A Lebanese artist's search for the Israeli pilot who refused bombing orders

Akram Zaatari's 'Letter to a Refusing Pilot,' Lebanon's entry in the 2013 Venice Biennale, is based on the story of Hagai Tamir, who in June 1982 disobeyed the command to bombard a school.

By Galia Yahav | Jun.16, 2013 | 7:51 PM

From Akram Zaatari's 'Letter to a Refusing Pilot,' at the Venice Biennale. Photo by Marco Milan

From Akram Zaatari's 'Letter to a Refusing Pilot.' The right way to make a paper airplane. Photo by Yael Engelhart

The Lebanese artist Akram Zaatari is representing his country in the 2013 Venice Biennale with “Letter to a Refusing Pilot.”The the film and video installation was inspired by Albert Camus’ epistolary essay “Letters to a German Friend,” from which it takes the following quote: “I should like to be able to love my country and still love justice.”

Zaatari combines family photographs, aerial photographs, video stills and computer imaging to create a multilayered story about rumors, memory, fantasy, constructing the past and the historical narrative.

In 1997 Zaatari cofounded the Arab Image Foundation, a nonprofit organization based in Beirut whose mission, as stated on its website, is "to collect, preserve and study photographs from the Middle East, North Africa and the Arab diaspora." Since 1999 he has been working closely with the veteran Lebanese photographer Hashem El Madani in the archives of the latter’s Studio Shehrazade.

"Letter" reflects Zaatari's main methodology, which involves researching and reexamining photographs and archival documents so as to undermine official narratives, to subvert the smokescreen of official images of war and the way these images create political and aesthetic codes. One question arising from this subversion is whether disobedience is also a matter of artistic freedom.

The piece deals with the collection of information and the examination of photographic processes overtime. It is described as a coming-of-age story that revolves around one extraordinary incident, the bombing of a boys' high school on June 6, 1982.

The weaving of the personal story into the documented, date-stamped, factual, military and nationalist universe in a way that changes that universe slightly is at the heart of his artistic interest, and what gives it political and lyric force.

From the background material for the exhibit: “In the summer of 1982, a rumor made the rounds of a small city in South Lebanon, which was under Israeli occupation at the time. It was said that a fighter pilot in the Israeli air force had been ordered to bomb a target on the outskirts of Saida, but knowing the building was a school, he refused to destroy it. Instead of carrying out his commanders’ orders, the pilot veered off course and dropped his bombs in the sea. It was said that he knew the school because he had been a student there, because his family had lived in the city for generations, because he was born into Saida’s Jewish community before it disappeared. As a boy, Akram Zaatari grew up hearing ever more elaborate versions of this story, as his father had been the director of the school for twenty years. Decades later, Zaatari discovered it wasn’t a rumor. The pilot was real.”

It was only when the pilot, Hagai Tamir, agreed to be interviewed about the incident after years of silence that Zaatari discovered the historical truth behind the story. While Tamir never lived in Lebanon he, like Zaatari, was an architect by training. In an interview with Avihai Becker**Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.** in 2002, Hagai said, “To be fair, I must say that I felt a strong inner opposition to [the war] even before I was called up. From the outset, I smelled the manipulation and the deceit at its base.” He told his fellow young officers, “Who knows better than me, an architect, how hard it is to build a city? So at least, don’t rejoice when you destroy houses. It takes a lot longer to build a city than it does to strike a target.”

Regarding the specific event, Tamir related in the interview: “We flew in tandem above the place. The liaison officer who was with the ground forces informed me of the target, a large building on top of a hill. I looked at it and to the best of my judgment, the structure could have only been one of two things - a hospital or a school. I questioned the officer and asked why I was being given that target. His reply was that they were shooting from there. There were a thousand reasons why I didn't think I should bomb the building. I asked him if he knew what the building was. He said he didn't. I insisted that he find out. He got back to me with some vague answers.” Another pilot bombed the school immediately after Tamir refused to do so.

An attempt to gain control

On the Israeli side the story, like many stories about refusing orders, is blurred in favor of the larger debate over the “surgical strikes” of the ethical army. Zaatari tells it from the perspective of the injured party, the civilian, by resuscitating the myth of the youth who meets the Israeli with a conscience, the soldier who is a human being. “Letter” reveals the complexity of Tamir’s disobedience and its consequences for the targets of the mission he refused to carry out, one of whom grew up to be an artist and the self-appointed keeper of the alternative memory.

The video is constructed as a montage conducted among three major sites - the school, the roof of a building in the city and a light table in a photography studio - that dictate the way in which the work is photographed. Thus the school, as well as the sky over the city and the camera, is the protagonist. The camera is an insistent presence for Zaatari, as a depicter of reality and as a competitor to the human imagination that is its memory bank and vice versa.

A close-up of the artist's cotton-gloved hands, moving old photographs on a light table, then a shot of Zaatari as a baby with his mother in the garden of the school his father founded and ran. The faded colors give away the age of the image.
The hands turn the pages of a French edition of "The Little Prince." The sound: a chorus of children's voices. A close-up of the hands drawing plans for the school,

including a row of cypress trees. Then the hands, photographed from above as in a training film, draw the right way to fold a paper airplane. A teenager, portraying Zaatari at 16, in 1982, inserts film into a camera and records the sounds of war on an old reel-to-reel tape recorder. Melodic, sentimental music, French pop hits, play in the background as he works, framing his actions like a postcard from the past. The scene is replaced by a siren warning of impending doom.

The camera pans with exhausting slowness around the tree-surrounded building, in archive film clips. A close-up of ants running around on a rock in the middle of the school's manicured lawn. On the rock is a stone sculpture by Alfred Basbous, a small lyrical abstract in the Modernist style - according to Zaatari, the first art object he ever saw. The camera documents the sculpture the way art was once documented, circumnavigating it and zooming in as if to decipher the essence of the stone, to penetrate it while at the same time viewing it from above.

Another close-up, this one of a full-blown, deep-crimson rose stirred by a breeze. The school bell rings for recess. Teenage boys bound down the stairs. Two of them climb a ladder to the roof, where they position themselves across from the balcony of a third boy and launch paper airplanes.

The cityscape spread before them, the viewer watches from the boys' point of view as planes fly above the dense, dilapidated neighborhood, between the laundry lines of the small, gray apartments. Their naïve flight of origami is a complex act: They reenact a local legend, carrying out a fantastical act that has a therapeutic dimension, in an attempt to achieve control.

In fact, they are part of Zaatari's traumatic reenactment, his return in time to the aerial bombardment of his city. This moment contains duality: enchantment with the planes' flight next to fear of the destructive capabilities of aviation technology. The boys' airplanes are made from exams, their teachers' red-inked comments next to their penciled answers visible between the folds of the paper.

This is the high point of his piece, in which the liberated papers split the skies of Lebanon, fettered by Israel, in an airborne dance. It is also the moment in which Zaatari's extended occupation with the blind spots of documentation and of control over the means of distribution reaches a lyrical zenith. Alongside a collage of still photographs of the bombed-out city is a boy wearing a light-blue tie.

The artists' hands return to the light table, which holds a panoramic shot of the area. It behaves like a touchscreen; anywhere the hands touch, it causes explosions at that point. In the background is the sound of a Hebrew news report of the bombing of the Ain el Helweh refugee camp.

This mythical-conceptual story raises many questions: How exactly did the people of Saida, Zaatari's town, hear about Tamir's refusal of orders? What is the significance of Tamir's refusal in light of the fact was bombed anyway? Does a military order contain within it, from the moment it is issued, some quality of tragic inevitability irrespective of the person who carries it out? Is that the same quality inherent to a photograph collected in an archive as evidence that is spun out? And what is the validity of the act of reenactment and of homage to the pilot, the architecture, the school?

Zaatari leaves these questions open, unraveled, like stories grown vague with time, the kind with no one to tell them and whose telling is forbidden.

Zaatari's camera is an unarmed force. Its boundary-less invasion, which floods the ground, moving back in time and within, into private memory, is the tool of resistance of the civilian imagination against the military agenda.