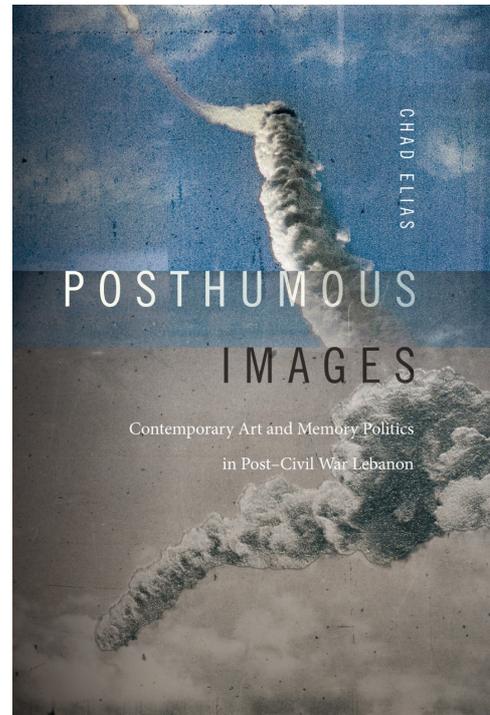


**BOOK REVIEW: Chad Elias,
*Posthumous Images: Contemporary
Art and Memory Politics in Post-
Civil War Lebanon***

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If post-civil war Lebanese art didn't exist, it would be necessary for art historians to invent it. In form, method and content, the conceptually savvy art produced in Lebanon during the 1990s and 2000s embodied the critical preoccupations of global contemporary art around the turn of the millennium. Here were parafictional archives insinuating suppressed histories through fabricated personae and events; multimedia installations resuscitating traces of revolutionary hope lost to an imperial proxy war and neoliberal state policy; essay-films that trouble representation, testifying to the opacities engendered by trauma as they challenged documentary's modus operandi of providing visual evidence; appropriated images turned haunted icons, mnemonic symbols of intergenerational witnessing for those marked by the condition of post-memory.

On the heels of Lebanon's fifteen-year civil war (1975–1990), a coterie of Beirut artists – who, born in the late 1960s and early 1970s, grew up amid car bombs, snipers, sieges and foreign occupations – produced highly theoretical and yet poignant projects, largely in lens-based media, that circulated at a serendipitous moment marked by both the 'documentary turn' in contemporary art and the vogue for all things Arab that followed the 11 September 2001 attacks. 'By 2003, one could speak of an inflation of contemporary Lebanese art', the Beirut-based artist Walid Sadek has written, noting how local and global conditions permitted his colleagues to 'graduate from the tenuous position of a survivor to the privileged position of a vetted onlooker who stands astride the wreckage and addresses the world'.¹ With new art

¹ Walid Sadek, *The Ruin to Come: Essays from a Protracted War*, Motto Books, Berlin, 2016, pp 89–90

institutions in Beirut welcoming international critics, curators and collectors, shows by Lebanese artists took off around the world. Exhibitions such as the Beirut-focused ‘Contemporary Arab Representations’ (curated by Catherine David for Witte de With in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, in 2002) and ‘Out of Beirut’ (curated by Suzanne Cotter for Modern Art Oxford in the UK in 2006) assembled key post-war Lebanese artists and stimulated widespread critical interest in the scene.

Now, the art historian Chad Elias has written the first book-length study of Lebanese contemporary art, developed from his doctoral dissertation. *Posthumous Images: Contemporary Art and Memory Politics in Post-Civil War Lebanon* focuses on several of the more internationally renowned artists of Lebanon’s ‘war generation’, including Walid Raad, Akram Zaatari, Rabih Mroué, Lamia Joreige, and Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige. His analysis centres on these artists’ critical efforts to retrieve local histories and wartime memories suppressed by ‘state-sanctioned amnesia’ – a project they undertake even as they question dominant methods of commemorating a disquieting past.² For Elias, these artistic practices critique both the forgetting imposed by the state as well as conventions of documentary practice and memorialisation that fail to attend to the social contexts that make acts of witnessing and remembering meaningful. Moreover, he emphasises the significant effects of evolving media technologies in reproducing and transmitting political imagery that circulates partial histories of the war and its afterlives, in the absence of definitive narratives.

Complementing Elias’s inquiries is the notion of ‘the withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster’ put forward by Lebanese writer and filmmaker Jalal Toufic. After catastrophes such as the Palestinian *nakba* or the Lebanese civil war, Toufic argues, societies risk ‘radical closure’ of the imagination unless artists and writers are able to ‘resurrect’ cultural practice by first representing a psychic lacuna obstructing perception of the disaster. In other words, historical ruptures call for ruptures in representation, and artworks that address such traumatic events must contend with the inaccessibility of conventional methods of representation in order to overcome psychological and social impasses in conceptualising the catastrophe. Toufic’s thesis, which has influenced frequent collaborator Walid Raad and other artists of their generation, offers a speculative premise that is useful for framing the

² Those concerned with Lebanon’s post-war condition have often characterised the policies enacted (and not enacted) by the government – including a 1991 law providing amnesty to militia leaders and politicians implicated in war crimes, the neoliberal reconstruction of downtown Beirut that prioritised privatisation and speculation over the preservation of communal histories, and the absence of any public reckoning with the civil war, which is absent in school textbooks and has no public monuments or memorials dedicated to its victims – as a collective amnesia imposed by the state. Elias quotes the Lebanese novelist Elias Khoury: ‘The new post-war political class – warlords and war criminals in alliance with oil-enriched capital and military and security apparatuses – was able to impose an amnesia, a complete forgetting, in order to whitewash their innocence. Their victims were silenced.’ Chad Elias, *Posthumous Images: Contemporary Art and Memory Politics in Post-Civil War Lebanon*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2018, p 8

more concrete critiques of documentary transparency and recuperative memorials that Elias advances throughout his study.

Posthumous Images is organised by artist and by theme, with both the first and the last chapter devoted to an extended study of an artwork, and the three middle chapters each engaging a political problematic related to post-war Lebanon through distinct artistic projects. Chapter One offers an in-depth analysis of the politics of translation in Walid Raad's *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes* (2001), a video that stages a complex, multiply-mediated relationship to testimony and truth as it conveys the fictionalised first-person experience of a man from south Lebanon held hostage together with Western journalists. Chapter Two takes up the legacy of the secular Lebanese left and its supersession by Islamic resistance groups, analysing the social phenomenon of martyrdom and its relation to the medium of video in works by Rabih Mroué and Akram Zaatari. Chapter Three broaches the subject of the thousands of Lebanese disappeared during the war, posing a critique of a human rights organisation's exhibition of photographs of the disappeared in favour of more personal and communally engaged projects by Ghassan Halwani, Lamia Joreige, and Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige. Chapter Four addresses post-war urbanism, examining Marwan Rechmaoui's sculptural practice and Bernard Khoury's architecture in relation to the destruction and subsequent privatisation of downtown Beirut. Finally, Chapter Five engages Hadjithomas and Joreige's film *The Lebanese Rocket Society* (2012), which Elias regards as an image of an alternative future for Lebanon, one that conjoins history and science fiction to envision a more hopeful counter-modernity with a productively indeterminate relation to Lebanon's real past and present.

Time, and the nonlinear temporalities induced by both the psychological experience of trauma and the political desire to rekindle bygone dreams of revolution, are recurrent themes in *Posthumous Images* – as should be expected in a book whose title 'refers to the ways in which certain images appear only after the presumed death of their referent'.³ Elias's final chapter, 'Images of Futures Past', addresses time and Lebanon's post-war imaginary most persuasively, with a compelling analysis of Hadjithomas and Joreige's documentary *The Lebanese Rocket Society*. A university experiment turned national space programme, the Lebanese Rocket Society (LRS) succeeded in launching rockets into the stratosphere, an astonishing accomplishment that 'seems inconceivable today, as if it were derived from a plotline in a postcolonial science fiction novel'.⁴ Elias relays Hadjithomas and Joreige's perspective that

³ *Ibid*, p 19

⁴ *Ibid*, p 161

the LRS represents a progressive vision of Arab modernity that dissipated alongside the political project of pan-Arabism – the last rocket was launched in 1967, the same year as Israel’s resounding victory over Arab armies – and is no longer accessible to Lebanon’s residents. In addition to his illuminating discussion of the artists’ intentions in relation to this cultural history, Elias offers an incisive examination of the conclusion to *The Lebanese Rocket Society*, an animated sequence set in 2025 and based on the premise that the LRS never stopped functioning. Noting the simultaneous presence of war-damaged landmarks and the absence of post-war architecture, he regards this sequence as ‘uchronic’ or ‘anachronic’, posing the provocative question ‘Did the civil war take place?’⁵ Elias underscores how Hadjithomas and Joreige refuse both nostalgia and utopian longing, describing the end of their film as a kind of failed speculation composed of ‘multiple potential presents and futures that cannot be crystallized’.⁶

Similarly, in Chapter Two, Elias reads the self-reflexive re-enactment of posthumous images of the Lebanese left, in videos by Rabih Mroué and Akram Zaatari, as a method of foregrounding ‘incomplete ontological-temporal states – belatedness, disappearance, delay, repetition, and return – that bring the past into productive conflict with the amnesia of the postcommunist present’.⁷ These auto-critical strategies, he argues, work to combat a melancholic fixation on a prior mode of resistance, and pave the way for imagining a different future. He likens Zaatari’s *All Is Well on the Border* (1997) to Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville’s landmark essay-film *Here and Elsewhere* (1976); both interrogate the theatrical rhetoric and narrative staging of resistance movements, turning from the espousal of a political cause to the deconstruction of its mediations. In the process, each avoids the documentary trap of presuming to ‘give a voice’ to the marginalised, or of reiterating the paternalism of political leaders who claim to represent the downtrodden while constraining their expression. Such an argument is cogent, and the analogy to Godard and Miéville apt, but Elias also risks downplaying the ethical limitations of art that arises from political struggle only to question the formal qualities of the latter’s enunciation and transmission.

⁵ Ibid, pp 167–170

⁶ Ibid, pp 174. In the final pages of this chapter, Elias alludes to contemporary sci-fi tendencies in art from the Middle East, focusing on the ‘Gulf Futurism’ articulated by Kuwaiti artist Sophia Al-Maria and Qatari artist Fatima al-Qadiri. The comparison is welcome, but more pertinent may be the many speculative artistic projects that have emerged in Palestine, from Wafa Hourani’s *Future Cities* projects such as *Qalandia 2067* to Larissa Sansour’s ‘sci-fi trilogy’ of video installations. For a broader overview of speculative currents in contemporary Arab art, see Jussi Parikka, ‘Middle East and Other Futurisms: Imaginary Temporalities in Contemporary Art and Visual Culture’, *Culture, Theory, and Critique*, vol 50 no 1, pp 40–58.

⁷ Ibid, pp 57–58

To his credit, Elias thematises this problem from the outset of his book. His analysis is animated by a tension he identifies in the introduction between a ‘politics of representation’ and a ‘politics of truth’. He rightly critiques what he calls ‘an increasing tendency on the part of critics and art historians to hypostasize the failures of representation’ in analysing the practices of Raad and other Lebanese artists.⁸ As an antidote to this mode of interpretation, he advocates more rigorous inquiries into the archival material and historical processes to which these artists’ works respond. Further, he encourages attention to the ‘communities of witnessing’ with whom the artists engage, and to which they contribute, as they record and obliquely represent social histories of the civil war. Such an emphasis on the intertwining of art and social history, and Elias’s efforts to overcome rote poststructuralist readings of the conjuncture of fact and fiction in post-war Lebanese art, gives this book its admirably probing qualities and clears important ground for novel and necessary lines of inquiry. Yet it remains unclear how Elias aims to orient his analysis to a ‘politics of truth’, as he often falls back on the same theoretical tools for examining the ‘politics of representation’ that he has put into question, using them to guard against documentary pretensions to ‘give a voice’ to subaltern communities.

Take Elias’s analysis in Chapter One, which focuses on Walid Raad’s *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes* (2001), a video produced under the auspices of Raad’s invented foundation The Atlas Group. Contesting the thesis – most influentially advanced by the art historian Carrie Lambert-Beatty, who coined the term ‘parafiction’ in writing about several contemporary artists, including Raad⁹ – that Raad’s fabulations serve primarily to foster a critical perspective on the authorship of history and the possibility of identifying any true narrative, Elias writes, ‘Raad is not simply exposing truth as an ideological fiction to do away with the concept of truth altogether. Instead, fiction becomes the basis for a new form of representation whose veracity consists not in any assumed relation to a prior reality, but in the production of a *new* political reality.’¹⁰ Yet Elias’s interpretation largely avoids the position of Raad’s work in relation to local histories. *Hostage* features the first-person narrative of Souheil Bachar, a fictional character based on Wajid Doumani, a Lebanese hostage mentioned in memoirs by the Western hostages whom Raad did not succeed in tracking down. As Elias notes, Bachar’s name is an evident adaptation and masculinisation of Souha Bechara, the Lebanese Communist who attempted to murder the South Lebanese Army

⁸ Ibid, p 15

⁹ See Carrie Lambert-Beatty, ‘Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility’, *October* 129, 2009, pp 51-84

¹⁰ Ibid, p 33

general Antoine Lahad and was subsequently imprisoned in the infamous Khiam prison for ten years:¹¹

While the allusion to Bechara would be lost on most audiences outside of Lebanon, within Lebanon her name has become a metonym for the struggle against Israeli occupation of the South ... the substitution of Bachar, an anonymous worker with unclear political affiliations, for Bechara, a lionized 'freedom fighter,' serves to undercut the myth of heroic Resistance associated with the South.¹²

Elias does not directly comment on the way this substitution negotiates considerations of gender, although the video's staging of ambivalent queer desire within the politics of imperialism becomes central to his reading. It appears as if the racialised image of a hypersexual Arab man becomes so magnetising for a familiar postcolonial reading of 'the homoerotics of interracial captivity' and 'the limits of cross-cultural communication' that the historical figure of a militant socialist feminist drops out of view. Elias pivots from histories of southern Lebanon, women's roles in leftist struggles, and the defeat of secular resistance movements, toward what he regards as a defiant act of mistranslation for the West. His analysis is, as always, theoretically astute – but where does it leave the promise of a 'politics of truth', or the communities of witnessing that are its ostensible subjects?

In his introduction, Elias professes a desire to 'challenge the idea that the cultural resistance to Lebanon's state-sponsored amnesia is comprised', as Sune Haugbolle has argued, 'mostly of "middle-class leftist artists and intellectuals [who have] privileged their own lived memories of prewar middle-class and radical Beirut"'.¹³ But in overlooking the implications of Raad's substitution, as critics before him have, Elias dodges the historical realities of Lebanon's relatively poor southern region and returns to well-worn theories of signification with little to say of the communities that might be impacted by the creation of a 'new political reality'. Writing on art that engages south Lebanon, Elias's sources are largely theorists from a Western canon, whether French theory (Derrida, Rancière), queer theory (Bersani, Sedgwick), art theory (Groys, Steyerl), or, to address postcolonialism, Spivak.

Despite its strengths, Elias's analysis in *Posthumous Images* is limited by its reliance on canonical and disciplinary histories. The retreat back to now-familiar theorisations of language, representation and translation in Raad's practice is disappointing given Elias's gestures toward more locally situated negotiations of memory, community and history, but it

¹¹ The South Lebanese Army (SLA) was allied with and supported by Israel during the Lebanese civil war and the Israeli occupation of south Lebanon that lasted until 2000. Torture was routinely used in the Khiam detention centre, which was operated by the SLA and overseen by Israel until its closure in 2000.

¹² Ibid, p 35

¹³ Ibid, p 10

is not entirely surprising for a book that takes as its subject a coterie of post-war Lebanese artists that has itself become something of a canon in art history. The book's missed opportunities to offer heterodox readings of certain subjects, I would argue, are in fact symptomatic of the narrow scope of the study. Consideration of critical documentary practices in Lebanese cinema, as well as attention to significant artists, writers and filmmakers beyond the 'war generation', would offer opportunities for more innovative and nuanced analysis of memory and visual culture in post-war Lebanon. For example, a counterpoint that would have served Elias well is the late director Randa Chahal Sabbag, whose films explore memories of the civil war from Beirut and southern Lebanon; leftist figures, including Souha Bechara (about whom Chahal Sabbag made a documentary upon Bechara's release from prison); and the social fissures around class, citizenship status and gender that are underrepresented in Elias's study. I raise this example not to point to a single missing subject, but to suggest that any interrogation of documentary practices in visual art should grapple with the politically committed films and videos of Chahal Sabbag, Jocelyn Saab, Rania Stephan, Mohamed Soueid, and others, rather than uphold an institutional divide between the film and visual art circuits. Furthermore, staging an intergenerational discussion – putting figures like Chahal Sabbag, born in 1953, in conversation with Raad's generation, as well as artists who come after it, such as Marwa Arsanios or Mounira Al Solh, each born in 1978 – is essential in understanding how memories of war, occupation, resistance and reconstruction are critically and creatively mediated in Lebanon today.

Posthumous Images is a welcome contribution to the study of contemporary art from the Middle East, significant in its substantive engagements with a generation of artists in Lebanon that has been championed around the world for its theoretically sophisticated responses to a devastating conflict and its tense, inconclusive afterlives. Elias offers important provocations for further study of cultural production in Lebanon, through his identification of a tension between a 'politics of representation' and a 'politics of truth', his attention to 'communities of witnessing' that contest a state-imposed post-war condition of forgetting, and his analysis of the role of media technologies in circulating images of contested histories. The book is at its strongest when its author examines its foundational terms – for example, deconstructing the very idea of post-war Lebanese art. For, as Elias argues, Lebanon's enduring state of political impasse and intermittent conflict 'forces us to critically revise the now-entrenched narratives heralding a post-civil war period and, more to the point, the emergence of a Beirut-based

school of art simplistically miscast as postwar'.¹⁴ This insight, as with many of Elias's critical arguments, invites the reframing of his own project, to ask such questions as: How did such a 'school' emerge, and how did it acquire a label that would launch it into the high orbits of the global art market? What are its prehistories and afterlives? Who and what has been excluded from the 'now-entrenched narratives' about visual culture in Lebanon? How would it transform the study of Lebanese art to reject the idea of such discrete periods and formations as post-war art, the 'war generation,' or the 'civil war' itself? To paraphrase Walid Sadek, how might one write a history not of post-war art in Lebanon, but of cultural production in the 'protracted now' of civil war?

Chad Elias, *Posthumous Images: Contemporary Art and Memory Politics in Post-Civil War Lebanon* is published by Duke University Press, 2018, ISBN 978-0822347668

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¹⁴ Ibid, p 7