

On Walid Raad's Practice: The Capital of Preserving and The Freedom of Destroying

By Misal Adnan

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Lebanon-born, New York-based artist, writer and lecturer Walid Raad's practice is instinctively nourished by the tension between two acts of human nature: preserving and destroying. Dealing with the codes, forms and languages derived from the Western models of museology with a skeptical attitude and context-sensitive approach, Raad questions their location, geographical reality and historical validity particularly as their meanings are shifting from archival images to politics of representation. As an institution, the museum proposes an organizational structure, where time is often frozen in the moment of writing history or defining 'history-making'. Through collecting, conserving and presenting 'things', it promises to protect them from the violence of everyday life;; what

happens outside as well as numerous other possibilities of danger, damage and destruction. This notion of time provides us a sort of cognitive motivation attempting to stop the time after the objects are registered in the records. When the artifacts enter into the institutional territory, they are expected to stay 'as they are'. Certain temperature, humidity and physical conditions are provided to keep them 'as they are'.

Preserving is a responsibility that fights against time whereas destruction appears as an unenlightened act. Recently, ISIS razed the ancient Assyrian capital of Khorsabad nearby Mosul and destroyed many artifacts including the statues of lamas – bulls with wings and heads of human figures. Their intention was clear, to erase the impact of the previous 'unbeliever' civilizations that 'did not obey God's rules'. In an interview, "it's an eradication of culture," said Deborah Lehr, chair of the Washington, D.C.-based Antiquities Coalition, a group that works with governments to protect ancient sites and materials. "It's a part of striking at those beliefs that differ from [ISIS's] extremist view: views of tolerance, views of religious freedom, views of expression", she continued.[i] The representation of political power gained through armed forces, religiously fundamentalist perspectives and oppressive world view reveal themselves through destruction of the past, erasure of the memory and violation of the heritage of human civilization. Remembering what has happened in Cairo, Baghdad or Kabul in the last decade might provide us a useful panorama for understanding why the ancient heritage and prehistoric artifacts are immediately attacked when the power dynamics and belief systems shift. Is this part of a 'political' show business or a freedom of choice misunderstood as decision making for what stays in the future?

Historically speaking, Plato's museum or library was the first place specifically dedicated for the Greek muses. "An institution devoted to the procurement, care, study, and display of objects of lasting interest or value;; also: a place where objects are exhibited"[ii] is one of the many

dictionary descriptions of 'museum'. The interest is in investment for the future and new generations to come. Museums are the first target for attack in case of emergency, chaos, revolution or war, in other words in times of social change. For instance, in her lecture, *Is the Museum a Battlefield?* (video documentation, 2013) Berlin-based artist Hito Steyerl refers to two revolutions that were fought in museums: The first in 1917 when the Bolsheviks stormed the Winter Palace, home of The Hermitage, during the October Revolution, and latter when the Louvre was raided in 1792 and again in 1830, 1832, 1848, and 1871, respectively, and, Steyerl notes: "each time it was a massive battlefield, where a battle for public space—for public art, actually—was fought".[iii]

Long before the discourse on memory, trauma and archive became inevitable chapters in every book about contemporary art or it was explored through exhibitions in every museum program, Raad had already produced a conceptual platform or fictional identity, entitled *The Atlas Group*, dedicated to the research and archiving of artifacts related with the three-decade-long Lebanese Civil War (1977-1991). His visual editing skills and abstraction technique have opened up questions on authorship, documentation value and subjectivity including the validity of these artifacts. Did they actually exist? What do they represent today? Who do they belong to? Perhaps they never existed or it is not possible to tell what is originally found, visually edited or fictionalized as narrative. In this body of the work, a fictive character, or a hoax, Dr. Fadl Fakhouri consistently appears as one of the most renowned historians of Lebanon. He is the ghost-writer of an unwritten history of an unknown territory. His chronicles become the footsteps for the audience to follow as visual codes for political narratives collectively shared by many generations.

Part of a long term, research-based artistic production, the projects signed by *The Atlas Group* have operated as leading examples of how artists reconstruct our perspectives towards history and its construction. The discussions that emerged through their presentations have also

allowed us to understand the role of traumatic experience during the transformation of personal codes into political statements or public discussion. The Atlas Group thus has played a key role in defining a genre, which has recently evolved into a field within which many research practices currently explore archival images in relation to notions of trauma, subjectivity and aesthetics of destruction. Today, there is a new generation of artists who work with archival material demonstrating conceptual approaches and posing critical questions. During an interview, Alan Gilbert asks Raad a rather direct question about the tension in the work positioned between individual authorship and the Atlas Group's collective production and accumulation of anonymous and pseudonymous documents. The artist refers to the context in his response:

"It seems to me that this question concerns the authorship of the Atlas Group project and its archive —documents attributed to Dr. Fadl Fakhouri, Souheil Bachar, Operator #17, and the Atlas Group, among others. It is not true that I have recently begun to emphasize the individual authorship of the work. In different places and at different times I have called the Atlas Group an imaginary foundation, a foundation I established in 1976, and a foundation established in 1976 by Maha Traboulsi. In Lebanon in 1999, I stated, 'The Atlas Group is a nonprofit foundation established in Beirut in 1967.' In New York in 2000 and in Beirut in 2002, I stated, 'The Atlas Group is an imaginary foundation that I established in 1999.' I say different things at different times and in different places according to personal, historical, cultural, and political considerations with regard to the geographical location and my personal and professional relation with the audience and how much they know about the political, economic, and cultural histories of Lebanon, the wars in Lebanon, the Middle East, and contemporary art." [iv]

Raad draws a symbolic distinction between an object-oriented way of writing history and subject-oriented narrative techniques in his approach.

As a critique of the museum tradition and its display language, the artist investigates what being located in the Middle East along with its physical conditions, political references and formal gestures contextually mean. One of his earlier works, a collaboration with Souheil Bachar, *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English version)* (2001) starts with a statement: "Yes our story is tragic, yes it is sordid, but you have to remember that it is first and foremost a story." These are the first lines of a testimony by the man, in front of the camera, who tells his story of being held captive as the only Arab among five other men – all American – in the same cell in Lebanon between 1983 and 1993. Most of these earlier works are currently shown at Raad's retrospective at New York's MoMA, establishing art historical relationships and promising inspirational conversations with Duchamp's 'ready-mades', Minimalists' monochromes, Neo-Conceptualists and Archigram's drawings in the museum collection as well as some referential artists such as Harun Faroucki or Akram Zaatari.

In his writings, Raad defines his interest in the history of art and its construction in the region, shaped by rapid geographical changes and the art market in light of global political transformations:

"I am intrigued by the increased visibility of the makers, sponsors, consumers and histories of 'Arab art', and more so by the acceleration in the development of new infrastructures for the visual arts in the Arabian Gulf. Suffice it to cite the Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi, which will soon include the largest-to-date Guggenheim museum by Frank Gehry;; a Louvre museum by Jean Nouvel;; a Performing Arts Centre by Zaha Hadid;; a maritime museum by Tadao Ando;; and a Sheikh Zayed National Museum by Foster and Partners." [v]

It is not a brave new world, but a brand new art map with Abu-Dhabi, Beirut, Cairo, Doha, Istanbul or Sharjah. Is it possible to develop a critical perspective on this new map? Saad systematically revisits his

collaborator Jalal Toufic's proposal, 'the withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster', which emphasizes disasters' impact – sometimes immaterial but still present – on tradition. Toufic characterizes immaterial effect as a 'withdrawal', not in the sense that an artwork is hidden or stored to safeguard from destruction nor because it does not conform with the reigning ideological and political outlook of the time, but because extant cultural artifacts are treated by sensitive artists in their own artworks as though destroyed, unavailable to imagine.[vi]



Installation view, Walid Raad, Sharjah Biennial 10, 2011. Curated by Suzanne Cotter, Rasha Salti. © Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

Departing from the absence of written history, unofficial records and the deconstruction of the idea of the museum in its Western sense, Raad's installation at the 10 Sharjah Biennial in 2011 was titled in reference to the form of 'index'. It had brought together a selection of archival material such as pages from old magazines and art history books, artists' portraits and biographies as well as art writings from local papers including spray-painted abstract formal gestures as part of his ongoing work

Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Art in the Arab World (1992-ongoing). This collection of ephemera was presented on large, sculptural, mounted walls, which looked as if they were cropped from another architectural setting and brought into this current exhibition space, like big wall paintings with art historical figures on them. In contrast to clean, precise, white museum walls, they looked like they were unraveled, stripped and stolen, similar to their lands, stories, and heroes. Raad's contribution to the 31 edition of the Sao Paulo Biennial (2014) also looked like another proposal for museum display, at first sight. The piece departs from a story about an Arab artist, who lived in Sao Paulo in the 1930s and worked in precarious conditions for another fictional museum, which could be everywhere or nowhere, in Hong Kong or in Dubai. In this work, the artist presented a series of free-standing walls that seemed to be carved with signature styles from different architectural structures. In a diverse range of colors and floor textures, they vary as a conceptual sequence to make up a collection. Each wall included an abstract form of framing – an ironically direct reference to museum frames as a formal gesture in their composition as the main design element. As Boris Groys says: "To produce an artwork means precisely to exhibit something as art—there is no production beyond exhibition." [vii]



Installation view, Walid Raad, 31 Bienal de São Paulo, Brazil, 2014. © Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

Through two solo presentations – Preface to the First Edition (2013), an exhibition and a publication project at the Louvre Museum of Paris and his recent installation Another Letter to the Reader (2015), currently on view in the 14 Istanbul Biennial, the artist plays with the idea of the 'universal museum.' This form of idealization is fictionalized through some open-ended scenarios that depart from the very nature of the research material, to which Raad dedicates an enormous amount of time, method and resources. Specifically, the Louvre piece directly communicates with the audience by visualizing the architectural limits and the potential visual changes that the collection items would experience when they are moved from Europe to Middle East. As a psychological understanding of these visual changes, as a state of mind, it stages a catastrophic scenario imagining those objects in a new geography, location and climate. Like a road movie where characters are always becoming someone else on the road, the collection objects will change on transit. It refers to the future plans shaped upon the collaboration between the Louvre Museum in

Paris and the new Louvre – a franchise museum soon to open in Abu Dhabi of the United Arab Emirates. During the first quarter of 2013, Raad exhibited this research in the basement of the museum originally built as a fortress in the 12 century and as the main foundation of the current complex. He installed architectural forms as a silhouette hung on the ceiling with a special light design, shadow play and an animated video work. Some of the questions that arose when I was inside this room, the ones, I still remember were: What happens to the Islamic Arts collection when the collection goes 'home'? How does climate and temperature change influence their physical bodies? What happens to their gravity when their locations shift? What is future home for them?



Installation view, Walid Raad, The 14 Istanbul Biennial, 2015. Curated by Carolyn Christov--Bakargiev. © Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

Raad's Another Letter to the Reader is inspired by the story of a controversial political figure in the modern Turkish history;; Enver Pasha.

As a reformist, Enver was a member of the Young Turks movement. It is told that when he served as the Minister of Defense during World War I, he ordered for hundreds of Iznik motifs to be stored in order to protect them from potential damages. Departing from this research, the work is cleverly installed in Istanbul's Kasa Gallery located in Minerva Han in the late-Ottoman financial district hence the street name – the Bank Street (Bankalar Caddesi in Turkish). The vault is situated in the basement of this 20 century building, which previously served as the Bank of Athens and now is a university hub that the gallery is a part of. Featuring staged compositions in three rooms, the installation initially greets the visitor first with laser cut boxes – stacked on top of each other in the entrance, and then invites one to wander around a large wooden shipping crate, centrally located in the middle room. It feels like a forgotten storage unit inside. The final room is also full of boxes, but this time, the feel is more like an archive. On the boxes and the crate, there are cut out motifs, enlarged from their original sizes. The absence of color becomes a cognitive threshold;; some can recognize the original designs, while others might not. Going back to that tension between preserving and destroying, keeping or throwing, saving or deleting, being attached or de-attached... It is all about the muses, as Plato might confirm. It is all about the muses and their lights. The endless play between the light and its shadow.

1. Lucy Westcott, 'Why ISIS Is Plundering the Ancient World,' <http://www.newsweek.com/why-isis-plundering-ancient-world--313695>, (link removed).
2. 'museum,' <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/museum>
3. Paul Schmelzer, 'Hito Steyerl: Is the Museum a Battlefield?' <http://blogs.walkerart.org/visualarts/2012/10/17/hito-steyerl-is-the-museum-a-battlefield/>
4. Alan Gilbert, 'Walid Ra'ad,' Bomb Magazine, Issue 81, Fall 2002. <http://bombmagazine.org/article/2504/walid-ra-ad>
5. Walid Raad, 'Scratching on Things I Could Disavow A History of Art

in the Arab World'

<http://www.scratchingonthings.com>

6. Ibid.

7. Boris Groys, 'Art and Money,' <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/art--and-money-2/>