

# "Let's Be Honest, The Weather Helped": Walid Raad

## REVIEWS

by Teresa Retzer

"I needed to get away from my own ghosts" says Jack from New York, the first protagonist in the narrative of Walid Raad's life performance *Les Louvres and/or kicking the dead* (2017–ongoing), presented every other month at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam as a crucial part of Raad's current solo show *Let's Be Honest, The Weather Helped*. Jack moved to the Belgian city of Ypres, where the ghosts of 450,000 dead World War I soldiers are spooking around. But who are his own ghosts, and where are they coming from?

It remains open if Jack is a real person and whether the conversations between him and Raad ever happened.<sup>1</sup> Raad is well known for his use of fictional persons to engage with the history, collective trauma, and absolute lack of investigation and justice during and after the Lebanese uncivil wars (1975–1990). However, Jack's narrative does not enlighten museum visitors about the Lebanese situation as much as connect them—a predominantly Western audience—to their own ghosts.

When Raad met Jack again, after he had moved back to New York, Jack had forgotten all about his ghost stories. He himself was not a victim of any war but a forensic investigator. Whenever people were found motionless in his district, his signature would officially declare them dead. Jack traveled to scenes of death day after day and was haunted by horrifying images of the thousands of suicides, head shots, jumpers, drowners, or just old people who never woke up in the morning. Jack got angry if people died at the wrong time and were discovered by the wrong

people. Once a father shot himself at lunchtime and was found by his children after school. Jack kicked him in the nuts before he gave his signature. After he retired, living among "the ghosts of others" near one of the biggest former battlefields in the world, reading Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928) and enjoying European Impressionists, helped cure Jack of the undead of New York.

The ghosts of European modernism are also still spooking around the global art world, throwing their shadows on *all* cultural production. The creation of art markets in the Middle East affects the global art world economically, but does world art (finally) build a stage for the representation of cultures beyond the Euro-American?

Western museums of modern art such as Louvre and Centre Pompidou in Paris, or the Guggenheim in New York, reacted to the challenge of a globalizing art world by expanding their authority and establishing neocolonial branches. During Raad's residency at the Louvre in 2013, a new building by French architect Jean Nouvel in Abu Dhabi was under construction, and the patriarch institution was about to transport three hundred works to its Middle Eastern daughter. During the transport, five of the works were oddly transformed (maybe affected by the boiling Emirati heat?) and lost their shadows. "But strangely enough," Raad explained, "if you paint fake shadows, their real shadow will show up."<sup>2</sup> Are these works, part of the project *Scratching on things I could disavow* (2007–ongoing), a poetic commentary on art that loses its meaning when radically decontextualized? But what shadow will appear once a fake shadow is created—one that produces new meaning for a new audience? One that overshadows the new museum with new ideas, other than the 295 other objects from Europe's noblest collection that manifest cultural Eurocentricity and Western ignorance?

Raad's show at the Stedelijk opens with ghosts from another world whose master was surely touched by the shadows of European

modernism. The spooky cabinet containing the series *Preface to the ninth edition: On Marwan-Bachi*, twenty-three paintings with drawings on the backside of the wooden frames made by the Syrian artist Marwan Kassab-Bachi (1934–2016), was “fortunately rediscovered” by Raad.

Raad and Kassab-Bachi have much in common. Both came from the Middle East to a Western city to study—New York and Berlin, respectively—and eventually became internationally acknowledged artistic voices who represent their home countries from *within the art world*. Both were trained in Western art, Kassab-Bachi predominantly in European modernism and Raad in US modernism. Kassab-Bachi reinvigorated figurative painting, which was contrary to the Berlin art scene in the 1960s, dominated as it was by monochrome painting, Informel, and the radical simplification of the ZERO movement. As opposed to his contemporary and former friend Georg Baselitz, he focused on his work instead of his rise in the art world. Raad is different. His engagement with Lebanon is authentic and he seems to be constantly researching and producing new work, but his intellect and the work’s conceptual cleanliness reflect the zeitgeist suspiciously well in both criticality and market value. The complex narratives of his long-lasting projects, packed in formalist aesthetics, produce distance and, as some critics argue, make his art only approachable to an informed and therefore exclusive circle. Raad’s highly theoretical tools derive from his deep understanding of critical theory and postmodern methods, which question everything conditioning our past, present, and future.

Kassab-Bachi’s drawings, on the contrary, refuse any sort of conceptualism and thought-out wittiness but speak the language of (German) expressionism—in some ways a universal language of solidarity, empathy, and its conveyance—picturing the nature of human suffering. “This is my favorite room,” says Gijs van Tuyl, former director of the Stedelijk Museum, as we walk through the salon-style cabinet. It surely has to do with his generation and personal taste, but, vastly, the

expressive strength of these works produces a magical attraction beyond politics, intellectual references, or criticality. Kassab-Bachi's ghosts belong to all of us; there is no "our" and "other" ghosts within this room—a room that is a cure to anyone living, sorrowing, and questioning the meaning of life.

"Walid Raad's art brings us to different worlds, like 'the' Lebanon," was the beginning of the opening speech for Raad's show, delivered by the mayor of Amsterdam. Voluntarily or not, the naive statement exemplifies Western ignorance, being dismissive of Raad's work thoroughly, which is showing the entanglement of power structures regardless of national borders. Even if the content of Raad's narratives coexists beyond the general audience's intellectual and emotional scope a closer look reveals the fact that the content is secondary to his systematic critique of conventional structures of representation. Making sense of Raad's rather complicated body of work dealing with Lebanese postwar realities, collective trauma, historiography, and the complexities of the (art) market, requires the viewer's contemplative examination and critical disposition. Thus, to understand that his critique entails the destabilization of 'our' system just as much as the 'different' world it refers to visually in the show, requires the viewer's self-awareness. It is an oeuvre that seemingly consists of hundreds of puzzle pieces that will—if we let it—eventually reconstruct the world in its (fictional) entirety.

[1] Walid Raad uses the terms "historical facts" and "imaginary facts" to explain the ambiguity of truth. "Imaginary facts" are not purely fictional but rather facts in fiction.

[2] Walid Raad uttered these words during his performance *Les Louvres and/or kicking the dead*, May 17, 2019, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

[at Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam](#)

until 13 October 2019