

Walid Raad Uses Fact and Fiction to Tell a Powerful History of Beirut

Raad exposes the way in which our accepted notions of historicizing events are simultaneously fact and fiction.

by [Susan Silas](#) May 13, 2019



Walid Raad, *Sweet Talk: Commissions (Beirut) _ Solidere 1994-1997 (2019)*, still. Panoramic digital video, resolution 5760 x 1080, ratio 16:3, looped. Installation view, *Walid Raad*, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York (photo by Steven Probert, © Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York)

In 1895 the Lumière Brothers exhibited some of the first films ever made.

One of these short, black-and-white films depicted workers demolishing the remaining wall of a small structure. Armed with pickaxes and sledgehammers, they eventually knocked down the wall and were engulfed in a cloud of dust. Then, slowly, the workers moved backwards; the dust cloud was magically reabsorbed and the wall stood back up, to the audience's astonishment. This extraordinary film by the Lumières is echoed in *Sweet Talk: Commissions (Beirut)_Solidere 1994-1997*, a panoramic video installation by Walid Raad in his current exhibition at [Paula Cooper Gallery](#). The three-channel color video is tellingly composed as a Rorschach test, with mirroring images above and below a central horizontal. It depicts the implosion of buildings and apartment blocks in Beirut. As in the Lumière film, buildings collapse into a furious cloud of dust and then miraculously reconstitute themselves. The crystal clear blue sky is reminiscent of the sky on September 11, 2001, in New York City.

The accompanying wall label tells us that in the early 1990s hundreds of buildings in downtown Beirut were demolished to rebuild the city center, adding, "The works displayed here derive from dozens of implosion videos recorded by irritated former tenants who had been ousted and/or bought-off to make room for the new downtown." Is this true? Does the source of the videos matter? At the ICP Infinity Awards in 2016 Raad said: "This question of whether something is fact or fiction is a reduction of the bookends on which we live our lives. We rarely live our lives on the edges of those bookends, where something is absolute and [historically] real or something is the pure realm of imaginary fantasy. Those bookends, it seemed to me, are like a false choice to explore the complexity of contemporary life."



Walid Raad, *Sweet Talk: Commissions (Beirut) _ Solidere 1994-1997* (2019), still. Panoramic digital video, resolution 5760 x 1080, ratio 16:3, looped (© Walid Raad, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York)

The video is striking in its beauty. It is a reminder of the obsessive aestheticization of ruin and destruction in Western culture. At the same time, it reaffirms what I believe to be the endless yearning for beauty that persists in the midst of catastrophe. The video depicts many buildings whose facades have already been torn off, revealing identical cubes that were once domestic spaces. We have become inured to the suffering implicit in images of dissected apartments open to the street through the endless publication of documentary photographs showing exposed kitchens, half-eaten meals, bedding hanging from cratered floors, people calmly drinking tea in homes whose outside walls are missing, people watching their homes being bulldozed. They are ubiquitous but also, for most Westerners, taking place elsewhere. And we have become equally inured to how we are implicated in them.

The destruction of Beirut did not begin with a grand plan to recreate downtown. It began during the civil war in Lebanon, which broke out in 1975 and lasted for 15 years, killing approximately 120,000 people. In [*The Great War for Civilization: The Conquest of the Middle East* \(2005\)](#), journalist Robert Fisk, who spent half his adult life stationed in Beirut, set out to explain the history of the Middle East from World War I to the present. This thousand-page tome outlines the sectarian factions that coalesced during the civil war in Lebanon. Armed to the teeth, they fought one another, bullied their own, and massacred civilians. Militias morphed into one another, divided, disappeared. The current Wikipedia entry for the Lebanese Civil War includes an astounding list of belligerents that came and went, from the Lebanese Front, the Army of Free Lebanon, SLA, Israel, Tigers Militia, Lebanese National Movement, Jammoul, Hezbollah, Iran, IRGC, Islamic Unification Movement, Syria, Amal Movement, PNSF Marada Brigades, Lebanese Armed Forces, UNIFIL Multinational Force in Lebanon, the United States, France, Italy, Arab Deterrent Force, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Libya, and South Yemen, accompanied by the dates they were engaged. While reading Fisk's book and looking at this list I find it nearly impossible to keep track of who is who and what religion they represent. Maronite Christian, Shia Muslim, Sunni Muslim, Druze? Or what political faction, as with Hezbollah and the PLO. But for 15 years, Beirut was torn apart.



Walid Raad, *Sweet Talk: Commissions (Beirut) _1991* (2019), detail. Archival inkjet prints, 8 prints, each: 20 x 28 3/4 in.; frame, each: 21 x 29 3/4 x 1 1/2 in. Installation view, *Walid Raad*, Paula Cooper Gallery, New York (photo by Steven Probert, © Walid Raad, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York)

Early in the conflict, I remember seeing a magazine article in one of the popular picture magazines of the time (*Look* or *Life*, maybe) depicting a group of bikini-clad Western women on a seaside terrace in Beirut. The article lamented that tourism was becoming too dangerous for visitors. I don't recall if it had much to say about the people who lived in Beirut, who routinely saw buildings rife with bullet holes, rubble from explosions in the streets, and cars flying through the air, projected by explosives. What becomes of domestic life in these circumstances? Most Westerners are lucky enough to have no idea. Domestic space was terrorized by the ongoing civil war. As the artist Helene Kazan, also from Beirut and also, unsurprisingly, very focused on architecture, explained to me in an

[interview](#) for Hyperallergic, all of the windows in her home were covered with cross-hatched tape to prevent shattering glass from coming into the apartment. This says nothing of the danger involved in venturing out into the street on any given day. By 1989 the war forced her family to move.

It is this experience that Raad seeks to explain without resorting to conventional historical narratives. In fact, the artist's work has a great deal to say about such standard academic histories, which tend to serve the victor while insisting on their objectivity, by poking holes into those conventions. It's not that he presents an alternate history, but rather that he exposes the way in which our accepted notions of historicizing events are simultaneously fact and fiction. The discipline of history in the 20th century rested on the belief that there were overarching explanations for events and that white Western men were best situated to illuminate them. Raad is asking us to consider: If these histories are just a consensual editing of the "facts" by a particular group, aren't they also fictions?

Walid Raad, *Sweet Talk: Commissions (Beirut)_1991* (2019), detail. Archival inkjet prints 8 prints, each: 20 x 28 3/4 in.; frame, each: 21 x 29 3/4 x 1 1/2 in. (© Walid Raad, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York)

Elsewhere, Raad marvels that a grainy, black-and-white photograph can come to be a credible document of the history of an event. A series of eight black-and-white photographs displayed on the wall opposite the video, titled "Sweet Talk: Commissions (Beirut)_1991," purports to represent spreads from a book "found in a flea market in 1994. It consisted of streetscapes of the city by the unsung Lebanese photographer, Ahmed Helou." If Ahmed Helou existed, he was indeed obscure. The wall label goes on to claim that Raad was drawn to the book by the handwritten inscriptions on each page. The beautiful black-and-white photographs are divided vertically down the center, like the centerfold of a book. On each image is an Arabic inscription handwritten in blue ink, with a typed English caption directly below the image. Raad allows the viewer to read the images through these short personal narratives. The first image is by now a cliché of urban destruction: bullet-riddled facades and concrete rubble. The caption reads, "My brother decided to join the right wing militia while walking with his buddies on this street." The effect is similar to entering an address on Google Earth and watching the globe grow closer and closer as the cursor zooms in. This strategy contrasts specificity with the inadequacy of the larger historical narrative to encompass it.

Walid Raad, *Sweet Talk: Commissions (Beirut)_1991* (2019), detail. Archival inkjet prints 8 prints, each: 20 x 28 3/4 in.; frame, each: 21 x 29 3/4 x 1 1/2 in. Installation view, *Walid Raad*, Paula Cooper Gallery, 521 West 21st Street, New York (photo by Steven Probert, © Walid Raad, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York)

Another photograph, of a more intact street, is captioned, "My first and most favorite camera, a Nikon F, will suddenly stop working on this street

in 1980." The grand narratives of the 20th century claimed the ability to theorize totalizing explanations. Postmodern theory replaced the absolute with the relative. Raad, it seems to me, is interested less in the relative than in the power of specificity to dispel our belief in one explanation to cover all bets, to ever fully explain anything.

A suite of intimately scaled color images in the next room, *Sweet Talk: Commissions (Beirut): 1984*, is a visual map of Beirut storefronts, dated from 1984, six years before the civil war ended. The works are introduced by the following text:

In 1984, as a budding photographer, 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 Eugene Atget and Walker Evans, my favorite photographers at the time. Years later, I found out that the store 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 being confiscated.

Walid Raad, *Sweet Talk: Commissions (Beirut): 1984* (1984), archival inkjet print image: 9 x 7 in.; frame: 11 5/8 x 9 1/8 x 3/4 in. (© Walid Raad, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York)

The narrator implicates himself in a violent and criminal activity that was part of a larger war, by association and only in retrospect. So too, most of us are implicated in the many atrocities carried out by our governments. And in most cases, not unlike the narrator, we would likely be unable to alter the circumstances, even if we knew enough and knew in time. How is this so different from our inability to prevent the murder of civilians by drones carried out on our behalf by the US government today? Or from German civilians watching Jews being taken from their homes and choosing not to inquire, let alone protest? The photographer in this narrative is a stand-in for endless acts of feigned ignorance or feelings of

powerlessness and inadequacy. And of course, a particular kind of willful “not seeing” protects us from the imperative to act. Because that imperative, for most decent people, would be there.

In the exhibition’s final room, Raad strikes a lighter tone. The context he creates for viewing is playful, funny, and absurd. Of a set of 11 color archival inkjet prints, *Appendix 137*, we are told that during the war a number of Lebanese artists created camouflage for the various fighting militias and that their designs were gathered into a book designed by “Farid Sarroukh, a mediocre immodest painter who was irked at not having been asked to submit his own designs.” Each image appears to be a photograph of a found painting, with groups of fighters added in the foreground. The fighters, seen in silhouette, are filled in with uproariously decorative and beautiful abstract patterns, which presumably function as camouflage gear. The checklist for *Appendix 137* credits the original paintings to Samir Khaddaje, Nabil Nahas, Yvette Achkar, Abdullah Benateur, Assadour, Huguette Caland, Paul Wakim, Saliba Doueishi, Paul Guiraggossian, Salwa Raouda Choucair, and Aref Rayess. This time, all the artists have an internet footprint except Farid Sarroukh, who seems to be as unsung as the Lebanese photographer Ahmed Helou. The variety of designs could compete with the number of militias and factional groups fighting each other during the war.

Walid Raad, *Appendix 137* (2018), detail. Set of 11 archival inkjet prints mounted on Sintra 11 prints, each: 34 5/8 x 29 1/4 in.; frame, each: 35 1/2 x 30 1/4 x 1 3/4 in. (© Walid Raad, courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York)

Oddly, what seems utterly intractable in history — the Troubles in Ireland, the Berlin Wall, the Soviet Union, the Pinochet regime, Apartheid South Africa, the Lebanese Civil War — can suddenly and unexpectedly vanish. Why then was all that horror necessary in the first place? Afterward, the question becomes how to inhabit this new reality with the memory of the

sadistic cruelty that some among us perpetrated on the rest. How to live with encountering those same perpetrators in restaurants, on the street, in elevators, especially for those with direct experience of this cruelty? Raad has obviously thought a great deal about the power of personal experience, about its potency as fact and about the explanatory power of fiction.

[Walid Raad](#) continues at Paula Cooper Gallery (521 West 21st Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through May 24.

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