

Akram's Reproduction Machine: Reimagining Lebanese Resistance¹

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East Meets West

Fading up from black, the first shot shows the corner of a hardbound book. In silver inscription, capital letters state, "THE BedouinS AND THE DESERT." A hand opens the book and begins to flip through the pages. Upon reaching the section entitled, "The First Pillar: The Desert," the screen cuts to a title card, "A work by Akram Zaatari." We return to the book flipping through pages and pausing on the photographs of camels and people living in arid conditions. Another title card announces the title of the video in English "This Day" and Arabic "*al-yeom*." *Al-yeom* is typically translated as "today," so Zaatari's inclusion of the English title points to the specifics of some particular day, possibly this very day or some day in the past. We return to the book being flipped through before cutting to an archivist's white gloves looking through a box of photographic proofs of the same images we saw in the book. This scene cuts to another book, this time facing the opposite direction and written in Arabic script the title says, *Badw wa-al-badiyah*, ie, "The Bedouins and the Desert."² The book is opened and hands begin leafing through the pages. Cut back to the white archivist gloves. The hands pick up several photos, each in a protective wax sheath. They are from a series of

¹ This e-paper is drawn from the final chapter of a book I have under preparation about documentary representation in "postwar" Lebanon. My research is informed by three periods of fieldwork in Lebanon, as well as a multi-sited moments where I focused on the global circulation of "Arab" and "Middle Eastern" art. I began research on this topic nearly ten years ago when Lebanon was about a decade beyond their protracted "civil war," again in 2005 during the "cedar revolution," and again in 2009 as Lebanon struggled to grapple with the effects of the 2006 war with Israel and wrestle with the growing prominence of Hezbollah.

² These English (Jabbur 1995) and Arabic (Jabbūr 1988) texts are the work of Arabic scholar Jabrail Jabbur.

shots of a vehicle in the desert.

The first-person perspective in each of these opening shots frames a subject position that collapses the viewer, the camera, and Zaatari's body, whose hands are leafing through these texts and photos. Throughout *This Day* we encounter frames that prescribe how we as an audience see the images presented by Zaatari. The integrity of the image exists in different registers and in frames within frames. In this opening scene, we do not merely encounter images, but images as part of media objects – photos set on the page of a book with text captions and proofs preserved in wax paper and photo boxes. In both cases, visible evidence is bolstered by its obviously physical form, but this also implies a reflexive critique that draws attention to representational frames. Their materiality is emphasized as is their phenomenological proximity to Zaatari's hands that manipulate the images in order for them to be seen – shelved books and boxed archives show nothing of their contents. This opening sequence identifies multiple frames of reference – the books, archival photos, the windshield, and the mirror – in order to simultaneously reveal the archival record of the Bedouins in the Syrian desert, situate the constructedness of these representations, and embody the space of these media objects and frames of reference. This nexus of mediation draws the viewer into the imaginary world of the film to think critically of these representations, while vicariously feeling contemporaneous with these artifacts. Mediation practices in experimental documentary in Lebanon characteristically draws attention to embodied modes of spectatorship and accentuates feelings of proximity to the media objects as they are recovered from a state of dormancy. At the same time, the proximity to media objects engender feelings of distance from the people and places represented therein.

These images of the Bedouin come from the collection of Syrian Arabist Jibrail Sulayman Jabbur (1900–1991) that was donated to the Arab Image Foundation by his granddaughter. A professor of Arabic Literature at the American University of Beirut, in the 1950s Jabbur conducted research on the Bedouin in Syria near his childhood home and had Armenian photographer Manoug take a

series of photos for inclusion in his monograph on the Bedouin. Zaatari, as one of the co-founders of the Arab Image Foundation and principle curators of its holdings, goes in pursuit of Jabbur's Bedouin. Indeed, a vision of the desert emerges around certain modes of transportation - like a broken down jeep, camels, and, of course, the "whole and noble" nomadic Bedouin, and a quest to document this "vanishing" culture. Traveling and im/mobility have long played a significant role in salvage anthropology, rescuing bits of culture while imperial modernization projects work to erase 'primitive' lifestyles. A vanishing 'culture' thus becomes both displaced to the archive or museum and politically silenced. Zaatari's work endeavors to uncover these traces and carry them back to the site of contact between Arabist, photographer, and the Bedouin. This site, the source of the photos, euphemistically implies a point of origins. But Zaatari complicates our accessibility to these origins, as an irretrievable and idealized farce.

In the next scene we cut to a shot through the windshield of a car driving in the desert. We can see the driver's eyes fixed on his path in the rearview mirror. In an extended sequence we proceed through the desert until coming to a low rock outcropping that prevents further passage in that direction. The driver stops the car and turns to look at the camera through the rearview mirror - literally looking 'back' at the viewer. This 'rearview' informs an audience that the agency of looking can assume different subject positions. A bit further into the video, we cut to another title card, "East meets West." Digitally panning across a black and white image of a broken down jeep in the desert, we hear Jabbur's granddaughter tell us in English,

"It's a perfect picture of the East meeting the West, because the western jeep breaks down in the desert. And ah, taking photographs of the desert and of the camels is looking at an eastern object with a western optic, a camera. Already to take pictures of that is to document it. The spirit to document such a thing is a western idea, I think."

As Zaatari's research leads him further into the Syrian desert in search of the participants photographed by Jabbur 50 years earlier, a new title card announces his destination, "Al-Qaryatayn (Syria)." In the courtyard of a small house, we see an elderly woman clad in black and thick eyeglasses trying to

mount a large water jug on her head. Behind her a large satellite dish points to the sky. From this scene we cut back to Jabbur's granddaughter narrating her memories of his photographs, in particular a shot with a series of Bedouin women carrying water jugs on their heads. While digitally panning across several ethnographic photographs taken by Manoug, Jabbur's granddaughter narrates her memories of these images and recounts her grandfather's quest for salvage anthropology. Zaatari is more interested in understanding Jabbur's social context than recouping the roots of Arab civilization, which often is ascribed to the Bedouin. Through interviews with Jabbur's granddaughter and two of the women photographed, Zaatari provides the context for Jabbur's work, or what Zaatari calls the "misc-en-scene." The series of photographs with women holding clay jars on their heads were taken with some of the few women who agreed to be photographed (Zaatari 2009). The Muslim women had refused to be imaged, so the women photographed for Jabbur are Christian relatives of the photographer, who have grown up here with the Bedouin.³

Cut to a new scene. At a clean desk, in front of a plain wall, a monitor displaying time code plays an interview with one of the woman who had been balancing the jug atop her head in Jabbur's photograph. In front of the monitor to the left, we see two rows of mini-DV cassettes and an empty case lying in front of the monitor's screen. To the right a mini-DV deck sits outside the glow of a black desk lamp. A black book sits off-screen. In the lower bottom of the screen, opened on the desk is one of Jabbur's books on the Bedouin, the English version. This subjective space of the documentary filmmaker reviewing his raw footage, while flipping pages in this ethnographic study, again inscribes multiple layers of mediation within a single frame – monitor, time code, tapes, deck, texts, interview, and a lamp – photography is after all an art of light and shadows. We also occasionally see Zaatari's hands or under-exposed profile leaning into the frame as he looks at the text or adjusts the volume of the monitor.

³ It would be worth investigating the origins of Manoug's relations. Many Armenians fled Anatolia during the 'Armenian genocide' in the early 20th century. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to know more about these Christian women (and families) and their relationship with their Muslim neighbors. The author has not been able to pursue these questions as yet.

Meanwhile, in the interview the woman is trying to remember the pictures she has on the wall behind her. Sitting on the end of the bed facing the filmmaker, the viewer can see several pictures hanging on the walls behind her, but she cannot see the pictures and her response suggests that Zaatari asked her to recount the pictures without looking at them in order to manifest her iconographic memory of the space in which she dwells. She talks about images of Christ, the Virgin, the last supper, archbishops, and relatives, but fails to remember Jabbur's image of her and the other women balancing the jugs captured fifty years earlier. When Zaatari hints to her about the picture he is thinking of, she laughs, "Important? No, the others are more important. We are not important, not me, not the girls. You might find it important; I'm not even aware of it." Her humble sense of self reveals a much different sensibility than the one that compelled the photographer. Without Zaatari's journey back to these women, we can only understand the image of the women with jugs balanced, as well as the other photos of the Bedouin, as existing in an ethnographic imaginary. Instead, Zaatari brings these divergent moments together to recharge the archive with the personal accounts about the experience of being imaged.

This Day uncovers a social history of photography secretly inscribed in the images, but also extends this reflexive critique of representation onto his own practices. While *This Day* explicitly critiques the visual desires of Jabbur, as an Arab Orientalist, who has romanticized the Bedouin as the essence of Arab civilization, he also calls into questions his own practices. Indeed, Zaatari's videos tend to exhibit a subtle strain in the relationships between the filmmaker and the people being filmed. For instance, as he asks these elderly women to indulge his requests to balance these heavy jugs atop their heads, the men's voices coming from off screen keep telling Zaatari to take the picture, probably assuming that Zaatari was taking a still image. Instead, as the video rolls we hear the off-screen commentary as a subtle critique of Zaatari's documentary objectification of its subject. Zaatari's ethics of nonfiction image making are not stated, but he often exposes himself as implicated within the hierarchies of representational politics. Perhaps, these intentional moments of exposure remind us that an ethically pure

approach to documentary pursuits is a flawed and unachievable ideal. As I will discuss below, this parallels a general sentiment among Lebanese artists, who dismiss any effort to objectively represent the Lebanese civil war.

My extended *in medias res* description of *This Day's* opening sequence aims to illustrate Zaatari's experimental engagement with the photographic heritage of the Middle East. This experimental nexus conjoins archival and artistic practices in an effort that bridges visual traditions with contemporary practices. In the Lebanese art world, a rupture that coincides with the civil war has also put earlier generations of plastic artists at odds with contemporary artists who gravitate more toward modern media, or as Zaatari says, "reproduction machines." Zaatari's investment in practices of the past stands counter to this general trend, but this does not mean that he blindly celebrates the work of these earlier generations. Instead, his investment is based on critical engagement, which enables him to reconstruct local traditions and bring them into contact with contemporary representation. In so doing, I argue that Zaatari's work fills several lacunae in the visual research of the Middle East.

In general, artists like Zaatari could be understood to be feeding a deep hunger in the west that became more pronounced in the wake of September 11. The western art world is but one venue that has witnessed dissatisfaction with tired caricatures and racist propaganda. This voracious appetite is not without problems, but does provide opportunity to feed it localized worldviews. Within this broadly understood void, there are three specific lacunae that I wish to address and then to situate Akram Zaatari's work in relation to each. First, his work with the Arab Image Foundation endeavors to establish a "parallax" perspective of the region (Ginsburg 1995). That is, the Arab Image Foundation offers a visual record made "by residents of the Middle East and North Africa from the 19th century until the present," which have seen things differently from the visual regimes based in western or orientalist worldviews.⁴ Second, if assessed as a contribution to visual anthropology, work by documentary artists like Zaatari fills a dearth of research in the region. According to Davey, who did a twenty-year content analysis of the

⁴ See <http://www.fai.org.lb/Home.aspx>

journal *Visual Anthropology* published by Routledge, only 6% of the journal's published articles focused on the Middle East (Davey 2008:199). Accordingly, I aim to situate Akram Zaatari's work within the shifting debates about visual anthropology and visual culture. Third, Zaatari's long-term project entitled *Earth of Endless Secrets* "unearths" documentary practices made under conditions of war. While offering pertinent theoretical and aesthetic critiques about the possibility of representing the ordinary experience of political violence, Zaatari specifically offers an extended engagement with Lebanon's secular resistance against Israeli occupation. This is a history that easily gets forgotten in relation to the current Islamic-based resistance of Hezbollah.

Diminishing Returns

In the wake of September 11 and the expanding war on terror, the (western) world has become hungry to understand the Middle East. While the mass media still propagates simplistic clashes between civilizations and pundits remain fixated on self-righteous criticisms of veils and terrorism, many people have turned to university classrooms and alternative news blogs in search of something more. Among the various forms of popular culture, film and art have also garnered much interest from western consumers. And Lebanese contemporary visual culture (film, video, photo, performance, digital art) has claimed a significant share of this limelight. For instance, Modern Art Oxford hosted an exhibition in mid-2006 entitled, *Out of Beirut*, with the aim of giving new audiences "startling and subtle insights" advanced by contemporary Lebanese artists, who "are questioning the purpose and power of art at a time of global anxiety" (Nairne 2006:7). But how did Lebanese contemporary visual culture attain this exalted status?

In 2001, on the eve of the current war on terror, Lebanon was a decade beyond its prolonged civil war (1975-1990).⁵ The country seemed to be prospering

⁵ Typically rendered as a national dispute between Muslims and Christians, the conflating of Lebanon's eighteen official sectarian identities, called confessions, into a civil duality belies the role of secular militias, shifting alliances, and prolonged history of foreign intervention. Refer to Robert Fisk's *Pity the Nation* (1992), an expansive record of this war, which provides an extended presentation of the shifting alliances, outside manipulations, and internal power dynamics.

again, the infrastructure being rebuilt, and exiles returning. New public cultures found place in the shifting conditions during and after the war. These were low cost efforts with common interest being the only thing that held them together. In the postwar period, tycoon politicians, like the late-Rafiq Hariri, invested heavily in the reconstruction of downtown Beirut and a new vision for Lebanon. Part of this vision included the opening of several satellite stations, which provided many jobs for journalists, technicians, filmmakers, and artists. Formal and informal collectives found each other in the rubble. Many returning artists and filmmakers found ripe material for artistic and documentary expression.

Akram Zaatari has become one of the most successful of these artist stories. After studying architecture at the American University in Beirut, he hoped to pursue his dream of becoming a filmmaker by applying to film schools in the US. He did not gain admittance to his desired programs and opted instead to pursue an MA in Media Studies at the New School in New York. He returned in the mid-1990s and worked as a producer at Rafiq Hariri's new Future TV. During this time he made several short videos that addressed both remnants of the war and expressions of sexuality. In 1997 he completed his *All is Well on the Border*, which grappled with the representation and narratives of occupation and resistance. That same year, he co-founded the Arab Image Foundation (hereafter AIF). Over the next decade, he exhibits widely around the globe, produces several videos, and publishes a series of books presenting material from AIF's archive. Like Zaatari, many Lebanese artists have gained significant notoriety in the western Art world (or at least one significant part of that art world) for their works that have interrogated a legacy of Middle East violence. According to Beirut-based art critic, Kaelen Wilson-Goldie (Wilson-Goldie 2007:139):

Lebanon's civil war ... figures into all of their work as an explosive set of phenomenon that seem doomed to repeat, transform and reinvent themselves constantly. How to capture, critically assess and ultimately diffuse those various phenomenon has arguably become the single most urgent challenge for contemporary artists living and working in Beirut today.

Using the history of war as a creative muse can of course have its drawbacks. For instance, famed reconstruction era architect Bernard Khoury

recently presented an installation called *Prisoner of War* at the Beirut Art Center (BAC), which suggests that Lebanese artists are prisoners of the civil war. In this installation at the BAC, Khoury has a collage of images taken from the work of different Lebanese artists and filmmakers entitled *Catherine Wanted to Know*. This reference to well-known French curator, Catherine David, who helped 'expose' Lebanese art to the west, also implies that Lebanese art is beholden to the whims of the western art market and its taste for war. Artists and curators in Lebanon recognize the irony of their appeal to the west, but nevertheless work tirelessly to build bridges with international colleagues. Unlike an earlier period where western art practices and aesthetics became markers of a nonwestern nation's (lack of) modernity and were used politically by European empires as part of their civilizing missions, the critically infused postmodernity of visual culture has enabled contemporary Lebanese artists to challenge the derivative assertions assailed on earlier generations. Furthermore, events like the Home Works cultural festival brings together regional and global art figures for an intensive exchange of ideas and ideologies.

Rather than casting Lebanese art and media practices as victims of a global art economy I want to take a different angle; one that presupposes that this body of work obsessed with its wars can and does tell 'us' something about the practices of representing violent conflict. More than mere moral lessons, I am interested in this critical practice from the perspective of a practicing visual anthropologist. I wish to understand the way artists and filmmakers, who have long-term auto-ethnographic experience and a refined propensity for reflexive critiques of representation, endeavor to visually depict the lived and imaginary experience of violence in the Middle East. Despite Khoury's premise in the *Prisoner of War* installation, many of the artists of Zaatari's generation refute claims that they are doing work on the history of the war. While their creative experience is significantly linked with the war, these artists consider it utterly inaccessible to representation. These concerns of Khoury's have been taken up by Zaatari in another way.

In this climate of post-911 cross-cultural understanding, Fulbright

announced a Visiting Specialist Program focusing on the Muslim world.⁶ Akram Zaatari and Hannah Feldman, an assistant professor of art history at Northwestern University near Chicago, submitted a joint application that would bring Zaatari to Northwestern for six weeks during the fall of 2006 (Zaatari and Feldman 2007). Although their application was accepted by Fulbright, in order to bring a perspective of the “Muslim world” to American university students, Zaatari would have to negotiate a sudden return of violence that completely destabilized Lebanon. On July 12, Hezbollah captured two Israeli soldiers near the border in an attack that also killed seven Israeli troops. In retaliation to these provocations, the Israeli government launched a military campaign against Hezbollah that displaced a million Lebanese and upwards of half a million Israelis, not to mention the death of over a thousand Lebanese civilians, with more dying each month from remnant cluster bombs. During this “July War,” Zaatari was unable to obtain the necessary J-1 visa. Zaatari finally secured his visa ten days before the course would begin.

In a moment immediately after Lebanon had endured a monumental crisis, what is the significance of Akram Zaatari teaching a course with an American academic on art history in Chicago in 2006? What is happening in Lebanon and the United States that could warrant this academic exchange? What could the cycles of violence in Lebanon tell American students about the representation of disaster that could benefit their worldview? Bogged down in an unjust war in Iraq, what do the Lebanese artists and filmmakers documenting this experience know that Americans do not know? Walid Raad, perhaps Lebanon's most well known art celebrity, affirms the role of the Lebanese, “We lived through so many of these events, we can prefigure some of the possible scenarios” (Quoted in Wallach 2004).

Given this over-determined history of violence, Zaatari and Feldman's seminar endeavored to move beyond similarly over-determined analyses of contemporary Lebanese visual culture. While this work typically bolsters critiques

⁶ Zaatari and Feldman identify this as the Fulbright Visiting Specialist Program: Direct Contact with the Muslim World, but according to Fulbright the name of the program is Direct Access to the Muslim World. Although inconsequential for the sake of this paper, the slippage between “contact” and “access” elucidates the insufficiency of official language to code these cross-cultural relationships.

of traditional documentary's "incapacity to adequately communicate experience without reification," Zaatari and Feldman had become concerned that "assertions of representation's impossibility threaten to trap representation in a cycle of diminishing returns" (Zaatari and Feldman 2007:51).

Indeed, critics from Lebanon and beyond have consistently noted, if not perhaps prescribed, that one of the most prevalent features of contemporary Lebanese artistic production is its preoccupation with the *reassessment of the role and place of documentary evidence in constructions of historical truth*. ... a number of Lebanese artists have spent the last fifteen years producing work that *attempts to register the irresolution* of the civil war's legacy (Emphasis added; Zaatari and Feldman 2007:51).

Given the limitations asserted by representational "impossibility," Zaatari and Feldman ask an imperative question. How can the representation of Lebanon escape this predicament's "cycle of diminishing returns?" This is a particularly important question on at least three fronts. First, it hints at the way representational critiques of Lebanon's history becomes mired in over-determined categories, like cosmopolitan excess (Lebanese polyglots identifying with exilic and postcolonial subjectivities of translation) and nationalist violence (multi-sectarian power-sharing system flawed by hierarchical inequality). Moving away from uniform totalities and toward the "divisions and misidentifications" of the margins, these border approaches favor engaging the "contradiction, irreconcilability, and multiplicity" of these images and objects (2007:53). Zaatari endeavors to make visible the processes that render certain perspectives silent, invisible, and dislocated in these popular histories of victimization and resistance. Second, the irony that this issue is being debated at a moment when Lebanon's 'postwar' period has been effectively terminated should not be lost on us. While a fifteen-year precarious peace allowed the memories of the war to slip into the past, a series of recent events have brought political violence back to the fore. How artists fixated on the earlier violence will grapple with this present danger is still being worked though. For some, its proximity is still too close to achieve creative and critical perspective. Third, and more positively, the question of diminishing returns and over-determined modes of representation has inspired

artists like Zaatari to examine the mundane experience of ordinary people. Thus, faced with the impossibility of representation, Zaatari turns to the quotidian. This quotidian gaze offers Zaatari a site for reinvigorating representation under more “possible” parameters.

This quotidian aspect of Zaatari's work emerged from “habits of recording” that he developed during the war in order to counter the boredom of a childhood spent in the safety of indoor environments. Zaatari's first photographs, mundane journal entries, and banal objects reveals a desire to witness and collect evidence of a world falling apart. Zaatari's early practice of recording and collecting will foreshadow his professional filmmaking and archivist pursuits. Suzanne Cotter, who had curated the Oxford show, argues that Zaatari's work conveys a “sense of a quotidian that contains within it extraordinary events” (Cotter 2009:55). Michèle Hadria argues that Zaatari’s engagement with “everyday life is claimed at a human, ordinary, and intimate level, transcending the eruptions, the curfews, the incursions, and suicide-bombings to counter-act the violence relentlessly spotlighted by the European [and American] news” (Hadria 2005:38). Indeed, this micro-ritualization of recording one's world at war provides crucial links for understanding Zaatari's research interests in the social histories of photography in the Middle East. It also helps to elucidate Zaatari's historiographical critiques, in which “the collected document ... is a central premise, as is the writing of history in which tangential events and the subjective eye-witness are privileged players” (Cotter 2009:50). Given the privileged status of the archival object, it is thus necessary to unpack Zaatari's archaeological research.

Unearthing Artifacts

As co-founder of the AIF, Akram Zaatari has worked to collect hundreds of thousands of photographs made by professional and amateur photographers in the Arab world. In a widespread effort to collect visual artifacts made by residents of the region (rather than Westerner travelers), AIF has created a massive archive of 'indigenous' images. Zaatari has been chiefly responsible for overseeing the collection of an extensive photographic archive from flea markets, art collectors,

photographic studios, and family albums. Zaatari's contribution to this endeavor is not limited to merely creating this alternative archive, but through exhibition and the production of several publications, videos, and installations his work constitutes an emergent site for reappraising the visual record of the Arab region.⁷ In this sense, AIF presents significant transformative potential for steering the direction of visual culture studies in the Middle East, so long as its collection is spared the threat of violence itself. By simultaneously collecting the photographic heritage of the Middle East and North Africa and promoting photographic practices, AIF offers an alternative archive from which to advance critiques about the visual record of the region, which has helped artists like Zaatari avoid making a redundant critique of Orientalist representations of the Middle East. These efforts help galvanize the importance of reassessing the hegemonic archive vis-à-vis this re-emergent collection.

In Lebanon, photo studios have proven to be urgent sites of preservation due to their destruction during the war or by natural disasters. In Beirut, most of the photo studios, which were located in the downtown area, became destroyed during the early battles of the civil war. In this case, "the only remnants of their production were the prints collected from Beirut families" (Zaatari and Feldman 2007:55). Furthermore, the photographic collections of commercial studios have also faced their peril at the financial dissolution of these studios, which has often been marked by the selling off of their negatives for the silver content. The recognition of these lost photographic collections fostered the founding of AIF in order to acquire and preserve these vanishing documents and archives. The photo studio thus emerges as a site of loss. Not only are the negatives and photos at

⁷ Walid Raad's imaginary archive is often situated in contrast to the work emerging from the Arab Image Foundation (AIF). For Walid Raad, the Atlas Group Archive provides an alternative archive with imaginary characters in order to affectively analyze the way history becomes documented and made believable. There is a tendency to distinguish these two endeavors based on fiction versus fact, thus reifying AIF as a 'true' archive and Raad's project as 'false'. As Zaatari says, "Better would be to suggest that they represent different experiential approaches to history, neither fictional nor real" (Zaatari and Feldman 2007:57). Whereas Raad's Atlas Group Archive foregrounds imaginary documents produced by fictitious characters in order to subvert the hegemony of the official archive, AIF has fostered the preservation of "vanishing" archives with photographs from across the region and re-enchanted them with social and cultural contextual analysis. Both projects ultimately critique the traditional archive based on Enlightenment ideals of rational and objective categorization.

risk of vanishing, but the public space of the photo studio is also in jeopardy of becoming erased. Zaatari's engagement with the photo studio should not be mistaken as a nostalgic desire for recreating a lost form of public art, but instead as an effort to re-inhabit these sites and re-enchant their legacy within the present.

Zaatari's visual critique of these images and their attending modes of production helps to acknowledge the unique ways in which modernity transformed social sites across the region. This attention to local modernities avoids typical presumptions about the destruction of tradition and static notions of authenticity. The images collected from studio and amateur photographers show the emergence of new social and cultural structures of feeling and provide a reflexive record of modernity's own incursion into public and private spheres of interaction. In his efforts to chronicle the work of Middle Eastern photographers, Zaatari joins biographical narratives about photography with an analysis of modern desires to mediate the transformation of social identity. In this way the modern history of the Middle East re-emerges from this alternative record of snapshots and portraits. While the collection of amateur photos showcases middle class sensibilities through modern lifestyles and new acquisitions (automobiles, televisions, cameras, etc.), it is in the semiprivate space of the photographic studio that individuals imagine alternative self-identities - dressing up or dressing down depending on one's whim.

Working extensively with studio photographers, like Van Leo in Cairo⁸ and Hashem el-Madani from Zaatari's hometown Saida (Zaatari and Le Feuvre 2004; Zaatari and Bassil 2007), Zaatari examines the rise and decline of studio

⁸ In the context of Egypt, Zaatari utilizes the AIF archive to explore the work of Van Leo, a prominent Cairene studio photographer during the mid-20th century. At the beginning of *Her+Him Van Leo* (2001) we are told that the filmmaker has found a Van Leo portrait of his grandmother in his mother's closet. The discovery of this semi-nude photo among his family's belongings prompts Zaatari to immediately visit Van Leo in Cairo. As the video progresses the story about the photo of his grandmother starts to change. By destabilizing her identity Zaatari apprehends the desires of women like his grandmother to use these secret meetings at the studio to explore new forms of self-expression, including (self-)pornography. His conversation with Van Leo also allows Zaatari to call into question the relationship between the photographer and his subjects, and to juxtapose the tradition of studio photography with the practice of video art.

photography within modernizing Arab societies. During the 1960s and 1970s, El Madani photographed dozens of individuals fighting with the pro-Palestinian militia, which in effect documents the mass arrival of Palestinian militiamen after the defeat of the PLO in Jordan. In interviews with Zaatari, however, El Madani points out that not all the individuals photographed were militants. Many of these men were simply the friends of militiamen playing out fantasies in front of the camera donning their friend's uniform and weapons. In this regard, Zaatari "recontextualizes not only [photo studios'] relation to Lebanese history, but also their subjects' relationship to the identity they want to perform in front of the camera" (Zaatari and Feldman 2007:65).

These alternative archival sources thus allow Zaatari to address the civil war from indirect trajectories, while undermining the repertory of (neo)orientalist images that would dehumanize these resisters. In Zaatari's explorations of photographic histories and sites of visual production in the Middle East, the photo studio has emerged as a site of intense focus and has generated important questions about the source of the archive. As Zaatari says, "The artist's intervention renders the past and the stories it might have preferred to keep repressed active, alive, and present" (Zaatari and Feldman 2007:63). In this regard, Zaatari brings latent visual histories into the present in ways that challenge the blockage of traumatic amnesia. In other words, these forgotten photographic histories break through the eclipse of over-determined crises of representation transfixed by the legacies of violence and impossible representation.

By making shifts in terminology from the "archive" to the more personal notion of a "collection," Zaatari endeavors to move conceptual formulations away from bureaucratic disciplinary approaches to history. Likewise, rather than documents of an archive, he prefers to think of these remnants as

“paleontological fossils,” as an unearthed artifact with “both its original integrity and its transformation over time” (Zaatari and Feldman 2007:51). The unearthing of these photographic fossils, however, relies on their current state of disappeared dormancy, in which they “resist belonging to the present until a conscious act seeks to use them for a particular purpose, to reassign them a new function” (2007:64). While the re-appropriation of these fossils “are made to reveal narratives and desires in the present, they still tell of their original function, thereby speaking simultaneously in two different tenses” (2007:64).

More recently, Zaatari has talked about his “objects of study” as “data” (Zaatari 2009).⁹ This association with research practices is something that both Zaatari and his reviewers comment upon. As Cotter has commented, Zaatari characterizes “the multi-faceted approach that defines his practice as ‘field work’” (Cotter 2009:54). He employs this notion by evoking archaeological excavation,

I decided I should tackle [Madani's] entire collection ... so for me the project became centered, precisely almost as an archaeological site, centered on that studio. Not only being interested in single pictures, but also being interested in the fabric or the tissue as a whole. I'm interested in what exists in his vitrine, how he organizes his work, how he organizes his studio, how he decorates his it. I'm interested in the peak time of his economy and the fall of his economy. (Zaatari et al. 2009)

The act of excavation takes its most literal form in his 2005 video, *In This House / Fi Hazal Bayt*. With a growing interest in the impulse to document, Zaatari began to enquire about other people in south Lebanon that might have done similar practices of recording. Knowing that his record was subjectively bound to the protection of his middle class upbringing, he wanted to get different perspectives on the Israeli invasion. Zaatari learned that Ali Hashisho, a Lebanese photojournalist and former member of the Democratic Popular Party militia, had also kept a collection of materials from his time on the front-lines of the resistance that included stones, dried leaves, photographs, and notebooks.

⁹ Given his propensity for archaeological metaphors, it is curious that he doesn't use the notion of 'artifact'.

Hashisho tells Zaatari about a letter he buried on the front and left for the inhabitants of the house in which his troop had taken position for several years. Zaatari's search for this buried letter structures the narrative arch of the video, in which we watch a hired-hand digging in a garden plot for a buried letter. Because this letter was buried within a mortar casing, because it was buried by a member of a defunct socialist militia, because it was buried at a time when southern Lebanon was largely under Israeli occupation, and because Zaatari desires to film the event, this simple garden excavation has prompted the presence of several members of the police, army, and security forces to be present. Flanking the growing hole, these men refuse to be imaged. Instead, our attention is visually directed on the process of unearthing this artifact, but by association we see the margins of visibility and the forces provoked by this excavation.

Whether digging for buried secrets or searching through amateur photo albums, Zaatari understands his practice as having affinities with archaeological research. This interest is not dictated by scientific enquiry, but a drive to “collect stories, characters, and perhaps objects” (Zaatari et al. 2009). As an collector for AIF, field research is a necessary aspect of acquiring a collection. While his role as an archivist for AIF and his artistic treatment of its materials is well known, the fieldwork dimension of his endeavors are less well explored. An archaeological analogy can be useful for thinking about the materiality of Zaatari's work, but when critics (or Zaatari himself) advance this quality they fail to go beyond making a passing reference. Furthermore, I wish to shift my analysis away from the archaeological materiality of these analyses in order to claim an ethnographic subjectivity that is also prominent in his work. In fact, the link between the material and the subject also engenders a phenomenological experience with the practices of self-mediation or “habits of recording” mentioned in the previous section.

I believe that this is a crucial move in order to theoretically and methodologically situate Zaatari. The archaeological metaphor plays too strongly to the historical dimensions of his work and fails to account for the quotidian present. For example, the astute critic Kaelen Wilson-Goldie falls into a trap of

privileging a psychoanalytic framework that places meaning beneath the surface. She says that Zaatari “undermines the ubiquity of conflict by excavating the stories that lie beneath, and persist throughout, a given political trauma.” (Wilson-Goldie 2007:139). If we recall, with the video *In This House*, it is Ali Hashisho's story that prompts the excavation, not what is buried. Moreover, if we focus too much on the hole being dug we miss the significance of the assembled security dispatch. The significance of the surface also seems to elude Laura Marks' review of the film. She says, “*In This House* is a video that doesn't provide answers on the surface; it asks viewers to excavate” (Marks 2009:229). And yet, it is the hole being dug that seems to elude Marks review of this video. “Because the people refused to appear, and because the act of digging is not very visual, the event barely registers visually” (2009:228). It is unclear from her statement what constitutes “barely” visual, but she goes on to argue that Zaatari's aesthetic path has moved toward an abstraction in which the image/visual is barely registered. The “abstraction” of these moments of watching accentuates the boundaries of the image, perhaps the border of permissible visibility. We become aware of the limits of what cannot be seen, by intently focusing on what can be seen. And yet, Marks' visual registry privileges only one-dimension of this video – that which is on the edge of the frame.

In an effort to describe how Zaatari's aesthetics draws attention to elements usually taken for granted, Marks unwittingly erases another element. I suggest that another reading of this video should consider the visual centrality of Faisal, the hired-hand digging the hole and the only person directly imaged at the excavation (albeit mute). In a way, Faisal silently digging bears the burden of representation, however, he has been completely evacuated from the significance of the scene unfolding. In fact, the significance of both those attending the excavation as well as the buried capsule seems to be incapable of being shown, whereas the significance of Faisal is readily apparent but mostly ignored. In a strange turn of phrase, Marks refers to the “mute documentary image” as “‘dumb as dirt’” (2009:229). Although speaking of the hole in the garden, this statement evokes the silent gardener without naming him. But if meaning is supposedly

buried beneath the surface, what are we to glean from this stupid soil?

Ironically, Zaatari's long takes of Faisal would seem to adhere to most of the standards of “ethnographicness” advanced by Heider nearly forty years ago - “whole bodies, whole people, and whole events” (Heider 1971). Heider's metrics for ethnographic film aside, it is the “ethnographic” footage of Faisal that gives shape to the invisible or obscured social structures flanking the ditch. Zaatari's visual aesthetics situates the mundane as a charged surface where disruptions provoke the assemblage of power. While secrets may be buried just below the surface, the ordinary landscape sustains both structures of invisibility and shock of spectacle. Rather than favoring a meaning model that situates truth as a phenomenon buried in the (psychoanalytic) depths of the war, the crystallization of meaning on the surface, that is moments when it suddenly and fleetingly 'makes sense', provide a more ethnographic rendering of the lived experience amidst war.

Actually, rather than the dirt, the depths, or the surface, Zaatari situates meaning (or if not meaning at least significance) in his objects of study. These objects are always *artifacts* manipulated by human communication or expression. Even the rock and dried leaf collections of Ali Hashisho, who left the letter in the mortar cartridge, exist as a compiled collection. And yet, most of Zaatari's objects constitute some form of media - videos, photos, letters, drawings, etc. Whether based on Zaatari's own practice or Jabbur documenting the Bedouin or Madani snapping portraits or merely an amateur photographer photographing a new car, in all cases lived experience is inscribed in these material remains. From the archive to the studio, Zaatari's research is “at once an extroverted voyage in geography and an introverted voyage in the recording of everyday.” (Zaatari 2005:162). Zaatari's work shows a fascination with these image factories as ethnographic sites that are densely encoded with the materiality of historical accumulation. Zaatari utilizes these critical engagement with the archival holdings of AIF to engender a type of ethnographic endeavor into the ordinary. His work not only reinvents the archive, but makes its images travel back to the people documented (and documenting) and resituates them within the banality of their

ethnographic contexts. These ethnographic explorations into the archive's history make these photos speak to the present, but to call these items "fossils" naturalizes them and to call them "data" objectifies them. Instead, "artifact" and "ethnography" seem to be two crucial concepts for considering Zaatari's "field work" practices.

Post-Ethnography

As mentioned above, there has been a veritable dearth of visual anthropology in the Middle East region (Davey 2008). Although an emerging generation of visual ethnographers are beginning to fill this lacuna, the Middle East has not featured significantly in the genre of ethnographic cinema. And yet, ironically, the Middle East is potentially one of the most mediated regions in the world. Broadcast journalism plays a significant role in tracing the contours of regional mediascapes. The overdetermined imagery of war journalism is precisely one of the domains that Arab video artists have tried to tackle. Indeed, within the terrain of contemporary art and politically focused documentary film, there is a significant body of work situated in opposition to mass journalism. For this reason, it seems imperative for visual anthropologists working in the Middle East to form closer ties with artists and documentarians operating in other disciplines. These cross-disciplinary objectives must first grapple with institutional obstacles that would limit or prevent this type of exchange. And yet, I think there is plenty of precedence for such cross-fertilization to flourish. In order to elucidate this point, allow me to sidetrack our discussion of Akram Zaatari momentarily to plot a tentative course through these interdisciplinary issues as I see them.

In a book review published over ten years ago, Lucien Taylor suggests that proclamations of a "pictorial turn" would seem to provide "a propitious moment for the revitalization of visual anthropology, a subfield that is at once highly visible and quite marginal to mainstream anthropological discourse" (Taylor 1998:534). In an effort to provide a definition and endorsement of "visual anthropology," Taylor turns on the meaning of 'visual' to show the field's dual projects. On the one hand, it denotes an anthropology that is conducted through visual media, while,

on the other hand, it means an anthropology that is ostensibly interested in the visual domain of the material and sensory worlds. A potential problem with the latter part of this definition, which Taylor rightly addresses, is the slipperiness of “visual culture” as an object of study. Since the visual is ubiquitously present in nearly all aspects of culture, defining a subfield by this parameter would in effect rendered its significance null – all anthropology is potentially visual. So what? When paired with the first definition, however, visual anthropology takes on unique significance as a field invested in both critiquing and producing visual media in the interest of anthropological knowledge. Not satisfied with only linguistic description, advocates of visual anthropology rightly point to the way ethnographic film provides frameworks for accessing different cultures, states of consciousness, sensory experience, visual imagery, and embodied memories.

Taylor’s review identifies another dilemma facing the field of visual anthropology. Although ethnographic methods and anthropological critiques of culture have been readily appropriated by other disciplines (albeit in idiosyncratic ways), “Anthropologists have so far been largely absent from the debates raging in the humanities about the role of the visual in the world today” (1998:534). The significance of this statement is far reaching – not merely because anthropologists continue to be absent from interdisciplinary discussions of visual research – but, more to the point, because their participation in these interdisciplinary debates are principally worthy due to the simple fact that they are anthropologists. Although Taylor’s analysis hinges on the visual qualifier of this subfield, implicit in his review are the merits of anthropology in and of itself. In this sense, the major strength of visual anthropology is also a fatal flaw. The field’s “anthropological” parameter fosters an exclusionist framework that devalues interdisciplinary collaboration. Ironically, the earliest anthropological expeditions often employed an interdisciplinary team of researchers.

If anything, this should convince us that there are other questions that should preoccupy our thoughts in visual anthropology. Whether something is ethnographic or not matters little when frameworks of analysis now foreground issues of identity, subjectivity, and self, particularly in regard to modes and

positions of authorship. Indeed, the positionality of a genre's author can no longer be assumed. While ethnographic film evokes the trope of a white colonial male intrepidly "hunting" for images, this image is no longer representative of cross-cultural filmmakers working with nonfiction materials. In a now dated call to action, Akos Ostor argues, "It is time to lay aside the old debate about visual anthropology failing or succeeding ..." (Ostor 1989:722) and calls on the field to envision a new future. These shifts both within and beyond the field help pave the way for this future trajectory. For its valuation of difference, particularity, and lived experience, the potential for visual anthropology to influence a more expansive genre of cross-cultural image-making has immense importance. A more substantial obstacle for visual anthropologists to consider is the way disciplinary boundaries have delimited cross-fertilization. The "others" who are producing important and interesting work on cross-cultural representation are more likely to be working in the fields of visual culture, art history, and film studies, rather than visual anthropology.

And yet, these alternative perspectives, whether informed by the politics of race, ethnicity, or gender, also help to scrutinize the presumptions of ethnographic authority. Indeed, now that the "others" are representing themselves, Bill Nichols (1994) argues that ethnographic film is in trouble and can expect great change in its future. I do not share Nichols' forebodingness, rather I think that this provides great promise for the field. MacDougall (2001) also has a more optimistic projection for the future of the field. He suggests that digital video has begun to transform the field, both with increased accessibility and engendered experimentation. A younger generation of ethnographic filmmakers has shifted their focus from the description of discrete 'cultures' toward current concerns about identity and social experience amidst a globalizing and postcolonial world. As Barbash and Taylor suggest, "the most interesting filmmaking today is happening in a fuzzy area between objective and subjective ... [T]hese films combine poetry and performance with autobiography and archival footage in ways that sublate traditional distinctions between fact and fiction" (1997:21-22). Cultural critics from various ethnographic contexts are now

producing innovative and intelligent visual projects that both borrow from and rail against the anthropological discipline.

In the same way that visual anthropology cannot contain the boundaries of “ethnographic film,”¹⁰ anthropology can no longer claim ownership of ethnographic methods and its discourses. In a similar way that media studies has begun to fetishize the “ethnographic perspective” (Murphy and Kraidy 2003), the “turn” toward ethnography can also be felt in contemporary art practices (Coles 2000). Infused with different modes of analysis, the meaning of “ethnography” takes on different discursive terrain. And yet, as a visual anthropologist it is strange to read surveys of “visual culture” with scant mention of anthropology (cf. Dikovitskaya 2005). Or, for instance, after drawing on anthropology to briefly situate a working definition of “culture,” Sturken and Cartwright (2001) only fleetingly mention the field. Although they claim, “Visual and cultural anthropologists have done the most toward providing accounts of how specific Third World culture produce and use technologies and images imported from the industrialized West,” attention to anthropology accounts for only one-percent of their entire introduction to visual culture (2001:328). Known ostensibly as the “study of culture,” anthropology seems strangely excluded from material on visual “culture.”

Embedded within these articulations of “visual culture” and “visual studies,” a variety of assumptions reveal the Eurocentric bastions of art history and its fascination with modernist modes of analysis. In spite of W.J.T. Mitchell’s assertion that one must not privilege a method based on disciplinary ideologies, but rather consider the types of questions one wants to answer, visual culture has tended to

¹⁰ Considering anthropology’s general vague articulations about the meaning of “culture,” Prins argues, “it would be amazing if visual anthropologists actually had managed to programmatically define ethnographic film” (1997:281). Although many efforts have been made to legitimate the definition of “ethnographic film,” the concept is used commonly outside the academic field and is beyond the policing of professional anthropologists. My project here is also interested in expanding what anthropologists would find significant in their research.

avoid ethnographic approaches while continuing to favor semiotics (Dikovitskaya 2005:78). Despite its celebration of interdisciplinarity, visual culture has only cursory engagement with anthropology preferring to draw its pedagogical identity from “cultural studies.” Cultural Studies’ close affinity with anthropology and its utilization of ethnographic practices have seemingly gone unnoticed. Indeed, anthropology is well poised to assess the lived experience of transnational art markets, the political economy of advertising’s labor force, and the social context of broadcast audiences, to name only a few trajectories.

Accordingly, it is necessary to explore the way these fields have encountered an ideological ‘crisis of representation’ in an effort to articulate a common ground as well as potential oversights. Considering the recent interdisciplinary turns in the humanities and social sciences – the narrative turn, the pictorial turn, the visual turn, the sensory turn, and the ethnographic turn – this convergence of disciplinary frameworks that reflect a broad critique of representation should help to elucidate the visual aesthetics and cultural conditions that inform Lebanese documentary video. And yet, if academic fields too strictly segregate their objects of study, there is a risk of creating artificial gaps in our knowledge. More than a delineation of academic territory, finding overlap between fields stands to benefit the study of visual cultures. This assessment is not intended merely as an exercise of pedagogical comparison. Instead, it intends to accentuate the importance of “crisis” in my project, not just for Lebanese postwar visual culture, but also for the various visual disciplines grappling with their own hegemonic legacies.

Despite the immense impact of the “writing cultures” critique, experiments with aesthetic projects have not become commonplace. In fact, Chris Wright has argued that anthropological content is typically defined in opposition to aesthetics (1998). In relation to ethnographic film, art/science debates go back at least as far

as Mead and Bateson's collaborations (Bateson and Mead 1976), if not also to the earliest period of ethnographic cinema and its marketability (Griffiths 2002). While Mead presumed that "artistic endeavors" would only be fleetingly fashionable, the enduring appeal of "artistic" ethnographic films has posed a great deal of concern for critics. In particular, the films of Robert Gardner have consistently caused great consternation. Although Gardner championed the potential of film to confirm the humanity of another to an audience (1957), Jay Ruby frets that Gardner's continued antiquated approaches and high-profile status create a stumbling block for the development of ethnographic cinema (Ruby 1991). But how exactly should ethnographic cinema develop? For the purposes of ethnographic film becoming more accepted in mainstream anthropology, Ruby argues, the "chief criteria" should be its "ethnographic" qualities, "not the aesthetics of film" (1991:4). Ruby presents these "criteria" as being mutually exclusive. In order to bolster the status of ethnographic film within "mainstream anthropology," he argues for the denunciation of all unworthy "ethnographic" film. As one of the most vocal visual anthropologists on the marginalized status of the "subfield," he seems to favor assimilation within the greater discipline, while others favor fostering new conceptual frameworks that push the discipline's boundaries.

Given the recent flurry of books on Robert Gardner and Jean Rouch, however, interests in these artistic ethnographers still seems to dominate the academic publishing markets. Furthermore, a new generation of visual researchers in the social sciences have opened possibilities for closer connections with documentary artists and experimental ethnographers. With the 'ethnographic turn' in contemporary art (Coles 2000), qualitative shifts in anthropology, and advances in digital technology, Schneider and Wright argue:

This would seem to usher in a new period of creative potential for contemporary anthropology, but, if this is to be a reflexive practice

transcending any art/science dichotomy and involve more than the production of illustrated multimedia 'texts', there needs to be a new approach to images and creativity in anthropology (Schneider and Christopher Wright 2006:3).

Central to this argument is a deeper engagement with the convergence of art and ethnography. Art and ethnography offer a synergistic approach to researching, collecting, and presenting social and cultural forms that defy scientific and objectifying modes of description. Although Jay Ruby argues that visual anthropology "offers a perspective that is *sometimes* lacking in other fields, that is, an ethnographic or ethnohistorical approach that entails going into the field for an extended period of time to examine, participate and observe the social processes surrounding these visual objects." (emphasis added, Ruby 2005:162), Schneider and Wright demonstrate that ethnographic and artistic approaches often share "certain questions, areas of investigation, and ... methodologies" (2006:3). Accordingly, they argue that anthropology needs to critically engage with artistic practices that draw on material and sensual registers rather than only textual ones. These contemporary art practices provide means for apprehending the performative aspects of quotidian experience, embodied meaning, affective intensity, and agency of objects and images.

Unfortunately, the incorporation of anthropological perspectives into contemporary art practices has not resulted in a productive two-way dialogue (Marcus and Myers 1995). Examples of cross-fertilization are not without precedent, however, specific models are limited and anthropological attitudes typically seem disinterested in adopting less rational approaches. Nevertheless, some anthropologists are now making the same realizations that artists in Lebanon have made. They are showing a deep interest in the sensory and material aspects of collective memory by engaging the temporal and spatial dimensions of lived experience. The artists who draw upon ethnographic approaches share affinities with anthropologists in their exploration of non-rationalist modes of apprehending cultural worlds. As these issues of violence and displacement become evermore present in anthropological research, visual

anthropology must continually consider how visual research practices might better address these issues.

Schneider and Wright (2006) suggest that a reevaluation of experimental film and video can provide new perspectives for visual anthropology to consider. By looking at experimental documentary in Lebanon and thinking of the ways that it engages with ethnographic film and visual anthropology, I am calling for greater efforts to think about doing visual research in conflict zones where "stable" notions of truth, subjectivity, and cultural identity are irrevocably disrupted. I argue that the goals of such research cannot presume to objectively situate cultural experience, nor that such stable categories can be reset through research. Instead, following Marks (2000), MacDougall (2005) and others (Shaviro 1993; Sobchack 1999; Wahlberg 2008), I argue that we need to embrace a more corporeal (haptic/phenomenological) dimension of visual research that does not aim to "make sense" cognitively but rather resonate affectively.

Lebanese documentary approaches, along with recent theoretical trends in visual anthropology, can co-participate in working through dilemmas raised about the cross-cultural representation. By bringing visual anthropology and Lebanese experimental documentary into closer dialogue, I hope to convey one significant benefit of inter-disciplinary cross-fertilization. That is to ask, what sort of questions and methods have Lebanese artists and intellectuals articulated in order to conduct visual research in conflict zones? If visual anthropology is both the study of visual culture and the use of visual media to conduct anthropological research, then how might the field appropriate the critiques and aesthetics of this Lebanese work in other contexts of conflict?

For my purposes here, I am particularly interested in how Akram Zaatari's work dialogues with these current trends in visual anthropology. I opened this paper with a description of Zaatari's engagement with Jabrail Jabbur's ethnographic project on Syrian Bedouin. Zaatari's return voyage through the archive and back to the field performs something like a post-ethnography. Unlike earlier renditions of 'salvage anthropology' hoping to preserve a 'vanishing' culture, Zaatari's research combines archival investigation with interviews,

observations, and explorations in order to salvage living traces of Jabbur's work and to question inherited representational codes. Static preservation is not Zaatari's aim in his archival research. Referring to the Madani photo studio and the series of works that have emerged from it , Zaatari sees his work as an intervention in a debilitated profession: "I'm intervening in his life completely and I'm shaping his ... so it's almost like a living documentary and it is not like a chapter that has been closed" (Zaatari et al. 2009). Indeed, Zaatari's work with AIF has breathed new life into Madani's work and taken it places (literally and figuratively) it never would have on its own.

Field site: Earth of Endless Secrets

Traveling from a 'heritage' family trip through former-Yugoslavia, I arrived in Beirut the morning of Akram Zaatari's opening gala. Like similar art openings, artist, filmmaker, and critic attendees offered a veritable who's who of the Lebanese art world. For a returning ethnographer, this provided an ideal opportunity to reconnect with friends and research subjects. The newly opened Beirut Art Center situated among East Beirut factories hosted a rooftop dance party late into the evening. Downstairs the BAC exhibited both Bernard Khoury's *Prisoner of War* (mentioned earlier) and part of Akram Zaatari's solo exhibition of *Earth of Endless Secrets* (co-hosted with the Sfeir Semler Gallery, July 23 to October 3, 2009). Here I greeted Zaatari and congratulated him on his show and we chatted briefly before he had to turn to other admiring fans. As I browsed the artworks and chatted with friends, I wondered what would an audience of anthropologists make of Zaatari's exhibition.

While Zaatari characterizes his *Earth of Endless Secrets* as "the totality of documents that I had collected in my life, including while working on my videos." (Zaatari 2009), his solo exhibition (first in Munich and then) in Beirut as well as the publication of his recent book are better characterized by a preoccupation with modes of image-making under conditions of political violence. As stated on the Sfeir Semler Gallery webpage, "Earth of Endless Secrets refers to an ongoing project by Akram Zaatari that consists of unearthing, collecting and examining a

wide range of documents that testify to the cultural and political conditions of Lebanon's postwar society." For Zaatari, his personal collection is integrally linked to the experience of living through a series of political crises. Zaatari appropriates these visual records in an effort to understand how people (himself included) documented their experiences during the civil war and since with the ongoing resistance against Israeli occupation. In the process, Zaatari creates a very nuanced perspective on the history of Lebanon's wars. Rather than a reiteration or a refutation of this history, Zaatari's multi-registered work performs a critical historiography of the war period and its remains. While today the south is typically associated with Islamic resistance, Zaatari, among other artists, tell an important history about the dreams and defeats of the secular left. A pursuit that simultaneously grapples with the erasure of history, the destruction of homes and cities, and the deterritorialization of lived experience.

Beginning with photographs he took as a teenager during the 1982 Israeli invasion, this ongoing body of work brings together 27 years of Zaatari's work on this theme. Although drawing on his childhood "habits of recording," most of the work in *Earth of Endless Secrets* comes from the past 12 years of research and production. Co-hosted by Sfeir-Semler Gallery and the Beirut Art Center, Zaatari's exhibition, compiles over 150 works, divided into five chapters, each organized around a single video project. While the Sfeir-Semler Gallery offered a free take-home poster, BAC hosted a retrospective featuring twelve of his videos made between 1992 and 2006.

Sfeir-Semler, a Hamburg/Beirut-based gallery, featured a presentation of four of Zaatari's earlier video projects: *All is Well on the Border* (1997), *This Day* (2003), *In This House* (2005), and *Nature Morte* (2008). These videos and an exhibition of their supporting materials provide illuminating perspectives on "the state of image-making in situations of war." The Beirut Art Center focused on his most recent work under the title, *Writing for a Posterior Time*, which contained two installations - *Neruda's Garden* (2009) and *Untold* (2008). These installations feature the letters and photographs of former resistance fighter, Nabih Awada. Born 1972 in Aytaroun, at 14 Awada joined the Communist Party, at 16 he was

captured during his eighth mission, sentenced to Askalan Prison in Israel at 18, and finally released at 26. During this time he sent over 100 letters to family and friends that Zaatari has documented and archived.

In *Neruda's Garden*, we see a series of large photographs of these letters and self-styled letter-cases that accommodate Awada's correspondence collection. The title refers to Awada's nickname adopted from "the poet of the Chilean revolution," but this Neruda's poetry is perhaps more clearly expressed in his illustrations. *Neruda's Garden* refers to the half-page colored flower that adorns each letter. Although he came of age in prison, these letters reveal very little about his situation during those years. Instead, the letters steadfastly reassure his family and repeatedly hope for his release. Responding to these correspondences that say "nothing," Zaatari has digitally erased Awada's handwriting on three letters. Stripped of its "iconic" or textual significance, the letter's material form indexes several qualities of life under occupation, namely, the Red Cross letterhead, the official date stamps in Hebrew, and Awada's illustrated flowers.

This is the material Zaatari used in 1997 when he scripted his characters' stories for *All is Well on the Border*, which uses documentary and experimental motifs to retell stories from the Lebanese resistance in an effort to critique the codes of heroism and suffering. Awada's story is like many young men (Lebanese, Syrian, Palestinian, and perhaps others) who joined the resistance to drive Israel out of southern Lebanon and out of other occupied lands, but were captured and sent to one of several prisons. Their removal from the occupied landscape paralleled a larger migration to the southern suburbs of Beirut. Here Zaatari conducted research within a community of displaced persons, doing oral history interviews with former fighters and collecting memorabilia. Awada's family loaned Zaatari the letters he had sent from Askalan prison in Israel. The title *All is Well on the Border / Al-Shareet Bi-Khayr* was partly inspired by the positive tone in Awada's prison letters. Zaatari fused these letters in a voiceover narrative running intermittently throughout the video. The pubescent voiceover is put in motion with three other narratives made by men on screen about their experience under occupation and during periods of detention.

Although invested in subverting the ideologies and discourses of occupation and resistance, Zaatari nevertheless remains intently focused on the individual experience of political violence. These three other narratives provide beginning, middle, and end chapters, which are delivered as testimonials. Zaatari scripted these testimonials based on oral histories he had collected from former resisters from occupied southern Lebanon. Zaatari uses several reflexive devices to comment on the scripting, rehearsing, and recording of these testimonials, and thus on the politics of representation in conditions of war. Together with these narratives and their dramatic performances, Zaatari weaves images of Hezbollah TV coverage, old men reminiscing through folkloric songs, school children reading nostalgic descriptions of their villages that they have never seen, and wedding home movies. These materials create a tension between the mythical importance of deterritorialized homelands and the revolutionary imaginaries. This multi-sited research project traces the public/private contours of local mediascapes. More than a mere media critique, Zaatari's video engenders the sensibilities of resistance and occupation. His narratives, performances, and images relay between desires and disappointments.

All is Well on the Border also makes an intertextual link to Jean-Luc Godard's political films with the Vertov Group – *All is Well / Tout va bien* (1972) and *Here and Elsewhere/ Ici et Ailleurs* (1976). “True to his interest in the unmaking of existing film or documentary traditions, Zaatari engages with the very failure of Godard's ambitions for an activist cinema in order to portray a continuing and evolving narrative of conflict, imprisonment and displacement that is marginalised from mainstream visual consciousness” (Cotter 2009:55). As the south became a largely inaccessible and unmediated “elsewhere,” Zaatari and others relied on “the unrecorded oral history of people who had fled and relocated to the southern suburbs of Beirut” (Salti 2009:17). This footage worked to fill some of the gaps between Zaatari's quotidian footage of the southern suburbs and propaganda newsreel footage of the “shreet” (occupied zone) taken by Hezbollah. This

creative cinematic geography plays with the idea of proximity and distance. Distance between representations and lived experience become acute in Zaatari's rendition of occupation narratives. Proximity is not with "the South" (al-Janub), but with its artifacts. While we know the occupied area only from a distance, we rub close to the people and objects marked by the experience of occupation. Children and old men, songs and rallying cries, news clips and home movies, teleprompters and video cameras, all somehow bear the burden of representation. As viewers, we experience these mediated subjects and objects as vessels filled with messages, premised neither on fact nor fantasy, but as shuttles between imaginary and lived experience.

Untold (2008), the second installation that draws upon Awada's correspondences, consists of two videos, one light-box, and 48 photographs of personal photographs sent to Neruda by other resisters. This installation focuses on the unspoken understanding between prisoners. According to the BAC exhibit brochure, "This work focuses on the difficulty of communicating situations of long isolation; in other terms, it focuses on all that Awada's letters could never say." Revisiting the personal collection of Nabih Awada, aka Neruda, enables Zaatari to meditate on the practices of correspondence under occupation. One of the videos is a four-minute loop of a video letter Awada made from prison in 1995. The light-box shows a front page news photo of Hezbollah leaders meeting with newly released Samir al-Qintar, "Israel's longest-held Lebanese prisoner," after his release in July 2008. Zaatari asked Awada if there were things he would want to tell al-Qintar, but couldn't due to the political climate of the moment. As Cotter articulates, "We can only imagine what Awada might have written to his compatriot, empathy with his years of incarceration, the cause for which they had been fighting, confusion from the apparent shift in ideological allegiances" (Cotter 2009) 56-57.

Indeed, Zaatari's latest video, *Letter to Samir* (2008), shows Awada sitting at a glass table with a stark white background writing a letter. We watch Awada in a 20-minute frontal shot compose his thoughts on paper, then this shot is followed by a 10-minute over-head close-up of Awada elaborately folding and sealing the letter into a capsule as for smuggling in or out of prison. Although we never see the actual message written by Awada, the installation identifies a specialized form of writing known as *msamsameh* - "written with letters as tiny as sesame seeds." Next to Awada's letters home that said "nothing," this form of writing offered another level of communication that discussed the security issues and were exchanged between the prison's central leadership. Again, the message itself is not what Zaatari wants us to focus upon. Rather than the words, Zaatari is more attentive to the mundane experience of life under occupation and quotidian performance of resistance.

Following the exhibition, Zaatari released an accompanying tome, *Akram Zaatari: Earth of Endless Secrets* (Zaatari and Bassil 2009), which consists of four sections each devoted to a different video project. In addition to a series of beautiful photographs, each section includes a critical review, a detailed script, and interview transcripts. This text provides a variety of information about Zaatari's documentary pursuits and is ultimately the culmination of a long-term research project. The multifaceted approach of videos, texts, and installations provide a format that publish hungry academics could learn from. But while the "documentary" impulse is strong in these moments of crisis, Zaatari argues, "the real fiction is that artmaking can avoid the document and that the document similarly avoids fiction" (Zaatari and Feldman 2007:57). Many at the center of an art public in Beirut mimic the genre in a way that calls into question the ability to "represent" Lebanon. Like the nation's continued inability to resolve political differences, these artists refuse the possibility of representing something

objective under such constraints. Despite these critiques of documentary, Zaatari's work shows parallels with anthropology's concern for the everyday experience, particularly in the everyday encounter with mimetic memory objects and images. These recovered images and objects mobilize strategies of remediation, which engender elements of "vitality" through the creation of alternative archives that are capable of addressing under-represented social dimensions and issues as well as transcending the limitations of representational impossibility. In this way, Zaatari's aesthetic approach presents an important effort to move beyond the traps of orientalist critique and challenge the representational aporias facing documentary practices.

Zaatari's long-term, site specific, and self-reflexive *Earth of Endless Secrets* thus provides an example of an experimental visual ethnography. In other words, the extensive body of work that Zaatari has produced under the umbrella of *Earth of Endless Secrets* provides an alternative model for visual ethnographers to consider. Although tentative in scope here, Zaatari's effort to re-imagine the political violence in Lebanon, deserves a closer examination in order to reevaluate the type of questions asked of a society in a cycle of violence and consider alternative forms of visual research being done in conflict zones. Borrowing from perspectives advanced in visual anthropology, I argue that Zaatari (and other site-specific visual researchers) fills a void of critical visual research in the Middle East. While not trained as an anthropologists, I believe Zaatari's work has interdisciplinary cross-over appeal and can help advance our understanding of how radical visual practices can be used to understand conditions of deterritorialization.

I approached this topic as one of many researchers, curators, artists, journalists, etc. with a hunger to understand. How does one from the "outside" understand the situation, when even those on the "inside" cannot understand

what is happening.¹¹ If representation and understanding are not the goals, then what is the purpose of these endeavors and why are so many people drawn to this depiction of incomprehensibility? I cannot answer but for myself and I can say that my aims are about finding common ground, but also grasping where we don't have something in common. I have not lived through a war, I have not had my neighbors try to kill or abduct me, I have not had bombs dropped on me, I have not been imprisoned or tortured, or otherwise displaced and traumatized by mass violence. I do not have these types of experiences in common with the Lebanese who lived the war, but neither do I have the same particular memories of family, festivities, leisure, and love. The space between these two sites of inaccessibility is where these artistic documentarians, or let's say visual researchers, craft their visions. The imaginary serves as a shuttle traveling, perhaps ricocheting, between these points. The imaginary is not contained by fact or fiction, it escapes these parameters by existing in its own world. But to bring this imaginary into material and sensory form with digital media, creates new sites for other visual researchers to seek common ground.

Recommended links

Zaatari's presentation of Earth of Endless Secrets:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=37fwJJOBFOc>

KM Artist talk: <http://www.kunstverein->

[muenchen.de/2008/gallery_akram_zaatari_interview.php](http://www.kunstverein-muenchen.de/2008/gallery_akram_zaatari_interview.php)

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¹¹ Here I am referring to a comment Walid Raad makes in Jayce Salloum's (This Is Not Beirut) / There Was and There Was Not (1994). Countering the idea that an anthropologist could come and stay long enough to understand what is going on in the country, Raad says, "People have stayed here all their lives and they still don't know what is going on."

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