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### **Abstract**

My presentation will be framed within the practice of Contemporary art and its links with Cultural Memory. As its focus, this paper will explore the contemporary artworks' response to the Amnesty Laws in Spain and Lebanon and examine the significance of amnesia as response mechanisms.

After dictator Franco's death in 1975, the Spanish political elite's commitment not to instrumentalise the past for political reasons was described as a tacit 'pact of forgetting'. Its general outlook was given official expression in the 1977 Law of Amnesty, which enabled a successful democratic transition thanks to the general willingness of the political class and of Spanish citizens to bury, at least temporarily, past conflicts and relinquish the desire for retribution.

My paper will consider how, 30 years on, the artworks by Francesc Torres and Fernando Sanchez Castillo still depict episodes of unresolved injustice that took place during the Civil War and the dictatorship. Both artists examine and denounce the current lack of political awareness and commitment to history in most of Spanish people and institutions, as well as the imposed amnesia during the transition to democracy.

It is interesting to note that in 1991 a similar Amnesty Law was passed in Lebanon, exempting those participants of responsibility to crimes perpetrated before March 28<sup>th</sup> that year. The laws enacting lead to the dissolution of Lebanese militias and the Lebanese Armed Forces began to rebuild themselves as Lebanon's only major non-sectarian institution.

Artists Nada Sehnaoui and Walid Raad will be considered in relation to the Lebanese Amnesty Law. Not only does their work confront events that took place during the Lebanese Civil Wars and the personal memory of the citizens, but it also examines the nature, effect, affect and impact of collective amnesia.

The aforementioned artists' work share similarities in that they do not focus on deploying memory conveyed in hegemonic and official accounts, but rather in antiheroic, repressed and hidden memory. That is, the counter-memory, which, according to Foucault, refers to a resistance triggered by memories and the evidence of existing, forgotten histories.

Such a reading of these artworks will enable me to elucidate how Contemporary Art has become a medium within which to hold current debates about memory, amnesia and injustice.

## Paper

My paper is framed within the practice of Contemporary art and its links with Cultural Memory. Contemporary art has tackled the debates and discussions framed within cultural memory over the last decades; in particular during the eighties, where art has worked as a medium through which to revise and criticise the official record of historical events. These artworks comprise images and accounts about past, histories of lost lives, trauma incurred and open wounds from the past. They are all assembled with the aim of fighting against the oblivion and repression of so-called 'official' history.

The concern about the past and the need to memorize often stems from amnesia imposed or created by governments and states, which is sometimes excused, covered and legally justified by so-called amnesty laws. Spain and Lebanon are two examples where amnesty laws have made histories and historical accounts become concealed, leaving injustices and crimes unsolved.

The amnesty laws imposed by governments and particularly the gaps that they leave in memory and historical accounts are a growing concern for contemporary artists. In broad strokes, the artists' aim is not only to reveal, expose or highlight the amnesia imposed decades ago, but also to denounce its persistency in historical debates and memory.

Such aims lead us to the three forms of history that Nietzsche differentiates as monumental history, antiquarian history and critical history. Contemporary artists' approach to history can be framed within the form of critical history, particularly because it is considered as a rejection of the other two forms and advocates a model that questions the past and reshapes it according to the needs of the present. In Nietzsche's words, it is a kind of history that "sits in judgment and passes judgment".<sup>1</sup>

The historical and political context in Lebanon is very complex and controversial. The issues stem from the civil war that took place between 1975 and 1990. The conflicts started with confrontation between Christian, Muslim and secular societies based in the country, with Syria and Israel participating too. The origin of such events can be traced to the six-day war which divided Lebanese society into Muslims, Christians and druses. Some time later, and after the Palestinian refugee attacks against Israel at the beginning of the sixties, the groups militarised and started fighting against each other in 1975. An uncontrollable situation arose for the Lebanese government, which saw itself forced to ask help to the Arab league.

After failing in their attempt for reconciliation, the remaining parts of the conflict brought peace to the country in 1990. In 1991, an Amnesty Law was passed, exempting responsible participants to crimes perpetrated before March 28th that year. The laws lead to the dissolution of the Lebanese militias and the Lebanese Armed Forces began to rebuild themselves as Lebanon's only major non-sectarian institution.

Since 1975, the atrocities of the Lebanese civil war have left the country in the shadow of tragic events - events that are difficult to remember, to represent and even to name. As a matter of fact, Lebanese people refer to them as "the events", a colloquialism that doesn't fully describe the war that vastly destroyed Beirut's physical and psychological infrastructure. The colloquialism also embodies peoples' difficulty to deal with the past and trauma. It is important to note that the aftereffects of trauma frequently give rise to individual and collective amnesia, along with psychological symptoms that harden when a traumatic experience is too painful for

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<sup>1</sup> NIETZSCHE, Friedrich, *The Use and Abuse of History*, 1873, p. 14.

consciousness to be addressed directly. But the amnesia in contemporary Lebanon is also a consequence of the amnesty law passed in 1991, which fostered the country to abolish the memories of the fifteen-year-long war. Nowadays, there are seldom discussions or public debates about “the events”, and even history books avoid tackling what happened in such period of time; the academic syllabi often finish with the independence of the country in 1943.

Artists Nada Sehnaoui and Walid Raad have extensively worked on issues relating to the Lebanese civil war and Amnesty Law. Not only does their work confront events that took place during the Lebanese Civil Wars and the personal memory of the citizens, but it also examines the nature, effect, affect and impact of collective amnesia.

The main topics in Nada Sehnaoui's work (born in Beirut, 1958) are the war, personal memory, public amnesia, the writing of history and identity construction. The fact that, after the amnesty law was passed, Lebanon established itself as a *tabula rasa*, that is, as a new territory dominated by amnesia is very relevant for the artist. The country disposed of an historical awareness that would prevent it from the conflicts of war to re-emerge. Herein lies the important reason to represent collective amnesia: to keep the past present and bring hidden histories to light.

One of her major works is *Fractions of Memory* (2003), a public installation displayed in the Martyrs Square of Beirut. Martyrs Square was destroyed twice, first during the civil war and later for an architectural project set to restore devastated parts of the city. The installation starts with an article published in a newspaper by the artist, wherein she asks citizens to send written accounts of their memories about the wars. Once all the responses were collected, Sehnaoui photocopied them and made 350 piles of correspondence in which you could read the top letters. However, many of the people's letters were left blank as a metaphor for oblivion and the amnesia about the civil wars instilled by the government. The installation represents a materialization of lost and regenerated memory, of a destroyed and recovered place. At the same time, the work echoes the Lebanese people's concern about losing their civil war histories due to imposed collective amnesia.

Artist Walid Raad (born in Lebanon in 1967) is widely known for creating an imaginary foundation called *The Atlas Group* in 1999, which works on investigating and documenting the contemporary history of Lebanon, specifically the civil war. The Atlas Group retrieves, stores, examines and produces all kind of documents, but mainly those of an audio-visual, photographic and literary nature. The project's main objective is to track the trace and effects of the experiences of the war in present, as well as amnesia and personal memory. The group uses information and records gathered by specific individuals, who have collected data about the civil war in personal notepads, home videos or as amateur photographs.

Like Nada Sehnaoui, The Atlas Group refuses to represent events of warfare in a conventional way. They create histories and characters from the documents gathered. A key figure in the Atlas Group's work is Dr. Fadl Fakhouri, a well-known Lebanese civil-war historian whose archive - donated to The Atlas Group by his family- is extremely rich in terms of the information it contains. The information in the stenographer's notebook corresponds to three ways of recording and representing information: statistics, photography and text descriptions. These are methods conventionally used for their objective nature, although sometimes they also show great subjectivism.

*Notebook volume 72: missing Lebanese wars 1989/1998* is one of the artworks inspired by and made from Fakhouri's notebooks. The project reproduces information recorded in a

stenographer's notebook by a "Dr. Fadl Fakhouri" concerning bets waged at horse races by his fellow civil war historians. But rather than betting on the winning horse, these gamblers – including Maronites, socialists, Marxists, and Islamists – wager on the distance between the horse's nose and the finish line as captured in the photo-finish image published in the next day's newspaper.

For Raad, history can never be captured at the moment it occurs or after the event has occurred. Historians can only estimate the discrepancy between the event and its documentation. Yet their conjecture only compounds the disparity between history and its recording, as no historian is able to determine exactly the distance between horse and finish line; rather, the winner of the bet is the one who comes closest.

As curator and professor Kassandra Nakas states, "'to lose' also involves the immanent and central 'loss' of the discipline of history, specifically the impossibility to represent history and recapture lived experiences, the main concern of The Atlas Group's whole project."<sup>2</sup>

Raad uses fiction to elucidate the way in which history is constructed and written. He documents and reflects upon censorship and the mechanisms that transform information into a historic narrative with the obstacles involved in corroborating the cause and accuracy. Fiction is utilized here as an artistic strategy that exposes the difficulty of representing history and the gaps that amnesty laws generate in historical accounts.

After dictator Franco's death in 1975, the Spanish political elite's commitment to not make cynical use of the past for political reasons was described as a tacit 'pact of forgetting'. Its general outlook was given official expression in the 1977 Law of Amnesty, which enabled a successful democratic transition thanks to the general willingness of the political class and of Spanish citizens to bury, at least temporarily, past conflicts and relinquish the desire for retribution.

Controversial questions about the recent past were suppressed for fear of endangering national reconciliation and the restoration of liberal-democratic freedoms. It is generally believed that the pact served a purpose at the time of transition, although it has been widely discussed as to whether it should still be adhered to. As Hispanist and biographer of Franco Paul Preston states, "Franco had time to impose his own version of history, which still prevents contemporary Spain from looking upon its recent violent past in an open and honest way".<sup>3</sup>

The consequences of the "pact of forgetting" and Franco's regime is still a contentious topic in relation to the current political and historical situation in Spain. In 2007, *The Historical Memory Law* was passed by the Congress of Deputies. It recognizes the victims on both sides of the Spanish Civil War, gives rights to the victims and the descendants of victims of the Civil War and the subsequent dictatorship of General Francisco Franco, and formally condemns the Franco Regime. One of its provisions is to "state help in the tracing, identification and eventual exhumation of victims of Francoist repression whose corpses are still missing, often buried in mass graves".

It is worth noting that there are nearly 2000 mass graves across Spain in places such as ditches, wells or mines. After the Partido Popular took power in 2011 it did not repeal the Historical

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<sup>2</sup> NAKAS, Kassandra, «Double Miss. On the Use of Photography in The Atlas Group Archive», in: *The Atlas Group (1989-2004): a project by Walid Raad / herausgegeben von Kassandra Nakas und Britta Schmitz*. Köln, Buchhandlung Walther König, 2006, p. 50.

<sup>3</sup> Tremlett, Giles (March 2012). "The Spanish Holocaust by Paul Preston – review". *The Guardian*. [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk). Retrieved November 17, 2013.

Memory Law, but merely closed the government office dedicated to the exhumation of victims of Francoist repression. Today, approximately two hundred and fifty out of nearly 2000 mass graves have been exhumed, although they have all been traced and identified, and research maps about their location have been published.

The artworks by Francesc Torres and Fernando Sanchez Castillo examine and denounce the current lack of political awareness and commitment to history in most Spanish people and institutions, as well as the imposed amnesia during the country's transition to democracy.

Torres's art (Barcelona, 1948) creates a critical examination of culture, politics and memory. He states that there is a lack of political awareness and commitment to history in current Spain, especially in terms of the imposed and agreed amnesty during the transition to democracy. This key concern led him to creating the project *Oscura es la habitación donde dormimos* (Dark is the room where we sleep, 2007), which signifies one of the most committed approaches to the problems in Spanish historical memory, specifically the excavation and exhumation of the aforementioned mass graves.

For this project, Torres documents with photographs the exhumation process from beginning to end. The outcome comprises 29 photographs and a display cabinet with a pocket watch buried in the mass grave next to its owner. By bringing the process of exhumation into the public and social arena, such a project demonstrates that there are still many concealed, repressed and buried historical events that Spain needs to confront. In Torres' words, "I wanted to bring to the citizens' consciousness what the political oligarchy tries to hide and forget by all means."<sup>4</sup>

Sanchez Castillo's main concern is antiheroic, repressed and hidden memory. That is, the counter-memory, which, according to Foucault, refers to a resistance triggered by memories and the evidence of existing, forgotten histories.<sup>5</sup> Counter-memory dismantles settled versions in official history, and, as Foucault notes, it is an essential basis to elaborate "effective" history, which also contains oppressed memories to question and modify hegemonic history. In Foucault's words, "it is about turning history into counter-memory".<sup>6</sup>

Sanchez Castillo utilises monuments, commemorative statues and the symbols of power displayed in the public realm as an essential element in his work. He sees them as elements of power used to build up hegemonic historical memory and to concurrently implement amnesia about antiheroic memory and traumatic events. As art critic Castro Florez states, "Sanchez Castillo's remembrance does not intend to reinforce subjectivity, which is seen as an international focus to create sense, but he aims to show that Historical memory is based in the amnesia of the cruelty."<sup>7</sup>

For Sanchez Castillo, the figure of Franco is often the central axis through which to investigate remaining traces in current Spanish socio-political situation. The figure of the dictator is the most relevant symbol of the regime. It is a symbol still seen in public spaces across Spain, appropriated by the artist to show the elaborate methods produced to build up an organism of power and subjugation. At the same time, the figure of Franco materializes the fear and taboo of the crimes during the dictatorship in today's Spanish society, ideological trauma and in particular the legacy of a painful civil war, a long dictatorship and a controversial transition to democracy.

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<sup>4</sup> Francesc Torres en: *Ejercicios de memoria*, (catalogue exhibition), Curator: Juan Vicente Aliaga, Centro de Arte la Panera, Lleida, 24/1/2011 – 24/4/2011, p. 148.

<sup>5</sup> See: FOUCAULT, Michel, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 1977.

<sup>6</sup> FOUCAULT, Michel, *Nietzsche, la genealogía, la historia*, Valencia, Pre-Textos, 2004 [1971], p. 63

<sup>7</sup> Castro Flórez, Fernando, «Sísifo y la historia», *Cultural*, Diario ABC, Madrid, 24/5/2003, p. 30.

The installation *Pacto de Madrid* (2003) consists of a replica of an equestrian statue of Franco buried by the artist, leaving just Franco's head and a section of the horse's uncovered. What the spectators see is something similar to an archaeological excavation. However, it would be difficult to tell whether the sculpture is appearing as a result of excavation or, rather, it is in the process of being buried. Such an arrangement contrasting and conflicting notions of appearing and disappearing echoes the figure of Franco in current political debates and Spanish society as something concurrently present and absent. Metaphorically, the installation represents the amnesia that the Francoist regime instilled in Spanish society. The monument is half hidden, as it represents the suffering and antiheroic stories from the civil war and dictatorship. The buried monument of Franco generates a reflection and revision of Spain's history, marked by the figure of the dictator as one of the most influential symbols in Spanish history.

In general terms, the aforementioned artists' works elucidate how Contemporary Art has become a medium within which to hold current debates about memory, amnesia and injustice. They share similarities in that they do not focus on deploying memory conveyed in hegemonic and official accounts, but rather in antiheroic, repressed and hidden memory. They refuse to transform amnesia into a new official history. Alternatively, they focus on clearly showing the amnesia and process of forgetting imposed in official accounts of history. In order for that, they rely on the citizens' personal memories to dig into oppressed histories. They also create aesthetic strategies based on the idea of void and absence as a metaphor for the gaps in historical accounts. Through the artworks, oblivion becomes an intrinsic part of the historical narrative as much as it is an intrinsic part of Spanish and Lebanon's past.

They generate an aesthetic procedure that perceptually incites the viewer to elaborate a historical narrative that includes oblivion. In some way, they can be seen as types of memorials displayed in spaces for contemporary art, which broaden the debates about the interrelation between culture, memory and history.