributed to Dr. Fakhouri, consists of an annotated collection of photographs showing replicas of the cars that were used as car bombs during Lebanon's wars. Souheil Bachar, also a fictive donor to *The Atlas Group* archive, is described as a low-level employee in the Kuwaiti Embassy. Through videos that he allegedly produced in collaboration with *The Atlas Group*, he tells his story as a former hostage held in joint captivity with Americans who projected on him their sexual fantasies. The footage provided by the so-called officer #17, shows the sunset on the Corniche in West Beirut, while he was supposed to be on the lookout for agents, spies and fortune-tellers.

These narratives, which are intimately linked with the visual material through which they are told, at first sight seem to be mere humorous fictions. Nevertheless, they all have in one way or another a basis in the real, factual events of their time. Besides western captives, a large number of Lebanese and other Arab citizens have also been taken hostage, although this generated much less coverage by international media. Car bombs, which are also the focus of other Atlas Group "documents" have exploded repeatedly during and after the civil war. But instead of analysing their political impact and causes, journalists were concerned with incidental details, such as the colour of the car or the landing point of the car engine that is propelled by the explosion. A generalized paranoia and fear of spies or conspiracies has been widespread in Beirut due to the very complex conflicts and the lack of investigation of crimes. And the fact that Lebanon still has not written, until today, an official history of its past is partly due to the irreconcilability of its communitarian versions.

These and many other complicated issues are subversively raised through *The Atlas Group* documents by drawing attention to curious practices and images and by focussing on unexpected perspectives. Reverting to the figure of *fait divers* instead of naming these contentious issues frontally is the artist's subtle strategy: by placing these narratives on the periphery of the major events, he avoids both potential ideological misappropriation and the association with a manifest, fixed, interpretative framework. Instead of sticking to the question of concrete factuality, these "hysterical documents" are concerned with the question of how utterances are pejoratively considered to be either objective or subjective, and how the reference to a particular imagery amplifies or reduces its trustworthiness. Moreover, the persistence of rumours, hearsay and popular wisdom is constantly accentuated through texts juxtaposed with indexical images, which seem to give weight to what is narrated. Thereby their impact on reality, their way of shaping perception and triggering reactions, is presented as constantly thwarting the purely objectivist recognition of facts.

Many of the documents included in *The Atlas Group* archive deal directly with press coverage in one way or another. Be it by integrating cut-out images taken from popular newspapers, by re-arranging press photographs found in archives or by directly addressing the way journalists treat a sensitive subject, Walid Raad's project is constantly

questioning political events and their societal impact through their mediation. What enters into focus is the complicated relation between an incident and its subjective experience and assimilation: How does the description and contextualisation of an event affect its understanding and political impact? What part does the persistence of intuitions and latent knowledge play? How is perception and the attribution of meaning shaped through media discourses and images? These questions not only concern local media and the public directly implicated in the events reported, but also their appropriation by international media and foreign observers, the divergences and points of conflict between the regional and the international sphere.

For example, several documents included in *The Atlas Group* combine texts that are written or spoken in different languages (English, French, Arabic). Often, meanings deviate slightly from one language to another, and translations are not completely congruent, thereby complicating the potential consensus and problematizing the one-sidedness of hegemonic claims. The notebook pages of *Already Been in a Lake of Fire*, for example, include handwritten texts in Arabic on the image. Their translation not only takes another form (typewritten, alongside the image), but also transmits another logic of telling: unlike the seemingly neutral English lists, the Arabic text narrates the event in a detailed and sometimes pejorative way.

Some documents address the problematic perception induced by media constructions more openly. *The Bachar Tapes*, for example, openly question the residual orientalist discourses propagated in cultural commodities and the press. When asked in a fictive interview why the voiceover does not accurately translate what is said in the Arabic, Bachar simply responds that he would prefer not to comment on the subject.[8]

Thus *The Atlas Group* documents appear like prismatic figures: by forming an intersection of different languages and their respective cultural ascriptions, they open a field in which each universalizing perspective is confronted with its antagonistic other leading to mutual problematization. Seemingly innocent and out of line, these minor stories that resort to the figure of *fait divers* undermine affirmative statements whilst reversing the angle: rather than aspiring to the determination of an accurate, conclusive sense, they appeal to the deconstruction of the *apparatus* itself.

Ali Cherri's video *Pipe Dreams* features another story difficult to classify. The film focuses on a phone call while on a Soviet mission between Muhammed Faris, the first Syrian astronaut in space, and the former Syrian President Hafez al-Assad. The situation seems both extraordinarily significant due to the singularity of the occasion and the importance of the men involved, but also trivial because of the banality of the conversation consisting mainly of polite phrases spoken in formal Arabic using the wooden ideological phraseology of the Syrian Baath Party.

In Cherri's video, both partners in dialogue are shown in a particular setting: the crew of the spacecraft appears in full screen, in which is placed the image of a television. The latter image, which is set in the foreground, first shows another screen showing the same crew, then zooms out in order to show the president in his office.

8 Cf. *The Atlas Group* / Walid Raad, « Civilizationally, We do not dig Holes to Bury Ourselves », in Tamass. Contemporary Arab representations 1 : Beirut / Lebanon, Barcelona: Fundacio Antoni Tapies, 2002, p. 125.

This device emphasizes the embedding of the situation in the media, thereby raising the question of the *mise en scène* of power. Even if the event as such does not seem to have a direct impact on the historical-political situation, it proves to be strongly implicated in politics, as it contributes to the creation of a heroic, authoritative and mighty image of the president and provides evidence of the greatness of the country.

The linking of this particular scene with the politics of representation is accentuated in *Pipe Dreams* through the juxtaposition of these images and the conversation in the soundtrack with other archival material. At the very beginning of the film, one can see the president's statue in a wasteland – a symbol of victory, edited together with the image of the fire produced by the launch of a rocket. During the conversation, at the moment when Muhammed Faris begins to speak about the beauty of Syria as seen from outer space, the background turns into YouTube images showing the dismantling of Hafez Al-Assad's statue in 2011, at the order of Hafez al-Assad's son, the current president of Syria Bashar al-Assad, in order to avoid its destruction by anti-regime protestors. The editing together of these two moments – one apparently innocent, the other a clearly political act – immediately affects the perception of the former, thereby appealing to a critical reassessment. In addition, the contrast between the solemn official images of the telephone conversation and the poor images drawn from YouTube – the former being included in an official archive, the latter furtively published on the Internet – emphasizes the staging and selectivity of information accessible to the public. The montage of the different elements in *Pipe Dreams* adds various layers to the apparently isolated and exceptional *fait divers*, thereby complicating its purpose by inscribing it into a broader political context. It queries the multiple relations enclosed in the allegedly immanent form of the event by reconnecting the apparently unrelated encounter between the "father of the nation" and a hero of the nation, with society and its internal tensions.

Rather than presenting this *fait divers* as an immanent, isolated event, Ali Cherri deploys the multiple layers it encloses: its medial construction and its interrelation with political and societal conflicts. Moreover, his video introduces a temporal dimension in a sort of constellation, by breaking through the ostensibly untimely moment of the conversation in order to link it with its historical horizon and prospective transformation. Recalling Walter Benjamin's "dialectical image" – the encounter between two specific furtive moments which produce the sudden manifestation of meaning – Pipe Dreams mobilizes traces of the past in order to reassess the present.[9]

Returning to the structure, figure and logic of *fait divers* thus turns out to be a complex artistic strategy that enables artists to problematize not only the production of an event through its mediatisation, but also that which its immanent, allegedly-innocent form conceals. While "[t]he classification '*fait divers*' has the function to seal, in advance, the questions raised by certain events par excellence",[10] its ability to rouse curiosity triggers further investigation. In both Walid Raad and Ali Cherri's projects, the *fait divers* as structurally closed information is used as a starting point. In both cases, it is first of all the surprise effect which incites the viewer to delve deeper not only into the

9 Cf. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press, 2002, p.463, [N3,1].
10 Dominique Perrin, "L'éthique surréaliste à l'épreuve du fait divers", in *Tout contre le réel. Miroirs du fait divers*, op. cit., p. 131-142, p. 132 (translation by the author).

historical, political and societal circumstances of the intriguing scene, but also into the premises of its representation as such. Emphasizing apparently minor details, incidental components or symptomatic behaviours, these artworks draw attention to the fissures pervading reality. As information considered to be of secondary importance, the *fait divers* makes an appeal for critical reflexion on the historical situation with regards to the present, thereby avoiding unilateral interpretations, while at the same time implicitly questioning the impact of personal and collective appropriation in the construction of meaning.

Other Lebanese art projects develop this aspect further. Nada Sehnaoui's project *Painting the L'Orient-Le Jour* addresses the personal appropriation of information as presented in the only French-language newspaper in Lebanon. Throughout the whole year of 1999, she would take the front page of *L'Orient-Le Jour* and paint over it – accentuating some of the headlines and scratching others out, commenting on some and erasing others. The newspaper – and with it the information it provides – serves as a sort of platform for her personal notebook. Some of the original headlines remain eye-catching, while others are erased, transformed or become part of a larger picture fragment.

As a point of intersection between very different approaches to reality, the *fait divers* turns out to be capable of seizing reality from below. Beyond established systems of categorization, it enables us to question the media's production of events as such. Many Lebanese artworks find in this curious, heterogeneous, but apparently minor figure of information a versatile model which intertwines fictional and documentary material in order to address sensitive political issues through the consideration of society's multiple layers.

Stefanie Baumann is currently a post-doctoral research fellow (FCT) at AELAB/IFILNOVA (New University of Lisbon) in the framework of the working group on cinema and philosophy. She obtained her PhD in philosophy in 2013, with a doctoral thesis on Walid Raad's artistic project The Atlas Group. She worked with the artist Esther Shalev-Gerz as personal assistant from 2005 to 2010, and collaborated with video artists Marie Voignier and Mounira Al Solh. She taught philosophy at University Paris VIII (2007-2010), philosophy of contemporary art at Ashkal Alwan (Beirut) in 2013 and gives seminars at Maumaus Study Program (Lisbon) since 2015. From 2012 to 2015, she has been teaching philosophy and aesthetics at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (ALBA) in Beirut (Lebanon).

1 | The Atlas Group (1989-2004)
Scratching on things I could disavow Part I, Chapter I, Section:139,
© The Atlas Group (1989-2004) / Walid Raad
Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery (Beirut / Hamburg)
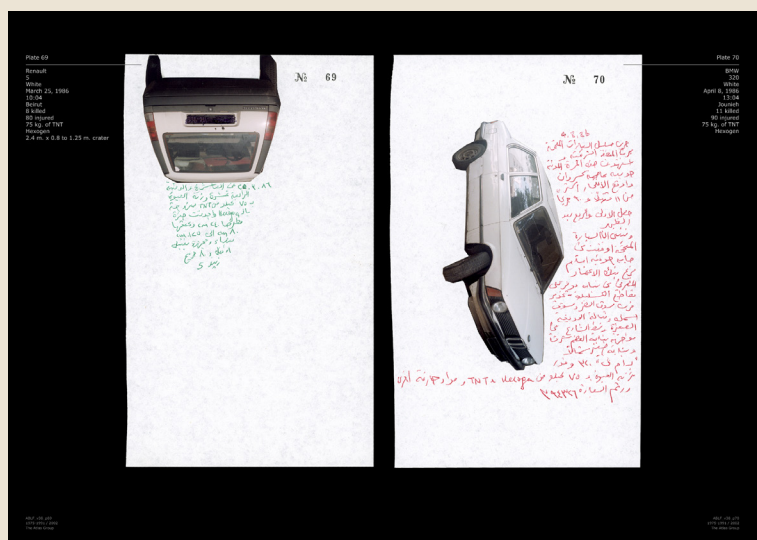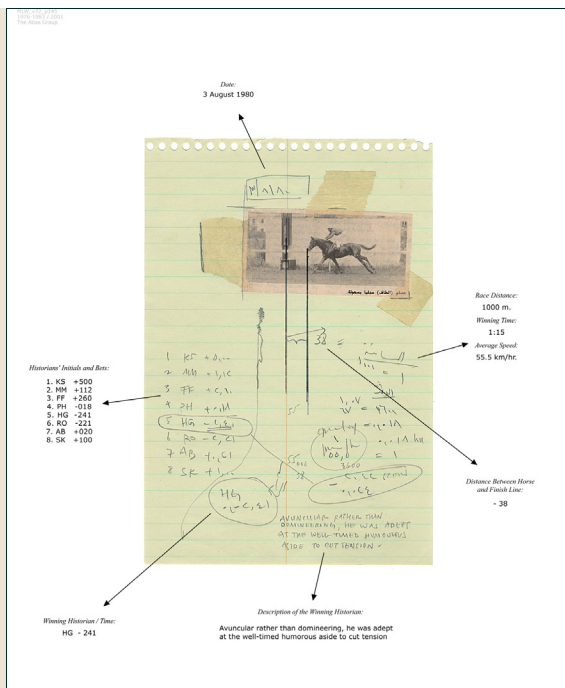
2-4 | The Atlas Group (1989-2004)
© The Atlas Group (1989-2004)/Walid Raad
Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery (Beirut / Hamburg)

5 | Ali Cherri
Pipe Dreams. Installation view. 2011
© Ali Cherri
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Iman Fares

6-8 | Nada Sehnaoui
Peindre L'Orient-Le Jour, 1999
Lundi 4 janvier 1999, and *Mercredi 24 mars 1999*,
© Nada Sehnaoui
Courtesy: Saradar Collection