



**HOMELAND INSECURITIES: DIASPORA
AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE**

A N J E E H E L S T R U P

This catalog selection features two excerpts from a larger project that explores the nature of diaspora and diasporic public spheres. The first excerpt focuses on local markets in the San Francisco Bay Area and defines a key theoretical term for the larger project. I use the markets as a starting point in understanding the visual dynamics of diaspora as encountered in everyday life in the San Francisco Bay Area. The second excerpt focuses on the piece *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)* by the Atlas Group, shown at the international art exhibition Documenta 11. The analysis of *Hostage* serves as an example of the dynamics at play within a diasporic public sphere. Together these two examples begin to address the ways in which people connect to their homelands and how homelands are represented from a distance.



Atlas Group/Walid Raad, *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)*
Video still (detail), 2001, 17 minutes
Courtesy of Walid Raad

Homeland Insecurities: Diaspora and the Public Sphere

Delving into Diaspora

I live in the country where I was born. But many of my friends, acquaintances, co-workers, and others whom I interact with on a daily basis were born somewhere else: in the Middle East—in Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Israel; in Latin America and the Caribbean—in Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, Brazil, Cuba, and Puerto Rico; in Asia—in China, Japan, Vietnam, India, and Pakistan; and in Africa—in Cameroon, Ethiopia, and Sierra Leone.

Though these people whom I know and interact with have created a new life here in the United States, they are still intrinsically connected to their homelands through a variety of means.¹ They are connected, for instance, through the memories that are deeply etched into their psyches—the rich memories of lives and homelands before the move to the United States. Then there are the long letters and short telephone calls to and from family and friends in the homeland, the announcement of major life events—births, weddings, and deaths. Food from the homeland obtained at local markets provides bittersweet satisfaction and another means of connection, though often the products purchased here are seen as inferior to there (*"The avocados in Cuba are bigger than the size of my two hands combined"* or *"The pomegranates in Iran are sweeter and juicier"*). They watch weekly, and in some cases daily, cable television shows that transmit news of their homeland, along with humorous sitcoms that depict the nuances of modern-day life of a place where they no longer live. On their computers, Websites that provide news from their homeland are bookmarked and checked for updates on a regular basis. They interact with others from their ethnic or cultural community here in the United States to exchange anecdotes about trips home and current events. These interactions with others like them form a diasporic community.

While diaspora and migration are not new phenomena in the annals of history, it is indisputable that the rate at which they occur today is much faster than at any prior time in history. As anthropologist Arjun Appadurai states "more people than ever before seem to imagine routinely the possibility that they or their children will live and work in places other than where they were born: this is the wellspring of the increased rates of migration at every level of social, national, and global life."²

Diaspora, translated from Greek, means "to scatter," and has traditionally been associated with the plight of the Jewish people. Current definitions of the concept of "diaspora" are broader and are no longer specifically linked to one cultural group. In a general sense, *diaspora* refers to people who migrate—immigrants, exiles, migrant workers, guest workers, undocumented workers, etc. According to the *Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*, the term *diaspora* is

used in Cultural Theory to cover a range of territorial displacements, either forced, such as indenture and slavery, or voluntary emigration. Recent formulations have stressed not only the complex ties of memory, nostalgia, and politics that bind the exile to an original homeland, but also sought to illuminate the lateral axes that link diasporic communities across national boundaries with the multiple other communities of the dispersed population.³

This definition of *diaspora* ties the individual subject to a larger community of others who have also been displaced. It does not distinguish between forced or voluntary

migration as a differential factor. Diasporic communities cannot be seen as static; they are not fixed in one place or nation. Instead, the individual is part of a fluid network that transcends national boundaries and remains connected to others through shared attributes such as history, language, food, culture, politics, etc. A key aspect of this definition of *diaspora* is the inclusion of the lateral axes, which implies that the diasporic community is aware and interacts with others that share similar experiences. For example, the Iranian diasporic community of Los Angeles interacts with and is connected to other diasporic Iranians who live in a multitude of cities throughout the world, such as Vancouver, Berlin, London, New York, etc.

In his seminal essay, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Stuart Hall adds another dimension to the concept of diaspora, through a metaphorical, rather than a literal, approach, when he states:

Diaspora does not refer us to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return, even if it means pushing other people into the sea. This is the old, the imperializing, the hegemonizing, form of "ethnicity." The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of "identity" which lives through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.⁴

Hall's statement on diaspora in relationship to identity is important because he positions the diasporic subject as not being apart from the homeland in a new situation in which meanings are formed through a process of struggle and redefinition. His use of the term "hybridity" embodies an understanding of diasporic identity as fluid, rather than one that is static, bounded by the past or the homeland. This fluidity evokes a state of tension in which identity is negotiated and renegotiated in both the context of homeland and host country. This creates a space that is neither fully *here* nor *there*, but rather a complex combination of the two. Through his use of the word "sacred," Hall is suggesting that the concept of "homeland" changes once a separation has occurred.

The concept of diaspora set out by Hall implies an underlying political dimension that needs to be brought to the forefront of this analysis. In *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, James Clifford states that "the term 'diaspora'

is a signifier not simply of transnationality and movement but of political struggles to define the local, as distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement."⁵ Clifford politicizes the interactions of diasporic people within their new context, as a way that distinguishes difference within their current environment and difference from those who remain in the homeland. Clifford is not describing the aspect of loss in regard to separation from the homeland; rather he amplifies the aspect of displacement to include the creation of a new hybrid identity that is distinct from others.

As I'm typing, I look up and see a map of Cuba on the wall of my boyfriend's apartment, demarcating the political and administrative boundaries of the island. This map is pinned to the wall and serves as a remembrance of homeland for him, a person displaced by diaspora. The interesting aspect about this map is that it isn't from his childhood; it wasn't printed in the late 1960s when his family left Cuba for a new life in Puerto Rico prior to moving to the United States. The map, printed in 1999, is a contemporary representation of his homeland. It does not carry sentimental value as a family heirloom; instead, it symbolizes a connection to his place of birth, as it exists today, without him.

As I look at the map, questions come to mind. How does an individual negotiate a sense of loss or displacement, resulting from migration? And how does this sense of displacement affect everyday practices? How do people remain connected to their homeland in a manner which ensures that their cultural difference remains intact? These questions are relevant because they point to a need for cultural continuity. Prior claims, such as the “melting pot” theory, suggested that immigrants lose their “otherness” or that the specifics of their culture blend in with the hegemonic “American” culture. There are many ways that people remain connected to their homelands. This map of Cuba is not an anomaly; rather it is a visual example of a personal connection to one’s homeland.



Spanish comics sold at That’s It market, San Francisco
 Courtesy of the author



Magazine stand at That’s It market, San Francisco
 Courtesy of the author

Everyday Encounters: Moving Through Markets

Groups form diasporic communities in numerous cities throughout the world, and one can discover many here in the San Francisco Bay Area. That’s It: Center of the Mile, a corner market that I frequent, is owned by Arab immigrants and is located in the heart of San Francisco’s predominantly Latino Mission District. As it is the closest corner store to my house, I pass by and shop at That’s It on a daily basis. At this particular market, products that connect immigrants to home are given prime real estate within the store. It is interesting to note that though the market is owned by Arab immigrants, they do not sell any products from the Middle

East. In the center of the store are two long shelving units that face each other, chock full of books and magazines in Spanish. Fashion magazines, soccer magazines, *novelas* (romance novels), risqué erotic pulp fiction novels, children’s books, coloring books, literature, cookbooks, and newspapers from Mexico contribute to the bulk of the store’s sales, along with the usual liquor-store staples of beer, cheap wine, and cigarettes. Next to the media racks are small stands filled with American junk food—Ho-Hos and Twinkies. The junk food is juxtaposed with small, cellophane-wrapped packages of candy from Mexico and boxes filled with Chiclets gum. Plastic jars of Folger’s Coffee are lined up next to the yellow tin cans of Café Bustelo.



Magazine stand at That's It market, San Francisco, California
 Courtesy of the author

In the back of the store, three refrigerated coolers line the walls. The coolers contain popular beers from both Mexico and the United States, paper cartons of milk, plastic containers of orange juice, and cans of Jumex juice from Mexico. Glass bottles of Coca-Cola, Jarritos sodas, and Peñafiel mineral water bottled in Mexico are on separate shelves from the American sodas. Posters advertising phone cards are positioned in any available empty space, often next to Budweiser propaganda celebrating Cinco de Mayo. Plastic phone cards with images of flags from various Latin American countries are neatly lined in several rows behind the cash register. Xeroxed flyers for cultural events—dance performances, films, plays, and musical performances—are haphazardly taped to the glass doors.

In the evening, the male owners and their friends often gather in small groups to smoke cigarettes in front of the store and chat amongst themselves. Though I don't understand a word of Arabic, I can usually tell if they are joking about something or if they are engaged in a serious conversation, based upon their facial expressions and body language. When the men convene in front of a large television turned to the *Al-Jazeera* news station, they are often solemn and appear distracted when I approach the counter, compared to when they have an Arabic cultural program with traditional music on the

television. Lately, I've noticed that when the younger men are working, the television is turned off and poppy Arabic dance music vibrates throughout the store. In contrast, their Latino employees who cover the morning shift usually have the television tuned to the Spanish language channel *Univision*, where scantily clad women appear in racy soap operas or nationalistic soccer matches are broadcast from Mexico, Argentina, or Brazil.

Besides the cacophony of seemingly disconnected images that occur within this corner market, the site serves an important, although overlooked function. It is a place where those who have been affected by diaspora can connect to their native countries through the consumption of media (newspapers, magazines, books), food products, and interaction with others from their homeland. Upon initial observation of products aimed at diasporic communities, it is easy to dismiss this type of consumption as a transnational marketing scheme. Though these products are one layer of a complex capitalist system, in a very real manner they also provide a significant connection to the homeland through the comforts of food and the ability to access information and news, such as the latest soccer developments from one's home town. Appadurai believes that consumption is a form of drudgery, but he also acknowledges that, "where there is consumption there is pleasure, and where there is pleasure there is agency."⁶ By making the connection between consumption, pleasure, and agency, Appadurai notes the personal power

that is tied to the collective power of many individuals in the ability to connect to one's homeland.

Along with objects of consumption that connect the immigrant to home, That's It market is also a site where political information is exchanged and disseminated to those within the local community. In recent months, as the United States prepares for war with Iraq, flyers announcing local protests of the impending war have begun to appear in the store. These antiwar flyers encourage the community to action by taking a political stance against the war. A flyer with the caption *Know Your Rights* appears next to the antiwar flyers. At a time when men who were born in so-called "terrorist nations" are being asked to register with the United States government, this flyer serves as an important source of information for immigrants to know what constitutes their legal rights. No one entering the store can miss the multilingual (Spanish, Farsi, Arabic, Tagalog, Vietnamese, English) flyer as it appears in a prime spot on the front glass door.



Guerrero's Mercado, San Jose, California.
 Courtesy of the author



Phone booths at Guerrero's Mercado, San Jose, California
Courtesy of the author

Other markets in the Bay Area also exemplify a connection to homeland. Guerrero's Mercado, a small corner market located in downtown San Jose, also connects people separated from their homeland in a different manner. The market occupies the corner unit of the building where I work as a curator. There are often men lined up early in the morning waiting for the market to open. Some lean on their bicycles and others are propped up against their carts that they push through the neighborhoods of San Jose to sell frozen juice bars and other cold confectionary treats. They gather in front of the market's glass windows, which are plastered with phone cards and Western Union ads.

The store sells a mixture of food products, household items, religious devotional items, and cassette tapes of popular Mexican music. In the center of the store are large, open bins filled with rice, beans, tamale wrappers, and dried chilies.

What is unique about this market is the row of white paneled phone booths that line one wall of the store. When the store opens in the morning, groups of men often divide into two lines. Some go to the counter that only handles international money transfers to send money earned in San Jose to their families in Mexico. Others line up at the counter to purchase time and subsequently enter into one of the phone booths. The phone booths are numbered one to six on the outside of each flimsy door and serve as a semi-private refuge to place an international call home.

As a curator, I am drawn to observing the arrangement of objects within different spaces. How the relationship between colors, forms, and content play off one another and interact with each other to create new meanings is of great interest to me. How certain issues are brought to light through inclusion within a space, while other issues are excluded. How issues might be positioned in a way in which meaning is amplified or minimized. How the meaning of a particular object may change depending on what is placed next to it and on the larger context in which it is viewed.

The markets encountered in my everyday experiences lead me to a series of questions. These questions relate to how we take observations of everyday life and translate them into artistic or curatorial practices. How might the images of diasporic cultures—marketplaces such as the ones I've described—be understood in a manner that expands and circulates beyond the confines of the actual stores? These images within the markets are made for, meaningful to, and emerge from diasporic communities.

As a curator, this leads me to ask, What impact might the experience of diaspora have on artistic practices? And in turn, how do those artistic practices affect curatorial practices? How do artists who have experienced diaspora create artwork that evokes memory, nostalgia, and longing as means to connect to their homeland? And how do these artists see their homeland from a distance? How might this artwork engage in a public discourse about the experiences of diaspora? And how might viewers interpret these images? To examine these questions further, I will focus on artwork that is connected to diaspora in the international art exhibition Documenta 11.



Wire transfer counter at Guerrero's Mercado, San Jose, California
Courtesy of the author

Documenta 11

This past summer, I traveled to Documenta 11 in Kassel, Germany. Documenta is an art exhibition that has occurred every four to five years in Kassel since 1955. The first Documenta was essentially a political and cultural strategy to positively reinsert Germany into the international art scene after World War II. This move was necessary after a 1937 exhibition by the Nazis, who proclaimed that most modern art was “degenerate art” under their political ruling. Over the years, Documenta has developed as *the* international art exhibition that sets a precedent for the larger art world in terms of artists shown, artistic materials, and themes addressed.

I had first read about Documenta 11 in a spring issue of *ArtForum* and was intrigued by the exhibition’s theme of globalism. The exhibition’s roster of 118 artists from all parts of the globe utilized a variety of materials and methods within their practices, presenting an impressive concept. Not one to get caught up in the fanfare of blockbuster exhibitions or international survey art shows, I was fascinated by Documenta 11’s seemingly maverick approach in terms of presenting an exhibition with the intent, according to the exhibition’s artistic director Okwui Enwezor, to “enlarge the space of the critical debates of contemporary artistic discourse today.”⁷ As a young curator who works in a Latino, community-based arts organization, I am keenly aware of the need to develop my own curatorial practices in a manner that can foster a critical dialogue with audiences about the political, social, and cultural roles that current-day exhibitions can promote. With the multitude of voices and issues that it presented, Documenta 11 was a natural place to further inform and develop my curatorial practices.

As an art exhibition that seeks to “mark the location of culture today and the spaces in which culture intersects with the domains of complex global knowledge circuits,”

Documenta 11 can be viewed as a public sphere.⁸ The concept of the public sphere is most often associated with Jurgen Habermas, who defined it as a site where private citizens come together to discuss and debate matters of civic and public concern—essentially a political arena that was needed for democracy to function within the nation-state.⁹ While Habermas believed that there was one overarching public sphere and that the emergence of multiple public spheres contributed to the decline of democracy, other theorists, such as Nancy Fraser, Bruce Robbins, and Rosalyn Deutsche, claim that Habermas’s version of the public sphere was flawed, because only those who were in power could participate. It is important to note that within a public sphere, people assume political identities, and conflicting opinions within this space are needed to fully engage democracy.¹⁰ Art exhibitions, such as Documenta 11, can also be seen as a site where private citizens come together to discursively engage matters of public concern. Deutsche situates art exhibitions into the public sphere when she states:

The public sphere replaces definitions of public art as work that occupies or designs physical spaces and addresses preexisting audiences with a conception of public art as a practice that constitutes a public, by engaging people in political discussion or by entering a political struggle.¹¹

In accordance with this definition of the public sphere, Documenta 11 occupies a site (Kassel, Germany), addresses a public audience about art, and, through its theme of globalism, engages a political discussion. To illustrate the political discussions that Documenta 11 participates in, I will examine *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)* by the Atlas Group.

Hidden Testimonies Revealed: Encountering Hostage

On the second day of my marathon viewing experiences at Documenta 11, I climbed the stairs to the second floor of an old train station on a hot and muggy July afternoon. The train station, referred to as the *Kulturbahnhof*, was one of the five Documenta exhibition sites. Towards the middle of this floor, I came across the piece *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)*. I read the accompanying wall text prior to entering the small, dark room where the video piece was shown. Standard within Documenta, the wall text first appeared in English with a subsequent German translation. This particular text read as follows:

Title: Hostage: The Bachar Tapes
(English Version)

File Type: A

Subtitle: Bachar/ Souheil Bachar

Documents A#: SB_17 and SB_31

Production Credit: Souheil Bachar/The Atlas Group

Summary:
In 1999, Souheil Bachar collaborated with The Atlas Group to produce 53 videotapes about his ten-year captivity in Lebanon. Tapes #17 and #31 are the only two tapes Bachar makes available for screening outside of Lebanon. In tapes #17 and #31 Bachar focuses on his three month captivity with 5 American men in 1985.¹²

The video *Hostage* commences with the following text:

Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)
The following videotapes were produced by Souheil Bachar.

Souheil Bachar was kidnapped in Beirut (Lebanon) in 1983. He was in solitary confinement for ten years except for 27 weeks in 1985 when he was held in the same cell with Americans Terry Anderson, Thomas Sutherland, Benjamin Weir, Martin Jenco, and David Jacobson. Tapes #17 and #31 are two of the 53 videotapes produced by Souheil Bachar about his experiences as a hostage, and the only tapes he makes available for screening in North America and Western Europe.¹³

The names of the American hostages Terry Anderson and Thomas Sutherland reverberated in the depths of my memory, even though I must have only been fourteen years old at the time of their captivity. Immediately, questions came to mind—Why did Souheil Bachar make available only two of the fifty-three videotapes about his time in captivity for screening in North America and Western Europe? What was said or documented in the other fifty-one tapes?

After the introductory text, the screen flashes to “Tape #17” and begins with the usual cinematic device of a backwards-number countdown. Grey subtitled text appears in English as a male voice speaks in what is presumably Arabic. His name is Souheil Bachar and he is thirty-five years old. Originally, he was from the village of Houla in southern Lebanon before he was kidnapped in 1983 and held in captivity for a decade. He requests that his words in Arabic be translated into the official language of wherever the videotapes are shown (“into English when shown in the United States and United Kingdom, into French for France, and into Arabic for Arab-speaking countries, and so on”). As he says this, even though the video was labeled “English Version” I expect to see the text translated into German as Bachar requests, but the text remains in English. In an unusual twist, Bachar also requests that his voice be dubbed with a neutral-toned female voice. He also states that the subtitles should appear in either a grey or a blue background. As Bachar requests a blue background, he says “blue just like the Mediterranean,” and as he says this the subtitles change from a pale grey to shortly pause on a vivid blue frame before the screen transforms into a jarring broken image with sounds of audio interference.



Atlas Group/Walid Raad, Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)
Video still (composite), 2001, 17 minutes
 Courtesy of Walid Raad

After a few seconds, the fuzziness fades away and the next image is that of Bachar sitting in front of a white sheet that is attached to the wall with electrical tape. The room is empty with the exception of Bachar. He is wearing a grey t-shirt and holds a TV remote control, which he points at the viewer, to signal that he is turning on the video. The frontal lighting is harsh and his face is cast in a shadow—the shadow of his head and body falls on the right-hand side of the screen. He begins speaking in Arabic, and after a pause, his words are translated by a female voice in English as the sound of his voice becomes softer. Bachar begins to tell his wretched story of the twenty-seven weeks spent in captivity with the American hostages in a small ten-by-twelve-foot room. After briefly talking about the emotional bond that occurred between the men, Bachar questions why each of the Americans wrote a book about their experiences even though they were in the same room during a significant portion of their time in captivity. As Bachar questions this phenomenon, images of each book flash across the screen.

Bachar's testimony is interrupted when a male voice with a heavy-handed tone of authority repeats segments of what Bachar has already said. During this time, the screen changes from the image of Bachar to a cityscape where the buildings appear as black silhouettes against a vibrant orange sunset. As telephone and electrical wires cut across the cityscape in the foreground, in the background a plane flies through the frame from the right.

After this interruption, Bachar relays that when he asked the Americans how they were kidnapped, each began their story by talking about the weather. He ponders the strangeness of this fact, wondering if there is a parallel for the Americans between the weather and being kidnapped. As if both the weather and being kidnapped were natural and capricious occurrences. As he talks about the weather, the image changes to a dark interior with a rectangular window framing a hazy pale blue sky that meets a white rocky coast. The stones appear in a v-shape formation, jutting out to where the water meets the sky. The video cuts to an image of a building, where the entrance is covered by a blue plastic tarp.

The male voice with a tone of authority again interrupts Bachar's story, repeating segments of his words as the image changes to a yellow screen. As each hostage's name and association is announced, a black and white photo cutout of each man's head and torso appears at the bottom of the screen. Each is holding a newspaper in his hands. The images of the six men held in captivity remain on the bottom of the screen as the background changes from an image of Ronald Reagan in the oval office to newspaper clippings with captions about the "Iran Arms Deal" to an image of Oliver North. The narrator continues to speak, announcing that the arms sale to Iran resulted in the release of three hostages in the mid-1980s and the other two Americans were released in 1991. As the narrator announces the release of each hostage, the hostage's photo disappears from the bottom of the screen. Bachar's release from captivity is never stated, and his lone photograph remains at the bottom of the screen as the image fades out.

The screen cuts back to Bachar; this time he is wearing a white tank top, with his arms, shoulders, and the upper part of his chest revealed. His words continue to be dubbed in the female voice. As he speaks, he is much more animated than in prior segments, and gestures with his hands as he speaks of the homoerotic transgressions in captivity. How the Americans feared and contradictorily desired that both Bachar and their captors would rape them.

How the hostages went to great lengths to make sure their bodies would not touch one another. How Bachar's body revolted the Americans, though they were compelled to touch him. And how one hot summer night one of the other hostages rubbed himself against Bachar, and when Bachar reciprocated the man punched him in the groin. Towards the end of the segment, the camera moves from Bachar to a rapid succession of splitscreen images, presumably the foreheads of the American hostages.

The video continues with the voice of authority that announces the release of a hostage against a montage of images—a blue screen, fuzzy frame, and a vertical five-color bar. Bachar appears again, with a close-up shot of his face against a gaudy floral-print background. The frame pauses on Bachar as his lips are pursed and face is scrunched. He talks of how they weren't allowed to see their captors, of being blindfolded, and of the threat of death for attempting to sneak a peak of those in power. The images shift to an intimate close-up still of Bachar—his eyes peer downward, in a vulnerable pose. The final segment of tape #17 ends with Bachar sitting, this time in front of a blue- and white-striped backdrop. In this segment he does not speak. As he stares at the viewer, the colors become more and more distorted until Bachar points the remote control and the frame fades into distortion.

Tape #31 follows immediately, again opening with a backwards-number countdown. With this tape, the screen remains fuzzy for over two minutes. The screen then fades to black and the sound of waves crashing against a coast is heard. Bachar appears in the distance on a rocky coastal area looking out onto the water, as the sound of crashing waves continues. Text appears over the image, "The previous video segment was 2 minutes and 12 seconds long. This is the average duration of all video segments I recorded during my captivity." As the video ends, the image of the ocean lingers as a place that is the opposite of captivity and full of endless potential as far as the eye can see.

On the surface level, it appears that *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)* does not address the issue of diaspora at all. However, when I looked at the artist who created *Hostage*—Walid Raad, who presents his work under the guise of the Atlas Group—I found a connection. According to the *Documenta 11: Exhibition Short Guide*, the Atlas Group was founded in 1999 as "an imaginary foundation whose objective is to research and document Lebanon's contemporary history" through the use of film, video, photography, and an array of archival documents.¹⁴ Raad is originally from Lebanon and currently resides in the United States, which makes him a person who has experienced diaspora. Though it does not overtly describe a first-hand experience of diaspora, *Hostage* is an example of a piece that confronts diaspora since the artist is creating work that deals with issues of his homeland and enters into a discursive arena regarding how his homeland is represented. Which brings up questions of who gets to represent a homeland? And how do homelands get represented in general? And who gets to appear in public? And whose voice is heard in public?

Hostage clearly demonstrates the dynamics of a diasporic public sphere. A diasporic public sphere is a site where issues concerning diaspora and issues brought forth by people who have experienced diaspora are discussed and debated within a public setting. These issues might relate to the actual experience of diaspora, to memories of the homeland or how the homeland is viewed from a distance. Within this forum, issues emerging from diaspora are politicized and discursive interaction occurs.

A diasporic public sphere is more complicated than a public sphere. The public sphere is tied to the concept of democracy, in which citizenship and certain rights are guaranteed. However, if one is a guest worker, an immigrant, an illegal alien, etc. rather than a citizen, rights are not guaranteed by democracy. Thus, a diasporic public sphere is an important forum to bring issues into the public context.

Documenta 11 functions as a diasporic public sphere because at least 30 of the 118 artists shown in the exhibition now live in a country different than their homeland; thus the exhibition is a site where issues of diaspora are presented in a public forum for dissemination among private citizens. As James Clifford states:

Diasporic communities, constituted by displacement, are sustained in hybrid historical conjunctures. With varying degrees of urgency, they negotiate and resist the social realities of poverty, violence, policing, racism, and political and economic inequality. They articulate public spheres, interpretive communities where critical alternatives (both traditional and emergent) can be expressed.¹⁵

Hostage exemplifies the dynamics that occur in a diasporic public sphere because it proposes an alternative narrative to the "Western hostage crisis." This is a political act by Raad, as he negotiates the issue of the Lebanese civil war in the public arena to reveal a shift in perspective, from the American hostages to that of a Lebanese hostage. In his text *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991*, Salman Rushdie recognizes that agency occurs in the act of description, particularly if it differs from the dominant story. Rushdie states:

I must say first of all that description is itself a political act. The black American writer Richard Wright once wrote that black and white Americans were engaged in a war over the nature of reality. Their

descriptions were incompatible. So it is clear that redescribing a world is the necessary first step towards changing it.¹⁶

As Bachar implies in the video, the story from the American perspective was told in excess—five times through each of the books published by the Americans. Prior to this video, Bachar's story had not been told in the same manner, if it had been told at all. Bachar's description of his experience in captivity takes on a political dimension since it presents another description of reality. The version of reality presented by Bachar is the first step in changing how one perceives the hostage situation, which is a launching point for other relevant issues. It is my position that this video is about more than just the subject matter at hand—the Western hostage crisis—it also functions as a catalyst to engage in a larger critique of who is allowed to participate in the public sphere, which in turn can be applied to many situations.

The Atlas Group, through Bachar's testimony, investigates the possibility that what is evident is not always what is told. This fact situates the work within a diasporic public sphere in terms of what is revealed and what remains hidden, depending upon who is allowed to participate within the public sphere and whose voice is heard. And the question of whose voice is heard within the public sphere is compounded by the use of a female narrator for Bachar's story. This brings up the fact that those who are in power are the ones who are usually allowed to participate in the telling of reality. By utilizing a female voice to dub Bachar's words, one is conscious of others (not only the Lebanese male, but females in general) whose perspective often remains hidden in a public forum.

Bachar also implies that there is much more to the story, perhaps even more than what the Atlas Group presents in this video. Bachar makes the viewer aware that only two of the fifty-three videotapes are available for screening

in North America and Western Europe. After Bachar questions the need for five different versions of the story by the American hostages he states:

Because the story is not the same. Or as the hostages liked to say, each man experiences captivity in his own way. No doubt, this is true. True not only of the experience of captivity, but of all experiences today. That there is more.¹⁷

As Bachar brings up the possibility that there is more to every story, in particular, stories that engage the public sphere—stories of the Western hostage crisis, stories of the Lebanese civil war, his story within this video, perhaps even stories of diaspora—he creates a link to the role of the imagination in terms of endless possible narratives. When alternative possibilities of reality are explored through the collective imagination of a group it serves as an impetus for activating new social realities. In the case of *Hostage*, these social realities relate to how a situation is portrayed based upon whose story is told within the public sphere. As Arjun Appadurai states:

It is the imagination, in its collective forms, that creates ideas of neighborhood and nationhood, of moral economies and unjust rule, of higher wages and foreign labor prospects. The imagination is today a staging ground for action, and not only for escape.¹⁸

The presentation of Bachar's story is a staging ground for action. The action occurs by self-representation within the diasporic public sphere. By telling the story from Bachar's perspective, that of a Lebanese male, there is agency in this action, because it allows a perspective to be told that differs from the predominant story of the American hostages.

Another way that *Hostage* exemplifies the dynamics of the diasporic public sphere is by amplifying certain issues and simultaneously downplaying others. This occurs when Bachar reveals that the Americans all began their captivity stories by talking about the weather.

I remember asking Terry, David, Ben, Marty, and Tom about how they were kidnapped. They all began their stories with talking about the weather. The weather? Why did the Americans begin their story by talking about the weather?

Is it because they want to present what happened to them as something that was natural and unpredictable?¹⁹

By beginning their stories with the weather, instead of talking about the political role the United States government has played in the Middle East, the hostages depoliticize their situation. Bachar suggests a parallel between being kidnapped and the weather, as if both were natural and unpredictable. That it is natural for Americans to be held hostage in the Middle East. This assumption plays on a Western stereotype that Arabs are seen as "unpredictable," instead of seeing the possibility that it is only "natural" that the United States government is despised in other parts of the world based on its foreign policy, and its citizens could be held in captivity as a means of retaliation. The issue of the weather is amplified at the expense of why Americans are taken hostage, illustrating that within the public sphere, some issues are revealed and others remain hidden.

When Bachar mentions a homoerotic encounter in captivity, the public sphere is also engaged through the questioning of what is revealed and what remains hidden. This politicizes the desire of a male body.

I remember one night in particular. One very hot summer night. When the room was filled with the stench of our sweat. As usual, we were all on the floor sleeping or trying to sleep. I felt someone's ass rubbing against my crotch. Someone was rubbing himself on me. I became hard. And I don't know why, but I pressed myself against his ass. It felt good. Seconds later, he punched me in the groin, as if my hard-on provoked him. I stayed quiet.

It is interesting to note that Bachar begins his story of the homosexual encounter with talking about the weather. After he criticized the Americans for introducing their captivity stories with the weather, he begins his story of a homoerotic encounter in the same manner. As the American hostages saw the weather as natural and unpredictable, perhaps Bachar views homosexual encounters in captivity as a natural activity. And like the weather, these sexual exchanges are unpredictable; when he recounts that he reciprocated the advance from one of the American hostages, the man punched him in the groin. By revealing the homoerotic aspect of captivity, Bachar's encounter takes on a political dimension in the diasporic public sphere. That it is only natural that men desire each other in captivity, even though this aspect of captivity usually remains hidden.

There is also a convoluted aspect of the diasporic public sphere, as the *Documenta 11 Exhibition Catalog* reveals that Bachar's testimony presented by the Atlas Group is fictional.²¹ Furthermore, the person who plays Bachar is a well-known Lebanese actor; when *Hostage* is screened in Lebanon the reception of the piece is guaranteed to be different if the audience immediately recognizes Bachar as a performer instead of a hostage.²²

As I've stated, the piece *Hostage* by the Atlas Group exemplifies the dynamics of a diasporic public sphere on many levels. By using the Western hostage situation as the piece's larger theme, Walid Raad connects to his homeland of Lebanon. Since Raad is involved with issues regarding the representation of his homeland, *Hostage* emerges from the experience of diaspora. Through this connection to Lebanon, an alternative narrative to Western hostage crisis is presented through Bachar's testimony. Through this alternative narrative, it is revealed that what is evident is not what is always told, thus exemplifying the dynamics of a diasporic public sphere. These representations of the hostage situation engage a discursive interaction within a diasporic public sphere by revealing some issues and hiding others.

Conclusion

The markets in the San Francisco Bay Area are one way that people who have experienced diaspora can connect to their homeland through food, media, and the exchange of information. These markets form diasporic communities where cultural continuity occurs. Documenta 11 is a diasporic public sphere because issues that stem from diaspora are brought into the public domain in a political manner. The piece *Hostage* is an example of how one artist, Walid Raad, connects to his homeland from a distance and presents an aspect of his homeland's history in a new manner. *Hostage* exemplifies the dynamics of a diasporic public sphere by revealing certain issues, while other issues remain hidden. While the markets and Documenta 11 are created for different "audiences," both evoke images of diaspora in motion. As diaspora and migration continue to occur at accelerated rates, it is important to recognize that these experiences contribute to the complex visual landscape seen in everyday encounters and within artistic practices.

Notes

- 1 I use the term "homeland" to indicate that there are connections to one's country of birth that are never fully severed; not as a binary claim of authenticity/inauthenticity between one's place of birth and adopted country.
- 2 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 6.
- 3 Michael Payne, ed., *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), p. 144.
- 4 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Diaspora and Visual Culture: Representing Africans and Jews*, ed. Nicolas Mirzoeff (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 31.
- 5 James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translations in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 252.
- 6 Arjun Appadurai, p. 7.
- 7 Okwui Enwezor, "Preface," in *Documenta 11_Platform 5: Exhibition Catalogue*, ed. Okwui Enwezor (Ostfildern-Rut, Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2002), p. 40.
- 8 Okwui Enwezor, p. 40.
- 9 Bruce Robbins, "Introduction: The Public as Phantom," in *The Phantom Public Sphere*, ed. Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. vii–xxvi.
- 10 Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2002), p. 287.
- 11 Rosalyn Deutsche, p. 288.
- 12 Text is taken from a photograph by the author of the accompanying wall text for *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)* at Documenta 11, Kassel, Germany, July 2002.
- 13 Walid Raad/*The Atlas Group*, *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)* VHS 17 min. (Chicago: Video Data Bank, 2001).
- 14 Carlos Basualdo, "The Atlas Group," in *Documenta 11_Platform 5: Exhibition Short Guide*, ed. Okwui Enwezor (Ostfildern-Rut, Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2002), p. 26.
- 15 James Clifford, p. 261.
- 16 Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), pp. 13–14.
- 17 See *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)*.
- 18 Arjun Appadurai, p. 7.
- 19 See *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)*.
- 20 See *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)*.
- 21 "The Atlas Group," in *Documenta 11_Platform 5: Exhibition Catalogue*, ed. Okwui Enwezor (Ostfildern-Rut, Germany: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2002), p. 181.
- 22 I acknowledge that an in-depth discussion could occur on the fictional aspect of Bachar's testimony. It is my opinion however, that whether or not *Hostage* is viewed as fiction or fact does not diminish the way it exemplifies the dynamics of a diasporic public sphere.