

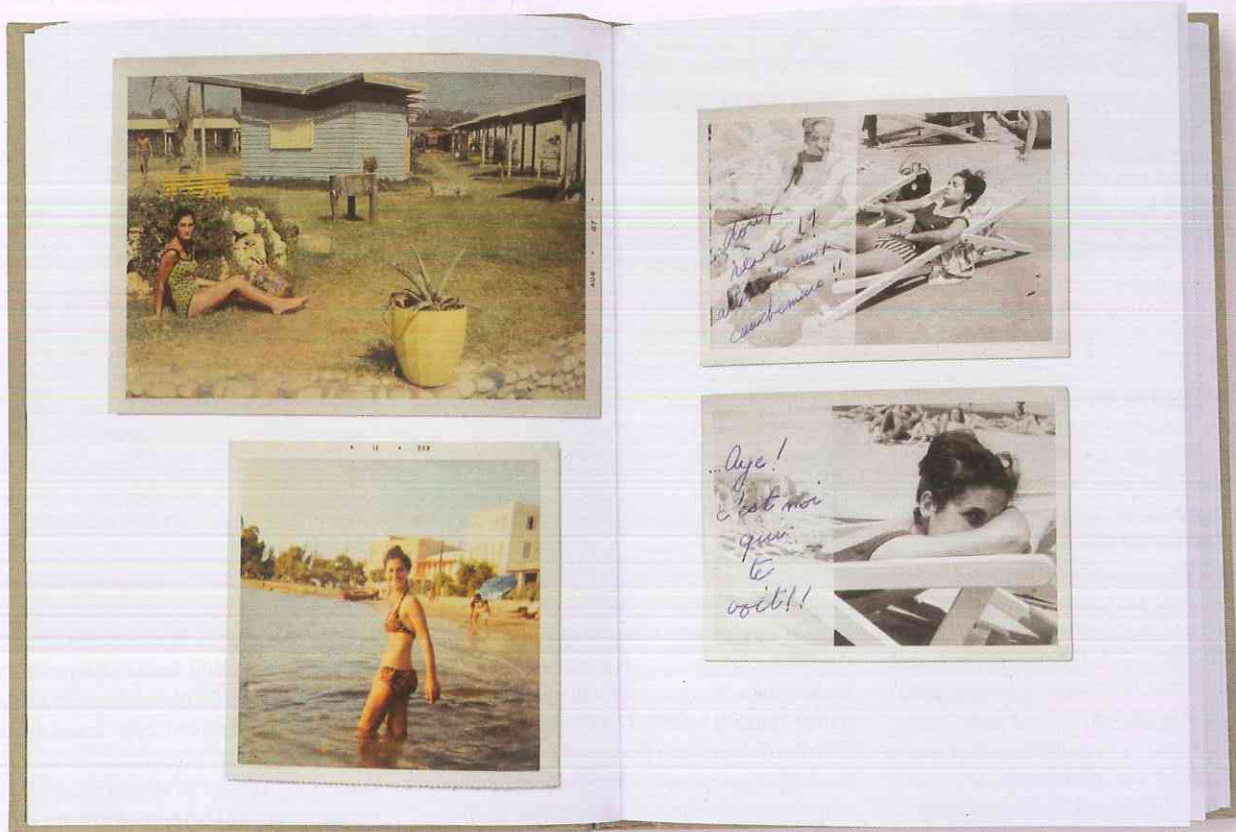
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True Lies

BY KEVIN JONES

Considering fiction and the photographic archive in the work of Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh and Rozenn Quéré



YASMINE EID-SABBAGH and ROZENN QUÉRÉ, *Possible and Imaginary Lives* (detail), 2012, book: 23.5 x 16.5 cm, 162 pages. Courtesy the artists.

“The Middle East is a fiction,” declared Lebanese artist Khalil Joreige at a recent talk at the Singapore Art Museum, and a palpable confusion gripped the room. The audience was bewildered by how the provenance of one of the region’s most prolific practitioners could be seen as concocted, a chimera. Fiction, in the hands of Joreige and other artists of his fact-bending ilk, is a strategy that serves to create narratives that muddy the waters of truth, questioning what we accept as real. The (dubious) archive is a hallmark of these tricky artists. Joreige and partner Joana Hadjithomas invented the photographer Abdallah Farah and his stash of latent images for “Wonder Beirut” (1997–2006), while the fictional Atlas Group, created by Walid Raad, is the wellspring of a slew of spurious documents about Lebanon’s history, particularly its 15-year war.

For some Middle Eastern artists, the archive-as-scrapbook allows a resuscitated (and often politically charged) past to be

showcased in the present. In his 2012 book *Conversation with an Imagined Israeli Filmmaker Named Avi Mograbi*, Lebanese artist Akram Zaatari revisits a childhood encounter (whether real or not is left unclear) when, from the balcony of his parents’ home, he exchanged glances with an Israeli tank operator during the 1982 occupation of Saida. Zaatari unearths family snapshots from his own past and that of the “invented” Mograbi (the tank operator of yore who is, in fact, a real filmmaker), mixing them with outtakes from Israeli missile-mounted transmission cameras. Such “authentic” documents serve to frame this imaginary dialogue in the purported irrefutability of photo-album reality.

“Possible and Imaginary Lives,” an exhibition-cum-photobook by Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh and Rozenn Quéré that won the 2013 Discovery Award at the Rencontres d’Arles photography festival, is the slipperier heir to this legacy of counterfeit reality. The artists met at Paris’ Louis-Lumière film/

photography school in 2002, remaining close afterward. Smitten by the rambling lives of Eid-Sabbagh’s four spirited, iconoclastic Palestinian-Lebanese aunts, they submitted a proposal in 2011 for an installation mingling documentary, biography, fiction and drama to the Festival Images in Vevey, Switzerland. Having secured the photography award, they set about mounting the installation, but were quickly confronted by issues of form: a photobook, they agreed, was the optimal vehicle to showcase their multilayered intentions. Realized in 2012 by a small Arles-based publisher, the book is seconded by an exhibit that changes form with each iteration.

“Possible and Imaginary Lives” is structured like a play, with passages of dialogue unfolding alongside a stream of accompanying images. The Palestinian-Lebanese diaspora is the backdrop for a family tale that shifts subtly between real and imagined—a tale “supported” by outtakes from the family photo archive,



YASMINE EID-SABBAGH and ROZENN QUÉRÉ, *Untitled*, from the series "Possible and Imaginary Lives," 2012, archival photograph. Courtesy the artists.

which are corrupted as part of the fictional enterprise. The four aunts are the stars of the narrative: the twins Graziella and Stella, Jocelyne the eldest and Freida the youngest. If exile is the spark of their story (they have fled post-Nakba Ramallah), absence is its fuel (they scatter across continents). The opening pages plant us firmly in the realm of drama: a cast list includes not only the sisters but Margaret Thatcher and God, while an epigraph from playwright Joël Pommerat quips that "life is fiction." The scenes that follow amplify what Eid-Sabbagh describes as her aunts' "particular" relationship to reality: their life stories become dreamed existences, an illusionary cascade of what-might-have-beens. Much like the lies told by children, the fantasies leave the reader in limbo, the lines blurred between lived and longed for.

The text is evacuated of any trustworthy anchors; the family photos, normally stalwarts of veracity, offer little solace. A recurring manipulation reinforces the feeling of fragmentation and absence: Jocelyne (who, in reality, died just before the project began) becomes transparent in the snapshots, a phantom from some reactivated past. Everything is suspect: archival images shed their "documentary" role to conspire with the text to create a narrative that is only nominally tethered to an accepted reality.

Images themselves become characters in the plot. Raising the curtain on the reality-tampering performed by the two artist-authors, one passage spotlights an agitated Freida with her own aunt as they sift through old wedding photos. The snapshot on the facing page, marked with some external hand's red "X," is seemingly the same that incites Freida's ire. She warns that the snap is an invented memory: "What you see in this photo did not exist." Photos lie, she concludes. It is an oddly self-referential

moment, in which the artists subtly allude to their own visual subterfuge.

"Possible and Imaginary Lives" subverts found imagery in the service of a semifictional narrative, yet its lineage lies in a far more documentary pursuit. From 2005 to 2011, Eid-Sabbagh researched collections of family photos in the Burj al-Shamali refugee camp in Southern Lebanon. A hermetic, conservative environment where life is staunchly syncopated by an image-wary culture, Burj al-Shamali hardly springs to mind as a compliant site for mining personal photos. And yet Eid-Sabbagh came across some willing "keepers of memories," who had committed to film the lives of their families and communities, and, more broadly, the plight of post-1948 Palestinians. She set about "collecting collections," constituting a digital archive.

As Eid-Sabbagh slowly established trust with residents, her work unearthed not only a wealth of visual documentation, but intriguing questions about the uses of such images. In the camp's private interiors, the martyr portrait habitually reigns supreme, yet one resident, Hesna Abou Kharoub, had lined her walls with a coherent and comprehensive collection of framed shots of herself and others, alive or dead—a constellation of remembered moments decidedly out of sync with prevailing norms. She seemed to transgress social expectations by this willingness to show her own image (sometimes unveiled), and to have the images seen by others. Issues of ownership, whether by the photographer or subject, have plagued image production since its inception, and were intensified in Burj al-Shamali by pressures of gender division and public exposure.

Kamal Musherfieh, another camp resident, entrusted Eid-Sabbagh with an image of his wife, young and unveiled, with cascades of black hair framing her face.

Eid-Sabbagh was instructed never to show the photo in the camp or even in Lebanon, but display it abroad alongside photos he had already conceded to Eid-Sabbagh's archive showing the same woman horribly disfigured after a 1982 Israeli napalm attack, of which she was the sole survivor. Musherfieh's political motivation surpassed his own conviction not to "release" images of his wife without a headscarf.

Like the process of creating "Possible and Imaginary Lives," the work in Burj al-Shamali consisted of interviewing, recording, sifting and selecting. But in the latter, no particular outcome seemed planned from the start. The resulting digital archive is treacherous because it made "invisible" Palestinians visible, but also somehow vulnerable: it is as much a repository of family memories as images. Eid-Sabbagh continues to bear the heavy responsibility of possessing such a shadowy archive while reflecting on its final form, and there is cause to wonder if Eid-Sabbagh and Quéré teamed up to channel the weight of the al-Shamali work into something freer, less politicized—a fictive family yarn with a set beginning, middle and end.

Accessing the sisters' photo archives was certainly easier than tapping into the Burj al-Shamali residents' visual stockpiles, but Eid-Sabbagh and Quéré's personal connection to these images problematizes "Possible and Imaginary Lives." Photo albums often contain what photographer Martin Parr calls "family propaganda"—the oh-so-perfect edit of life, all smiles and sunny days. "Possible and Imaginary Lives" is such an exercise: it knowingly keeps the sisters' memories for them, inserting them in a new, sprawling narrative. The fiction functions like some kind of wish fulfillment for the siblings: here are the dreams they craved, activated and materialized. If constituting the digital archive in Burj al-Shamali implied unraveling individual storylines—removing an image from its context to situate it in the inventory—"Possible and Imaginary Lives" does exactly the opposite: here, theater trumps archaeology.

At the 2010 "Speak, Memory" symposium at Cairo's Townhouse Gallery, Eid-Sabbagh, presenting excerpts of the Burj al-Shamali archive, admitted that "the images want to be seen from the outside, but maybe don't want to be shown from the inside." Being remembered, it would seem, is a precarious prospect: camp residents were perhaps reluctant to relinquish images to a shapeless archive, uncertain how they would "live on." For the heroines of "Possible and Imaginary Lives," their remembrance will forever be tinged with illusion. Ultimately, though, the fantasy in the document becomes a sort of document itself. Relying on the past as "proof" is a hollow undertaking. "Possible and Imaginary Lives" is in the realm of the true lie, whose interest resides less in its faithfulness to the past than its potential in the future.