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REVIEW Leslie Dick

Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Modern and Contemporary Art in the Arab World/Part I_Volume 1_Chapter 1 (Beirut: 1992-2005) A Project by Walid Raad

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REDCAT
Los Angeles, CA



Walid Raad, *Part I Chapter 1 The Atlas Group (1989-2004)*, 2009. Gallery walls and understructure: Acrylic sheet with latex paint; Floor: red oak veneer with polyurethane; Photos: resin, latex paint, polycarbonate and archival inkjet prints; Video installation: 4 lcd screens. 12 1/2 x 110 3/8 x 41 in. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery and the artist. © Walid Raad. Photo: Scott Groller.

“What a curious feeling!” said Alice. “I must be shutting up like a telescope!” And so it was indeed: she was now only ten inches high, and her face brightened at the thought that she was now the right

size for going through the little door into that lovely garden. First, however, she waited for a few minutes to see if she was going to shrink any further: she felt a little nervous about this; “for it might end, you know,” said Alice to herself, “in my going out altogether, like a candle. I wonder what I should be like then?” And she tried to fancy what the flame of a candle looks like after the candle is blown out, for she could not remember ever having seen such a thing.”

-Lewis Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland

Walid Raad has stated the Atlas Group project, which he pursued for fifteen years, is over. The current work, on view recently at REDCAT, nevertheless presents a miniature architectural model, about nine feet by three and a half feet, which perfectly depicts a hypothetical museum displaying the collected works of the Atlas Group (1989 – 2004). These artworks, and the rooms that contain them, are reproduced with what can only be described as uncanny precision, at 1/100th of their actual size. Many of the pieces, for example the series of 100 photographs *My neck is thinner than a hair: Engines* (2001), originally 24 x 34 cm, now 24 x 34 mm, are almost impossible to identify. Yet REDCAT’s wall captions provide the titles, media, dimensions, dates, and attributions of each work, as if each photographic series, each video, and the floor sculpture *I was overcome with a momentary panic* (1998) are present in their entirety, not replaced by a miniature double. The model exerts a compelling fascination. Two of the video installations are large enough to view, being three or four inches across, if you are willing to kneel or sit on the floor. There is an extraordinary intensity to this ideal, imaginary gallery space: the obsessive detail of the floor boards and the almost invisible markings on the walls representing the minute writing of the wall texts are like a lure, pulling me in, situating me in a peculiar, not to say curious, mental space.

The issue of scale (large to small, small to large) reoccurs in *Part I_Chapter 1_Preface_Title 23* (2009), where three explanatory texts are projected from overhead projectors placed on the floor onto three portable fold-up screens: very old school. These three screens are placed beside and slightly behind each other, receding, with the beginning of the text appearing on the screen to the right, necessitating a visual negotiation with the three screens, as we figure out in what order to read them. The Arabic alphabet is written right to left, so perhaps the move we are asked to make brings us closer to another kind of writing, a reversal of the expected sequence. Here Raad writes about the miniature model, and suggests three possibilities: “i) the reduction in scale is a mere psychological fact... ii) it is manufactured and leans on formal

and conventional tropes influenced by, for example, Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*... iii) the works, for some unknown reason, have shrunk." The solemnity of Raad's tone contradicts the hilarity of this idea: Honey, I shrunk the art? It's a kind of magical thinking that opens up the Lewis Carroll world, where anything can happen. That world is imbued with pleasure in the context of art, and suffused with pain in the context of the meaningless violence of disaster and war.

It is often said that the miniature model allows the viewer a sense of control, like a child looking down, god-like, onto a carpet strewn with tiny soldiers or diminutive high heels and handbags. In the case of this model, I would say it is less about control and more about seduction. In order to see anything at all, one has to look intensely; one has to bend or kneel to achieve the correct eye-line, to see what there is to be seen. It is impossible not to be aware of looking at the art works, not to be aware of visual desire—wanting more than is available. As the model frustrates our curiosity, it leaves us with something else, an awareness of our own desire and the mechanisms of its operation. At the same time, perhaps another kind of wish is granted: the wish to contain the Atlas Group's unruly oeuvre, to hold it all in one place, apparently complete. Thirteen major works are presented here in miniature, and it is, with difficulty, possible to identify each of them, to locate them and, so to speak, measure them against their captions.

The architectural model functions as an *aide-memoire*, like a picture in a locket, the complete set that invokes the actual things, which are apparently somewhere else. Are these the final versions of the artworks? Is the artist regaining control of his own work, now dispersed? I was most excited (and alarmed) by the sculpture entitled *I was overcome with a momentary panic*, which I could not remember, never having seen it before. Looking hard, my wish to grasp the work (an unlikely model of all the detonations in Beirut between 1975 and 1991) became more and more insistent, as the object became more undeniably out of reach.

Raad describes the Atlas Group as responsible for collecting, maintaining, and producing an archive of material relating to the contemporary history of Lebanon, with particular emphasis on the wars of 1975 to 1990/91. Each artwork is titled as if it is an object in this archive, for example the floor sculpture:

Document title: I was overcome with a momentary panic
Category_File_Type_Model: [cat AGP] Thin neck Maps 1994

While much of the work of the Atlas Group resembles more traditional archival material (that is, numbered pages, photographs, text), even objects as ungainly as this floor sculpture become “documents” in this context. So the architectural model (scaled 1/100) of an art gallery contains a sculpture which functions as a map of a series of explosions, and this model within a model belongs as an object in an archive. In a series of regressions, the Atlas Group archive, miniaturized, itself becomes a sub-set of Walid Raad’s latest archival project, which takes as its topic “A History of Modern and Contemporary Art in the Arab World.” The apparent totality of the architectural model recalls a book, a catalogue, or a website; for those who are interested, all of the Atlas Group works that are displayed in this miniature gallery are also available, again reduced in size, on the website www.theatlasgroup.org.



Walid Raad, *Part I Chapter 1 The Atlas Group (1989–2004)*, 2009. Gallery walls and understructure: acrylic sheet with latex paint; Floor: red oak veneer with polyurethane; Photos: resin, latex paint, polycarbonate and archival inkjet prints; Video installation: 4 lcd screens. 12 1/2 x 110 3/8 x 41 in. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery and the artist. © Walid Raad. Photo: Scott Groller.

Looking at the tiny screens, listening to the almost inaudible sound, I think how flexible our perceptual system must be, how intensely driven our unconscious capacity for identification, that we can connect, emotionally and intellectually, with figures the size of insects, not only are we capable of making this connection, but we often choose this scale, on YouTube, or Facebook, peering into the little vistas offered by the laptop screen, like Alice looking through the tiny door that leads into “that lovely garden.” The intense pleasure of scrutinizing Raad’s model invites me reflexively to consider questions of scale, of distance, proximity, and time. For one of the most obvious effects of the fascination I describe is to slow down the process of viewing, to invite us to stop, lean down, or get down on the floor, really to look.

Underlying the five works in the REDCAT show is a set of ideas formulated by theorist and artist Jalal Toufic in one of the accompanying printed texts, *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster*. Here Toufic suggests that certain events, such as wars or other disasters, can sometimes produce a cultural loss, not only at the level of material objects (for example, the destruction of artworks, museums, libraries, or even archives), but also at an “immaterial” level, that is, even though an artwork may be extant, it is in some sense “not available to vision” (Raad’s words). Toufic describes the ways in which artists (and others) are required in certain instances to “resurrect” such artworks, and outlines the crucial role of the “counterfeit” as part of the process of this resurrection.

In my view, the objects in *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow* enact, in their very materiality, such a withdrawal, and at the same time, inaccessible as they may be, paradoxically, Raad manages to bring them back to life. (The urgency of my desire to get at the meanings and forms of the tiny floor sculpture is only intensified by the realization that it is too small for me to see.) That these objects are “counterfeit” goes without saying. There’s a deep absurdity to this project, where a mysterious idea of “immaterial withdrawal” is represented in very material terms: things become smaller as they get further away!

The surpassing disaster itself cannot be represented; it can only be inferred, hypothesized, from its effects. And the withdrawal of tradition is invisible to many; this is the deepest and darkest joke at the heart of these quicksilver ideas. What hasn’t been destroyed—blown up, burned to a crisp, reduced to ashes and dust—is apparently still here; we can, for example, go to the museum and see it. But Toufic’s text invites us to consider that things aren’t

that simple, and the effects of the surpassing disaster are deeper and harder to grasp. Toufic writes:

...The surpassing disaster leads to the withdrawal not of everything, but of tradition, and touches not everyone, but a community, with the caveat that this community is reciprocally defined by it as the community of those affected by it, and this tradition is defined by it as that which withdraws as a result of the surpassing disaster and it is thinkers, writers, artists, filmmakers, musicians, and dancers who can “take care,” by resurrecting it, of what has withdrawn as a result of the surpassing disaster.

Tradition itself is defined reflexively, as “that which withdraws,” in a mirror-like infinite regress. Raad’s manipulations of scale in the REDCAT show perform a literal withdrawal, mimicking the withdrawal of history, where events are superseded by more recent events, and the past becomes smaller and smaller, more and more distant. Looking at the show requires a participation in this process of withdrawal and resurrection, an engagement with the problems of tradition.

“Oh, my poor little feet, I wonder who will put on your shoes and stockings for you now, dears?...I shall be a great deal too far off to trouble myself about you... -but I must be kind to them... how funny it’ll seem, sending presents to one’s own feet! And how odd the directions will look!

*Alice’s Right Foot, Esq.
Hearthrug,
near the Fender,
(with Alice’s love)...”*

As objects shrink in size, one can’t help wondering, is it because the object has withdrawn, so to speak, or is it because I am further away? Spatial distance is woven into temporal or psychological distance, reminding me of the small child’s question, in response to being told his birthday is in October: “Where is October?” In the play with scale that recurs in these different works, Raad plants an ambiguity—has the artwork withdrawn, or is it me? For if the fundamental trick of perspective relies on diminishment of size, all perspective is articulated around a point of view, and therefore despite its apparent objectivity, subjectivity—or point of view—is built into its very structure. The entire work of the Atlas Group circulates around the impossibility of anything like an objective account of the wars in Lebanon

from 1975 to 1990/91. Using a strategy of displacement, Raad draws tangents across the historical field. For example, in *Notebook volume 38: Already been in a lake of fire* (1991), we are invited to contemplate “the exact make, model, and color” of the various cars used as car bombs during the period 1975 to 1991. By making such a move, Raad shows how all representation selects and displaces, as information is systematized, sequenced, and processed.

The works of the Atlas Group perform this move of displacement in numerous ways, making me think of the phenomenon familiar to stargazers, when in order to see a particular star, you look just to the side of it, and it emerges with startling clarity. This phenomenon can be explained by the structure of the rods and cones of the retina, nevertheless this “knight’s move” allows Raad to get at things (like over 3,600 car bombs in fifteen years—an average of 4.6 car bombs a week) that are otherwise almost unthinkable. I would argue that the deployment of radical absurdity provides a method that sidesteps the various pitfalls evident in any discussion of contemporary Lebanese history: rage, sentiment, nostalgia, chauvinism, academicism, despair. Displacement is key to this method, always moving onward, shifting to one side of the object, as if the tragedy, the violence, and the loss are like a blind spot, an area of brightest light where nothing can be seen.

Each of the works in this exhibition perpetrates a play on the idea of historical perspective. *Part I_Chapter 1_Section 79: On Walid Sadek’s Love Is Blind (Modern Art, Oxford, UK, 2006)* (2008), presents a trompe l’oeil black-and-white wall painting of part of another exhibition, depicting a specific instance of a display of another artist’s work—Walid Sadek’s—which itself invoked the absence, or possibly the withdrawal, of yet a third artist’s work. The trompe l’oeil evocation of explanatory wall texts, unreadable in the mural, is simultaneously illuminated, so to speak, with actual wall texts. There’s an infinite regress: looking at this wall, we can’t get at Sadek’s piece, which itself addresses the question of not being able to get at Mustafa Farroukh’s artwork. Buried in the work is yet another missing Lebanese artist, Rita Oudaimy, driven by economic circumstances to paint trompe l’oeil for a living, whose mark-making, of the three artists, is most “available to vision,” yet also most anonymous and overlooked. It is as if any attempt to construct a history of Lebanese art necessarily takes the form of detours, marking absence and invisibility.



Walid Raad, *Part I_Chapter 1_Index XXVI_Artists 2009* (detail). White vinyl on white wall, dimensions variable. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery and the artist. © Walid Raad. Photo: Scott Groller.

This idea of the inaccessible recurs in the work titled *Part I_Chapter 1_Index XXVI_Artists* (2009), in which the names of forty four 20th century Lebanese artists are written in Arabic script in white vinyl, laser-cut lettering, in a long

line of script glued directly to the wall. These names would be invisible to the casual viewer, as the white on white of the relatively small script camouflages their presence. Arabic writing, illegible to many at REDCAT, is further abstracted, as the script transforms into a decorative frieze, a dado, dancing down the wall, reminiscent of architectural moldings or floral plasterwork. This pleasant disappearing act is interrupted by an acknowledged mistake. Raad explains in the wall caption how he was chided (by a Lebanese art critic) for misspelling one artist's name, an act regarded as particularly brutal and insensitive, for this particular artist, Johnny Tahan, now dead, had a hard life, much of it spent in a wheelchair. The public rebuke for this apparent error (Raad acknowledges that more than one of the artists' names are "intentionally and arbitrarily" misspelled) allows Raad to adjust his work, by writing the name correctly in red, directly on the wall above the white vinyl letters, and adding a little dossier on Tahan, in the form of a small selection of print outs of press documents. These are printed on overhead projector film, assembled in a stack and tacked onto the wall below the correction. Raad writes that he looks forward to the day when all the names will be corrected. It is precisely the mistake that breaks open the seamless and decorative line of script, and demonstrates the actual gap between this particular present and its past. Every illegible word signifies a lost history, a name that we can't grasp, except through the hooks and eyes of unintended or intended error.

Raad seems to be proposing an idea of history as something that produces a counterfeit or substitute object, an object lesson, for our consideration. The risk that it may almost disappear in the distance is built into the proposition. The line of white-on-white names extends across the entire wall, as if the list of artists reaches precisely as far as the specific installation requires. In the work *Part I Chapter 1 Appendix XVIII Plates 88-108* (2009), a series of 21 framed photographs recedes down the opposite wall, the nearest (and largest) approximately 6 by 4 feet, the furthest, and smallest, only a couple of inches tall. (This work also refers to the trompe l'oeil tradition, for if we read the receding rectangular frames as all the same size, we are apparently looking at an extremely long wall!) Each plate is titled: *Untitled and/or a History of...* - a History of Art, of a Museum, of an Exhibition, of a Dissertation, etc. The photographic plates present papers, mostly printed with text, Arabic calligraphy, French, English, often fragmentary, always on a very lovely field of color: grey green, lemon beige, puce, titian red, ochre. Sometimes the text is tiny, sometimes perfectly legible. Studying the extremely small print of one, I recognize the name Catherine David; in another, almost indecipherable due to superimposed typewriting, Raad and the Lebanese architect Bernard Khoury are proposed as representatives of Lebanon in the "upcoming Biennale del Arte." one plate presents a journal wrapped in plastic, one

presents the worn covers of a notebook, old papers, blank and faded. It appears to be a collection of fragments, evocative typefaces, and different correspondence, publicity, indexes, a handwritten budget, from the dossier of an artist (like Raad) whose practice bridges the complicated gaps between the art institutions of the Arab world and art institutions of the West. The parade of plates, diminishing in size, provokes the extraordinary question: Are things clearer when they are bigger? In other words, can we see (or understand) things more clearly when we are close to them—when they are bigger? Does being tiny makes something inaccessible, or does it bring us closer? Maybe we can see things more clearly when they've receded in time, when we get some perspective on the situation.



Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Modern and Contemporary Art in the Arab World/Part I_Volume 1_Chapter 1 (Beirut 1992–2005) A project by Walid Raad, 2009. Installation view of Part I_Chapter 1_Appendix XVIII_Plates 88–108, (2009), archival inkjet photographs, and Part I_Chapter 1_The Atlas Group (1989–2004), (2009). REDCAT, Los Angeles, Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery and the artist. © Walid Raad. Photo: Scott Groller.

Perspective not only raises the material issue of size and proximity, clarity and obscurity, qualities that perhaps belong to the object, it also raises the question of point of view. There is no question that my reading of these works is informed by my knowledge and ignorance of the history of Lebanon, my familiarity and lack of familiarity with the Atlas Group project, my enthusiasm for and mistaken memories of the writings of Lewis Carroll. None of the names written in white on white mean anything to me, apart from

Khalil Gibran, whose name, I discover, was actually Gibran Khalil Gibran. (I can read these names in the Latin alphabet in the booklet included in the box which accompanied the exhibition, where I found that each name is preceded by the word “and” –as if to emphasize the companionship of the list, and its ongoing quality.) It is impossible to encounter Raad’s work without an acute awareness of one’s own point of view, its limitations and strengths, such as they are. Raad’s work invites research, by demonstrating the extent of the gaps in our knowledge and experience, at the very same time as calling into question the authority of that research.

Perhaps the most telling image from Alice is when she eats the “very small cake, on which the words ‘EAT ME’ were beautifully marked in currants.” “She ate a little bit, and said anxiously to herself ‘Which way? Which way?’, holding her hand on the top of her head to feel which way it was growing...” Alice’s attempt to measure relative distance by placing her hand on her own head is doomed to failure; Alice is inside the phenomenon, and therefore has no perspective on it. At the center of the proposition articulated by these works is a questioning of the markers of the ordinary. Everything is changing size; the life-size, 3-D representation of Walid Sadek’s installation is a trick of the eye; the pantheon of names of Lebanese artists melts into the wall. Raad’s work challenges the idea of perspective as producing certainty, or hierarchy, or some kind of stability. And it challenges the idea of the archive as maintaining that certainty, that stability. Despite the implicit claims of the archive, all measures are like Alice’s hand on the top of her head, all points of reference mutable and uncertain.

At the deepest level, Walid Raad’s work is profoundly absurd. His work proposes that any account of Lebanese history requires a detour through absurdity, which compacts tragedy and comedy into itself. Looking at this show, the kind of laughter it provokes is so extreme it turns into tears. The intensity of desire is experienced as frustration, the depth of my ignorance experienced as I find out something I didn’t know before. This effort to acknowledge withdrawal, to negotiate the space of what’s missing, nevertheless brings objects into being, which themselves enact a shrinking, a receding into the distance. Raad’s insistence on the absurdity of conceiving perspective as an issue of scale or size engages us visually in the problem of history, in the withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster. The process of perceiving this withdrawal in physical terms brings us close to the possibility of disappearance, to imagining “what the flame of a candle looks like after the candle is blown out.” Raad’s work suggests that it is only through subjectivity, through the arbitrary, the mistaken, the everyday, it is only through displacement that we can resurrect tradition, and all our knowledge,

however hard won, is partial, slanted, skewed, changing size and shape continually, and maybe that's what makes it alive. At bottom, there's a playful and pleasure-driven working out of visual forms that keeps me hooked, following the multiple ways Raad finds to materially manifest complicated ideas and absences. His work is exciting, elating, hilarious, and tragic. Like Beirut.

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Errata: The name of the artist Jalal Toufic was misspelled in this article in the print publication of X-TRA Volume 12, number 1. The editors apologize for this error.

FALL 2009
VOLUME 12 NUMBER 1

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