

# INTERROGATION NATION

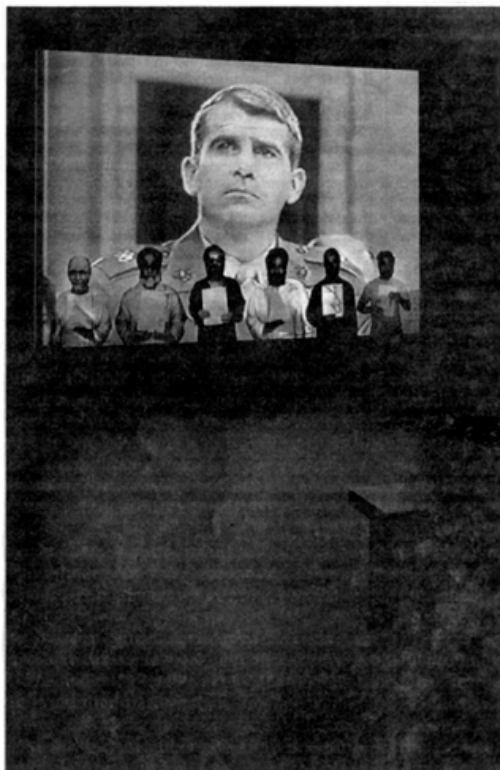
BY JERRY SALTZ

Just after dawn, on the morning of April 13, 1300, Dante enters the Earthly Paradise at the top of Mt. Purgatory. There, amid an angelic procession, a prophet sings a line from the Song of Solomon, "Come with me from Lebanon and be crowned." Beatrice then appears and speaks to Dante. The poet is overcome by her presence: he weeps

and stammers. Of this impossible but sublime meeting in the 64th line of the 64th canto of *The Divine Comedy*, Jorge Luis Borges wrote, "Beatrice existed infinitely for Dante; Dante existed very little, perhaps not at all, for Beatrice." Borges ruefully concludes, "To fall in love is to create a religion that has a fallible god." Walid Raad, founder of the semi-fictitious Atlas Group, a collective that archives ephemera from Lebanon's civil war, shares both Borges's proclivity for elaborate fiction laced with apparent fact and Dante's rhetoric of exile. Raad transforms his native Lebanon into a kind of Beatrice, or lost love.

For Raad, Lebanon is a Gordian knot of notaries, dentists, professors, and mechanics—a principality of would-be revolutionaries, marginal characters, and heartbroken souls. Instead of the totality of war, Raad fixates on its parts. He lets us know that there were 3,641 car bombs detonated in Beirut between 1975 and 1991. In seven collages titled *Notebook Volume 38: Already Been in a Lake of Fire*, an invented character named Dr. Fadl Fakhouri presents pictures of cars and Arabic writing. One image reads, "Silver Volvo; August 20, 1985; 56 killed; 120 injured; 100 kg of TNT; 24 cars burned; 11 buildings burned." Raad/Fakhouri fetishizes the facts of violence in Beirut the way Henry Darger recorded the weather in Chicago. Elsewhere, he gives us the serial numbers of engines that were blown from car bombs, how far each motor flew, and where it landed.

In *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes*, Raad, 38, recounts what he calls the "captivity narrative" of five American hostages held in Lebanon in the 1980s, adding a fictitious Arab who describes nocturnal homoerotic encounters. In *Miraculous Beginnings* we see a hallucinogenic 52-second film made



Photograph by David Allison

## Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (#17 and #31)

by Dr. Fakhouri in which he exposed a frame every time he thought the war had come to an end. It's an abstract image of lost hopes and wishful thinking. In *I Only*

vision of his war-torn country is part apparition, part anxiety attack, and part healing fantasy. You can almost feel the incubus of history squatting on his chest and recit-

*Wish That I Could Weep* we see furtive views of sunsets filmed by a Lebanese army intelligence officer posted to monitor a boardwalk in Beirut.

Borges wrote about the "pleasure of useless and out-of-the-way erudition." Rather than taking pleasure in arcana, Raad's work exudes a mania for minutiae that turns melancholic and openly joyless. His art is like a detective report or a communiqué from a secret agent: Facts are related, occurrences indexed, detachment and delusion mingle with obsession.

Yet for all his pseudoscientific esotericism and his ultra-educated post-structuralism, Raad (or at least his character) is a textbook romantic: a man in search of the miraculous, a knight-errant taken with political intrigue, social estrangement, and emptiness—someone preoccupied with connections and affinities, real or not. As with all romantics, Raad is homesick. Lebanon for him is a refuge and nightmare, a utopia and a cult. Raad's

ing Lucian's description of the passage to the Isle of Dreams: "As we approach, it recedes, and seems to get further and further off." This is Raad's relationship to Lebanon's civil war.

As poignant as several of these pieces are, I'm not really sure Raad is an artist. He's more of a social scientist using art or examining power—which is fine. He mixes Joseph Beuys, Marcel Broodthaers, and David Wilson's Museum of Jurassic Technology, but there's not a lot of alchemical energy to what he does. His work is smart, doctrinaire, and poetic, but formally it's very nth generation conceptualism. You wonder if all this fictionalized fact, factualized fiction, and secret-intrigue business is even necessary. Sometimes it feels wooden and hokey. His melodramatic Bas Jan Ader-like titles and his talk about "authority" and "authorship" suggest Raad is suave but has a latent pedantic streak. Also, nearly every work here dates from between 1996 and 2000 and has been seen in international exhibitions. He needs to do some new work.

In the end, Raad submerges you in the lyrical ethos of Lebanon's 14 seasons in hell. Tellingly, he omits certain figures. The war left approximately 144,240 people dead and 197,500 wounded. Another 17,415 went missing, 1 million people left the country (including Raad's family), nearly that many were rendered refugees. Raad—who splits his time between Brooklyn and Beirut and who teaches at Cooper Union—is the opposite of the slash-and-burn artist Thomas Hirschhorn, whose show is currently up at Barbara Gladstone. Both men deal with war and memory. Hirschhorn's work grabs you by the collar and says, "Pay attention." Raad is more Machiavellian. He's like a figure in a Renaissance painting pointing to something in the picture. He stands between worlds. When this strategy works, Raad summons the plaintive spirit of heartache. When it doesn't, you just end up with paragraphs of explanation. Fortunately, it works often enough.