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.

A girl from the Belcadi family (from the series The Fold), Sale, Morocco 1946. Inkjet print of gelatin silver paper print, 6 x 8.7 cm. Photographer: Anonymous. Collection Hamid Belcadi. Courtesy of the Arab Image Foundation

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

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

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

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Various sizes
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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

8 paper planes. polyamide, selective laser sintering Various sizes
Courtesy of the Artist and Sfeir Semler Gallery
"Every photograph hides parts to reveal others..." —Akram Zaatari

Desire for the archive as an unsalvageable 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 aninomities, 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.” While the AIF has successfully amassed over 600,000 images from multiple countries and eras, Zaatari adamantly refuses 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.” Ensuring 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 fosion happens most intriguingly in the seemingly ordinary and banal, in the snapshots and mistakes archives historically declare “preserve, study and exhibit photographs from the Middle East, North Africa and the Arab diaspora from the 19th century to today.” While the AIF has successfully amassed over 600,000 images from multiple countries and eras, Zaatari adamantly refuses 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.” Ensuring 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.

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Un-Dividing to uncover and suggest alternate readings that inject life into said objects. As a stirring case in point, and invention. Rather than entrenching images with fixed historical assignments, he performs subtle interventions of archives—Zaatari re-situates photos entrusted to the AIF in a multiplied field that spans origins and film. And, that amidst many formulae, clichés and the already said, in the seams between these contemporary, same-sex lovers speak in prose drawn from popular cinematic clichés. Their conflicted flirtation is not a cynical photographer. And while the ensuing images are stiff, sober and highly formulaic, this 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 Zaatar’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), Zaatar 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,” Zaatar’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, Zaatar 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 Zaatar’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 Zaatar’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. Zaatar’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 Zaatar 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 Zaatar’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 Zaatar’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.
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 original. 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 subject of flight, though not one directed towards the Moon. 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 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.
400 + ARTISTS
31 + DAYS
ART + EVENTS