

Chad Elias. *Posthumous Images: Contemporary Art and Memory Politics in Post-Civil War Lebanon.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2018. xvi + 243 pp. \$25.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8223-4766-8.

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In 2002, curator Catherine David launched her Contemporary Arab Representations project with an exhibition and a series of seminars focused on artistic production from the Lebanese capital. The exhibition, which opened in Fundació Antoni Tàpies in Barcelona before traveling to Rotterdam, Umeå, and the Venice Biennale became one of the first major platforms of contemporary Arab art in the West. In subsequent years, many of these Beirut-based practitioners—often collectively referred to as the post-civil war artists—have become well-established figures in the international art scene; in 2007 *Art Journal* dedicated its summer issue to Lebanon’s contemporary art scene. However, with *Posthumous Images: Contemporary Art and Memory Politics in Post-Civil War Lebanon*, Chad Elias presents the first academic monograph on the subject.

Posthumous Images is structured around five chapters, each of which focuses on one to four artworks. Rather than offer a survey of postwar Lebanese art, Elias focuses on a group of artists who work in photography and video—although his broad definition comes to include architecture, film, and performance—so as to “foreground the medium-specific questions of memory” with which they engage (p. 19). For Elias, cultural production is not merely reflective of the sociopoliti-

cal divisions that shape postwar memory, but is instead “an essential site of political contestation in which communal memory is both constituted and potentially redefined” (p. 10). The selected artists—Joana Hajithomas, Ghassan Halwani, Khalil Joreige, Lamia Joriege, Bernard Khoury, Rabih Mroué, Marwan Rechmaoui, and Akram Zattari—both reappropriate existent images to challenge the authority of political discourse in Lebanon, and produce new images to “provide representation” for those “excluded from the dominant sectarian articulations of subjecthood” (p. 4). However, Elias argues that this question of representation is a slippery one, for the artworks in discussion resist “the claim to speak for or give voice to the subaltern” (p. 56), and remain “sensitive to the power dynamics of delegated speech” (p. 75).

The problem of proximity manifests itself in different ways throughout *Posthumous Images*. The lack of distance from the artists themselves is particularly striking; Elias’s excessive reliance on the words and writings of his very eloquent subjects to establish the crux of his argument often makes it difficult to recognize his critical interventions. Indeed the misinterpretations of the works that he identifies are often countered or corrected by returning once more to the artists’ own expla-

nations of their intentions. Rarely does *Posthumous Images* offer a critical engagement with these auto critiques. Consequently, differentiating the author's position from that of his subjects proves challenging.

The first two chapters of *Posthumous Images* focus on the use of audiovisual media as ideological weapons. By utilizing different modes of reenactment, the artworks/artists in question "problematize the representation of subjects" whose stories have excluded from the official state narrative (p. 22). Chapter 1 is a study of Raad's video, *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes* (2001), a recreation of the 1985 Western Hostage from the perspective of a fictional Arab captive held with the American and European men. By presenting Bashar's narrative of the "homoerotics of [his] interracial captivity," Raad at first appears to be granting representation to a subject whose voice has been absent from the Western narrative (p. 45). However, the untranslatability of Bashar's testimony reaffirms the impossibility of speaking for the silenced. In chapter 2, Elias examines the reenactment methods used by Zaatari and Mroué in *All is Well on the Border* (1997) and *Three Posters* (1999) respectively. By drawing on "the strategies of staging and reenactment," both pieces "unmake the language of resistance" by calling into question the dominant myths of heroic martyrdom propagated by both leftists and Hezbollah (p. 57). Similar to Raad, Zaatari and Mroué reject the possibility of producing a more reliable or representative historical narrative.

Chapter 3 approaches the question of the state-imposed amnesia surrounding the eighteen thousand Lebanese missing by examining representations of the disappeared—in Halwani's street drawings and Hajithomas and Khalil Joreige's photographs, *Lasting Images* (2003)—and the suspended state of the families left behind, what Elias calls "communities of witnessing"—in Hajithomas and Khalil Joreige's film *A Perfect Day* (2005) and Lamia Joriege's documentary *Here and*

Perhaps Elsewhere (2003). These artists, Elias argues, do not limit their critique to a questioning of photography's reliability as a historical document or an insistence on "a politics of truth" but instead suggest "hearsay, gossip, and family and community memory" as modes through which artists can "unearth[ing] and retell[ing] traumatic histories" they may not have personally experienced (p. 129).

In chapter 4 Elias shifts his analysis from "images in the city to a consideration of the city itself as a set of images" so as to focus on the intersection between "geography, architecture, and popular memory" in Beirut (p. 132). In doing so, "the medium-specific questions" posed by photography and video—the focal point of the previous three chapters—are somewhat compromised as we turn to architecture and (counter) monuments. In his sculptural projects, *Spectre* (2006) and *Monument for the Living* (2002/2008), Rechmaoui reconstructs modified models of landmark Beirut buildings. Through the hollowing out of these structures, he produces ghostly monuments, stripped of the ornamentation usually associated with commemoration. The second half of the chapter argues that Khoury's infamous nightclub BO18—built on the remains of a Palestinian refugee camp, the site of a massacre carried out by Christian militias in 1976—"unsettles the idea of the monument as a space of mnemonic reflection" (p. 156). Rather than create a (counter) monument, Khoury designs "a living memory space" that "heightens the tensions between willful amnesia and the obsession with the past" (p. 157).

The past is engaged with differently in chapter 5. Here Elias focuses on a recent interest amongst these artists in "the utopian projects of the pre-civil war past" as a means to access a pre-traumatic imagining of the future (p. 25). In his analysis of Hajithomas and Khalil Joreige's film *The Lebanese Rocket Society* (2012)—an exploration of Lebanon's brief involvement in the 1960s space race—Elias argues that rather than

commemorate this unacknowledged moment in Lebanese history, the filmmakers seek to create a productive conversation between these “aspirations of the past” and the “imperatives of a postutopian present” (p. 166). For this purpose, science fiction proves the most apt genre, allowing the artists to retrospectively unearth possibilities for a different future.

While Elias’s analysis of the ten or so selected artworks is detailed and thought-provoking, the chapters individually and collectively feel myopic in focus. Stepping back from the specific artworks so as to situate them within the artists’ larger bodies of work would have given readers a better understanding of the continuities and significance of the themes that concern both the author and his subjects. Structurally, Elias’s choice to address multiple artworks in the same chapter sequentially rather than simultaneously furthers this sense of the works as isolated units. Similarly, although Elias weaves essential information regarding the historical and political moments that inform each artwork through his chapters, one has little sense of the broader artistic and cultural landscape within which these works exist, neither in a national nor regional context. This is not to insist on a comprehensive study of postwar production in Lebanon, but rather to suggest that a wider lens might have afforded the non-expert reader a more multifaceted impression of this art world. Elias’s study raises important questions regarding the challenges of writing a history of contemporary artists so articulate (and prolific) in theorizing their work. However, these questions remain unexplored because of the author’s adherence to established statements by artists and theorists. Moreover, the theoretical material that Elias draws on is, for the most part, a familiar part of Beirut’s artistic discourse; Jalal Toufiq, Jacques Rancière, Boris Groys, and T. J. Demos have been long-time interlocutors of Beirut’s art scene and feature prominently in Elias’s analysis. By contrast, the scholarship of a number of leading female academics—such as Ghalya Saadawi, Kirsten

Scheid, and Hanan Toukan—on the subject is noticeably missing. The almost complete absence of Arabic-language sources is striking, especially given the emphasis by practitioners and local institutions on developing a critical discourse in Arabic. It is unfortunate that such efforts are not reflected in the analysis in *Posthumous Images*.

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