Akram Zaatari, *Saida, June 6, 1982*, 2005, digital photograph montage, 50 x 98⅜ in. (127 x 250 cm) (artwork © Akram Zaatari)

This montage weaves together six photographs that Zaatari shot from the balcony of his childhood home in Saida during Israel's invasion of southern Lebanon in 1982. The composite image corresponds to the spectacularity of the event in the artist's memory, even if not to the actuality of the event as it really took place. Along with images from other moments in the history of the photography in the Middle East, these pictures of Saida are central to Zaatari's extended video investigation into the multiple notions of truth coded in photographic imagery, *This Day* (2003).

Disaster without Limits, or I am (we all are) from a place of war

Hannah Feldman and Akram Zaatari

Mining War: Fragments from a Conversation Already Passed

In December 2005, we (Hannah Feldman and Akram Zaatari) submitted a joint application to the Council for International Exchange of Scholars and the Fulbright Visiting Specialist Program: Direct Contact with the Muslim World to bring Zaatari, a Lebanese multimedia artist and cofounder of the Beirut-based Arab Image Foundation, to Northwestern University for six weeks in the fall of 2006. Feldman's research on French vanguardist projects from the 1950s to the present, and in particular on their relation to the events and aftermath of the Algerian War of Independence, and Zaatari's work recovering and researching photographic documents of an uneven modernity in Lebanon and the surrounding region suggested several fruitful points of intersection. In interrogating the implications of national and regional affiliations as emblems or determinants of identity, we both question—and hope to reshape—notions of aesthetic heritage in order to think about the political economy of cultural production. We envisioned our collaboration as one that might introduce to Northwestern's campus a sense of the immediacy and interconnectedness of otherwise apparently remote histories, times, cultures, and analytical practices. We hoped that it would also help our students reconceptualize a part of the world that the majority of Americans know only from the fragmented images of violence and war that the Western media routinely disseminate.

On May 4, 2006, our application was approved, and we were told that it was just a matter of a final review by the Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Review Board. An officer from the Fulbright explained that this last purely bureaucratic step would take no more than two to three weeks. Instead we waited until August 10, 2006. Between May and August everything changed: Lebanon, still recovering from the material and psychological effects of the nearly two decades of international and internal strife commonly referred to by the imprecise and perhaps revisionist moniker of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90), had once again become the site of an asymmetrical war.[1] The fighting this time was largely between Israeli Defense Forces and the security arm of Hezbollah, the political party led by Shi'a cleric, Hassan Nasrallah.[2] It had begun on July 12, when Hezbollah reported the capture of two Israeli soldiers between the villages of Aitaa al-Chaab, Lebanon, and Shtula, Israel, during an attack that also killed seven Israeli troops.[3] In response to these provocations, the Israeli government and its army launched the military campaign referred to as "Operation Just Return," "Operation Just Reward," or "Change of Direction." Troops were sent back into southern Lebanon, ostensibly to retrieve the missing soldiers, Eldad Regev and Ehud Goldwasser, while Israeli naval forces blockaded Lebanon from the Mediterranean. Air strikes targeted not only the pro-Hezbollah southern villages and the southern Beiruti suburbs where Nasrallah's headquarters are, but also communications and transportation infrastructure throughout the country. These combined assaults left 1,360 Lebanese civilians dead (160 of these the result of cluster bombs detonated since the cease-fire in August) and more than 2,000 injured. In Lebanon, these events have come to be known as the July War. In

1. Some, especially those in south Lebanon, might suggest that the nation was actually not "postwar" until after the 2000 withdrawal of Israeli military from the ten-mile-wide swath of Lebanese territory it had occupied as a "security zone" for nearly two decades. Similarly, others would prefer the term "Lebanese Wars" to indicate the importance of international factors, including the involvement of the United States.
2. Hezbollah's lineage dates back to 1982, when the Lebanese Resistance Front (JAMOUL, Jabhat al Mouqawamah al-Ouataniyyah) was founded by the Lebanese Communist Party with the ambition of liberating Lebanon from the Israeli occupation. The LRF launched attacks against Israeli military targets in Lebanon and later against the Israeli-supported faction known as the South Lebanese Army. Encouraged by LRF successes, other parties quickly formed, most notably the Syrian Social Nationalist Party and the Popular Nasserist Organization. Hezbollah was convened as a constituency of anti-imperialist, Islamist guerilla factions that were eventually unified under a single leadership. By 2000, Hezbollah had developed into a sophisticated political organization administering an expansive set of social services, including medical care and housing. It also runs its own media channels. Hezbollah won fourteen seats in the Lebanese Parliament in 2005, the year that marked the party's decision to join the government. (It had previously held seats but always refused to be part of the government.) Although the party itself is sectarian—and widely perceived to receive financial and military support from external sources such as (Shi'ite) Iran and (Sunni-majority but Allawite Shi'a ruled) Syria—its services are said to be delivered without regard to sect.
3. Skirmishes along the border have been routine for years, as has been Israeli patrolling inside Lebanese borders in supposed response to the

Israel, the same conflict is called the Second Lebanon War—a misnomer that means to pay homage to the 1982 invasion while amending a history that has actually seen Israel invade Lebanon not once but twice previously, first in 1978 during the Litani River operations, and again in 1982.

In July and August of 2006, the likelihood that Zaatari would be able to receive, or even apply for, a US J-1 visa from his home country—under assault by an important US ally—was, to be frank, not good. War, it seemed, had irreversibly intertwined itself with our planned collaboration. Subsequent to the cease-fire of August 14, 2006, however, US State Department restrictions eased and, after much brokering, Zaatari was able to obtain and file the necessary paperwork. He received his visa on September 5, 2006, roughly ten days before the class we had proposed to team-teach was slated to begin.

Our proposed class was to address "Contemporary Art from the 'Islamic' World" through primary documents and original art objects from the geographic regions that had once constituted the Ottoman Empire. We had specifically hoped to interrogate and undermine the homogenizing, orientalist, and Eurocentric implications of the imprecise geographical category of "the Islamic World" (which we'd inherited from CIES/Fulbright). Equally anxious to avoid naturalizing the American government's insistence on positioning Israel as culturally and economically central to the unity of the region referred to as "the Middle East," we had hoped to problematize that term as well. The need to ground this deconstructive impulse in specific historic, cultural, and geographic detail led us to focus more stringently on the specifics of Lebanese history and cultural production as exemplary, to some degree, of the contradictions and divisions that challenge the imposition of any homogenous identity on the region. These contradictions, it was clear, were highlighted by the outbreak of—and international response to—war in Lebanon during the summer. No matter how we had resisted making a class about contemporary art from the Middle East—let alone a class meant to address something like "the Islamic world"—synonymous with a class on representing war and strife, this experience and the multiple factors that had come to shape it lodged themselves irrefutably at the core not only of our conversations but also of the work we were analyzing. The everyday concerns of sexuality, gender, family, ethnicity, and class that we'd hoped to illuminate as counters to the sensationalized media depictions of the "Arab street" were already implicated within a history of war, and vice versa. With this revised focus, Beirut became even more important as the site of an independent art scene that reflected on a certain locality within a particular history of war and violence, but that did so in an explicitly internationalist idiom. Art, we insisted, could not be made to represent geopolitical identities without falling back on extreme simplifications. Similarly, the experience of war in its lived complexity could not be isolated from the ramifications of so many other social, religious, cultural, and economic factors on subject formation. In Lebanon the geographical borders and fragmentations, for instance, formed by a history of British and French imperial divestments in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s as well as by nationalist, pan-Arab, and sectarian strife, found their metaphoric reflection in the construction of borders between the sexes, between the classes, between the institutions of art and both its more spontaneous and studied manifestations, and even between representations of "fact" and "fiction."

occasional lobbing by Lebanese irregulars of generally ineffectual explosive devices at Israeli towns. What was unusual in this instance was the kidnapping, though there has been speculation that the Israeli invasion had been planned for some time and was awaiting only a "visible" provocation.

The implied "versus" that traditionally separates these last two terms has generated much of the scholarly focus on art produced in Beirut since the civil war. 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. Using widely varying techniques and points of departure, and equally disparate approaches, 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 as well as of those battles that still threaten everyday life in the form of continued Israeli aggressions. These artists have been less interested in "resolution" than in examining the grain of history by way of resisting the premature closure or forgetting upon which governmentally sanctioned amnesties, treaties, and even such cultural projects as the rebuilding of downtown Beirut by Solidere have insisted.[4] Their projects have been received as evidence of more traditionally defined documentary's incapacity to adequately communicate experience without reification. Our conversations, by contrast, began from the impulse to investigate this overdetermined critical stance and the ways in which its constant assertions of representation's impossibility threaten to trap representation in a cycle of diminishing returns—one which, perversely, repeats the gesture of marginalization and trivializing.

We wondered what it would mean to the formulations of fact and fiction if we shifted the frame of analysis from that provided by the bureaucratic and disciplined approach to history indicated by terms like "archive" to one suggested by more personal terms like "collection." As a product of an action that emphasizes amassing and thus implicates desire, the collection takes on a selected as opposed to a predetermined nature. Similarly, we thought to replace terms like "readymade" or "found" or even "document." Here, we turned to more paleographic metaphors, such as that of the "fossil," which imputes to the object a sense of its being discovered and unearthed while also maintaining a sense of both its original integrity and its transformation over time.[5] These terminological shifts necessitated that we consider rearticulating the temporal order normally implicit in the understanding of both representation and history as related to things that have already passed and are no longer present. We were reminded of the way figures like Walter Benjamin and Henri Bergson before him had called for understandings of history and its artifacts that would enable the present to spread, as André Lepecki has put it, "toward the past, the past toward the present, and the future toward both."[6] These new terms also necessitated a shift in our spatial understandings, leading us away from the inclusive and uniform totality implied by terms like "archive" and "atlas" and toward the simultaneously metaphorical and concrete phenomenon of the "border," which emphasizes divisions and misidentifications. While the critical reception of the Beiruti docu-fictional projects often stresses the way these projects expand the field of representation to include psychological or individual truths otherwise unaccounted for by more official histories, we took this to be an incomplete interpretation. Rather than what Zaatari describes as "mobilization images"—pictures that aspire to motivate viewers to act in accordance with a specific agenda or that depend on soliciting an empathic identification—the model of the border

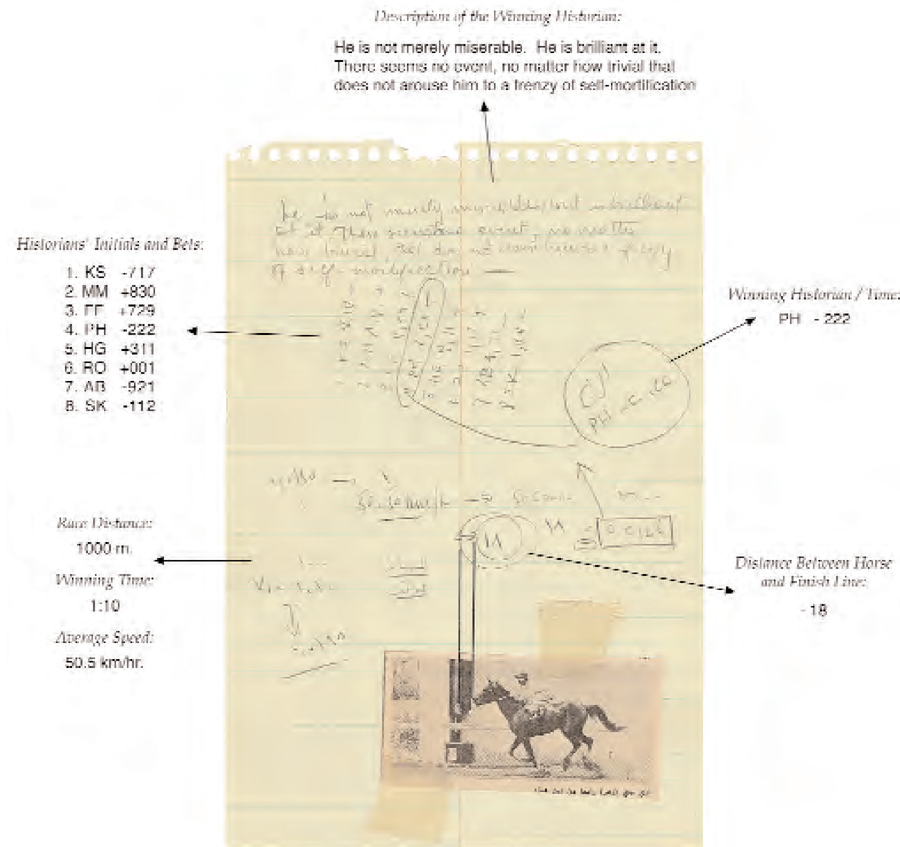
4. Solidere, a private joint-stock holding company founded by Rafik Hariri in 1994, undertook the massive postwar redevelopment of downtown Beirut. (Hariri served as prime minister of Lebanon 1992–98 and 2000–4; he was assassinated in 2005.) The resulting city center is widely applauded, but the overall project has been heavily criticized as a kind of contemporary Haussmannization. The owners of buildings demolished by Solidere in the city center were given 50 percent ownership of the new buildings, while Solidere took the other 50 percent. As a number of these original owners had fled the country during the wars, this 50 percent ownership is a much contested issue and presents problems for the long-term viability of the development. The largest Lebanese shareholder in Solidere is the Hariri family, while most of the remaining stock is held by European, American, and Gulf Arab interests. For example, on Martyrs' Square, see Makram elKadi and Bouki Babalou-Noukaki, "Debating the Future of Martyrs' Square," *Bidoun* 9 (Winter 2006–7); on urbanism more generally, see Tony Chakar, "A Journey into Beirut's Dark Side," in the same issue.

5. Zaatari was first exposed to this concept in informal talks with Laura Marks, and in reading Janet Walker and Diane Waldeman, *Feminism and Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

6. André Lepecki, "'After All, This Terror Was Not without Reason': Unfiled Notes on the Atlas Group Archive," *TDR: The Drama Review* 50, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 88–99. In this text, Lepecki expands upon—and introduces Walter Benjamin into—the exemplary and insightful analysis of Walid Raad's performances that Lepecki had proffered in "In the Mist of the Event: Performance and the Activation of Memory in the Atlas Group Archive," in *Walid Raad: The Atlas Group 1989–2004*, ed. Kassandra Nakas, Britta Schmitz, and Walid Raad (Cologne: Walter Konig, 2006), where he discusses the same work in relation to Henri Bergson's *Matter and Memory*.

Walid Raad/The Atlas Group, *Missing Lebanese Wars*, 1996–2002, detail, archival inkjet prints, set of 21 plates, each 13 x 9⅞ in. (33 x 25 cm), edition of seven (artwork © Walid Raad; image provided by Sfeir-Semler Galerie)

For this project, Raad displays the notebooks of a Lebanese historian he names Dr. Fakhouri, in which the historian has chronicled the bets that he and other illustrious historians made at horse races during the Lebanese wars. Their bets depended not on when or on which horse would first cross the finish line, but on how far in advance or in delay the track photographer would shoot the image meant to document the event. The same notebook pages include photographs said to be clipped from the post-race-day issue of the newspaper *An-Nahar*, Dr. Fakhouri's notations on the race's distance and duration, the time of the winning horse, calculations of averages, the historians' initials with their respective bets, and the time discrepancy predicted by the winning historian. English notations are, according to Raad's ventriloquy of Dr. Fakhouri's widow, Zainab, Fakhouri's short descriptions of the winning historians' personalities.



Walid Raad/The Atlas Group, *My Neck Is Thinner than a Hair*, 1996–2004, digital prints, 100 plates, each 9½ x 13⅜ in. (24 x 34 cm) (artwork © Walid Raad; image provided by Sfeir-Semler Galerie)

This photograph and accompanying text come from the Atlas Group's ongoing investigation into the use of car bombs in the 1975–90 Lebanese wars. The work represents the study of the location of a car engine from an explosion. The Atlas Group presents this material alongside the explanation that the only part that remains intact after a car bomb explodes is the engine. Landing on balconies, roofs, or adjacent streets, the engines are projected tens and sometimes hundreds of meters away from the original bombing sites. The claim is further made that during the wars, photojournalists competed to be the first to find and photograph the engines.

Akram Zaatari and Walid Raad, *Mapping Sitting*, 2002, detail showing 35mm film rolls used by "surprise" photographers stacked in wooden drawer, from Photo Jack archive, Tripoli, 1950s (artwork © Akram Zaatari and Walid Raad; photograph by Agop Kanledjian, provided by the Arab Image Foundation)

The film rolls were generously donated by Photo Jack to the photographer Aarabi in Tripoli following the closing of his own studio. The boxes were subsequently acquired by Zaatari and have been preserved as part of the Arab Image Foundation's collection. AIF preserves not just the imagistic legacy of photographic practice in the region, but its material dimensions as well. The rolls of film contained within the boxes had been shot by two street photographers working for the Jack Studio in Tell Square in Tripoli in the 1950s. For *Mapping Sitting*, Raad and Zaatari compiled a video montage of these snapshots of pedestrians walking in that urban center. In this appropriation, these "surprise photos," originally produced to circulate in a very specific economy, are now used in the entirely different context of the art institution. Rather than appropriating the photographs into personal or fictional narratives, the artists present them as products of an economy tied to portrait photography in urban centers. In this particular photograph, the artists similarly take the original objects from their status as opaque archival objects and reorient them to the vertical address of art, replete with formal allusion and convention. Not all of the boxes are full or labeled—as if to enforce the artists' insistence that the archive is always incomplete, no matter its pretensions.

allowed us to approach images and objects with an eye to their engagement with contradiction, irreconcilability, and multiplicity.

What follows are fragments and pieces of the conversation that ensued, in which we—Feldman and Zaatari, along with Chad Elias, our teaching assistant, and twenty-four students—tested these terminological shifts over the course of six weeks in the fall of 2006. In deciding how best to represent this conversation, we chose not to respect the individual, geographic, or professional boundaries that separate us—an American academic and critic, an art and documentary practitioner from Lebanon, a Lebanese-Australian graduate student assistant, and a class of mostly American undergraduates—and instead to pen fragments of our conversation as a single voice, recognizing the multiplicity of opinions and biases that always inform even the singular subject. Identities, we assumed, exceed the administrative and institutional boundaries asserted by our passports or our professional affiliations. Instead, they take shifting positions and, as such, are always in the process of becoming what they were in the past and what they will be in the future. Our discourse, then, necessarily engages in its own performance of representation and correction—events we had already found so critically mired in the thematics of our conversation.

Collecting within the Archive

More than any kind of hoped-for completeness, the archive represents power. In Roberto Rossellini's allegorical film *Machine to Kill Bad People* (*La Macchina Ammazzacattivi*, 1952) a studio photographer in a small postwar Italian town is given the power (by a saint eventually revealed to be the devil in disguise) to "kill bad people" simply by photographing their photographic likenesses, that is by taking pictures of their pictures. Through the capacity of his camera's reproductive technology

Akram Zaatari and Walid Raad, *Mapping Sitting*, 2002, detail showing identification photos from Studio Anouchian, Tripoli, Lebanon, 1935–70, installation view, Musée Nicéphore Niépce, Chalon-sur-Saône, France. M. Yammine Collection/Arab Image Foundation. (Artwork © Akram Zaatari and Walid Raad)

On one wall of the *Mapping Sitting* exhibition Zaatari and Raad pinned thousands of six-by-nine-centimeter contact prints of ID photographs from the AIF's collection. The effect was not dissimilar to a wall festooned with sequins. Beyond the spectacular effect of this megamosaic lay an order that was evoked but never fully decoded. Photographers in the region normally classified their archives for easy access according to year of production. Portraits of women were often separated from those of men and of couples. *Mapping Sitting*, however, presents other modes of classification wherein clusters of images suggest their own relationships and logical associations. Of these, some are highly visible, such as groups in which the styles of moustaches or necklaces or headscarves correspond. Others, however, remain less visible, the product of the artists' own desires. The installation works as both an exercise of classification and a testimony to its failures in face of the endless possibilities provided by such a collection.

and the potential it represents to create a totalizing image of a place and its people in time, the photographer assumes the power and authority of both judge and executioner, determining who is bad and enacting their punishment.[7]

These same correlated manifestations of authority—photographic, historic, academic, institutional—are unmasked by the collective production of Walid Raad's Atlas Group: Raad's soft-spoken, quasi-academic performances; the documents he attributes to the notebooks, ruminations, and private collection of the oft-befuddled Lebanese historian Dr. Fakhouri; the diagrammatic surveys and terrestrial mapping he claims were produced by the failed ammunitions expert Yussef Nassar; and even the "corrected" images of buildings allegedly photographed by Lamia Hilwé. Each of these projects plays a role in exposing the arbitrary (but highly motivated) constructions of the past by experts, who are in turn equipped with the power ascribed them by virtue of their control of the institutional apparatuses, especially photography, upon which the totality of their authority is based.

A similar unmasking is engaged by the Arab Image Foundation. Founded in 1997 by photographers and aesthetic practitioners Fouad Elkoury, Samer Mohdad, and Zaatari and currently counting Raad, Yto Barrada, Zeina Arida Bassil, Lara Baladi, Nigol Bezjian, Lucien Samaha, Karl Bassil, and Negar Azimi as members, AIF collects, indexes, studies, and exhibits photography in the Middle East and North Africa. AIF's mission to acquire and preserve photographic collections from this region developed after it became clear that many of the documents and archives of commercial studios in Beirut, Saida, Tripoli, Damascus, and Aleppo had vanished. Often, these studios' archives were destroyed after the studios closed. Within those collections that remained, the images, once considered the capital of every studio, became private documents belonging to clients, and there was little concern for the value of these documents beyond the circle of the family or individuals depicted. At the same time, studios began to recognize the literal value of their negatives, selling them for their embedded silver particles; the process of extracting the silver from the plates would of course completely erase the image. And numerous archives were destroyed by natural disasters such as floods and fire, and especially by the ravages of war.[8] AIF's project marks the first attempt to look for the dispersed evidence of this history of

Akram Zaatari and Walid Raad, *Mapping Sitting*, 2002, detail showing group portraits with nurse Zainab Shalabi, Egypt, mid-1920s–1937, black-and-white photographs, dimensions variable (artwork © Arab Image Foundation; photographs by (left, top to bottom) Badr, unknown, G. Rocca; (right, top to bottom): unknown, Al-Ghaouli, Photo Emile) (artwork © Akram Zaatari and Walid Raad; photographs © Arab Image Foundation)

These images represent plates from a collection purchased by Zaatari for the Arab Image Foundation in 2001 at a flea market in Cairo. From an extensive study of these images, Raad and Zaatari note that we can learn that their former owner, Zainab Shalabi, worked as a nurse in various Egyptian institutions during the 1920s and 1930s.

7. Rossellini's film is not only about the camera and the powers it might represent, but also about the filmmaker's investigation of imagination and fantasy after his determinedly "realist" investigations of poverty and destruction. As such, the film must also be seen within a trajectory of Italian postwar cultural production and in relation to the long-term project of coming to terms with the legacy of Italy's unresolved fascist past.

8. For instance, the collections of renowned Jerusalem studios, notably the archives of Krikorian Studio, which was opened in the late nineteenth century by Yohanes Krikorian, were destroyed in 1948. In Beirut, most photographic studios (notably those of Gulbenk and Vahe) were concentrated in the downtown area; they all burned down or were destroyed during the 1975–76 war, and the only remnants of their production were the prints collected from Beirut families.

Walid Raad and Akram Zaatari, *Mapping Sitting: Itinerant Photographs by Hashem el Madani*, Saida, 1950s, flashed bromide prints, installation approx. 6 ft. 6 in. x 12 ft. (200 x 360 cm) (artwork © Walid Raad and Akram Zaatari; photographs © Arab Image Foundation)

The images are by el Madani, a Saida-based photographer in whose archives Zaatari has been working for several years independently of this collaboration with Raad. The artists organized and arranged them in this fashion for the section of *Mapping Sitting* dedicated to itinerant photographs. Itinerant photography names the practice in which the photographer would roam a city or landscape in search of paying subjects. The photographer may have been engaged in the practice of his trade, but seen this way, these photos are made to perform something about conventions of masculinity and self-presentation just as the figures within perform the identity to which they aspire. As fragments of one photographer's work introduced into the body of two artists' own collaboration, they complicate the borders that separate author from audience, research from production, and creation from consumption. Their reorchestration within *Mapping Sitting* also brings the economic component of one photographic practice into visibility by emphasizing the photographer's original motivations for shooting the pictures presented.

photographic production and to commit to making it visible. The foundation functions as a traditional photographic archive, providing images for sale and reproduction in publications, and so on; it also stages or makes itself available to staging art projects.

In an analysis of Raad's affiliation with the Arab Image Foundation as well as his collaboration with Zaatari on the exhibition and book project *Mapping Sitting* (2002), Daniel Baird has suggested that while "Raad's work under the guise of the Atlas Group" elides "the reductive binary between fiction and nonfiction," his collaboration with the Arab Image Foundation is of an entirely "different order." By way of emphasizing the fictitious or unreal nature of the archives generated by the Atlas Group, Baird stresses that "the Arab Image Foundation's archives are *real* archives, documenting the history of the representation of Arabs by regional photographers."[9] By this, we understand Baird to mean that, since the foundation's collections are not only actual, but generally represent what they purport to represent, they provide a kind of factuality more concrete and more documentary than the documents that Raad (-as-Atlas Group) creates or appropriates and reassigns. This supposition is typical of attempts to read the AIF in relation to the Atlas Group, but it radically misconstrues not only Raad's most serious interventions into the structures of authority that construct and legitimate history, but also the conceptual framework that motivated *Mapping Sitting*.[10] For this installation-exhibition, Zaatari and Raad organized a large collection of images from the AIF's extensive archive and exhibited them in groupings determined by what they learned from their research were the four most prevalent genres of studio photography: identity, group, itinerant, and "surprise."[11] While these images were presented to indicate a representative totality, the installation also emphasized the ease with which the organization and selection of some images over others is always determined by the desire of those doing the organizing and collecting.

Comparing the archives of the Atlas Group to those of the Arab Image Foundation, which Baird does by implication, is therefore not so simple as to state that one archive is true and one is not. Better would be to suggest that they represent different experiential approaches to history, neither fictional nor real. Both, in fact, are concerned with how the past and the identities it is thought to conjure are not only represented, but also constructed, if not deliberately performed. Like Raad's imaginary Atlas Group, the Arab Image Foundation presents art projects that undermine the neutrality of photographic curating, archiving, and documentation. If the archive is a static entity, then these projects are better thought of as the archive's antitheses in that they constantly draw attention to their constructedness, as well as to their gaps. In *Mapping Sitting*, for example, what was nominally a display from the archives of the AIF was arranged and presented according to a schema that unmoored the archive's claims to self-sufficiency—a schema more properly associated with conceptual-art practices. The project's hybrid form insisted that the real fiction is that artmaking can avoid the document and that the document similarly avoids fiction.

In *Mapping Sitting*, the emphasis falls on the arbitrariness of certain narratives. Why and in what context might all of the ID photos have been taken, for instance? And how did the classification and ordering result not from internal or intended qualities, but from the interests of the artists? As with many of Raad's and Zaatari's investigations, the artist's role as author, fabricator, inventor, and interpreter is highlighted precisely by his (or in the case of *Mapping Sitting*, their) retreat. More than operating according to simplistic binary oppositions such as truth or falsehood, history or memory, public or private, *Mapping Sitting* functions simultaneously as *both* and *neither* in order to question how narratives themselves are organized, transmitted, and legitimated. As Roland Barthes long ago advised, the story these photographs tell only makes sense when contextualized (though we revise him to note that the contextualizing information may come in forms not limited to text or linguistic inscription).[12] How otherwise might we make sense—even incorrectly, as we're often instructed by the artists to do—of the fragmented architectural vistas that make up *Sweet Talk* (Walid Raad/Atlas Group, 2005), the scribbled notations that proliferate on the pages of Dr. Fakhouri's notebooks, or the glittering wall of mug shots in *Mapping Sitting*?

Borders in and as Representation

One inspiration Zaatari regularly cites is Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville's *Ici et ailleurs* (*Here and Elsewhere*, 1973), a film about partitions—visible or perceived—and their effects. The film, in fact, helped structure the entirety of our course and our thinking about what it meant to talk about the politics of images in, from, and about the Middle East from the privileged position of Evanston, Illinois, in 2006.[13] The story of the making of *Ici et ailleurs* begins in the early months of 1970, when Al Fatah, then the largest faction of the Palestinian

9. Daniel Baird, "Radical Politics: Walid Raad," *Border Crossings* 24, no. 2 (May 2005): 40.
10. The title *Mapping Sitting* refers to two related but distinct projects. The project to which Baird refers is the exhibition by Raad and Zaatari, titled *Mapping Sitting: On Portraiture and Photography; An Exhibition by Walid Raad and Akram Zaatari, Arab Image Foundation.* This exhibition has been touring Europe, the Middle East, and the United States since its initial opening at the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, in May 2002. The other component of *Mapping Sitting* is the book entitled *Mapping Sitting: On Portraiture and Photography*, which, in recognition of the importance that design and layout have in determining meaning, is credited to the collaborative efforts of the designers Karl Bassil and Zeina Maasri, alongside Zaatari in collaboration with Raad (Beirut: Fondation Arabe pour l'Image and Mind the Gap, 2002).
11. "Surprise" photography designates the urban practice wherein photographers from a studio would take unsolicited and unposed snapshots of pedestrians walking in urban centers in order to lure them to the studios.
12. On photography's "third meaning" and the relationship between image and caption see "The Photographic Message," "Rhetoric of the Image, and "The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills," in Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).
13. The authors thank Chad Elias for his significant contributions to the research and analysis of *Ici et ailleurs* and *All Is Well on the Border* as presented here. They also gratefully note his other contribution to their conversation and research.

Liberation Organization and based in Jordan, commissioned Godard and Miéville to make a film about the anticipated victory of the Palestinian militias over Israeli occupation. This film was to be titled *Jusqu'à la victoire* and was to depict Al Fatah's defeat of the Israeli enemy. History, however, had other plans. By the time Godard and Miéville returned to France in 1971, the working title had already been rendered ironic since, far from celebrating victory over Israel, the Palestinian militias had found themselves forcefully expelled from Jordan.[14] Unsure how to position the footage, Godard began crafting the montaged feature that would become *Ici et ailleurs* and which would eventually weave together images of Palestinian refugees conducting military drills and reciting revolutionary slogans with contemporaneous images of a French family eating dinner and watching television. Alternating between these two worlds, Godard and Miéville examined their own initial investment in the Palestinian revolution and their relationship to its failure to deliver as promised. Their image of armed struggle in the Third World was paralleled by counterinvestigations into the politics of media circulation, wherein they rigorously critiqued both French consumer society, built around the images of bourgeois pleasure and satisfaction, and the associated proliferation of mass-media images of terrorism. The "problem" might be located elsewhere, they seemed to say, but it is here (France, of course, but also "in the film") that we need to look for its roots. *Ici et ailleurs* rejects not only the false neutrality of the traditional documentary film, but also the mandate to represent the Palestinian cause from the point of view of those directly engaged in it (as originally commissioned). To have done so, Godard reasoned, would have presupposed what form a politics of the image would take, whereas in fact this was precisely the problem that was at issue. As a result, the film implicates the French Left, more interested in the struggles of the Third World than in the social problems immediately confronting it at home, as equally engaged in the appropriation and manipulation of images as Al Fatah.

The challenge faced by Godard and Miéville was to make representations such as the one Al Fatah had hoped they'd produce collide with the ideologies of consumption that orchestrate their appearance, while also insisting on their irreducible difference. As with the geographical entities—Jordan and Paris, the Middle East and Europe—referred to in the film's title, the discordant images are joined together by a montage that limns the frontier of two films while finally belonging to neither one nor the other. This interstice is neither arbitrary nor discontinuous. Rather, the gap establishes a new relation between images that could not otherwise have been determined in advance.

"We live in partitioned times," Stephen Wright asserts.[15] Unlike or even in opposition to more common, temporally defined descriptors for our period—postcolonial, neocolonial, global, etc.—the notion of the partition emphasizes our spatial separation and disjuncture around the lines drawn or imagined to keep populations, nations, and identities separate. By extension, it also suggests the separation and isolation not only of people and their placement, but of ideas, genders, classes, actions—in fact, what Wright, introducing Jean-Luc Moulène's *48 Palestinian Products,* suggests is "virtually every field and discipline of contemporary human activity." Separated and fragmented, our identities are made more available to control and supervision, our actions to diffusion and dismissal.

For the exhibition at the PhotoCairo 3 festival (2005), Moulène presented

Jean-Luc Moulène, *Soda*, from the series *Documents: Produits de Palestine*, 2003, Cibachrome print, 15¾ x 19⅝ in. (40 x 50 cm), edition of five (artwork © 2007 Jean-Luc Moulène, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris; image provided by Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris)

In this series, Moulène mimics, perhaps to the point of absurdity, the language and format of advertising photography to represent these "documents" of Palestinian production, drawing our attention not only to their existence, but so too to the ways in which the language of commerce and commodities participates in the perpetuation of the political reality of everyday life in Palestine and around the world.

14. By 1970, at least seven Palestinian guerrilla groups had been established in Jordan. Initially, King Hussein of Jordan had sought to accommodate the Palestinian militias, known as the Fedayeen, by providing training sites and financial assistance. But the groups obtained additional funds and arms from other Arab states as well as from Eastern Europe, developing a quasi-state-within-a-state and openly flouting Jordanian law. After a series of assassination attempts on King Hussein, and following the hijacking of three civilian aircraft in Amman in September of 1970, the Jordanian Army drove all Palestinian guerillas out of the country. The most important factions wound up in Lebanon—setting the stage, according to many historians, for the civil war. Once established in Lebanon, they were joined by a number of Lebanese parties and became the dominant military power in south Lebanon until the Israeli invasion of 1982. The historian Samir Halif writes that when Israel expelled the PLO from Beirut, it ironically created "a more ferocious and recalcitrant enemy. Hizbullah, like the PLO before it, is now embroiled in much the same interlocking web of regional and global rivalries." *Civil and Uncivil Violence in Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 14.

15. Stephen Wright, "Products of Partition," in *Jean-Luc Moulène: 48 Palestinian Products*, exhibition brochure produced in association with PhotoCairo 3, the Townhouse Gallery, and the Contemporary Image Collective, Cairo, 2005. Wright credits the Indian philosopher Ranabir Sammaddar with having introduced him to the phrase.

forty-eight images from his *Documents: Produits de Palestine*, in which he photographs commercial items produced in Palestine but not marked with an accurate indication of their origin, in accordance with international convention, which recognizes only states as producers—and does not recognize Palestine as a state. The products carry no barcode, or no *real* one, and no declarative "Made in Palestine." (Sometimes, however, these objects are stamped with the city of their production: "Made in Ramallah," for example.) Like the Palestinian people, the territorial origins of these products are invisible precisely because they have no purchase on an international market that is determined, even in these "global" times, by the circulation of nationally produced goods (made, for instance, in China or Peru); the market, in turn, is enabled and delimited by the treaties entered into by those sovereign states. Moulène's project crosses not only national partitions but also those between art and politics, photography and object, art and commerce by presenting the images of these goods repeatedly, in different cities and in different media (the Cairo exhibition was accompanied by the distribution of a free booklet that pictured the items as if products for sale in a "real" catalogue). In part, the efficacy of this work depends upon its implicit invocation of this same perverse logic of national identification *within* the art world and its markets. Consider, for instance, the way in which Palestine became a "problem" in the planning of the 2003 Venice Biennale. When the director, Francesco Bonami, first floated the idea of including a Palestinian pavilion among the national displays, criticism ranged from charges of anti-Semitism to the observation that because Palestine is not a nation—and not recognized as such by Rome—it categorically could not be included in this aspect of the Biennale. The compromise solution was a commission to the Palestinian-born architect Sandi Hilal and her Italian husband Alessandro Petti to make a set of seven-foot "passports" replicating identification documents and dispersed throughout the Biennale grounds—a piece called *Stateless Nation*.[16] Similarly, but perhaps more alarming, several students in our class voiced adamant opposition to any aspect of our conversation that referred to a place called "Palestine." Because, they insisted, Palestine was not a country, it was also not a place. In such nationally determined constructs of visibility, power—here evidenced by international laws usually written from outside contested territories in accordance with what Wright calls "imaginary ethnic imperatives"—perpetuates itself and the invisibility upon which it depends. In this regard, it is not uninteresting that none of these same students protested at the inclusion of a French artist in a class dedicated to "non-Western" art.

Moulène's is a compelling assessment of what the image can still do in an age of image saturation. As the July War reminded us, in times of war we are often treated not to a reduction of images, but instead to a surge. In his 2003 video *This Day*, Zaatari attempted to understand the flood of images he received by e-mail from friends and colleagues during the second Intifada. Most of these were of the violence and suffering endured by Palestinians at the Israelis' hands. (No doubt inboxes in other parts of the world were flooded with similarly motivated images of Israeli suffering.) In the video, Zaatari paired this genre with the study of photographs he'd shot during the Israeli invasion of 1982 and with those produced by a historian who was tracking the movements of Bedouins in the Syrian desert. In this tripartite focus, Zaatari connects his own childhood snapshots with those the historian had produced of women carrying water jugs

16. See Christopher Hawthorne, "The Venice Biennale's Palestine Problem," *New York Times*, June 1, 2003, 36.

in his native village (Al Qaryatayn) on the edge of the desert. Both speak cogently to experiences of war, including those of displacement, voluntary nomadism, and the involuntary movements of a refugee. No photographic genre, the video concludes, is free from the distortions of desire or the imprint of history. And none, especially not those of the Intifada, whose militant implications were meant to be perceived as political with a capital P, is actually more political than the others. Juxtaposed across the border that usually separates these different types of photography, each reveals its construction and efficacy. In these moments, film ceases to be part of "an uninterrupted chain of images over which we have lost all power" (*Ici et ailleurs*) and is transformed into a tool for investigating how, and in whose interests, images are assigned meaning in the world. The active role of the viewer in that investigation echoes the challenge that Godard and Miéville issue at the end of their film: "To learn to see in order to hear elsewhere. To learn to hear one's self speaking in order to see what others are doing. The others, the elsewhere of our 'here.'"

All Is Well on the Border (1997), a forty-three-minute video Zaatari produced in collaboration with the Beirut Theater (then artistically led by Elias Khouri), also explicitly addresses this challenge.[17] Taking as its subject the myth of popular resistance during the Arab-Israeli conflict, the film systematically interrogates assumptions regarding the relationship between the southern Lebanese border and the militias who formed to protect it. To this end, *All Is Well on the Border* broaches the different varieties of representation that have been integral to the codification of certain images of resistance and the exclusion of others. Three interviews with members of Lebanese Resistance who had been imprisoned in Israel during the nearly ten years of conflict are intercut with archival television footage of the 1982 Israeli invasion and passages read from letters written by a detainee in an Israeli prison to his family in Lebanon. Through this montage, Zaatari examines both the incomplete documentation of the mainly leftist and secular militias that had fought against Israeli occupation and the issue of representational strategy, demystifying the former while implicating the latter in its originary codification. On one level, then, *All Is Well on the Border* is best understood as an attempt to construct an alternative history of the Lebanese wars from the vantage point of those excluded from its dominant representations—the prisoners, the traitors, the exiled, the coerced, the opportunistic. Yet the video refuses to make victimhood a source of empathetic identification or to use the documentary as an argument for a "just cause." As with *Ici et ailleurs*, the montage across divergent forms and sites of representation works to locate our relation to the prisoners and to their cause in a more integrated understanding of the a priori conditions of the original exclusions that led to their military and political engagements, rather than in their alleged heroism or victimization. It also works to expand our sense of the different and divergent urgencies that fueled alliance in the region.

One of the interviews, for example, describes the sense of paranoia that set in around the border following Israel's 1982 invasion. In a war where shifting and multiple allegiances rendered the identity of the enemy unclear, everyone from the shopkeeper to the mayor of the village was suspected of betrayal and collaboration. This uncertainty was enhanced by the restrictions on movement imposed by the occupation. Being confined to one's own village or home meant

17. Subtly extending the exploration of media culture, the video was shot and edited using the resources of Prime Minister Hariri's television station, Future TV.

Akram Zaatari, *Studio Shehrazade*, 2006, composite digital image, light jet print, approx. 4 x 10 ft. (114 x 310 cm) (artwork © Akram Zaatari)

This image depicts three walls of the Studio Shehrazade in Saida, as photographed by Zaatari in his ongoing investigation into the function of photography in a particular city's social and urban histories. Zaatari's ongoing research into el Madani, his photographic archive, and the costumes and props stored in the studio for client use positions the history of practice in relationship to the typology of the studio, the photographers' tools and methods of work, aesthetic influences, and his social network which enabled him to secure work, and therefore income.

losing contact with the outside world and its entertainments. Boredom, the film makes clear, is also a dominant experience during times of war. Intercut with the representations of banality, however, harrowing testimonies of Lebanese actually interned in Israeli prisons also attest to the psychological abuse inflicted by their captors. Rather than abandon the representation there, by which we might be expected to sympathize with the detainees' plight, the montage builds to reveal a more fraught relationship to the politics of armed resistance. After Israel tried to institute obligatory enrollment in its proxy militia, the South Lebanon Army, many of the young men—both Muslim and Christian—in the area were left with the false choice of leaving their villages, being conscripted into the puppet army of an occupying nation, or joining one or other of the resistance groups then fighting Israel.[18] Their allegiance to the war for territorial liberation is thus shown to be determined less by ideological certainty than by the more enduring circumstances imposed by the borders built and fought for around them.

Fossils, or the Earth of Endless Secrets

The ongoing research into the photographic archive of Hashem el Madani that Zaatari presents as *Studio Practices: Hashem el Madani* needs to be understood in the light of these video investigations. In this project, which runs parallel to but is nonetheless distinct from the artist's involvement with *Mapping Sitting* and with the AIF, Zaatari archives, researches, incorporates, films, and exhibits photographs by the Saida-based commercial photographer Hashem el Madani (born 1928).[19]

Manipulated by the intervening hand of the artist, the photographer's archive is reorganized, rearranged, and re-sorted to communicate something of photography's economy, conventions, and even conflicting relationship with the social and the political. Aspects of an otherwise invisible Lebanese history are

18. During its occupation of south Lebanon (1978–2000), the Israeli military tightened its control over the primarily agricultural economy of the region by closing the border with the rest of the country, while opening the border with Israel (with restrictions). Lebanese residents were allowed to work in Israel and thereby earn a decent income only if a member of their family served in the pro-Israel South Lebanese Army. This left southerners no choice except to leave or to enlist. Further, the resistance groups that cropped up often involved the paradoxical affiliations of "my enemy's enemy" that still haunt Lebanese politics in 2007. While most of the rhetoric of the southern resistance militias was political rather than sectarian in nature, their membership often fractured along lines of sectarianism in accordance with the numerous groups that live in Lebanon, including Muslims, Druze, Maronites, and Greek Orthodox. On the other hand, the right-wing (and Maronite-dominated) Phalangists were also more willing to join the SLA in the fight against the PLO, and against secular and, later, Islamic resistance forces.

19. Hashem el Madani began his photographic practice in his parents' house in Haret el Keshek in Saida, in southern Lebanon, in 1948. In 1953 he opened a professional studio, naming it Studio Shehrazade after a movie theater in the same building.

Akram Zaatari, *Studio Practices: Hashem el Madani*, 2004, modern silver print, 11⅜ x 7½ in. (29 x 19 cm), based on photograph of Baqari's wife, Studio Shehrazade, Saida, Lebanon, 1957 (artwork © Akram Zaatari; photograph provided by Arab Image Foundation)

Zaatari developed this print from negatives in the el Madani archive. The picture tells only half the story. The negative, which dates to 1957, had been the source of an argument between a jealous husband, enraged to find his wife had been photographed by el Madani without his permission, and el Madani, who had refused to hand over the negatives because to have done so would have meant ruining a roll of film with pictures of other subjects. For the photographer, these other pictures represented not only the integrity of his archive, but, even more significantly, the possibility of future earnings if the sitters needed additional prints. After much heated discussion, it was agreed that el Madani would scratch the negatives with a pin to destroy the likeness and thereby insure they would never be reproduced. Years later, after the woman's grief led her to self-immolate, the husband returned to the studio to see if by chance el Madani had kept any other negatives intact.

rematerialized through a cast of characters who reveal borders—national, perhaps, but more often cultural—precisely through their ambitions to cross them as tourists, idealists, resistance fighters, workers, and as members of a whole genre of aspirants and performers. The artist's intervention renders the past and the stories it might have preferred to keep repressed active, alive, and present. A photographic portrait of a paying sitter in 1957, for instance, represents that woman as she chose to be pictured, while its negative represents a source of income for the photographer. But a 2004 reprint tells of the woman's misery, her husband's jealousy, and, more broadly, suggests social mores regarding women's standing in a modernizing Lebanon.

The photographs organized, assembled, and edited by Zaatari perform new histories. The subjects within them had originally performed in accordance with the accepted codes and fantasies of the time. Today, however, we look at them from a different cultural vantage point, hoping to see in a family portrait from Saida in the early 1980s indications of the multiple and far-reaching impact of Israeli invasion, or in an identity portrait from the 1970s signs of nascent military resistance. The question that Zaatari's appropriation begins to raise is at what point do we discover that what we have been looking at as history or as a document of a repressed truth is also a performance of resistance or conservatism? What happens to our capacities of reading and interpreting those photographic collections after we look at them as performative images? Not only is the representation of history questioned through the reception and interpretation of the documents that both witnessed and participated in it—issues of concern in *All Is Well on the Border* and *In This House*—but so too are questions of meaning and intention, authorship and institutionality, as it is Zaatari who presents the reorchestrated archive as his own artistic intervention.

In this sense, Zaatari claims, his work on el Madani's photographic oeuvre

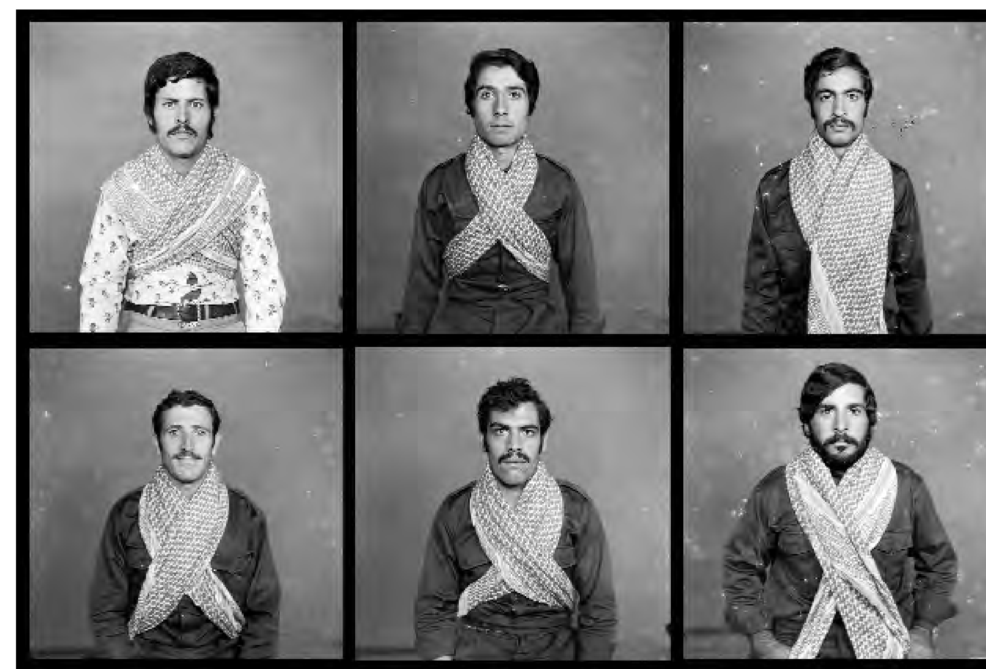
Akram Zaatari, *Studio Practices: Hashem el Madani*, 2004, modern silver print, 7½ x 11⅜ in. (19 x 29 cm), based on photograph of Najm (left) and Asmar (right), Studio Shehrazade, Saida, Lebanon, 1950s (artwork © Akram Zaatari; photograph provided by Arab Image Foundation)

In this image, which is presented alongside other instances of same-sex affection or role-playing, the sitters for the portrait are able to experiment with identity and gender roles because of the legitimizing lens of the camera, which allows for a sense of playacting and performance. The borders represented here might be understood as both reality and fantasy, but also as the traditional division of gendered attributes.

relates less to the art-historical tradition of the readymade or to the filmic incorporation of found footage, and more to the paleontological fossil. By definition, fossils are entities hidden inside second bodies until they are unearthed. They resist belonging to the present until a conscious act seeks to use them for a particular purpose, to reassign them a new function. That very act of reassignment, however, depends in part on the original object's dormancy. Without the initial collecting mandate of the Arab Image Foundation or Zaatari's subsequent interventions, the five hundred thousand images in el Madani's collection would not only never have been seen as a collective, they would not have been made available as documents attesting to the history of everyday life—fashion, taste, gender roles, class aspirations, relationships to the importation of Western-style modernity, and more—in south Lebanon. Instead, they would have been maintained as private documents, known only to the photographer and those he photographed. Or they would simply have been destroyed. As with the paleontologist who literally unearths a fossil by smashing a stone, the artist has enriched our understanding of the fabric of everyday life in the region by unearthing, recoding, and circulating these images to a broad public. At the same time, the artist can do so only because the tradition that originally framed these images has, as a consequence of time, itself disappeared.

As fossils these artifacts maintain an ambivalent autonomy. As much as they are made to reveal narratives and desires in the present, they still tell of their original function, thereby speaking simultaneously in two different tenses. Zaatari has developed this concept of the fossil in particular relation to Egyptian popular cinema and his own video practice.[20] For Zaatari, the model of the fossil's function is most clear in Shadi Abdel Salam's popular film *El Mumia* (1976), a story about the commercialization and trading of ancient Egyptian antiquities in Upper Egypt. In the film, the director cast an aging Egyptian film icon, Nadia

20. See Akram Zaatari, "The Singular of Seeing [Al Marra Min Al Nazar]," *Third Text* 19, no. 1 (January 2005): 45–52.



Akram Zaatari, *Studio Practices: Hashem el Madani*, 2004, modern silver print, 7½ x 11⅜ in. (19 x 29 cm), based on photographs of pro-Palestinian activists (Syrians), Studio Shehrazade, Saida, Lebanon, 1970 (artwork © Hashem el Madani; photographs provided by Arab Image Foundation)

These commissioned portraits document the arrival of Palestinian resistants in southern Lebanon in the years following the Palestinian defeat in Jordan. In re-presenting these photographic documents, Zaatari's Studio Project recontextualizes not only their relation to Lebanese history, but also their subjects' relationship to the identity they want to perform in front of the camera. El Madani has noted (in interviews with Zaatari) that not all the men photographed in this uniform or with guns were militants. Many were friends of the militants or were simply interested in playing before the camera.

Lotfi, to play a bit role as a high-class prostitute. Within the narrative exegesis, Lotfi's presence—easily and immediately recognizable to any Egyptian viewer—comes to subtly suggest an uneasy settlement between Egypt's ancient past and its current popular culture. Her silence, in combination with her iconicity, seems to call for a temporary muting of the present in order to hear the narratives of past civilizations—precisely those fossils being traded and destroyed within the film's narrative construction. Without Lotfi's presence inserted, fossil-like, as an integral entity within an external structure, Abdel Salam would not have been able to make this critique as concisely.

In Zaatari's hands, the photographs taken by el Madani function in a similar fashion. Through them the artist makes explicit photography's relation to Lebanon's history as well as history's relation to Lebanese studio photography, a tradition and cultural practice slowly disappearing from our present. Appropriation reactivates the fossil, and with it the past, the present, and perhaps the future.

Works, Not Just of Art

Despite a strong Beaux-Arts tradition inherited from the period of French Mandate (1920–43), post–civil war Lebanon enjoyed little institutional support for contemporary art practices, particularly any that might cast their ambition toward the multimedia inquiries shaping the art world more globally.[21] In a 2006 interview for *Bidoun*, an English-language, New York–based magazine of "Arts and Culture from the Middle East," Zaatari has explained that

> in the absence of dedicated art institutions, an artist often finds him/herself focused on the development of structures without being an arts administrator or a curator, interested in histories without being a historian, collecting

21. The nonprofit arts organization Ashkal Alwan (mid-1990s to date) and the Ayloul Festival (1997–2001), both of which would come to sponsor video and film works alongside more traditionally conceived "public" art works, were originally developed by artists and cultural practitioners alike as ways to circumvent these institutional shortfalls.
22. Akram Zaatari, "Terms Falling: Migrating among Artist, Curator, and Entrepreneur," *Bidoun* 6 (Winter 2006): 16.

Ali Cherri, Untitled, 2006, still from video, sound, 2 min. (artwork © Ali Cherri)

Cherri recorded an Israeli government's guerilla broadcast over a Lebanese radio channel with his mobile phone. The address explained to the civilian population under bombardment that Israel is not its enemy, but that Nasrallah is. All the while, Cherri's camera records a view of the ships busy taking foreigners out of the country in July 2006.

information without being a journalist. It is indeed distracting to be an artist in such conditions, but it is also an unequivocal privilege to be able to sustain so many positions simultaneously. Such a blurring of positions and roles is neither superior nor inferior to an increasingly clear-cut assignment of roles.[22]

To some degree, then, the emphasis on fact versus fiction with which we began might itself be understood as less the result of the traumatic impact war has had on the possibilities of representation and more the result of the same economic motivations that once fueled the studio productions (now fossils) of historic photographers like el Madani. To be sure, the hybrid and docu-fictional works that have been produced in Beirut since the 1990s have evolved in specific relationship to the institutional support available. Catherine David, something of an international spokeswoman for Beiruti art since her 2002 exhibition *Tamass: Beirut*, has acknowledged these blurred modes of production in her choice of the term "aesthetic practitioners" to describe the constellation of artists she included in that exhibition, even as she cautioned the art world not to construe these artists as representative of a singular school.[23] While geopolitical realities do not, in and of themselves, construct identities, we must nevertheless acknowledge the degree to which, to borrow a phrase from Zaatari's colleague Tirdad Zolghadr, "ethnic marketing" will always factor into the vagaries of the art world's interest.[24] In late summer of 2006, the New York– and Ramallah-based Palestinian artist Emily Jacir (herself quite familiar with such marketing) worried publicly in a widely circulated blog post that a secondary consequence of Israel's July 2006 invasion would be the art world's descent upon Lebanese artists as if on a box of "bonbons."[25] Indeed, there has been a surge in interest in art from the region, as evidenced in part by this very issue of *Art Journal*. Ironic, at the very least, that it takes one state's illegal destruction of another's infrastructure to bring the cultural life of that nation not just to international visibility, but to the sustained attention and complex contextualizing that have always and precisely set the terms of its marginalization. Zaatari explains the problem:

> When a structural reality that is particular to a city (such as Beirut) produces "nomadic" art forums (independent from institutions), the resultant art is often viewed through an unfortunate geographic lens. Such viewing lends itself to the pigeonholing practices of the international art market and, ultimately, limits the realm of interpretation of the work. How better for an artist to resist than to migrate between the rigid poles of the art world by blurring production, curating, and education?[26]

For the constellation of artists associated with contemporary Beiruti production—and perhaps for those working in places with similar institutional aporias—it is not without political significance to identify oneself as an art practitioner who works in a variety of media—videos, texts, photographs—and through a variety of analogic strategies—assemblage, appropriation, documentation, creation. In this model, the artist must walk against the mainstream to challenge and excavate dominant practices and statements. So, for instance, in Lebanon last July, when Beirut was under heavy air assault and oppositional websites and blogs sprang up like mushrooms in a boggy field, rather than just affirming that Israel was once again playing the role of oppressive enemy, artists were called upon to produce work that might more insistently illuminate the circumstances. To have done anything less would have been to reduce cultural production to the function of reproduction. Rather than repeating the homilies of victimhood, artists found more incisive routes to question the histories and alignments that made the current war possible, for some, and necessary for others. Some artists asked (as they had for a long time) what was being fought over. How were the roles of national or regional identity, scripted decades in advance of the most recent invasions, important to this fight? How might one construct a sense of counteridentity in a time of war? From our classroom in Evanston we wondered which, for instance, communicated more about the devastation of life during war or its impact on actual people: Beirut DC's short video *Letter from Beirut to Those Who Love Us* or Ali Cherri's even shorter *Message to the Lebanese People*, both of which circulated on the internet shortly after Israel's assault on Lebanon last summer.

In an interview with Amir Muhammad about the AIF and the Hashem el Madani studio project, Zaatari was asked if "the need for your foundation [the AIF] is especially urgent (to use a CNN phrase) 'in the light of recent events'?"[27] Zaatari's reply, that the "foundation does not depend on actuality" but is useful for "whoever needs it," suggests one of the ways in which politics in and around art might be understood. Instead of the "mobilization" of images to inspire us to fear or pity or even to anger or indignation, art might present us with contradictions that describe, when they don't actually traverse, the boundaries that are erected to ensure the complacent consumption of history, as it has been written and, all too frequently, as it has been pictured.

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Akram Zaatari is an artist who lives in Beirut. He is cofounder of the Arab Image Foundation. He is one of five artists representing Lebanon at the 52nd Venice Biennale this summer.

23. In her essay, "Learning from Beirut: Contemporary Aesthetic Practices in Lebanon; Stakes and Conditions for Experimental, Cultural, and Aesthetic Practices in Lebanon and Elsewhere," first delivered at *Homeworks* 2002, Catherine David has suggested that the American and European art worlds have something to learn from Beirut, as opposed to the other way around. See *Home Works: A Forum on Cultural Practices in the Region: Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria*, ed. Christine Tohme and Mona Abu Rayyan (Beirut: Ashkal Alwan, 2002), 32–39
24. Tirdad Zolghadr, quoted in François Bonenfant, "Entretien avec Akram Zaatari," *Bref: le magazine du court métrage* 73 (June 2006): 19.
25. This issue was raised and further explored on a blog posting by the artist Naeem Mohaiemen, previously available online at http://shobakorg.blogspot.com/2006/08/lebanese-artists-as-chocolate.html.
26. Zaatari, "Terms Falling," 17.
27. Amir Muhammad, "Guardian Angel," *Options* (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia), January 2004, 10–11.