In ICA show, Walid Raad dazzles with artful fictions

But then you might equally ask: Is American naiveté real? Or is it an illusion? Are the stupid reasons given for doing things not, in fact, the actual reasons? Is there a deliberate split between political rhetoric, which simplifies issues in order to make difficult actions palatable to the electorate, and the crafty world-weariness, the Machiavellian calculations of political actors who do things for deeper reasons — hidden financial reasons, perhaps, or elite and secretive ideologies?

I've just begun this review, and I admit it, I'm already confused. Confused, and a little scared.

That's also how I felt after the press preview of "Walid Raad," a discombobulating show at the Institute of Contemporary Art about power, paranoia, war, the Middle East, the art world, and — above all, perhaps — gullibility.

I saw the show, which was organized by Eva Respini with the assistance of Katerina Stathopoulou, late last year at the Museum of Modern Art. I left confused and underwhelmed.

But what I missed in New York was Walid Raad's performance, "Walkthrough." It's a kind of theater, really — a dazzling 55-minute single-person show.

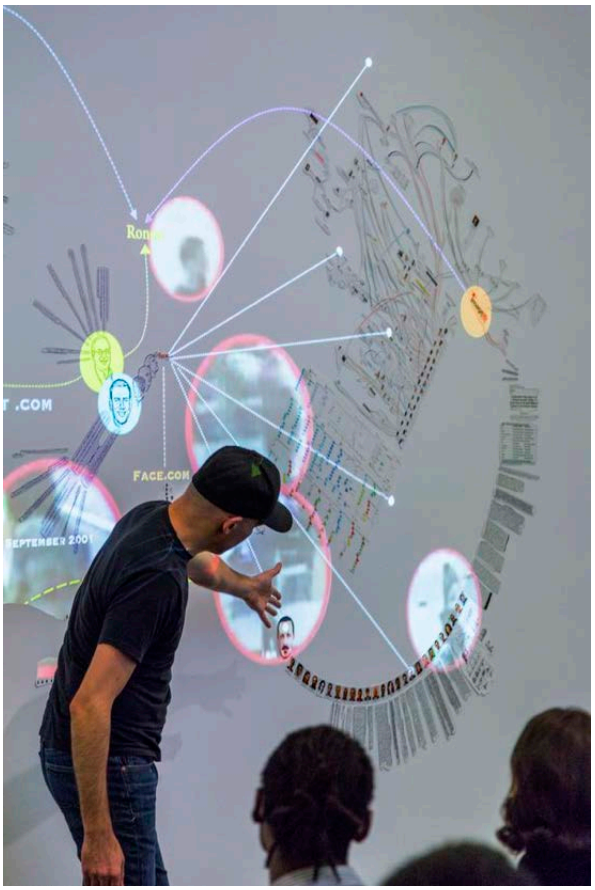
Let's pretend that it's art. And let's above all be clear: It's brilliant.

Raad was born in Lebanon in 1967 and raised during that country's civil war (1975-90). He left for America in 1983, not long after the Israeli invasion. He studied photography and Middle Eastern studies at the Rochester Institute of Technology, learning things about his native region

that he acknowledges he would never have been taught had he stayed there.

Later, at the University of Rochester, Raad wrote a dissertation about Western hostages in the Lebanese Civil War. After the war ended he returned to Lebanon, where he became part of a burgeoning art scene. He currently lives in New York.

There is much more to the ICA exhibition than "Walkthrough." There are photographs, videos, installations, and even wall labels, which in this case are very much part of the art.



Raad conducts the live “Walkthrough” presentation that is a vital part of the exhibit at the ICA.John Kennard

But the performance is vital if you want the full flavor of Raad's art. (Check the ICA's website for the timing of the eight live performances scheduled between now and mid-May. If you can't attend, almost as good is an audio recording of "Walkthrough" available on the ICA's Mobile Guide.)

How to describe it? I have to tell you, I'm so nervous about getting this right I've had to get up and walk around the house a few times.

That last sentence may or may not be true; I mention it only because Raad, who has dark eyes, olive skin, and an earnest, beseeching manner — only slightly frantic at times — begins his talk with a similar disclaimer.

The effect is disarming. We're ready to believe.

Standing in front of a wall covered with an elaborate diagram, Raad begins by telling us about an artist's pension fund he was invited to join.

He describes the fund's ingenious structure: Each artist signs a 20-year contract, and is obliged to give one work to the fund per year. The fund can sell the work at any time. A percentage goes to the artist, slightly less to the fund, and the rest is shared among all the participating artists.

The result? Financial security for the invited artists, a cache of works owned by the fund, and a good amount of art-world intelligence that could potentially be harnessed for other purposes.

Raad is intrigued. He starts to research it. He presents his researches in the same excitable tone as a wide-eyed lover just back from a bizarre, coincidence-filled job interview in another city.

He discovers, by and by, that one of the founders of the pension fund is an entrepreneur called Moti Shniberg, who made his fortune with a company that developed camera-based barcode-scanning technology. He finds out that many of the company's employees and investors have close connections to Israel's elite military intelligence units.

Raad is immediately worried. He knows that, since Israel and Lebanon are still officially at war, a Lebanese artist who hitches himself to a company linked with Israel's military intelligence could be asking for trouble.

Eventually, he gets to put his questions to Shniberg, whom Raad describes as "simply the most beautiful man I have ever seen in my life." When Raad asks him about the links between the pension fund, the technology company, and Israeli military intelligence, Shniberg looks at him: "Please don't tell me you're one of those naive, left-wing, head-in-the-sand pontificators who actually think that the cultural, technological, financial, and military sectors are not and have not always been intimately linked."

It's a hilarious moment. After all, who *does* want to be that person?

The narrative goes on for another 20 minutes, the plot thickening all the time. Red herrings leap out from every sentence. We hear about a parent company registered in the British Virgin Islands; about algorithms that can tell clients what days of the week are ideal for the buying and selling of art; and about an application to trademark the words "September 11, 2001" that Shniberg submitted to the United States Trademark and Patent Office just hours after the towers collapsed.

Finally, near the end, Raad has apparently lost the point of his story, but he is suddenly relaxed, and telling us that although everything he has learned "is very, very intelligent, ... at the end of the day, it ... is all too banal. It is expected." He says he finds none of it insidious or sufficiently interesting "to deserve an artwork."

"After all, do we really need another artwork to show us, as if we didn't already know, that the cultural, financial, and military spheres are intimately linked?" His answer is no. But we are thinking: hmm. Do we? Is this not exactly what we have just experienced? Or was it all about something else? Are we not yet, perhaps, sufficiently in the know?

There's no time to settle on an answer, because Raad invites us to come to a nearby space, where he launches into another story: this time about the astonishing museum-building project of Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi.

The bones of this story, like the last, are as unlikely as they are true. We recognize established facts and familiar names (Frank Gehry, Sir Norman Foster, the Louvre, the Guggenheim), before having to wrestle with assertions that sound plausible but perhaps rather unlikely . . .

This story, too, abruptly ends with a statement that comes as a blessed antidote to all the earlier, accumulating questions: "There's one thing that I know for sure, one thing about which I'm absolutely certain."

What is this one thing?

We quickly find out: It is that an event will take place at the opening of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi in 2017, and it will result in the following headline in the next day's newspaper, on page six, in the bottom right-hand corner: "Demented Man Disturbs Opening, Claims World Is Flat."

Is Raad the demented man in question?

There are two more stories he tells, each in front of a different installation in the gallery, each more convoluted, conspiratorial, and frankly crackers than the last.

What is going on here? Why this descent into paranoid psychosis?

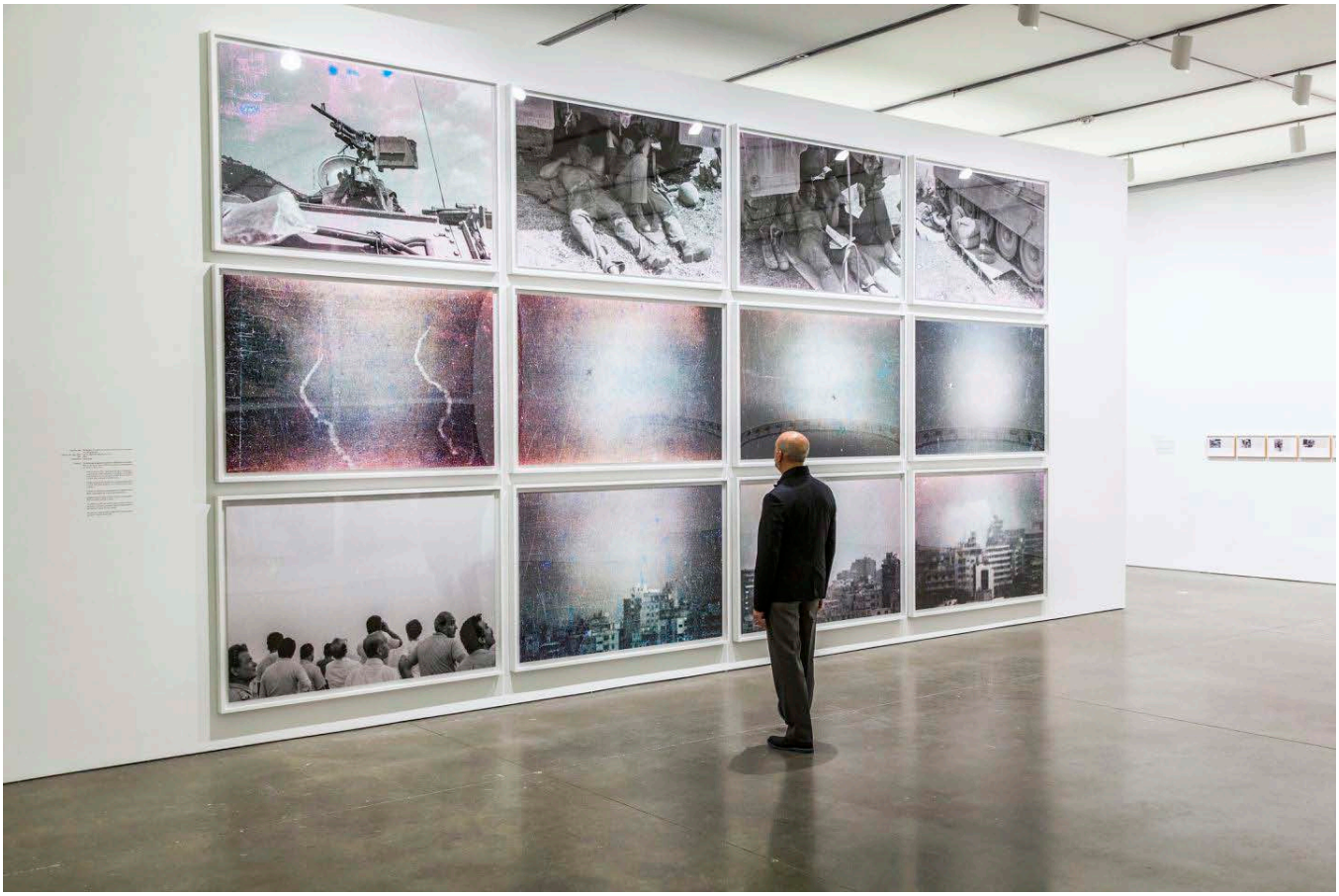
There is, of course, no single answer. But the whole performance is immensely provocative, and so brilliantly acted out that it lends its manic charge to all the other work in the show.

Some of this, from a long-term project called "The Atlas Group," which Raad worked on from 1989-2004, comes in the form of series of documentary-style photographs with wall labels that are elaborate and often darkly funny fictions.

The overarching fiction is that these materials were gathered by a collective called the Atlas Group (which never existed; it is Raad's invention), with the aim of preserving an archive of the contemporary history of Lebanon.

Raad's more recent, ongoing project, of which his performance is a part, is called "Scratching on things I could disavow."

Where "The Atlas Group" was concerned largely with what was knowable in war, "Scratching" is concerned with the workings of the Arab art world. But given the context of ongoing conflict in the Middle East, it is just as much about what is knowable in states of war and chronic instability as was "The Atlas Group."



A wall of photographs in the “Walid Raad” exhibit.John Kennard

An idea of naiveté — including, of course, the naiveté of art critics, artists, and contemporary art lovers — is very much at the heart of Raad's carefully constructed hall of mirrors. And it gets you thinking.

In war, technology, and finance we have, for some time now, been witnessing exponentially greater complexity and layering of information. We assume that once we are introduced to a new level of information, our naiveté evaporates, that we are now the lucky ones in the know, while everyone else is benighted.

But then we learn of another layer of information, something that had been obscured, and our earlier naiveté embarrasses us.

On and on it goes — on towards madness, it can seem. Insider knowledge, in these crucial spheres of life, can become a form of insanity.

And so perhaps a kind of "naiveté" — the sort that is not a function of gullibility, but which sets aside unhelpful complication and has the courage to proceed in darkness and yet in good faith — turns out to be necessary after all?

God knows, it's just a thought. God and America. Myself, I couldn't possibly say.

Art review

Walid Raad

At: Institute of Contemporary Art, through May 30. 617 478 3100, www.icaboston.com

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