

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

In a Performance, Walid Raad Playfully Probes His MoMA Survey

by [Eva Díaz](#) on January 22, 2016



Walid Raad, “Scratching on things I could disavow: Walkthrough” (2015), part of ‘Walid Raad’ at the Museum of Modern Art through January 31 (all photos by Julieta Cervantes, © 2015 The Museum of Modern Art, New York)

A note of hysteria begins to creep into [Walid Raad](#)’s voice as he concludes his hour-long monologue performance, “[Scratching on things I could disavow: Walkthrough](#),” at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Moving through the fifth section of the installation of the same name, he frantically points to details in “Appendix XVIII: Plates 22–257,” a work composed of 54 framed images, many of them monochromatic, occupying the greater portion of one of the massive walls in MoMA’s atrium. As Raad darts from image to image, his voice grows breathless and troubled. He claims that, threatened by destruction during the Lebanese wars, “colors, lines, shapes, and forms, sensing the forthcoming danger, have deployed defensive measures: they hide, take refuge, hibernate, camouflage, and/or dissimulate.” To Raad, these visible features of art have retreated to the ephemera that accumulates around artworks, lurking in the registrarial reports, price lists, and installation budgets; transubstantiated into the documents of the field of art writing, its dissertations, and exhibition catalogues.

At this point I think of sci-fi writer Philip K. Dick. “The ultimate in paranoia,” [wrote Dick](#), “is not when everyone is against you but when *everything* is against you. Instead of ‘My boss is plotting against me,’ it would be ‘My boss’s phone is plotting against me.’”



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Raad identifies a black line here, dashes over to note a patch of color there, gingerly traces the outline of a letter with his finger in another area. Indicating a few calculations jotted down on a piece of white paper, he rules on its real content: “Now, if we observe the budget, do we find numbers? Absolutely not. These are lines disguised as numbers.” Moving to a nearby document, “The condition report? No. This is a shape taking refuge within a condition report.” Of course, none of these miraculous migrations of forms are evident to anyone other than Raad.

In an earlier section of the tour, Raad explained how a retrospective of his project The Atlas Group had inexplicably shrunk down to one one-hundredth of its original size. He then claimed that he was receiving telepathic signals, albeit static-y ones, from artists of the future.



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We indulge the silliness of the fictions in Raad’s work because the lattice of paranoia he erects is

grounded upon the major blind spots, repressions, and acts of self-censorship endemic to the production and reception of art. The art world's foremost repression, one could call it, is economic inequality. Raad's work probes the tendency of **the wealthy** to treat art production as a speculative market, but also their power to determine the outcomes of events — artistic ones, like the careers of artists, as well as socio-political ones, like elections and wars — in order to boost their influence and affluence.

Raad begins his tour by asking the audience to sit on folding gallery chairs while he stands before a massive chart concerning the **Artists Pension Trust (APT)**, a private company with the laudable goal of providing a retirement fund for artists who donate their work for sale. After being invited to join APT and contribute artworks, Raad researched the organization and came to learn several unsavory details about its activities. The extensive flow chart on the wall diagrams many things, among them the connections between the APT and the elite intelligence corps of the Israeli military, the commodification of taste by art sales algorithms in APT's sister project (the website **MutualArt**), and the attempt by one of the APT's founders to **trademark the phrase "September 11, 2001"** mere hours after the twin towers came down.



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Raad then asks the 40 or so people attending the ticketed performance to move themselves and their chairs around the corner. Before a suspended sculpture of white door frames and a video projection of various empty gallery spaces, Raad embarks on a discussion of the proliferation of cultural organizations on Abu Dhabi's **Saadiyat Island** — including **a New York University campus**, new branches of the the **Guggenheim** and the **Louvre**, and an affiliate of the **British Museum**. These institutions, paid handsomely by the sheikhs and sheikhas of the United Arab Emirates to expand to the Middle East, are essentially luxury amenities for a monumental real estate boondoggle in a politically repressive state. Raad links this manicured version of cultural expression to the **policy of permanent political disenfranchisement** of many laborers subcontracted from abroad for the construction projects. Raad then interjects a fictional case of a man imprisoned and severely beaten for disrupting a tony art opening on the island. "These events will take place sometime between 2014

and 2024,” Raad assures the audience.

The paranoid is the person in possession of all the facts, William Burroughs **observed**. Raad’s hyperawareness of the invisible forces of greed keeps his impersonation of a madman ever attuned to the mystical vibrations of power on the near side of fatuousness. As the errant jester of MoMA, he deftly sheds light on and makes light of art’s interconnections with political corruption and violence. In “Walkthrough,” Raad occupies the nearly impossible role of a charming Cassandra, one whose rant both educates and activates listeners.



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*Walid Raad will continue performing “**Scratching on things I could disavow: Walkthrough**” through January 31, the final day of **his survey exhibition** at the Museum of Modern Art (11 West 53rd Street, Midtown, Manhattan).*

Artists Pension Trust
Museum of Modern Art
performance art
Saadiyat Island
Walid Raad