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ABBAS KIAROSTAMI GHADA AMER WALID RAAD



The Atlas Group/ Walid Raad.
Civilizationally, we do not dig holes to bury ourselves. Plate 922. 1958-59/2003.
 Pigmented inkjet print. 25.4 x 20.3 cm.
 Courtesy the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. © 2015 Walid Raad

NEW YORK

THE WALKTHROUGH

Now at MoMA is the first comprehensive American survey of Lebanon-born, New York-based Walid Raad. **Laura van Straaten** meets the artist in New York and discusses his performances, the role of photography and video, and the unceasing conflicts that haunt the Arab world



Installation view of Walid Raad,
 The Museum of Modern Art,
 October 12, 2015-January 31, 2016.
 © 2015 The Museum of Modern
 Art, New York. Photography by
 Thomas Griesel

The expansive survey of 25 years of work by Lebanese artist Walid Raad's work at New York's Museum of

Modern Art's comprises a complex constellation of more than 200 artworks across many media, often with titles that are downright obtuse (e.g. *Civilizationally, we do not dig holes to bury ourselves*).

Thankfully, the artist himself, in his black t-shirt, jeans and shiny black lace-up shoes is there to help in person several times a week. Raad says that *Walkthrough*, as he calls his hour-long, scripted performance, is an extension of his longtime "lecture performances" that deconstruct, explain and exemplify the tired convention of the artist-talk. "There's elements of slapstick, standup comedy, the TED talk, the academic lecture, the artist talk," he explains.

Visitors who cannot get tickets (available on MoMA's website) can and should listen to the full performance on the museum's free audio tour; without that personal touch, the survey may be hard to comprehend and much less enjoyable for those not familiar with Raad's *oeuvre* and his good sense of humour. (Raad will also perform *Walkthrough* with some regularity when the exhibit travels first to Boston in February then to Mexico City next autumn.)

Just as the Raad survey straddles two floors of MoMA, so too does it also straddle two of Raad's main artistic projects as well as the worlds of fiction, the playful and the dead serious.

At the outset of an interview in a modest MoMA conference room, Raad lays out the challenges for those approaching his work for the first time. "I think everyone gets caught up in this fact versus fiction thing," he cautions. "Not to compare myself, but you wouldn't ask Picasso or Van Gogh 'Are these faces real and is the sky really like that?' because art is in the realm of aesthetic facts, not journalistic or historical facts." Raad's shaved head is covered by a logo-less navy baseball cap, under which intense brown eyes peer from behind rimless eyeglasses. "But there's no doubt that I deliberately use certain tools and forms that bring up this question of documentary," he adds.

The first of these quasi-documentary projects is called *The Atlas Group*, begun in 1989. That rubric — really just him —



combines archival research from real events with imaginary stories and characters. In doing so, he both offers up and questions a contemporary history of Lebanon, and in later work, the Middle East at large.

A central preoccupation here is the impact of violence. For Raad, this is specifically the protracted wars in Lebanon, where suicide attacks, car bombs, political assassinations and refugee-camp massacres ripped the country apart and presaged the ongoing violence in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and elsewhere in the region. The civil war in Lebanon started in 1975 when Raad was eight, lasted 15 years, caused 120,000 fatalities and created more than a million refugees and displaced people.

Raad explores this impact of war by drawing on two kinds of fictions. First, he folds in testimonies and even “artwork” by experts with invented biographies who are quoted and even pictured. Here’s a Dr. Fadl Fakhouri, “the most renowned historian of Lebanon” whose photo bears an uncanny resemblance to Raad’s father. There’s a watercolourist and arts patron named Nahia Hassan whose day job is “senior topographer in the Lebanese Army’s Directorate of Geographic Affairs.” They, and others, are made-up.

Then, even more compellingly, Raad makes use of magical realism — though he is not wont to use that term — by weaving fantastical traits and happenings in with hard social and political realities. This is the freshest and most emotional part of the exhibit. The most moving example of this is where he describes how “colours, lines, shapes and forms” (he repeats this phrase like a mantra) can tend to withdraw in the wake of war; they may be found decorating forms, budgets, indices, dissertation covers and reports, but they are no longer “available,” as he puts it, to artists as they were in antebellum days.

The second main project on view is *Scratching on things I could disavow*, begun in 2007. For this, Raad uses interrelated series of photographs, videos, sculptures, installations and performance to evince a discomfort with the burgeoning of art fairs, auctions, prizes, biennials, western-branded museums and galleries alongside the geopolitical, economic, and military conflicts that have long consumed the region.

Here too are elements of magical realism. In his series called



The Louvres, he relays an impossible story about how objects arriving for exhibition at the planned Louvre outpost on Abu Dhabi’s island of Saadiyat are found upon arrival to have “traded skins” with one another in transit from France. And in a series of inkjet prints, Raad posits paintings that like vampires (a favourite trope of his) have simply lost their reflections on the shiny floors of Doha’s Arab Museum of Modern Art.

Very much in the air was Raad’s controversial relationship with the UAE, ostensibly for his role in Gulf Labor, the international coalition of artists trying to protect migrant workers in the UAE. While this is not explicitly part of exhibition, it was a key topic on the eve of its opening during an invitation-only, three-way conversation among Raad, MoMA director Glenn Lowry and exhibition organiser Eva Respini.

This exhibition is not for the casual art tourist. Raad makes the viewer work for it, pay attention and peer around and upside-down and sideways at objects, systems, traditions and history. But for those who are willing to do the work and go along for the ride, the potential pay-off is big. ■

Walid Raad is on view at New York’s Museum of Modern Art through January 16, 2016. The exhibition will then travel to the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston (February 24–May 30, 2016) and to the Museo Jumex in Mexico City (October 13, 2016–January 14, 2017)

Above: The Atlas Group/ Walid Raad. *Hostage: The Bachar tapes* (English version), 2001. Video (colour, sound), 16:17 min. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. © 2015 Walid Raad
Left: Walid Raad. *Scratching on things I could disavow: Walkthrough*, 2015. © 2015 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photography by Julieta Cervantes