

**CHAD ELIAS, *Posthumous Images: Contemporary Art and Memory Politics in Post-Civil War Lebanon* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018). Pp. 243. \$99.95 cloth, \$25.95 paper. ISBN 9780822347668.**

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In Chad Elias' book, *Posthumous Images*, the central theme is the role of art in a context marked by a violent culture of collective amnesia, which is sustained to this day by the Lebanese state. This backdrop challenges the possibility of rebuilding a society that can no longer recollect and reconcile with its recent history of violence. Elias couches his five-chapter book in the context of the Lebanese war that ravaged Lebanon between 1975–1990. It extends beyond that timeframe to include the period between the end of the war up to the present day. Using a variety of contemporary Lebanese works of art in various formats including videos, plays, photographs, buildings, monuments, and stamps, Elias analyzes and illustrates how contemporary art plays a critical role in attempting to evoke the past and recreate the future under conditions of amnesia, violence, and unresolved war. Through a rich historical and political contextualization, the reader can clearly understand the setting in which the variety of artistic works have been produced. Images of the work are effectively incorporated throughout the book, thus facilitating the reader's visual understanding of the content the author is analyzing.

The book begins with an analysis of the role audiovisual media played within a conflictual and volatile political context in which a national and international war of images was taking place. He underscores the limitations of the translatability of experiences and cross-cultural communication using the documentary film *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes* by Walid Raad (2001) to illustrate the extent of this limitation. Raad's film revisits the Lebanon hostage crisis that took place during the Lebanese war and focuses on the staged testimony of

Bachar—the only ‘Arab’ who was held captive along with five Americans.

Through the study of two multimedia performances, *Three Posters* (1999) by Rabih Mroué and *Al Shareet bi-khayr* (*All is Well on the Border*) (1997), the author proceeds with an analysis of the way in which the National Lebanese Resistance Party used video technology as part of its martyrdom operations. Elias points out that although the Lebanese political left had become invisible by the end of the war, its media strategy was subsequently adopted by Hezbollah which digitally manipulated photographs of its martyrs within a war of images. At this point in the text, the reader’s attention is drawn to the way in which videotapes and images had become instruments that could be repeatedly replayed to provide “technical immortality” whereby a past event could be instrumentalized to continuously haunt the living with the “unnatural merging of life and death” (92).

Lebanon’s state-sponsored culture of amnesia is appraised through a close look at a diverse collection of artworks including street drawings, two films, a documentary film, and a photo exhibition. A flagrant illustration of amnesia is the absence of any monument or memorial dedicated to the victims of the war. Another example is the still unverified fate of Lebanon’s thousands of missing men and women who disappeared during the war, leaving their families in a state of limbo and unable to mourn their lost relatives. In response to this void, Lebanese artists have sought to devise different ways in which latent images could be excavated to create a “memory space” as a reminder of the war and its victims while contributing to the development of communities of persons who could constitute potential witnesses for families of missing persons.

In Chapter 4, it is suggested that the failure of urban planning in the reconstruction of postwar Beirut and the void created by the absence of grave sites, official landmarks, or monuments, meant to embody the lived memory of traumatic events, has left a city center haunted by the unidentified dead lying in unmarked mass graves. Elias emphasizes the fact that public space serves private interests, and rather than state-led redevelopment, key decisions for the reconstruction of the city have been taken by private developers. This is in contrast to postcolonial Europe and the United States where public memorialization is institutionalized as a socially reparative gesture. In Lebanon, artists and architects resist the eradication of urban memory in spite of the absence of state-sponsored reconstruction efforts, public planning, and debate. Exemplifying this point, the author refers to the

BO18 nightclub built on what had been the *Qarantina* Palestinian refugee camp where a massacre was perpetrated. Despite this nightclub's seemingly provocative location and concept, Elias suggests that the BO18 nightclub could also be perceived as a "living memory space" where "entertainment and gentrification impinges upon Beirut's volatile and haunted urban geography" (158).

In the book's summary, the achievements that Lebanon made and celebrated in the 1960s are described. At that time, the country's ambitions were demonstrated through the Lebanese Space Program and the creation of the Lebanese Rocket Society (LRS) that made front-page headlines in Lebanese newspapers. The latter was even acknowledged by the issuing of a celebratory stamp in 1964 by the Lebanese Post Office but has since become long forgotten. In today's Lebanon, as the author sadly points out, should such lofty ambitions be ever expressed, they would be ridiculed and relegated to the realm of science fiction. To illustrate the point, reference is made to a short, animated sequence at the end of the film *The Lebanese Rocket Society* (2013) by Hadjithomas and Joreige. The sequence explores an imagined possible scenario for Lebanon, had its 1960s space program continued and the benefits of technological research and development trickled down to the national economy, creating a self-sufficient and secure country. While making the film, its directors decided to build a scale reproduction of the Cedar IV rocket and transport it to the campus of the Haigazian University in Beirut where the LRS originated. There was considerable concern that transporting the rocket to the assigned location would risk it being mistaken for a real missile! Hence, complicated logistics had to be put in place to transport this work of art to the campus. This reality underscores the tense national and regional political context in which the artists had to seek government authorization.

This book is clearly written; its arguments are convincingly constructed and structured. The flow and transitions between chapters are smooth, with brief summaries at the end of each chapter or at the beginning of the following one. The book ends with a rich coda of photographs by Jalal Toufic, prints and photographs by Raad Walid, and video stills by Akram Zaatari that are all reviewed through the prism of how destruction and conflict can damage representation itself. The author also uses a rich and varied selection of artistic creations to develop a sturdy analysis backed by references to relevant authors in his field.

In the context of the Lebanese uprising that began on 17 October 2019 as a result of decades of state neglect and endemic corruption, Chad Elias' book constitutes a truly relevant read. It sheds light on what could be perceived as symptoms of the deeper problems of Lebanon that have led to the economic, social, and political implosion the country has been witnessing over the last nine months. Anyone interested in Lebanon and its fate would be interested in learning more about how its contemporary artists keep the memory of past unresolved conflicts alive. These artists serve as custodians of memory in the face of the state-sponsored amnesia that paralyzes any attempt to move forward, given that there has never been any reconciliation with the past. The choice of architecture that erases the capital's identity and turns it into a ghost town; the families of missing persons who are left to their own devices still not knowing what happened to their loved ones, and the unidentified mass graves are all points raised throughout the book that must be addressed so that the country can move forward. The example of the LRS is a reminder to the reader of the lofty ambitions Lebanon once had. It also makes one aware of how the oppressive system has stifled the dreams of its people, and how, despite all the hardship, art can help to commemorate past ambitions and aim high for the country's future.

In my view, the term "state," as used in the book, could be called into question. Given the Lebanese context, which is marked by what could best be described as the absence of a "state," this term would benefit from the insertion of a clear definition. I would also question the use of the term "Lebanese civil war" rather than "Lebanese war," as the notion of civil war may overlook the extent of foreign implication in the conflict. Given that the debate on terminology is not central to the rich study by Elias, I would suggest using the more neutral reference to the "Lebanese war." Likewise, the book could benefit from a stronger conclusion summarizing its main ideas while raising new questions related to one of the most unequal redistributions of wealth backed by the power elite, who are the same people behind the state-sponsored culture of amnesia. Reinforcing the idea that the center of Beirut has been deserted by local people as a result of a reconstruction program where memory of that capital city has been erased through speculative investment, the author should emphasize how "Downtown Beirut," as it is referred to in the text, is now an almost uninhabited ghost town of luxurious empty buildings. Nevertheless, these minor comments and suggestions would not deter me from strongly recommending *Posthumous Images*. Just like the

artwork it analyzes, the book also serves as the custodian of the city's memories.