

## Interview

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# Letter to a Refusing Pilot

Seth Anziska in  
conversation with  
Daniella Rose King

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### **LETTER TO A REFUSING PILOT**

**Or the slow repair of a historical rupture via the  
convergence of a childhood memory, a researcher and a  
Pavilion at Venice**

In the summer of 1982, at the beginning of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, an Israeli Air Force pilot was ordered to bomb a structure on the edge of the Ain El-Helweh refugee camp in the southern city of Saida. The pilot saw from the cockpit that the target could only have been a school or a hospital and refused the order. He cut off communication with officers on the ground and dropped his explosives into the sea. Word of this 'refusing pilot' spread throughout Lebanon and became an urban legend; an unbelievable tale of an Israeli Jew allegedly from Saida, who refused to bomb the Public School for Boys he was said to have attended as a child.

The Saida-born artist Akram Zaatari was sixteen years old during the war. His father had been the principal at that very school and Zaatari had heard the rumour of the refusing pilot from his uncle. Many years later, he would recall the story in a conversation with an Israeli filmmaker, Avi Mograbi. Yet the unfurling narrative, a series of intriguing coincidences, remained obscure.

By chance, in the summer of 2010 a Ph.D. researcher from Columbia University, Seth Anziska – investigating this specific period of Middle Eastern history – not Lebanese himself and with no knowledge of the myth of the pilot, met and interviewed a man named Hagai Tamir in Israel. Tamir told the researcher of his career in the Air Force and specifically recalled how he had defied his orders to bomb what he knew to be a civilian building during Israel’s First Lebanon War. Two years later, while leafing through the transcription of Zaatari’s conversation with Avi Mograbi in a Beirut archive, the researcher came across a short reference to the story of a pilot who refused to bomb a secondary school in Saida.

The Lebanese Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale grows directly out of an unlikely tale. Located in the Arsenale, Akram Zaatari’s installation *Letter to a Refusing Pilot* is comprised of a film, 35 minutes in length that revisits the target and its surroundings in Saida, drawing on the artist’s memories of his childhood and the story of the pilot who dropped his explosives into the sea. *Letter to a Refusing Pilot* is an extraordinary disavowal of the typical national narrative often seen in pavilions at the Biennale. In its elegant use and presentation of the archive – whether institutional or personal – Zaatari’s installation uncovers the humanistic grain within a large-scale historical conflict. This interview with Seth Anziska, who had contributed to the Lebanese Pavilion and was responsible for ‘finding’ Tamir, began in the garden of Palestine’s exhibition *Otherwise Occupied* in Venice and continued over email. Struck by how his own research has been disseminated into a medium that transcends academia, history and politics, Anziska recounts the chance discoveries that led to his collaboration with Zaatari and the Lebanese Pavilion.

Lebanese Pavilion,  
55th Venice Biennale,  
installation shot.  
Photo by Marco Milan.



**Daniella Rose King:** Let's start at the beginning: How did you hear of the 'refusing pilot'?

**Seth Anziska:** In May 2010, I travelled to the Middle East to begin preliminary dissertation research. My Ph.D., which is in the field of international history, examines relations between the US, Israel and the Palestinians in the period between the Camp David Accords (1978) and the first Palestinian Intifada (1987). The 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and subsequent American intervention is a particularly important moment in the wider dissertation. Before heading to Beirut, I spent several weeks in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem exploring archival material and conducting oral history interviews.

By chance, I found myself in Tel Aviv's Neve Tzedek neighbourhood browsing the shelves of the history section in a little independent bookstore. The woman who was working there that day, Judith Tamir, smiled at me and we struck up a conversation. I explained a bit about my research, mentioning the 1982 war, and immediately she brought up her husband Hagai, who fought in the war as a pilot. Judith gave me Hagai's details and encouraged me to get in touch. Israel is a very small and intimate country, and as I discovered during the course of my research, random connections would often lead to unexpected encounters.

A few weeks later, I called Hagai Tamir and he invited me to his home in Jaffa. When I arrived, Hagai welcomed me into his light-filled office, where he practices today as an architect and designer. We sat for several hours and discussed many subjects during the interview: his parent's flight from Nazi Germany, his childhood growing up on Kibbutz Hazorea, his love of flying and decorated career in the Air Force, the progression of Israel's wars and the changing nature of combat.

I turned to what happened during the 1982 war in Lebanon. Hagai reported late for reserve duty, suspicious of the war from its inception. 'From the outset, I smelled the manipulation and the deceit at its base,' he later remarked. Having been trained as an architect, Hagai was sensitive to the intricacies of the urban landscape, and grew very uneasy with the nature of the mission in Lebanon. Hagai's doubts were tested by an operation over the Ain El-Helweh camp in Saida, which he did not share publicly until 2003. As he recalled in an interview published in *Ha'aretz*:

We flew in tandem above the place. The liaison officer who was with the ground forces informed me of the target, a large building on top of a hill. I looked at it and to the best of my judgment the structure could have only been one of two things – a hospital or a school. I questioned the officer and asked why I was being given that target. His reply was that they were shooting from there. There were a thousand reasons why I didn't

think I should bomb the building. I asked him if he knew what the building was. He said he didn't. I insisted that he find out. He got back to me with some vague answers.[1]

Hagai decided not to drop his bombs, reporting a 'malfunction' and cutting off contact with the ground. He then flew out over the Mediterranean and dropped his bombs in the sea. The pair of jets that followed went ahead with the order, bombing the building in question. Hagai's squadron investigated the incident, and when questioned, he told officials that he would never bomb a school or a hospital.

**DRK:** What drove you to research and investigate this story further?

**SA:** Meeting Hagai was fortuitous. After I departed Israel, and continued the research in Lebanon and the US, his story stayed in the back of my mind. Our interview encouraged me to think more about the threads that connect large-scale political change with the actions of individuals on the ground (or in this case, up in the air). Hagai's account restored human agency to traditional military and diplomatic narratives of the war, which was inspiring for my own work.

I also kept in touch with Judith and Hagai, and whenever I returned to Israel for research I would make sure to visit them in Jaffa. We developed a close friendship over the years. But I never imagined what would transpire next – that Hagai's story would surface in a totally different Lebanese context.

**DRK:** How did you conduct the research? (I'd be interested in getting a sense of particular methodologies here, particular archives, or people, links or traces that assisted?)

**SA:** My work attempts to answer how the US relationship with Israel and the Palestinians during the late 1970s and 1980s had a formative influence on the architecture of what emerged as the 'peace process' of the 1990s. Core issues of political contention,

Akraam Zaatari,  
*Letter for a Time of Peace*,  
2007.  
126 x 156 cm.  
Courtesy the artist.



such as the permissible degree of Palestinian self-determination, the nature of Israeli sovereignty in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and the legality of settlement expansion were all subject to intense diplomatic scrutiny during this period. Given the decisive role of the United States and the wider international context that shapes these issues, I'm interested in perspectives that extend beyond national prisms alone. So my research tries to incorporate sources from archives across national boundaries.

In Israel, for example, I examined newly released collections on the autonomy talks and the Lebanon war at the Israel State Archives as well as the private papers of Prime Minister Menachem Begin in Jerusalem. In Lebanon, I explored the rich collection in Beirut's Institute for Palestine Studies, where the archive contains extensive newspapers and bulletins published in Arabic and English by various Palestinian factions experiencing and responding to events in the occupied territories and the diaspora. There are also related memoirs from Lebanese and Palestinian leaders, and other local collections like the American University of Beirut Archives and the UMAM Documentation and Research Center in Harat Hreik.

In the US, I gathered material on Middle East policy at the Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan Presidential Libraries, as well as private papers of diplomats held at the Hoover Institution and the Library of Congress. The archives of key American Jewish organizations help explain the role of domestic politics, and the National Archives in the United Kingdom provide an external European outlook that is quite revealing. In addition to these written sources, I have been conducting oral history interviews with retired diplomats, politicians, communal leaders and military veterans across the US, UK, Israel, the West Bank and Lebanon.

My involvement in the Lebanese Pavilion at Venice also allowed me to explore the cultural perspectives that shape historical consciousness of this period, which is particularly helpful given that narratives of Lebanon's recent past and the Israeli invasion are so contentious. By thinking about the legacy and representation of the

Lebanese Pavilion,  
55th Venice Biennale,  
installation shot. Photo by  
Marco Milan.



war, Venice helped me understand how the work of an artist like Akram Zaatari can be an invaluable source base. Akram excavates histories not available in traditional archives, yielding a trove of primary source material in the process. Here again are the voices of those individuals left out of the dominant narratives, and one contribution the historian can make is to incorporate these voices, allowing them to tell a story that has not yet been heard.

**DRK:** What are your thoughts about the meaning of this pilot's refusal to act, within a national narrative (for example, collective memory/military perception) and on a personal level?

**SA:** The story of Hagai's refusal to bomb what he saw as an illegitimate target resonated as an ethical act; the recognition that even war has its moral limits. A combat pilot's personal judgment in the midst of fighting – the triumph of an inner voice that deliberated inside a cockpit – countered the demands of a national army. War is so often associated with losing your individual identity to fight for the collective – and here is an example of one individual's defiance of that pattern, manifest in Hagai's insistence that his own conscience could not countenance such an order.

Such defiance struck me to the core. It is a very personal act of refusal, a private decision in a time of war. This personal aspect is central. I do not claim to speak for Hagai, but I do not think he sees his action as refusal on a national scale. Yes, he was opposed to the war, and the broader militarism that was emerging in Israel at the time. But it was a refusal to comply with morally suspect orders, not a rejection of war in toto. This intrusion of ethical considerations into the overarching demands of a wartime invasion is a restorative act, reminding us that the moral judgment of an individual does not disappear in one's national context. Hagai did not claim to be a pacifist – and yet his actions show that justice and morality can never be separated from the claims of the military or the agenda of the nation state.

I also think that to a degree we are all accidents of history, and could have been born anywhere – Kibbutz Hazorea, the refugee camp in Ain El-Helweh or my own birthplace in New York City. One test of our moral character is how we might respond in such a situation. What is so moving about this whole story is that it forces us to consider our own actions were we in the cockpit of an airplane, ordered to drop our bombs over an urban landscape. This, I think, is a question with universal resonance.

**DRK:** What brought you and your research together with Akram Zaatari and the Lebanese Pavilion exhibition?

**SA:** Having travelled regularly to Lebanon for research, I was back in Beirut over the summer of 2012 gathering material at the Institute for

Lebanese Pavilion,  
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installation shot. Photo by  
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Palestine Studies. I had heard about the Arab Image Foundation [co-founded by Zaatari in 1997], a non-profit organization devoted to collecting photography from the Middle East and preserving these images in an archive. On a whim I decided to check it out during one of my last days in town, thinking there might be some photographs of the 1982 invasion.

Sitting in the Foundation's library, I asked the archivist if she could recommend any particular works on this topic. She scanned the bookshelves, pulling out a few titles, and handed me a thin orange volume by Akram Zaatari, which turned out to be his recently published work, *A Conversation with An Imagined Israeli Filmmaker Named Avi Mograbi* (2012).

I had seen some of Zaatari's work in various exhibitions in Beirut, and knew that he dealt directly with the experience of the war. But this book just stunned me. It is a transcript of a presumed public conversation the artist had with Avi Mograbi, a prominent documentary filmmaker from Israel. In it, the two delve into their individual histories and experiences during the invasion, among other reflections. Akram was a young boy living in Saida during the June invasion, taking his first photographs of Israeli Merkava tanks in the streets below his apartment; Mograbi was sitting in one of the tanks and recalls seeing Akram on the balcony, and shouting at him to put the camera away.

At one point in the book, Akram turns to a story that he heard from his uncle in the late summer of 1982:

He said there was an Israeli officer who came to visit the public school that my father had headed for twenty years until 1979. The Israeli officer, who was a former student of the school, took part in several air raids on Saida, and one time he was given orders to bomb a target in Ain El-Helweh, near the school. It is said that as he approached the target, he flew over the school he attended as a child, so he refused the orders and dropped all

the explosives he was carrying in the sea.[2]

I just froze. This had to be the story of Hagai Tamir's refusal, even though he grew up on a kibbutz and never went to school in Saida. Somehow, Hagai's refusal had circulated in Lebanon as an urban myth, which I knew to be real.

I asked the staff for Akram's email and we made arrangements to meet the following evening. At first, I didn't know how to tell him that I knew of this refusal directly from the source. After circling around the topic, I finally told Akram I had met and interviewed the pilot, Hagai Tamir, who lives in Jaffa and practices as an architect.

Akram was amazed, and asked if I could send Hagai a copy of the book when I got back to London, because it could not be mailed directly between Beirut and Tel Aviv. I wrote to Hagai, telling him about this remarkable encounter, and he too was surprised. He allowed me to share with Akram the clip from our interview when Hagai spoke of what happened in 1982.

A few weeks later, I was copied into the first of several email exchanges between Akram and Hagai. Each note read like the slow repair of a historical rupture. The exchange led to an unforgettable meeting in Rome between the three of us. Akram had decided to incorporate the story into the work he was preparing for the Venice Biennale, which became his *Letter to a Refusing Pilot*.

**DRK:** What is it about the setting – within an exhibition of contemporary art – that you think is significant, or brings an added layer of meaning to the project and the research? This is opposed to the research being published in a purely academic/historical forum, or via journalism. Do you believe that art has a wider or broader audience?

**SA:** I came to the contemporary art world as an outsider, filtering what I saw through the eyes of a historian. But I have appreciated how the medium allows for a different category of expression, one

Akram Zaatari,  
*Letter to Samir*, 2009.  
126 x 156cm  
Courtesy the artist.



that is sensory and emotional: an experience that cannot match the pages of a newspaper or a chapter in a book.

Even though I had seen an early cut of the film and although I knew some of the details about the installation itself, when I came into the pavilion I was transported. Sitting in the dark, watching the screen, seeing the red cinema chair, hearing the whirr of the projector behind me, moved me somewhere beyond the written word, beyond the physical encounter of an interview. It was a chance to get a glimpse into the artist's memory box, to hear the sounds of his childhood, to gaze upon the target (the school) as it was built and exists today, and to viscerally understand its place in Akram's life and the impact of the war in a wider Lebanese context.

There is also the collective aspect of experiencing such a work – sharing this space with other visitors, watching them watch the story unfold in real time, entering into a narrative together. Venice is a unique space in this regard, for it brings together a cross-section of viewers, perhaps still an elite group from the art and curatorial world, but a geographically diverse audience. Here were Lebanese men and women who had lived through the war, and Israeli visitors who may have fought in it in some capacity, Arabic and Hebrew speakers, circulating alongside one another in the pavilion. Each one has their particular entry point and emotional attachment to the subject matter, which makes for a multiplicity of viewings, receptions and the possibility of intersecting reactions.

The reception, however, is not the same as it would be in an academic or journalistic forum. The way in which contemporary art is spoken about – the language of the critic and the metrics to situate and judge a piece – are quite different from how we might assess a work of history or the quality of the research that underpins it.

**DRK:** What are your thoughts on the presentation of your research and the exhibition within a national pavilion context? Are there complications or contradictions in this framework?

Lebanese Pavilion,  
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installation shot. Photo by  
Marco Milan.



**SA:** While many find the idea of the pavilions constraining, I think the format in Venice also forces artists and audiences to challenge these national contexts and to break apart boundaries. There was a similar concern about the insular narratives of the nation-state that spawned the transnational turn in the historical profession and forced scholars to examine perspectives farther afield. This explains why one can't simply stick to events as seen in Washington to truly understand US involvement in the Middle East – it is playing out in places like Beirut and Jerusalem and shaping the course of American power in return.

At the opening reception, Akram spoke about how we don't choose the countries in which we are born or which we 'belong' to. This is hard for some people to register, but really gets to the heart of what artistic expression enables: to imagine alternatives, to dream beyond the confines of our particular context. Many of the Lebanese visitors to the Biennale were filled with intense national pride, which perhaps reflects a deep-seated desire to assert cultural presence on the international stage in light of fractured politics at home and wider regional instability. But national pride also has a darker side. What does it mean to love your country, exactly? And at whose expense? The Lebanese Civil War was a terrible teacher of communal pride, and given the state of postwar memory (including instances of wilful amnesia), this love of country often remains unexamined. A work dealing with the war breaks open these issues. As a result, I think some Lebanese viewers were taken aback, especially by the central role of an Israeli pilot in a film presented at the Lebanese pavilion. But as Akram writes in the opening to his *Conversation with an Imagined Israeli Filmmaker*, one possible title of his script could have been 'Israel's History Is My History'.<sup>[3]</sup> Here is a radical statement, and one can say the same of Israeli history, forged in Saida and Beirut during the invasion. No one can walk away from the legacy of this war in Israel today, even if some will suppress or deflect it. Venice is a space to surface these memories, to interrogate and revisit what 1982 wrought.

**DRK:** What will happen to your research now? Do you plan on developing it further? And how has this process affected your research? (We often hear of researchers working for particular contemporary artists today, does this interest you?)

**SA:** I am in the final writing stages of my dissertation, and plan to complete the Ph.D. in the coming year. The story that emerged with Venice will certainly play a role in how I write the chapter on the war and its broader impact. Down the road, I hope to publish my work as a book for a wider audience, because it deals with a subject that is such a critical part of US and Middle Eastern history, and has shaped contemporary politics in both places. Understanding what happened in the late 1970s and 1980s, especially the dynamics of the Arab-Israeli conflict and America's role as a protagonist in the region, may help us combat what the late historian Tony Judt called

called the 'perverse contemporary insistence on not understanding the context of our present dilemmas...on seeking actively to forget rather than remember.'[4]

The events that led to *Letter to a Refusing Pilot*, particularly witnessing the encounter of Akram and Hagai, certainly changed the way I think about historical research, the power of recovery, the possibility of repairing historical ruptures, and the contemporary resonances that emerge from the past in the most unexpected ways. I also hope this story can serve as an opening for broader conversations beyond the art world – there are so many themes and strands that are worthy of discussion. As a historian in training, this experience has been moving on several levels.

**DRK:** Do you know of any planned future for *Letter to a Refusing Pilot*?

**SA:** I know there is interest in showing this piece in other places, especially Beirut. And given what I know of Akram's work, and the generative power that characterizes his artistic production, this may only be an opening. The way things have unfolded so far provides a new sort of language, away from stilted debate, from paradigms of aggressor and victim.

We desperately need more of this.

Lebanese Pavilion,  
55th Venice Biennale,  
installation shot. Photo by  
Marco Milan.



**Seth Anziska** is a Ph.D. candidate in International and Global History at Columbia University, with interests in the Middle East, US foreign relations and modern Jewish history. His dissertation explores the relationship between Israel, the Palestinians, and the United States from the Camp David Accords through the war in Lebanon and the first Intifada. He received his BA in History from Columbia and his M. Phil. in Modern Middle Eastern Studies from St. Antony's College, Oxford. A recipient of the Boren, FLAS and Wexner Fellowships, Seth has written for *The New York Times*, *Foreign Policy*, and *Ha'aretz*.

[1] See Avihai Becker, 'Why We Refuse', *Ha'aretz*, 29/9/2003.

[2] Akram Zaatar, *A Conversation with an Imagined Israeli Filmmaker Named Avi Mograbi*, Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, Kadist Art Foundation, Sternberg Press, 2012, p.30.

[3] *Ibid.*, 3.

[4] Tony Judt, 'What Have We Learned, If Anything?' *The New York Review of Books*, May 1, 2008

## About the author

**Daniella Rose King** is a curator and writer currently resident in London. Most recently she was Program Curator at MASS Alexandria, an independent study and studio program for artists in Egypt. While in this role she curated the program of workshops, lectures, screenings and discussions at MASS Alexandria and *Exhibition 2*, a group show featuring the work of 18 students who took part in the 2012 program. King holds a BA in History of Art from the University of Manchester and an MA in Curating Contemporary Art from the Royal College of Art in London. She recently contributed to Adel Abidin's exhibition catalogue *Symphony* at Lawrie Shabibi Gallery (Dubai 2013), Hatje Cantz's *On One Side of the Same Water: Artistic Practice between Tirana and Tangier* (Germany, 2012) and *The Right Dissonance* (London, 2011) a collection of interviews between emerging curators and artists. She has written for *Frieze*, *Art Monthly*, *Universes in Universe – Worlds of Art*, *Portal 9*, and *Harper's Bazaar Art*. Between 2009 and 2011, King worked as Assistant Curator in Nottingham Contemporary's Exhibitions and Public Programmes departments.