Two Point Perspective (part III): Forms of Refusal

The third and final part of the essay by Noah Simblist focuses on Akram Zaatari's use of dialogical exchange as an artistic strategy. While completely different in their dynamics and outcomes, Zaatari's conversations with both Hagai Tamir and Avi Mograbi, he argues, reveal different degrees of both personal and political engagement and, at the same time, various forms of antagonism and refusal.

Essay / Noah Simblist December 26, 2016

Continued from part II

1_Stills from Avi Mograbi's second mission, The Other Side of Shebaa Farms, 9 minutes, 2008.jpg



[1]Stills from Avi Mograbi's second mission, the Other Side of Shebaa Farms, 9 minutes, 2008

The conversation between Akram Zaatari and Avi Mograbi in *A Conversation with an Imagined Israeli Filmmaker* ends when Zaatari tells the story of another task that he had given Mograbi. Following up on his film All is Well on the Border *[2]* (1997), Zaatari wanted to return to a border zone that he could not reach, the area of Shebaa Farms. This area, at the intersection of the Lebanese and Syrian borders and the northern Golan Heights, was occupied by Israel, starting in 1967, and despite the Israeli withdrawal from Southern Lebanon in 2000, it remains disputed territory1. Zaatari asks Mograbi to film interviews with older locals in the area and gives him a list of specific places to find. In response, Mograbi makes a short film, *The Other Side of Shebaa Farms* (2008), but it is a record of failure. In this short film, whose transcript is included in the book about their conversation, Mograbi can be seen driving around, unable to find any of the places that Zaatari has asked him to find, encountering mine fields and electric fences instead.

Zaatari said that in the 1990s, Israelis were constantly trying to collaborate with artists and intellectuals of the Arab world, and that one potential reason for this was to recruit them to be spies. Zaatari and Mograbi acknowledge this, playfully, through a role reversal in which Mograbi is being

sent on various exercises on the border. The imagery of *The Other Side of Shebaa Farms*, which ends the conversation between Mograbi and Zaatari, is the actual border, militarized and fenced off, that sits between the nations that Mograbi and Zaatari represent. By ending here, it is as if they want to make concrete, to remind each other and us of the very real gulf that lies between the two, despite their attempts at communication.

Stills from Avi Mograbi's second mission, The Other Side of Shebaa Farms, 9 minutes, 2008 .jpg **[3]**



[4]Stills from Avi Mograbi's second mission, the Other Side of Shebaa Farms, 9 minutes, 2008

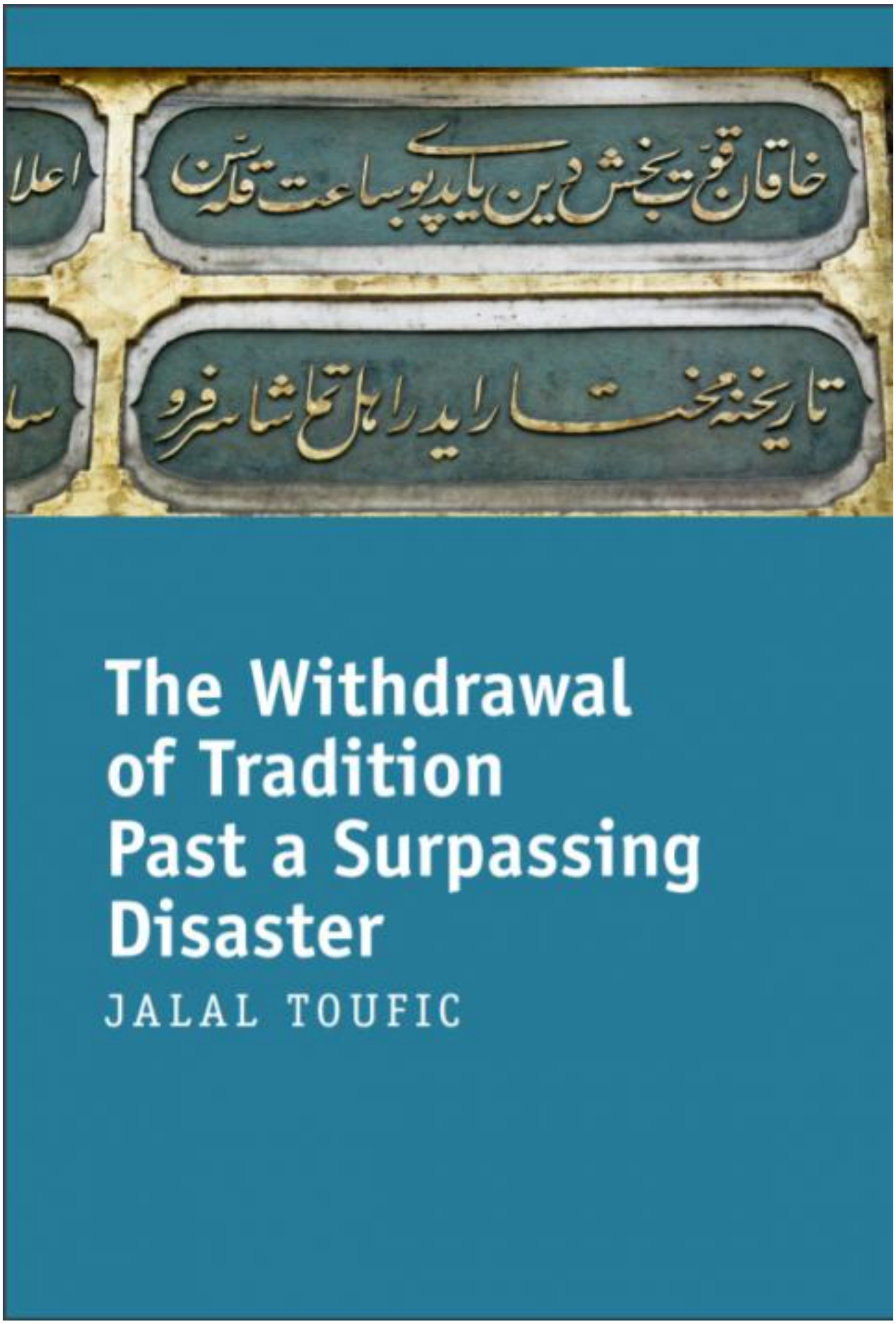
When Grant Kester describes Habermas's notion of discursive democracy he notes that Habermas has assumed an ideal set of circumstances for discourse, and has not accounted for various power dynamics2. Kester is also suspicious of the assumption that Habermas makes that all discourse is naturally subject to the force of reason, positing instead that counterpoised models of argument, where each interlocutor seeks to identify with the position of the other, are more productive. In the conversation between Zaatari and Mograbi, they are clearly trying to account for the power dynamics built into the situation. Moreover, when Mograbi reveals the photographs of his Arab Jewish family, he is identifying with Zaatari's Arab context.3 They are also looking to identify with the other when each of them refers to their mutual engagement with experimental documentary film. This attention to the structure of the conversation as a model where each subject's national interests are suspended reveals that a dialogical aesthetics is at play.

Hagai Tamir didn't feel the same kind of mutuality as Mograbi had in his conversations with Zaatari.4 This is evident in the absence of the pilot's voice from Zaatari's 2013 video or its accompanying publication. Tamir felt he was used as material for an artwork, and that he told Zaatari much more about himself than he learned from the artist. Zaatari had invited him to come to the opening of the Venice Biennial to see the finished work, but Tamir declined, worried that since this was a part of the Lebanese national pavilion, he might be instrumentalized for a political purpose.5 But he did eventually visit the exhibition at a later date, and sat on the empty chair.

Furthermore, there is one thing that has bothered Tamir about Zaatari's work that is worth noting. At the outset of their correspondence, Zaatari sent him DVDs of his work and in one of them, *This Day* (2003), Tamir saw the image of former Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon, made to look like he was a Nazi. The idea that an Israeli would be compared to a Nazi was too much for him. He acknowledges that his understanding of art doesn't extend to video art or appropriation and, in my view, Tamir

didn’t understand that Zaatari was not himself making the comparison but instead looking at the ways that imagery was used for propaganda purposes during the second Intifada. But regardless, the seat in the installation of *Letter to a Refusing Pilot* was empty. For these reasons, the dialogical exchange between Tamir and Zaatari was a relative failure and didn’t reach the same level of mutuality of Mograbi and Zaatari’s conversation. In actuality, it was a more accurate reflection of the current political condition under which Israel and Lebanon existed. Like Mograbi driving around the north of Israel, endlessly bumping into mine fields and electric fences, Tamir had met his own roadblocks with Zaatari. But perhaps this was because each of them was holding a widely different set of expectations for the encounter. The border between Zaatari and Tamir wasn’t based on national politics but the politics of aesthetics – Tamir is a modernist humanist who believes in truth, essentialism, originality and its relationship to expression, whereas Zaatari is interested in appropriation and plays with the borders between perceptual categories, such as documentary and fact, point and counterpoint, or author and reader.6

Untitled-1.jpg **[5]**



online book [6]

Writer and artist Jalal Toufic [7] offers a way of thinking about Zaatari's use of appropriation that is particular to their experience as post-war artists. In his book, The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster *[6]*, Toufic claims that the phenomenon of an appropriated copy might seem like a repetition of something but actually is a resurrection of a lost tradition in the context of what he calls a "surpassing disaster."7 A resurrection occurs when the original is no longer available, a situation that follows wars, like the civil war in Lebanon, during which countless museums, archives, and artworks have been destroyed along with the historians, artists and intellectuals that were killed. Toufic argues that the disaster of war destroys tradition and, in effect, constructs a poststructuralist condition in which all representations become part of a chain of signifiers. For Toufic, another example of a resurrection is the ruin:

*I along with my two siblings and my mother deserted the family apartment during the 1982 Israeli Invasion of Lebanon. Did this make the apartment a ruin? Yes, and not because it was severely damaged and burned during the last days of the offensive: even after it was restored it remained a ruin.*8

The renovated apartment is a copy of what it had been before it was deserted and destroyed but that copy can never be the original, and as a result always points to its destruction. In this sense the true ruin is the new building. To illustrate this idea, Toufic tells a story about a vampire in post-war Beirut, who is looking for the perfect ruin and goes from one destroyed building to another, constantly dissatisfied, until he finds a brand new building and buys it. The realtor was confused because the vampire had asked for a ruin, which would seem to be an old decrepit place, and instead the vampire was interested in a shiny new building, which would seem to be the opposite of a ruin. But at that moment the realtor saw the seemingly young vampire as old and the seemingly new building as a ruin. In this sense, the newly constructed building is haunted by the destruction that led to its construction, its becoming.9

When Zaatari includes the image of Sharon dressed as a Nazi in *This Day*, he is quoting from a realm of visual activism for Palestinian solidarity.10 But when we recall that Zaatari was interested in Godard's critique of militant filmmaking, his use of the visual activism that had produced the image of Sharon dressed as a Nazi most probably follows a similar critique and skepticism towards activism's use of visual culture.11 Furthermore, Zaatari is reproducing an image from an email that in itself is a reproduction of Nazi imagery. In Toufic's terms, Zaatari is resurrecting the image of the Nazi in Palestinian solidarity discourse, a repetition that produced a counterfeit, without the real power of the original, a copy that occurs in the wake of the surpassing disasters of both the Shoah and the Nakba.12 This model of repetition/resurrection is used throughout Zaatari's work. In *All is Well on the Border,* he has actors read the words of prisoners. In *This Day*, aside from the Sharon image, he also attempts to reproduce a series of photographs of Bedouins, originally taken by the orientalist Jibraiel Jabbur in 1950. In *Letter to a Refusing Pilot*, he reuses the photographs that he has taken in 1982 and that were depicted in *This Day* to construct a film. Tamir's misreading of Zaatari's use of repetition was to believe that Zaatari intended to repeat the initial equation of Nazi and Israeli political violence. But Tamir also misinterpreted the repeated image by assuming that it held some sort of original power.

no-reflection.png **[8]**



[9]Vampire and Mirror from Dracula (1931)
dir. Tod Browning

Zaatari works like a historian, archaeologist, or an archivist of a situation in the wake of war[13] but like Toufic says, “with regard to the surpassing disaster, art acts like the mirror in vampire films: it reveals the withdrawal of what we think is still there.”[14] Zaatari believes that we might look for a document of an original thing but what we are left with is a record of absence.[15] For instance, in *Letter to a Refusing Pilot*, Zaatari focuses on a school that is now destroyed, an architectural volume that has been punctured and now is only a flattened mass of rubble, only existing through photographs, stories or through the approximations of the new school that replaced it. Toufic recalls a famous line in the 1961 film *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, “You have seen nothing in Hiroshima,” and asks if all we have is absence, “does this mean that we should not record?”[16] He answers that we must record the “nothing,” because the absence of the original referent is something that we can hold on to. Zaatari traces the shape of this absence through photography, architecture, correspondence, and conversations with a filmmaker and a pilot. These conversations chart the space between two subjects. This dialogical space is also “nothing.” It has no subjectivity or materiality but it can be characterized through its affect, a particular kind of remembering that alters the present.

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

Conclusion

To return to the point that I made at the start of part I of this essay [12], the strategy of dialogue has a great deal of significance in the region of Israel-Palestine and Lebanon. So when Akram Zaatari engages in various forms of dialogue with an Israeli pilot and a filmmaker, he does so within the context of various constraints within two states who remain at war and the larger regional BDS discourse. But what I find illuminating about these conversations is that when we look closely at their form they reveal different degrees of both personal and political engagement and at the same time, various forms of refusal.

The conversation between Zaatari and Tamir was burdened by Tamir's fear, hesitancy, and skepticism. It also was burdened by the traumas of not only the wars between Israel and Lebanon but also the traumas of the Nakba and the Holocaust. Furthermore, their conversation was one sided by its very intention. It was meant to produce an artwork and Zaatari asked Tamir to serve as its subject, thereby "recruiting" him, in a reversal of the motivation for Israeli 1990s outreach efforts towards intellectuals in Arab countries. In my view, Zaatari intentionally instrumentalizes Tamir to be an Israeli subject who must sit in a chair made for him and look at the film that documents the destruction that an Israeli invasion created. The conversation between Zaatari and Tamir was not part of a coexistence project, and thus is not meant to participate in normalization. Instead, it was playfully antagonistic and intentionally one sided.17 But at the same time, Zaatari's conversation with Tamir was based on a respect for Tamir's refusal, his exercise of agency in the face of an immoral military machine. Both in this case, and in the conversation with Mograbi, then, it was an act of refusal that instigated the dialogical exchange.

LEBANON PAVILLION268 2.JPG **[13]**



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

Zaatari's conversation with Avi Mograbi had different formal characteristics. First, it was performative, given the fact that the conversation discussed here is the one that occurred in Aubervilliers. Secondly, their relationship began from a mutual recognition as filmmakers in a third space, a film festival in Italy, neither Israeli nor Lebanese.18 In addition to this, they use photographs in the way that Ariella Azoulay describes as discursive democracy, using a civil contract of photography. They use the photographic trace as evidence of the intersection between their personal and political lives and as a space for interpretation and counter-interpretation. Finally, Zaatari and Mograbi were able to acknowledge to one another the power dynamics that exist when an Israeli and a Lebanese artist work together. *The Other Side of Shebaa Farms* is a perfect example of this. It isn't about collaboration that illustrates some kind of utopian coexistence. Instead they are in dialogue, collaborating on a project that ultimately reveals the fact that their dialogue is constantly cut off by the borders, checkpoints, closed military zones, and other territorial limits. But in my view, it was important that they were engaged in this conversation, one that was honest about its limits and revealed its impossibility but worth attempting nevertheless.
This is the paradoxical nature of discussing these projects together. Refusal in the context of Israel is often discussed in cultural circles in terms of a boycott. But Hagai Tamir's courageous refusal was internal to Israeli society. He refused to participate in an indiscriminate war. Avi Mograbi's son's refusal to serve in the Israeli military is yet another example of an Israeli citizen stepping back from the policies of the governing regime. When Zaatari answered the call from Yousry Nasrallah to stand in solidarity with Mograbi's son's refusal, this was in direct contradiction to the tendency for many in the Arab world to refuse to be in dialogue with Israeli artists, for fear of normalization. In this context, the conversations that unfolded were rampant with dialogical aesthetics because each party was

hyper aware of what was at stake when they engaged each other. As a result, both *Letter to a Refusing Pilot* and *A Conversation with an Imaginary Israeli Filmmaker* reveal that both refusal and dialogical engagement are tools to intervene in a political situation that all too often lacks the speculative possibilities that civil imagination can provide.

Two Point Perspective (part I): Letter to a Refusing Pilot [12]

Two Point Perspective (part II): the Dialogical Exchange [15]

- 1. Israel withdrew its occupation of southern Lebanon in 2000, but it did not withdraw from Shebaa Farms. Israel claims it is a part of the Golan Heights; Hezbollah disputes this claim.
- 2. Grant H. Kester, Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) p 113
- 3. One could say that Mograbi goes further to identify with Zaatari than vice versa, and in that sense reveals a limitation to the mutuality at play in their exchange. But at the same time, one must remember the power relations that are also at play between an Israeli and a Lebanese citizen, perhaps revealing the gulf between the goal of equality and mutuality and the realities of a political and social situation that has been in place from 1982 till the present moment.
- 4. Interview with the author on July 29, 2013
- 5. The context of the Venice Biennial for this work, one which includes national pavilions that are tied to not only a history of nationalism but also a history of colonialism, makes this more than just any contemporary art exhibition context for a work predicated on antagonistic nationalisms.
- 6. Jacques Rancière calls this tendency “the distribution of the sensible,” the regime that determines what can be sensed, including what can be seen, felt, said, thought, and heard. Jacques Rancière, The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible (London: Continuum, 2000)
- 7. Jalal Toufic, The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster [6] (Forthcoming Books, 2009)
- 8. Jalal Toufic, “Ruins” in Matthew Gumpert and Jalal Toufic eds. Thinking: The Ruin, (Istanbul: Rezan Has Museum, 2010), pp. 35-40.
- 9. ibid p20
- 10. It is important to also note that the image of an Israeli prime minister dressed as a Nazi is most famous in the case of Yitzhak Rabin,used in a right wing crusade [16] against him, because of his engagement in dialog with Palestinians as part of the Oslo process. This image has been conjured many times to stress the role of political right-wing propaganda in Rabin’s assassination in 1995. But in that case, this gesture served a very different ideological position from the image of Sharon. The ubiquity of the Nazi signifier and its instrumentalization for various political positions is important but would take too long to describe or analyze here.
- 11. Zaatari’s film All is Well on the Border (1997) is an homage to Jean Luc Godard’s Ici Et Ailleurs (1972), an experimental documentary film, originally made as a result of the invitation by the Palestinian Liberation Movement, that is a deconstruction of the propaganda of revolutionary movements.
- 12. For Toufic, an example of the withdrawal of tradition after the surpassing disaster of the Holocaust is the tendency in the early years of the State of Israel for Holocaust survivors to be marginalized in a society that wanted to forget Jewish weakness and replace it with Jewish strength. Jalal Toufic, “Ruins” p46
- 13. One way that Zaatari has worked to archive this social history is through the Arab Image Foundation, which he cofounded. Zaatari speaks extensively about his work, including these aspects, in a conversation with Chad Elias, published in Tate Papers [17] (Spring 2013)

- 14. Jalal Toufic, The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster (Forthcoming Books, 2009) p57
- 15. ibid
- 16. ibid
- 17. In this sense, the work's socially engaged or, in other terms, relational aspects embrace Claire Bishop's notion of antagonism as outlined in Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics [18]," October 110, Fall 2004 pp51-79.
- 18. It's interesting to note that both meetings (Zaatari with Tamir and Zaatari with Mograbi) occurred in Italy.

Source URL: https://tohumagazine.com/article/two-point-perspective-part-iii-forms-refusal

Links
[1] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/1_Stills%20from%20Avi%20Mograbi%E2%80%99s%20second%20mission%2C%20The%20Other%20Side%20of%20Shebaa%20Farms%2C%209%20minutes%2C%202008.jpg
[2] http://www.vdb.org/titles/all-well-border
[3] https://tohumagazine.com/file/stills-avi-mograbi%E2%80%99s-second-mission-other-side-shebaa-farms-9-minutes-2008-jpg
[4] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/1_Stills%20from%20Avi%20Mograbi%E2%80%99s%20second%20mission%2C%20The%20Other%20Side%20of%20Shebaa%20Farms%2C%209%20minutes%2C%202008%20.jpg
[5] https://tohumagazine.com/file/untitled-1jpg-0
[6] http://www.jalaltoufic.com/downloads/Jalal_Toufic,_The_Withdrawal_of_Tradition_Past_a_Surpassing_Disaster.pdf
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[14] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/LEBANON%20PAVILLION268%202.JPG
[15] http://tohumagazine.com/article/two-point-perspective-part-ii-dialogical-exchange
[16] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9MTx8O_1hzU
[17] http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/19/the-libidinal-archive-a-conversation-with-akram-zaatari
[18] http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic641765.files/6%20c%20Bishop_Antagonism%20and%20Relational%20Aesthetics_October.pdf