



AKRAM ZAATARI'S QUEER RADICAL HOPE: ON BEING A CURIOUS ARCHIVIST/ARTIST

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Abstract: Critical of Lebanese officialdom's response to the civil war, Akram Zaatari is among a group of war-generation artists have been aesthetically archiving the war. Interested in unearthing and salvaging the forgotten or queer remains of war, the aesthetic interventions of Akram Zaatari, on whom this paper will focus, document and 'archive' the quotidian, the discrepant and the discarded. Important to his aesthetic practice is an intimacy with the objects he collects for his creations. What brings him to his objects is not so much an intention or a plan, but a queer curiosity, which sends him on a journey of discovery to unearth buried and untold pasts. Queer here is not defined through identity but the traces of dangerous and libidinal relationalities that set the stage for radical hope and political repair.

Akram Zaatari's art practice began as a child growing up in southern Lebanon in Saida during the civil war. Born in 1966, he would've been nine years old when the war broke out and twenty-four when it ended in 1990. His protective parents kept him at home and away from militia and resistant groups calling on young men to join the struggle. Zaatari's 'habits of recording,' in the words of Suzanne Cotter (2009: para.2), developed over the time he was confined at home. Observing the Israeli invasion from inside his house, he took pictures and recorded radio broadcasts. Zaatari became an archivist of sorts, and eventually an experimental documentary maker and visual artist pre-occupied with the dilemmas of documenting and representing history.

Zaatari is among a group of Lebanese war-generation artists (Rabih Mroué, Lamia Joreige, Walid Raad, Joana Hadjithomas, Khalil Joreige, Jalal Toufic) interested in both

creatively and critically thinking about the representation of war. What ties them together is an interest in unearthing and salvaging the forgotten queer remains, or/that is what's left behind in the aftermath of an event, to make insights into a past that can never be fully knowable or fully reconstructed. Each represents memory as subjective, fragmented, ghostly, unreliable, obfuscated and fictitious. The body of work they have produced is ambiguous and often politically challenging. Many of these artists take up the archive playfully. Walid Raad's *The Atlas Group*¹ and Rabih Mroué's *Make Me Stop Smoking*² are two well known examples. In the interventions of Zaatari and others, much of what is being documented or 'archived' in their body of work is discrepant and discarded realities.

The war-generation artists have by and large characterized themselves as unofficial historians, anthropologists and archeologists responding, on the one hand, to reductive representation from the western mainstream and on the other, a culture of forgetting inside Lebanon. This is because forgetting has been the official strategy of post-war Lebanon. In lieu of state-sponsored monuments and memorials, a general ethos of 'No Victor, No Vanquished'³ and of letting 'bygones be bygones' defined Rafiq Hariri's government, the former and late prime minister of Lebanon. This political recipe of re-uniting Lebanon, argues Haugbolle (2010), required benevolence, the forgetting of sectarian and political differences, and oblivion toward the past and the crimes of war. Solidère, Hariri's reconstruction project of Beirut, had a similar strategy. It razed the remains of the war in downtown Beirut and replaced it with architecture reminiscent of an ancient Beirut and with upscale stores and cafés. By invoking a nostalgic aesthetic of an 'authentic' Phoenician and Roman heritage, Solidère covered the ruins of war, and with it the past. Its strategies of unity were psychologically repressive and politically neoliberal in that differences were placated and flattened to make way for commercial success.

Though Raad and others invent fictional archives, events and personalities to fill the gaps of historical and cultural oblivion, Zaatari, for the most part, excavates real objects from real events: images, interviews, letters, notes, audiotapes, video and radio recordings, and songs. His documentaries play with these objects to produce complex, ambiguous and unexpected iterations of and from the past, not exclusively of the civil

war but also of modern mid-century Lebanon. Representing history from found objects that people lovingly store, set-aside, or absent-mindedly lose offer clues to what is valuable albeit sometimes ‘forgotten’ or unthought-of. Zaatari, however, is not fond of using the word ‘archive’ or ‘archivist’ to describe his art practice. That is because his practice is not obligated to the question of the past, but in the words of Derrida in *Archive Fever*, to ‘the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow’ (1995: 37).

Co-founder of The Arab Image Foundation, established in 1997, Zaatari’s original mission was to collect, preserve and study photographs from the Middle East, North Africa and the Arab diaspora. Though never imagined as a proper archive because its expanding collection is generated through artist and scholar-led projects, including his own, over the years Zaatari has questioned his own archival impulse, especially around the question of holding on and preserving people’s images. In a video produced by San Francisco MOMA (2012), Zaatari explains that he thought it possible/productive to ask people to donate their family photos and albums with the promise of preserving and protecting their personal collections. Eventually, he became uncomfortable telling people that their collections are better off in an archive. This is partially because the building that houses the collections could be bombed at any time, but, more to the point, images ‘have the right to die with their owners and the families that loved and cared for them.’ He goes on to say that digital reproduction of original photos has made it possible for the artist to communicate the same issues without the original copy. Arguably, digital technology has freed the artist from the mandate to preserve and from the archive itself. More importantly, what separates his practice from that of the conservator is that the artist is free to change and do whatever he wishes with the objects (reproduce, re-contextualize, obscure). Indeed, Zaatari not only returns the objects to their original owners, if an object is of particular interest to him, he embarks on a journey of discovery with them to unhinge buried histories, creating the conditions for new futures.

Though Zaatari prefers the word ‘collection’ to ‘archive’ (Zaatari and Feldman, 2007: 51), I suggest that we think of his collection as queerly inspired and he a queer archivist. This is so because he seems to like to collect and be drawn to objects before they are attached to an idea ‘of their presumed usefulness’ (Ricoeur, 1978: 67), before

they are donated or discovered and thematically sorted and catalogued in an institution. Though an object does not necessarily lose its dynamic status by virtue of being catalogued, the sorting of archival materials discourages making contact with the object's elusive content. A postmodern view suggests that the archive is a place of knowledge and power—the first place where meanings of events are made and therefore the shaper of thoughts and discourses (Craven, 2008). For Foucault, the archive produces truth as historical *a priori* (Foucault, 2006: 26-30), which limits what can be said about the past. What the archive cannot control, however, is how the object can be experienced beyond what can be said about it or what is known. In the words of Walid Raad, 'what we hold to be true is not consistent with what is true at the level of the senses, reason, consciousness and discourse but also with what holds to be true at the level of the unconscious' (The Atlas Group, 2006: 180).

Zaatari's art practice seems to be committed to collecting and exploring not only objects that were found outside institutional walls, but by what captures his curiosity. To me this is an important intervention to how we think about our archival tendencies, which for Derrida is essentially a conservative impulse of securing the meaning of the past. For Zaatari, the appeal of the objects he collects are queerly felt because their meanings are not *a priori* or pre-determined. They are objects that excite his imagination and launch him on a journey of meaning-making. As I see it, Zaatari's improper archive is necessary for an art practice that attends to the work of reparation *vis-à-vis* creation from the traces of devastation. Inspired by Jonathon Lear's *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, this paper argues the radical hope of Zaatari's artistic practice lies in the artist's queer curiosity towards discarded and found objects. His encounters with these objects lead to creative works made from being able to reach a state of 'play,' a word used by D. W. Winnicott to refer to the individual's capacity for meaningful cultural experience.

A Queer and Curious Art Practice

What might an art practice interested in documenting/archiving look like if we take our cues from the adventures of a bored child? For Adam Phillips, excitement and

boredom in a child are not mutually exclusive. He writes:

the bored child is waiting, unconsciously, for an experience of anticipation. [...] That boredom is actually a precarious process in which the child is, as it were, both waiting for something and looking for something, in which hope is being secretly negotiated; and in this sense boredom is akin to free-floating attention. In the muffled, sometimes irritable confusion of boredom the child is reaching to a recurrent sense of emptiness out of which his real desire can crystallize. (Phillips, 1993: 69)

For Phillips, curiosity, which provides infinite pleasure, is a scandal for culture (Phillips, 1998, p. 20). Phillips is not idealizing the noble savage; rather, he is interested in the wordless state that preceded the adult. The subject comes together from a conflict and collaboration ‘between a part of the self that can and sometimes wants to speak and the part of the self that is verbally confounded’ (Phillips, 1998: 50-51). The aesthetic, I propose, is made in this in between space of speaking and not speaking. In Zaatari’s work, this tension is foregrounded by the ‘free-floating’ attention and value he gives to an object that excites his curiosity. Not burdened by the imperative to represent the past authentically, the effect is a libidinal practice and a libidinal aesthetic archive.

One of Zaatari’s longstanding curiosities and lifetime muse is Hashem el Madani, who was an archivist in his own right. Madani was first to own a 35 mm camera in the artist’s hometown of Saida where he set up a popular photo studio (Studio Shehrazade). His collection, which included pictures of working class people doing their jobs, such as fixing cars, farming, or sitting by their shop windows, provided openings into life in Lebanon’s social, economic and police life in the second half of the twentieth century. But for Zaatari, Madani’s studio was fascinating at a deeper level because in the 50s and 60s its novelty provided a platform for play and performance (2012b). People would



Figure 1. From Arab Image Foundation archive.

come and pose with their accessories, often disguising themselves in front of the camera. Men would dress up as women, women as men, in front of a photographer who was clearly willing to make it possible for his subjects to play out their fantasies and curiosities. Through Madani's improper archive, Zaatari, the curious artist, excavates the surprising and unusual worlds of ordinary people.

Zaatari, though a photographer, is less interested in taking pictures than he is in collecting pictures people have taken. He admits that in his work 'photography is a subject before it is a medium' (Zaatari, 2006: 183). What brings people to pick up or stand in front of a camera is perhaps as fascinating as the outcome. With photography, it is often difficult to know what narrative motivated the photograph. Arguably, the photographer is giving expression to something that seems exciting, important or valuable. Zaatari's work foregrounds how the impulse to document and to preserve the past might be an attempt to represent an interior feeling that at the time is not fully available to consciousness. In other words, an unconscious agency compels the subject to pick up a camera, or stand in front of it as the case may be, and play.

In psychoanalysis, playing is psychologically significant. For child psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, playing begins with the infant who must learn to have a relationship with the outside world. Toys, he argues, are transitional objects that help the child see the mother as 'not me.' Object-relating, typically to a doll, enables the child to move out of the illusion of omnipotence over its environment. As the child learns to adapt to the

demands of external reality, ideally with a ‘good enough’ mother who instills sufficient trust by surviving her child’s aggression, the child will also learn to be disobedient. For Winnicott, playing is spontaneous and precarious non-compliant communication or, in his words, ‘a creative experience taking up space and time’ (Winnicott, 197: 68). In finding a transitional object, the child is creatively finding its self. For this reason, Winnicott understood transitional phenomena as ‘the separation that is not a separation but a form of union’ (Winnicott, 1971: 132). At once inside and outside, ‘me’ and ‘not me,’ a transitional object makes possible an intermediary in-between space, offering a dynamic playground of learning and meaning-making, what Winnicott termed ‘potential space.’

The camera, considered as transitional object, appears to offer a playground for the fantasies and desires of Madani’s subjects. Many of the images are non-compliant to the norms of external reality. They elaborate the aesthetic dimension of everyday representations and the creative impulse of subjectivity. In *Dance to the End of Love* (2011), a four-channel video installation, Zaatari runs homemade You Tube videos of young men he found on the Internet. In the videos, men are using the camera and social media to show off their bodybuilding muscles, pose with their guns, trick-ride on cars and motorcycles and dance together or alone. Expressions of Arab machismo (from Palestine, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen) are mixed in with a feminized masculinity. Though many might not describe what these young men make with their camera ‘art,’ Zaatari’s work elaborates the aesthetic dimension of everyday representations and the aesthetic drive of subjectivity.

In psychoanalysis, aesthetic expression is the impulse to give form and value to the self’s experience to the outside world (see Hagman, 2005). Accordingly, experience itself has an aesthetic dimension and reality is always symbolic. Indeed, symbolization is how we develop our relation to the other and to the outside world and it is the story of becoming a subject.⁴ By observing how children play, Melanie Klein (1937) understood that symbolization is the way infants express, learn, and repair their emotional experiences. While Winnicott emphasizes the ‘doing’ (1971: 55) aspect of playing, Klein emphasizes how the nature of attachments to toys in children occupies a ‘symbolic equation’ wherein they stand in for feelings. Zaatari’s adult toys are the photographs (and

other objects) of his curious archival excavations. While dispassionate, about proper archival research (Elias, 2013), Zaatari, ‘is bound up with his own deep attraction to the subjects captured in [Madani’s] images: “I loved the Palestinian *feda’i*, my childhood mythical fighter figures, who used to give me all sorts of bullets to collect as a kid. I loved how they lived on the streets, how they slept in the fields or in vacant



Figure 2. From Arab Image Foundation archive.

buildings. I loved how they smelled. I envied them for fighting for justice; I sincerely loved them”” (Elias, 2013: para. 4). For Zaatari, Madani and the subjects he photographed provide secrets and delights. These delights speak as much about the mysteries of the subjects as they do about the delight of the artist, who takes a great deal of pleasure in the symbolizations of ordinary people and their queer objects. From a psychoanalytic standpoint, when Zaatari, the adult gay man, discovers and describes in dreamy language pictures of a masculine freedom fighters from the 70’s, he might be rediscovering the meaning of his childhood fantasies, maybe even repairing what was forbidden from him as a youth, cooped up at home with his protective middle class family. It is in this sense that the objects that incite his curiosities are queer. Their affective and libidinal appeal are not new and their meaning is likely unfinished. They open up his imagination and potentially the imagination of those who come in contact with his work. Indeed, I treat much of Zaatari’s work as aesthetic queer objects demanding to be creatively considered and thoughtfully treated. In re-contextualizing the pictures, he is not simply presenting them but playfully re-presenting them and as such

inviting the spectator to play along and reflect on their aesthetic experience in potentially creative and radical meaning-making.

Arguably, no one ever completely stops playing. To stop playing is to stop taking interest in the world and to stop learning and interpreting. Known for making political art, Zaatari models not only an art practice that takes interest in the world but also what it means to have a creative relationship to it. His interest in creating art from found objects is psychoanalytically interesting because it describes our primal experience of object-relating and creativity. For the baby, writes Winnicott, ‘every detail of the baby’s life is an example of creative living. Every object is a ‘found’ object. Given the chance, the baby begins to live creatively, and to use actual objects to be creative into and with’ (1971: 136-137). The paradox of finding and creating an object, explains Winnicott, is that it was there waiting to be created (1971: 119). In other words, all creations are re-creations of experience. The queer objects that Zaatari finds might be thought of as affective placeholders of experiences to be discovered or (re)created. In a political context where oblivion to the past is encouraged and state sanctioned, Zaatari’s art practice is particularly fecund.

As a metaphor for lost objects waiting to be found, queer is a fitting metaphor because it registers the idea of forbidden or discarded love objects. Queer, under my formulation, is not a social identity but the affective remains of lost sexual tie to the maternal figure (see Georgis, 2013a).⁵ Queer resides in affects we might call strange yet familiar, disturbing yet familial, recalling what has been censored. Queer affects are at odds with not only self-identity but also with knowledge and the linear passage of time. This is because, as Elizabeth Freeman writes, they come from ‘elsewhere, other times’ (Freeman, 2005: 59), when the child sought pleasure from the (m)other without the threat of loss or scrutiny. As Lauren Berlant suggests, queer is ‘not a thing, it’s a relation’ (Berlant, 2011: 81). In other words, even when queer affect returns in an inanimate object, it is attesting to a relation. The object is the symbolization of a psychic remainder, and reminder, of a carnal relationality that had to be sublimated to become an acculturated human. Even that which we identify as our sexuality is the effect of sublimation, rendered useful if you will, and therefore has lost its curiosity, argues Phillips. Indeed, for Phillips, children’s ‘curiosity is their sexuality’ (Phillips, 1998: 21)

and it is also their art (Phillips, 1998: 30). With culture, Phillips argues, we lose art: We become habituated against curiosity where knowledge is assumed, experiences simply make sense, and only socially recognizable objects are archived.

Stumbling upon a discarded object and taking interest in its peculiarity is arguably a practice and an orientation made from being curious. Its value may not seem obvious, but considered as a trace of the past and noticed for its queer or affective hold renders it an object with aesthetic potential. To be curious is to be open to play with objects that might unhinge predictable knowledge and predictable relations made from difficult experience such as a war. In playing with queer objects, what returns is a timeless place in the psyche of pre-verbal attachment and not yet knowing, a place that paradoxically animates symbolization and futurities (see Munoz, 2009). This is important to how I am suggesting we read Zaatari because his practice collects objects that are emotionally loaded even if they have been buried or discarded, and thus carry reparative potentialities of meaning making.

In one of his earlier videos, *Red Chewing Gum* (2000), Zaatari's archival art practice is most poignantly demonstrated. Here, the queer remains of war are revisited in a 'video love letter' that tells the story of the separation of young lovers. The narrator poetically recounts the past by returning to his lover's video archive, specifically of footage he had taken of Hamra, a commercial and tourist centre in Beirut where bourgeois pleasures thrive. Against the sounds of gunshot and the gritty sticky streets of Hamra, we are introduced to a young street vendor who is sitting in an alley chewing all the contents of the Chiclets gum packets he is supposed to be selling. A single red gum stands out among the heap of chewed white gum. The narrator is asked by his lover to chew the masticated gum but he resists playing this game. Eventually they both partake in this curious and erotically represented activity (wide open mouth and deep throating the gum with the middle finger). The meaning of this scene however comes slowly, the lost memory of it is broken and shadowy. The film returns to the scene over and over again, adding more information and more insight with each take.



Figure 3. Akram Zaatari, *Red Chewing Gum*, 2000, still from video, 10:45 minutes.

The young street vendor is likely imaginary as his almost invisible body is presented as a figurative amplification of the lovers' strange desires. Choosing pleasure over survival, the boy's appetite represents uninhibited desire and pleasure—desire that has no social sense, especially in war. The boy chews away his livelihood and his future for immediate personal pleasure. Wars are fought with a determined eye on what the future should look like. Love is channeled for the group and the collective cause. In sectarian or nationalist struggles, the fate of boys is often clearly marked: there is no place for carnal pleasures whose aims are not to serve the group in some way. But in *Red Chewing Gum*, we do not see that. Aimless pleasure and lost love is what characterizes this video.

At first, the narrator does not understand his lover's fixation on the boy. The boy's queer affects, and the narrator's queer response to it, are from elsewhere, from other times. These are affects that put knowledge into crisis and interrupt not just sexual norms but cultural and social norms. The sight of chewed up gum normally evokes disgust, not fascination. Towards the end of the video, the narrator tells his lover that he did finally come to understand the point of chewing (playing with) the masticated gum. The narrator could finally see that his lover delighted in the boy's pleasure, recognized it as timeless, and wanted to partake in it. The boy's pleasure stands as a *remainder* of the sensuous and erotic and his masticated gum a *reminder* of pleasure that is unmediated by commercialism or the demands of war. As a remainder of the carnal, it interrupts time

and its social sense for just a moment. Sure enough, reason returns when the lovers are separated because Beirut becomes divided along sectarian lines, forcing Muslims to live in West Beirut where Hamra is located, and Christians in East Beirut, where the narrator is forced to move. In war, there is no place for queer ties. We abjure our appetite for curiosity and creativity because ‘being realistic is a better guarantee of pleasure’ (Phillips, 1998: xv) and a better guarantee of belonging and security.

Red Chewing Gum, like much of Zaatari’s work, is interested in discrepant memories and objects, in finding interest in the singular and quotidian, in noticing desire, and in making art that is ambiguous—challenging the spectator to be curious about it. Arguably, his most fictional film is perhaps also his most theoretical because it suggests that there is a complex relation between queer desires, knowledge, and time. Queer fragments not only constitute *Red Chewing Gum* but his entire aesthetic archive. Like the boy who sensuously chews the gum he is supposed to sell to make a living, Zaatari’s excavations, as we shall see, reveal endless moments of people behaving queerly, knowingly or unknowingly defying power, knowledge and the linear progress of time. His excavations take him on an intellectual adventure of discovery. His work sets his spectators on a similar adventure. In the words of Jacques Rancière, the artist ‘orders them to venture into the forest of things and signs, to say what they have seen and to think of what they have seen, to verify it and have it verified’ (Rancière, 2009: 11). This is a pedagogical relation defined not by the ‘teacher’ imparting what he already knows but by calling the spectators into making knowledge that cannot be ordered.

Behaving Queerly and Radical Hope

Jonathon Lear’s book *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (2006) is an enquiry into what’s possible in the face of shared vulnerability that is felt but hard to name because it is dangerous to do so. When the stories that have given purpose, a way of life, and sense of shared selfhood have become undermined, what comes next? The collective story of Lebanon being a nation that embraces harmonious religious pluralism broke down in a sectarian civil war. Lear would call this predicament a real loss, one that only the courageous are able to acknowledge or name. Lear’s context is the

moment in history when Indigenous peoples in the Americas lost the buffalo, and therefore also their way of living. In the face of this devastation, Plenty Coups, the chief of the Crow Nation asks his people to face the loss and start anew, insisting that their way of life must now be reorganized in relation to the reality of white settlement and dominance. Zaatari's art is not expressing *how* Lebanese people are to reorganize life in the aftermath of war, but might be beckoning the Lebanese to play with the 'masticated' remains of war and work through the damage. Winnicott writes: 'Its good to remember that playing is itself a therapy' (1971: 67).

Zaatari's work is transparently subjective, sometimes personal. The artist often has a presence in the work either as filmmaker holding the camera, as a subject, or as an individual with a shared history with others. Many of Zaatari's films take up South Lebanon, his birthplace and childhood home. In its attention to subjectivity and to the traumatic political events that shaped his childhood, Zaatari's body of work and art practice stages the psyche's efforts to remember and understand what he witnessed. For Derrida (1995), the limit to represent or understand lost experience from the breakdown of memory fundamentally affects subject-formation, not only the archive. Indeed, in Zaatari's work, the personal/psychic and official archive collapse into each other. Much like the official archive, in the psychic archive, loss is put into some order so that the subject has a coherent self. But in the psychic archive, explains Jonathon Boulter's, 'loss is maintained and nourished' (2011: 1). While all archival objects are psychically interesting, even when institutionally stored and assert knowledge, the fragments of memory stored in the psyche, sometimes materialized or 'nourished' in real objects, act as affective placeholders in the absence of knowledge. What is at work in keeping such objects around is an unconscious will that seeks to grasp and make sense of the vanishing past.

Zaatari's aesthetic work finds excitement in archival objects that do the work of offering hints into unconscious knowledge. To be clear, such objects 'stand in' for the unconscious, because 'the unconscious resides in its description' (Phillips, 1998: 105). Unconscious hints, be they in curious objects, dreams or slips in language, are akin, writes Phillips, 'to an instruction, or an order: that is really this' (1998: 107). For Phillips, this is an order made from a willingness to be seduced into interpretation. To be moved

and excited by hints is radically hopeful because it speaks of an insistence against ‘growing up,’ against being antagonists of our queer pleasure and curiosity and against living by the rules. In curiosity, life is transfigured, but living by the rules, explains Phillips, ‘is another way of hoping that the future will be like the past’ (1998: 113). The aesthetic outcome of Zaatari’s curiosity is made from a practice of taking the hint and leaving tantalizing hints. If the spectator is curious, s/he will take the hint and play with Zaatari. In playing, everyone risks reorganizing knowledge in new interpretations.

It would take 20 years before Zaatari would make a film where he plays with some of the objects he collected as a bored and sheltered child witnessing Israel’s invasion of South Lebanon on June 6, 1982. In *This Day* (2003), Zaatari returns to his memory traces and to his personal archive for the mysteries they withhold. Photographs taken from his balcony, notebooks, and homemade audiocassettes of ABBA are the objects—affective placeholders—produced and preserved by a curious child. Eventually, they are revisited by the curious adult who is interested in exploring what hints they offer. In the film, objects from his childhood archive are set in relation to other strange and ambiguous objects: still images of present-day Beirut; archival photographs of Dr. Jubrail Suhail Jabbour who, concerned about the stereotypes of Arabness and interested in exploring his own origins, studied and wrote about the Bedouins of the desert; and finally, internet images of the Palestinian fighters circulated to garner empathy and support for ‘The Free Palestinian Network’ during the Israeli invasion of the West Bank in 2000-2002. Zaatari does not thread these objects in a narrative that ideologically explains the Israeli invasion in Lebanon. But these disparate archives are not disconnected. Condensed in the event of June 6th are the complex and affective entanglements of various histories. In this way, the film not only queerly collapses linear space and time,⁶ making it difficult to differentiate the recent past from the distant past, the private knowledge from public knowledge; it also collapses meaning: the banality of everyday life, the history of sinister Arab representation, and aspirational politics of freedom fighters all make a presence in this film. In this way, Zaatari asks us to pick up on hints and ‘tantalizes us with the problem of interpretation’ (Phillips, 1998: 75) and with the adventure of making new and radical insights.

In *All is Well on the Border* (1997), made several years before *This Day*, Zaatari

again returns to his birthplace of South Lebanon, but this time he brings focused attention to the region occupied by Israel⁷ and pays particular attention to prisoners of war. This is not a film of military victory and martyrdom but of various dimensions of the occupation censored from the Hezbollah's narratives of heroic resistance. *All is Well* is an examination of various and contradictory responses to a complex political situation. What we see are a queer arrangement of fragments of life—a happy wedding ceremony, news media footage of Israel's invasion, interviews of displaced inhabitants, school children



Figure 4. Akram Zaatari, *All is Well on the Border*, 1997, still from colour video, 43 minutes.

reading essays nostalgically describing their native villages, computer-generated reenactments of military operations by Hezbollah, a kid naively reciting a speech by a Hezbollah leader, and the testimonies of two political prisoners. While there are many hints to take up, my reading of this film will focus on the letters of prisoners, which can arguably be thought as transitional objects.

The film begins auspiciously with the caption: 'To Dream: To imagine something beautiful.' Uniting all the different voices of this (what is this) might be the dream of something else, even if that desire is apprehended in obedience to dogmatic belief. Desire has a powerful unconscious agency, sometimes it serves a longing for 'all is well' when it isn't. 'All is well' is what Nabih Awada, a resistance fighter with the Lebanese Communist Party,⁸ wrote to his mother over and over again while detained in Askalan prison in Israel for 10 years. Zaatari discovers the story from Awada's mother who

generously loaned him the letters he wrote to her from prison. Wanting to convince her that his time in prison was not completely lacking of ‘any life and pleasure’ (Zaatari, 2009: 50), Awada sent letter after uplifting letter. Awada, however, is not in the film. Indeed, no real detainee is featured in the film. Instead, coached by the artist, actors read testimonies from scripts written by anonymous detainees. The film beckons the spectator to think about the ‘fictional’ nature of testimony. It suggests that one approaches these narratives not for their literal meaning; rather, one must assume that they are symbolizations of queer truths. In this way, the film stages the structure of the unconscious.

But the film is more than a clever staging of the relationship of testimony to the unconscious, it speaks to what’s possible when a letter, as a transitional object, uncovers the queer relationalities of war. It is not surprising that Zaatari would find letters from prisoners exciting, when, by his own admission, he was obsessed with freedom fighters as a child. Zaatari’s curiosity with Awada’s does not end with the making of *All is Well*. Zaatari subsequently seeks out Awada and interviews him. The interview transcripts with Awada appear in Zaatari’s book, *Earth of Endless Secrets*, published 12 years after the making of the film. Also included in this book is an interview with ex-detainee Mohammed Assaf, whose testimony is not among the ones featured in *All is Well* but is identified as a leader in the stories of the other detainees. The ‘secrets’ exposed in Zaatari’s interviews with these two men peel back the layers of the past and unearth fascinating discarded histories. A history thick with layers, like a palimpsest, is slowly unraveled in the body of Zaatari’s work—that is, if the spectator is curious enough to play and to treat the work as leaving hints for further excavation. After seeing the film, my curiosity led me to find and read Zaatari’s interview transcripts of Awada and Assaf. I was struck by how highly esteemed Assaf was among his peers. He was apparently a leader who kept his comrades alive and intellectually engaged, hailed as the smartest and most educated. He even gave them English lessons. After he escaped prison, he ended up in Germany where he married a woman and subsequently killed her. Assaf’s matter of fact testimony of why he felt he had to kill his wife was jarring to read, especially against his comrades’ glowing admiration of him. For me, and maybe for Zaatari as well, it not

only unsettled the easy representation of him as a war hero, but also the very status of knowledge that belies queer truths.

Awada's testimony similarly exposes queer secrets. He admits to Zaatari that he was not as cheerful as he made his life sound and that he was, in retrospect, lying to himself. Behind the curtain of 'all is well' are of course the brutal conditions of prison life, which include interrogation, surveillance, torture and collaboration. But Awada, known as 'Neruda' to his friends and family, reveals another layer of prison life not accounted for in the film: where strict rules were introduced by detainees to scrutinize and punish each other for 'immoral' and carnal behaviours such as masturbation (because it was deemed a sign of weakness and a threat to security); where men were having sexual relations with one another while others were turning a blind eye to it; and where prisoners were killed by their fellow detainees for collaborating with Israel. In the midst of such libidinal and dangerous intimacies creative collaborations among the detainees were rendered possible. Most significant were the letters that were sent to other prisons in the bodies of prisoners who were being moved from one jail to another. The letters, which were reports on the conditions of the prisons, were made with 'msamsameh' writing, 'written with tiny letters, as tiny as sesame seeds' (Interview with Awada, Zaatari, 2009: 53), wrapped in plastic like a capsule and swallowed, to be delivered upon defecation. Sometimes the letters were delivered mouth to mouth through a visitor. As a queer trace of the past that could not be shared at the time in letters to family, in his video *Letter to Samir* (2009) Zaatari salvages the lost archive and the unaccounted memory of this practice in filmic dramatization.

In Zaatari's work (the) subjective curiosity allows him to find objects that are there to be discovered. That is the paradox of transitional objects, according to Winnicott's thinking. But perhaps we only reach out to these objects when we relate to them as hints with reparative potential. Zaatari's work is most interesting when his archival objects open up precarious intimacies, creating the conditions of political reparation. *In This House* (2005) the intimacies at play are not sexual in nature, but they are libidinally dangerous. The story of this film begins with Zaatari's interest in former member of the Democratic Popular Party, Ali Hashisho, now a photojournalist who shares a documentation style with Zaatari. Also like Zaatari, Hashisho is from Saida in

South Lebanon, about the same age, and experienced the same conflict in the same context. Zaatari had approached Hashisho in the hopes of accessing new stories. To his surprise, it was Hashisho's own story that would be the one he was looking for. When the war ended, Hashisho had apparently buried a letter in Ain el Mir in the garden of the house he and his comrades had occupied for 6 years. The letter, placed inside the empty casing of a B-10 82mm mortar, intended to accomplish several things: to explain their occupation of the house, to welcome the owners of the house, the Dagher family, back home, and to let the Daghers know that Hashisho and his comrades had done their best to care of their home (albeit, they failed to protect their olive tree from being felled). Not keen on having contact with Charbel Dagher and his family, who were all understandably distrustful of the man who had occupied their house, Hashisho wanted to keep his distance. He had also wanted the letter to stay buried for an indefinite time, but as Zaatari points out in his interview with Chad Elias, 'time ended up being me' (2013: para. 53). Suspicious of Zaatari's intentions, the family almost quashed his intervention. However, unable to live with not knowing what was buried in the garden, the family finally agreed to proceed with the excavation after reporting the situation to official authorities and involving them in the process. Symbolic of these fraught relationships, a split screen literally separates the interview with Hashisho and the video footage of the Dagher family at the site of the excavation. Accompanied by the neighbours, a military representative and the police, the Dagher family did not want to be filmed. In this scene are queerly tethered intimacies and absent presences. Faisal, the gardener who Zaatari hired to dig the land, is the only figure we see in full, but he has no voice. The rest of the bodies are headless—only legs and torsos are seen hovering over Faisal, anxiously conversing and murmuring paranoid commentaries as they await the final outcome.

In This House is affectively loaded—beginning with its surprise inception to its convoluted and obstructed making, and finally in its dramatic conclusion of discovery. Virtually nothing in the making of this film could have been anticipated and its existence would not have been possible if the artist was not curious and if Hashisho did not trust Zaatari to proceed with a project that would unearth the floodgates of difficult



Figure 5. Akram Zaatari, *In This House*, 2005, still from colour video, 30 minutes.

relationalities and an unworked through past. The power of this film is that it forces a confrontation with the past and digs up buried wounds. It reveals a truth about a present that is fragile and haunted by sectarian conflicts, exposing the fraught and unspoken relationalities as precarious, delicately managed, but easily unhinged. In this way, the film stages the return of repressed relations and their queer affects, which when carefully excavated, in Laura Marks words, ‘will reveal to you the entire history of the civil war and what came after’ (Marks, 2009: 231). Indeed, as Marks observes, Zaatari’s short film unravels many small truths of significant meaning about the nation-state, property, and relationship to land and earth. For instance, she points out that the Daghers fled their house not when Israel occupied the region, but when they actually withdrew from their hometown. Because they were Christians (and therefore belonged to sect whose conflicts with the PLO were co-opted by Israeli interests), they felt safer under Israeli occupation. This does not necessarily implicate them as pro-Israeli; rather, in a context of sectarianism where social relations are strictly negotiated based on what religion is recorded on your identity card, and where the divided and powerless state is otherwise incapable of protecting you or your property, it would make sense that the Daghers would feel that their only recourse at the time was to flee. Furthermore, when they returned 6 years later, their relationship to the land had been altered. To Hashisho’s surprise, they did not dig the earth to replace the lost olive tree; otherwise, they would have found his

letter, which is what he assumed would happen.

In This House, and indeed almost all of Zaatari's work, articulates how the past remains buried, waiting to be exhumed. The earth, in other words, carries the weight of lost history, even if it is invisible to the naked eye. Though Zaatari's film is dark it is not cynical. By digging up the past, he inadvertently creates the conditions for shifting relationalities in the present. As he himself notes, the Dagher family had to face their prejudices upon reading the letter, which had explained that he and his party were secular resistance fighters, communists, concerned for the poor and the exploited: 'They did not want to accept the idea that a so-called freedom fighter (whom they considered a militiaman) could express these sentiments. The content of the letter is in fact compassionate and literate' (Elias, 2013: para. 53). Of course not all who are faced with their prejudices, who are confronted with how they have caricatured or reduced a person to an other they think they know and recognize, will be transformed. Nonetheless, for at least one moment, Zaatari's intervention animated the breaking down of political walls between people and created the conditions for radical hope.

If as Judith Butler argues, mourning, 'has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say *submitting* to a transformation) the result of which one cannot know in advance' (Butler, 2004: 21) then Zaatari's work might be understood as an invitation for mourning. Mourning, psychoanalytically speaking, is not synonymous with moving on, forgetting or letting bygones be bygones, but about letting oneself have an altered and therefore radical relationship with the past by letting oneself be changed. Zaatari's archeological practice of excavating objects from the past is a dynamic and interactive aesthetic process of creation. In his work, the excavated remains are the transitional objects that affectively help us revisit the queer past, sometimes with creative outcomes. Zaatari's art practice, it seems to me, is practice of creating potential space for insight and reparation. It teaches us that aesthetic practice and aesthetic experience is a form of therapy. When he returns or invites individuals (and himself) to re-engage with their letters, photographs, or notes, he stages a dynamic playground with these enigmatic objects. Since these objects are bound up with people's fears, conflicts, desires, and longings, the outcome of this relational process is an aesthetic adventure that animates and sets him and us on a journey of adventurous thinking.

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Notes

1. Walid Raad was one of the first of the war generation artists to work with the metaphor of the archive. In his project, The Atlas Group Archive aims to document the history of Lebanon, especially its recent wars of 1975 to 1990 by locating, preserving and studying audio, visual, literary and other artifacts 'to shed light on the contemporary history of Lebanon' (The Atlas Group, para 1). The objects it finds and collects include notebooks, statistics, films, videotapes, photographs and other items. Established in 1999, this real and fictional archive produced memory as something to be excavated, constructed, studied, and aesthetically re-produced in multi-media representations, performances and lectures. By blurring the line between fiction and fact, Raad playfully disputed the authority of official histories. Though it ended officially in 2004, The Atlas Group presented the archive, or a counter-archive, as a storehouse where the unfinished past returns in new objects of memory, gesturing an interminable future. Resonant with the structure of trauma understood psychoanalytically, the past is re-visited in the present and re-made with every newly found or made object.
2. See Georgis, Dina (2013) 'The Living Archive of War in Rabih Mroue's *Make Me Stop Smoking*.' *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*, 18 (3): 242–258. Here, Mroue', in a one man performance presents his audience with his unofficial and personal archive of war, where contradiction, hesitation, and pain organize his narrative. Mroue's *Make Me Stop Smoking* is an invitation to visit the archive and be suspicious of its desires.
3. 'No Victor, No Vanquished' is a phrase that circulated after the 1958 civil war in Lebanon. Lebanon's prime minister at the time expected leaders who were fighting each other to 'let bygones be bygones' (Volk 2010: 22-23). This discourse was revived by Hariri's government and became the general ethos of the country.
4. For Klein (1937), the aesthetic is a function of the earliest phases of human development. A lost sense of union with the world, experienced through the loss of the maternal bond, inaugurates what develops into our capacity for symbol formation. In our attempt to address the anxiety this provokes and to reintegrate ourselves to the external world, we develop a symbolic system to negotiate our conflicting drives of creation and destruction toward self and other.
5. At its core, queer is the affect that is left behind after the self muddles its way through primary relations and social norms, usually arriving and settling into some version of socially sanctioned sexual identity (even we if we call that identity queer). Psychoanalytically speaking, all identifications and identities are

- ambivalent, which is to say they are not always obedient to what they say they are. They slip up or slide out of place to expose affects that might invoke surprise, troubling excitement, even disgust.
6. For discussions on thinking queer time and subjectivity outside of normative linear time and straightforward progress of psycho/social/political development, see Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004); Judith Halberstam's *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005), Heather Love's *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2007), Elizabeth Freeman's *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities* (2010), *Queer Histories* and José Muñoz' *Cruising Utopia: the then and there of queer futurity* (2009).
 7. Sharing a border with Israel, South Lebanon has been brutalized by Israel's 'defensive' measures. Invaded in 1982, occupied till 2000 and attacked in 2006 in full-blown war, the South has been most affected by Israel and most discarded by the Lebanese nation-state. An invisible border separates the South, an 'elsewhere' with 'a far away geography' (Salti, 2009: 14) from the rest of Lebanon. With the Taef agreement of 1990,¹ Lebanon positioned itself free and liberated from war and therefore could move on, get rebuilt and rehabilitated without, as Salti argues, getting dragged into the South's confrontation with Israel (Salti, 2009: 14). For Salti, Zaatari exhumes a forgotten reality occluded by the nation-state, but also by Hezbollah, which ideologically dominates the region and controls knowledge and representation of the conflict.
 8. Originally founded in 1924, the Lebanese Communist Party was made up of a coalition of sects that actively fought at the start of the civil war and aligned itself with the Palestinian cause and in resistance to Israel's occupation of South Lebanon.

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Akram Zaatari's Filmography

All is Well on the Border (Lebanon, 1997, 43 minutes) DVD.

Red Chewing Gum (Lebanon, 2000, 10:45 minutes) DVD.

This Day (Lebanon, 2003, 86 minutes) DVD.

In This House (Lebanon, 2005, 30 minutes) DVD.

Letter to Samir (Lebanon, 2009, 32minutes) DVD.

Dance to the End of love (Lebanon, 2011, 22 minutes) DVD.

Letter to a Refusing Pilot (Lebanon, 2013, 34 minutes) DVD.