THE DOCUMENTARY TURN: SURPASSING TRADITION IN THE WORK OF WALID RAAD AND AKRAM ZAATARI

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In Lebanon, the very question of how one might engage with the image as a medium of expression drives intellectual and artistic sensibilities. In a country still living the consequences and continuations of a devastating sequence of wars, the very production of image-making, let alone its credibility within the highly contested zones of public discourse, is called into question. For artists working within or in response to this context, we move from the primacy of the visual to the concept of the image as footnote, a malleable point of reference in a stream of contested histories competing for a place to be written.

The work of Walid Raad and Akram Zaatari offers two distinct but equally compelling approaches to visual practice. Each artist has developed new forms of address that express the conditions and consequences of Lebanon's recent history, bound to the period of violent civil war, or wars, between 1975 and 1990, and the contradictions—if not impossibility—of their objective representation. In their respective works, the collected document, be it photographic, textual or aural, is a central premise, as is the writing of history in which tangential events and the subjective eye-witness are privileged players. Both engage in processes of dismantling and attempts at reconstruction of the multiple perspectives of this history. Both articulate narratives of a fragile present still coming to terms with its past and looking to find a language with which to express the future.

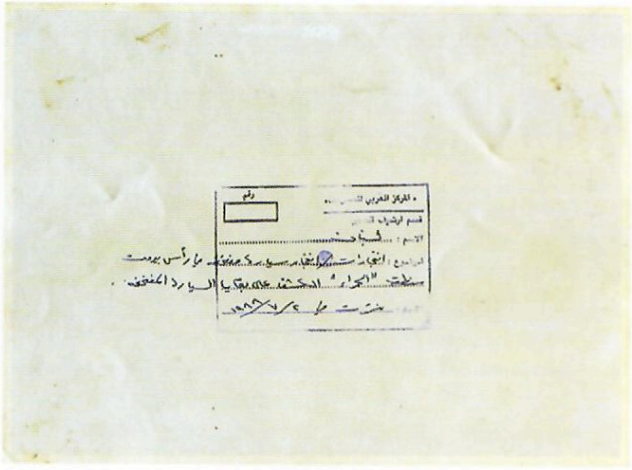
Walid Raad's exposés of real and alleged events, presented by way of the power-point lecture, documentary-style video works and photo-textual displays, is pointed in its articulation of mechanisms through which history is constructed. Nimbly blurring facts and fiction within an elaborate exposition of impersonation and parody, he reveals the arbitrary nature of these mechanisms and their laughable inefficacy. Working with the history of photography and filmmaking genres, Akram Zaatari's layered use of written and recorded testimonies and autobiographical material, addressing themes of resistance and the transmission of experience, propose a new form of individual and social portraiture.

Raad's creation of The Atlas Group, 1989–2004, "a project established in Beirut in 1999 to research and document the contemporary history of Lebanon", has resulted in an impressive body of work that mimics the very structure of the forensic archive. The very idea of a largely unidentified collective of individuals (Raad is the only acknowledged member) is redolent with unease, ideas of covert operations, surveillance and undercover activity. It also raises questions about authorship and the construction and dissemination of history, of whom we can trust, and the validity of information purporting to come from a position of empirical authority.

Complete with numbered files, the archive is organised according to three main categories: Type A (attributed to an identified individual), Type FD (found documents) and Type AGP (attributed to The Atlas Group). The subject of these so-called files relates to the situations and conditions of living through the Civil War, from the experience of being held hostage (The Bachar Tapes) and surveillance (*I only Wish that I Could Weep*, [Operator 17]), to the unsolved disappearance of citizens and family members (*Secrets in the Open Sea*, [Anonymous]) and a taxonomy of the charred remains of car engines found after car bomb attacks (*My Neck is Thinner Than a Hair*). Raad plays on the stereotypes we have come to associate with this period of Lebanon's recent history, filtered through the clichés of East-versus-West and its abiding legacy.

Written and verbal explanations and annotations, generally in Arabic and translated into English, abound

THE ATLAS GROUP / WALID RAAD
My Neck is Thinner Than a Hair
2000–2003, 100 black and white digital prints,
each 25 x 35 cm

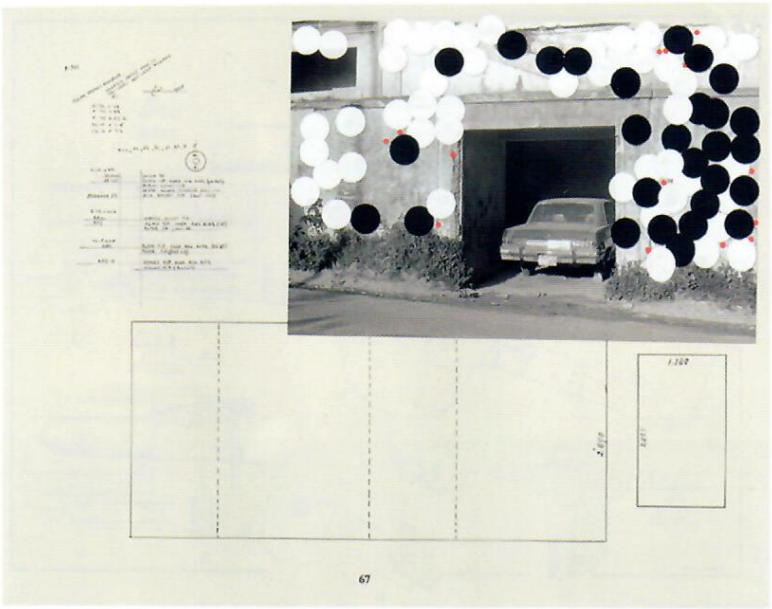


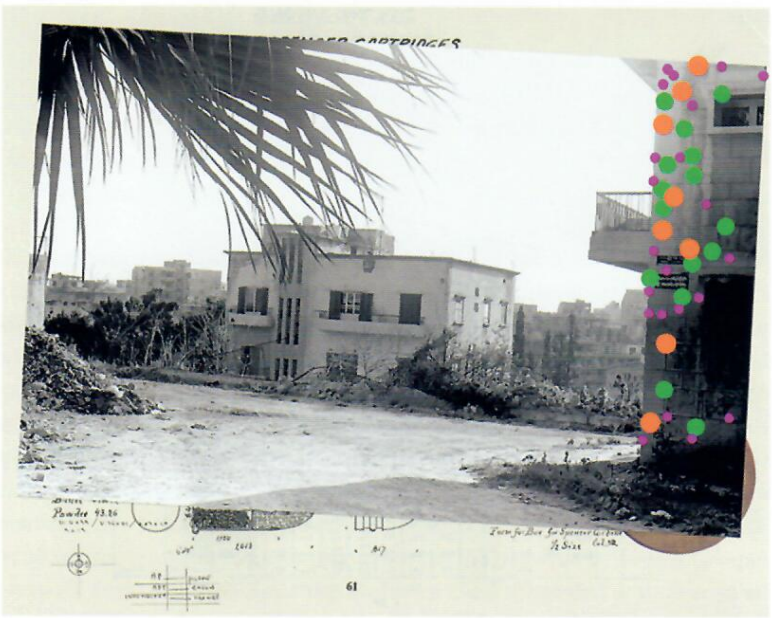
in The Atlas Group archive. Each proposes a subjective interpretation of seemingly objective evidence. In the Fakhouri Files, made up of collected documents from one Beirut-based amateur historian, Doctor Fadl Fakhouri, we find a series of annotated notebooks, photographs and films dating from the early years of the Civil War. *Miraculous Beginnings*, we are told, is the result of Fakhouri exposing a roll of super 8 film, frame by frame, each time he thought the Lebanese wars were going to end. Literal snapshots of façades of buildings, familial interiors and fleeting glimpses of daily life are caught and replayed in stroboscopic rhythm, passing before our eyes at lightning speed; the assault of these flickering moments of hope is devastating in its poignancy.

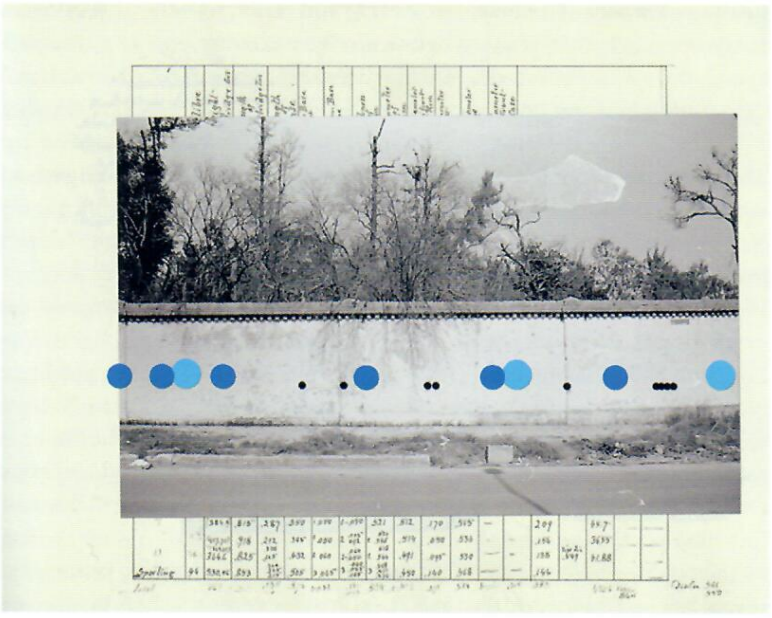
The subjective act of prediction is also present in another work from the same File A, *The Missing Lebanese Wars*, Notebook Volume 72. Raad draws our attention to interpretations of the event rather than the event itself. We are told that the collection of small black and white photographs attests to a betting circle of historians from Lebanon's then leading political parties—Maronite Nationalists, Socialists, Marxists and Islamists—who would meet regularly at the races. In an absurdist twist, rather than bet on the horses, each member of the group would bet on the distance between the horse and the finishing post at the time at which their win was captured by the course photographer. The photographs themselves reveal the just-before or the just-after, but never the actual moment of passing the post. Adding to the seemingly evasive tactics of our gamblers, we are witness to Fakhouri's carefully pencilled notes on the length of the race, the critical distance between the horse and finishing post and his observations on the characters of the winning punter: "He was imbued with a patience and otherworldliness ill-suited for politics"; "Uncivil and sullenly rude."

Like some brilliant prodigy let loose in the laboratory, Raad's visible role in the construction of the archive's various files adds a further layer to the idea of subjective histories. There is an elegantly mordant wit to his analyses of the social, economical and ideological systems that underpin war and its representation. His addition of brightly coloured dots on a group of black and white photographs in *Let's be Honest, the Weather Helped*, 1998, which recall John Baldessari's reflexive photomontages from the 1980s, are meant to refer to the different coloured tips of ammunition used by a host of national forces fighting in Lebanon during the Civil War. If certain images showing a dense build up of dots along the façade of a building have some credibility as a record of an identifiable military intervention, Raad's account of this particular form of mapping becomes more patently dubious when it names countries such as Switzerland as part of the elementary table of munitions distribution, with the traces from its white-tipped cartridges delineated as a single, large dot on the trunk of a solitary tree.

THE ATLAS GROUP / WALID RAAD
Let's Be Honest, The Weather Helped
1984–2007, archival colour inkjet print,
17 prints, each 46 x 72 cm







The aesthetic strategies at play in The Atlas Group archive suggest some explicit references to the language of photojournalism and reportage but also to that of photoconceptualism, "the quintessential anti-object", in which the photographic image never functions alone but always in relation to other objects, forms and narratives.[1] Raad's an-aesthetic approach to his work, its marks of indifference in the presentation of supposedly found images assembled by the persona of an amateur, also echo the deliberate 'deskilling' of the medium that was integral to the anti-aesthetic of Conceptual art (Raad's claim of authorship to certain collections of photographs in The Atlas Group archive are ostensibly dated from the artist's pre-formed adolescence): "In photoconceptualism, photography posits its escape from the criteria of art-photography through the artist's performance as a non-artist who, despite being a non-artist, is nevertheless compelled to make photographs." If Dan Graham's photo-essay *Homes for America*, 1966–1967, or Ed Ruscha's *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, 1966, serve as prime examples of this approach, Martha Rosler's exposition of the photographic image as necessarily part of a critically discursive space in *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*, 1974, offers a particularly pertinent reference for Raad and The Atlas Group archive.

In response to the idea that his work might extend the possibilities of Conceptual art's tenets from the perspective of twenty-first century Lebanon, Raad proposes instead that his work represents its negative. If Raad's work contributes to an expanded terrain for a history of Western experimental culture, he aligns it, more crucially, to an emergent artistic language capable of communicating the complexities of living in a country affected by war. For Raad, it is precisely the impossibility of the conditions that allowed for Conceptual art to flourish in Europe and North America in a context such as that of Lebanon, where the very act of photographing is regarded as a suspicious act and the validity of photographic document itself is regarded with scepticism.[2]

In contradistinction to the operations of Conceptualism, Raad situates his work within the philosophical propositions of the writer Jalal Toufic, whose notion of "the withdrawal of tradition past a surpassing disaster" has proved especially resonant for Raad and his contemporaries in articulating the ghostly presence of established conventions of image-making in the wake of calamitous events, or of their reappearance as an act of haunting or resurrection.[3] A further connection might be made between Raad's enterprise and Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*, conceived in 1927 and continued to his death in 1929. In an unpublished introduction to the Atlas, itself an attempt to construct a collective historical memory of Western European thought, Warburg, in prescient anticipation of the calamitous consequences of Fascism and the Second World War, wrote of the relationship between memory and trauma: "Mnemonic desire… is activated especially in those moments of extreme duress in which the traditional material bonds between subjects and objects, and between objects and their representation appear to be on the verge of displacement, if not outright disappearance."[4]

In the summer of 2008, Raad presented a 'retrospective' exhibition at the Gallery Sfeir-Semler in Beirut. Titled A History of Modern and Contemporary Arab Art Part 1. Chapter 1: Beirut 1992–2005, it was the first of what is intended to develop into a multi-form elaboration of the use of the archive as medium. In the first manifestation of this new body of work, which Raad anticipates will develop over a number of years, he uses the reflexive strategy of the exhibition format itself to explore what he describes as "the emerging infrastructure for the creation, distribution and consumption of Arab art and artists". The six-room installation was organised with Raad's characteristically taxonomic precision:

1. Part I_Chapter 1_Preface: Title 23
2. Part I_Chapter 1_Section 79: Walid Sadek's *Love Is Blind* (Modern Art Oxford, UK, 2006)
3. Part I_Chapter 1_Section 79: Index XXVI: Artists
4. Part 1_Chapter 1_Section 8a: Museums
5. Part I_Chapter 1_Section 139: The Atlas Group (1989–2004)
6. Part I_Chapter 1_Section 271: Appendix XVIII: Plates

The section on The Atlas Group presented a scaled-down model of the almost complete archive. The second section,

WALID RAAD
***A History of Modern and Contemporary Arab Art Part I Chapter 1: Beirut 1992–2005, Section 79: Walid Sadek's* Love Is Blind (Modern Art Oxford, UK, 2006)**
2008, paint on wall, 4 x 10.3 m and 4 x 6 m
Courtesy the artist and Gallery Sfeir-Semler, Beirut

Love is Blind, featured a *trompe l'oeil*-painted reproduction of a work by Raad's fellow artist Walid Sadek as it was installed in the exhibition Out of Beirut at Modern Art Oxford in 2006, in which Raad also exhibited. In a further layer of historical reverberation, the work by Sadek references a series of paintings by yet another Lebanese artist from the first half of the twentieth century, Moustafah Farroukh. While Raad's nascent enterprise reveals the systems of constructing an all too consumable contemporary Middle-Eastern art, it also eloquently conveys the condition of the artist who, like history, is reduced to the state of a document, a mere footnote in a sequential telling of events stripped of context and consequence.

In contrast to Raad's discursive use of the archive as format, Akram Zaatari dislikes the use of the term in discussing his work. Instead, he prefers to discuss the multi-faceted approach that defines his practice as "field work".

Zaatari consciously plays on the genres of photographic practice and film, from the studio portrait to documentary filmmaking. Reinventing these traditions in an attempt to adequately reflect the dynamics of image-making arising out of conditions of war, he has developed an extensive practice in which he assumes the role of collector, researcher, and curator. He considers his different photographic and film portraits as "objects of study", collected for the purposes of specific phenomena, whether it is the practice of photography in Lebanon or the broader Middle East, or communicating the experience of imprisonment and acts of resistance.[5]

Zaatari's "habits of recording" are related to his adolescent years in Lebanon during the Civil War. Growing up in the southern town of Saida in a relatively protected environment, and with few opportunities to leave his parent's apartment, he developed the habit of taking notes, and making photographs and recordings of the things going on around

him. That these things proved to be Israeli planes being shot down overhead by Syrian fighter pilots and news of the bombing of Beirut, or propaganda broadcasts by Lebanese resistance groups, was simply part of the daily reality that merged with his interest in the Cannes Film Festival or the latest pop release by singer Sami Clark.

The sense, prevalent in Zaatari's work, of a quotidian that contains within it extraordinary events, is particularly apparent in his exploration of resistance. His early documentary-styled *All is Well on the Border*, 1997, was shot largely in the southern suburbs of Beirut as he was unable to cross into southern Lebanon, which, since its invasion by Israel in 1978, has been at the heart of the country's resistance activities. While these activities, intended to protect the southern part of the Lebanon under the banner of the 'National Resistance', were initially led by a coalition of largely secular, left-of-centre parties, they were subsequently assumed under the leadership of the radical Islamicist movement Hezbollah as the dominant force defying Israeli occupation. Writing of the work in the context of the 'uncritical consensus' which has prevailed in Lebanon since the end the Civil War in 1991, Lebanese writer Rasha Salti has observed: "It defends a forgotten cause, speaks for the silenced, and exposes a reality occluded from representation."[6]

Zaatari's film, a deliberately self-conscious montage of still images, current and archival footage from news broadcasts and propaganda films, and recorded interviews with former resistant fighters and prisoners, bears witness to multiple perspectives on the nature of resistance. Both in terms of visual style and in the title itself, Zaatari is explicit in his references to Jean-Luc Godard's forays into *cinema vérité* in the late 1960s and early 1970s with his films *All Is Well*, produced with Jean-Luc Gorin and *Here and Elsewhere*, which he produced with Anne-Marie Miéville. True to his interest in the unmaking of existing film or documentary traditions, Zaatari engages with the very failure of Godard's ambitions for an activist cinema in order to portray a continuing and evolving narrative of conflict, imprisonment and displacement that is marginalised from mainstream visual consciousness.

The collected document as evidence in the excavation of stories that have either become obscured over time, or that simply cannot be told, is a central element of Zaatari's project of individual and collective portraiture. His film *In This House*, 2005, records the search in the garden of a house in southern Lebanon for a letter encased and buried there by a former National Front resistance fighter who had occupied the house in the early 1980s. The split-screen format presents, on one side, the resistance member—now a respected photojournalist—telling the story of his experience in the house and on the other side, the digging up of the garden and the eventual discovery of the canister containing the letter. The running table of text that accompanies the unfolding narrative identifies the owners of the house and a host of security agents who oversee the operation and whose faces, we are told, are not to be filmed. The anxiety about who or what is allowed to be caught on film together with their growing excitement as the letter is unearthed connotes the poignant tension of a country in a constant state of deferral; the dilemma of whether it is better to unpack the still unresolved consequences of events from the past or to simply carry on, and leave them buried.

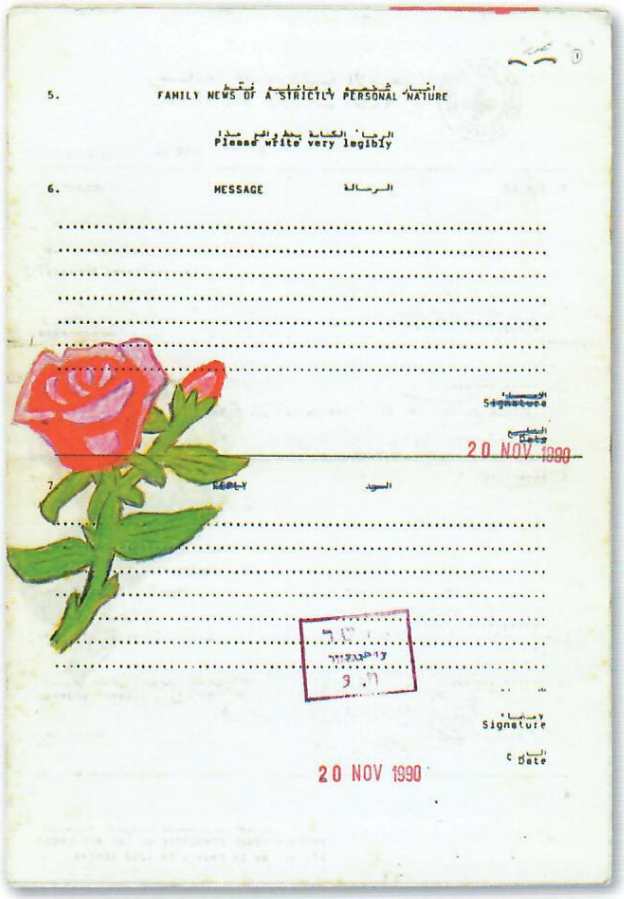
Zaatari's description of works such as *In This House* as interventions is telling. Drawing on documentary methods, he produces a physical but also psychological impact on the people and places involved. For the present owners of the house where the buried letter was found, their perception has been changed by this freshly uncovered knowledge. More recently, Zaatari's style has moved on from the more straight, if not slightly reflexive, reportage of *All is Well* and of *In This House* to that of constructing a scenario to which real-life characters respond. His film *Nature Morte*, 2008, is an *intimiste* portrait of two men intent on the task of making a bomb. Filmed in a cabin interior, its painterly *chiaroscuro* is lent by the burning gas lamp which provides the principle light source, the only sounds accompanying their task those of a call to prayer from a distant mosque. It is into the crisp air of a rugged hillside that the two men part company at the end of the film, one equipped with a backpack presumably carrying the explosive device.

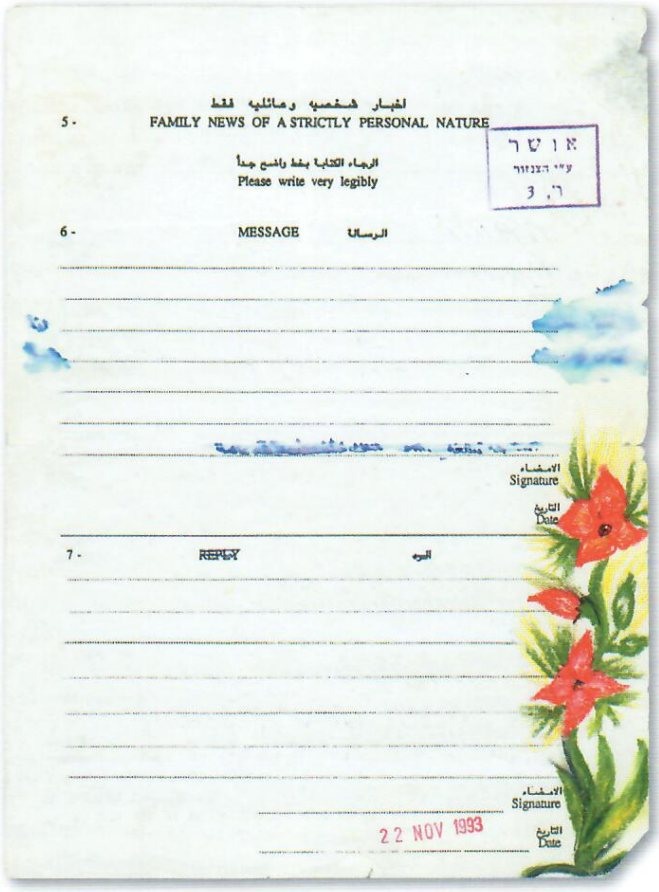
AKRAM ZAATARI

Neruda's Flowers

2009, set with three prints, C-prints, each 80 x 62.5 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Sfeir-Semler, Hamburg/Beirut





Revisiting his collected material over time is also a feature of Zaatari's project. For *Letter to Samir*, 2008, Zaatari filmed Nabih Awada—nicknamed Neruda—who had been imprisoned in Israel for ten years from the age of 16. Awada's poetic letters to his mother during the years of his imprisonment formed part of the content in *All is Well on The Border*. Awada's letters are also the subject of a recent series of still photographic portraits, in which the writing is erased, leaving only the author's touching embellishments of drawn, coloured flowers. Zaatari has said of his act of erasure: "What is or was significant cannot be said. The content is irrelevant; it is enough to see the drawings."[7]

Responding to a news photograph of Samir al-Qintar, Israel's longest-held Lebanese prisoner released in summer of 2006, Zaatari asked Nabih Awada to write to the former member of the PLO to ask him why, in his first public appearance after his release, he was photographed with Hezbollah's party leaders and dressed in their Islamic party's uniform. Recorded in real time, Awada begins by stating al-Quintar's first name before writing a letter, the content of which remains unknown to us. The second half of the 30 minute film witnesses Awada folding the letter into a small capsule before encasing it in successive layers of plastic, a method that suggests the communication might be swallowed or inserted into a bodily cavity, a common means of smuggling communications from one cell or one prison to another. That the histories of Awada and his imagined correspondent are ones of shared national struggle and imprisonment is the pivotal link

around which the two narratives revolve is central to the film's unspoken narrative. We can only imagine what Awada might have written to his compatriot, empathy with his years of incarceration, the cause for which they had been fighting, confusion from the apparent shift in ideological allegiances.

The mountains and valleys of the Shebaa farms are the focus of a new but related area of Zaatari's ongoing photographic research. It is in this rugged and bitterly fought-for landscape on the border of Lebanon with Israel and Syria that he filmed *Nature Morte*. Zaatari's large-scale photographs of this same area continue his fascination with this eerily unpopulated, high-surveillance terrain. It is when talking about these photographs that Zaatari allows himself to use the term "archive", for it is here in these mountains and this earth that one might trace its cartography of clandestine resistance. Although the image suggests only what cannot be revealed or spoken, the tension of its secrets is palpable. In the impossibility of viewing these images as pure landscape, we are witness to the overshadowing of one tradition, its withdrawal if it ever existed, and the production of an entirely new way of seeing, one that seems to respond to the question of the image as a credible producer of content in a way that might allow for what might be a new tradition to begin.

1 Jeff Wall, "'Marks of Indifference', Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art", 1995, originally published in Ann Godlstein and Anne Rorimer, *Reconsidering the Object of Art*, 1965–1975, Los Angeles: Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995, reprinted in Douglas Fogle, *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography 1960–1982*, Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2003, pp. 32–44.

2 Conversation with the artist, Dubai, March 2009.

3 Jalal Toufic, *Two or Three Things I'm Dying to Tell You*, Sausalito: The Post-Apollo Press, California, 2005.

4 Benjamin HD Buchloh, "Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*: The Anomic Archive", *Gerhard Richter: Atlas. The Reader*, London: Whitechapel, p. 109.

5 Conversation with the artist, Munich, March 2009.

6 Rasha Salti, "The Unbearable Weightlessness of Indifference", *Akram Zaatari: The Earth of Endless Secrets*, Portikus, Frankfurt, Galerie Sfeir-Semler, Beirut, forthcoming, in which Rasha Salti provides an excellent exposition of the history of armed resistance in southern Lebanon.

7 Conversation with the artist, Munich, March 2009.