



## **A Particular Shade of Red**

A play of accuracy and doubt, Walid Raad's MoMA retrospective manifests the artist's distinctive way of relating the affects of war. Naomi Lev visited and took the walkthrough

Critique / Naomi Lev February 21, 2016

Through scholarly research, Walid Raad invites accuracy along with doubt and confusion into his first comprehensive American survey, at The Museum of Modern Art in New York. The exhibition, curated by Eva Respini and curatorial assistant Katerina Stathopoulou, is titled "Walid Raad." It comprises video, sculpture, installation, photography, and collage. Throughout the exhibition, fact and fiction are mixed together to raise our awareness about the subjectivity of history, while attempting to deal with the pain, the cynicism, the banality, and the aftermath of war.

**Installation view of Walid Raad, The Museum of Modern Art,  
October 12, 2015-January 31, 2016.**



[1] Installation view of Walid Raad, The Museum of Modern Art  
© 2015 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Thomas Griesel

If one word were to describe Raad's work, it would be "meticulous." He is rigorously precise, and pays attention to every little detail. Not only a perfectionist from the formal aspect of the works, he also composes elaborate made-up stories that support a general narrative. Moreover, by referencing an abundance of iconic artists and artworks, he provides each piece in the show with a rationale, as well as a citation related to its shape and logic, as if trying to enhance the facts and present a convincing case. Raad invents intricate tales and eccentric characters, and grounds them in authentic documents, photographs, news clips, and real-life situations.

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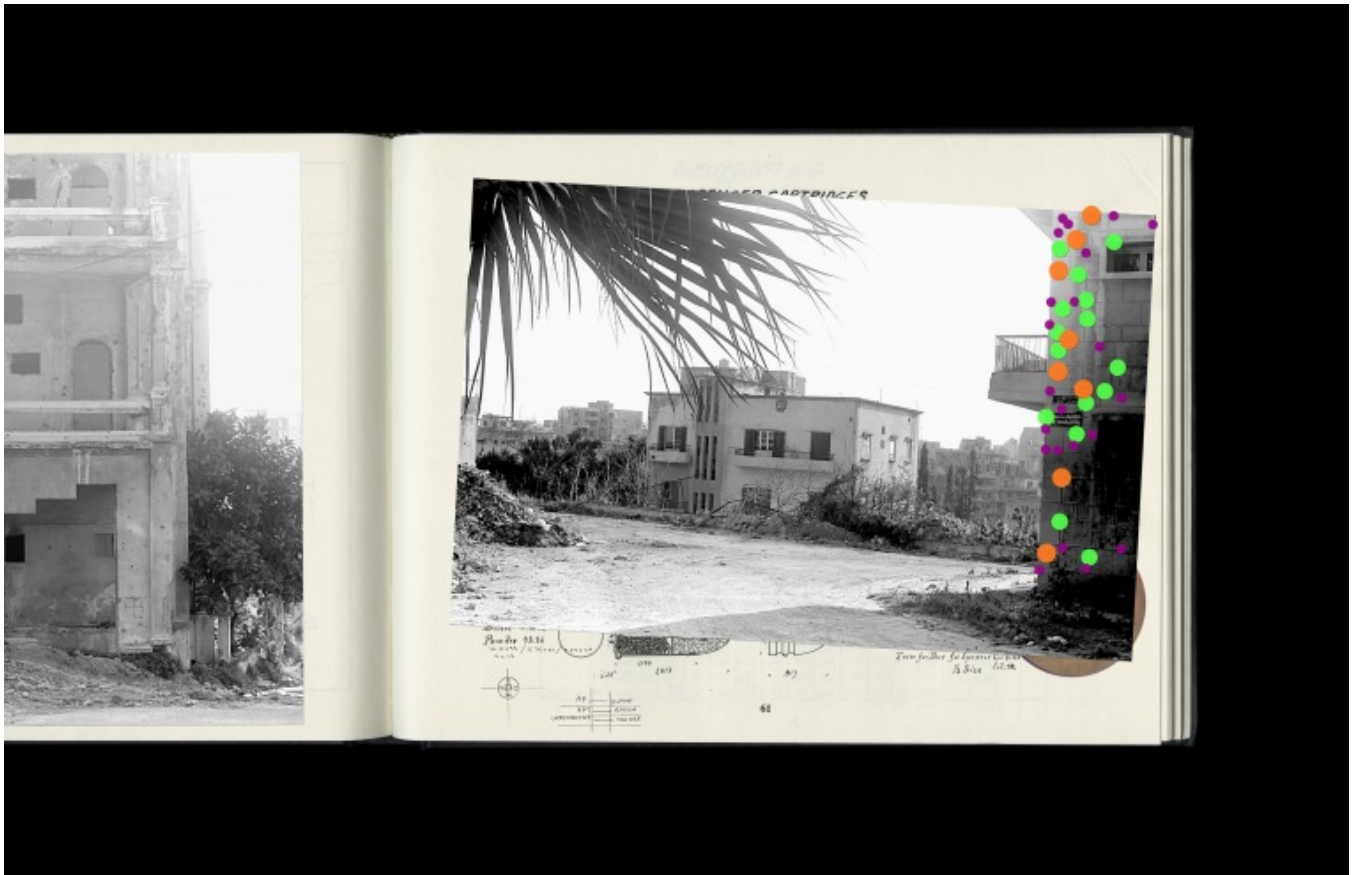


[3] Installation view of Walid Raad, *The Museum of Modern Art*, 2016  
© 2015 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Thomas Griesel

The exhibition, situated on two of the museum floors, is divided into two main projects: works created by The Atlas Group are located on the third floor, and the ongoing project “Scratching on Things I Could Disavow” is located on the second floor.

The Atlas Group (1989-2004), a fictive one-man collective created by Raad, aims to “locate, preserve, study, and produce audio visual literary and other artifacts that shed light on the contemporary history of Lebanon,” and, more particularly, explores the Lebanese Civil War years (1975-1990). The archive-like presentation of The Atlas Group’s works consists mostly of photography but also includes collage, video, and, of course, the artist’s made-up wall text, which is a critical part of communicating the work. *Let’s be honest, the weather helped* (1998/2006), for example, is a series of ten black and white photographs that Raad had made of bombed neighborhoods in Beirut. The text accompanying the work, written by Raad, tells a true story of how, as a child in the late 1970s, he collected bullets and shrapnel and catalogued their locations in a notebook. Covering the ammunition holes on the façades of the photographed buildings with various-sized round colorful stickers à la John Baldessari, Raad succeeded in documenting the different cartridge manufacturers that represent the manifold armed forces present in Beirut in those years.

[moma\\_raad\\_letsbehonesttheweatherhelped.jpg](#) [4]



[5]The Atlas Group/ Walid Raad. Let's be honest, the weather helped\_Saudi Arabia 1998/2006. Pigmented inkjet print, 18 7/16 × 28 1/2" (46.8 × 72.4 cm). Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. T.B. Walker Acquisition Fund, 2007. © 2015 Walid Raad

In another work, *Notebook volume 72: Missing Lebanese Wars* (1989/1998), Raad invented a renowned historian of the Lebanese war, Dr. Fadl Fakhouri, according to the wall text, he was an avid gambler who used to play alongside fellow historians at horse races. Funnily enough, they were not gambling on which horse was to win – the bet was by how much the photographer shooting the horse's victory would miss the moment when the horse crossed the finish line. In reality, these images are cutouts from a Lebanese daily newspaper called An-Nahar. While referencing the famous images of the running horse, made by Eadweard J. Muybridge in 1878, Raad comments on the elusiveness of photography, the slipperiness of history, and the questionable role of those who refer to themselves as "historians."

What caught my attention in Raad's project was that, despite the incorporation of authentic documents and valid facts, the sense was that there is nothing concrete to hold on to. The information and evidence seem fluid, unstable, and confusing, in light of the mixing of the actual and the imaginary. The novelist D.H. Lawrence once stated, "Never trust the artist. Trust the tale." But what if the tale is false, or at least consists of clashing truths – can we then trust the artist? In previous published interviews Raad has mentioned that as a young child in Lebanon, he never learned about Lebanese history; the majority of his education about Arab history was received in the US, where he fled in 1983, when he was 13 years old. During these years Raad's only way to comprehend what was happening in his homeland was through phone conversations with relative, as well as media documentation. It seems that his interpretation of the war is made of a creative imagination and abstract memories, combined with personal and collective loss and post-trauma. By featuring somewhat esoteric information about the Civil War years, Raad retells history from a personal perspective, emphasizing the subjectivity and the often evasive nature of what we accept and consume as solid facts. Eventually, and in spite of the very elegant appearance of the archival





combined with these “made-up facts,” Raad’s work creates a sense of deception.

[\\_mg\\_3916.jpg](#) [6]



[7] Installation view of Walid Raad, The Museum of Modern Art  
© 2015 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Thomas Griesel

But let’s go back to the paradoxical phrase “made-up facts.” In her 1967 essay “Truth and Politics” Hannah Arendt writes: “[b]ut do facts, independent of opinion and interpretation, exist at all? Have not generations of historians and philosophers of history demonstrated the impossibility of ascertaining facts without interpretation, since they must first be picked out of a chaos of sheer happenings...and then be fitted into a story that can be told only in a certain perspective, which has nothing to do with the original occurrence?...” How do we then distinguish truth from fiction, and the real from the made-up? And is it at all possible? In this case, despite the perplexity, it seems that Raad’s work does display a certain kind of truth, one that, despite the dynamics of “facts,” continues to exist. One of the more poetic works in The Atlas Group project embodies this statement; *Secrets in the open sea* (1994/2004) is a series of 29 pigmented inkjet prints, five of which are presented in this show. The large-size prints, each in a different tone of solid blue, are a meditative pause within the various photographic malfunctions displayed in the room. These five pristine blue prints, representing the sea, are accompanied by a thumbnail-sized photo in the bottom right corner of each framed work. According to the text accompanying the series, these 111x173 cm prints were found buried under rubble during the 1992 demolition of Beirut’s commercial district. They were given to The Atlas Group for preservation and analysis, which revealed latent black and white images of people who have drowned and died during the war. However, according to the catalogue text, written by Respini, these group photographs were taken in banal corporate board meetings<sup>1</sup>. Raad



invites the viewer to experience an emotional crisis, which is later revealed to be false. The question to be asked now is: who controls the validity of historical facts? Moving forward to the second part of the show, this question may or may not be answered in full.

Raad's more recent project, *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow* (2007-ongoing), is situated on the second floor's main atrium, a space that supports the theatrical structure of this project. The project is accompanied by a "Walk-through" – a performative lecture given by Raad numerous times throughout the show, and also available as an audio tour via MoMA's website and iPhone App.

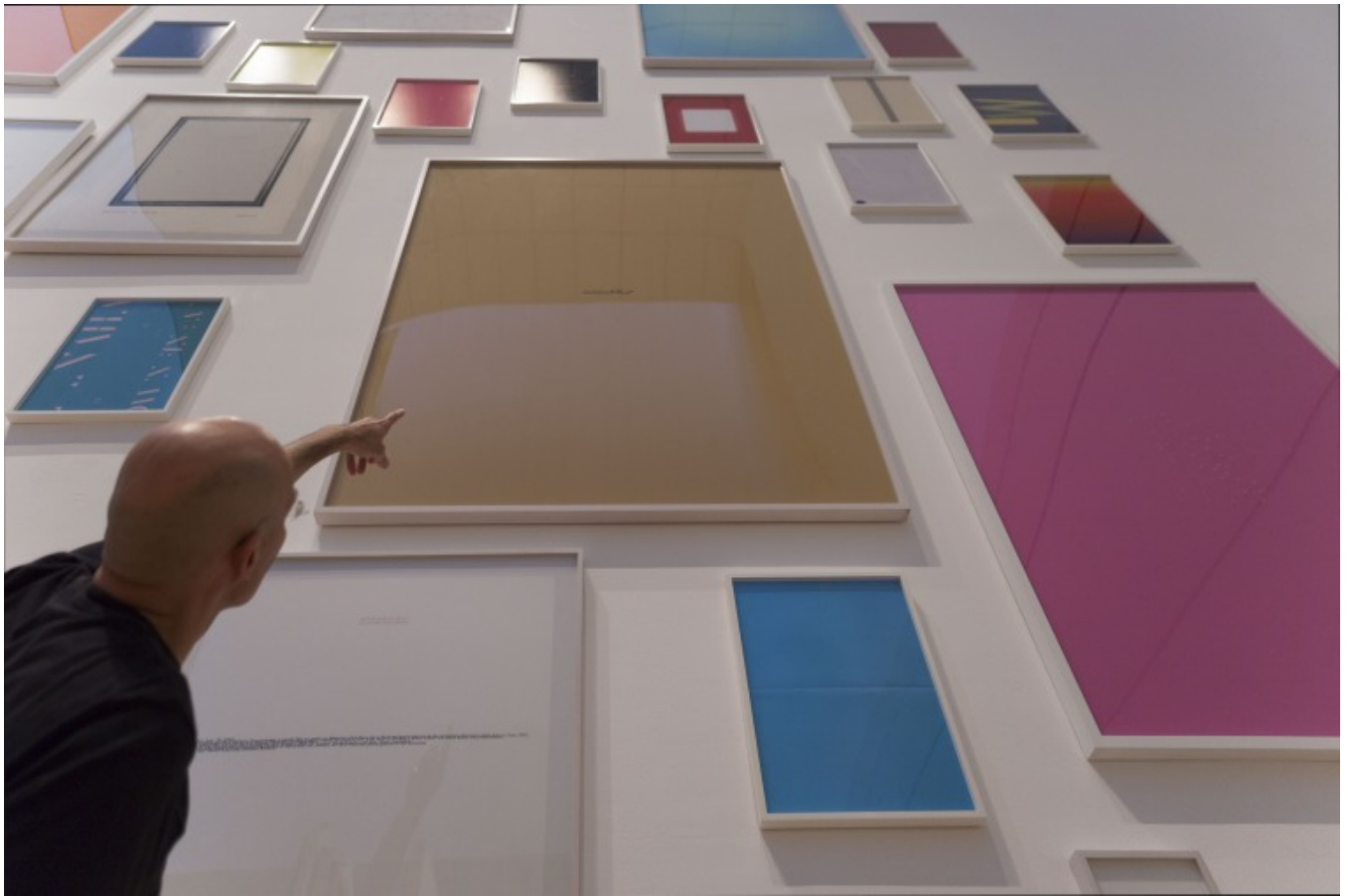
[20151005\\_walidraad\\_0145.jpg](#) [8]



[9]Walid Raad. *Scratching on things I could disavow: Walkthrough*

2015. Part of Walid Raad, *The Museum of Modern Art*, October 12, 2015-January 31, 2016. © 2015 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Julieta Cervantes

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[11]Walid Raad. Scratching on things I could disavow: Walkthrough

2015. Part of Walid Raad, The Museum of Modern Art, October 12, 2015-January 31, 2016 © 2015 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Julieta Cervantes

Here Raad, known for his proficiency in lecture-performances, inspired by the groundbreaking works of artists such as Robert Morris in the 1960s, Joseph Beuys in the 1970s, and Andrea Fraser in the 1980s, articulates a new type of act on his part. He “performs” the role of the artist by giving a tour of his works. He walks through the show and shares with the audience information, stories, and anecdotes. In continuation with The Atlas Group’s wall text, which acts as a textual, silent guided tour, Raad takes a step closer to introducing the personal and the didactic by giving a real guided tour of his work. While intending, in this tour, to explore the commercialization of art in the Arab world, Raad more delicately shares painful anecdotes related to the consequences of war.

[moma\\_raad\\_scratchingonthingsicoulddisavow.jpg](https://www.moma.org/artists/walid-raad/scratching-on-things-i-could-disavow) **[12]**



[13]Walid Raad. Scratching on things I could disavow: Walkthrough

2011. Performance, Kustenfestivaldesarts, Les Halles de Schaerbeek, Brussels, 2011. Photo © Piet Janssens

Raad begins the performance with an elaborate lecture about how the Artist Pension Trust (APT), a for-profit trust that offers financial security to artists across the globe, has tried to recruit him. Raad describes in detail how he has done research and found that the trust is connected to the Israeli army, and that the majority of employees in one of the founder's former hi-tech companies used to serve in elite Israeli intelligence units. He also mentions that Western investors alongside Arab ones are involved in the trust, shifting the attention to a widespread, commercialized, intertwined, political reality. In the next stop Raad talks about the construction of new high-end museums in Abu Dhabi, including branches of The Louvre, The Guggenheim Museum, and others. Raad alludes to the powers now dominating the art world, and how these establishments, or, better yet, these money structures, build actual things in the world, thus creating history through facts.

[20151005\\_walidraad\\_0114.jpg](#) [14]





[15]Walid Raad. Scratching on things I could disavow: Walkthrough

2015. Part of Walid Raad, The Museum of Modern Art, October 12, 2015-January 31, 2016. © 2015 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Photo: Julieta Cervantes

However, Raad's discussion of war and its consequences is more refined. He takes the audience to the next wall over, where Arabic letters are inscribed in white on the white wall. The white letters, Raad explains, are names of artists who have worked in Lebanon in the past century, and were passed to him through telepathy by artists from the future. While trying to investigate what these names mean, he eventually realizes that the artists from the future want or need something from him. Raad recognizes that what artists from the future need is a color, a particular shade of red that is not available to them any longer, because the color has been affected by war. The next stop is a large wall with a salon-style installation of framed printed documents, where Raad talks about how war affects so many things but "he has never thought of how the wars can also affect colors, lines, shapes, and forms." He continues this inspiring and distressing sentence and concludes: "colors that sense a catastrophe coming, they take defensive measures and decide to hide."

["Walid Raad" at The Museum of Modern Art, NYC](#) [16], was on view between October 12th, 2015 and January 31st, 2016



- [1.](#) Eva Respini, “Slippery Delays and Optical Mysteries: The Work of Walid Raad,” in Walid Raad (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2015), 38.

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