

Lebanon's history with the Venice Biennale has been rocky, much like the country's own past. It first participated with a national Pavilion in 2007 with *Foreword*, curated by Saleh Barakat, Sandra Dagher and Vittorio Urbani and featuring artists Fouad Elkoury, Lamia Joreige,

Walid Sadek, Mounira Al-Solh and Akram Zaatari – the latter returns to the biennale this year for a specially commissioned solo show, curated by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath. The country's 2013 participation marks its sophomore return after the national Pavilion was cancelled in 2011 due to lack of funding and political instability and after skipping the 2009 edition. After months of research into their curatorial theme and artist selection, Fellrath and Bardaouil chose Zaatari, whom they had previously worked with in 2010 for *Told/Untold/Retold*, the groundbreaking group show at Doha's Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art.

"The Venice project builds on Akram's previous work, including *This Day At Ten* from 2012" explains Bardaouil. "It transcends the locality of Lebanon and is a construction of a historical



LEBANON

Letter To A Refusing Pilot



“Akram is one of those artists that never left Lebanon, so his selection to represent his country at Venice sends a signal of encouragement and inspiration to other artists to continue to strive for international recognition.” *Till Fellrath*

narrative. It's a comprehensive installation and an evolution of what he's done in the past; at the same time, it's a new departure in his artistic trajectory. It's very strong, and audiences both in Venice and internationally will relate." A multimedia installation, *Letter To A Refusing Pilot*, occupies 350 square metres in the Arsenale – prominently positioned as the first national Pavilion adjacent to the artistic director's exhibition – and according to the curatorial statement, is "conceived as a theatre of limitless possibilities [...] where strangers from different worlds find themselves on stage face-to-face." The statement continues: "Most fascinating about the project is how it oscillates between reality and myth, weaving elements of autobiography and collective memory, of rumour and historical fact." The title is a reference to Albert Camus's *Letter to a German Friend*, from which Zaatari extracts and examines the author's "I should like to be able to love my country, and still love justice" plea.

Not only is this Pavilion eagerly anticipated after Lebanon's long absence from the Venice Biennale, it also coincides with the country's 70th anniversary of independence in November. "Akram is one of those artists that never left Lebanon, so his selection to represent his country at Venice sends a signal of encouragement and inspiration to other artists to continue to strive for international recognition," says Fellrath. "A solo presentation with work by someone like Akram, who has a certain experience, makes a strong statement for the arts in Lebanon and hopefully will inspire future generations of artists."

Commissioners the Association for the Promotion & Exhibition of the Arts in Lebanon (APEAL) have taken on the often-difficult task of fund-

raising for the Venice project. "The country may be in shambles, but the people behind APEAL feel it is very important to overcome those challenges and create a platform to promote art," says Fellrath. "The organisation's president Rita Nammour has been particularly instrumental in reaching out to donors, and she has created an environment that allows us and the artist a completely independent Pavilion, where there is no intervention from the government or anyone else. It's quite phenomenal and unique to this region."

Nammour says the Pavilion's location this year will boost Lebanon's profile. "This will represent [Lebanon] the best way it can be represented and we hope it will get the attention it deserves," she says, explaining that the presentation will have a universal appeal. "Everybody can find themselves in the subject that Akram, Sam and Till are tackling." As Lebanon takes part in the world's oldest biennial in the world for a second time, talk of a permanent Pavilion has inevitably come to a head. "I hope there will be one," says Nammour, "but this is the job of the Ministry of Culture. We, as APEAL, help with all the means we have, but it is for them to make this decision – and I really hope they will." 



ARTIST: Akram Zaatari
COMMISSIONER: Association for the Promotion and Exhibition of the Arts in Lebanon (APEAL)
CURATORS: Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath
THEME: *Letter to a Refusing Pilot*
LOCATION: Pavilion at Arsenale

Facing page:
 Clockwise from left:
 Akram Zaatari. Image courtesy APEAL;
 Curators Till Fellrath and Sam Bardaouil. Image courtesy Art Reoriented, Munich/New York. © Heidi Gutman Photography, New York; Akram Zaatari. *This Day at Ten*. 2012. Exhibition view at Magasin, Grenoble. Photography by Blaise Adilon. Image courtesy Art Reoriented, Munich/New York.