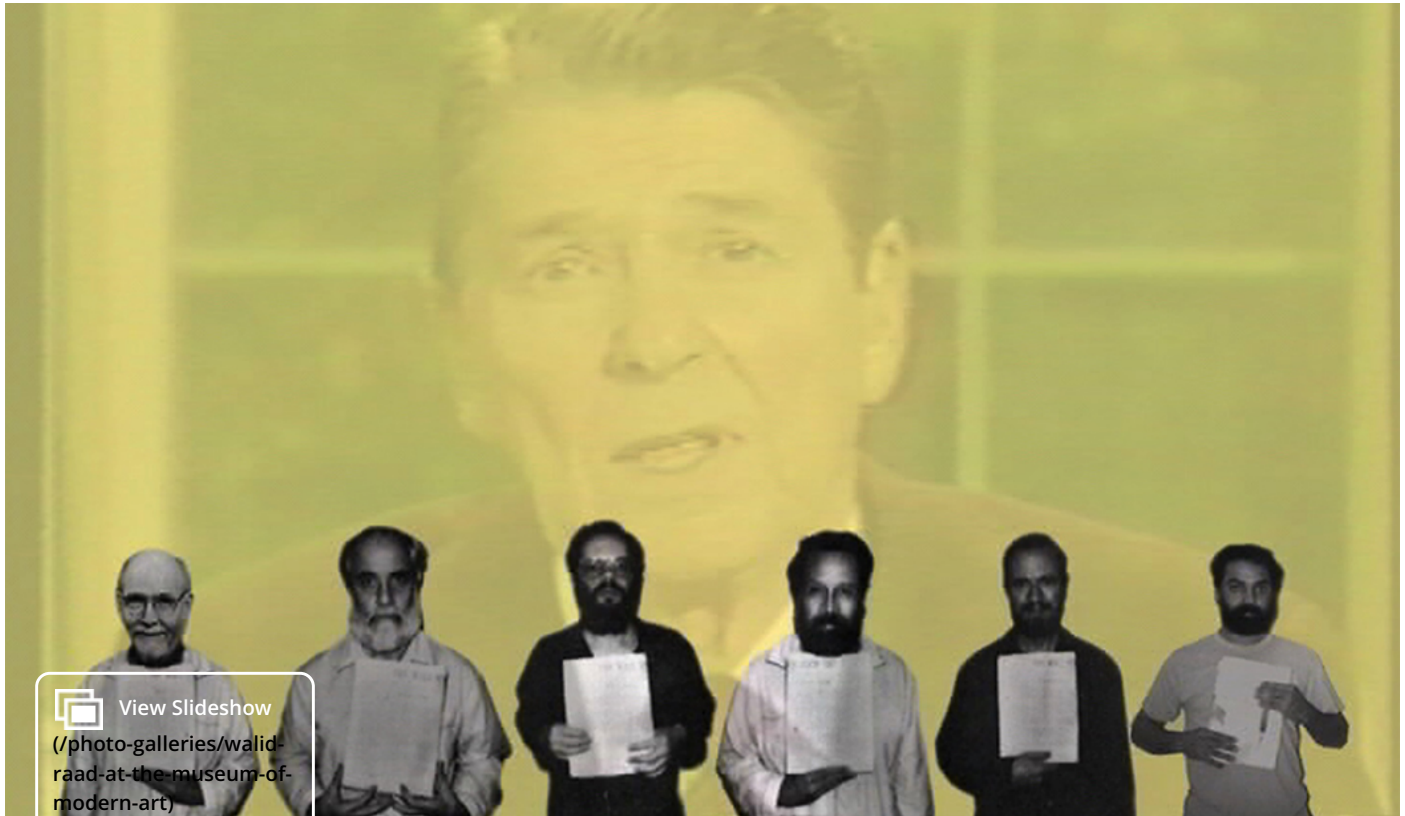


Telling Stories: Walid Raad at MoMA

BY MOSTAFA HEDDAYA | OCTOBER 16, 2015



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Walid Raad's "Hostage: The Bachar tapes (English version)," 2001.
 (The Museum of Modern Art, New York/© 2015 Walid Raad)

At 5:37 pm on the day the Twin Towers fell, a trademark application was filed to the United States Patent and Trademark office, requesting to register the phrase “September 11, 2001.” Though ultimately [rejected](#) (<http://www.uspto.gov/web/offices/com/sol/foia/ttab/2eissues/2006/78083495.pdf>), the opportunistic bid came to the attention of Lebanese-born artist Walid Raad in the course of his research on the Artist Pension Trust (APT), a global retirement scheme for artists developed by one Moti Schniberg — the same man who tried to trademark 9/11. This remarkable anecdote surfaces in the lecture-performance at the heart of Raad’s exhibition at the [Museum of Modern Art](#) (<https://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/1543>), a talk that deftly moves across a “set” exploring various symptoms, actual and imagined, engendered by the accelerating infrastructure for art and culture in the Arab world.

Unlike Andrea Fraser’s digressive tour-guide act in “Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk,” 1989, the objects to which Raad directs his attention are themselves his own artwork. These are by turns concrete and abstract, and they include a hallucinatory collage-schematic depicting Raad’s research into APT, a diminutive model depicting a shrunken exhibition of his work, a fragment of a gallery wall containing names of artists received telepathically, and a striking hanging sculpture (“Views from outer to inner compartments,” 2015) that depicts moldings of a blank museum gallery, the cutout effect accentuated by light and shadow. It is on this “set,” installed in the museum’s atrium, that Raad will deliver the hour-long lecture some 60 times between now and January 31, when the exhibition closes. (It will then travel to Boston’s Institute of Contemporary Art and Mexico City’s Museo Jumex, and so will Raad.)



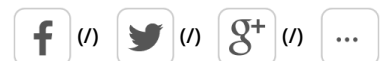
Upstairs, in the third floor special exhibitions gallery, the rest of the show unfolds. Though Raad is long celebrated, with appearances in Documenta, the Whitney Biennial, and the Louvre under his belt, this is his first-ever North American survey, and it covers two bodies of work that represent two and a half decades of the conceptual artist's photography, video, sculpture, and performance. The first, and more recent, project included in the exhibition is "Scratching on things I could disavow," 2007-ongoing, of which "Walkthrough" is a part. The corridor leading to the special exhibitions gallery is given over to a further component of the "Scratching" project explored downstairs, this time offering a destabilizing encounter, complete with false shadows, with the collection of Islamic art objects destined for loan to the Louvre Abu Dhabi. Inside the gallery, work from Raad's earlier archival

project addressing the Lebanese civil wars, "The Atlas Group," 1989-2004, is displayed, and the serial prints and "documentary" videos seem to adopt the mannered conventions of archival practice, even as their content proposes more unsettled accounts of truth. Two wall texts accompany each work: the museum's official labels and "The Atlas Group"'s own dissimulated metadata, diffracting the authorship of the archive through corporate or non-governmental "fiction."

This is, as curator Eva Respini puts it, an exhibition fundamentally about "storytelling," and there are two main narrative strategies. "Scratching on things I could disavow" foregrounds Raad's destabilized individual perspective in the face of the vertiginous acceleration of arts infrastructure in the Middle East and its relationship to the history of art in the Arab world. On the other hand, the perspective is depersonalized in the "Atlas Group" work — Raad calls these "hysterical documents." But the "Atlas Group" work is hardly clinical: the fulcrum of the gallery, for example, is held by five large-scale monochrome inkjet prints in varying blues. Upon closer inspection of the works, from a series titled "Secrets in the open sea," 1994/2004 (the first date refers to the piece's attribution to the Atlas Group the second its actual date of production), a minuscule faded portrait appears at the corner of each rectangular monochrome, which we are told represent "individuals who had drowned, died, or were found dead in the Mediterranean between 1975 and 1991." And across the gallery, two videos are screened in a loop: "I only wish that I could weep," 1997/2002, which purports to be footage of sunsets shot by an intelligence operative tasked with monitoring Beirut's Corniche for subversive individuals, and "Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English version)," 2001, which deals with kidnappings in Lebanon in the 1980s and '90s. At the beginning of the second video, the captive who is its subject, Souheil Bachar, explains that although his story is violent and specific, it is "first and foremost a story, and in this way it is familiar to you."

As it happens, Raad scooped [Bloomberg News](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-07-15/the-problem-with-selling-the-largest-private-art-collection-in-the-world-) (http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-07-15/the-problem-with-selling-the-largest-private-art-collection-in-the-world-) on the 9/11 trademark when he presented the first iteration of "Walkthrough" at Paris's Festival d'Automne in 2010. But where facticity is journalism's currency, and judgment or explication criticism's stock-in-trade, Raad moves between what he calls aesthetic, emotive, and historical "facts," floating above the literal implications of his subject matter. (The privilege of this light touch does not extend to his personal involvement as an activist with the Gulf Labor Coalition, and Raad recently found himself [barred](http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1157939/gulf-labor-artists-walid-raad-ashok-sukumaran-barred-from-uae) (http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1157939/gulf-labor-artists-walid-raad-ashok-sukumaran-barred-from-uae) from travel to the UAE.) The work might appear to inherit the twin mantles of institutional critique and information art. But Raad eschews the didacticism of the former, and conspiracism of the latter, in favor of an intermingling of perceptions and cognitions, an approach as incisive as it is affecting.

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