

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.²⁷ 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

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.²⁸

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).²⁹ 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 XXXI: 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).³⁰ 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.³¹ 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 Iraq 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

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.³²

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.³³ 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.”³⁴ 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*,

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."³⁵ 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.

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."³⁶ 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

with the Middle East to conceive artworks.³⁷ 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.³⁸ 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?"³⁹ 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."⁴⁰ 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."⁴¹ 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.

- 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/Jalal_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.