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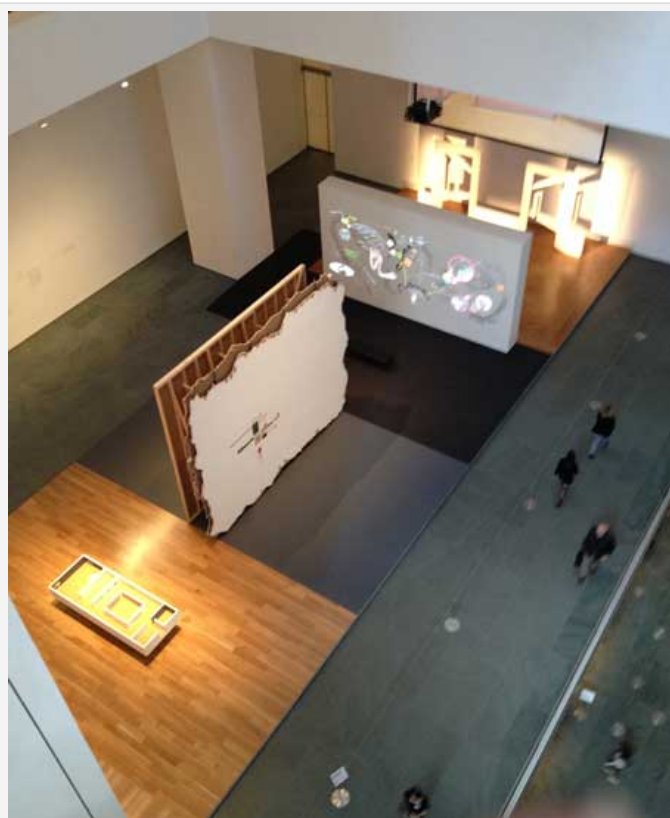
Walid Raad's Blurred Lines at MoMA: Does Truth Matter?

October 27, 2015 by [CultureGrrl](#)

The Museum of Modern Art's bewildering **Walid Raad** exhibition (to Jan. 31) "investigates distinctions between fact and fiction," according to [its press release](#). In truth, it blurs those distinctions in a ways that sometimes feel more like heavy-handed propaganda than subtle artistry or clever parody.

Raad intentionally distorts political and economic relationships through lens of his slyly subversive sensibility. He has occupied MoMA's cavernous atrium with stage-set components for his four-times-a-week public performance—"Scratching on things I could disavow: Walkthrough."

He would not allow the press to photograph him, but here's a view of his props from higher up:



View of Walid Raad's atrium installation at MoMA
Photo by Lee Rosenbaum

I was interested in hearing what Raad had to say, thanks to his notoriety for having been barred from entering the United Arab Emirates as a result of his high-profile involvement with Gulf Labor Coalition—the artist-initiated activist group that has [strongly protested](#) the Guggenheim's plans to open a satellite facility on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi, in light of serious and seemingly intractable [workers' rights violations](#) on [other major capital projects](#) there.

MoMA's director, **Glenn Lowry**, had been [one of the signatories](#) of a [strongly worded letter](#) addressed to the Guggenheim (as well as to other major institutions, including the Louvre and New York University), asking it to "work with the concerned authorities" to lift the UAE's travel prohibitions against Raad and another artist, **Ashok Sukumaran**. Glenn revealed during a conversation with Raad at the end of the press preview that the two had shared a car ride to Abu Dhabi from Dubai about 10 years ago.

I listened to the beginning of Raad's presentation with journalistic interest, as he exposed the purportedly insidious undercurrents marring a project that I had always regarded as a laudable effort to strengthen the financial security of artists—the [Artist Pension Trust](#). (APT boasts [several illustrious artworld figures](#) on its advisory board.)

After initially praising the concept behind APT, Raad, who is Lebanese, maintained that "it could be dangerous for any Arab artist joining this fund, because "Lebanon and Israel are still in a state

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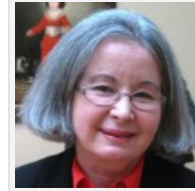


Photo © by Jill Kremantz

CULTUREGRRRL (Lee Rosenbaum) is the artworld's award-winning "best blog."

I'm a veteran cultural journalist and lecturer with many pieces in the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times* and major art magazines. I've been a cultural contributor on New York Public Radio (WNYC and WQXR) and provided arts commentary on NPR [\[Read More ...\]](#)

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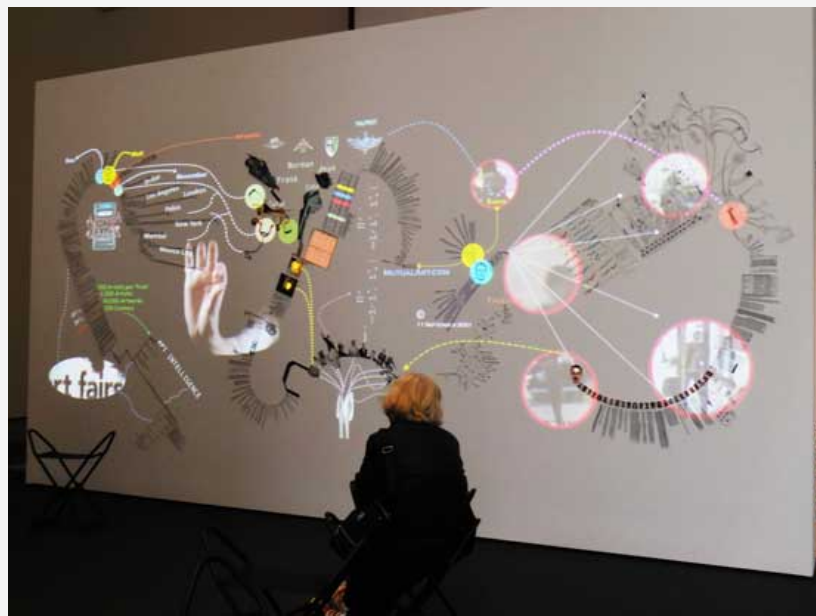
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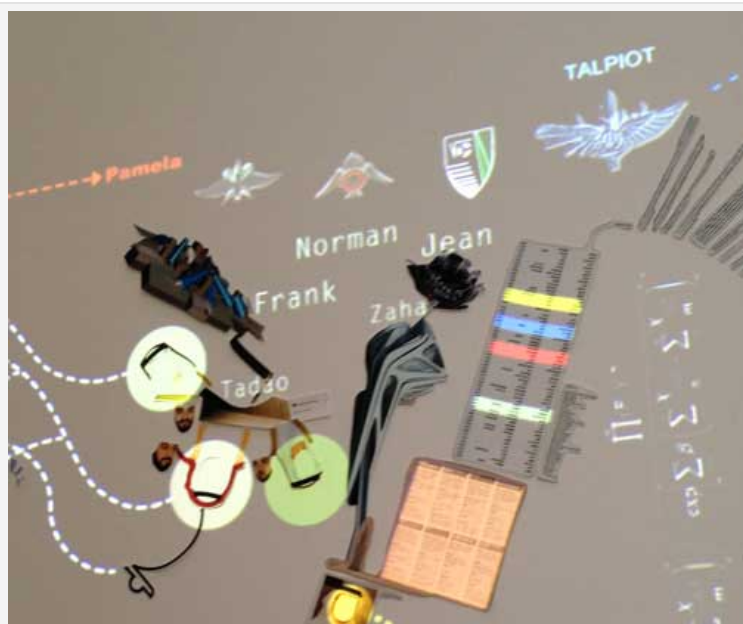
of war." He said his research had revealed that one of APT's founders had served in an "elite military intelligence unit" of the Israeli army.

His visual representation of APT's activities (which at first had reminded me of **Hans Haacke's legendary documentation** about a New York slumlord) is in the upper left corner of this complex diagram of political and economic artworld interrelationships, projected on a temporary wall erected in MoMA's atrium:



Raad's wall diagram
Photo by Lee Rosenbaum

Also on Raad's screen were references to the architects of the planned museums on Abu Dhabi's Saadiyat Island...



First names of architecture's Abu Dhabi Five
Photo by Lee Rosenbaum

...and **NY Times** clippings regarding Abu Dhabi-related protests:



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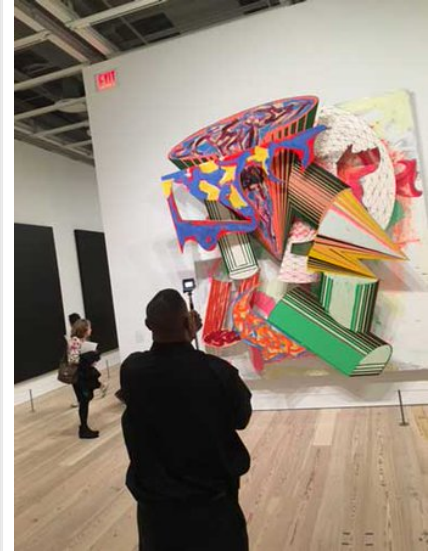
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Photo by Lee Rosenbaum

As Raad's performance escalated into increasingly bizarre flights of paranoid fantasy (including a gallery's shrinking of his artworks, the alarming unavailability to artists of certain colors, and telepathic messages from future artists), I felt like a fool for initially believing his earnestly presented "research." Maybe he had intended for us to believe his critique of APT, but by now everything out of his mouth seemed metaphorical at best, hallucinatory at worst.

More "documentation" occurs on the third floor, with photos, video and text bolstering the imaginary research findings of a fictional organization, The Atlas Group, related to strife in Lebanon:



"We are a fair people. We never speak well of one another_IX," 1994/2003
Photo by Lee Rosenbaum

Curator **Eva Respini** told the press that Raad's work "is about nuances and slippages" and that the question of what's real and what's fiction is "beside the point." I suppose that prioritizing artistic imagination over "reality" is, for better or worse, a time-honored practice (as in the "Steve Jobs" movie, which those who knew him say is more fiction than fact).

But the journalist in me says that truth counts, even in art and art museums, and especially in matters of public interest. If you play fast and loose with your audience, you're likely to subvert your own mission.

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