

Walid Raad

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK

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Walid Raad, *Scratching on things I could disavow: Walkthrough*, 2007–. Performance view, Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 5, 2015. Photo: Julieta Cervantes.

SINCE THE LATE 1990s, Lebanese artist Walid Raad has embarked on two major long-term projects, each generating a wealth of videos, installations, performances, sculptural objects, and photographic prints. The first, known as the Atlas Group, concerns the recent history of Lebanon, including the country's devastating fifteen-year-long civil war and the stalled and controversial reconstruction of its capital, Beirut. The second, titled *Scratching on things I could disavow, 2007–*, considers the fraught processes by which institutions are shaping the categories of modern and contemporary Arab art—mainly through the building of new museums and the development of emerging markets, primarily in the Persian Gulf—and the ways in which those categories function in the fields of sales, publishing, and academia. For those who have been following Raad's work closely over the years, it has been difficult, at times, to muster the same level of enthusiasm for the second project as for the first. Whereas the Atlas Group appears concise, serious, and above all punchingly political, *Scratching* can seem, on occasion, almost embarrassingly precious and decorative, with its emphasis on forms, colors, lines, walls, doorways, and real and imagined books, periodicals, exhibition venues, and shipping crates. The subtle curatorial twist of Raad's first proper museum survey in the United States,

organized by Eva Respini for the Museum of Modern Art, New York, is that by giving each project ample space and equal weight, the show allows viewers to perceive the emergence of meaningful and substantial continuities between them.

To see these projects side by side, or, more accurately, to enter a vast gallery devoted to the Atlas Group after passing through a long sunlit corridor dedicated to *Scratching*, is to confront the artist's clear predilection for exaggerating and distorting the formal elements of specific visual and material phenomena that have been produced by political and economic upheavals alike. Throughout both sections, the exhibition stays focused on Raad's abiding interest not only in the slippage between fact and fiction but also, and perhaps more significantly, in the literary machinations of character, setting, and plot—in the old-fashioned work of storytelling—that illuminate the best moments in both projects. Viewers and critics have often complained of feeling manipulated by Raad's work. By emphasizing the artist's role as a fabulist, as a teller of tales that are at once true and false, Respini nudges the experience of the work toward imagination and away from distrust.

Across the films, videos, collages, and displays of archival photographs in the show's Atlas Group section, for example, we meet the historian Fadl Fakhouri, said to have been a preeminent chronicler of Lebanon's civil war as well as an avid gambler. We learn that he and his colleagues gathered every Sunday at the racetrack in Beirut, where they wagered not on the winning or losing horse but rather on the margins of error apparent in the finish-line photographs. We also learn that he donated to the Atlas Group his personal archive of films, photos, and notebooks, yielding memorable works such as *Notebook volume 72: Missing Lebanese wars, 1989/98*, and *Civilizationally, we do not dig holes to bury ourselves, 1958–59/2003*. The latter consists, in fact, of a collection of self-portraits by Raad's father (one among many crucial details conveyed in Respini's notably clear-sighted catalogue essay). Certainly, this casts the actual existence of Fakhouri into question, but that feeling of doubt does nothing to detract from the profundity of the self-representation in each shot and, moreover, the air of loneliness in each image—which is to say, the work's emotional truth.

The obviously fabricated figure of the bewildered man who emerges as a character in *Scratching* likewise elicits greater sympathy than skepticism. That individual—clearly a stand-in for Raad himself—communicates telepathically with artists from the future, and finds himself unable to enter a new museum at its opening in an unnamed Arab city in an indeterminate year sometime before 2024. If the Atlas Group's fictions delve into the artist's memory of Lebanon's civil war in his childhood, and with it histories that had been neglected, ignored, and discarded by the state, *Scratching* continues this story but grapples with Raad's experience in adulthood, as his own art and that of his peers is increasingly commodified by new money, imported institutions, and an emerging class of collectors with ties to a political system that has arguably benefited from ongoing conflicts in the region.

Raad's attention to institutions and the objects that circulate in them reaches a climax in the exhibition's pièce de résistance, *Scratching on things I could disavow: Walkthrough*, 2007–, an elaborate stage set constructed in the museum's atrium, where the artist regularly delivers a performance, literally pulling a small crowd of people through a breakneck history of intrigue in and around the establishment of a pension trust for artists and the creation of new museums. Raad's second, thinner, and allegedly more decorative project has never looked so dynamic, and, as befits this museum setting, its presentation here gives greater clarity to the artist's ever-stronger undercurrent of institutional critique.

“Walid Raad” is on view through Jan. 31; travels to the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Feb. 24–May 30; Museo Jumex, Mexico City, Oct. 13, 2016–Jan. 14, 2017.

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