

Akram Zaatari

Against Photography. An Annotated History of the Arab Image Foundation

Exhibition from 7 April to 25 September 2017

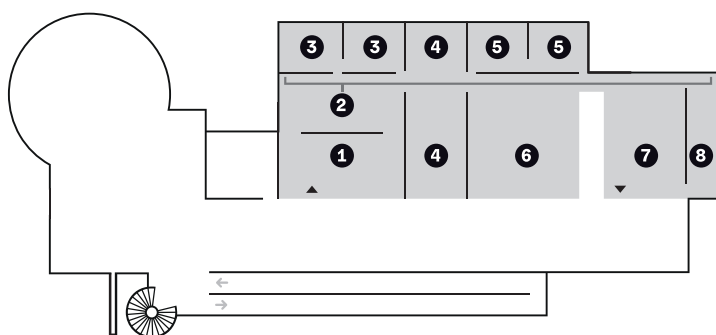


Akram Zaatari, *Safety Film*, 2017 (detail). Close-up of a 35mm negative by Antranick Bakerdjian, Jerusalem, 1950s

‘To collect photographs is to engage in a process of selective recording, like a second reading, like creative rewriting that is no less photographic than the act of taking images itself.’

Akram Zaatari

Meier Building. Level 0



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PHOTOGRAPHIC OBJECTS HAVE BEEN the centre of Akram Zaatari's artistic practice since 1995. Photographic formations or emergences, as he calls them, are the focus of this exhibition: enigmatic objects that bear traces of past events and accompany people through key moments in their lives. Cherished at times, destroyed at others, photographs are capable of provoking diverse and extreme reactions. Initially, capturing instances, they change over time. The perception of an image changes, but sometimes the physicality of the object itself is also altered as a result of its contact with the natural, social and political environment. The desire to own these images, to look for them and collect them, is rooted in a spectrum of motivations from the personal to the commercial. They are currency for our emotional, cultural and economic desires.

In 1997, Zaatari co-founded the Arab Image Foundation (AIF) partly to contain this activity of collecting, but also to organise it within an institutional framework and give it form through an expanding collection, which itself is a result of multiple modes of acquisition. Less of a repository of documents, the strength and originality of the AIF lies in the critical intersection of two archival practices, institutional and artistic. Over the past twenty years, the AIF was the medium through which many of Zaatari's projects and interests were developed.

This exhibition traces Zaatari's various contributions to expanding our understanding of photography through a reflection on the evolution of the AIF and its collection. It can be seen as the outcome of an excavation that addresses the institution as a whole, extending to specific collections and photographic objects that might carry traces of wear and sometimes violence.

On the Photograph and the Vehicle

ZAAATARI'S EARLY PROJECTS with the AIF shared an anthropological approach and derived from the predominant patterns he observed in family albums from the mid-twentieth century. These projects were concerned with the representation of the body and of social classes. *The Vehicle: Picturing Moments of Transition in a Modernising Society* (1999) looks at two significant inventions of the late nineteenth century: the camera and the motor vehicle. It was as much as an exhibition about self-representation as it was an exploration of modernity infiltrating the lives of people in the Arab world.

Partly returning to *The Vehicle*, this display is informed by the artist's ongoing work with archival objects. Both sides of the photograph are reproduced to size and given equal importance, allowing viewers access to both the family and the institution's annotations on the back.

On Morphology

A CONTINUING ELEMENT IN THE EXHIBITION is a timeline that traces the growth of the collection in volume and the diversity of its provenance. The incoming material is reflected graphically in size units and in the book of all 300 collections, which is made in three volumes and tells the story of each.

There are interventions that present four ideas that the artist believes are worth bringing up in relation to the AIF collection. The first relates to the consideration of photographs as objects and not simply as images, represented with the back side of photographs. The second idea relates to the ownership of collections and whether or not they are physically part of the AIF collection, or only digitally. For this an empty box is shown, which is a facsimile of a wooden box that contained lantern slides. The third idea is a reflection on the photographic ensemble like the Photo Surprise archive of the Photo Jack Studio (Tripoli, Lebanon), which represents the first time the AIF chose to preserve material intact, leaving the film unprocessed in the original wooden drawers in which they were stored and privileging the preservation of the whole fabric of the archive over the images in it. The last is the idea of the imprint of collections, indicating the many things that remain even after a collection leaves the AIF. This is represented with six folders that the artist made that carry traces of Rifat Chadirji's architecture index sheets.

On Displacement and Performativity

CAIRO STUDIO PHOTOGRAPHER VAN LEO (1921–2002) was inspired by cinema and the wilder side of the entertainment industry. His work provides insights into the social transformations that took place in Egypt during the second half of the twentieth century and the performative nature of posing in front of a camera.

Zaatari's interest in Van Leo hinges on 'the possibility of raising through him a wider question about those dying traditions of image production and building around them an informed contemporary practice'. Zaatari's inquiry into Van Leo takes an experimental stance, performing or re-writing the original images, transposing them from analogue black-and-white photography into digital colour.

On Photography, People and Modern Times

TRAVERSING THE TIMELINE are the two volumes of Zaatari's research for pictures within AIF, *On Photography, People and Modern Times* (2010) and *On Photography, Dispossession and Times of Struggle* (2017), which are pivotal to understanding Zaatari's stance towards the archive and photography's social function. The films are shown consecutively, on facing screens, creating an extended dialogue between them.

The first, a two-channel projection set in the former premises of the AIF, explores the transformations through which photographs pass in their transition from original context to the archive. Taking the idea of loss and dispossession as a starting point, the second part looks at the individual's position within the context of war and how photographs become the sole record of that displacement, despite the risk of them being dispersed.

Twenty-Eight Nights and a Poem

HASHEM EL MADANI HAS BEEN A KEY SUBJECT for Zaatari's research since they met in 1999. El Madani opened Studio Shehrazade in Zaatari's hometown of Saida in South Lebanon in 1953 and has photographed the city's community over decades. Zaatari considers Studio Shehrazade as a site for an archaeological intervention that seeks to unearth not only the negatives and photographs taken in the studio, but also the stories behind them, and the social and economic framework that sustains a photographic practice in a small town.

Zaatari has been interested in the multiple lives of artefacts and the transformations they undergo as they cross multiple generations and contexts. He believes that it is not possible to grasp the power of an archive that is less than a generation old: it starts to enable vision and make sense only after it lives through changes across generations.

Twenty-Eight Nights and a Poem refers to a set of works by Zaatari centred on the archive of Studio Shehrazade and includes three cabinets containing photographs of 28 selected objects from the studio, *Studio Shehrazade - Reception Space* (2006) and *Endnote* (2014).

Object Narratives

THE IMAGES PRESENTED IN THIS SECTION are photographic close-ups of 35mm and sheet-film negatives, and glass plates of various sizes. Each image recorded on them tells a story, but the whole object that contains the image tells another story. The objects depicted sometimes carry traces of retouching, the photographer's fingerprints or tape. Some have been consumed and eroded by external conditions or simply by the passage of time. They are composites of past events together with the remnants of history that form an inherent part of the photographic object. The stories told by the deterioration of the negatives add another layer of information to those of the images inscribed onto them.

Against Photography

THE SERIES ENTITLED *Against Photography* (2017) looks at gelatin negatives that have been scratched or suffered other abrasions. Without recording the images, Zaatari registered only the relief of their surfaces, and reproduced this in the form of prints from digitally engraved plates. Here it is not the image that bears historic information, but the material on which it is ingrained. Each sign of wear tells a story of the object that is totally different from that of the image recorded on it.

Archaeology (2017) evokes the traces of time registered on a glass plate through a life-size reconstruction of a plate showing the naked figure of an athlete. The original image was recovered from Antranick Anouchian's studio in Tripoli after it was flooded.

Archives of the Future

SANDWICHED BETWEEN THE FINAL GALLERY and the street – between museumification and vivid reality – is a representation of a conservation room, a place where light, temperature and humidity are controlled, and where traces of past events rest dormant. Zaatari wanted to take what is most private in an archive and place it in what looks like a display case, where – when viewed from the street – people become part of the exhibition.

Exhibition organised by the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona and the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea.

Curators

Hiuwai Chu, Bartomeu Mari

Publication

Akram Zaatari. *Against Photography. An Annotated History of the Arab Image Foundation*. With an introduction by Hiuwai Chu and Bartomeu Mari, an essay by Mark Westmoreland, a conversation between Chad Elias and Akram Zaatari, and an illustrated selection of collections entries from the AIF by Ian B. Larson and Akram Zaatari. The book will also include new works by the artist. Co-edited between MACBA and MMCA, Korea. English, Spanish and Korean editions. Date of publication: July 2017.

Guided visits

(from 14 April)

See times and languages at www.macba.cat.

International Museum Day and Museum Night

See special programming at www.macba.cat.

In conversation

Inaugural conversation

Akram Zaatari and Hiuwai Chu

Thursday 6 April, 6.30 pm.

Meier Atrium. Free. With simultaneous translation

Let's talk about Politics, Migration and Visuality With Julia Ramirez Blanco

Saturdays 22 and 29 April and 3 June, 7 pm. Museum galleries. 5 €

Performance

Performative Interventions in An Annotated History of the Arab Image Foundation With Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh

8-14 June. Atrium, galleries and exterior of the museum. Free

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Opening times

Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, from 11 am to 7.30 pm (from 25 June to 24 September, from 11 am to 8 pm)
Tuesday closed
Saturday, from 10 am to 9 pm
Sunday and public holidays, from 10 am to 3 pm

The museum entry ticket is valid for a month. Activate it at the ticket desk and visit us as often as you like.

MACBA

Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona

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