



One Take

In our regular series focusing on a single work, *Kaelen Wilson-Goldie* considers *Postscript to the Arabic Translation*, a collaborative intervention by **Suha Traboulsi** and **Walid Raad** in a warehouse outside Beirut, where Tony Salamé of the Aïshti Foundation stores his art collection



Jasper Johns
Flag
1954-55



Ben Nicholson
Gouache 1935-1942
1935-42



Alfred Jensen
That is It
1966



Lucie Foo
Spotted Line
1966

Early in the autumn of 2014, a colleague of mine emailed me to ask a question. He lives in New York and had just visited an exhibition of contemporary art from the Arab world at the New Museum. There, he had been blown away by the work of one artist in particular: a woman named Suha Traboulsi, who was showing her abstract ink drawings from the 1940s.

My colleague had never heard of the artist and had found nothing when he searched for her online and in libraries. I live in Beirut, where Traboulsi was said to have studied, so he wondered whether I knew her. Moreover, he wanted to know to what source he could turn for the story of how she came to be so prescient, making these gorgeous works on paper that are unlike anything of their era but that also so clearly forecast much of the minimalism and geometric abstraction to come.

As it happened, I did know Traboulsi or, rather, I had seen her name and her work, if not her person, several times by then, and have come across it several times more in the 18 months since. According to one version of her biography, Traboulsi was born in Palestine, grew tired of painting in the 1950s, and took up the study of philosophy, psychology and architecture instead. She tried her hand at conceptual, performance and mail art. Increasingly theatrical, her antics scandalized the art scenes of Beirut, Amman and Cairo. She was known for a time as 'the witch of contemporary art'. The brightly coloured drawings in the New Museum show—early works in the arc of her career—were actually mathematically construed portraits in ballpoint pen.

Another variation of her biography states that Traboulsi was already an Arab *émigré* in Brazil in the 1930s. She began building a series of pastel-hued walls, cutting through each one to create a shape related to the vocabulary of vernacular Arab architecture. Her point was to register the fall of Arab art. Having completed only 11 of her projected series of 276 walls, Traboulsi abandoned the works in the basement of a Syrian-Lebanese hospital in São Paulo. They were recently rediscovered, featured in the last São Paulo Biennial and flown to Europe for exhibitions in Poland and Portugal. (A selection went on view in New York earlier this year at Paula Cooper Gallery.)

According to yet another version of her biography, in the same decades that Traboulsi was active as a member of the Arab avant-garde and making her most experimental art, she was also, paradoxically, employed as a humble civil servant of the Lebanese state.

Attributing works to Suha Traboulsi, or enlisting her as an ally, allows Walid Raad to participate in projects while distancing himself from them.

From the 1950s–80s, she served as the chief registrar of public collections for the Ministry of Culture in Beirut. During that time, Lebanon was planning a Museum of Modern Art, acquiring paintings by local and foreign artists to form the core of a permanent collection. The museum never materialized. Traboulsi witnessed the plunder of the state's collection as various politicians dipped into it for gifts and home décor. Whether for posterity or rebellion, she began painting reproductions of the stolen works on storage crates in the ministry's depot. Thirty-seven of those crates recently turned up in a warehouse in the coastal suburbs of Beirut—part of a project titled *Postscript to the Arabic Translation* (2015) that was commissioned by the Lebanese retail impresario Tony Salamé to mark the opening of the Aïshti Foundation, housed in a shopping mall nearby.

To return to my colleague's query: as it happened, I knew Traboulsi's name but, more to the point, I also knew that she did not exist. (I had worked on the catalogue for the New Museum show, so I knew where the materials were coming from.) She is one in a series of characters or decoys who have been created over the years by the Lebanese artist Walid Raad. *Postscript to the Arabic Translation* is the latest instalment in the life of his busiest avatar yet.

Raad is best-known for the Atlas Group: a long-term, critically acclaimed project for which he rifled through the recent political history of Lebanon to produce a series of artworks that considered how a conflict such as a civil war is remembered, imagined or distorted by those who lived through it. Many of those works—including videos, photographs, installations and performances—are attributed to fictional characters, such as the gambling historian Dr. Fadl Fakhouri, the melancholy intelligence agent Operator 17 and the unlucky police detective Youssef Bitar, a specialist in car bombs and explosives.

As a follow-up to the Atlas Group, in 2007, Raad embarked on a second, ongoing, equally ambitious and arguably more expansive project, titled *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow*, which delves into the various and developing infrastructures for contemporary art in the Middle East. In one of the more subtle strains of the project, he frequently sends a fake artist with a false name to take his place in panel discussions, juries, books, benefit auctions and exhibitions. The likes of Janah Hilwé and Farid Sarroukh, as well as Traboulsi, are never present in person, but they are almost always conjured in biographies, artists' statements and, from time to time, actual artworks.

Traboulsi is the most complex of these characters. She is the perfect surrogate and ideal predecessor—a feminist forebear with the capacity to restore an art-historical narrative that has been otherwise broken, forgotten or dismissed. It's not impossible that someone like Traboulsi, as scripted by Raad, could have been active and influential for much of the 20th century, albeit in a corner of the Arab world where no one was really looking for her. She could have been championed as the missing link, an ancestor lost and found, and the starting point of a lineage plucked from obscurity, so that everything about Beirut's contemporary art scene suddenly made sense. She could have been the maternal figure to make artists like Raad the children of art rather than the orphans of war.

Traboulsi also fulfils a baser function. Attributing works to her, or enlisting her as an ally, allows Raad to participate in projects while distancing himself from them. She appears in his place; the organizing entity is often denied the use of his name or acknowledgement of his involvement. This is trickier than it sounds, opening up issues of complicity, leverage and institutional critique that are so prevalent in Raad's thinking that they have become a medium in and of themselves.

Salamé is a successful businessman running a slew of department stores and high-end fashion boutiques. He has among the highest number of employees of any company in the Lebanon and is the biggest retail tenant in downtown Beirut. According to the lore around him, he got his start as a teenager, selling old collections of Italian clothes from the trunk of his car on Martyrs' Square. He began buying art later, though he will tell you eagerly that he had always collected stamps, rugs and 17th-century paintings. At Art Basel in 2006, he met Jeffrey Deitch, who soon became a close advisor. In one short, intense decade, Salamé has become a major player in the international art market.

In Beirut, Salamé impresses people with his energy, perseverance and ability to get things done in a city where nothing really works in terms of basic infrastructure (the Aïshti Foundation opened amid a dismal, Naples-esque crisis over rubbish collection). So quick, liquid and rapacious is his art-buying that he also makes people nervous, particularly in a place known for war, banking secrecy and corruption. To be a collector in such a matrix is unique neither to Salamé nor to Lebanon. There is arguably a collector like him everywhere, in every city, particularly in the Middle East, China and Russia.

The Aïshti Foundation opened in late October with two exhibitions, curated by

Both images
Suha Traboulsi in collaboration with
Walid Raad, *Postscript to
the Arabic Translation*, 2015, acrylic on
wooden crates, dimensions variable

Courtesy
the artist, Raymonde
Ghossein Gallery, Jerusalem, and
Aïshti Foundation, Beirut

Deitch and the New Museum's artistic director, Massimiliano Gioni. (Salamé was a patron of the museum's Arab art show, 'Here and Elsewhere'.) There was also a project by Richard Prince installed in the windows of Salamé's downtown department store. And then there was *Postscript to the Arabic Translation*, Raad's intervention in one of the warehouses where Salamé stores his collection.

Just inside the entrance was a wall text telling the story of Traboulsi's time as the culture ministry's registrar. Then, to the left, the warehouse opened up in a grid of corridors, inventory shelving and shipping crates, each affixed with an A4 sheet of paper listing the contents. Raad's project filled the first corridor, where the crates had been turned lengthwise to show Traboulsi's reproductions of the stolen paintings, including well-known works by Lygia Clark, Carmen Herrera, Jasper Johns, Wassily Kandinsky, On Kawara, Ellsworth Kelly, Morris Louis, Robert Motherwell and Barnett Newman.

The narrative framing *Postscript to the Arabic Translation* is, of course, a fiction but, like many good tales, it is rooted in fact. There was never a Museum of Modern Art planned for Beirut, as such. But the Ministry of Culture does have an art collection in storage, and allegations of theft and illicit gifting cling to it. Raad's piece isn't accessible to the public – permission from the foundation or an invitation from Salamé is required – but it does pry open the space of a private collection for greater scrutiny and critical reflection.

The project's unveiling coincided with Raad's first major museum show in the US, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. And, in fact, the two are linked. All of the works reproduced in *Postscript to the Arabic Translation* are a part of MoMA's collection. They propose the approach of Alfred Barr, MoMA's founder, to the story of modern art as a kind of counterweight to Salamé's brash, frenetic and acquisitive style. They beg the question: what narrative of art in our time is being pieced together and fitfully told here? The selection from MoMA's storage is also telling. There are no Arab artists represented in the reproductions, despite their presence in the story, and, from the perspective of Beirut, Raad's project features no local artists at all. 'My fantasy', says Raad, 'is that the crates may contain a fantastic collection of Arab art (maybe even disguised as the works listed).'¹ Yet the works repainted by Raad-as-Traboulsi do not adhere to the white Western male bias that MoMA is so often accused of perpetuating. They cover a broad geography, include a number of women and evince an obviously internationalist sensibility.

And then, beyond the physical manifestation of the work – and the uncomfortable questions it raises about whether the participation of a serious, cerebral and notably uncommercial conceptual artist, working in the vein of Andrea Fraser and Hans Haacke, conveys a kind of legitimacy upon a fast and loose collector who wants or needs such affirmation – there are the conditions of the work, the contractual terms of its making and the stipulations

of its continued existence. Through his Beirut gallery, Raad has not sold a single work to Salamé, by mutual agreement. The pieces in the warehouse are a loan. Salamé funded the production but does not own the art. For a period of three years, the work must remain in the warehouse and cannot be moved or shown elsewhere without Raad's permission. It must be insured and maintained at Salamé's expense. Raad may cancel the loan at any time. What remains an open question is this: who owns the 37 crates? At around US\$1,000 apiece, they aren't cheap. And, in a sense, that ambiguity is everything: the force and substance of the work. It throws into useful doubt the status of the object, the future of art, the queasiness of how an artist's work moves through the market and the efficacy with which one single project shoulders the critique of several complex and competing systems – all at once. ♦

1 Email to the author, 27 October 2015

Kaelen Wilson-Goldie is a writer who lives in Beirut, Lebanon.

Walid Raad lives in New York, USA. In 2015, he had solo shows at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and Museo MADRE, Naples, Italy. Previous solo shows include Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, in March 2016, and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut, in 2013. Postscript to the Arabic Translation can be viewed by appointment via the Aishti Foundation, Beirut.

