

# Exhibitions: Lebanese artist Walid Raad layers fantastic truths at MoMA

In the first American survey of his work, Raad challenges his audience on the blurring of fact and unreality in Arab art.



Lebanese artist Walid Raad leads the 'Walkthrough', part of his project 'Scratching on things I could disavow' at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In it, he examines the emergence of new infrastructures in the Arab world for the visual arts, such as art fairs and galleries, and how conflict distorts art, culture and tradition. Courtesy Julieta Cervantes / The Museum of Modern Art, New York

*Scratching on things I could disavow*, the centerpiece of a mesmerising art exhibition by the Lebanese artist Walid Raad at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, begins unappealingly enough as a lecture – a sort of technologically abetted address or generic PowerPoint presentation suffered by legions of bored souls in conference rooms across the globe.

In front of a small audience assembled several times a week for the occasion, the artist stands in the flesh before a wall blinking with data and names of things arranged into a giant flowchart. The sprawling story he tells incorporates many sundry elements: people, places, percentages, equations, all linked up and interconnected.

Dressed in jeans, T-shirt and a baseball cap, Raad plays the role of a conceptual artist concerned with matters of art, the market, museums, a high-tech military cabal and cultural institutions taking up new positions in the Middle East. He talks about complicated money trails and moral quandaries shared among artists in international scenes in Los Angeles, London, Beijing, Mumbai and Mexico City.

At one point he takes leave of the flow chart and leads his audience around the exhibition space, as their collective confusion grows in proportion to his increasingly detailed explanations and rationales.

His historical facts are verifiable and true, Raad promises, before changing direction toward the allure of "other kinds of facts".

Talk turns to the impossible: artists have sent him telepathic signals from the future about nefarious colours of paint, Raad says, and then there was the time when a gallerist in Lebanon ruined all his work by shrinking it, mysteriously, to 1/100 of its original size.

The audience looks on, perplexed, as Raad says he remembers thinking at the time: "I might be in the middle of a psychotic episode."

Raad's artwork, on show over two floors at MoMA in the artist's first major survey in the United States, often plays with the condition that attends processing reams of information that simultaneously do and do not make sense.

Focusing on some of the artist's long-term projects, the exhibition brings

together more than 200 works rooted in photography, video and sculpture – as well as the performance tour that channels Raad's extraordinary narrative ambitions.

At the centre of them all is the surreality of what is most commonly believed and disbelieved, especially as related through art with origins in an Arab world defined by conflict and misperception.

Raad was born in Lebanon but emigrated to the US as a teenager in 1982 to flee the civil war. He wanted to be a photographer initially and came upon the many vagaries of documentary art early on: what kind of truth can an unthinking medium impart? What kind of truth can even exist when seemingly all matters of truth are in dispute – in Lebanon and everywhere else?

In her essay in the exhibition catalogue, curator Eva Respini, who worked with the artist in assembling the MoMA show, writes: "Raad's personal experience of the last decade of the war was as an émigré, dealing in partial information, rumour, mediated news reports, and conversations with family members over crackling phone lines."

His own truth of it was abstracted, and the truth of the typical exhibition-goer in New York can be assumed to be more abstracted still.

Part of the exhibition catalogue is devoted to a collage-type essay that Raad assembled with quotations from other artists and writers, relating to the inescapability of conflict in contemporary Arab art. Some of them signal the preposterousness of that inescapability (see an interview question asking, in all earnestness and naive simplicity, "What impact did the wars in Lebanon have on you and your work?"). Other citations are pithy and epigrammatic ("The political is not the opposite of the stupid").

One in particular seems to get to the essence of Raad's art by suggesting that Lebanese artists should not depend on making work to "understand"

the war years.

While social science can provide the fleeting comforts of reason, it states, "valid literature and art provide us with intelligent and subtle incomprehension. Art and literature do not provide us with the illusion of comprehending, of grasping, but allow us to keenly not understand."

That sort of keen "not understanding" can be a state to aspire to, and it abounds in other work by Raad on display. One floor up from the atrium space where the lectures are delivered, a larger gallery is given over to work in more conventional but no less confounding forms of photography, sculpture and video.

Any illusion of conventionality is erased at the start with a collection of wall-hangings arranged to show artworks that supposedly underwent strange transformations when being shipped from the Louvre in Paris to the future Louvre in Abu Dhabi.

Some of them, the wall text says, stopped casting shadows, among other odd behaviour. Something metaphysical is said to have happened to them in transit from one world to another.

With vacant frames and allusions to their crating and distribution more than their finished form as décor, these works serve as signifiers of art rather than "art" curated and displayed in the traditional sense.

Most of the gallery is given over to work credited to the Atlas Group, of which Raad is a foundational member. The bulk of it comes from a great archive of photos and findings from the murky past of Lebanon.

A collection of large photographs documents cast-off engines from cars that were blown up by bombs in savage acts of war.

Another collection shows beautiful plumes of smoke and flames as painted by the reputed head of the Lebanese Army's directorate of

geographic affairs. Her name is Nahia Hassan and she donated the work to the Atlas Group after retiring.

Except the Atlas Group, it turns out, isn't real – it doesn't exist in any fashion outside the realm of Raad's art. He's not only a foundational member but the only member. The group, in terms of fact, is not a group at all.

By working with an "archive" that has been appropriated, rewritten and even just entirely imagined, Raad suggests that facts only go so far in getting to the whole of the past, and often not far enough.

During a brief interview in the midst of the show, Raad tells me that truth should show special fealty to imagination. His brand of what he calls "hysterical documents" has its own source of wisdom to share.

"There's a Picasso show here," he says, referring to Picasso Sculpture, the kind of blockbuster exhibition that MoMA is known for.

"People wouldn't go up there and say, 'Did this woman really have a nose in her ear?' What kind of 'fact' is that? Was the sky in a Van Gogh really like that? Did the world of Seurat really look pointillist? What prompts somebody to ask that kind of question?"

He wonders over the impulse to want or need to know certain things and not others. "It's interesting how we can maintain different levels of scepticism and belief," he says.

Gesturing towards all his work on display, with its brain-bendingly dense and complicated approach to matters of complex and often extremely dark reality, he continues: "I would love if somebody would bring the same attitude they bring to a Picasso or Seurat to this."

**• Walid Raad is on show at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, until January 31.**

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