

The Artist as a  
*History-  
Teller*

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# Introduction or How Did my Day-job Become my Art?

“Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else.”

— Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*<sup>1</sup>

I have lived and worked in Amsterdam for almost four years. I came to attend the Gerrit Reitveld Academie. Soon after arriving in Amsterdam, I found work as a tour guide, a profession I practiced in Israel. With time, tour guiding has developed into a crucial element in my thinking about art and informed my artistic practice as well.

Initially I worked as a city guide, taking Israeli and American tourists to see the “best of Amsterdam” including the city’s night life, and for tours about Jewish life in Amsterdam, before and during WWII . It was through these tours, walking from Rembrandt’s home to Anne Frank’s house, through the red-light district, that the image of the best of Amsterdam cracked, revealing

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1. Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston, p.44

the distance between the image of the city and its reality in its full complexity.

Later on, as my career developed, I started leading art focused tours in the Van Gogh museum, the Stedelijk museum, in the Rijksmuseum and in various galleries. As an experienced guide, I arrived at these spaces knowing that they try to tell a certain story, that what is presented simply as history or chronology is in fact a self-affirming narrative. While I enjoyed making art accessible to individuals coming from very diverse backgrounds, I also witnessed how the institution of art is co-opted to justify the national narrative, obscuring colonialism and other wrongdoings, even though the traces are evident in the works.



Leading a tour within a space that is unfamiliar to the group made me fall in love with the activity of interrogating the narratives presented there and mediating their complexity to the listeners. Guiding in the Rijksmuseum, I felt I was experimenting with reading between the lines of the national narrative and I learned of the power of the guide to assert or disrupt this process. I felt a strong relation to this activity, in the sense that it opened up a space for sharing experiences and for speculation.

The possibilities that I discovered while working as a guide had affected me immensely. I wanted my own art to resonate with the same possibilities. This led me to integrate the character of the tour guide in my work. I felt my practice as an artist and as a tour guide provided me with a unique way of seeing. Tour guiding, like art, involves a keen perception for details and the ability to tell a story. The intimate knowledge of a place that comes from guiding allowed me access to hidden aspects of the museum and the city. I realized that often the hegemonic narrative is challenged by the traces of the past which mark the stones of the city. I came to experience art as a chance to investigate these hidden traces. It became a meeting point between personal memory, sensual experience and the political context. I started, therefore, exploring the idea of a guided tour as a performance piece. This image, of the artist as a tour guide, found in other works of art such as

Dante's Virgil and Beatrice has fascinated and compelled me.

I imagine the artist-as-tour-guide as related to the figures of the *flâneur* and the *storyteller*, as they appear in the works of Walter Benjamin. Michel Foucault's idea of *heterotopia* helps me understand the workings of the tour in the space of art, viewing the museum and the gallery as spaces that discipline and educate and the artist-as-tour-guide as a potentially disruptive element in these spaces.

I will investigate these ideas through a reading of the works of Francis Alÿs, Yael Bartana, William Kentridge and Walid Raad. They are all influential artists who I believe play on this border between artists and guide-storytellers, as they become active elements in within their work. I will discuss the different structures that allow for a creation of temporary, alternative realities within protective borders, either those of a museum, a gallery or within a group on a tour. By studying these questions, I wish to explore issues that inspire me in my work, such as storytelling as a tool that questions and reforms ideas of identity, migration and history. In the works of all four artists exile, forced or self-imposed, is an important element. They all deal with the experience of being displaced from one's home due to civil war, political turmoil or migration. Consequently, they develop a distance. They are all looking awry at the realities from which they came from and

the realities in which they have settled. They try to use them as resources to recreate a sensible story.

The works I have studied focus on the subject of histories in relation to migration, civil wars and identity. They all investigate the idea of borders, coherent narrative and the meeting points between the political and the personal. These artists work in South Africa, the Middle East, South and North America and Europe. Even though they are located in different continents and have different backgrounds and different methods of working, they all share similar concerns and characteristics. They are all motivated by the injustice that they were exposed to, either general or biographical, as in the case of Bartana, Kentridge and Raad.

They are all trying to frame historical events that affected them and introduce them to the space of the gallery or the museum. In a way, it is as if they take newspaper articles, color them and allow them to develop as artistic statements. Alÿs, Bartana, Kentridge and Raad are using a performative act, embedded in fictional stories, so that a new element appears. With this method they expose different points of view, showing that the truth is constructed of different layers and perspectives that together might create a complete story. The fantasy or their personal logic of images and stories is being embedded in actual locations, narratives and histories. This

allows one to imagine other possible futures and to create a wider perspective that is not limited by the borders of the real and could question the essence of the concept of the historical truth and its narratives.



# Walter Benjamin

## Seeing the Small Picture

Walter Benjamin was a philosopher, an art critic and a translator. He was passionately interested in Marxism, Jewish mysticism and is considered to be one of the founders of critical theory. Benjamin is known for his opaque writing style, through which his thoughts were mended slowly from fragments into a coherent idea. Benjamin was born in 1892 in Berlin to a German Jewish family. He studied philosophy and finished his doctorate in Bern, Switzerland. He returned to Germany but failed to find an academic position. He lived in Berlin until the rise of the National Socialists at 1933, when he moved to France. Benjamin had lived in France before and was very familiar with its culture, as the translator and a scholar of Baudelaire and Proust. After he moved, he started to look in greater depth into French culture, seeing Paris as the capital of modern times. When France was occupied in 1940, Benjamin fled to Spain but was caught crossing the border. The same night he committed suicide. On the day after he was to be released.<sup>2</sup>

Many people see in Benjamin's tragic life story a living metaphor of his writing. His unstable, hectic presence in Europe, always trav-

2. "About Walter Benjamin" in: Walter Benjamin, Mivkhar Ktavim [Selected Texts] Tel Aviv, Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1992, p. 114

eling, seemingly unable to fit in anywhere, reflects his fragmented style of writing that always touches on many things but never fully commits to any. Due to the circumstances of his life he had a share in a number of different cultures, regimes and languages. At the same time, he was constantly rejected from these cultures, regimes and languages due to his politics, nationality or Jewish identity.

It seems to me that when Benjamin writes in fragments, he mixes his personal history with his theory. His critical thinking proposes the idea that theory should actively connect with daily life and challenge its conventions. His unique conception of history developed through examining minor details such as different figures of statues in a park or childhood experiences in the countryside, as part of a wider picture.<sup>3</sup> In his view modernity has increased the processes of destruction of human experience - whether it is the World War, extreme economic phenomena such as inflation or even the amount of people passing through a very crowded junction, alienated from one another. Therefore, history by definition is everything that ever existed and was destroyed. Any attempt to frame it in one form or another, as a coherent narrative, would be artificial and almost brutal.<sup>4</sup>

3. Benjamin [Selected Texts], p. 7

4. "Theses on the philosophy of history"(1940) in: Ruins (MIT Press/Whitechapel Gallery, 2011), p. 41

# The “Flâneur” Walks in The Structure of The Ongoing Changing Experience

The hero of the modern era for Benjamin is the *flâneur*, from the French verb *flaner*, which means to wander joyfully with no purpose. The *flâneur* is the one who appears in the big city, seeking to define himself through the urban experience. The idea traveled from the thought of E.A. Poe in the US (for example in his short story “The Man of the Crowd”, 1840<sup>5</sup>) to mid-19th century Paris where it became central to the ideas of Baudelaire (“The Painter of Modern Life”, 1863).<sup>6</sup> Benjamin identifies the place where the wandering experience unfolds with the Passages, the hidden discarded parts of the modern urban architecture, where the “left-overs” of history, rejected from the cycle of commodities, is accumulated. For Walter Benjamin the figure of the “Flâneur” stands for the wanderer who is mixing stories, objects, centuries with his own emotional, associative personal experience and point of view.<sup>7</sup>

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5. Edgar Allan Poe, and J. Gerald Kennedy. The portable Edgar Allan Poe. New York: Penguin Books. 2006, p. 233

6. Eli. Friedlander, Walter Benjamin : A Philosophical Portrait (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), p.10; Baudelaire Charles, “The Painter of Modern Life,” The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays Translated and Edited by Jonathan Mayne, Oxford: Phaidon Press,(First Published in 1863), 1964.

7. Benjamin, Mivkhar Ktavim [Selected Texts], p. 50







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# Francis Alÿs

## Suspiciously Drawing a Line

I have recently read an article about the artist Francis Alÿs (1959). There it was mentioned that Mexico is Alÿs's adopted home country, though he is originally from Belgium. His physical appearance was also described. As slim, tall, elegant, charismatic man.<sup>8</sup> I was fascinated by this idea of adopting a home country. It makes the idea of home and a motherland very flexible, an active choice. I wonder, did he adopt Mexico or did Mexico had to agree to adopt him? This almost light conception of a motherland lead me to think of his approach in a work he made in my motherland.

In 1995 Alÿs had marked Jerusalem with a green line and made a video recording this action.<sup>9</sup> He had used 58 liters of green paint to trace 24 km. He always seems so calm; his work seems almost effortless yet very precise. Alÿs chose to perform in a highly charged area walking slowly pouring a very specific shade of green paint, that is sharply visible while being poured. I have been wondering

8. "Francis Alÿs: Surreal Whimsy Meets Ethical Commitment," Financial Times, accessed December 12, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/6bcd8-3074-11ea-a329-0bcf87a328f2>.

9. Francis Alÿs, "The Green Line" Francis Alÿs, accessed December 12, 2019, <https://francisalys.com/the-green-line/>.

if he had any self-reflection while doing that. Did he think of his position as a white European man while adopting Mexico or while walking in the Middle East marking the ground? There's a sharp contradiction between his playful and cool approach and the subject that this and other works engage with. *The Green Line* questions the role and the legitimacy of the artist's action in such a loaded place as Israel/Palestine. In this work he refers to the figure of the *flâneur*, explored by Walter Benjamin. The character of the *flâneur* makes me wonder, can one allow oneself, as an artist, to just walk through without taking a stance? I often wonder about this question. What is my role as an artist in relation to current political issues? I often have the feeling that my position as an artist can be either passing through or getting trapped in a rhetoric of one ideology or another. What could be the third option?

I believe that a model for that third way can be found in Alÿs's works. In the "the Green Line", for example, after he had filmed the documentation of the walk, he had presented it to a number of people whom he invited to react spontaneously to what they had seen. Then, by adding the interviews to the filmed footage he had created 10 different versions of the action. In that way he allowed the "simple" act of walking to become loaded and reveal the real meaning that was hiding underneath it the whole time. Among

the people that he had interviewed there were an anthropologist, historians, architects, a journalist, activists, a film maker, a politician and a publisher, mostly Israelis and Palestinians.<sup>10</sup> Assembling all of the above together created a wide and critical view of the situation in the places were Alÿs “just” walked through. “How could one think of art as political without falling into propaganda or activist kind of strategies?” Jean Fisher, an art historian asked Alÿs and herself in one of the recorded talks he had added.<sup>11</sup>

Somehow, I have the impression that art that reaches beyond trying to resolve a problem is the kind of art that changes things. Jean Fisher defined it as artwork “that can give you a sense of [its] expansiveness”.<sup>12</sup> The work of art, by itself, cannot carry a definite message but it can raise and frame political issues and thoughts. Art pieces that touch me the most are the ones that are more fluid, that allow this personal or poetic view to be the key point, that would shed a new light on the issue. Art pieces that allow the viewers to find themselves within “that moment which is capable of inducing that sort of momentary loss of self, that’s where I see it working, not where it’s telling me what I already know”.<sup>13</sup>

10. Alÿs, “The Green Line -Jean Fisher” accessed January 10, .<http://francisalys.com/the-green-line-jean-fisher/>.

11. Alÿs, “The Green Line -Jean Fisher”

12. Alÿs, “The Green Line -Jean Fisher”

13. Alÿs, “The Green Line -Jean Fisher”



“Maximum effort minimum result”, was Alÿs’s motto for his video work *When Faith Moves Mountains* (Peru ,2002).<sup>14</sup> Alÿs gathered a group of five hundred volunteers to make “Maximum effort”. They gathered on a sand dune on the outskirts of Lima, Peru, and then moved it by several centimeters with shovels. Similarly, to “the Green Line”, Alÿs includes in the video interviews with the participants, activists, students and community organizers. In these interviews they explain how Alÿs had managed to make them feel as part of a group of people that became in their eyes a living metaphor for the social tension and for the emerging movement of resistance in Peru. Alÿs has a talent for framing, for pointing out, marking, emphasizing - allowing the metaphor and the action to bend into one another. In his way of working he communicates with the locals and plays the role of the spotlight on current,

14. Francis Alÿs, “When Faith Moves Mountains,” Francis Alÿs, accessed January 12, 2019, <https://francisalys.com/when-faith-moves-mountains/>.

burning political debates.<sup>15</sup> I was suspicious of his intentions and of the emotional detachment he seems to have, especially while performing. I found myself fascinated by Alÿs's method of "Sometimes making something leads to nothing".<sup>16</sup> The passing nature of the "monumental" art that he creates, which disappears from the landscape almost at the moment of its creation, draws attention to that landscape, to the context in which it is placed.



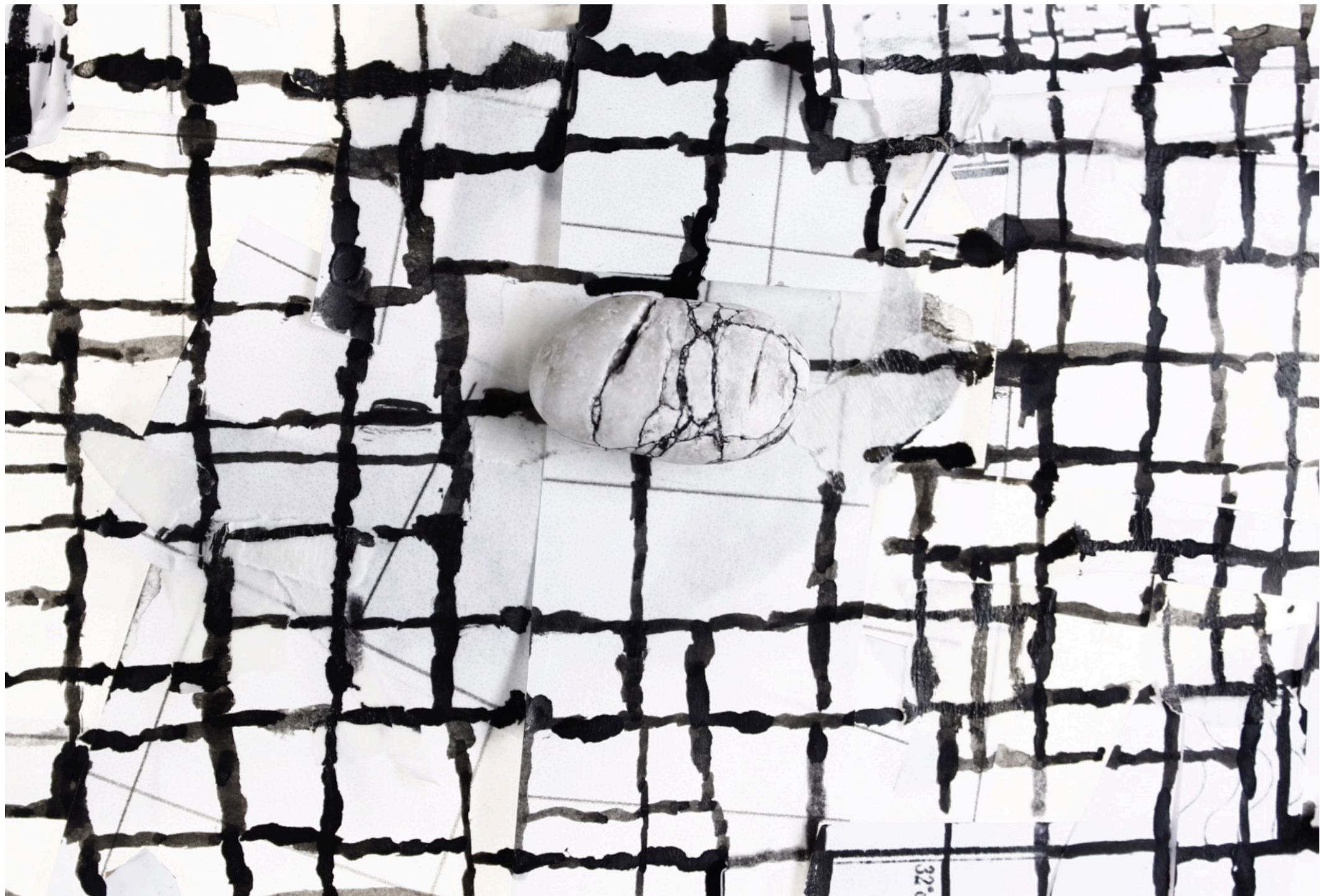
*When Faith Moves Mountains* (2002) Francis Alÿs



*When Faith Moves Mountains* (2002) Video stills

15. Kirsten Swenson, *Critical Landscapes: Art, Space, Politics*, 2015, University of California Press, Oakland p. 61–62.

16. Francis Alÿs, "Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing," Francis Alÿs, accessed November 12, 2019, <https://francisalys.com/sometimes-making-something-leads-to-nothing/>.



# Walter Benjamin

## The Storyteller Gathering the Crowd

My personal experience led me to believe that the artist-as-tour-guide can occupy a more complex position, supplementing the *flâneur* with the elements from the practice of the storyteller. In my mind, the overwhelming and shocking multifaceted experience of modernity creates a need for the figure of the guide, a figure that would attempt to create a coherent narrative from the heterogeneous fragments of reality. In this sense, the guide can be an agent creating a representation of reality, a figure representing the artist. The experience of the guide-as-artist is public and dialogue-based and in that respect is closer to the figure of the storyteller.

The Storyteller is another important figure in Benjamin's thought. This figure is a binding force in the community. Unlike the solitary Flâneur, s/he is creating the community by mediating different stories and experiences to all. The ancient role of the storyteller exists in all human cultures and was widespread before printed literature was common, but this social function was made obsolete

by modernity, according to Benjamin:

Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly... It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences.<sup>17</sup>

Benjamin claims that a number of reasons caused this decline in the value of experience. First it is the nature of industrial modernity, with its shocking pace of change that renders experience irrelevant:

[...] For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.<sup>18</sup>

Another reason is the overflow of information. When all the information from everywhere is readily available, there is no more value to the experience of a person who traveled far or to that of the person who knows a place in depth. when we can discover the

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17. Walter Benjamin and Harry Zohn, "The Story-Teller: Reflections on the Works of Nicolai Leskov," *Chicago Review*, vol. 16, 1963, p. 83

18. Benjamin and Zohn, "The Story-Teller: Reflections on the Works of Nicolai Leskov," p. 84

“why” of everything in an instant, the art of explaining through storytelling is no longer necessary.

The effect of these changes is felt in the novel, or by extension in modern art. The novel is no longer concerned with the lesson, moral or instruction that can be derived from the work but rather, it is interested in ‘the meaning of life’, while the story is “[...] less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding.”<sup>19</sup>

Benjamin claims that we must not see in these changes a symptom of decline or modernity but rather a side effect of the development of modern powers of production that removed the story from the sphere of living discourse. This change is not wholly tragic. It exposes the unique and disappearing beauty of an experience that used to be useful.<sup>20</sup>

In my experience, even though information is readily available, people would still engage a guide to tell them a story, show them around, to give them secret tips about the city. People still love hearing stories. They seek the unmediated experience of receiving counsel, advice anchored in the experience of far-off lands, even if it is only to recreate the emotional and sensual experience of being able to communicate.

19. Benjamin and Zohn, “The Story-Teller: Reflections on the Works of Nicolai Leskov,” p.86

20. Benjamin and Zohn, “The Story-Teller: Reflections on the Works of Nicolai Leskov,” p. 87

In that I still see a way for storytelling to function as an art form. It is true that the guide/storyteller could be a questionable figure that reaffirms the hegemonic narratives. But the practice of the artist-as-guide can turn a critical eye toward this function. Above and beyond any ideological function, storytelling can be a playful, critical practice that allows to fabulate in different ways, to change mindsets and connect the present with lost memories. It can demonstrate how every narrative is the result of framing several selected elements and excluding others from the picture, according to one ideology or another. As such, storytelling holds utopian and transgressive possibilities: the practice of storytelling allows to view history from a different perspective, joined with the character of the flaneur, who knows all the secrets of the passages, the things abandoned by the hegemonic narrative. The artist-as-guide allows for the composition of different stories that question or contradict the hegemonic narratives of history. Through this practice, aspects of the past that were erased can resurface and find their place in a story. The elements creating the story reminds the audience of the conventional historical narrative but allows them to view it critically.

In the following chapters I will look at the figure of the artist as a guide and storyteller, a figure that through her/his personal voice mediates a critique of conventional narratives to a given audience.

My question is: could the artist as tour guide realize the possibility of being present and alive within the confines of her or his work? This is the question guiding this paper. The artists discussed in this work present solutions that I find productive and inspiring. Each of them, presents a possible model for being present in the work.





# Yael Bartana

## Historical Pre-Enactment

Yael Bartana (1970, Israel) is an artist who lives in Amsterdam and Berlin and works internationally. Her films, installations and photography are characterized by a cinematic and dramatic language. This particular language often questions the image and its role in depicting and dealing with concepts of identity, history and memory. Bartana tries in her work to “wake up the ghost of history and provoke a new discourse” in relation to the concepts of politics, nation and state.<sup>21</sup> Even though she lives in exile for many years she works often in relation to her native country Israel and its history. In her video work *Inferno* (2013), Bartana chose to work in a huge, public building that was built by the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in São Paulo, Brazil.<sup>22</sup> This building is supposed to be a replica of the Temple of Solomon that was built in Jerusalem in 516 BCE. The description of this building appears in the Bible and it serves for many today as a symbol of a Jewish kingdom and the place where all its citizens will unify after the coming of the Messiah.

21. “Yael Bartana: Returning 3.3 Million Jews,” Louisiana Channel, accessed February 1, <https://channel.louisiana.dk/video/yael-bartana-returning-33-million-jews>.

22. “Yael Bartana: Inferno [Hell],” Artis.art, accessed February 6, <http://artis.art/grantees/yael-bartana-inferno-hell/>.

The work, mixing fiction and fact, consists of two parts. In the first part, helicopters flying towards what we would discover later is the structure of the temple carrying several objects: a menorah and a golden altar. People wearing white, holding baskets with crops and flowers are smiling, waving to them. An imagined recreation of the biblical ritual of pilgrimage is happening when hundreds of people walk inside together, singing and dancing. The nostalgic atmosphere evident in people’s clothes and the temple clashes with the outside view, as one can easily see the modern city and notice the helicopters that lead the way to the temple. Bartana mixes here fact and fiction, time zones, past with present in order to formulate another possibility. She lets the viewer into a detailed world that holds its own logic and pulls the viewer into a spiritual experience.<sup>23</sup>

In the second video the name “*Inferno*” becomes clear, when something goes wrong. Invaders are demolishing the Temple, killing people, burning and looting the sacred objects. Bartana breaks the spiritual harmony and recreates the ancient story, when the Romans conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. The final cut of the video shows the temple falling apart, with only one wall remaining, reminding the viewer of the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. We can see people pray at the wall, just like in Jerusalem. This wall, of course, is not in Jerusalem but in Brazil and in this re-enactment,

23. “Yael Bartana,” annet gelink gallery, accessed February 11, 2019, [annetgelink.com/artists/5-yael-bartana/biography/](http://annetgelink.com/artists/5-yael-bartana/biography/).

it surfaces as an inclusive tolerant place, accepting women and queer people as worshippers.

In this work, as well as in many of her other works, Bartana questions national consciousness, by mixing fragments of time and space to create a new independent world. Bartana's technique in this video disturbs chronology by mixing the modern with the ancient and the mythic. She is using a familiar structure taken from national public ceremonies in which she is mixing the known with the fabulous in a particular way. The actors use no words, they only act as a group together, displaying the desired national unity. This gesture is closely related to the well-known sentiment of the national public ceremony, but it creates a new logic.<sup>24</sup>

That aspect of instruction and moral lesson is seen in the way Bartana conceptualizes her work. Bartana refers to her work as a “historical pre-enactment” a methodology that combines fact and fiction, prophesy and history.” This methodology is evident also in her work “*The Undertakers*” (2019), where she uses mainly female/non-binary actors who preform militaristic tropes in order to tell a fantastic tale of women abolishing weapons from this world.<sup>25</sup> Bartana refers to this work as “pre-enactment”, alluding to the practice of re-enactment, commemorating a historic event

24. Yael Bartana, “Trembling Time-2001,” <http://yaelbartana.com>, accessed December 24, 2019, <http://yaelbartana.com/project/trembling-time-2001-3>.

25. “Bartana”, Annet Gelink gallery



*Inferno* (2013) Video stills, Yael Bartana



*The Undertakers* (2019), Video stills, Yael Bartana

by recreating it. In Bartana's case the re-enactment takes place before the event, hence "pre-enactment". In this way, the work lets the audience experience utopia while making them aware of the distance between the militaristic and masculine visual language and the story she tells. The utopian and transgressive possibilities can be made real for a moment by the artist/storyteller, who is using a montage like technique, putting together familiar, factual and fictional elements in a new and surprising manner.

This is a very successful strategy for confronting reality through a compelling narrative about an alternative one. Bartana's use of the narrative form and her masterful technical control produce a closed separate reality that echoes our own. This is a feature of her work that might be seen as problematic as the near perfect rendering of the work inspires resistance in some viewers. Guiding groups through her works I noticed that many found it manipulative, propagandistic or simplistic.

I believe, however, that Bartana's power comes specifically from this problematic aspect of her work. While her story feels as if it contains a moral or a lesson, it's very structure revolts against the familiar way of telling history, making the "lesson" an unclear experience.

According to Walter Benjamin:

There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another.<sup>26</sup>

It might be that in that sense Bartana, the artist as a storyteller, enjoys the freedom of revolting against the structure of a clear timeline or the ideas of national identity in relation to a particular land. This way of telling a story could be an instruction as to how to continue or observe the narrative in a different way, using fantastic knowledge coming from another space and time. Therefore, Bartana dissociates herself from the Big Narrative and "regards it as *her* task to brush history against the grain."<sup>27</sup>

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26. Walter Benjamin , "on the concept of history" in: Whitechapel, Ruins, p. 47

27. Walter Benjamin , "on the concept of history", p. 47. The original text uses the masculine pronoun. Changes were done by me

# Narrating History and the Collective Memory

## My memory of a memory

Memories are very often not something one can describe in clear words or chronological order. Describing a memory is a delicate thing. It is more like stains or notes that float in a blank space called time. Memories that seem to be clear, almost objective, are actually changing their shape in our mind, as we sense nostalgia or choose to remember one detail from a situation and forget another. In the experience of recalling a distant memory, emotional intensities are somehow mixed up together. The happiest, peaceful moments blend with the most frightening, painful, dark ones. Forgetfulness could also be a necessity. Forgetting is another form of remembering, like when we remember to forget the ones who lost the war.

## Walkthrough Collective Memory

“It requires a great deal of power to change the city and its stories or to write history, and power is never equally distributed... whoever controls the physical space usually controls also the cultural one, and it is never the ones who lost the battle over history.”<sup>28</sup>

Collective memory is a term that was defined first by the French scholar, philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs at 1920s. Halbwachs developed the idea of collective memory by looking at patterns within a group's memory. His research was focusing in the distinction between an individual memory, the present knowledge of the past, and the collective memory. Halbwachs studied the form in which the past remains in our consciousness. His extended research examines the relation between individuals' memory

28. Sharon. Rotbard, Ir levanah, 'ir shehorah [Black city White City], Tel Aviv: Babel, 2005, p. 17. T, translated from Hebrew by me.

and the event's commemoration in objects and spaces under the influence of society's structure . Halbwachs argued that even in the reproduction of most intimate experience “ [...] at the moment of reproducing the past our imagination remains under the influence of the present social milieu.”<sup>29</sup> Halbwachs claimed that the consciousness of the past is being compressed into images. These images are often complex and selective. Our mind chooses what to keep and what to throw away. In that sense, the collective memory is always a system in which facts, emotions and individual memory are mixing and developing into images. Halbwachs claimed that understanding society's past is a key ingredient in shaping consciousness and actions in the present.

## Narrating Some Personal history

Israeli national consciousness is built out of memorial days. One for the Holocaust, one for the fallen soldiers and other victims, a day for the independence in between. We, the kids, wear white, we recite, standstill when the sirens echo to remember the dead, we sing sad songs, the national anthem and then happy songs for the winners. This gap between the solid institutional memory and

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29. Lewis A. Coser, Maurice Halbwachs: On Collective Memory. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.1992 p. 46-51

the personal subjective memory is present. Marble monuments, official ceremonies and history books seem to be part of a curated, organized system of remembrance serving institutional myths, while the subjective memory remains vague, lively and mysterious. But after all, our memories, which feel authentic, are just as curated and organized in order to fabricate a similar myth of the self. The fluid nature of memory completes the ever-growing gaps that repression, displacement or “simple” forgetfulness open in it. In doing so the image that appears is a mythic representation of the self rather than the actual accumulation of lived experiences.

# William Kentridge

## The smell of old books

In a talk Kentridge gave at the Brooklyn Library, He was talking about his artistic practice. the talk was also printed and given as a small publication by the end of the event.<sup>30</sup> It was simple. A clear message yet full of hints of stories that were hiding under his simple, easy to grasp lecture. I was inspired by the way he was sharing his personal story as a starting point for his work. The genuine way in which he mixed the personal, the political and the emotional all together.

Kentridge has a way of telling stories. His inspiration is certainly the world that surrounds him but this “world” of history and identity, forms its own shape and is mixed up with a detailed and sensitive imaginary. The inside and the outside merge together. He once said that as you remember your dream you construct it into something that isn’t the dream, for it is organized according to another logic.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, his works contain a logic of their own. In

30. William Kentridge, “Message from the Library,” in “Let Us Try Once, 15 1/2 Thoughts in the Library”, No. 3 New York : Brooklyn Public Library, 2018

31. IN CONVERSATION | WALID RAAD & WILLIAM KENTRIDGE (Centre for the Less Good Idea), accessed December 1, 2019, <https://vimeo.com/300123940>.

his thinking history appears as collage. There is no universal truth, it is a story made from fragments and the question is what are the fragments one uses to construct the world.

Kentridge draws in old books. Growing up in a family of lawyers, the relation between laws, facts and words had always surrounded him.<sup>32</sup> This element came into his works as a physical material. Throughout the action of dismantling them, he creates a new order. He also questions the content of the book. The drawings in the books are becoming stop motion animation. The characters function as “actors” in his story but very often also as animated metaphors. For example, in the short animation film *Felix in Exile* a group of wounded Africans, melt into a landscape and become the soil again. The metaphor for the land of south Africa struggling and fighting the apartheid regime becomes this group of images: African people, bodies, bold, death and life again within soil. All of those images are symbols for South African history, but they also function literally, existing in the film as characters transforming into soil and growing out of the soil again, etc.

32. “William Kentridge,” Art21, accessed, November 12, 2019, <https://art21.org/artist/william-kentridge/>.

Kentridge was born in 1955, in Johannesburg. He was born into a reality of apartheid.<sup>33</sup> From 1948 until the early 1990s the apartheid made laws that forced the different racial groups to live separately and develop separately, unequally. the regime tried to stop any kind of social integration between racial groups. The apartheid policies have been increasingly criticized by the international community since the 1960s, a process that has gradually led to sanctions against South Africa. Combined with the uprising of anti-apartheid movements within South Africa, the apartheid regime collapsed in 1994.

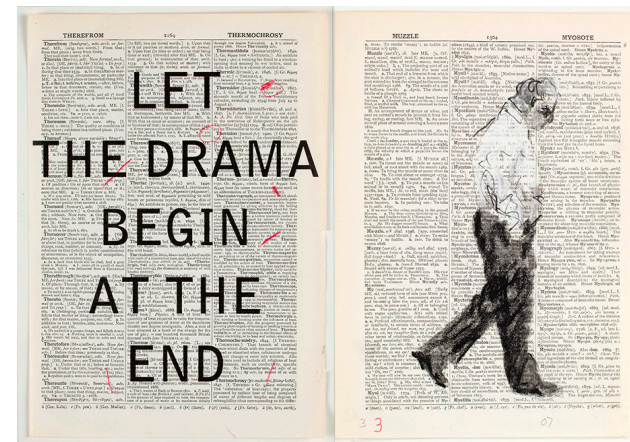
*Nine Drawings for Projection* is a series of animations he made Between 1989 to 2003. The Title Drawings for projection hints the tactility of the videos. While the images move, projected as a film, the viewer will constantly notice the erasure marks, the pencil and the charcoal. These qualities allow the viewer to experience the slow process of making an animation. Contrary to the presumption that the artist is a creator that makes pieces *Ex nihilo*<sup>34</sup>, almost like a god, here the marks of the labor are clearly evident. I was amazed by how beautifully the trace of the action of drawing appears here. It reminds the viewer that s/he is watching a drawing making a drawing. Like *Mise en abyme*, a technique of placing a copy of an image within itself, often referring to an endless sequence.

33. Kentridge, "Let Us Try Once, 15 1/2 Thoughts in the Library", p. 7

34. from Latin , "Out of Nothing"



*Felix in Exile* (1994) Video stills, William Kentridge



*Second-hand Reading*, (2013) Video stills, William Kentridge

In the 8-minute video work from 1994 *Felix in Exile*,<sup>35</sup> an African woman named Nandi appears, drawing landscapes. Nandi observes the land, watching wounded African bodies, who melt into the landscape. Later on, Felix, a character who reminds us of Kentridge himself, appears alone in a room. He is looking at Nandi's drawings, which cover the walls. When Felix looks in the mirror, he sees Nandi. They are connected to one another, through the mirror. For a moment another reality is re-formed. But then she's shot and is absorbed back into the ground. Kentridge transitions from the black charcoal animation to using blue color. A wave of blue water floods the room, like tears of grief but also the promise new life, once it is over.

Kentridge's technique in animation contradicts the content, which is drawn from South Africa's recent history. He confronts the viewer with violence, but his way of drawing and his notion of characters creates a very compassionate view of the situation. It is as if we experience human pain through his eyes. This is an example of Kentridge's ability to introduce viewers into his world and allow them to join in for a moment or be present within the reality that he fabricated.

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35. *Felix in Exile*, Tate: Art and artists, accessed November 20  
<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/kentridge-felix-in-exile-t07479>

Fabulating is the action of creating stories that, like a fable, contradicts some aspects of reality in order to recreate a potential version of it out of different views that are combined into a new thing. All along the video the transition between the story that is being told, the metaphor, the presence of the action of drawing and the sight of the maker accompanies the viewer. One could read such a work on different levels. As if during the same song few languages are being used.

When I heard Kentridge's talk at the Brooklyn library, it was as if one of his charcoal characters came to life. Clear message yet full of hints, stories hiding under every word. I was inspired by the brilliant way in which he mixed the personal, the political and the emotional all together. How does he do that? Kentridge's works elevate pieces of history that he chooses to highlight. He presents fictions grown from these moments as different forms of the truth. Truth that in order to understand fully, one has to learn the background and history of South Africa. In order to activate all the different levels of the piece, one would have to engage with history or accept not understanding it fully.



# The Tour

## A Different View of Time and Space

The activity of a tour, outdoors or in a museum, can tell a story that creates a different view of time and space. For example, while walking in a city in 2019, through the story told by the guide, traces of the 17th century are revealed for few hours. Or while telling the story of exhibits that were made in different times and places, the guide can create an environment that allows the viewers to float in time and space. In this chapter I will examine the question of the role of an artist as a guide, a mediator and a storyteller in light of the concepts found in the work of Walter Benjamin and in relation to the concept of Heterotopia that was developed by Michel Foucault.

### The Structure of a Museum and a Gallery as Heterotopia:

Heterotopia is a key term coined by the philosopher Michel Foucault.<sup>36</sup> It is a combination of two words in Ancient Greek.

36. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias, Architecture," *Mouvement/Continuité* 1, no. 9 (1984).

Hetero, that means "other" and Topos that means "place". The term Heterotopia relates also to Utopia, which means literally: no space/good space.<sup>37</sup> Heterotopia refers to a world made out of many divided spaces. Each space like that has its own rules and can control who are the people allowed or forced to be within this space (like a Jail, a school or a golf club) as well as the norms of their behavior in relation to its structure.<sup>38</sup> This different space creates norms and divisions that the society accepts as "Natural", as part of civilization. This so-called natural mechanism has a role in to internalize these structures of power. The world is then made of diverse closed supervised spaces.<sup>39</sup> According to Gourevich and Arab, this mechanism is transparent, it uses rational arguments in order to enforce rules, control structures and behaviors, to punish and discipline.<sup>40</sup>

When considering the museum or the gallery as a heterotopia, the heterotopic qualities of these spaces rise from the fact that both present themselves as the opposite of the surrounding environment.<sup>41</sup> Both present themselves as a break from normal time: while the time outside is historical and forward moving,

37. James Faubion, "Michel Foucault," in *Encyclopædia Britannica* (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc.), accessed December 11, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Michel-Foucault>.

38. David Gourevich and Dan Arab, "Heterotopia," *The Encyclopedia of Ideas*, accessed January 19, 2019, <http://haraayonot.com/idea/heterotopy/>.

39. Faubion, "Michel Foucault."

40. Gourevich and Arab, "Heterotopia."

41. Gourevich and Arab "Heterotopia."

the museum or the gallery present a space that can be timeless, where periods overlap and art is eternal.<sup>42</sup> As opposed to the outside consumerist world the museum or the gallery are spaces of observance and reflection. This difference is maintained by clear borders between the outside and the space of the museum or gallery.<sup>43</sup> The entrances are guarded; entry requires a tuition fee and once inside special rules apply. All these rituals give the experience a sense of something sacred. However, it is important to note that this place contains in fact several opposing, contradicting spaces: the gallery is a place of serene reflection but also a space of commerce. The museum celebrates humanism but also serves the national narrative while hiding and justifying economic interests and colonialist histories.

What does the guide do in those spaces? I believe that the guide can either hide the *heterotopia* in the space of art or show it. S/he can normalize the ritual and affirm the dominant narrative. This is a functional role which is non-critical. In a sense the guide becomes a function in the museum machine. On the other hand, the guide can point out the different spaces/times/narrative that exist together in the space. This is a critical action, in which the guide stands aside from the institution and makes viewers see the

multifaceted world.

42. Gourevich and Arab "Heterotopia."

43. Gourevich and Arab, "Heterotopia."

In imagining this action, I am inspired by Another text: Temporary Autonomous Zones, by thinker and activist Hakim Bey.<sup>44</sup> This text describes the possibility of creating temporary spaces of freedom as alternative, local revolutions. These are ways to free oneself from concert identity or nationality, age etc.<sup>45</sup> I believe a guided tour can also be a temporary space where alternative realities are formulated. The character of the guide is talking, explaining, inventing - words are her/his tools. The guide is hosting in an unfamiliar place and creating intimacy with people that were strangers a moment before. Conducting a tour holds within it great power, which is temporary. A random group of people start walking in foreign city, following the same story, revealing together hints on that corner or another. A tour could be a tool to reveal hidden histories and show the world through utopian binoculars. But the question presents itself: Can this activity be autonomous? If it takes place in the context of a tourist industry? Within the power structures of national cultures and narratives?

44. Hakim Bey, *Taz*, *T.A.Z – The Temporary Autonomous Zone*, Tel Aviv, Resling Publishing, 2008

45. Moshe Elhanati, "Preface," in *T.A.Z – The Temporary Autonomous Zone*, Resling Publishing, Tel-Aviv 2008, p. 176.

# Walid Raad

## *Let's Be Honest, the Weather Helped*

The artist Walid Raad presents a model for such action where the artist as a guide disrupts the space of the museum. Raad becomes a guide or a doorman opening a portal to a fictional reality but with a historical context. This reality is that of the Atlas Group, a collective formed by anonymous characters, characters Raad might have created himself. So, it is a group made by one artist, Walid Raad (1967, Lebanon), an artist living and working in New York and Beirut.

Already by forming a group made of a single person, one could sense the logic Raad applies to his work. It is an internal logic that is based on the freedom of mixing the imaginary with the factual, without fully hiding the surreal affect it creates. As part of the work of “The Atlas Group” Raad created a new form to express his own personal history in relation to the wider subject. From 1989 until 2004 Raad had created and gathered documents about Lebanon’s civil war (1975–1990), connecting archive-like material, mixing fictional stories with his personal photography. He had fabricated a

fictional archive of works that lean on the events that had actually happened. With the archives, in a way, Raad is creating, by using artifacts he had collected, a parallel reality where history, the personal and fiction merge into one another and play a similar role. Raad is formulating a new possibility, claiming that the Atlas group could exist, and he only fulfills this potential.

The body of exhibits of “The Atlas group” kept on growing with time, just like an archive, referring to Lebanon’s civil war but maybe most importantly to the collective memories and experience of the citizens. Raad is rising some crucial questions while approaching archives or historical facts. What happens mentally to people in a city when they are exposed to the ongoing threat of assault? How do they change? How does the city change? What traces and “memories” stay within the walls of a house under such conditions? Raad in that sense doubts and peels off the layer of the so-called historical facts and highlights the subjective, creating a multifaceted view.

Raad connects the museum to a political reality that exceeds the museum’s borders. He adopted and revolts against the frame of the white cube at the same time. His body of work exposes people to things they would not have seen otherwise, but these political realities and this information are processed through a more open,

less linear visual language. In a mediated way, Raad leaves a lot of blank spots, spaces to fill in, to investigate or sometime to be overwhelmed by. Something about the seam between fact and fiction intrigues the viewer to keep on guessing what is true and what is false. In that sense it also questions the idea of the archive as an objective tool to frame and document. His work leans on the archival or the historical but takes the freedom to reconstruct histories or resurrect them in its own way, as Raad had put it. Is this the element that allows it to become a work of art, instead of a documentation?<sup>46</sup>

Another idea presents itself: it is this playful practice of documentation and fiction that allows an exhibition to be a temporary, autonomous space where alternative realities are formulated. For example, visiting Raad's exhibition 'Let's be honest, the weather helped,' in the Stedelijk Museum I was pulled into a colorful space, covered with purple wallpaper. On the walls were hanging paintings of the Syrian born painter Marwan Kassab-Bachi<sup>47</sup>. Works that were painted on the backs of other paintings and were discovered in the basement of the museum. The discovery and recognition of the "forgotten" paintings in the

46. Walid Raad accessed January 21, <https://artmap.com/stedelijk/exhibition/walid-raad-2019>

47. Artist interview- The Principle of Uncertainty, accessed January 17, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-9gVHitcK2Y>

museum's storage became a key point to understand the world, according to Raad. Even though a moment before I barely knew a thing about this painter, his work became a key point of reference for me. I was pulled into a new reality with a different logic. This exciting experience made me think and doubt things I didn't know before and have just learned. I read briefly about Kassab-Bachi online and the whole affair lasted in my mind for an hour or two. Similarly, the exhibition stayed in the museum for a month or so and then it disappeared and another temporary reality appeared in its place. The powerful experience made me think of the power of art and wonder how this temporary reality can be autonomous if it takes place in the context of a gallery or a museum, that is, within the power structure of the art industry or the national institution of culture.



A detail from the installation, 'Let's be honest, the weather helped' (2019) Walid Raad

The answer lies, I believe, in the figure of the guide. In the audio guided tour accompanying the exhibition, Raad guides us through the works and reveals that these are in fact his own paintings,



Scratching on things I could disavow: Walkthrough (2015) Performance view



A detail from "Resurrections" of a painting of Marwan Kassab-Bachi, made by Raad (2019)

“resurrections” of spirits of unfulfilled works of the Syrian painter. and yet, even with this revelation, he insists on his own logic and asks “why did these paintings chose to hide in Amsterdam?” in doing so, he brings the “lost” paintings to life, letting them develop an autonomous subjectivity and behavior. Of course, he, and progressively us as well, are aware that the manipulation is evident but that is part of his way of telling a story, of pointing the viewers toward that which is really interesting. That is to the invitation to a fabulous land where such things are possible.

In the summer of 2019 I went to see a performance Raad gave as part of his exhibition ‘Let’s be honest, the weather helped,’ in the Stedelijk Museum.<sup>48</sup> He was wearing a cap for protection against ghosts. That’s how he started his performance. He proceeded by giving a presentation in a semi academic lecture setting, fabulating realities in relation to historical events: The Cooper Union, Lebanon, the exchange of artifacts between the Louvre in Paris and the Louvre Abu Dhabi, etc. In his performance, like with the archives, Raad uses the figure of an academic historian, but takes the freedom of an artist as he uses the world as raw material. After the presentation, he guided us through his works like a tour guide, pointing to exhibits, expending our view on the exhibits with

48. accessed January 10, <https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/events/walid-raad>

personal stories that connects to past and current politics. following him into his fabulous world was very liberating as we considered ideas in light of history but without the crushing constraints of reality. One interesting example that had left a mark in my mind was the story of the objects that had lost their shadow traveling back to the middle east as artifacts on loan from the Louvre in Paris to the Louvre Abu Dhabi. The story of the decaying shadowless objects discovered by their putrid smell and of the effort to restore them does not become an allegory to the complicity of art institutions in colonialist histories. It remains a story of the fate of those displaced by these historical realities. Raad plays on the border between resurrection, adaptation, invention and appropriation as he embeds these objects in his story. In doing so, he instructs the viewers in a more humane and compassionate way of listening to history and its ghosts.

# Conclusion

## The Artist as a History teller

My encounter with the city and its histories evoked questions about memory, identity, culture, power structures and immigration. I experienced this interrogation as a complex sensual experience, which compelled me to learn my story and tell it to others. This led me to integrate the character of the tour guide in my artistic work and to develop models for various critical experiments relating to these questions. I found insight in the works of Francis Alÿs, Yael Bartana, William Kentridge and Walid Raad, with their imaginary landscapes and historical excursions. I found this act of “History telling” a critical tool, giving freedom to the artist to frame an experience, rather than constantly dealing with historical facts and accuracy. Delicate line since they are all dealing with loaded topics. The way these artists avoid their works being an instructional lesson rather than an interrogation is by liberating themselves from the bonds of physical and historical reality, in the same way a storyteller would, in order to point out what is possible and what is missing.



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# Illustrations

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# BA Thesis

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