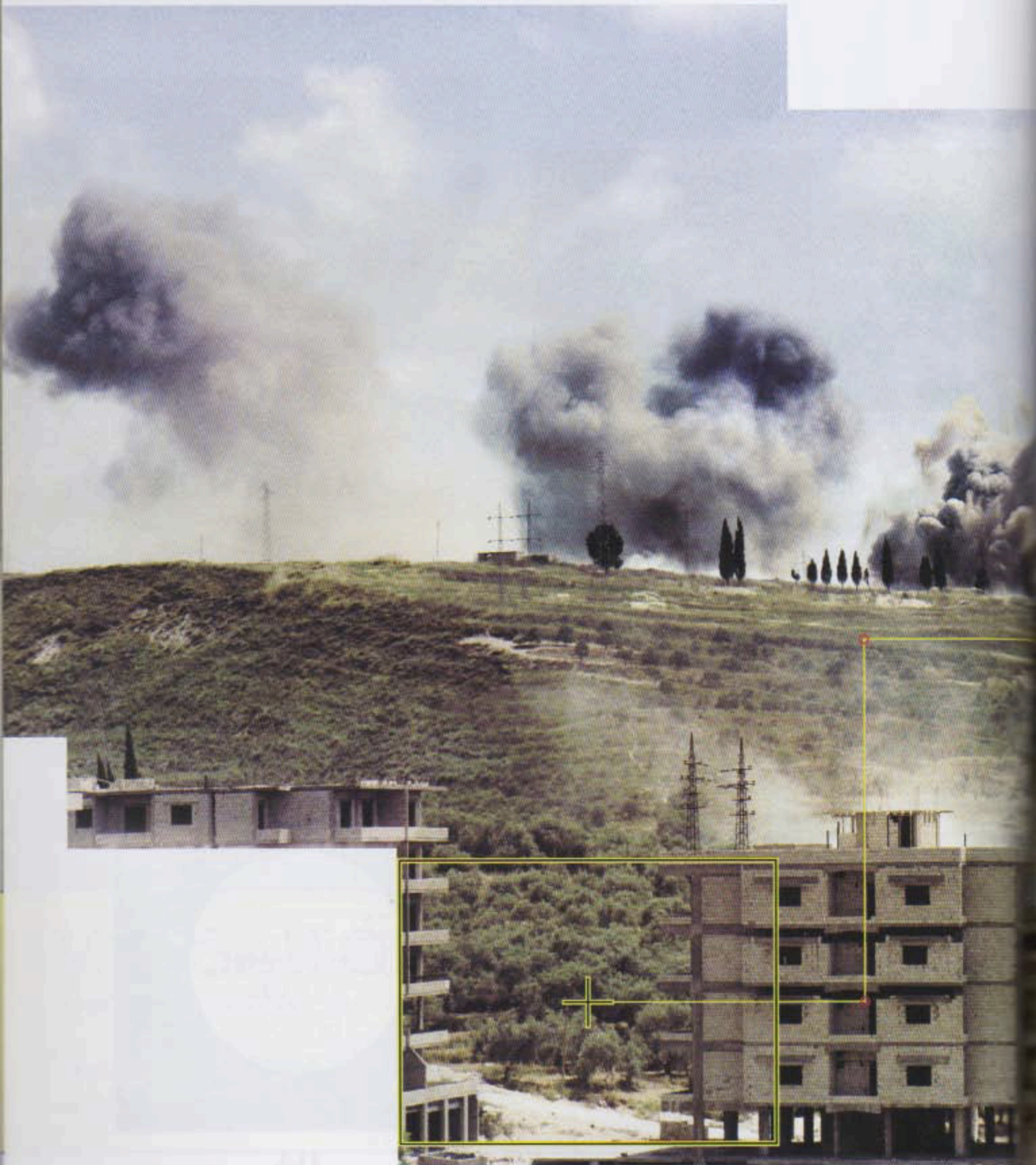


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A Sentimental Dedication



A k r a m Z a a t a r i

By HG Masters

The explosions sent scorched earth high into the air above a row of cypress trees, followed by noxious, billowing clouds. What did you say you were doing that day?

Where were you on June 6, 1982? Akram Zaatari remembers exactly; he has pictures. He was standing on the balcony of his family's apartment building in Saida, Lebanon, when Israeli warplanes shrieked overhead and began dropping bombs on the towns of Southern Lebanon. Zaatari was armed too—with his camera. Which the 16-year-old boy aimed at the hills. *Click, click, click.* As fast as the bombs were falling, he snapped the shutter. Smoke rose up from a distant hillside, then from the slope right in front of him. The explosions sent scorched earth high into the air above a row of cypress trees, followed by noxious, billowing clouds. *What did you say you were doing that day?*

Zaatari was just learning how to take photographs then. Born in 1966 in Saida, an ancient port city on the eastern Mediterranean coast 40 kilometers south of Beirut, Zaatari's teenage years coincided with the early 1980s, generally considered the worst period of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90). In June 1982, in the third phase of the conflict, Israel invaded Southern Lebanon under the pretext of rooting out Palestinian militant groups. Twenty-two years later, we can experience Zaatari's documentation of these moments: his pictures appear stitched together into a brief video, *Saida June 6th, 1982 (Air Raid)* (2002), and later into a large panoramic photographic image, *Saida June 6, 1982* (2006–09). In the former, the camera zooms in and out, panning around the composite image, animating the scene by showing the succession of explosions, from the distant hillsides, coming nearer and nearer, augmented by the sounds of fighter jets overhead, as well as by gunfire. Forever looping, the imagery is like an apocryphal origin myth replayed as a traumatic memory of an artist's premature exposure to violence and his precocious curiosity.

Although Zaatari has written that his interest in photography "coincided with, or was even prompted by, the constant Israeli wars on Lebanon," neither representing conflict nor depicting trauma is the central motivation for his work. Over his two-decade career as artist, filmmaker, curator and researcher, he has investigated the many emotional valences and historical implications that surround photographic and filmic imagery—its instantaneous historicization and the wealth, or perhaps dearth, of information it produces. His voyages have been ones of the intellect, yet equally of the heart: for love and desire—lost amid, or surviving despite, warfare—is Zaatari's greater theme.

I. Instant Exposure

"Hello sexy. . . hello u. / **Who is it?** / You know who it is. / **It's been more than 10 years.** / Really? I don't count." On screen, in Zaatari's video *Tomorrow Everything Will Be Alright* (2010), one side of the conversation appears, without warning, in black ink, while responses are rapidly hammered out in red ink, all in a manner recalling an online chat or IM conversation, except it's happening on an old typewriter (in that regard, the text also resembles a film script). A former lover has suddenly reappeared (as people sometimes do in the online world) after spurning his beloved a decade ago: "Do you miss me? **Yes.** [. . .] / Can I call you? / **No.** / Are you alone? / **No answer.** [. . .] **You left all of a sudden, and gave me your back.** [. . .] **Why did you leave this way?** [. . .] **and you stepped on my life with the feet that I loved?**" They agree to meet. "Shall we meet where we first met? / **at sunset?** / At sunset. *Le rayon vert.*" The anonymous interlocutor is referring to Éric Rohmer's film *Le Rayon Vert* (1986), which itself refers to a belief, popularized by an 1882 Jules Verne novel of the same name, that a flash of green light as the sun sets below the horizon into the sea indicates true love has been found and reveals the thoughts of one person to another. Near the conclusion of the 12-minute film, Zaatari cuts to a car driving through Beirut's Hamra neighborhood toward the west-facing corniche at dusk, while an audio excerpt from the Rohmer film begins to play. Finally, there's a picture of the setting sun over the



EVERYTHING WILL BE ALRIGHT, 2010, composite
medium: print, 32 x 190 cm.

EVERYTHING WILL BE ALRIGHT, 2010,
medium: video with color and sound, video: 12 min.

© 2010 the artist and Steir-Semler Gallery.

sea, with the date stamp, "31 Dec 1999." As the sun disappears, for an instant the camera is saturated with light, and the screen goes white, as if there's been a flash, suggesting both the connection the two lovers once shared, and the time they spent together a decade ago. The short film, with its autobiographical suggestions, is a tribute to love, to memory and to the influence that another artist—here, the filmmaker Rohmer—had on shaping an individual's perceptions of the world.

Zaatari always wanted to be a filmmaker—but his surroundings didn't allow that. There was no film program in Lebanon in the mid-1980s when he finished high school, and, with his hometown under Israeli occupation, he studied architecture at the American University of Beirut, graduating in 1989. In 1992, Zaatari headed to the United States, where he received a Master's degree in Media Studies at the New School, a university in New York. Curiously, he never studied photography either, though he was taking pictures throughout this time.

All the while, his passion for film remained. In a 2013 post for the blog *This Long Century*, Zaatari revealed how, for his 15th birthday, he asked for a film encyclopedia. What he received was "a beautiful two-volume French edition at the only bookstore that carried French and English books in Saïda, where we lived. After seeing me a few times looking at it, the owner told my father: you can have it at cost price. Nobody was going to buy it in a provincial city at war." The following year he asked for, and received, a typewriter. "And from there on, I spend most of my free time updating the film encyclopedia by adding inserts with new film titles and names that

I thought were important to include." That very same typewriter was used many years later both in *Tomorrow Everything Will Be Alright* and in his photographic works, starting a cycle of repeated excavation of past objects and images in his practice. The resulting depths would uncover, in his title for what he calls an ongoing series of photographs of his archives and practice, an "Earth of Endless Secrets" (2009-).

II. A Collector of Testimonies

Updating a partially written, or unwritten, history is what Zaatari has done through both his art practice and his research—the two are nearly inseparable in the way they feed off one another. In 1996, having returned to Beirut from New York the previous year, Zaatari embarked on a research project that led directly to the creation of the Arab Image Foundation (AIF), which he established with fellow artists interested in the photographic image: Fouad Elkoury, Samer Mohdad and Walid Raad. The building of its collection sent him on trips across the Arab world, from Morocco to Syria, through Egypt and Lebanon, hunting for photographers' archives to acquire and preserve.

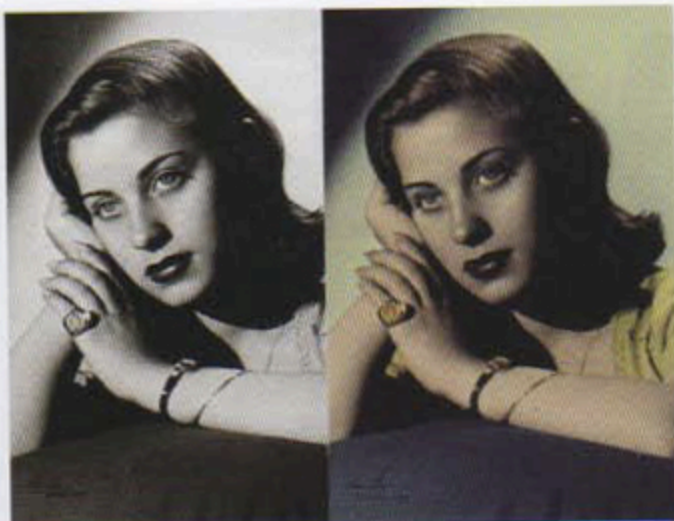
In a 2011 interview for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Zaatari describes the formation of AIF:

In the spring of 1997 we got a travel grant that allowed us to form the core of what is today the collection of the Arab Image Foundation . . . We thought it was so simple to go to people and ask them to give us their photographs with the intention of preserving those photographs for them and for the next generation. So many people donated their family albums and family pictures to us. The scope of the collection goes from Lebanon to Morocco.

Zaatari's involvement with AIF would lead him to numerous artistic and curatorial projects, as well as dovetailing with his own interests as a video artist in re-creating stories of the past. His first curatorial project for AIF, for example, in 1999, was "Portraits of Cairo: Alban, Armand and Van Leo," which looked at the works of three Armenian studio photographers whose portraits depict midcentury Egyptian society: Levon Boyadjian (Van Leo), Armenak Arzrouni (Armand) and Aram Arnavoudian (Alban).

One of the series not included in this initial AIF project—but that Zaatari learned about from his visits to Cairo—was Van Leo's photographs, from 1959, of a woman called "Miss Nadia Abdel Wahed." Her story would give rise to Zaatari's own 31-minute video documentary, *Her + Him, Van Leo* (2001/11), which tells the story of Van Leo's encounter with a woman who walked into his photography studio and asked to be captured as she undressed and, finally, when naked. She turned out to be Zaatari's grandmother. Zaatari had first gone to Cairo to meet Van Leo in April 1998, and the video records their early conversations in the latter's studio, as Van Leo talks about his meticulous techniques, as well as his own eccentric self-portraits, posing shirtless or in costumes such as a sailor's outfit, before Zaatari asks about the women whose pictures he took. Years later, in 2011, for the exhibition "The Uneasy Subject" at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León, Zaatari would finally display the 12 prints from that infamous photoshoot in Cairo 60 years earlier, when "Miss Nadia Abdel Wahed" walked into Van Leo's studio and asked to be photographed in the nude.

Zaatari's thinking about AIF's project underwent an evident conceptual shift in the touring exhibition "Mapping Sitting: On Portraiture and Photography," which he launched in 2002 with Walid Raad at the Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels. The exhibition looked specifically at the nonartistic genres of studio photography: passport photography, war photography and the *photo surprise* (a commercial practice in which a photographer would snap candid shots of



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HER + HIM, VAN LEO, 2001/11, still from HD video with color and sound, video: 31 min.

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TIME CAPSULE, 2012, reinforced concrete foundation and 16 buried objects, concrete, steel, wood and paint, 268 x 83 x 83 cm. Installed for Documenta 13 at Karlruhe Park, Kassel, 2012.

passersby and then entreat the subjects to buy prints at his studio). Their display tactics were nontraditional: in a section entitled "id," for example, Zaatari and Raad displayed more than 4,500 reprinted passport photos from Studio Anouchian in Tripoli, Lebanon, in a massive grid on the wall. And, for their study of the *photo surprise*, they digitally compiled pictures taken by Turkish-born photographer Agop Kuyumjian around Tripoli's central Tell Square into a video panorama, showing how it looked in the 1950s.

There's a much longer story about all the people—artists, curators, collectors, gallerists and even institutions—who have been influenced by the activities and philosophy of the Arab Image Foundation, but, as it has grown to encompass more than 300,000 images, Zaatari himself has moved away from its original mission:

I'm not as confident taking people's pictures and telling them they will be safer in an archive as I used to be in 1997 or 1998. And not only for safety issues, because the building where we are in Beirut could be bombed at any moment. But I also think that images have the right to die with the owners or with the families that loved them and cared for them.

But also today the technology has changed. Today I can go to people and scan their pictures and leave the originals with them. A conservator would not do it, because the conservator wants to preserve the original. And today this remains the premise of the Arab Image Foundation, which I don't relate to as much as I did in the past.

I know as an artist, I can work, produce, communicate the exact same issues without the original. Without creating this center of gravity. If you look at the Foundation, it's almost a reflection of my thinking on images, but this is also to tell you that we change as humans, as artists.

The contrast between AIF's ideals and Zaatari's recent approach was evident during a visit to its offices in April 2010. At the time, AIF was housed on the tenth floor of the corporate-looking Starco

Center in central Beirut (it has since moved). Its space was packed with shelving units and filing cabinets, but there was not much for a visitor to see, other than its publications. The photographs were in storage and researchers had to schedule appointments to look at images. While there, however, I picked up a map of Zaatari's ongoing project "Hashem el-Madani: Itinerary." Launched in 2007, it showed where in the old city of Saida you could see photographs by the famous local photographer, who ran a place called the Studio Shehrazade. Zaatari had installed these images in local shops. It seemed like a good reason to visit Saida.

With a big foldout map in hand, you entered stores and looked for, or were directed to, black-and-white framed pictures on the walls, taken between the 1950s and 1970s. The images show the stores or their owners as they were. Some were prominently displayed at the front of the store; others were in shops that were closed that particular day; a few owners didn't seem so welcoming, at least to such an obvious foreigner. It was difficult, and awkward, to be a non-Arabic speaker hunting for this art project, and it was clearly conceived as much for the local audience and the shopkeepers themselves. These artifacts of history had been extracted from the photographer's archive and placed back into circulation, almost as if arresting time, or puncturing the city's decline with memories of a more prosperous and less factionalized era.

Zaatari explained his intentions in such projects as follows: "If emotions can be preserved with pictures, then maybe returning a picture to the album from which it was taken, to the bedroom where it was found, to the configuration it once belonged to, would constitute an act of preservation in its most radical form."

He made a more polemical gesture about practices surrounding the preservation of photographs—a protest, in fact, against the organization he had helped to establish—at Documenta 13 in June 2012. *Time Capsule* (2012) was inspired by the story of how the National Museum in Beirut, in 1975, when the civil war began, sealed its archaeological treasures within huge concrete blocks inside the museum to protect them, where they remained sealed until 1991.





Zaatari stated at the time that his piece was a statement “against excessive speculation on photographic archives, and extends archive-related practices into making objects, film, architecture and painting.” He sealed 16 “photographic objects”—simple, abstract paintings made of juxtaposed monochromatic rectangles, supposedly referring to the landscape—into wooden blocks and placed them at the base of a rebar column resembling those often seen at construction sites. The “archive” was covered with concrete in a meter-deep hole on the far side of the Karlsaue park in Kassel, and supposedly should never be excavated. In its extreme form of preservation, *Time Capsule* is an antiarchive, an antimonument, full of images so well protected that they are inaccessible to the public—a critique, it seems, of AIF’s role as the protector and provider of imagery to the public.

III. What’s Love Got to Do with It?

Roland Barthes, in *Camera Lucida* (1980), writes about the sentimental attachment of images, and the relationship between photographs and real emotions: “What is it that will be done away with, along with this photograph which yellows, fades and will someday be thrown out, if not by me—too superstitious for that—at least when I die? Not only ‘life’ (this was alive, this posed live in front of the lens), but also sometimes—how to put it?—love.”

Zaatari says, in a 2011 interview with Maïke Mia Höhne of the Berlinale film festival, where *Tomorrow Everything Will Be Alright* was screened: “I believe much of our behavior, our desires, is conditioned by films and literature. We live alone even if we make families and friends, and films help us overcome our loneliness. I grew up in very difficult moments in Southern Lebanon, and later in my teens I moved to Beirut, and films and literature were my only way to imagine life elsewhere, to imagine love elsewhere, and to get to accept your difference.”

In 1995, upon his return to Lebanon, he worked for the Future Television network, and, inspired by Jean-Luc Godard’s experimental documentary *Here and Elsewhere* (1976), Zaatari began to make his own video works—short pieces that often montaged television news footage with his own recorded imagery. In *Apprends-Moi (Teach Me)* (1996), he overlaid soundtrack excerpts and dialogue from Egyptian films on top of footage of a young man posing in the manner of figures from early Christian frescoes, interspersed with news footage of street battles, helicopter crashes and political murals—as if the diverse realms of imagery are all merging in the man’s mind.

Over time, his approach grew more cinematic, more narrative. *Red Chewing Gum* (2000), for instance, is a “video letter” to someone the narrator (voiced by artist Walid Sadek) had met 15 years earlier. “I still keep the tapes you shot in Hamra 15 years ago,” the voice explains, showing the face of a young man (the artist Ziad Antar). In reenacting moments from this distant evening, the narrator, as Zaatari’s surrogate, sings, “Missing you even when you are next to me / Even when you are away / Your love survives inside of me / Always inside of me.” The narrator and his lover had encountered a boy in an alley in the Hamra neighborhood of west Beirut, who, seemingly frightened by the conflict, instead of selling gum is chewing it all, piece by piece, until “there’s no sugar left.” He’s collected a pile of masticated gum, but there remains one red piece, which the friend picks up and dares the narrator to chew. The friend chews it instead. “I haven’t seen you since that day.”

One of the more recent of his videos involving the depiction of men, often incorporating homoerotic overtones, is *Dance to the End of Love* (2011), which Zaatari pieced together entirely from YouTube clips made by Arab youths—flexing their muscles, break-dancing for the camera, doing tricks on cars and motorcycles. These are images of very personal, often isolated, self-expression, made and shared at the beginning of the so-called Arab Spring, when there was a new optimism about the future.

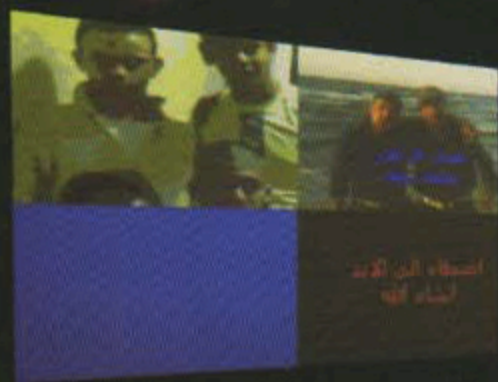


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THE MAKING OF TIME CAPSULE,
KARLSAUE PARK, KASSEL, 2012, still
from video with sound, video: 6 min.

(This page, bottom)
APPRENDS-MOI (TEACH ME),
1996, still from video, 6 min 5 sec.

(Opposite page, top)
DANCE TO THE END OF LOVE, 2011,
four-channel video projection with color and
sound, video: 22 min, installed for “Archive State”
at Museum of Contemporary Photography,
Columbia College, Chicago, 2012.

(Opposite page, bottom)
THE END OF TIME, 2012, still from 16mm
black-and-white silent film, 13 min 30 sec.



In the black-and-white 16mm film *The End of Time* (2012), which debuted at Documenta 13, two young men appear against an all-white backdrop. They face each other, embrace, kiss and undress in stages, eyeing one another and exchanging gifts, before their initial attraction fades and they go their own ways. Striking in its simplicity, the film embodies a timelessness—it appears to be an allegorical restaging of some past encounter or relationship, yet is entirely divorced from any particular place or evident narrative. Lacking in specifics, it contains almost nothing that an ordinary photograph does. It is pure(ly) about love. As Zaatari told Tate Modern curator Achim Borchardt-Hume in a 2013 conversation at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London: "I'm not into the golden formula of beauty. I think beauty is related to a certain understanding of a situation. I would connect it with desire, because it is ephemeral. The more you keep things ambiguous, the more you protect the beauty in them."

IV. Forbidden Contact

If homosexuality remains a societal taboo in much of Lebanon, nothing could be more forbidden for a child in Southern Lebanon than amicable contact with a Jewish-Israeli. As Zaatari said of his upbringing: "I was born 18 years after the tragic loss of Palestine. I was born with what Arabs popularly designate as the scar of Palestine. I grew up in Saïda with so many negative stories about Israelis. And I never met an Israeli until the age of 16."

There are two stories of that moment on June 6, 1982, when the teenage Zaatari stood on the balcony with his camera. The first



involves the filmmaker and artist Avi Mograbi, renowned in his own career for documenting some of the most brutal scenes of the Israeli occupation of Palestine, who, like nearly all young Israelis, served in the military as a teenager. Mograbi recalls the particular moment in 1982: "We were driving down a street in Tzidon [Hebrew for Sidon or Saida] . . . I pulled my head out of the tank's hatch and saw a teenager with a camera on one of the balconies . . . and he was aiming his camera at me. I remember I shouted in Hebrew, 'Al Te-tzalem! Ma yesh lekha le'tzalem?' — 'Don't shoot! What have you got to shoot at?'"

Zaatari remembers it as well: "At the age of 16, I recall standing by the entrance of the building where we lived waiting in total silence to watch the first Israeli tanks drive up the street. These were the first Israelis I saw in my life—young victorious soldiers riding their noisy tanks."

Mograbi recalls: "He ran into the house, and I went back down into the tank. I raised the periscope . . . only to discover that he was back on the balcony with his camera. 'Maniac,' I said to myself. 'Maniac.' You must be thinking that I enjoy this? You think I am less fucked than you? The guy on the balcony continued taking pictures. He didn't notice that I had centered him in the machine gun's scope. I was angry at him. I was angry at his parents for letting him hang around outside at such a moment, and get into trouble. I thought about what they told us about how the Arabs would use every means possible to fight us and that they had no red lines and that the most innocent-looking person could be the most dangerous one. He was in the scope of my machine gun and that moment lasted and lasted, and I asked myself if I was going to do it. But suddenly he jumped back inside and disappeared."

Zaatari concludes: "I have always avoided eye contact with soldiers, but one day, accidental eye contact almost got me in serious trouble, and made me hate Israelis even more."

These two recollections are included in Zaatari's book *A Conversation with an Imagined Israeli Filmmaker Named Avi Mograbi* (2012), which resulted from his residency in 2010 at Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers in France, where the two artists first encountered one another—two people, divided by history, brought together by photography.

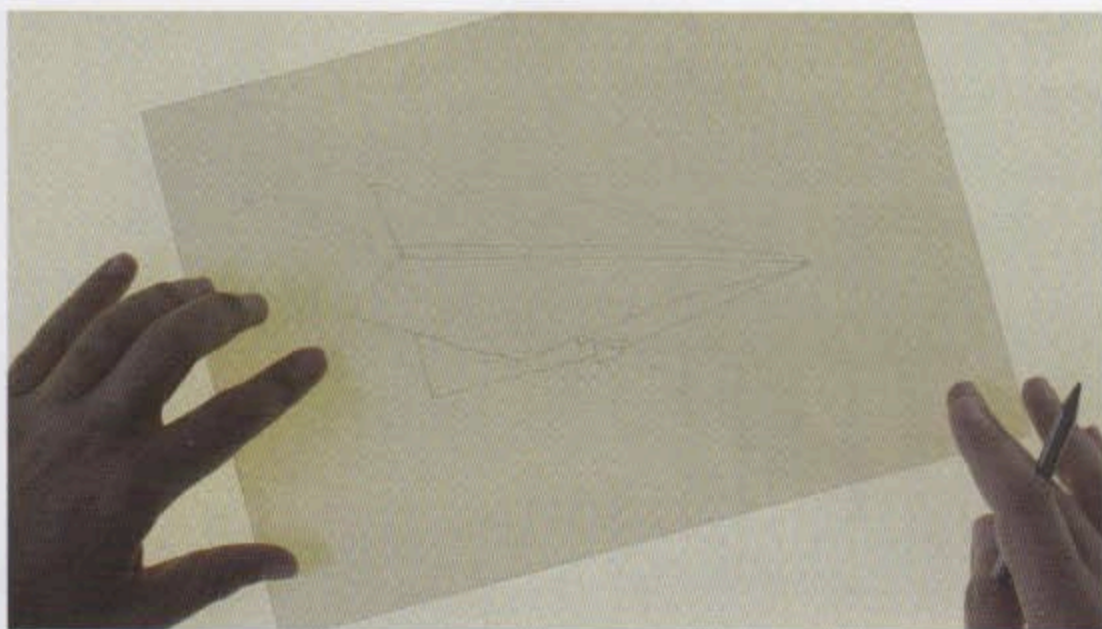
Israel's invasion of Southern Lebanon also led Zaatari to another

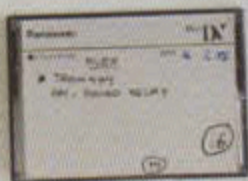
incident from his early days taking pictures, the story of which was told in the film he created for the Lebanon Pavilion at the 2013 Venice Biennale, *Letter to a Refusing Pilot* (2013), about the Israeli Air Force pilot Hagai Tamir, who, trained as an architect, refused to follow orders to bomb a particular structure in the Ain el-Helweh camp in Saida, because the building's shape signaled to him that it was either a hospital or a school. Instead, he dropped his bombs into the Mediterranean. The story circulated in Lebanon as a myth, yet Zaatari would discover through a string of coincidences that it was based on fact. His own connection to the school that had been targeted: his father was its headmaster.

Letter to a Refusing Pilot opens with a camera attached to a drone filming as it is taking off from the roof of a building; interspersed black-and-white photographs reveal this to be the school in Saida. Meanwhile, hands begin to flip through a copy of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Le Petit Prince* (1943), and gloved hands place old family photographs on a lightbox showing young boys in the garden of a modernist building. Hands start sketching trees and a building, and then there is contemporary footage of boys and girls lining up in a school courtyard and filing into classrooms. Gradually, over the course of the film, it becomes apparent that the story revolves around this particular school at different periods, around the modernist stone sculpture that stands in its courtyard, and around Zaatari's personal connection to it, via his father.

Two kids run up to the roof of a modernist apartment block, climbing a ladder to the rooftop. Looking down to see someone throwing a paper airplane, they start throwing their own paper airplanes. These planes become a jet. The sea appears. Sudden explosions rise from the water in a line. A voice reads, "On the second of July 1982, my brother Ahmad wrote in his diary, 'Today father took us to visit the school, which was damaged during an air strike, and Akram took a few pictures.' A few pages before that, my brother had inserted a small newspaper cutout showing an Israeli jet during the air raid."

This story began long ago; it can be traced through family photographs and the young Zaatari's own images. And it has a postscript. In the pavilion at Venice, a lone theater seat faced in the





ON PHOTOGRAPHY, PEOPLE AND MODERN TIMES, 2012, still from two-channel synchronized HD video with sound, artwork, video 38 min 43 sec. Courtesy the artist.



opposite direction from the film, looking instead at a separate 16mm projection of Zaatari's images of the bombings of June 1982. This was a small, ambivalent gesture of both welcome and refusal to the pilot Hagai Tamir, as if Zaatari wanted him to come see the film, but also didn't want him to be accorded a simple place of honor. Tamir did indeed travel to Venice to see Zaatari's film, long after the opening, and sat in the chair intended for him, facing away from the film that doesn't quite celebrate, but does recognize, how his action of conscience became a legend and so deeply impacted the artist's life.

V. Other People's Pictures

Zaatari has made a career of resurrecting old pictures, whether his own or others'. And often others' pictures have become, in a sense, his pictures—because he develops them, or displays them, in his exhibitions. Yet, while these images are associated with Zaatari, the people in them are so plainly from another time and place that their stories remain as something that Zaatari cannot possibly possess. The black-and-white images of Lebanese weightlifters—made from evidently corroded negatives—that Zaatari displayed as large-format pictures in his exhibition "The Uneasy Subject," in Spain's Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León in 2011, are a perfect example of this peculiar condition.

These particular pictures were also by the Saida photographer Hashem el-Madani, who first caught Zaatari's interest when he was, in his words,

Looking for all sorts of data or objects that could testify about the function that photographics played in the second half of the 20th century. These [the studios] were not places that would only produce pictures for people. These were places of transactions. They are like crossroads. They became places where you could come and buy a Super 8 projector, and rent Laurel and Hardy films to project/show them to your neighbors . . . This place [the studio itself] that is facing the camera, in the '50s and '60s, was really, really fun; people came and used accessories, disguising themselves in front of the camera.

The faces that look out at you from the black-and-white images that Zaatari describes are almost exactly what you do not expect to see. Everyone is dressed up, some in costumes, women as men, men as women, some are posing with guns—an almost carnivalesque atmosphere prevails. "It's theater," says Zaatari. "I consider the studio an archaeological excavation. It's a different way of using photography." Like objects collected by an archaeologist or a connoisseur, the images become attached to another person besides the one who made them or is their subject, someone who discovers them, and whose own life and interests become entangled in them.

Some of these, and other, complexities are suggested in Zaatari's two-channel video *On Photography, People and Modern Times* (2010). The film documents a television monitor in a photographic archive that is playing past interviews Zaatari has conducted with some of the photographers he has researched. Meanwhile, a figure in the archive displays assorted images by these same photographers, in a kind of meta-arrangement of the artist filming what he has already filmed and re-recording what he has photographed, in an act of double preservation. It recalls what Zaatari told Borchardt-Hume in their conversation: "My interest in preservation starts with love and life . . . Desire is something that inhabits an artist, a filmmaker, or even an architect: you build where you desire to live, construct what you want to see, you make films that you would have loved watching." Zaatari's practice continually returns what he has discovered, in the form of films, artworks and exhibitions, back to the world—with love. 📷