Two Point Perspective (part I): Letter to a Refusing Pilot

In the summer of 1982, during Israel's incursion into Southern Lebanon, a story swirled around the port town of Saida that acquired mythological flourishes: One of the Israeli fighter jets that were sent to the nearby Palestinian refugee camp of Ain El-Helweh, aborted its mission to bomb a school building, its pilot dropping the bombs into the sea instead. In a text for Tohu Magazine, that will be published in 3 parts, Noah Simblist dives into Lebanese artist Akram Zaatari's work, Letter to a Refusing Pilot, instigated by this true story.

Essay / Noah Simblist August 16, 2016

The Pilot
The Meeting

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

The concept of dialogue is a loaded one within the context of Israel and Lebanon, two enemy states. Lebanese law states that it is illegal for a Lebanese citizen to correspond with or meet an Israeli citizen. It is also legally problematic for an Israeli citizen to meet or correspond with a Lebanese citizen. In a wider scope the notion of dialog has another set of implications within the context of Israeli and Palestinian diplomacy. Since the Oslo Accords (1993-1995), when negotiation made direct conversations between Israelis and the Palestinians possible, and it became legal under Israeli law, dialog has been at the center of an endless peace process. In the 1990s, this peace process opened up not only diplomatic channels but also cultural and academic partnerships. But many have argued that these coexistence initiatives normalized the occupation and failed to acknowledge a lopsided power dynamic.1 Today engagement through dialogue is increasingly viewed with skepticism by many in Israel-Palestine and the wider region. Dialog has been seen as a cover for an ongoing occupation, aggressively enforced through land confiscation, house demolitions, settlement building, and other practices on the ground. This suspicion towards the concept of dialogue in this context is specifically embodied in BDS, which argues for an opposite strategy of disengagement, including the cultural and academic sectors2. In this context, the contact between Zaatari and the pilot, as well as his contact with the filmmaker, reveals that personal interaction has a number of political ramifications. In order to address just how this is the case, I will first turn to a description of the work *Letter to a Refusing Pilot*.

5356.jpg



[1]Akram Zaatari. Letter to a Refusing Pilot (still), 2013

Film and video installation. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut

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

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

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

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

points of view.

LEBANON PAVILLION270 2.jpg **[2]**



[3]Akram Zaatari. Letter to a Refusing Pilot, 2013

Installation view, Lebanese Pavilion, 55th International Venice Biennale. Photo: Marco Milan

LEBANON PAVILLION268 2.jpg **[4]**



[5]Akram Zaatari. Letter to a Refusing Pilot, 2013

Installation view, Lebanese Pavilion, 55th International Venice Biennale. Photo: Marco Milan

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

akram_zaatari-538x255.jpg **[6]**



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

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

The large video projection at the center of *Letter to a Refusing Pilot* begins with a camera, mounted on a drone that rises from the roof of a building in the seaside Beirut neighborhood of Raouche. It cuts to black and white aerial shots of architecture in Saida and then to a light table, much like the opening shots of *This Day*. 5As the light table is turned on in the video, fluorescent tubes flicker on around the installation, and it is as if we are in the box, complicit in the narrative on the screen. Zaatari not only resists the passive spectatorship of film, he brings us into the archive, a space dedicated to the organization of the visual and material culture of history. A pair of hands in white gloves moves a set of photos across the backlit surface. We see family snapshots - a woman posing with two kids, a mother helping a toddler to pet a dog, and a teenager mugging for the camera. Then the hands take a piece of white paper and make a couple of pencil drawings: an enigmatic structure fills one, and another seems to be an image of two trees in front of a building. A school bell rings, and the next drawing is made of a paper airplane.

5359.jpg **[8]**



[9]Akram Zaatari. Letter to a Refusing Pilot (still), 2013

Film and video installation. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut

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

The pilot

The pilot in this story is Haggai Tamir. While it is true that he flew this mission and chose not to bomb the school, it wasn't because he had grown up in Lebanon. He made the decision because he was an architect and he recognized the structure as a school, rather than the military target that his

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

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

213.jpg **[10]**



[11]Akram Zaatari. Letter to a Refusing Pilot (still), 2013

Film and video installation. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut

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

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

Tamir's story was kept quiet within the military, and only his immediate circle of friends and family knew what happened in Saida. But in 2002, following the targeted assassination of Saleh Shehadeh, which involved an F-16 dropping a one-ton bomb that killed 15 people and injured 100, Tamir was disturbed by the killing of innocent civilians and decided to speak out.13 He was interviewed by Haaretz [12] and told the whole story of his military career, including his questioning of the reasoning behind Israeli military decisions.

zaatari_en_couv1.jpg **[13]**



[14]Akram Zaatari, A Conversation with an Imagined Israeli Filmmaker Named Avi Mograbi

Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, Kadist Art Foundation, Sternberg Press, 2012

The meeting

In April of 2010, Zaatari was in residence at Le Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers [15] in France. During this time he had a public conversation with the Israeli filmmaker Avi Mograbi. He retold this story and the conversation was published in a small orange-covered book, *A Conversation with an Imagined Israeli Filmmaker*. In July of 2012, Seth Anziska, an American historian, was conducting research at the Arab Image Foundation [16] in Beirut, and he came across the book. As he was reading Zaatari's recounting of the story of the refusing pilot, Anziska realized that he knew that the pilot was Haggai Tamir. Anziska had met Tamir two years prior while he was doing research in Israel. He had met Tamir's wife in a store, and they struck up a conversation. She asked Anziska what he was doing in Israel and he told her that he was researching the Lebanese and Israeli perspectives on the war in 1982. She said that he should meet her husband, who was a pilot in the war, and not long after that Anziska conducted many hours of interviews with Tamir.

Anziska then contacted Zaatari, met with him in Beirut, and told him that the pilot was Haggai Tamir. Zaatari asked if he could send Tamir a copy of *A Conversation with an Imagined Israeli Filmmaker*.14

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

LEBANON PAVILLION226 2.jpg **[17]**



[18]Akram Zaatari. Letter to a Refusing Pilot, 2013

Installation view, Lebanese Pavilion, 55th International Venice Biennale. Photo: Marco Milan

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

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

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

LEBANON PAVILLION239 2.jpg **[19]**



[20]Akram Zaatari. Letter to a Refusing Pilot, 2013

Installation view, Lebanese Pavilion, 55th International Venice Biennale. Photo: Marco Milan

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

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

invites us as viewers into a conversation about the meaning of these images, taking the place of Tamir.

In the next installment of this essay [21] I will expand on this notion of discursive democracy by introducing art historian and critic Grant Kester's notion of dialogical aesthetics as a theoretical methodology to examine the conversation between not only Zaatari and Tamir but also another conversation – one between Zaatari and Avi Mograbi.

Two Point Perspective (part II): the Dialogical Exchange
[21]Two Point Perspective (part III): Forms of Refusal

- 1. In conversations over the course of 2012-2014 with some Palestinian curators and artists, who were active in the 1990s, I repeatedly heard this sentiment.
- 2. For specific policies regarding the cultural boycott, see https://bdsmovement.net/cultural-boycott.
- 3. Akram Zaatari: Letter to a Refusing Pilot (The Pavilion of Lebanon at the "55 Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte – La Biennale di Venezia") (2013)
- 4. TJ Demos, The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary During Crisis (Durham: Duke, 2013), 188.
- 5. In the early 1960s Michel Ecochard, an architect and planner, flew over the site of Frères Maristes College in Rmeileh, near Saida. He was documenting the process of its building through photographs. On the ground below his collaborator, Amine El-Bizri, supervised the construction. Ecochard himself was a pilot and he built many projects in Lebanon, including the Taamir public housing project surrounding the Saida Secondary public school in the early 1960s.
- 6. Avihai Becker, "Why We Refused. [12]" Haaretz, Sept 25, 2002.
- 7. It should be noted that Zaatari was also trained as an architect and this was a point of commonality that he was interested in.
- 8. Becker, "Why We Refused," Haaretz, Sept 25, 2002.
- 9. Tamir lives and works in Jaffa, in an old Palestinian house that he remodeled.
- 10. Becker, "Why We Refused," Haaretz, Sept 25, 2002.
- 11. ibid
- 12. Author's interview with Haggai Tamir, July 2013.
- 13. On July 22, 2002, an Israeli plane dropped a one-ton bomb on a house in Gaza City, killing Saleh Shehadeh, the military wing commander of Hamas and an aide, as well as thirteen Palestinian civilians. In response to objections to this action by the Israeli NGO Yesh Gvul and others, an Israeli panel appointed by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert found that the military acted appropriately. Barak Ravid, "Israel's 2002 hit of Hamas leader was justified, despite civilian casualties. [22]" Haaretz, Feb 27, 2011.
- 14. Akram Zaatari, A Conversation with an Imaginary Israeli Filmmaker Named Avi Mograbi (Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, Kadist Art Foundation, Sternberg Press, 2012)
- 15. It is interesting to note that the publication for the exhibition is printed on newsprint in the form of a newspaper, the primary form of news during the Lebanon civil war.
- 16. Ariella Azoulay, The Civil Contract of Photography (New York: Zone Books, 2008).
- 17. Ibid, 17

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