History and photographic memory

Akram Zaatari

(an interview by Elisa Adami)

Abstract. In this interview, artist Akram Zaatari reflects on his longstanding work with photographic heritage in the Middle East, North Africa and the Arab diaspora, and considers the different ways in which he has used photographs to illuminate and unfold historical truths. Charting divergencies and disagreements around issues of preservation that have arisen over the years within the Arab Image Foundation (of which he is one of the founders), Zaatari points out radical gestures of preservation that return photographs to the 'living tissue', the 'larger ecosystem' and a set of affective relations from which they had become detached. The far-ranging metaphor of archaeology that the artist employs to illuminate his practice also lends itself to describe the destructive nature of certain acts of collecting premised on 'excessive accumulation', of which the pillage of the archaeological heritage in the Middle East and North Africa in the late 18th and early 19th centuries is an emblematic example. Collecting, however, is also a tool for writing history and the displacement of photographs serves as a crucial step to reconfigure them within new narratives. Attentive to the changing nature of photographic archives, Zaatari frees photographs from fixed and prescribed readings, bringing new perspectives to bear on them without necessarily denying those former interpretations. Additional layers of historical information can be found nestling in details accidentally captured by the camera's lens, in signs of material damage or 'worthy' defects. In Zaatari's hands, digital technologies are used to emphasize, not to occlude the traces of these material histories. In the folds of the archives, hidden narratives wait to be revealed and unfolded under the loving gaze of the artist, collector and historian.

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Elisa Adami (EA): Your artistic practice is significantly imbricated with your experience as a co-founder of the Arab Image Foundation (hereafter AIF) in 1997. To date, the AIF holds a collection of more than 500,000 photographs from the 19th century to the present, offering an insight into the history of the medium in the Middle East, North Africa and the Arab diaspora, including technological, formal and iconographic changes. You have pointed out, though, how your work with the AIF has shifted from the initial intention of reconstructing the history of photography in the region to the more ambitious project of writing a history of the region *through* photography. Can you tell me in what ways photography, in your work as a film-maker, photographer and curator, contributes to the writing

of this history, and how it serves as a means to chronicle, expand and complicate existing historical narratives?

Akram Zaatari (AZ): I am not sure if writing a region's history through photographs is more ambitious than writing photography's history in a region. I do not believe in such a hierarchy. In both cases, it's a contribution to 'a history'. But the shift you mention has happened, and it's neither an evolution of thought nor a better approach to take while reading photographs. It's simply a different dimension that I'm exploring.

I started my research looking for photographic records that attracted my attention or surprised me, like photo experiments, like cultural phenomena that were depicted in photographs, like a few important personalities caught young in photographs, etc. Photography as an invention was developed as part of a universal renaissance, of which the Middle East was an integral part. Thousands of curious skilled and meticulous photographers enabled the reproduction of manuscripts, of architectural drawings, of archaeological objects and people's portraits. Imagine the impact of such a metier on all aspects of life in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Without them knowing, photographers were agents of change.

I truly believed in researching the details of photographers' practices as they were, themselves, the point of articulation that prompted the dissemination of such a modernizing project. This was the theoretical underpinning behind the launching of the AIF in 1997. And such a proposition gave legitimacy to the research, legitimacy to the whole project as a structure for a foundation to collect and take care of photographs as a resource. But, 20 years later, I found myself looking at the same items I had collected from a totally different perspective. I insist that it's simply another angle through which I was able to re-read them. It does not contradict nor deny former propositions, but complements them, or expands on them.

Why did this happen? I simply changed in those years. Working with a photographic archive puts you in direct contact with its changing nature. Thanks to photo education, to photo history, we are brought up to believe that a photograph fixes a single moment for eternity, and that such a moment stays unchanged, which is partially true because once a moment registers on film, it's there unchanged.

But being in contact with so many phenomena that one tries to make sense of makes you want to research the reasons behind scratches, to make sense of broken parts and try to understand how a photographic item changed since its exposure and why. All of a sudden, you start seeing imperfections, broken parts, peeling emulsion, and all the things that you might have considered once as damage or deterioration, you now see as traces of different layers of history.

They tell you something. So, what I am able to see in a photograph, on one level, is history recorded as the capturing of a moment but, on another level, when you look at the changes in material such as a broken part, for example, all of a sudden another historical narrative comes across, it's history that found its way to an object, and inscribed itself onto it (see Figure 1).

I like to bring up the example of Lisa Steele's video *Birthday Suit, With Scars and Defects* (1974) in which she stands naked in front of her camera for her 27th birthday, pointing at every scar in her body, dating it and telling its story. In this film, Steele doesn't recount her biography. She lets us guess who she is through the scars recorded on her body over 27 years.

EA: Lately, you have expressed discomfort about how the AIF has turned from an experimental 'collecting mechanism' into a more traditional institution of preservation. Yet, the Foundation is not merely a storage space. It continues to operate as a research platform for artists, making its collections available for re-activation within exhibitions, publications and artworks. What do you think are the limitations and potentials of working with institutions?

AZ: The idea behind the AIF is rooted in a strong belief that photographic records assembled through artists' research could serve a larger historical function if made accessible to the public at large. So, the conflict with the institution didn't arise from making those documents public. The different boards of directors that were mostly led by artists prioritized a public database from day one. Consequently, the AIF has made accessible photographic records on its database since 1999 and improved it a few years later thanks to a Getty Conservation Institute grant I applied for, written on behalf of the AIF, and which AIF got. So, it is not new that the AIF wants to make accessible its collection. However, what's new since 2015 is that the AIF board decided to review its policies regarding the use of images and how one can change them digitally in a specified work. Cropping, for example, the use of photographs in illustrating fiction, as another example, and other gestures that weren't tolerated in the past are accepted today. Besides, the internet did not allow us to offer medium resolution images in the early 2000s, so we lived (for too long!) with low-resolution images online. Only now are we able to change that platform and supply the public with usable resolution files. But my ill feelings with the institution were not at all connected with this. On the contrary, I was president of the board when that 2015 decision was taken. I assure you that no one in the Foundation was or is today against putting the AIF collection online.

But there have been tensions with the institution several times in the past 22 years. Putting management issues aside, those tensions always came from territorial attitudes that one needs to resist within oneself. An individual may resist the desire to territoriality, but I doubt institutions can do so easily. In 2010–2011, I proposed to the AIF to offer owners of family collections the

possibility of taking back their collections if they wanted them. In most of the cases with families, a member of a family decided to donate a collection without being exactly the legal owner, sometimes without consulting with the larger family. We've heard news, a few times, that members of the family sometimes objected to a donation after it was too late, after a donation had already happened. The rationale behind my proposition was for the AIF (1) to acknowledge the legal complexity of ownership of family photographs, (2) not to come across as a possessive or greedy institution facing original owners, and (3) to acknowledge that, in order to make accessible digital reproductions, we really would *not* need the originals. But, in addition to all these reasons, I did not believe any more in detaching images from a living tissue for the sake of their preservation. We (at the AIF) have always told families that our interest in originals came from our interest in their conservation. But archaeologists know very well that the ultimate way to conserve archaeology is to keep it buried under earth, which contradicts the very idea of the excavation. Keeping potential finds under earth is working against an archaeologist's natural desire, and to work against it or resist it is already an agency of what I'd call 'second-generation' archaeologists. And because I had always considered the analogy between my practice, looking for photographs, and that of an archaeologist, I wanted to reverse the archaeologist's gesture returning archaeological finds to earth metaphorically, hence my *Time Capsule* project at dOCUMENTA13 (2012, see Figure 2). The *Time Capsule* proposition was a hypothetical one because its implementation would have required an institutional level of 'generosity' that's non-existent:

We (at the AIF) always insisted that we were interested only in originals, because we were interested in preservation. I don't believe in that any more, because I don't see the preservation of photographs as the preservation of material alone. It would be interesting to determine what exactly is essential to preserve. If emotions can be preserved with pictures, then maybe returning a picture to the album from which it was taken, to the bedroom where it was found, to the configuration it once belonged to, would constitute an act of preservation in its most radical form. (Zaatari, 2013: 34)

A few years before, in 2008, I disagreed with the AIF over the application of standard measures of conservation that I found insensitive, or blind to the specificities of the AIF collection; I found they were not suitable for an organization with a collection carefully picked or sampled by artists. For me, conservation as a field of science resolves half of the conservation tasks for an organization. Standard conservation measures are very helpful and maybe crucial to every organization. I am sure they have been tested over years, before they became standard protocols to follow. But before adopting standard measures, an organization is supposed to define its needs, then maybe customize measures or invent new protocols that feed on library science while respecting the particularities of the collection. Unfortunately, the AIF prioritized

space efficiency over integrity of collections. Hence the AIF broke down all the small collections that were sampled by artists, and mixed them up with collections much larger in numbers and sorted everything in the conservation room according to sizes. It meant that a collection of three images of different sizes is stored in three different boxes on three different shelves, as opposed to them figuring together in one box and accessible as a set.

From a distance, one may ask, does it really make any difference? I would say the fact that there were reservations on those measures before they were implemented, and the fact that those reservations were dis-considered or ignored by the AIF, is symptomatic of an attitude that comes out in a conflict. Looking back, in hindsight it looks like the AIF wanted to untie itself from any artistic practice that led to the inclusion of these photographs as part of its collection. For the AIF, provenance has always been the geography and, to a much lesser degree, the type of practice. Although the AIF never denied the role of the few artists who shaped its collection – and has even acknowledged artistic practices as generators of photographic collections in its holding – despite that, it never put those considerations forward to the public in any form and always leaned towards simplifying the presentation of collections in its public interface. This attitude is reflected first in the fields of the database that are public versus the fields that are only administrative. All information on the researcher or the artist who brought the collection was suppressed to the administrative fields not accessible by the public. Second, all supportive non- photographic material such as publications, stories, or even hand-written manuscripts, did not find room in the collection. Such material was forwarded to the library or considered as supportive material detached from collections and, in some situations, lost. Interviews with collectors or photographers, letters or sometimes fax exchanges with collectors or photographers, researchers' address books and so forth, are barely retraceable today. Indeed, there would be ill feelings with the institution when these things happen. And, certainly, there would be ill feelings when researchers asked for digital copies of material they brought to the foundation, 10 or 15 years earlier, to work with and they are only given extremely low-resolution files or told the collection was never reproduced.

The institution that was founded by artists who fed and shaped its collection failed to contain the diversity of those practices, especially when they touched on issues that the AIF considered as its mandate. Those mainly were administration and preservation. But, reflecting back on the whole history of the AIF again, it looks like the institution wanted primarily the photographs: the outcome of research practices by its members, and nothing else. The institution sounded much clearer to the public when described simply as an archive of photographs than an organization where artists collect photographs as samples of different kinds of practices, study them and possibly produce work with them, and where staff members think of photograph preservation along with them in a more interlaced manner and where the whole thing would be available for

present or ‘future’ activations, successively, by other artists or practitioners as well.

AIF invented a mission and a model of operation and governance that I had never encountered before. Partly an artist’s collective, partly a preservation institute. It’s a museum with a collection, but without a space. Its collection of mostly vernacular photography is partly an outcome of an art project, and partly an archive that could serve as material to make several art projects. It is the outcome of research of some, and the primary material for research for others. The AIF was born in this shady area between, on the one hand, art and research practices and, on the other hand, preservation and library science. To what extent would they continue to inhabit the same space? I am not sure. In the first 10 years of the Foundation, I tried my best to encourage others (members or non-members) to lead fieldwork that brought further collections to the AIF. But it did not prove easy. For the founders, mainly me and Fouad Elkoury, the AIF was, before anything else, a collecting engine and a place where knowledge about photography and this part of the world is produced. But, as the membership of the Foundation grew, and with the exception of Negar Azimi, Lara Baladi and Yto Barrada, no one was really interested in expanding the collection. I think artistic practices and research, as programmes at the AIF, were over more than 10 years ago.

EA: The 2017 exhibition at MACBA in Barcelona, which reflected back on the 20-year history of the AIF from your personal perspective, was provocatively titled ‘Against Photography’ (see Figure 3). You have used this proposition on a number of occasions, which I take to stand for the refutation of a particular practice of archival preservation that fixes and crystallizes the meaning of the photographic document, hindering other avenues of use and interpretation. Yet, rather than an outright refusal, it seems to open the door for new possibilities. Can we think of this negation as a necessary step towards the re-invention of the medium? And what new ways of working with photography and the photographic archive can it lead to?

AZ: Throughout the AIF history there were questions that remained unanswered, but were always in the background of discussions. The most provocative ones would be, ‘What is Photography? What do we collect? And what does the term “Arab” refer to in our name?’ Photography for an institution is tied to (1) the members’ understanding of photography and their willingness to consider its expanded notion, and (2) the institution’s capacity to store and offer diverse sets of items. Apart from Walid Raad, members did not see the definition as worthy of discussion. So, the AIF, as a body that included members and staff, was resistant to re-defining photography. And, even if such a re-consideration was to take place on a theoretical level, it was made clear that the conservation programme would remain rigid. It also meant that we, as a group, allowed the preservation programme to dictate what goes into the collection and what does

not. We will find the time to talk about it later but, to answer your question on negation as a necessary step, I would say it's not the negation of photography that's essential but the displacement of the document away from its context, even away from its material composition, and to seek other non-material compositions that relate it to function, economy, or emotion. I got more and more interested in the idea of performance and its relation to photographs; in other terms, I got interested in performing documents.

Somewhere in 2011, I read Yōko Ogawa's novel *The Ring Finger* (2005), first published in Tokyo in 1994, and I was struck by how the plot introduces performative acts as *the* tool to conservation, and how ephemeral acts can be radical acts of conservation. How liberating it is to transcend conserving material, and what a liberty it is to ask oneself about the essences of things to conserve before using a standard conservation manual. Who says a photograph is made of light-sensitive-paper only? 'Against Photography' is the title of a conversation I had with Mark Westmoreland, published in *Aperture* in 2013. It is an invitation to look at the larger ecosystem in which a photograph is produced, diffused, consumed, and thus to look at photography as a set of relationships converging in the object of a photo. Those sets of relationships are not only photographic. The title evokes a confrontation and is indeed a provocative title because it can be misread as a position against iconography. Although it is not so, I believe mis-readings are possible readings too! The term 'against' means 'in opposition to' but also 'in comparison to' and 'in contact with' as well. In 2015, when I was invited by MACBA to work on the history of the AIF through collections and objects, I decided to use the same title.

What you call 'a negation of some archival practices', I would call the refusal to look at photographs from a narrow angle and their consideration as part of a living ecosystem along with films, as well as with other means of communication and social media today. Indeed, I find this step crucial to liberate oneself from the consideration of the archive as a number of assets, from the practice of licensing images, from the consideration of the caption as the DNA of a photograph, and other practices performed daily at a photo archive without any questioning. It is a first step to re-consider the medium in a larger perspective. The title is indeed provocative and that's the nature of

picking suitable titles.

You ask about new ways, but innovation always depends on the creative mind behind any project, behind any decision. There are infinite ways to liberate oneself from the tradition of printing pictures and framing them, or from simply placing a negative sheet into an acid free sleeve. Performing essences of photographs, as preservation, would be the most challenging, I believe.

EA: This is a fascinating way of looking at photographs and their preservation, considering the larger system of relations of which they are a part. Yet any act of collecting and preservation is characterized by a destructive element; it always entails the tearing away of the collected object from its living context, its severance from the historical and social relations in which it was originally embedded and circulated. In reconstructing the social, political, historical, economic and affective context of photographs, it seems to me that your work represents a countervailing strategy to the deracination that is constitutive of the act of collecting. I'm thinking here of your long-term research on studio photographer Hashem El Madani, in which you explored not just his photographic work but also the studio as a social microcosm. How do you navigate this contradiction that is at the heart of collecting as a practice?

AZ: Any detachment of an object from a living tissue would do the same, whether looted or acquired by a collector or someone else. But some people collect abundant 'collectables' such as stamps, coins, art works, etc., capitalizing on the rise of their future value, and that's a kind of harmless speculation. What collectors do here is to bet on something abundant today, a little expensive, but that (they bet) will be rare and valuable tomorrow, especially when presented as a full set and/or whole edition. Many collectors develop an irresistible desire to own more and more of the same thing. They can't stop themselves from acquiring way more than they will be able to enjoy or synthesize in their entire lives. That's what I call excessive accumulation that could happen with both individuals and institutions. If what they collect was rare because its production had been discontinued, or because technology had rendered it obsolete, collectors end up doing damage to the ecosystem around them. Let's call that 'the black hole effect', which is when a dealer or collector or an institution tries to collect every single piece of a certain past production and becomes the only entity that owns a genre or a type of cultural product.

I have always drawn the analogy between the research practices of the Arab Image Foundation and those of archaeologists because they shared the gestures of looking for past objects in hidden places. Members of the AIF travelled in different places and picked the photographs that they saw worth keeping as part of the AIF collection, and that's a kind of 'museum'. I call that period the sampling period, and I am happy we were extremely selective in our choices and that such a practice went on for no more than three or four years between 1998 and 2001.

Back to archaeology. At some point in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, archaeological missions did something similar and subsequently prompted local independent diggers to actively look for archaeological objects to sell to dealers. It was impossible any more to keep archaeological finds buried where they had always been because someone would get to them, dig them out and sell them to a dealer, collector or to a museum directly. Their cultural and material value had

risen so quickly because of the high demand for them and their value had become known to everyone, everywhere. More than a hundred years before excavating and trafficking archaeological finds were regulated, whole cultural heritage moved from poor countries to richer countries, from South to North from colonized to colonizer cultures, all in the name of 'conservation', in the name of 'study', and for the sake of building and consolidating 'the Museum'. What such a practice left in Egypt, Greece, Lebanon, Syria and in so many other countries pre-independence, was devastating!

To sum up, some collecting practices are found to be more destructive than others. I started using this analogy with the AIF practices somewhere in 2004–2005. The analogy is more applicable in the case of family collections than studio archives. It is true that taking a picture out of an album damages a certain tissue, which is a specific narration in itself. Furthermore, taking a picture of a person away from people who love that person also damages a certain tissue in the realm of the affect. But life is capable of doing the same. I have seen many albums with so many missing pictures. I have seen many albums with torn pictures. And I've seen photographs thrown away in the garbage or sold in flea markets after the person who cared for them left. In the case of a photographer's archive, it's different because it's a place that developed no emotional ties to the people photographed. It's a place of work and the archive is an archive of a practice, like printers, like book-binders, like shoe makers, etc. A photographer would never part with an archive until the studio closes, not because the photographer is attached to pictures of people, but because a photographer lives from such an archive. And once an archive ceases to function that way, it needs to be adopted by someone else, traditionally a next of kin, or another younger photographer, otherwise – in most cases – it is destroyed. And, in this case, the AIF may be the best place for it.

EA: When appropriated and inscribed within your work, photographs take on a new meaning through novel juxtapositions with other images and the new context in which they are placed; they enter a sort of second life, and this afterlife changes the very way we look at and understand them. Yet, this process of de- and re-contextualization in your practice is always bound to the historical circumstances of production, circulation and reception of those photographs. What do you think are the limits to the artistic appropriation and use of photographs? In other words, how do you produce new ways of experiencing photographic images without diluting their historical and evidentiary value? And what role, if any, can fiction play in this equation?

AZ: Photographs experience different lives, second, third or more. The moment the referent in a photograph dies, the referent's photograph changes. The moment the photograph moves location, something in it changes. As I wrote for the MACBA exhibition:

A photograph changes upon the vanishing of its referent. The death of a living person represents a threshold in the life of their portrait . . . When the body vanishes, each of its descriptions is recalled to fulfill a new function. A picture hangs, an anecdote is told, a gesture is re-enacted in memory of those who are no longer there. There are so many ways to re-enact significant traits of a description. Each trait would privilege a story over others as if withdrawing the others from description. (Zaatari, 2017: 103)

I agree that it's my documentary interest that brought me to study photographic records and not my interest in fiction. I am not fond of the polarity [documentary vs fiction], and I do not believe in the justice of one over another. I do my work to highlight moments in history. For that, sometimes I need to invent forms, borrow tools, and I understand those could be fiction. Why not if they reveal something in a document that otherwise would have stayed in the dark? In my work, all that I do is in the service of a larger historical' 'truth' which one longs for. I do not appropriate, but re-contextualize. And, there are no formulas to guide one while producing work with photographic records.

EA: In your recent work as a filmmaker and photographer, I've noticed something you mentioned earlier: a shift of attention from the content of the photographic image to its material support and the different layers of information inscribed on it. For instance, in the series of prints 'The Body of Film' (2017, see Figure 4), photographic close-ups of 35mm and sheet-film negatives reveal signs of erosion, erasure and mishandling. This seems to be connected to your mobilization of an archaeological imaginary in relation to the photographic object, particularly your use of the paleontological metaphor of the fossil. Can you tell me how this focus on the *life* of the photograph as a material object contributes to our historical knowledge and understanding of what images can tell us? I'm curious whether you think this interest in the materiality of the photographic object is somehow a reaction to digitalization, which has resulted in the heightened perception of a split between photographic object and photographic image?

AZ: In the framework of this very specific project, the morphology of the AIF collection and its development over time and the lives small collections have had within the AIF were the main focus, more than simply a history, or a chronology. I did not want to address specific contents of images, but rather explore trends, or the in-and-out traffic, i.e. the movement of collections prior to their inclusion in the AIF collection and after it. I wanted to explore the accumulation of collections, their storage, their handling within the AIF, and possible conservation failures. I wanted to explore photographic mistakes and how they inform us about a practice, explore the dying industries that made the fame of photographers, explore material and finally, ageing, through items that will probably outlive all of us. I wanted to evoke all of that, without showing a single original item from the collection, because I did not want to further fetishize

originals. I wanted to go in the opposite direction of the archaeology museum. All that you saw in the exhibition were reconstitutions of photographic phenomena, elaborations of ideas taking shape through 'worthy' defects, if one may say, informative 'accidents', whether found or invented. Some objects were enlarged way larger than their original items, others preserved scale, and many were imported into film. There were four different films in the exhibition. I am not afraid of digitization, on the contrary. Digital processes can be used in so many telling ways. For example, in the series *Against Photography* (see Figure 5), I used a 3D scanner that does not see the image, not the colour only relief to scan the surfaces of negative sheet films that have developed channelling or breaks in emulsion. The results look like topographic maps, which I made traditional prints from. Withdrawing the image, or muting it, was so necessary to divert the viewer's attention away from looking at photographs for what they described. Here, I wanted the viewer to concentrate on the shape of the material and the forms it took due to changes in environmental conditions. Digital processes are tools like any other artists' tools. So, I would say one should use them with a certain focus, with a certain consciousness, and knowing that there is no bible for digitizing. There should not be standard modes of digitization.

EA: In *After the Last Sky*: *Palestinian Lives* (1986), a book-collaboration between Edward Said and photographer Jean Mohr, Said writes: 'exile is a series of portraits without names, without contexts' (p. 12). When watching your film *On Photography*, *Dispossession and Times of Struggle* (2017, see Figure 6), it brought to mind this sentence. The video contains a number of interviews with Palestinians displaced from their homes after 1948, and we see them as they try to attach names to portraits of nameless men and women. In so doing, the film seems to present an image of future return, while at the same time hinting at its impossibility – some names are missing, some contexts are irretrievable, and photographs themselves get lost. Can you talk a bit about how, in your work, the displacement of photographs often reflects the displacement of people?

AZ: Photographs are enfoldings of some sort. They record. They describe a human being, a moment, a situation, etc. It's fascinating that, while looking at pictures in a family album and when you point at a picture, the first thing the owner of photographs does is to ask himself or herself who is it in the picture? The names are rarely written on the back of pictures. In this specific interview with Dr Sami Khoury, I intentionally film him in his home in Amman, writing the names of his friends featured in the photographs before giving them to me to take to Beirut. From there onwards, he would never see them again. Do you imagine such a moment in the life of the pictures? They lived with their original owner without any words written on their backs, and now that he is willing to donate them to an organization in Beirut, probably 60 years after they were produced, he is inscribing the names of those he still remembers on the back of every picture because he knows that his pictures are experiencing their first major displacement, that they will be from then onwards in the hands of

professionals, 'strangers' to his personal history. To answer you, yes, some things get lost and may seem irretrievable to us now, but maybe they would prove retrievable in the future through others, not the initial owners. Furthermore, some elements are captured in a picture by accident, and sometimes it's that accidental capture that makes the picture 'telling'. The displacement of documents from their contexts, reconfiguring them in a different narrative, in a different body, is an essential step in revealing layers of meaning in them. Such displacement could happen through an artwork, a publication or something else, and why not an online platform! In other words, as much as it is important to root the interpretation of photographs in photographs' histories, family, practice, etc., it is also important *not to* chain them to these narratives and always seek new tools, new models that could probably shed further light on the understanding of photographic records outside the situations that produced them. And this cannot happen without digital and online tools, like a platform. I would have loved the AIF's new platform to have addressed the morphology of the collection more rigorously and its history, but I hope this would be further enriched in the future.

EA: Your recent exhibition at the Contemporary Arts Centre in Cincinnati is titled *The Fold – Space, Time and the Image* (see Figure 7). Can you tell me more about this idea of 'the fold' which, I assume, is influenced by Deleuze's reading of Leibniz (Deleuze, 1992[1988]), but also perhaps by film scholar Laura U Marks's (2010) compelling study of the practice of enfoldment, not least given her tracing of visual and philosophical connections between new media art and classical Islamic art? Do you see your role as that of unfolding the layers of historical information contained in the folds of photographic images and objects? This is, incidentally, how Walter Benjamin (2002[1927– 1939]: 205), who was also drawing on Leibniz, describes the figure of the collector: as someone who is uniquely able to unravel the total history that is enfolded in the monad of the single object; an object that for him or her becomes 'an encyclopedia of all knowledge of the epoch'.

AZ: As Deleuze outlines, folding and unfolding are two consecutive and complementary steps feeding one process. How can you not be attentive to folds when you have worked in an archive, when you've worked in a library, when you've experienced any practice of filing or indexing including taking pictures, which is itself an enfoldment of space, and editing films, which is an enfoldment of time. Part of what draws me to folds has to do with structure, and my formation as an architect. Without deconstructing you cannot learn building, and you can't teach it. Without an exploded view of a machine you can't teach users about its inside, you can't show them how to maintain it or inspect it or fix it. So definitely what I am interested in is the ultimate meaning of a photographic record, whether it's being a cultural product, or sometimes a product of an intimate relationship, but also a commercial transaction maybe, an economy, and an object itself that has a weight, that is maybe fragile, but that is

capable of moving us. All these represent a spectre of diverse functions, diverse facets to a photograph, and there is no photographic manual that addresses such a diversity. This is why within my practice I move between models seeking to grasp the multiple facets, or natures, of a photograph. Being a collector helps, but 'collector' is a term that's shared nowadays by so many types of actors and not all of them are driven by study or are after knowledge. This is why I always say I'm a historian, not a collector. Collecting is one of my tools to contribute to history, not an end in itself.

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Akram Zaatari has produced more than 50 films and videos, all sharing an interest in writing histories, pursuing a range of interconnected themes, subjects and practices related to excavation, political resistance, the lives of former militants, the legacy of an exhausted left, the circulation of images in times of war, and the play of tenses inherent to various letters that have been lost, found, buried, discovered, or otherwise delayed in reaching their destinations. Zaatari has played a critical role in developing the formal, intellectual and institutional infrastructure of Beirut's contemporary art scene. As a co-founder of the Arab Image Foundation, he has made invaluable and uncompromising contributions to the wider discourse on preservation and archival practice. Zaatari has represented Lebanon at the Venice Bienniale in 2013 with his film *Letter to a Refusing Pilot*. His work was featured at dOCUMENTA13 in 2012.

Elisa Adami recently completed her PhD at the Royal College of Art in London. Her dissertation focused on radical historiographical practices in the work of Lebanese artists of the postwar generation. She is co-founder and co-director of Mnemoscape, an online publishing platform and network dedicated to contemporary art practices exploring issues of memory, history and the archival impulse. She teaches at Kingston University and has published in *Journal of Visual Culture*, *Third Text*, and regularly in *Art Monthly*.