

# Walid Raad Goes Meta on Middle Eastern Art

At the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, it's hard to tell what's real and what isn't

Any life is lived somewhere between truth and fiction. This includes the stories a person – or a people – tell themselves to compensate for profound injury or loss. Walid Raad first achieved acclaim with his archive of photographs, prints, videos and films relating to the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90), exhibited under the alias of *The Atlas Group*. With his latest show, 'Let's be honest, the weather helped', at Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum, Raad continues to fabricate attributions – primarily to show how any work of art is the product of larger histories, discourses, social formations, economies and genealogies. In Raad's case, the conditions for these are war, dispossession and a burgeoning interest and investment in art from the Middle East.

*Sweet Talk: Commissions (Beirut) \_ Solidere 1994–1997* (2019) is a stunning panoramic digital video of collapsing and recomposing multistorey buildings. Irrevocably damaged during the civil war, these structures were demolished as part of downtown Beirut's urban renewal programme. Raad's wall text claims that the edited and looped five-minute footage was shot by the involuntarily displaced residents. But were they displaced by war or by a rebuilding process that destroyed more structures than the fighting? Raad has long linked the shattered architecture of Beirut to the damaged psyches of its inhabitants. He has also described the reconstruction efforts as a wilful attempt at collective amnesia. Yet, trauma never truly forgets; it merely takes on new forms.



Walid Raad, *Museo Jumex*, 2016–2017, installation view, 'Walid Raad – Let's be honest, the weather helped', Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 2019. Courtesy: Museo Jumex; photograph: Moritz Bernouilly

At the Stedelijk Museum, alongside Raad's documentation of the Lebanese Civil War – its aftereffects as afterimages – is his investigation into the recent embrace of art by the Arab world, signalled most visibly by collections assembled for museums in the Middle East, such as branches of the Louvre and the Guggenheim in Abu Dhabi. *Scratching on things I could disavow* (2007–ongoing) investigates how certain works made by Middle Eastern artists that are purchased, organized, exhibited and historicized according to models of Western art quite literally lose the shadows they cast as physical objects. At the performance-talks Raad always gives at major exhibitions of his work, he acknowledges how fantastical this claim may sound, at times (he said at the Stedelijk this summer) even questioning his own sanity. As compensation for these artworks' losses, Raad has produced a series of sculptural pieces, such as *Letters to the reader\_010* (2014), that he terms 'shadow magnets', which have the shapes of these artworks' missing shadows excised into

their wooden panels.

The focused span of the works in this retrospective highlights a set of themes – including militias and the ghosts of people and histories – that recur in an oeuvre which has a touch of the otherworldly or, more accurately, the uncanny. Consisting of three prints, *A Proposal for a Beirut Site Museum: Preface (2016–2026)* (2017) includes drawings that Raad and the architect Bernard Khoury submitted to a competition in Lebanon to build a Beirut Museum of Art. Their contribution resembles a vertical tomb, an inverted skyscraper, a mine or, perhaps, simply an empty space for possibility. According to the wall text, Raad and Khoury's museum proposal finished third in the competition but the winning architect was dismissed, leaving their plans the current runner-up and therefore still in play – with the emphasis here on play. In Raad's practice, it is difficult to know what is real and what isn't, whether it leads to lunacy or to an escape from suffocating historical circumstances. Raad's work has never provided answers; rather, it seeks tenuous clearings between the lands of warring factions.

['Walid Raad - Let's Be Honest, The Weather Helped'](#) runs at Stedelijk Museum until 13 October 2019.

*Main Image: Walid Raad, 'Let's be honest, the weather helped', 2019, installation view, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 2019; photograph: Gert Jan van Rooij*