

# *Enfolded Worlds.* *Exhibiting Art from* *the Arab World* 2000-2016 Carolyn Christov- Bakargiev

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev is an Italian-American independent curator, theoretician, and art historian. She has lectured widely at art and educational institutions and Universities for the Arts and was Director of Castello di Rivoli Museum in Turin (2009 and 2016–23). She has curated critically acclaimed exhibitions including most recently *Arte Povera* at the Bourse de Commerce-Pinault Collection, Paris (2024–25), and was Artistic Director of *dOCUMENTA(13)* in Kassel (2009–12), for which she was awarded the Hessian Cultural Prize (Hessischer Kulturpreis) in 2015.

During my time at PS1 in the late 1990s, I worked with and exhibited artists from various parts of the globe, including those from the Arab world. This was not necessarily the result of a specific focus on artists from that region, but rather a reflection of New York’s inherently cosmopolitan nature. At that time, the city facilitated encounters with diverse artistic practices, and my curatorial interests were shaped by the conceptual and formal inquiries of the artists themselves.

The decision to host The Atlas Group (Walid Raad) at PS1 to present a lecture-performance *Secrets in the open sea*, proposed by the collective Nomads and Residents in 1999 and delivered in early 2000, was therefore never driven by an interest in a regional framework but by an engagement with the conceptual nature of his work. I was particularly drawn to the way his practice foregrounded that fine line between fact and fiction which is now intrinsic to our digital era. At a time when this kind of analysis of manipulation was still in its nascent stages—long before the widespread discourse on fake news and AI generated material—Raad’s work anticipated critical questions about the construction of truth. He exposed the ways in which historical narratives could be mediated, distorted, or reimagined, making visible the mechanisms through which a fact can also not be a fact, and a fiction can be real in a different way.

This became one of the most important and urgent questions of our time. We find ourselves in a situation where the boundaries between reality and fabrication are so blurred that it’s almost impossible to determine who elected whom, who produced what, or even who knows what. What initially drew me to Raad was his use of the digital space, using a website and other tools to construct a false story, a narrative that plays with possibility, yet underpinned by a deeply philosophical approach. He is a great artist because he inhabits a space of ambivalence and ambiguity, which is the highest form of art. In his work, meaning is never fixed; it is fluid, shifting. A piece could mean one thing—or it could mean something entirely different. Take, for instance, those blue monochromes from *Secrets in the open sea* that might be hiding information or might be nothing more than a monochrome. It is this precise tension that defines his work.

This interrogation of (un)reality using the digital world was what I was interested in, not so much the origin of the artist, even though broader questions about the influence of the cultural and historical landscapes on artistic production are obviously important, and in the case of artists from the Arab world there is for example the influence of Islamic visual culture. But these were not the initial impetus for my engagement with

their work. Of course, Raad came from Lebanon, a crossroads of spies in the 1970s and 1980s and therefore the question of fictionalized identities was at the core of life.

Beyond Raad, other artists from the Arab world or broader Islamic cultural spheres were also present in PS1's programs. One example is Adel Abdessemed, who was invited to the PS1 studios long before his career gained international recognition. Undoubtedly the programming at PS1 was a direct reflection of that moment in time, in New York City. At the time, around 2000 or 2001, I also met Emily Jacir who had a studio at the World Trade Center; it was part of a cultural center run by Moukhtar Kocache. Jacir is a delicate artist—deeply precise, conceptual, and rigorous in her approach. She belongs firmly to the tradition of European and American conceptualism, more aligned with the lineage of artists like Hans Haacke than with any direct engagement with Islamic aesthetics. There are no numerical systems, no geometric repetitions, no folded universes in her work. Instead, she operates in the realm of evidence, of documentation, of proof, of performance. Her practice is forensic in nature—she gathers, collects, and presents material evidence. Rather than constructing narratives, she reveals narratives and real-life stories. There is an investigative impulse in her work, a desire to trace histories and expose systems, making visible what is often obscured. Whether it's the cyclical devaluation of currency, the bureaucratic structures of power, or the assassination of Wael Zuaiter in Rome, her works do not simply recount—they present irrefutable proof. Photography, paper, currency, testimonies—each material choice reinforces her role as an investigator, revealing the mechanics of control, erasure, and resistance. It is the poetics of the document, a space where form and content converge with an almost surgical precision.

It's much later that my sustained and deliberate engagement with artistic practices from the Arab world developed more consciously. Although already in 1997, I had noticed the near-total absence of artists from the Arab world in *documenta X* curated by Catherine David. Some years later, I asked David about this omission, and she remarked that while she had encountered many intellectuals and thinkers from the region, she had not found a visual arts community that resonated with her curatorial approach at the time. Interestingly, this absence later shaped her own inquiries, leading to her exhibition at MACBA in Barcelona—a significant early institutional engagement in Europe with contemporary Arab artistic production.



Walid Raad, *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow*  
Installation view, dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, 2012

When I left PS1 in 2002, I assumed the role of chief curator at Castello di Rivoli. Though I took a leave of absence in 2007–08 to curate *Revolutions – Forms That Turn* in Sydney, I returned to Rivoli at the end of 2008. I was selected to become director of documenta in early December 2008, and being nominated to lead *dOCUMENTA(13)*, I had to decline the directorship of Castello di Rivoli, but remained interim director until a successor was appointed in late 2009.

By the time I began working on *dOCUMENTA(13)* in early 2009, it seemed imperative to critically engage with artistic practices from the Arab world. This was not only because of its historical underrepresentation in previous editions of documenta, but also due to a deeper intellectual concern in my curatorial vision: the relationship between digital culture and Islamic aesthetics, particularly as it pertains to mathematical structures and algorithmic patterning.

This intersection was articulated by Laura Marks in her book *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (2010), which, although published later, in mid 2010, resonated with my preexisting reflections on the subject. Marks, drawing on Deleuzian thought—specifically *le pli* and its conceptualization of the universe as an infinitely folded structure—argued that Islamic aesthetic traditions, particularly their numerological and algorithmic dimensions, offer a crucial framework for understanding the emerging digital culture. Her work highlighted how algorithmic processes underlying digital media parallel the logic of Islamic geometric abstraction, wherein complex structures emerge through iterative patterning. In this sense, the technological image—composed of pixelated codes and algorithmic sequences—can be understood through a framework that predates digital culture, one rooted in a numerological and geometric

understanding of form. The word algorithm itself is a latinized version of the name of ninth century scholar Muhammad ibn Mūsā al-Khwārizmī.

In this context, Walid Raad's practice became particularly significant, with his manipulation of digital images which are themselves created by code. His work interrogated the construction of historical truth and the fluid boundaries between fact and fiction—concerns that became increasingly relevant as digital culture expanded. At the time, what we now recognize as algorithmic culture was still referred to as “media culture.” The discourse surrounding digital aesthetics was nascent, but already artists were beginning to explore how computational processes could shape visual and narrative forms. Raad's role in my *dOCUMENTA(13)* cannot be overstated. He was a close collaborator and became a close friend. Our shared interest not only in technology but more importantly in the intersection of art and science was central to many of our discussions. This dialogue is inextricably linked to an Islamic aesthetic tradition—one that engages with the world through mathematical structures. The conceptual framework underpinning this tradition suggests a cosmos that is both infinitely folded and infinitely unfolding, wherein divine presence is never directly perceived but rather intuited through patterns, from the microcosm of a single leaf or cell to the vast macrocosm of black holes and the universe itself.

In many ways, Raad is the most Islamic artist, though not at all religious in the conventional sense. His work is mathematical, calculated, precise—coded. He taps into a deep understanding of Islamic aesthetics, yet without subscribing to belief. This is crucial. The way he works with form, structure, and the language of aesthetics is detached, not in the sense of rejection, but in critical engagement, understanding the philosophy behind the patterns and systems. There are many artists today in the Arab world who produce works that superficially resemble Islamic aesthetics, yet sometimes they fail to grasp the philosophy that underpins it. They at times lack the critical consciousness, the ability to deconstruct the language they use. Raad, on the other hand, uses every tool of Islamic aesthetics with detachment, with critical awareness. He does this not with negative critique but with a deep insight into the layers of meaning that exist within these forms. It's almost like a semiotic deconstruction, akin to what someone like Umberto Eco might have done—understanding the full depth of a system of signs and how to use it. Raad's work leads us into a state of *ataraxia*, a suspension of judgment. It's the impossibility of making a definitive conclusion because he has weighed every side, every possibility. This is a state of purity, of abstraction. His

work stands in that space of absolute abstraction—similar in spirit to the work of someone like Robert Ryman. He reaches a perfection in his abstraction that is rare, one that transcends context, whether it's the internet, a gallery, or a collection storage.

I remain mindful of the distinction between Arab and Islamic aesthetics. While the former pertains to a linguistic and cultural identity, the latter is deeply rooted in mathematical principles and visual structures and runs through different cultures in the world. This mode of seeing—the articulation of form through numerical and algorithmic patterning—has resonances not only in Islamic artistic traditions but also in aspects of Jewish mysticism, particularly in Kabbalistic thought, as well as in the hierarchical cosmologies of angelic orders across all three monotheistic religions of the Book. It is, in many ways, a philosophical inheritance of the South Mediterranean world, shaped by pre-Socratic thought and preserved through the intellectual legacy of the Arab civilization at its apex.

In the contemporary moment, I see this legacy manifesting in the work of Walid Raad. His practice—both consciously and unconsciously—engages with these structures, interrogating the intersections of art, mathematics, and digital epistemologies. During the development of *dOCUMENTA(13)*, our exchanges were invaluable. He introduced me to scientists such as Dr. Ali Brivanlou, whose encounter with Pierre Huyghe was crucial, and several artists whose work I later pursued, including those engaged in photographic inquiries into the Arab world, such as Akram Zaatari.

I got to know Zaatari, as a person, as an artist—his work is deeply thoughtful, rigorous, and filled with a quiet, speculative intelligence. His project for *dOCUMENTA(13)* was remarkable: the act of burying a time capsule, a gesture of both preservation and concealment. It's still there, hidden, waiting for an uncertain future to rediscover it. No one knows exactly where—except a few of us, and even that knowledge fades with time. In many ways, he is a science fiction artist. His practice operates at the intersection of truth and fiction, imagination and historical record. Like Walid Raad, his work interrogates narratives—how they are formed, how they are projected, and how they shape our perception of the past and future. But Zaatari works through a speculative lens, a form of storytelling that stretches across time, anticipating future encounters with the traces he leaves behind. In this sense, there is a connection to Emily Jacir as well—both share a deep commitment to the archive, to the weight of evidence, and to the act of making the unseen tangible. His work functions as an archaeology of things yet to come, a projection



Etel Adnan, installation view, documenta (13), Kassel, 2012

into the future as much as an excavation of the past. There is something profoundly cinematic about his approach—a careful construction of time, space, and meaning, always aware of the gaps, the unknowns, and the narratives waiting to unfold.

At the time, I also became keen to engage with figures such as Etel Adnan. I had encountered her literary work in Paris, had read *Sitt Marie Rose* (1978), her seminal novel. I was introduced to her by Andrée Sfeir-Semler at the opening of her solo exhibition in Beirut in 2010. This meeting was not incidental—it was a deliberate engagement that I sought, and that aligned with my broader curatorial and intellectual inquiries into histories, languages, and the ways in which aesthetic forms encode and unfold complex narratives. When I encountered her paintings in Beirut for the first time, I was compelled to invite her to *documenta(13)* on the spot, and I wanted to assemble a comprehensive and chronologically structured presentation of her work. Adnan and Simone Fattal, who were a couple, stayed at my house in Kassel during this period, a residence located at the edge of the Karlsaue Park—incidentally, the historical home of the Brothers Grimm. It was a large space, and I often hosted artists there, had so many conversations over shared meals. One morning at breakfast, eighty-four-year-old Adnan remarked: “If only you had invited me ten years ago, when I was in my seventies, I could have put so much more energy into this exhibition.” I laughed—seventy, after all, was hardly young—but it was characteristic of her wit. She was eighty-seven when we opened the documenta! This was her first major presentation of visual art and had a great impact on her subsequent career.

Etel Adnan’s paintings were never about grand pictorial revolutions; rather, they were about the quiet insistence on beauty, the survival of

joy and vision in the face of history’s weight. Her works carry the spirit of Matisse, not just in their chromatic intensity, but in their belief in painting as a form of vitality, as something life affirming. At the same time, they evoke Alighiero Boetti’s small tapestries—the way he produced hundreds, metaphorically ensuring that anyone could possess one. This proliferation of intimate, personal paintings creates a kind of poetry of generosity, of optimism. What fascinated me was the contrast: the lightness and simplicity of these paintings set against the gravity of the histories she described in her writing. They were, in a sense, an antidote, or at least a refusal of despair. Their modest scale also carried a quiet innovation—painting not on an easel but flat, at a desk, as if writing. This shift in bodily engagement with the work created a particular intimacy, as though each painting were a letter, written and sent out to the world. Unlike a vertical canvas that meets the viewer head-on, her approach allowed the landscape to be seen from above, abstracting it further. In an age where images are endlessly reproduced and dematerialized, Etel Adnan’s paintings retained their singularity. There’s something almost paradoxical in this—like a pre-digital version of the NFT concept, where uniqueness is not artificially enforced but naturally embedded in the act of making. Each small canvas, sent into the world, carried its own destiny, its own presence. And this, perhaps, is where the true radicality of her work lies—not in technical breakthroughs, but in the belief that art can be both deeply personal and profoundly expansive, a luminous offering to the world.

Andrée Sfeir-Semler had also introduced me to the work of Wael Shawky in 2009. Discovering his work was like a revelation. The first film of his *Cabaret Crusades* trilogy, created during a residency in Italy at Michelangelo Pistoletto’s Foundation Cittadellarte, near Castello di Rivoli was included in the Istanbul Biennial of 2011 curated by Adriano Pedrosa and Jens Hoffman—and by then I was already working with Shawky. When he started filming *Cabaret Crusades: The Path to Cairo* (2012) in Aubagne, I traveled there, and we ended up premiering that film at *documenta(13)*.

Wael Shawky is a deeply religious artist. I know this classification can be contentious, but his work engages deeply with notions of faith, devotion, and artistic perfection. Craft is extremely important to him—whether in prop-making, editing, or sound design, every element is meticulously precise. There is a sense of harmony in his compositions, a synesthetic quality where sound and image are inextricably linked. A ceramic object resonates differently from glass or cloth or wood or terracotta,



Wael Shawky, exhibition view, Castello di Rivoli, Turin, 2016

and these material nuances shape the sonic and visual experience of his films and installations. His pursuit is that of a total artwork—an *opera d'arte totale*—grand and refined enough to praise the divine, in whatever form that takes. Shawky is a practicing Muslim, yet his artistic position is not unlike that of Fra Angelico, who saw his role as an artist as one of servitude—creating the most perfect object possible in devotion. He is driven by a spiritual impulse, channeling history through art as a means of revelation. His engagement with history, particularly the Crusades, is shaped by an awareness of historical distortion. Initially influenced by Amin Maalouf’s novels, Shawky later turned to Arab historians, whose chronologies resist Western teleological narratives; his world operates chronologically in a strict numerical rhythm—one event following another without imposed synthesis or interpretation. This approach allows him to bring to light what he sees as European historical hypocrisies and to reconstruct history through a non-Western, Arab lens.

His most recent work, *Drama 1882* (2024) presented in Venice, extends this inquiry, shifting focus to the British Empire’s role in the decline



Anna Boghiguian, installation view, dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, 2012



Rabih Mroué, *The Fall of a Hair: Blow Ups* Installation view, dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, 2012

of the Ottoman Empire. Through strategic interventions—supporting fragmented nationalisms from the Balkans to North Africa—the British engineered geopolitical shifts with lasting consequences. Shawky’s reversal, or rather illumination, of these histories mirrors his earlier approach to the Crusades. The supposed religious motivations of the Crusaders stand in stark contrast to their actions—Venice, a deeply Christian city, looted Constantinople, another Christian city, under the guise of a crusade. His work exposes these contradictions, revealing the material and political ambitions often hidden behind ideological narratives. At its core, Shawky’s practice is one of perfectionism, a pursuit of the highest possible artistic quality in an era that no longer values the term. Today, “quality” itself is often dismissed as conservative or outdated. We are far from the early twentieth century, when Kurt Schwitters sought to elevate discarded materials in *Merzbau*. Now, we exist in a world overrun with refuse—digital debris, space junk, discarded fast fashion flooding entire continents. Trash is no longer an artistic statement; it is the defining condition of our time. Shawky, in response, moves in the opposite direction, insisting on precision and refinement in an age of excess and disposability.

Anna Boghiguian, on the other hand, came from a different encounter. I first saw her work at the 2007 Thessaloniki Biennale curated by Catherine David. I remember being completely astonished by it. That was the first time I encountered her work, and from that moment, I knew I wanted to meet her. I worked with her for documenta first, then at the Istanbul Biennial in 2015 she contributed a large-scale work, *The Salt Traders* (2015), a piece that intertwined histories of migration, trade, and environmental change. Initially produced with support from an Armenian benefactor, it later became part of the Castello di Rivoli

collection, ensuring its continued presence in critical discourse: the work really captured cycles of collapse and resurgence across civilizations.

Anna Boghiguan's transformation of the book into visual art is key to understanding her practice. She doesn't just create singular drawings; each of her works require the experience of many drawings together in an installation. It emerges from a deep connection to the book—a format intimately tied to Armenian culture, especially with its long tradition of biblical and literary history. For her, the book isn't simply a passive object; it's a dynamic, evolving space. She takes the concept of a book and turns it into an installation, which engages viewers in a pop-up format, almost like unfolding chapters of a larger narrative. Her passion for books is rooted in her intellectual background, having studied philosophy and engaging with literature, poetry, and intellectual history. Although much of her research is done through the internet, her travel with books connects her to a long tradition of portable, devotional objects, like the small triptychs carried on journeys since the Middle Ages. For me, this understanding of the book, as both a physical and philosophical object, is at the heart of her art. She's a traveler, carrying not just physical books but the intellectual and spiritual baggage they represent. The idea of the book isn't confined to its traditional form but becomes a dynamic, movable object of devotion and intellectual exploration. This makes her not just a visual artist, but someone who reinterprets the relationship between words and image-making in a profoundly innovative way.

In 2009, I became aware of Rabih Mroué's work as he had presented a striking performance at Centre Pompidou as part of the *Festival d'Automne* in Paris. My husband, Cesare Pietroiusti, had attended and told me about it. He described it in vivid detail, fascinated by the way it played with truth, secrecy, fiction, and storytelling. That conversation made me think about Walid Raad's work and the way it also engages with narrative constructions. There was something about Lebanon's geopolitical history that seemed to shape this artistic language—this persistent examination of truth and fabrication. I imagined Beirut in the 1970s as a world of spies and counterspies, a place where the lines between reality and fiction blurred, much like the investigative impulse in these works. I knew then that if I ever had the chance, I would collaborate with Mroué. As it turned out, I didn't have to search far. Eventually, I met him in Berlin, again through Andrée Sfeir-Semler, and saw his performance there. The timeline is slightly blurred, but it must have been around 2010 or 2011. What remains clear, though, is how much Cesare admired that first performance and how long we spoke about it afterward. It had left an undeniable impression.

I think Mroué is one of the most compelling artists working today, particularly in his ability to embody trauma—both its production and its liberation through technology. His practice engages deeply with the intersection of pain, media, and violence. After all, we shoot with a camera just as we shoot with a gun. In many ways, his work parallels that of Walid Raad, particularly in their shared interrogation of truth, sincerity, and insincerity. However, while both artists employ lecture performances as a method, their approaches diverge formally and technically. What sets Mroué apart is his insistence on the question of authenticity—what it means to be authentic in a society shaped by control, surveillance, and power structures. In this sense, his work resonates with Heideggerian notions of authenticity and the complexities of sustaining it within a police state. To fully grasp Mroué's explorations, one might turn to thinkers like Althusser—not because he necessarily references them, but because their frameworks help articulate the tensions he navigates. His work underscores how the medium itself shapes meaning, aligning with McLuhan's assertion that “the medium is the message.” Ultimately, Mroué's inquiry into authenticity inevitably leads to the question of pain. The struggle for authenticity in a technologically mediated world is fraught with difficulty, and his work lays bare the weight of that pursuit. Mroué created an exceptional artwork referencing Syria for *dOCUMENTA(13)* that we showed at the old Bahnhof: *The Pixelated Revolution* (2012).

At the dawn of the digital age, it felt urgent to bring a strong presence of Arab artists into the documenta. Many of them indeed came from North Africa and the broader Arab world. One such artist was Kader Attia, whom I encountered through Galleria Continua in Paris. At the time, he was still an emerging artist and had yet to gain significant recognition. His project at *dOCUMENTA(13)* was a defining moment in his practice. While he had previously created installations that could be seen as metaphoric landscapes, this was the first time he fully embraced an archival methodology—where the role of the artist merged with that of the archivist. His work became a form of research, a way of collecting and presenting history as material. I think he represents the perfect synthesis of these impulses: the archive, the sculptor, the intellectual philosopher, theoretician, historian, and the visual artist. His focus on reparation—both in the restoration of African objects and in the reconstruction of faces disfigured by World War I—embodied one of the two core ideas I was working with in documenta. The first idea was *multi-species co-evolution*, the idea that to become more humane, we had to become less humanist, less anthropocentric. That paradox—decentering the human in order



Kadier Attia, *The Repair from Occident to Extra Occidental Cultures*  
Installation view, dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, 2012

to exist more ethically within a broader ecosystem—was fundamental to my curatorial approach, which is why I published so many feminist science studies and authors in the notebook series, or dedicated the *Wordly House* in the Aue Park to Donna Haraway, an important advisor on my team,. It was at the core of Pierre Huyghe's work for documenta. The second main concept I had was around the relationship between *destruction and reconstruction*, the necessity of repair in a place marked by war and the Nazi period. Here Attia's work wove this theme into the European colonial history of Africa through the archival impulse, showing how reparation is not just about individual objects or bodies, but about histories, narratives, and cultural memory through those singular objects. His approach didn't just document wounds—it proposed ways to reckon with them, to acknowledge the violence of the past while insisting on the possibility of repair.

Another fundamental artist in this context was Tarek Atoui. When I first saw his performance at Media City Seoul in 2010, where he had been invited by my friend and documenta curatorial agent Sunjung Kim, what struck me wasn't just the sound but the body—the way the performer moved, how the body itself became an instrument, shaped by and shaping technology in return. It wasn't about music in the traditional sense; it was about a human being in dialogue with a machine, navigating the tension between control and surrender. At that time, analog music was fading, and Tarek Atoui was in a Sisyphus-like attempt to counter the loss of the body. During documenta he also began his workshops in the Orangerie to create homemade analog instruments from daily life objects, which has become a major part of his practice. That moment was pivotal—it marked the beginning of an entirely new trajectory in his work,



Tarek Atoui, *Metastable Circuit 1*  
Performance, dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, 2012

one that would later expand into countless projects. But what fascinated me in that early performance was how he engaged with technology not as something overwhelming or deterministic, but as something to be ridden, like a powerful horse in the desert. You're not simply carried by it—you guide it, respond to it, enter into a relationship with it. This was at the heart of his practice: the survival of the human in the technological era. And out of his work, a whole generation of artists emerged. You can trace a direct line from his performances to the explosion of sound-based performance art, to DJs and experimental musicians who began working with similar embodied interactions. What he initiated—this fusion of body movement, sound, and technology—went far beyond his own performances, setting off a whole generation in this direction.

What I find crucial about the curatorial vision for *dOCUMENTA(13)* is how the question of *reparation* intersects with art, artifacts, and culture. It's not just about restoring objects; it's about the idea that the most human of creations—art, books, and culture—need reparation. Michael Rakowitz's work deals deeply with the loss and restoration of cultural heritage, and that's not an isolated issue. It's intertwined with the broader question of how we treat the planet and its ecosystems. This connection between the repair of culture and the repair of the environment is something I think very few people grasp. It's essential to understand that human civilization and its cultural expressions are key elements in the larger ecosystem. Without acknowledging the interrelation between culture and ecology, we cannot truly think about the planet's future. There's a difference between people who want to save the planet by imagining a world with fewer humans, as if a perfect ecosystem could exist without human life, and those who see the planet's survival as inseparable



Michael Rakowitz, *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist*, 2007,  
exhibition view, Lombard-Fried Gallery, New York, 2007

from the survival of human cultures. I'm not one to advocate for a utopia where humans disappear into smaller numbers to leave the Earth untouched. In my view, we need to repair the ecosystem and culture together. And this brings me to the issue of identity and history—like with Rakowitz, it's critical to acknowledge not just his American identity, but also his Iraqi background. His work isn't just about where he lives now, but about what he carries with him from his origins. The nuances of his heritage, his Iraqi roots, are intrinsic to his artistic practice and the way he addresses historical loss and the reparation of culture. It's important not to flatten identity but to recognize the full complexity that shapes an artist's vision.

Like many Americans, Rakowitz is a descendant of immigrants, but his artistic trajectory follows a different path—one of reverse cultural migration. His work is, in many ways, a process of becoming an Arab artist, navigating a space of belonging shaped by displacement and loss. His grandparents, Baghdadi Jews, were forced to leave abruptly in the aftermath of 1948, as the founding of Israel triggered a backlash against Jewish communities across the region. Throughout much of the Arab world, the coexistence that had defined these communities gave way to radicalization and rupture. This history informs Rakowitz's artistic pursuit: an attempt to reconstruct a lost world, a utopia of coexistence that existed in memory but was violently disrupted. His sense of dislocation is compounded by the cultural framework of American identity, which has been largely shaped by European migration—particularly from Northern Europe. American traditions, from language to cuisine, often feel more aligned with Dutch, German, or British influences than with the cultural legacies of the Middle East. For Rakowitz, this absence fuels a longing—his work becomes a way to reconstruct the erased or forgotten connections between Arab and Jewish histories. Technically, his practice of repairing looted and destroyed artifacts—particularly those damaged after the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the looting of the Baghdad Museum—carries a profound psychological weight. It is an act of reparation, driven by a sense of guilt, a reckoning with the uncomfortable position of being both the descendant of a displaced people and a citizen of the country that has perpetrated destruction in their homeland. This tension runs through his work, operating almost as a psychoanalytic process—a way of confronting the trauma of having, in some way, become complicit in the erasure of a culture to which he also belongs. At its core, Rakowitz's work is a paradoxical pursuit: a desire to repair, to reclaim, and to inhabit an identity that was fractured by history. His artistic practice is, in many

ways, an ongoing negotiation of that paradox—an exploration of what it means to reconstruct a world that was lost.

As the Istanbul Biennial I curated followed *dOCUMENTA(13)*, it seemed natural that my engagement with artists from the region influenced my selection. The geographical position of Istanbul—straddling both the Arab and European worlds, between Islamic and Christian traditions—reinforced this approach. Given the significance of 2015 as the centennial of the Armenian Genocide—though the term itself was legally fraught in Turkey—I sought alternative ways to engage with the history of trauma. I used the Armenian phrase for “The Great Catastrophe,” a term that carried the weight of remembrance without violating legal restrictions. Haig Aivazian created a powerful piece involving singing and the Armenian community, staged within a former Greek school—a site imbued with its own layers of displacement and loss giving the work a universal resonance. I also invited Marwan Rechmaoui—I found his work beautiful and significant, he is a remarkable sculptor, deeply attuned to the ravages of destruction and war. His sculptures embody the physical and emotional scars that such violence leaves behind. At first glance, they may appear abstract, yet they are profoundly figurative. The destruction of the world, when witnessed in its raw form, becomes something almost unrecognizable—an abstraction forged by trauma. In this way, his work captures the disfigured essence of reality, reduced to its essential forms, yet carrying the weight of lived history. And of course, Walid Raad, Wael Shawky, Etel Adnan, and Anna Boghigian were all also involved in Istanbul as well as many other artists from Turkey and around the world.

This interweaving of histories, from the Armenian diaspora to broader questions of displacement and resilience, became a defining aspect of that biennial. It was an extension of what had begun in *dOCUMENTA(13)*—a sustained engagement with artists whose work speaks to the complexities of place, memory, and transformation.