

Essays

An Archive of Refusal

On Shuruq Harb's *The Keeper*

Fawz Kabra

I am not going to argue for the writing of Derrida,[1] Foucault,[2] Benjamin,[3] or Sekula.[4] Instead, I am going to discuss Mustafa,[5] that 'young image entrepreneur, who collected photographs online, to be printed for sale on the streets of Ramallah.'[6] I will discuss Shuruq Harb, who stumbled upon and exposed Mustafa's images and reframed the collection as an archive of seemingly ordinary events and adapted it into a monument of significance. *The Keeper* (2011) is a project that is the consequence of a series of encounters between Mustafa and Harb that resulted in the reformatting of the material Harb collected from this Ramallah-based image vendor as archive.



Shuruq Harb, *The Keeper: A Photo Story by Shuruq Harb*, 2011, book.
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Since 2011, Harb has shown *The Keeper* as a performance-lecture, a book, a video and a sculptural installation in a gallery setting. *The Keeper* contains over 2,000 printed images, sweeping from celebrity headshots, to propaganda, to kitschy, that were originally part of Mustafa's larger collection. These 2,000 are the leftovers of his ten-year profession.[7] Mustafa passed on his remaining stock to Harb who, on several occasions, had tried to make contact with the image vendor. She finally succeeded in having him meet her for a coffee and an interview that provided the backstory to this collection. The artwork is an attempt for Harb to make sense of, and articulate in different contexts, the numerous personalities she is now the caretaker of. As display,[8] the images lay face-up, with bright lights illuminating down on them in the familiar empty space of the whitewall gallery. They are presented in stacks, preserved as artefacts, by the protective architecture of the alcoves that have been carved out of the tables purpose-built to present them. This allows each stack to fit inside its storage space while remaining accessible for viewers to handle and sift through the images.

Still, *The Keeper* is not merely a showcase of images. It also presents a particular alternative sub-history, while translating and re-contextualizing it within the contemporary transnational language of the globalized art world as an artwork. *The Keeper* takes on both the aesthetic and language of the archive, while deploying the methods of how records are institutionally presented, consisting of images, text, and print. Each individual image, here, seems disconnected from its event. However, reading *The Keeper* as a system of text, images and first-hand accounts, tells us about the motivations of how and why the images were collected. It also references larger historical events through the commerce of seeking-out, selling and buying celebrity.

The pictures include images of the iconic 'Muhannad', the Turkish soap-opera heartthrob, made famous in the Middle East by his leading role in the Turkish television series *Noor*, Hollywood actors such as Leonardo DiCaprio, Brazilian football stars Ronaldo and Ronaldinho, various local politicians, militants, and martyrs – 'only the popular ones', according to Mustafa. Those in demand included Ahmad Yassin, Abdel Aziz al-Rantissi, Yasser Arafat, and Yahya Ayyash. In the mix are sultry images from the world of Lebanese pop-culture: Nancy Ajram, Haifa Wehbe, and Ragheb Alama. There are also the aspiring musicians that starred in 'Star Academy' like Tamer Hosny and Rayan Eid. The taxonomy of iconic (and not so iconic) faces and figures showcase what the Middle East's – specifically Ramallah's – stock of popular culture from a particular period looks like. This stock is also reveals the trauma within which these images were reprinted. Of course, these are not immediately horrific images, as they mainly depict beguiling sirens, super-athletes, and smiling men with guns, amongst others. However, their extended narrative – that, which surfaces outside the frame of the image – points to events of violence. The pictures of long-gone Palestinian martyrs are purchased as homage, yet their image is a product of loss and destruction. Their presence amongst additions

of famous musicians and soap opera actors complicates meanings of celebrity and popular culture. Images that stand for a tragedy are conflated with stardom, merging into a mass of a single, saturated fantasy, and within the collection of 2,000, they become interchangeable. These particularities are made prominent by the network of image, video, and text, a relationship the artwork sets up between these disparate records.



Shuruq Harb, *The Keeper: A Photo Story by Shuruq Harb*, 2011, book.
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Therefore, Harb's archive is a phenomenon resulting from a sequence of social instances: Mustafa's sourcing of each image depends on his interest and that of his customers; the developments, successes, and disappointments in regional politics; the celebrity of a particular martyr, president, or Hollywood starlet; the digital embellishment of each picture, its duplication, and ultimate sale. *The Keeper* is a physical display of the parallels drawn between these social instances and the consequent archive. Therefore, social exchanges, experiences, and memory are elements that are inscribed into the archive, framing its assembled history through the particularities of the 2,000 leftover images Harb collected, which are testament to Mustafa's previous profession.



Shuruq Harb, *The Keeper: A Photo Story* by Shuruq Harb, 2011, book.

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The transcribed interview between Mustafa and Harb, makes up an important portion of the book, *The Keeper: A Photo Story* by Shuruq Harb (2011). It acts as a primary source of information when it comes to the installation and contextualizes the images and Harb's framing of this history via her own art practice. In the discussion, Mustafa explains how he entered into the profession, why he chose to leave it, and through his innocent anecdotes, reveals the complexities of internal Palestinian politics. Mustafa explains to Harb how he got himself into trouble for selling Hamas photos, noting:

I started hiding [from the Intelligence] the Hamas photos, because they would get me in trouble. But I told them I had to be fair, and that I sell photos of Fateh, Hamas, The Communist Party, Hezbollah, as well as others.[9]

He explains how the high-demand for political photographs came during times of war. Images of Saddam Hussein amongst other regional politicians were printed along with those of popular

Palestinian martyrs. This popularity, however, dwindled in 2008. But before then, it was the *Al-Aqsa* martyrs that were the most sought-after, according to Mustafa.[10] These images, now preserved by Harb, recall the violence, wars, and political feuds Mustafa remembers in his interview. In this, what can be accessed in *The Keeper* is the reading of an archive generated from sub-narratives within a larger history, produced through and from a social network that grew out of those very narratives.



Shuruq Harb, *The Keeper: A Photo Story* by Shuruq Harb, 2011, book.

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The social fabric is already – and continues to be – intertwined with this archive. The movie posters, head-shots, pin-up quasi-erotica, digital collages that mingle with political portraits, party signage and propaganda, mirror the realities of celebrity and its culture during the years in which Mustafa was active in Ramallah. As the new proprietor, Harb has re-appropriated these images once ripped off the Internet and printed for sale, in order to explore this unexpected network as art form and archive. In so doing, Harb constructs an archive that appears to be making an attempt at formulating

classifications of popular culture – an archive that is reinterpreting a particular kind of history through its reorganizing and repurposing.



Shuruq Harb, *The Keeper: A Photo Story* by Shuruq Harb, 2011, book.
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Adding to this is the reader (or viewer), who brings their own understanding and associations to the images – some of which are recognizable for what they depict, the time they represent, or their aesthetic composition. This transaction is part of the social network that is produced around the archive and which the archive in turn reflects. The reader expands on the subtleties and complexities at the core of the archive's production due to the values and meanings they introduce during their interaction with its documents. In this, *The Keeper* as an archive becomes a monument to these varying social relations.

On documents, image archives, and their monumentalization within artworks, Okwui Enwezor writes:

The issue grappled with here is not so much the artist's employment of archival logic, but, rather, the artist's relationship to images or instruments of mass culture or media in which the archival is sought out – especially in the digital arena – as part of a broad culture of sampling, sharing, and recombining of visual data in infinite calibrations of users and receivers. We are fundamentally concerned with the overlay of the iconographic, taxonomical, indexical, typological, and archaeological means by which artists derive and generate new historical as well as analytical readings of the archive.[11]

In thinking about the artist's hand in producing this particular archive, *The Keeper* lends a muted voice to Mustafa's past profession, and attempts to locate awareness and a certain sensibility to grasping the thousands of images that were printed and sold. This frames the transactions of selling and purchasing on the streets of Ramallah, and introduces a particular aesthetic and history, also suggesting what the youth of Ramallah – Mustafa's main clients – considered significant (whether trendy pop, spiritual, or political). That Mustafa ceased selling his images due to his own growing religious morals, as well as the eventual decline in demand for these images is but one more aspect to this archive's story. This is an archive made out of the leftovers – documents made redundant by social consequence. It is an archive of refusals.

[1] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. by Eric Prenowitz, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996.

- [2] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1972.
- [3] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968.
- [4] Allan Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive' in *October*, Winter 1986.
- [5] The name Mustafa is the alias given to the protagonist of *The Keeper* by the artist, Shuruq Harb.
- [6] Shuruq Harb, *The Keeper: A Photo Story by Shuruq Harb*, Arab Fund for Arts and Culture, 2011.
- [7] Mustafa took charge of the business – originally started by his brothers – in 2004 after moving from Jerusalem to Ramallah, and through chance and the artist's curiosity the collection was finally handed over to Harb.
- [8] *The Keeper* was recently shown as a gallery installation with images displayed on specially designed tables, a video, and book at Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, September 30 - October 25, 2013.
- [9] Ibid.
- [10] Ibid.
- [11] Okwui Enwezor, 'Archive Fever: Photography Between History and the Monument', in *Archive fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, New York, N.Y.: International Center of Photography, 2008, 23.

About the author

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Fawz Kabra is a writer and curator currently based in New York. She completed her MA at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College (2013), and received her BFA in Studio Arts at Concordia University in Montreal (2004). She has worked with the Emirates

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