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# Blue like the Mediterranean: the work of the monochrome in the Atlas Group Archive

Katerina Korola

**Abstract.** In the prologue to Walid Raad's *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes* (2001), the speaker asks that his words appear against a grey background. Or, he continues after a pause, 'use a blue background . . . blue just like the Mediterranean'. Beginning with this colourful riddle, this article investigates the work of the monochrome in the Atlas Group Archive. With this attention to the monochrome as a format, the author's goal is to move away from the categories of documentary and fiction that dominate discussions of Raad and parafictional work more generally, towards the formal infrastructure through which such works command belief and emotion. This attention to the aesthetic form of the archive not only brings into focus the constituent role of design in the construction of knowledge, but it also reveals the transformation of the monochrome in its encounters with the archive, technical media, and the chromatics of affective capitalism.

**Keywords.** abstraction • archive • colour • design • grey media • monochrome • parafiction • Raad

> Now everything cries out in all imaginable colours, but it cries out to deaf ears. We have become accustomed to visual pollution. (Vilém Flusser, 2000, pg. 66)

The prologue of Walid Raad's *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes* begins with an empty grey field. Soon, words spoken in Arabic and subtitled in English appear on its surface in a black sans-serif font. The voice identifies itself as belonging to one Souheil Bachar, 35 years old, born in Southern Lebanon and held hostage between 1983 and 1993. After this brief introduction, the speaker goes on to ask that his voice be dubbed in the tapes that follow by a 'neutral female voice' in the language of the country in which the tapes will be presented. He then specifies that the introduction he is speaking should appear subtitled, as it indeed does, against a grey background. Or, he continues after a pause, 'If you prefer . . . use a blue background . . . blue just like the Mediterranean.' As these last words are pronounced, the grey background performatively dissolves into a vivid blue and the subtitled text

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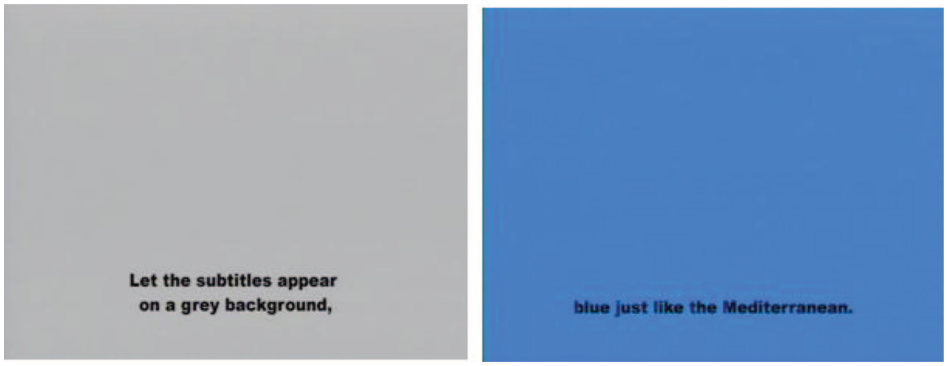



**Figures 1 and 2.** Video stills from Walid Raad, *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (#17 and #31)_English Version*, 2000, 18 minutes, single channel video. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Hamburg/Beirut.

disappears (Figures 1 and 2). Promoted to an object, this blue monochrome remains onscreen for an additional 8 seconds before finally collapsing into a surge of informatic noise.

On the inventory chart that accompanies the Atlas Group Archive, *Hostage* appears under the heading 'Bachar', which is itself nestled under the larger category 'File Type A' (Figure 3). The 'A' in this context stands for authored or attributed documents, in distinction to those that are anonymous (Type FD: Found Documents) and those that were produced by or on commission for the Atlas Group (Type AGP: Atlas Group Productions). However, it bears saying right away that, despite this appeal to the language of provenance, Souheil Bachar is nothing more or less than one of the many personae invented by Raad to populate his Atlas Group Archive. Established by Raad in 1999, the Atlas Group exists as a parafictional project dedicated to the research and documentation of the Lebanese Civil War, containing a number of works – documents – produced by Raad and attributed to various proxies.[1] As this provenance chart and the introduction to *Hostage* already begin to suggest, however, Raad's fictional conceits do not stand alone, but rather are supported by an equally shrewd mimicry of the formal infrastructure of the archive. Indeed, in Raad's Atlas Group works, fiction and mimicry collaborate to trouble authorship, authority and authenticity, foregrounding the many types of mediation that intervene between the documents of the archive and their presumed referents out in the world, if not undermining the connection between the two entirely.

To date, the bulk of literature on the Atlas Group has tended to focus on the role of fiction in Raad's practice (Kaplan, 2004; Lambert-Beatty, 2009; Nakas and Schmitz, 2007; Rogers, 2002; Spieker, 2008; Takahashi, 2013), devoting considerably less attention to the formal strategies through which these fictions impose on the viewer's faculties of belief. In treating the project as an

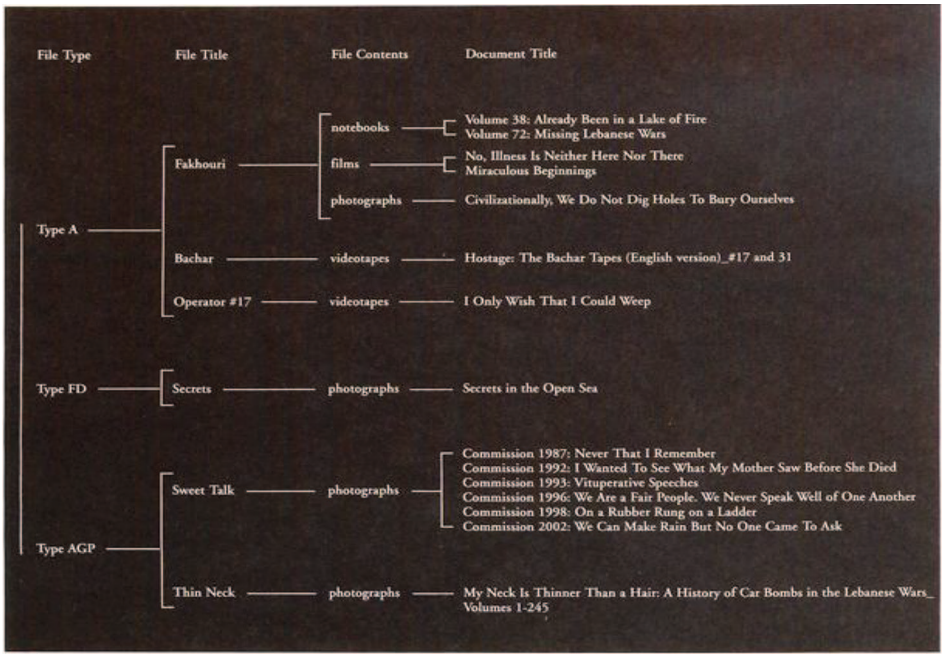



**Figure 3.** The Atlas Group Archive's inventory chart (nd). © Walid Raad. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and the Sfeir-Semler Gallery.

exercise in the conceptual, however, such criticism risks overlooking the very concrete structures that mediate inscription, organization, and transmission within the Atlas Group Archive and archives in general. As Jacques Derrida (1996: 17, emphasis in the original) reminds us:

> the technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content, even in its very coming to existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event.

The authority of the archive is thus not simply a function of the archivist, historian, or even the provenance of the document. Rather, it is also the function of the material, technical, and institutional channels that produce the document as an object of knowledge.

In order to better appreciate Raad's intervention into the archive, then, my discussion turns away from the population of human proxies invented by Raad towards the aesthetic infrastructure that conditions their statements, a category which includes everything from the material substrate of the document to the font with which it is labelled. Drawing inspiration from the colourful riddle of *Hostage*'s prologue, it broaches this infrastructure through the work of the monochrome, a format that repeatedly emerges in

the Atlas Group Archive as both the material support for its authority and a vehicle for its disruption. As I will argue, the monochromes of the Atlas Group Archive – sitting uncomfortably between object and background, art and design – provoke a productive collision between the aesthetics of modernism and those of the archive, thereby disclosing the critical role of the aesthetic in production of historical knowledge. My larger goal, however, is not to rehearse a project of deconstruction, but instead to consider how the 21st-century monochrome is transformed in its encounters with the photography, the archive, and the digital colour fields of affective capitalism. In an era of ubiquitous images, produced and circulated in the name of advertising, surveillance, and humanitarian discourse alike, the monochrome acquires a new (albeit ambivalent) politics, one that not only suggests the limitations of visual knowledge, but also probes the chromatic codes upon which belief and emotion are founded.

## Secrets and surfaces

Before delving into the monochromes that haunt the Atlas Group Archive, it is worth dwelling for a moment on the project as a whole and the unique conception of history upon which it is premised. Since 1999, the Atlas Group has served as the unifying framework for a dense body of multimedia works that purport to 'locate, preserve, study, and produce audio, visual, literary, and other artefacts that shed light on the contemporary history of Lebanon'.[2] More specifically, the project focuses on the historical period conventionally known as the Lebanese Civil War, a period marked by numerous outbreaks of multi-sectarian conflict that would remain ongoing for over 15 years (1975–1991). Given the uncertain endpoint of the conflict and the lack of meaningful investigation and reprisals in its wake, the history of the civil war remains unresolved to this day, and this indeterminacy is reflected in the slippery character of the Atlas Group Archive.[3] Including formats as diverse as photographs, illustrated essays, video, collage, performance lectures, and even PowerPoint presentations, the heterogeneity of the works presented under the aegis of the Atlas Group is staggering in itself. Further complicating matters, Raad not only attributes these documents to invented proxies, but also alters dates and details from exhibition to exhibition, and frequently recycles titles, texts, and images from one work to another. As a result, the documents of the Atlas Group can at times appear inscrutably self-referential, constructing an image of the period that is indeterminate at best, and prohibitively disorienting at worst.

Of course, such indeterminacy is precisely the point, corresponding as it does to Walid Raad's own understanding of this history. Eschewing its official name, Raad describes the historical moment with which he is concerned as the 'Lebanese civil wars', 'the contemporary history of Lebanon', or, drawing on a common vernacular expression, simply as the 'events' (*al-hadath*) – a variable terminology

that gestures towards the multiple, at times contradictory, experiences and events elided by the neatness of the period's official designation. As Raad (2004: 44) elaborates in one interview:

> We do not consider 'The Lebanese Civil War' to be a settled chronology of events, dates, personalities, massacres, invasions, but rather we . . . consider it as an abstraction constituted by various discourses, and, more importantly, by various modes of assimilating the data of the world.

Following Raad, then, the very notion of the Lebanese Civil War itself emerges as what might be called an historical abstraction. However, what characterizes this particular form of abstraction is that it emerges not from a lack of documentation, but as a direct result of the latter's proliferation through networks of technical media. Indeed, it is one of the ironies of the period that the destruction of cultural objects was accompanied by an equally robust production of images. As fellow Lebanese artist and filmmaker Khalil Joreige (Respini, 2015: 31) explains, 'During the war, every militia had its own media station, television, newspaper, or radio. There was a real war of images.'[4] Moreover, these images did not simply function as weapons in a conventional sense, but also furnished the raw material from which competing histories of the civil war would be crafted – both contemporaneously and retroactively, locally and globally.[5]

To understand the Lebanese Civil War as an historical abstraction, then, is to attend to the way in which images have been recruited into the construction of an historical narrative whose very cohesion belies the uncertainty and contradictions of the events it purports to explain. For this reason, Raad's project is less concerned with constructing yet another counter-narrative than it is with probing the media archive's 'various modes of assimilating the data of the world' (Raad, 2004: 44). The elaborate fictional frames that surround the Atlas Group works and the multiple mediations that its documents undergo can both be understood as strategies mobilized to this end, foregrounding the extent to which images are always already determined by the formal and technological conventions of discourse, whether these conventions operate within the image (via aesthetic conventions, the affordances of a given media, and the transformation of the image as it moves through media channels) or outside of it (via titles, texts, frames, and institutions). In this way, the Atlas Group works direct attention to the material infrastructure of mediation, calling for a critical engagement with the concrete processes by which images become the grounds of historical knowledge. That being said, however, it is equally important that, even upon deciphering these layers of mediation, the viewer is confronted with a palpable absence that resists resolution. For curator Eva Respini (2015: 29), this absence is at the core of the Atlas Group Archive, which she describes as a 'coming-to-terms with the limits of directly capturing history through images or words'. History, Raad seems to suggest, can exist only as an abstraction.

**Figure 4.** Walid Raad, *Secrets in the Open Sea*, 2004, installation view, Museo Jumex, 13 October 2016 – 8 January 2017. Photo: Moritz Bernoully. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Hamburg/Beirut.

It would be a mistake, however, to view this approach as nothing but a strategy of postmodern negation. As Alan Gilbert (2016) has argued, 'Walid Raad's art investigates not the failure of images to represent traumatic events, but the refusal of the real to inscribe itself as a legible image.' Paradigmatic of this approach, for Gilbert, is Raad's *Secrets in the Open Sea* (Figure 4). Perhaps the most prominent instance of the monochrome within the Atlas Group Archive, *Secrets* consists of six large-scale ink-jet prints, each featuring a rectangular colour field in a different shade of blue, bordered by a white margin and accompanied on the lower right-hand corner by a small, low-resolution, black-and-white group portrait. While the dimensions of the prints evoke the large scale of post-war non-representational painting, Raad chooses to frame the work as a series of photographic prints, introducing the monochrome into the photographic archive. This association is established in a lengthy text that describes the six monochromes as part of a larger group of photographic prints that were bequeathed to the Atlas Group after being found under the rubble of postwar Beirut. Following the text's narrative, the Atlas Group then sent the prints to laboratories for chemical analysis, which revealed the presence of latent black-and-white images featuring persons who were subsequently identified as individuals who 'drowned, died, or were found dead in the Mediterranean between 1975 and 1991' (Raad, 2008: 107).[6]

Framed by this elaborate provenance narrative, the monochromes of *Secrets* demand to be addressed in relation to the photographic archive, broaching

the politics of representation and visibility more generally. Raad's use of the monochrome can thus be aligned with concerns raised by a number of artists and theorists regarding the limitations and even dangers of representation in the contemporary moment. Already, in the 1980s, theorists of photography such as Allan Sekula and Vilém Flusser prefigured much of the contemporary discourse on the spectacularization of violence and compassion fatigue. The latter, making specific reference to photographs of the Lebanon civil wars, went so far as to argue that such photographs have the effect of 'absolv[ing] us from the bother of going into the causes and consequences of the war in Lebanon' (Flusser, 2000: 62). More recently, the artist–theorist Hito Steyerl (2009: 166) has approached the problem of representation from a different angle, suggesting that 'within a fully immersive media landscape, pictorial representation – which was seen as a prerogative and political privilege for a long time – [today] feels more like a threat.'

Within such a media environment, the question facing the artist thus becomes how to address historical violence while resisting the rapid resolution of the photographic medium. Indeed, Raad intimates as much in an experimental collage-essay created to accompany the retrospective of his work at MoMA in 2015. Appropriating a passage culled from an interview with the Lebanese painter Walid Sadek, Raad (2015: np) suggests that the task of the artist is to 'question the dominance of the camera by writing a work capable of harbouring secrets – secrets not readily available to the obscenity of the image.'[7] Considered in relation to *Secrets in the Open Sea*, this statement suggests that we might think of these prints first and foremost as a gesture of refusal, one which counters the reifications of the photographic archive with the mute obstinance of the monochromatic surface.

To see such a gesture simply as one of negation, however, would be to neglect its powerful affective appeal. For, although the text accompanying the monochromes alludes to that which cannot be seen, their brilliant blue surfaces nonetheless exert a palpable force on the viewer, commanding our attention with their sheer luminosity. In this respect, it is worth recalling that, from the beginning of its long history, the monochrome has troubled any easy boundary between the visible and invisible, the absent and present, the abstract and the concrete. Indeed, Kazimir Malevich (1976: 130) went so far as to proffer the monochrome as an icon of 'new painterly realism', a living surface more alive than any representational image. Though the complex debates that have accompanied the monochrome's recurrence over the 20th century cannot be done justice to here, Malevich's words offer an important reminder that the monochrome's gambit consisted less in denying the imperatives of representation than in confronting it with another form of immediacy, a tendency which perhaps saw its most complete manifestation in Rodchenko's *Pure Colours* triptych.

Returning to *Secrets in the Open Sea*, we might say that, although the monochrome does indeed refuse the 'obscenity' of the camera, this refusal is nonetheless accompanied by a surplus. Capitalizing on the vibrancy of the colour blue, *Secrets* challenges the photograph's claims to immediacy, confronting the archive with a form of presence that escapes the schemas of representation. This operation, moreover, becomes particularly critical in relation to the fate of the thousands, referenced in the work's provenance narrative, who were forcibly disappeared during the civil wars. Many of these individuals remain missing to this day – caught in a limbo between presence and absence, an uncertain state to which the monochrome gives form. Indeed, the colour blue itself acquires an additional resonance in light of this history: the Mediterranean to which it alludes was also, reportedly, a disposal site for the bodies of the disappeared. The blue monochrome thus emerges as an emblem for an alternative strategy of memorialization, manifesting the power of the format to accommodate and make perceptible the absences that haunt the present – and, more importantly still, to lend these absences the potency of presence.

## The pixilated monochrome

Produced around the same time as *Secrets*, *Hostage* introduces a further variation on the work of the monochrome. Like many works in the Atlas Group Archive, *Hostage* presents itself as a fragment. In this case, we are told, we have been permitted to view only 2 of the 53 tapes in which Bachar recounts the story of his captivity – the only ones that he has chosen to make available for distribution in North America and Western Europe. After the prologue that began our discussion, the first tape – Tape #17 – begins. It is here that we first encounter Souheil Bachar, played by the well-known Lebanese actor Fadi Abi Samra. Seated before a hastily pinned Lebanese flag, Bachar shares a disturbing narrative of captivity, international intrigue, and sexual abuse. His story is recounted through a combination of first-person testimony, archival footage, and collage, all of which are repeatedly interrupted by bursts of artefactual abstraction. By contrast, the second tape –Tape #31 – confronts the viewer with a very different type of video object. Here we encounter what might be called a pixilated monochrome, whose faint hue – somewhere between blue and grey – recalls the colour fields of the prologue and the Mediterranean it invoked (Figures 5 and 6). The shot is held for 2 minutes and 12 seconds, after which the video goes black and the crash of waves can be heard. These waves remain audible as the only soundtrack for the subsequent shot, in which we see a man standing on a rocky shore, looking out to sea. At this point, the viewer is informed by white subtitles that the length of the previous segment represents the average length of the videos recorded by Bachar during his captivity. The video then goes black for a last time.

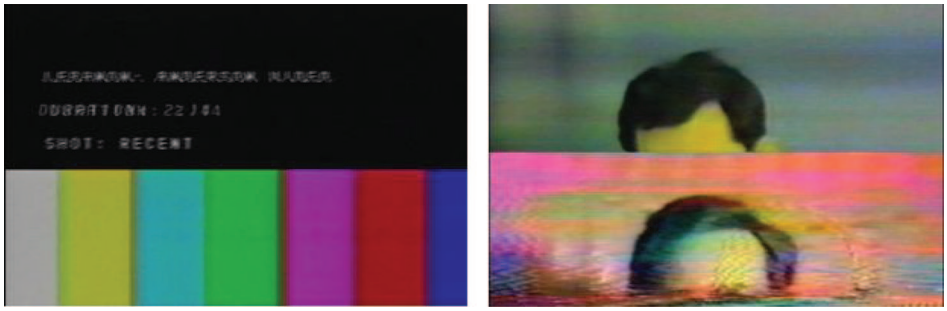
As this short and regrettably reductive summary conveys, the monochrome is only one of several species of unresolved images that *Hostage* uses to


**Figures 5 and 6.** Video stills from Walid Raad, *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (#17 and #31)_English Version*, 2000, 18 minutes, single channel video. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Hamburg/Beirut.

foreground technical and discursive mediation. Nonetheless, the work's progression from the grey and blue colour fields of the prologue to the pixelated monochrome of Tape #31 is important insofar as it establishes a kinship between the low resolution of video and the vibrant surface of the monochrome. Of course, such a kinship is not without precedent in the realm of media art. As early as 1963, the video pioneer Nam June Paik (1974: np) declared the TV monitor a new canvas, explicitly articulating his aesthetic of 'High Infidelity' in reference to modernist painting: 'Modern Art became Modern Art after it shed its "hi-fi" bit to the art of Photography and plunged itself into the flurry of High Infidelity. TV became TV Art through all technical malfunctions.' Formulated in opposition to the increasingly high-fidelity ethos of commercial entertainment, High Infidelity may have been born of technical error, but it reached beyond video to articulate its compromised images in terms other than loss.

Coming some time later, Hito Steyerl's concept of the poor image offers a more recent theorization of visual noise as productive and political, recalibrating the politics of artefactual abstraction to the contemporary moment. Like the pixelated monochrome of Tape #31, Steyerl's poor image is one whose 'visuality is resolutely compromised: blurred, amateurish, full of artefacts' (Steyerl, 2009: 44). As Steyerl insists, however, this loss of resolution is in no way accompanied by a loss of the real. On the contrary, the poor image allows for a registration of the real in the very artefacts that accumulate on its surface. Steyerl explains, 'The poor image is no longer about the real thing – the originary original. Instead it is about its own real conditions of existence' (p. 33). Shifting the emphasis from an external referent to the traces of mediation, the abstraction of the poor image thus becomes itself a kind of witness, 'testify[ing] to the violent dislocation, transferrals, and displacement of images'.

Something like an aesthetics of the poor image can be identified in contemporary media art from the Arab world, which Laura Marks (2014: 257)




**Figures 7 and 8.** Video stills from Walid Raad, *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (#17 and #31)_English Version*, 2000, 18 minutes, single channel video. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Hamburg/Beirut.

has elsewhere described as 'Arab glitch', tracing the aesthetic back to the materiality of the digital image and its uneven accessibility across the globe. Indeed, for some members of this artistic community, such an aesthetic has even come to signify a kind of oppositional pedigree. For instance, in an essay and performance piece titled, significantly, 'The Pixelated Revolution', the Lebanese performance artist Rabih Mroué (2012: 26) locates the potential of pixilated images in the fact that they 'exist outside of regulated systems and official institutions'. We might say, then, that for artists like Steyerl and Mroué, pixilation emerges less as an aesthetic choice than a mark of provenance, transforming the image into an archive of its own production and circulation.

Of course, in their larger projects as artists and theorists, both Mroué and Steyerl have grappled with the fundamental ambivalence of such images, which have proven assimilable into channels of all kinds.[8] Tape #17 of *Hostage*, similarly, makes use of artefactual abstraction in a way that ultimately complicates any uncritical celebration of visual noise (Figures 7 and 8). The video's low-resolution, canted framing, and makeshift set all conspire to evoke the low-budget and improvised character of the videos produced by combatants during the civil wars, offering an important reminder of the poor image's entanglement with violence and coercion.[9] Moreover, as Chad Elias (2018: 38) has observed, the work's repeated bursts of technical distortion themselves gesture back to the practices used by combatants to disguise the origins of their tapes. Indeed, the notion of an oppositional aesthetic becomes highly untenable in the case of Lebanon, a nation whose 15 years of civil war implicated over 20 militias and a number of foreign interests, each with their own media offices (Fandy, 2007: 67). The very idea of an oppositional aesthetic thus emerges as compromised, or at least in bad want of historicization.

If such an aesthetics is to retain its politics, then, that politics must be grounded in something other than the easy equation of video noise with oppositional pedigree. Jalal Toufic attempts something of the sort in his discussion of the imperfections of Lebanese photography during and after

the war in *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster*. Here, in a parable that Raad is fond of quoting, Toufic (2009: 64) tells the story of a photographer who became 'used to viewing things at the speed of war'. Even years after the war had ended, his photographs 'still looked like they were taken by a photographer . . . in imminent danger, the compositions haphazard and the focus almost always off' (p. 65). Though these photographs soon won the photographer recognition in North America and Western Europe (where he was celebrated with references to Michael Snow and Vito Acconci), Toufic insists upon the specificity of this aesthetic to the legacy of the civil wars. For Toufic's photographer, abstraction is not one formal strategy to be chosen amongst others, nor is it even, following Mroué and Steyerl, a certificate of its circumstances of production; rather, it is mysteriously compelled by the 'withdrawal and . . . unavailability to vision of the material world' (p. 65).

Following Toufic, then, post-war Lebanese photography would seem condemned to an aesthetics of abstraction. Yet, grim as this conclusion may appear, Toufic also argues that the legacy of the wars also brought artists a unique perspicacity. This perspicacity consists above all in the ability to perceive what Toufic terms the 'immaterial withdrawal' of even those cultural objects, documents, and landscapes that remained physically intact in the aftermath of conflict. Drawing inspiration from Jean-Luc Godard's provocative claim for the loss of culture after Chernobyl, Toufic defines immaterial withdrawal as a condition in which that which is physically present becomes nonetheless 'unavailable' to a community that has experienced a surpassing disaster (p. 120).[10] To put it more plainly, we might define immaterial withdrawal as the result of a caesura that unmoors the artist from the traditions that once sustained his or her craft; although physically intact, surviving cultural artifacts remain present only superficially, since they have lost their potential to act and be activated in the present. Crucially, however, although the experience of this withdrawal is common to a community, it frequently remains imperceptible – Toufic identifies historians and archivists as especially inattentive to it (pp. 15–16).[11]

For this reason, it becomes the artist's task to 'reveal the withdrawal of tradition, and therefore that a surpassing disaster has happened' (p. 22). The disclosure of this withdrawal has three interlinked goals: first, to make apparent the wide-reaching legacy of the surpassing disaster; second, to prepare the ground for a future resurrection of tradition, which can occur only after the withdrawal itself has been made manifest; and third, when the time comes, to perform that resurrection. The challenge facing the artist thus becomes, first and foremost, how to make evident a withdrawal that is already beyond representation. Art in the wake of the civil wars thus becomes a future-oriented project, charged with the task of using technical media to archive this withdrawal in order to make it available as the foundations of a still-forthcoming tradition.[12]

This perhaps is what the pixelated monochrome attempts. Unlike the moments of artifactual abstraction that punctuate Tape #17, the pixilation of Tape #31 is imbued with a profoundly ambivalent longing. The only full segment of the work to be presented without subtitles or dubbing, Tape #17 unfolds in all but silence, accompanied only by the faintest hum of white noise – an audio correlate to the shimmering pixels on its surface. Recalling the blue colour field with which *Hostage* began and its wistful evocation of the Mediterranean, the pixelated monochrome opens up an extended space of suspension, characterized by silence, representational uncertainty, and a powerful sense of loss. Its glimmering, almost blue pixels seem vaguely wave-like, however this reference remains elusive, unstable, suggesting that the video monochrome is ultimately less about how mediation transforms the image than it is, itself, an image of pure mediation. Though haunted by the Mediterranean, a gulf separates the pixelated monochrome from its presumed referent, which, in any case, can only be inferred.

## Primary colours for a third time

As we have seen, both *Hostage* and *Secrets* play on the vibrancy of the colour blue to articulate questions of mourning, loss, and absence. Raad's use of the blue monochrome, however, also stands in dialogue with the history of the monochrome, a format that stands at the center of one of the most prominent polemics in the history of 20th-century art. In his 1986 essay, 'The primary colors for the second time', Benjamin Buchloh famously cast the repetition of the monochrome in the postwar period as symptomatic of the increasing commodification of the public sphere, which in turn fundamentally altered the meaning of the monochrome, recruiting it into a logic of spectacle.[13] Another repetition, then, would hardly seem a promising endeavour. More recently, however, Jaleh Mansoor (2014: 44, 47) has argued that we might better think of the monochrome's appearance across the 20th century in terms of recursivity, offering a 'sine wave' through which it becomes possible to chart an 'etiology of historical transformation'. Following Mansoor, we might say that, more than a mere homage or repetition, Raad's turn to the monochrome provides an opportunity to reflect on both the transformation of the format across historical contexts and the aesthetic terrain of the present historical moment.

Indeed, as Buchloh and Mansoor have demonstrated, the monochrome is always haunted by its own history. The spectre of Yves Klein, especially, looms large behind Raad's monochromes. If the monochromes of the historical avant-garde elevated the painterly surface to the status of a material object, Klein's practice introduced a further variation on this theme, positioning the monochrome as the source and condensation of an affective environment. The colour blue, in particular, served as the privileged vehicle for the creation of this environment, which Klein (2010: 64) described as 'zones of immaterial

sensibility'. In this sense, Klein's work can be seen as one of the many predecessors for Raad's use of the colour blue to make present that which is beyond representation. This is perhaps most clear in the blue monochromes of *Secrets in the Open Sea*, whose large scale immediately calls to mind the 11 identical IKB monochromes that Klein exhibited in Milan in 1957.

Unlike Klein, however, Raad's *Secrets* relies less on the colour blue than it does on a whole gamut of blues, undermining to some extent the colour's metaphorical force. While an encounter with any single print from *Secrets* might permit a reading of its hue as the Romantic blue of the unattainable or the lost, when viewed as a series this association becomes far less stable. As curator Achim Borchardt-Hume (2010) has observed, in Walid Raad's work, the colour blue always functions as a mixed metaphor, alluding all at once to the Mediterranean, mourning, the weather, Novalis's blue flower, the Israeli flag, and the helmets of NATO peacekeepers – with all the irony such an association implies.

Nonetheless, Raad's willingness to remain open to the multiple associations that the colour blue acquires in different contexts does not necessarily disavow its potency, especially in opposition to the neutral grey that is equally prominent in the Atlas Group Archive. As Raad explains in an interview with Ann Temkin (2008: 217):

> Being fascinated with what two colours can do, I would never want to give that up. But to insist only on that relationship, that those parameters are closed, that those boundaries are well-protected, that is impossible for me to maintain . . . You can take a set of colours and view them in relation to hue, or you can take the same colours and view them through a different prism – say, ammunition manufacturing.

In this comment, Raad refers to another work from the Atlas Group archive, *Let's Be Honest, The Weather Helped*. In this work, Raad overlaid photographs of war-scarred buildings with bright colourful circles. Popping out against the greyscale of the photographs below, these circles have an almost cheerful quality, as though a child had been let loose in a stationery cabinet.[14] The effect of the work comes in large part from the sudden gravity these colours acquire when one learns that these colours in fact correspond to those painted on bullets to indicate their country of origin. But as Raad suggests above, this gravity somehow does not negate the fascination of these colours, but rather coexists uncomfortably alongside it, suggesting the strange porousness of colour to both affect and historical context.

The example of these coloured bullets also reminds us, however, of the occasionally arbitrary relationship between a colour and its function as a chromatic sign. This is especially true in the case of *Secrets in the Open Sea*,

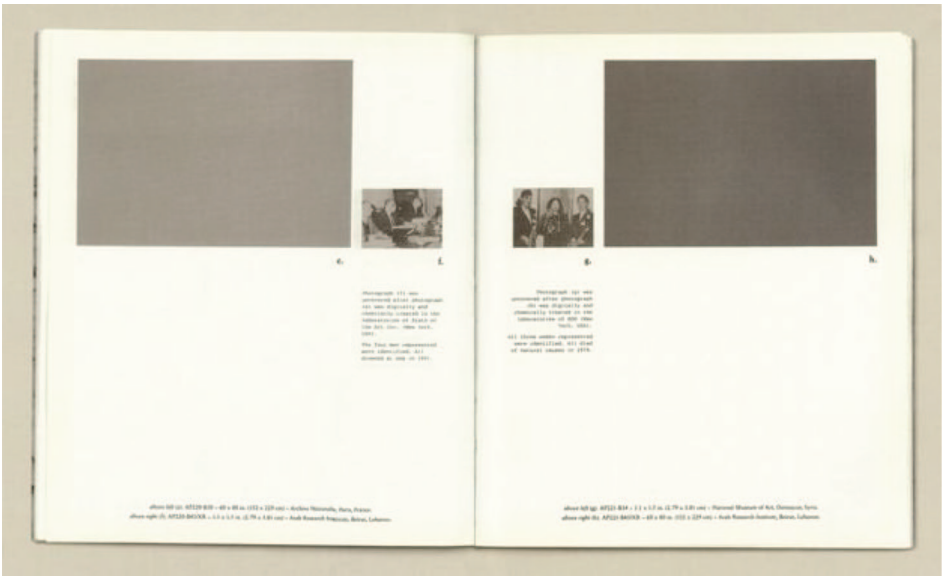


**Figure 9.** Walid Raad, *Miraculous Beginnings*, 1997, illustrated text first published in *Public* 16 (1997). Reproduced courtesy of the artist and the Sfeir-Semler Gallery Hamburg / Beirut.

where the various blues of Raad's monochromatic prints resemble nothing so much as the digital swatches of graphic design interfaces. Such interfaces rely on the aesthetics of the colour chart, which David Batchelor (2000: 105) has described as 'a grammarless accumulation of colour units [in which] every colour is equivalent to every other colour'. The availability of colour as an interchangeable option is capitalized upon by *Secrets*, where there seems to be no reason for the selection of one hue over another beyond the possibility of doing so.

This aspect of the project is made even clearer when examining *Secrets* alongside its earlier iteration, *Miraculous Beginnings* (Figure 9). Produced in 1997, shortly before the establishment of the Atlas Group, *Miraculous Beginnings* is an illustrated article attributed to Dr Fouad Boustani, Director of the Beirut Photography Center (another of Raad's proxies).[15] The work begins with a lengthy narrative describing the discovery of a series of prints buried beneath the rubble left by the demolition of large swathes of the Beirut Central District to make room for new development in 1991 – the beginnings of postwar reconstruction and the historical amnesia that accompanied it. Although more expansive on technical details and provenance than the text that accompanies *Secrets in the Open Sea*, the narratives framing the two projects are largely identical. The only major difference between the two sets of texts and images, beyond their format and scale, is that the monochromes of *Miraculous Beginnings* are identified as being grey instead of blue. Considered side-by-side, these two projects attest to the extent to which not only colours, but also colour itself has become arbitrary and optional in light of the digital colour chart.

Grey as it may be, Raad's illustrated essay once again summons the spectre of Yves Klein and the whole history of primary colours in the 20th century. Although there is more to be said about greyness itself, it is worth pausing for a moment to consider *Miraculous Beginnings* in relation to Klein's *Yves Peintures* (1954), a tongue-in-cheek catalogue that purported to document the artist's 'discovery' of the monochrome through small rectangles of coloured paper, representing early works that, of course, existed nowhere outside the book itself.[16] Although an interest in the power of the colour blue is no doubt the most obvious touchstone linking the two artists, Klein's mimicry of the art world's graphic infrastructure in this small book suggests that there might be more germane reasons to consider Raad's monochromes as primary colours for a third time. Considered alongside each other, Klein and Raad's respective projects attest to the monochrome's enduring capacity to lend itself as a mirror to the conditions of its production – conditions which include not only the artist's material and tools, but also the art market, the institutions of art criticism and history, and the larger networks upon which they depend. But where Klein's space of intervention ended at the edges of the art world, in Raad's work, the monochrome becomes the format through which the art object can migrate beyond the gallery and into visual discourse at large. It does so precisely through its ability to move – as background – from the sphere of art into that of design. In this respect, we might also say that Raad's monochromes are not entirely unrelated to the project that emerged from Alexander Rodchenko's declaration of the end of painting, namely, the dream of an art become social praxis (Buchloh, 1986: 42).

Indeed, Raad's work has recently become increasingly concerned with graphic design. In this last section, however, I would like to suggest that a dialogue with graphic design has always been integral to his practice. An astute observer of the formal conventions of knowledge and belief, Raad could hardly have missed the centrality of design to the authority of the archive. It is here that the (non)colour grey comes in, which prompts me to nuance my earlier statement regarding the arbitrariness of colour. For, while the free choice between colours, or colour and greyscale, might initially appear to render all options interchangeable, to map this equivalence onto the realm of effect – or affect – would be to grossly underestimate the extent to which colour and its lack are coded. The movement from blue to grey and vice versa offers a case in point. Although the narratives behind *Miraculous Beginnings* and *Secrets* are roughly identical, their modes of address are radically different. The former's sparse layout, expertly deployed courier font, and above all the sober grey of its monochromes lend the project an air of credibility that the blues of *Secrets* cannot and will not maintain.

The opposition between these projects is no coincidence. Just as Raad's use of the lecture as a performance format makes use of the 'weighty associations

with authority and authenticity of certain modes of address' (Gilbert, 2002: np), his use of the colour grey leans on the longstanding association of the greyscale with the ostensibly disinterested project of scholarship. This association is part and parcel of what David Batchelor (2000: 22) has described as a general chromophobia that emerged alongside the positivist epistemology of the Enlightenment, casting colour as 'an object of prejudice'. The result of this exclusion and opprobrium, as Batchelor explains, is that 'seriousness in art and culture [becomes] a black-and-white issue, [and] depth is measured only in shades of grey' (p. 49). In *Miraculous Beginnings*, Raad exploits these associations to his advantage, appropriating the greyscale as an achromatic code soliciting belief.

Raad's use of grey in *Hostage* functions similarly. However, in this later work, we can also observe a shift in the way the monochrome is deployed. Still an object in *Miraculous Beginnings*, the grey monochrome is presented as a bounded rectangle against a white page. It is even labelled. In the prologue of *Hostage*, however, the monochrome becomes a grey background, no longer an object but the achromatic base upon which information appears.[17] This unstable relationship between object and background, moreover, demands that we pay careful attention to the Atlas Group's self-presentation. A closer look at the design conventions operative in the Atlas Group's website is therefore instructive (Figure 10). Upon arriving at its home page, we encounter two grey overlapping fields: a light grey field that serves as a background to a bounded rectilinear field in a darker grey, which in turn serves as the background for the white text of the Atlas Group's mission statement. As in the prologue of *Hostage*, the grey monochrome-cum-background appears here as the aesthetic support for the archive's authority.[18] Indeed, it is perhaps above all the infrastructural role of these greys that the brilliant blues of *Hostage* and *Secrets* disclose. To put it simply, the blue monochrome confronts the grey infrastructure of the archive with another mode of belief, premised precisely on the affective dimension that this infrastructure is meant to preclude.

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to assume that Raad's reliance on the colour blue is less equivocal than his reliance on the grey. As we have seen, the blues of the Atlas Group Archive are fundamentally porous, carrying with them not only conventional associations from the realms of poetry and aesthetic theory, but also a host of concrete historical referents, a number of which – munitions manufacturing codes, flags, NATO helmets – intimate the extent to which power is saturated with colour, and colour saturated with power. In her own reflections on the 21st-century monochrome, Hito Steyerl (2016: 173) has seized precisely on such an alignment of affect and power: 'Power', she writes, 'operates more than ever within the senses . . . It has become overwhelmingly aesthetic.' Given this shift, monochrome's ability to affect its viewer without representational content renders it an especially attractive


**Figure 10.** Author's screenshot of the home page of the Atlas Group (July 2019). This website has since been re-designed.

tool. Hence the potency of what Steyerl terms political monochromes: colour-coded flags, revolutions, and alerts that are able to 'catalyze massive political identification and emotion without any apparent political content – by appealing on "pure feeling"' (p. 176). Though less explicit than Steyerl, Raad's allusions to similar instrumentalizations of colour ultimately render its affective appeal highly ambivalent. Indeed, it may even be that affect has displaced rationality as a primary means of compelling belief, identification, and emotional investment.[19]

For this reason, it is perhaps not surprising that the structural opposition between the grey and blue in the Atlas Group Archive is superseded by a whole riot of colours in Raad's more recent project. With *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Modern and Contemporary Art in the Arab World*, the artist turns his attention towards the infrastructure that has rapidly developed during the past two decades in response to the surge of interest in art from the Middle East region. In his overview to the project, Raad (2009: np) describes himself as both 'fascinated by and skeptical about' the recent boom in arts festivals, forums, contemporary art museums, art funds and foundations, and other such institutions in cities across the Arab world, submitting that this development is 'inextricably linked to a broader economic trend whereby cultural tourism figures more and more as an engine of economic growth'. Even as affect has become a new terrain for the exercise

of power, such developments intimate the extent to which it has also been conscripted into the production of value, altering the field in which the artist operates.

The series of prints that make up *Appendix XVIII* are especially interesting in this respect. A collection of more-or-less found monochromes, *Appendix XVIII* features a variety of colour fields sourced from the catalogues, dissertations, gallery correspondence, budget sheets, and other print media whose circulation has supported the recent boom in contemporary Arab art (Figures 11 to 13). If the monochromes of the Atlas Group Archive played with the shift from object to background, here it is backgrounds that have been promoted to objects. Like the monochromes of the Atlas Group works, *Appendix XVIII* plays on the unstable relationship between document and base. In transforming backgrounds into art objects, however, *Appendix XVIII* also hints at the expansion of the aesthetic beyond the art object into the graphic infrastructure of the art world, which has responded to the increasing commodification of affect by exploiting the potential of colour, line, and form for the production of value. In foregrounding this graphic infrastructure, Raad's monochromes leave the viewer with an open question – what role has colour played in sustaining the recent boom in Arab art? And, furthermore, what possibilities and dangers does such a development portend?

## Toward a tactical chromatics

What the multifaceted use of colour fields across Walid Raad's work ultimately suggests is that, in the context of a capitalism that is as affective as it is informational, the monochrome gains a particular currency. The epitome of a nonrepresentational sign, it is also one whose abstraction renders it able to travel through channels with maximum velocity and efficiency. Yet, here again, we encounter a moment of ambivalence, centred on the monochrome's movement between art and design, and the stakes of this mobility. Although my discussion of *Appendix XVIII* has, until this point, taken a somewhat cynical stance towards the appropriation of monochromatic colour into the graphic infrastructure of the art world, Raad's comments on this work also suggest an interest in the possibility of a movement in the opposite direction. In a lengthy passage worth quoting in full, Raad (2015: 144) writes:

> It is clear to me today that [the] wars also affected colours, lines, shapes, and forms. Some of these were affected in a material way, and, like burned books or razed monuments, were physically destroyed and lost forever; others, like the looted treasure of politically compromised artworks, remain physically intact but are removed from view, possibly never to be seen again. And yet other colours, lines, shapes, and forms took refuge in unexpected places: they hid in Roman and Arabic letters and numbers; in circles, rectangles,



**Figure 11:** Walid Raad, *Appendix XVIII*: *Plates 160–237*, 2012, exhibition view, Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut. **Figure 12**: Walid Raad, *Plates 87–89: Study in Yellow, Orange and Blue (Plate 88),* 2008. **Figure 13**: Walid Raad, *Plate 97: A History of Contemporary,* 2008, pigmented inkjet print, 54.6 x 41.9cm. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Hamburg/Beirut.

> and graphic lines and footnotes of books; they camouflaged themselves as letters, price lists, dissertations, and catalogues; as diagrams and budgets. They hibernated not in but around artworks.

Drawing equally on the language of Jalal Toufic and military tactics, Raad here casts the transformation of the monochrome into a background as an active retreat of art into graphic design. Far from a capitulation, the migration of the monochrome begins to take on the character of a tactical gambit, opening up a new terrain for action.

With this in mind, we might say that, although Raad's work evinces a profound scepticism regarding the instrumentalization of monochromatic colour, it also refuses to lose sight of the subversive potential latent in the monochrome's migration into graphic design. Here and elsewhere, Raad's work evinces a sincere fascination with colour and its capacity to act on the viewer. While scepticism may be a requisite skill for navigating the complex and chromatic terrain of the 21st century, Raad's multifaceted engagement with the monochrome ultimately suggests that the instrumentalization of the chromatic as a mode of affective persuasion does not exhaust the potential that colour continues to harbour. Indeed, while initially a retreat, the monochrome's flight into graphic design situates it in a unique position from which to destabilize the chromatic codes that undergird the production and reception of knowledge, art objects and history.

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## ORCID iD

Katerina Korola https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3042-2330

## Notes

1. The term 'parafiction' was coined by art historian Carrie Lambert-Beatty as a shorthand to describe the mix of fictional and documentary strategies characterizing a number of contemporary media art practices (including that of Raad). Lambert-Beatty (2009: 54) defines parafiction as 'related to but not quite a member of the category of fiction. It does not perform its procedures in the hygienic clinics of literature but has one foot in the field of the real.'
2. The Atlas Group has more recently been retro-dated by Raad to 1989, corresponding with the signing of the Taif Accord. The alteration of dates is a common feature of Raad's practice, further muddling the boundaries between fact and fiction in individual works.
3. TJ Demos has discussed the Lebanese civil wars as a prime example of a shift from a paradigm of 'war' to the considerably messier and more open-ended paradigm of 'conflict'. As Demos (2013: 170) explains:

The term *conflict* thus signals the obsolescence of conventional 'war', designating terrorism and state violence alike, often with indecipherable differences regarding their effects, constituting psychic and representational components as much as strategic matters of geopolitical and military calculation.

Demos further argues that bodies of work such as Raad's Atlas Group project 'foreground the instability of the documentary mode' as a mirror to the 'indeterminacy of contemporary warfare' (p. 172). In the case of the Lebanese conflict, this indeterminacy has been compounded by the implementation of an amnesty law following the Taif Accord that pardoned all combatants, as well as a 'culture of amnesia' that has discouraged both investigation into war crimes and the teaching of the history of the conflict in classrooms.

4. Both TJ Demos (2013) and Chad Elias (2018) have emphasized the importance of the transformation of the media sphere into a new arena of conflict in their discussions of postwar Lebanese art. Elias has furthermore drawn a distinction between the use of images during the Lebanese conflict and more traditional forms of propaganda, insofar as the former 'served less to persuade . . . than to cast doubt on competing constructions of reality'.
5. The curator Rasha Salti (Dagher et al., 2007: 116) has also discussed the consequences of such a media environment on postwar artistic practice, noting that during the wars 'there were at least two versions to every incident, scuffle, exchange of fire. Nonfiction was palpably constructed, its "fictional" nature unmasked to the naked eye.' The recruitment of images and other forms of information into the construction of ideologically-motivated narratives was thus a process confronted by the Lebanese on a daily basis during the civil wars.
6. Raad occasionally changes the location of these laboratories from iteration to iteration of the work. The most recent description on the Atlas Group's website, for instance, lists the laboratories as located in France and the UK.
7. This statement originally appeared in an interview published in the *Beirut Daily Star*. See Quilty, 2010.
8. At the end of 'The pixilated revolution', Mroué (2012: 26), for instance, observes that pixelated imagery has come to be absorbed as a 'constituent element of several official programs', appearing in news broadcasts, military intelligence briefs, and even commercial cinema. Steyerl, similarly, has been attentive to the ways in which low resolution imagery has been reincorporated into informational capitalism's system of value production. For more on this aspect of Steyerl's project see Erika Balsom (2017: 46).
9. Such hostage videos in fact play an important role in Raad's doctoral dissertation.
10. Toufic in fact directly invokes Godard's work of the 1980s and 1990s, especially *King Lear*, where Godard makes this statement, throughout his text. The importance of this intellectual dialogue in Toufic's work, as in Raad's, stands as a productive counter to what might otherwise risk being interpreted as an essentialist or exceptionalist claim for the particularity of Lebanese photography. The local and global are inextricably entwined in both bodies of work, and nation is nothing if not a fragile construct.
11. This is presumably because their professional preoccupation with material remains tends to obscure the immaterial withdrawal of their objects.
12. Toufic (2009: 57) places particular emphasis on technical media when he writes:

    With regard to the surpassing disaster, art acts like the mirror in vampire films: it reveals the withdrawal of what we think is still there. 'You have seen nothing in Hiroshima' (Duras's *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, 1961). Does this entail that one should not record? No. One should record this 'nothing', which only after the resurrection can become available. We have to take photographs.

13. Buchloh (1986: 52) famously ended his essay with the conclusion:

    The very same strategies that had developed within modernism's project of enlightenment now serve the transformation of the bourgeois public sphere into the public sphere of the corporate state, with its appropriate forms of distribution (total commodification) and cultural experience (the spectacle).

14. Incidentally, Raad reports that he himself collected these colourful bullets as a child.
15. This essay was first published as Raad (1997) Miraculous beginnings. *Public* 16: 6–15. It is reprinted in Raad (2008).
16. Klein's *Yves Peintures* is discussed in greater length in Rosenthal (1982), Bois (2007) and Mansoor (2016).
17. In his discussion of Raad's more recent *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow*, Islamic art historian Finbarr Barry Flood (2015: 165) has highlighted a parallel instability between art object and the institutional frames of the museum, arguing that the 'transformation of historical artefacts into chromatic abstractions suggests an unstable relation between the museum object and the institutional and material frames that produce and sustain it.'
18. Raad has recently redesigned the Atlas Group's website. In conversation with the author, he related that part of his reason for doing so was that its former design – discussed here – leaned too heavily into what might be construed as the deceptive aspect of the Atlas Group project, from which he is trying to move away.
19. This is precisely the point TJ Demos has made in relation to Hito Steyerl's monochromatic video triptych, *Red Alert* (2007), yet another allusion to Rodchenko in 21st-century video art. For Demos (2008: 413), Steyerl's use of the colour red reveals the extent to which the 'affective image out-takes representational significance [in] the current economy of affect'.

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**Katerina Korola** is a PhD Candidate at the University of Chicago, pursuing a joint-degree in the Departments of Art History and Cinema and Media Studies. Her research interests focus on two main thematic areas. The first concerns the blurred boundaries between the natural and the artificial in the wake of the 19th century's scientific revolutions, including everything from the designed atmospheres of greenhouses to the production of artificial clouds in the silent film studio. The second concerns archival practices in postwar art and film, especially in relation to an aesthetics of decay, the encounter between painterly modernism and technical media, and the politics of abstraction.

*Address*: Art History & Cinema and Media Studies, University of Chicago, 166 Cochrane Woods Art Center, 5540 South Greenwood Avenue, Chicago, IL 60637, USA. [email: katerinakorola@uchicago.edu]