

Story for performance #991
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Source: Glenn Kessler, 'US pushes Palestinians back to negotiations', *Washington Post*, Guardian, AP in *Sydney Morning Herald online*, 07/03/08.

Tags: [Lebanon](#), [architecture](#), [art](#), [bombings](#)
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Can I tell you about a show? I'm not asking your permission, but worrying out loud about that troubling gulf between speaking and seeing, knowing words favour literary forms while things of mute materiality so easily slip out of reach. Perhaps all that can be done in these few minutes is to describe one exchange in a complex strand of small explosions that constitutes the show.

Let's say this show began with a postcard, though the two partners in this double act might take you back much further. Any postcard is a double-sided object divided between image and text, made to be handled and sent, cheap, mass produced reproductions for travellers and tourists, exchanged between friends about sights seen, art admired and places visited. Postcards are the quintessential products of the 20th century: images without auras; language stripped to blurbs; mementos of separation.

The one that triggered this collaboration was bought the day before 9/11 by our man in LA. It shows Baldessari's artwork of the twin towers exploding, entitled *Two High Rises (With Disruptions)*. With hindsight, you could say it foretold disaster. A year later our man was back home in Sydney when he made a small explosion, superimposing a cinematic special effects blast onto a picture-postcard. At the edges of its fireball, just beyond the flames, is the clean white frame of a glass wall and ramp. The caption on the back identifies its subject as the modernist house Harry Seidler left New York to build for his mother Rose half a century earlier on the rugged northern bushland of Sydney overlooking Ku-ring-gai.

Neither of these postcards appears in the show, though the latter appears in verso and is mentioned in the checklist of works. Instead, the postcard of the obliterated iconic house was turned by its recipient, our woman in Madrid, into a soft doppelgänger by working the image into a fine petit point, stitching together the bush and the edges of the Bauhaus flying saucer around a strange yellow bloom. A rose becomes another sort of rose. By then our two correspondents knew they were onto something, modernism meets the apocalypse, or at least comes face-to-face with its own immanent destruction.

Some time elapsed, more postcards were sent between Sydney and Madrid.

Meanwhile, Australia (and briefly Spain) joined the coalition of the willing and went to war. Our collaborators discovered, amongst other things, The Atlas Group which gave a new twist to that avant-garde strategy of exploding the canon. Its mastermind was Walid Raad who had grown up in the war zone of Beirut in the 1970s. His fake collaborations superimpose a system onto historic documents like the work *A history of the car bomb in the 1975-91 Lebanese Wars*. He retrieves as a readymade the grim souvenirs of war, whether

exploded car engines or shrapnel and then weaves them into elaborate fictional narratives. He writes, for instance, of making an archive of detailed notes that map where every bullet he finds in Beirut is, of photographing each site, forensically marking the holes with dots that correspond to each bullet's diameter, and finds himself mesmerized by the colours on the bullet tips. But do the aesthetics of ammunition keep him suspended in anger? Or does the act provide some distance? He later confesses: 'It took me 10 years to realize the ammunition manufacturers follow distinct color codes to mark and identify their cartridges and shells. It also took me another 10 years to realize that my notebooks, in part, catalogue 17 countries and organizations that continue to supply various militias and armies fighting in Lebanon.' It led our collaborators, she in Madrid and he in Sydney, to superimpose different systems.

They turned once again to Harry Seidler and his mission to remake the Australian city as a metropolis of glass towers with grand foyers, monumental art works and urban plazas. They took over Australia Square with its glistening circular tower now girdled at street level by a Sol LeWitt drawing whose isometric explosions are visible from several blocks in all directions. Flames escaping from one of the lift doors and licking the LeWitt in the immaculate lobby are montaged in Sydney then stitched in Madrid.

Now the partners pull their explosions straight from the daily news like this snippet from the *Sydney Morning Herald* '...the burning wreckage after trains carrying chemicals and oil crashed in Kotri, north of Karachi' or a photo of a burning vehicle in Baghdad from *The Age*. That one appears reflected in the glassy foyer entry of 'The Horizon', one of Seidler's apartment blocks. Alongside this same car bomb image is another LeWitt and incidental pedestrians, oblivious to the catastrophe, occupying the same space.

These four stitched works, each no bigger than a postcard, are laid out at the far end of a long elongated bench, paired with installation photos from The Atlas Group. Arranged along this bench are other unframed photos placed in shallow archival boxes, postcards and sewn petit points. These collaborators, she in Madrid and he in Sydney, make overlays and montages from a personal stockpile of images—diminutive models of the twin towers, domestic interiors in Sydney and Madrid, a tour of New York and LA. Further along the bench are twelve pale rectangles that reproduce the text side of a series of postcards. We can just make out the titles of the unseen explosions they record: Matta Clark's *Window Blow-Out*, of '76, Ruscha's *Inferno* of '89 and that incendiary blast of Baldessari's from 1990, that first fanned the flames.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Ann Stephen.