Archiving the Potentialities of Events

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Constructing an archive exclusively for events that *can* happen—regardless of whether or not they ever will or actually ever did happen—is also to challenge the limits of what an archive can do. Since 1999, the Lebanese artist Walid Raad has done just that. His project *The Atlas Group Archive* still documents, researches and produces a contemporary history of the Lebanese civil wars that ravaged Lebanon between 1975 and 1991. In their exhibitions, *The Atlas Group Archive* claims, like any other archive, that the objects on display constitute factual evidence of past events. This is in no sense untrue, but as I will suggest in more detail, the most striking experience when attending their exhibitions is the realization that the documents represent not actual past events but potential ones. I will argue that the archive's artefacts and explanatory texts produce historical paradoxes in such a way that these are capable of documenting the historical potentialities of events. As Raad himself explained in an interview: "The documents in this imaginary archive do not so much document 'what happened', but what can be imagined, what can be said, taken for granted, what can appear as rational or not, as thinkable and sayable about the civil wars" (Raad 2001). In short, *The Atlas Group* organizes an archive for potentialities that only

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appeared historically after the wars. In this article, I will describe and analyze what structural features are required of such an archive.

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The Atlas Group Archive collects and displays physical things. Yet its collection amounts to an archive of potentialities. This is in itself remarkable, since the distinction between things and potentialities is fundamental. Their separation is ontological, which means that the way things are is completely different from the way potentialities are. It was Aristotle who introduced this fundamental difference into philosophy.[1] He argued that if a potentiality were said to be, in the same way that a thing is, one would confuse the being of a thing with the being of that which enables a thing to be the way it is. Aristotle also said that, unlike a thing, a potentiality can exist without manifesting itself as an actual being: one can be able to do a thing without ever doing it, showing it or even knowing about it.

There have been several different attempts to define the difference between potential beings and actual beings. For the purpose of speaking about *The Atlas Group Archive,* I would like to avoid the majority of definitions, which in one way or another hinge upon the materialization or realization of a potentiality. Instead, I would prefer to take as my departure point how actual beings and potentialities change. A potentiality does not change the same way as an actual being changes. Therefore, I would say that ontogenetically the two belong to two different modes of existence. In the essay collection *Potentialities,* Giorgio Agamben traces a philosophical history of potentiality from Aristotle until today. He ends by showing how Derrida and Deleuze differ precisely on the point of how to separate potentialities from actual beings. Agamben concludes his remarks on Derrida by saying that in his conceptualization of the "trace," its pure potential to signify (and not to signify) "is no longer meaning's self-reference, a sign's signification of itself; instead, it is the materialization of a potentiality, the materialization of its own possibility" (Agamben 218). "Trace" in Derrida does not mean that potentialities materialize into actual beings, but that they materialize so as to make their own actualization possible. Quite differently in the essay on Deleuze, Agamben finds that "the potentiality that constitutes life in the original sense (self-nourishment) coincides with the very desire to preserve one's own Being that, in Spinoza and Deleuze, defines the potentiality of life as absolute immanence" (Agamben 237). Self-nourishment—as a desire to preserve—does not mean to reduce change

1 The difference between *dynamis* (potentiality) and *energeia* (actuality) is elaborated in Aristotle's *Physics, De anima* and in the *Metaphysics,* book Teta. For a remarkable introduction to these passages, see Agamben 177–184.

to a minimum, but to "encourage the natural growth …, to let it attain the state toward which it is tending" (Émile Benveniste, quoted in Agamben 237). Thus, Deleuze's potentialities change quite differently than Derrida's trace. The materialization of trace is not necessary in Deleuze, for whom the concept of life is absolutely immanent to Being, whose preservation is its own growth and development.

Deleuzean potentialities change, but not in the same way or for the same reasons as things. Let me give a simple example. We all know that water boils when its temperature reaches 100° centigrade. When it boils, it crosses a state transition at which its turbulence grows from being more organized to being more chaotic as its liquid state turns into a gaseous state. A condition for this transition is that temperature needs to reach 100° celsius. Every time water is brought to this temperature, its molecular energy becomes great enough to cross the state transition into boiling. Thus, a substance's state changes due to its being affected. But changing a potentiality is different. If the temperature cannot reach 100° C, the state transition of water may still be effected if the atmospheric pressure can be reduced. If its pressure is reduced below one atmosphere, water can boil below 100° C. But reducing the pressure does not affect temperature as temperature affects water. Heat is not affected like a substance. From the point of view of the state transition, the potentiality of temperature and air pressure to cause boiling change as two dependent variables. A change in one immediately changes the other. In more complex events than boiling water, several potentialities may interweave with each other in clusters. These clusters are held together by their changes, which, when they are radical enough, constitute an event. This often happens in a social group when it is introduced to a new member, a different task, or a change of environment; such events are immanent to an immediate alteration of what the group is able to do, even if that alteration may seem quite unrelated to the actual change.

The ontogenetical difference between an actual thing and a potentiality can be defined by the way their changes relate to an event. The being of a thing changes, and constitutes an event, when that being is affected by another being (another thing or a force), as in, for instance, a car crash. The being of a potentiality changes immediately with the change of another corresponding potentiality, and that constitutes an event immanent to the change itself. This happens, for example, when a company in a competitive market acquires a new desired field of competence. It becomes able to do other things, and differently, and therefore it also becomes a different company; at the same time, all the other companies in that market also become different, since they are now comparatively less able to compete.

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Hence, a change of competence in one company is immediately and immanently related to an increase or a decrease of another company's abilities. To the contrary, a car—seen as a thing—transcends its being and becomes a wreck when it crashes into a tree that mediates that transition. Thus, an event constituted by a changing thing is different from an event immanently constituted as a change in potentialities. (Of course, one may also consider a car crash a change of potentialities.) When a thing changes, the event is the transition over a threshold from one state to another. When potentialities change, the event is the transition within a set of variables, from one constellation of values to another. With the Deleuzean standpoint adopted here, this difference is no longer an ontological opposition, as it was for Aristotle. Ontogenetically, changes specific to things affect potentialities, just as changes in potentialities affect things. This is why Deleuze says that both potentialities and actualities are *real*—and that an actualization is not a realisation, but rather, that an actualization is a morphogenetical process, a question of assuming form.

From an ontological standpoint, things look rather different. When it comes to things, we value historically those changes that are preserved as material traces. It can be as trivial as a line drawn on a piece of paper. If something is affected so that the change, preserved as a trace, could in the past only have constituted one specific event, then that trace corresponds *analytically* to the historical occurrence of that event. Photographs, handwritten manuscripts, fingerprints and relics are examples of objects invested with the value of such a testimonial relation to a past event.[2] As Kant might have said, it cannot be denied without contradiction that their preserved traces are informed exclusively by the occurrence of one particular event.[3]

But a thing often bears material traces from a change that could have constituted several different events. When we come across a different style of poetry in the works of a poet, or a differently developed fossil in a younger geological sedimentation, we clearly detect a change, but we cannot say analytically what event is constituted by this change. Does the new poem constitute a new literary discovery, an experiment or a joke; does the fossil constitute new behaviour, new habitats or a singular mutation? In these cases we need to compare a particular object to other related objects so

2 It was the great achievement of Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin to show how these processes always need recourse to a mythological frame of knowledge in order to be carried out as factual social practice.

3 Kant's definition of analytical judgments is that the predicate of the judgment is already present in the subject and that this cannot be denied without contradiction (Cf. Kant 17).

that the most likely event can be identified. Relationships between objects in such historical or palæontological analyses will always be of a *representational* kind.[4] Material traces on affected objects will be said to represent an event to the extent that these are consistent with each other. The same type of representationally based analysis is also viable when dealing with objects whose material traces stem from a number of different changes, or when a number of different objects together show changes that constitute an event. Representation is necessary in all but analytical correspondences. It is the means with which science can compare and analyze objects, and eventually identify which changes constitute which events, and under what circumstances.

Archives were made to facilitate the labour of identifying events from representational analyses. It is in this sense that we today understand archives to be the foundation for historical research.[5] Archives are organized to aid the representational identification of events. The organization of an archive is therefore constructed to arrange objects into strands. Every type of classification has as its main purpose to put things together in linear arrangements (Ranganathan 18). A classification system is what creates and maintains linear consistency within a growing and changing catalogue. The strands thus created (e.g., of all the works of a single author, or all the eggs of a given family of reptiles) enable representational analysis to discover and compare preserved changes, and thus to identify a proper historical event. The discoveries, comparisons, and analyses that an archive allows can only detect one type of change. Only the preserved changes of affected objects can be grouped and classified in an archive. Therefore, the only events that can be identified in an archive are those that may be reconstituted by means of representation.

This defines the limit of the archive I suggested at the beginning of this article when referring to *The Atlas Group Archive.* Its collection of potentialities challenges the notion of an archive, since potentialities are not determinable by means of representation. The artefacts in this archive do not represent events as they actually happened. Rather, they reveal changes of historical potentialities, and those changes constitute a number of immanent events, which, as Walid Raad has managed to show,

4 It should be noted that I use the term "representation" here in the Kantian sense to refer to what is necessary for a synthetic judgment.

5 Archives are of course not only used for historical research in the narrow sense. Biologists, chemists, economists and sociologists also consult archives to analyse how complex sets of representational relationships may constitute observable events.

may be catalogued and archived if targeted with rather intricate strategies. The theoretical framework for such an archive was first outlined in Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge,* where he wrote, "The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events" (Foucault 129).

In the following, I will focus on the organization of *The Atlas Group Archive* as exhibited on the website, <www.theatlasgroup.org>. Graphically, it is a very sober website in muted colours and simple type fonts, typical of a traditional institution. But the introductory text on the home page reveals an aspect that a respectable historical archive would never admit to: that the aim is not only to locate, preserve, and study different historical artefacts, but also to produce them. The archive is divided into three sections: "Authored Files," "Found Files," and "Atlas Group Productions." Yet one soon finds out that there is no clear distinction between what is found, authored, and self-made. Under the section "Authored Files" one may find the Fadl Fakhouri File. It contains three individual titles: "Notebook Volume 38," "Notebook Volume 72," and "Films." Dr Fakhouri, one may read, was until his death in 1993 "one of the foremost historians of the Lebanese wars," and he donated his 226 notebooks and two short films to *The Atlas Group Archive.* However, searching for this famous historian in bibliographies and indexes yields nothing. A web search produces references only to the *Atlas Group Archive* and to one daring German journalist who once posed the question: "Who is this Fadl Fakhouri?"[6]

If he existed, he donated a most challenging record of contemporary history. The photographs of Dr Fakhouri himself in the series "Civilizationally, We Do Not Dig Holes to Bury Ourselves" (Figure 6) shows a handsome young man in his late twenties out for dinner, or posing in front of monuments during his one-time visit to Paris. These images are said to have been found in a brown envelope titled in Arabic, "Never as I remember." (However, these images are not available on the Atlas Group Archives website, but may be seen on the site of Galerie Sfeir-Semler, which represents Walid Raad in Germany.[7]) An analogy of a profound historical gap appears between the title of this imaginary envelope of autobiographical snapshots, "Never as I remember" and Notebook Volume 72 in the archive's Fakhouri files called "Missing Lebanese Wars" (Figure 7) which contains gambling sheets. Ludomaniac historians in Lebanon would meet every Sunday on the racetrack to bet—though not on the horses—but on how many seconds

6 Elke Buhr, "Wimmelbild Dokumenta."

7 See <http://www.sfeir-semler.de/sites/Raad/00-raad-artist.htm>.

before or after crossing the finishing line the photographer would snap the picture of the winning horse.

This file of betting sheets, together with the title "Never as I remember," signals the existence of a gulf between the past experience of an event, the historical experience of a past event, and the historical documentation of that event. Since the mode of documentation in both of these files is photographic, that gulf amounts to nothing less than a disjointing of the analytical relationship intrinsic to photography. This exposes the myth behind the historical proof value of a snapshot or a photo finish: the "I was there" or "this horse won." Historians gambling on the discrepancy between the testimony of photographic evidence and the occurrence of a photographed event must have understood that the absence of an analytical correspondence does not leave an empty space. Using the terms of Manuel de Landa, the vacuated space can be seen as a space of potential historical events, located "between" intensive spaces of variables (de Landa 60). The group of gambling historians seems to have recognized that these variables have an altogether different kind of value than the analytical proof value usually associated with photography. The winner of the bet does not win because he rightly guessed which horse stood to win the race; the gambler who wins is he who accurately guessed how much faster or slower the photographic variables reach their state transition ("click") compared to the variables that produce the common double experience of a finish (when it happens and when it is officially announced). The gambler bets on the relative incapacity to reconcile these two intensive spaces of variables. The game of betting is possible because both spaces of complex variables are produced by the virtual conflict space between them. Hence, the incapacity to unify them is itself a potentiality that can be photographically actualized and become measurable in the photo finish as the distance between the snout of the horse and the white stripe. Odds for this bet are impossible to determine: it is a pure chance, a roll of the dice. The two complex spaces of variables reveal an *a priori* conflict in the potentialities of the race, actualized in photography. For everyone else on the racetrack, the event is the decision of an undecided: *that* horse won; for the historians, the event is a play with two undecidable ontogenetical processes: how much does their irreconcilability actualize itself this time? This is why no conclusions can be drawn from the results, and why the bet, so to speak, goes on forever; as Brian Massumi puts it, "Potential is the *immanence* of a thing to its still indeterminate variation, under way" (Massumi 9).

If this relationship between the photo finish and the event on the racing track can be transferred to the snapshot images of the Lebanese historian

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in Paris and the event "I was there", then who was Fadl Fakhouri? He may have been a very forgetful historian, one who could not remember having been photographed in Paris and who did not publish any of his research. More likely, he could be an allegorical name for the conflict between the intensive spaces of historical experience and photographic document. Or, as a common argument has it, both Dr Fakhouri and the histories about him are purely fictional. Chances are that his name is indeed invented, for Fadl is a Muslim name while Fakhouri is Christian, and they would not likely be mixed. In Arabic, the latter name can mean "someone proud, known for bragging," while the former means "surplus" or "reserve"; it may also carry the meaning of "superior," "good," or "friendly." Thus the name Fadl Fakhouri suggests indeed an allegory of the religious conflict of the war, and, as a historian, his name calls him a boaster of a storyteller, someone fairly uncommitted to objective history as it really was. But like the racetrack images, the name also indicates that the space of conflict between experience and document is not empty. Its different meanings suggest variable values: *how much can he invent this story; indeed how much can his story be invented?* Recall that the collection of tourist snapshots of this allegorical figure is titled "Never as I remember." The cluster between his allegorical name, his failed remembrance, and these photographs reveals another virtual conflict space pertaining to the potentiality of writing a history of the Lebanese wars. The space of potentiality between experience and the document is itself able to produce history.

What history would that be? I think it is a history of the potential conditions of life during the war. The file that relates most immediately to the civil war is Dr Fakhuori's Notebook Volume 38. It has been exhibited under the name "Already Been in a Lake of Fire" (Figure 8), and consists of 17 sheets with pasted images of cars, apparently cut out from picture magazines. Visitors are informed that each car corresponds in make, colour, and model to a car used as a bomb during the war. Around the images of cars is information in Arabic about where and when a bomb exploded and the size of the detonation. "Already Been in a Lake of Fire" is a mere sample of Fakhouri's entire notebook, which contains a complete record of all 145 explosions that took place during the war.[8] Of course, the relationship between the documents in this file and the historical events is completely allegorical. The only thing that binds the archived sheets to the event of car bombs is Dr Fakhouri's good name—which I believe constitutes an allegory of the

8 The figure of 145 car bombs is contested by another file in the archive: "My Neck is Thinner Than a Hair," which is listed under the self-produced files, and contains 245 dossiers, one for each car bomb.

religious conflict and the potentiality to write its history with variable values of experience and photographic documents. A crucial variable for Raad's historical experience of the war is that the most significant event of a car bomb was not when one actually exploded, but the perpetual anxiety that a bomb *could* explode at any time, without warning. That every car was potentially a bomb led to rumours spreading in Beirut that certain makes and colours were more frequently used for car bombs than others, and this affected all conditions of life during the civil war (Raad 2002b, n.p.). Fakhouri's documents in Notebook Volume 38 correspond allegorically to this experience: its images are as imprecisely cut out and pasted on the sheet of paper as a car bomb would be imprecise in its targeting and killing; the text around the pasted images reveals that the regulating distance in an archive, between catalogue and documents, has collapsed, just like the desperate attempts at classifying which cars are most likely to be used as bombs.

In these ways, the Fakhouri file identifies a virtual historical space between photographic documents and historical experience. This space is a required element in the archive of potentialities. Experience and document must be understood as constituting this conflictory space of virtual variables that determines the historical potentiality of an event. The value of virtual variables is a measure of the historical situation in which potentialities may be actualized, that is, in which constellation of paradoxical statements, images, and technologies they may take form. The two other files in the section, "Operator # 17 File" and the "Souheil Bachar File," set up different constellations and identify other potentialities.[9] All of these files have different allegorical authors, or agent personae, like Fadl Fakhouri.

"Found Files" is another section of the archive. It serves to increase the values of variables in the Authored Files so that these can reach a productive state. There is only one file in the Found File section. It is called "Secrets in the Open Sea" and contains six large monochromatic photographs of various shades of blue. These were found underneath the ruins of the collapsed commercial district in Beirut, and were later donated to *The Atlas*

9 Operator #17 was an agent surveilling the popular seaside boardwalk of Beirut from hidden inside a mobile café. Every evening, he turned his video camera away from his duties and filmed the sunset instead. For this he was dismissed in 1996, but allowed to keep his sunset footage, which he donated to The Atlas Group Archive.

The Souheil Bachar files consist of two videotapes (of a total 53 tapes) produced in collaboration with the archive. Here Bachar records the memories of being held hostage together with five Americans in 1985 by Islamic militants in Lebanon.

Group Archive by the Lebanese government. The website recounts the following story:

> In late 1994, The Atlas Group sent the prints to laboratories in France and the United States for technical analysis. Remarkably, the laboratories recovered small black and white latent images from the prints, and the small portraits represent group portraits of men and women. The Atlas Group was able to identify all the individuals represented in the small black and white prints, and it turned out that they were all individuals who had been found dead in the Mediterranean between 1975 and 1990.

I hardly need to repeat that this story does not describe events as they really took place. One should instead consider this story as listing three rhetorical conditions for boosting enough value into the variables to set off a productive tension between them. First is the archive's capacity to mythologize, that is, to create value by relating to other well-known and already established histories with recognized value. Here, the common story is that of unveiling: the mysterious appearance of a hidden image. "Secrets of the Open Sea" mythologizes, or creates value, by quoting the technical analysis of the Turin cloth, which in October 1978 increased the relic's value dramatically by revealing a portrait of Jesus Christ. A second capacity for creating value is effectuated with the very term "technical analysis," which serves to reify the relationship between object and myth. As a term frequently used in certain types of advertisement (most notably for cosmetics) it rarely refers to anything but an abstract notion of transcendental knowledge. "Technical analysis" is a phrase with which a relation between an object and a myth can be certified. If the laboratories are furthermore located in France and The United States, one rhetorically adds refinement and financial resources to the value of certification. The third capacity to produce value is the identification process. Here, *The Atlas Group Archive* ties the discovered images together with unrelated past traumatic events into a new knot: like stumbling upon a clue in a detective story, the images raise new questions which increase the possibility of understanding the many dead bodies in the Mediterranean. Together, the three effectuated capacities in the Found Files raise the tension between the archive's documents and its historical experience to a highly productive rate.

The third and last section is the Atlas Group Productions. What is specific about this section is not, as the name indicates, that its objects are produced by the archive; rather, in this section the potentiality values of virtual variables are preserved. This is important because the historicity of

potential events is not, like the historicity of representational events, preserved in the material traces of a thing. Potential events may be preserved only in the constellation of values and their ratio of variables. But since a particular potentiality changes immediately with other potentialities, one cannot preserve a potential event by not changing it. For an event to be preserved as a potential event, it must change according to its surrounding events. Hence, The Atlas Group Productions enable the preservation of potentialities by letting the being of events grow and attain the state toward which it is tending, what Deleuze called the self-nourishment of Being. It is important that the two files in this section are continuously unfolding.

The first of the two files is an ongoing project called "Sweet Talk, A Photographic Document of Beirut," in which participants have been supplied with cameras and asked to photograph the parts of Beirut they consider of particular aesthetical, cultural, political or popular significance. The first images were produced in 1977, and the cameras were specially produced by the Archive in order to facilitate candid photography during the war. They produced a 43 mm circular positive b/w image. The photographers were asked to note the time and three different street addresses where the picture had been taken, of which only one address would be correct (Raad 2002a 383).

The other file is called "My Neck is Thinner Than a Hair" (Figure 9) and is in itself a history of the 245 car bombs that detonated during the war. Each bomb will have a separate dossier and each dossier may take four different forms: installation, publication, lecture, and screening. One of the many stories focused on here is that the only thing remaining after a car bomb was the engine. This was often thrown hundreds of meters from the site of detonation and could land anywhere. Photographers made a sport of finding them (Raad 2002b).

By installing the preservation of potentialities into the tension between photographic documentation and historical experience, the files of the Atlas Group Productions do not close the circle but, rather, open into a widening gyre. There is a very strong reason for this strategy. I think it could be expressed as a desire not to reduce the experience of the traumatic civil war to verbal or visual clichés when addressing it in historical terms. Experiments in how to historically articulate collective traumas, such as the concentration camps of World War II, the genocides in former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, or Cambodia, or the apartheid regimes of South Africa, without reducing their horrors to formal jargon have been conducted by Jacques Derrida, Daniel Libeskind, Avital Ronell, Thomas Keenan, and several others associated with late deconstruction. Questions of responsibility

are key to these approaches. Walid Raad's admirable project of an archive of potentialities is a very different approach to these questions. It is one where deconstruction's intricate and often seductive plays on language have been abandoned for a more vital immediacy which does not need to wrest itself free from the responsibility of representational language. Instead Raad begins by asking what potentialities make representation possible, and, when it is not possible, what other relationships may sustain value as historical experience.

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