As far upriver as you can go before having to switch to a pole

by

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Abstract

The Anthropocene is the proposed current geological epoch in which the earth's climate is affected by human influence. Nature was the standard in which species evolved, and now nature must adapt to conditions created by one of its byproducts. Centred on a 16mm film installation of footage shot on location in Chilliwack, the various forms of the anthropogenically-altered landscape are represented within this project to build a discourse between the perception of what is natural and what is naturalized. This project is presented as a document of the "super unnatural," a term proposed by the artist to refer to the hidden anthropogenic influence within the naturalized landscape as a method to question what qualifies as the unnatural in nature. Chilliwack, as a site of agricultural production on the periphery of urban expansion, embodies the super unnatural.

Keywords: anthropocene; anthopogenic landscape; super unnatural; Chilliwack; contemporary art; 16mm film

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The Chilliwack River Valley snakes westward from a rural community through the Cascades terminating at Chilliwack Lake. This cold, glacier-fed lake runs off into the eponymous river, eventually turning into the Vedder River. This stretch of river intersects with the Trans Mountain pipeline at its halfway point before bending into the Vedder Canal. A straight line that angles 60° NW from the longitudinal No. 3 Rd as seen on a map, the canal is crossed by a bridge at Keith Wilson Rd, near which it is also crossed by high-tension power lines that supply power to the Lower Mainland from hydroelectric dams. Further north, highway traffic crosses the canal before it joins up with the Sumas River and feeds into Fraser.

The Vedder Canal, in Chilliwack, BC, is the product of a large-scale dredging project that displaced the Sumas Lake in the early 20th century and it plays a major role within my MFA graduate thesis project. Prior to the completion of this project in 1924, Sumas Lake would triple in size during flood season in the spring. Regulated by a series of small canals and pump stations that supply water to farms, the main canal is situated on the eastern edge of the former lake and floodplain. The Vedder Canal is a functioning monument to the displacement and dispossession of indigenous life: flora, fauna and people. Just as monuments that commemorate historical events and figures become obscured as history accumulates around them, so too is the history of the canal obscured by adaptation. The plants grow over the berms. Birds and people feed on the fish that swim through the water. It is visibly artificial, but has been naturalized. It exists in an in-between state, in conflict with itself. This conflicted environmental state is the nexus of my project and the concentration of my research as an artist.

My MFA graduate thesis project focuses on the perception of the anthropogenic landscape. This landscape is created by human subjugation of nature. Specifically over naturally occurring processes. Identifying the characteristics of this landscape is important as human influence over nature becomes increasingly prevalent, if not yet completely dominant. Within the anthropogenic landscape, nature—defined as that which exists independent from human involvement—is difficult if not impossible to distinguish from that which is naturalized: what appears to be natural is actually a product of human influence and adaptive processes. In As far upriver as you can go before having to switch to a pole, I propose the term "super unnatural" to refer to this grey area of obscured human influence. An irreverent play on BC's branded tagline, "Super, Natural British Columbia," the intention of this term is to identify the anthropogenic landscape that hides in plain site by suggesting that the super unnatural, as the excessive degree of artificial (read: man-made) nature, becomes natural when considering humans as a by-product of nature. Chilliwack's location in the Fraser Valley makes it one of British Columbia's top agricultural producers. Its hinterland position on the periphery of the Lower Mainland includes it just within the sprawl of urban expansion. These aspects make Chilliwack an ideal location to create a project that embodies the super unnatural.

Succeeding the last hundred centuries of the Holocene, the Anthropocene is the proposed current geological epoch in which the earth's climate is affected by human activities, accelerated by exponential population growth over the last century. The long-term causes and effects of climate change can be speculated, but the current human population of 7.3 billion and counting is tangible. Outside of cataclysmic geologic and weather phenomena (e.g. earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, and however climate change affects the biosphere) humans are now creating the conditions in which nature exists. "It is with industrialization that humans began and continue, to transform the Earth's metabolism to a degree that now parallels geological forces, competing with its disasters" (Sepahvand et al, 2015, p. 14). Nature was the standard in which the species evolved, and now nature must adapt to conditions created by one of its byproducts. From an evolutionary standpoint, there is no design in nature, only adaptation. Therefore, if anthropogenic emissions, as by-products of harnessing the energy stored in fossil fuels, are released into the atmosphere without the intention—or design—to affect

the climate, but do so unintentionally, could this not be argued as part of nature? This blurring is acknowledged by Bernd M. Scherer (2015), in the preface to Textures of the Anthropocene, as, "when humankind itself becomes a natural force – or that which we have understood to be nature is now made by humans – then dualisms such as nature/culture or subject/object no longer function in the accustomed fashion" (p. 3). In other words, humans and the natural world no longer play their original roles.

The area of Chilliwack has a history of use by humans dating back to the last great glaciation at the advent of the Holocene. Prior to settlement, this area was used by the Stó:lō during the spring and summer for fishing, hunting and foraging. Chilliwack's planar topography and substantial water supply in the Sardis-Vedder aquifer have contributed to its importance within the Fraser Valley as a concentrated area of intensive agricultural use. As the urban Lower Mainland increases in population density and real estate values, Chilliwack's location on the periphery of this expansion has encouraged its growth. This growth fuels the development of subdivisions, business parks and golf courses that reclaim parcels of land, previously allotted for livestock and farming.

This landscape that sits in the transitional areas on the edges of urban concentration is described in Scott Watson's (2011) essay "Discovering the Defeatured Landscape," in his contribution to Vancouver Anthology. Watson identifies the term, "defeatured landscape," as an urban semiotic to identify the subject matter of early works by artists associated with Vancouver photo-conceptualism, such as Ian Wallace and Jeff Wall. According to Watson, the "earliest locally produced image of… the defeatured landscape" was found in the 1968 photo work titled Ruins by Ingrid and Iain Baxter, working as N.E. Thing Co. (p. 263). This lightbox-mounted photograph depicts an anonymous housing tract that exists outside of a specific time and place. The generic architecture of the subdivision in the image could have been built anytime in the last half century and could exist almost anywhere in the Lower Mainland or Fraser Valley. In "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey" Robert Smithson (1967) anticipates the Baxters' Ruins stating that, "buildings don't fall into ruin after they are built but rather rise into ruin before they are built." (p. 72). This inherent ruination is not only endemic to buildings, but to any human project that exists outside of natural processes. Smithson's statement acknowledges the prevalence of entropy, which is hardwired into everything.

Within the natural landscape, entropic processes are visible yet usually move in harmony with life cycles. Outside of indigenous cultures that could identify this natural balance and adapt themselves to its pace, the entropic processes that threaten human projects, even within the anthropogenic landscape, must be maintained lest they succumb to their inherent ruination.

Chilliwack (Ts'elxweyeqw) translates to "as far upriver as you can go before having to switch to a pole" in Halq'eméylem, the language indigenous to the area. This meaning reflects the turning point in the anthropogenic influence, the moment at which an external dependency occurs. As rural gentrification and populations increase to accommodate urban centres, the landscape is increasingly anthropogenic. Naturally occurring wildlife is pushed further back from areas where they can feed and are safe from human influence. Stewardship and conservation are required to keep these animals close to their natural habitats. The Great Blue Heron reserve on the Vedder River is an example of this: the birds' nesting trees are not threatened by development, and they are in close proximity to the Vedder River—rerouted from the original course of the Chilliwack River to flow into the canal—and can feed off the fish and other prey that have adapted to the area. This kind of stewardship and conservation of species, habitats and sensitive natural areas found in wildlife reserves and parks represent this turning point of external dependency. The prevailing dependency of nature on human preservation becomes super unnatural. The stewardship of natural processes becomes a form of nature controlled by humans to recreate natural environments and processes through artificial means.

The perception of landscape is inherently visual. Smells, sounds and textures may reveal themselves in the experience, but it is the visual perspective that is the manifest total of landscape. The representation and interpretation of landscape can take on many forms, but landscape painting persists as the ultimate artistic representation of rural scenery in the popular consciousness as a historical genre. Matts Leiderstam's Neanderthal Landscape (2009-2010) uses this genre to depict the history of artistic interpretation of the Neanderthal canyon near Düsseldorf. Research for this project began with a collection of oil studies by Johann Wilhelm Schirmer that were executed on location in Neanderthal between 1828-1830. Leiderstam's project took shape as he

found that studies by Schirmer were used as teaching aids for students who would copy them in the development of their own style. This pedagogic process resulted in the Düsseldorf School of Painting. With Neanderthal Landscape, Leiderstam collects this research material to create an archive of the perception of landscape through artistic interpretation surrounding this specific site. The paintings selected for inclusion in his project are aesthetic objects that also act as historical documents.

The photographic image, whether it is a still or moving image, is mechanically produced, and therefore considered objective, whereas painting is considered to be subjective. Similarly, photographic images can also occupy this subjective dual role of object and document. According to Allan Sekula (2003), photographs can be viewed as 'historical documents' but also treated as 'aesthetic objects' (p. 447) and that, "when photographs are uncritically presented as historical documents, they are transformed into aesthetic objects" (p. 448). In regards to the archive; Sekula states that, "the possibility of meaning is 'liberated' from the actual contingencies of use" (p. 444), so when an image becomes part of an archive, its original purpose or intention is lost when it is re-purposed and re-contextualized. I approached the creation of the moving and still images that make up my MFA graduate thesis project as an archive of images that could be both re-purposed within my own practice, but that could also be used beyond my control if their final destination was, for example, the Chilliwack Museum and Archives. In 'Reading an Archive,' Sekula believes that:

> photography is neither art not science, but is suspended between both the discourse of science and that of art, staking its claims to cultural value on both the model of truth upheld by empirical science and the model of pleasure and expressiveness offered by romantic aesthetics (p. 450).

My choice to use the photographic image was based on this fluidity of the image's use, as well as the perceived objectivity of the photographic image as a document.

As far upriver as you can go before having to switch to a pole focuses on three specific sites in Chilliwack that challenge notions of the natural, unnatural, and naturalized. In addition to the Vedder Canal site, the second site is a golf course located on a former dairy farm, which constitutes an apt example of 'man-made' nature. It is in a state of

constant maintenance, through intensive landscaping, within the anthropogenic landscape. The third site is a fallow field, formerly used as a dump and currently used as a grazing field for cattle during the summer. The field is surrounded by subdivision and townhouse development, and is scheduled for full residential development by 2019. Over the course of several months, I visited and documented these sites, in both moving and still images. This project functions as an archive to create a discourse around the super unnatural, between the perception of what is natural and naturalized.

Presented within the space of the gallery as an installation, the three sites of super unnatural phenomena are depicted in a 16mm black and white anamorphic silent film projection. Within the installation, two channels of silent 16mm film that have been scanned to digital files complement the projection. The collection of silent images, shot between March-August 2015, document the visible seasonal changes that occur at these sites. In his essay, 'The Politics of Installation,' Boris Groys (2010) asserts that the intention of art, "is not to change things—things are changing by themselves all the time anyway. Art's function is rather to show, to make visible the realities that are generally overlooked" (p. 69). The film is presented within the installation to give the audience a sense of awareness of looking. Presented outside a cinema space, enveloping darkness and comfortable seats, the viewer of this film is aware of her surroundings, that there are structures of which she should be aware overhead and underfoot. Instead of a standard exhibition, works on the wall or the floor, in which "the body of the viewer in this setting remains outside of the art" (p. 52), Groys explains that the installation "takes a copy out of an unmarked, open space of anonymous circulation and places it—if only temporarily—within a topologically well-defined 'here and now'" (p. 65) and "builds a community of spectators precisely because of the holistic, unifying character of the installation space" (p. 61). Matthew Buckingham's work, similar to Matts Leiderstam's Neanderthal Landscape, assembles the material of his research into the objects and films that are presented as an installation. Obscure Moorings (2006) is a 25-minute film based on a Herman Melville short story that is set in Liverpool and screened in front of a curvilinear floor. The floor element has a dual function: it functions as seating, albeit in an unwieldy fashion, and as a form to illustrate the thrust of progress that carries the film's aged protagonist through the changing face of his personal landscape, in this case the shifting face of Liverpool as a port city. Similarly, my installation aims to create an

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awareness of the space around the projection, to encourage an active, rather than passive, viewer.

Human influence on the world is as significant as nature's influence on humans, and the latter continues to increase. If the pervasive characteristics of the super unnatural phenomena within the anthropogenic landscape are identified and documented, then future generations will be encouraged to further differentiate between nature and the naturalized. Archives will be necessary to maintain this identification, but will still need to be activated and interpreted as historical documents, as their intended purpose fades over time.

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Documentation of Work

Figure 1. installation view

Figure 2. installation view

Figure 3. installation view (detail, 16mm film loop)

Figure 4. selection from research image archive, photograph: *Barrowtown Pump Station, 11 April 2015*

Figure 5. selection from research image archive, photograph: *Stump and Tree at Kinkora Golf Course (looking towards Mount Cheam), 24 August 2015*

Figure 6. selection from research image archive, photograph: *Cows In The Field at 44490 Keith Wilson Road (looking towards Vedder Mountain), 5 April 2015*

Appendix A.

Object Remains: Vehicular Aftermath in *My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair* by The Atlas Group

I want to speak of what I am calling "aftermath": that is, what one experiences as personal trauma, such as the loss of a loved one or sickness. It can also be experienced as a member of a community following the loss of beloved figure of a community, or a natural disaster, or after being victim to or a witness of multiple, sustained acts of violence during wartime. The experience of violent aftermath becomes part of everyday life in zones of perpetual conflict, as Jean-Luc Godard illustrates in his film *Weekend* (1967) that follows a bourgeois Parisian couple, Roland and Corinne, as they travel by car through an increasingly hostile French countryside. The de facto protagonists of the film, inasmuch as they are the characters who drag along (or are dragged by?) the narrative, they plot each other's murder, plot the murder of Corinne's father in the event he does not willingly give them his inheritance, become involved in murder as they lose their mode of transport, meet literary characters and then join a cannibalistic hippie cult. With lengthy monologues, animated title card cutaways that perforate what little narrative exists, and scenes of violence, Brechtian in their artificiality, mixed with documentary shots of animal slaughter, '*Weekend* is frequently regarded as one of Godard's most nihilistic films.'[1] Often noted for its seven and a half minute tracking shot of a traffic jam, as well as other scenes of vehicular disasters, '*Weekend*'s scenes of auto-stasis and collision are not simply nihilistic spectacles of disaster, but serve rather as sites for exploring the condition of living on after "the end"… [it] is a film in which hyperbolic, apocalyptic visions of disaster repeatedly suggest the end of everything while continually, and often comically, giving way to the next scene.'[2] The film makes abrupt cuts from one scene to the next, one disaster leading to the next, the viewer is

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[1] Karen Beckman, *Crash: Cinema and the Politics of Speed and Stasis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 205.
[2] Ibid., 205.

constantly left to deal with each successive aftermath on her own with little or no resolution in the narrative.

With this essay I intend to explore the ways in which a discourse can be created around a violent aftermath by examining a specific artwork that deals with these issues. In *My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair* by The Atlas Group, an ongoing project by artist Walid Raad dedicated to the documentation of the contemporary history of Lebanon, a series of archival photographs depict the aftermath of car bomb detonations during the period of the Lebanese Civil Wars (1975-1990/1) to represent a collective memory of the chaotic violence that took place during these wars. The car bomb, both as an implement and a result of military and political conflicts, is used as the subject in *My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair* to create a discourse around the experience of these wars, and as a way to communicate and assimilate those experiences, while the repetitive depiction of these scenes of aftermath comments on how the sustained violence experience during wartime can become a banality to those who it affects.

The car bomb has become a privileged "figure" and tool in contemporary Lebanese history and, like the history of car bombing or the history of its representations, lets us also track the history of the physical and psychological experience of those wars.[3] Within his collection of images of the aftermath of car bomb detonations, Raad has picked images of specific objects, engines from the detonated cars as the object of focus within the image. In the aftermath of a car bomb detonation, 'the only part that remains intact after a car bomb explodes is the engine… landing on balconies, roofs or adjacent streets, the engine is projected tens and sometimes hundreds of meters away from the original site of the bomb.'[4]

As a photographic based project depicting multiple images of exploded car bombs and the engines that remained, *My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair* has existed in multiple forms

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[3] Thomas Elller, "Letter from Hamburg," Artnet.com, 2004, accessed December 1, 2013, http://www.artnet.com/magazine/features/eller/eller3-15-04.asp.

[4] Walid Raad, *My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair: Documents from The Atlas Group Archive* (Köln: Walther König 2005), 9.

of presentation and we can understand Raad's process of this project's origination under the banner of The Atlas Group. It originated as a collaborative work in which the project's focus was on a single car bomb that exploded in Beirut on 21 January 1986 in East Beirut,[5] one of the 3641 cars that detonated in Lebanon between 1975 and 1991. Working with Tony Chakar, an artist, professor and architect based in Beirut, and Bilal Khbeiz, a writer, poet and artist also based in Beirut, this research was then assembled as '*My Neck Is Thinner than a Hair: A History of the Car Bomb in the 1975-1991 Lebanese Wars Volume 1: January 21, 1986*… [taking] the form of a presentation by Walid Raad in a lecture format followed by a question and answer session.'[6]

My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair began as project that focused on one car bomb explosion, where the artist seated himself at a laptop to conduct a Power Point presentation to give 'a history of what is known and believed about this detonation.'[7] This project was expanded to depict multiple images of car bomb explosions and designed as an installation for gallery presentation and its title was trimmed to *My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair: Engines*, presented as 100 framed works in five vertical rows of twenty on a wall. Each individual work contained both a black and white reproduction of an image of a detonated car bomb next to a reproduction of the back of the photograph noting the date of the photograph and the name of the photographer, and if known, the archive in which the photo was found – either the Arab Documentation Centre (Beirut, Lebanon) or the An-Nahar Research Center (Beirut, Lebanon) – as well as the subject keywords. In a work similar to the format of this work by The Atlas Group and related to the

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[5] 'On 21 January 1986, a car bomb exploded in the Furn Ech Chuback district of Beirut, one of 245 that were to shake Beirut at regular intervals during the years of civil war. Walid Raad, Tony Chakar and Bilal Khbeiz's on-going exploration of contemporary and historical events in Lebanon focuses on these car bombings, creating a fictive documentary on the make, model and colour of each car used as a bomb. Since the cars were European, Japanese and American, they started their project in the countries producing those cars and engines - in Germany, for instance, concentrating primarily on the luxury Mercedes 200 and 220 models from the late 1970s.' "The Atlas Group / Walid Raad, Tony Chakar, Bilal Khbeiz," *In-Transit.de*, accessed December 2, 2013,
http://www.in-transit.de/2004/content/en/productions/prod_atlas.html.

[6] Emma Govan, "Witnessing Trauma," In Art in the Age of Terrorism, ed. Graham Coulter-Smith and Maurice Owen (London: Paul Holberton, 2005), 54.

[7] Silvia Kolbowski and Walid Raad, Silvia Kolbowski, Walid Raad (New York: A.R.T. Press, 2006), 18.

photographic depiction of vehicular aftermath, the Danish/Icelandic artist Ólafur Elíasson, for his project *Cars In Rivers*, 'assumes the role of the arbiter who calls for entries on a chosen subject.'[8] Whereas Elíasson placed an advertisement in an Icelandic newspaper asking for the public to submit photos related to the eponymous theme of the work, from which 35 images were selected as part of the final work, Raad, acting as The Atlas Group, sources his found, photographic images, and accompanying data, from archives in Beirut. Halldór B. Runólfsson notes in an essay for the *Cars In Rivers* exhibition catalogue, 'none of the thirty-five photographs can pass for works of art and they were not produced with that intent… it is only after gathering them into a series that the whole becomes a piece of art under the careful eye of the artist'. Similar to Elíasson who gathers 'documents sent to him by enthusiastic daredevils who heed no warning and end up on the roofs of their cars waiting for the rescue team',[9] Raad selects the photographs of the engines from exploded car bombs that were taken by photojournalists acting as enterprising daredevils who 'competed to be the first to find and photograph the engines.'[10]

The Atlas Group, and the way in which Raad uses this imaginary foundation to fictionalize artistic authority and the documentary form, will be explored further later on this essay, but for the purpose of clarification this essay will refer to *My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair* as it exists in book form (see bibliography). This version consists of 104 photographs, with the reproductions of the backs of the photographs placed beside, and is the version of the project most readily available to the public. This publication states

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[8] Halldór B. Runólfsson, "A gift to adventurous people," in *Ólafur Elíasson: Cars in rivers* (Reykjavik: National Gallery of Iceland, 2011), np.

[9] Ibid., np.

[10] Raad (2005), 9.

that the amount of car bombs that were detonated during the Lebanese Civil Wars between 1975 and 1991 numbers at 3641.[11]

A number this high approaches sublime proportion when one fathoms the destruction delivered by so many car bombs over an approximately fifteen-year period. This number is due in no small part to the accessibility and effectiveness of the car bomb as a weapon to inflict massive devastation and invoke fear in everyday life. As Mike Davis describes them in his 2007 book *A Brief History of the Car Bomb*, 'vehicle bombs… were cheap to fabricate and astonishingly powerful: they elevated urban terrorism from the artisan to the industrial level and made possible sustained blitzes against entire city centers as well as causing the complete destruction of ferro-concrete skyscrapers and residential blocks.'[12]

By displaying multiple variations on the results of these individual car bombs, *My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair* is not about the singular effect of just one explosion, it is about the cumulative effect of this form of street level terrorism. Because car bombs are at street level and accessible to the public, and especially journalists, they do not only

[11] A discrepancy in this number exists in project's description on the website of the Tate Gallery, which owns one of the five editions of this work: 'In the sixteen years of the Lebanese war, 245 car bombs exploded in Lebanon and killed thousands, injured tens of thousands and caused extensive damage in the neighbourhoods of Lebanon's main cities Beirut, Tripoli, Saida and Sidon. The car bombs were detonated with a remote control, and were used to kill, destroy and terrorise. *My Neck is Thinner than a Hair: Engines* documents car engines that were discovered after the explosions around the city, and the military and civilian investigators and witnesses of the engines. The engine is the only part of a car that remains intact after a bomb has exploded. The force of explosion causes the engine to soar tens and sometimes hundreds of meters away from the site where the bomb was detonated. As a result of this, car engines were found all around the city of Beirut, in such locations as balconies, roofs and nearby streets. Photographs of these engines were a common feature in newspaper reports at the time of the war. The repetitive presentation of these pictures can be seen as a comment on the banality of violence during war. Raad also explores the relationship between the details of the cars and the bombs used to explode them. The work may be understood as operating between research, archiving and ironic interpretation of a historic reality. Furthermore, it can be said to examine issues such as authorship, authority and authenticity, as well as the ways in which the history of Lebanon is documented and remembered.' Evi Baniotopoulou, "My Neck is Thinner than a Hair: Engines 2000-3," *Tate.org.uk*, 2010, accessed December 2, 2013, http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/atlas-group-raad-my-neck-is-thinner-than-a-hair-engines-t11912/text-summary.

[12] Mike Davis, *A Brief History of the Car Bomb* (London: Verso, 2007), 5.

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cause massive amounts of damage, but the explosions can be effective advertisements for a cause, leader or abstract principle, or terror itself, and by slaughtering innocent civilians, car bombs create a pervading sense of fear and tension around the heavily used public space of the street.[13]

Looking at the dozens of photos of car engines freed from their exteriors by use of explosives, one is confronted by the banality of the aftermath. In the photographs selected by Raad, some images contain men interacting with the engines, studying them, touching them, some in military dress, many in civilian attire and some in suits wearing dour expressions. The images depict the engines during the day, illuminated by a flash at night, in urban centres, surrounded by collateral destruction, or by smoke, which suggest that the explosion just took place. Sometimes the engines look completely out of context from the explosion that placed them where they were photographed, while others are photographed on dusty, rural roads. In some images other parts of the car remain, like a twisted section of the chassis or an axel and two wheels, which give an abject, anthropomorphic quality to the image, like seeing a vital organ wrenched from its body.

During the period between 1975 and 1991, Beirut was the site of civil wars between the Shiites and Palestinians, and by the early 1980s it was also the site of multiple conflicts between different factions, regions outside of Lebanon, such as between the Israelis and Syrians, as well as the United States in their conflict with Iran, within the space of the Cold War. This period of violence in Lebanon's contemporary history saw many small scale car bombs, but also some very strategically planned attacks using vehicular bombs to attack the outsiders, such as the United States. These large-scale vehicular bombs caused massive destruction to their intended targets and still managed to inflict extreme collateral violence upon the civilians of Beirut. British journalist Robert Fisk, who was in Beirut in 1983, describes the destruction of the US embassy:

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[13] Ibid., 9-10.

The centre of the Embassy was missing. The bottom of the two wings of the Embassy had disappeared. One half of the building had disintegrated and the upper floors of the centre now hung down in slabs as if someone had cut through it with a knife and removed the outer portion. Behind each dangling slab of floor were trapped desks, telephones, carpets and chairs. And suspended by the feet from one of the slabs, upside-down, still in his business suit, his arms dangling cruelly round his balding head, hung a dead American diplomat.

We tripped over corpses. The roadway was slippery with water, glass and blood and other, more terrible objects which a team of Lebanese Red Cross men and women were shovelling onto stretchers. In the visa section, where dozens of Lebanese men and women had been queuing for permission to visit the United States, every living soul had been burned alive. They were brought out not as bodies but as torsos, legs, lumps of intestines piled on stretchers, individual heads heaped inside a blanket. A Red Cross girl was scooping up remains in a bucket.[14]

The aftermath described by Fisk gives a sense of the range of violence within Beirut at the time and is far more immense than what is seen within the photographs of *My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair*.

To create a discourse around the sustained trauma experience experienced by those living in Beirut during the wars, Walid Raad, in his work as The Atlas Group, uses an 'obsessive-compulsive methodology to convey the trauma of the constant car bomb onslaughts in Beirut that raged for fifteen years (1975-1990) during the Lebanese Civil War.'[15] The Atlas Group's blending of facts and fictions, exemplified in its use of documentary archival materials, such as photographs and video footage, "donated" by fictional characters, is both a fictionalization of artistic authority and a fictionalization of the documentary form, where 'this dual fictionalization corresponds to and renders visible the fictitiousness of the contemporary itself.'[16] To document the contemporary history Lebanon, The Atlas Group sheds light on this history as it collects, preserves and

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[14] Quoted in Davis, 80-81.

[15] Graham Coulter-Smith and Maurice Owen, eds., introduction to *Art in the Age of Terrorism* (London: Paul Holberton, 2005), 2.

[16] Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*. (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2013), 33.

displays audio, visual, literary and other documents,[17] which are then housed in New York and Beirut. The archive materials are catalogued according to the medium of the materials, from where the archival material originated, donated by an individual, found documents, and so on. With this level of cataloguing, the conceit is that The Atlas Group documents historical events, but instead Raad creates new documents represent potential responses to the events.[18] As the artist explains the intention behind *My Neck Is Thinner Than A Hair*:

> [The Atlas Group] is not an attempt to place blame or generalize suffering. Not all of the Lebanese people sustained physical or psychological harm from car bomb explosions, nor did all militias and armies use car bombs to terrorize, destroy, or kill. What our work demonstrates is that the detonation of a car bomb is not only an act of violence, but also produces a discourse that directly and indirectly affects individuals, families, and communities. We have found that the car bomb is both a cause and a consequence of the ongoing political, military, economic, and criminal conflicts that have defined most aspects of life in Lebanon for the past thirty years. The history of these car bomb explosions doubles as a history of how the wars were physically and psychically experienced, and how those who lived through such events speak about and assimilate their experiences.[19]

Then how does The Atlas Group, functioning as a fictional organization dedicated to the documentation of the contemporary history of Lebanon, use the car bomb as a historical subject to represent and assimilate Beirut's history of violent conflict? And in what way is this conflict experienced by those it affects? As Graham Coulter-Smith and Maurice Owen paraphrase Raad in *Art in the Age of Terrorism*, 'aestheticizing can be understood as a displacement of trauma.'[20] As The Atlas Group aestheticizes its archive materials into works of art, and uses fiction and documentary materials as the bricks and mortar with which to build these works, it also builds a critical distance from the represented material of traumatic experiences, such as the car bomb, to create a discourse around the representation of trauma. By fictionalizing artistic authority and documentary

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[17] Raad (2005), 9.

[18] Govan, 57.

[19] Walid Raad, *Scratching On Things I Could Disavow: Some Essays From the Atlas Group Project* (Lisbon: Culturgest, 2007), 91.

[20] Graham Coulter-Smith and Maurice Owen, 2.

practices, it asks the question, 'what if the truth is neither in the represented nor in the representation?'[21]

To come across a work by The Atlas Group in a gallery context, it is apparent that The Atlas Group is a fictional construct. There is no elaborate ruse to trick the viewer of the work that this is an actual foundation, yet 'despite the numerous, albeit at times subtle, markers of the project's overall fictitious character, its documentary apparatus and forms, combined with its significant actual documentary content, continue to persuade viewers of its factual status.'[22] By calling into question the authorial voice or authoritative voice, The Atlas Group's fictional nature removes the limitations on the work that come attached to the author's name. As Roland Barthes explains in "The Death of the Author", 'to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing.'[23] Raad uses The Atlas Group to create a distance from his role as "the author" of *My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair* to remove the limits imposed on this work as coming from a single author. As Michel Foucault details in "What is an Author?", 'the replacement of the concept of author by that of the author-function was a "matter of depriving the subject (or its substitute) of its role as originator, and of analyzing the subject as a variable and complex function of discourse… [by] grasp[ing] the subject's points of insertion, modes of functioning, and system of dependencies."'[24] Walid Raad working behind the "front" of The Atlas Group as an imaginary foundation, is a way of negating possible contestations to his ability, or even national right (Walid Raad was born in Lebanon in 1967, before moving to the United States) to represent the contemporary history of Lebanon. In comparison, when an individual or a group detonates a car bomb, whatever the intended message, the bomb is part of a larger social and political unrest. The car bomb is the cause and effect of violence, but in its aftermath, this violence weaves into the fabric of the society affecting those who experience it. Just as Barthes states that 'a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its

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[21] Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 51.

[22] Osborne, 32.

[23] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 147.

[24] Quoted in Osborne, 33.

destination,'[25] a car bomb's 'unity', no matter where it originated (in essence whether it is intended as a political or terroristic message), is in its creation of a climate of violent retaliation, as it is 'an inherently fascist weapon guaranteed to leave its perpetrators awash in the blood of innocents.'[26] Foucault believes the author's name can be used to both group works and differentiate them from others to create different forms of relationships.[27] Raad, as he acts in his role of The Atlas Group, creates a system of classification to respond to this history of violent actions, and in *My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair*, represents the frequent use of car bombs to group these works that integrate facts with fiction to create a discourse around the subject materials.

The images of the aftermath of car bombs represent both the desperate and destructive measures undertaken during the Lebanese Civil Wars, and how the fantasy held by residents in most cities 'that a distinction exists between the realm of the private and that of the public'[28] can by obliterated by a destructive act of terror in the detonation of an everyday object such as a car. Although 'no other weapon in the history of warfare has proven to be such a promiscuous equalizer of combat between elephants and fleas,'[29] the car bomb is a powerful weapon in that it is delivered by a ubiquitous mode of transportation along the streets around which cities are designed. If a large percent of the population did not own or depend on vehicles as a mode of transport, for example if the sentiment Guy Debord's "Situationist Theses on Traffic" was universally shared in his opinion of 'the automobile as an evil in itself… its extreme concentration in the cities that has led to the negation of its function,'[30] the car bomb as a stealth weapon would lose its effectiveness.

[25] Barthes, 148.

[26] Davis, 10.

[27] Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch (New York: Norton, 2001),1627.

[28] Kolbowski and Raad, 20.

[29] Davis, 11.

[30] Guy Debord, "Situationist Thesis on Traffic," in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), 57.

Within the photographs of *My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair*, the car bombs do not exist as objects, yet their aftermath exists in the remains: the engines that survive the explosions. The engines are things that can affect a response to the violent devastation caused. A representation of the aftermath, the engines are things that do not represent the car they came from so much as they represent their own method of how they got there.

> [A] thing is usually not a shiny new Boeing taking off on its virgin flight. Rather, it might be its wreck, painstakingly pieced together from scrap inside a hangar after its unexpected nosedive into catastrophe. A thing is the ruin of a house in Gaza. A film reel lost or destroyed in civil war. A female body tied up with ropes, fixed in obscene positions. Things condense power and violence. Just as a thing accumulates productive forces and desires, so does it also accumulate destruction and decay.'[31]

A thing is the remains of the car after being exploded by a bomb. Outside of whatever agenda or intent for which that bomb was placed, this thing is what exists after the destruction occurs. A photographer in Beirut then documents this object. The negative is printed as a photograph and is stamped with a date, and maybe the name of the photographer and finds its way into an archive. The photograph of the aftermath is a thing itself as it sits in the archive. Gradually more of these things, images of exploded car bombs, accumulate around it in the archive, and other archives. The subjects within the photographs are forgotten. Those who may have claimed authorship of the bombs will be forgotten, 'whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious, or other nature that may be used to justify them,'[32] fade from public memory. What remains is a photographic representation of an act of violence. This documented history of violence becomes part of a discourse for those who were part of and were affected by this history.

In his research into the car bombs that were detonated during the Lebanese wars, Raad noticed in both the archival photographs and videos 'how the scenes of the crimes, and the craters produced by car bombs, were cleaned up almost within a few days of the

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31   Steyerl (2012), 53.
32   Rogoff, 139.

detonations… performed as much by the local militias (who may have had something to hide) as by the local residents (who, one would think, would have every possible interest in keep [sic] the crime scene intact in order to help an investigation that would find the culprits)' and it was general knowledge an impartial juridical investigation was an impossibility.[33] Given the amount of factions in dispute and the civil unrest in Beirut between 1975 and 1991, most likely any form of prosecution would be in the form of retribution, and that retribution would beget further violence. These local residents probably thought it better to clear away reminders of the violence as a way to move on, aware of the lack of juridical prosecution and knowing, as Irit Rogoff cites Giorgio Agamben from "On Security and Terror", 'when security becomes the sole purpose of the state, this sole purpose can be turned terroristic through acts of terrorism.'[34]

Considering these things that contain an inherent nature to shift towards violence, whether it is security becoming terroristic, or vehicles used as weapons of terrorism, it is worth noting, in relation to photographic elements of *My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair*, the violent nature from which photography arose. Before digital photography, the emulsion on which the photographs was exposed was a byproduct of the manufacturing of explosives, the exposure mechanism of early cameras was modeled on a handgun mechanism and motion picture camera mechanisms took their inspiration from machine gun technology.[35]

This relationship between art and violence, whether in the depiction of war atrocities, or the valour of heroes, is deep and has existed for centuries, from sculptors carving out a image of a victorious general in marble, to Francisco Goya representing witnessed horrors of the Spanish Peninsular War, or Steve McQueen's recent *Queen and Country*, which depicts British soldiers who died in Iraq on sheets of postage stamps. Yet this

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[33] Kolbowski and Raad, 64.

[34] Quoted in Irit Rogoff, "Engendering Terror," in *Concerning War: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art*, ed. by Maria Hlavajova and Jill Winder (Utrecht: BAK; Rotterdam: Post Editions, 2010), 139.

[35] Quoting Paul S. Landau from "The Body and the Archive" in Hito Steyerl, "The Violence of Images: Documentarism and Documentality," in *Concerning War: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art*, eds. Maria Hlavajova and Jill Winder (Utrecht: BAK; Rotterdam: Post Editions, 2010), 215.

relationship between artist and the artist's depiction of war has become complicated both by the media, as well as easily reproducible forms of media, like photography and video, which now both exist on digital devices that can publish to the Internet in seconds. Even in the late 70s and 80s, during the period that the photographs for *My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair* originated, these images were taken by journalists rushing to the site of the explosion, eager to have first access to the aftermath of the explosion. As Boris Groys describes the relationship between the artist and the warrior in his essay "The Fate of Art in the Age of Terror", in which the warrior can be thought of either as terrorist or anti-terrorist, 'the two were mutually dependent.'

> The artist needed the warrior to have a topic for an artwork, but the warrior needed the artist even more. After all, the artist was able to find another, more peaceful topic for his or her work… But in our time the situation has changed drastically: the contemporary warrior does not need an artist anymore to give him fame and put his action into the universal memory. For this, the contemporary warrior has all the media at his immediate disposal. Every act of terror and every act of war are immediately registered, represented, described, depicted, narrated, and interpreted by the media… By pushing a button that makes a bomb explode, a contemporary warrior or terrorist pushes a button that starts the media machine.'[36]

Given the immediacy of representational media and the Internet, the opportunity for discourse around acts of violence perpetrated in the name of terrorism, or even anti-terrorism, could be greater than it was 30-40 years ago. But there is a danger to the immediacy of image production. It can stir up a frenzy of re-posting, re-blogging, re-tweeting that can disseminate images of violence and as well as acts of rebellion at a rate faster than would have been imaginable even twenty years ago. This fast rate of dissemination also removes any critique of representation of whether the images produced are as true and real as they claim to be.[37] This discourse around truth and reality in relation to the subjects of war and violence, and distinguishing the collected data of the past and its relevance to the present is central to The Atlas Group as an

[36] Boris Groys, "The Fate of Art in the Age of Terror," in *Concerning War: A Critical Reader in Contemporary Art*, eds. Maria Hlavajova and Jill Winder (Utrecht: BAK; Rotterdam: Post Editions, 2010), 93.
[37] Groys, 100.

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ongoing project that questions the documentary practice through fictionalization and collecting and archiving the past for the present and future of Beirut and elsewhere.[38]

Walid Raad, as The Atlas Group, uses the car bomb as an object of Lebanon's contemporary history in *My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair* to create a discourse around the way it has been used both to inflict power through violence, and to demonstrate the banality of this violence to displace the trauma of the Lebanese Civil Wars through aestheticization. The aftermath of the car bomb becomes the subject of the work through the repetition of images. In Karen Beckman's reading of *Weekend*, and 'its preoccupation with the experience of living on within the condition of confusion and uncertainty that follows the disaster, refusing either to reassure spectators with fictional solutions or to equate the end of one particular social narrative with the end of everything,'[39] so too do the object remains of the car bombs within Raad's work remind the viewer of the potential cyclical nature of violence. As it is part of The Atlas Group, *My Neck Is Thinner Than a Hair* should be read as part of a larger project documenting the history of the wars from the point of view of the present, as a way to look to the future. 'History, as [Walter] Benjamin told us, is a pile of rubble. Only we are not staring at it any longer from the point of view of Benjamin's shell-shocked angel. We are not the angel. We are the rubble. We are this pile of scrap.'[40]

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[38] Kolbowski and Raad, 65.
[39] Beckman, 209.
[40] Steyerl (2012), 56.

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Appendix B.

16mm anamorphic black and white silent film from *As far upriver as you can go before having to switch to a pole*

Creator: Curtis Grahauer

Description: 16mm anamorphic black and white silent film from *As far upriver as you can go before having to switch to a pole*, exhibited at the Audain Gallery, September 11th-26th, 2015

File name: cgrahauer_asfarupriver-film_thesis.mp4