

Interview

Conserving Memories

A conversation
between Zeina Arida
and Laura Allsop

Laura Allsop: My first question is: how did the foundation come into being? It's been going now since 1997?

Zeina Arida: Yes, we've just entered our 16th year and the more time that passes, the more difficult it is to sustain. Now I really feel that every year is an achievement. But the project evolved from an initial idea that Samer Mohdad and Fouad El Khoury had in discussion with Akram [Zaatari]. They were in contact with museums and photographers in Europe at the time. It became clear to them that in Europe, photography from the Middle East was understood

*Mazen el Kheiry,
Ramla, Palestine,
1942, Anonymous
photographer, Collection
AIF / Mahmoud. © Arab
Image Foundation.*

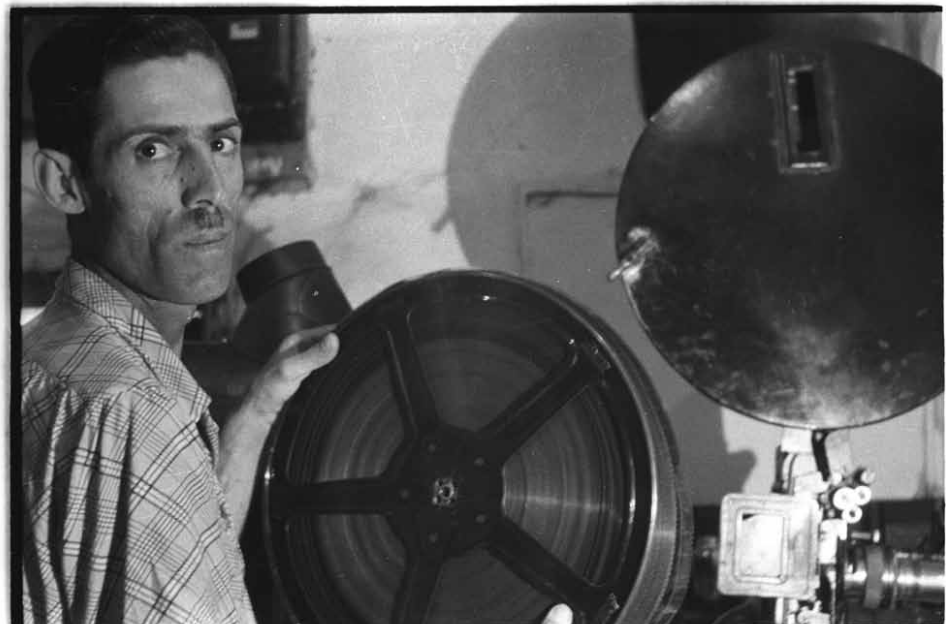


through the works of «Orientalist» western travellers in the region. So the idea evolved from a desire to challenge this cliché, and to show that there was more to photography from the Middle East than only the works of early pioneer photographers.

Samer, Fouad and Akram became interested in the idea of collecting photographs no one perceived as important at the time. Being photographers themselves, and working in and on the Middle East, they were keen to become more familiar with their own visual culture. They wanted to understand how photographers in days gone by would learn their practice, and what their influences were. As such, they decided to set up a non-profit, with the aim of each inviting two friends or colleagues to become members of the organisation.

I met with the three of them in the summer of 1997 when they had already set up the foundation as a non-profit and applied for a substantial grant from the European Commission. It was a huge grant for an organisation still very much in its infancy. At this point it became clear that the foundation was still more just an idea in need of a lot of development. However, Akram was going to Canada for a six-month residency, Fouad was living in Paris and Samer in Switzerland. It was then that I met with them and became a member. Akram brought in Moukhtar Kocache and Walid Raad. Fouad brought in Yto Barrada and Jellel Gastelli, a Tunisian photographer. Samer brought in members who didn't stay so long (Elie Khalifé and Nadia Benchallal) and then others came, including Lara Baladi, Karl Bassil, Negar Azimi, and Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh, who are still involved.

*Muhammad el Sakka
at Cinema Empire,
Hashem el Madani
Studio Shehrazade,
Collection AIF /
Madani. © Arab Image
Foundation.*



I had to set up a structure and a framework for them to start researching and acquiring photos. The first grant we obtained covered this research, in addition to documenting photographic practices and photographers. The foundation's members travelled for a year. Most of the research was carried out by Akram and Fouad, who travelled sometimes together, sometimes alone, across Egypt, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. After a year, we had gathered 15,000-20,000 images. The foundation's members had many useful connections to help us

network and gain support. I've always said that this apparent focus on the Middle East is not a recent phenomenon, because when we started there was already a lot of interest in the Middle East. However, with regards to photography, there was very little activity. In Beirut there were very few cultural institutions and initiatives such as ours in the private sector. Thanks to the connections of our members, we had opportunities to hold exhibitions. Our first exhibition opened one year after the establishment of the foundation at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris. Our first two publications were with Actes Sud.

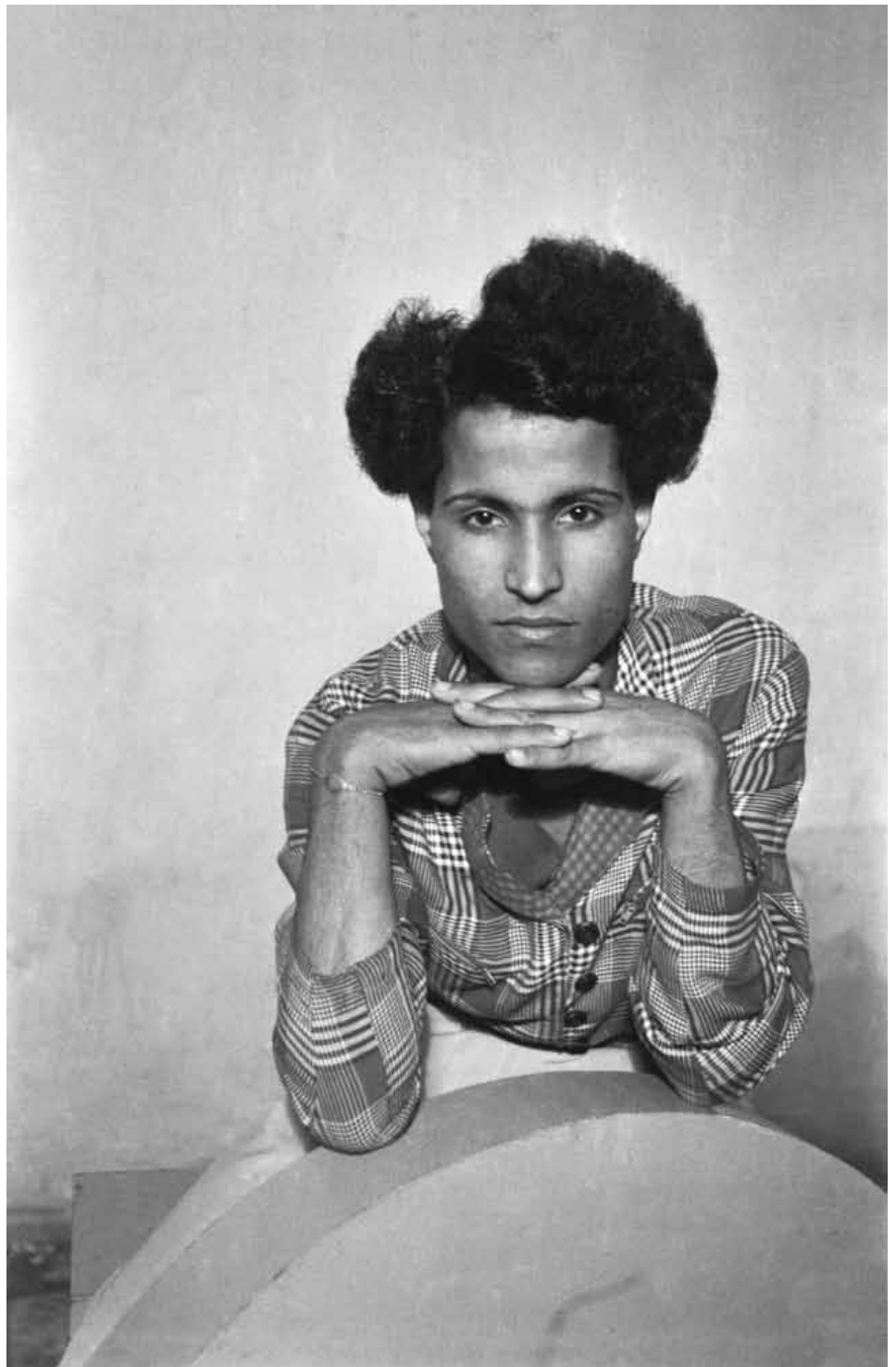
The foundation attracted a lot of interest right from the beginning. I soon became completely amazed by the fact that Akram, Fouad and Samer could do a joint venture, because they were so different. I believe this was the strength of the foundation. We never had a singular vision; rather, we were a group of individuals who each had a different idea of what it might mean to collect, and who each had a different relationship with photography. This is evident in each artist's work. Even between Akram and Walid, the collecting and archiving

*Syrian resistant, Saida,
Lebanon, early 1970s,
Hashem el Madani -
Studio Shehrazade,
As featured in Akram
Zaatari's project
Objects of Study, Studio
Practices. Collection
AIF / Madani. © Arab
Image Foundation.*



practices are very different. We never tried to impose a vision; the idea was that members would develop a vision through the projects that they would initiate. This helped us to build a collection that is quite atypical. We never hired a historian to go and look for images, and we've never published an announcement asking people to bring us their pictures. We always wanted to go and get the pictures ourselves, so as to choose what we really wanted.

Ahmad el-Abed, a tailor, Madani's parents' home, the studio, Saida, Lebanon, 1948-53, Hashem el Madani, As featured in Akram Zaatari's project Objects of Study, Studio Practices, Collection AIF / Madani. Copyright © Arab Image Foundation.



LA: It was curatorial from the outset.

ZA: Yes and also very subjective. Some of the images were just so incredible, and really made a huge impression on us. From the first time, for example, that we saw a painted set up – where the subject is placed within artificial scenery – we were intrigued. Then, if a member knew that we already have some such images in our collection, if he encountered another, he would make sure to obtain it for the foundation. Thus it was important to get to know the collection well.

LA: You mentioned that prior to the work that you did there wasn't much interest in preserving photography in this region. Why you think that is?

ZA: Who could you imagine doing this work? The foundation didn't have a collection to preserve – it built a collection in order to preserve it. As recently as 15 years ago, institutions that had collections didn't even look at them. It is only in the last five years that institutions and individuals are becoming aware of their heritage. I have no idea why. I think that our project and intention was part of a momentum after the Civil War. Those of my generation who had left during the war years returned to the country after a ten-year absence. I really did not want to accept a state of amnesia like my parents' generation. In 1993, most of the people who had left the country came back and personally, bumping into the foundation's members was the best project I could have been involved in. Akram was very interested in looking into photography as a practice, almost as a small economy, and what kind of a relationship photographers could establish with the society they were living in. For him, it was also interesting to look at the anthropological and social context. I don't know who else

*Baqari's wife, Saida,
Lebanon, 1954,
Hashem el Madani -
Studio Shehrazade,
As featured in Akram
Zaatari's project
Objects of Study, Studio
Practices, Collection
AIF / Madani. © Arab
Image Foundation.*



could have done this. You would expect that the national archives would have photographs, but they do not.

LA: What about libraries?

ZA: We don't have libraries in Lebanon. The National Library is a project that the country has been trying to get off the ground for years. There is a small collection of books that was very damaged during the war. They restored them, but have now been building the site to host The National Library for almost ten years. In Lebanon and the region, photographic archives can be found in universities and most of the time these collections are inherited, whereas in our case we constituted the collections. Often, people didn't know what to do with the collections they inherited.

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Lebanon, 1954,
Hashem el Madani -
Studio Shehrazade,
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LA: What you do is quite unlike a museum or library, where objects often languish in storage. You actually use the work and bring it to life.

ZA: The idea was not to resemble a museum collection. If you look at what interested us and what we acquired, you will see that our collection is mainly made up of negatives and family prints. The originals do not have that much value: it was the cultural value that was important for us. It's worth mentioning here an initiative that we have been involved in called The Middle East Photograph Preservation Initiative. A pilot project ran in 2009 in Beirut with two American photo conservators – Nora Kennedy, Conservator of Photographs at the Metropolitan Museum of Arts in New York and Debbie Hess Norris, who is the chair of the Art Conservation department at the University of Delaware. They have been teaching workshops related to the preservation of photographs for 20-odd years. We met in 2004 and we started talking about doing a workshop in the region. It was only in 2009 that we were able to organise the first workshop that brought together 12 institutions for 10 days of intensive training, looking at different aspects of preservation, teaching basic guidelines, but also learning how to recognise a photographic medium, a process, how to

spot the deterioration of an image, and how to intervene. We started a new three-year project last year comprising three workshops, for which we bring together 15 institutions each year. It's in partnership with the Getty Institute, and there is distance mentoring after each workshop. Each institution is given assignments and we translate publications and glossaries into Arabic where they don't yet exist. In order to target the right institutions and to make sure that they know about this opportunity we did a survey of collections – over six months, we hired three scholars who each extensively researched photo collections in the Levant, North Africa and the Gulf. The first workshop took place last year in Beirut, and the second will be held in November of this year in Abu Dhabi. Last year the participants were a diverse array of institutions including the National Library of Rabat, the Iraq National Library, the City of Aleppo Archives, the Palestinian News and Press Agency Wafa, the Fouad Debbas collection, the Grand Egyptian Museum, and others. The Ministry of Tourism in Lebanon in fact participated in the pilot.

Girl with prosthetic leg, Saida, Lebanon, early 1980s, Hashem el Madani - Studio Shehrazade, As featured in Akram Zaatari's project Objects of Study, Studio Practices, Collection AIF / Madani. © Arab Image Foundation.



LA: You now have 70,000 images?

ZA: 600,000 images. Some of our archives are really big, like that of the Hashem el Madani archive, which contains 150,000 negatives. We also have big chunks of archives not even processed yet. We recently received a really interesting collection from Rifat Chadirji, an Iraqi architect and photographer, now 85 and previously in exile in the early 80s. He was one of the architects to introduce modern architecture in Iraq. He carried out many interesting projects not only

in Iraq but also in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Lebanon. He extensively documented his work and the work of other architects. Iraq not only lost these buildings during the wars, but is losing them in the reconstruction. Old buildings and modern architecture are not really considered to be heritage in this region. For those reasons we believe it's a very interesting collection. He also extensively documented daily life in Iraq. He would organise weekly encounters with intellectuals and artists. His father was one of the first photographers in Iraq, and we also have his collection.

LA: It's interesting that you bring up Iraq. I spoke to someone from the Baghdad Museum a while back who is involved in trying to archive all the items there and work out how many of them are missing. They were talking about wanting to digitise their archive. Was it always your aim to have your archive digitised?

ZA: Since the beginning we wanted to digitise the archive and make it accessible. We've been online since we started but being a small structure made things difficult. We didn't have the means to digitise in high resolution. So we digitised in low resolution: it was better than nothing. In 2010 we successfully applied to a grant from the Bank of America Merrill Lynch Art Conservation Program. The aim was to set up our own digitisation facilities and to digitise more extensively parts of the collection. But I have to say it is very challenging. So far we might have 60,000 that are scanned in high-res out of 600,000. We moved to our current premises last year. For 12 years, we were only two members of staff and I was almost always working alone in the administration. It's only in the last two years that we have expanded to a team of six full-timers and two part-timers. We are processing as quickly as we can with the means we have. It was also important to set up procedures for research, because it was a structure founded by artists and because it was an institution dealing with a collection. The members were always very interested in thinking about the procedures that we were establishing and the policies for image use and reproduction for members, non-members, and the press.

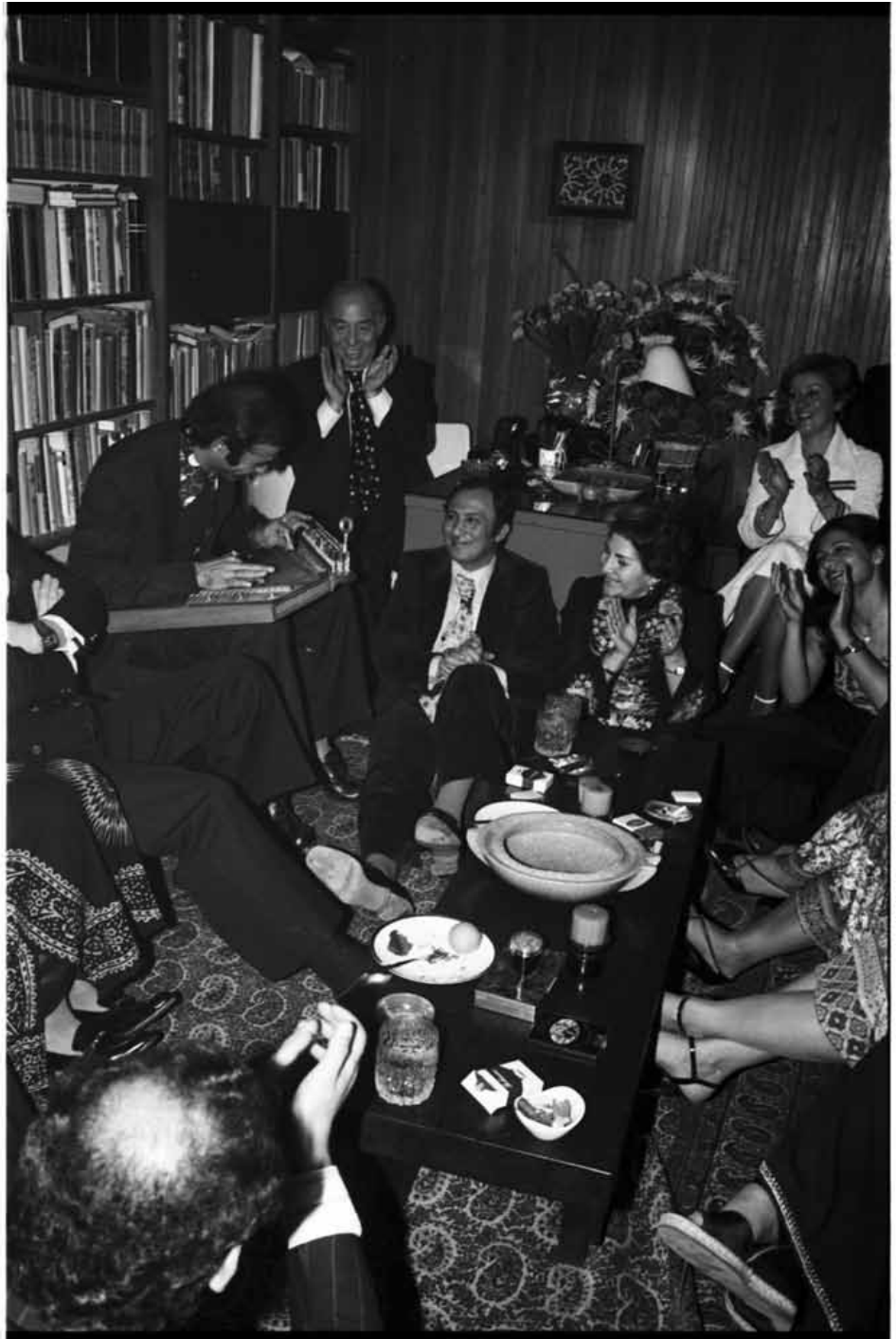
LA: I was wondering about copyright. Presumably you own the copyright to all the images?

ZA: Yes, we do actually. We share the copyright with their owners, but we have different kinds of agreements. One of the agreements is a deposit, where we become a kind of manager of the collection for ten years and this is renewable. We protect the rights of the photographer or the collector, so when we earn money we pay them back 50 percent of what we take. Usually for family collections, they donate them to us but we nevertheless protect the source of the image. It is always published along with the name of the collection or the name of the family who gave us the collection.

LA: So you have 60,000 images digitised of a 600,000 strong collection. Where do you house that collection? Is it in premises here? Is it climate controlled?

ZA: It's here: we have a fresh storage room equipped with an anti-fire system and 24 hours-per-day climate control. The collections that are not processed yet are in another space, where we work on cleaning, numbering, and writing inventories. We've built a cold storage room since we started collecting photographs. We didn't think we had a choice because Beirut is very humid and we wanted to follow the best procedures.

Social gathering at Chadirji's family house in Taha Street, Iraq, Baghdad, 1970s, Rifat Chadirji, Collection AIF / Chadirji Foundation. © Arab Image Foundation



LA: I am interested to know how the process works from the beginning. For example, with Hashem el Madani's studio, how did the artists know about this studio? Was it something that people knew about?

ZA: It is all part of the research you do. In this specific case, Akram was born in Sidon and spent 15 years there, and Madani is

one of the most famous photographers from there. As a child, Akram would go to Madani's studio to be photographed. I would say this is also why Akram's relationship to Madani is so special. When he was working on *The Vehicle*, one of the studios Akram visited in order to look for images related to this theme was Madani's. For *The Vehicle*, he brought a series of portraits of men posing on a boat on the harbour and posing on a bicycle in front of their truck. While doing his research for the project *Mapping Sitting*, Akram started collecting a large number of photographs from Madani, and would keep on going back to the studio and bringing negatives that represented the same pose with different people. I remember we would tell him to stop bringing the same photograph 200 times and we would somehow make fun of him but actually he really knew what he was doing and what he wanted. With Madani, it was the first time that we had the chance to meet with a photographer who had started his studio in the 50s, who was still living and whose studio was still there, and who still had his memory. He could tell us the names of the people in the photographs. Sidon is also typical of a small city in the Mediterranean in that it's quite conservative and doesn't witness much change over time. If you are born in Sidon and you keep on going there regularly, you get to know everyone. Akram was also very interested in exploring Madani's photographic practice as an economy. Madani was a hard worker – he would do his studio photography but then he would go out, to shops or to prisons for example, to take pictures of prisoners, and then sell the images to their parents. He would go to the cinema, and during the film he would photograph people looking at the film and then sell these images too. He needed to earn money and he was very ambitious. There were many other photographers in the city so he always had to struggle to keep on getting work and earning money.

LA: What did his archive look like when you started working with him? Did he have it climate controlled? Had it suffered damage?

ZA: Yes of course. He doesn't even have air conditioning in his studio. Each photographer has their own way of numbering and archiving their work. Madani had a huge cupboard with piles of cardboard boxes containing negatives. It wasn't all like this, though; some films were in metallic boxes.

LA: So they would deteriorate?

ZA: Yes, in some cases you would open the box and it would smell like vinegar. Some even melted. If you entered his darkroom today, you'd find it full of negative strips. He says that these are the ones to which he still has access. Madani still has a lot of negatives in his studio – we took only a small selection. Sometimes clients come to him asking for a copy of a portrait he took of them years before, but it's rare. These are the negatives he says he needs to access the most. It's paradoxical actually – the images most needing preservation are not in an enclosed space.

LA: It's a treasure trove going through these things. You must be surprised all the time and making discoveries all the time. Is there a

single image that particularly grabbed you?

ZA: From Madani?

LA: Yes.

ZA: Of course. The guy on the right side here [indicating photograph], you find him in different photos – very enigmatic for me especially in a conservative city like Saida. There is another image that's very strong – a portrait of a child that I don't understand so much.

LA: These are such storied images.

ZA: Yes. I'll tell you one of the ones that struck me the most. The story is told in Akram's *Studio Practices* book. A woman went to get her picture taken and the husband came a few days later and was very jealous. He wanted to take the negative, but Madani refused, so he scratched it. The story goes that a year later she committed suicide because her husband was so harsh and he returned to the studio, asking for a copy of the picture. I also like the series of resistance images. They're also quite damaged by fungus.

LA: Do you do much restoration of photographs?

ZA: No. We don't have a conservator in-house and there are very few in the region. In general in the photographic sector there is a tendency not to restore original material. You do everything you can to stop deterioration but then you restore digitally.

LA: In terms of the online archive, how do you classify each image? How do the keywords that you use work?

ZA: Each image is classified using all the information we have available. You can search by name of photographer, names of people in the image, keywords, photographic genre, country, location, year, and more. It has become a priority to change the whole website and the online platform so as to make it more interactive and enable people to upload images, and comment on them. The current format was developed eight or nine years ago. It took a lot of time to complete it. You must be aware of how difficult it is to run a website – it's a never-ending project and you are never satisfied because there is always room for change and improvement. The database functions very well but it could be more user-friendly. We often assist individual researchers further in their search when necessary.

LA: My last question is something that relates to an upcoming platform we are planning on the notion of the archive. You said it is very challenging managing the work that you do and the question is: What is the potential of the archive? What are its limits? Indeed, is it limitless?

ZA: In general? The archive with a big A?

LA: Yes.

ZA: That is a very good question. I suppose that if you're collecting original material, you're limited by the space you have to store it. The potential is the information that it holds, what it can tell you about yourself and your present even though it belongs to the past. Another limitation is to be fascinated with the Archive with a big A and not be able to take it further, especially today when archives are so present and important in lots of artistic practices. I think the presence of references to archives in works by contemporary artists has to be very relevant, otherwise they run the risk of being uninteresting.

LA: A discovery for discovery's sake.

ZA: Not for discovery's sake, but it has to have a meaning for today and not only today, but also in relation to the specific artistic practice or in relation to what the artist really wants to convey. There has certainly been a fascination with the archive for years now. It is almost trendy to use archives. Luckily, there is a sense of responsibility on the part of those who hold archives, knowing as we do how much information is constantly being lost. The Arab world has always been very unstable, which has never helped in preserving private, institutional or public archives, and the situation is no better today.

Zeina Arida was born in Beirut and educated between Beirut and Paris. She studied Literature and Theatre at the Sorbonne in Paris and graduated in 1993. Returning to Beirut, she was involved in several cultural projects. Since its inception in 1997, she has been a member and the Director of the Arab Image Foundation – a non-profit organisation established in Beirut in 1997 to preserve and study photographs from the Middle East, North Africa and the Arab diaspora. Arida also served as a Board Member of the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture from 2006 to 2011.