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Anything Goes, Nothing Sticks: Radical Stillness and Archival Impulse

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Introduction

The perception of the archive as the warehouse of tradition is inflected with the notion that what it stores is also removed from the everyday, at once ancient but also irrelevant, standing still outside time. Yet, if the past is of any relevance, the archive cannot maintain a rigid fixity that does not intersect with the present. In the work of the Atlas Group, the fabrication of "archival material" reflects what Hal Foster has termed an "archival impulse" that is constructed of multiple temporalities. The Atlas Group archive interrogates forms that are at once *still*, excavated from life, while *still* being in the present. In the process, the reductive singularity of the archive as an immobile monument is opened up to the complexity of a radical stillness through which the past enters the present in a moment of recognition. What is *still*, and what is *still there*, intersect in the productivity of a stillness that cuts through an undifferentiated continuity. This juncture echoes the Benjaminian flash which heralds the arrival of past in the present

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. (Benjamin, *Theses*)

Klee's *Angelus Novus* stands still between past and future as a momentary suspension of motion brings history and prophecy into the present. For "the historian of the dialectic at a standstill", Walter Benjamin, historical materialism was not simply a means of accessing the past in the present, but of awakening the potential of the future (Tiedemann 944-945). This, Rolf Tiedemann suggests, was the

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revolution of historical perception that Benjamin wanted to bring about in his unfinished *Arcades Project* (1941). By carrying the principle of montage into history, Benjamin indicates an intention "to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event" (Benjamin *Arcades* 461). This principle had already been alluded to in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" where he had written that a historical materialist cannot do without a present in which time stands still, and later, that it is in the arrest of thought that what has been and what will be "crystallizes into a monad" (Benjamin "Theses" 262-263).

Everywhere in Benjamin's writings on history, there is something of the irreducibility of the phrase "standing still". Standing still: still as an active, ongoing form of survival and endurance, still as an absence of movement. The duality of stillness is amplified as semantic clarity vacillates between one possibility and another: to endure and to be motionless. Is it possible to reduce "standing still" to a singularity? Benjamin's counsel to take hold of memory at the "moment of danger" might be an indication of this complexity. The "moment of danger" emerges as the flash of the past in the present, but also the instant at which the past could recede into the inertia of eternity, at once a plea against the reduction of the moment into a "dead time" and recognition of the productivity of stillness.

Something of that "flash" surfaces in Gilles Deleuze's reading of Michel Foucault: "a first light opens up things and brings forth visibilities as flashes and shimmerings, which are the 'second light'" (Deleuze 50). The first flash makes "visibilities visible" and determines what can be seen in a given historical period, while the second makes "statements articulable" and defines what can be said (Deleuze 50). These visibilities and statements, however, are distributed into the stratum and constitute knowledge as "stratified, archived, and endowed with a relatively rigid segmentarity" (Deleuze 61). Strata are historically determined, what they constitute of perceptions and discursive formations varies across time and results in the presence of thresholds between the stratum that come to behave as distinct layers subject to splits and changes in direction (Deleuze 44). Despite these temporal variations that account for differences across thresholds, the strata appear as fixed entities, they mimic rock formations shaped over thousands of years of sedimentation (Deleuze and Guattari 45). Reading Deleuze on Foucault in conjunction with his earlier collaborative work with Felix Guattari brings forth distant shadows of another "stratification". *A Thousand*

Plateaus is notably less interested in discursive formations and more concerned with "striation", the organisation and arrangement of space by the diagrams of power. Striated space is state space. It is offset by moving in the opposite direction, effectively turning striated space into smooth space (Deleuze and Guattari 524).

Whether on striation or stratification, Deleuze's work exhibits more than a cautionary distrust of processes of classification, regulation, and organization. Despite the flash that brings visibilities and statements into being, stratification, as much as striation, remains a technique of knowledge shaped by the strategies of power. It is interesting however, that Deleuze sees something as indeterminate as a flash, creating structures that are as determined as stratum. Yet perhaps this is a deceptive conjecture since while the strata appear relatively rigid they are also "extremely mobile" (Deleuze and Guattari 553). Foucault had already given an indication that what the archaeological method uncovers is not necessarily suspended, but rather that it suspends the notion of an absolute continuity (*Archaeology* 169). He suggests that "history is that which transforms *documents* into *monuments*" (7). The task of archaeology, it would seem, is to recover *documents* from *monuments* by demonstrating rather than reversing the process of sedimentation and without necessarily relying on a motionless past. While there is a relative, albeit interstratally tentative, stillness in the strata, absolute destratification proceeds towards deterritorialisation through incessant movement (Deleuze and Guattari 62-63).

If *A Thousand Plateaus* is any indication, the imperative for the creative thinker today seems to be stirring in this direction: movement, motion, animation. Whatever forms of resistance are to be envisioned, it is motion, rather than stillness, that emerges as a radical form of action (Deleuze and Guattari 561). The question raised by these theoretical interventions is not so much whether such processes are indeed valuable forms of opposition, but rather, whether movement is always the only means, or the most effective means, of resistance? To imagine resistance as "staying in place" seems antithetical to nomadic thinking but is it not possible to imagine moments when the nomad resists not by travelling, but by dwelling? What of all those living a life of forced nomadism, or dying nomadic deaths, those for whom movement is merely displacement and loss? In *Metamorphoses* Rosi Braidotti reflects upon forced displacement and loss, yet her emphasis nonetheless remains on "figurations", mappings of identity through time and space, mappings

of movement (2-3). Braidotti certainly does not neglect the victims of motion, those who are forced to move, yet she remains committed to nomadism as a form of becoming. Braidotti's notion of "figurations" finds a deeply poignant expression in Joseph Pugliese's textual maps of some of these technically "nomadic" bodies and their movement from the North African littoral into the waters of the Mediterranean where they eventually surface on southern European shores as corpses (Pugliese 15). While Braidotti recognizes the tragedy of these involuntary nomads, it is in Pugliese's work that this tragedy is starkly exposed and given concrete form in the figures of Europe's refugees. This is movement as death, something akin to what Paul Virilio calls inertia, the product of excessive speed, the uncanny notion of running to stand still (Virilio 16).

This tension between motion and stillness surfaces again in Laura Marks' essay "Asphalt Nomadism." Despite wanting to embrace the desert as a smooth space Marks retorts that "smooth space seems always to be elsewhere" (Marks 126). She notes the stability of the acacia trees and thorny shrubs in the desert and the way that nomadic people are constantly beset with invitations from the "civilising forces of religion and the soporific of a daily wage" (Marks 126). Emphatically she concludes that "the desert is never really 'smooth', for that is death" (Marks 126). On this deviation from Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the desert as smooth space she concludes: "we who inherit their thinking need to stay on the ground: both in thought, moving close to the surface of concepts, and literally, remaining alert to signs of life in the sand and the scrub of the desert" (Marks 126). In Marks' appeal for groundedness the tension between motion and stillness is maintained rather than being resolved through recourse to smoothness or in favour of perpetual movement. The sedentary and still structures that pervade the desert remain: the desert could not exist without them. In turn we might ask whether even the most rigorous abstraction can convince us that the ground between radical nomadism and perpetual displacement does not also need to be rethought. Perhaps this complexity is starkest when we begin to think about war, not only the potentiality of the war-machine to destabilize the state (Deleuze and Guattari 391), but war as the deterritorialisation of bodies, lives and livelihoods. Is the war of nomadism against the state not somehow akin to war as the violence that produces nomadic bodies through forced displacement?

One of the questions that strikes me about the work of the Atlas Group, "an imaginary non-profit research foundation established in Beirut to research and

document the contemporary history of Lebanon" (Raad 68) through the production and exhibition of "archival" material, is whether their propensity towards *still* forms in the creation of documentary evidence cannot be directly attributed to war as perpetual movement and territorial flexibility, as the flattening of structure and the creation of "smooth space" (Deleuze and Guattari 389). One need only think of the reigns of terror that begin with destratification – abolishing libraries, destroying documents, burning books. On the work of the Atlas Group, Andre Lepecki offers a very thorough introduction:

The Atlas Group is an ongoing visual and performative archival project initiated by Walid Raad ...whose main topic and driving force are the multiple and disparate events that history and habit have clustered into one singularity named "The Lebanese Civil Wars of 1975-1991". (Lepecki 61).

While the "inventedness" of the Atlas Group's archive, its "post-event" status as manufactured evidence, raises a myriad of questions about how to document the trauma of war, its insistence on an "archival" existence, rather than say a purely artistic one, also challenges the presumption that the process of becoming, indeed of producing or even creating, is necessarily akin to movement or animation by insisting on the materiality of producing "documents" as opposed to the abstraction of producing "art". The Atlas Group archive does not contribute directly to the transformation of visibilities into statements so much as statements into visibilities. Indeed, the "archival impulse" that seems to be present here works against the constitution of discursive formations precisely by making visible those aspects of culture which continue to circulate discursively while not necessarily existing. In other words, if one reads the sedimentary process of stratification as forming knowledge by allowing the relationships between "words" and "things" to settle or to solidify into historical strata, then the Atlas Group project seems to tap into the stillness of these stratified forms in order to reverse the signification of "things" and "words". Hal Foster's diagnosis of an "archival impulse" is located in a moment where, as he says, "almost anything goes and almost nothing sticks" in reference to the current obliviousness of contemporary artistic practices to political culture (Foster 2-3). Foster's observation endows this paper with more than just an appropriate title since what Foster seems to identify are the limitations of the current obsession with speed. What one senses in the Atlas Group's "archival impulse" and Foster's detection of an "archival impulse" at play in contemporary cultural practices is a war

against the war on form, a war against erasure through speed, and an inclination to dwell once more in the dusty matter of the past, rather than to pass through it.

Yet the archive, in the view of nomadology, might simply be what Benjamin Hutchens terms "the dead-letter office of lived memory" (38). Indeed Hutchens's critical review of the archive is both timely and relevant pointing out that "the preservation of cultural memories eradicated from culture itself" simply establishes the authority of the archive by erasing "the incessant historical violence" through which the archive establishes itself (Hutchens 38). In working his critique through Derrida's *Archive Fever*, Hutchens revisits the concealed etymology of the word "archive" which "names at once the *commencement* and the *commandment*" (Derrida 1). Derrida's suggestion that the concept of the archive shelters both the memory of this dual meaning while also sheltering itself from remembering that it shelters such a memory (Derrida 2) leads Hutchens to assert that "the archival 'act' opens history to the archive, but it closes politics to its own archivization" (Hutchens 44). The danger that "memory cultures", archives among them, pose to memory itself has also been explored elsewhere by Andreas Huyssen. Although Huyssen does not necessarily hold memory up as something to be protected from memory cultures, he is critical of the excessive saturation of contemporary societies with both (Huyssen 3). Huyssen refers to this as the "hypertrophy of memory" following Nietzsche's "hypertrophy of history" (Huyssen 2-3). Although Hutchens and Huyssen differ radically in direction, they seem to concur nonetheless that what could be diagnosed as an "archival impulse" in contemporary societies might describe only the stagnation and stiltedness of the remainders of lived experience.

To return once more to Foster's notion of an "archival impulse" in contemporary art practices, rather than the reinstitution of the archive as the warehouse of tradition, what seems to be at stake is not necessarily the agglutination of forms, but the interrogation of formations (Foster 3). One could say that this is the archive interrogated through the eyes of art, art interrogated through the eyes of the archive. Perhaps this is precisely what the Atlas Group does by insisting on *manufacturing documents* in the form of *documentary evidence*. "Missing Lebanese Wars", an Atlas Group project produced in 1998, takes as its point of departure the hypothesis

that the Lebanese civil war is not a self-evident episode, an inert

fact of nature. The war is not constituted by unified and coherent objects situated in the world; on the contrary, the Lebanese civil war is constituted by and through various actions, situations, people, and accounts. (Raad 17-18)

The project consists of a series of plates made up of pages taken from the notebook of a certain Dr Fadl Fakhouri, "the foremost historian of the civil war in Lebanon" until his death in 1993 (Raad 17). The story goes that Dr Fakhouri belonged to a gathering of "major historians" who were also "avid gamblers" that met at the race track every Sunday – the Marxists and the Islamists bet on the first seven races, while the Maronite nationalists and the socialists bet on the last eight (Raad 17). It was alleged that the historians would bribe the race photographer to take only one shot as the winning horse reached the post. Each historian would bet on exactly "how many fractions of a second before or after the horse crossed the line – the photographer would expose his frame" (Raad 17). The pages from Dr Fakhouri's notebook are comprised of these precise exposures of film as the winning horse crossed the line – *stills*, as well as measurements of the distance between the horse and the finish line amid various other calculations, the bets that the historians wagered, and short descriptions of the winning historians given by Dr Fakhouri. The notebook pages, with photographs in the form of newspaper clippings, calculations and descriptions of the winning historians in English, are reproduced one per plate. In producing these documents as archival evidence, the Atlas Group is able to manufacture the "unified and coherent objects" that *do not constitute* the war as things that are at once irrelevant, incongruous and non-sensical. In other words, presenting material that is, while clearly fictitious, reflective of individual "actions, situations, people, and accounts" as archival material, the Atlas Group opens up discourses about the sanctity of historical evidence to interrogation by producing documentary evidence for circulating cultural discourses.

While giving an ironic shape to this singular and complete picture of the war that continues to pervade popular cultural discourses in Lebanon through the media with politicians still calling for a "unified history", the Atlas Group simultaneously constitute these historical materials as the work of a single person, Dr Fakhouri. Yet it seems that our trustworthy archivist also chooses not to write about the race, but about the winning historian – echoing the refusal to conceive of the war as a self-evident fact (to talk about the race as a race) and to see it rather as an interplay of individuals, actions and narratives (to view the race

through the description of the winning historian). Indeed Dr Fakhouri's descriptions of the winning historians are almost comical for their affinity with descriptions of Lebanon's various past and present political leaders.

A potent shadow, and a legend that has grown into an officially sanctioned cult (Plate 1).
Avuncular rather than domineering, he was adept at the well-timed humorous aside to cut tension. (Plate 3).
He is 71. But for 6 years he was in prison and for 10 years he was under house arrest and in exile, so those 16 years should be deducted – then he's 55 (Plate 5). (Raad 20-29)

Through these descriptions of the historians, Lebanon's "missing" wars begin to play themselves out between one race and the next. While all we have are supposed "facts" with neither narrative, movement, nor anything else that could connect one fact to another that is not arbitrary, we are also in the midst of an archive that is as random as these "facts." This is the archive of the "missing" wars, wars that are not documented and victims that are not known, wars that are "missing" for no good reason.

What is different about this archive may not be the way in which order is manufactured and produced, but rather the background against which it is set. In his introduction to *The Order of Things* Michel Foucault makes reference to "a certain Chinese encyclopaedia" in a passage by Borges where

animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable... (xvi)

"The uneasiness that makes us laugh when we read Borges", writes Foucault, is the sense of loss of a "common" name and place (*Order*, xx). Whereas in Eusethenes, ("I am no longer hungry. Until the morrow, safe from my saliva all the following shall be: Aspics, Acalephs, Acanathocephalates [...]") the randomness of the enumerated species is ordered by their non-location in Eusthenes' mouth (Foucault, *Order* xvii), in Borges there is no means through which the enumerated species can belong in a common place except in language (Foucault, *Order*, xviii). In the same way, the work of the Atlas Group is filtered through the processes of archival classification without belonging to the archives of any real war. There is no common ground against which they can be read except

the purported *stillness* of the archive itself, its ability to put things in place and to keep them there.

If the Atlas Group's archives of Lebanon's wars are indeed to work against the fluidity of war and its ability to enter and reshape all spaces, then the archival impulse they evoke must be one in which the processes of sedimentation that create archival documents are worked through a radical stillness, tapping into the suspended motion of the singular moment – its *stillness*, in order to uncover *stillness* as presence, survival, endurance, to be there *still*. Indeed, if archives turn "documents into monuments" (Enwezor 23), then the "theatre of statements" that Foucault unearths (Deleuze 47) are not those recovered in the work of the Atlas Group since is not monuments, but documents, that the Atlas Group archive uncovers.

It is true that Benjamin urges us to seize hold of memory at the moment of danger, but he does not instruct us as to what to do with it once we have it, yet, what if we were to read this statement in conjunction with another, "for every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably" (Benjamin, "Theses" 255). By turning monuments into documents it is possible that the Atlas Group reconfigure the formations that make up the archive, indeed any archive, by recognizing images of the past as being *still* in the present. Not still as a past tense, motionless, but still as enduring, remaining. In the work of the Atlas Group the archival impulse is closely aligned to a radical stillness, letting the dust of things settle after its incitation by the madness of war, putting things in place that insist on having a place in language. Against such a background Benjamin's "moment of danger" is more than the instant of sedimentation, it is the productivity of a radical stillness in which the past opens onto the present, it is this moment that makes possible a radical reconfiguration of the archival impulse.

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