

**“So many roles”**

**Akram Zaatari: Artist, curator, collector, historian, archivist, interventionist**

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**Photography and the Archive**

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In 2004, Hal Foster identified “an archival impulse” among contemporary artists who “seek to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present” by “elaborat[ing] on the found image, object, and text.”<sup>1</sup> In his 2007 essay, “The Artist as Historian,” Mark Godfrey writes, “There are an increasing number of artists whose practice starts with research in archives, and others who deploy what has been termed an archival form of research (with one object of inquiry leading to another).”<sup>2</sup> This paper will examine the work of Akram Zaatari, which though exemplary of the tendencies described by both Foster and Godfrey, has largely been overlooked by such texts addressing the recent proliferation of “archival” or “historical” practices among contemporary artists.

Akram Zaatari was born and raised in Saida, Lebanon. In 1982, at the age of sixteen, he witnessed the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon, which catalyzed his interest in photography. Regarding the experience, Zaatari recalls: “As a child, I used to be fascinated by the site of air raids, and thought of them as the ultimate fireworks; real fireworks; real threats. They were shots of adrenaline.”<sup>3</sup> Upon seeing a Syrian plane explode in the sky after being hit by an Israeli missile—“one of those things you never forget”—Zaatari explains how “I decided to bring out the camera whenever I heard the sound of planes with a view to capturing these ephemeral spectacles.”<sup>4</sup> While standing on the balcony one afternoon with his father’s Kiev camera, Zaatari took six color snapshots

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<sup>1</sup> Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” *October 110*, Fall 2004, 42. Foster’s essay examines the work of Tacita Dean, Sam Durant and Thomas Hirschhorn, which he considers to be emblematic of this impulse.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Godfrey, “The Artist as Historian,” *October 120*, Spring 2007, 142 – 143. Godfrey’s essay focuses on the work of Mathew Buckingham, but he mentions other artists such as Walid Raad/The Atlas Group.

<sup>3</sup> Suzanne Cotter, ed. *Out of Beirut*, exh. cat. (Oxford: Modern Art Oxford, 2006): 31.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

of the raids on Mar Elias hill within a five minute period, noting in his journal that he had “taken important photographs” that day.<sup>5</sup>

Twenty years later, Zaatari revisited these snapshots when creating his photo-composite, *June 6, 1982 (2003-2006)*<sup>6</sup> [Fig. 1] and video, *This Day-loop (2005)*.<sup>7</sup> The photo-composite compresses five minutes of explosions into a single image, exaggerating an already dramatic occurrence. In *This Day-loop*, Zaatari utilizes a video camera to survey the images of nearby apartment buildings and landscape under attack; its tilts, pans, and zooms—alternately slow and rapid—bear more resemblance to the machinic gaze of a security camera than that of a human.<sup>8</sup> The brown and grey clouds produced by Israeli missile strikes are undeniable markers of violence—especially when paired with the sound of explosions on the accompanying audio track—but Zaatari’s manipulation and proliferation of these indexical forms also abstracts and aestheticizes them, thus lending some distance from reality.

While *June 6, 1982* and *This Day-loop* are constructed from his own snapshots, since 1997 Zaatari has primarily appropriated existing documents, including photographs, film, and television footage taken by others. He recently described this tendency:

Part of my work as an artist involves collecting, looking for ‘documents’ for potential incorporation in my work. I am interested in documents that

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<sup>5</sup> Akram Zaatari. “Photographic Documents/Excavation as Art,” reprinted in *The Archive: Documents of Contemporary Art*, Charles Merewether, ed. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 295-296.

<sup>6</sup> Other Lebanese photographers including Walid Raad have revisited photographs they took during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Raad recently enlarged his own (or perhaps someone else’s) scratched black and white negatives of air raids and explosions on the horizon of Beirut, as well as those of Israeli soldiers resting in their camp [Fig. 2].

<sup>7</sup> *This Day-loop* is a three-minute edit from Zaatari’s ninety-minute video *This Day* (2003).

<sup>8</sup> This is similar to Harun Farocki’s “operational images originating in military industrial contexts... personless - disciplinary - devices of vision, developed to survey and assess a machine’s operation and efficiency.” Akram Zaatari, “Radical Closure: Send me to the seas of love, I’m drowning in my blood,” in *Radical Closure Short Film Festival Catalogue 2006*, 85.

originate outside art practices,<sup>9</sup> often produced for commercial purposes, or for personal or other reasons.

For Zaatari, using diverse documents allows for a more “versatile,” art practice.<sup>10</sup> In post-civil war Beirut, which has a dearth of “institutional support for contemporary art practices,”<sup>11</sup> he explains, “you need to play so many roles.”<sup>12</sup> For example, artists often find themselves “focused on the development of structures without being an arts administrator or a curator, interested in histories without being a historian, collecting information without being a journalist.” Although these tasks can be “distracting,” Zaatari considers it “an unequivocal privilege to be able to sustain so many positions simultaneously.”<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps Zaatari’s most significant role is that of founding member of the Arab Image Foundation, “a not-for-profit organization established in Beirut in 1997 to locate, collect, preserve, interpret and present the photographic heritage of the Middle East and North Africa from the nineteenth century to the present.”<sup>14</sup> The foundation’s collection is currently comprised of three hundred thousand images including negatives and prints acquired by its artist-members.<sup>15</sup> Since its inception, the foundation has presented itself as “an organization created by artists,” although according to Zaatari, “the implication of this statement was never clear.”<sup>16</sup> Only recently has the foundation begun to publicly

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<sup>9</sup> Akram Zaatari. “Photographic Documents/Excavation as Art,” 294.

<sup>10</sup> Akram Zaatari. Lecture, North African and Middle Eastern Curatorial Workshop, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, April 18, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Feldman and Zaatari, 63.

<sup>12</sup> Zaatari, Lecture, MoMA.

<sup>13</sup> Feldman and Zaatari, 64.

<sup>14</sup> Arab Image Foundation mission statement: <http://www.fai.org.lb/CurrentSite/index.htm>

<sup>15</sup> The Arab Image Foundation include Founding Members Fouad Elkoury (Lebanon/France), Samer Mohdad (Lebanon /Switzerland), Akram Zaatari (Lebanon), and Members Yto Barrada (Morocco/France), Zeina Arida Bassil (Lebanon), Walid Raad (Lebanon /USA), Lara Baladi (Lebanon /Egypt), Nigol Bezjian (Lebanon /USA), Lucien Samaha (Lebanon /USA), Karl Bassil (Lebanon), Negar Azimi (Lebanon).

<sup>16</sup> Author’s e-mail interview with Akram Zaatari, May 4, 2007.

articulate that its collection is “generated through artists’ work.”<sup>17</sup> He explains this shift in ideology and practice:

When we started we used to think that artists should stop their art work, and go on a mission for the foundation, bring collections, and then resume working on their own videos, photos, etc. Now for me this is not the way I see it. I see my research work as part of my art work, in the sense that I was always looking for themes that interested me in my career as an artist, and I started to see images I bring to the foundation not as neutral images, brought into an image bank, but as an artist’s reflection on cultural and social iconography.<sup>18</sup>

Given the founding members’ diverse interests, Zaatari characterizes the organization as “more heterogeneous in the beginning.”<sup>19</sup> However, as time passed, many of these members have not sustained their initial commitment to the foundation, and consequently just a few artists are now in charge, Zaatari being the most active.<sup>20</sup> New York-based artist and foundation member Walid Raad attributes this to the logistical difficulty of gathering the busy and geographically dispersed members together regularly, particularly given the volatile geopolitical environment of Beirut.<sup>21</sup> Zaatari, Lara Baladi, and Director, Zeina Arida Bassil, are, in fact, the only members currently living there.

For Zaatari, having so few artists actively involved allows “the foundation [to] become more focused and more aware of its role and mission.”<sup>22</sup> But Raad perceives this awareness to be a sign of institutionalization. Rather than formulate a new, more critical model for a photographic archive, he believes the members “went down the most

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> According to Walid Raad, Zaatari is the foundation’s most active member, responsible for approximately 75-80% of the foundation’s acquisitions, and has unofficially become the director of research.

<sup>21</sup> Author’s interview with Walid Raad, New York, March 29, 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Author’s e-mail interview with Zaatari.

retrograde, conservative route possible.”<sup>23</sup> Raad further argues that before acquiring more images, the foundation’s members must critically assess why such a collection is being amassed.<sup>24</sup> Photographs are, in fact, discussed and debated by members before they are acquired. Consequently, Zaatari believes that criticality is embedded in forming the collection, especially through the exhibition and publication of its images. He adopts a more pragmatic approach than Raad, stating, “It is very hard to manage ...150,000 images with their physical being, their description, making [them] available, and at the same time being critical of their being an archive.”<sup>25</sup> Though he uses the term archive, Zaatari does not view these documents as comprising an archive in the conventional sense of the word:

It is a collection of images carefully selected by artists according to their interests, so it is not a neutral archive, nor a total one. A newspaper’s collection, for example, is an archive because it has all photographs taken by the newspaper’s photographers. I like to [make] this differentiation.<sup>26</sup>

Zaatari further differentiates the Arab Image Foundation by proposing that it serves “as a series of interventions as opposed to a depository of photographic collections.”<sup>27</sup> He prefers the term “border” to that of the totalizing implications of “archive,” believing this model allows members “to approach images and objects with an eye to their engagement with contradiction, irreconcilability, and multiplicity.”<sup>28</sup> The foundation aspires to generate projects that “undermine the neutrality of photographic curating, archiving, and

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<sup>23</sup> Author’s interview with Raad.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Author’s email interview with Zaatari. Zaatari outlined the cost of acquiring images for the foundation, stating members “know the limits of the foundation, how much each image they bring costs the foundation before it is stored, and they are the ones who decide whether or not it is worth it. Every image costs the foundation about \$10 processing before it is stored in the conservation room, so imagine you are facing 1,000 images, it is already \$10,000.”

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Feldman and Zaatari, 53.

documentation”—ones that are, in fact, antithetical to archives “in that they constantly draw attention to their constructedness, as well as to their gaps.”<sup>29</sup> Such projects, Zaatari hopes, will encourage not only artists and scholars, but the general public to take “critical approaches to reading and interpreting photographs.”<sup>30</sup>

This critical approach is by no means limited to Zaatari’s work with the Arab Image Foundation. He is part of “a constellation”<sup>31</sup> of Beirut artists that includes Walid Raad, Tony Chakar, Lamia Joreige, Walid Sadek, and Jalal Toufic, who investigate a similar set of issues about how the recent history of Lebanon has been constructed and narrativized from documents.<sup>32</sup> Zaatari attributes their overlap in “desires and anxieties”<sup>33</sup> to having grown up in Lebanon during the violence of the Civil War (1975-1991) and come of age in a very specific post-war environment. Believing that the country’s official history of events failed to account for much of what was actually experienced, many of the artists have a predilection for “counternarrative” or “docufictional” strategies. Toufic explains this, stating, “In Beirut *some* features of ‘the real’ must be fictionalized to be thought.”<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Mark Godfrey understands this tendency not as one meant “to evade historical representation but to represent historical experience more adequately.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Hannah Feldman and Akram Zaatari, “Mining War: Fragments from a conversation already passed,” *Art Journal*, (Vol. 66, no. 2, Summer 2007): 57.

<sup>30</sup> Arab Image Foundation mission statement: <http://www.fai.org.lb/CurrentSite/index.htm>

<sup>31</sup> Zaatari, *The Museum of Modern Art*.

<sup>32</sup> These and other artists were featured in Modern Art Oxford’s exhibition *Out of Beirut* in 2006. Jalal Toufic was, in fact, a member of the Arab Image Foundation for one year.

<sup>33</sup> Cotter, 33.

<sup>34</sup> Jalal Toufic, quoted in Cotter, 28.

<sup>35</sup> Godfrey, 145.

Of the projects generated by these artists, it is Walid Raad's The Atlas Group that has most visibly raised critical questions about the "authority and authenticity"<sup>36</sup> of information and images. Seeking to complicate the perceived objective truth assigned to documents,<sup>37</sup> and more broadly, the "false binary of fiction and nonfiction,"<sup>38</sup> Raad explains the foundation's evolution,

It started off as an imaginary foundation, a fictional foundation but soon found itself becoming real in the sense that as it publicly presented its project, others sought to join it. And as others sought to join it, it over time became a real foundation and a real project, whose mission was to research and document the contemporary history of Lebanon.<sup>39</sup>

Rather than "seek to write a simple chronology of massacres, invasions and political history," The Atlas Group aims "to find and produce documents that help shed light on some of the least examined dimensions of the contemporary history of Lebanon."<sup>40</sup> To do this, it executes projects that reframe and re-present existing documents and produce new documents in the form of photography, video, multimedia presentations and performances.

Despite its frequent characterization as fictional, Raad insists that The Atlas Group does not aim "to fool."<sup>41</sup> Rather, he explains, "Our interest is in how certain stories and situations capture the attention and belief of viewers and listeners."<sup>42</sup> By the same token, Zaatari refutes the designation of the Arab Image Foundation as a "real" counterpart to The Atlas Group, maintaining that while they "represent different

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<sup>36</sup> Lee Smith. "Missing in Action: The Art of The Atlas Group/Walid Raad," in *Artforum* 41, no. 6, February 2003: unpaginated online.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, unpaginated

<sup>38</sup> The Atlas Group/Walid Raad, Interview conducted by Antonia Bryan for The Museum of Modern Art and Acoustiguide: December 14, 2005.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* It remains unfounded whether or not Raad is the sole member of The Atlas Group.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Jalal Toufic, ed. *Review of Photographic Memory*. (Beirut: Arab Image Foundation, 2004): 45.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

experiential approaches to history, neither fictional nor real... both are concerned with how the past and the identities it is thought to conjure are not only represented, but also constructed, if not deliberately performed.”<sup>43</sup> Further supporting this stance, Zaatari adds, “The real fiction is that art-making can avoid the document and that the document similarly avoids fiction.”<sup>44</sup>

One of the Arab Image Foundation’s objectives is “to establish the necessary documentation on photographers,” and to “research their biographies and working methods.”<sup>45</sup> Over the past decade, Zaatari has undertaken most of this research himself, conducting video interviews with several photographers whose images are in the collection. According to the artist, “In the early years, 1997-1999, I convinced the foundation to buy a video camera that I used to take with me... The idea was to have a record of who they were, and what they had to say about their images.”<sup>46</sup> Though he “never thought these would become videos,”<sup>47</sup> Zaatari used footage from his 1998 interview with Van Leo—best known for his portraits of film actors as well as his performative “self-portraits” [Figs. 3, 4, 5]—as the basis for a video called *Him + Her Van Leo* (2001).

Funded by the Arab Image Foundation, *Him + Her Van Leo* cuts between Zaatari’s interview with Van Leo, and a narrative concerning twelve photographs of a naked woman that the Cairo-based photographer took in 1959. [Figs. 6, 7] The video ironically begins with Van Leo announcing, “Photography is dead,” which he attributes to the rise of color photography and video (“All art is in black and white,” he says). The

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<sup>43</sup> Feldman and Zaatari, 57.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Arab Image Foundation web site: <http://www.fai.org.lb/CurrentSite/index.htm>

<sup>46</sup> Author’s email interview with Akram Zaatari. From this footage, Zaatari writes biographical texts that are then made available through the foundation’s online image bank and printed publications. T

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

video cycles back again and again to the provocative images of the woman, each time paired with new subtitles offering different explanations for her identity and how the photographs were rediscovered. Though Van Leo's testimony ultimately identifies the woman as "Nadia from Heliopolis," it is Zaatari's belief that "history cannot be written just by providing information,"<sup>48</sup> which becomes evident in Van Leo's deliberately evasive and sporadic dissemination of 'the facts.'

Comparatively, *Him + Her Van Leo* has a far more linear and cohesive narrative than Zaatari's feature length documentary, *This Day* (2003).<sup>49</sup> Though it begins with slow pans of the camera and narration conveying traditional emblems of the Arab world—the desert, Bedouins, and camels **[Fig. 8]**—*This Day* escalates to become a rapid and layered montage of disparate images and footage drawn from Zaatari's personal photographic albums and journals, so recalling Hal Foster's expression "the archives of mass culture."<sup>50</sup> The narration and text within the video shift between various contemporary topics, from propagandistic pro-Palestinian/anti-Israeli television advertisements<sup>51</sup> to personal commentary about a traffic circle in Amman. Similarly, the subtitles and narration for *This Day* alternate between Arabic and English and from narrator to narrator. When employed in this way, Mark Godfrey believes "the form and content of the voice-over creates thinking space" for viewers.<sup>52</sup> He elaborates,

The fluidity of story is broken up, and the authority of its presentation is questioned. In tandem, viewers recognize their situation in relation to this

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<sup>48</sup> Mahmoud Hojeij. "Disciplined spontaneity: A Conversation on Video Production in Beirut," in *Parachute: Contemporary Art Magazine*, October 2002, unpaginated digital copy.

<sup>49</sup> *This Day* is a different project from the previously discussed *This Day-loop*.

<sup>50</sup> Foster, 4.

<sup>51</sup> In one such advertisement, voices sing, "Killer, not a crazy man. Killer, not a crazy man. Killing the people of Palestine. Drinking the blood of olive trees. Woe unto you. Your dark days are coming. Tomorrow the sun will break your arrogance wherever you may be. Ariel Sharon: Arrest him for his crimes against humanity."

<sup>52</sup> Godfrey, 167.

process...in terms of their responsibility in deciding what to make of the story or subject of the work.<sup>53</sup>

By constructing the video in this way, Zaatari refuses to “use credible voices in support of some absolute truth”<sup>54</sup> or “conceal the power of the narrator”—strategies commonly employed by Hollywood cinema and conventional documentaries. Moreover, by asking the viewer to continually readjust to different voices, languages, and sources of information—from journal entries written by a teenaged Zaatari, to emails from his friends, to television footage—*This Day* challenges its audience to, in Godfrey’s words, “reconsider the role of narrative itself in historical representation,”<sup>55</sup> particularly with respect to narratives about the contemporary Arab world. This approach is aligned with Foster’s characterization of the archival impulse as active and generative: “Archival art is rarely cynical in intent (another welcome change); on the contrary these artists often aim to fashion distracted viewers into engaged discussants (here there is nothing passive about the word ‘archival’).”<sup>56</sup>

Zaatari frequently cites Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville’s 1974 film-video *Ici et Ailleurs (Here and Elsewhere)* as an inspiration for his work, a claim made evident in *This Day*. In 1970 Godard, a long-time sympathizer of the Palestinians, was commissioned by the Palestinian Liberation Organization’s Al Fatah to make a film called *Jusqu’ a la victoire (Until Victory)*, borrowed from their popular slogan of the time, “Revolution until Victory.” The film originally intended to document life in the Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, and “anticipated victory of the

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 151.

<sup>54</sup> Zaatari, quoted in Hojeij, unpaginated.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 149.

<sup>56</sup> Foster, 6.

Palestinian militias over Israeli occupation.”<sup>57</sup> Godard shot footage of the camps in 1970, but upon returning to France “he could not get himself to complet[e] the film initially intended” given the events that transpired in the interim.<sup>58</sup> It was not until 1974 that Godard finally collaborated with Miéville to edit the film.

*Ici et ailleurs* decidedly rejects “the false neutrality of the traditional documentary”<sup>59</sup> and instead offers a “meditation on how cinema records history.”<sup>60</sup> Divided between France (*ici*/here) and Palestine (*ailleurs*/elsewhere), Godard’s film investigates “why the discourse of resistance is often communicated through pompous slogans, delivered in a theatrical way.”<sup>61</sup> The film depicts France as a nuclear family—“a passive audience sitting in front of the television awaiting the resolution of their pending social problems”<sup>62</sup>—and by contrast, the exiled Palestinians in action: training, plotting attacks, and singing songs of resistance.

In one scene, Godard’s voiceover informs the viewer that an ostensibly young pregnant Palestinian woman pledging to sacrifice her child to the resistance, is, in fact, neither Palestinian nor pregnant, but rather an actor. Zaatari explains,

He asks us to believe, then to suspend our belief in his images. Not only does he make us aware that images are manipulated, but he asks us to take every image more seriously, as if saying that in the study of history, a false document is still considered a document.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Feldman and Zaatari, 58.

<sup>58</sup> These events included the 1971 Ajloun massacre, Black September’s attack on the Israeli Olympic team in Munich in 1972, and the expulsion of Palestinian militias from Jordan.

<sup>59</sup> Feldman and Zaatari, 58.

<sup>60</sup> Zaatari, “Radical Closure,” 84.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

Another scene shows people lined up in front of a video camera, awaiting their turn to display a black and white photograph of Al Fatah in action. As each person presents the image to the camera, Godard's voice narrates:

Each time the image after expels the image before and takes its place keeping of course more or less the memory of it. This is made possible because the film is moving and the images don't come altogether but separately, to inscribe themselves one after the other, on their support. Afga, Kodak, Orvo, Gevaert.<sup>64</sup>

This scene serves as a didactic demonstration of the construction of historic narratives through images, as well as a metaphor for the slippage of memory. Rasha Salti writes that *Ici et ailleurs* is not only a "radical reflection on the image, the frozen still photograph and its reproduction of reality, but also the moving image in film, the serial of images following one another, supplanting one another, hence adding up to zero."<sup>65</sup>

Both *Ici et ailleurs* and *This Day* reveal the apparatus behind the creation of such narratives. In the scene just described, the video camera shooting the scene is a tangible, diegetic prop, while in *This Day*, a pair of hands—likely Zaatari's—are visible typing words that then appear on the computer monitor, serving as subtitles for the film before they are deleted and replaced by new words. Later, the same hands flip through Zaatari's journals and photographic albums from the early 1980s. Deliberately rendering apparatus visible was a strategy popularized by the twentieth-century German dramatist Bertolt Brecht, who abandoned "long complex plots in favor of what Walter Benjamin called, "situations." According to Claire Bishop, these function to

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<sup>64</sup> Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville, *Ici et Ailleurs*, 1974. Film-video.

<sup>65</sup> Rasha Salti, "Ici et ailleurs," *Radical Closure Short Film Festival Catalogue 2006*, unpaginated.

“interrupt the narrative through a disruptive element. Through this technique of montage and juxtaposition, audiences were led to break their identification with the protagonists on stage and be incited to critical distance. Rather than presenting the illusion of action on stage and filling the audiences with sentiment, Brechtian theatre compels the spectator to take up a position towards this action.”<sup>66</sup>

Bishop’s description of Brecht’s estrangement effect could easily be interchanged with Salti’s characterization of *Ici et ailleurs*<sup>67</sup>—“a cinema that compels exchange and reflection.”<sup>68</sup> Salti continues, “This is a cinema where the spectator, the filmmaker and the subjects...are... summoned to interrogate the world around them and their being in the world as citizens, historical agents as equals.”<sup>69</sup>

While mining materials from the past, Zaatari’s projects, like those described in Foster’s “An Archival Impulse,” also become “enigmatic prompts for future scenarios.”<sup>70</sup> Zaatari has, in fact, frequently characterized his work as “a document for future generations,” which he believes is liberating “in that it allows it to be seen from a distance, outside political considerations that reduce the work to its didactic content.”<sup>71</sup> Though he states that his ambition is ultimately “social change,” he believes that it will “not happen through video, nor through art in general.”<sup>72</sup> Rather, “If we agree that our goal is to produce personal documents of our era, then our audience is time. Our work contributes to the writing of an alternative history for other people to discover.”<sup>73</sup>

“Alternative histories written by many ordinary people are necessary, Zaatari thinks, “because diversity is the most important factor in resisting collective misrepresentations,

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<sup>66</sup> Claire Bishop, ed. *Participation: Documents in Contemporary Art*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006): 11.

<sup>67</sup> This is also consistent with Foster’s archival impulse.

<sup>68</sup> Salti, 87.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Foster, 5.

<sup>71</sup> Zaatari, quoted in Hojeij, unpaginated.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

stereotypes, and so on.”<sup>74</sup> His own focus “on individuality thus becomes a political mission.”<sup>75</sup> Growing out of what might be considered a Subaltern approach is Zaatari’s current—and by far most expansive project—archiving the photographs of studio photographer Hashem el Madani.<sup>76</sup> In 1948, Madani opened his first portrait studio in his parents’ living room in Saida, Lebanon. Five years later, he moved to a modern studio on the first floor of the prestigious Shehrazade Building, where he remained for fifty years.<sup>77</sup>

According to the Arab Image Foundation,

The Madani Project takes the entire archive of studio Shehrazade as study material to understand the complex relationship, which ties a studio photographer to his working space, his equipments and tools, economy, and aesthetics, and further explore his ties to his clients, society, and the city in general.<sup>78</sup>

The project fulfils “Zaatari’s interest in living situations as objects of study that testify on modern traditions and complex social relationships” as well as the foundation’s “commitment to preserving, indexing and studying photographic collections in the Arab world.”<sup>79</sup>

After years of traveling to Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, and Jordan on “research missions” for the foundation, Zaatari said he became “aware of the importance of doing extensive mapping of situations in order to get the maximum information in the photographs.”<sup>80</sup> He explains,

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid. This is interesting in that it contradicts something Zaatari states about the mission of the Arab Image Foundation: “It is too reductive to see our mission as reactionary to misrepresentation. I don’t really care for misrepresentations of Arabs. The wealth of material that we encounter dwarfs these representations completely....The Arab Image Foundation aims to study photography in the Middle East, North Africa, and their diaspora. It is more a project of discovering what has been there, a project about learning.”

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Though it originated with its focus on Southeast Asia, the approach of Subaltern studies is to look at history from below—focused on the people at the base levels of society rather than the master narratives of the elite.

<sup>77</sup> This is one floor above street level, which offered clients discretion.

<sup>78</sup> <http://www.sfeir-semmler.de/last/zaatari2007/zaatari2007.htm>

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Author’s e-mail interview with Zaatari.

This led me to stop traveling and to dedicate my research to one studio, and that is Madani's. This decision was less due to the fact that he was unique, but more to the fact that he is still alive, his studio hasn't moved, his archive was complete, and he is from the same city as me. So for me I thought I could say all I would have said on the functions of photography in an Arab context through one studio, and would go much farther in depth analyzing the photographer's work in relation to economy, city locations, notions of work and society.<sup>81</sup>

He has done this by generating "a series of thematic exhibitions, publications, and videos,"<sup>82</sup> which center on Madani's photographs. In 2004, Zaatari and Lisa Le Feuvre co-organized *Hashem el Madani: Studio Practices*, a selection of over 500,000 portraits by Madani. Zaatari has also exhibited his own photo-composites of Studio Shehrazade, which he refers to as "blue prints" or "mapping,"<sup>83</sup> and color photographs of Madani's tools alongside Madani's photographs at the Gallery Sfeir-Semler.<sup>84</sup> [Figs. 9, 10] Zaatari distinguishes between these two exhibitions, acknowledging the commercial agenda of the gallery: "Because it was a project that included photographs sales, it had to be carefully presented as a project where I am the artist, and where Madani is the photographer."<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, Madani has a contract that indicates Zaatari "is an artist interested in studying his collection and that the Arab Image Foundation is the entity interested in preserving the collection."<sup>86</sup> Zaatari explains,

The foundation pays for the expenses of cleaning and processing of the collection, and pays for the studio rent and Madani's health insurance...any financial entries from publishing and exhibiting works are

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> <http://www.sfeir-semmler.de/last/zaatari2007/zaatari2007.htm>

<sup>83</sup> Author's interview with Akram Zaatari, New York, March 18, 2008.

<sup>84</sup> This exhibition was on view in the Hamburg gallery from January 26 – March 17, 2007.

<sup>85</sup> Author's e-mail interview with Zaatari.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

split between the [Arab Image Foundation] and Madani, whereas any gallery sales are split in three, including me.<sup>87</sup>

According to Zaatari, “Madani is very supportive of this project as it is getting him some attention, and an income.”<sup>88</sup> He has even accompanied him when touring the exhibition at venues throughout Europe.

Zaatari’s awareness that photographs originate “in an economic system with a certain specificity”<sup>89</sup> has prompted him to draw parallels between studio photography and factory production. His desire to make visible the “original motivations for shooting the pictures presented”<sup>90</sup> and in turn “the economic component of one photographic practice”<sup>91</sup> is what led him to focus on the work of Madani’s studio. In 2004, when Zaatari co-organized with Walid Raad the exhibition *Mapping Sitting: On Portraiture and Photography* on behalf of the Arab Image Foundation, they devoted a section to “photo-surprise” photographers like Madani, who photographed people during their recreational and quotidian activities—at the beach, walking down the street, and bicycling across bridges. Studio photographers became itinerant in the hope of luring customers to their studio to sell them these images, and hopefully take more.<sup>92</sup>

Madani, who claims to have “photographed 90% of people in Saida”—a staggering, likely hyperbolic percentage even when accounting for passport and identity

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Zaatari, “Photographic Documents/Excavation as Art,” 295.

<sup>90</sup> Feldman and Zaatari, 56.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> In fall 2008, Zaatari completed a permanent installation in Saida called *Itineraries*, in which he placed framed photographs taken by Madani in the late 1940s of store owners posing in front of their businesses. The Arab Image Foundation produced a map of Saida’s central business district for people to locate the stores displaying these photographs. This has been very well received by the local community, store owners, and tourists.

photographs—says his clients “used to come from all social backgrounds and classes.”<sup>93</sup> Neither Madani nor Zaatari, however, address the 10% of the population not documented by him, which includes Zaatari himself.<sup>94</sup> Given the perceived comprehensiveness and vastness of Studio Sherazade’s archive and Zaatari’s interests in the construction of historical narratives through images, it would be interesting to investigate who escaped Madani’s lens, and hence, Zaatari’s appropriation and reactivation of Studio Shehrazade’s “paleontological fossils.”<sup>95</sup>

In addition to their economic value to the photographer, Zaatari is also interested in the shifting value of photographs—their personal value to the sitter or sitter’s family and the historic or artistic value they assume when acquired and exhibited by commercial or non-profit exhibition spaces. Zaatari’s investigation of Madani’s photographs centers largely on the studio as a site of fantasy and play in Saida during the 1950s and 1960s. Madani has candidly discussed the construction and performance of identities within his studio, through the use of poses and props such as radios, guns, hats, dresses, and flowers. Explaining a group of ostensibly homoerotic photographs that depict men kissing men and women kissing women [Fig. 11], Madani says, “In a conservative society such as Saida, people were willing to play the kiss between two people of the same sex, but very rarely between a man and a woman.”<sup>96</sup> This is one example of how

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<sup>93</sup> Lisa Le Feuvre and Akram Zaatari, *Hashem El Madani: Studio Practices*, exh. cat. (Beirut: Arab Image Foundation and Mind the Gap Productions and London: The Photographer’s Gallery, 2004): 16.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 17. Zaatari said he did not know about Madani’s studio when he was growing up in Saida. “In 1953 a set of six passport photos (including a free postcard size enlargement) cost 3 Lebanese Lira (which in 1953 was equal to 3 USD). In 1970 the price was raised to 4 Lira. After the Israeli invasion in 1982 the price started to go up after the devaluation of the Lebanese Lira. Now the price for a passport portrait is 6,000 Lira (equivalent to 4 USD).”

<sup>95</sup> Feldman and Zaatari, 64. Zaatari likens his work on el Madani’s photographs “less to the art-historical readymade or to the filmic incorporation of found footage, and more to the paleontological fossil...entities hidden inside second bodies until they are unearthed...[that] resist belonging to the present until a conscious act seeks to use them for a particular purpose, to reassign them a new function.”

<sup>96</sup> Le Feuvre and Zaatari, 106.

photographs can be initially read on the surface, and then “retrieved in a gesture of alternative knowledge”<sup>97</sup> to “perform new histories.”<sup>98</sup> As part of his unpacking of these images, it would be interesting for Zaatari to assess whether or not economics affects a sitter’s ability to control their own representation in studio photography—and their performances of “resistance or conservatism.”<sup>99</sup>

Stating that his “ambition lies somewhere between the institution and the individual,”<sup>100</sup> Zaatari demonstrates the fluidity and overlap of his own aesthetic production and his work for the Arab Image Foundation. While his “idiosyncratic probing into particular figures, objects, and events”<sup>101</sup> exemplifies Foster’s archival impulse, his ability “to work with a methodological freedom and creativity without sacrificing rigor”<sup>102</sup> embodies Godfrey’s description of “the artist as historian.” But as a Beirut artist juggling many roles and perspectives, whose coming of age during the civil war catalyzed his interest in photography and the construction and deconstruction of historic narratives, Zaatari may be uniquely positioned to “present the reorchestrated archive as his own artistic intervention.”<sup>103</sup> And if it is possible to build a photographic archive such as the Arab Image Foundation while embedding it with institutional critique in mind, Zaatari and his colleagues may, in fact, be uniquely capable of doing so.

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<sup>97</sup> Foster, 4.

<sup>98</sup> Feldman and Zaatari, 63.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Zaatari, quoted in Hojeij, unpaginated.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>102</sup> Godfrey, 169-170. Foster and Godfrey’s failure to address Zaatari’s work in their essays may be due in part to his explicitly stated refusal to appeal to the art and film markets. Despite its self-described examination of “relationships between the arts and their critical and social contexts,” *October*, which published the essays of both Foster and Godfrey, is still focused largely on modern and contemporary art in the west, rather than in a broader global context that encompasses the Middle East

<sup>103</sup> Feldman and Zaatari, 63.

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## **Online Resources**

Arab Image Foundation web site: <http://www.fai.org.lb>

Galerie Sfeir-Semler: <http://www.re-title.com/exhibitions/SFEIRSEMLERHamburg.asp>