

REVIEW - 10 DEC 2015

Walid Raad

Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA

BY SAUL ANTON



Walid Raad, *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: Walkthrough*, 2011, performance documentation at Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Les Halles de Schaerbeek, Brussels

Walid Raad's retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art comes at an opportune time. Billions of petrodollars have been committed to the founding of Arab art institutions. Abu Dhabi's Saadiyat island is set to open a Jean Nouvel-designed Louvre in 2016, a Frank Gehry Guggenheim 12-times the size of the signature New York building in 2017, and other venues designed by Tadao Ando, Norman Foster and Zaha Hadid. Added to the extensive network of fairs, biennials and smaller institutions that have emerged in recent years, these museums promise to become a long-term platform for a 21st-century Arab art public.

What will the super-sizing of the Arab art world bring? To what extent does it represent merely the latest expansion of the global franchise of modern art? To what extent might it create the conditions for a renegotiation of Western models of cultural value and historical exemplarity embodied by its museum?

To Raad's great credit, these are the kinds of questions that keep him up at night. Drawing on influences such as Jorge Luis Borges and Jalal Toufic, his work has long explored the relation between history and materiality in visual culture. In *The Atlas Group Archive* (1989–2004), a long-term quasi-fictional collection of documents concerned with the Lebanese civil wars, Raad invented figures such as Fadl Fakhouri, a Lebanese historian fond of visiting Europe's tourist spots, whose life we learn about through photographs taken around famous sites such as Paris's Eiffel Tower or the Notre Dame cathedral. In Notebook volume 72: *Missing Lebanese Wars* (1989/98), we study the journals of Lebanese military officers who presumably liked to bet on horses at the racetrack. Beyond the strange analogies between war and horse-racing, these fictional notebooks filled with scribbled notes and pictures of horses are infused with an everyday, quirky banality that, Raad reminds us, thrives in even war-torn cities and regions.

In *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Art in the Arab World* (2007–present), the second long-term project on view at MoMA, Raad presents a diverse body of drawings, models, photographs, sculptures and prints. Exhibited on five platform stages set in the middle of the museum's second-floor atrium, he presents the project by means of one of his signature lecture-performances: *Walkthrough*, a masterful 55-minute talk that he delivers four-times per week for the duration of the exhibition.

Walkthrough uses historical fact and fiction to tell the story of the Artists Pension Trust (APT), a real organization that has sought to develop a data-driven financial model for speculation in the art markets. Initially, the audience is confronted with a wall-length diagram of the APT's corporate and curatorial network. The diagram clearly recalls Alfred H. Barr Jr.'s famous sketch of the development of modern art and locates the APT clearly within the historical genealogy of MoMA itself. As Raad details the ways – real and potential, if not yet fully realized – that art can be and is currently being financialized, we slowly recognize that he is unfolding an uncanny analogy between the worlds of art and finance, not merely a critique of art-world commercialism.

Walkthrough begins with a discussion of the APT but, by the end, deals with the late Lebanese artist Johnny Tahan. Raad's increasingly conspiratorial narrative about APT thus doubles as an account of the kinds of speculation that art historians practice. His inventions ride the bleeding edge of the real and the potential, the rational and the irrational: fictive collections of real documents, art criticism algorithms, quantified data linking curatorial gossip and geopolitical intelligence. The museum is, he suggests, the ultimate machine of speculative frenzy.

The photographs and ceramics that make up the *Preface to the third edition* (2013), on view on the third floor, depict Islamic antiquities from the Louvre – a warrior's helmet, a ceramic bowl, ornamental wall reliefs – that are sometimes 3D-printed and recast, and sometimes overprinted. These composite objects allegorize in their making the kinds of speculation that the museums engage in when developing their histories of material culture.

Here we see how both art history and finance must tell stories that establish and sustain future values. Seen through the prism of Arab art, the Western museum is the locus of an unlikely coincidence of truth and speculation, fact and fantasy. You can call this the 'thousand and one nights' version of art history. You can call it a reverse colonial Freudian art history – the story of transference between art and its art historian-analyst. Or, hypocrite lecteur, you may consider it a conspiracy theory, if you like, of contemporary art.

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