



The Association for the Promotion and Exhibition of the Arts in Lebanon (APEAL) presents a major new work by the artist Akram Zaatari, titled *Letter to a Refusing Pilot*, in the Pavilion of Lebanon for the 55th International Art Exhibition, La Biennale di Venezia. This is only the second time Lebanon has organized a national pavilion in the history of the event, which is the world's oldest and most prestigious exhibition of its kind, and the first time the country has been represented by the work of single, groundbreaking artist.

Curated by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath the exhibition creates a dialogue between two works, a new 35-minute video and a looping 16mm film, and is set within an immersive environment conceived as a stage awaiting an actor, or a cinema awaiting a spectator. Situated in a high-profile location in the Arsenale, *Letter to a Refusing Pilot* marks the debut of Zaatari's most aesthetically ambitious and politically nuanced project to date.

Weaving new footage into five decades' worth of archival material, including photographs from the studio of Hashem El Madani alongside snapshots from family albums and images Zaatari made in his youth, the installation presents a non-linear narrative that blurs the boundaries between an elusive past and the tangible present. *Letter to a Refusing Pilot* combines elements of civic architecture, small-town gossip, the archeology of memory, family history, the politics of fear, the grace of flight, and the punishing realities of war. As never before in a single work, Zaatari has pulled together all of the disparate interests he has been pursuing in his practice consistently but separately for the past twenty years.

Delving into the story of an Israeli fighter pilot who refused to bomb a school in South Lebanon, the installation raises a number of difficult yet trenchant questions about heroism, nationalism, and integrity in relation to the Arab-Israeli conflict, which has confounded artists in the region (and beyond) for generations. Zaatari's great sensitivity to form and everyday poetry, combined with the uncompromising rigor of his ideas and arguments, takes *Letter to a Refusing Pilot* far beyond the usual polemics of what is perhaps the most intractable political impasse on earth, and gets to the heart of how one behaves when confronted with starkest of choices.

About the work

In the summer of 1982, a rumor made the rounds of a small city in South Lebanon, which was under Israeli occupation at the time. It was said that a fighter pilot in the Israeli air force had been ordered to bomb a target on the outskirts of Saida, but knowing the building was a school, he refused to destroy it. Instead of carrying out his commanders' orders, the pilot veered off course and dropped his bombs in the sea. It was said that he knew the school because he had been a student there, because his family had lived in the city for generations, because he was born into Saida's Jewish community before it disappeared.

As a boy, Akram Zaatari grew up hearing ever more elaborate versions of this story, for his father had been the director of the school for twenty years. In many ways, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon had been the backdrop to his education as an artist, as he began documenting the world around him by photographing explosions and recording the sounds of fighter jets. Decades later, during a public conversation with the Israeli filmmaker Avi Mograbi, Zaatari retold the pilot's story in his own words, turning it into a fable and perhaps a truthful fiction. Then, after the transcript of the talk was published in a book, Zaatari discovered it wasn't a rumor. The pilot was real.

Born and raised on a kibbutz, Hagai Tamir had never set foot in South Lebanon, but like Zaatari he had studied architecture, and he knew a schoolhouse (or hospital) when he saw one. His refusal to bomb the building had remained a secret, known only among small circles, for twenty years, until the day came when he found it useful to speak. That was ten years ago in Israel. Now, across a border still defined by a state of war, Zaatari has picked up the other side of an impossible correspondence.

Letter to a Refusing Pilot reflects on the many complexities, ambiguities and consequences of refusal as a decisive and generative act. Taking as its title a nod to Albert Camus' four-part epistolary essay

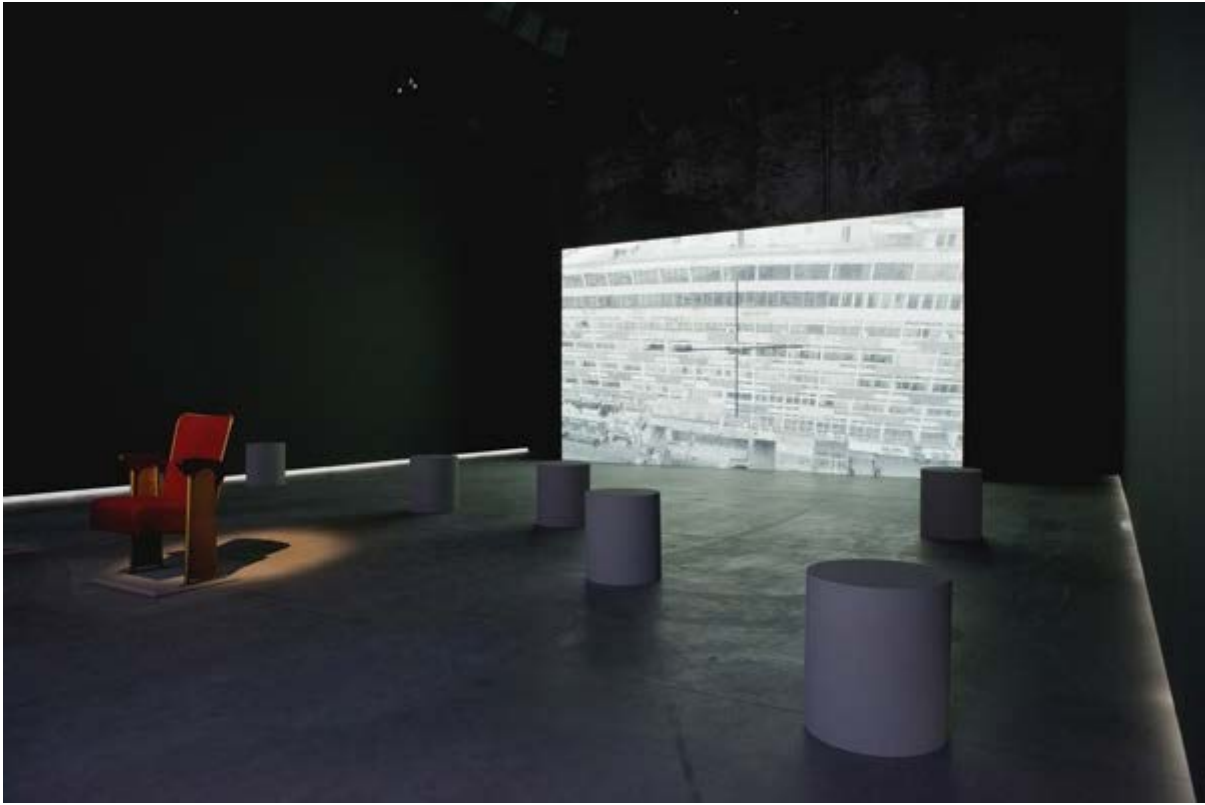
“Letters to a German Friend,” the work not only extends Zaatari’s interest in excavated narratives and the circulation of images in times of war, it also raises crucial questions about national representation and perpetual crisis by reviving Camus’s plea: “I should like to be able to love my country and still love justice.”

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Photos by Marco Milan

