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On the eve of the current war on terror, I initiated long-term research in Lebanon on the way cultural practitioners grappled with self-represen- tation in the wake of horrifying political violence. Lebanon was a decade beyond its prolonged civil war (1975–90).2 The country seemed to be prospering again, the infrastructure being rebuilt, and exiles returning. New public cultures found a place in the shifting conditions during and after the war. In this postwar period, tycoon politicians, like the late Rafiq Hariri, invested heavily in the reconstruction of downtown Beirut as well as a new economic vision for Lebanon. Part of this vision included

. 1 This paper is drawn from my ongoing research about documentary representation in 'postwar' Lebanon. My research is informed by three periods of fieldwork in Lebanon, as well as multi-sited moments where I focused on the global circulation of 'Arab' and 'Middle Eastern' art. I began research on this topic nearly 10 years ago when Lebanon was about a decade beyond its protracted 'civil war,' again in 2005 during the 'Cedar Revolution,' and again in 2009 as Lebanon struggled to grapple with the effects of the 2006 war with Israel and wrestle with the growing prominence of Hezbollah and other ideologues.

. 2 The conflating of Lebanon's eighteen official sectarian identities, called confessions, into a civil duality, typically rendered as a national dispute between Muslims and Christians, belies the role of secular militias, shifting alliances, and prolonged history of foreign intervention. Refer to Robert Fisk's *Pity the Nation* (1992), an expansive record of this war, which provides an extended presentation of the shifting alliances, outside manipulations, and internal power dynamics.

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the opening of several satellite stations, which provided many jobs for journalists, technicians, filmmakers, and artists. Formal and informal collectives found each other in the rubble. Most of these endeavors were low-cost efforts, with common interest being the only thing that held them together. Many returning artists and filmmakers, as well as those who had endured in Lebanon, found ripe material for artistic and docu- mentary expression. Among these emerging artists, Akram Zaatari has exemplified avant-garde and interdisciplinary documentary practices in contemporary Lebanon. His oeuvre opens a set of representational possibilities that are not reducible to visualizing violence or picturing politics. A close look at Zaatari's work shows a carefully designed set of practices that bridges concerns about aesthetics, politics, and research.

As a visual anthropologist concerned with the mechanisms and social relations that govern documentary practices in contemporary Lebanon, I want to understand how visual practitioners, like Akram Zaatari, select particular aesthetic forms and social figures to focus on within this contested landscape. This will help to explain how creative individuals navigate the politics of image production and dissemination between war-torn field sites and curious publics near and far. Although most visual anthropologists have been shy about using political aesthet- ics in their own work, a close examination of experimental documentary practices in Lebanon can provide ethnographers and social scientists important insights into alternative visual methodologies and embodied ways of mediating the lived experience of political uncertainty.

Documentary Artists

When I first came to Lebanon during the summer of 2001 to do pre- dissertation research on Lebanese cinema, the multiplicity of vocational titles any one person may claim challenged my conceptions of what these categories mean: filmmaker, artist, author, intellectual, academic, journalist,

critic, curator, etc. The hybrid nomenclature of 'documen- tary artist' demonstrates the multivalency of creative practices in this impoverished, war-torn landscape.3 The art and cinema industries had dried up, and those who chose to stay, and even those who left and later returned, all had to learn their practices autodidactically to some

3 "Documentary artist" is how Akram Zaatari described his profession in an artist talk in Berlin.

extent. This improvisational learning is integrally linked to experiences of contingency and times of uncertainty, which correlates with Akram Zaatari's research on "the dynamics that govern image-making in situ- ations of war."4

This hybridity—the mixing of the documentary genre's objectivity and the subjectivity of artistic creativity is also important to consider in relation to this work's fan base. In general, artists like Zaatari could be understood to be feeding a deep hunger in the west that became more pronounced in the wake of September 11. That hunger partly gains its pangs of emptiness from the tasteless caricatures and racist propaganda that typically feed the media consumer's diet. While some alternatives do exist (and more all the time), they hardly dominate the discourse. Furthermore, caricatures within popular culture often work their way into the objectivity of the news world, thus demonstrating the poignancy of hybrid aesthetics that draw upon both empirical and imaginary qualities.

This voracious appetite of the western art world is not without prob- lems colored by perennially thorny east/west relationships. And yet, the global art world's fashionable taste for Lebanese and Arab art does cre- ate a space for artists working in this hybrid documentary-art 'field' to experiment with tropes and character types. Thus, it creates opportuni- ties to reorient the iconography of the Middle East and North Africa, to repopulate an essentialized landscape, and to demonstrate practices that localize representation. Within this broadly understood void in which the global art world hungers for fresh material, I wish to address three specific lacunae relating to visual knowledge of the Arab world and demonstrate how the work of Akram Zaatari offers worthy pos- sibilities for feeding the void.5

The first lacuna relates to the orientalist repertoires. As we know, the images depicting the 'east' have both created and ignored blind spots in the archives of the Middle East. Zaatari's work with the Arab Image Foundation (AIF) to collect the photographic heritage of the region

4 This is the statement Zaatari makes near the beginning of his video *In This House* (2005).

5 The phrasing and word choice here are meant to evoke a stark reality of living in volatile locations in which the abyss may open before you at any moment. But this does not imply that the Lebanese are fragile—at least, not usually.

provides a "parallax" perspective to the tradition of western colonial and exploratory photography (Ginsburg 1995). Put another way, AIF's collection of photographs "by residents of the Middle East and North Africa from the 19th century until the present" sees differently from the visual regimes inspired by orientalism.6

The second lacuna relates to the silences and blind spots in the record of the civil war in Lebanon. Zaatari's long-term project entitled *Earth of Endless Secrets* provides a meta-analysis of people's wartime docu- ments and photographs. Zaatari has developed a methodological visual practice intended to "unearth" not only wartime artifacts and images, but also the mundane "habits of recording" people developed during these periods of instability. In so doing, Zaatari evokes an ethnographic frame focused on the remnants of Lebanon's secular resistance against the Israeli

occupation of southern Lebanon (al-Janub). This is a history that is easily forgotten in relation to the current Islamic-based resis- tance of Hezbollah. Viewing the mediated record of this earlier resistance against the current one provides a cogent critique of ideologically driven violence. But this does not seem to be Zaatari's principal aim. Instead he endeavors to reclaim a human dimension captured, not nec- essarily in stories and images, but in the practices and materiality of self-mediation, thus enabling Zaatari (among others) to create sites for contesting and rethinking the historical production of Lebanon.

Third, and specifically important to our concerns motivating this special issue of *Cairo Papers,* social scientists of the Middle East have overlooked the potential applications of visual methodologies in their research. Indeed, according to a twenty-year content analysis of the journal *Visual Anthropology* published by Routledge, only six percent of the journal's published articles focused on the Middle East (Davey 2008:199).7 Given that the journal did do a special double issue on "The Seen and the Unseeable: Visual Culture in the Middle East" (Armbrust 1998), the frequency of scholarship in other issues becomes that much lower. One is forced to ask, whither the visual anthropologists of the Middle East? Are there really so few?

. 6 See the AIF website: http://www.fai.org.lb/Home.aspx

. 7 Compare this low quantity to 12 percent on South Asia, 18 percent on East Asia/ Pacific, 18 percent on Europe, 22 percent on Africa, and 25 percent on the Americas (Davey 2008:199).

Although neither self-identifying as an ethnographer nor making claims about anthropology, Akram Zaatari both researches the visual cultures of the Middle East and engages in research practices that uti- lize methodologies similar to that of visual ethnographers. Accordingly, I aim to situate Akram Zaatari's work within the shifting debates about art and research within the fields of visual anthropology and visual cul- ture. Furthermore, it is important to consider the way in which Zaatari's work adds a political dimension to the 'art + research' formula, which is typically missing or downplayed in visual ethnographies. As such, Zaatari's research practices as a 'documentary artist' expand the debate about the aesthetic and sensory registers of visual research, provide the- oretically informed models for critically engaging politically sensitive debates, and offer alternatives to the dearth of visual anthropology in the region.

Blind Spots

Anyone seeking to represent the Middle East cross-culturally will surely struggle with the predominant stereotypes of the region produced by outsiders as violent, misogynistic, and despotic, not to mention exotic, labyrinthine, and mysterious. As co-founder of the AIF, Akram Zaatari has worked to collect hundreds of thousands of photographs made by professional and amateur photographers in the Arab world. In a wide- spread effort to collect visual artifacts made by residents of the region (rather than western travelers), AIF has created a massive archive of locally produced images. Zaatari has been chiefly responsible for over- seeing the collection of an extensive photographic archive from flea markets, art collectors, photographic studios, and family albums. In his efforts to chronicle the work of Middle Eastern photographers, Zaatari joins biographical narratives about photographers with an analysis of modern desires to mediate the transformation of social identity. This attention to local modernities avoids typical presumptions about the destruction of tradition and static notions of authenticity. The images collected from studio and amateur photographers show the emergence of new sensibilities and provide a reflexive record of modernity's own incursion into public and private spheres of interaction. In this way the modern history of the Middle East re-emerges from this alternative record of snapshots and portraits collected at the AIF.

But Zaatari does not conceptualize the AIF as a static repository, nor merely an alternative archive. Rather, through exhibition and the cre- ative production of several publications, videos, and installations, his work constitutes an emergent site for reappraising the visual record of the Arab region.8 By simultaneously collecting the photographic heri- tage of the Middle East and North Africa and promoting photographic practices, AIF offers an alternative site from which to advance critiques about the visual record of the region. This has helped artists like Zaatari to avoid making a redundant critique of Orientalist representations of the Middle East. In this sense, AIF presents significant transforma- tive potential for steering the direction of visual culture studies in the Middle East (so long as its collection is spared the threat of violence experienced by many private collections). Consider the shift in termi- nology from the 'archive' to the more personal notion of a 'collection' and the way that Zaatari resists adopting the preexisting order of typi- cal archival sources. By doing so, he endeavors to move conceptual for- mulations away from bureaucratic disciplinary approaches to history.

Likewise, rather than documents of an archive, he prefers to think of these remnants as "paleontological fossils,"9 as an unearthed artifact with

. 8 Walid Raad's imaginary archive is often situated in contrast to the work emerging from the AIF. For Raad, the Atlas Group Archive provides an alternative archive with imaginary characters in order to affectively analyze the way history becomes documented and made believable. There is a tendency to distinguish these two endeavors based on fiction versus fact, thus reifying AIF as a 'true' archive and Raad's project as 'false.' As Zaatari says, "Better would be to suggest that they represent different experiential approaches to history, neither fictional nor real" (Zaatari and Feldman 2007:57). Whereas Raad's Atlas Group Archive foregrounds imaginary documents produced by fictitious characters in order to subvert the hegemony of the official archive, AIF has fostered the preservation of 'vanishing' archives with photographs from across the region and re-enchanted them with social and cultural contextual analysis. Both projects ultimately critique the traditional archive based on Enlightenment ideals of rational and objective categorization.

. 9 I find his choice of "pale-ontological" peculiar. Is he really interested in the study of prehistoric beings? Or is it a desire to locate people in situations of war as being outside history, outside of recordable experience, and thus as predecessors to history—its ghosts? An interesting rereading of the idea of 'pre-' history could be meant here to evoke time travel and the collapsing of different times into a found object, making its historicity radioactive (an idea evocative of Laura Marks's work). These conjectures are unsubstantiated by Zaatari, but the ontological dimension of his paleontological interest begs for further consideration. Knowing the nature of being from the fossil record of Lebanon's civil war era is an important consideration for these artifacts in the present.

"both its original integrity and its transformation over time" (Zaatari and Feldman 2007:51). This evocation of scientific research provides an important parameter or considering Zaatari's work in relation to anthropology. Indeed, characterizations of Zaatari's work as "research" are commonplace. Zaatari and art critics alike have highlighted such concepts in his work as "archaeology," "excavation," "fieldwork," "data," and "fossil." Thus far, this discourse on research practices—"the multi- faceted approach that defines his practice as 'field work'" (Cotter 2009:54)—typically evokes

an archaeological excavation. Referring to the ongoing work Zaatari has done on Hashem El-Madani's Sheherazade photo studio in his hometown of Saida,10 Zaatari says:

I decided I should tackle [Madani's] entire collection . . . so for me the project became centered, precisely almost as an archaeo- logical site, centered on that studio. Not only being interested in single pictures, but also being interested in the fabric or the tissue as a whole. I'm interested in what exists in his vitrine, how he organizes his work, how he organizes his studio, how he decorates it. I'm interested in the peak time of his economy and the fall of his economy. (Zaatari et al. 2009)

While curators and critics have been quick to pick up on his "archae- ological" trope as a metaphor for buried postwar trauma, which has been instructive for much of Lebanese postwar artwork, this reading tends to account only for historical or perhaps historiographical inter- pretations. A close look at Zaatari's own conceptual framework reveals a deep concern with the contemporary life of these artifacts and the sites in which they are discovered. He thus revisits mediated pasts and records their state in the contemporary, which incorporates a dimension of lived experience. I suggest that this opens an ethnographic dimen- sion to his work that has not been properly scrutinized.

Consider the way Akram Zaatari archaeologically unearths artifacts and works to place them within "the tissue as a whole." His attention to the act of excavation provides the conceptual key. The unearthed photographic artifacts "resist belonging to the present until a conscious

10 Refer to the texts Zaatari has produced about Madani's photographic practices (Zaatari and Le Feuvre 2004; Zaatari and Bassil 2007).

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act seeks to use them for a particular purpose, to reassign them a new function" (Zaatari and Feldman 2007:64). While the reappropriations of these artifacts "are made to reveal narratives and desires in the pres- ent, they still tell of their original function, thereby speaking simulta- neously in two different tenses" (2007:64). If the past tense speaks for the 'pre-history' of the 'pale'-ontological fossil, then the present tense speaks for the contemporary concerns of the human subject. Indeed, Zaatari's work does bring these tenses together. This bilinguality of past and present tenses means speaking of the artifact as both an archaeolo- gist and an ethnographer.

Unearthing Artifacts

While artists like Zaatari draw upon research techniques to ferret out unexpected stories otherwise blanketed by the orientalist repertory, these techniques also disrupt the silences and blind spots in the record of the civil war in Lebanon, and thus deserve further consideration. The "habits of recording" that Zaatari developed during the war in order to counter the boredom of a childhood spent in the safety of indoor environments may help explain his interest in situating artifacts within a quotidian domain. Zaatari's first photographs, mundane journal entries, and col- lection of banal objects reveal a desire to witness and collect evidence of a world falling apart. Zaatari's early practice of recording and collecting foreshadow his professional filmmaking and archivist pursuits. Suzanne Cotter, who had curated an exhibition called *Out of Beirut* at the Modern Art Oxford show, argues that Zaatari's work conveys a "sense of a quo- tidian that contains within it extraordinary events" (Cotter 2009:55). Michèle Hadria argues that Zaatari's engagement with "everyday life is claimed at a human, ordinary, and intimate level, transcending the erup- tions, the curfews, the incursions, and suicide-bombings to counter-act the violence relentlessly spotlighted by the European [and American] news" (Hadria 2005:38). Indeed, this micro-ritualization of recording one's world at war provides crucial links for understanding Zaatari's research interests in the social histories of photography in the Middle East. It also helps to elucidate Zaatari's historiographical critiques, in which "the collected document . . . is a central premise, as is the writing of history in which tangential events and the subjective eye-witness are privileged players" (Cotter 2009:50). Given the privileged status of the

archival object, it is thus necessary to unpack Zaatari's archaeological research in order to reveal the ethnographic dimension.

Like that of many of Lebanon's artists and filmmakers, Akram Zaatari's work is concerned with the legacy of violence in his country and the representation of conflict across the Middle East. Unlike some who employ fictive elements in order to elucidate the unrepresentable, he insists on the veracity of his material.11 He is actually troubled by the tendency in postwar Lebanese art to fictionalize characters and nar- ratives. He says that this "veracity" can be collected in fieldwork. He describes both his collecting and his documentary productions as a type of research that "steps into the unknown" of a social field, which evokes the spontaneity of the ethnographic encounter. The knowledge gained in his visual studies is inherently tied to real locations and real people. In making his 1997 video, *All is Well on the Border,* about the occupa- tion of southern Lebanon, Zaatari relied on displaced people living in the southern suburbs of Beirut as his primary source of knowledge. There he gathered interview testimonials with men formerly detained in Israeli-run prisons.

He also collected various photographs and documents, like a series of letters from the imprisoned Nabih Awada (nicknamed 'Neruda'), who had been captured in his mid-teens. Neruda's letters to his family serve as one of the capture narratives in Zaatari's video. This emotional connection to research is also described in the relationships he formed in these projects. Zaatari says, "I remember I was so moved every time I met Nabih's family. I think I loved him without knowing him" (inter- view with author, 2010). Inspired by Neruda's epistolary poetics, *All is Well on the Border* shows the tension between what goes unsaid and what is not permitted to be spoken.

After his release from Askalan Prison, Neruda re-emerged as a signif- icant focus of Zaatari's visual research studies.12 Compared to his focus

. 11 "But what sets his work apart is, among other things, his insistence on the veracity of his material. Zaatari does not, for example, toy with fact and fiction" (Wilson-Goldie 2009:322).

. 12 Where he was imprisoned with Sirius Black. What? Sorry, my wires got crossed there. The world works in mysterious ways. Neruda was held at Askalan and Sirius Black at Azkaban. With only cursory research, I discovered that the idea behind the prison in the Harry Potter series is credited to Alcatraz, but the phonetic parallel with the prison in Israel is much closer.

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on testimonials and the embodiment of recitation in *All is Well on the Border,* his more recent work with Neruda is decidedly silent. In *Untold,* a series of 48 postcard portraits of men Neruda befriended in prison, most of the detainees write uplifting verses much like Neruda's happy letters from prison that refuse the victim narrative. But this silence is also evident in Zaatari's most recent videos, *Nature Morte* and *Letter to Samir.* Borrowing from the how-to video format, Zaatari makes 'pro- cess films' or, as he refers to it, "portraits of making," stripped of com- mentary. *Nature Morte* provides his first formal study with this format as two men quietly perform two very different tasks. The actor in the foreground prepares a bomb, while the actor in the background mends his comrade's torn coat. Kaelen Wilson-Goldie contrasts these silent and pensive observational studies with Zaatari's earlier, more "cacopho- nous" work (2009:321). According to Wilson-Goldie, the "long, quiet, pensive shot" that begins *Nature Morte* constitutes the "distilling" of his visual research. However, I suggest that one of his most cacophonous and media-saturated videos, *In This House,* actually foreshadows these observational 'how-to' studies.

Zaatari's 2005 video, *In This House,* tells the story of a buried let- ter being excavated and the political tensions released by this event. In Zaatari's search for other people who had developed "habits of record- ing" during the war, Zaatari interviewed Ali Hashisho, a Lebanese photojournalist

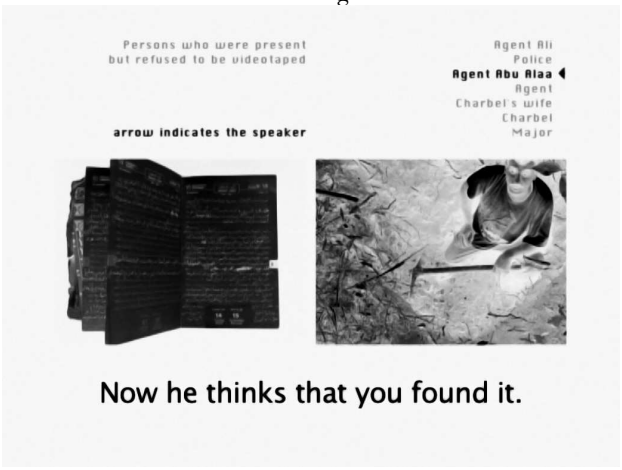
and former militia member of the Democratic Popular Party. As it turns out, Ali had kept a collection of materials from his time on the front lines of the resistance. These banal objects included stones, dried leaves, photographs, and notebooks (38 pages of which are reproduced and translated in Zaatari's *Earth of Endless Secrets* [Zaatari and Bassil 2009]). Ali also tells Zaatari a story about a letter he bur- ied. After the Taef agreement, when all militiamen were ordered to lay down their arms and withdraw (except for Hezbollah, of course), he wrote a letter to the owners of the house where he and his comrades had made a base on the front line. He says to Zaatari that he wanted to tell the owners that he and his men had respected the house and had tried to take care of it. Zaatari gets explicit details about the address of the house and the location of the buried letter and sets off to find it. After some delays with the house's owner, Zaatari hires a gardener to dig for the letter

134 In This Field: Akram Zaatari's Ethnographic Excavations

In This House/Fi Hazal Bayt (2005), Akram Zaatari. Courtesy of the filmmaker.

while he films the unfolding performance. In this sense, Zaatari's prac- tice of excavation takes its most literal form in this video, as we watch the gardener slowly dig a large hole in the ground. And yet, I argue that archaeological metaphors applied to this video actually elide an ethnographic dimension. Because this letter was buried within a mor- tar casing, because it was buried by a member of a defunct socialist militia, because it was buried at a time when southern Lebanon was largely under Israeli occupation, and because Zaatari desires to film the event, this simple garden excavation has prompted the presence of sev- eral members of the police, army, and security forces. We see their feet flanking the growing hole and can hear these men refuse to be imaged. Instead, our attention is visually directed at the gardener's efforts to unearth this artifact as our observation of this mundane task is coupled with suspense and expectations.

The video was initially conceived as a two-channel installation composed of an interview on one track and observational footage on the other. Zaatari later decided to combine these components in a



split-screen video and add several additional layers of information to the timeline. In Laura Marks's essay, "Diagram with Olive Tree," she says, "In *This House* is a video that doesn't provide answers on the sur- face; it asks viewers to excavate" (Marks 2009:229). Despite her atten- tion to the excavation, she actually pays very little attention to the hole being dug. And while she directs viewers to excavate answers from the ground, she is actually much more concerned with an analysis of the periphery—that is, the edge of the screen. Marks explains, "Because the people refused to appear, and because the act of digging is not very visual, the event barely registers visually"

(2009:228).13 Let us consider this statement in parts. First, the "refusal to appear" is only a discursive analysis of the absent presence, or rather present absence, of the state officials and the owners of the home. They are in fact significant subjects in the video, embodied in their feet and ankles as well as their voices and words. Akram actually utilizes a diagram to aurally identify those who didn't want to be identified visually. This is achieved with both a visual cue and a specific high-pitched tone for each person. He says that he added this nerve-racking noise over their voices, because this best represented how he felt toward them (interview with author, 2005). By reducing the size of the video frames and pushing informa- tion to the edges of the screen, Zaatari uses these diagrams to draw our attention to the edges of the frame and the politically contentious element of the dig. In other words, the edges of the video populated by surveilling appendages are emphasized on the boundary between video footage and an informational diagram.

As for the second part of Marks's statement, I would like to decon- struct "the act of digging" and why, contrary to Marks, I think that it is particularly visual and how it serves as a profound example of ethno- graphic observation. But because Marks's visual registry privileges the edge of the frame, she has unwittingly evacuated the gardener from the unfolding scene. Indeed, while those attending the excavation, as an audience on the sidelines, are actually "barely visible," Faisal, the

13 It is unclear from her statement what constitutes "barely" visual, but she goes on to argue that Zaatari's aesthetic path has moved toward an abstraction in which the image/visual is barely registered. The "abstraction" of these moments of watching accentuates the boundaries of the image, perhaps the border of permissible visibility. We become aware of the limits of what cannot be seen, by intently focusing on what can be seen.

hired hand digging the hole, is the only person directly imaged at the excavation (albeit mute). The visual centrality of this silently digging gardener underlines the fact that he bears the burden of representa- tion for everyone present. In a strange turn of phrase, Marks refers to the "mute documentary image" as "dumb as dirt" (2009:229). Although speaking of the hole in the garden, this statement evokes the silent gar- dener without naming him. If answers are supposedly buried beneath the surface and we must dig for them, then what are we to glean from this stupid soil and the man who tills it?

During the video, we learn his name, Faisal, and that he is fasting for Ramadan, making the digging more strenuous. Zaatari has hired him before, remarking to me, "He is so honest, rare in Lebanon" (inter- view with author, 2010). As it turns out, Faisal is a Palestinian living in Zaatari's hometown of Saida. Conceiving him partly as an actor, Zaatari says that the video actually shows "how he dislikes the com- ments around him. Lebanese people around him, the family, the agents, the police, tell bad jokes, unnecessary comments, and he rises above all this, as a hard worker . . . silent and noble" (interview, 2010).14

At the moment when the buried letter is about to be unearthed, Zaatari cuts to a full screen. As all the diagrammed information on the periphery of the image is pushed off screen, people who were previously "barely visible" begin to enter the shot, as if this recovered artifact has pulled them back into the frame. Zaatari breaks his confidential frame as he follows the canister out of the hole, tilting the camera up to wit- ness the curious crowd of men, women, and children. As one of the men opens this bomb canister, the attending audience erupts in anxious joy and "the search yields joyfully unexpected results" (Zaatari and Bassil 2009:223). In one sense, an ethnographic moment explodes on screen, not with pieces of shrapnel, but with shared excitement.

While wartime secrets may be buried just below the surface, the ordinary landscape sustains postwar secrets. In this sense, *Earth of Endless Secrets* not only implies artifacts of 'archaeological value,' but 14 "By being a silent witness, he elevated beyond the daily Lebanese-Lebanese divisions, beyond Israeli collaborators and intelligence agencies looking for tracing their activity. . . Faisal risks being a caricature, like everything does, in fact I realize that he is like Hanzalah (Naji el-Ali's caricature of a random Palestinian watching the daily horrors of the world)" (interview with author, 2010).

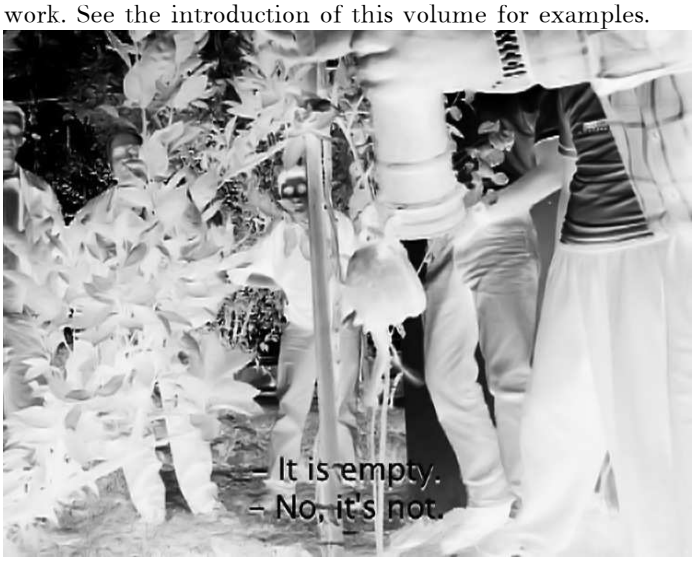
In This House/Fi Hazal Bayt (2005), Akram Zaatari. Courtesy of the filmmaker.

opens a space for engaging the contemporary. By disrupting the surface and provoking the assemblage of anxious state power, Zaatari's 'ethno- graphic' footage gives shape to the invisible or obscured social structures flanking the ditch. Rather than situating truth as a phenomenon buried in the (psychoanalytic) depths of the war, the crystallization of social forces on the surface provides a more ethnographic rendering of the lived experience amid postwar conditions.

Ethnographic Lacuna

As mentioned in the introduction, the third lacuna in visual knowl- edge of the region is exhibited by the dearth of visual anthropology of the Middle East (Davey 2008).15 Although an emerging generation of visual ethnographers is beginning to correct this absence, the Middle East has not featured significantly in the genre of ethnographic cinema.

15 Given the prominence of anthropologists of the Middle East and North Africa engaging with emergent 'media worlds,' it is curious that visual anthropologists have not contributed any notable work. See the introduction of this volume for examples.



138 In This Field: Akram Zaatari's Ethnographic Excavations

And yet, ironically, the Middle East is probably one of the most medi- ated regions in the world. Broadcast journalism plays a significant role in tracing the contours of regional mediascapes. The overdetermined imagery of war journalism is precisely one of the domains that Arab video artists have tried to tackle. Indeed, within the terrain of contem- porary art and politically focused documentary film, there is a signifi- cant body of work about MENA that is situated in opposition to mass journalism. For this reason, it seems imperative for visual anthropolo- gists working in the Middle East to form closer ties with artists and documentarians operating in other disciplines in a

common effort to engender new critical visualities of the region. Those who pursue these cross-disciplinary objectives must first grapple with institutional obsta- cles that would limit or prevent this type of exchange.

While visual anthropologists have spent much time and energy debating the definition of ethnographic film, these redundant debates have been mired in fatigued and irresolvable dualities of art/science, subjectivity/objectivity, words/images, and measurements of 'ethno- graphicness.' In a now dated call to action, Akos Ostor argues "It is time to lay aside the old debate about visual anthropology failing or succeeding" (Ostor 1989:722) and calls on the field to envision a new future. Indeed, in the past two decades a flood of work has come to offer new frameworks for thinking visually as an anthropologist and doing ethnography visually.These shifts both within and beyond the field help pave the way for this future trajectory. For its valuation of difference, particularity, and lived experience, visual anthropology has the potential to influence a more expansive genre of cross-cultural image-making. A substantial obstacle for visual anthropologists to consider is the way disciplinary boundaries have delimited cross-fertilization. Indeed, by policing the field's 'ethnographic' parameters, an exclusionist framework ultimately devalues interdisciplinary collaboration.16

Of course, disciplinary borders have been crossed and nowadays the anthropological 'others' are producing important and interesting work

16 Allaine Cerwonka's work on interdisciplinary issues is illustrative here. Following Mary Douglas's work on purity and contamination, Cerwonka argues, "the promiscuousness of interdisciplinary scholars is indeed perceived to be unwise and, for some, dangerous to the academy because their work challenges the established divisions of authority and expertise that disciplinary borders conventionally reflect" (Cerwonka 2007:9).

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on cross-cultural representation, but they are more likely to be working in the fields of visual culture, art history, and film studies, rather than visual anthropology. These alternative perspectives, whether informed by the politics of race, ethnicity, or gender, also help to scrutinize the presumptions of ethnographic authority. Cultural critics from various ethnographic contexts are now producing innovative and intelligent visual projects that both borrow from and rail against the anthropologi- cal discipline. Indeed, now that the 'others' are representing themselves, Bill Nichols (1994) argues that ethnographic film is in trouble and can expect great change in its future. I do not share Nichols' foreboding; rather I think that this provides great promise for the field. MacDougall (2001) also has a more optimistic projection for the future of the field. He suggests that digital video has begun to transform the field as a younger generation of ethnographic filmmakers have shifted their focus from the description of discrete 'cultures' toward current concerns about identity and social experience amidst a globalizing and postcolonial world. It is equally telling that one of the few manuals of cross-cultural filmmaking suggests, "the most interesting filmmaking today is hap- pening in a fuzzy area between objective and subjective. . . . [T]hese films combine poetry and performance with autobiography and archi- val footage in ways that sublate traditional distinctions between fact and fiction" (Barbash and Taylor 1997:21–22).17

Of course, there is no real agreement among anthropologists as to what constitutes 'ethnographic film.'18 Given the interdisciplinary slippage across theoretical and methodological domains, anthropol- ogy can no longer claim ownership of ethnographic methods and its discourses. Infused with different modes of analysis, the meaning of 'ethnography' moves onto different discursive terrain. Similarly to the way that media studies has begun to fetishize the "ethnographic

. 17 Barbash and Taylor head the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard University, where Diana Allan (represented in this volume) worked on her film projects.

. 18 Considering anthropology's generally vague articulations about the meaning of 'culture,' Prins argues, "it would be amazing if visual anthropologists actually had managed to programmatically define ethnographic film" (1997:281). Although many efforts have been made to legitimate the definition of 'ethnographic film,' the concept is used commonly outside the academic field and is beyond the policing of professional anthropologists. My project here is also interested in expanding what anthropologists would find significant in their research.

perspective" (Murphy and Kraidy 2003), the 'turn' toward ethnog- raphy can also be felt in contemporary art practices (Coles 2000). Accordingly, it is necessary to explore the way these fields have encountered an ideological 'crisis of representation' in an effort to articulate a common ground as well as potential oversights and differ- ences. Considering the recent interdisciplinary turns in the humani- ties and social sciences—the narrative turn, the pictorial turn, the visual turn, the sensory turn, and the ethnographic turn—this con- vergence of disciplinary crises reflect a broad critique of representa- tion that should help to elucidate an eclectic field of visual research in MENA. If, instead, academic fields segregate their objects of study too strictly, there is a risk of creating artificial gaps in our knowledge. Finding overlap between fields stands to benefit the study of visual cultures more than a delineation of academic territory could.

The concern perhaps should not be about disciplinary exclusivity, but about reclaiming interdisciplinary significance. As a visual anthro- pologist, I find it strange to read surveys of 'visual culture' with scant mention of anthropology (cf. Dikovitskaya 2005).19 For instance, after drawing on anthropology to briefly draw up a working definition of 'culture,' Sturken and Cartwright (2001) only fleetingly mention the field. While they claim that "visual and cultural anthropologists have done the most toward providing accounts of how specific Third World cultures produce and use technologies and images imported from the industrialized West," their attention to anthropology accounts for only one percent of their entire textbook (2001:328). Known ostensibly as the 'study of culture,' anthropology seems strangely excluded from material on 'visual culture.' Indeed, the definition of culture seems hap- hazardly applied.

This argument about visual culture thus calls for a deeper engagement with the convergence of art and ethnography. Art and ethnography offer a synergistic approach to researching, collecting, and presenting social and cultural forms that defy scientistic and objectifying modes of description. Schneider and Wright demonstrate that ethnographic and artistic approaches often share "certain questions, areas of investigation,

19 "Visual culture" here refers specifically to the critically inspired outgrowth of art history, and its disciplinary framework can be traced in the journal *Visual Culture* as well as in the volumes mentioned in this article.

and . . . methodologies" (2006:3). Accordingly, they argue that anthro- pology needs to engage critically with artistic practices that draw on material and sensual registers rather than only textual ones. These contemporary art practices provide means for apprehending the per- formative aspects of quotidian experience, embodied meaning, affec- tive intensity, and agency of objects and images. Schneider and Wright also suggest that a reevaluation of experimental film and video can provide new perspectives for visual anthropology to consider. By look- ing at experimental documentary in Lebanon and thinking of the ways in which it engages with ethnographic film and visual anthropology, I am calling for greater efforts to think about doing visual research in conflict zones where 'stable' notions of truth, subjectivity, and cultural identity are irrevocably disrupted. I argue

that the goals of such research cannot presume to situate cultural experience objectively, nor that such stable categories can be reset through research. Instead, following Laura Marks (2000), David MacDougall (2005), Sarah Pink (2006), and oth- ers (Shaviro 1993; Sobchack 1999; Wahlberg 2008), I argue that we need to embrace a more corporeal (sensory/phenomenological) dimen- sion of visual research that does not aim to 'make sense' cognitively but rather to resonate affectively.

Post-Ethnography

"In This Field," the title of my paper, is thus a play on the title of Zaatari's video, *In This House/Fi Hazal Bayt* (2005), as well as both the idea of a specified disciplinary field and research-oriented fieldwork. The intersection of these fieldsites is thus an intentional effort to bring otherwise disparate practices together. Thus I argue that Zaatari's his- toric journey through the archive and then tracing photographs back to the site where they were made performs something like a post-eth- nography. Zaatari's research combines archival investigation with inter- views, observations, and explorations in order to salvage living traces of earlier work and to question inherited representational codes. Unlike earlier renditions of 'salvage anthropology' that hoped to preserve 'van- ishing' cultures, static preservation is not Zaatari's aim in his archival research. Referring to the Madani photo studio and the series of works that have emerged from it, Zaatari sees his work as an intervention in a debilitated profession: "I'm intervening in his life completely and I'm

shaping [it] . . . so it's almost like a living documentary and it is not like a chapter that has been closed" (Zaatari et al. 2009).

Like Madani, our story is still unfinished. Lebanese documentary approaches, together with recent theoretical trends in visual anthro- pology, can co-participate in working through dilemmas raised about the cross-cultural representation of MENA—namely, how might visual anthropologists appropriate the critiques and aesthetics of this experi- mental Lebanese work? That is to ask, what sort of questions and methods have Lebanese artists and intellectuals articulated in order to conduct visual research in conflict zones? What is the translatability of this work into other contexts of conflict?

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