Walid Raad

A History of Modern and Contemporary Arab Art

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Walid Raad: A History of Modern and Contemporary Arab Art

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There is still no official word on whether Lebanon will return to the Venice Biennale in 2009 with a second iteration of its national pavilion. Such silence both confirms the exceptional nature of its inaugural outing in 2007 and openly questions the notion of national representation itself, particularly for a country still in the process of building a viable

government some sixty years after independence. Politically engaged artists often question what Lebanon has actually achieved.

In 2005, Andrée Sfeir-Semler, the owner of Galerie Sfeir-Semler, with spaces in both Beirut and Hamburg, attempted to get the first Lebanese national pavilion off the ground with an exhibition of work by Walid Raad, to be housed in a structure designed by the architect Bernard Khoury. It didn't happen, due in part to the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and to an assortment of other political disasters and intrigues, including a cabinet shake-up that saw one minister of culture come and another go.

A reference to that effort appeared in the form of a letter, blown up to the size of a poster, in Walid Raad's *A History of Modern and Contemporary Arab Art: Part 1/Chapter 1: Beirut (1992–2005)*, an exhibition that was hosted by Galerie Sfeir-Semler this past fall.

If the development of modern and contemporary artistic practices in a place like Lebanon is inextricably linked to the country's recent political history, then Raad, in this new exhibition — which introduced a new, post-Atlas Group body of work — used the cultural sphere to consider how Lebanon's past has traumatically affected its present. At the same time, Raad used the work of artist and theorist Jalal Toufic to insist on the impossibility of seeing, engaging, or representing that history, understood as a "tradition that has been withdrawn past a surpassing disaster" — in this case, the many wars and conflicts that have long plagued Lebanon and the region. Beyond the challenge of resurrecting a tradition that has been withdrawn, it is also necessary to grapple with the ethical implications of making history visible when it runs the risk of being immediately fed into a global art establishment, the market having recently taken hold in the region. Raad addressed these challenges directly; his new show also explored the spaces, names, institutions, and relations that constitute the art world as we now know it. Sfeir-Semler's

letter on behalf of Lebanon's Ministry of Culture may have struck some viewers as an inside joke, but it was part of a larger inquiry pondering how certain materials have come to form the narrative of modern and contemporary art in Beirut. The extent to which Raad and a tight-knit group of his peers are implicated in that narrative, and in the formation of one narrative over others, lent the show an added layer of complexity.

This exhibition was the first chapter in what will surely unfold as a larger, more complicated project in the months and years to come. In considering how historical perspective is created, how critical distance is achieved, how art history is "shown," and how near or far people need to be to make it, see it, understand it, or reject it, this project stands to be an important one.

To present his material, Raad, in his usual fashion, adopted a system of delineation. Different sections were presented in the gallery space like pages of a missing art history book — *Preface: Title 23; Appendix XVIII: Plates, The Atlas Group (1989–2004); Museums; Walid Sadek's* Love is Blind *(Modern Art, Oxford, UK); Index XXVI: Artists*.

The show was divided along a central spine into two parts. On one side, works that were more spatial or sculptural in nature were installed in separate rooms. On the other side, a series of large-scale color prints were arranged in triptychs along the length of a long wall — *Appendix XVIII: Plates*.

The plates delved into an important part of Raad's research — the information he gathered from primary and secondary sources about the creation of Lebanon's national pavilion (the first, failed attempt and the second, successful effort); a series of indexes taken from international art magazines, journals, and catalogs dedicated to contemporary art in Beirut; title pages from real and imagined books on the subject; and an archive on modern Lebanese art compiled by the anthropologist and art historian Kirsten Scheid, who teaches at the American University of

Beirut. But the information conveyed was nearly indecipherable. Some plates seemed magnified to the point of abstraction; others, such as Scheid's archive, were reduced to total illegibility. The emphasis was on formal concerns, such as layout, typography, and color. The effort to grasp what was presented moved the viewer back and forth in a kind of game.

The same applied to the sculptural works. *The Atlas Group* (1989-2004) was an impressively executed mini-size mock-up of the Atlas Group retrospective held at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin. The poetic détournement of Operator #17, who every day would redirect his surveillance camera monitoring Beirut's seaside promenade to videotape the sunset, was projected onto a miniature screen the size of a postage stamp. The mock-up, often used to visualize the final execution of an exhibition, was presented like an open grave, demanding that viewers bend their heads in reverence. A note on the wall admonished: *Do not touch*.

Echoing the gallery, the mock-up raised questions as to how it differed from the space in which it stood. Rather than collapsing local and international settings — a white-cube private gallery in Beirut, a public museum in Berlin — Raad emphasized the asymmetry of spatial experience.

This show was Raad's first in the region, and his first to take up art proper as subject matter. The performative, and potentially transformative, aspects of his multifaceted practice were replaced here by object-based works. If viewers were always reminded of their own physical presence, the silent echo of Raad's missing voice also inevitably resonated. Self-reference and the continuous deferral of the critical questions at hand, reflective surfaces, physical limits, and the impossibility of accessing information certainly provoked reactions, occasionally enigmatic ones, but it did not make for an entirely generous or generative encounter.