

Part of my work as an artist involves collecting, looking for 'documents' for potential incorporation in my work. I am interested in documents that originate outside art practices, often produced for commercial purposes, or for personal or other reasons. These works clearly originate in an economic system with a certain specificity, and in social environments where they have a particular function to play. In my work, these documents circulate in an art context, as part of a process of study, therefore bringing up political, social, urban and cultural issues pertinent to the contemporary world.

From 1997 my work became more and more centred on researching and collecting existing documents. While doing fieldwork for different documentary works such *All is Well at the Border* (1997) and *Crazy of You* (1997), I collected many documents that helped me study and assess complex political situations, and which provided me with keys to understanding the complex relationships that tie society to its image(s). I ended up incorporating some of this visual material in the videos but there remained significant material that was not included.

In *All is Well at the Border*, I worked on video documents of military operations led by members of the Lebanese resistance against the Israeli army occupation in south Lebanon, and while researching the conditions of detainees in Israeli-controlled prisons, I gained access to Nabih Awada's prison letters. Nabih was caught during a resistance operation in 1988. He was taken to a military court in Israel and sentenced to fifteen years. He stayed in Askalan prison until 1998, when he was released as part of a political agreement with the Lebanese government. His letters showed a sixteen year-old-boy growing up in prison, maturing, trying to convince his mother and family that he was strong, he was doing well, he had friends, and that he was learning in prison what anyone else could be learning in school. His attitude gave the film title its tone (all is well). For me the letters were about distance, which also represented the distance that separated the occupied zone in south Lebanon from the rest of the country, mentally and geographically. It was precisely what I wanted to communicate in my video. I ended up using only excerpts from three letters, and kept the rest in my archive.¹

In my video *This Day* (2000–03), I tried to focus on this approach, collecting all sorts of documents, photographs, notebooks, and more recently, e-mail attachments of pictures and testimonies from areas of conflicts, particularly Iraq and Palestine. In the context of this work, these documents were linked with a

psychological and geographic journey between Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, commenting on the circulation of images in the divided Middle East; on borders; and on looking at possibilities of representing landscapes and cityscapes charged with historie(s) of past wars.² This work marked the first time I used personal documents dating back to my adolescent years living through the Israeli invasion of south Lebanon in 1982. These personal notebooks, photographs and audio recordings stimulated me to look for more personal documents done by others witnessing war.³ This is why I started collecting the e-mail accounts sent by Mona Mouhaissen and Marina Barham describing what it was like to go through the Israeli invasion of the west bank in 2002. This is also how I met Ali Hashisho, who became the main character of my latest work *In This House* (2002–05). In this video I dug out a letter that Ali had written as a member of the Lebanese resistance. The letter was addressed to the owners of the house that he had occupied for six years with his militant group after it had become the frontline. Ali buried his letter inside a B-10 mortar casing one metre under the earth of the family's garden.

The creation of the Arab Image Foundation in 1997 as a non-profit organization led by artists interested in collecting and studying photography in the Middle East, and of which I am co-founder, facilitated my focus on collecting and studying photography, first from Arab countries and more recently from the archive of Studio Shehrazade, Hashem el Madani, in Lebanon.

The Madani Project takes the entire archive of studio Shehrazade as study material to understand the complex relationship which ties a studio photographer to his working space, his equipment and tools, economy and aesthetics, and further explores his ties to his clients, society and the city in general. The project meets, on the one hand, my interest in living situations as objects of study that testify to modern traditions and complex social relationships and, on the other, the Arab Image Foundation's commitment to preserving, indexing and studying photographic collections in the Arab world.⁴ The Madani Project takes shape in a series of thematic exhibitions, publications and videos centred on the photographer Hashem el Madani, born in 1928, and his work. The project began with *Hashem el Madani: Studio Practices*, which studied conventions that shape the making of portraiture studio photographs, and focused on the studio as a space for play in a socially conservative society such as Saida in the 1950s and 1960s.⁵

Apart from serving as decoration in domestic spaces or displays in family albums, these portrait photographs, like others from the AIF archive, will now be accessible to a wide audience. My artistic position lies precisely in establishing this link; uncovering images, classifying and presenting them as the findings of fieldwork.

Apart from family pictures and events, and images from nineteenth-century European photographic missions to the Middle East and North Africa, few photographs are accessible through public channels. Popular culture in the Arab world has rarely viewed photographs for the sake of looking at photography. People look at photographs because they want to look at themselves, their friends or family. While I was mounting *Mapping Sitting*,⁶ in Beiteddine (Lebanon), the public could come in and out of the exhibition space while it was being installed, over eight days. All those who saw me installing 3,000 identity photographs from Anouchian's archive on the wall asked us the same question: 'Who are these people?' I could hear them guessing, saying these were maybe martyrs, singers, actors and actresses, or the couples to be married in an upcoming collective wedding at Tyr! When I explained that these were images of ordinary people, they would ask: 'What's the purpose of exhibiting portraits of ordinary people?'

In my work, photography is a subject before it is a medium. I would rather work on photography as opposed to with photography, which becomes a site of an intervention. Photographs are documents of cultural significance. I am interested in their description, researching their social histories before making them circulate in groups or as individual images in the art world,⁷ and before setting up new relationships with the audience at large. With its inclination to research and curating, my work has set up a model for artists' practices acquiring new collections for the Arab Image Foundation. I see my motivation for research not as that of a historian but an artist interested in history; not a social scientist or urbanist but rather an artist interested in socio-urban issues. Such motivation is manifested in various forms, some of which are material, such as publications and exhibitions, others not, such as research, curatorial work, archiving or teaching.

- 1 Nabih Awada's letters were stored by his parents inside an old woman's bag. The letters he received from his parents while in prison were kept in a book he made himself there.
- 2 When I watched the first live images of the US-led war on Afghanistan, I was shocked that these images didn't show anything except open desert landscapes, shot with special night vision equipment. Very often the correspondent's commentary placed them in the military context. Greenish flickering images would focus for minutes on glittering dust particles shot in night vision mode, waiting in silence for something to happen, a glowing missile behind a mountain, barely visible. It would have been a worthy exercise to fabricate such images at home. When I was shooting in the desert in Syria, almost on the border with Iraq, I had these images in mind. This is why the ending shot brings sounds of war onto images from the desert.
- 3 While making *This Day* (2000-03) I worked on the first photographs I took in my life, using my father's Kiev camera: six images of explosions after an Israeli air raid on Mar Elias hill in Saida, on 6 June 1982. The photographs were taken within five minutes. In my personal notebook I

noted that I had taken important photographs.

- 4 The Madani project is one I designed to fit the AIF's mission and at the same time my interests in objects of study.
- 5 I have been working on the archive of Hachem Madani (Studio Shehrazade, Saida) since 1999. What fascinates me is the diversity and magnitude of the archive. For example, contrary to what the photograph of two young men or women kissing might evoke now, it is certainly not a declaration of homosexual love, but a kiss acted by two men or two women. In a conservative social environment where men and women aren't allowed to kiss openly before marriage, and far from any gay culture scene, the image of two men kissing automatically refers to the kiss (the one they long for) between a man and a woman.
- 6 *Mapping Sitting* (a collaboration with the artist Walid Raad in 2002) was the first time the AIF presented an art project as opposed to a curatorial one. The exhibition focused on the formal role of portraiture in shaping notions of citizenship, work, leisure and public space.
- 7 When I started researching photographs for the AIF, I was attracted by a 1950s image taken in Al Qaryatayn, East of Homs, on the edge of the Syrian Badia. The photograph, which I attribute to both historian Jibrail Jabbur and Armenian photographer Manoug, shows five women holding jars, including Jabbur's niece Hoda dressed up in a villager's black dress. Unlike the four other women, Hoda couldn't hold the jar on her head because she wasn't used to it; instead, she carried it on her shoulder. For me that element of difference, visible in the image, provided a key to its deconstruction. It presents us with imperfection, giving a hint of the fact that this image might be a *mise en scène*. I used this image in my latest work, *This Day*, where I travel to Al Qaryatayn looking for some of those who figured in this photograph.

This text was written before the events of July 2006.

Akram Zaatar, 'Photographic Documents/Excavation as Art', 2006. This text has its origins in an interview from which extracts were published as 'Fouiller la photographie', in *Territoire Méditerranée*, ed. Cléa Redalié, Anne Laufer and Maurici Farré in collaboration with Sofiane Hadjadj and Selma Hellal (Geneva: Labor et Fides/Paris: Sofédís-Sodis, 2005).