

EVENTUALLY, EVERYTHING CONNECTS

Kevin Jones explores the crafty entanglements of **Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck**.

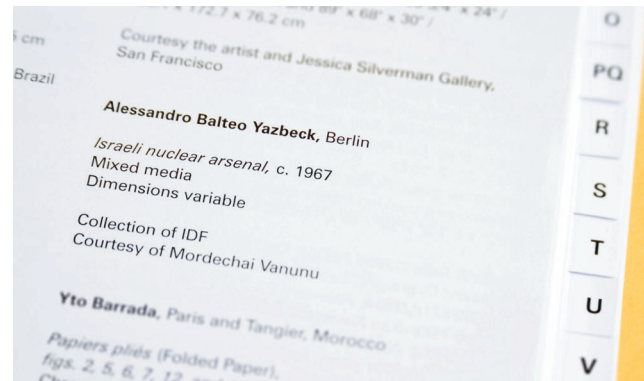
Excerpts from a conversation between
President John F. Kennedy and Prime Minister Ben-Gurion
Waldorf Astoria, New York, May 30, 1961



curious text awaited anyone who leafed through the catalogue of Jens Hoffmann's 2012 "remake" of Harald Szeemann's legendary 1969 show commonly known as *When Attitudes Become Form*. Buried at the start of the catalogue/book—a faithful replica of Szeemann's alphabetically tab-paged original design—tucked obediently into the checklist of featured works, figured the title "Israeli nuclear arsenal, circa 1967," attributed to Venezuelan artist Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck (b. 1972). In classic artwork-labelling tradition, the five-line entry dutifully detailed the work's material ("mixed media"), size ("dimensions variable") and provenance ("IDF," the Israel Defence Forces), before revealing that the piece appeared in the Hoffmann-curated show courtesy of Mordechai Vanunu, the inaccessible Israeli nuclear technician-cum-whistleblower who, in 1986, leaked information about the Jewish state's nuclear weapons program to the British press.

Of course, there was no work. Or rather, the catalogue entry was the work—to be reproduced and disseminated, via print and electronic media, in databases, exhibition checklists, institutional inventories and, well...art magazines. "If Harald Szeemann had known that someone came up with a nuclear arsenal and wasn't saying anything about it," Yazbeck explains giddily, "he would have seen it as the best conceptual artwork of the 1960s." Yazbeck's gesture of codifying the entire history of the phantom arsenal into a single label was not only the ultimate refusal of object-making, in almost utopic Conceptual style, it also crystallized many of the impulses coursing through his entire practice—the blurring of politics and art, a daring curatorial bent, a crafty "stand-back-and-let-facts-speak-for-themselves" posture, and a strategic taste for appropriation. As the devilishly intelligent Berlin-based artist gears up for a Dubai show at Green Art Gallery, the Israeli Nuclear Arsenal catalogue entry offers cause to reflect on a profoundly silent "piece" that distills a thoroughly distinctive voice.

Yazbeck does not juxtapose. He entangles. In the Israeli Nuclear Arsenal catalogue entry, the history of conceptual art and the politics of nuclear armament do not just overlap, they are fundamentally intertwined. Elsewhere, as in the sprawling series *Cultural Diplomacy: An Art We Neglect* (2006-2013), American sculptor Alexander Calder and his compliant mobile abstractions are wound up in a Cold War political agenda, cast in a narrative that glides from a Nelson Rockefeller-owned hotel in Caracas to the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, with oil and atom bombs threading throughout. Entangled too are Charles and Ray Eames—the husband-and-wife darlings of American design from the 1950s to 1970s—who are embroiled in nothing less than our teetering global financial system. *Eames-Derivative (Small Version)* will be in the Dubai show, as will a more tangible, advertising-fuelled evolution of the *Israeli Nuclear Arsenal* series (2004-2014),



Israeli Nuclear Arsenal. Exhibition catalogue, *When Attitudes Become Form*, curated by Jens Hoffmann, CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, 2012
Photography by Ludwig Abache.

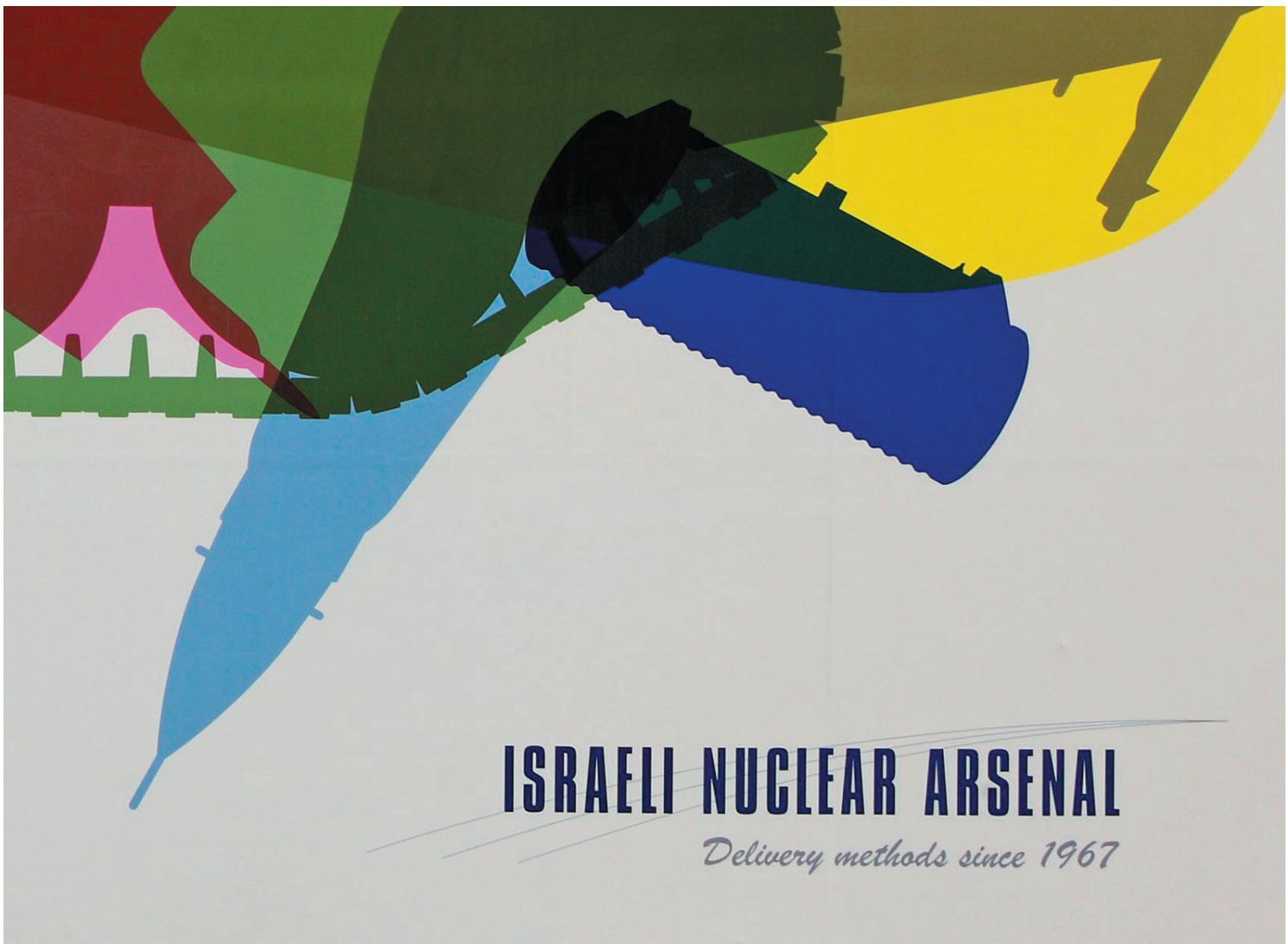
including a new 3D work. "All this comes back to a very basic idea I learned in college in the 1990s," the artist confides. "Knowledge has become so specialised that we lose track of other human activities outside our specializations. You end up with a very limited view. Interdisciplinarity is one reason for doing entanglements."

Unsurprisingly, massive research goes into the multifarious entanglements, and the methodological catchphrase seems to be "boiling down." Mounds of information are processed and reduced to a crisp, succinct timeline—the wall-mounted chronology that accompanies each installation. The linear, exhibition-friendly product of twisting research investigations, this factual point-by-point exposé conceals a sly strategy: the seemingly non-narrative voice dons an air of irrefutable authority, lulling the viewer into instant acquiescence. The artist literally disappears: "I'm not telling you what I'm telling you," Yazbeck cunningly boasts. It is a mechanism similar to the very writing of history itself, as "facts" are threaded together in the service of a willed narrative.

Yazbeck is not alone in his strategy of re-historicisation. San Francisco-born Iranian art historian Media Farzin is an occasional co-conspirator, having brought her analytic tools and specific insights to the *Eames-Derivative* shown at Green Art Gallery, as well as to their acclaimed video *Chronoscope* (2009-2011), ingeniously manipulated footage from a Cold War-era current affairs TV show peppered with talk of Communists, coups and hydrocarbons.

"I have been interested in the Cold War since I was a teenager," explains Caracas-born Yazbeck, who is mixed Lebanese/Italian. "Venezuela was the supplier of oil for the US. So in case of global confrontation, we were a target for Soviet missiles." No surprise, then, that a pair of Cold Warriors like the Eames would constitute obvious entanglement bait. The Eames were models of industrious pith, spouting up-beat, ad-friendly sound-bites ("The best for the most for the least," "What works good lasts," "Take your pleasure seriously") against the internecine workings of their prolific California design office. Highly sensitive to their own image, the Eames were also two of America's most gifted myth-crafters. In 1959, they were the design brains behind the consumerist extravaganza of the United States National Exhibition in Moscow, where their film *Glimpses of the USA* unfolded across seven screens in a feat of high-tech propaganda. (Interestingly, two works by Calder were displayed only a stone's throw away on the Exhibition site.)

The Eames were also feisty marketeers for corporate giants like IBM. Their office functioned like a Warhol's-Factory-meets-McKinsey hub of big brand problem solving, with much of their talent devoted to humanising the conquering techno-capitalist message. In *Eames-Derivative (Small Version)*, Yazbeck and Farzin pair their remake of Eames' *House of Cards*—sets of interlocking picture cards sporting close-ups of IBM computers, designed for



ISRAELI NUCLEAR ARSENAL

Delivery methods since 1967

‘YOU HAVE TO UNDERSTAND HOW THESE IDEOLOGICAL PROCESSES OF PROPAGANDA-GOVERNMENTS BEHAVE, AND HOW TO COUNTERACT THEM. THAT IS WHAT I AM DOING AS AN ARTIST.’

the company’s pavilion at the 1970 Osaka World’s Fair—with perhaps their longest chronology to date. Running from the 1944 Bretton Woods financial conference, which restructured post-WW II monetary exchange, to Nixon’s curtailing of the gold standard for the dollar in 1971, the chronology matter-of-factly recounts the twin rise of the computer and an increasingly virtual monetary system. The neighbouring House of Cards, spelling out the looming word “DERIVATIVES,” leaves little doubt as to the Eames’ complicity.

Appropriation is another of Yazbeck’s artistic strategies. In the expanded Israeli Nuclear Arsenal at Green Art Gallery, for example, he enlists the language of advertising to literally broadcast—on billboards—the nuclear arms Israel and the US worked so hard to keep secret. Here, no wall-text chronology accompanies the complex “ads.” “The chronology’s function,” he explains, “is now codified in the label information and the visual clues.” *Waldorf Astoria, 1961*, one of the three billboards in the Israeli Nuclear Arsenal series, displays excerpts from a conversation between John F. Kennedy and Israeli Prime Minister Ben-Gurion at the New York hotel, the text set in the cloud-like forms of a Mark Rothko canvas made grainy, referencing the CIA PR machine that paid for magazines to publish articles about American abstractionists. All the elements in the work—the nuclear-esque clouds, Rothko’s Jewish heritage, the proximity of the Waldorf Astoria to MoMA, home of Rothko’s solo show that same year, and erstwhile art-as-propaganda HQ—conspire in a potent mini-entanglement all its own, like a Situationist *dérive* ravelling history up in advertising. “It’s about the dynamics of communication the US and Israel were able to develop during the Cold War to keep as low a profile as possible on something that was really dangerous,” Yazbeck states.



Although both works ultimately deal with communication dynamics, *Israeli Nuclear Arsenal* is the absolute negative of *Eames-Derivative*: on one hand, a work about US propaganda; on the other, a work about public secrets that Yazbeck converts into ersatz advertising. Perhaps unsurprisingly, in spite of its intelligence, *Israeli Nuclear Arsenal* has been vastly misunderstood, meeting with both cold shoulders and tacit criticism. “My galleries in the west think it’s kryptonite,” the artist fears. But it would be a fundamental misreading of the piece to see it as easy finger pointing. “You have to see the whole operation,” he insists. “You have to understand how these ideological processes of propaganda-governments behave, and how to counteract them. That is what I am doing as an artist.”

Yazbeck’s art is like a Trojan horse: it enters the gallery context, where its meaning slowly seeps out, almost insidiously. Although each entanglement holds its share of “ah-ha” moments and intrigue, the artist’s voice is hard to fathom—shielded by a chronology or remotely orchestrating behind an appropriationist hand. His interdisciplinary bent enables him to link together, line up, embroil, embed and entangle—diving into the folds of history to shed light on the present, to paraphrase Edward Said. Perhaps on one level, Yazbeck bears some resemblance to Charles Eames—his hive mind always working, relentlessly scouring the raw material of the newsfeed, assessing and investigating. At the very least, Yazbeck would be hard-pressed not to agree with one of Eames’ famously pithy yet macro-minded maxims: “Eventually, everything connects.” **HBA**

ALESSANDRO BALTEO YAZBECK’S MODERN ENTANGLEMENTS RUNS AT GREEN ART GALLERY FROM 16 MARCH TO 5 MAY 2015.

(Facing page) (Detail) *Delivery Methods since 1967. Israeli Nuclear Arsenal. 2004-2013.*
 (This page, above) Installation view at Artissima, Turin of *Delivery Methods since 1967. Israeli Nuclear Arsenal. 2004-2013.*

(Below) Media Farzin and Alessandro Balteo Yazbeck. Photography by Ethan Carrier.

