
Akram Zaatari, a founder of the Arab Image Foundation in Beirut in 1997, has emerged as one of the most prominent commentators on photography of the Middle East. Overseeing AIF's mission to preserve and study the photographic culture of the region, Zaatari has, as both an artist and a cultural critic, pushed for more experimental approaches to understanding this collection. Through books, installations, and videos, Zaatari's visual studies provide new ways of seeing and thinking about images. This work parallels his long-term engagement with "the state of image making in situations of war," highlighted in his book *Earth of Endless Secrets* (2009). More recently, *Akram Zaatari: The Uneasy Subject* (2011) explores the way photography and other imaging practices capture vernacular expressions of masculinity and sexuality. The following interview with anthropologist Mark Westmoreland took place last October via email correspondence.

Akram Zaatari
Against Photography

Conversation with Mark Westmoreland

Mark Westmoreland: You have played a fundamental role in the establishment and direction of the Arab Image Foundation. Today, AIF is one of the most interesting and significant photographic archives in the region. Can you talk about how this collection came to be?

Akram Zaatari: AIF was created by many endeavors, with many movements in it. It could have ended up simply as an image bank. My involvement marked AIF's path after the first two years, and my interest in extensive fieldwork tied to the production of exhibitions dominated AIF's practice. Walid Raad has been of great support since that time, both in interpreting the collection and in debating with the other members.

The initial goal of the foundation was naïve, but not unproductive: we wanted to be able to recount, one day, a history of photography in the Arab region. AIF did not exist as an archive before individual artists expressed the desire to create a collection and work on it, with it. AIF reflects the concerns and desires of those behind it. Fundamentally, there is a difference between archives as collections of "sediment"—repositories of images of various practices in an institution—and what we do as individuals with AIF. If it is an archive, it is more an archive of research and collecting practices than an archive of photographic practices.

MW: You touch upon something quite significant here. If we consider the Arab Image Foundation as a conventional archive, we might assume that your work at AIF and your work as an artist occupy two distinct registers. But by delineating research and art as separate facets of your work, we might miss out on important ways these two projects converge. Can you talk about these roles and what your work at AIF means for you as an artist?



Still from the video
**On Photography People
 and Modern Times, 2010**
 Courtesy the artist and
 Sfeir Semler Gallery,
 Hamburg/Beirut

AZ: If we consider AIF’s collection as an archive of a photographic heritage/practices, we do miss out on the personalized nature of that collection and its contemporary component. AIF is a product of a movement in contemporary arts, internationally and in Lebanon—particularly in the late 1990s—and seeing it today without this angle would be presenting a false history. Again, AIF started with a naïve propos to focus on important moments in photography’s history in the region, but soon we came to recognize how important photography is in writing personal histories, multiple histories. Looking through photographs became a writing project—in the way that Siegfried Kracauer and John Berger undertook amazing readings of history through photographs. So the desire to write histories became a driving force behind expanding AIF’s collection.

MW: As an example, a substantial part of your research and collecting practices have focused on Hashem El Madani, a studio photographer in your hometown, Saïda (Sidon), Lebanon. You’ve published two books about his work, *Studio Practices* in 2005 and *Promenades* in 2007, and have organized numerous exhibitions. How did you begin working with him?

AZ: I met Madani in 1998, and I became interested because he was not a perfectionist, “high-end” photographer. He produced many images that look poor from a technical perspective when compared to the work of his peers in urban centers like Beirut, Tripoli, Cairo, or Alexandria. Madani’s compositions were not complex: his subjects were usually placed right in the center of the frame, shown from head to toe. He rarely bothered with mannered or excessive lighting. In his early years, his shadow would fall onto his subjects because he would photograph them with the sun low behind him. (I find it amazing to see a photographer make mistakes that directly affect the shape

Twenty-eight Nights and a Poem (tools found on Hashem El Madani's desk), 2007-10. C-print
Courtesy the artist and Sfeir Semler Gallery, Hamburg/Beirut



of images!) But then ... you could see him improving over time, learning more and more. Madani did his best to establish a kind of signature style to differentiate his product from other people's. He took as many photographs as he could, all the while expanding his address book and adding clients to his growing archive.

MW: How did your interest shift from Madani's individual pictures to the workings of his studio?

AZ: He took pictures both in the studio—Studio Shehrazade—and outside, in public spaces or workplaces. He photographed by day and developed by night, seven days a week. He took pictures of weddings, burials, circumcision celebrations, festivities, political demonstrations, election rallies; he traveled with people who wanted a photographer along on daytrips. He cared about the quality of the image, his prints were well developed, and he wanted his prices to compete with other studios in town—so he privileged the 35-millimeter camera over heavier photo gear, and relied on this format for most of his outdoor photography.

A few years after I met him, I realized that my own interest in researching photographs was shifting, and that I was not looking for individual images of particular significance only; rather, I wanted to understand *how* Madani worked and how he made his choices. I was interested in how he used his studio, how he treated his clients, what kind of transactions took place there. I was also trying to understand why this profession was dying. This is how I decided to take his entire studio as a repository of transactions and records, and to target it with projects, a series of exhibitions, publications, and videos that would communicate an understanding of how photography has mixed with society throughout modern times. Studio Shehrazade still exists today partly because of an art/study project that considers describing his collection, preserving it at once as capital and as study material.

MW: Recently, you have entertained the provocative idea of being “against photography.” Your position entails a critique that challenges photography’s privileged status among other imaging practices, the presumed importance of preservation, and the burden of carrying collections into new and unintended economies. Particularly striking is your counter-preservationist suggestion to “give it all back”—to return original photographs to their owners. But, while *against* can mean simply contrasting, the term also carries the connotation of physical abutment, or collision, or even ideological opposition. What does this oppositional gesture mean for your future work with photography?

AZ: “Against photography,” as you say, has a double meaning. Today, it would make a great title for a magazine on photography—better than, say, “Aperture.” On the surface, it is a statement in opposition to the paths that photography institutions have taken. But indeed, “against photography” also means leaning against photography’s history in order to move elsewhere, where we can save photography from its fate.

My relation to photography is mainly one of study; it is a medium I rely on in my art practice: I am an image maker. Having explained how I admire photography’s ability to overthrow dominant historical narratives, to present us with multiple histories, even contradictory narratives, I want at the same time to stress that what stimulates me in this study is being able to look at documents with critical distance (both temporal and situational) and being able to compare them with other documents. But that’s the kind of cultural-studies perspective that marked much of my work in the 1990s. The idea behind the Arab Image Foundation was to establish a collecting mechanism and a study platform. For me, it was meant to be first a learning experience, culturally, and then a preservation project. When I started traveling, looking for photographs, I was eager to discover

what was out there that had been inaccessible to me. I was guided by the possibility of discovery.

I recently proposed to the board of AIF that we should offer to return collections to their respective families. There are many facets to this proposal. With passing years, I realized that the foundation does not need original documents to write history, especially now that scanning technology allows us to do what was difficult to do in the mid-1990s. We always insisted that we were interested only in originals, because our interest lies in photographic preservation. I don't believe in this anymore, because I don't see the preservation of photographs as preservation of material only. It would be interesting to determine what exactly is essential to preserve. If emotions can be preserved with pictures, then maybe returning a picture to the album from which it was taken, to the bedroom where it was found, to the configuration it once belonged to, would constitute an act of preservation in its most radical form. I made a video in 2010 titled *On Photography People and Modern Times*. It is about my sense of discovery while researching photography's history in the Middle East, and my more recent reservations about photographic preservation. The video closes with an interview with Armenian-Egyptian photographer Van Leo, during which I try to convince him to donate three additional pictures to AIF while he is trying to avoid answering. Van Leo's hesitation communicates a fear of parting from his images, perhaps because he knows he will soon die: should he agree to give away his archive while he's alive, or stay with it, at the risk of it being dispersed after his death?

MW: Critics often remark on the archaeological motifs in your work, but this idea of discovery strikes me as more alive with possibilities than the mere search for artifacts. Your video *In This House* (2005) and the related work *Letter for a Time of Peace* (2007) superbly demonstrate the nuance of excavation. The video records the search in the garden of a house in southern Lebanon for a letter buried by former resistance fighter Ali Hashisho, who occupied the house from 1985 to 1991. Can you elaborate on the idea of discovery in that work and in *Letter for a Time of Peace*?

AZ: When I started digging, looking for Hashisho's letter, which had been buried twelve years earlier in the garden of a house that he and his military group had occupied in Saïda, I was not really after the letter itself, but I was enjoying the *possibility* of finding it, and what might have been the experience of excavating it. I have the actual letter today in a drawer at my home in Beirut. The letter is not the work. The work lies in all that has surrounded its excavation, in what was constructed around that story, gesture, or performance—whatever you might call it. This is exactly how I would like to refer to the collection of the Arab Image Foundation. They are there as records, but also as traces of research, and they are not there as final pieces by themselves.

MW: How does this relate to the world of photography?

AZ: The world of photography, and the direction in which I see it heading, interests me less and less. I do not think that the platforms dedicated to photography—schools, journals, exhibition spaces, museums, funding organizations—have done enough to challenge definitions or to reenvision or reinvent the medium today. I am glad that Hasselblad Awards were recently given to Sophie Calle and Walid Raad, two artists who have expanded our notion of photography—but I can't see many other examples of forward motion, to be honest.

Look at how the notion of dance has changed in the past fifty years, and you will understand my argument against photography.



Objects of Study/Hashem El Madani/Studio Practices/Scratched Portrait of Mrs. Baqari. Saïda (Lebanon), 1957. Modern gelatin-silver print, 2006
Courtesy the artist and Sfeir Semler Gallery, Hamburg/Beirut
© Arab Image Foundation

“Against photography” also means leaning against photography’s history in order to move elsewhere, where we can save photography from its fate.

Letter for a Time of Peace
(the mortar capsule that
housed Ali Hashisho's
letter), 2007. C-print
Courtesy the artist and Sfeir
Semler Gallery, Hamburg/
Beirut



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Why, in comparison to dance, has the notion of photography not evolved? In my opinion this lack of progress is largely due to the cult of the original, and the glorification of the image as an object—not as an element in a larger protocol—that makes photography an object of speculation. It is speculation that ties a photographic object on one hand to a market and on another hand to a tradition of conservation. We are told that a photograph needs constant maintenance to keep it alive. Is it because dance is based originally and fundamentally on protocols that it is liberated from definitions, from material objects and the kind of capital that is linked to them? I think this question needs reflection, and I would have loved for the Arab Image Foundation to take it on, but I am afraid it is not yet ready.

MW: Can we extend these ideas to your work at last year's Documenta, as an instance of thinking “against photography”—and ironically against preservation?

AZ: Instead of *ironically*, let's say *metaphorically*. My work at Documenta 13, *Time Capsule, Kassel* and the film *The End of Time*, imagines scripts/models for radical preservation designed for the Arab Image Foundation. These models consider nonscientific paradigms and recognize the necessity of timely withdrawal—as a gesture of radical preservation—of documents and artifacts in times of risk. The project was inspired by an act of the National Museum in Beirut at the outbreak of the civil war in Lebanon in 1975, when the museum director had most of the museum's collections of archaeological objects and artifacts sealed up inside huge concrete blocks, which remained onsite in the museum's main hall until the end of the war in 1991.

MW: This parallels the work in your 2009 project *Earth of Endless Secrets*. Your videos *In This House* and *Letter to Samir* foreground the “gestures” of opening and sealing,

Letter to Samir, 2008.

C-print

Courtesy the artist and Sfeir
Semler Gallery, Hamburg/
Beirut



burying and unearthing, and so on. (*Letter to Samir*, of 2008, is a video that depicts the writing of a letter, kept secret and sealed into a capsule, from Lebanese resistance fighter Nabih Awada, a former prisoner-of-war in Israel, to Samir al-Qintar, a prisoner in Israel for thirty years, upon Samir’s release in 2008.) In this way, *Time Capsule* strikes me as an extension of your interest in the “habits of recording” during times of war. In what ways does this project relate to your earlier work and in what way does it suggest a new approach?

AZ: I agree that time capsules are ways of recording, and consider the Earth to be the ultimate archive, the ultimate recording; hence the title *Earth of Endless Secrets*. Certain forms of recording—including my diaries, photographs, and audio recordings while living through the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982—are messages for time, but they are not totally time capsules. The work I did for Documenta borrowed the form of the time capsule as a medium to make a statement, to express my take on photography and on archives and on the future of the Arab Image Foundation.

You’re right that *Time Capsule, Kassel* draws from other works, notably *Letter to Samir*. *Time Capsule* takes the shape of an underground reinforced concrete foundation, whereas *Letter to Samir* takes the form of a letter-capsule that prisoners make and give to other prisoners to swallow before leaving prison, to send messages out without censorship. For me the form that any time capsule takes—its tectonics—is essential in the work, not only what’s inside it. I would even say it *is* the work. I considered leaving *Time Capsule, Kassel* empty—but at the last moment I decided to have it carry painted photographic objects, inspired by different photographic film formats: a reference to a photographer losing sight, hence producing monochromatic paintings. In parallel, *Time Capsule, Kassel* imagines institutions parting from their collections, and photography relieved from the institution.

Akram Zaatari is an artist dedicated to researching and studying photography in the Middle East. His work will be presented this summer at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, as *Projects 100*. Zaatari will represent Lebanon at this year’s Venice Biennale.

Mark Westmoreland is an anthropologist currently writing a book titled *Catastrophic Images*, about experimental documentary practices in Lebanon.