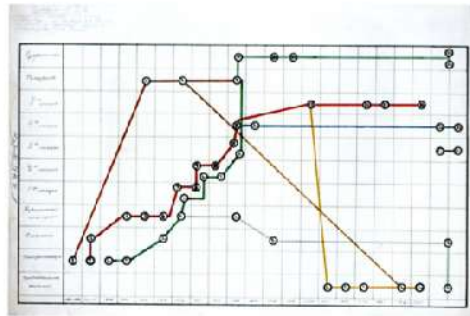




Miraculous Beginnings Walid Raad

The Need for Profanation
Hélène Chouteau-Matikian

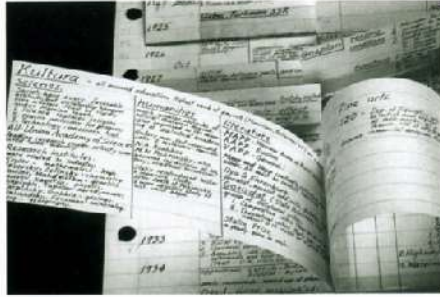


Kazimir Malevich
*Historical development of the new painting
 1880-1926 and the inferences which this
 has brought us in the West and in Russia
 1927*

'Modernity is sufficient unto itself; it finds its own tradition' wrote Octavio Paz.¹ He (the modern artist) single-handedly creates an archaeology of ruptures and continuities which he inserts into the historiography of styles, artists and masterpieces. He points out his predecessors – his 'necessary ancestors'² – in order to reconcile the international avant-garde's emphasis on moving forward in time with local, ancestral, popular, or even archaic traditions, above all to escape from academic role-models. The Cubists turned to African and the so-called 'primitive' arts to feed their formal agenda; Picasso praised the autodidact Henri Rousseau as his peer; and Kazimir Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin claimed Russian icons as part of their heritage while Natalia Goncharova perceived a latent form of Cubism in Scythian art. In order to fulfil his programme, the modern avant-garde artist must be a pedagogue as well as a historian. For this purpose he sometimes uses visual techniques (lists, tables, charts, diagrams, indexes), which Jack Goody, the anthropologist writer, defined as 'intellectual skills that allow the entry of data into the public space and the abstract sphere, in other words an "artificial memory"'.³

In 1927, for his exhibitions in Warsaw and Berlin, Malevich created a series of twenty-seven educational boards for display at the entrance to his exhibition. Featuring complex tables, diagrams, graphs and coloured compositions, these boards were intended to educate the public about the principles of Suprematism. Following in Malevich's historical and conceptual footsteps, George Maciunas developed his *Learning Machines*, executed by hand on graph paper following rigorous procedures, to counteract the segmentation of academic knowledge. His aim was to devise a universality in which history and the history of art could follow parallel trajectories of development. Like the Russian Constructivists and Supremacists, Maciunas wanted to create parallels between the aims of art and those of the socialist revolution.⁴

Walid Raad's installation *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Art in the Arab World* includes *Index XXVI: Artists* which lists the names of artists who lived and worked in Lebanon during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These lists are inscribed in horizontal rows on the walls of the exhibition space. They appear white on white, in three successive layers of vinyl lettering applied to the wall. *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow* is built on complex relationships between series, sentences and fragments of text, colours, documents, references and works which seem to attest to one another as if they



Georges Maclunas
Chronology of Russian History (detail)
 c.1953-54

were part of a historiographic process within a large table that looks to be pedagogic. After donning the role of the artist as archon historian of *The Atlas Group*, Walid Raad seems to want to assume the role of a didactical art historian who publicly wishes to 'reinstale' his precursors and peers in the exhibition and publication, and to communicate the historical significance of his own work. However, in a curious twist, we are told that the names in *Index XXVI: Artists* have been transmitted to Raad telepathically, by artists from the future. These near-invisible lists always begin with the conjunction 'and', and end with the same word. Their length is determined by the wall on which they are inscribed. They sometimes contain the names of non-Lebanese contemporary artists and the names are not listed chronologically. These lists therefore have nothing to do with explanatory diagrams.

Classical historical time refers to the past, modern historical time refers to the future. For avant-garde artists, inscribing a work within the determinism of history took on a highly moral intent. With Walid Raad, these ethics are sustained by a symptomatic *mimesis* of the context that he intends to report about. We can write history if history is closed. We can formulate a history of art if it is a subject matter whose validity is proven and which can be revisited. We could write history or a history of art, if the war were over. But is it possible, even today, to locate the end of the Lebanese wars? *Notebook volume 72: Missing Lebanese wars* (1989/1998) is the title of one of *The Atlas Group's* files. The physical and material absence of artists and works in the ghostly history of art presented in *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow* are echoes of these 'missing Lebanese wars'. Like *The Atlas Group*, *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow* is built on a hysteria of affected chronologies, presences and 're-appearitions'. As a medium rather than a historian Walid Raad transmits information to his audience in a stammering form of glossolalia, as he did in his performance *The Loudest Muttering is Over* (2001), when he pretended to have lost his page or the thread of his story. In Raad's work, the historical process is thought of as a haunting memory, in an explosion of both time and place that Jacques Derrida would describe as 'historical truth' which is different from 'material truth', a truth that resists and returns as a 'spectral truth'.⁵

Here, the articulation between what is visible and what is invisible has more to do with transmission rather than history. In his essay, 'Experience and Poverty' (1933), Walter Benjamin wrote 'Who still meets people who really know how to

tell a story? ... No, this much is clear: experience has fallen in value, amid a generation which from 1914–18 had to experience some of the most monstrous events in the history of the world.⁵ After employing a parable about the stock market he describes how transmission became impossible after the war, stating that people were 'not richer but poorer in communicable experience'.⁶ Similarly, Raad draws on the writings of Jalal Toufic, intellectual and sometimes collaborator, for his project raising the idea that some disasters 'surpass' reality: they affect transmission as well as tradition both in a material and in an immaterial way, within a time frame that exceeds the existence of bodies.

In 2005, Raad came to realize that *The Atlas Group* could not be shown in Beirut in the smart premises of the commercial gallery where he was invited to exhibit. Based on the principle of deterritorialization as a counter authority and on fictional procedures which guarantee its ontological and ethical power to account for violence, *The Atlas Group* could not be assigned to a real territory in the country from which it originated, let alone to this space in Karantina (a district that was the scene of the horrendous massacre of Syrians, Palestinians and Kurds by the Phalangists, a radical military group, during the civil war in 1976). Like Pasolini, who in 1975 repudiated his *Trilogy of Life* films in front of a world that had enslaved the body to the pressures of the media and the market, Raad waived the opportunity to exhibit the archive in this slick 'white cube' by abjuring the possible existence of his work and its language in a space like this. In the late 1970s, Brian O'Doherty defined the white cube space as a 'black box', as a laboratory, and as a chamber of 'transformation into art'.⁷ Originally an experimental utopian space, in this context, the white cube had become a kitsch artefact where the 'conversion into economic value' took precedence over artistic and political ontology. The only possible outcome for Raad thus was to present *The Atlas Group* in a small-scale model of a museum, a synthetic representation of the buildings where it had previously been exhibited. In essence, he extracted the works from the white cube to transpose them into another space. Just as he had reduced archival images and texts to illegible comments in the margins of the white panels in the series *We can make rain but no one came to ask* (2003/2006), here he indexes *The Atlas Group* like footnotes lifted from the body of a text that cannot materialize. If *The Atlas Group* mapped the impossibility of locating the violence of war, then *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow* indexes potentialities of memory and language in the shadow of a thick and overwhelming contemporary economic (and military) violence that appears falsely pacified.

Scratching on Things I Could Disavow features architectural renderings of modern art museums. These imaginary places are empty. Raad has made them appear two-dimensional and ghostly, sometimes confining them to a holographic state. These disembodied spaces echo current museum projects in the Gulf Region, which Raad highlights as 'fallacious artifices of universal utopias'. In this sense, he follows in the steps of post-war avant-garde and post-avant-garde artists who wanted to highlight the corruption of the museum's emancipatory values born under the aegis of the Enlightenment (be it through the pervasive abuse of political power or the commercial drive of the cultural industries). Thus on 27 September 1968, in his house in Brussels, Marcel Broodthaers inaugurated his



Viewing Matters: Upstairs curated by Hans Haacke
Museum Boijmans-Van Beuningen, Rotterdam
1996

fictional museum *Section XIX^e siècle, Musée d'art moderne, Département des Aigles* where he displayed a number of empty wooden crates (commonly used for transporting valuable paintings), slide projections and a series of postcards of works of art. The 'by-products' were exhibited in place of the artworks. In 1996, for the exhibition *Viewing Matters: Upstairs* at the Museum Boijmans-Van Beuningen in Rotterdam, in order to demonstrate the ideological proponents underlying any form of display, Hans Haacke transferred the museum's spare hanging rails from the depot into the galleries and presented an exhibition where the works were hung not according to aesthetic, chronological or historic criteria, but solely to maximize the use of the space. In *Les Formes: Peintures* in 1977, Daniel Buren intervened in the collections of the Musée national d'art moderne in Paris by sliding a frame, made from canvas with his trademark pattern (8.7cm-wide coloured stripes), under certain works of art. He then added a label underneath the original work's label to indicate his involvement. He stated about the installation: 'forms reinforce the fact that below a framework, there is always something that the frame ignores, conceals or which is foreign, that is to say the wall, and that wall is not innocent.'³

However, while Broodthaers continued to imagine a possible emancipatory force for the museum that he highlighted by default in his installations, and while Haacke, in a Brechtian vein, still believed in using effective 'weapons' against a dominating spectacle, and while Buren proposed 'visual tools' which could have a direct effect on the viewer's gaze, Raad questions the efficiency of the languages and forms that he has used and produced thus far. 'Now that American hotels are decorated with abstract paintings ... radicalism itself must pay the price that it is no longer radical',⁹ claimed Theodor Adorno in 1970 to denounce the appropriation of avant-garde art by mass culture. Having seen that the radical foundations of Conceptual art by now have become the 'style sheet' of an international art affiliated to geopolitical and economic contingencies, Raad moves away from it. Thus, if he provides explanatory elements (diagrams, drawings, maps, charts, lectures or videos) on the complex intricacies that exist between current technological developments in the fields of statistics and their application in finance, in art databases, in contemporary art foundations, in the Israeli high-tech industries and the cultural industries in the Gulf Region, he does not make these his project's central motif in the way that his post-Conceptual or neo-Minimalist predecessors may have done. Instead, he pulls them out, or

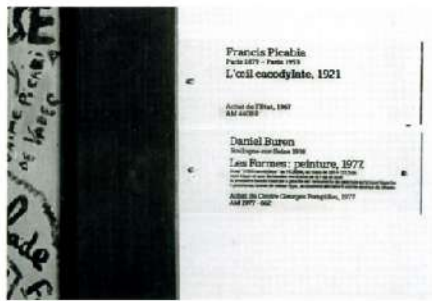


Photo-Souvenir: Daniel Buren
Les Formes: Peintures (detail)
 Work in situ in the permanent collection,
 Musée national d'art moderne, Paris
 1977

sets them back, as possible clues or explanatory materials, while treating them with a certain distance and sometimes a sense of absurdity. Raad never proceeds by direct denunciation, but always through assertion and displacement.

In 2007, in his lecture *I Feel a Great Desire to Meet the Masses Once Again* (which dealt with the kidnapping, detention and torture of people by state and non-state protagonists), Raad was already reflecting on the ambivalence of the political use of his formal means, concluding that: 'Over the past two years, several times I hoped that the task of gathering this material and assembling these stories would have been more difficult. I always said: "This is too easy," I kept thinking to myself. "A few billion dollars spent on intelligence, so that an artist with an internet connection and some free time can uncover all this? This can't be!"' The 'political' artist's task of revealing scandals hidden within spheres of a 'global conspiracy' proved to be obsolete and irrelevant. Everything was already there, before our eyes, no need to add visibility to what is already visible.

In 1997, Raad was one of the founding members of the Arab Image Foundation, an organization whose mission was to collect, preserve and present photographs from the Arab world, the Middle East, North Africa and the international diaspora. Its aim was to uncover lifestyles and customs found within the details of images to reveal, according to Edward Saïd's precepts, the real complexity of life in these territories, as opposed to the globalizing and fake Western representation of an 'orientalist' world. Some years later, in 2002, Raad was involved in Catherine David's project entitled *Tamass, Contemporary Arab Representations*.¹⁰ This series of events (exhibitions, publications, conferences) presented 'heterogeneous situations' related to different social, economic, historical and sometimes complex or conflicting situations in the wake of a Foucauldian idea of history as a series of 'discontinuities', of clashes between narratives and counter-narratives and of conflicts between dominant and minority memories. Since the late 1970s, many artists and intellectuals have argued that there was no single Modernism, but a series of diverse and delocalized 'climatologies'. In this line of thought, Luis Camnitzer in Uruguay, and Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica in Brazil, have claimed 'a political conceptualism'. In her stark introduction to Hélio Oiticica's work, as early as 1992, Catherine David stated: 'Is an experimental avant-garde possible in an underdeveloped country? As Harold de Campos points out,¹¹ the question is indicative of an implacable attitude toward the so-called peripheral



IRWIN Group
Retroavantgarde
1997-2005

cultures – an attitude, based on ignorance, condescension and paternalism, that has led to the fact that the major ideas and creations appearing outside the 'accepted' capitals of modernity have been lastingly occulted, transformed into mere folklore or exoticism, or simply marginalized'.¹⁴ Recently, the IRWIN Group, a group of artists from Slovenia, made its diagram *Retroavantgarde* (1997–2005) in response to the famous diagram by Alfred Barr, founding Director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which proposed an ethnocentric genealogy for the movements of modern art.

Walid Raad's *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow* can be read in the light of this intellectual and artistic constellation. In these post-colonial times and in the age of globalization, it could be interpreted as the desire to uncover a hidden modernist tradition in Lebanon and to historicize this within a global reconfiguration of the critical and aesthetic discourse. However, faced with the culture industry's dominance in the Middle East, Raad also organizes an apostasy of the utopias that formed the basis of his activity. In 1941, Walter Benjamin stated: 'every age must strive anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is working to overpower it.'¹⁵ Raad continues his enterprise of 'volte-face' to misguided (modernist) notions that underpin today's cultural industries. And so he states: 'Artists of the future are more interested in reviving lines, colours, shapes or contours than to uphold the work of certain painters, sculptors, photographers and filmmakers who have lived and worked in Lebanon during the twentieth century.'¹⁶ All the documents, theses, archives or posters on the history of modern art in Lebanon that Raad has found or that have been passed on to him are then 'carved up', cut out, or extracted to be presented in *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow*, like an atlas documenting colours, shapes and lines. By using a technique that is reminiscent of the late Roman Empire's practice which consisted of dismantling monuments in order to use their various elements for other purposes, Walid Raad provides his new floating archive with the spoils that he took from the artefacts of tradition provided to him by the authority.

'The Revolution's monument is... the gap.' Eric Michaud cites Michelet's famous aphorism to posit his argument and continues: 'Therefore, the atomization of practices and forms of art, its auto-dissolution by renunciation to its "will to power", and finally its gradual disembodiment during the twentieth century, were the only limited answers that artistic activity could bring to the never-ending mythical incarnation of a productive future, in order to preserve democracy's

necessary power vacuum that the cultural industries continue to fill in'.¹⁵ Raad does not hesitate to dynamite the processes he employs in order to question their historicist and declarative pretensions. He would no doubt be interested to know that in reality, Malevich's educational panels contained their own didactic failures within them from the start. Without the artist being present to comment on them, their graphic complexity made them incomprehensible to the public. Similarly, George Maciunas' enterprise surpassed him, the amount of knowledge and information to process proved to be too vast and too complex; he would be forced to add fragments and extensions *ad infinitum* to his graphs. Raad is interested in faulty machinery. Like the protagonist in Herman Melville's novella *Bartleby, the Scrivener* (1853), whom Giorgio Agamben describes as 'a scribe who does not simply cease writing but "prefers not to", [and who] is the extreme image of this angel that writes nothing but its potentiality not to write',¹⁶ Raad's political efficiency is posited through 'power by default'. His ethical project is continually underpinned by the pragmatic concern to put the conceptual and visual tools that he employs to the test. It is not unreasonable to think that, like the other artists who share the same intellectual and artistic scene in Beirut, Raad is an artist 'only under certain conditions'. He occupies a space within contemporary art only if it can be considered a field open to the possibilities of 'politics-poetics', to borrow a term used by Catherine David and Jean-François Chevrier for Documenta X in 1997;¹⁷ these politics-poetics that do not place art 'facing' history, but rather 'into' histories. Raad proposes dialectical objects based on 'conflicts' between elements, according to procedures of montage and re-assembly similar to those defined by Georges Didi-Huberman (referring to means employed by Bertolt Brecht in his *Kriegsfibel* (*War Primer*) and his *Arbeits Journal* (*Journals*) as 'methods of knowledge' by 'dislocating and re-composing everything', by noting the 'disorder of the world'.¹⁸

And when Walid Raad repeats his lists of artists on the walls of the exhibition space through layers of misaligned letters, or when he remakes the work of Walid Sadek on his own terms in order to integrate it into his oeuvre, these repetitions should not be understood as a postmodern procedure assigning the 'death of the author at the birth of the reader', according to Roland Barthes.¹⁹ Neither should they be seen as the simulationist desire for reappropriation that lead artists such as Louise Lawler, Richard Prince or Cindy Sherman to assert that there was no need to add objects to the existing visual world 'as the only path to art's truth'.²⁰ Rather, this form of repetition is what Giorgio Agamben detects in Guy Debord's films: 'The force and grace of repetition, the novelty it brings us, is the return of possibility of what was. ... To repeat something is to make it possible anew. ... Memory is, so to speak, the organ of reality's modelization; it is what can transform the real into the possible and the possible into the real. ... When he [Debord] shows an excerpt of a TV news broadcast, the force of the repetition is to cease being an accomplished fact and to become possible again.'²¹

In 1953, Marcel Duchamp organized a Dada retrospective at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York. At the entrance to the exhibition, the public was handed a leaflet listing the names of the exhibiting artists and their works with the condition that this should be thrown away when leaving. By purposefully inviting

a premeditated vandalistic gesture, Duchamp invited the public to confirm the end of art as proclaimed by his Dadaist peers whom, according to Adorno, thought that 'it would be better not to have an art than to have a false one'.²²

Walid Raad invites his audience to point out the mistakes in his list of artist's names so that he can amend them. Whenever a name is restored to its lexical origin, a visible red correction mark is left in the exhibition space. He then proceeds to collect and exhibit materials (biographies, newspaper articles) on the current or past activities of the artist to whom those corrections apply and inserts those elements into his project. Thus, the montage of this new archive that Raad is building is the product of alterations, symbolic or material, individually or collectively approved acts of vandalism. Repetitions and dismantlings, as practised by Raad, are means by which forms are (re)made available in the public (democratic) sphere, according to a (joyful) 'profanation' of the global apparatus of art and economy. A 'profanation' that Giorgio Agamben would see as returning to the profane community, or to secular use, that from which it has been separated.

- 1 Octavio Paz, 'A Tradition Against Itself', in *Children of the Mirror: Modern Poetry from Romanticism to the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1991), p.2.
- 2 Marina Vancî Perahim, 'Ancêtres nécessaires et "douaniers" sans frontières: internationalisation du modèle primitif', in *Un art sans frontières, l'Internationalisation des arts en Europe 1900-1950*, under the supervision of Gérard Monnier and José Vovelle (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1994), p.47.
- 3 Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).
- 4 George Maciunas, 'Letter to Tomas Schmat', *Fluxus etc.*, January 1964.
- 5 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998).
- 6 Walter Benjamin, 'Experience and Poverty', in *Selected Writings: 1931-1934, Volume 2, Part 2*, eds. Howard Eiland, Michael Jennings and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2005), p.731.
- 7 Brian O'Doherty, *White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976).
- 8 *Les Couleurs: Sculptures Les Formes, Peintures* (Paris: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1980), reproduced in *Daniel Buren: Mot à Mot* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 2002), p.C6a.
- 9 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), pp.37-38.
- 10 *Tamás: Contemporary Arab Representations: Beirut/Lebanon* (Barcelona: Fundació Anton Tapies, 2002).
- 11 Haroldo de Campos, 'De la Raison Anthropophage', in *Lettre Internationale*, No. 20, Spring 1989.
- 12 Catherine David, 'The Great Labyrinth', in *Hélène Oiticica* (Rotterdam: Witte de With, 1992), p.248.
- 13 Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', in *Selected Writings: 1938-1940, Volume 4*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2003), p.391.
- 14 Interview with Hélène Chouteau, press kit, Festival d'Automne à Paris, June 2010.
- 15 Eric Michaud, 'L'image matrice de l'Histoire', in *Histoire de l'Art, une discipline à ses frontières* (Paris: Éditions Hazan, 2005), p.145.
- 16 Giorgio Agamben, 'Bartleby', in *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p.37.
- 17 *Documenta X*, eds. Jean-François Chevrier and Catherine David (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern-Ruit, 1997).
- 18 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Quand les Images Prennent Position, L'œil de l'Histoire 1* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2009), p.85. With regards to the theoretical basis of knowledge by montage, for his exhibition project *Atlas* at the Reina Sofia in Madrid in 2010, Georges Didi-Huberman entitled a section 'Going back through the History of Art' which comprised amongst others Aby Warburg's mnemotype *BilderAtlas*, Dada *Hand Atlas*, Kazimir Malevich's pedagogical boards, George Maciunas' charts, Josef Albers' photographic atlases, Marcel Broodthaers' *Section XIX^e siècle, Musée d'art moderne, Département des Aigles*.
- 19 Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).
- 20 Patricia Falguieres, preface in *White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Geneva: JPR Ringier, 2008), p.21.
- 21 Giorgio Agamben, 'Difference and Repetition: On Guy Debord's Films', in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge MA and London, MIT Press, 2002), pp.315-316.
- 22 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), p.38.

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Walid Raad

Miraculous Beginnings

Whitechapel Gallery, London
14 October 2010–2 January 2011
Travelling to Kunsthalle Zürich, 2011

And the exhibition and performances

Walid Raad

***Scratching on things I could disavow:
A history of art in the Arab world***

Festival d'Automne à Paris
Presented at Le CENTQUATRE, Paris
6 November–5 December 2010

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the weather helped, Flate cot, Saudi Arabia*
(detail), 1998/2006-7



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