



## Drake Stutesman

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This Day

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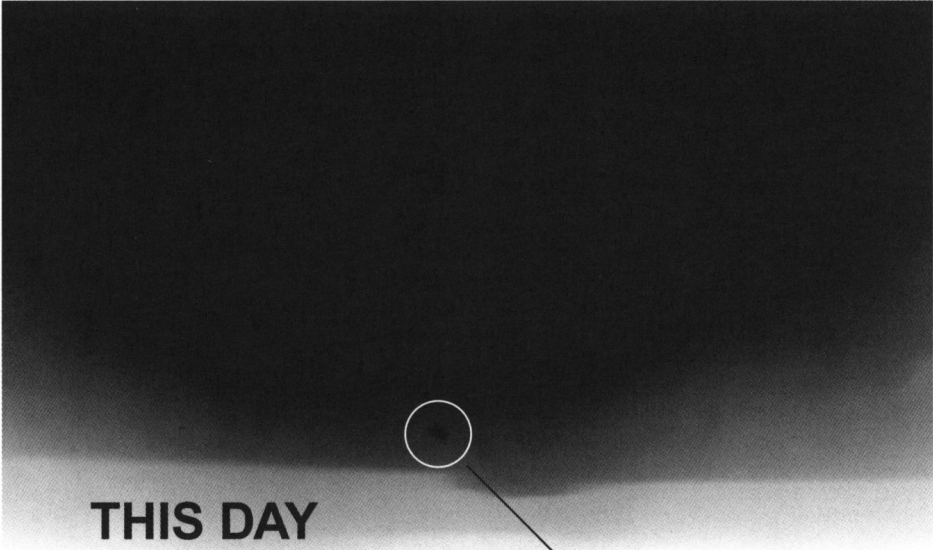
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# THIS DAY

This Day regroups recordings I used to produce as a child during the '82 Israeli invasion of South Lebanon (1981-85). They included clips from radio, audio clips of television programs, and audio recordings of daily life. I used to create my own radio programs, featuring my top hit songs, reading the news, and commercials ....etc. I developed those recording habits that soon extended to include photography, and a diary, reporting on the politico-military situation in the South, and daily reviews of all the films I managed to watch on the Lebanese, Egyptian and Israeli TV channels.

Israeli F-16 air fighter, June 1981



# This Day

**Akram Zaatari**

Between the age of fifteen and nineteen, and right before going to bed, I used to write personal daily reports on the military situation in the different parts of Lebanon, still plunged in the middle on a civil war then, and subject to continuous Israeli attacks led, which occupied twelve percent of it between 1978 and 2000. The daily reports, which often had a political angle, included also weather information and outlines of film I saw on local, Egyptian, and Israeli television. They always started with an opening title that said; 'this day . . .' That happened between 1982 and 1985.

I have no idea what were the reasons behind my writing, since they were not very personal notes, but rather descriptions, re-writing or summarizing what was on the radio, or in the papers that day. I didn't know neither who was I writing to. All I knew was the fact that I used to enjoy my time doing it when there was nothing else to do, nowhere to go to. Some of my writings reflected a certain joy; others reflected absolute boredom in a tight contradiction with which I tend to describe a state of war. The latest two years concentrated less on the military, for the country was going into a relative, yet misleading, calm during the Gemayel era (1982–1988), and focused on basic, though detailed, description of popular films I watched on TV or in movie theaters.

This essay is about some aspects of popular culture, precisely about the joy embedded in the daily practice of poetry, drawing, and photography; a joy, which I wanted my personal video work that is continuously in progress, to reflect. I am outlining here, three samples from this work intercut by

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excerpts from my notebooks, evoking continuously, the joys and boredoms of a teenager living through war.

**Friday January 28<sup>th</sup> 1983**

This morning, we learned the decease of French actor Louis de Funès, who devoted most of his life to French cinema. This evening, my father arrived back from Egypt and Yemen. It was a surprise since we were expecting him to arrive tomorrow.

**Friday February 18<sup>th</sup> 1983**

This morning, we woke up on a cloudy weather, which soon turned stormy. The windshield reached 90km/h, broke a glass window in the classroom, and held Lebanese delegation in Nattania. Continuous showers raised the water level today another 57mm. This is certainly an unprecedented storm in Lebanese history. Mahmoud brought the results of the English test. I got 403. I watched 'Serpico', by Sidney Lumet with Al Pacino and John Rudolph (1973).

**Friday March 18<sup>th</sup> 1983**

*Controle Physique.* 'did well'

Today the temperature reached 21 degrees Celsius. In the evening I watched an Egyptian TV movie entitled 'They Became Five,' with Salah Zoufikar and Layla Fawzi.

I have recently become aware of situations that move me such as the case of Amani singing Najwa Karam. I don't know the reasons why, but got challenged to name that thing, which stimulated all those feelings in me. Amani is an eight-year old girl, who looks a bit older than other kids of her age. She lives with her parents in Ras Baalback, in rural North-East of Lebanon at some forty km North of *Baalbeck*. She has an admiration to singing and loves Najwa Karam. Why? 'Because all what she sings is nice' she would say. She sings in school and at home, where her father encourages her, and joins her singing while also playing the *Oud* that he built himself.

If I were to list things that move me to an extent of making me cry, Amani's singing would be one of them. The song, as she performed it, evoked that joy I felt writing those notes. Her joy came from the simple practice of singing. It was certainly not for the good music of the original song, not for the lyrics, and not for the still immature voice of Amani. It is a joy that has no limits. Yet it is a joy counteracted by this fear of not performing well. This is where a limitless generosity is evoked within the parent-child relationship, expressed in the father's assistance of the girl's singing, and his patience doing so four or five times repeatedly.

I had met Amani by pure chance when my assistant, a *Oud* fan, took the chance of our presence in that region to fix his *Oud*. When we arrived the

daughter, Amani, was doing some school homework sitting silently on the sofa. But As soon as she heard the father asked for the Oud to try, she came to him and whispered what we could not hear. But that was understood later when the mother laughed saying that Amani wanted to sing.

While singing, the 8-year old girl was acting like Najwa Karam, imitating her gestures, saying:

How can I cure you?  
When I need to be cured myself.  
I didn't learn Arab medicine, or Chinese medicine.  
How can I be the remedy that cures your wounds?  
When I still have mine to deal with.

Despite the intended exhibition of 'a possible talent' that obviously fails, there was a pleasure quite obvious on Amani's face. But it was not that failure that moved me. Emotion lied somewhere else, an entity, which needed to be named, and possibly dissected. The only word, which comes to mind for the moment, is JOY, nothing more.

**Monday April 18<sup>th</sup> 1983**

Today was an ordinary day.

**Monday May 9<sup>th</sup> 1983**

Today was a strike in Saida as protest against the Israeli army who killed a student yesterday in Tyr. We knew also from school that the strike would continue tomorrow as well. Anyway, the cease-fire continues, more or less. My uncle called today from Spain. Luckily, my grandmother was here to talk to him. In the evening I watched a concert with the 4M with *Dr. Izzat Abu Ouf*, held for *Shamm el Nissim*.

**Tuesday May 17<sup>th</sup> 1983**

This is an important day in the Lebanon's history. The Lebanese/American/Israeli peace treaty was signed today in Khaldeh in both French and Arabic texts. Then the delegations moved to Keriat Shmona where the English and Hebrew texts were signed. Syria remains in opposition to this agreement so are Libya and the PLO. Libya asked both its ambassador in Beirut and the Lebanese ambassador in Libya to leave immediately. Anyway the U.S.A. did not lose hope on Syria yet.

Fouad Helmi was a bank administrator who developed a passion for photography. His photo album, which dates back to the late fifties and sixties, shows family snapshots in addition to three photographic subjects, which were his favorite.

1—He was fond of photographing ships crossing the Suez Canal especially after its Nationalization, which led to the embargo in 1956. He used to sit down observing the ships crossing the Canal from *Port Tawfic*.

2—He was also fond of taking pictures of the TV screen in the early sixties, right after the inauguration of the local TV channel in Alexandria where he was born, and where he lives now. He used to sit down in front of the TV screen. He had the aperture and speed fixed, and waited for his favorite actors and TV shows to play. Taking pictures became a matter of ‘pressing the button’ as he says. Not surprisingly, his album included photos of singers Sabah, Chadia, Oum Kouloum, Sherifa Fadel, and actors like Youssef Wahbi, Amina Rizk among other popular figures of the time, including the legendary TV presenter Salwa Hegazi, who died young in a plane crash over Sinai.

3—Fouad Helmi was also fond of photographing animals, which he observed at the *Antoniades* zoo in Alexandria. He photographed monkeys, elephants, but considered that the swan, or the goose, had exceptional photogenic features due to the unique form of its neck. He believes that the goose is even more photogenic in water since its reflection generates a pleasant symmetrical shape.

I was interested how Fouad Helmi’s album unconsciously reflected three popular themes that contributed to the shaping of national identity in Egypt during the 50’s and the sixties. Suez Canal, especially after its Nationalization in 56, Television in a country that possesses great entertainment industry, and the Zoo, were products of the Nasser period, and which consisted somehow of a National pride. Helmi used photography to reproduce them excessively, mechanically; over and over again to an extent it almost became a photographer’s obsession, and performance. But isn’t this also about passion, about the joy of the practice itself? When I met Fouad Helmi, he showed me some of his correspondence with Agfa, and Kodak. He often asked the most efficient use of photographic chemistry. His passion made him cut 120 rolls into smaller 16mm negative format, at a time when it was not possible to import film stock for his Russian equivalent of the German Minox, due to the 1956 embargo.

There were two points that attracted me in Fouad Helmi’s work. First, was the passion with which he produced his work and the knowledge he accumulated just by doing research, writing to Agfa or Kodak asking for tips of information to process his negatives. He was not a professional photographer, and he never exhibited or even cared to exhibit his work. He was satisfied producing those albums that shouldn’t bore the ‘viewer’, as he said. A reason why he designed them in a way to have a page for family, facing another page of what he called ‘recreation’ (*nuzha*). That ‘recreation’ could be any of his three favorite themes: ships, images taken of television programs, or animals at the zoo. But which viewer did he design his albums

for? He doesn't know. The second thing that attracted me in Helmi's work was his ability to reproduce the popular with minimal and simple mechanisms. Despite the fact that he never gave himself the title of an artist, Fouad Helmi possessed the logic of an artist without knowing it, without wanting it. His daily practices of photography escape aesthetic definitions. He is an obsessive collector who uses his camera to acquire objects, ships, animals, people on TV, etc. . . .

Fouad Helmi took an excessive number of photographs showing ships crossing the Suez Canal. Most of the shots were taken from the same location on the East bank of the canal in Port Tawfiq. He did not have any motivation except the joy of taking pictures, of using technology, of producing more and more of those roll films that he cut himself. He had tons of them; this is why he could take large quantities of those photographs. For him, it was quantity that counts. He wanted at least one photograph of every ship, but still was convinced his production was unworthy of being called Art. He says: 'There was nothing to be photographed in Egypt then,' and asks: 'What else were we going to photograph?'

**Thursday June 2<sup>nd</sup> 1983**

Today was a normal day waiting with impatience for tomorrow.

**Friday August 6<sup>th</sup> 1983**

Aunt Ina'm visited us in the evening. Then, came Mohamad Ali el Sayed, and Ramzi Minkara with his wife Rana, who got me a Walkman as a gift.

**Friday September 9<sup>th</sup> 1983**

Today, the bombing of Deir el Kamar continued until Joumblat announced seize fire later in the afternoon, when the PSP (Progressist Socialist Party) started its attack on Bhamdoun. Today, I saw Hitchcock's 'Birds' with Rod Taylor on the second channel of Lebanese Television; a reason why I saw only the last fifteen minutes from 'Murder on the Orient Express' which was playing at the same time on the Egyptian second channel. I had seen Chahine's 'The Land' earlier in the after noon.

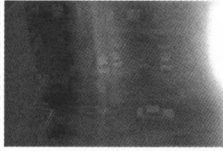
**Thursday December 8<sup>th</sup>, 1983**

Today, nothing important happened.

Fox is a name that four local performers gave to themselves. With an activity that started, and still is, improvised, Fox aims to break the meaning of common Arabic songs by replacing their lyrics with sexual stories they invent. Their performances started in a spontaneous way, and led to the production of 9 songs and 3 poems.

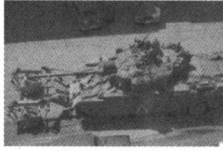
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Syrian tank carried by an Israeli carrier. Saïda, July 8th 1982



reconstruction of Jad building Saïda, July 20th 1982

anti-mine Israeli Mircava. Saïda, July 1982



martyrs square Saïda, July 20th 1982

Israeli tank. Saïda, July 1982



Saïda public school for boys Ain el Helweh, July 2nd 1982

Syrian tank carried by an Israeli carrier. Saïda, July 1982



top floor of Jad building Saïda, July 1982



Fox started as improvisation among friends, but moved into another phase when the four active performers united and called themselves Fox. They perform usually for themselves, and are mostly unknown outside their circle of friends, but so are numerous other similar experiences among people who sing for the joy of it, for the freedom they granted to them, letting their frustrations out dis-considering any correctness.

In Fox's performance of Ahmad Kaabour's song '*Tala' A' Bali*' (I feel like), they recite the following:

[I feel like going out alone for wine  
Get drunk in the nights, and stroll  
In a world with no inhibitions, no condoms  
I feel like going out for a fuck!  
I go out alone wearing my scarf and BOOT  
Around the bars of Beirut  
To find a slut, a whore who invites me in  
I go out alone for a *tooot* . . .]

The original Kaabur song says:

[I feel like forgetting myself, dissolve into stars  
fly high in the night, and fly around  
sing above houses and dance with birds  
I feel I want to sing and fly  
I feel like telling stories to myself  
About beautiful places, and forests  
Where houses are small, but where love is big  
I feel I want to sing and fly  
I feel like going far  
Meet other kids like me  
In a world with no frontiers, and no guards  
I feel I want to sing and fly]

Fox transforms Kaabur's song from a bedtime story into an adult story preserving its essential meaning as chant for freedom. For them, flying, singing to the birds, telling stories about other places is not freedom. They name the needs, focusing on the sexual and often the perverse, challenging social constraints consciously playing with censorship, which is obvious in their use of the word *toot* denoting beeps that television uses to cover undesirable words.

Love and freedom are two recurring themes in Fox's repertoire, where a different world is being presented. It is an imaginary world, a nightmare as is the poem of *Zaaraneh bil hammame* (bathroom naughtiness). Fox's performances are a reaction to the mystification of freedom in *Taala abali* (I feel like), of love in *Aktar min kida eeh* (How better can it get?) and in *Baddi*

*etsawwar ana wiyyaki* (I want to have a picture with you). Their modified lyrics portray the opposite of love, *Aktar min kidah eeh* (How much more?) becomes *Aniak min kidah eeh!* (How fucking worse can it be?) the opposite of freedom as in the case of *Zaaraneh bel Hammame*

[*Labattoh a' baydo wzattayto barra, kal la tfakreh ennek horra*]

(I kicked his balls and threw him out, he said don't think you are free).

They plot sexual encounters that are in their opinion 'different' given the context of current mediated popular culture. This is a difference that capitalizes much on creating funny associations such as:

[*nammal bezzeh ya ghabi*] (pins and needles in my breast, stupid)

Substituting,

[*Da' khilki ya sabi*] (I am suffocating, boy)

and violent scenarios that produce humor, black humor. A typical scenario shows one of the partners as either ignorant, and therefore fails to lead the sexual act, sometimes misbehaving, or with a certain weakness, or a defect that causes the failure of the act. For in their opinion, the sexual act is never perfect. Moreover, they believe that popular culture has created myths that are so unreal, which needed to be broken.

They portray a world where there is no room for nostalgia, no room for packaged feelings, or reactions, no room for flowers or velvet dreams. There is no room for the word 'love', or 'heart'. As if it's the jungle out there, portrayed only for the joy of it being elsewhere. By doing that, i.e. by shying away from romantic stereotypical clichés and focusing on the dirty, the violent, their world paradoxically aims to be more human. An excess of vulgarity takes over what Fox considers, artificial tenderness that characterizes popular Arabic music. Cynicism and irony, sure, are behind marrying the perversity of the lyrics with the traditional popular, logic and tune. In a way it is a parody of the innocence in popular music.

*Zaaraneh bel Hammame* (bathroom naughtiness) is one of the most distinguished pieces by FOX. Recited by one performer or a duet, this poem is narrated from the point of view of a woman who spots a man from the window of her bathroom and invites him over to bed. He comes, but turns to be too rough, possessive and violent. The poem describes in details all sorts of sexual practices that happen between the two, until she discovers that the man is actually her brother. The narrative ends revealing the whole to be a nightmare. The poem is usually recited along with a background concerto; an eighteenth century 'romantic' composition by *Beneditto Marcello* which accentuates the parody.

The poem says:

One day  
Going for my last evening shit  
I saw him through the bathroom window  
Masturbating what a pity  
Why not have him for the night?  
I plucked my vagina in the dark  
Rubbed my breast against the wall  
Heated my hole over the boiler  
I called him  
He came up like a bird  
I opened the door and my pussy  
He had a toothbrush  
I asked about his name he said Issam  
I felt slained, muted by his body  
Got closer to his dick  
Pulled it towards me  
For an hour I sucked it, no hard on  
Frustrated I decided to sleep  
He held his dick  
Wanting to fuck me  
I decided to give him a chance  
Instead, he pinched my breast  
I screamed of pain  
This will lead to a fight  
He apologized then penetrated my ass  
My holy  
An endless night  
A useless fight  
I kicked his balls and kicked him out  
He said you are not free  
He tied me up and jerked himself  
I realized it was my brother  
I wept  
And feared his baby  
As if a thousand nails in me  
Thanks God it was all a nightmare.  
(FOX © 2000)

It was precisely that passion with which Fox performers wrote, and recited their performances that interested me, and brought Amani's singing back to my mind. Given that the nature of their work dictated a very limited and selected audience, Fox experience was totally liberated from market, from political considerations, and from working on building a name, or a music career. Their work does not cater for a specific market, and hence doesn't get conditioned nor polished by market requirements. Indifferent to polit-



ical correctness, their work is often vulgar and grotesque: a reason for, and a byproduct of, their anonymity.

Fox's manipulation of popular lyrics is a reaction to passive reception and passive recital of songs as they are provided by the music industry. Singing, for them, is a creative act. And this is where reciting blindly reduces from the pleasure of singing. However, their practice is certainly not unprecedented; for most people in the Middle East invent their own songs based on existing ones as a daily practice. People rework songs they know, with modifications that vary between a word, a sentence, or sometimes totally depending on the context(s) where these are used. Fox's transformations usually deface the whole text of the original song, sexual content, but keep the rhyme. This is a reaction against social constraints imposed on most popular products in Arabic culture. This is a reaction against promoting packaged music, packaged social values, and feelings. Fox's manipulation is about re-appropriation of tunes, which gives their performances a subversive nature. Yet, this is not a subversion intended to mobilize an audience, for Fox's practices are not intended for an audience. It is a frivolous practice that has no future, but doesn't care for one anyway, a practice that doesn't fear discontinuity, failure or amnesia.

**Friday September 16<sup>th</sup> 1983**

Today, the Lebanese army led a war against the communist party in *Souk el Gharb*, (mount-Lebanon). A Lebanese *Hawker Hunter* was hit and fell in *Khaldeh*.

**Thursday November 17<sup>th</sup> 1983**

Today, the French airplanes hit Baalbak, precisely the Amal, and the Iranian forces based in the *Cheikh Abdallah Camp*.

**Thursday December 8<sup>th</sup>, 1983**

Today, nothing important happened.

**End**

*Akram Zaatari is a Lebanese filmmaker and video artist living in Beirut. He has a BA from the American University of Beirut, where he taught photography and design between 1991–1996, and an MA in Media Studies from the New School for Social Research, New York. He was executive producer of a daily morning show 'Aalam Al-Sabah' at Future Television-Beirut where he produced his early video work. He has edited three books on photography from the collection of the Arab Image Foundation, of which he is a founding member.*