



AZ, *This Day*, 2003  
video, color, sound, 86min.



AZ, *This Day*  
photo: Blaise Adillon 3



AZ, *Letter to a Refusing Pilot* # 60.1

## AKRAM ZAATARI: THIS DAY AT TEN

by Catherine Somzé

Lebanese artist Akram Zaatari – chosen to represent his country at the last Venice Biennale – is perhaps less known than his compatriots Walid Raad and Rabih Mroué, both artists who have arguably become synonymous with Middle-Eastern contemporary art. This spring, WIELS in Brussels – known for featuring artists whose work is on the verge of international public fame, such as Mike Kelley in 2008 – presents the first survey exhibition of the Lebanese artist in the Low Countries. In a similar fashion to Walid Raad – with whom he, Fouad Elkoury, and Samer Mohdad founded the now-famous Arab Image Foundation (AIF), dedicated to preserving and making accessible an expanding collection of more than 600,000 photographs from the Middle East, North Africa, and the Arab diaspora – Zaatari is as much a visual artist and photographer as he is a performer, filmmaker, and curator. In most of his work, Zaatari uses preexisting archival material, which he reassembles, or the very discovery of which becomes the central feature of a film for instance. Zaatari has been called a visual archeologist, though since he broke his ties with the AIF he has started to stage the entombment rather than the disclosure of texts, images, and other documents that speak to a collective unconscious drenched in memories of war, exile, and segregation. In *Time Capsule* (2012) for Documenta 13, Zaatari buries copies of photographs from the AIF archive in a concrete box, a radical practice that was used by the Beirut National Museum in order to preserve historical artifacts from the destruction brought on by the civil war. In most of Zaatari's work, the involvement of the artist and the constructed nature of images and objects are made clearly visible. Photographs and artifacts might be gateways to a past otherwise unreachable, but they are not neutral. Just like an object with special emotional value, memories are wonderfully distorted entities that need to be cherished for their very imperfection, Zaatari seems to tell us. In his work, one feels the child-like awe and excitement he might actually have felt coming of age during the Lebanese civil war. The work appears to be an obsessive attempt at getting to grips with the unbridgeable gap that exists between the experience of actual violence and its afterlife in mental images, traumatic symptoms, and other problematic traces.



Zaataran-saida  
June 6th 1982, 2003  
video, colour, sound, 4,30min



Saida Public Secondary School for Boys, late 1950's  
photo: Hashem el-Madani (c) Arab Image Foundation