

Conversations and Actions Whitechapel Gallery

Walid Raad: Miraculous Beginnings



Conversations and Actions

.....

This booklet has been written to help you explore the Whitechapel Gallery exhibition **Walid Raad: Miraculous Beginnings**.

It begins with a conversation between two artists, **Rebecca Greathead** and **Daniel Wallis**. This conversation outlines key ideas and concepts in Walid Raad's work and introduces you to different aspects of the exhibition.

It is designed to support your exploration of the exhibition and give you ideas to share with others in your group, be they children or adults.

The three sections relate to the galleries in which the exhibition is on display: Galleries 1, 8 & 9.

Throughout the booklet are actions that you can do **in the Gallery** (these appear in the boxes with the wavy lined edge) that will help you consider the artists' ideas, working processes or more directly the work and themes of the exhibition. These actions are easily adaptable to suit a wide-range of people.

Also within the booklet are actions that can be used **beyond the Gallery** (these appear in the boxes with the diamond patterned edge). They can be adapted.

Spread throughout are images that you can use to act as prompts or reminders of the exhibition.

Have fun!

Miraculous Beginnings

.....

REBECCA I thought this was an exhibition of Walid Raad's work, but the work in this downstairs gallery appears to be by The Atlas Group?

DANIEL The Atlas Group is the name of a body of work that Walid Raad put together. He describes it as a research project focussing mainly on the wars in Lebanon between 1975 and 1990.

REBECCA So what we see on display is all 'found' documentary material?

DANIEL Some of it is but Walid Raad has extrapolated narratives from the original material so that the boundary between the actual found material and what he has added becomes blurred.

REBECCA So is he trying to trick us?

DANIEL I think it is more about pointing out how we all make narratives from historical events by piecing together bits of evidence and developing them through our imagination.

REBECCA There is a lot of repetition in the work. Do you think he is suggesting that the same things happening again and again?

DANIEL Maybe. Remember he grew up in war torn Beirut and is looking back and trying to make some sense of it. The images of bombings are repeated so become everyday life activities.

REBECCA I suppose there would be many conflicting opinions on the history of in Lebanon as well as some of the neighbouring countries in this part of the Middle East.

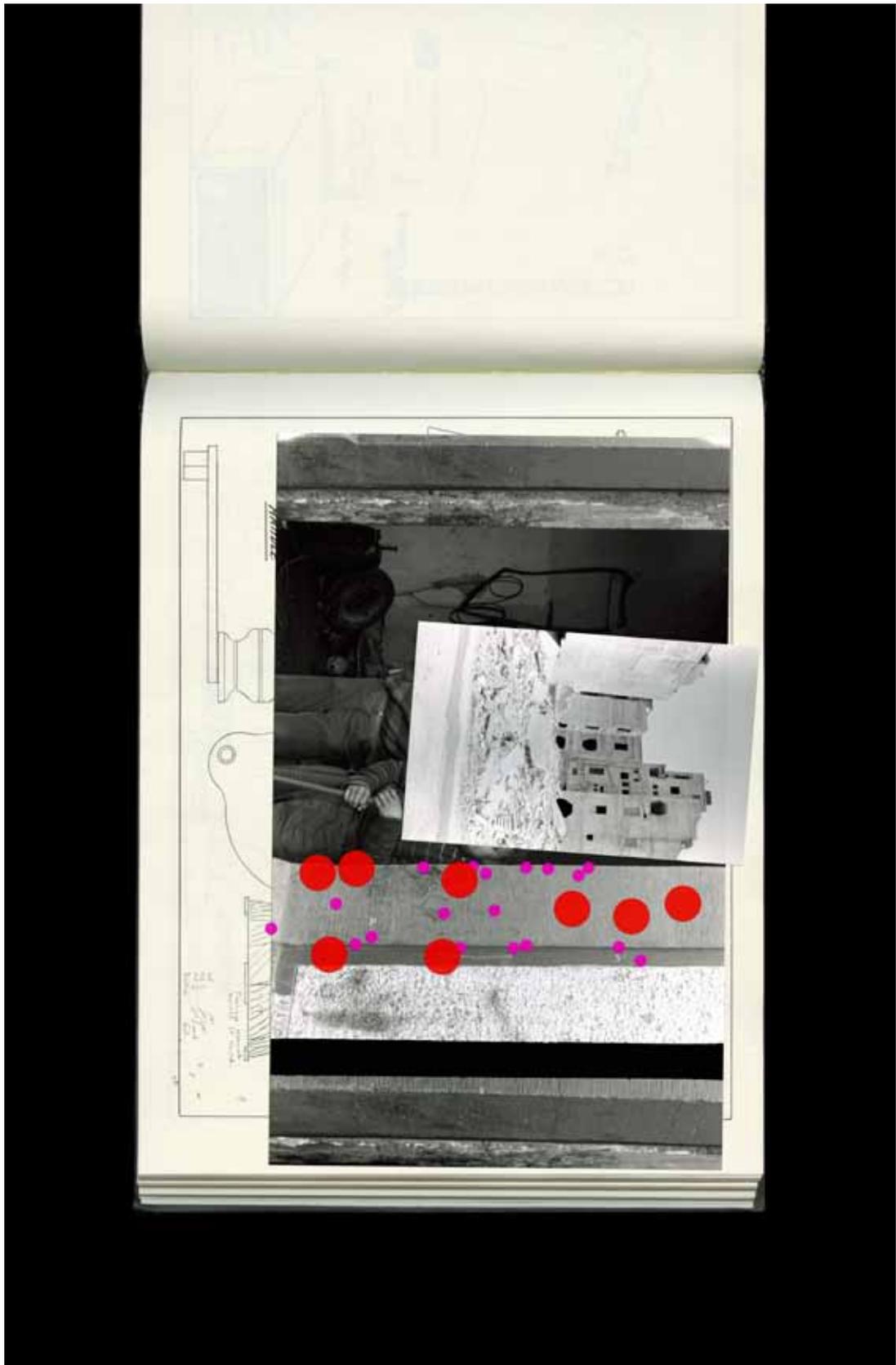
DANIEL I understand that schools in Lebanon can only teach history up to the country's independence in 1943. After that there is no consensus on the sequence of events. It is strange to think of living in a country with no written history or stable facts.

REBECCA So there is a danger in such cases of a country 'losing' its history.

DANIEL Yes, both physically through the destruction of its people, buildings, artefacts as well as through lost memories.

REBECCA The titles of Walid Raad's works are quite strange but seem somehow poetic. Some of them are like book titles or quotes from a piece of writing.

DANIEL I think they help you not to look simply at the works as dry cataloguing but to look closer at the human element of the work – the stories they contain.



Let's be honest, the weather helped, Plate 017_Belgium (detail), 1998/2006-7

Gallery 1: The Atlas Group (1989 – 2004)

Rebecca I like the images with the coloured dots on them. They come from Raad's teenage interest in collecting bullet shells from the streets of Beirut.

Daniel I didn't realise bullets come in different colours.

Rebecca The shells are often colour coded but I think it is unlikely that you can identify which country they came from as the artist claims in the written explanation. This story makes us consider what countries might have provided ammunition rather than providing documentary fact.

Daniel A lot of artworks in the Atlas Group are made up of images that Raad has manipulated so they are given a new history. Dr Fadl Fakhouri isn't really the most important historian to come out of Lebanon, he's made up by Raad. But, if there's no official history of the Lebanon for us to read, then thanks to Raad, perhaps he does exist?

Rebecca Therefore the things Dr Fakhouri collected aren't real either, they have been constructed. A lot of meticulous crafting has gone into some of these pieces.

Daniel Some material comes from actual archives of real events, and that's where it gets confusing. If you look closely you'll see that Raad has re-used the same images in different works.

Rebecca I guess he is highlighting the impossibility of pinpointing the truth of any historical fact.

Actions beyond the Gallery

Take photographs of or find a **selection of images** (9 is good) of a similar size. They should have one thing in common that you are familiar with: a street sign, a person, a building, sky, sea or trees

Walid Raad's Beirut series is a collection of images of explosions, made tiny and printed upon a huge white sheet. The writing in the bottom right hand corner corresponds to the size of a person in relation to the size of the explosion. The explosions treated this way they cease to be threatening and become quite appealing, surreal and distant from our understanding. (see image on next page).

Cut out something from all the images - it could be an object or just an area of colour. Mount each one on a large sheet of neutral coloured paper.

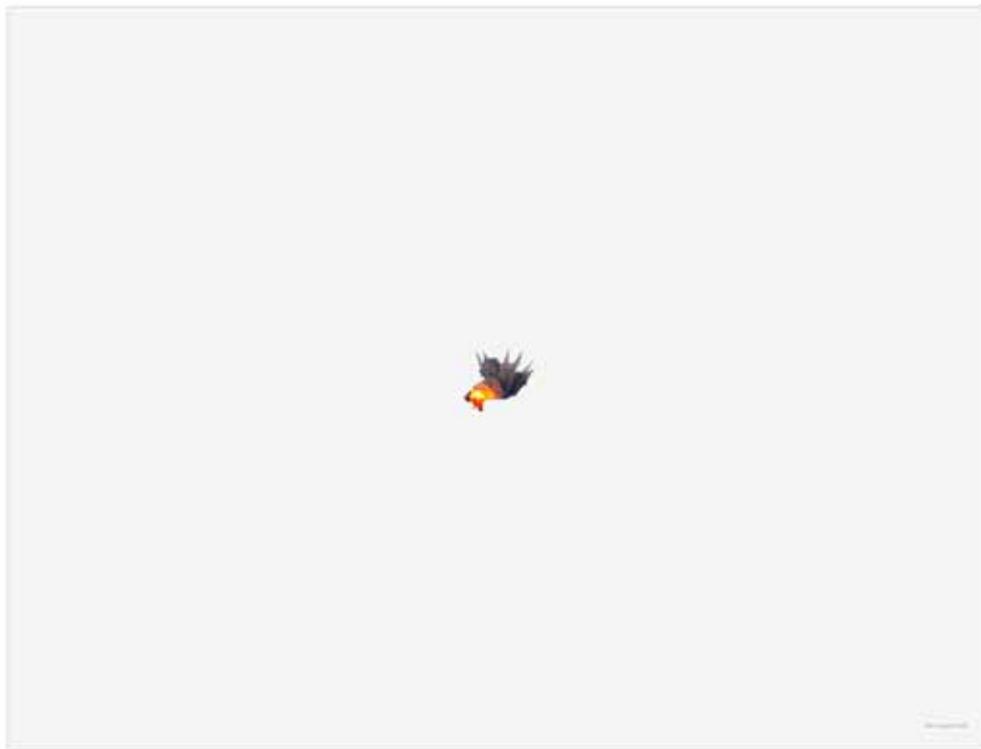
Alternatively **paint out** all the rest of the image except the detail you have chosen.

Display all your images in a **grid layout** and give the series a **title**.

Although the element you have selected may mean something to you it may cause other people think about something completely different.

Ask a number of people to sum up what your group of images remind them of or make them think about in their own lives.

Collect these responses and display them with the artwork.



"Oh God," he said, talking to a tree, Plate 15_Khiyam, 2004/2008



front back

Date: 3 July 1988
Archive: Al-Saff (Beirut) / The Atlas Group | Photographer: Unknown
Notes: Lebanon - Crimes and Criminals - Explosions - 1988 - Beirut

From My neck is thinner than a hair: Engines (2000-3)

Actions in the Gallery

Look at *My Neck Is Thinner than a Hair: Engines (2000–3)*, they are to the left as you enter Gallery 1. The image above is a detail.

Before reading the description next to the work **look closely** at all of its parts.

Can you find a **story** in an individual image that could also apply to other images?

Who took the photograph and why? Was it taken for this artwork?

Can you create a story behind why the person collected them?

Now read the description of the artwork does it change your understanding of it?

Choose an image and imagine the same scene without the engine – how could the story change?

Do you think the photo journalists really had a competition to see who could photograph the engine first?

Does it matter if this is true or not? What might the truth of these works be?

Actions beyond the Gallery

Find an old **photograph with people** in it.

Even if you already know who is in the photograph, **invent a new story** that explains who these people are and why they have come together.

Collect objects, or create documents that reinforce and develop the story around the photograph:

You might draw or collect a personal item – a ring, a souvenir, a gift.

You might add another image of an object relating to one of the characters- a car, a building.

You might write a letter, note or postcard.

You might create some kind of official document.

You might add diagrams or annotations to your photograph.

Add to your story- try telling it to others.

Ask others to try and create a story from your documents



Sweet Talk: Commissions (Beirut), 1996-1997



Sweet Talk: Commissions (Beirut), 1991-1995

Gallery 8: Sweet Talk: Commissions (Beirut), 1987-present

Rebecca This piece was commissioned especially for the exhibition. Since 1987, whenever Raad went back to Beirut for a few months at a time he'd give himself 'self-assigned projects' to direct how he photographed the city.

Daniel He studied the history of photography and a lot of his work refers to it. He admired American photographer Walker Evans and French photographer Eugène Atget who periodically documented Paris from the 1890 until the late 1920s through taking thousands of photographs.

Rebecca So these photographs are a version of that, a documentation of Beirut. The panels all look quite different. Some have black and white photographs of different sizes, and some with a montage of colour images.

Daniel They're not just visually different but themed. Over here for example, are panels of buildings around badly bombed sites, taken after the end of the civil war in the early 90s. Some show Beirut being reconstructed, it's now a popular tourist city.

Rebecca It must have been quite risky for him at times, people may have thought he was a spy going around the city with a camera.

Daniel Absolutely. In fact the panel of small slightly blurry and badly taken photos are what he describes as encounters as he went through the city on a bike, unable to stop for long in case he was questioned. You can even see his finger over the lens in some of the shots.

Actions in the Gallery

Divide into **pairs**, or threes.

Each group explore a **different panel**.

Start by looking at the **layout**, then the **individual images**, but don't read the text on the panels until you've thought about the following:

The layout of the images, their **size, colours, positioning**.

The **kind** of subject matter – street scenes, portraits, landscapes.

Write down individual words that describe these elements.

What are the images **representing**?

How have they been taken:

Slowly and carefully?

continues on next page...



Sweet Talk: Commissions (Beirut), 1992-1994

At interesting angles?

Of very particular objects?

Covering a large area?

Write down or mind-map your observations.

Why do you think Walid Raad made the decision to **lay out** the images as he has?

Do the two sets of words you have **link** or **compliment** each other?

How does the text written in the panels add to your understanding? Why is it there?

Read your words out to the rest of your group while they look at the panels – does this help make sense of the images?

Actions beyond the Gallery

In **small groups** set yourselves a photographic assignment to **document an area** you know well. It could be a room, a building, an outside space.

Start by mind-mapping or listing **words that define** that place.

Pick the **five most important** words from that list that sum up your chosen area.

Your photographs must also **represent** these words.

Set yourself some rigid parameters for how you will take the photographs. You could:

Walk around with a camera, photographing on the move or only taking a photo when someone asks you what you are doing.

Photograph the same area from **lots of angles**.

Only focus on **objects** in your area that truly represent it.

Photograph from a **distance**.

Only photograph **people** from behind.

Make sure **no people** are in your shots.

Print out a selection of your photographs and **present them on a panel**.

Think about the **size, layout, colours** and **numbers** of your photographs.

Think about why you're making your panel look a certain way?

Can you add some simple **text** that helps a viewer understand your intentions in representing your chosen area?

Give your work a **title**.

*d'Arts
Contemporain
au Liban*

Gallery 9: *Scratching on Things I could Disavow: A History of Art in the Arab World* (2008- present)

- Rebecca** The title seems to suggest that this room is about the history of Arab art?
- Daniel** I think in this part of the exhibition Walid Raad is wondering how the wars might have affected Arab art and what it might become like in the future.
- Rebecca** There is an art boom taking place in the Middle East now isn't there?
- Daniel** Yes, but it could be seen as an import of the powerful and successful aspects of Western art such as the white cube gallery and big name European architects.
- Rebecca** Rather than a development through the culture of Middle East.

Actions in the Gallery

Look around at the large coloured images entitled **Appendix XVIII** (they fill most of the room)
Many of them look initially like empty coloured rectangles

Look more closely – can you see anything hiding in or on the colours?

There are suggestions of lettering and shapes. Removed from their original context they derive from the stuff that exists around art rather than the art itself - brochures, lists, letters, bills of sale or gallery plans.

They're like found fragments of evidence, clues to something that may not exist anymore.

Can you tell where the writing or images might be from?

What **languages** can you see written?

How are they affected by:

Their **size**?

The **colour** they appear on?

Walid Raad believes that as a result of the trauma caused by the wars, line, colour and form have taken refuge not in artworks but in the stuff around artworks.

As with the fragments of material used to fabricate historical narratives in the *Atlas Group work*, Raad has beautifully crafted a new form from these forgotten pieces.

The colours for these works are also taken from catalogues, leaflets and the paraphernalia of art exhibitions.

If colour form and line are hibernating **what might wake them up?**

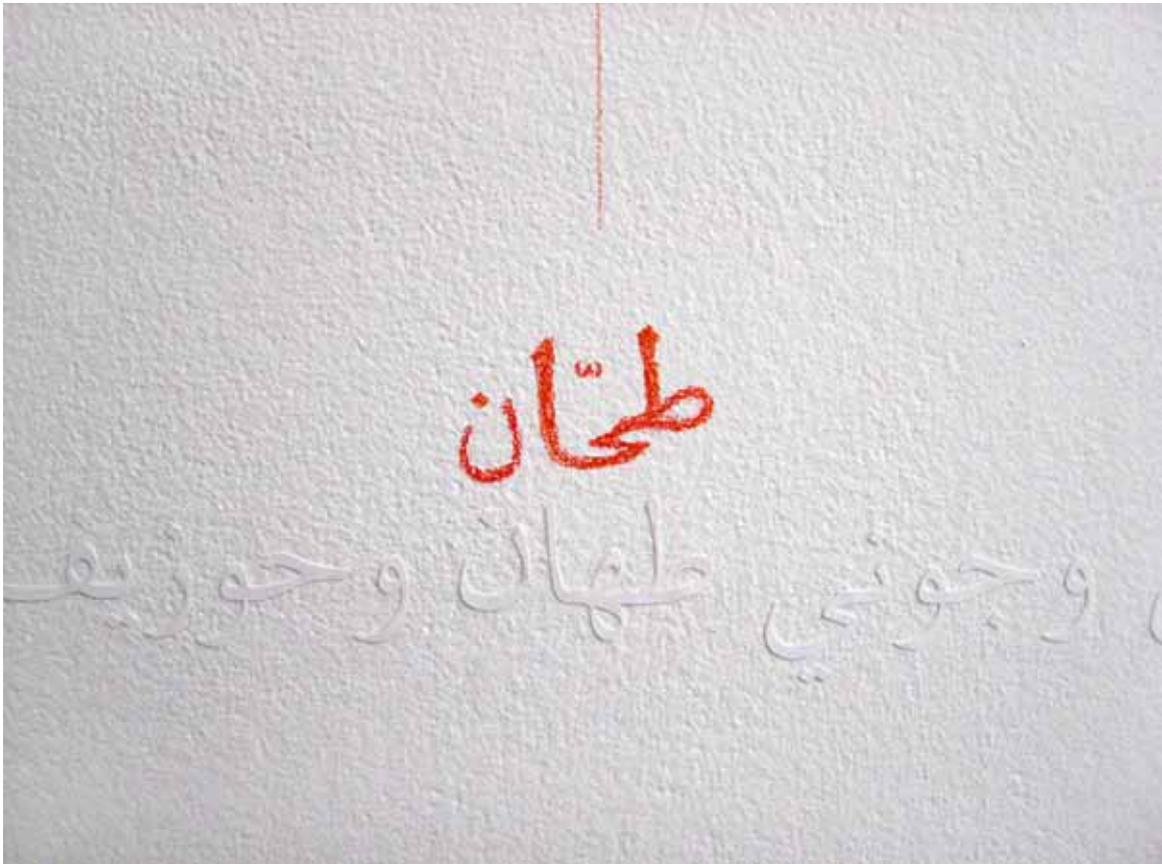
continues on next page...

Look at the **model** in the middle of the room *The Atlas Group (1989-2004)*, 2008
Can you recognise parts of it?

Walid Raad tells a story of how his work *The Atlas Group* mysteriously **shrunk** when he tried to exhibit it at a white cube gallery in Beirut – he says this is not a metaphor but a fact.

Living and working in the USA and exhibiting widely throughout Europe, **how do you think the artist might have felt** about showing his images in Beirut, the city where he grew up?

How do you think people who had lived through the wars **might respond** to his images?



A History of Art in the Arab World: Index XXVI: Artists, 2010

Actions in the Gallery

There are **lines of white writing** along the side walls of the gallery, can you spot them? (See image on previous page).

This piece is entitled **Artists, 2010** and lists artists who worked in Lebanon in the last century. *Walid Raad* claims that the artists' themselves **sent their names** from the future by some sort of **telepathy**. He says that some of the names were misspelled due to a transmission error and have been **corrected in red** by a critic.

The action of the critic has now given the artists access to the colour red. Other actions might allow different colours to become available.

Can you read the names?

Would you **know** if they were spelt correctly?

Why do you think they might be displayed so **discretely**?

The list is **longer or shorter** when displayed at different galleries depending on the wall space.

Activity beyond the Gallery

Choose a friend you remember from the past and **write their full name by hand**.

Spell the name as you think it sounds, not how it should be.

Now find a **place** for this name to **'hide'** in the same way that the artist has done with his text: (Try and make it look beautiful and worth finding)

You could make the letters of the name the **same colour** as their background.

You could make it **tiny** and place it somewhere on a **large** sheet.

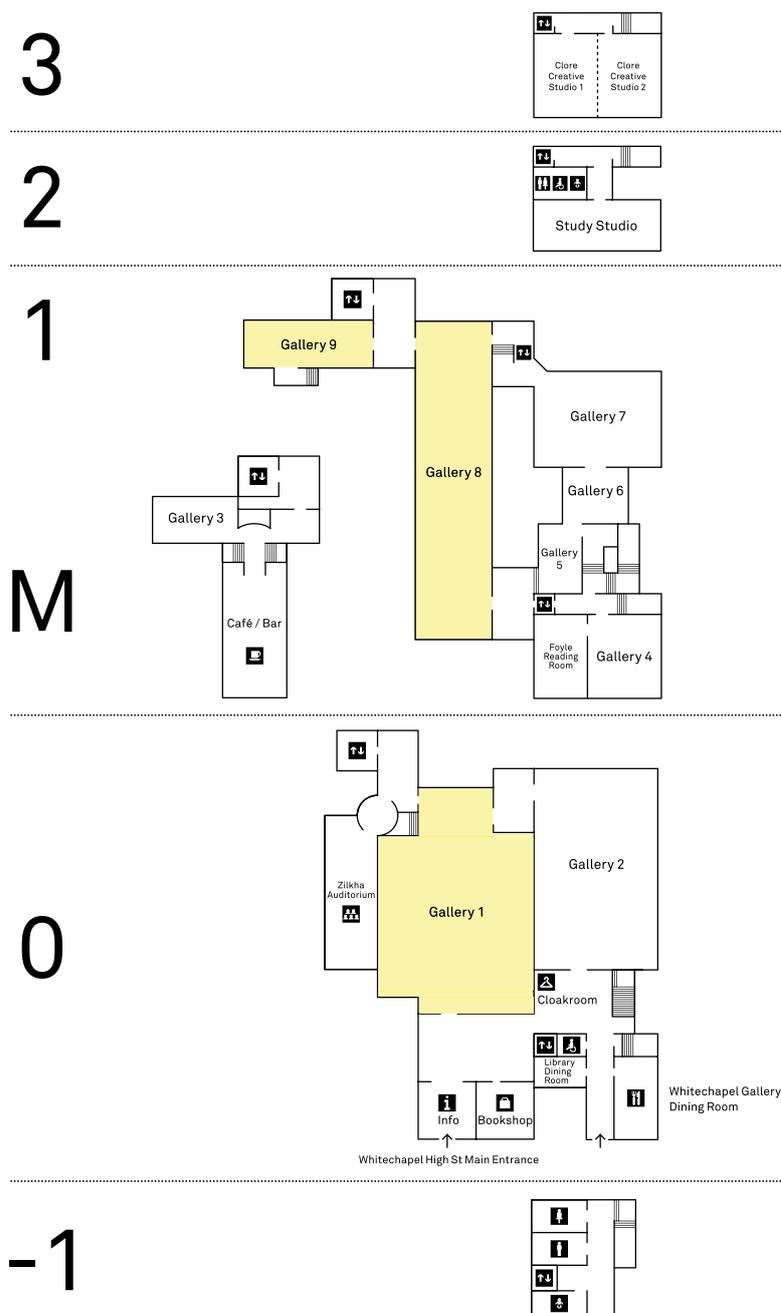
You could **cut out** the letters and put them somewhere **secret** using a photograph to document the spot.

Help the names to come out of hiding by adding a few details about that person in a contrasting colour.

DANIEL You know, some critics and academics argue that the wars in Lebanon have not ended but are still continuing.

REBECCA It must be hard to plan for the future if you feel that war is always close at hand.

Floorplan



Find out more

For visitor information please go to our website: whitechapelgallery.org/visit

To book your free group visit and use our Education Space (available Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays during term time) please call Education on 020 7522 7888 or email: education@whitechapelgallery.org

If you have enjoyed this resource or have any other feedback please do contact us. For more Conversations and Actions visit whitechapelgallery.org/education/schools/teachers