

# The Unreliable Narrator

05.11.2019

In 1984, living in Lebanon at the height of a devastating civil war, the artist was beginning his career as a photographer. Israel had withdrawn from around Beirut to more southerly positions, opening up space for conflict between Christian and Druze militias in the Chouf district. By February 1984 the Lebanese Armed Forces, which had been fighting alongside the Christian militias, had largely disintegrated, collapsing along sectarian lines. The war was entering a terrible new phase, culminating in the 'War in the Camps'. In Beirut, meanwhile, the artist found his first job; according to the wall text in the gallery, 'I was thrilled to be hired by a cousin active in the local militia, to photograph various storefronts. It was my first professional job. I proceeded to make pictures not unlike those of Eugène Atget and Walker Evans, my favourite photographers at the time.'

The photographs on display by the wall text are small, neat, and evocative examples of social documentary, plainly capturing the storefronts in a categorical manner. The comparison to Atget, the French pioneer of documentary photography whose photographs captured the lifeless Parisian street, is not unfounded. The text, however, continues on, containing a horrific epilogue: 'Years later, I found out that the stores' owners had refused to pay the "security fees" imposed on them by my cousin's militia, leading to the owners being beaten or exiled, and their businesses confiscated.'

How does an artist become complicit in the business of war and the violence of history? And what do these artifacts, created in the legacy of French photography, mean in the context of that violence, now we know they are both artworks and a military archive used to wage war? These are the questions that the artist Walid Raad, raised in Christian East

Beirut by a Palestinian mother and Lebanese father, has asked of art throughout his career. And here, on the walls of the prestigious Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the questions become even more complex. As a result of the civil war Raad left Lebanon in 1983 — a year before these photographs were supposedly taken. So who is the 'I' in the wall text? And why is the wall text, a gallery convention that we trust to provide authoritative explanations of the artworks, lying to us?

This is how Raad's art operates; he works to undermine our assumptions about the objective nature of both the art institution and the archive, and implicitly the objective nature of the art viewer or consumer. History is constructed through such institutions and archives, yet the roots of both were produced from systems of colonialism, war, and expropriation. In his Stedelijk show *Let's Be Honest, The Weather Helped*, Raad repeatedly uses such destabilising fictions, with a sharpened wit, to examine how we remember violence and consume it as art and entertainment. In another work, Raad presents a collection of collages produced from botanical textbooks. The wall text recounts how the Lebanese security service, the *Deuxième Bureau*, descended from the French military intelligence unit of the same name, used the names of local flora as codenames for local and international politicians. They employed a botanist named Fadwa Hassoun to generate and catalogue the names; the collages are purportedly her works. The images are playful; from the *Achillea* family of plants bloom a hundred heads of Palestinian leaders such as Yasser Arafat. On other pages Brezhnev, Hosni Mubarak, or Ruhollah Khomeini blossom as furious flowers. But their playfulness is undercut with resonances of the relationship between taxonomy and imperialism.

Raad's work repeatedly draws our attention to the contingent nature of history, undermining any belief that we can be sure of its veracity independent of the storytellers. The art world itself, and the gallery space, isn't exempt from his eye. Like most people in it, he's aware of art's complicity in shaping historical and political narratives, but also in

brute power, in the art world's economic reliance upon some of the world's most corrupt and unethical power players. In this show his unreliable narrators help shine light on the Louvre, France's most prestigious art institution (stocked largely from its imperialist conquests), and its relationship with the United Arab Emirates, where it recently opened a new branch. The UAE paid over half a billion dollars to be associated with the museum, as well as \$700 million more for the loan of artworks and consultancy. Art, Raad understands, is about more than objects of contemplation; it's a weapon of soft power, which can help shape political history. As Abu Dhabi have realised, it can be well worth paying the piper a small fortune if you get to call the tunes. The question will always remain whether art itself can ever effectively critique its own system of reproduction, but Raad admirably refuses to remain silent on its complicity.