

Two or three things I know about him

Mark R. Westmoreland

Delineating the creative trajectory of artists requires more than a tracing of personal influences and lived experience. The space between an individual's idiosyncrasies and his or her social conditions is a gulf typically glossed over with the false coherence of a biographic narrative. Indeed, telling a person's story with this type of totalizing logic commits a betrayal of the enormity and incongruence of experience itself. Biographies, like histories, are always partial. They are incomplete in their summation of a prolonged lifetime, but they are also limited by perspective. The bulleted format used below aims to emphasize the hidden ruptures, the minutia of everyday experience, and personal memories that inform the practices of Akram Zaatari. But this format also hopes to thematically draw attention to the importance of different mediated forms in his development. Whether drawing upon his diaries, audio recordings, photography, cinema or video, Zaatari's "reproduction machines" and their ability to reproduce objects coalesces in his lifetime "habit of recording," whether mundane observations or extraordinary events of occupation and civil conflict. For Zaatari, the mimetic object enables intimacy with things that may otherwise remain at a distance, while also creating distance from things that impose an unnerving proximity.

- Akram Zaatari grew up in the port city of Saïda (a.k.a. Sidon) in southern Lebanon. During the prolonged civil war, he spent much of his time sequestered indoors away from harm. There he would while away the time in habits of recording his mundane activities with photography, audiocassettes, and diaries. Secretly he would daydream of revolutionary adventures— a reality his middle-class Sunni family would not approve. Instead of fighting in the resistance during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the subsequent occupation, he would document the encroachment of tanks and the bombardment of nearby landscapes from his apartment window.

- Akram Zaatari wanted to be a filmmaker since he was a boy, and many of his diary entries chronicled movies he had seen at one of Saïda's six theaters or had rented and watched at home. And yet, when he began his studies at the American

University of Beirut (AUB) during the late 1980s, he chose instead to study architecture. Nevertheless, his great love for cinema motivated him to run a cine-club at AUB, for which he would scour the city for 35mm prints of Eisenstein, Bergman, Antonioni, Scorsese and others. Over the years, his principal influences came from European filmmakers like Werner Fassbinder as well as from Middle Eastern filmmakers like Abbas Kiarostami in the Iranian context and Mohammad Khan in the Egyptian context.

- Akram Zaatari began working as an architect in Beirut just as the era of postwar reconstruction took off. But the desire to revisit his filmmaking passion resurfaced and he applied to various film schools in the United States. Unsuccessful in his applications, he instead pursued an MA degree in Media Studies at The New School in New York City. There he became exposed to art and video practices and wrote a thesis about hostage films as alternative media. Unsure of his options in Lebanon, he found inspiration in the work of Mohammed Soueid, who was a prominent film critic in Beirut before becoming a vanguard video-maker. Soueid's improvisational poetics and comedic criticism portrayed a Lebanese vernacular that inspired many artists like Zaatari.

- Akram Zaatari, like many of his contemporaries, studied abroad and then returned in the early 1990s to a budding satellite television industry in postwar Lebanon. This era presented new labor opportunities engendered by the social reconstruction and economic liberalization of Beirut. In the shifting political and economic structures, new constellations of social relations brought people together from different parts of this divided city. And in this flux, undefined spaces enabled creative experimentation for many artists. As the city and country appropriated new identities, intellectuals and artists like Zaatari also adopted and shaped new identities for themselves. As producer of the Aalam al Sabah morning show at Future TV, Zaatari produced several short experimental videos that screened alongside morning cooking and health shows. Owned by tycoon politician Rafiq Hariri, Future TV provided a mass-mediated discourse that erased the past of the civil war for the benefit of a prosperous and peaceful future. This tenuous "postwar" vision for Lebanon came to an abrupt close when Hariri's 2005 assassination prompted the so-called Cedar Revolution.

The ensuing assassinations, invasions, and domestic battles would throw into serious question the status and meaning of a "postwar era."

- Akram Zaatari left Future TV and co-founded the Arab Image Foundation (AIF) in 1997. Based in Beirut, AIF has since collected hundreds of thousands of photos and negatives from countries across the region. As one of the lead curators of the archive, Zaatari has collected photographs and researched photographic practices from Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt. This venture initiated his sustained interest in and engagements with the photographic history of the Arab world. More than mere collecting or appropriation, Zaatari envisions his work as an intervention in the social life of waning photographic practices. Drawing on the richness of AIF's growing collection, Zaatari produces artistic engagements and scholarly enquiries with these sources. In 2001 he released a documentary about Cairene studio photographer Van Leo in *Her + Him: Van Leo* (2001), followed by a broad engagement with past and present representational practices from across the Eastern Mediterranean region (Levant/ Mashreq) in *This Day* (2003). He has also edited a series of books on the social history of photography in the region, particularly giving sustained attention to hometown studio photographer Hashem El Madani.

- Akram Zaatari, along with his generation of "postwar" artists, helped to push the boundaries of art practices in Beirut at a time when gallery owners and organizers of theater festivals didn't know how to conceptualize the role of video and mixed media. During the 1990s, Zaatari produced a series of video installations that worked to define this new practice, including work from his *Image + Sound* series installed at L'Entretemps gallery in 1995, his photo and video installation of *Another Resolution* at the 1998 Ayloul Festival, and his public video installation of *The Scandal*, which he contributed to Ashkal Alwan's 1999 exhibition on the Beirut Corniche. This period also marked the beginning of Zaatari's participation in a global art world with an inspirational trip to the Videobrasil Festival in 1996.

- Akram Zaatari's work, like many of Lebanon's artists and filmmakers, shows great concern with the legacy of violence

in his country and the representation of conflict across the Middle East. As he says, his work often attempts to illuminate perspectives on “the state of image-making in situations of war.” The cache of violence and trauma has attracted many international curators and other interested parties to the work of Zaatari and his contemporaries, but considerably less attention has focused on his representations of sexual practices, intimacy, desire, and the body. Indeed, Beirut-based art critic Kaelen Wilson-Goldie suggests that Zaatari’s work follows two streams: first, the effects (and affects) of “radical closure,” the traumatic outcome of civil war and continued violence and uncertainty; and, second, the representation of sexual practices particularly among men in Lebanon. Zaatari’s work shows how these two streams diverge and intersect in unexpected ways.

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About the author: Mark R. Westmoreland is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the American University in Cairo, Egypt. He is completing a book about experimental documentary practices in Lebanon and has initiated research on documentary activism in Egypt.

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On view in Reference Gallery:

Tomorrow Everything Will Be Alright, 2010,
12 min, HD digital video.

Additional screenings in Reference Gallery:

This Day, 2003,
86 min, video, In Arabic with English subtitles.
February 23rd, 6:30pm
March 29th, 6:30pm

All is Well on the Border, 1997,
43 min, video, In Arabic with English subtitles.
In This House, 2005,
30 min, video, In Arabic with English subtitles.
March 15th, 6:30pm
April 5th, 6:30pm

On view in Bakalar Gallery:

Red Chewing Gum, 2000, 10 min, video,
In Arabic with English subtitles.

Nature Morte, 2008, 11 min, video,
In Arabic with English subtitles.

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