

Image courtesy of the artist

# WALID RAAD

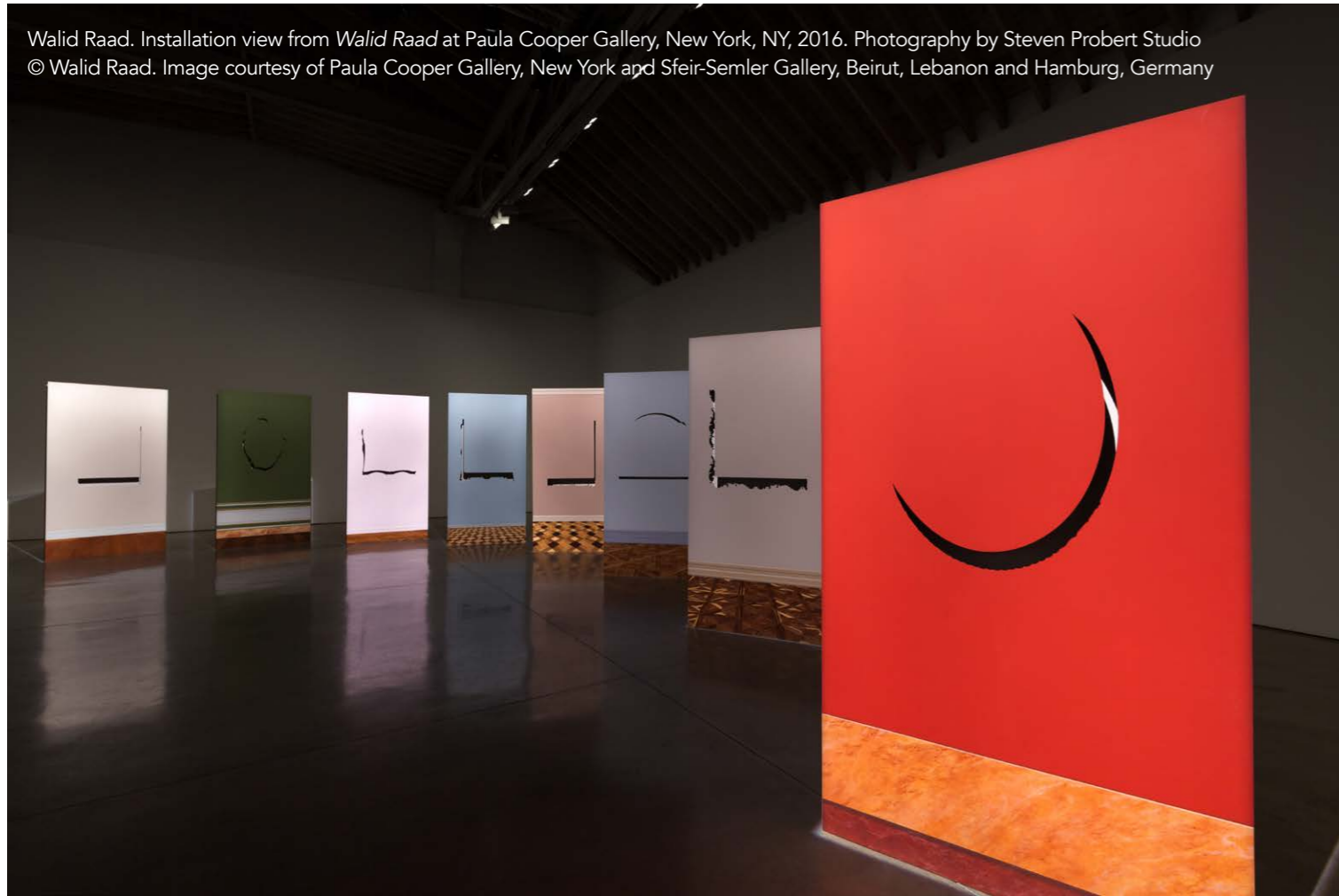
Ever the careful whisperer, the artist approaches the archive with a grain of salt.

*Words by Osman Can Yerebakan*



PROFILE

Walid Raad. Installation view from *Walid Raad* at Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, NY, 2016. Photography by Steven Probert Studio © Walid Raad. Image courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut, Lebanon and Hamburg, Germany



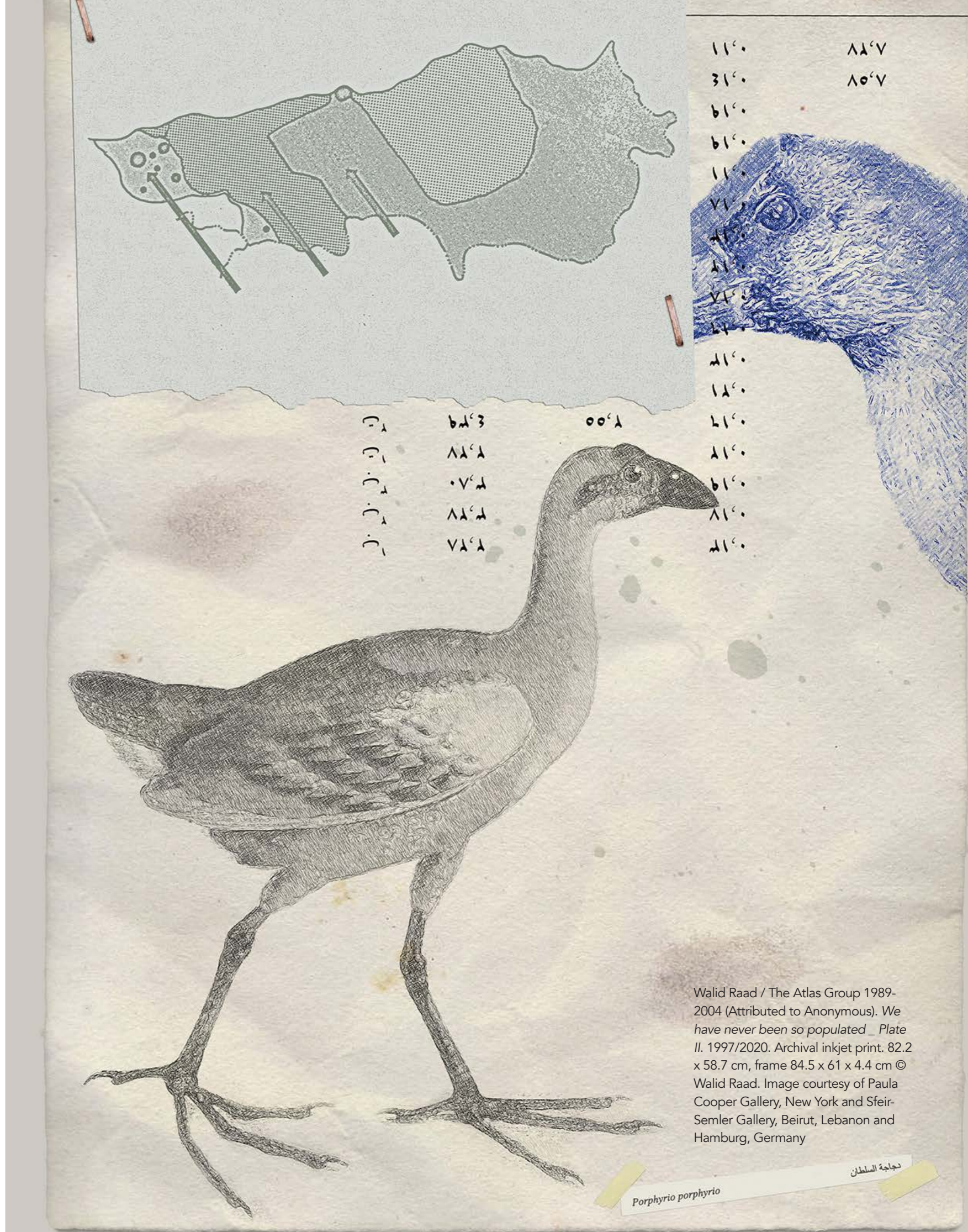
Caution is instrumental for Walid Raad. Wariness, however, is a tool that he imposes foremost on himself, on his own immediate intrigue towards a potential material which could eventually materialise into a work of art. "I try to figure out why a form, a situation or a gesture is capturing me," he reveals. On a minefield of probable misleadings and presumptions, the mixed-media artist of collaged archival images, videos and, occasionally, performative walkthroughs strives to decode his own inclination to a found photograph, an encountered object or even an abrupt piece of pamphlet. The research stage begins by Raad asking himself whether the fascination is a "symptom of greater forces, such as ideological, financial or historical" that condition his interest. If the enquiry responds positively to the impact of a possible outer impact, he leaves the idea behind. He only trusts in the promise of an artistic outcome if "the search and research lead me to a form, a volume or a gesture that is more than mainly a symptom of another condition". In his evasion of the obvious, he mines what asks for a second look, the fringed marginal on the cusp between history and what seems likely.

Raad joins the main exhibition in the forthcoming 61st Venice Biennale, *In Minor Keys*, with two series, which will be exhibited separately in the Giardini and the Arsenale. *Far from quieting* (2026) is a group of eleven drawings and paintings that illustrate some of many beds in which Yasser Arafat may have slept during

his life in order to avoid assassination while plunging into repose. Colourful and unassuming, the beds and the everyday interiors that they inhabit bring hard facts face-to-face with surmise and the normalisation of extremes.

The clinical specificity that the Lebanese artist practices towards his source material yields projects concerned with the enigmatic annotation of historical facts. They manoeuvre around a slice of the past often marred by violence and trauma, but carefully omit its bare-faced exposure. Tangled with an historical moment, Raad's subjects – whether Lebanese racing horses battling to the finish line or an army official obsessed with flowers and other countries' politicians – prevail as agents of their place and time. Liberated by the variables of imagination, they thrive on the power of anecdotal storytelling and the immediacy of pictures collaged with poetic configurations. Of Raad's created characters, academic Dr Fadl Fakhouri, for instance, chronicles his mundane and rather benign engagements with Lebanese life during the country's civil war. In a series of prints from the 1980s, overall entitled *Notebook volume 72: Missing Lebanese wars*, he reports on horse-race bidding politicians for a local newspaper.

Like a fresh artichoke, peeling the ornate layers reveals a note to be relished. Just like the edible purplish-green flower's meaty heart, the awaiting finale in the artist's offering bursts out and intrigues. The aftertaste of looking at Raad's work triggers an urge to flip through



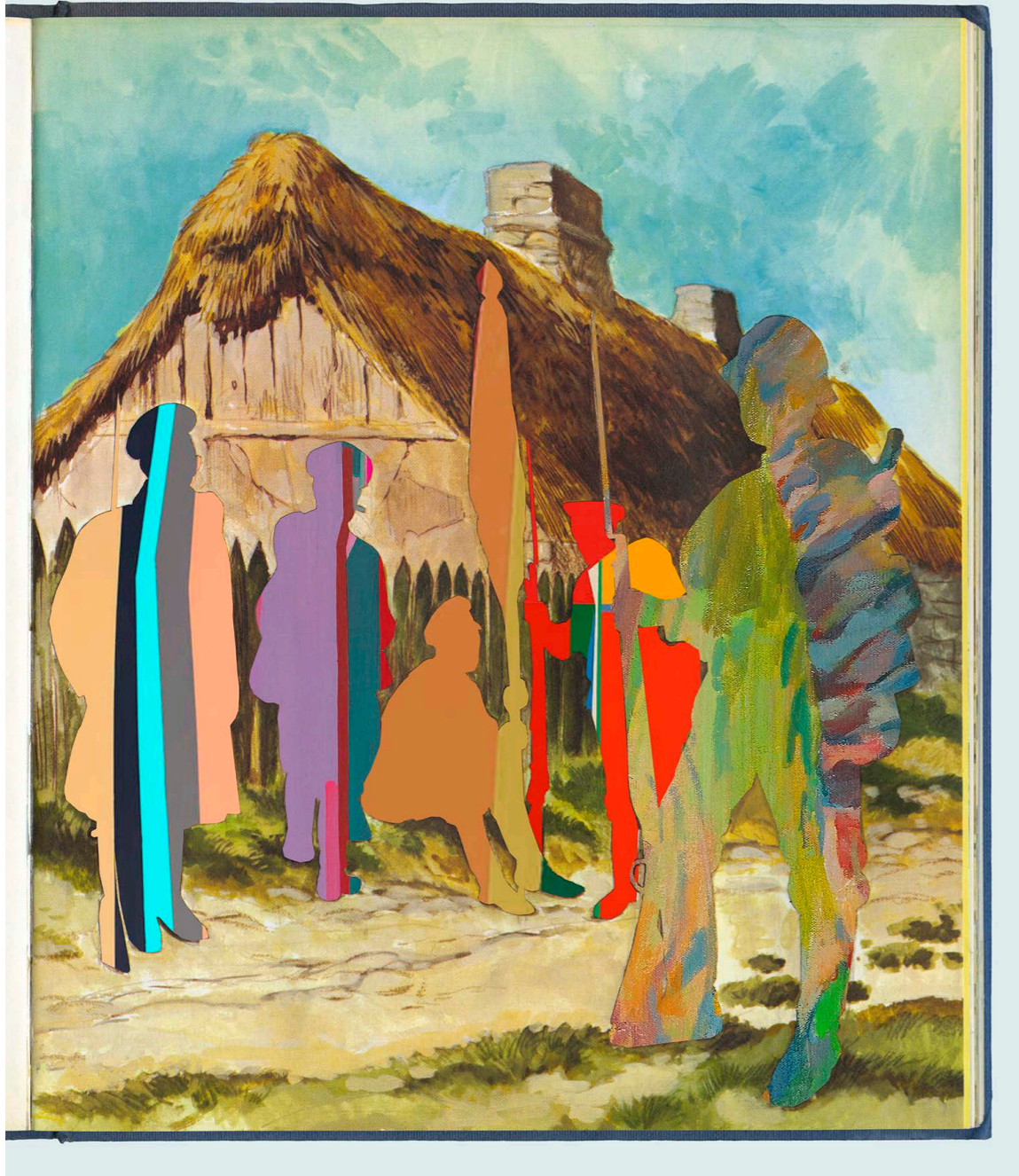
Walid Raad / The Atlas Group 1989-2004 (Attributed to Anonymous). *We have never been so populated\_ Plate II*. 1997/2020. Archival inkjet print. 82.2 x 58.7 cm, frame 84.5 x 61 x 4.4 cm © Walid Raad. Image courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut, Lebanon and Hamburg, Germany

Porphyrio porphyrio

نخاعة السلطان



Walid Raad. *Museum of Mortal Guilt - The Paletts*. 2025.  
Photography by Urša Rahne. Image courtesy of Moderna galerija Ljubljana



Opposite: Walid Raad. *Appendix 137\_060*. 2018. Archival inkjet print mounted on Sintra. 87.9 x 74.3 cm © Walid Raad  
 Below: Walid Raad. Still from *Sweet Talk: Commissions (Beirut) \_ Solidere 1994-1997*. 2019. Single channel video, looped, 10 minutes 22 seconds © Walid Raad. Images courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut, Lebanon and Hamburg, Germany



the pages of history to delve into the before and after of his subjects. Indeed, the urge starts within the artist himself, who feels disarmed by the call for a quest: "I need to place myself in the space that is demanded of me, as opposed to me needing to recognise something familiar to me."

The Atlas Group, to which Raad attributes some of his most exhibited works, adds another layer of slipperiness to authorship and experience. The group, which the artist initiated in 1989 and terminated in 2004, was a supposed collective and a collaborator in works of questionably reliable protagonists. Raad renders his characters opaquely familiar against the brusque reality of the political landscape in which they operate. Their stories endure through printed materials, found and often clipped from Lebanon's turbulent modern history, infusing a reality that is indisputably physical and vivid: cutouts of cars described as those used for bombing, and migrant birds sent by soldiers to complicate the enemy's fauna, are among the findings that The Atlas Group utilised to recount alternative histories of Raad's Lebanon since he was born there in 1967. Elaborate character backgrounds, which read as mind-boggling wartime anecdotes, unfold as fables, disputable instances of ethereal human curiosity.

They defy Google-able knowledge at a time of cracked facts while hinting at their likelihood in someone's liquid memory.

The objective attraction of food is the main ingredient in Raad's *The Bleeding Stomach* series (2004/23), which narrates the incredible story of Chef Ramza, a prolific cook whose unparalleled command in the kitchen raised her to the rank of feeding the militia. In inkjet prints, Raad creates a diagram with photographs of meatballs and stuffed peppers whisked together by Ramza alongside their recipes and handwritten notes, all in Arabic. The honest immediacy of what poses as archival and the protagonist's intricate plot line together thin the distinctions between real and imagined. Against the strong probability of the chef stemming from the photography-trained artist's imagination, the conditions of the Lebanese Civil War where she supposedly cooked for the gunned dissidents remains brutally palpable. Beyond binaries between fiction and truth or history against myth, Raad conducts his speculative vignettes based on what he considers "created, found, and received".

Raad lays the foundation of his practice on a grey area where the archive – or the constant questioning of its definition and function – remains malleable and porous. The fact-delivering

nature of a resurfaced past remains in a constant ether while the artist reinforces the war's blow on the individual through a return to elusive recollections. He leaves the door ajar with a trust in the memory where erasure and resistance remain entangled. "There are so many concepts between absence and presence that we need to be tuned to," he says. Against the concrete brutality of physical oppression, he points at "the voluntary and involuntary memory" as an indelible source from which to borrow. He believes in "severing non-remembering from forgetting", as author Jalal Toufic said, as two co-dependent conditions: "Just because something is forgotten doesn't mean it is not remembered".

Raad's ongoing exhibition, *Festival of (In)Gratitude*, at Ljubljana's Moderna galerija, exhibits three bodies of work in which recollection appears as incredibly personal to a degree of pure imagination, as well as in the form of documented recent history. Besides works from The Atlas Group, the show features the series *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow* (2007), in which the artist quietly dissects the evolving umbrella of the Arab world through the region's growing cultural investment in Western-style art institutions. *Sweet Talk: Commissions (Beirut)* (2019), on the other hand, consists of looping videos in

which footage showing the demolition of the Lebanese capital's crumbling buildings to make way for new high-rises has a phoenix-like effect, with debris roaring like an angry beast and a budding flower. Predating 2020's devastating blast in the city, which Raad has been documenting for over 40 years, the sequences of explosion in a constant back-and-forth both hallucinate and trigger, tugging the viewer into a kinetic questioning of power.

Chance often plays its part in Raad's operations and he rarely starts his journey from scratch. "I am not a 'standing in front of a blank canvas' type of artist" he says about always having an object in hand at his upstate New York studio. 'Strange' is an initial quality which often attracts him to what chance puts in front of him, mostly during his trips back to Beirut. Then generally comes the curiosity of reception. "I ask where this thing that I received comes from," he says, adding how – in terms of responding to his enquiry – "it sometimes takes me days or, in other instances, years to figure out who made this thing that I now relate to as found." ■

*Festival of (In)Gratitude runs until 17 May and the 61st Venice Biennale Exhibition runs from 9 May until 22 November*