

Labyrinth and Rhizome:

On the Work of Walid Raad

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Introduction

In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-François Lyotard posits that postmodernity's skepticism towards modernist metanarration is key to understanding this epochal shift. Constructed continuities attempted to inform the individual's orientation and modern society's ability to make sense of its past, present, and future. These overarching "grand narrative[s]" presented themselves as institutionalized, universalist truth-claims.¹ Others, including Fredric Jameson, theorize that this loss of orientation and historicity has given way to a sort of pastiche, a collection of empty signifiers that no longer bear true relation to the past.²

In response to this loss of historicity, artistic practices from the early 1990s onward began to favor memory over history, the oral over the written, and singular perspectives over the master narrative. This often involved embarking on singular perspectives through witnesses' testimonies. The increasing geopolitical complexities required incomplete approaches rather than those which retained an idea of symbolic totality. While marking the return of the narrative, it emerges in its most scattered and fragmented form. Centrally, the emergence of alternative subjective ways of speaking has fostered the participation of multiple, previously unheard voices. As "the logic of facts and the logic of stories" mingle, a division between the two regimes is impossible.³ Conversely, the underlying power structures which advocate their division in the first place are highlighted.

Demonstrated in artistic practices (especially in the Middle East), the overlapping of facts and stories facilitate reflection

on the construction and writing of history, both linked to singular outlooks on a contested public sphere. Some of these practices, especially in the Middle Eastern, post-conflict context, questioned the topos of the archive as a relic of modernity. They utilized alternative forms of knowledge production. Mobilizing the archive as both tool and material site, these practices renegotiated models of representation. Markus Miessen and Yann Chateigné describe it as a prolific “space of conflict.”⁴

Reimagining the Public Sphere

Working with fiction and the imaginary as central categories in contemporary art of the last quarter of a century, Lebanese artist Walid Raad’s practice continually produces radically asymmetrical narratives and images. To the viewer, the body of work of Raad, a preeminent figure in the contemporary art world of the Middle East, often remains obscure and labyrinthine, especially when engaging in the incongruities in the artist’s narratives, his humor, and the disguise of his purported role as artist-as-researcher in the form of his imaginary collective, *The Atlas Group*. Centrally, Raad has fostered a style of narration and performative interaction using “documents” (be they archival or produced) that allow a glimpse of new perspectives on a yet-to-come public sphere.

Raad’s work posed a radical promise in the mid- and late 1990s, confounding the borders between thorough research and imagination. Arguably, the artist’s strategies and means have morphed into dominant contemporary forms of artistic production. As Pamela M. Lee, for instance, poignantly puts it, Raad’s fictions and his blurring of the borders between reality and fiction did not simply aim to disrupt the horizon of expectations of spectators. Rather, his forged collectivism and imaginative production of ostensible facts was an expression “emblematic of a new crisis of representation surrounding the politics of visibility.”⁵

As Raad has suggested in “The Beirut Al-Hadath Archive,” he aims to “yield an ever-expanding collection of images” and, in this way, establish “a project that cannot and will not end.”⁶ “The Beirut Al-Hadath Archive,” an article published in the journal *Rethinking Marxism*, is one of the formative precursors for what would develop into the artist’s best-known project, *The Atlas Group*. While the quotation relates to one specific project, we can see how the idea threads throughout his work. The roots of this can be traced back to his images and narratives of the early and mid-1990s, including video, photography, archival works, and academic research. His ongoing works, existing in series, are interconnected and presented as iterations with variations.

Apart from this overall labyrinthine dimension, the artist’s individual works often rotate around withdrawal, lack, and absence, making use of poetics which create blind spots.

Writer Jalal Toufic has understood the ruins that punctuate the city of Beirut's fabric in terms of an "anachronistic, labyrinthine temporality."⁷ Both ancient ruins and those originating in (post-) conflict destruction account for the country's decentering in both time and space. The individual's sense of orientation in a labyrinth can be facilitated using supplementary, quasi-prosthetic means (we are reminded of Ariadne, whose thread aided Theseus's escape from the labyrinth constructed by Minos). Mnemonic techniques, such as the use of threads or markers, enable eventual escape from a labyrinth. However, this idea suggests that there is a point of entry, a center, and an exit.

In short, the concept of the labyrinth is constructed around dichotomies and a modernist dialectic of inside and outside, or center and periphery. It builds on the idea of complexity while assuming that one can find the "way out." Raad's work, contrary to this notion and almost as described in Lyotard's postmodernist disorientation, rather resembles a labyrinth without a clear beginning or an end. Taking this into account, this essay seeks to expand the notion of the labyrinth—as both a trope and a built spatial configuration—proposing Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of the rhizome as an analytical framework.⁸ Deleuze and Guattari define the rhizome as a configuration lacking a point of entry and a point of exit. Hence, this essay proposes an understanding of the artist's work as decentered threads, lines, and dead ends that correspond to the idea that recent history cannot be understood and written by adhering to centralized, stable narratives and cannot be grasped in dialectical terms. Rather, Raad foregrounds a type of narration and historiography, a "new episteme"⁹ that counteracts hegemonic substitutes of grand narratives, which today—in a time that has been labelled *post-truth era*—recur.

Asignifying Ruptures

Raad's works move beyond a form of mere self-appropriation or recycling of material as a type of pastiche (as attributed to postmodernity by Jameson). Rather, his series operate "by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots," as Deleuze and Guattari describe the operational principles of what they term "rhizome."¹⁰ As developed in the preface to their comprehensive book from 1980, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, the term mobilizes a distinct botanical configuration (as found in ginger, which develops and expands as a subterranean meshwork). Moving on from this metaphor, they highlight that animals, humans, and plants can also form rhizomatic structures through their interactions, one instance of this being orchids that seduce wasps to form a "common rhizome."¹¹ The idea of a rhizome in Deleuze and Guattari is, hence, characterized by its operating principles of connection, discontinuity, and multiplicity, rather than by depicting an actual configuration.

Deleuze and Guattari's foreword, "Rhizome," is on the subject of writing and thinking itself, and serves as a programmatic preview of what the rest of the book will *perform*, emphasizing a type of nomadic, decentered thinking and writing. This "Nomadaology" generates an active but not totalizing form of writing that contests its passive counterpart, history.¹² This is an idea which is prevalent in Raad's contempt of modern historiography.

Raad's project *The Atlas Group* famously deals with the multifaceted effects and ongoing aftermath of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990). This is done by amassing a variety of conflicting narratives, documents, artifacts, and personae (some presented as imaginary donors to the ongoing archival project) into an archive of conflict. This experimental cultural record oscillates between imagination and facticity. Raad exposes the imaginary components of discourses and their visibility through contradicting performative and narrative framings of what are presented as documents.

One part in the series, *Notebook vol. 72: Missing Lebanese Wars* (2003), was first published in the journal *Public Culture* in 1999 as a series of ten plates with an accompanying foreword.¹³ This was previous to its inclusion in *The Atlas Group* project. In *Notebook vol. 72*, Raad critically comments on the austere, bureaucratic language of facticity as an expression of a modernist, centered thinking. As Deleuze and Guattari suggest, the book as cultural object and representation of writing (including the writing of history) no longer corresponds to the image of a stabilized world, as it "has become chaos, but the book remains the image of the world: radicle-chaosmos rather than root-cosmos."¹⁴

Furthermore, there is an eponymous six-minute video that is split into three parts and revolves around the character Zainab Fakhouri, who purportedly transported various objects when forced to leave Palestine between 1947 and 1971. In *Notebook vol. 72*, Lebanese historian Dr. Fadl Fakhouri, the imaginary husband of Zainab Fakhouri, is said to have donated a number of documents, including his notebooks, to Raad's collective. The digitally produced notebook pages feature cut-out newspaper articles drawn from the Beirut-based daily newspaper An-Nahar, depicting finish photos from horse races. As the story goes, a group of Lebanese historians, including Fakhouri, regularly bet on the Sunday races.

Strikingly, in a variation of the game, they did not place bets on the winning horse (as one would at a bookmaker's), but instead on the "insufficiency" of the photographic medium. Bets were placed on the proximity of the finish photo as printed in the following day's newspaper. Various annotations in Arabic (and English transcriptions in typewriter font on the page margins) comment on the betting historians' habits and personalities.

This piece uses metaphors to reflect on the historian's profession, forming a caricature that exposes the risk of betting, distortion, and myopia in the writing of history. There is always a short, aphoristic note on the character of the historian; often peculiar, odd figures that speak in rhetorical flourishes rather than in objective language. This is a device to point to the delusion that history can be written in objective language. *The Atlas Group*, with two fictional elements (the forged collective and the documentary approach), constructs and deconstructs meaning and representation, examining historical writing, memory, and power relations.¹⁵

As increasing geopolitical complexities decentered the world, the understanding of orientation and knowledge adhered to a modern, "arboreal" image. Contrary to the metaphor of a tree as a hierarchical dialectic model of Western thought—Deleuze and Guattari describe it using the term "arborescent"—a rhizome is centerless. It endlessly establishes new connections, even when disconnected or cut off. Deleuze and Guattari understand this as the rhizome's "principle of asignifying rupture";¹⁶ a rhizome which is fractured or broken can take up at any point and develop new lines.

The artist's recent project, *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Art of the Arab World* (2007–ongoing), shifts in focus to the contemporary Middle East. It explores the region's thriving art world, its commercialization and institutionalization, and questions power relations in an era of globalization. Raad presents multiple histories and trajectories of art that reflect upon the circumstances in which modern and contemporary art in the Arab world is conceptualized, periodized, and, ultimately, labeled. The project establishes links between twentieth-century Lebanese modernism, the country's early twentieth-century cosmopolitanism, and the contemporary boom in the Middle East's cultural landscape. The project's starting point suggests a critique of institutions. This is directed towards an intensifying culture industry and takes both modern and contemporary art as a means of accumulating symbolic, social, and financial capital. Parallel to his artistic work, the artist engages in the Gulf Labor Artist Coalition, a group of artists that gathered starting in 2010 and, among other concerns, sought to improve the working conditions of workers at the recently opened Guggenheim Museum on Saadiyat Island, Abu Dhabi. While Raad claims his political engagement and activism is not connected with his artistic work, there is a direct connection in terms of the content and context.¹⁷ His more recent work questions the agency of artistic practice and its possible forms of intervention in the public sphere. It also underlines a shift from what had been dubbed *era of the witness* into a "politics of human rights advocacy."¹⁸

The Atlas Group was founded in the year 1999, while *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow* was initiated in 2007. However, these dates should be understood rhetorically

rather than as delineating real beginnings. Over the last fifteen years, the artist has introduced *The Atlas Group* in a variety of ways. He has claimed varyingly that the project started, together with a character named Maha Traboulsi, in 1967 (the year the artist was born), in 1989 (the year in which the Ta'if Accords were signed, officially ending the Lebanese Civil War, and the year the Iron Curtain fell), or 1999 (which is the actual founding date). By constantly iterating and shifting dates, work titles, narratives, and images, Raad's works, publications, and exhibitions seem impenetrable. They encompass a multitude of vectors, threads, and versions which constitute the artist's projects and make them all the more difficult to grasp.

In 1992 Raad (who had moved to the United States in the mid-1980s) returned to Beirut for a short time. This same year, the political scientist Francis Fukuyama proclaimed the "end of history" in his eponymous book. Fukuyama suggested that liberal capitalism had achieved a final victory over other possible forms of social organization. While the rise of finance-led capitalism dates back a decade earlier, this time period and the diagnoses made by Fukuyama and others offer the first glimpse of an "end point." Coinciding with changes globally, Lebanon's geopolitical situation is molded by a couple of unique elements. One central factor is the aftermath of the perennial wars and their negotiation in public discourse. The 1990s witnessed the relaunch of artistic production in Lebanon, through the so-called "postwar generation." This coincided with political ruptures throughout the world; crucially, the end of socialism and the concomitant intensification and domination of financial capitalism.

Archive and Memory: Limitations of the Arab Image Foundation

The civil wars left behind not only ruins, but also conflicting narratives, competing viewpoints, and seemingly irreconcilable collective identities. Alongside the material effects of the civil wars and the fragmented society, it became clear that contemporary history could only be grasped in fragmentary and preliminary terms. A totalizing view seems inapplicable within a postwar context, especially one where armed conflict is still ongoing. It is worth asking why numerous postwar Lebanese practitioners, including Raad, have questioned their country's situation via archival and fictionalized documentary approaches. A common narrative surrounding this generation of artists suggests that they began exploring the possibilities of archival and documentary formats within contemporary art to "use it as a space capable of accommodating complex visual temporalities, narrative protocols and cognitive procedures."¹⁹ The topos of the archive provides a productive theoretical ground and, at the same time, a powerful tool for visualizing fractured temporalities when combined with video, photography, objects, and performance.

Considering the circumstances of a postwar memory crisis, it is not a coincidence that the Arab Image Foundation (AIF, an archive of photographic documents of the Arab world), was founded in 1997, just two years before Raad officially started *The Atlas Group* project. The founders and “archons” of this nonprofit organization are predominantly artists.²⁰ They are (according to Jacques Derrida), endowed with the protection of the archive and are granted the “hermeneutic right” to allocate meaning to its visual evidence and documents.²¹ By compiling documents, most of which were donated by private individuals, the organization has established an archive of individual memories. This provides a platform for researchers, visual artists, and the public.²² The material amassed in the AIF’s collection provides fruitful ground for reimagining the Middle East’s contemporary history to counteract dominant narratives.

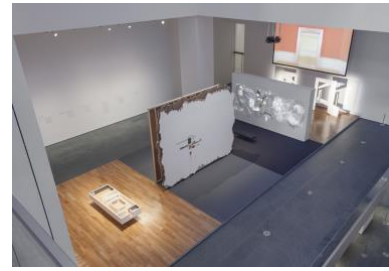


Fig. 1. Exhibition view of *Walid Raad* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 12, 2015–January 31, 2016. Photo: Thomas Griesel. Digital Image © 2018 The Museum of Modern Art/Scala, Florence.

However, archives such as the AIF only provide a limited and contingent view of history and the present, and risk echoing the totalizing perspectives that they seek to defeat. Expanding the archive with video, academic publications, performances, and installations undermines the problematics of totalization by highlighting the complexity of temporalities and conflicting narratives. Raad draws on materials from the AIF’s archive for many of his own pieces. Similar to the commentator or “voice of the master” in documentary film,²³ Raad and his contemporaries have discovered that interpreting the archive is vital to exposing and making use of its political potentials. Raad’s intertwined projects are thus characterized by expanding the notion of the archive drawing on real archival materials and eventually producing archives of its own. He reveals that archival materials are always “found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private.”²⁴ As art historian Hal Foster notes, the status of the archive has gone from that of a modernist passive site of storage to a contemporary “construction site.”²⁵ It remains a relict of modernity: a means of collecting, ordering, classifying, remembering, and forgetting. The archive provides a structure and an aesthetic means while simultaneously being a site of enquiry into the remnants of positivism in the wake of postmodernity.

Reworking the Map

At the Museum of Modern Art, New York (MoMA), the first comprehensive survey of Walid Raad’s work in the United States (October 12, 2015–January 31, 2016) highlighted the ruptures and continuities of the artist’s archivally oriented oeuvre over the last twenty-five years.²⁶ In the exhibition titled *Walid Raad*, the artist’s project *The Atlas Group* was shown in a third-floor gallery, while *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow* occupied the second floor’s Marron Atrium (fig. 1).

The form of artistic subjectivity at stake in *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow* is no longer that of the imaginary group, but a manic, seemingly torn picture of the myths and

limits of a modernist artist's subject matter. The piece is connected to a series of performances called the *Walkthrough* (2012). This serves to reinforce the centrality of the medium in former bodies of work. Throughout the duration of the exhibition, Raad performed *Walkthrough* four times per week around a series of five loosely connected installations arranged on a rectangular platform devised specifically for the piece.

Variations of the piece were previously shown at Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, Vienna, in 2011, dOCUMENTA (13) in 2012, and at Carré d'Art – Musée d'Art Contemporain de Nîmes in 2014. Each time there was variation in the narrative framing and the order in which displayed works were linked to the performance. The performance established a narration, almost choreographic, around the "props" presented on the stage set. It also intensified the labyrinthine and rhizomatic qualities of the work, presenting single manifestations from a multiplicity of narratives that could be spun around the exhibited objects. The narratives themselves were also subject to constant but slight revisions. In his performances, Raad activates the presented material with scripted texts. A steady play of difference and repetition is graspable in the seemingly mechanical execution of the script, accompanied by a certain amount of deliberate improvisation and aberration.

The setting of the exhibition is nuanced and can be placed somewhere in between a theater set and a white cube exhibition, and is composed of installations of video, inkjet prints, wall paintings, architectural models, architectural fragments, light installations, and multimedia wall panels. Maps, diagrams, and charts play a significant role in the exhibition. For instance, *Translator's Introduction: Pension art in Dubai* (2012), a two-channel video installation, served as the first stage set for Raad's *Walkthrough* at MoMA.

Pivotal to the rhizome concept is an absence of hierarchy, hence, an opposition to centrally organized, fixed structures. It does not imitate, mimic, or represent a fixed path, but rather develops a map-like structure: "The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation."²⁷

In *Walkthrough*, Raad's point of departure was the thriving Middle Eastern art world. The piece engaged with the commercial, institutional, and political effects of recent growth during militarized conflict and economic globalization (fig. 2.). In *reworking* the map and making sense of it, Raad carries out an institutional critique, interpreting geopolitical entanglements in this particular cultural landscape. However, he only delivers one possible vanishing point and a singular account of these nefarious ties.

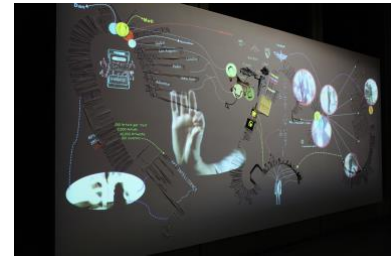


Fig. 2. Walid Raad, *Translator's introduction: Pension art in Dubai*, 2012, paper cutouts on wall, two-channel video (color, silent, looped), dimensions variable. © Walid Raad. Digital Image © 2015 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

Most strikingly, Raad is both a critic and a beneficiary of the flourishing cultural landscape in the Middle East, having exhibited at the Musée du Louvre with works that comment critically on the franchise boom that occurred during the past few years, through which Western museum branches are imported to the region. The performance started off as an ostensible investigation into the political entanglements of the Artist Pension Trust (APT). This network of artists, researchers, and curators was founded by risk management experts who Raad suggests may have close ties with Israeli military intelligence agencies. Raad takes his personal entanglement—his Lebanese nationality, and the claim that he was invited to join the organization in 2007—as his point of departure.

During *Walkthrough* a group of around twenty-five visitors sat on museum chairs facing a segment of wall where the artist displayed an interactive map of paper cutouts, diagrams, and infographics. The artist purported that this was documentation of links between the APT and Israeli military intelligence. After about fifteen minutes of argumentation pointing out potential ties between these groups, Raad abruptly urged the audience to move on to the next stage set with him. He announced that what he had just presented was “not deserving of an artwork,” creating ambiguity around the function of both truth and humor in his observations.²⁸ This indiscernibility is a central strategy of disguise and incertitude in Raad’s work, especially in his early work and performance series. Continuing this with *Walkthrough*, rhetorical figures pierce through syllogisms and disrupt the logic of the narrative.

“You can check on your iPhones,” Raad told the group hastily, adding another degree of removal from the narrative, a layer of audience mitigation and thus of doubt. Raad’s role as artist-as-researcher began to be flooded with a heterogeneity of facts and sources. Unlike his work as *The Atlas Group*, the artist’s presence at MoMA brought the author back from the grave. His appearance questioned not only the reliability of the amassed artifacts and documents, but Raad’s own function as an originary researcher and commentator.

Transposed Images

Proposed as part of *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow*, but not part of the *Walkthrough* performance, was *Les Louvres* (2015), installed in MoMA’s third-floor hallway. There, an archive of sketches, models, and 3D-printed objects relating to items from the Louvre’s collection of Islamic art objects shipped to the museum’s outpost in Abu Dhabi were arranged on three large wall panels and an adjacent gallery.

Presented like this, the objects questioned the material and immaterial transformation that artifacts undergo when

moved—and thus transposed—from one space to another. In this case from the Parisian Musée du Louvre to the (then incomplete) annex designed by Jean Nouvel in the United Arab Emirates. The wall text was an integral part of *Les Louvres* at MoMA, and asserted that the objects considered had “lost their shadows” in transit, and now presented themselves as composites of other artifacts. The works on display, among them a series of painted 3D-printed plaster composites, expand an earlier project by Raad, *Préface à la troisième édition* (2013). This work emerged out of a collaboration with the Department of Islamic Art at the Musée du Louvre, Paris. Published as a portfolio of twenty-five loose inlays, it deals with the photographic archive of the Louvre and its use for publications issued by the museum. The inlays (which also exist as prints in exhibitions) are generated by combining photographs for the *catalogue Les Arts de l’Islam au Musée du Louvre*, published in 2012 at the reopening of the collection.²⁹

Préface à la troisième édition (2013) is a collection of images refined from catalogue photographs taken by Hughes Dubois. It takes the form of an artist book which was produced in cooperation with the Musée du Louvre.³⁰ Raad created images which establish the anachronistic relations between the presented objects. The images were generated by superimposing photographs of multiple objects from the catalogue. The use of the photographic medium suggests a deframing and decontextualization of the objects which come from a specific context, but are singularized through their presentation in the museum context.

The archival materials are combined following a scheme that is exemplified by *Préface à la troisième édition: Reliure*, 2013 (fig. 3). This image, resembling the shape of a horse’s head, filled with a floral pattern, and presented on a gray background, recalls the standardized forms of a “neutral” catalogue image. The pattern filling the shape seems cut out, as suggested by the missing head of the bird. The pattern matches that of an Iranian book binding (*Reliure à decor floral*), which is dated to the end of the eighteenth century. The shape, however—the horse’s head—corresponds to that of the handle of dagger (*Poignard à manche en tête cheval*) from the seventeenth century.

Historiographies of “Art in the Arab World”

Raad’s interest in the history of modern art in Lebanon is expressed most clearly in *Index XXVI: Red* (2010). The piece comprises a section of wall on which different cut-out elements, vinyl letters, and spray paint are combined. As such, the wall element appears to have been cut out of a gallery space and is now freestanding; it seems to be a displaced architectural element. Printed in white Arabic letters on white walls in a horizontal line, the names of one hundred and fifty Lebanese artists are, even to a viewer familiar with the Arabic script, hardly legible. It also features cut-out photographs, newspaper articles, diapositives, sales



Fig. 3. Walid Raad, *Préface à la troisième édition: Reliure*, 2013, archival inkjet print, 28,1 x 50,8 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Hamburg/Beirut.

lists, invitation cards, and other ephemera. The wall fragment displays materials related to a short history delivered by Raad: he explains that the work is a collection of names of twentieth-century Lebanese sculptors and painters which were sent to him telepathically.

The wall chart piece is comparable to *Translator's introduction: Pension art in Dubai*, in that it educates the viewer about Lebanon's modernist past. Raad, as an artist of the present, purports to connect the past, the present, and the future. He explains that telepathy is always subject to distortions, and that therefore some of the names are misspelled. Raad claims that this has nothing to do with "noise" in the signals he received, but is instead due to "the impertinent attitude common to my generation of postwar Lebanese artists who... can't even spell the names of their predecessors." He concludes that future artists had given him false names and were for some reason in need of "these colors [that are 'available' to artists of the present] because they are no longer available for them."³¹ As seen in his earlier work, this metaphoric speech asserts that the Lebanese postwar generation embarked on a path similar to that of postmodernity: the cutting off of historicity to become a sort of pastiche.

The names are, when translated for a non-Arabic-speaking audience, partly familiar, yet not widely known. Painters such as Etel Adnan or Paul Guiragossian, who are featured in the list, have also recently received more widespread attention. *Index XXVI: Red* reflects on the recent rediscovery of modern Lebanese art. Major institutions, such as the Mathaf (Arab Museum of Modern Art) in Doha, Qatar, as well as commercial interests, have provided material for Raad's investigations and writing of canons. While contemporary Lebanese art has participated in a globalized art market over the last twenty-five years, a modernist tradition has only recently been accepted in Lebanon. Raad literally inscribes a canon onto the gallery wall in *Index XXVI: Red*. This can be interpreted as a materialization and spatialization of the canon, while equally pointing out the fissures and inadequacies in its formulation. In the performance, the artist's interaction with the panel is key to activating these fissures.

Spreading through different forms of distribution (museum and gallery exhibitions, books, catalogues, websites, journals, seminars, performances) the images constantly reshape and recontextualize. Not only do they change in title, form, and dimensions, their narrative framings are also subject to change. As with many artistic practices in the Middle East from the 1990s onward, performance has been used to subvert the visual paradigms of fine art. Unlike other forms of artistic expression, performance involves both a temporal and a bodily component. This enables subjective and shifting narratives that involve physical presence to be established. Raad achieves and intensifies this by subtly changing his accent, for instance, when he forges and intensifies a "Middle Eastern accent" in his performance

series, thereby playing on the Western listener's lack of sensitivity and awareness of local inflections.

A recent episode of *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow*, adding another chapter to the series, is the exhibition and accompanying performance *Kicking the Dead* (2017). Two variations were recently shown at the steirischer herbst festival in Graz, Austria (September 22–October 15, 2017), and the NEXT festival in Kortrijk, Belgium (November 9–11, 2017).

In Graz, eleven chapters or “footnotes” make up a seventy-five-minute presentation, which combines audio, visual, and spoken text, performed three times a day for the duration of the exhibition. *Kicking the Dead* was comprised of four rooms: an auditory room and three galleries, which were initially behind closed doors. The foyer served as a lecture hall and reception room, and was equipped with around forty-five chairs for the audience, a video projector, and a lectern. This included the mandatory glass of water positioned on the lectern, which one has come to expect in an academic or lecture context. Raad, wearing a dark outfit and a matching cap, started the presentation off with a slide stating “Footnote 117: Jack in Ypres.” Using variously researched material, he began to spin a story around the (real) character Jack Sturiano. Sturiano works at the In Flanders Field Museum in Ypres, Belgium, an institution dedicated to World War I. An American Vietnam War veteran, he decided to work in Flanders because he is a WWI enthusiast. Raad's narrative circles around topics such as art education and financial speculation in connection with the real estate investment company Tishman Speyer. He links this to recent stock market losses of the Cooper Union, an art school on New York's Lower East Side where he teaches.

The presentation continues with a video showing staff of the Parisian Louvre restoring a gift from Iran to the institution. The following chapter connects back to Jack Sturiano, who Raad recounts to have met in New York, where Sturiano supposedly worked at a medical examiner's office in Suffolk County. The narrative Raad develops moves back and forth, and is interrupted by the artist's repeated urges that the audience come with him to one of the three galleries. In the first room, three wooden panels in yellow, blue, and orange with 3D-printed objects and painted shadows are presented (fig. 4). With subtle variations, Raad recounts the story he had formerly connected to his work *Les Louvres* in his presentation at MoMA.

Throughout the performance, characters appear to disappear and emerge again in a different context. Raad celebrates the return of singular authorship, which had formerly been obscured by *The Atlas Group*. On the other hand, this subject appears manic and subtly scrutinizes artistic subjectivities, deconstructing them with fissures that



Fig. 4. Exhibition view of *Kicking the Dead* at steirischer herbst, Graz (Austria), September 22–October 15, 2017. *Les Louvres: Preface to the third edition_Acknowledgements* (2017), three painted wooden panels, 3D-printed objects, painted shadows and lighting. Photo: Wolf Silveri.

point to an incompleteness and openness which—following a psychoanalytic reading—is immanent to subjectivity.

Conclusion

Raad's work, as this essay has illustrated, is organized into iterating chapters, prefaces, drafts, or footnotes. Altogether, they perhaps ultimately form the type of book that Deleuze and Guattari might have had in mind: a disassembled, scattered collection of ever-expanding thoughts, documents, and narratives. Its components are interconnected, at times leading to dead ends, only to arise again with a different trajectory. Similar to the operations of a rhizome, Raad's works expand, multiply, and disconnect, as the projects' delimitations are fluid and the images, narratives, and impulses within them are interconnected and strive against identification. The bodies of work have an entangled yet disconnected structure, echoing that of a rhizome.

The constant flux of images and narratives in Raad's work provokes new stories that reflect on the construction of history, without cutting off the nexus to the past or limiting future ways of speaking and writing. This essay did not set out to illuminate and disentangle the threads tracing through his work. Instead, Raad's work is construed as a perpetuation or intensification of the concepts of the labyrinth and the rhizome, which manifest throughout his practice and pay tribute to the complex temporalities of the contemporary world. Crucially, Raad does not merely mimic disorientation, fragmentation, and competing outlooks on the public sphere, but has established a style of image-making and narration that provides alternatives to the ostensibly factual, yet still arborescent public discourse.

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