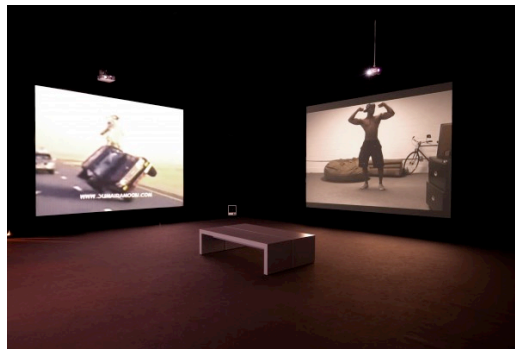


## THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Liz Glass, “Archive State at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Columbia College”, Daily Serving, February 27, 2014

On view across three levels of the Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College in Chicago, the exhibition *Archive State* presents five discrete bodies of work developed by six artists. (One of the installations is made by a duo.) Spatially expansive and ideologically packed, each of these five groups of works deserves individual attention. Likewise, the title of the exhibition itself is due some unpacking.



Akram Zaatari. *Dance to the End of Love*, 2011; four-channel video installation; 22 mins. Installation view at MUSAC. Courtesy of the Artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg/Beirut.

Using the term *Archive*—one that seems ever more fashionable in the contemporary art milieu—the title calls forth a ready image. We may imagine a dusty or orderly collection of papers, books, ephemera, and photographs, understanding the archive as a contained entity, one of history, knowledge, specialization, and significance; an institutional repository of the past. *Archive State* yanks the rug out from under this term—and us—quite quickly, however, developing an expanded notion of what “the archive” comprises within our digital culture. Here we find YouTube clips, spliced together into a tonal montage; found photographs, discarded by their originators, but now reclaimed and re-presented; and other anonymous images. The idea of the archive, as expressed through the majority of these projects, becomes nebulous. While our image of ordered knowledge quickly fades, it is replaced with a form of knowing and being that reflects our haphazard, messy, subjective, and contentious present.

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The second half of the exhibition's title—*State*—experiences a similar twisting here. What is being alluded to is not some ambiguous, generalized condition. The idea is not *only* that we are living in something of an “archive state” of mind, characterized by compulsive self-reflection, promotion, and historicizing via the many flowing waters of the internet. Rather, a secondary meaning of the word “state” is brought to the fore. As evidenced by the collection of works themselves, the title points toward the state as a seat of power, a locus of collective identity and understanding, an arbiter of norms—the State with a capital “S,” as it were. Though not always relating to an individual nation as such, the canopies of power on display throughout the exhibition are not explicitly represented; the images act under, against, or in complicity with these power structures, evoking them through shadow and absence. Instead of being directly about the State as such, these works demonstrate the ways in which the identities of individuals may form and change in relationship to these powers.

Or rather, perhaps it is about our own shifting understandings of these structures as we are confronted with the lived expressions of individuals. In the pair of video-based works in the exhibition, for instance, we are confronted with two—often literally—opposing groups. On the one hand, we have young Arab men, living in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Libya, and Yemen; on the other, young American soldiers fighting in the Middle East. Both of these groups are portrayed through sequences of found videos, pulled off of the internet and assembled into complex narratives. Going into both of these works, there is a tacit understanding of these two groups as simultaneously divergent and similar: Assumptions (and perhaps they are only mine)

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about both American soldiers and young Arab men are that they are obsessed with outward displays of hyper-masculinity and therefore insensitive. And in both videos, these assumptions are affirmed. Akram Zaatari's four-channel video installation, *Dance to the End of Love*(2011), spends the better part of its twenty-minute run splicing together homemade videos of men striking bodybuilder poses for the camera, trick-riding on cars and motorcycles, and firing weapons. And in David Oresick's *Soldiers in Their Youth* (2009), we find not dissimilar expressions of machismo as soldiers beat each other, discharge firearms, and the like.

But both projects also go beyond affirming what we already know and proceed to complicate that as well, providing far more nuanced portraits of the cultures and individuals depicted. In the middle of Zaatari's synchronized set of videos, we find ourselves watching a series of odd videos celebrating male relationships. In these, a stock background is filled with photos of men—usually in groups or couples. These videos are reminiscent of the yearbook pages that groups of teenage girls would populate with pictures of themselves to demonstrate that they are “best friends forever.” These yearbook-pages-turned-public-internet-videos demonstrate something unexpected about the lives of the men depicted: that affection is not absent, nor embarrassing; that intimacy between and among men might even be accepted.

Oresick's video, likewise, seems to toy with the image of the hyper-masculine American soldier, revealing vulnerabilities and even humor in his edit of DIY videos made primarily by soldiers serving in Iraq. While many of the videos focus on the rather lighthearted brutality that seems to be the core of the day-to-day experience captured by these soldiers, there are others that speak directly to trauma. One particular video—which is intercut with other clips and spans of whiteness—is shot from the ground, as soldiers lie on their bellies underneath wooden furniture. We can just see partial glimpses of individuals, but what is more important is the sound: As we hear explosions in the distance, disembodied voices speak to each other, to God, and to no one in particular, asking for reassurance and praying for their lives. Other videos within Oresick's piece speak to the aftereffects of trauma, as soldiers speak directly into

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the camera about their feelings, or when a soldier's girlfriend (I assume) pranks him by awakening him with an ill-advised scream—a stimulus to which he reacts rather violently. These works work powerfully together, though the impact of the exhibition's thesis is also carried through the photographic projects by Thomas Sauvin, Simon Menner, and Arianna Arcara and Luca Santese. These other artists also use found images, creating compelling narratives about China's swelling commercialism, Germany's Cold War-era surveillance, and Detroit's breakdown of law as it parallels an erosion of personal history as well. The sorts of narratives that are teased out by Zaatari, Oresick, and the other artists included in the exhibition are significant for their assertion that history—embodied and encapsulated in the idea of the archive—is infinitely more complicated than we might know. This is obvious, yet it reads powerfully here. Throughout the exhibition, expressions authored by individuals (usually anonymous, at that) speak in tandem to offer a chorus of voices that is fractured and polyglot. By re-presenting these events from recent history through these fragmentary views, the exhibition reaffirms the tension between the body politic and the individual body, while posturing toward a way of writing history that is aggregate, collective, and multi-vocal. In this sort of *Archive State*, it seems, history may become a very different thing.

*Archive State is on view at the Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College Chicago through April 6, 2014.*

<http://dailyserving.com/2014/02/archive-state-at-the-museum-of-contemporary-photography-columbia-college/>