

# Major solo show of works by Walid Raad opens at the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston

**BOSTON, MASS.-** This February, the [Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston](#) opened a comprehensive survey of the artist Walid Raad (b. 1967, Lebanon), a pivotal figure in contemporary art whose work investigates the ways in which we represent, remember, and make sense of history. Walid Raad, on view from Feb. 24 through May 30, brings together over 200 works across various mediums—including photography, video, sculpture, and performance. Informed by his upbringing in Lebanon during the civil war (1975–90) and by the socioeconomic and military policies that have shaped the Middle East in the past few decades, Raad’s work is dedicated to exploring archives and photographic documents in the public realm, the role of memory and narrative within discourses of conflict, and the construction of histories of art in the Arab world. *Walid Raad*, which originated at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, is organized by Eva Respini, the ICA’s Barbara Lee Chief Curator, with Katerina Stathopoulou, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Photography, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

The exhibition focuses on two of the artist’s long-term projects: *The Atlas Group* (1989–2004) and *Scratching on things I could disavow* (2007–ongoing). These two distinct projects are united by the question: How does war affect bodies, minds, and cultures?

Under the rubric of *The Atlas Group*, a 15-year project exploring the contemporary history of Lebanon, Raad produced photographs, videotapes, notebooks, and lectures that related imaginary stories. The stories were inspired in part by real events and extensive research in Lebanon’s various archives and elsewhere.

Raad's recent work has expanded to address the Middle East region at large. His ongoing project *Scratching on things I could disavow* examines the recent emergence in the Arab world of new infrastructures for the visual arts—art fairs, biennials, museums, and galleries—alongside the geopolitical, economic, and military conflicts that have consumed the region in the past few decades.

The exhibition also features a series of live, in-gallery performances by Raad.

### **The Atlas Group (1989-2004)**

It was with The Atlas Group that Raad established the brilliantly daring artistic methodology that he employs to this day. The project was established in Beirut in 1989 to preserve, study, and produce audio, visual, literary, and other documents that shed light on Lebanon's history. Each of The Atlas Group documents is attributed to a source who, like the organization, is fictional. None of the "documents" produced by The Atlas Group is wholly imaginary: these photographs, texts, and videos are borrowed from original sources, such as newspapers, or from Raad's own street photography. But when Raad rephotographs or scans them and mediates their presentation through story lines, literary titles, narrative wall texts, and engaging performances, they move into the imaginary realm. Raad calls these hybrids "hysterical documents."

The Atlas Group's various characters are all seemingly involved in absurdly exhaustive tasks like recording sunsets (I only wish that I could weep, 1997/2002) or locating every car bomb detonated during the civil war (My neck is thinner than a hair: Engines, 1996–2001). Violence is rarely pictured in The Atlas Group archive, which focuses instead on peripheral details like the purported gambling habits of fictional historians during the civil war (Notebook volume 72: Missing Lebanese wars,

1989/1998).

A number of The Atlas Group works are attributed to Dr. Fadl Fakhouri, including Notebook volume 72: Missing Lebanese wars, Notebook volume 38: Already been in a lake of fire (1991½2003), and Miraculous beginnings/No, illness is neither here nor there (1993/2003). Dr. Fakhouri, an esteemed, recently deceased, imaginary historian of the Lebanese wars whose papers were donated to The Atlas Group, lends the project authenticity. *Civilizationally, we do not dig holes to bury ourselves* (1958–59/2003), is a series of small black-and-white photographs purportedly taken by the scholar during his first and only trip to Europe, in the late 1950s. These self-portraits capture the lone Fakhouri lounging in hotel rooms, reading in cafés, and viewing the tourist sites of Paris and Rome. The images, repurposed from family snapshots, actually feature Raad's father.

Let's be honest, *the weather helped* (1998/2006) comprises images of notebook pages featuring black-and-white photographs that Raad himself took in Beirut during and after the civil war. These images of pockmarked buildings and bombed-out neighborhoods are overlaid with different-sized colored disks that map bullets and shrapnel, again collected by Raad after bombings and battles when he was a child in Beirut. The colors are linked to the national origins of the ammunitions and form a more expressive and poetic image, rather than one that is purely meant to document. *The weather*, referenced in the title of the work, is a recurring motif in The Atlas Group; the banal staple of small talk, it is neutral, unpredictable, and acts as an equalizer, circumscribing the direct address of violence.

In making his own documents, along with their accompanying narratives, Raad has created the documents that he felt these experiences and situations deserved; the documents he wished someone had created all

along.

### **Scratching on things I could disavow (2007-)**

Scratching on things I could disavow, which Raad began in 2007, is an interrelated series of photographs, videos, sculptures, installations, and performances. While each of the series within this larger body of work stands individually, taken together they constitute an examination of how art history is being forged within the new infrastructures for art in the Arab world. Why are the Sheikhs and Sheikhas in the Arabian/Persian Gulf building massive new museums? To answer this question, Raad visited and documented the emerging museums, galleries, art fairs, and public collections, and found himself asking another question: How has art in the Arab world been affected physically and otherwise by the wars of the past century?

Scratching on things I could disavow is marked by narratives of absence and withdrawal—the shrinking of works of art, for instance, or empty museum spaces with un-enterable doorways. In this body of work, Raad seems more like the narrator of a play, creating scenarios wherein works of art are no longer fully available to be seen, read, or experienced.

Blank walls, polished floors, and empty doorways become active players in Section 88: Views from outer to inner compartments (2010 and 2015), the title of both a video and a sculptural installation. Raad devised a set of doorways that are fashioned from wood and mimic the architectural style of Western museums of the 19th century. This set-like quality is enhanced in the ICA display with theatrical lighting that casts strong shadows.

Another work, Section 139: The Atlas Group (1989–2004), also uses museum architecture and infrastructure in innovative ways. This work—a maquette of a never-realized Atlas Group retrospective—recognizes the

need for new modes of display and content formation in areas with histories of conflict and trauma. In Section 139, Raad has faithfully recreated his own artworks, down to the videos, which play in a model-size version of a white-cube gallery space. The accompanying text explains that in 2008, after agreeing to exhibit in a chic new gallery in Beirut (in the neighborhood of Karantina, site of one of the deadliest massacres of the Lebanese Civil War), Raad found that his works had become inaccessible to him, shrunk down to 1/100th of their original size.

Scratching on things I could disavow encompasses an entire constellation of the ephemera that accompany the production and display of art in today's accelerated art economy. Appendix XVIII: Plates 22–257 (2008–14) is a series of photographs drawn from documents of real exhibitions and art activities in the Arab world: books, catalogues, posters, invoices, and invitations. One such work in the series, Plates 22–24: A History of Venice IV (2009), is drawn from promotional materials for the Lebanese Pavilion at the Venice Biennale of 2007, the first time Lebanon was represented with its own national pavilion there.

Performance is the central axis around which *Scratching on things I could disavow* revolves—indeed the overall body of work includes a performance, *Walkthrough*. Scheduled regularly throughout the run of the ICA exhibition, *Walkthrough* takes the form of a gallery talk, accommodating 40 visitors who sit on the stools that the museum's educators use to seat attendees at their lectures. Raad's presentation style ranges from sober investigator to psychotic telepath, as he recounts some of the economic and ideological motives behind the cultural boom in the Middle East, but also some of the fantastical situations he found himself in along the way.