

Walid Raad

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Abstract (Summary)

BEIRUT, LEBANON Walid Raad GALERIE SFEIR-SEMLER Since 1999, the Lebanese artist Walid Raad has been better known as his collective alter ego the Atlas Group, an imaginary, anonymous research foundation in whose name he has produced an intricate series of videos, installations, and performances.

Full Text (579 words)

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BEIRUT, LEBANON

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GALERIE SFEIR-SEMLER

Since 1999, the Lebanese artist Walid Raad has been better known as his collective alter ego the Atlas Group, an imaginary, anonymous research foundation in whose name he has produced an intricate series of videos, installations, and performances. This fictional entity has been devoted to an accounting of Lebanon's contemporary history, maintaining an archive of notebooks, photographs, videotapes, films and other materials supposedly culled from the country's visual culture. Raad's work with the Atlas Group has delved into episodes from Lebanon's long history of civil wars (always plural, never singular in Raad's formulations) and specifically into the occurrence of car bomb explosions that rip through this tiny corner of the Levant with alarming frequency.

Raad's first solo exhibition in the Middle East is titled "A History of Modern and Contemporary Arab Art: Part I_Chapter 1_Beirut (1992-2005)." With six new works on view, it follows the structure of a book, opening with a preface and proceeding through sections to an index and an appendix. The show is arranged like an elongated U-turn, and located at the hinge is the entire Atlas Group enterprise, inexplicably reduced to miniature size. The installation, section 139: The Atlas Group (1989-2004)all works 2008-is a maquette of an exhibition never fully realized, a dollhouse-style presentation of every plate, video, and carefully phrased wall text Raad has authored under the Atlas name.

"A History of Modern and Contemporary Art" marks the beginning of another long-term project. This time around, Raad's focus is on the creation of independent art scenes in cities such as Beirut, Cairo, and Ramallah alongside the importation of culture by way of ambitious, forthcoming museum projects in cities including Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Doha. Nothing, as yet, suggests that Raad is creating a theoretical opposition between the bottom-up and top-down approaches, but the five pieces currently installed in the gallery tell an intriguing, and highly specific, story about how a field of critical practice takes shape in a place without an infrastructure or an economy for contemporary cultural production. section 79: Index XXVI: Artists is a list of Lebanese artists, printed in Arabic in three layers of white vinyl and wrapped right to left around three walls of a white room. The names seem to appear and disappear as you approach them. section 8: Museums features a tiny, empty room that resembles a nineteenth-century colonial museum and is nestled into an otherwise resolutely white-cube gallery, invoking museum projects in Lebanon that never materialized. section 271: Appendix XVIII: Plates presents six triptychs in which each image is built from excerpts

of exhibition catalogues, academic dissertations, slide libraries, and real or imagined treatises on the history of Lebanese art. Yet everything is illegible. Raad's exhibition could be considered somewhat standard institutional critique, or a tender tribute to Hans Haacke, except for the fact that Beirut is a city with no such institutions to critique.

Over the years, Raad has fine-tuned the art of thwarting expectations. Just as his work with the Atlas Group never simply explained Lebanon's political history, his current project refuses to offer a comprehensible narrative of the country's art history. One may take Raad at his word and understand the show as the expression of a desire for a meaningful lineage, as one among several attempts by younger artists to engage the work of elder artists in Lebanon. Or one may conclude that, along with the Atlas Group, Raad is really just burying them all.

-Kaelen Wilson-Goldie