

## Re-enacting pre-existing image collections in Akram Zaatari's 'Unfolding'

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Lebanese artist Akram Zaatari's exhibition *Unfolding* at Moderna Museet in Stockholm (7 March – 16 August 2015) is what you may call a hybrid exhibition in the sense that it includes several different media and makes use of various exhibition formats.[1] The exhibition can be divided into two separate but interrelated parts. The first part explores the photographic collection of the Shehrazade Studio in the Lebanese city Saida, home to professional photographer Hashem el Madani. The second part of the exhibition is a reconstruction of Zaatari's 2013 contribution to the Biennale di Venezia: a gallery film titled *Letter to a Refusing Pilot*, which revolves around personal memory in relation to the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. The exhibition also includes three film programs featuring previous video work by Zaatari, continuously screened in the museum's small cinema throughout the exhibition period.

Zaatari's archival interest forms a backbone in his artistic practice. He is a founding member of the Arab Image Foundation, an organisation dedicated to collecting and researching photographic images from the Middle East, North Africa, and the Arab diaspora.[2] The Madani collection is part of the Arab Image Foundation's holdings and has been an object of study for Zaatari since the late 1990s. Often discussed alongside Walid Raad and the Atlas Group, Zaatari's work regularly explores the conditions of a post-war Lebanese context using documentary, installation, and video. Zaatari's oeuvre can be said to form part of a wider tendency within installation art, described by Hal Foster as an 'archival impulse', in which the archive is considered to be an unstable entity or body of knowledge to be re-investigated within the walls of the gallery. To Foster this involves an in-

creased concern with the materiality of the archival object and should be viewed in tandem with a will to affectively engage viewers and to construct alternative and idiosyncratic collections that are open to ‘critical revisions’. Within this model Foster identifies an urge to ‘relate’ rather than to ‘totalize’, and a need to bring forth ‘[...] a gesture of alternative knowledge or counter-memory.’[3] Rather than preserving a historic and static record of the past for the indefinite future these archival art practices regularly question the legitimacy of the archival document by opening it up to new and future interpretations, accentuating that meaning is produced in the present. Anthony Downey, discussing contemporary archival art practices in the Middle East, asserts that ‘[...] these artists are not simply questioning veracity, authenticity or authority, or, indeed, authorship; rather, they interpose forms of contingency and radical possibility into the archive that sees it projected onto future rather than historical probabilities.’[4]

The material that makes up *Unfolding* has undergone several transitions. The images have travelled from a local to a global context, from handicrafts to fine art objects, and from a private to a public sphere. This brings forth an ethical conundrum in which the question of ownership becomes a central concern. Madani is the craftsman behind this material, but where do his subjects belong in this new scenario? This issue is accentuated in one of the images included in the exhibition that portrays a certain Mrs Baqari. This woman was apparently photographed without her husband’s consent, causing him to demand that Madani destroy the pictures, which the photographer refused. However, he did agree to scratch the negatives, forever leaving the husband’s mark on the portrait. The interference is violent and irreversible and acutely points to the conditions in which the image was conceived, creating a vivid historical link. The scratched portrait also underlines the precarious state of the source material, its openness to manipulation, as well as its ties to a specific moment in time. However, given that the archival impulse is characterised by a loosening of the archival document’s reliability, how much credit are we willing to assign the indexical document in this context?



Fig. 1: Photo by Åsa Lundén / Moderna museet.

The ambivalence of the archival record is at the centre of Jamie Baron's discussion of 'the archive effect', in which she argues that '[w]hen temporal and intentional disparity are uncertain, the viewer is faced with a constant struggle around how much authority to give the indexical recording.'<sup>[5]</sup> However, she also underlines that '[...] the potential meanings and effects of these indexical archival documents will also always exceed the intentions of the appropriation filmmaker.'<sup>[6]</sup> The question of spectatorial agency is therefore paramount here and it is in large part dependent on the framing of the viewing experience. In the case of Mrs Baqari's scratched portrait the story behind the image is presented to the viewer both in the image caption and in the exhibition folder. Without this information the image would most likely have yielded alternative interpretations that may or may not have been in line with the original story. The indexical claim of the photograph has thus been reinforced by the accompanying texts, creating a narrative that the spectator can hold on to when examining the truthfulness of the archival document. This strategy arguably strengthens the material presentation of the image as it provides a direct explanation for its current status. It does not, however, position these facts in a larger framework in which the social inequalities that the portrait is a token of are accounted for, nor does it change the fact that the image has been snatched away from its original context to perform a certain function in this particular exhibition's lay-out. Arousing interest with its demonstrative markings,

the portrait is positioned close to the entrance, drawing the spectator further into the world of Madani's photographic practice.

Zaatari's appropriation of the Madani collection also raises several questions in terms of authorship and agency. To begin with, whose story are we being told when walking through the exhibition? Is it the original photographer's or the contemporary artist's? Is it the story of the subjects portrayed in the images? Or is it perhaps the curator's or even the museum's version of the collection that we are being presented with? Artist and filmmaker Mariam Ghani makes a valid point when stating that '[w]e cannot evaluate the materials in the archive along some sort of moral axis unless we take into account the structures through which we receive them, structures which have been produced by the archive's performers and performances.'<sup>7</sup> As has been demonstrated earlier, most notably perhaps by Brian O'Doherty in the 1970s, the deceptively innocent white walls of the gallery are far from a neutral reservoir that leaves the objects presented there unaffected.<sup>8</sup> As opposed to the institutional critique that dominated the art scene in the 1970s, it seems that this newfound preoccupation with the unstable status of the archival object within contemporary installation art has allowed the structural ordering of knowledge represented by the museum to be largely bypassed or simply ignored. Oftentimes the artist also has some sort of personal connection to the material on display. This is true for *Unfolding* because Saida is also Zaatari's hometown, and his inventory of the Madani collection has taken place in close proximity to the photographer himself. Surely this sets the stage for an initiated and engaged re-interpretation of previously uncharted material, but it also risks producing an ahistorical account lacking in context which falls short in addressing the ideological structures behind the material and in questioning its authority, which – assumedly – is the primary impetus behind the archival impulse to begin with.

Zaatari does address this issue to some extent by making Madani himself play a central part in the exhibition. For instance, he appears in a film that Zaatari has taken where he has been instructed to position himself in the same manner that he asked his own family members to perform in front of the lens in their vacation films (which are also displayed in the exhibition). This re-enactment of events points to the performative elements in the films and images we see in the exhibition, which otherwise might have gone unnoticed. Zaatari also appears in the exhibition. A large screen shows a short looped sequence where Zaatari and Madani are seen

watching a performance by the singer Melhem Barakat on a laptop. Their gazes remain fixed on the screen and we cannot see the musical performance for ourselves, but we can certainly hear the music that accompanies it, as it travels across the entire exhibition. By physically inscribing himself and Madani into the exhibition Zaatari, in my mind, acknowledges the presence of both authors within the installation space. To actively reinstate their co-presence as producers of the material and as voices of authority in the experiential path that the spectator follows testifies to an awareness of the potential difficulties involved in 'owning up' to a pre-existing collection. Although Zaatari has undoubtedly left his mark on and controls the selection of material and the omission of any potential gaps, this inclusion points to the performative qualities inherent to the material itself (indeed, one could argue, to all archival material) as well as to Zaatari's own artistic intervention.

Zaatari's *Unfolding* can be seen as an inventory or excavation of Madani's photographic practice, but it also stages an archaeology of the filmic medium itself, highlighting the vulnerability of the photographic material. This focus sheds light on another crucial aspect of the archival object: the matter of preservation. The material displayed in the exhibition ranges from analogue still images to Super 8 films and includes some of the technological equipment used by Madani as well as images of props from his studio. We encounter analogue film as well as digital projections, television monitors, and archival cabinets. On display here, then, is not merely the transition of images from one context to another but also the migration from analogue to digital media. This is perhaps most evident in the *Twenty Eight Nights and a Poem* series, in which Zaatari explores material that has been damaged, sometimes due to poor storage conditions. Such is the case with the bodybuilder images that Madani was often asked to make copies of, which is why he kept them accessible instead of storing them in metal boxes, eventually resulting in their premature deterioration. Covered in decay, the strained poses of the bodybuilders still manage to stand out from the photographs' decomposing surfaces. Zaatari also makes a film from an outdated Super 8 stock that he found in Madani's studio and invites the viewer to take part in the process in a short 'making-of' documentary. Meanwhile the traditional archive cabinets of the pre-digital era occupy the centre of the exhibition space as pillars of the conventional archive – the monuments of an analogue era that is still very much alive and well within the embalming walls of the museum.

One basic trait of the archival document is its inherent tendency towards multiple temporalities. As such the archival document is never static but remains dependent on the present moment in which it is summoned and given new meaning. Indeed one of the key characteristics of the archival impulse as described by Foster is these artists' aspiration to allow the archival object to embark on new paths, to become a vehicle for the future, opening up to what he calls new 'points of departure'.<sup>[9]</sup> This desire is especially pronounced in Zaatari's *Itinerary* project. Exhibited in the gallery, this piece consists of a considerable number of still photographs that Madani took of shop owners in the old market areas of Saida in the 1940s and 1950s, but the project actually involves more than that. Zaatari and the Arab Image Foundation managed to install copies of Madani's pictures at their original sites in the city and provided a location map that indicated where the different sites were located. In the gallery we also encounter present day images with similar motifs hanging side by side with Madani's original photographs. These images were taken by Zaatari himself in the same sites and in a similar manner and formal staging as Madani's original images. The *Itinerary* project is thus a re-enactment and a logical continuation of Madani's photographic practice and, in effect, an archaeological exploration of sorts of the city of Saida. Through this re-enactment within the borders of the city it could be argued that Zaatari performs a kind of ethnography from within, premiering the original location but at the same time making the city's history and cultural specificity available for the larger audience in the art gallery. By anchoring the material in the original sites of production Zaatari manages to establish a historical and geographical contextualisation that stays true to the original document while simultaneously opening up to new beginnings.



Fig. 2: Photo by Åsa Lundén / Moderna museet.

*Letter to a Refusing Pilot* (2013) continues the archival trajectory initiated in the first part of the exhibition but is less concerned with recounting the details behind the archival material that it appropriates. Seemingly uninterested in 'setting the record straight', Zaatari's use of the archival document here works more towards fraction than sustained narrative and starts from his personal investment in the images. The film tells the story of the Israeli air force pilot Hagai Tamir who opposed orders to bomb a school building in Saida during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. The film incorporates present-day images from inside the school as well as what seem to be archival photographs of the same building. It also includes faded family album photographs and other memory documents that are exhibited before the spectator on a lightbox, carefully arranged by hands carrying the characteristic white archival cotton gloves. Exhibited opposite another work of Zaatari's that consists of a 16mm projector that runs images taken by Zaatari himself on the first day of the invasion (*Saida June 6, 1982*), as well as a single empty cinema chair dedicated to the pilot, the installation is a powerful piece of memory work that resonates with personal as well as cultural significance. The film also ties in to the staging of a technological history as various outmoded recording devices are showcased to the spectator. The encounter between old and new is illustrated most forcefully in the sequence where an archival photograph is positioned next to a tablet displaying moving images from an Israeli documentary of the invasion; a finger

then taps on the photograph's surface and creates instant explosions within the frame, animating the archival document with a gesture that befits our modern technology.

The physical installation of the film is also crucial in this aspect. To begin with, the projector that is located opposite the main screen fills the room with its characteristic pattering sound. Likewise the empty cinema chair is set against the strict stools that are placed at random intervals in front of the main projection area. Lighting rods are installed alongside the edges of the room and these illuminate whenever we visit the archive table in the film, carrying the probing light of the 'archivist' over into the exhibition space. A recurring motif in the film is also the handling of paper planes that are folded and almost ritually thrown out into the air from rooftops and balconies. These planes become symbolic entities loaded with historic reference and are animated to perform synchronised loops. They also point back to the first part of the exhibition where large still images of airplanes have been mounted on the wall next to Madani's documentation of an evolving housing project that took shape in close proximity to the school in the late 1950s.



Fig. 3: Photo by Åsa Lundén / Moderna museet.

The spectator is positioned in the middle of this exploration of memory documents of the past and their present reincarnation in the gallery room, actively participating in the uncovering and renegotiation of the archival images. In this way Zaatari's *Unfolding* successfully positions the spectator in-between the archival past and the directness of the re-enacted lived ex-



perience. This is a relational position that may lead to new insights into the material presented as well as to new trajectories. More than a mere recycling, this is also a reactivation of transcultural memory that travels effortlessly across borders and through the art world comes to inhabit new contexts and gains new momentum in the present moment of looking.

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## Notes

- [1] <http://www.modernamuseet.se/stockholm/en/exhibitions/akram-zaatari>
- [2] <http://www.fai.org.lb/Home.aspx>
- [3] Foster 2004, pp. 4, 17, 21.
- [4] Downey 2015, p. 15.
- [5] Baron 2014, p. 30.
- [6] Ibid., p. 25.
- [7] Ghani 2015, p. 53.
- [8] O'Doherty 1999.
- [9] Foster 2004, p. 5.