

Walid Raad

Eva Respini, ed. *Walid Raad* Exh. cat. New York: [Museum of Modern Art](#), 2015. 192 pp.; 200 color ills. Cloth \$55.00 (9780870709739)

Exhibition schedule: [Museum of Modern Art](#), New York, NY, October 12, 2015–January 21, 2016; [Institute of Contemporary Art](#), Boston, February 24–May 30, 2016; [Museo Jumex](#), Mexico City, October 13, 2016–January 14, 2017

The catalogue accompanying Walid Raad's eponymous survey at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) is a beautiful volume with extensive documentation of the artist's oeuvre from the 1990s to today; it will undoubtedly serve as the go-to resource on the artist for years to come. Ironically, it is also colored by a set of historiographic problems that Raad himself vigorously works over in his artistic production. What does it mean that alongside a contribution by the exhibition's curator, Eva Respini, MoMA commissioned a historian of Islamic art, Finbarr Barry Flood, to write the second catalogue essay? What is the significance of the fact that the authors' efforts to address legacies of Conceptual and post-Conceptual art in Raad's work—one of the greatest strengths of the exceptional exhibition itself—read like a series of disconnected points on an art-historical map, which do not fully cohere into a larger analytical or historical framework? A sense of uncertainty about just *how* to inscribe Raad into a canon of modern and contemporary art pervades much of the writing about the artist's work. For all the facility with which we habitually critique the museum, considering *Walid Raad* the catalogue alongside *Walid Raad* the exhibition had me jotting in my notes: thank God for exhibitions. Raad's is a powerful example of the ways they can serve as an engine to scholarship, a transforming force with the potential to upend standard disciplinary formations.

At MoMA, the artist's oeuvre is divided into roughly two periods. The first

section focuses on the Atlas Group, the fictional organization under whose name Raad produced work between roughly 1989 and 2004. Devoted to the mission of “researching and documenting the contemporary history of Lebanon,” the Atlas Group’s dates of inception are as multiple and elusive as its supposed authors, of which Raad is the only one identified (31). The collective moniker calls attention to the anonymous contributors whose labor fed into the artworks—donators and photographers, draftsmen, quoted voices, and those who populated and animated the featured scenarios. Raad frames, reframes, and serializes documents, newspapers, and found photographs in the context of new narratives and performances. The resulting objects are iconic in the sense that even when it is difficult to recall exact details they hover in your mind’s eye. *Let’s Be Honest, The Weather Helped* (1998/2006) is a case in point. The ostensible, longer story is that as a child in Beirut Raad would collect discarded bullet casings and catalogue where the accompanying bullets had lodged themselves. What remains long after the implausible tale has faded, however, is the image of a Baldessari-esque explosion of colored dots covering Beirut’s facades in digital reproductions of black-and-white found photographs of the cityscape. The Lebanese civil war (1975–1991), whether one can truly describe lived experience as “pre-” and “post-war,” and the wide-ranging effects of conflict upon artistic production are the overarching questions here. Against a backdrop of the “war on terror” and the rise of the political untruth as an acknowledged truth all its own, Raad’s Atlas Group has been hailed as paradigmatic of “parafictions”—forms of artmaking where “real and/or imaginary personages and stories intersect with the world as it is being lived”—and lauded for their critical edge (Carrie Lambert-Beatty, “Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility,” *October* 129 [Summer 2009]: 54).

The second section of the exhibition, *Scratching on things I could disavow*, features ongoing work that Raad has developed since 2007. Here the artist focuses on the ways in which international museums have

frenziedly acquired, exhibited, and historicized so-called “Arab,” “Middle Eastern,” or “Islamic” art in the 2000s. As Raad describes it, this constellation of projects is an endeavor to think through recent “encounters” of his own: “an invitation to join the Dubai branch of the Artist Pension Trust; the development of Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi; the opening of the Sfeir-Semler Gallery in Beirut” and a “two-year exploration of the Louvre’s newly established Département des arts de l’Islam” (110). Much of *Scratching on things I could disavow* is located in MoMA’s famed atrium. Raad set up this portion of the exhibition as five subdivided stage sets where he conducted a series of hour-long lecture-performances. On one of these “stages,” *Translator’s introduction: Pension arts in Dubai* (2012)—a wall covered with text and images, including press clippings and mug shots—evoked what might be called the Hollywood crime-solving wall. This is the contemporary visual language of the criminal hunt, a schematized plot mechanism that drives countless TV procedurals and films by mapping the criminal, the socially aberrant, even the psychopathic. At MoMA, however, it is not felons but members of the international art world, government leaders of the Middle East, and starchitects involved in building projects in Abu Dhabi (Norman Foster, Frank Gehry, Jean Nouvel, Tadao Ando) who are portrayed as part of a global network. Raad does not hesitate to name names. We may not know how, or if, an investment company called the Artist Pension Trust, an individual who applied to trademark the date September 11, 2001, the Israeli defense program, and the software industry are connected, but the mere implication of collusion stands as an open call for further sleuthing on the part of the public. The fact that it is almost impossible to photograph the wall, as a series of moving projections race across its surface and make it difficult for the average phone camera to focus, is a classically Raad-ian move, in whose work obscurantism often serves as an invitation rather than a rejection of the viewer’s agency.

As mentioned, one of the major tasks that Respini takes up in the catalogue is to canonize Raad by making explicit points of comparison

between his work and Conceptual and post-Conceptual art as well as Institutional Critique. She places the Atlas Group works in company with Eugène Atget, Hannah Höch, Gerhard Richter, Hans Haacke, Michael Asher, Ilya Kabakov, Mark Dion, Sherrie Levine, Louise Lawler, Joseph Beuys, Sophie Calle, Zoe Leonard, Hans-Peter Feldmann, and On Kawara, all blue-chip artists who, with the exception of Asher, are present in MoMA's collection. It is telling, then, that Respini is more tentative in plotting out the requisite art-historical affiliations for the artworks in *Scratching on things I could disavow*, drumming up a more paltry list of MoMA residents with which to establish the relevance of the theme of art of the Middle East (Andrea Fraser, Marcel Duchamp, Marcel Broodthaers, the Japanese Metabolism movement, and Lina Bo Bardi). This, presumably, is where Flood comes in. As a historian of Islamic art, he suggests that there are "other historiographies" that "may be equally relevant." For example, Raad's "penchant for micro-calligraphy" is said to "[recall] the miniature scale of amulet or talismanic scripts" while other works evoke "medieval *tiraz*" (168–69).

To my eye, Raad's scale model of a gallery space showing his own exhibition in miniature, included in *Scratching on things I could disavow*, has everything to do with a critique of the Western museum, and less so with medieval Islamic art, as Flood claims (169). Whether Flood's specific comparisons hold up or not, historicizing Raad in this bifurcated fashion is a problem. For here, fully activated, is the pesky binary of contemporary/Islamic that plagues contemporary artists like Raad and the critics and scholars who seek to historicize them. This bifurcation functions both at the level of the exhibition's structure and in the catalogue: roughly, the Atlas Group is coded as "contemporary," *Scratching on things I could disavow* as somehow more essentially "Islamic." To evaluate Raad's impressive and multi-faceted oeuvre through schemas of either/or or both/and is a discredit to an artist whose work refuses to engage reductive historical frames and, refreshingly, demonstrates the irrelevance of label-focused ontological inquiries such

as “what is Islamic contemporary art?”

Respini and Flood should be given immense credit for their multi-faceted essays on an artist whose work is a formidable object with which to engage. And MoMA should be applauded for its impeccable staging of this rich exhibition, which builds substantially upon, and moves far beyond, the museum’s controversial 2006 exhibition *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking* ([click here for review](#)). If my comments are at times critical, it is because I believe MoMA and Respini have pulled off an important exhibition, and that the stakes of its interpretation are equally as substantial. In Raad’s own catalogue text, in which he eschews a traditional essay format in favor of a collage of quotations by “Lebanese artists, architects, historians, writers, curators, and gallerists, mostly from his own generation,” the artist launches with an enigmatic formulation that might stand as a description for the exhibition as a whole: “But it’s a nice beginning” (13).