O priceless market town! How inestimable thou art... in the way of becoming holy, when abandonment to every disgusting inclination of envy, rudeness, and vulgarity becomes an expression of the worship of God!

- Søren Kierkegaard, 1848

I.

Like any art worth its name, Walid Raad's documents the world as much as it testifies to something else, something other beyond the horizon of the brute, material here and now or the simple index of then and there. The part that exceeds the material world might be called 'fiction', of course, or 'fantasy', or 'form', or 'self', or 'nation', or even 'God', but none of these fabulations by itself will help us much with the art in question, or, for that matter, with any other. Rather, we would be better served by using one of Raad's own more measured characterizations — 'hysterical symptoms' is probably the best — to make sense of that part which exceeds the documentary. Or, we could simply call that excess 'desire' or even 'hope'. No matter how we diagnose this otherworldly or yearning or delusional part of Raad's work, however, the more mundane reality of the workaday world is still documented there — to the side, perhaps, or out of focus, or lost in the compressed and circumscribed visual thicket of everyday life given by photography — as a kind of remainder lurking nearby, waiting patiently to have its say.

There is nothing new about this confusion between realms: the blurring of the ideal and the real, the aesthetic and the political, the symptomatic and the somatic, has always been the signal concern of art, the concern that distinguishes it from straight documentation and simple craft or vulgar propaganda and coarse commerce. Put differently, we can simply say that even if modern art has almost never been directly religious it has almost always been so residually as a medium that insists on seeing another, better world in the shadow of the world as it is — even when it does so through the lens of cynicism or opportunism or disenchantment or despair. As such, art’s images of this dreamy, distant potential have no choice but to remain blurry or ill defined if they are to retain their status as art and fend off being folded immediately into commerce and propaganda, on one side, or back into religiosity proper, on the other. Said simply, what art has always amounted to when it has not yet become subject to any of its more worldly endgames is a 'no' to business as usual, and it declares its refusal abstractly in the
name of something that is yet to be made real or tangible or true - its 'fiction' (or 'fantasy', or 'form', or 'self', or 'nation', or 'God').

So it is that art, when it is done right, breathes a dream of publicness into an image that politics and commerce only later squeeze out to their private advantage - the advantage of kings and clergymen, states and industries, bureaucrats, consumers and petty tycoons rather than the public at large. This was as true for Greek statues and Gothic cathedrals as it was for the ruins of Caspar David Friedrich, the spires of Vladimir Tatlin or the fancies of Andy Warhol. Raad's enterprise is defined by the same knotty intercourse of airy, never-quite-graspable artistic projections, on the one hand, and the pinch and clatch of political and commercial implementations, on the other. In the end, this is what makes it good art, serious art, art that meaningfully stakes its place in the world in the name of art itself.

That said, there are two distinct varieties of such airiness: that which names its lofty ideals and that which does not, that which inflates itself with values like beauty or morality or truth or justice, and that which finds its ethical and aesthetic role by floating free of any such ideals, that which conjures its airiness as universal essence and that which experiences it fleetingly as the transience of existence. Both see the world with blurry vision but where one squints in order to see the forest for the trees, the other finds its freedom in the blur of movement. We have a pretty good sense of the history of the older essentialist ideal, of course - think of Plato's theory of forms, for example, or the Augustinian account of God's will, or Kant's definition of enlightenment - but the newer autonomy of momentary, existential signification has a history too and, as such, conforms to its own identifiable conventions, structure and style.

The 'free act takes place in time which is flowing', so how this latter ideal was put in its most influential formulation, and its measure of freedom has become the dominant standard for contemporary art. We could label that style 'postmodern' or post-Enlightenment or 'art after the death of God' but that would be simplistic at best. A more nuanced account would understand postmodern indeterminacy to be no less bound up with modernity writ large than modernism's sublation of religious impulses. Philosophically, we might trace that indeterminacy back to Descartes' methodology of doubt, for example, and economically, as far back as the rise of mercantilism - back, that is, to its own identifiable conventions, structure and style.

As Raad puts it, the problem for the viewer confronted by both such forms of airiness is that of being addressed as an 'empirically-determined person' or the 'social person in us, as man, woman, straight or gay, Arab or American'. While the technology of this address is becoming ever more sophisticated (soon, Raad worried, 'we are going to be empirically determined in real time constantly') the implicit threat has always been the nemesis of the best art regardless of whether such empirical measures were used for the purposes of crusades or genocides, old school imperialism or new school globalization, nationalism or populism,
that has dominated the Middle East with particular intensity and, in one way or another, affects us all.

The most pertinent philosophical framing of this opposition comes from the still-standing distinction between ‘closed’ versus ‘open’ societies and ‘static’ versus ‘dynamic’ religions first articulated systematically by Henri Bergson in his 1932 book, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion,* and later recast as a neo-liberal plank by Karl Popper in his 1945 two-volume treatise, *The Open Society and its Enemies.* Popper understood social closure or stasis to be a function of false moral determinism, of predetermining social development based on an ideal past (‘moral conservatism’), an ideal future (‘moral futurism’) or notions of ideal form (‘moral sociologism’ or ‘moral modernism’) against which he posited the true determination of what we might call ‘moral in-the-moment-ism.’ *History has no meaning*, he asserted without qualification: *We cannot attempt to explain Beethoven’s genius in this way, or in any way at all* (as part and parcel of the so-called ‘Age of Revolution’, for example) because genius just happens and any attempt to explain it, or anything else for that matter, always induces an epistemological crisis that leads to social closure and religious stasis.²

The kernel of this historical positivism was initially elaborated in 1898 by Bergson when he asked: *Can time be adequately represented by space?* Answering his own question he concluded that: *Yes, if you are dealing with time flowing*, but *No, if you speak of time flowing*. Time, he asserted, is freedom only when it is not spatialized or given predetermined formal parameters:

Now, the free act takes place in time which is flowing and not in time which has already flown. Freedom is therefore a fact, and among the facts which we observe there is none clearer. All the difficulties of the problem, and the problem itself, arise from the desire to endow duration with the same attributes as extensity, to interpret a succession by a simultaneity, and to express the idea of freedom in a language into which it is obviously untranslatable.³

As stated before, overstepping boundaries is the aim of all art — whether as ‘hysterical symptoms’ in Raad’s terminology, or as ‘freedom’ in Bergson’s. It is what allows us to identify art qua art. What we have not resolved though is whether this freedom is a function of temporalizing space — in the un-tethering of the signifier, say, or the unfettered exchange of the market, or in the spatial mobility of our increasingly globalized cosmopolitanism — or whether it is a function of spatializing time — the moral conservativism of our own resurgent religiosity, say, or the moral futurism of the French and Russian revolutions, or the moral modernism of modern art, or the moral sociologism adopted by most forms of identity politics. To picture the blurry or the true, the closed or the open? To look inland towards Damascus, the ‘Beating Heart of Arabism’, as one of Raad’s peers has put it, or to open up to the sea of the new economic world order? These are the questions that concern contemporary Lebanese art in general, and Raad’s as much or more than any other. They are also the questions which, in one way or another, are faced by all of us.

It was the trauma of the fifteen-year Lebanese civil wars that made these questions more pressing, for sure, but it did not give rise to them in the first instance. Indeterminacy as a negative marker of openness and dynamism, of freedom, of experience in flux, of a broadly Bergsonian view, has long held a distinctive appeal to modern Lebanese, just as it did to the Young Turks, for example, or the Dreyfusard French, for that matter. The ‘principal tendency’ of this view, a prominent Lebanese expatriate observed in 1924, ‘is one of exchange — exchange of culture as well as commodities’, and its resulting ‘universal consciousness, multifarious, multicolour, prismatic’ was to ‘harmonize with, nay, reinforce, the culture of every race.’ Or as a Beirut banker put it to *Time* magazine in 1954, *Beirut handles capital like the Suez Canal handles ships.* Indeed, by all accounts, the modernity of the Christian Lebanese might be said to be ‘prismatic’, to lie between two distinct worlds — the beating heart of Arabism and the open sea of global capitalism — more than it is an experience of world unto itself.

At least one thoughtful student of the work of Raad and his peers, has defined this tendency in strictly confessional terms: the foundation of Lebanese modern art is Christian, she writes; its cosmopolitanism, its ‘openness and diversity’, its outward-directed airiness, is ‘rooted in the presence of its Christian communities and their acceptance of European culture as part of their own history.’ This is probably fair enough: Lebanese contemporary art, like the cultural affinities of the Beirut-centred Christian Lebanon and decorated Christian Lebanese diaspora that Raad is part of, is nothing if not postmodern and cosmopolitan, nothing if not a function of global capitalism, nothing if not born of what one author calls in another context a *Christo-Capitalist Assemblage.*⁴ If left at that, however, Raad’s work would have little enduring purchase on us as art qua art, little sense of a living, desiring relation between the blurry and the true, little sense of what it feels like to be a sensitive soul working in and out of the Middle East. Indeed, it may be the beating heart of Arabism, more than anything else, that opens up the meaning of Raad’s compelling art by standing for the aesthetic realm of the ideal and against global capitalism’s political-economic realm of the real.

III.

*He suffered from being a genius in a market town,* so Kierkegaard indulged himself in 1848 and we might imagine something like this role for Raad — or at least put it to his work as a modernist litmus test.⁵ The measure of any such genius would have to be found in the hysterical symptoms, in the part where the true becomes blurry, where the material world becomes ‘fiction’, or ‘fantasy’, or ‘form’, or ‘self’, or ‘nonsense’, or ‘God’. Insofar as the movement from true to blurry in Raad’s work can be diagnosed as symptomatic — i.e., as an external material marker of an internal disease, or malaise or disorder — that movement returns us back to the realm of the materially true, back to the realm of documentary.

The vast reserve of oil underlying the Arab states has long occupied the spatial role of an enclosed earthly body whose energies are tapped by the open-ended temporality of the global capitalist mind. The history of British Petroleum and its predecessors in Iran, with all the political and economic complexity this has entailed, is just one example. There are two ways we might think about this image, one given by Bergson, the other by Marx. In Bergson’s account, humanity was ‘limited so long as it was confined to utilizing … visible, forces’ (such as labour or wind power). However, once the hidden energies ‘deposited in coal, oil, etc.’
were released 'a power so mighty, so out of proportion' with existing human nature gave rise to 'tremendous social, political and international problems'. 'The body', Bergson concluded (meaning the human body, but also the social body and the earth's material body), 'is a means of action, but it is also an obstacle to perception' and that obstacle needed to be overcome with the 'mystic genius' of the open and dynamic mind.

Marx's understanding of genius was different, of course, and for our purposes we might even say that it was opposite. The Bergsonian free act that 'takes place in time which is flowing' would not have been an act of freedom for Marx rather than an act of exploitation. Capitalism, he wrote emphatically, will 'tear down every barrier to intercourse' only to 'annihilate this space with time'. Capitalism temporalizes and desacralizes space. In contrast, politics, when done right, re-spatialize and re-socialize time by extending the dominion of the sovereign act from the private to the public, from the mind of the individual will to the body politic of a society or nation. Political freedom is not freedom from politics, not freedom of the individual from accountability to others, but instead freedom to speak and to organize. This was the noble (if continuously travestied) dream of the bourgeoisie's public sphere, just as it was of the proletariat's 'actually existing' socialism. The great ruins of democratic deliberation -- the museum, the university, the city square, the parliamentary chamber, the union hall, the newspaper -- still preserve a glimmer of the old aura that first radiated from the monuments, in its freezing of moments and plotting of distances, in its concretization of language and de-focusing of vision, in its labyrinthine elaborations of archive, authorship, analysis and institutionality -- even as it does so in a manner that is woefully, painfully, tragically abstract. The suffering that gathers in the blur of that abstraction is its measure of the true, its measure of becoming documentary, its measure of genius in a market town. It is left to us to discover for ourselves whether we bear those symptoms as well or have passed by unscathed in the free flow of time.

3 Fouad El-Baz in "1935 Dust Storm, New Mexico 1935", answer to question 125, "We are convinced" online 2002/2006.