

THE COMMON GUILD

Visual arts: Projects / Events / Exhibitions



Photo by Ruth Clark

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COMMENTARIES

Akram Zaatari

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In recent years a number of contemporary artists have produced works that explore the archive both as a material repository and as discursive system of knowledge production. This has become an especially urgent task in the Middle East, a region where archives remain neglected, dispersed, destroyed, instrumentalised and censored. Akram Zaatari's engagement with archival collections and systems carries this sense of anxiety about the possibility of writing alternative histories when the thread connecting the present to the past has been broken. In his experimental documentary, *This Day* (2003), Zaatari draws on photographs, audio-recordings and journal entries that he had made as a teenager. If this habit of recording the everyday became a way to resist the boredom imposed by frequent electricity cuts and confinement to the family apartment, it would also give the artist a particular sensitivity to the precarious life of documents during times of war. This attitude informs not only Zaatari's artistic production but the overlapping projects he has undertaken as one of the founders and principal members of the Arab Image Foundation.¹

More than simply amassing images, the AIF was also set up as a platform for artist-led exhibitions and publications on the history of photography in the region. The idea was to generate critical thinking about photographic practices, using the collection both as a basis for scholarly research and artistic experimentation. This can be seen in projects such as *Mapping and Sitting*, a curatorial collaboration between Zaatari and Walid Raad, that brought together group portraits taken in photographic studios in the Arab world, primarily in the 1950s and 60s. There, the interest was in analysing photographs as a mobile commodity linked to "new notions of work, leisure, play, citizenship, community, and individuality."² In his projects on Hashem El Madani's Studio Shehrazade, Zaatari examined commercial portrait photography as site of self-idealisation and social masquerade that functioned to destabilise the very identities that medium, in its colonial and institutional modes, had sought to prescribe.

Over the course of its two decade existence, Zaatari has urged the AIF to consider the social life of photographs, arguing that the back of a picture could be as important as its front, that the mounts and the boxes that housed photographs are as significant as what's in them. At the same time, the artist has used the Foundation's platform to open up a critical debate about the origin, ownership and authorship of photographs that extends to the custodial claims of the archive. One of the main issues of contention

concerned the adoption of standardised methods of photographic preservation and storage at the AIF. Indeed, Zaatari has gone as far as to propose that the entirety of the AIF collection should be scanned and then returned back to its owners. This provocative idea was aimed at liberating images from what the artist sees as a structure of institutional confinement that treated photographs as capital stored in an image bank. While archives importantly serve to safeguard an ephemeral heritage for future use, the narrow focus on the material preservation of the photographic document involves cutting it off from the social fabric in which it was once embedded. Thus, Zaatari asks if emotions can be preserved in images and wonders whether such an undertaking might actually involve "returning a picture to the album from which it was taken, to the bedroom where it was found, to the configuration it once belonged to."³ Approaching this question from a different angle, the film scholar Laura Marks argues that "sometimes the materiality of the archival object arouse dreams, half-felt longings."⁴ For Marks, the archive is not only a space of historical enquiry, but "a flirtation, an erotic practice, a romance" that unsettles the distinction between scholarly interest in and libidinal attachment to images.

This offers a useful lens through which to examine Zaatari's exhibition at The Common Guild. The assembled works foreground the artist's long-standing fascination with vernacular image-making practices in the Arab world. In this regard, Zaatari draws on a range of media and formats including: gelatin-silver photography, digital video, 16mm film, and drawing. In the main gallery viewers are confronted with a set of black-and-white photographs that the artist has sourced from El Madani's studio in Saida, the artist's hometown. In several images we see same-sex 'couples' kissing each other in front of the camera. In others, young men playfully embrace a cardboard cut-out of a voluptuous blond woman. Shot mostly between the 1950s and the 70s, these photographs point to moral codes limiting the public display of physical affection between men and women who were not married. However, far from viewing these images as an index of social repression Zaatari suggests that these restrictions generated creative solutions in the photographic studio. Indeed, in Lebanon, photography afforded sitters the opportunity to assume subject positions that were otherwise foreclosed beyond the walls of the studio. El Madani's photographs read ambiguously when viewed through the prism of Zaatari's wider pre-occupation with images of homo-social and homo-erotic desire in the

Arab world. In fact, these photographs might lead viewers to question how we think about queer identity, particularly the assumption that freedom necessarily means being openly gay.

In *Tomorrow Everything Will Be Alright* (2010) Zaatari explores how amorous speech can take on new range of meanings and associations when it is translated across different media. The video is structured around a fraught re-union between two former lovers who make contact with each other online after a long period of estrangement. Each message and reply is typed out in alternating lines of red and black ink. As the transcript makes clear, one of the men is still clearly hurting from his rejection by the other more than a decade earlier. The chat originally takes place online but in this work it is reimagined as a kind of anachronistic film script that is composed in real-time using a type-writer that Zaatari received on his 16th birthday. The transposition not only registers the sense of nostalgia produced by technological obsolescence but also pays tribute to the artist's cinephilia—as a teenager he used the same type-writer to add entries to a film encyclopedia. At the same time, the script functions as a meta-textual reference to the many love stories that Zaatari grew up watching on the big screen. The dialogue moves uncomfortably between expressions of love and longing (“am I making your heart beat?” “do you miss?”) and demands for something more carnal (“do you have a hard on?”). In the end, the interlocutors agree to meet at the beach at sunset. Zaatari cuts to video footage—filmed at the end of the millennium—of the sun slowly descending over the Mediterranean sea. The artist self-consciously deploys a cinematic cliché but the date-stamped images also point to the singularity of the recorded event.

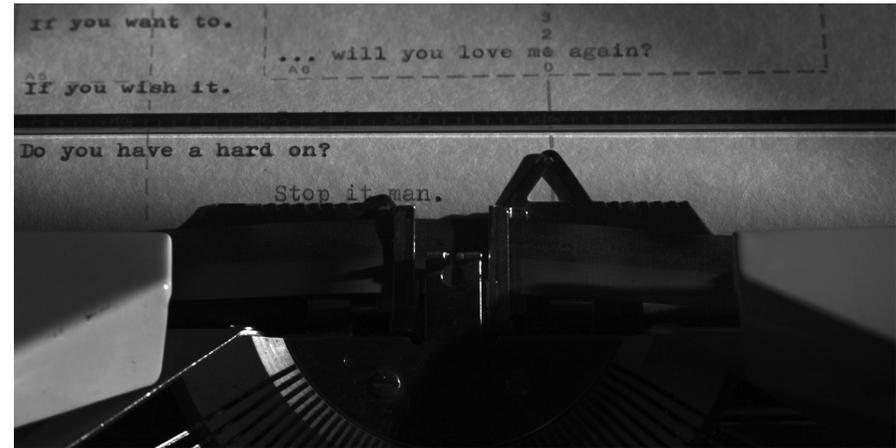
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1. Founded in 1997, the AIF is a non-profit organization dedicated to the collection, preservation and study of photography and other related visual material from the Middle East, North Africa and the Arab diaspora.

2. See Akram Zaatari and Walid Raad, *Mapping Sitting* (Beirut: The Arab Image Foundation, 2005).

3. Quoted in Eva Respini and Ana Janevski, 'Interview with the Artist', April 2013, www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/projects/akram-zaatari/interview-with-the-artist, accessed 5 October 2016.

4. Laura U. Marks, *Hanan al-Cinema: Affections for the Moving Image* (MIT Press: Cambridge, 2015), 173.



Akram Zaatari
Tomorrow Everything Will Be Alright, 2010 (still)
Digital video (with sound). 12 minutes.
Courtesy of the artist and Thomas Dane Gallery, London