

Walid Raad
at MoMA New York City

TALES THAT MAY OR MAY NOT BE TRUE

The 'paradox of fiction' whereby one feels scared, horrified or disgusted, even though one realizes that one is not actually experiencing the cause of said emotions (one is rather reading a book, watching a film, or attending theater), is well documented. Those who consider artworks that provoke feelings, however inappropriate, exemplary of art's true success are likely to deem the 'paradox of fiction' inconsequential. Walid Raad's artworks not only tap the paradox of fiction, but they alternatively ply the 'paradox of nonfiction,' whereby nonfictional forms like archives (press clippings, letters, or notebooks), documentary photographs, and/or documents (affidavits, testimonies, etc.) designate truthfulness, even though readers/viewers recognize that nonfictional works are never completely accurate. Artworks present a special worry, since those who view them as nonfiction are apt to feel deceived if they discover them to be otherwise. The same doesn't hold for landscape paintings or historical novels, presumably because we assume that they are fiction. When art historians realized that 17th Century Dutch 'realists' Jan van Goyen and Salomon van Ruysdael had rerouted a river and relocated a church spire into the background scene, we didn't cry fowl. We rather appreciated their imaginative decisions.

Critics have variously denigrated Raad's artworks that employ nonfictional forms as: deceitful, a hoax, a prank, unreliable, trickster art, fabulist histories, flimflam, and even a 'pure wave of irritation.' Totally frustrated, one reviewer asks,

'But who knows if any of this is true?' (In my mind, this worry ought to apply to all art or none at all.) Even more controversial, Raad's oeuvre (MoMA is presenting 200 works from 28 series produced since 1990), and especially photo-text works tied to The Atlas Group (1989-2004), borrow the look, tropes, and attitudes of both 'activist' and 'political art.' But this factor proves irrelevant, since he doesn't share their goal to set records straight or to expose the powerful manipulating truth and/or manufacturing consent. He rather creates new narratives that routinely prompt misinterpretations! His project is hardly postmodern (nothing is original), cynical (there is no such thing as truth), or duplicitous (he's a liar). Our false (and absurd) interpretations of his humorous send-ups rather demonstrate how poorly we process information. Rather than blame him for deceiving us, we could credit his work for sharpening our critical thinking tools, just as centuries of artworks have helped us finesse our perceptual skills.

SMOKE PLUMES

Despite the paradoxes of fiction and nonfiction, truth is hardly a precondition of art. And by beginning with the farcical 'Scratching on things I could disavow' (since 2007), which details how objects shipped from the Louvre Museum's Islamic Art Department to Louvre Dubai for its opening exhibition morphed into different objects (defying Louvre curators' capacity to identify them or to explain what happened), MoMA's exhibition establishes Raad's playful temperament from the onset. This totally absurd narrative sets the exhibition's tone, making it difficult to take anything at face value from here on out. What one is left with is not really analyses of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) or the Louvre's Islamic Art Collection, as visitors initially presume, but Raad's analysis of how minute bits of information cohere to weave more in-depth tales that may or may not be true.



Walid Raad, 'Scratching on things I could disavow: Walkthrough', 2015 © 2015, The MoMA © photo Julieta Cervantes

I suspect that the real offenses that prompt critics' disdain are the way his series defy expectations, ultimately confounding human judgement. For example, we're told that car bombs destroyed the cars, but left engines intact, as confirmed by ten seemingly 'authorized' photos of engines. Images of shadowy figures floating amidst blue expanses are said to be portraits of anonymous victims who supposedly died in the Mediterranean Sea between 1975 and 1991. A series of erased images leaves only smoke plumes, presumably caused by bomb blasts; while others feature colored dots placed over hundreds of holes formed by bullets and shrapnel lodged in buildings. It seems that one need only mention a place, some dates, and

depict choice objects before viewers begin filling in details. If one overlays this very same strategy onto information and pictures gleaned online, whether from Facebook, Twitter or Wikipedia; then Raad's exhibition serves as a glaring indictment of how we have opted to experience our world these days. The same critical thinking tools that help us to grasp art can also help us navigate the digital world.

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Walid Raad thru 31 January, 2016 at Museum of Modern Art, NYC,
U.S.A. www.moma.org