

Akram Zaatari

The Documentary Turn. Zaatari's multi-strand approach that defines his practice as 'field work'.

By Suzanne Cotter | Apr 2009



Akram Zaatari dislikes the use of the term "archive" in discussing his work. Instead, he prefers to discuss the multi-strand approach that defines his practice as 'field work'. Zaatari consciously plays on the genres of photographic practice and film, from the studio portrait to documentary filmmaking. Reinventing these traditions in an attempt to adequately reflect the dynamics of image-making arising out of conditions of war, he has developed an extensive practice in which he assumes the role of collector, researcher, or curator. He considers his different photographic and film portraits as 'objects of study', collected for the purposes of specific phenomena, whether it is the practice of photography in Lebanon or the broader Middle East, or communicating the experience of imprisonment and acts of resistance. [1]

Zaatari's 'habits of recording' are related to his adolescent years in Lebanon during the civil war. Growing up in the southern town of Saida in a relatively protected environment, with few opportunities to leave his parent's apartment, he developed the habit of taking notes, and making photographs and recordings of the things going on around him. That these things proved to be Israeli planes being shot down overhead by Syrian fighter pilots and news of the bombing of Beirut, or propaganda broadcasts by Lebanese resistance groups, was simply part of the daily reality that merged with his interest in the Cannes Film Festival or the latest pop release by singer Sami Clark.

The sense, prevalent in Zaatari's work, of a quotidian that contains within it extraordinary events, is

particularly apparent in his exploration of resistance. His early documentary-styled, *All is Well on the Border*, 1997, was shot largely in the southern suburbs of Beirut as he was unable to cross into southern Lebanon, which, since its invasion by Israel in 1978, has been at the heart of the country's resistance activities. While these activities, intended to protect the southern part of the Lebanon under the banner of the 'National Resistance', were initially led by a coalition of largely secular, left-of-centre parties, they were subsequently assumed under the leadership of the radical Islamicist movement Hezbollah as the dominant force defying Israeli occupation. Zaatari's film, a deliberately self-conscious montage of still images, current and archival footage from news broadcasts and propaganda films, and recorded interviews with former resistant fighters and prisoners, bears witness to multiple perspectives on the nature of resistance. Writing of the work in the context of the 'uncritical consensus' which has prevailed in Lebanon since the end of the civil war in 1991, Lebanese writer Rasha Salti has observed: "It defends a forgotten cause, speaks for the silenced, and exposes a reality occluded from representation." [2]

The collected document as evidence in the excavation of stories that have either become obscured over time, or that simply cannot be told, is a central element of Zaatari's project of individual and collective portraiture. His film *In This House*, 2005 records the search in the garden of a house in southern Lebanon for a letter encased and buried there by a former National Front resistance fighter who had occupied the house in the early 1980s. The split-screen format presents, on one side, the resistance member—now a respected photo-journalist—telling the story of his experience in the house and on the other side, the digging up of the garden and the eventual discovery of the canister containing the letter. The running table of text that accompanies the unfolding narrative identifies the owners of the house and a host of security agents who oversee the operation and whose faces, we are told, are not to be filmed. The anxiety about who or what is allowed to be caught on film together with their growing excitement as the letter is unearthed connotes the poignant tension of a country in a constant state of deferral; the dilemma of whether it is better to unpack the still unresolved consequences of events from the past or to simply carry on, and leave them buried.

Zaatari's description of works such as *In This House* as interventions is telling. Drawing on documentary methods, he produces a physical but also psychological impact on the people and places involved. For the present owners of the house where the buried letter from a still reticent period of the civil war was found, their perception has been changed by this freshly uncovered knowledge. More recently, Zaatari's style has moved on from the more straight, if not slightly reflexive, reportage of *All is Well* and of *In This House* to that of constructing a scenario to which real-life characters respond. His film *Nature Morte*, 2008, is an *intimiste* portrait of two men intent on the task of making a bomb. Filmed in a cabin interior, its painterly *chiaroscuro* is lent by the burning gas lamp which provides the principle light source, the only sounds accompanying their task those of the call to prayer from a distant mosque. It is into the crisp air of a rugged hillside that the two men part company at the end of the film, one equipped with a backpack presumably carrying the explosive device.

Revisiting his collected material over time is also a feature of Zaatari's project. For *Letter to Samir*, 2008,

Zaatari filmed Nabih Awada — nicknamed Neruda — who had been imprisoned in Israel for ten years from the age of 16. Awada's poetic letters to his mother during the years of his imprisonment formed part of the content in *All is Well on The Border*. Awada's letters are also the subject of a recent series of still photographic portraits, in which the writing is erased, leaving only the author's touching embellishments of drawn, coloured flowers. Zaatari has said of his act of erasure: "What is or was significant cannot be said. The content is irrelevant; it is enough to see the drawings." [3]

Responding to a news photograph of Samir al-Qintar, Israel's longest-held Lebanese prisoner released in summer of 2008, Zaatari asked Nabih Awada to write to the former member of the PLO to ask him why, in his first public appearance after his release, he was photographed with Hezbollah's party leaders and dressed in their Islamic party's uniform. Recorded in real time, Awada begins by stating al-Qintar's first name before writing a letter, the content of which remains unknown to us. The second half of the 30 minute film witnesses Awada folding the letter into a small capsule before encasing it in successive layers of plastic, a method that suggests the communication might be swallowed or inserted into a bodily cavity, a common means of smuggling communications from one cell or one prison to another. That the histories of Awada and his imagined correspondent are ones of shared national struggle and imprisonment is the pivotal link, around which the two narratives revolve, is central to the film's unspoken narrative. We can only imagine what Awada might have written to his compatriot, empathy with his years of incarceration, the cause for which they had been fighting, confusion from the apparent shift in ideological allegiances.

The mountains and valleys of the Shebaa farms are the focus of a new but related area of Zaatari's ongoing photographic research. It is in this rugged and bitterly fought-for landscape on the border of Lebanon with Israel and Syria that he filmed *Nature Morte*. Zaatari's large-scale photographs of this same area continue his fascination with this eerily unpopulated, high-surveillance terrain. It is when talking about these photographs that Zaatari allows himself to use the term 'archive', for it is here in these mountains and the earth that one might trace its cartography of clandestine resistance. Although the image reveals only what cannot be revealed or spoken, the tension of its secrets is palpable. In the impossibility of viewing these images as pure landscape, we are witness to the overshadowing of one tradition, its withdrawal if it ever existed, and the production of an entirely new way of seeing, one that seems to respond to the question of the image as a credible producer of content in a way that might allow for what might be a new tradition to be continued.

1. Conversation with the artist, Munich, March 2009
2. Rasha Salti, 'The Unbearable Weightlessness of Indifference', *Akram Zaatari: The Earth of Endless Secrets*, Portikus, Frankfurt, Galerie Sfeir-Semler, Beirut, forthcoming
3. Conversation with the artist, Munich, March 2009

Suzanne Cotter

Curator at Large at Modern Art Oxford, UK.

Extract from "Surpassing Tradition in the Work of Walid Raad and Akram Zaatari," in
ARTWORLD:Contemporary Art in the Middle East, edited by Paul Sloman, Black Dog Publishing, London,
June 2009.