

Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Art in the Arab World Part 1_Volume 1_Chapter 1 (Beirut: 1992–2005)

A project by Walid Raad

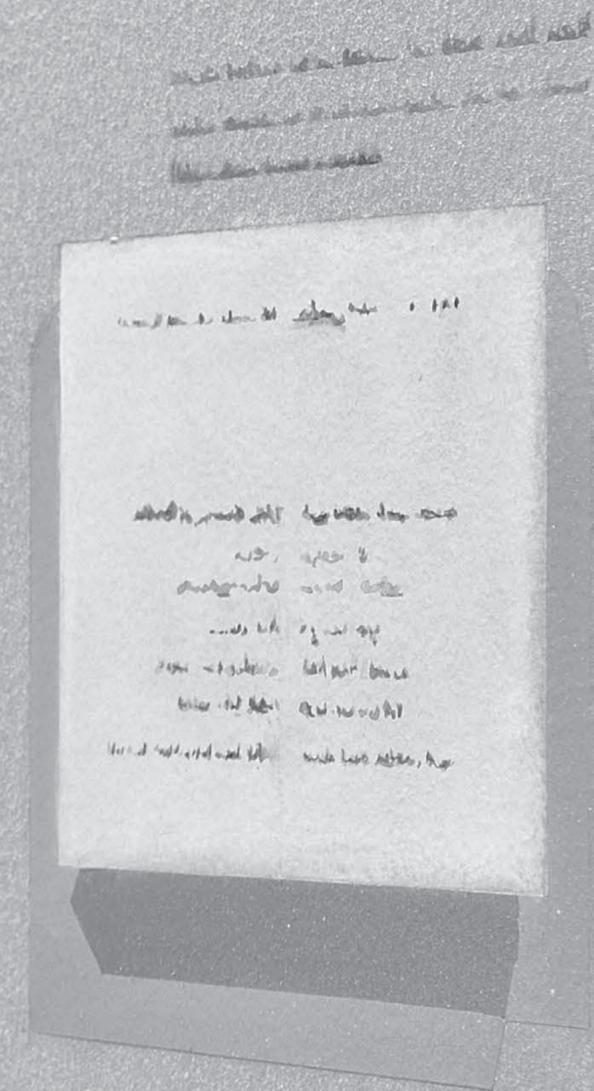
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This exhibition is part of an on-going project titled *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Modern and Contemporary Art in the Arab World*. Here, I present five sections from the first chapter of the first volume of the first part of this work, sections about the history of art in Beirut between 1992 and 2005.

This project engages with the fast-paced development in the Arab world over the past decade of a new infrastructure for the visual and other arts. During this ten years, I have become fascinated by and skeptical about the emergence of arts festivals, forums and workshops, historical and contemporary art museums, art galleries, art funds, non-profit art spaces, foundations, art catalogs, theoretical and historical texts, art schools, journals, and collections in cities such as Abu Dhabi, Amman, Beirut, Cairo, Damascus, Doha, Dubai, Istanbul, Ramallah, and Sharjah, among others. This infrastructure did not sprout from infertile ground, and out of nothing. While white-cube galleries are certainly new to Arab cities, other forms such as foundations, collectives, museums, galleries, collections, magazines, journals, and schools lean on their historical predecessors, and/or break with them, and/or overlook them. It is also clear that the development of this infrastructure is inextricably linked to a broader economic trend whereby cultural tourism figures more and more as an engine of economic growth.

Moreover, still unfolding events in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) over the past five years provide a vivid picture of forthcoming material changes that may affect how culture, and in particular contemporary visual art will be conceived, made, experienced, and consumed not only in the UAE but in the Arab world and beyond. It is worth noting in this regard various projects in Abu Dhabi such as the Saadiyat Island that is scheduled to include the largest-to-date Guggenheim Museum to be designed by Frank Gehry; a Louvre Museum by Jean Nouvel; and a Sheikh Zayed National Museum by

Foster and Partners. These buildings, institutions, and their programs are part of strategic state, corporate, and privately sponsored initiatives to showcase Arab and Islamic cultures and traditions in their full-complexity, and to stimulate the creation of new concepts and forms by Emiratis, Arabs, and others.

My project aims to engage with the progressive as well as reactionary, predictable and unpredictable forms this new infrastructure will have on the making, and experiencing of current, past and future artworks, and other cultural events. More importantly, these developments, when viewed alongside the geo-political, economic, social, and military conflicts that have consumed the region in the past few decades, form a rich and knotty foundation for creative work. With this installation, I attempt to heed the constraint and promise of this ground.

My art project also engages a concept formulated by the writer, artist and professor Jalal Toufic, "The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster." In his book titled *Forthcoming*, and in the essay by the same title, Toufic considers whether certain wars and other kinds of disasters lead not only to the material destruction of culture (the destruction of artworks, the burning of books, the looting of museums and other cultural institutions, the collapse of publishing houses, schools and universities, for example) but also whether such events can in some rare instances affect culture and tradition immaterially. In his analysis, Toufic describes this immaterial effect as a "withdrawal" of artworks not in the sense that they are hidden (to safeguard against their destruction not because they do not conform to the reigning ideological outlook of the time) but in the sense that the affected artworks are treated by some artists as not available to vision. In his essay, Toufic postulates that this immaterial effect can sometimes be sensed by artists, writers and thinkers (but not exclusively) in their artworks, writings

and concepts. Toufic's essay explores how and when artists, writers and thinkers have expressed such immaterial effect with regards to the Shoah, and to the martyrdom of Husayn in Karbala in 61 AH (680 CE), for example. In his essay, Toufic also proposes that artists, writers and thinkers (again, not exclusively) have at times attempted to resurrect such withdrawn artworks, albeit with great doubt as to the success of their efforts.

In my current project, I lean on Toufic's concepts and writings. These have provided me with a language to describe to myself some of my own feelings, experiences, and ideas about Arab cultural production and tradition, and in particular about Arab visual arts production of the past century. As my project unfolds, I will most likely modify, amend, confirm, and refute some of the parameters implied by Toufic's concept.

The five artworks presented here, *Preface_Title 23; On Walid Sadek's Love Is Blind (Modern Art, Oxford, UK, 2006); Index XXVI_Artists; The Atlas Group (1989-2004); and Appendix XVIII_Plates 88-101* figure as five loosely linked sections of an unfolding story about the history of art in Beirut between 1992 and 2005, a period inadequately referred to in Lebanon and elsewhere as the post-war period. In another way, they also figure as the five stage sets for a forthcoming multi-act play about this history.

This yet-to-be-staged play, this unfolding story begins for me with an encounter between an artist and his artworks, my confrontation in *The Atlas Group (1989-2004)* with the reduction in scale of my own prints, projections and sculptures; they appear to me today as miniature objects, 1/100th of their original size. This encounter leaves me pondering three possible scenarios: i) the reduction in scale is a mere psychological fact, an illusory fantasy born out of my fascination with architectural models in general; ii) it is manufactured

and leans on formal and conventional tropes influenced by, for example, Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*; iii) the works, for some unknown reason, have shrunk. I disregard the first scenario when I hear *The Atlas Group (1989-2004)* described as a miniature essentially confirming to me that this reduction in scale is objective and not subjective. This recognition leaves intact the other two scenarios. These, along with the formal and conceptual variables they generate, are explored in the other works exhibited here. In *On Walid Sadek's Love Is Blind (Modern Art Oxford, 2006), Index XXVI_Artists, and Appendix XVIII_Plates 88-101*, I follow the detours I am forced to make as I try to collaborate with a contemporary artist, as I attempt to hail other artists from Lebanon's past, present and future, and as I attempt to form an image in the present. These detours lead me to surprising objects and forms from the sediment and germline of Beirut's visual arts infrastructure, and to unforeseen collaborations with artists, artisans, writers, historians, and critics.

WALID RAAD

Walid Raad is an artist and an Associate Professor of Art in The Cooper Union (New York). Raad's works include *The Atlas Group*, a fifteen-year project between 1989 and 2004 about the contemporary history of Lebanon, and the ongoing project titled *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Modern and Contemporary Art in the Arab World*. His books include *The Truth Will Be Known When The Last Witness Is Dead, My Neck Is Thinner Than A Hair, and Let's Be Honest, The Weather Helped*.

Raad's works have been shown at Documenta 11 (Kassel), the 50th Venice Biennale (Venice), The Hamburger Bahnhof (Berlin), The Museum of Modern Art (New York), Homeworks (Beirut) and numerous other museums and venues throughout Europe, the Middle East, and North America. Raad is also the recipient of the Alpert Award in Visual Arts (2007), the Deutsche Börse Photography Prize (2007), and the Camera Austria Award (2005).