

Walid Raad – The Atlas Group: Fact or Fantasy?

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"Yet Another Letter to the Reader" at Fondazione Volume!, Rome, 2017. Photo: Emanuela Scintu

Born in 1967 in East Beirut only eight years before the war in Lebanon broke out, this war and subsequent battles have punctuated Raad's life and art.

Raad, a renowned contemporary media artist gives his views on life through film, photography and multimedia installations. Using his talents to portray the horrific events in Lebanon between 1975 and 1991.

Early Life

In 1983 Raad left Beirut with \$850, leaving his family, mother, father and sister to travel to Cyprus, from Cyprus to Paris, and then on to America.

Settling in Boston, Raad attended the *University of Boston*, going on in 1989 to receive his BFA (Bachelor of Fine Arts) from the *Rochester Institute of Technology*, and then MA and PhD in cultural and visual studies at the *University of Rochester* in 1993 and 1996 consecutively.

This is where fact finishes and fantasy begins. It is not clear how he managed to settle in America, only saying, "This is a matter for another time", but admitting that his family had means, and he had a visa to enter America—not that any of this information matters, but it is an early indication of the mystery that Raad is keen to employ.



Walid Raad. Photo: MEMO

The Atlas Group

Probably the most famous of all Raad's work is the creation of *The Atlas Group*, a fictional foundation created by Raad to be a functioning continual exhibition in order to accommodate and contextualise his work, and this is an evolving feature throughout his career.

Back in 2016 Raad appeared five times a week at the *Museum of Modern Art New York* as part of a retrospective of his work, and it's at this retrospective that we learn exactly how it felt to be in a war zone aged 8 years old.

Raad explores the possibility the wars in Lebanon and around the world may have been lived but not experienced: going on to show some photographs taken from a building across from his childhood home. Punctuating the point by saying he has no memory of taking the photos, giving way to the possibility that trauma took over and art pushed forward.

The photos Raad has taken he says are hysterical historical symptoms and culture that he felt needed to be collected, identified and archived for prosperity and in order that real-life history is not erased when it isn't popular. Stating that if you can't find photographic evidence you may as well produce new evidence. Confirming that is why *The Atlas Group* came to be.

In a particularly poignant selection, Raad took of a series of photos of car engines and showed how, when a car bomb is set off, the only thing that remains is the engine, and the engine is thrown out of the car in the blast and ends up on rooftops and balconies, several hundred feet away from the blast site.

Raad goes on to explain that he followed photojournalists around Lebanon as a matter of course. The journalists had become so used to the sight of the car bomb damage that they were bored with reporting it, eventually only reporting on the colour and make of car that had been

blown up; failing to mention the victims, or who had planted the bombs, or if anyone had come forward to claim the atrocity.

This turned into a game of who could find the engine first. Subsequently, a series of car engine photos came into being and is one of the first exhibitions produced by *The Atlas Group*.

Talking about this exhibition in 2016 Raad said: "Politicians would pose next to the engine to prove they were committed to ending the war and this became a laughable joke – turning the whole process of war into a bland/neutral and possibly harmless event and not what it is, death and destruction".

In another of the exhibitions Raad talks about that fact that as a kid he collected bullets – exchanging them like baseball cards – the bullet colour would tell a story; what it was made of, the story of the impact. Raad collected these bullets along with photos of where he got them from; dug out of walls, documenting each bullet with a coloured dot – purple for impact, yellow for incendiary and red for blast

Raad says every country which manufactures bullets has a colour code inbuilt into the bullet. This is a statement from the artist, but it turns out this is a fantasy. Or is it? Art and journalism overlap once again.

In March of this year in Raad's exhibition "*Let's be honest, the weather helped*" he engages on how violence affects the body, mind, culture and tradition – going back over the works seen in 'The Atlas Group: Sweet Talk and Commissions, and scratchings on things I could disavow'.

Raad is keen that his work does not come across a journalistic fact, but that it is artistic and therefore he adds to the photos or films a caption or enhancement that was not originally there but lends itself to the story. Away from artist licence to the facts:

Raad the Historian – The Arab Image Foundation

Raad is a founding member of the Arab Image Foundation, set up in 1997 by photographers *Foudad Elkoury*, *Samer Mohdad* and artist *Akram Zaatari* to document, collect and preserve photographs from the Middle East, North Africa and the Arab diaspora.

The object of the collective is to accurately depict the social history of the Arab world – attentive to the specificity of Arab art.

Within this group further exhibitions explore the culture and history of the Arab nation, preserving what many may consider being irrelevant pieces of art, photography and painting into an entire historical story.



Appendix, 2018. Photo: Sfeir-Semler Gallery

Within these exhibitions are the more mundane but relevant pieces of work, pots, architectural pieces and photos of everyday life, untouched and presented in a traditional way.

Raad is active in the political arena a cross over between *The Atlas Group*, *The Arab Image Foundation* representing the *Gulf Labor Artist Coalition* and continued to work in the arts where he is currently an associate professor at Cooper Union School of Art, New York.

Gulf Labor Artist Coalition

In 2015 Raad was denied entry into the United Arab Emirates, the third member of the Gulf Labor Artist Coalition to be denied entry. The coalition of artists was set up to ensure the rights of migrant workers are protected during the construction of museums and other institutes.

This is a fact, and not part of any artwork. In response, the CIMAM (international committee for modern and contemporary art museums) along with leading curators from the Museum of Modern Art and the Tate in London signed an open letter calling on institutions to help lift the travel ban.

To date, Raad has not been allowed to enter the UAE—giving the feeling that nothing much changes but is merely reproduced, again and again.