



© Akram Zaatari

ثمانية وعشرون ليلاً وبيت من الشعر

Thamaniyat wa ushrun laylan wa bayt min al-sheir

Twenty-Eight Nights and A Poem

Akram Zaatari

Producer Akram Zaatari. **Production company** Akram Zaatari (Beirut, Lebanon). **Director** Akram Zaatari. **Screenplay** Akram Zaatari. **Director of photography** Akram Zaatari, Bassem Fayad, Mark Khalifeh. **Sound** Carine Basha. **Music** Nadim Meshlawi. **Sound design** Rana Eid. **Editor** Jowe Harfouche. **Commissioner** Musée Nicéphore-Niépce.

DCP, colour. 120 min. Arabic.

Premiere 9 February 2015, Berlinale 2015

Contact: festivals@mcidistribution.me

The song 'Fil bahr' (At Sea) extols the moon in twenty-eight different ways before finally making its point about the fleeting nature of love at the end. Different variations on one and the same thing, each an original: **28 Nights and a Poem** is an interpretation of the archive of the Sheherazade photo studio. Photographer Hashem el Madani opened the studio in 1953 in the Lebanese city of Saïda after spending years photographing people in front of their shops, in public squares or at the beach to satisfy their wish to appear before the camera. Some of the poses he captured on film were adopted by those who saw the photographs and subsequently took on a life of their own. They were recorded by photo and 8 mm cameras and are accompanied in the film by songs recorded on cassette tapes and played back on a laptop, together with el Madani's stories. In one children's programme, a polyphonic song is used to teach the alphabet. The archive's numerical ordering system is topsy-turvy because the booklet with the list of recordings was held the wrong way round. The archive does not actually exist in itself, but is generated by a system of recordings and transmissions in infinite variations.

Stefanie Schulte Strathaus

The essence of archives

Thamaniaat wa ushrun laylan wa bayt min al-sheir is partly a study of a photographer's studio practice in the mid-twentieth century and partly an exploration of the essence of archives today. The film tries to understand how this mode of producing images functioned in the lives of the communities it served, how it ceased to exist and what it led to. It is set between the Arab Image Foundation, where most of Hashem el Madani's collection is preserved today, and Studio Shehrazade in Saïda, where the photographer still spends time surrounded by his old machines, tools, photographs, negatives, and what remains of millions of transactions that took place there. The film is a reflection on making images, on an industry of image making, on ageing and on the life that remains and continues to grow in an archive. All of this is presented in this film through a set of staged interventions of which Madani himself is a part.

Akram Zaatari

"I was interested in a matrix that makes the image end up looking the way it does"

You were one of the co-founders of the Arab Image Foundation, which is not just an important archive in the Middle East, but also a source for much of your work. Could you tell us about its beginnings?

Akram Zaatari: I would say that the archive of the AIF is not a source but the outcome of a research project that I largely contributed to on photography in the Middle East and North Africa. I do not use existing archives as sources for developing work. My work aims to bring to light stories, experiences, and documents, and the many links within all of them. So the work generates collections of documents, mainly photographic records, which are kept by the AIF. It is not the other way around. The creation of AIF was very eventful. It could have ended up simply as an image bank. My involvement in research projects, besides acting as president of its board for thirteen years, marked AIF's path after the first two years. That reflects mainly in the weight given to extensive fieldwork while working on art projects that communicate or present them at the same time. This dual focus, research/art project, dominated AIF's practice from 1998 until 2010. That was the time when I researched the theme of the vehicle and made *The Vehicle: Picturing Moments of Transition in a Modernizing Society* (1999) and later, together with Walid Raad, we made *Mapping Sitting* (2002).

Reflecting on its history today, I consider that the initial goal of the foundation was a bit naïve, but it proved to be not so unproductive: we wanted to be able to recount, one day, a history of photography in the Arab region. AIF did not exist as an archive before individual artists expressed the desire to create a collection and work on it, work with it. AIF therefore reflects the concerns and desires of those behind it.

Now the question is whether AIF's collection is, or is not, an archive, and what it means or entails if it were or not. I believe there is a fundamental difference between archives as collections of 'sediment' – repositories of images of various practices in an institution – and what we do as individuals, as artists too, with AIF. If you want to consider AIF an archive, I would say it is more an archive of research and collecting practices than an archive of photographic practices.

In many ways, you work as an aggregator, a collector – one could even say curator – as much of your work has taken as its starting point pre-existing archival photographs, studio images, and documentary footage. The archive of portrait photographer Hashem el Madani, who is from your hometown in Saïda, has been a rich source of creative activity for you. Can you talk about your relationship to the authors of these images, in particularly Madani?

Anything pre-existing around me is an extension of my experience, knowledge, and perception, and could possibly end up as a subject for my research and in my work.

There are so many people who took pictures in the twentieth century, and most of these practices interest me. My relationship to authors of individual photographs is one of research in addition to the contractual side, with the exception of Madani, with whom I have a human relationship in addition to those. I spent so much time with him and know so much about his family, his work, and his life. Madani himself became part of my work, and not only his photography. I am interested in his work because I am interested in Saïda's history, on one hand, and because I am interested in taking an entire archive as a source to write the history of an industry, a practitioner, and a city. While working on a huge body of work made by one person, the question of authorship imposes itself immediately, whereas it does so to a lesser extent when you work on a number of images each made by a different person. I always insist that photographers whose work featured in my work are not my collaborators, because I initiated the work with an interest that goes beyond the scope of individual images they made, and an interest that is different from theirs.

The fact that I don't consider these photographers my collaborators does not mean they are not authors. I think this complicates notions of authorship the way institutions, galleries, indexing methods, and the art world in general understand it. One needs to explain why a single photograph made by Madani in the 1950s is dated differently on a museum website and listed under an artist's name. Madani becomes here a subject in an art project. Some databases do not have that much flexibility or space to describe a picture!

By doing so you displace and comment on works made by others and transform their perception. I use images made by Hashem el Madani and build around them so they look like fossils, metaphorically. If those documents are photographs, then yes, to answer you, a single photograph would have two parents, two authors. In this case they are products of a photographer's practice, tradition, and economy, and at the same time an artist's project that displaced them into another time, another tradition, another economy, while studying them and producing around them works that aim to change their initial perception completely. And that is what I like to call theatre.

Your work (in still and moving images) in many ways can be thought of as documents for writing history. Can you tell us how you see your works in relation to the writing and retelling of histories?

Much of my work is indeed about how personal narratives meet historical moments. It is a way of looking at how moments in history translated into the micro, into people's day-to-day. It is exactly like looking at family pictures of people in the 1950s and looking at how the values of modern times seem to infiltrate people's lives.

I am interested in the mechanism that makes an image what it is, even when that mechanism is a total accident, or when

images come to be what they are for purely economic reasons – that would be even better. I am after learning, and I cannot learn from something that was made to follow canons. This is why I was interested in the photographer Hashem el Madani, because he was self-taught and because I can learn from his simple, spontaneous reasoning. I agree with you that there is a lot behind someone's attitude facing a camera, not only ideology, but a universe of factors, a matrix that makes the image end up looking the way it does. The fact that this happens today without a facilitator, without that medium that used to be the photographer, multiplies choices and accidents and makes self-representation go completely off-canon. On the one hand, the images get wilder, but on the other – and thanks to instantaneous dissemination – dominant types get to reproduce much quicker than before. The marketing of digital cameras and phones, and the ease and immediacy with which images circulate, certainly represent a revolutionary phenomenon in the history of image production and diffusion, and that will definitely impact not only how images look, or how they are constructed, but also our logic, our human relationships, our recording habits, or simply our lives.

Interview: Eva Respini, Ana Janevski



© Marco Milán

Akram Zaatari was born in Saïda, southern Lebanon in 1966. He studied Architecture at the American University in Beirut and Media Studies at the New School in New York. He works as a performance and video artist, photographer, filmmaker, writer, and curator, and he lives in Beirut. Zaatari co-founded Beirut's Arab Image Foundation.

Zaatari's works are shown all over the world in solo and group exhibitions and are now found in the collections of many museums (Tate Modern, London; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Global Arts, London; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Arco Foundation, Madrid; TBA21, Vienna). Along with his artistic work, Zaatari teaches at numerous universities at home and abroad.

Films

1997: *Al-Sharîf Bi-Khayr / All Is Well on the Border* (45 min.). 2003: *Al-Yaoum / This Day* (86 min.). 2005: *Fo Haza al-Bayt / In This House* (13 min.). 2008: *Tabiah Samitah / Nature Morte* (10 min.). 2010: *Tomorrow Everything Will Be Alright* (10 min.). 2011: *Hia wa Houa / Her + Him* (33 min.). 2013: *The End of Time* (14 min.). 2013: *Letter to A Refusing Pilot* (34 min.). 2014: *Beirut Exploded Views* (30 min.). 2015: *Thamaniyat wa ushrun laylan wa bayt min al-sheir / Twenty-Eight Nights and A Poem*.