Two Point Perspective (part II): the Dialogical Exchange

In the second part of his essay analysing Akram Zaatari's 2013 work "Letter to a Refusing Pilot," Noah Simblist addresses a previous work by the artist that involved a conversation with filmmaker Avi Mograbi. Simblist is reading this work through the prism of dialogical exchange, referencing Grant Kester's definition of "dialogical art," as well as Ella Shohat's observations on the identity politics of Mizrachi or Arab Jews.

Essay / Noah Simblist October 14, 2016

Continued from part I

LEBANON PAVILLION268 2_lowres.jpg



[1]Akram Zaatari. Letter to a Refusing Pilot, 2013
Installation view, Lebanese Pavilion, 55th International Venice Biennale. Photo: Marco Milan

While Akram Zaatari's *Letter to a Refusing Pilot* can be described as a film and video installation, I believe that it also constitutes a dialogical work – a conversation between Zaatari and Haggai Tamir. This is the most powerful and innovative aspect of the work, both politically and aesthetically. Zaatari went far beyond the representation of a story. He has engaged in an illegal and potentially risky conversation.

In a text she wrote about Zaatari's work, writer and critic Kaelen Wilson Goldie pointed out that the position of the pilot was absent from Lebanese life1. The small country only has four old fighter planes, which that are rarely used. During the civil war, aerial combat was fought primarily between Israeli and Syrian planes. Today, Hezbollah fires rockets and launches drones and Israel still flies across Lebanese airspace. There are no private helicopters, and the only civilian aircraft belong to Middle East Airlines. As a result, Lebanese citizens must imagine the point of view of the pilot, and Zaatari conjures this imagination in his work, this imagination through the eyes of young boys who eagerly craft paper airplanes and drop them from their rooftops.

It is important to note that Zaatari responds to the absence of a pilot's point of view from within his own lexicon of experience, one that must be understood, instead, through a conversation with an actual pilot. In this case, it was by contacting one of the pilots who had flown the planes that he watched overhead as a boy, and, more specifically, the pilot that he heard rumors about. He sent an email, which, unlike the paper airplanes, came back to him. Consequently, he started a conversation with a once imaginary but now very real subject.

LEBANON PAVILLION253 2_lowres.jpg **[2]**



[3]Akram Zaatari. Letter to a Refusing Pilot, 2013
Installation view, Lebanese Pavilion, 55th International Venice Biennale. Photo: Marco Milan

Letter to a Refusing Pilot self-consciously uses a number of literal and metaphorical points of view. The opening image of the video was made by strapping an HD camera onto a drone that rose above a building. With this move, Akram Zaatari both reclaims and references the fact that throughout his childhood the sky above southern Lebanon was controlled by the Israeli army. This is also signaled in the video by the aerial shots of Saida, shown on an iPad, originally recorded by the Israeli military and shown on Israeli television. Intercut with these images are Hashem El-Madani's photographs of the Taamir public housing project in Saida, which were commissioned by the Lebanese government in the 1950s to document the advance of urban development. It's interesting to note that El-Madani, a Lebanese photographer, went to Haifa in 1947 and worked as an assistant to a Jewish immigrant photographer named Katz. But because of the events of 1948 he returned to Saida and opened a studio there.2 Finally, Zataari's 1982 photographs of the bombing on the hillside, also included in the video, are taken literally from an individual point of view, but also from that of the metaphorical subject: in comparison with the images taken by the Israeli invader or the Lebanese government photographer, Zataari depicts his point of view as both an individual and as a Lebanese citizen, who watches and documents the transformation of his local landscape because of war.

LEBANON PAVILLION266 2.JPG **[4]**



[5]Akram Zaatari. Letter to a Refusing Pilot, 2013
Installation view, Lebanese Pavilion, 55th International Venice Biennale. Photo: Marco Milan

At this point I would like to borrow the term dialogical from Grant Kester, who defined "dialogical" art practices as those that are centered on conversations and based on reciprocal openness. But how do we know that a conversation is based on reciprocal openness3, and what makes it an art practice? Kester says that according to Kant, aesthetic perception is a mode of being in which we transcend our specific identities as subjects (including our desires and self-interest) and see things from the point of view of the universal4. Kester then compares Kant's notion of the aesthetic to Jürgen Habermas's notion of the public sphere, a discursive space that is predicated on equality and the suspension of the individual interests of each subject participating in dialogue. For Kester, the way to create an egalitarian dialogical space is through a physical and psychological framework that sets it apart from daily discourse. Kester is saying that just as two individuals need to compare aesthetic experience through some form of common language, two individuals also need to rely on a common language that transcends individualistic subjective experience to create the building blocks for a civic space defined by egalitarian reciprocity. For Akram Zaatari and Haggai Tamir, this was done in two ways. First, they needed to find an extraterritorial meeting place and used Italy as a third country. Furthermore, the primary location of their conversation was a hotel lobby, a heterotopic space that was a public sphere, in between the private homes and homelands of each participant. Secondly, on Zaatari's suggestion, they used an archival structure of old photographs and documents to set up stories about each other's upbringing and life on opposite sides of a war. It is the shared framework of old photographs that reveals the disjunction between the two participants of this conversation.

Beyond these circumstances, we don't know the actual content or structure of the conversation between Zaatari and Tamir. It was not recorded, and there is no transcript. But the conversation between Zaatari and Avi Mograbi that lead to the meeting between Zaatari and Tamir, was explicitly set up as an artwork. This conversation was performed on a stage in Aubervilliers, France, and documented in a book. But, complicating things even further, the book frames the conversation as an imagined one – alluding to the absurd fact that Israeli and Lebanese citizens cannot be in conversation in public.

These two conversations are parallel because they are both conversations between Zaatari and an Israeli. They are also interrelated because, as I explained in part one of this essay [6], the conversation between Zaatari and Mograbi indirectly lead to the meeting between Zaatari and Tamir. Contrary to the conversation between Zaatari and Tamir, the fact that there is a record of Zaatari's and Mograbi's discourse allows us to see it in more detail, and probe deeper into its nature as a dialogical work.

zaatari_en_couv1.jpg **[7]**



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

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

In the script entitled *A Conversation with an Imagined Israeli Filmmaker*, Zaatari states that he is not Akram Zaatari and that the Israeli filmmaker is not Avi Mograbi. Zaatari says, "... we could only be individual voices, fictive... because we don't represent. In fact we misrepresent. Fictive because we are out of synch with national entities. Our voices are our nation's' imagination(s), rather than realities."5 In this statement, Zaatari reverses the one by the late Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafiq Hariri, which says that "Lebanon is more than a nation; it is an idea,"6 It also reverses Benedict Anderson's famous definition of nationalism as an imagined community that is collectively beheld by its constituent subjects.7 For Zaatari, the subjects are imaginary but the nations of Lebanon and Israel are real. If we combine these two attitudes, the imagined national communities of Israel and Lebanon tend to produce constituent imaginary subjects that are enemies. The fact that Zaatari and Mograbi are collaborating is out of sync with the national ideological positions of their respective countries of origin. But for Zaatari, if they are imagined characters then they simply have the option to take on different points of view, like a different script for an actor. He then goes on to note that as documentary filmmakers, both Zaatari and Mograbi are aware of the blurry line between fact and fiction, and the play between the two in this performance is an extension of that aspect of their work.

At this point, Zaatari starts to tell his own personal story. He was born in Saida in 1966. His mother was from Tripoli, but her great-grandfather came from Turkey. His Father was born in Saida, but his family originated from either the Arabian Peninsula or Palestine. By revealing that his family is from Arabia, Lebanon, and potentially Palestine, Zaatari is showing not only that families in the Middle

East used to move more freely between cities, but also that recounting these personal facts already begins to explode any kind of essentialized national identity. He then goes on to note that he was born one year before the 1967 war and grew up hearing only bad stories about Israelis. He never met an Israeli until he was sixteen years old, when he saw tanks driving up his street:
At the age of sixteen, I recall standing by the entrance of the building where we lived, waiting in total silence to watch the first Israeli tanks drive up the street. These were the first Israelis I saw in my life – young victorious soldiers riding their noisy tanks. Despite the deafening noise, I remember the scene in total silence.[8]

Zaatari then tells us about a particular instance when he saw an Israeli soldier:
We lived on the sixth floor of a building, facing south, so the balcony was almost like a theater seat for me, and explosions were the spectacle. I grew up hearing the same warnings over and over: don't stare at the Israelis from the balcony. We were told that the Israelis were the snipers of the sky, that they saw and heard everything. And I always wondered why they would want to shoot at a young boy holding a camera![9]

Then Mograbi intervenes via Skype:
Actually, I remember this incident very well. We were driving down a street in Tzidon. I know you call it something else but we call it Tzidon in Hebrew. I pulled my head out of the tank's hatch and saw a teenager with a camera on one of the balconies. He was wearing a blue and gray Adidas shirt, and he was aiming his camera at me. I remember I shouted in Hebrew, al Te'tzalem! Ma yesh lekha le'tzalem? Don't shoot! What have you got to shoot at?[10]

This last line is interesting, because the Hebrew words for shooting pictures (the word le'tzalem that Mograbi said he used) and shooting guns are different, but in the text of this book, printed only in English, the ambiguity of "shoot" is preserved. Under orders to shoot at anyone, because the most innocent-looking person could be dangerous, Mograbi hopes that he doesn't have to shoot the teenager on the balcony. He curses the kid's parents for letting him hang outside, thus forcing Mograbi to shoot at him. At the last minute, the boy runs indoors.

Since Zaatari has pronounced this performance a fiction from the outset, we immediately doubt that this amazing coincidence could have occurred. But nonetheless, the imagery is incredibly powerful, and whether or not the actual Zaatari and Mograbi were looking at one another in Saida/Tzidon[11], one down a machine gun's scope and the other through the lens of a camera, they still represent the symbolic national subject positions of the characters in this story. Even if they weren't the people in this story, they could have been.

Nahon Family 2 1934 With Names.jpg **[9]**



[10]Nahon Family Beirut 1934
From The Mograbi Family Album

Zaatari ignores the story that Mograbi tells and then continues to say that prior to the moment of the Israeli invasion in 1982, he had only seen Israelis on TV, through an Israeli television station's signal that reached Saida. He tells us that he grew up with a natural affiliation with the Palestinian cause and loved the Palestinian *fedayeen*Palestinian once chaos the remembers also he but ,(فِدائيّين) military factions took over southern Lebanon. He says that he took pictures of destroyed buildings, Israeli vehicles, and damaged cityscapes, but never soldiers. It wasn't until later that he saw press images of Israeli soldiers as human beings rather than abstractions – eating, drinking, or washing clothes. The only ones that he could imagine like this at the time were Palestinians.

He says that he grew up with a great love of cinema, including Hitchcock, Truffaut, Fassbinder, and Pasolini, and that he considered cinema, like the arts, to be outside of geography and citizenship. In 1997, he presented a short video at a film festival in Pesaro, Italy. Mograbi was also there, and he showed his film How I Learned to Overcome My Fear and Love Ariel Sharon [11] (1997). After the screening there was a dinner and Zaatari says that he sat down next to Mograbi and introduced himself. At this point in the performance, Mograbi enters the stage with his laptop and says that he remembers this event differently, and that there were two people sitting in between them, and that they never said more than "hi" to one another. Again, Zaatari ignores him and says that Lebanese artists and officials used to get annoyed when Israelis insisted on talking to them after the Oslo Accords. These gestures of friendship were seen as a result of guilt over Israel's occupation and constant wars in Lebanon, or possibly because they wanted to recruit Arab intellectuals and artists to become spies for Israel. But after Zaatari saw Mograbi's film and heard him speak in the Q&A, he decided that he needed to talk to him, but to turn the tables: it was to recruit him.

Mograbi interrupts again and says that he wants to return to Zaatari's comment about Godard's metaphor of the shot and reverse shot, but to do so he wants to show some pictures. Mograbi then shows the audience old family snapshots. The first is of his father, Gabi, and his mother, Rivka, standing and smiling next to a man who looks like he may be Palestinian. Mograbi tells us that this picture was taken sometime between 1949 and 1952 in Haifa. He says that the first time that he saw this photograph he was surprised, because his father was a right-wing Zionist who fought with the *Irgun*12, and was jailed and deported to Eritrea by the British because of these activities. Mograbi then shows another picture of his mother, in the Galilee, surrounded by a group of Palestinians, all of whom are smiling. Then Mograbi says that a third photograph is the reverse shot, a portrait of his father, Gabi, with a gun in his belt. He shows a fourth photograph of a smiling Gabi, still with a gun in his belt, with a glum-looking Palestinian who is clutching a blackboard to his chest, with the number 239 written in white chalk across it, and another man who is taking his picture. Mograbi then says that these last two pictures are documents, but we know how documents can be fiction. He returns to the Godard quote and asks, "what happens when you suddenly find both the documentary and the fiction at the same frame? Like in those photos or like here now? Godard would have absolutely said that you, Akram, are the documentary and that I am total fiction."

What is Mograbi saying here? What is it about this last photograph that combines documentary and fiction? And what is it about that photograph that is analogous to the conversation between Zaatari and Mograbi? In the most straightforward manner, he is saying, using Godard's analogy, that the Jew (fiction) and the Palestinian (documentary) are found in the same frame, as opposed to the model of shot and reverse shot. Furthermore, if we extend the analogy between Zaatari and the Palestinian, then Zaatari serves as the documentary. In this sense the narrative is structurally different. The stories of two people, two nations, two enemies, is no longer about point and counterpoint. When found within one frame, or on one stage, the narrative of two characters is interconnected. As a result the diametric opposition becomes more discursive and potentially dialogical.

gabi4.jpg **[12]**



[13]Gabi Mograbi
From The Mograbi Family Album

This process is evident through a series of doubles found within Mograbi's last photograph. First, it is a photograph of a photograph being taken. One photograph presumably serves the administrative purpose of tracking a Palestinian subject. The other photograph documents the Israeli subject acting in this situation, in this case Mograbi's father. Second, the main characters are Gabi and the unnamed, but numbered, Palestinian. The photographer frames this pair. Finally, there is an image of militant violence, of the gun in Gabi's belt, capable of shooting in one sense, and the administrative violence of the photographer's shooting in another sense: documenting and archiving a Palestinian subject under Israeli occupation. This last double is closest to the shot and reverse shot in that story that Mograbi tells of the boy on the balcony and himself in the tank, but it combines the two senses of shooting in one frame.

After Mograbi has presented these photographs, Zaatari says that he hasn't been in contact with Mograbi since that meeting in Pesaro in 1997, but he did take his business card and carefully hid it, in case it might be found by the Lebanese authorities. In 2005, Zaatari received a group email from Yousry Nasrallah, an Egyptian filmmaker, about Mograbi's son Shaul, who had refused to serve in the Israeli military. Nasrallah was asking the contacts on this email list, a group of Arab artists and intellectuals, to show solidarity with Mograbi. Nasrallah also noted that he knew that this gesture would contradict the popular opinion that solidarity with Israeli leftists would be an action of normalizing the occupation, but that he thought it essential to support what he considered to be a brave action. Zaatari replied to the group email to echo this solidarity and got an email back from Mograbi immediately. This began a correspondence, in which they exchanged DVDs of their work, a relationship that was reinforced during the war between Israel and Lebanon in 2006. In this

correspondence, Zaatari asks Mograbi to see if he can find some original footage that he had seen traces of in the media during the 2006 war. These were videos from the point of view of Israeli missiles as they approached their targets. Cameras were mounted on the missiles to help to guide them, but they were destroyed along with the bombs. Zaatari calls these “suicide cameras;” he was fascinated by the creation of one more point of view that combined the shooting of a camera with the shooting of military ordnance. Something about the idea of the point of view of this camera reminds Zaatari of the story of the pilot in 1982, whom we now know to be Tamir.

Mograbi then responds with more photographs. He shows one of his father’s mother’s family when they used to live in Beirut. He explained that they had moved to Palestine in the mid-1920s and that one member of this side of the family was married to a Jewish Egyptian. He shows another photograph with Gabi in Beirut, in a family picture. He says that every summer his father used to go to Beirut to visit the family. He used to do this up until the mid-1940s, when the British government deported him. Mograbi then shows a photograph of the Mograbi clan in Damascus, and says that these relatives of his look Arab, and asks if they are, and, if his great grandfather was Arab, then what does that say about him? Is he an Arab as well? Mograbi doesn’t answer this question, but this revelation complicates the shot and reverse shot analogy. It means that shot and reverse shot are combined not only when Mograbi and Zaatari are on the same stage, as a Jew and an Arab in the same frame, but furthermore, Mograbi himself contains these two identity positions within the frame of his own identity.

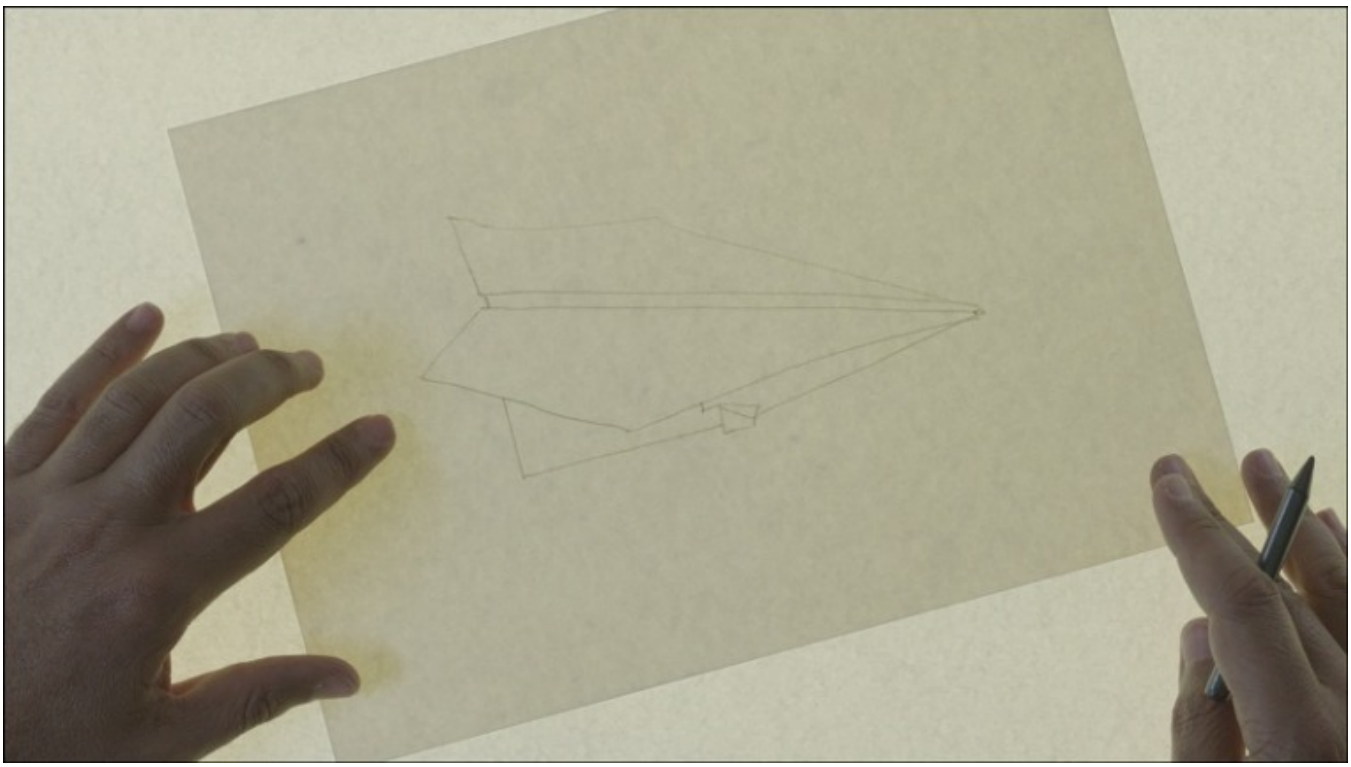
Mograbi_Damasque.jpg **[14]**



[15]The Mograbi family in Damascus, early 1920s
From The Mograbi Family Album

The notion of the Arab Jew has been addressed by a number of artists and intellectuals, most notably in the US by the artist Michael Rakowitz [16], who has made a series of projects that were related to his identity as a diasporic Iraqi Jew. Cultural and Women's Studies scholar Ella Shohat [17] has noted that "The Zionist denial of the Arab-Moslem and the Palestinian East… has as its corollary the denial of the Jewish "Mizrachim" (the "Eastern Ones") who, like the Palestinians, but by more subtle and less obviously brutal mechanisms, have also been stripped of the right of self-representation."13 The dominant discourse in Israel about Mizrachim, sometimes referred to as Jewish Arabs, Oriental Jews, or *Sephardim*14, is that they were saved from the harsh rule of Arab countries after 1948 by immigrating to Israel.15 But the photographs that Mograbi shows us reveal an alternative narrative, in which Jewish Arabs in Beirut and Damascus, Cairo or Jerusalem had a thriving cosmopolitan existence. Furthermore, their mobility resembles that of Zaatari's family in the pre-1948 Arab world. Thus, Mograbi describes his identity, through his family's history in the Middle East, as a way to identify with Zaatari.16

5357.jpg **[18]**



[19]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 and final installment of this essay, I will argue that the conversation between Zaatari and Mograbi has been truly dialogical, in the sense that it was predicated not only on mutual identification but also on mutual exchange. Furthermore, I will argue that the conversation between Zaatari and Tamir could never reach this level of mutuality, because of the mistrust engendered by the haunting specter of history and the politics of aesthetics.

Two Point Perspective (part I): Letter to a Refusing Pilot [6]

Two Point Perspective (part III): Forms of Refusal [6]

- 1. Kaelen Wilson Goldie, *The Archaeology of Rumor*, in “Akram Zaatari: Letter to a Refusing Pilot” (the Pavilion of Lebanon at the 55 Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte – La Biennale di Venezia, 2013), p2
- 2. Seth Anzika, *The Archaeology of Rumor,* in “Akram Zaatari: Letter to a Refusing Pilot” (The Pavilion of Lebanon at the 55 Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte – La Biennale di Venezia, 2013), p15
- 3. Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) p90
- 4. ibid. p107
- 5. Akram Zaatari, *A Conversation with an Imagined Israeli Filmmaker Named Avi Mograbi* (Les Laboratoires d’Aubervilliers, Kadist Art Foundation, Sternberg Press, 2012), p3
- 6. Tony Chakar, “Living in an idea” *Parachute: Contemporary Art Magazine* (Oct. 2002), p60
- 7. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism,*

(London: Verso, 1983)

- 8. Akram Zaatari, *A Conversation with an Imagined Israeli Filmmaker Named Avi Mograbi* (Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, Kadist Art Foundation, Sternberg Press, 2012), p5
- 9. ibid.
- 10. ibid. p8
- 11. This city is called Saida in Arabic and Tzidon in Hebrew.
- 12. The *Irgun* was a Jewish paramilitary unit that operated in Palestine from 1931-1948.
- 13. Ella Shohat, "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of its Jewish Victims," *Social Text*, no. 19/20 (Autumn, 1988), p1. Emphasis in the original.
- 14. These terms each have very different social contexts and ideological implications and it should be noted that for most Mizrachim in Israel, it is a radical act to self-identify as Jewish Arabs or Arab Jews.
- 15. Ibid. p3.
- 16. Avi Mograbi's 2012 film Once I Entered a Garden *[20],* deals with the subject of past Middle-eastern cosmopolitanism explicitly.

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