

PRESS KIT

Akram Zaatari
Against Photography
An Annotated History of the Arab Image Foundation
November 18, 2017 – February 25, 2018
K21 Ständehaus

“To collect photographs is to engage in a process of selective recording, like a second reading, like creative rewriting that is no less photographic than the act of taking images itself.”

Akram Zaatari

Photography and the photographic object are central to the artistic production of the Beirut-based artist, filmmaker, and curator Akram Zaatari (born in Saida, Lebanon in 1966). His internationally acclaimed oeuvre, consisting of video installations, films, and photographic objects, reflects upon and documents the production, circulation, and collecting of images – also in relation to current political upheavals occurring in the Middle East.

Zaatari has pursued this artistic strategy of treating photographs as real objects – and at the same time regarding photography as an overarching theme – since 1995. As a cofounder and principal protagonist of the Arab Image Foundation (AIF), founded in Beirut in 1997, Zaatari directs his attention toward the present moment, albeit with reference to the rich photographic tradition of the Middle East.

The first museum exhibition in Germany devoted to this Lebanese artist, *Akram Zaatari – Against Photography* will be on view at the K21 of the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen from November 18, 2017 until February 25, 2018.

The extensive presentation at the K21 focuses on the multifarious links – highlighted by the timeline displayed on the walls – between Zaatari’s artistic production and the Arab Image Foundation. In this way, the exhibition not only reflects upon the two decades that have passed since the founding of the AIF, but also on the multilayered status of the photograph itself: as a simple object and at the same time an illustrative document, but also as a repository of memory that possesses aesthetic and even material value.

Having grown up during the Lebanese Civil War, Akram Zaatari is among those artists who are interested in history as well as in the “gaps” in its transmission. He compares himself with an archaeologist who “excavates” objects, photographs, letters, diaries, and

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narratives in order to transport the traces of past events into the present, where they acquire new meaning.

With its enormous inventory of studio portraits, passport photos, snapshots, group and street photographs, taken by numerous amateur and professional photographers throughout the Arab world, the AIF is regarded by this artist, in his own words, “not [as] an archive of photographic artefacts, but one of collecting practices, because that is its primary activity.” One outcome of these reflections is the digital film *On Photography People and Modern Times* (2010).

Zaatari: “It was important to understand how local photographers worked, how they evaluated images, what they thought was important to capture in their photographs, and how the photographic enterprise that is the studio functioned.”

The strength and originality of the AIF resides in the critical intersection between archival and artistic practices. By relying on artists as the agents of historical memory, the foundation in a sense propels the archival document into the realm of contemporary art.

For Zaatari, it is in particular the production of the Lebanese photographer Hashem el Madani (1928–2017) and the Armenian-Egyptian photographer Van Leo (1921–2001), who operated an independent studio in Cairo beginning in 1946, which constitute an archaeological excavation site for the social praxis of Arab photography. One series, for example, explores depictions of the automobile, presented in photos “like a member of the family or a piece of furniture” (Zaatari). Another photo series features the cast shadow of the photographer, which is integrated into the motif. Documented cinematically are the “two lives of the photograph”: first, in the hands of the original user, and secondly as a part of the collection of the AIF.

The exhibition’s themes include the character of image documents and the investigation of their material or chemical qualities. At times, photographs display traces of use – even of violence – which testify to their pasts. Parallel to their pictorial presence, this material – whether photo paper or glass negative – narrates a broader history of Arab photography.

A number of new works have been produced especially for the exhibition at the K21, among them light boxes which demonstrate the photographic effects on these images of aging silver emulsion. Zaatari’s latest film thematizes photography, its conservation, and its loss in connection with the AIF collection: *On Photography, Dispossession and Times of Struggle* (2017), which will be seen in Germany for the first time, shows how images of the past merge and coalesce with current artistic production.

Exhibition organized by the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) and the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea (MMCA), in collaboration with Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen.

Curators: Hiuwai Chu and Bartomeu Marí.
Düsseldorf curator: Doris Krystof

Akram Zaatari – Against Photography will be on view in spring of 2018 at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Seoul, Korea (MMCA).

The Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen is funded by Ministerium für Kultur und Wissenschaft des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen.
Media partner: Handelsblatt

Biography

Akram Zaatari lives and works in Beirut. His works are found in numerous international collections, including the Tate Modern in London, MoMA in New York, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, and the Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis.

Solo exhibitions

Kunsthaus Zürich, Videobrasil São Paulo (2016), Moderna Museet, Stockholm (2015), Wiels Contemporary Art Center, Brussels (2014), Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (2013). The artist represented Lebanon at the 55th Venice Biennale, and participated in Documenta 13 (2012).

Publication

Akram Zaatari: Against Photography: An Annotated History of the Arab Image Foundation. With an introduction by Hiuwai Chu and Bartomeu Marí, essays by Mark Westmoreland and Akram Zaatari, a conversation between Chad Elias and Akram Zaatari, as well as selected illustrations of objects from the Arab Image Foundation. Contains a series of new works by the artist; edited jointly by Macba, MMCA, and the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen.

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Exhibition Preview

Carmen Herrera

Lines of Sight

December 02, 2017 – April 08, 2018

K20 Grabbeplatz

The Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen presents the largest exhibition to date devoted to the Cuban-American artist Carmen Herrera, featuring works drawn from a span of 70 years. Herrera is among the pioneers of geometric abstraction in the United States. This wide-ranging presentation includes circa 70 works and involves paintings, works on paper, and sculptures produced between 1947 and 2017. Herrera – who is now 102 years old – was long ignored by the art world: she sold her first picture at the age of 89. Up to the present, this New York-based artist continues to create powerful, eye-catching works.

Carmen Herrera – Lines of Sight was organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. The Düsseldorf venue is organized in a cooperation between the Whitney Museum and the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen.

Maria Hassabi

STAGING: Solo #2

December 09, 2017 – January 21, 2018

K20 Grabbeplatz

The performances of Maria Hassabi (born in 1973) consist of choreographed movements that unfold gradually in space. In her works, which have been presented internationally, she explores the relationship between the body and the image, transforming corporeality into precise movement. Hassabi refers to her compositions as "the paradox of stillness." For the K20, Hassabi has developed a version of the installation *STAGING: Solo*, which was presented at Documenta 14. With this work, the Kunstsammlung opens itself up to an approach that explodes the boundaries between art media.