

Unreliable Informants: A Walid Raad Primer

by Thomas Micchelli October 10, 2015 Print

[Thomas Micchelli](#) October 10, 2015



The Atlas Group/Walid Raad, "I might die before I get a rifle" (1993/2002), pigmented inkjet prints. Courtesy the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic) (click to enlarge)

The [survey exhibition](#) dedicated the work of Walid Raad, which opens to the public on Monday at the Museum of Modern Art, is a rich and compelling point of entry for anyone seeking a handle on this sly and elusive artist.

Raad was born in Lebanon in 1967, eight years before that country was

rent by civil war. In a precursor to the ongoing bloodshed in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, the conflict dragged on for fifteen years, claiming more than 100,000 lives and creating a million refugees.

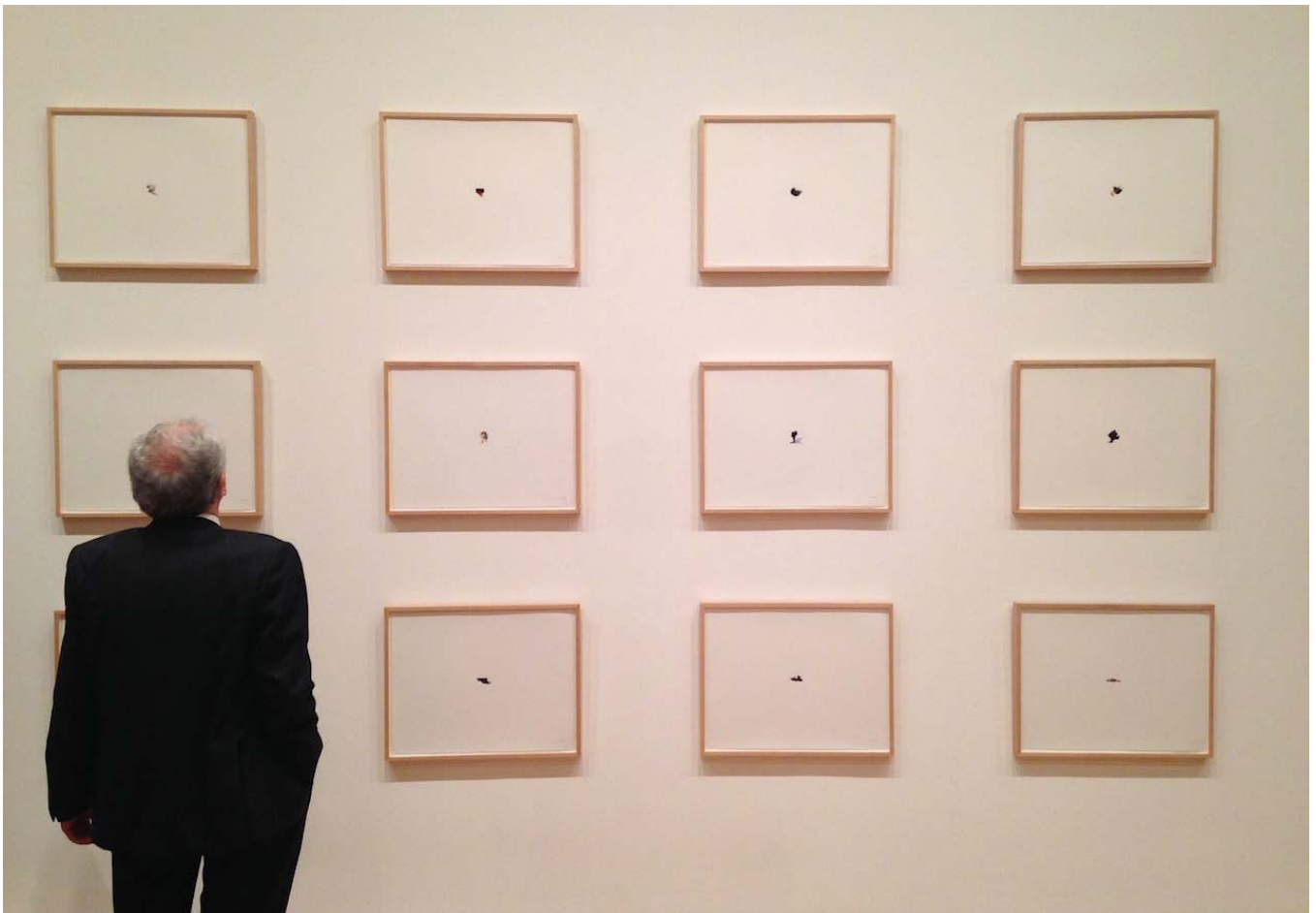
The artist's coming-of-age, then, was mired in intractable sectarian warfare among Sunnis, Shias, and Maronite Christians, involving Palestinian, Israeli, Syrian, American, and French forces. The violence was marked by car bombs, suicide attacks, the assassination of President-elect Bashir Gemayel, and the massacre at Sabra and Shatila refugee camps.

Raad emerged from this crucible to establish The Atlas Group as a declaration of purpose evidently immersed in the infinitely paraphrased maxim, first uttered by an isolationist U.S. Senator in 1918, that "The first casualty when war comes is truth."

The Atlas Group, which was dedicated to researching and archiving artifacts salvaged from the civil war, in fact never existed, and it is impossible to discern the degree to which the exquisitely wrought photographs, collages and videos that Raad produced to document its activities contain even a grain of truth. It is certain that the most prominent figure chronicled in The Atlas Group's works, Dr. Fadl Fakhouri, "the most renowned historian of Lebanon," is a hoax, playing, it would seem, on the West's presumptions toward, and ignorance of, the culture and history of Middle East.

Raad has taken up the tradition of artist-as-trickster — a role carried into modern art through the Dadaist antics of Marcel Duchamp's transgender alter-ego, Rose Sélavy — while reaching even farther back to the artist-as-historian-cum-fabulist. Some works trip you up and others leave you out in the cold. A set of pigmented inkjet prints collectively titled "Better be watching the clouds" (2000/2015), comprised of colorful floral imagery festooned with black-and-white portrait photos of middle-aged men, is all but opaque to anyone unfamiliar with Lebanese politics;

nevertheless, the prints' acerbic designs manage to resonate with the still-startling Weimar collages of John Heartfield (currently on display in the excellent *Berlin Metropolis* exhibition at the Neue Galerie).



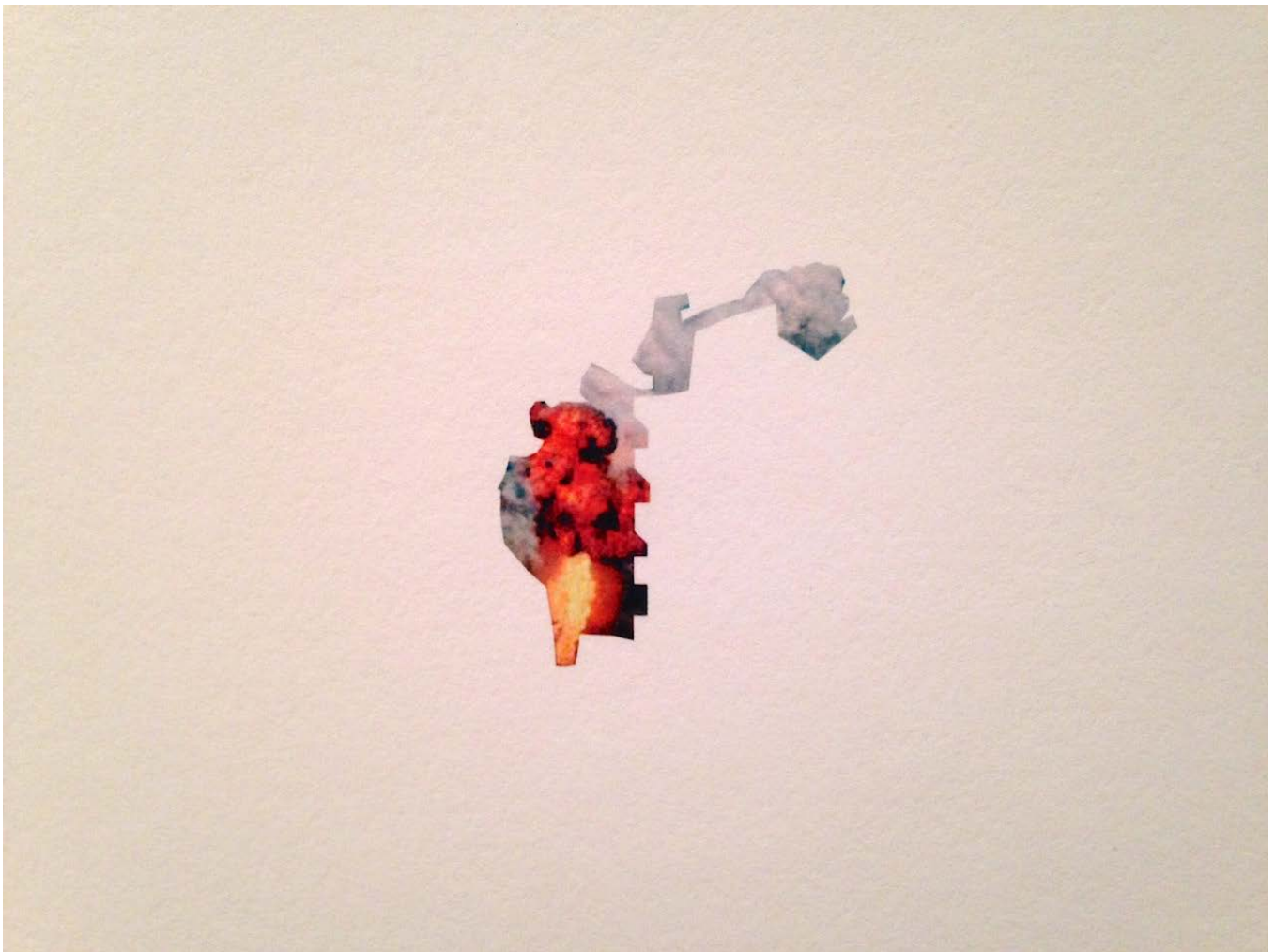
The Atlas Group/Walid Raad, "Oh God, he said, talking to a tree" (2004/2008), pigmented inkjet prints. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Another collection of inkjet prints, "Oh God, he said, talking to a tree" (2004/2008), is characterized by tiny, abstracted images in the middle of blank expanses of white paper. Upon second glance they are clearly photographs in which everything has been eliminated except the smoke and fire from an explosion. The wall text, however, refers to them as prints of watercolors "attributed to Nahia Hassan, who donated them to The Atlas Group in 2004." The statement identifies Hassan as "a senior topographer in the Lebanese Army's Directorate of Geographic Affairs" whose "tasks included the investigation of all missile attacks on

Lebanese soil." It goes on to read:

In her time off, and as an amateur painter, Hassan painted hundreds of small watercolors of the plumes of smoke, debris, and fire produced by the missiles she tracked. Moreover, and consistently over her twenty-five-year career, she sent the paintings as thank-you gifts to the officers and enlisted men and women who served with her. While some reprimanded her for her insensitivity and others commended her for her formal mastery, few turned down Hassan's painted gifts.

The artworks on display, the text concludes, "are such turned-down gifts." While plainly a joke, the coupling of "insensitivity" and "formal mastery" demands a closer reading, in that it calls out the overriding conflict in Raad's work.



The Atlas Group/Walid Raad, "Oh God, he said, talking to a tree_Beirut:

July 20, 2006" (2004/2008), pigmented inkjet print; sheet: 16 15/16 x 22 inches. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

The purported function of The Atlas Group is documentary and archival, which resides predominantly in the arena of aftermath, not with action as it happens. The imagery never lunges out at you in the way that war photography often does. There is an aesthetic distance, akin to the fourth wall in theater, that is never broken.

"Secrets in the open sea" (1994/2004) is the most explicit example of Raad's predilection for upending expectations while simultaneously acknowledging and undermining the primacy of formalism. To the unsuspecting viewer, these large, monochromatic pigmented inkjet prints in various shades of blue are a post-Minimalist answer to Color Field Painting. But in the lower right-hand corner there's a small, barely discernible, bleached-out black-and-white image of people posing for a group portrait. That image, despite its size, comes off as a rasp of reality at odds with the work as a whole. There are also catalogue numbers, presumably assigned by The Atlas Group, printed beside the upper right corner of the small image as well as the lower right corner of the large monochromatic field.

The puzzle presented by the prints is explained, in a manner of speaking, by another tall tale in the wall text, which recounts the discovery of the blue prints "under the rubble during the 1993 demolition of Beirut's war-ravaged commercial districts." These were "entrusted to The Atlas Group for preservation and analysis," which in turn sent "six of the prints to laboratories in France and the U.K. for chemical and digital analysis."

In a Borgesian twist, the labs "recovered small black-and-white latent-images from the blue prints," which were revealed to be portraits of men and women "who had drowned, died, or were found dead in the Mediterranean between 1975 and 1991."

The Atlas Group/Walid Raad, "Secrets in the open sea" (1994/2004), pigmented inkjet prints. Helga de Alvear Foundation, Cáceres, Spain

And so these seemingly formalist works are freighted with an emotional weight that reflects history without documenting it, and the fiction is complete only through the intercession of the wall text. The verbal and the visual are seamlessly united, avoiding the literalism that regularly dogs Conceptual and Neo-Conceptual practice, where textual elements perform an exegesis on the visual, or the visual acts as an illustration of the precepts outlined in the text.

While foregrounding the formal even as he undercuts it, Raad is telescoping the aesthetic takeover awaiting all formidable works of art once the urgency of their content has passed — an action that, like the works of the fictional Nahia Hassan, can be considered a form of indifference to real-life events.

But he is leading us down a garden path. The miniature black-and-white portraits that appear uninvited beneath the blue expanses of "Secrets in the open sea" are like blockages in the digestive track; a purely formal appreciation of these works will never go down smoothly, precisely because the portraits of the (fictitiously) drowned are wedged into their borders as willful formal irritants.

In a work like "Let's be honest, the weather helped" (1998/2006), in which Baldessari-esque colored dots decorate photographs of battle-scarred buildings, the artist's formal intervention is more straightforwardly built into the piece, though the outcome is equally deceptive. While you may first approach the collage series as an appalling aestheticizing of tragedy, your reaction shifts as you read the wall text, which explains that in his childhood, Raad would collect bullets and shrapnel, "run[ning] out to the streets after a night or day of shelling to remove them from walls, cars, and trees." He became fascinated by the "mesmerizing hues [...] on bullets' tips," and covered his photographs of the sites with dots corresponding to the bullets' location, color and diameter — only to discover ten years later that "ammunition manufacturers follow distinct color codes to mark and identify their cartridges of shells."

Further investigation, after "another ten years," revealed that there were "seventeen countries and organizations that continue to supply [ordnance to] the various militias and armies fighting in Lebanon." And so what at first seemed to be a gesture trivializing the devastation of war ends up as a meditation on the persistence of proxy wars and the cold calculus of the the global arms trade.

But who knows if any of this is true? The sheer number of colored dots documented in the photographs defy one child's ability to collect and record them all, especially those located on upper-story exterior walls. But would that make the images any less potent or truthful in their intent?

The work of The Atlas Group can hardly be considered political art; it is far too elegiac for that. Raad's vision — skewed, analytical, and wickedly imaginative — addresses the realm of art qua art in terms of its intricate relationship with history and its messy, accident-prone, contradictory layers of meaning. The installation he has assembled in MoMA's maligned (some would say malignant) second-floor atrium — which, it should be said, has never looked better — is the site for "Scratching on things I could disavow: Walkthrough" (2015), a [series of performances](#) that the artist will hold during the course of the show.

A brochure accompanying the installation, which incorporates prints, sculpture and video, explains that the project, begun in 2007, was meant to trace "the history of art in the 'Arab world' [...] at the same time that the establishment of new cultural foundations, art galleries, art schools, art magazines, art prizes, art fairs, and large Western-brand and local museums was accelerating in cities such as Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Beirut, Doha, Istanbul, Cairo, Manama, and others."

In a "translator's introduction," Raad describes the performance's genesis in an invitation he received to join the Artist Pension Trust (APT), which "aims to select and pool artists and artworks into regional investment and pension funds." He continues:

To determine whether to join APT Dubai, I found myself asking who was funding APT and MutualArt, and why was APT launching a trust in the Middle East. This led me to look into technological innovations in the areas of statistics; risk-management concepts in finance; art as an alternative asset class; culture as an engine of economic growth in the Arab world and elsewhere; text, data-mining, and face-recognition algorithms; and the Israeli military and its links to the Israeli high-tech sector.

He created the installation as a stage set where he would relate his findings, but these stories — if the texts in the brochure are any

indication — will hinge on topics such as communing with artists from the future via telepathy and discovering that the works in a 2008 exhibition by The Atlas Group had shrunk to 1/100th of their original size.

The epic scale of this and other works — the stunning walls of photos making up “I might die before I get a rifle” (1993-2002),” depicting hands holding grenades, or the blurred, grainy shots of “We decided to let them say, ‘we are convinced’ twice. It was more convincing this way” (1982/2006) — reinforce the paradox of Raad’s practice, that of a thoroughgoing skeptic and a true believer, whose faith in the power of art is predicated on the strength of his questions, and the unanticipated answers they frame.

[Walid Raad](#) opens to the public on Monday, October 12, at the Museum of Modern Art (11 West 53rd Street, Midtown, Manhattan) and continues through January 16, 2016.

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