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Akram Zaatari: The Script New Art Exchange Nottingham

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commissioning a new monument, and while it is a choice that feels somewhat fetishistic, the journey from Ukraine to Manchester allows for some serendipitous moments. One such incident comes at the beginning of the journey, while still in Ukraine, as a passer-by asks 'it's our history, why did they take it down?', inadvertently echoing the same arguments made by those in favour of retaining Confederate monuments in the US (see Stephanie Schwartz's 'Face of Bigotry', *AM417*), or opponents of the global Rhodes Must Fall movement. As the statue makes its way through Germany, passing from East to West, Collins's narration brings up German reunification, and notes that while the East was liberated, this action also saw the vast privatisation of public land. It is ironic, then, that Engels's new home in Manchester sits on privately owned land masquerading as public space.

Intercut with the statue's journey, Collins shows various scenes from across working-class life in today's Manchester, contrasted with Maxine Peake's narrator reading Engels's words, which resonate strongly with today's economic and social climate. 'Employment and food today do not mean employment and food tomorrow,' reads Peake at one point, which seems as true as ever, particularly as we hear from a warehouse worker who 'couldn't afford to stay off' returning to work after suffering a stroke. It's moments like this where *Ceremony* shows its value, as Collins reminds us of the exploitative and degrading working conditions that persist for many in this country. ■

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Akram Zaatari: The Script New Art Exchange Nottingham 13 July to 9 September

Akram Zaatari's exhibition 'The Script', which is also the title of his new film, a commission by New Art Exchange, consists of three bodies of work that ruminate on the production, consumption and distribution of images in digital media ecologies, taking the Middle East as a point of origin.

The first gallery exhibits Zaatari's 22-minute, four-screen video *Dance to the End of Love*, 2011. The image track shows sequences of low-grade phone camera footage uploaded to YouTube portraying young Arab men and boys from countries as diverse as Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Saudi Arabia and the UAE engaged in various forms of performance: motor vehicle stunts, demonstrations of 'superpowers', body-building, dancing, singing and playing instruments, the musical sequences filmed in domestic spaces typical of YouTube DIY self-performances. The large scale of the projections, however, shown in the round and viewed from a central circular seating area, estranges us from the original intimacy. Choreographed in sequential thematic sections, the work testifies to rather than enacts the passions of online communities across the Middle East which share and refine these 'scripts'. It mostly seems like harmless fun, but, as with internet culture, there



Phil Collins
Delete Beach 2016
installation view

are also a few ambiguous sequences, especially one of a young boy singing in the company of a group of armed men suggestive of mujahideen. A sequence showing numerous fast-changing windows and scrolling inserts of male homosexual dating sites occurs midway. Again, this might seem like harmless fun, but in many of these countries homosexuality is illegal. Is this why the images are predominantly homosocial rather than overtly sexual, the body-building sequences seeming instead to hyperbolise a libidinous sexuality by default?

In the darkened space of the second gallery, 24 formerly unpublished photographic portraits, from Zaatari's 2018 *Objects of Study* project, hover glowingly under individual lighting. Transferred onto the walls using Mod Podge and enhanced with white oil paint, the frameless images of posed sitters, male and female, are from the Shehrazade Studio of Hashem El Madani which operated from 1953 to the late 20th century in Zaatari's hometown of Saida in Lebanon. Zaatari acquired El Madani's studio collection as part of the Arab Image Foundation which he co-founded in 1997 with photographers Fouad Elkoury and Samer Mohdad. The AIF both preserves photographic collections of the Middle East, North Africa and Arab diasporas and, in the case of an artist such as Zaatari, makes these collections available for new readings, not of history, but of the historical life of images. In *Objects of Study*, unlike Zaatari's other outings of El Madani's studio, the people in the photographs are nameless, captions removed, perhaps mirroring the exhibition premise of displacing images from one ecology to another, alien one. While the male subjects portray themselves posing as cowboys, body-building or engaging in playful wrestling tussles which could as easily be amorous same-sex embraces, these performances are de-authored, their protagonists becoming objects of curiosity about life in pre-civil war Lebanon. Again, as with *Dance to the End of Love*, questions arise as to what it means to take these photographic and internet 'archives' out of their collective and self-authored contexts and show them under the signature of a successful artist. Is this a gesture of appropriation à la Sherrie Levine or is the work engaging

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in debates about representation? Many of the performative acts from both eras link to global media cultures, Hollywood cinema in particular, which suggests a certain homogeneity of desire, yet at the same time, they put paid to the western notion that Middle Eastern identities are 'pre-modern' and dominated by religious ideology. Ultimately, though, Zaatari's investment in re-presenting other people's 'collections' seems incredibly distant. Is he perhaps staging what Marianne Hirsch, referring to archives of war-torn countries, calls 'post memory', ie 'a space in the child-subject that links it with a world and events s/he personally never knew but with which s/he acquires a dislocated, imaginary intimacy'?

Post 2011, Zaatari has noticed a shift in YouTube subject matter away from the theatrical posing of *Dance to the End of Love* to more everyday family-oriented footage, especially depicting rituals around faith. One of the most popular 'scripts' was of fathers praying with their young sons playing around them. *The Script* re-enacts one such scenario. It opens with close-up of an actor's face in prayer cutting to a mid-shot of a modern domestic living room filled with children's toys. While the young father character performs his ritual, his two male children by turns mount his shoulders whenever he bows down. The sequence is repeated in an empty auditorium, the 8-minute film ending with shots of the empty seats as if standing in for an absent public, much as the singularity of *The Script* stands in for the online authors of these 'scripts'.

The film's iconicity is somewhat puzzling. Is this a representation of a good modern Muslim acceptable to a western audience? Perhaps *The Script* is less about the 'good' versus the 'bad' Muslim categorisations that are used to justify the war on terror and more about the staging of something that is not portrayed in western media. The re-enactment of prayer is reverent, yet it is combined with playfulness and both are gently embedded within domestic space, though when I looked online at

Akram Zaatari
The Script 2018
video

Dance to the End of Love 2011 video
installation



one of these vernacular YouTube videos, many of the comments were critical of fathers for not being strict enough in their codes of prayer. Regardless of Zaatari's conceptual reflection on the migration of images from one location to another, *The Script* no doubt has a role to play in challenging cultural misconceptions. ■

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Lucy Skaer: The Green Man

Talbot Rice Gallery Edinburgh

26 July to 6 October

'I am working through a wood,' wrote Hilda Doolittle (known as HD) in her 1926 book *Palimpsest*, 'a tangle of bushes and bracken out to a clearing, where I may see clear again.' And so it is with this display of ephemera curated by Lucy Skaer, a trail of disparate objects that meander through the gallery and eventually come together.

The pagan symbol of the 'Green Man' provides a fertile ground from which Skaer grows multiple ideas. Historically the symbol of the Green Man was present in both pagan and Christian literature but was popularised after the plague, and represented as a face sprouting leaves and vines, at a time when wilderness had consumed the cultivated land. In the exhibition's text Skaer writes, 'spew forth foliage, exhale tendrils, weep leaves', encapsulating the organic nature of the display, where ideas spread outwards from a single starting point. Skaer and a series of artists she has selected explore various approaches to collecting and assembling objects and the ways meanings can be expanded or disrupted through playful, alternative presentations.

In *La Chasse*, 2016-18, Skaer has arranged a series of 'sculptural sentences' across the gallery floor and walls, visceral, ambiguous objects in rich earthy colours that seem to share a private, coded language. The installation loosely references *Le Livre du Chasse* (The Book of the Hunt) from 1387-89 by Gaston Phébus, which includes illuminations of animals of the forest and field. There is a subtle allusion to animal forms in Skaer's objects, with sloping shapes and holes suggesting eyes, while a series of 'lozenges' mimic the medieval painting's background.

Nestled among Skaer's objects are several oval panels with densely layered surfaces painted by Hanneline Visnes. Her vibrant colours and sprawling shapes provide a visual counterpoint to Skaer's muted sculptures. Some suggest a shimmering, pointillist heat haze, while others resemble Rorschach tests or cell patterns. Visnes's paintings draw us in with hints at naturalism, yet her artificial colours and mechanical symmetry are unsettling, suggestive of attempts to cultivate and control a new natural order.

Skaer has mined the University of Edinburgh's collection of objects and artefacts to add meat to the bone of this display, reinforcing the exhibition's context. One can imagine such a dense archive of material would be hard for an artist such as Skaer to resist, given her penchant for found curiosities. Among the treasure troves, Skaer found a collection of hunting horns of varying shapes and sizes from the 16th to the 20th century – hung from the wall in an adjoining room, they reinforce Skaer's imagery in *La Chasse*.

Throughout the gallery, Fiona Connor has made some subtle interventions that could easily go unnoticed or might even seem accidental. In *All the doors in all the walls*, 2018, six of the gallery doors have been removed to open up spaces normally hidden from view, including a fire escape, roof hatch, tool cupboard and chair store. The doors have then been embedded in the downstairs gallery