

**FOTOFOCUS  
BIENNIAL  
OPEN  
ARCHIVE  
OCTOBER 2018**



# FOTOFOCUS

## Akram Zaatari: *The Fold – Space, time and the image*

CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER

October 5, 2018–February 10, 2019

Curated by Steven Matijcio, FotoFocus Guest Curator and Contemporary Arts Center Curator

*Akram Zaatari: The Fold – Space, time and the image* is a curated exhibition for the 2018 FotoFocus Biennial: *Open Archive*. Now in its fourth iteration, the Biennial spans over 90 projects at museums, galleries, and universities across Greater Cincinnati; Northern Kentucky; Dayton and Columbus, Ohio; and features more than 400 artists, curators, and educators. The *Open Archive* theme emphasizes the centrality of photography and lens-based art to modernism, and examines our fundamental need to preserve photographs and to tell stories through their collection, organization, and interpretation.

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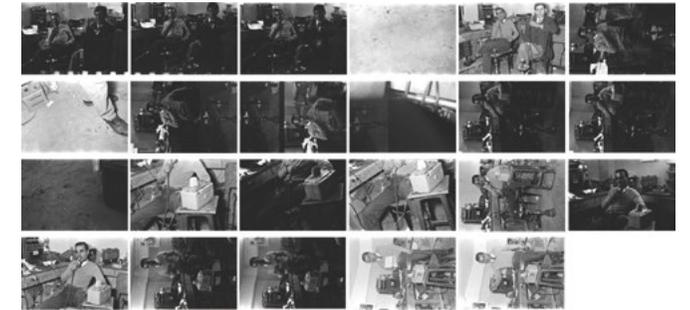
**400 + ARTISTS  
31 + DAYS  
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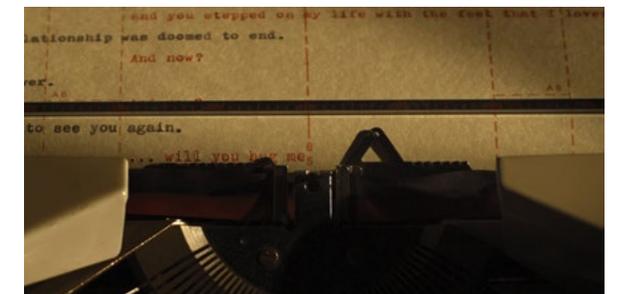
*Flash Failure | Triptych, 2007*  
 3 Inkjet prints  
 50 x 93 cm each  
 Courtesy of the Artist and Sfeir Semler Gallery



*Flash Failure | Photo-Log Sheet, 2007*  
 From the archive of Studio Shehrazade / Hashem el Madani  
 Inkjet print  
 40 x 20 cm  
 Courtesy of the Artist



*The End of Love, 2013*  
 150 black and white inkjet prints from the archive of Studio Shehrazade / Hashem el Madani  
 18 x 11.7 cm each  
 Courtesy of Adrastus Collection



*Tomorrow Everything will be Alright, 2010*  
 HD video  
 12 minutes  
 Courtesy of the Artist



*Bodybuilder 35mm negative strips, 2011*  
 From the archive of Studio Shehrazade / Hashem el Madani  
 4 Inkjet prints  
 98 x 50 cm each  
 Courtesy of the Artist



*The Fold, 2018*  
 12 Inkjet prints of reproductions  
 of photographs from different  
 collections selected from the archive  
 of the Arab Image Foundation (Beirut)  
 Various sizes  
 Courtesy of the Arab Image Foundation



*Against Photography, 2017*  
 48 prints (blind emboss, Aluminum foil, intaglio  
 and Chine-collé), 27.5 x 31 cm each  
 12 Aluminum plates, 24 x 28 cm  
 Courtesy of Kurimanzutto



*Double exposure with one Flash Strike, 2018*  
 From the archive of Studio Shehrazade / Hashem el Madani  
 Inkjet prints  
 120 x 80 cm each  
 Courtesy of the Artist



*Damaged Negatives: Scratched  
 Portraits of Mrs. Baqari and her friend,  
 2012*  
 Made from 35mm scratched negative  
 from the Hashem el Madani archive  
 Inkjet prints  
 180 x 120 cm  
 Courtesy of the Artist and  
 Kurimanzutto



*Un-Dividing History, 2017*  
 8 Cyanotypes, 18 x 24 cm  
 8 inkjet prints on gelatin-treated-glass plates, 18 x 24 cm  
 Courtesy of the Artist and Sfeir Semler Gallery



*Letter to A Refusing Pilot.  
 Hagai Tamir's photographs, 2013*  
 Vinyl text on wall  
 Courtesy of the Artist



*Letter to A Refusing Pilot. Paper Planes. 2013*  
 8 paper planes. polyamide, selective laser sintering  
 Various sizes  
 Courtesy of the Artist and Sfeir Semler Gallery

## Unfolding Histories

Steven Matijcio

“Every photograph hides parts to reveal others...” —Akram Zaatari

Desire for the archive as an unassailable repository of documents, testimony and truth seems to escalate despite, or perhaps because of, the more imminent reality that there is no singular history on which all peoples can agree. And while the “post-truth” era feels pandemic in North America, in other parts of the world this is an all too familiar paradigm where the manipulation of the past is a customary practice to administer the present, and influence the future. This is especially true of Lebanon, where fifteen years of malignant civil war from 1975–1990 has produced a knotty, contested history riddled with sectarian animosities, institutionalized amnesia, and ubiquitous uncertainty. And yet when nothing is solid, codified or certain, everything becomes possible. Across the Middle East where formal archives remain partial and at risk, an increasing number of artists employ the fragments as fodder for new forms of historical preservation and production. Akram Zaatari (b.1966 Sidon, Lebanon) is a pioneer within this amorphous terrain, marrying personal experiences of the war, an abiding interest in the vernacular performance of identity via photo and film and a quasi-archaeological treatment of lens-based documents as artifacts. Beyond his individual practice, one of Zaatari’s greatest, most enduring contributions in this field may be the Arab Image Foundation (AIF)—an archival institution he co-founded with photographers Fouad Elkoury and Samer Mahdad in 1997 to self-declaredly “preserve, study and exhibit photographs from the Middle East, North Africa and the Arab diaspora from the 19th century to today.” And while the AIF has successfully amassed over 600,000 images from multiple countries and eras, Zaatari adamantly refutes the onset of institutionalization—shunning the paralyzing conservation practices of museums and libraries to double down on a more radical, generative employment of these materials. In his hands, this archive moves beyond a delicate commodity to circulate as a mutable constellation that partakes in an expanded field of histories with cumulative socio-cultural cargo. As such, the archive can be seen as both Zaatari’s medium and subject, and the AIF as both his fuel and foil—collecting and re-presenting photos as “a form,” in his words, “of creative un-making and re-writing that is no less important than the act of taking images.” Ensuing questions of authorship and appropriation yield to more multi-faceted strategies of displacement, where the re-framing of photos and films as living, changing vessels unfurls invigorating new layers and folds to mine and forage.

He does so, not as an iconoclast seeking to condemn archives as cogs in the machine of hegemony, but rather as a revitalizing gesture that replaces rhetorical manipulations with emancipated re-assignment. For Zaatari, this frisson happens most intriguingly in the seemingly ordinary and banal, in the snapshots and mistakes archives historically diminish, where he argues, “It is a misconception that photographs testify to the course of history. It is history that inhabits photographs.” As such, Zaatari regularly subverts the canonical treatment of photos as evidentiary relics hidden away in cold storage to slow their inherent/inevitable chemical entropy. He instead treats images as susceptible material objects, and one could argue, as surrogates for the subjects and structures they depict. Much like the wrinkles, scars and repressions that the human body + mind collects, Zaatari reads the folds endemic to photography as a palimpsest of information and suggestion. Whether it be a purposeful edit or crop, an aesthetic gesture to redirect our viewing, or the natural degradation of materials over time, he argues that “The fold in a photograph is a detail through which a narrative different from that narrated by the photograph unfolds.” As fertile superstructures that expand the interpretive constitution of said photos, such folds are less obfuscations than nascent fonts for alternative narratives to percolate. “In these folds lies a history...” according to Zaatari, “many histories.” In this inclusive arena, the micro and macro flow into one another as citizen and state intermingle, and one discovers pockets of collective history in the pictures we have of ourselves and one another. These photos and their attendant folds do not float unattached in clouds, but instead coalesce as archives of their making, and lenses to look backward and forward.

In his position that “the traces that transactions leave on a photographic object become part of it,” Zaatari argues that the physical manufacture and decay of a photograph (or film) is as much a contribution to history as that which it depicts. He calls the ensuing composites “informed objects,” which, while partial or possibly broken, highlight the greater whole “like an exploded view of a machine,” or “a model of the human body used in anatomy class.” As a holistic specimen without fixed parameters, “An informed object,” Zaatari elaborates, “is an object that is conscious of the material and processes that produced it, conscious of its provenance, its morphology and displacement over time, conscious of its history in the sense that it is able to communicate it. An informed object is already materialized, activated.” His self-declared “displacement” of these objects is thusly not about post-colonial uprooting, but rather a deeper, wider recognition of the apparatus that informs the production, circulation and reception of such images in, and beyond their respective context/s. In this expanded field, negatives, contact sheets, glass plates, double exposures, mistakes, erosion and all that is habitually left on the cutting room floor are re-valued as revelatory anomalies with “something to say.” Zaatari’s poignant 2017 series *A Photographer’s Shadow* is a case in point, presenting a number of historical photos where the cameraman’s shadow has infiltrated the composition, which was historically reason to throw the picture away. In Zaatari’s revised appraisal, however, such discards are instead accentuated as elucidating nexus points where author and subject meet within the frame. A diptych of found photos Zaatari premieres in the CAC exhibition thickens this premise even further, displaying a malfunction in the camera of Hashem el Madani (1928–2017) that led to an in-frame doubling of men (presumably father and son) standing upon the rocks of a swelling shoreline. Evoking past hallmarks of romantic painting, a multiplicity gathers with equal muster across this pairing as the images coagulate with the residue and implication of generational, production and art historical lineage. The cresting physicality of this informed object is pushed even further in the 2017 work *Against Photography*, which removes the image from the equation to instead detail the natural patterns of environmental decay upon a series of 12 photo plates. By extracting the traditional focal point of the photographic process, Zaatari instead surveys iterations of deterioration that take on an uncanny beauty in multiple media—turning the archival chimera of folds and fracture into a verdant topography of patterns, avenues, and stories untold.

The continued consideration of the photograph as a physical entity with corresponding history, memory and lifespan connects to Zaatari’s ongoing exploration of the human body as it is performed for, and by the camera. As an index of experience and identity, the body and its photographic proxy find a surrogate-like relationship in the images he provocatively re-frames—where intimate narratives are gleaned from voluminous collections and otherwise numbing aggregates. And while we are only sometimes privy to the background and/or the names of those photographed, Zaatari is a long-standing student of the ways in which gender, sexuality and taboo are concurrently codified and obscured by indigenous photographic practices. By re-contextualizing private photos in a public arena, Zaatari “frequently composes works,” according to Professor Mark Westmoreland, “that force the photographic medium to comment upon social aesthetics that it has been deployed to produce at different historical moments.” A compelling example is found in Zaatari’s 2011 re-presentation of Madani’s timeworn photographs of male bodybuilders performing feats of both physical strength and acrobatic agility in a showcase of masculine prowess. Inferences to homo-eroticism within this display were comparatively forbidden; and, while we must resist the temptation to define historical images through the lens of today, the entropic folds highlighted in Zaatari’s framing of these photos (particularly as diminutive contact sheets) suggests modern cracks in the visual codification of patriarchal rule, male normativity, and the stigma of homosexuality. Like the photographer’s shadow that interrupts the self-contained world of his subjects in Zaatari’s aforementioned work, the humbling eclipse that befalls many an ideology and

monument creep over a pantheon of bravado here. The violent exercise of patriarchal custody is on frightening display in Zaatari's 2012 diptych *Damaged Negatives: Scratched Portraits of Mrs. Baqari and her friend*, where otherwise benign photographs of two young women are marred by a flurry of black scratches. These disturbing scars are the product of a controlling husband who demanded Madani lacerate the negatives of a portrait session initiated by his wife before they were married. Years later, after Mrs. Baqari burned herself to death to escape his control, the widowed husband came back to Madani's studio asking for enlargements of these photos. Their display decades later under the auspices of this exhibition demonstrates the extraordinary valence of the fold, which in this case manifests a tragic relationship, evokes the history of effigies and iconoclasm, embodies the systematic societal violence against women, and opens up a plethora of readings that could not exist without slashes that span both object and subject.

The social life of the informed objects that Zaatari presents thereby opens a larger sociological discourse which, in the case of Lebanon, speaks to the ways love and sexuality have been regulated—and liberated—via photography and film. He traces the visual trajectory of this contested history largely by way of Madani's studio photography, which pictured thousands of people over the course of almost half a century in Zaatari's hometown of Saida. The ensuing photos demonstrate a complex spectrum of desire as people moved across both sides of the state-sanctioned line, performing the love they coveted and that which they concealed. As a site of concurrent fantasy and societal uniformity, what genders, professions, events and relationships were prescribed to “look like” created an orthodoxy of both restrictions and their corresponding transgressions. In *The End of Love* (2013), Zaatari presents over 100 photos of wedding portraits taken in Madani's studio that collectively illustrate the codes surrounding this classic trope. Kissing was forbidden for such a photo which, in Lebanon, was taken a week after the ceremony with the bride wearing her wedding dress, supplemented by a bouquet of plastic flowers and white gloves provided by the photographer. And while the ensuing images are stiff, sober and highly formulaic, this *End of Love* is not a cynical farewell to the romantic aura of marriage, but rather a site where ideals collect in the margins, in aspirations that exceed both the subject and frame. Much like Arthur Danto's post-historical 1984 essay “The End of Art,” Zaatari's collection implies the exhaustion of a particular lineage of love and the opening of a chaotic, open-ended eddy where de-regulated desire could be performed. Madani's studio was the site and catalyst for many of these performances; but, in this exhibition, Zaatari pairs *The End of Love* with the aspiration of his 2010 video *Tomorrow Everything will be Alright*, in which a proposed reunion of estranged lovers is told in the form of typewritten dialogue. The voices here remain anonymous throughout, much like the many couples in *The End of Love*, and we gradually learn that these contemporary, same-sex lovers speak in prose drawn from popular cinematic clichés. Their conflicted flirtation culminates in the familiar romantic trope of a sunset at seashore, and more specifically that portrayed in the 1986 film *Le Rayon Vert* in which a disillusioned woman's faith in love is restored after she sees a green flash at twilight. And yet, despite the overt homage, the time stamp in the bottom corner of Zaatari's version implies this is his personal footage. And, that amidst many formulae, clichés and the already said, in the seams between *The End of Love* and *Tomorrow Everything will be Alright*, something unique and human can be spoken.

In contrast to the charge that photos are moments plucked out of time—slowly staving off death in the airless preservation of archives—Zaatari re-situates photos entrusted to the AIF in a multiplied field that spans origins and invention. Rather than entrenching images with fixed historical assignments, he performs subtle interventions to uncover and suggest alternate readings that inject life into said objects. As a stirring case in point, *Un-Dividing*

*History* (2017) merges historical images by Khalil Raad (1854–1957), a Palestinian from Jerusalem, and Yacov Ben Dov (1882–1968), a Zionist-Ukrainian filmmaker and photographer, who dually inhabited Jerusalem from 1907–1948 but “belonged,” in Zaatari's words, “to completely different universes.” Glass photo plates from each of these men had been acquired into a private collection years later and stored against each other for over a half-century in the same position, slowly and mutually “contaminating” one another with the opposing image. Zaatari's cyanotypes reveal these beautifully compromised hybrids, depicting “traces of one world inscribed into another,” and symbolically de-partitioning the tragic schisms/folds that have long scarred this population and place. This grid of 8 images is not one of easy, idealistic harmony, but rather a complex, messy, fundamentally human portrait of the way lives intersect and overlap, if only they are allowed. A related moment of extraordinary, stirring empathy is found in the 2013 project *Letter to a Refusing Pilot*, in which Zaatari realizes the rumor of Hagai Tamir, an Israeli fighter pilot, who in 1982, during his country's invasion of Lebanon, disobeyed the order to drop a bomb on what he knew to be a schoolhouse. The legend, and Zaatari's ensuing interview with Tamir have taken multiple forms in the translation to art, most notably paper planes that have appeared in both video and physical form, floating across terrain that spans real and virtual, truth and myth. What in theory started as a description, or a document, or a letter, has thereby taken flight via multiple folds—transforming this story into a mutable vessel that lands often, but temporarily—its ultimate destination indeterminate. In this lightness of being and itinerant course, the paper plane embodies Zaatari's affinity for ephemeral records rather than the weighted gravity of archives. These are images, objects, videos, memories and outtakes that bear creases, evince life, and find renewal in each and every reappraisal.

## Akram Zaatari: On outer space as humanity's safe

Valentine Umansky, Curatorial Fellow of Lens-Based Arts at the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Ohio

It was announced last week that Elon Musk's SpaceX rockets will host Japanese collector Yusaku Maezawa and 6-8 of his guests (all artists) who will board the first passenger ship to the Moon. Since the 1990s, space science found an echo in the public's interest by promoting space tourism as a possible outlet for our overpopulated planet. In that endeavor, artists and scientists sit side-by-side, conjuring other planets as potential repositories for humans, knowledge and, of course, art. Scientists' rationale for exploring space evokes the advancement of research by way of collecting scientific data and, more prosaically but with a certain sense of urgency, the survival of humanity. To artists, curators and conservators, though, the equation has different variables: outer space is regarded with curiosity as a virgin space, devoid of art, and brings about the burden of contributing to humanity's future repository. In this context, space exploration carries along its own set of questions, the most frequent being: were we to leave the Earth, what should humanity bring to the Moon to preserve?

Curators, artists and archivists are entrusted with the difficult task of defining the limits of what is to be looked at, studied, and preserved. Lebanese, interdisciplinary artist Akram Zaatari's work sits in that exact space, which involves both a deep dive into the immensity of images and the recourse to typologies, taxonomies and classifications to create order within chaos. His artistic work is inseparable from his interest and commitment to the Arab Image Foundation, which he founded in 1997, along with photographers Fouad Elkoury and Samer Mohdad. Dedicated to the collection, study, editing and archiving of the photographic history of the Arab diaspora, the Foundation mirrors the artist's personal practice, which is derived from field research and the study of Middle Eastern photographic practices. Out of the mass of artworks the Earth shelters, some already listed as world heritage sites and others preserved in our human memory banks—our brains, what would Zaatari then take to the Moon?

When pondering on the possibility of a repository of artworks outside of Earth, most artists suggest pieces that testify to their preferred medium's specificity. Were that the case, Zaatari could pick his self-referential series *Against Photography* (2017) as an introduction to the unique physicality of the medium. The series reminds us that, though based on light, photography relies on photosensitive materials to be seen by human eyes, and for fleeting images to be made durable in time. To create the works, the artist used digitally routed plates to reproduce gelatin negatives, leaving out the actual image photographed to focus on the traces of abrasions and creases borne by the originals. In so doing, Zaatari reflects on the medium's inherent qualities of both immanence and permanence, one that relies on long-lasting imprints that can nevertheless fade away. The artist refers to the series as "a trip across time and media" but, highlighting photographic paper's and negatives' limitations, *Against Photography* also cleverly hints at the exhaustion of all earthly, material resources.

Another of Zaatari's works attests to one of the most pressing contemporary, socio-economic challenges faced by humanity. Hence, if it was only possible to salvage only but a small portion of Hashem el Madani's studio archives – which entail over a million images—*Damaged Negatives: Scratched Portrait of Mrs. Baqari* (2012) would be essential. Like the other prints from the series, this one bears the marks of el Madani, as he physically scratched the surface of his own negatives. Uniquely testifying to the power of the image, it tells the story of Mrs. Baqari whose jealous husband made sure the negatives from his wife's portraits would be destroyed by the photographer, as he had not agreed to her posing for the studio. Mrs. Baqari's posture is striking. Her defiant eyes stare right into el Madani's lens; one of her hands safely placed on her left hip, the other lying by her side as she rests her back on a densely granular pillar. Looking at the print from a sociological perspective, one cannot help but associate the scratching marks on Mrs. Baqari's face with an era of censorship, repression and feminist protests. The series therefore acts, to the eyes of the twenty-first century viewer, as a definite marker of a time hopefully gone and reminds us of a freedom that women are still fighting for. Were Zaatari to board a space ship to the Moon, one would surely hope that the *Damaged Negatives* would be part of the trip, as essential markers of a gender equality that is yet to be achieved.

But, for the pleasure of metonymies, Zaatari could choose the ultimate nesting doll. One of his works approaches the subject of flight, though not one directed towards the Moon. *Letter to a Refusing Pilot* is a video and an installation based on the true story of Jewish pilot Hagai Tamir, who, in 1982, when sent to bomb a school in Israeli-occupied southern Lebanon, veered away from target and dropped the thirty explosives he was carrying into the sea. Referring to this well-known account of resistance and heroism, Zaatari, no stranger to the story—his father was the principal of the school—approaches flights in times of conflict as symbols for both escapism and destruction. *Letter to a Refusing Pilot* weaves together a mix of archives and vernacular photographs: a set of prints from el Madani depicting the old rural settlement of Saida, where the school was built; images Zaatari made with his father's Kiev camera after the bombing; and aerial shots of Lebanese architecture and daily life. Planes recur throughout the video, a trope evocative of the desire to escape war realities and the technologies at play, which consider jets as tools of surveillance and targeting. In one scene, two hands draw lines on a white sheet of paper. The outlines of trees appear... then a school building... and finally a paper airplane. Echoing the scene, towards the end of the video, a group of boys rush to a roof and fold their exam papers into tiny jets. Thrown together, they resemble the flock of birds Tamir dreamed he would become: "They taught us to fly in an elegant manner and this really suited me. I wanted to feel like a bird." They resemble the military formations and war machines invented by men, which have consistently damaged and disfigured the Earth's landscapes and, conversely, the fantasies of a safer outer space that will probably act, in not so distant years, as a repository for artworks and humans alike.

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