

Walid Raad's Spectral Archive, Part II: Testimony of Ghosts



The [March issue](#) of *e-flux journal* includes the [second part of Alan Gilbert's in-depth study](#) of Walid Raad's work. This installment focuses on the theme of ghosts in his art, from the casualties of civil war to the remnants of bombed-out architecture. Here's an excerpt:

Why is there so little of the present in Raad's art? Where are its human occupants? The few that are seen, as in the video *We can make rain but no one came to ask* (its very title an invocation of the past by the present), quickly disappear from the frame. Justice, truth, and reconciliation can exist without care, but there's no expiation without care. Along with being a textbook sign of the traumatic symptom, the constant repetitions in Raad's art are wedged between conflict and reconciliation. While at times they may resemble transcendence, they instead create the space (and time) for a different way of understanding guilt and expiation. In a powerful reading of Benjamin's

"early aesthetics"—where the expressionless stands *against* retributive justice—in relation to his "Critique of Violence" essay, Judith Butler writes: "This power of obliteration constitutes a certain kind of violence, but it is important to understand that this is a violence mobilised against the conception of violence implied by retribution. Understood as 'a critical violence', it is mobilised against the logic of atonement and retribution alike." In Raad's work, these historical and temporal caesuras—Toufic's "the withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster"—just as readily induce moments of profound uncertainty in their

movement away from a binary, sacrificial logic and any totalizing belief that a regulative ideal (such as justice) may be fully realized (a movement that is in my judgment desirable) toward a problematic condition of social emergency or crisis marked by the generalization of trauma as trope, arbitrary decision (or leaps of secular faith across antinomic or anomic abysses), extreme anxiety, and disorientation, if not panic.

In this sense, it would be easier if Raad's art were about a counterhistory to the ones written by the victors. It would be easier if Raad's art were about the stutters and lacunae of traumatic expression. It would be easier if Raad's art were about the failures of historical representation. It would be easier if Raad's art were about indeterminacy countering dogmatism. It would be easier if Raad's art were about nonjudicial justice. All of these are engaged, but none are exhaustive.

Image: Walid Raad, Scratching on things I could disavow: Walkthrough, 2015. Copyright: The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Julieta Cervantes.