Two Point Perspective

by Noah Simblist

Part I: Letter to a Refusing Pilot

This essay is a close look at Akram Zaatari's *Letter to a Refusing Pilot*, a video and film installation first shown at the 2013 Venice Biennale. As the title suggests, a key component of this work was the correspondence between a Lebanese artist and a former Israeli fighter pilot. I will compare this work with a book that documented a performance that Zaatari participated in, *A Conversation with an Imaginary Israeli Filmmaker* (2012), and will argue that at the heart of both of these projects was an attempt toward dialogical exchange.

The concept of dialogue is a loaded one within the context of Israel and Lebanon, two enemy states. Lebanese law states that it is illegal for a Lebanese citizen to correspond with or meet an Israeli citizen. It is also legally problematic for an Israeli citizen to meet or correspond with a Lebanese citizen. In a wider scope the notion of dialog has another set of implications within the context of Israeli and Palestinian diplomacy. Since the Oslo Accords (1993–1995), when negotiation made direct conversations between Israelis and the Palestinians possible, and it became legal under Israeli law, dialog has been at the center of an endless peace process. In the 1990s, this peace process opened up not only diplomatic channels but also cultural and academic partnerships. But many have argued that these coexistence initiatives normalized the occupation and failed to acknowledge a lopsided power dynamic[1]. Today engagement through dialogue is increasingly viewed with skepticism by many in Israel-Palestine and the wider region. Dialog has been seen as a cover for an ongoing occupation, aggressively enforced through land confiscation, house demolitions, settlement building, and other practices on the ground. This suspicion towards the concept of dialogue in this context is specifically embodied in BDS, which argues for an opposite strategy of disengagement, including the cultural and academic sectors[2]. In this context, the contact between Zaatari and the pilot, as well as his contact with the filmmaker, reveals that personal interaction has a number of political ramifications. In order to address just how this is the case, I will first turn to a description of the work *Letter to a Refusing Pilot*.

1 In conversations over the course of 2012–2014 with some Palestinian curators and artists, who were active in the 1990s, I repeatedly heard this sentiment.
2 For specific policies regarding the cultural boycott, see https://bdsmovement.net/cultural-boycott.

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Akram Zaatari. Letter to a Refusing Pilot (still), 2013
Film and video installation. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut

In the summer of 1982, during Israel's incursion into Southern Lebanon, a story swirled around the port town of Saida – a rumor that acquired mythological flourishes. Israeli fighter jets were sent to bomb a set of targets. One of these planes was sent near Ain El-Helweh, a Palestinian refugee camp just south of Saida. As the plane approached the target, the pilot recognized the building as a school that he had attended as a child. It was said that his family had lived in Saida for generations, a part of its now disappeared but once thriving Jewish community. The pilot swerved away at the last minute and headed towards the sea, where he dropped his bombs into the water. A few hours later the school was bombed and partially destroyed by another pilot.

Akram Zaatari's *Letter to a Refusing Pilot* is based on this story. Zataari grew up in Saida, and in 1982 he stood on a balcony watching Israeli warplanes bomb the nearby hillside. He had been learning to use his father's Kiev camera, and he captured images of the smoke billowing up from between the cedars on the horizon. His father has been the director of the school that this story revolves around, Saida Public Secondary School, for 20 years. Because of Zaatari's memories as a teenager at the time of the bombing, and his acknowledgement of his father's connection to the site, *Letter to a Refusing Pilot* combines the intimate, quiet playfulness of adolescents with a violent rupture emanating from the sky. It is also about the intersecting points of view of two people. In a text accompanying the exhibition Zaatari quotes Jean-Luc Godard in his film *Notre Musique* (2004), saying:

In 1948, the Israelites walked in the water towards the Promised Land. The Palestinians walked in the water to drown. Shot and reverse shot. The Jewish People join fiction. The Palestinian people, the documentary[3].

With this quote, Zaatari likens the Israeli-Palestinian relationship to the Israeli-Lebanese relationship. Zaatari continues this "shot and reverse shot" by dwelling on his own and the pilot's intersecting points of view.

3 Akram Zaatari: Letter to a Refusing Pilot (The Pavilion of Lebanon at the "55 Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte – La Biennale di Venezia") (2013).

Akram Zaatari. Letter to a Refusing Pilot, 2013
Installation view, Lebanese Pavilion, 55th International Venice Biennale. Photo: Marco Milan

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The installation includes a large video projection, a looped 16mm film, and an empty theater seat. The seat is waiting for the pilot, the sole audience for whom these films have been made. As the seat remains empty, it keeps the work open like an unanswered letter. The empty seat reveals the difference between the two points of perspective in this work. The pilot exists as an absent subject in *Letter to a Refusing Pilot*. His body and voice exist only in the imagination. This is in direct contrast to Zaatari's point of view. He is the storyteller. And the pilot, as the subject of the story, is conjured mostly through speculation. The seat also becomes an invitation extended to the pilot, one that he accepted when he visited Venice in October 2013 to sit in the chair.

Akram Zaatari. Saida June 6, 1982
2006-09, Composite Photograph, C-Print, 92 x 190 cm

The 16mm film, Saida June 6, 1982, included in the installation, consists of a tracking shot of a composite image. This composite is made up of the photographs that Zaatari took of the bombed hillside in 1982. It is based on the same photographs featured in his earlier film 'This Day' (2003), but they have taken a couple of turns. First, in 'This Day' the photographs were shown as discrete entities, snapshots that were records of a certain moment and were kept in a photo album. But when Zaatari created the new composite image, he took these disparate images and created a new whole that was self-consciously constructed, laying bare its artifice.[4] *Zaatari then made a video from this composite by creating a tracking shot across it, leading our eye from one point to another within the image. We move from one explosion to the next, passing between the violent ruptures, pausing on interstitial resting points, such as cypress trees or a clear blue sky. The 16mm film version is the latest iteration of this work, once again revisiting these images and this remembered moment.*

The large video projection at the center of *Letter to a Refusing Pilot* begins with a camera, mounted on a drone that rises from the roof of a building in the seaside Beirut neighborhood of Raouche. It cuts to black and white aerial shots of architecture in Saida and then to a light table, much like the opening shots of *This Day*[5]. As the light table is turned on in the video, fluorescent tubes flicker on around the installation, and it is as if we are in the box, complicit in the narrative on the screen. Zaatari not only resists the passive spectatorship of film, he brings us into the archive, a space dedicated to the organization of the visual and material culture

4 TJ Demos, The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary During Crisis (Durham: Duke, 2013), 188.

5 In the early 1960s Michel Ecochard, an architect and planner, flew over the site of Frères Maristes College in Rmeileh, near Saida. He was documenting the process of its building through photographs. On the ground below his collaborator, Amine El-Bizri, supervised the construction. Ecochard himself was a pilot and he built many projects in Lebanon, including the Taamir public housing project surrounding the Saida Secondary public school in the early 1960s.

of history. A pair of hands in white gloves moves a set of photos across the backlit surface. We see family snapshots - a woman posing with two kids, a mother helping a toddler to pet a dog, and a teenager mugging for the camera. Then the hands take a piece of white paper and make a couple of pencil drawings: an enigmatic structure fills one, and another seems to be an image of two trees in front of a building. A school bell rings, and the next drawing is made of a paper airplane.

Akram Zaatari. Letter to a Refusing Pilot (still), 2013
Film and video installation. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut

In the next scene of the video students line up at Saida Secondary Public School, filmed in the present, under the watchful gaze of a teacher. They chatter amongst themselves as they rush through the halls and into their classrooms. After these scenes of a typical day at school the video cuts to a group of boys running through the streets, into a building, up the stairs, finally climbing onto the roof. There they carefully fold paper airplanes from marked-up exams and toss their creations off the roof. The paper planes flutter in the breeze and float slowly on their tiny winged expanses towards the ground. At one point another group of boys folds and flies more paper planes, but this time they gather and converge like jet planes in formation. An innocuous game turns quickly into a militaristic gambit, and a boyhood fantasy intersects with the roar of jet engines as we see, spread out on a light-table, archival photographs of the school taken from a nearby hill, along with an iPad playing an excerpt from an Israeli documentary of the 1982 invasion made by the Israeli army. As we hear the Israeli narrator proudly describing the military operation against Ain El-Helweh, in Hebrew, a hand reaches out and touches the photograph of the school. With each touch of the hand's outstretched finger, a digitally rendered flame emerges from the photograph, and we imagine, along with this archivist, the explosive destruction of the school - despite the refusal of the pilot. The pilot noted that he refused to engage in war as if it were a video game[6]. When Zaatari constructed this scene in which a simple touch on a screen can produce an explosion, he was referencing this very critique.

6 Avihai Becker, "Why We Refused," Haaretz, Sept 25, 2002.

The pilot

The pilot in this story is Haggai Tamir. While it is true that he flew this mission and chose not to bomb the school, it wasn't because he had grown up in Lebanon. He made the decision because he was an architect and he recognized the structure as a school, rather than the military target that his commander had sent him to destroy[7]. Tamir grew up in kibbutz Hazore'a. He completed flight school in 1968; he says that he has been trained in a European manner, which emphasized the elegance of flight, making use of aerodynamics as opposed to engine power. As a result, he says, "the concept of a plane as a platform for weapons was foreign to me, so I enjoyed the aerobatics much more than I did dropping ordnance. Even during my compulsory service as a young pilot, I didn't derive any pleasure from it."[8] Tamir has served as an Israeli air force pilot in the 1967-1970 War of Attrition, and he says that he felt that something had happened in that period that shifted the Israeli air force from what he called a European model, based on formal elegance, to an American model, which relied on brute force. He was called up for reserve duty in 1973, and his plane had been shot down in one mission in the Sinai. He ejected, parachuted down while Egyptian ground forces shot at him, and was finally picked up by an Israeli tank crew. After the war, he enrolled at the Technion school to study architecture, and at the time of the opening of Zaatari's show in Venice he was still practicing, specializing in remodeling projects.[9]

When Tamir was called up again for reserve duty in the Lebanon War, he was suspicious of the motivation for waging this war and found that many of the soldiers that he had served with were "trigger-happy and gonzo for battle." He remembers saying to them, "who knows better than me, an architect, how hard it is to build a city? So at least, don't rejoice when you destroy houses. It takes a lot longer to build a city than it does to strike a target."[10]

Akram Zaatari. Letter to a Refusing Pilot (still), 2013
Film and video installation. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut

7 It should be noted that Zaatari was also trained as an architect and this was a point of commonality that he was interested
8 Becker, "Why We Refused," Haaretz, Sept 25, 2002.
9 Tamir lives and works in Jaffa, in an old Palestinian house that he remodeled.
10 Becker, "Why We Refused," Haaretz, Sept 25, 2002.

While on the operation at Ein El-Hilweh, near Saida, he was told by a liaison officer to bomb a large building on a hill. Tamir thought that the building looked like a hospital or a school and questioned the officer. The officer said that someone was shooting from there and that he was to proceed with the mission. Tamir did not release the bombs, saying that they had malfunctioned, but two jets that followed him went ahead and leveled the building that he was sent to destroy.

In July of 1982 he sent a letter of solidarity to Colonel Eli Geva, an armored brigade commander who refused to take part in an attack on Beirut. Tamir wrote that this was the third war that he had taken a part of and it had challenged him psychologically and morally because he was sure that a number of targets which had been bombed were not military.[11] In February of 1983, the commission of inquiry regarding the Sabra and Chatilla massacres published its conclusions, leading to Ariel Sharon's stepping down as Israel defense minister. This restored Tamir's faith in the Israeli military, because, in his view, this formal rebuke showed some degree of moral responsibility on the part of Israeli civic leadership.[12] In 1988, when he was 42, he was released from military service due to a series of cutbacks.

Tamir's story was kept quiet within the military, and only his immediate circle of friends and family knew what happened in Saida. But in 2002, following the targeted assassination of Saleh Shehadeh, which involved an F-16 dropping a one-ton bomb that killed 15 people and injured 100, Tamir was disturbed by the killing of innocent civilians and decided to speak out.[13] He was interviewed by Haaretz and told the whole story of his military career, including his questioning of the reasoning behind Israeli military decisions.

Akram Zaatari, A Conversation with an Imagined Israeli Filmmaker Named Avi Mograbi
Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, Kadist Art Foundation, Sternberg Press, 2012

11 ibid
12 Author's interview with Haggai Tamir, July 2013.
13 On July 22, 2002, an Israeli plane dropped a one-ton bomb on a house in Gaza City, killing Saleh Shehadeh, the military wing commander of Hamas and an aide, as well as thirteen Palestinian civilians. In response to objections to this action by the Israeli NGO Yesh Gvul and others, an Israeli panel appointed by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert found that the military acted appropriately. Barak Ravid, "Israel's 2002 hit of Hamas leader was justified, despite civilian casualties," Haaretz, Feb 27, 2011.

The meeting

In April of 2010, Zaatari was in residence at Le Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers in France. During this time he had a public conversation with the Israeli filmmaker Avi Mograbi. He retold this story and the conversation was published in a small orange-covered book, *A Conversation with an Imagined Israeli Filmmaker*. In July of 2012, Seth Anziska, an American historian, was conducting research at the Arab Image Foundation in Beirut, and he came across the book. As he was reading Zaatari's recounting of the story of the refusing pilot, Anziska realized that he knew that the pilot was Haggai Tamir. Anziska had met Tamir two years prior while he was doing research in Israel. He had met Tamir's wife in a store, and they struck up a conversation. She asked Anziska what he was doing in Israel and he told her that he was researching the Lebanese and Israeli perspectives on the war in 1982. She said that he should meet her husband, who was a pilot in the war, and not long after that Anziska conducted many hours of interviews with Tamir.

Anziska then contacted Zaatari, met with him in Beirut, and told him that the pilot was Haggai Tamir. Zaatari asked if he could send Tamir a copy of *A Conversation with an Imagined Israeli Filmmaker*.[14] Zaatari added, "maybe that would open a continuation of the conversation." Since there is no mail service between Israel and Lebanon, Zaatari gave Anziska a copy, to take with him to London and then send to Tamir in Jaffa. By September of 2012, Tamir and Zaatari had begun an email correspondence. Anziska was copied on these emails, and he says that "each note that arrived in my inbox felt like the slow repair of a historical rupture." Eventually, Zaatari asked if the two could meet. Because it is impossible for either of them to enter the country of the other, given that the two nations are still in a state of war, they had to meet in a third place. In this case it was Rome, and over the course of a few days they talked for hours, in the lobby of a hotel. Tamir asked Zaatari if he should bring anything, and Zaatari responded that it would be great for him to look at Tamir's old photographs, drawings and other documents and letters from his family albums. This request was in keeping with Zaatari's persistent engagement with archives of both personal and public histories and it also served as the starting point for a conversation between two men who met each other as subjects who were a part of, but not beholden to, the history of war between their two countries.

14 Akram Zaatari, A Conversation with an Imaginary Israeli Filmmaker Named Avi Mograbi (Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, Kadist Art Foundation, Sternberg Press, 2012)

Akram Zaatari. Letter to a Refusing Pilot, 2013
Installation view, Lebanese Pavilion, 55th International Venice Biennale. Photo: Marco Milan

Some of these exchanged photographs are included in the video *Letter to a Refusing Pilot* and in the accompanying newsprint publication. In the publication, the images of Zaatari's childhood are reproduced but Tamir's are absent, reduced to textual descriptions of six images, written in the third person. Tamir asked Zaatari not to reproduce these pictures but was willing to accept that they were described. For Zaatari, this request highlights the difficulties of working within the context of an ongoing conflict. The artist chose to respect Tamir's request and acknowledge all of the fears and hesitations, embedded within it.

One picture is described as a black-and-white image of Tamir at the age of 18 or 19, taken at the beach in Haifa or Yaffa. Another is a black-and-white family picture. These descriptions function as linguistic corollaries to photographic images. Each person and the spaces shot are described in a rather straightforward manner, but a few details begin to suggest interpersonal relationships. Another photograph depicts a landscape containing nine identical houses in kibbutz Hazorea. A page of an album with four photographs shows Tamir's father, who was a builder, working in the kibbutz where they grew up. Zaatari groups these images of Tamir's family together with text that describe Tamir's father as a worker on a kibbutz, tied to the landscape through physical labor, elements that are distinctly tied to the Zionist mythology of Israel's origin story.

Two photographs depict Tamir in military uniform. One is of him in aviation school, standing with his helmet against his waist. The other is of Tamir in uniform but talking on the phone. These are images of the pilot as a man of the Israeli military but cast in a more banal way than the drama of the imagined refusing pilot.

Akram Zaatari. Letter to a Refusing Pilot, 2013
Installation view, Lebanese Pavilion, 55th International Venice Biennale. Photo: Marco Milan

There are five photographs that Zaatari includes in the publication, images that are also used in the video.[15] They show Zaatari as a child, surrounded by flowers and smiling. A caption for these tells us that he attended Frères Maristes College as a student but spent his weekends with his family in the garden of the Saida Secondary School, which his father was the director of for twenty years. So this caption tells us that for Zaatari, this school was also a garden of childhood memories for him. One photograph shows him as a teenager, standing in front of a sculpture by Alfred Basbous that is also featured in the video.

These photographs and their descriptions are the main record that we have of the conversation between Zaatari and Tamir. They are also an essential structural component of *Letters to a Refusing Pilot*. Following visual culture theorist Ariella Azoulay's notion of the 'civil contract of photography,' we might understand these photographs, or more specifically the overlapping archive of Zaatari's and Tamir's photographs that Zaatari uses, as a space for discursive democracy.[16] Azoulay believes that photography can open up a civic space constituted by gaze, speech and action, where we can address one another instead of the ruling power.[17] In this sense, these photographs that revealed Zaatari and Tamir's childhoods to one another constructed an expanded definition of the national subject that each was taught. Zaatari revealed his own personal relationship to the school that, up until this point, Tamir had only seen through the crosshairs of a fighter plane. Zaatari expanded this view to include a pastoral image of a family playing in its garden or a sculpture proudly displayed in its courtyard. Tamir revealed his personal history that included a relationship to flying and architecture. Zaatari symbolically pantomimes this discourse in the video when he turns on the light table and moves photographs on and off its surface, as if displaying them to someone. This action invites us as viewers into a conversation about the meaning of these images, taking the place of Tamir.

15 It is interesting to note that the publication for the exhibition is printed on newsprint in the form of a newspaper, the primary form of news during the Lebanon civil war.
16 Ariella Azoulay, The Civil Contract of Photography (New York: Zone Books, 2008).
17 Ibid, 17

In the next installment of this essay I will expand on this notion of discursive democracy by introducing art historian and critic Grant Kester's notion of dialogical aesthetics as a theoretical methodology to examine the conversation between not only Zaatari and Tamir but also another conversation – one between Zaatari and Avi Mograbi.

Akram Zaatari. Letter to a Refusing Pilot, 2013
Installation view, Lebanese Pavilion, 55th International Venice Biennale. Photo: Marco Milan

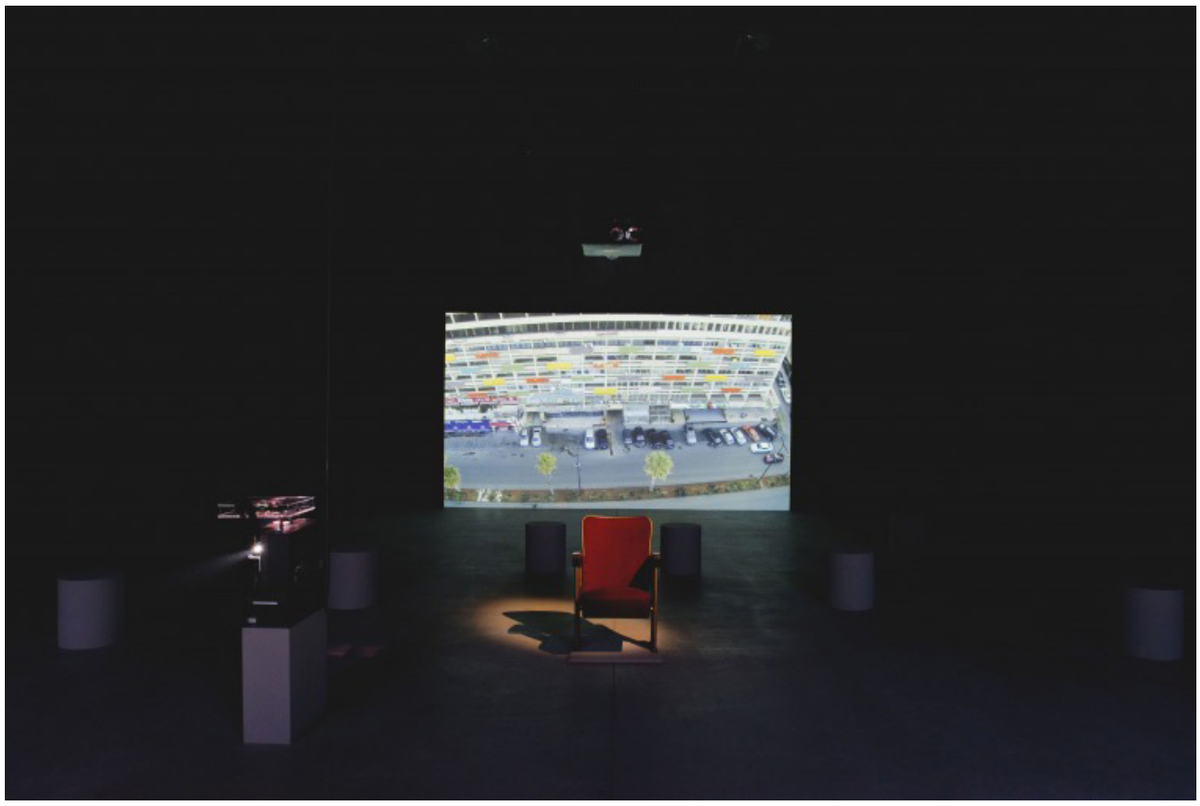
Part II: the Dialogical Exchange

While Akram Zaatari's *Letter to a Refusing Pilot* can be described as a film and video installation, I believe that it also constitutes a dialogical work – a conversation between Zaatari and Haggai Tamir. This is the most powerful and innovative aspect of the work, both politically and aesthetically. Zaatari went far beyond the representation of a story. He has engaged in an illegal and potentially risky conversation.

In a text she wrote about Zaatari's work, writer and critic Kaelen Wilson Goldie pointed out that the position of the pilot was absent from Lebanese life[18]. The small country only has four old fighter planes, which that are rarely used. During the civil war, aerial combat was fought primarily between Israeli and Syrian planes. Today, Hezbollah fires rockets and launches drones and Israel still flies across Lebanese airspace. There are no private helicopters, and the only civilian aircraft belong to Middle East Airlines. As a result, Lebanese citizens must imagine the point of view of the pilot, and Zaatari conjures this imagination in his work, this imagination through the eyes of young boys who eagerly craft paper airplanes and drop them from their rooftops.

18 Kaelen Wilson Goldie, The Archaeology of Rumor, in "Akram Zaatari: Letter to a Refusing Pilot" (the Pavilion of Lebanon at the 55 Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte – La Biennale di Venezia, 2013), p2

It is important to note that Zaatari responds to the absence of a pilot's point of view from within his own lexicon of experience, one that must be understood, instead, through a conversation with an actual pilot. In this case, it was by contacting one of the pilots who had flown the planes that he watched overhead as a boy, and, more specifically, the pilot that he heard rumors about. He sent an email, which, unlike the paper airplanes, came back to him. Consequently, he started a conversation with a once imaginary but now very real subject.



Akram Zaatari. Letter to a Refusing Pilot, 2013
Installation view, Lebanese Pavilion, 55th International Venice Biennale. Photo: Marco Milan

Letter to a Refusing Pilot self-consciously uses a number of literal and metaphorical points of view. The opening image of the video was made by strapping an HD camera onto a drone that rose above a building. With this move, Akram Zaatari both reclaims and references the fact that throughout his childhood the sky above southern Lebanon was controlled by the Israeli army. This is also signaled in the video by the aerial shots of Saida, shown on an iPad, originally recorded by the Israeli military and shown on Israeli television. Intercut with these images are Hashem El-Madani's photographs of the Taamir public housing project in Saida, which were commissioned by the Lebanese government in the 1950s to document the advance of urban development. It's interesting to note that El-Madani, a Lebanese photographer, went to Haifa in 1947 and worked as an assistant to a Jewish immigrant photographer named Katz. But because of the events of 1948 he returned to Saida and opened a studio there.[19] Finally, Zataari's 1982 photographs of the bombing on the hillside, also included in the video, are taken literally from an individual point of view, but also from that of the metaphorical subject: in comparison with the images taken by the Israeli invader or the Lebanese government photographer, Zataari depicts his point of view as both an individual and as a Lebanese citizen, who watches and documents the transformation of his local landscape because of war.

19 Seth Anzika, The Archaeology of Rumor, in "Akram Zaatari: Letter to a Refusing Pilot" (The Pavilion of Lebanon at the 55 Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte – La Biennale di Venezia, 2013), p15

Akram Zaatari. Letter to a Refusing Pilot, 2013
Installation view, Lebanese Pavilion, 55th International Venice Biennale. Photo: Marco Milan

At this point I would like to borrow the term dialogical from Grant Kester, who defined "dialogical" art practices as those that are centered on conversations and based on reciprocal openness. But how do we know that a conversation is based on reciprocal openness[20], and what makes it an art practice? Kester says that according to Kant, aesthetic perception is a mode of being in which we transcend our specific identities as subjects (including our desires and self-interest) and see things from the point of view of the universal[21]. Kester then compares Kant's notion of the aesthetic to Jürgen Habermas's notion of the public sphere, a discursive space that is predicated on equality and the suspension of the individual interests of each subject participating in dialogue. For Kester, the way to create an egalitarian dialogical space is through a physical and psychological framework that sets it apart from daily discourse. Kester is saying that just as two individuals need to compare aesthetic experience through some form of common language, two individuals also need to rely on

20 Grant H. Kester, Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) p90
21 ibid. p107

a common language that transcends individualistic subjective experience to create the building blocks for a civic space defined by egalitarian reciprocity. For Akram Zaatari and Haggai Tamir, this was done in two ways. First, they needed to find an extraterritorial meeting place and used Italy as a third country. Furthermore, the primary location of their conversation was a hotel lobby, a heterotopic space that was a public sphere, in between the private homes and homelands of each participant. Secondly, on Zaatari's suggestion, they used an archival structure of old photographs and documents to set up stories about each other's upbringing and life on opposite sides of a war. It is the shared framework of old photographs that reveals the disjunction between the two participants of this conversation.

Beyond these circumstances, we don't know the actual content or structure of the conversation between Zaatari and Tamir. It was not recorded, and there is no transcript. But the conversation between Zaatari and Avi Mograbi that lead to the meeting between Zaatari and Tamir, was explicitly set up as an artwork. This conversation was performed on a stage in Aubervilliers, France, and documented in a book. But, complicating things even further, the book frames the conversation as an imagined one – alluding to the absurd fact that Israeli and Lebanese citizens cannot be in conversation in public.

These two conversations are parallel because they are both conversations between Zaatari and an Israeli. They are also interrelated because, as I explained in part one of this essay, the conversation between Zaatari and Mograbi indirectly lead to the meeting between Zaatari and Tamir. Contrary to the conversation between Zaatari and Tamir, the fact that there is a record of Zaatari's and Mograbi's discourse allows us to see it in more detail, and probe deeper into its nature as a dialogical work.

Akram Zaatari, A Conversation with an Imagined Israeli Filmmaker Named Avi Mograbi
Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, Kadist Art Foundation, Sternberg Press, 2012

In the script entitled *A Conversation with an Imagined Israeli Filmmaker*, Zaatari states that he is not Akram Zaatari and that the Israeli filmmaker is not Avi Mograbi. Zaatari says, "... we could only be individual voices, fictive... because we don't represent. In fact we misrepresent. Fictive because we are out of synch with national entities. Our voices are our nation's' imagination(s), rather than realities."[22] In this statement, Zaatari reverses the one by the late Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafiq Hariri, which says that "Lebanon is more than a nation; it is an idea,"[23] It also reverses Benedict Anderson's famous definition of nationalism as an imagined community that is collectively beheld by its constituent subjects.[24] For Zaatari, the subjects are imaginary but the nations of Lebanon and Israel are real. If we combine these two attitudes, the imagined national communities of Israel and Lebanon tend to produce constituent imaginary subjects that are enemies. The fact that Zaatari and Mograbi are collaborating is out of sync with the national ideological positions of their respective countries of origin. But for Zaatari, if they are imagined characters then they simply have the option to take on different points of view, like a different script for an actor. He then goes on to note that as documentary filmmakers, both Zaatari and Mograbi are aware of the blurry line between fact and fiction, and the play between the two in this performance is an extension of that aspect of their work.

At this point, Zaatari starts to tell his own personal story. He was born in Saida in 1966. His mother was from Tripoli, but her great-grandfather came from Turkey. His Father was born in Saida, but his family originated from either the Arabian Peninsula or Palestine. By revealing that his family is from Arabia, Lebanon, and potentially Palestine, Zaatari is showing not only that families in the Middle East used to move more freely between cities, but also that recounting these personal facts already begins to explode any kind of essentialized national identity. He then goes on to note that he was born one year before the 1967 war and grew up hearing only bad stories about Israelis. He never met an Israeli until he was sixteen years old, when he saw tanks driving up his street:
At the age of sixteen, I recall standing by the entrance of the building where we lived, waiting in total silence to watch the first Israeli tanks drive up the street. These were the first Israelis I saw in my life – young victorious soldiers riding their noisy tanks. Despite the deafening noise, I remember the scene in total silence.[25]

Zaatari then tells us about a particular instance when he saw an Israeli soldier:
We lived on the sixth floor of a building, facing south, so the balcony was almost like a theater seat for me, and explosions were the spectacle. I grew up hearing the same warnings over and over: don't stare at the Israelis from the balcony. We were told that the Israelis were the snipers of the sky, that they saw and heard everything. And I always wondered why they would want to shoot at a young boy holding a camera![26]

Then Mograbi intervenes via Skype:
Actually, I remember this incident very well. We were driving down a street in Tzidon. I know you call it something else but we call it Tzidon in Hebrew. I pulled my head out of the tank's hatch and saw a teenager with a camera on one of the balconies. He was wearing a blue and gray Adidas shirt, and he was aiming his camera at me. I remember I shouted in Hebrew, al Te'tzalem! Ma yesh lekha le'tzalem? Don't shoot! What have you got to shoot at?[27]

This last line is interesting, because the Hebrew words for shooting pictures (the word le'tzalem that Mograbi said he used) and shooting guns are different, but in the text of this book, printed only in English, the ambiguity of "shoot" is preserved. Under orders to shoot at anyone, because the most innocent-looking person could be dangerous, Mograbi hopes that he doesn't have to shoot the teenager on the balcony. He curses the kid's parents for letting him hang outside, thus forcing Mograbi to shoot at him. At the last minute, the boy runs indoors.

22 Akram Zaatari, A Conversation with an Imagined Israeli Filmmaker Named Avi Mograbi (Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, Kadist Art Foundation, Sternberg Press, 2012), p3
23 Tony Chakar, "Living in an idea" Parachute: Contemporary Art Magazine (Oct. 2002), p60
24 Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, (London: Verso, 1983)
25 Akram Zaatari, A Conversation with an Imagined Israeli Filmmaker Named Avi Mograbi (Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, Kadist Art Foundation, Sternberg Press, 2012), p5
26 ibid.
27 ibid. p8

Since Zaatari has pronounced this performance a fiction from the outset, we immediately doubt that this amazing coincidence could have occurred. But nonetheless, the imagery is incredibly powerful, and whether or not the actual Zaatari and Mograbi were looking at one another in Saida/Tzidon[28], one down a machine gun's scope and the other through the lens of a camera, they still represent the symbolic national subject positions of the characters in this story. Even if they weren't the people in this story, they could have been.

Nahon Family Beirut 1934
From The Mograbi Family Album

Zaatari ignores the story that Mograbi tells and then continues to say that prior to the moment of the Israeli invasion in 1982, he had only seen Israelis on TV, through an Israeli television station's signal that reached Saida. He tells us that he grew up with a natural affiliation with the Palestinian cause and loved the Palestinian *fedayeen* (فِدائيّين), but he also remembers the chaos once Palestinian military factions took over southern Lebanon. He says that he took pictures of destroyed buildings, Israeli vehicles, and damaged cityscapes, but never soldiers. It wasn't until later that he saw press images of Israeli soldiers as human beings rather than abstractions – eating, drinking, or washing clothes. The only ones that he could imagine like this at the time were Palestinians.

He says that he grew up with a great love of cinema, including Hitchcock, Truffaut, Fassbinder, and Pasolini, and that he considered cinema, like the arts, to be outside of geography and citizenship. In 1997, he presented a short video at a film festival in Pesaro, Italy. Mograbi was also there, and he showed his film How I Learned to Overcome My Fear and Love Ariel Sharon (1997). After the screening there was a dinner and Zaatari says that he sat down next to Mograbi and introduced himself. At this point in the performance,

28 This city is called Saida in Arabic and Tzidon in Hebrew.

Mograbi enters the stage with his laptop and says that he remembers this event differently, and that there were two people sitting in between them, and that they never said more than "hi" to one another. Again, Zaatari ignores him and says that Lebanese artists and officials used to get annoyed when Israelis insisted on talking to them after the Oslo Accords. These gestures of friendship were seen as a result of guilt over Israel's occupation and constant wars in Lebanon, or possibly because they wanted to recruit Arab intellectuals and artists to become spies for Israel. But after Zaatari saw Mograbi's film and heard him speak in the Q&A, he decided that he needed to talk to him, but to turn the tables: it was to recruit him.

Mograbi interrupts again and says that he wants to return to Zaatari's comment about Godard's metaphor of the shot and reverse shot, but to do so he wants to show some pictures. Mograbi then shows the audience old family snapshots. The first is of his father, Gabi, and his mother, Rivka, standing and smiling next to a man who looks like he may be Palestinian. Mograbi tells us that this picture was taken sometime between 1949 and 1952 in Haifa. He says that the first time that he saw this photograph he was surprised, because his father was a right-wing Zionist who fought with the *Irgun*[29], and was jailed and deported to Eritrea by the British because of these activities. Mograbi then shows another picture of his mother, in the Galilee, surrounded by a group of Palestinians, all of whom are smiling. Then Mograbi says that a third photograph is the reverse shot, a portrait of his father, Gabi, with a gun in his belt. He shows a fourth photograph of a smiling Gabi, still with a gun in his belt, with a glum-looking Palestinian who is clutching a blackboard to his chest, with the number 239 written in white chalk across it, and another man who is taking his picture. Mograbi then says that these last two pictures are documents, but we know how documents can be fiction. He returns to the Godard quote and asks, "what happens when you suddenly find both the documentary and the fiction at the same frame? Like in those photos or like here now? Godard would have absolutely said that you, Akram, are the documentary and that I am total fiction."

What is Mograbi saying here? What is it about this last photograph that combines documentary and fiction? And what is it about that photograph that is analogous to the conversation between Zaatari and Mograbi? In the most straightforward manner, he is saying, using Godard's analogy, that the Jew (fiction) and the Palestinian (documentary) are found in the same frame, as opposed to the model of shot and reverse shot. Furthermore, if we extend the analogy between Zaatari and the Palestinian, then Zaatari serves as the documentary. In this sense the narrative is structurally different. The stories of two people, two nations, two enemies, is no longer about point and counterpoint. When found within one frame, or on one stage, the narrative of two characters is interconnected. As a result the diametric opposition becomes more discursive and potentially dialogical.

29 The Irgun was a Jewish paramilitary unit that operated in Palestine from 1931-1948.

Gabi Mograbi
From The Mograbi Family Album

This process is evident through a series of doubles found within Mograbi's last photograph. First, it is a photograph of a photograph being taken. One photograph presumably serves the administrative purpose of tracking a Palestinian subject. The other photograph documents the Israeli subject acting in this situation, in this case Mograbi's father. Second, the main characters are Gabi and the unnamed, but numbered, Palestinian. The photographer frames this pair. Finally, there is an image of militant violence, of the gun in Gabi's belt, capable of shooting in one sense, and the administrative violence of the photographer's shooting in another sense: documenting and archiving a Palestinian subject under Israeli occupation. This last double is closest to the shot and reverse shot in that story that Mograbi tells of the boy on the balcony and himself in the tank, but it combines the two senses of shooting in one frame.

After Mograbi has presented these photographs, Zaatari says that he hasn't been in contact with Mograbi since that meeting in Pesaro in 1997, but he did take his business card and carefully hid it, in case it might be found by the Lebanese authorities. In 2005, Zaatari received a group email from Yousry Nasrallah, an Egyptian filmmaker, about Mograbi's son Shaul, who had refused to serve in the Israeli military. Nasrallah was asking the contacts on this email list, a group of Arab artists and intellectuals, to show solidarity with Mograbi. Nasrallah also noted that he knew that this gesture would contradict the popular opinion that solidarity with Israeli leftists would be an action of normalizing the occupation, but that he thought it essential to support what he considered to be a brave action. Zaatari replied to the group email to echo this solidarity and got an email back from Mograbi immediately. This began a correspondence, in which they exchanged DVDs of their work, a relationship that was reinforced during the war between Israel and Lebanon in 2006. In this correspondence, Zaatari asks Mograbi to see if he can find some original footage that he had seen traces of in the media during the 2006 war. These were videos from the point of view of Israeli missiles as they approached their targets. Cameras were mounted on the missiles to help to guide them, but they were destroyed along with the bombs. Zaatari calls these "suicide cameras;" he was fascinated by the creation of one

more point of view that combined the shooting of a camera with the shooting of military ordnance. Something about the idea of the point of view of this camera reminds Zaatari of the story of the pilot in 1982, whom we now know to be Tamir.

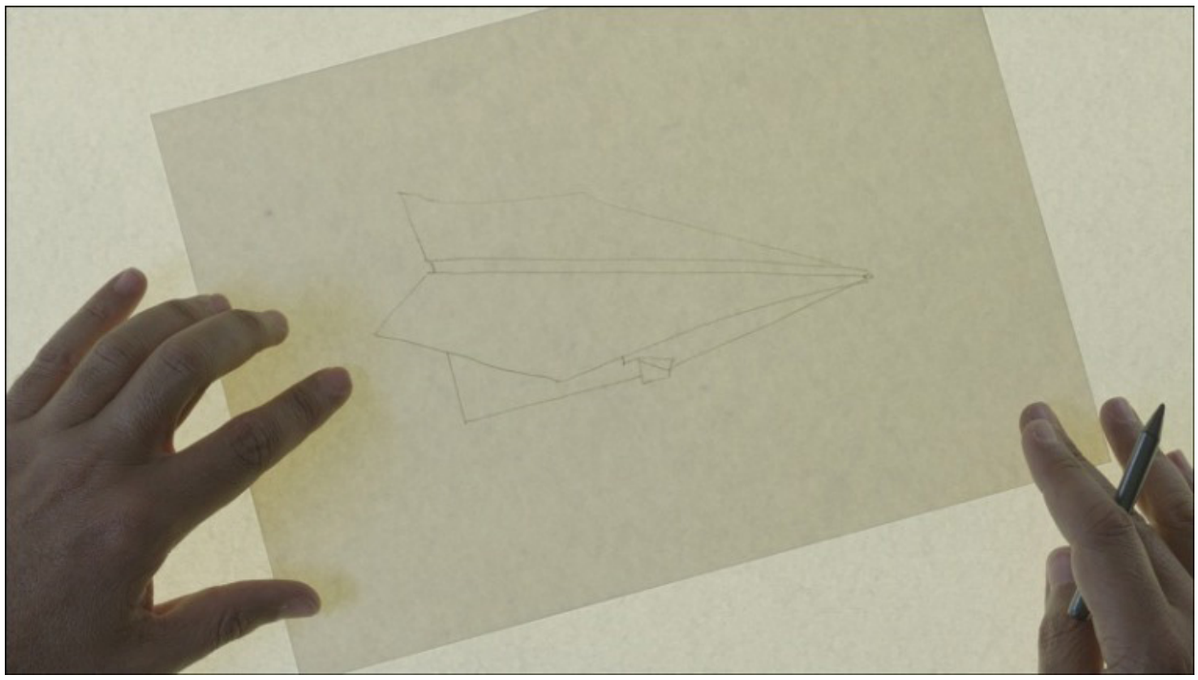
Mograbi then responds with more photographs. He shows one of his father's mother's family when they used to live in Beirut. He explained that they had moved to Palestine in the mid-1920s and that one member of this side of the family was married to a Jewish Egyptian. He shows another photograph with Gabi in Beirut, in a family picture. He says that every summer his father used to go to Beirut to visit the family. He used to do this up until the mid-1940s, when the British government deported him. Mograbi then shows a photograph of the Mograbi clan in Damascus, and says that these relatives of his look Arab, and asks if they are, and, if his great grandfather was Arab, then what does that say about him? Is he an Arab as well? Mograbi doesn't answer this question, but this revelation complicates the shot and reverse shot analogy. It means that shot and reverse shot are combined not only when Mograbi and Zaatari are on the same stage, as a Jew and an Arab in the same frame, but furthermore, Mograbi himself contains these two identity positions within the frame of his own identity.

The Mograbi family in Damascus, early 1920s
From The Mograbi Family Album

The notion of the Arab Jew has been addressed by a number of artists and intellectuals, most notably in the US by the artist Michael Rakowitz, who has made a series of projects that were related to his identity as a diasporic Iraqi Jew. Cultural and Women's Studies scholar Ella Shohat has noted that "The Zionist denial of the Arab-Moslem and the Palestinian East... has as its corollary the denial of the Jewish "Mizrachim" (the "Eastern Ones") who, like the Palestinians, but by more subtle and less obviously brutal mechanisms, have also been stripped of the right of self-representation."[30] The dominant discourse in Israel about Mizrachim,

30 Ella Shohat, "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims," Social Text, no. 19/20 (Autumn, 1988), p1. Emphasis in the original.

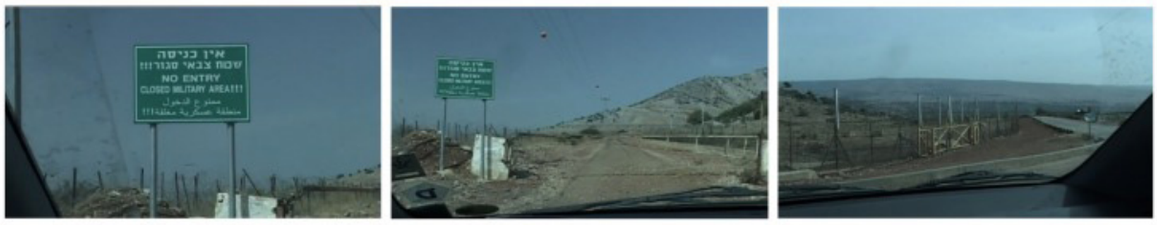
sometimes referred to as Jewish Arabs, Oriental Jews, or *Sephardim*[31], is that they were saved from the harsh rule of Arab countries after 1948 by immigrating to Israel.[32] But the photographs that Mograbi shows us reveal an alternative narrative, in which Jewish Arabs in Beirut and Damascus, Cairo or Jerusalem had a thriving cosmopolitan existence. Furthermore, their mobility resembles that of Zaatari's family in the pre-1948 Arab world. Thus, Mograbi describes his identity, through his family's history in the Middle East, as a way to identify with Zaatari.[33]



Akram Zaatari. Letter to a Refusing Pilot (still), 2013
Film and video installation. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut

In the next and final installment of this essay, I will argue that the conversation between Zaatari and Mograbi has been truly dialogical, in the sense that it was predicated not only on mutual identification but also on mutual exchange. Furthermore, I will argue that the conversation between Zaatari and Tamir could never reach this level of mutuality, because of the mistrust engendered by the haunting specter of history and the politics of aesthetics.

31 These terms each have very different social contexts and ideological implications and it should be noted that for most Mizrachim in Israel, it is a radical act to self-identify as Jewish Arabs or Arab Jews.
32 Ibid. p3.
33 Avi Mograbi's 2012 film Once I Entered a Garden, deals with the subject of past Middle-eastern cosmopolitanism explicitly.



Stills from Avi Mograbi's second mission, the Other Side of Shebaa Farms, 9 minutes, 2008

Part III: Forms of Refusal

The conversation between Akram Zaatari and Avi Mograbi in *A Conversation with an Imagined Israeli Filmmaker* ends when Zaatari tells the story of another task that he had given Mograbi. Following up on his film *All is Well on the Border*(1997), Zaatari wanted to return to a border zone that he could not reach, the area of Shebaa Farms. This area, at the intersection of the Lebanese and Syrian borders and the northern Golan Heights, was occupied by Israel, starting in 1967, and despite the Israeli withdrawal from Southern Lebanon in 2000, it remains disputed territory[34]. Zaatari asks Mograbi to film interviews with older locals in the area and gives him a list of specific places to find. In response, Mograbi makes a short film, *The Other Side of Shebaa Farms* (2008), but it is a record of failure. In this short film, whose transcript is included in the book about their conversation, Mograbi can be seen driving around, unable to find any of the places that Zaatari has asked him to find, encountering mine fields and electric fences instead.

Zaatari said that in the 1990s, Israelis were constantly trying to collaborate with artists and intellectuals of the Arab world, and that one potential reason for this was to recruit them to be spies. Zaatari and Mograbi acknowledge this, playfully, through a role reversal in which Mograbi is being sent on various exercises on the border. The imagery of *The Other Side of Shebaa Farms*, which ends the conversation between Mograbi and Zaatari, is the actual border, militarized and fenced off, that sits between the nations that Mograbi and Zaatari represent. By ending here, it is as if they want to make concrete, to remind each other and us of the very real gulf that lies between the two, despite their attempts at communication.

Stills from Avi Mograbi's second mission, the Other Side of Shebaa Farms, 9 minutes, 2008

34 Israel withdrew its occupation of southern Lebanon in 2000, but it did not withdraw from Shebaa Farms. Israel claims it is a part of the Golan Heights; Hezbollah disputes this claim.

When Grant Kester describes Habermas's notion of discursive democracy he notes that Habermas has assumed an ideal set of circumstances for discourse, and has not accounted for various power dynamics[35]. Kester is also suspicious of the assumption that Habermas makes that all discourse is naturally subject to the force of reason, positing instead that counterpoised models of argument, where each interlocutor seeks to identify with the position of the other, are more productive. In the conversation between Zaatari and Mograbi, they are clearly trying to account for the power dynamics built into the situation. Moreover, when Mograbi reveals the photographs of his Arab Jewish family, he is identifying with Zaatari's Arab context.[36] They are also looking to identify with the other when each of them refers to their mutual engagement with experimental documentary film. This attention to the structure of the conversation as a model where each subject's national interests are suspended reveals that a dialogical aesthetics is at play.

Hagai Tamir didn't feel the same kind of mutuality as Mograbi had in his conversations with Zaatari.[37] This is evident in the absence of the pilot's voice from Zaatari's 2013 video or its accompanying publication. Tamir felt he was used as material for an artwork, and that he told Zaatari much more about himself than he learned from the artist. Zaatari had invited him to come to the opening of the Venice Biennial to see the finished work, but Tamir declined, worried that since this was a part of the Lebanese national pavilion, he might be instrumentalized for a political purpose.[38] But he did eventually visit the exhibition at a later date, and sat on the empty chair.

Furthermore, there is one thing that has bothered Tamir about Zaatari's work that is worth noting. At the outset of their correspondence, Zaatari sent him DVDs of his work and in one of them, *This Day* (2003), Tamir saw the image of former Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon, made to look like he was a Nazi. The idea that an Israeli would be compared to a Nazi was too much for him. He acknowledges that his understanding of art doesn't extend to video art or appropriation and, in my view, Tamir didn't understand that Zaatari was not himself making the comparison but instead looking at the ways that imagery was used for propaganda purposes during the second Intifada. But regardless, the seat in the installation of *Letter to a Refusing Pilot* was empty. For these reasons, the dialogical exchange between Tamir and Zaatari was a relative failure and didn't reach the same level of mutuality of Mograbi and Zaatari's conversation. In actuality, it was a more accurate reflection of the current political condition under which Israel and Lebanon existed. Like Mograbi driving around the north of Israel, endlessly bumping into mine fields and electric fences, Tamir had met his own roadblocks with Zaatari. But perhaps this was because each of them was holding a widely different set of expectations for the encounter. The border between Zaatari and Tamir wasn't based on national politics but the politics of aesthetics – Tamir is a modernist humanist who believes in truth, essentialism, originality and its relationship to expression, whereas Zaatari is interested in appropriation and plays with the borders between perceptual categories, such as documentary and fact, point and counterpoint, or author and reader.[39]

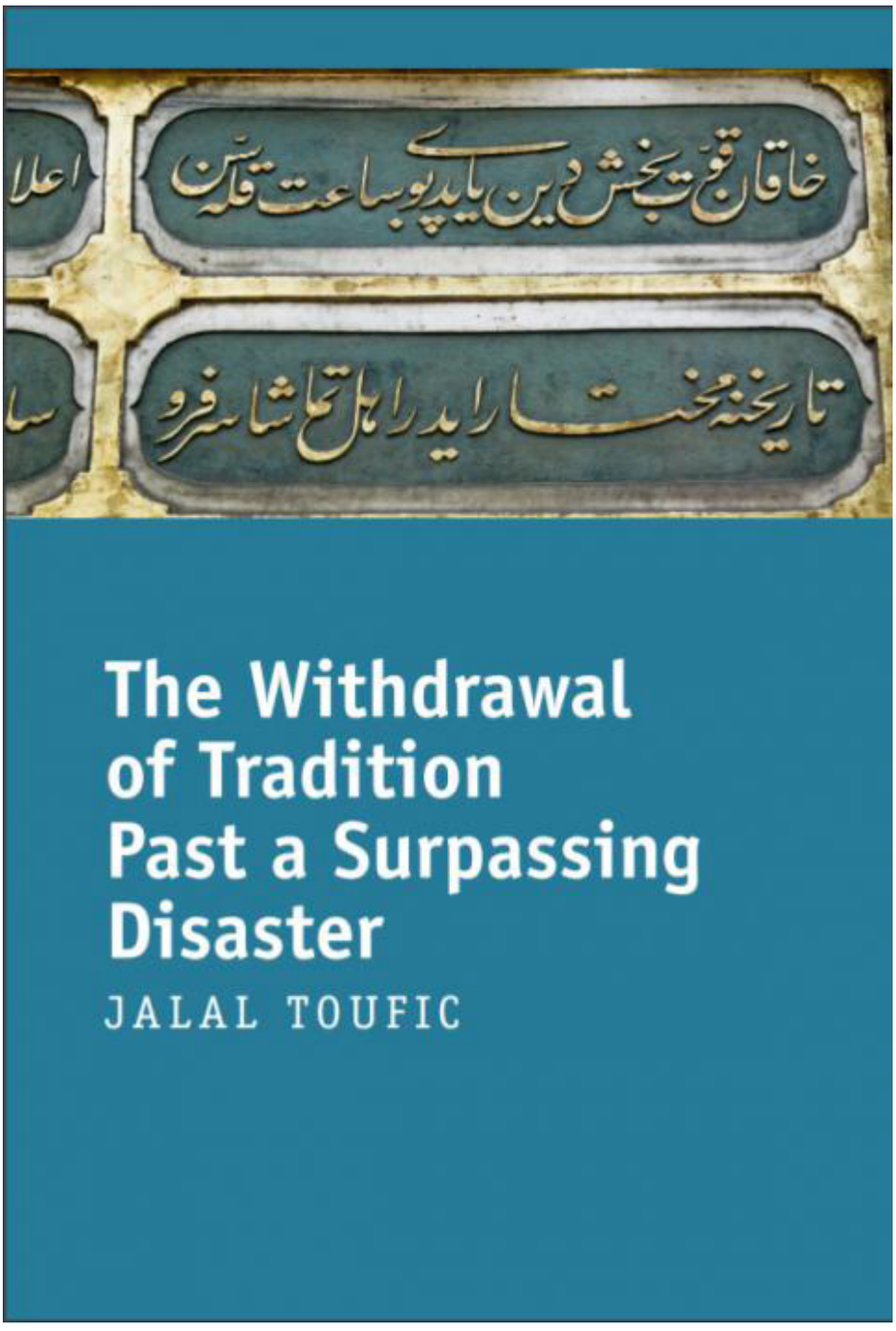
35 Grant H. Kester, Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) p 113

36 One could say that Mograbi goes further to identify with Zaatari than vice versa, and in that sense reveals a limitation to the mutuality at play in their exchange. But at the same time, one must remember the power relations that are also at play between an Israeli and a Lebanese citizen, perhaps revealing the gulf between the goal of equality and mutuality and the realities of a political and social situation that has been in place from 1982 till the present moment.

37 Interview with the author on July 29, 2013

38 The context of the Venice Biennial for this work, one which includes national pavilions that are tied to not only a history of nationalism but also a history of colonialism, makes this more than just any contemporary art exhibition context for a work predicated on antagonistic nationalisms.

39 Jacques Rancière calls this tendency "the distribution of the sensible," the regime that determines what can be sensed, including what can be seen, felt, said, thought, and heard. Jacques Rancière, The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible (London: Continuum, 2000)



online book

Writer and artist Jalal Toufic offers a way of thinking about Zaatari's use of appropriation that is particular to their experience as post-war artists. In his book, *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster*, Toufic claims that the phenomenon of an appropriated copy might seem like a repetition of something but actually is a resurrection of a lost tradition in the context of what he calls a "surpassing disaster."[40] A resurrection occurs when the original is no longer available, a situation that follows wars, like the civil war in Lebanon, during which countless museums, archives, and artworks have been destroyed along with the historians, artists and intellectuals that were killed. Toufic argues that the disaster of war destroys tradition and, in effect, constructs a poststructuralist condition in which all representations become part of a chain of signifiers. For Toufic, another example of a resurrection is the ruin:

40 Jalal Toufic, The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster (Forthcoming Books, 2009)

I along with my two siblings and my mother deserted the family apartment during the 1982 Israeli Invasion of Lebanon. Did this make the apartment a ruin? Yes, and not because it was severely damaged and burned during the last days of the offensive: even after it was restored it remained a ruin.[41]

The renovated apartment is a copy of what it had been before it was deserted and destroyed but that copy can never be the original, and as a result always points to its destruction. In this sense the true ruin is the new building. To illustrate this idea, Toufic tells a story about a vampire in post-war Beirut, who is looking for the perfect ruin and goes from one destroyed building to another, constantly dissatisfied, until he finds a brand new building and buys it. The realtor was confused because the vampire had asked for a ruin, which would seem to be an old decrepit place, and instead the vampire was interested in a shiny new building, which would seem to be the opposite of a ruin. But at that moment the realtor saw the seemingly young vampire as old and the seemingly new building as a ruin. In this sense, the newly constructed building is haunted by the destruction that led to its construction, its becoming.[42]

When Zaatari includes the image of Sharon dressed as a Nazi in *This Day*, he is quoting from a realm of visual activism for Palestinian solidarity.[43] But when we recall that Zaatari was interested in Godard's critique of militant filmmaking, his use of the visual activism that had produced the image of Sharon dressed as a Nazi most probably follows a similar critique and skepticism towards activism's use of visual culture.[44] Furthermore, Zaatari is reproducing an image from an email that in itself is a reproduction of Nazi imagery. In Toufic's terms, Zaatari is resurrecting the image of the Nazi in Palestinian solidarity discourse, a repetition that produced a counterfeit, without the real power of the original, a copy that occurs in the wake of the surpassing disasters of both the Shoah and the Nakba.[45] This model of repetition/resurrection is used throughout Zaatari's work. In *All is Well on the Border,* he has actors read the words of prisoners. In *This Day*, aside from the Sharon image, he also attempts to reproduce a series of photographs of Bedouins, originally taken by the orientalist Jibraiel Jabbur in 1950. In *Letter to a Refusing Pilot*, he reuses the photographs that he has taken in 1982 and that were depicted in *This Day* to construct a film. Tamir's misreading of Zaatari's use of repetition was to believe that Zaatari intended to repeat the initial equation of Nazi and Israeli political violence. But Tamir also misinterpreted the repeated image by assuming that it held some sort of original power.

41 Jalal Toufic, "Ruins" in Matthew Gumpert and Jalal Toufic eds. Thinking: The Ruin, (Istanbul: Rezan Has Museum, 2010), pp. 35-40.
42 ibid p20
43 It is important to also note that the image of an Israeli prime minister dressed as a Nazi is most famous in the case of Yitzhak Rabin,used in a right wing crusade against him, because of his engagement in dialog with Palestinians as part of the Oslo process. This image has been conjured many times to stress the role of political right-wing propaganda in Rabin's assassination in 1995. But in that case, this gesture served a very different ideological position from the image of Sharon. The ubiquity of the Nazi signifier and its instrumentalization for various political positions is important but would take too long to describe or analyze here.
44 Zaatari's film All is Well on the Border (1997) is an homage to Jean Luc Godard's Ici Et Ailleurs (1972), an experimental documentary film, originally made as a result of the invitation by the Palestinian Liberation Movement, that is a deconstruction of the propaganda of revolutionary movements.
45 For Toufic, an example of the withdrawal of tradition after the surpassing disaster of the Holocaust is the tendency in the early years of the State of Israel for Holocaust survivors to be marginalized in a society that wanted to forget Jewish weakness and replace it with Jewish strength. Jalal Toufic, "Ruins" p46

Vampire and Mirror from Dracula (1931)
dir. Tod Browning

Zaatari works like a historian, archaeologist, or an archivist of a situation in the wake of war[46] but like Toufic says, "with regard to the surpassing disaster, art acts like the mirror in vampire films: it reveals the withdrawal of what we think is still there."[47] Zaatari believes that we might look for a document of an original thing but what we are left with is a record of absence.[48] For instance, in *Letter to a Refusing Pilot*, Zaatari focuses on a school that is now destroyed, an architectural volume that has been punctured and now is only a flattened mass of rubble, only existing through photographs, stories or through the approximations of the new school that replaced it. Toufic recalls a famous line in the 1961 film *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, "You have seen nothing in Hiroshima," and asks if all we have is absence, "does this mean that we should not record?"[49] He answers that we must record the "nothing," because the absence of the original referent is something that we can hold on to. Zaatari traces the shape of this absence through photography, architecture, correspondence, and conversations with a filmmaker and a pilot. These conversations chart the space between two subjects. This dialogical space is also "nothing." It has no subjectivity or materiality but it can be characterized through its affect, a particular kind of remembering that alters the present.

46 One way that Zaatari has worked to archive this social history is through the Arab Image Foundation, which he cofounded. Zaatari speaks extensively about his work, including these aspects, in a conversation with Chad Elias, published in Tate Papers (Spring 2013)
47 Jalal Toufic, The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster (Forthcoming Books, 2009) p57
48 ibid
49 ibid

Akram Zaatari. Letter to a Refusing Pilot (still), 2013
Film and video installation. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut

Conclusion

To return to the point that I made at the start of part I of this essay, the strategy of dialogue has a great deal of significance in the region of Israel-Palestine and Lebanon. So when Akram Zaatari engages in various forms of dialogue with an Israeli pilot and a filmmaker, he does so within the context of various constraints within two states who remain at war and the larger regional BDS discourse. But what I find illuminating about these conversations is that when we look closely at their form they reveal different degrees of both personal and political engagement and at the same time, various forms of refusal.

The conversation between Zaatari and Tamir was burdened by Tamir's fear, hesitancy, and skepticism. It also was burdened by the traumas of not only the wars between Israel and Lebanon but also the traumas of the Nakba and the Holocaust. Furthermore, their conversation was one sided by its very intention. It was meant to produce an artwork and Zaatari asked Tamir to serve as its subject, thereby "recruiting" him, in a reversal of the motivation for Israeli 1990s outreach efforts towards intellectuals in Arab countries. In my view, Zaatari intentionally instrumentalizes Tamir to be an Israeli subject who must sit in a chair made for him and look at the film that documents the destruction that an Israeli invasion created. The conversation between Zaatari and Tamir was not part of a coexistence project, and thus is not meant to participate in normalization. Instead, it was playfully antagonistic and intentionally one sided.[50] But at the same time, Zaatari's conversation with Tamir was based on a respect for Tamir's refusal, his exercise of agency in the face of an immoral military machine. Both in this case, and in the conversation with Mograbi, then, it was an act of refusal that instigated the dialogical exchange.

50 In this sense, the work's socially engaged or, in other terms, relational aspects embrace Claire Bishop's notion of antagonism as outlined in Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," October 110, Fall 2004 pp51-79.

Akram Zaatari. Letter to a Refusing Pilot, 2013
Installation view, Lebanese Pavilion, 55th International Venice Biennale. Photo: Marco Milan

Zaatari's conversation with Avi Mograbi had different formal characteristics. First, it was performative, given the fact that the conversation discussed here is the one that occurred in Aubervilliers. Secondly, their relationship began from a mutual recognition as filmmakers in a third space, a film festival in Italy, neither Israeli nor Lebanese.[51] In addition to this, they use photographs in the way that Ariella Azoulay describes as discursive democracy, using a civil contract of photography. They use the photographic trace as evidence of the intersection between their personal and political lives and as a space for interpretation and counter-interpretation. Finally, Zaatari and Mograbi were able to acknowledge to one another the power dynamics that exist when an Israeli and a Lebanese artist work together. *The Other Side of Shebaa Farms* is a perfect example of this. It isn't about collaboration that illustrates some kind of utopian coexistence. Instead they are in dialogue, collaborating on a project that ultimately reveals the fact that their dialogue is constantly cut off by the borders, checkpoints, closed military zones, and other territorial limits. But in my view, it was important that they were engaged in this conversation, one that was honest about its limits and revealed its impossibility but worth attempting nevertheless.

This is the paradoxical nature of discussing these projects together. Refusal in the context of Israel is often discussed in cultural circles in terms of a boycott. But Hagai Tamir's courageous refusal was internal to Israeli society. He refused to participate in an indiscriminate war. Avi Mograbi's son's refusal to serve in the Israeli military is yet another example of an Israeli citizen stepping back from the policies of the governing regime. When Zaatari answered the call from Yousry Nasrallah to stand in solidarity with Mograbi's son's refusal, this was in direct contradiction to the tendency for many in the Arab world to refuse to be in dialogue with Israeli artists, for fear of normalization. In this context, the conversations that unfolded were rampant with dialogical aesthetics because each party was hyper aware of what was at stake when they engaged each other. As a result, both *Letter to a Refusing Pilot* and *A Conversation with an Imaginary Israeli Filmmaker* reveal that both refusal and dialogical engagement are tools to intervene in a political situation that all too often lacks the speculative possibilities that civil imagination can provide.

51 It's interesting to note that both meetings (Zaatari with Tamir and Zaatari with Mograbi) occurred in Italy.