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Dissertation

**ART IS A LIE THAT MAKES US REALIZE TRUTH:
WALID RAAD'S ABSTRACT REALISM**

by

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ABSTRACT

Working across a range of media, the Lebanese-American artist Walid Raad severs and re-wires the links between reality, history, narrative fiction, and photographic indexicality, often by intervening in the presumed socio-political implications or technical aspects of canonical photographic forms. Raad relies on fiction to tell stories based on truths, merging visual abstraction and photographic realism to point to a dimension of reality that the documentary image alone cannot grasp. While Raad's artistic project has typically been described as a fictional archive and thus a critique of history *tout court*, this dissertation aims to describe his work according to a revised rubric of *realism*. Drawing on the literature and theory of trauma, I argue that Raad constructs a new language to narrate the otherwise inaccessible history of Lebanon's civil wars.

Raad's projects to date have engaged two core topics: the disastrous period of conflict in Lebanon (1975 to 1991) and the rise of a powerful global art market. Focusing primarily on *The Atlas Group*—which includes notebooks, videos, installations, and photographs—this dissertation analyzes Raad's use of photography to complicate the real events his works describe. Chapter One traces the combined effects of living through the early years of the civil war in Lebanon

and Raad's emigration to and education in the United States, where he has lived since 1983. Chapter Two looks at the role of language in Raad's work—from elaborate narrative captions and lecture-performances to the invention of an entire cast of fictional characters. Chapter Three examines several Atlas Group projects via their interrogation of photography's historical conjunction of evidence and indexicality. Chapter Four continues this line of investigation, but does so from a seemingly opposite perspective, investigating Raad's use of fiction, which he melds with an embrace of formal abstraction to echo the conceptual abstraction deployed in his narratives. In my conclusion, I consider Raad's most recent series of artworks in relation to his involvement in the artist-run activist group Gulf Labor to address how his engagement with realism is directly bound up with the politics of the global art world.