

# Walid Raad

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The Museum of Modern Art

**Walid**

**Raad**

**Eva Respini**

With a contribution by Walid Raad  
and an essay by Finbarr Barry Flood

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# The Atlas Group

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## Foreword

In an age of increasing Western engagement with art from across the globe, it is a pleasure to present the first American museum survey of one of contemporary art's most critical figures, Walid Raad. Several years ago I had the opportunity of traveling with Raad in the United Arab Emirates, where we encountered an advertisement for a commercial bank stating "Pre-write history." This slogan precipitated a lengthy conversation about what history means in a region with various and often conflicting accounts of past, present, and future. No one has thought more about this problem than Raad; the construction of history—how it is made, received, visualized, and understood—is a central theme for him. A Lebanese national who fled his war-torn country in 1983, Raad emerged in the 1990s with work that asked urgent questions about the power of images and information within the context of the trauma of war. His work generates a host of questions about our fundamental understanding of lived experiences and a palpable sense of art as urgent.

The Museum of Modern Art committed to Raad early in his career, acquiring major works in 2003 and 2004 and including his art in group exhibitions such as *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking* (2006), *Color Chart: Reinventing Color 1950 to Today* (2008), *Greater New York 2005* at MoMA PS1, and several collection installations throughout the last decade. This exhibition, which surveys his output in all mediums over the last twenty-five years, is the most comprehensive in any museum to date, introducing the full scope of his work to an American audience for the first time. Raad's art touches on so many areas of curatorial expertise—photography, video, architecture, graphic design, and performance—that it epitomizes the mission of our museum as an institution of cross-disciplinary learning.

I am indebted to MoMA's Board of Trustees for supporting such an ambitious project, and for allowing us, once again, to break new ground. I owe my deepest gratitude to the exhibition's funders: The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts; MoMA's Wallis Annenberg Fund for Innovation in Contemporary Art through the Annenberg Foundation; The Jill and Peter Kraus Endowed Fund for Contemporary Exhibitions; The Contemporary Arts Council of the Museum of Modern Art; Oya Eczacıbaşı; A. Huda and Samia Farouki; Elham and Tony Salamé, Aishti Foundation Beirut; Basil and Raghida Rahim; Maya and Ramzy Rasamny; and Rana Sadik and Samer Younis. I am also grateful to The International Council of The Museum of Modern Art for providing critical research and travel support for the exhibition.

After its presentation in New York, the exhibition will be shown at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston and Museo Jumex in Mexico City. I extend my thanks to Jill Medvedow, Ellen Matilda Poss Director of the ICA, and to interim Director Julieta

González and former Director Patrick Charpenel of Museo Jumex, for embracing this project. This tour is only possible because the lenders (p. 191) have been willing to part with important works for over a year, and we owe them an enormous debt.

I extend my profound gratitude to Eva Respini for organizing this important exhibition. Before assuming the role of Barbara Lee Chief Curator at the ICA/Boston, Eva served as a curator in MoMA's Department of Photography, organizing exhibitions such as the Museum's major retrospective of Cindy Sherman and its long-overdue survey of the work of Robert Heinecken. I also wish to thank Finbarr Barry Flood, William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of the Humanities, Institute of Fine Arts and Department of Art History, New York University, for his illuminating contribution to this book.

Finally I salute Walid Raad for his extreme generosity and close collaboration in bringing this presentation to its fruition. His works are moving, elegant, and provocative, leading us to reflect deeply on the issues of our time.

—Glenn D. Lowry  
Director, The Museum of Modern Art

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A project of this scope would have been impossible without the assistance of many dedicated and talented people, both within and outside The Museum of Modern Art. My heartfelt appreciation goes to Glenn D. Lowry, Director, a champion of the show since its inception and a critical sounding board when I needed it. At the ICA/Boston, I am deeply grateful to Jill Medvedow, Ellen Matilda Poss Director, who warmly welcomed me and this project to Boston.

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*Walid Raad* has depended for its success on its lenders, listed on page 191. The Museum of Modern Art is grateful to these individuals and institutions for their willingness to make important works available to a larger viewing public.

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My first and final thanks are reserved for Walid Raad. I am deeply honored to have worked closely with such a brilliant and thoughtful artist. I learned an enormous amount from Walid and his work, which has profoundly moved and inspired me.

This book is dedicated to my family.

—Eva Respini  
Barbara Lee Chief Curator  
Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston

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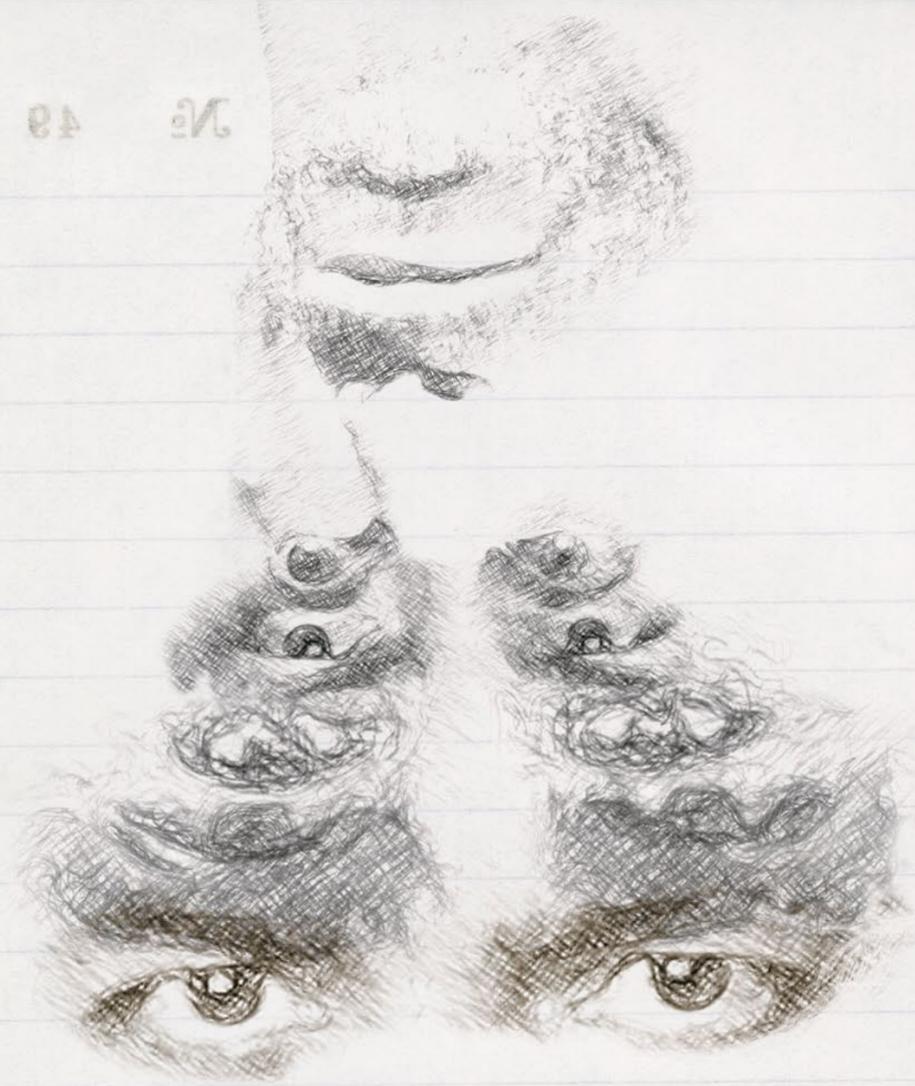
Invited to contribute a text to this book, Walid Raad researched art magazines, newspapers, journals, catalogues, and other sources—all published over the last twenty years in Arabic, English, and French—to find quotations from about fifty people: Lebanese artists, architects, historians, writers, curators, and gallerists, mostly from his own generation. Raad chose quotations from statements he wishes he had made himself or would never make himself. Culled from over 1,400 pages of text, the voices featured here include Amhad Beydoun, Tony Chakar, Joana Hadjithomas, Khalil Joreige, Bernard Khoury, Rabih Mrou e, Ghassan Salhab, Lina Saneh, Christine Tohme, Jalal Toufic, Fawwaz Traboulsi, Akram Zaatari, and others.

# I Thought I’d Escape My Fate, But Apparently

## Walid Raad



escape my fate, but apparently." I thought I'd



"People die collectively but mourn alone,"

one life at home and one life in the hospital.

"here." The more I read in the remarks about "here," the more I find the word opens the floodgates for waves of sadness and loneliness. "Here" ushers in words like "unable," "do not,"

r. Through the cracks of this system of "not speaking so as not to die",

« Les morts ne meurent pas parce que les vivants ne sont pas encore prêts à supporter de vivre sans père, même si ce père est un cadavre ».

أنا: سوف العب دورك قريباً.  
جميلة: لا تقولي لي هذا. واحد من هذه الأقلام مجدداً.  
أنا: سوف أحاول أن أقول شيئاً جديداً.  
جميلة: قولني إنني مت.

Depuis la  
Guerre civile, les morts sont ultra présents. Les  
morts ne meurent pas, ils ne sont pas enterrés.  
Ils sont dans les slogans, dans les discours,  
sur les affiches, tous ces posters de martyrs.

Think  
about it, I can't be secular when I die! If I'm a Christian they'll pray in  
church, if I'm a Muslim I can't be cremated... But here the dead man has  
escaped religious branding. Another way to disappear,

The idea is that to  
live in a place like Lebanon is to live in the presence of corpses that cannot  
be laid to rest, that rot without proper burial, that prevent the work of  
mourning, the work of memory and, perhaps most importantly, the work of  
forgetting.

What this mythical king  
teaches us is that our encounter with the corpse is not sudden, not an  
eruption, not a stumbling upon a possibly pathogenic primal scene;  
rather, the corpse we encounter is a corpse we partake in making  
without impatience, namely through a soliloquy which turns impatience  
upside down towards the temporality of the corpse and not away from it.

- لا أريد تصنيفها ولكن واضح بالنسبة الي اننا لا نبني  
المدينة ولا نعطها الوجه الذي نريد. نحن نلحق بها حيث  
تذهب. الطريقة الوحيدة لتعامل مع ذلك هي ربما ان نكون  
اشباحاً؟



art. Moreover, portraiture was the first type of "modern" painting to inhabit Lebanon, indeed to form the notion of a nation called Lebanon made up of fully autonomous, rational individuals deserving of nationhood status. Yet since the 1930s, or three-quarters of a century ago, that form of figural painting has fallen completely out of favor to be replaced first by landscapes and types, and later by abstraction.

By 2003, one could speak of an inflation concerning contemporary Lebanese art. The contradictions were conspicuous. Lebanese art was marking the calendar of the international art circuit at a time when the socio-political situation in the country was regressing, alarmingly. Artists, it seemed, could do nothing else.

But it's not true. Nobody in the region is supposed to have watched Maya Deren's films when they came out, but they did. The first post-independent films in Algeria? So radical. The first post-independent films in Morocco? Crazy.

ذلك الخط الصغير الذي يتيح للسطر الواحد أن يتسع لأربعين كلمة، والصفحة أن تتسع لسبعين سطراً هو، في ما يتعلّق لي، المساوي الشكلي، أو الرمزي، لأن أقول، لنفسي أولاً، إن ما أخطّه على الورقة ليس سهل الكتابة، ولا سهل القراءة من ثمّ، ذلك أن الخط الذي هو غاية في الصغر يتطلب إجهاداً للنظر، ينبغي أن يساويه إجهاد مماثل في النظر المقابل، نظر كارنيو.

another interview with an artist and art critic, who was a Lebanese nationalist, another art critic and writer who was an Arab nationalist, then became a progressive leftist, a collector who was part of elite ruling Beirut family but was more interested in Iraqi and Arab art, not Lebanese art, a gallerist whose experience is during the war, which is outside of our time bracket.

Such has certainly been the situation during the past fifty years of interpreting art in Lebanon. "Traditional," "European," "Arab," "universal," "Ottoman," "modern," "Islamic," "nationalist," and "individual" notions of art were called upon by different actors to promote various projects designed by...

All signs suggest an imminent flourishing in the study of contemporary Arab art!

Because Lebanon is joining the biennale's national pavilions 112 years into the history of the event - late in the game, as it were - and because it is doing so at a time of grave political crisis in the country - when the concept of the nation has once again been called rather roughly, even violently into question - this exhibition does not seek to represent...

"As an artist you do everything in English," "From grant applications to press releases."

### Out of Breath

Statements from a round-table discussion between four Lebanese artists and intellectuals

is a visual artist and filmmaker who lives

is the Director of

is the Editor-in-Chief

sits on the editorial board

currently editing

is a Consulting Editor

is an Advisor to the

Where are the Palestinian painters of the Nakba and Intifada, such as Suleiman Mansour and Ismael Shammout, or the Lebanese artists of Arab nationalism and communism, such as Saloua Raouda Choucair, Aref Rayyes, and Seta Manoukian? The polymaths, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Abdel-Rahman Munif, and Fateh Mudarris? Is it that they were asleep?

"In Lebanon, for instance," she says, "there's an artist named..."

# Slippery Delays and Optical Mysteries: The Work of Walid Raad

Eva Respini

An encounter with Walid Raad's work can be a profoundly moving experience, shaking the very foundations of what we believe to be true. For Raad, the opposition between fiction and nonfiction does not apply. Fact in his work incorporates fantasy and imagination while fiction is grounded in real events, dates, and statistics. Raad's career thus far has had two main chapters, *The Atlas Group* (1989–2004) and *Scratching on things I could disavow* (2007–); both are large bodies of work that tell a complex composite truth stretching beyond historical fact, and both rely on storytelling and performance to activate imaginary narratives. In both cases, parsing fact from fiction is beside the point.

Raad was born in Lebanon, a republic whose history since its founding, in 1943, is not taught in its schools, and where, during its sixteen-year Civil War (1975–91), sectarian allegiances changed from one day to the next. Having fled the brutal violence of the war, Raad took to photography and theoretical art discourses as a means to reflect on the lived experience of conflict. Investigating how photographs, moving images, documents, and first-person narratives confer authenticity on official histories, be they histories of war or of art, Raad's work weaves elements of the past, the present, and the future to build narratives that question how history, memory, and geopolitical relationships are constructed. A viewer need not know the history of Lebanon or the Middle East to engage with this art; at its heart is a coming-to-terms with the limits of directly capturing history through images or words.

Perhaps it is more productive to think of Raad's work in terms of its *imaginary* dimensions rather than its *fictive* ones. For Raad, the relationship between image and text is key to unlocking how photographs, videos, and documents occupy the public sphere. He activates this relationship, this interdependence, through wall texts written in the first-person voice or in the guise of an imaginary character. His works are further illuminated by frequent lecture/performances wherein Raad adopts the persona of a scholar or artist. It is through these literary acts—the performance monologue or wall-text narrative—that the work truly comes into its own. In fact, its success hinges on our need to believe in official narratives.

To grasp the complexity of Raad's work, it is worth revisiting his formative cultural and artistic influences. Born in 1967 to a Palestinian mother and a Lebanese father, Raad grew up in predominantly Christian East Beirut. As a teenager, he dreamed of being a photojournalist, and his father gave him his first camera and helped him to build a home darkroom. Raad subscribed to European photography magazines such as *Photo*, *Zoom*, and *Photo Reporter*, where he saw the work of Eugène Atget, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Man Ray, Diane Arbus, and Helmut Newton.<sup>1</sup> The escalating violence of the Lebanese Civil War, especially with Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982, led to Raad's emigration the following year to the United States, where he finished high school.

After a brief stint in Boston University's premed program, Raad enrolled in photography courses at the Rochester Institute of

Technology (RIT). He was already deeply aware of photography's tenuous claim to veracity and its power as informational currency:

You don't do street photography in a city at war. . . . [Doing street photography] assumes that you can stay in one place for 20 minutes, adjust your tripod and ensure that there's no sniper or bomb about to go off nearby. It also assumes that the photograph is neutral, the product of a predominantly aesthetic activity. But in a divided city, it's an intelligence document. Especially when people want information about the other side, taking photographs of buildings, streets or residents is very contentious.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to his photography courses at RIT, and perhaps just as important, Raad took classes in Middle Eastern studies and, in exile, began to gain perspective on the Arab world. Of his earlier education in Beirut, he has said, "I never got to learn anything about the history of the Arab world or the history of Lebanon in a serious way. That training was in the United States."<sup>3</sup>

On leaving RIT, Raad enrolled as a doctoral candidate in visual and cultural studies at the University of Rochester, where he was introduced to semiotics, Marxism, and psychoanalysis and was taught by Kaja Silverman, Douglas Crimp, and Norman Bryson. He also eagerly read the theories of race, sexuality, feminism, and postcolonialism written by Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and others. Raad's dissertation focused on the captivity of Western hostages in Lebanon in the 1980s, a topic later

developed in his 2001 work *Hostage: The Bachar tapes* (English version) (2001; pp. 90–93). Preparing for the dissertation, Raad honed his research skills, combing through archival documents and congressional testimony on the Iran-Contra affair to analyze the literary dimensions of the writings of those in captivity. Occupied with the demands of a PhD, Raad made little art during this time, but the research skills and theoretical literacy he developed then anticipate the artistic strategies that he employs to this day.

An important influence on Raad's artistic formation was his return to Lebanon after the end of the Civil War. In 1992 he took a break from his studies to live in Lebanon for a year (the most time he had spent at home since leaving) and to collaborate with the Canadian-Lebanese artist Jayce Salloum on the documentary *Up to the South* (1993; fig. 1). He and Salloum conducted interviews with fighters, farmers, workers, and intellectuals who had been actively involved in the resistance against the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon (and who therefore had often been called terrorists). Encountering the nascent postwar Lebanese art scene during this year, Raad met the artist Akram Zaatari (fig. 2) and the writer Jalal Toufic, important influences and future collaborators. Raad is now part of the tight-knit generation of Lebanese artists, architects, and filmmakers, among them Toufic, Zaatari, Tony Chakar, Joana Hadjithomas, Khalil Joreige, Lamia Joreige, Bernard Khoury, Rabih Mroué, Marwan Rechmaoui, Walid Sadek, Ghassan Salhab, Mohamed Soueid, and Lina Saneh, who collectively established

Beirut as a fertile cultural center in the 1990s.<sup>4</sup> They responded to the aftermath of the war with wide-ranging works probing shared questions about memories, traces, and images of conflict. Khalil Joreige has speculated on these Lebanese artists' fascination with the status of the image: "During the war, every militia had its own media station, television, newspaper or radio. There was a real war of images. Audiences or publics had to learn to deal with these images. We as artists became critical about the use of images. Perhaps interest in art coming from Beirut was due to this sophisticated relationship to images."<sup>5</sup>

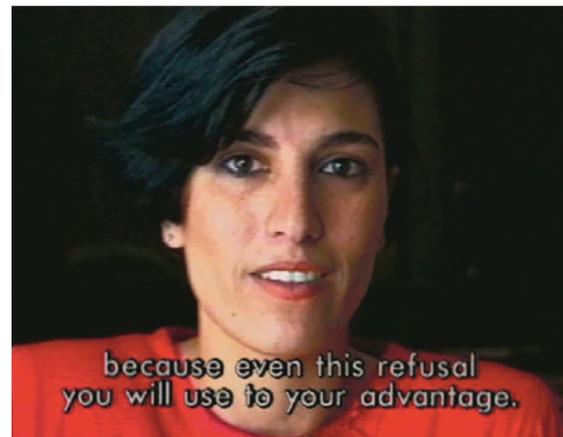
The work of many of these Lebanese artists, including Raad, points back to the rich legacy of the twentieth-century artists who explored trauma and memory, from Hannah Höch to Gerhard Richter. Raad's methods are also indebted to Conceptual artists such as Hans Haacke and Michael Asher, to the post-Conceptual inquiries into the lives of institutions exemplified by the work of Ilya Kabakov and Mark Dion, to the postmodern appropriations of Sherrie Levine (fig. 3) and Louise Lawler, and to the performative strategies of Joseph Beuys, Sophie Calle, and others. Raad's formative training in photography, however, is the driving force of his work. He is well versed in the conventions of photographic image-making, and in how those conventions may change or be changed in the aftermath of crisis. His projects continually call into question the still-dominant fiction of photography's objectivity, and insinuate the suspicion that material evidence is insufficient to capture a full understanding of historical events. They extend the same suspicion

to other archival materials besides photographs, to the point of generating alternate documents. Beginning in the late 1990s, these strategies, along with a close reading of theory and a quasi-outsider's perspective on the war in Lebanon, coalesced into the fragmentary narratives, documents, and images of the groundbreaking work Raad made under the aegis of The Atlas Group.

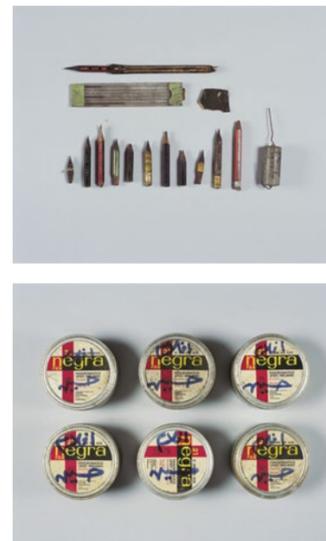
### The Atlas Group (1989–2004)

It was with The Atlas Group that Raad established the brilliantly daring artistic methodology that he employs to this day. The group presented itself as an organization founded to research and document the contemporary history of Lebanon, specifically the Lebanese Civil War, and as such as maintaining an archive of documents, films, notebooks, photographs, and objects. (Raad himself refers not to the Lebanese Civil War but to the Lebanese civil wars, underscoring the pluralistic nature of the shifting and sometimes conflicting agendas at stake.) Raad, supposedly, was the group's archivist. Each Atlas Group document was attributed to a source, including the colorful historian Dr. Fadl Fakhouri—who, however, was fictional, as was the organization itself.

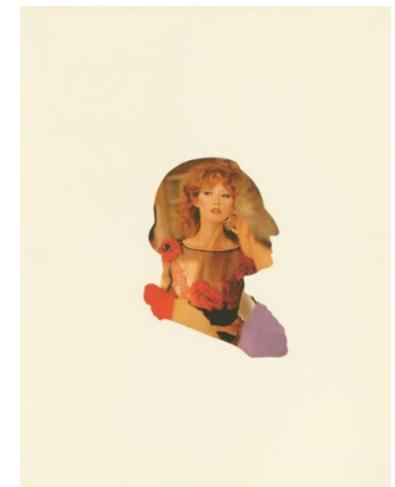
Raad acknowledged the fictive quality of The Atlas Group from the beginning; in a wall text or performance, for example, he might announce, "We produced and found several documents." (He often uses the plural "we" in discussing The Atlas Group, although he was in fact its sole member.) Yet many failed to perceive or fully grasp the group's imaginary dimension, so



1. Jayce Salloum and Walid Raad. *Up to the South*, 1993. Still from video (color, sound), 1 hour



2. Akram Zaatari. *Twenty-Eight Nights and a Poem* (detail), 2010. Twenty-eight chromogenic prints in wooden cabinet, each: 15 3/4 x 19 1/4" (40 x 49 cm), Super 8 loop, video projection, variable durations



3. Sherrie Levine. *President Collage*: 1. 1979. Cut-and-pasted printed paper on paper, 24 x 18" (61 x 45.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Judith Rothschild Foundation Contemporary Drawings Collection Gift

strong is our belief in the authority of archives as the repositories of documents that enable and authorize our understanding of history. Raad acknowledges the power of photography's claim to veracity within his own formative training, even while he debunks the fiction of photography's impartiality.<sup>6</sup> Although his intention is not to mislead, the imaginary dimension of his project can be destabilizing. In 2002, at a lecture he gave for the Middle Eastern Studies Association at the CUNY Graduate Center in New York, Raad faced heated questioning from students, and replied, "The Atlas Group proceeds with the consideration that the Lebanese wars are an abstraction. One troubling question is: under what notion of facts can we operate in our construction of 'the history of' the history of Lebanon? How do we approach the facts of the war?"<sup>7</sup> The Atlas Group is less about the Lebanese Civil War than about the limits and possibilities of writing, documenting, and remembering history. Raad's personal experience of the last decade of the war was as an émigré, dealing in partial information, rumor, mediated news reports, and conversations with family members over crackling phone lines. His work is predicated on a reality in which recent events are accessed not only through statistics and facts but equally through experiences, memory, and feelings.

None of the "documents" produced by The Atlas Group is essentially faked: these photographs, texts, and videos are appropriated from original sources, such as newspapers, or from Raad's own street photography. But when Raad rephotographs or scans them and mediates their presentation through

story lines, literary titles, narrative wall texts, and engaging performances, they move into the imaginary realm. Raad calls these hybrids "hysterical documents": "they are not based on any one person's actual memories but on 'fantasies erected from the material of collective memories.'"<sup>8</sup> They also look less like documents than like art: featuring formally considered compositions and carefully calibrated colors and marks, each series falls squarely within the legacy of the politically contentious collage and montage aesthetics of Höch and John Heartfield.

Violence is rarely pictured in The Atlas Group archive, which focuses instead on peripheral details such as the gambling habits of historians (*Notebook volume 72: Missing Lebanese wars, 1989/1998*; pp. 60–63). Even human figures are rare, and when they exist, they are microscopic specks in a bucolic landscape (*We are a fair people. We never speak well of one another, 1994/2013*; pp. 102–5). The Atlas Group is seemingly involved in absurdly exhaustive tasks—locating every car bomb detonated during the Civil War, for instance (*My neck is thinner than a hair: Engines, 1996–2001*; pp. 74–77). Serial repetition, a hallmark of the efficiency of photography and the archive, gives way to bizarre and arbitrary obsessions symptomatic of the experiences of war.

Raad's avoidance of overtly picturing violence corresponds to his interest in vernacular photography, such as family albums and commercial studio photography. He was a member of the Beirut-based Arab Image Foundation (AIF), founded in 1997 with the mission of collecting and studying photographs from the Middle East. In 2002, together with Zaatari, a fellow AIF

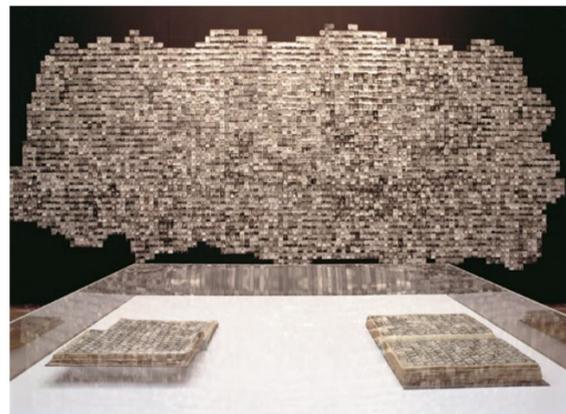
member, Raad organized the exhibition *Mapping Sitting: On Portraiture and Photography*, drawn from the AIF archive (fig. 4).<sup>9</sup> His interest in the collapse between public and private is reflected in the seemingly superficial, often personal narratives that populate The Atlas Group archives, where they serve as an alternative to the linear construction of the grand historical narrative. The Atlas Group follows the principle that conflict is never a unified entity, and privileges memory and personal experience in the retelling of history.

The Atlas Group takes part in a fertile discourse around the status of the archive. Artists have explored the relationship of photographs to evidence, history, and information since the inception of the medium, but interrogation of the archive, both as subject and format, has intensified in the last two decades, being taken up such artists as Zoe Leonard, Hans-Peter Feldmann, Gerhard Richter, and others. Central to this exploration have been Hal Foster's 2004 article "An Archival Impulse" and Okwui Enwezor's 2008 exhibition *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* at the International Center of Photography, New York, which examined how artists have reinterpreted and appropriated archival documents and systems of organization and logic, ultimately in order to challenge the archive's authority and relevance in the present moment.<sup>10</sup> As Foster points out, this mode of investigation is not new in art,<sup>11</sup> but Raad's work and that of his contemporaries reflect the new realities of the post-Internet age: the easy access to information (if often dubious or unreliable information), the ubiquity

of photographic images, the blurring of the distinction between amateur and professional image-makers, and the widespread understanding that any image can be manipulated to support any narrative.

Raad has supplied conflicting narratives about the origins of The Atlas Group, variously describing it as founded by himself or by the Lebanese artist Maha Traboulsi, and in 1967 (Raad's birth year), 1976 (the year after the start of the Civil War), or various years in the 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>12</sup> In fact the group's first incarnations were in "lecture/performance" in Beirut in the late 1990s.<sup>13</sup> Raad was the first artist in Beirut to engage in the format of lecture/performance, which soon became a fertile format for experimentation for a number of artists. Later, Rabih Mroué, who had a background in theater, created lecture/performance that toed the line between fact and fiction, between theater and visual art, bringing this discourse into the realm of theater (fig. 5). At its inception, The Atlas Group archive was virtual, comprising a set of on-screen images that were activated through the performative act of storytelling. The performative element is inscribed in the group's very fabric, from the narratives of the wall texts to the accompanying lecture/performance, which simultaneously illuminate the "documents" and unravel the imaginary dimensions of The Atlas Group.

Raad's performances occur in lecture halls and have been presented in a wide range of contexts, including high-profile art exhibitions such as the Whitney Biennial in New York and documentas 11 and 13 in Kassel, as well as many universities and



4 Walid Raad, Akram Zaatari, and the Arab Image Foundation. *Mapping Sitting: On Portraiture and Photography*. Installation view, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, May 4–26, 2002



5 Rabih Mroué. *The Pixelated Revolution*, 2012. Nonacademic lecture, dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, 2012



6 Walid Raad. *My neck is thinner than a hair: A history of the car bomb in the 1975–1991 Lebanese Wars*, Volume 1, 2004–5. Performance view, Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Kaaitheater, Brussels, May 12–15, 2004

museums (fig. 6). Presenting himself as an archivist and representative of The Atlas Group, Raad sits at a table furnished with a small lamp, a glass of water, and a laptop computer that he uses to project PowerPoint images onto a screen. The images include handsome diagrams of The Atlas Group's document categorization system as well as the documents themselves. The presentation may sometimes be interrupted by (staged) technical difficulties, and may be followed by an awkward question-and-answer session with the audience, often featuring planted questioners. The legitimacy and authority of the scholar persona are paramount: Raad follows a respectable dress code (dark suit, wire-rimmed glasses) and stages the lecture apparatus carefully. As the performance historian André Lepecki has observed, he also carefully calibrates his Lebanese accent, making it more pronounced over the course of the lecture.<sup>14</sup> The familiar presentation format and staging are upended by Raad's admission at the beginning of the lecture that The Atlas Group is an imaginary organization. But while he clearly distinguishes between documents that he has produced and those attributed to individuals he acknowledges are imaginary, his scholarly authority is such, and the stories of his characters and documents are so compelling, that audiences often fail to hear, or grasp, the imaginary dimensions of the project.

Raad's PhD curriculum at the University of Rochester, like that of American graduate programs in the humanities generally, emphasized spoken and written language as a means of synthesizing and articulating ideas, and he also teaches

in the university and art school contexts. The lecture format is part of the very fabric of his art. If his work as The Atlas Group is to be fully appreciated, performance must be recognized as not ancillary to it but central. His performances, with their literary titles, colorful characters, diversions, digressions, and self-referential texts and images, work to demonstrate that the construction of history is unstable, being open to interpretive invention. These lectures can be understood as a performance of memory on levels personal, national, and historiographic. The slippage between authenticity and imagination, the academic decoding of stories and archival documents, is at turns probing, absorbing, and confounding, and resonates deeply with our own experiences of remembering and understanding the images, documents, and stories that are integral to our own lived experiences.

A number of Atlas Group works are attributed to a Dr. Fadl Fakhouri, including *Notebook volume 72: Missing Lebanese wars*, *Notebook volume 38: Already been in a lake of fire* (1991/2003; pp. 84–89), and *Miraculous beginnings/No, illness is neither here nor there* (1993/2003; pp. 68–69). Dr. Fakhouri, an esteemed, recently deceased, fictional historian of the Lebanese Civil War whose papers were donated to The Atlas Group, lends the project an authenticity not typically afforded to artists—yet despite the meticulousness of his documents, an arbitrariness is inscribed within the structure of his authority. Dr. Fakhouri was an avid gambler who filled notebooks with such banal details as the particulars of the bets he placed with fellow

historians who gathered on Sundays at the track.<sup>15</sup> They wagered not on which horse would win, but on a particular margin of error—that is, by how many fractions of a second the track's photographer would miss the exact moment when the animal crossed the finish line. Dr. Fakhouri's lined notepads feature a neatly pasted photograph of one race's winning horse, clipped from the daily newspaper *An-Nahar*; details of the race's distance and duration; and anecdotal descriptions of the historian who won the bet that day ("He was the thief who at night hugs the walls as he walks home. He was the one who said he will not die with his throat cut").<sup>16</sup> *An-Nahar*, a source that Raad continues to use often (in *My neck is thinner than a hair: Engines*, for example), is itself a site for suspicion, since during the Civil War, Lebanon's various militias often used the country's newspapers for propaganda purposes. The photographs in *Notebook volume 72* were indeed clipped from the paper, but years after the war (fig. 7).<sup>17</sup> Raad's project questions the authority ascribed to legitimate sources of information (the newspaper), the arbiters of history (the historian), and the tool that often bears witness (the camera).

*Notebook volume 72* details an avoidance of the facts of a singular moment. Rather than bet on the win, the historians bet on the inaccuracy of representation and photography's failure to make crucial events visible. Eadweard Muybridge's famous photographic sequence of a galloping horse (fig. 8), also the result of a wager, was an exercise in proof: his photographs confirmed what the naked eye could not see—that

all four of the horse's hooves left the ground at full gallop. Muybridge's photographs showed what *happened*. The photographs in Dr. Fakhouri's notebooks, however, don't show that at all. The images are delayed, and the crucial moment of winning remains unrecorded, unseen, missing. Fakhouri's notebooks are incapable of describing the "decisive moment," the phrase made famous by the celebrated photojournalist Henri Cartier-Bresson. For Raad, this inability is analogous to the limitations of accurately documenting histories of conflict. The viewer's attention is shifted from the center of events (that is, the photo finish) to the margins, underscored by the copious notes in the work's margins. By highlighting what was not there, Raad exposes the gap between an event and the report of it, between an incident and the history written about it.

Another work attributed to Dr. Fakhouri is *Civilizationally, we do not dig holes to bury ourselves* (1958–59/2003; pp. 52–55), a series of small black and white photographs purportedly taken by the scholar during his first and only trip to Europe, in the late 1950s. These self-portraits capture the lone Fakhouri lounging in the hotel rooms, reading in the cafés, and viewing the tourist sites of Paris and Rome. The images being repurposed from family snapshots, the subject is actually Raad's father. The meshing of personal and private through the apparatus of an archive recalls a project by artist Zoe Leonard, *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* (1993–96; fig. 9), about the life of a fictitious African-American starlet of the 1930s who is documented in "vintage" headshots and stills. Conceived as a way



7 Clipping from the Lebanese newspaper *An-Nahar*. N.d.



8 Eadweard J. Muybridge. "Daisy" Galloping, Saddle, Plate 624 from *Animal Locomotion* (1887). 1884–86. Collotype, 5 7/16 x 16 7/16 (15.1 x 42.9 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the Philadelphia Commercial Museum



9 Zoe Leonard. *The Fae Richards Photo Archive*. 1993–96. Installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Purchase, with funds from the Contemporary Painting and Sculpture Committee and the Photography Committee

to write an unwritten history, the project was created for *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), by filmmaker Cheryl Dunye, who has said that it “came from the real lack of any information about the lesbian and film history of African-American women. Since it wasn’t happening, I invented it.”<sup>18</sup> Raad similarly uses the conventions of the photographic archive and the family album to create a plausible narrative for Dr. Fakhouri, a historian of the Lebanese Civil War active at a time when such figures were rare or nonexistent.

Not all of The Atlas Group’s documents are attributed to invented characters. *Let’s be honest, the weather helped* (1998/2006; pp. 78–83) comprises images of notebook pages featuring black-and-white photographs that Raad himself took in Beirut during the Civil War. These images of pockmarked buildings and bombed-out neighborhoods are overlaid with different-sized colored disks that map bullets and shrapnel left after bombings and battles, again collected by Raad himself as a child in Beirut. The colors are linked to the national origins of the ammunitions: in the accompanying text, Raad explains, “It took me ten years to realize that ammunition manufacturers follow distinct color codes to mark and identify their cartridges and shells. It also took me another ten years to realize that my notebooks in part catalogue seventeen countries and organizations that continue to supply the various militias and armies fighting in Lebanon.” An upsetting of expected timelines through delays and absences permeates much of Raad’s work: whether he took the photographs when he collected the

shrapnel or later, and whether the photographs represent the actual places where he collected it, are unimportant. The dating of The Atlas Group works share in this temporal disruption: each work has two dates, the first a fictional, attributed date, the second the actual production date. The first of these dates may go back as far as the 1950s, although the group was not founded, or Raad’s project begun, until 1998. Similarly, although 2004 is given as The Atlas Group’s end date, Raad has made later works attributed to it (*We are a fair people . . .*, for example), has predated works, and has on occasion changed the dates of works even after they were published or exhibited. The collapse of past, present, and future in Raad’s “documents” is one signal that they cannot be readily consumed as records of past events.

*Let’s be honest . . .* draws from the rich photographic tradition of the documentary survey, most notably Eugène Atget’s record of old Paris (fig. 10), made in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Atget produced thousands of photographs bearing witness to the streets and locales that were disappearing under Baron Haussmann’s modernization of Paris. Although made for commercial purposes (the pictures were offered for sale to artists, artisans, and architects), these photographs fascinated the Surrealists and are precursors to the work of August Sander, Walker Evans, and Bernd and Hilla Becher, whose various projects ambitiously catalogue types of people and buildings. Raad’s alignment of *Let’s be honest . . .* with a recognizable documentary mode gives it an assumption

of indexicality. He first produced these works as analogue collages, applying colorful stickers to his street photographs (fig. 11), and then eventually began to develop them as digital images. The formal, almost abstract compositions of the brightly colored disks recall the conceptual works of John Baldessari (fig. 12), who has long added colored disks to the surfaces of found photographs—a humorous punctuation that alters the meaning and role of these ordinary pictures in the cultural realm. The colored disks in Raad’s *Let’s be honest . . .* similarly introduce a different kind of visual narrative from the documentary mode, one that is more expressive, poetic, even illogical.

The seemingly arbitrary title *Let’s be honest, the weather helped* also undermines the claim to veracity inscribed in the work. The weather is a recurring motif for The Atlas Group; the banal staple of small talk, it is neutral and acts as an equalizer, circumscribing the direct address of violence.<sup>19</sup> During Israel’s attack on Lebanon in 2006, when Raad and his family ensconced themselves in their home in the Lebanese mountains, he wrote to a friend, “I just woke up and the weather in the mountains is beautiful. Eastern winds have cleared the air all around. It is just beautiful here. The weather again: the best way to naturalize a disaster, to think of something else to write, to think, and to feel.”<sup>20</sup>

The weather also plays a role in *Hostage: The Bachar tapes (English version)*. This Atlas Group video focuses on Souheil Bachar, a fictional Lebanese national who, we learn from his

testimony, was held hostage in Lebanon in the 1980s and early ’90s alongside five Americans—Terry Anderson, Thomas Sutherland, Benjamin Weir, Lawrence Martin Jenco, and David Jacobsen, all actual abductees in Lebanon during that period, kidnapped by the Islamic Jihad group. At least one early U.S. reviewer of *Hostage . . .* speculated about whether Bachar was a real person, but this would not have happened in Lebanon, for he was played by a Lebanese actor well-known and recognizable there.<sup>21</sup> In the video, Bachar notes that all five Americans wrote memoirs of their time in captivity and each began by mentioning the weather. The sea too plays a role: Bachar asks that the subtitles translating his Arabic be shown against a background blue like the Mediterranean (fig. 13), and the video ends with a montage of the sea’s crashing waves, with Bachar gazing out at them. The legendary beauty of Lebanon’s Mediterranean coast must have made the violence of the Civil War even more incomprehensible as it played out against that backdrop.<sup>22</sup>

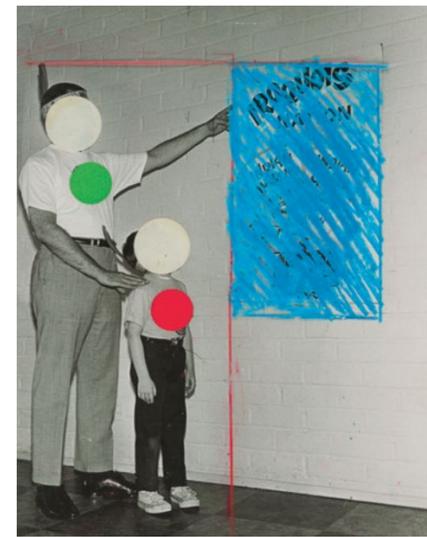
Beginning as research for Raad’s doctoral dissertation, *Hostage . . .* evolved into an artwork setting imaginary narratives against real historical events. Bachar’s testimony, which takes place in a nondescript room with a pinned-up sheet as a backdrop, and with a camera that seems to have been set up on a tripod by either Bachar or his captors, is interspersed with footage of U.S. President Ronald Reagan speaking from the Oval Office and of Oliver North at the Iran-Contra trial. To accompany this found footage an offscreen narrator describes



10 Eugène Atget. *Rue de l’Hôtel de Ville*, 1921. Albumen silver print, 6<sup>5/16</sup> × 8<sup>1/16</sup>” (17.6 × 22.1 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Abbott-Levy Collection. Partial gift of Shirley C. Burden



11 Walid Raad. Study for *Let’s be honest, the weather helped*, 2000. Color photograph and pressure-sensitive stickers, 4<sup>1/16</sup> × 3<sup>3/16</sup>” (12.5 × 8.6 cm)



12 John Baldessari. *Untitled*, 1986. Crayon and pressure-sensitive stickers on synthetic polymer sheet overlay on gelatin silver print, 9<sup>1/4</sup> × 7<sup>7/16</sup>” (24.8 × 18.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Brooke Alexander and of the artist



13 Walid Raad. *Hostage: The Bachar tapes (English version)*, 2001. Stills from video (color, sound), 16:17 min. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the Jerome Foundation in honor of its founder, Jerome Hill

the kidnappings and their relation to Iran-Contra. Meanwhile there are many ways in which Bachar's story breaks from the published accounts: he describes homoerotic activities on the part of the captives, for instance, that are not known to have taken place. If the hostages' own published accounts constitute the "official" narratives of their captivity, Bachar offers an alternate point of view, challenging their authority and the subjective points of view embedded in such documents.

While researching *Up to the South*, Raad viewed videotapes made by resistance fighters preparing to die—tapes, the artist notes, that often include multiple takes of the same scripted speech.<sup>23</sup> The *Hostage . . .* video evokes these tapes in being frequently interrupted by video noise, bands of color, and other technical disruptions that lend authenticity to its DIY quality. At the same time, though, this noise has its own formal beauty, and further destabilizes the narrative by offering visual breaks in an apparently plausible story. The claim to authority is key to Raad's imaginary documents and characters: just as Dr. Fakhouri lent authority to the archival activities of The Atlas Group, Bachar's firsthand experience as a hostage is necessary to make his account of it convincing.

*Secrets in the open sea* (1994/2004; pp. 70–73) addresses loss and disappearance through the brilliant blue of the Mediterranean. This is a group of large photographs, supposedly found in a pile of rubble in Beirut in 1993, that appear at first to be monochromes—variations of the color blue—but on close inspection reveal in their margins small black-and-white

portraits of individuals who, an accompanying text notes, had drowned, died, or been found dead in the Mediterranean between 1975 and 1991. In fact these group portraits come from newspapers that had originally identified their subjects as attendees at innocuous gatherings such as corporate board meetings.<sup>24</sup> The presence of hidden data beneath the surface of a monochrome recalls On Kawara's monochromatic date paintings, which are linked to world events that are typically invisible to viewers, as the box that houses each painting is lined with the local newspaper for the day the work was made (fig. 14). Similarly, the hidden narratives in Raad's art destabilize our certainty about what we understand to be facts, and ultimately about what we are seeing.

*Secrets in the open sea* plays deftly on the associations of the color blue, including, as curator Achim Borchardt-Hume writes, "its symbolism of promise (a bright blue sky on a sunny day), neutrality (the helmets of the NATO peace-keeping forces in the Middle East), and Romantic longing (Novalis's blue flower)."<sup>25</sup> Blue is also the hue of a lost or dead video signal. Raad has long been fascinated with color; as a student in Rochester, he was the chemical technician in the school's darkroom and made monochromatic prints there as a personal project, experimenting with the variables affecting the reproduction of colors on photographic papers. At the time, he was also viewing iconic works in the photograph collection of George Eastman House and modernist paintings in Buffalo's Albright-Knox Art Gallery, encounters, he remembers, that along with

the daily phone calls to Beirut must have combined into a potent cocktail that, at the time, failed to blend smoothly with the chemical and optical experiments unfolding in my darkroom. For some time, the experiences sat on top of the other, like oil on water. It took another fifteen years for the blend to mix in such works as *Secrets in the open sea*, *We decided to let them say "we are convinced" twice . . .*, and *Let's be honest, the weather helped*.<sup>26</sup>

For Raad, color—and specifically the monochrome—is a way to experience war from a distance.

The Atlas Group gives rise to many shifting chronologies, from the various accounts of its founding to its official conclusion, in 2004. Although Raad has begun to exhibit this body of work as if it were completed, he has revisited the project in recent years, producing new works attributed to the organization. *We are a fair people . . .* is a recent series of color photographs enlarged from slides, their golden palette evoking the 1960s. The original photographs were taken by a relative of Raad's who had traveled the scenic countryside of Lebanon and Syria before the Lebanese Civil War. Into these color images Raad has collaged found black-and-white newspaper photos of militia leaders assassinated or murdered during the Lebanese Civil War, tiny pictures well hidden within the surrounding bucolic landscapes and archaeological sites. Embedded in these works is a sense of unease—something is not quite right. The rough outlines of the collaged elements are a far cry from the seamless

Photoshop techniques of today, and the shift in scale between the bodies and the landscape is jarring. What has led Raad to reopen The Atlas Group? Can it be the ongoing civil war in Syria, the deepening crisis in Gaza, or the broadcasting of the increasing violence of ISIS? Although Raad avoids commenting on specific events, at a time of escalating conflict in the Middle East and at home *We are a fair people . . .* signals the continuing importance of investigating the ways in which violence and its image affect our reading and understanding of both historical and current affairs.

#### Scratching on things I could disavow (2007– )

*Scratching on things I could disavow*, which Raad began in 2007, is an interrelated series of photographs, videos, sculptures, installations, and performances.<sup>27</sup> While each of the several series within this various and all-encompassing body of work stands individually, taken together they constitute an examination of how art history is being forged within the new infrastructures for art in the Arab world—Abu Dhabi's Saadiyat Island, for example, which will soon house several world-class museums, including branches of the Louvre and Guggenheim, designed by international architects Frank Gehry, Jean Nouvel, Zaha Hadid, and Tadao Ando. New museums, biennials, and galleries are also proliferating in Beirut, Doha, Dubai, Saudi Arabia, and Sharjah. While *Scratching . . .* may seem a departure from the Atlas Group project, in both Raad uses literary and imaginative means to reimagine a history



14 On Kawara. Left: 18 FEB. 1973. "Dimanco." Right: MAR. 14. 1973. "Wednesday." Both 1973. Both from the Today series, 1966–2013. Both acrylic on canvas, 8 x 10" (20.3 x 25.4 cm), accompanied by artist-made box and corresponding newspaper clipping

set against the background of the geopolitical, economic, and military conflicts that have shaped the Middle East.

Where The Atlas Group appropriated the logic and look of the archive, *Scratching . . .* takes a more digressive and poetic approach. The methodologies of The Atlas Group, systematic, serial, and repetitive, are supplanted by more subjective relationships. None of the works are presented in grids, as they are in The Atlas Group; the works are all different sizes and no two structures are the same. If in The Atlas Group Raad appropriated the authority of the archive to probe how history is written, read, and remembered, his new line of inquiry uses the conventions of the museum display and the authority of the curatorial voice to introduce a performative space for art.

Performance is the central axis around which *Scratching . . .* revolves—indeed the overall body of work includes a performance, *Scratching on things I could disavow: Walkthrough*, that shares its title. That performance, which is scheduled regularly throughout the run of the MoMA exhibition that this book accompanies, takes the form of a gallery talk, in MoMA's case accommodating forty to fifty visitors who sit on the small stools that the Museum's educators use to seat attendees at their lectures. For this presentation Raad has devised five platform stages, each with a floor based on that of a different art space, ranging from the poured concrete of a contemporary art gallery to a herringbone wood-parquet motif at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. The artworks on these stages—the exhibition's galleries—function like props, signaling that

the art is just one part of a larger performative project; and the stages are installed in MoMA's Marron Atrium, where they can be viewed from above by visitors to that space's various catwalks, which come to resemble balconies at a theater (fig. 15). Raad's careful delivery, dramatic staging, and the performance's narrative arc are intensely theatrical. He forbids the recording of his performances, for their success, as in theater, relies on the performer's live presence.<sup>28</sup>

The performance begins in front of Raad's video installation *Translator's introduction: Pension arts in Dubai* (2012; pp. 114–21), where the artist launches into an overview of the complex structure of the Artist Pension Trust (APT), a real organization that signals a significant shift in the collection of art and in the speculative practices of the art market. The installation includes a digitally animated chart recalling the famous chart of the development of modern art that Alfred H. Barr, Jr., the founding director of MoMA, published in 1936, as well as later precedents such as Hans Haacke's *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971* (1971; fig. 16).<sup>29</sup> Like Haacke's work, Raad's APT chart attempts to track and expose the control of assets, but his diagram is an exercise in digression and uncertainty, and he explicates it like an investigative journalist or even a conspiracy theorist. He next invites his audience to move to another "gallery," where, by tapping his cell phone, he makes the lights fade in one area and come up in another, signaling a new act. His monologue now turns bizarre, as he recounts how an unnamed Arab is physically

incapable of entering a new museum built at some as yet undefined time in the next ten years (here he focuses our attention on *Section 88\_ACT XXI: Views from outer to inner compartments*, 2010; pp. 122–25) and matter-of-factly reveals that he has received information telepathically from artists in the future (*Index XXVI: Red, blue, black, orange, yellow*, 2010; pp. 132–37).

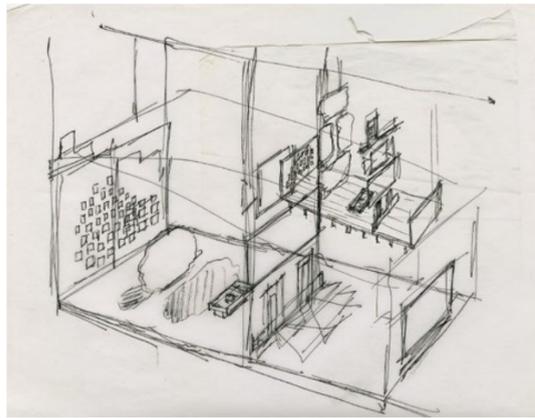
A number of artists have used the gallery-talk format, perhaps most famously Andrea Fraser, in her fictional persona as a museum docent (fig. 17).<sup>30</sup> Like Raad, Fraser plays with museum practices as a way to question their authority. Where Fraser's work is the talk itself, though (and its reperformance through live and recorded means), Raad's is one part of a complex network of elements (wall color, wall texts, lights, floors). Like his Atlas Group lectures, the *Scratching . . .* performance unlocks the meaning of all of the works that constitute the series.

*Scratching . . .* is marked by narratives of absence and withdrawal—the shrinking of works of art (*Section 139: The Atlas Group (1989–2004)*, 2008; pp. 128–31), for instance, or their changing over time (*Preface to the third edition*, 2013; pp. 150–51), or empty museum spaces with unenterable doorways (*Section 88: Views from outer to inner compartments*, 2010; pp. 126–27). The idea of withdrawal is inspired by Toufic's concept of "the withdrawing of tradition past a surpassing disaster," as elaborated in his book of the same title.<sup>31</sup> Toufic posits that there are events (the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, for example) so devastating that their impact causes certain cultural artifacts—that is, artworks—to "withdraw" (which

occasionally means that they become unavailable). Raad, who in *Scratching . . .* seems more like a spiritual medium, or the narrator of a play, than like the scholarly historian of The Atlas Group, for his part creates scenarios wherein works of art are no longer fully available to be seen, read, or experienced.

The recent history of the Middle East has marked the cultural realm with startling violence. In Baghdad in 2003, the National Museum was ransacked and priceless cultural artifacts were lost after the collapse of the regime of Saddam Hussein. In Cairo in 2011, the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities in Tahrir Square was looted during the Arab Spring. In 2013, the minaret of the Great Mosque at Aleppo was destroyed during the Syrian Civil War, and more recently, ISIS forces in northern Iran have destroyed Shia shrines, Sufi sites, and Mesopotamian relics. This kind of violence affects not only historical sites and institutions but the study of recent art history, particularly of Arab modernism, which flourished in centers like Damascus and Baghdad, where the first Arab biennial was presented in 1974. In the current environment, art historians must struggle to gain access to artworks, documents, and archival materials essential to write the history of the Arab art of the twentieth century.

Recognizing that these realities demand new modes of display and content formation, Raad proposes scenarios that make even extant artworks appear in some ways unavailable to those standing in front of them. *Section 139: The Atlas Group (1989–2004)*, for example, is a retrospective of the works of The Atlas Group, but they are scaled down and installed in a gallery



15 Walid Raad. Sketch for *Walkthrough*, 2013. Ink on tracing paper, 8 1/2 x 7" (21.6 x 17.8 cm)



16 Hans Haacke. *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971*, 1971 (detail). 2 photo-enlarged maps, each 24 x 20" (61 x 50.8 cm); 142 black-and-white photographs, each 10 x 8" (25.4 x 20.3 cm); 142 typewritten sheets, each 10 x 8" (25.4 x 20.3 cm); 6 charts, each 24 x 20" (61 x 50.8); one explanatory panel, 24 x 20" (61 x 50.8 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Purchased jointly by the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, with funds from the Director's Discretionary Fund and the Painting and Sculpture Committee, and the Fundació Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona



17 Andrea Fraser. *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk*, 1989. Performance view, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1989

model small enough to be unenterable. The accompanying text explains that in 2008, after agreeing to exhibit in a chic new white-cube gallery in Beirut (in the neighborhood of Karantina, site of one of the deadliest massacres of the Lebanese Civil War), Raad found that his works had shrunk to 1/100th of their original size. He insists, though, that the works on view are not miniatures:

These artworks shrunk once they entered the space. Why, I don't know. Sometimes artists encounter their own works, concepts or forms, and they're no longer available to them. They appear distorted. Something about Beirut's time and space makes an artwork shrink and inaccessible to the artist. This is not a psychological encounter, nor is it a metaphor for some condition.<sup>32</sup>

Museums, galleries, and artists often use architectural models and scaled-down artworks to plan exhibition layouts (including those of Raad's survey at MoMA) before installing them. *Section 139*, though, does not prefigure The Atlas Group but comes after it—it is a literally miniature retrospective of a kind. As such it recalls Marcel Duchamp's *Boîte en valise* (Box in a suitcase, 1935–41; fig. 18), in which the artist reproduced over sixty of his own works at a reduced scale. In *Section 139* Raad re-created his own artworks equally faithfully, down to the videos, which play in the model. Even the frames of the photographs are as meticulously reproduced as the images

themselves. Like Duchamp, Raad constructed a mobile museum of his own work, and like the valise, *Section 139* exists in multiple editions, in this case five, so that an Atlas Group retrospective could be theoretically mounted in five different locations simultaneously.

While *Scratching . . .* is grounded in the present conditions of the Middle East, its roots lie in the Conceptual and post-Conceptual art that investigated the legitimacy and relevance of the art museum by appropriating and altering conventional museum practices and modes of display. Perhaps the most famous example is Marcel Broodthaers's *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* (1968–72; fig. 19), an art museum with neither a collection nor a permanent site that appeared in pop-up locations between 1968 and 1971, when it was offered for sale (no buyers were found). Like Broodthaers, Raad adapts the apparatus of the museum display—silkscreen wall texts, the white-cube gallery space, the gallery talk, carefully considered frames and lighting—in order to lean on and play with the authority of the museum.

*Scratching . . .* should also be considered alongside architects' imaginings of what civic institutions might look like in the future—visionary projects such as the Japanese Metabolism movement's models for living after the devastation of World War II, and Lina Bo Bardi's projects during the period of the military dictatorship that ruled Brazil from 1964 to 1985. For the Museu de Arte de São Paulo (1957–68), Bo Bardi designed not only the building but the display scheme: the museum's paintings

were mounted within glass panes (making them viewable from both front and back) that in turn were set on concrete blocks distributed throughout an enormous open gallery without walls (fig. 20). Not only could these individual pods be moved around, but visitors had to create their own paths through them—their own paths through art history. By stripping away the institutional apparatus of sequential rooms of works that the visitor came to in a certain order, Bo Bardi undercut the typical Western form of art history as a chronological series of movements and developments. Working during the turbulent sociopolitical events of mid-century Brazil, she was interested in a populist "pedagogy of the oppressed," a democratization of knowledge.<sup>33</sup> The political gesture inscribed in her system resonates with the multifarious network that is *Scratching . . .*, which suggests, as Bo Bardi's does, that in certain political and social climates the undoing of museums as we know them is a reality. Raad speculates on new, subjective relationships among works of art, systems of display, and cultural entities reflecting the sociopolitical contexts that they occupy.

*Scratching . . .* encompasses an entire constellation of the ephemera that accompany the production and display of art in today's accelerated art economy. *Appendix XVIII: Plates 22–257* (2008–; pp. 138–43) is a series of photographs drawn from documents of real exhibitions and art activities in the Arab world: books, catalogues, posters, invoices, invitations. After scanning these documents, though, Raad erased or rearranged their graphic elements, signs, and letters, producing works

that although colorful are largely monochromatic. According to his text (pp. 140–41), this realignment is a direct effect of the Lebanese Civil War: "It is clear to me today that these wars also affected colors, lines, shapes, and forms. Some of these were affected in a material way, and, like burned books or razed monuments, were physically destroyed and lost forever; others, like looted treasure or politically compromised artworks, remain physically intact but are removed from view, possibly never to be seen again."

The titles of bodies of work such as *Appendix XVIII*, of course, are appropriated from the language of academic books, which may contain an appendix at the end to supplement or explicate the information that has preceded it. *Appendix XVIII: Plates*, however, is an appendix without an antecedent. *Scratching . . .* also includes several prefaces, an index (*Index XXVI: Red, blue, black, orange, yellow*), and a prologue (*Prologue\_Plates I, II, III* (2015; pp. 150–51, 158–59), but the manuscript to which these addenda refer is absent. In breaking the linear sequences of written art history, Raad speculates on a new reality for art that is subject to delays and absences and presented as a decentralized combination of subjective images.

Like much of Raad's work, *Appendix XVIII: Plates* is grounded in traditional photographic practices, and he likens his method to that of a documentary photographer: "I produce an image by 'borrowing' historical facts."<sup>34</sup> The photographs in *Appendix XVIII* constitute a kind of map or catalogue for the new infrastructures of Arab art. *Plates 22–24: A History of Venice I–III*,



18 Marcel Duchamp. *Boîte en valise* (De ou par Marcel Duchamp ou Rose Sélavy [Box in a valise [From or by Marcel Duchamp or Rose Sélavy]]). 1935–41. Leather valise containing miniature replicas, photographs, color reproductions of works by Duchamp, and one "original" drawing (Large Glass, colotype on celluloid, 7 1/4 x 9 1/2" [19 x 23.5 cm]). 16 x 15 x 4" (40.7 x 38.1 x 10.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. James Thrall Soby Fund



19 Marcel Broodthaers. *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section des Figures*. Installation view. Düsseldorf Kunsthalle, May 16–July 9, 1972



20 Lina Bo Bardi. Museu de Arte de São Paulo (MA SP). 1957–68. Interior view of the main gallery with the original display system, c. 1971

for example, is drawn from promotional materials for the Lebanese Pavilion at the Venice Biennale of 2007, the first time Lebanon was represented with its own national pavilion there. Beyond the title, however, this reference is unclear, since the text and graphics have been removed or rearranged, leaving a predominant field of red. Like *Secrets in the open sea*, the monochromes in *Appendix XVIII: Plates* are a site for hidden or encrypted information. As such, they are highly politicized documents.

Where *Appendix XVIII: Plates* appropriates documents from the contemporary-art infrastructures of the Arab world, the several bodies of work in *Scratching . . .* that bear the title *Preface* (there are currently seven of these, numbered from one to seven) largely focus on Islamic art. Raad acknowledges his novice status as a student of Islamic objects: "I don't know that much about Islamic art. All this is very new to me, but some of these objects I see in the display at the Louvre and at the Met—their lines, their forms, and their colors—have been very productive for me."<sup>35</sup> Raad's treatment of these artworks in *Scratching . . .* addresses the slippery nature of their forms and the inability to "see" them within their new contexts. *Preface to the third edition* and *Preface to the fifth edition* (2012–15; pp. 150–51, 154) focus on the Louvre's collection of Islamic art, one of the premier holdings in the West, eventually to be displayed in the new Abu Dhabi museum designed by Nouvel. In 2012, at the invitation of the Louvre, Raad accessed the Paris museum's archives, including pictures from its conservation

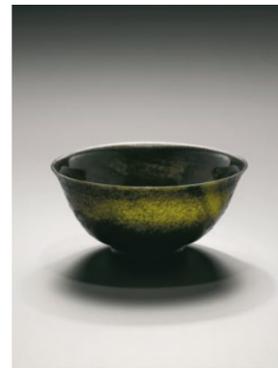
and curatorial files and object photographs made by in-house photographers. He also photographed the highly publicized new Islamic-art wing, which opened in the fall of 2012. This research produced an exhibition of a video and sculptural installation at the Louvre in 2013 (fig. 21), followed by an ongoing series of intertwined multimedia installations built around imaginary narratives of the Louvre's collection. These works, which continue to be rearranged in various configurations, include *Footnote II* (2015; pp. 150–51), a sculptural installation conceived for the MoMA exhibition.

In *Preface to the third edition* Raad tells the story of the inexplicable transformation of 294 objects from the Louvre during their journey to Abu Dhabi, to take place in the future, sometime between 2016 and 2046:

While no one will doubt the subsequent changes, the nature and reason of their onset will be contested. Many will attribute them to the weather, asserting that the "corrosion" began soon after the exquisitely crafted, climate-controlled crates were opened in the Arabian Desert. Others will insist they are immaterial and psychological, expressed only in the dreams and psychological disorders of noncitizens working in the Emirate. And a few, the rare few, will speculate that they are aesthetic and came into view only once, in the . . . photographs produced by an artist during her Emirati-sponsored visit to the museum in 2026.



21 Walid Raad. *Preface à la première édition*. Installation view, Pavillon Sully, Musée du Louvre, Paris, January 19–April 8, 2013



22 Cup with inscribed poem. Iran, 15th century. Jade with traces of gold and incised decoration, 2 1/8 x 5 1/8" (6.7 cm x 14.4 cm) diam. Musée du Louvre, Paris



23 Head of a prince. Rayy, Iran, late 12th–early 13th century. Stucco with polychrome traces, 12 1/8" (32.5 cm) high. Musée du Louvre, Paris

The photographs picture this transformation: a fifteenth-century jade wine cup from Iran inscribed with a poem and a design of carved flowers (fig. 22), for example, combines with a late-twelfth-to-early-thirteenth-century sculpture from Iran (fig. 23) to produce a new hybrid (p. 154). The objects seem to have changed skins, as if one object's form had been superimposed on another.

The photographs in *Preface to the third edition* are just one part of an iterative process that is growing increasingly layered as Raad's work develops. In *Preface to the third edition, Acknowledgement* (2014–15; p. 150), for example, Raad's photographs become sculptural objects, their forms being printed with a 3-D printer and recast in plaster, resin, and other materials. The most complex iteration in *Scratching . . .* is surely *Footnote II*, a section of wall wallpapered with a digital collage of archival photographs of the vitrines that the Louvre used to display Islamic art in the 1920s—vitrines, though, that these particular photographs show empty. On the surface of the wallpaper, meanwhile, hang both the photographs from *Preface to the third edition* and the three-dimensional objects derived from them. The wall, then, contains not only all the elements of the objects' transformation but clues to their past histories. Having disappeared from the archival photographs, appeared transformed in Raad's new images, and been remade in other materials in the sculptures, these objects are evidently not fixed; they are elusive, in flux. Their support is also elusive: wallpaper, photographs, and objects are all affixed to a separate

wall segment that hangs off the museum wall structure, as if ready to be transported in its entirety to Abu Dhabi.

For Raad, a key idea about these intangible Louvre artworks is that they are "extant but not available. I've always liked the sentence. Toufic has written it. It resonates with me. It's like something is there but not, present but not available."<sup>36</sup> In this context consider the 1990 art theft at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston (Raad's first American landing point). Gardner, the museum's founder, stipulated in her will that the works in the collection had to stay where she had put them; her installation cannot be changed. Today, then, empty frames hang in place of the stolen treasures (fig. 24). These frames signal a hope for the art's eventual retrieval, but also in a way make the stolen works visible to visitors through memory, like sites for their afterimage. Raad's *Preface to the third edition* draws on the idea of placeholders for artworks that are never fully available.

Many of the works in *Scratching . . .* picture not art objects but their effects, such as reflections (*Preface to the second edition*, 2012; pp. 144–47) and shadows (*Preface to the seventh edition*, 2012). Blank walls, polished floors, and empty doorways become active players in works such as *Section 88: Views from outer to inner compartments*, the title of both a video and a sculptural installation. The sculptural work was made for the opening of Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, in Doha, for which Sheikh Hassan bin Mohamed bin Ali Al Thani of Qatar invited a group of internationally recognized artists affiliated



24 The Dutch Room, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston

with the Middle East to conceive artworks.<sup>37</sup> Raad devised a set of doorways that mimics the architectural style of Western museums of the nineteenth century. Photography remains the artist's primary language even in this sculptural work, for the proportions of the doors are derived from photographs. The doorways, which are fashioned from wood, are like stage sets in that they are only convincing from a frontal vantage point. This setlike quality is enhanced in the MoMA display with theatrical lighting that casts strong shadows, integral parts of the work that function to activate the sculpture as an agent in a story. A related work, *Letters to the Reader (1864, 1877, 1916, 1923)* (fig. 25), Raad's installation at the 2014 São Paulo Bienale, pictures shadows of empty frames on free-standing walls. In both of these projects, familiar elements of museum display—doors, walls, frames (everything but artworks themselves)—play a role in the new spaces of an imaginary museum.

The video titled *Section 88: Views from outer to inner compartments* features museum doorways that slowly fade into each other in silent animation. Created from digitally manipulated photographs of actual museum doorways, including some at both MoMA and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the video is a virtual hall of mirrors, the rooms and hallways endlessly looping and superimposing. The galleries are empty of both visitors and art. Their walls refer to the preferred display modes of different eras, from the jewel-toned walls of historical museums to the white cube of the modern and contemporary space. An

accompanying text (pp. 124–25) tells the story of a newly built museum in an unnamed Arab country, a museum inaccessible to one of the country's citizens—trying to enter, he “hits a wall” and cannot penetrate the museum's façade. The text concludes,

Within seconds, he is removed from the site, severely beaten and sent to a psychiatric facility.

These events will take place sometime between 2014 and 2024. We will certainly read in newspapers the following day the headline: “Demented Man Disturbs Opening—Claims World Is Flat.”

These blank, empty museum spaces might look innocuous and almost serenely abstract, but geopolitical realities are ever present for Raad and are often hidden in plain sight. As I write this essay, labor conditions for the workers constructing the new museums and universities in the Gulf are being reported on critically in the press, and Raad has been active in Gulf Labor, a coalition of artists, writers, and activists trying to publicize them.<sup>38</sup> These realities, as well as the ever shifting conflicts in the region, have intricate roles to play in the renewed interest in the Islamic heritage and the perception of its traditions.

*Scratching* . . . should not be considered simply as institutional critique. “When thinking politically, my term was never institutional critique, my term was ideology and hegemony,”

Raad explains. “Ideology in the sense of, How do ideas become ruling ideas? What is the relationship between ideas, the economy—the superstructure/infrastructure debate—but also ideas, economy, discourse, and the psyche?”<sup>39</sup> Perhaps fantasy and literary digression are the only way to grapple with those complex superstructures. The term proposed by art historian Carrie Lambert-Beatty is *parafictional*, which she uses in relation to recent projects such as Khalil Rabah's natural-history-museum-style display *Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind* (2003– ) and Raad's Atlas Group. Lambert-Beatty writes, “Fiction or fictiveness has emerged as an important category in recent art. But, like a paramedic as opposed to a medical doctor, a parafiction is related to but not quite a member of the category of fiction as established in literary and dramatic art. It remains a bit outside.”<sup>40</sup> The notion of the parafictional could be extended to precedents such as Ilya Kabakov's seminal series *10 Characters* (1972–75) and *The Man Who Flew into His Picture* (1981–88; fig. 26), which uses fictional characters to explore the ubiquitous language of bureaucracy and the absurdity of daily experience within the old Soviet Union. Raad's imaginary narratives too must be understood within and as a response to the economic, political, and military structures of the contemporary Middle East. Just as the Lebanese Civil War functioned as an ever present abstraction that impacted the reading and understanding of the documents of The Atlas Group, the geopolitical realities, both historical and new, within which Arab art is

constructed and read provide the lens through which to view the *Scratching*. . . works.

Raad's art, though, is liberated from fixed historical chronologies, whether the telling of war or the chronology of art. Not just an escape, this disruption offers an alternate vision of how we might understand and remember history. For Raad, the relationship between past and present, personal and public, truth and fiction, are blurred: “The story one tells oneself and that captures one's attention and belief may have nothing to do with what happened in the past, but that's the story that seems to matter in the present and for the future.”<sup>41</sup> The optical mysteries, literary digressions, and imaginary dimensions of Raad's art resound well after we encounter them. Through his photographs, videos, and sculptures, he creates compelling scenarios in which we are invited to inhabit the universe that they occupy.



25 Walid Raad. *Letters to the Reader (1864, 1877, 1916, 1923)*, 2014. Installation view, 31st São Paulo Bienal, September 6–December 7, 2014



26 Ilya Kabakov. *The Man Who Flew into His Picture*, 1981–88. Installation of painted dry wall, composition board, and painted homosote, containing enamel paint on composition board, ink and colored graphite on paper, photographs, watercolor on paper, painted wood doors, wood chair, painted wood shelf, and painted electric light bulb, dimensions variable. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Marcia Riklis, Jerry I. Speyer Fund, and Michael and Judy Ovitiz Fund

1

Walid Raad, conversation with the author, March 6, 2014.

2

H. G. Masters, "Those Who Lack Imagination Cannot Imagine What Is Lacking," *ArtAsiaPacific* no. 65 (September/October 2009):130.

3

Raad, quoted in Lee Smith, "Missing in Action: The Art of The Atlas Group/Walid Raad," *Artforum* 41, no. 6 (February 2003):126.

4

A number of influential art and exhibition centers were established in Beirut in the 1990s, including Ashkal Alwan, the Beirut Art Center, and the Ayloul Festival. Curators, critics, and writers both local and international produced exhibitions and publications on the Beirut art scene: see, e.g., *Parachute* no. 108 (October–December 2002); *Tamáss 1: Contemporary Arab Representations. Beirut/Lebanon*, ed. Catherine David (Rotterdam: Witte de With, and Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 2002); and Suzanne Cotter, ed., *Out of Beirut*, exh. cat. (Oxford: Modern Art Oxford, 2006).

5

Khalil Joreige, quoted in Chantal Pontbriand, "Artists at Work: Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige," *Afterall Online*, September 12, 2013, available online at [www.afterall.org/online/artists-at-work\\_joana-hadjithomas-and-khalil-joreige/#VMj3KS4sDag](http://www.afterall.org/online/artists-at-work_joana-hadjithomas-and-khalil-joreige/#VMj3KS4sDag) (accessed February 26, 2015).

6

Raad, conversation with the author, June 12, 2014.

7

Raad, quoted in Janet A. Kaplan, "Flirtations with Evidence," *Art in America* 92, no. 9 (October 2004):136.

8

Raad, quoted in Alan Gilbert, "Walid Ra'ad," *Bomb* no. 81 (Fall 2002):40.

9

Coproduced by the Arab Image Foundation and the Palais des Beaux Arts, Brussels, the exhibition toured from 2002 through 2006 to venues in several cities, including São Paulo, Athens, Geneva, Singapore, Cologne, and New York.

10

See Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October* no. 110 (Fall 2004):3–22, and Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, exh. cat. (New York: International Center of Photography, and Göttingen: Steidl, 2008).

11

Foster, "An Archival Impulse," p. 3.

12

See Gilbert, "Walid Ra'ad," p. 40.

13

Accounts differ on the timing of Raad's first performance. The artist has said that the first was in Beirut in 1989. See *ibid.*, p. 45.

14

See André Lepecki, "After All, This Terror Was Not without Reason": Unfiled Notes on the Atlas Group," *TDR* 50, no. 3 (Fall 2006):90, 94.

15

Beirut's racetrack, which remained open intermittently during the war, was in the city center, near the infamous Green Line dividing the city. During the Israeli invasion of Beirut in 1982, the woods around the track were burned and dozens of horses were slaughtered. See Dina Al-Kassim, "Crisis of the Unseen: Unearthing the Political Aesthetics of Hysteria in the Archaeology and Arts of New Beirut," *Parachute* no. 108 (October–December 2002):161, n. 6.

16

See Raad, *Notebook volume 72: Missing Lebanese wars\_Plate 135* (1989/1998). Raad collected these quotes, and the titles for his artworks, from the *New York Times* and various other newspapers and magazines. Raad, conversation with the author, April 18, 2014.

17

See Lepecki, "After All, This Terror Was Not without Reason," p. 92.

18

Cheryl Dunye, quoted in Anne Stockwell, "Fall Film Preview: Cheryl Dunye," *The Advocate*, September 17, 1996, p. 69.

19

See, e.g., *Secrets in the open sea* (1994/2004), pp. 70–73 in the present volume.

20

Raad, in Silvia Kolbowski and Walid Raad, *Between Artists* (New York: Art Resources Transfer Press, 2006), p. 36.

21

"I tried Googling Bachar to establish his existence, and all I found were references on The Atlas Group Web site and in writings on Raad's work." Beth Secor, "Walid Raad and his Fake Foundation Show Real Art at the Glassell School," *Houston Press*, October 29, 2008, available online at [www.houstonpress.com/2008-10-30/culture/walid-raad-and-his-fake-foundation-show-real-art-at-the-glassell-school/](http://www.houstonpress.com/2008-10-30/culture/walid-raad-and-his-fake-foundation-show-real-art-at-the-glassell-school/) (accessed March 22, 2015).

22

See also *I only wish that I could weep* (1997/2002; pp. 94–97), which features the purported footage of a Lebanese soldier obsessed with filming the sunset on Beirut's waterfront cornice.

23

Raad, conversation with the author, April 18, 2014.

24

See Janet A. Kaplan, "Flirtations with Evidence," *Art in America* 92, no. 9 (October 2004):137. *Secrets in the open sea* had an earlier iteration, published under the title *Miraculous Beginnings* (now part of the title of a video; see pp. 68–69) in the journal *Public* in 1997. In this version the monochromes were gray and the people identified in the photographs were said to have lived in cities from Detroit to Freetown, Sierra Leone. See Raad, "Miraculous Beginnings," *Public* no. 16 (1997):44–53.

25

Achim Borchardt-Hume, in Raad and Borchardt-Hume, "In Search of the Miraculous," in Borchardt-Hume, ed., *Miraculous Beginnings: Walid Raad* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2010), p. 9.

26

Raad, in *ibid.*, p. 12.

27

For more on *Scratching on things I could disavow* see the essay in this volume by Finbarr Barry Flood.

28

Raad sometimes uses a stand-in for the performance *Scratching on things I could disavow*. Actors have included Carlos Chahine, who performed the work at Le Centquatre, Paris, as part of the Festival d'Automne in 2010, and Markus Reymann at Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, Vienna, in 2011.

29

The chart appeared on the cover of the exhibition catalogue *Cubism and Abstract Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1936).

30

Raad recalls attending one of Andrea Fraser's talks at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art in the 1980s. Raad, conversation with the author, June 12, 2014.

31

Toufic, *The Withdrawal of Tradition past a Surpassing Disaster* (Beirut: Forthcoming Books, 2009), available online at [http://www.jalaltoufic.com/downloads/Jala\\_Toufic\\_The\\_Withdrawal\\_of\\_Tradition\\_Past\\_a\\_Surpassing\\_Disaster.pdf](http://www.jalaltoufic.com/downloads/Jala_Toufic_The_Withdrawal_of_Tradition_Past_a_Surpassing_Disaster.pdf) (accessed March 23, 2015).

32

Raad, quoted in Masters, "Those Who Lack Imagination Cannot Imagine What is Lacking," p. 127.

33

See Roger M. Buergel, "'This Exhibition Is an Accusation': The Grammar of Display According to Lina Bo Bardi," *Afterall* 26 (Spring 2011):51.

34

Raad and Borchardt-Hume, "In Search of the Miraculous," in *Miraculous Beginnings*, p. 14.

35

Raad, quoted in Louisa Buck, "Artist Interview, Walid Raad: A Mediator Between Worlds," *Art Newspaper* no. 242 (January 2013):46.

36

Raad, conversation with the author, June 12, 2014.

37

*Preface to the second edition* (2012; pp. 144–47) pictures reflections of artworks on a museum floor—the polished concrete floors of the Mathaf museum.

38

See Ariel Kaminer and Sean O'Driscoll, "Workers at N.Y.U.'s Abu Dhabi Site Faced Harsh Conditions," *New York Times*, May 18, 2014. Available online at <http://nyti.ms/1gXQSCd> (accessed April 1, 2015).

39

Raad, conversation with the author, June 12, 2014.

40

Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility," *October* no. 129 (Summer 2009):54.

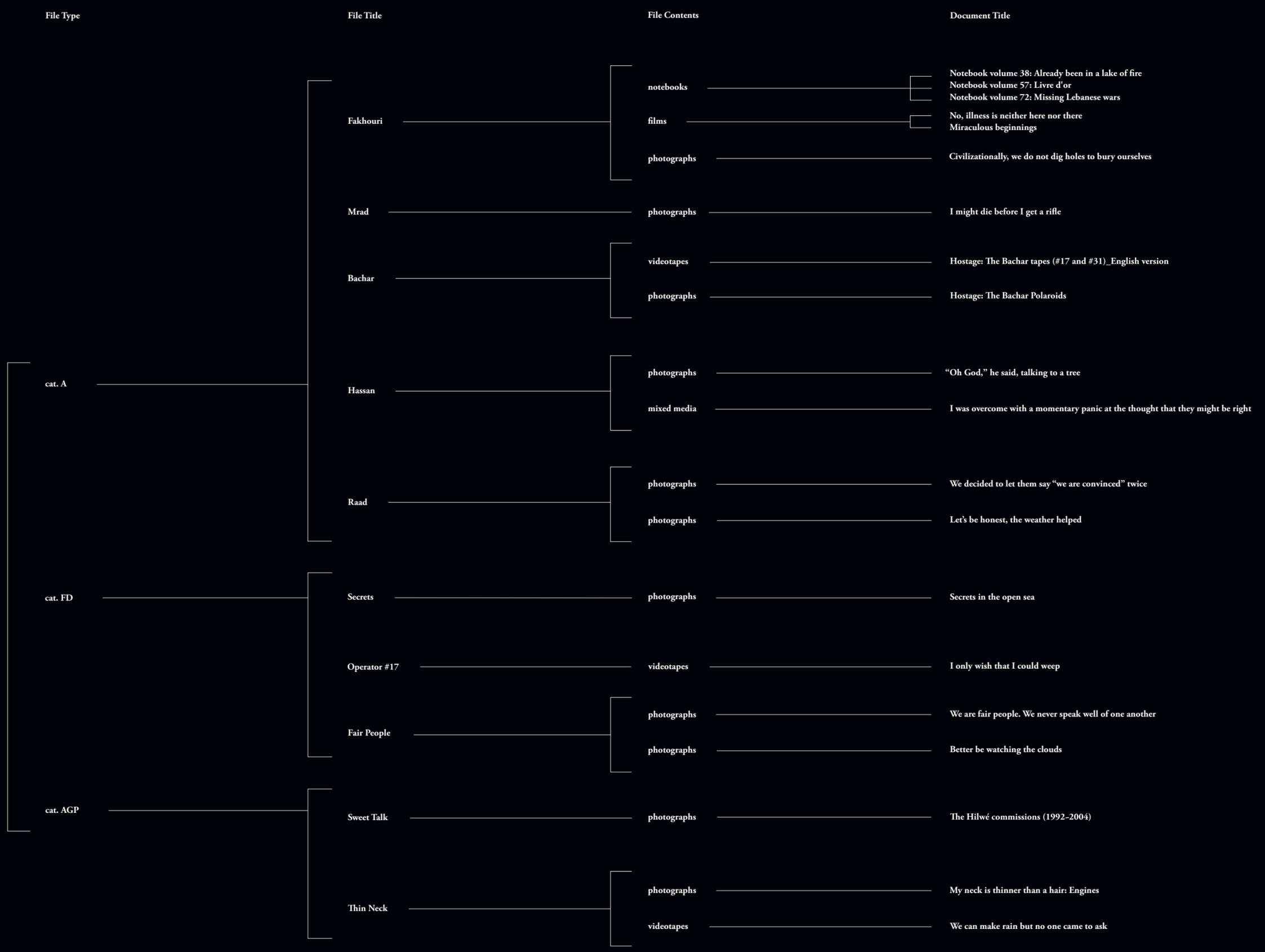
41

Raad, quoted in Kassandra Nakas, "Double Miss: On the Use of Photography in The Atlas Group Archive," in *The Atlas Group (1989–2004): A Project by Walid Raad*, ed. Nakas and Britta Schmitz (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2006), p. 52.

The Atlas Group was a project undertaken by Walid Raad between 1989 and 2004 to research and document the contemporary history of Lebanon, with particular emphasis on the Lebanese wars of 1975 to 1991. Raad found and produced audio, visual, and literary documents that shed light on this history. The documents were preserved in The Atlas Group Archive, which is located in Beirut and New York and is organized in three types of categories: [cat. A] refers to documents attributed to individuals; [cat. FD] stands for documents attributed to anonymous individuals or institutions; [cat. AGP] is the abbreviation for documents attributed to The Atlas Group itself. The schema reproduced in this book offers a snapshot of the archive and its contents.

# The Atlas Group

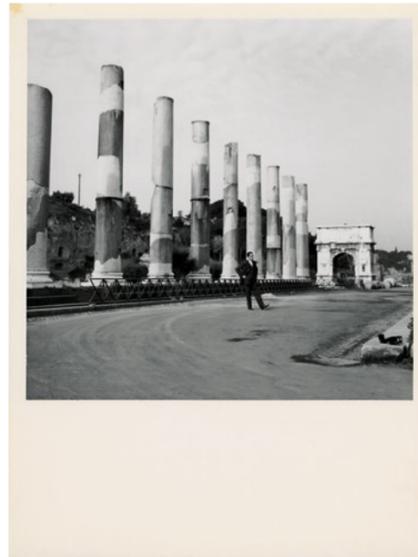
# the Atlas Group



Until his death, in 1993, Dr. Fadl Fakhouri was the most renowned historian of Lebanon. The only available photographs of Dr. Fakhouri consist of twenty-four black-and-white self-portraits that were found in a small brown envelope titled *Civilizationally, we do not dig holes to bury ourselves*. The historian produced the photographs in 1958 and 1959 during his one and only trip outside of Lebanon, to Paris and Rome.

*Civilizationally, we do not dig holes to bury ourselves. 1958-59/2003*





In 2007 I initiated a project, *Scratching on things I could disavow*, on the history of art in the “Arab world.” I began the project 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 museums was accelerating in cities such as Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Beirut, Cairo, Doha, Manama, Ramallah, and others. These material developments were matched by equally fraught efforts to define, sort, and stitch “Arab art” along three loosely silhouetted nodes: “Islamic,” “modern,” and “contemporary.” When viewed alongside the political, economic, social, and military conflicts that have consumed the “Arab world” in the past few decades, such developments shape a rich yet thorny ground for creative work.

The artworks and stories I present in this project concentrate on some of the stories, forms, lines, and colors made available by these developments, especially when they are screened alongside Jalal Toufic’s concept of “the withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster.”<sup>1</sup> I have so far produced two main chapters, each composed of several works.

*Scratching on things I could disavow: Walkthrough* chronicles some of the encounters that drove me to engage with the history of art in the “Arab world” in the first place: 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 the subsequent shrinking of my works; my “communication” with artists from the future; artworks that have lost their reflections and shadows; and the effects of the wars in Lebanon on colors, lines, and forms.

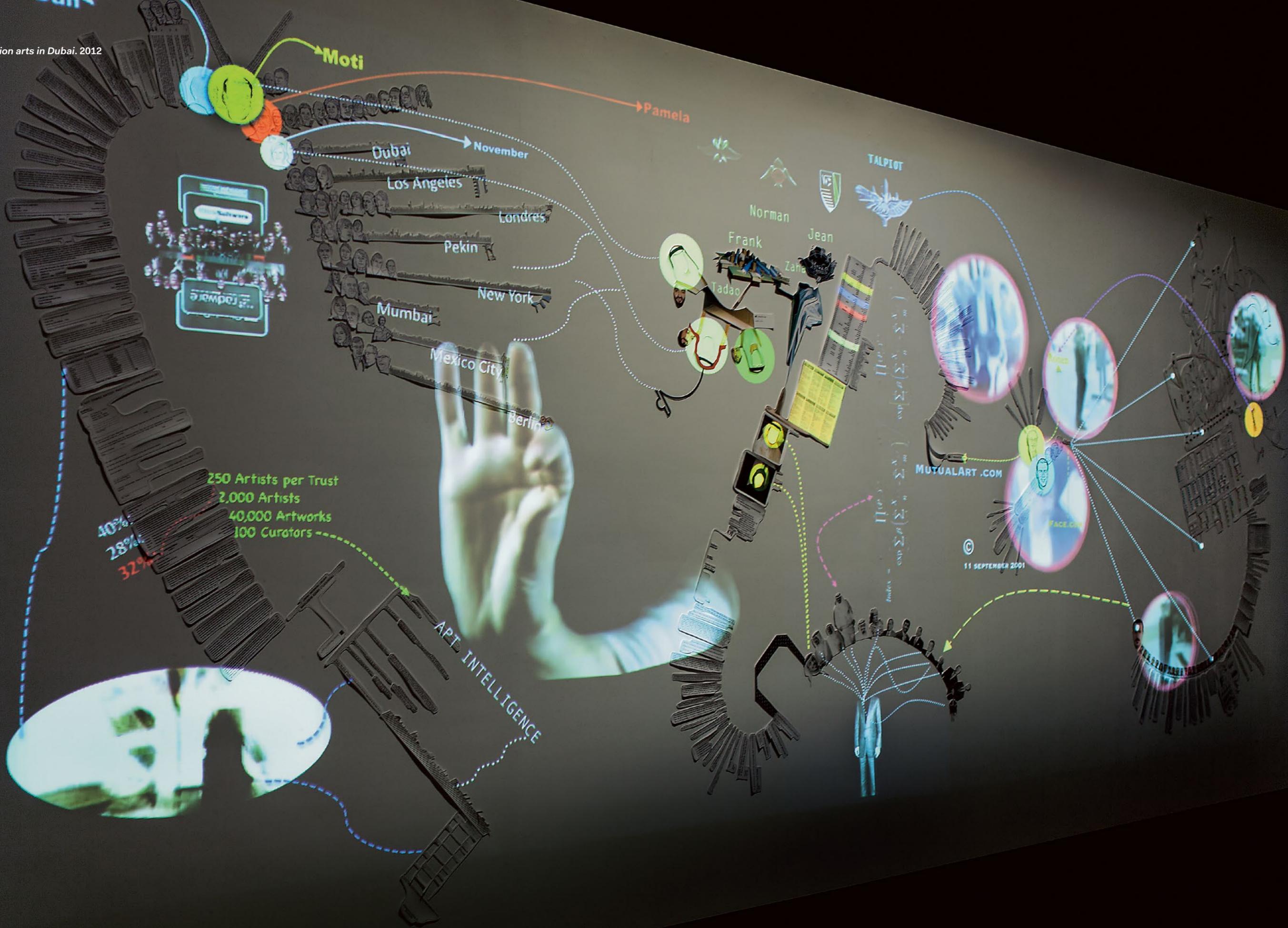
*Scratching on things I could disavow: Les Louvres* relates to my ongoing study of “Islamic art.” More specifically, I present works that emerged out of my two-year exploration of the Louvre’s newly established Département des Arts de l’Islam, its archives and new exhibition spaces. This encounter with “Islamic arts” in the Louvre in Paris was also animated by the emergence of a new Louvre in Abu Dhabi.

<sup>1</sup> The writings of Jalal Toufic, and in particular his concept of the “withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster,” remain central to me and to this project. With this concept Toufic considers how certain disasters affect tradition. He pays special attention to the rare instances when artworks are affected immaterially, in more subtle and insidious ways than has hitherto been thought. He characterizes such immaterial effects as “withdrawals,” meaning not that an artwork or other cultural artifact is hidden (to safeguard against its destruction, or because it does not conform to the reigning ideological and political outlook of the time) but that it is treated by sensitive artists in their own artworks as though destroyed, as unavailable to vision. In his various books, Toufic also proposes that artists have at times attempted to resurrect such withdrawn artworks, albeit with great doubt as to the success of their efforts.

# Scratching on Things I Could Disavow

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Walkthrough





The presentations in 2005 were collaborations with the Visible Collective and the artist Naeem Mohaiemen, who came on stage after Raad to give a five-minute presentation. This was followed by a question-and-answer session with both Mohaiemen and Raad.

#### 2005

Theater der Welt 2005. Kunstmuseum Stuttgart. June 22 and 26.

Homeworks III, Ashkal Alwan, Beirut. November 20 and 22.

#### 2006

Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin. October 24–26.

Teaterhuset Avant Garden, Trondheim. October 28 and 29.

Black Box Teater, Oslo. November 1 and 2.

BIT Teatergarasjen, Bergen. November 4 and 5.

#### 2007

The Holland Festival. Theater Bellevue, Amsterdam. June 1 and 2.

Les Halles de Schaerbeek, Brussels. October 4 and 5.

Festival d'Automne, Centre Pompidou, Paris. October 12 and 13.

### Scratching on things I could disavow: Walkthrough (2008–ongoing)

70 minutes  
Walid Raad

Raad has presented this performance both in gallery spaces, within an installation of related sculptural and video works, and in theater spaces, in the format of a lecture with a PowerPoint slide show. See pp. 110–47.

#### 2009

*Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Art in the Arab World, Part 1\_Volume 1\_Chapter 1 (Beirut: 1992–2005)*. REDCAT, Los Angeles. April 9.

*Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Art in the Arab World, Part 1\_Volume 1\_Chapter 1: Beirut (1992–2005)*. Fondazione Antonio Ratti, Como. July 2.

*Scratching on Things I Could Disavow*. Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London. September 23–26.

*Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Art in the Arab World/Part 1\_Volume 1\_Chapter 1 (Beirut: 1992–2005)*. Paula Cooper Gallery, New York. November 5–7.

*Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Art in the Arab World: Part 1\_Volume 1\_Chapter 1 (Beirut: 1992–2005)*. Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg. November 12–14.

#### 2010

Festival d'Automne, Le Centquatre, Paris. With Carlos Chahine. November 6 and 7, November 9–14, November 16–21, November 23–28, November 30, December 1–5.

#### 2011

Bildmuseet, Umeå University, Umeå. February 19.

Kunstenfestivalesarts. Les Halles de Schaerbeek, Brussels. With Carlos Chahine. May 8–15.

Wiener Festwochen. Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, Vienna. May 26–28, June 7–12 (with Walid Raad), May 29–31, June 1–6, 11, and 13–15 (with Markus Reyman).

Hebbel am Ufer, Berlin. June 24–26 and 28–30.

#### 2012

Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. February 23.

Carpenter Center, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass. March 1.

Tensta Konsthall, Tensta, Sweden. March 24.

*Scratching on things I could disavow*. DOCUMENTA (13), Kassel. June 7–10 and 12–16, July 10–15, September 10–16.

#### 2014

Eurokaz festival, Muzej suvremene umjetnosti, Zagreb. January 11.

Binghamton University, State University of New York, Binghamton. April 24.

*Walid Raad: Postface*. University Museum of Contemporary Art, University of Massachusetts, Amherst. September 17.

"Eikones." Schaulager, Basel. November 14.

#### 2015

*Walid Raad*. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

### Other

#### 2000

*Miraculous Beginnings*. Kahlil Gibran colloquium, Nicolas Sursock Museum, Beirut. January 27.

During this event Raad presented archival material on Kahlil Gibran as annotated by The Atlas Group's fictional historian Dr. Fadl Fakhouri. It is described in M.G., "Colloque au musée Nicolas Sursock: Vues contradictoires sur Gibran le peintre," *L'Orient Le Jour*, January 28, 2000, p. 6.

#### 2010

Lecture on Bernd and Hilla Becher. Dia Art Foundation, New York. January 11.

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