

Walid Raad's Unreality Show Spins Middle Eastern History as Art

By **HOLLAND COTTER** JAN. 7, 2016

Official political history is as self-assured sounding and logically suspect as presidential primary promises. This is the kind of history — a modest amount of matter plumped on clouds of hot air — that the Conceptual artist Walid Raad devises in his Museum of Modern Art retrospective: a set of fantastic tales spun from a few hard facts, with the live equivalent of an operatic mad scene at the center.

Among the facts the art is built on, though they go unmentioned, are details of the artist's life. He was born in Lebanon in 1967 and left that country as a high school teenager to escape what would be more than a decade and half of continuous warfare, with invasions by Israel and Syria and endlessly splintered sectarian conflicts. (Muslim versus Christian, Sunni versus Shiite, and so on.) Thousands of Lebanese died; more than a million were displaced. Beirut, the most beautiful of Mediterranean cities, was ruined.

Mr. Raad continued his education in the United States, focusing on photography and Middle Eastern studies at the Rochester Institute of Technology, and then on postcolonial theory in a doctoral program at the University of Rochester, where he completed a dissertation based partly on writing by American and European hostages held in Lebanon in the 1980s during the country's civil wars.

Those years and wars became the subject of his first body of work. In 1992, he returned to Lebanon for a year. There, with the filmmaker Jayce Salloum, he interviewed people who had been involved in resistance to the Israeli occupation. He also became involved in Beirut's burgeoning community of young contemporary artists, many of whom, like Akram Zaatari

and Rabih Mroué, and the writer Jalal Toufic, were trying to get a grasp on recent history by sifting through its physical traces, which included documentary photography.

By the '90s, photography's reputation as a truth-telling medium had long been in disrepute. Far from being an objective record of reality, it was seen as agenda-ridden and manipulative. When applied to as crazily complicated a slice of history as the Lebanese wars — everyone had a different take on cause, effect, justification and blame — photographic unreliability took on an absurdist, surreal cast. Mr. Raad went with surrealism and turned photographs and videos into the visual equivalent of creative nonfiction, fantasy reality, truth that isn't true.

Authorship was up for grabs. He attributed most of his work done between 1989 to 2004, and installed on MoMA's third floor, to the Atlas Group, a fictional foundation dedicated to researching and documenting Lebanon's modern history. (The country gained independence from France in 1943.) Mr. Raad called himself the group's archivist, but he was also its sole member. And while the images he amassed were not necessarily invented — many of the photographs used are the real archival thing — the contexts he gave them were fanciful.

For example, portions of the archive are credited to a Dr. Fadl Fakhouri, a Lebanese historian said to have bequeathed his personal collection to the group. Snapshots, dated "1958-59/2003," are described in a wall label as being self-portraits of Dr. Fakhouri taken in the 1950s on his first trip to Europe. The pictures really do date from the 1950s and are of Paris and Rome, but they're of Mr. Raad's father, borrowed from a family album.

There are other nonexistent contributors. Hannah Mrad, we are told, worked in the ammunition and explosives division of the Lebanese Army, where she surreptitiously photographed thousands of incendiary devices as a way to keep track of them by name and precise function. We see some of her alleged memory-aid images here.

The group itself was responsible for several absurdly labor-intensive documentation projects. One project involved clipping and collaging images of cars from magazine advertisements, each car corresponding in make and model to one of the many thousands of vehicles destroyed in car bombings. Handwritten annotations in Arabic ("BMW, White, April 8, 1986, 11 killed")

give a veneer of forensic authenticity, but the collages themselves, with their bright colors and angled automotive forms, suggest that archival labor is not without aesthetic considerations.

We sense this, too, in a 2001 video, “Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version),” which combines real news images of American captives in Lebanon with those of a fictional character named Souheil Bachar, played by an actor, who claims to have shared a cell with the Americans. He is filmed being interviewed, or interrogated, about his jail experiences. And both the tales he tells (which mention homoerotic encounters) and the artful look of the video (at one point Ronald Reagan’s face rises, a great, jaundice-yellow Big Brother, in the background) make for an account of “history” as clearly pitched to entertainment as a Fox News broadcast.

It is not, however, as entertaining as the live performance given by Mr. Raad several times a week downstairs in MoMA’s atrium, an essential component of the show, which has been organized by Eva Respini, chief curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, and Katerina Stathopoulou, a curatorial assistant at MoMA.

Titled “Walkthrough,” it’s the main component of a second long-term project, “Scratching on things I could disavow,” begun in 2007. If the Atlas Group work is a 15-year meditation on localized past Middle Eastern wars, the newer project is a semifictional, semifactual look at the recent rise of an international market for historical “Islamic” art and contemporary “Arab” art. The market’s most conspicuous manifestations are in the Arab world, with new museums going up and ambitious Western institutions, like the Guggenheim and the Louvre, pushing their brand abroad. All of this coincides with waves of political violence that have spread well beyond the Middle East, leaving the question open as to who really benefits from the new cultural entrepreneurship.

Mr. Raad’s performance, in the form of a 55-minute artist’s tour — given to groups of 40 or so reserved-seat MoMA visitors within a multipart stage set — addresses the phenomenon of the Middle Eastern art-quake in both general and personal terms. And although the fixed script initially sounds like neutral reportage, it soon swerves toward fantasy realms of conspiracy theory and extrasensory perception. In addition, Mr. Raad’s delivery gradually takes on a driven, slightly unhinged tension that keeps you confused and on edge.

He begins his episodic tour with a long, twisty account of an artist retirement plan, one that really exists and has extended its reach to the Middle East. He hasn't signed up, however. He claims that he traced the trust's founders to an elite branch of the Israeli Army, and further claims that any connection with the founders would potentially put him in danger in Lebanon. He quickly assures his listeners that he is accusing no one of anything. Yet his words suggest the opposite, and establish an atmosphere of unreality — what's true, what's false? — that will color the rest of the tour.

He now moves on to another section of the stage, this one a mock-up of the interior of an imaginary under-construction museum of modern or contemporary Arab art. The world will flock to the museum, he says, but local Arab visitors will find themselves barred from entry by a mysterious magnetic force field as solid as a wall.

Finally, he comes to a display of his own art, specifically the Atlas Group material, as it appeared, or so he says, in a fancy new MoMA look-alike in Beirut. The only problem was that when the work was installed there it shrank to a miniature scale and became almost impossible to see. He had nothing to do with this reduction, he insists, sounding borderline distraught. It just happened.

Furthermore, he reports, he's noticed that everywhere so-called Islamic or Arab art is undergoing self-generated change. Ancient sculptures are spontaneously mutating and merging into bizarre hybrids. Colors and lines are disappearing from contemporary paintings. And all of this is happening at a time of unprecedented international attention to such art and the rise of a bubblelike billionaire market for it, which is also a time of explosive global conflict and repressive domestic strife.

“Do we really need another artwork to show us, as if we didn't already know, that the financial, cultural and military spheres are intimately linked?” Mr. Raad asks his “Walkthrough” audience. What he's really asking is whether art is of any use, with its unstable meanings and prevarications, to shape history at all, never mind in a positive way. He doesn't give an answer outright. Instead, both in the Atlas Group work and his confounding but incisive performance, he shows art taking matters into its own hands, temporarily shrinking and vanishing to sustain a radical life of its own, building new power through self-protective retreat.

Correction: January 7, 2016

An earlier version of this article misstated the title of an art installation in the Walid Raad retrospective. It is “Appendix XVIII,” not “Appendix XVII.”

“Walid Raad” runs through Jan. 31 at the Museum of Modern Art, 212-708-9400, moma.org. The show will be at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, from Feb. 24 to May 30.

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