

Saadi Nikro

Inhabiting Photography – Between Medium and Mediality

Images are like curtains, they are like cityscapes, like buildings. They live with us.

Akram Zaatari, *The Uneasy Subject*



Akram Zaatari, *Twenty-Eight Nights and a Poem* (film still). Image used with kind permission of the artist

I

At one point in Akram Zaatari's film *Twenty-Eight Nights and a Poem* (2015), the veteran photographer Hashem el Madani sits in what appears to be the upper floor of his shop, Studio Shehrazade, in the southern Lebanese coastal city Saida. The dark low-ceilinged enclosure is punctuated by a small rectangular window, lying almost at floor level, barely keeping within the outline of its frame the glaring patch of stark, searing light outside.

It is a long take, in which not much happens, except for an incremental closing of the camera's lens every ten or so seconds. With the camera firmly planted to its spot, and minimal movement from Madani, it is almost as though the image had been taken with a still camera, rather than a moving picture camera. Gradually, as the aperture is closed ever tighter, the light inside the studio dims and becomes more shadowy, and the busy world outside slowly starts to take on contrast and form. This goes on until Madani is transformed into a barely recognizable silhouette

of his thin and somewhat stoop-shouldered figure, while the movement of cars and people through the window becomes visible.

An aperture directed towards an aperture (the window), a camera situated inside another camera-like chamber – in this scene in which Madani and the world outside come to appear as figures in hazy, inchoate relief, it is as though light and sound have yet to settle into an equilibrium between an outside and an inside that have also to shift through each other's atmospheric contours.

It is easy to get carried away with the lovely aesthetic of this precious moment in Zaatari's film, all the more charming in its simplicity, employing a technological medium to fashion an atmospheric play of light and retrieve a graphic image. Zaatari's gesture strips the medium to its bare essentials: in this all too reposeful and uneventful scene, the drama comes to be concentrated in the wave-lengths of light and sound in which the photographer inhabits a relational capacity to direct the camera's lens and transform the scene into an image. In the process light itself is worked on and rendered a material resource for the tracing of an image, shifting through the many hues of an equally layered visibility and audibility. The image is not so much recorded by outlining a fixed chiaroscuro, but rather traced through gradations of light and dark, shifts between sound and noise – shifts in relationships between inside and outside.

Zaatari employs a motion picture camera to gather light and record shades of visibility, hues of invisibility. Madani is depicted as inhabiting, dwelling in, a room with an aperture. For both Zaatari and Madani, we can say, the photographic apparatus is not simply a piece of technology employed as a medium to either represent that which is captured by its frame, or else a subjective orientation suspended by and positioned in the web or network of the frame's constructive force. The apparatus is not merely a technical application that can be put to use, but rather embodies certain hermeneutic repertoires by which people inhabit and engage capacities to exchange a sense of being in a world.

In his work Zaatari gestures towards a sense of the photographic medium as a site of habitation, as what in a more phenomenological vein I want to refer to as *mediality*. In developing this, I discuss his work towards addressing the theme of *critical habitations*, which I want to consider in respect to the life of photographs as embodied circulations and social economies of affect.

II

As the title of Simon Strick's opening contribution – "[How do you live? From Construction to Habitation](#)" – for the site *Critical Habitations* suggests, he develops a critique of a constructionist approach fixed on "*positional* thinking" (his emphasis) and discourse-centered analytics. As he compellingly observes: "Representational analysis is looking to the blueprint to find out how things cultural are *constructed* – the perspective of *critical habitations* looks to the livability of these constructions" (his emphasis).

In my current research in Lebanon on the social life of memory I am foregrounding a critique of "representational analysis" towards better appreciating how subjective impulses of communities and groups *emerge* according to practices and circulations of image-making. This critique involves a shift of focus from the discursive implications of mediums as modes of communication and representation to the livelihood of images and image-making (film, photography, audio), initiating alternatives to predominating distributions of material and imaginary resources that tend to flow towards sectarian channels of political advocacy and sensibility.

Discourse-centered or representational analysis all too often regards 'the group,' 'the community,' or else 'national identity' as an *object* – however it may be 'constructed' or 'invented' (i.e. not naturally given). This object can then be analyzed according to the dissecting practices of the critic, conveniently forgetting that this supposed self-contained entity affords manifold strands, impulsive beats, and polyphonic resonances of hermeneutic embodiment and habitation. For my purposes, I want to ask: as long as 'the group' is regarded as a 'constructed' or 'manufactured object,' how do researchers expose their own embodied assumptions to the ways by which subjects undergo, embody, and employ hermeneutic entanglements to inhabit and disinhabit instances of group identity and/or association?

Like Strick and Carolyn Pedwell (on this blog), I would want to ask how hermeneutic repertoires come to be embodied, how they circulate as affective habitations of social (and academic) exchange; how they are channeled and lived as modalities of social viability. I am also interested in how such repertoires are engaged as creative instances, reflective exercises, and critical interventions of what I want to call *disembodiment* and *disinhabiting*.

Strick, indeed, notes how the “livability” of habitation involves interwoven experiences of “disorientation,” “unease in,” “exclusion from,” and “uncanny” intimations of defamiliarization. In other words, habitations do not merely consist of habitual ways of being and doing, of mechanically moving in and moving through locations, institutions, situations, circumstances. Modalities of inhabiting capacities for social viability, we could say, are shot through with intimations and instances of disinhabiting. Such modalities, as Strick is well aware, involve power and authority as modicums of subjugation, whereby others are designated as not having adequate credentials to share exclusive rights of inhabiting; whereby capacities to inhabit patches of earth require the violent dispossession of others.

Strick is attentive to the variable impulses, divergent flows, and relational vectors of association and dissociation woven into capacities to inhabit what he calls “corridors.” His reference to “representational analysis” alludes to certain applications of critique preoccupied with analyses of modes of representation – be such applications constructivist, narratological, discourse centered, or indeed deconstructionist – that come to be severed from their embodied and embedded circumstances. In the process, signification is restricted to a disembodied, atemporal logic of sign-posting, attuned to an imperious assumption that the sign of the times is equivalent to the time of the sign, vacating an awareness of different ways in which subjects may temporally *aspire* to embody signs, gather resources and breathe themselves into an embodiment of the sign.

Over thirty years ago, in her still valuable *Alice Doesn't*, Teresa de Lauretis sensed the limits of analyses that restrict representation to a constructivist critique. “The significance of the sign,” she writes, “could not take effect, that is to say, the sign would not be a sign without the existence or the subject’s experience of a social practice in which the subject is physically involved” (1984: 183). We need only extend this sense of “physicality” to a relational, inchoate sense of “the subject” (including the subject matter of research) as dissonant currents in the midst of which place and time are hermeneutically embodied and acted on.

Strick’s “corridor” suggests a Kafkaesque notion of action and deliberation taking place in passageways and doorways, of both moving in and moving through those strange, supplementary adjuncts to enclosures of familiarization – the lounge room, bedroom, kitchen and dining room. The notion otherwise reminded me of toy shops I sometimes visit to buy something for my kids, where the excessively pink corridor is pitched towards a becoming girl or

woman, and the blue/gray corridor pitched towards a becoming boy or man. While there are no Lacanian signs hailing Boys or Girls dominating the entries to these passage ways, they are nevertheless saturated with conventional semiotic associations and modalities of identification that assume a White, Eurocentric heterosexual normativity – a normativity by which to judge alternatives and divergences.

But my point, like Strick's, is that these corridors do not merely construct categories and standards for identification, but constitute sites of hermeneutic embodiment, of inchoately inhabiting (respiring) particular interpretative grammars, grids, and sensibilities that one carries with them and employs to make sense of other events and figures they come across, to make sense of themselves, situating self-understanding as modes of social exchange and viability.

The significant point of habitations not amounting to mere habit informs Pedwell's contribution, ["\(In\)habiting the Present"](#) – a title that captions the important theme of temporality she introduces to the debate, drawing on the work of John Dewey, among other, more contemporary critics. Mindful of the tendency of theorists to idealize normative, teleological models of social justice and "environmental transformation," Pedwell forthrightly asks: "Might critical work on habit offer a different, and potentially productive, conceptual topography for making sense of the affective and material nature of social and political continuity and change today"? She is suspicious of a theory of affect that presupposes a normative, largely teleological schema for social transformation.

Like Strick, Pedwell draws on a mix of work from postcolonial, decolonial, gender and queer studies to situate and develop her concerns. The continuity and complementarity between their essays is suggested by, among other insights, Strick's adaptation of Fanon's existentially inspired phenomenological notion of a "bodily schema," from whose work he further quotes: "The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty." Indeed, both Strick and Pedwell suggest a more critical phenomenology that to some extent sheds the field's assumption of more generalizing categories and concepts. This can be described as a reconstructed, practical phenomenology attuned more to relational tensions energizing (and energized by) the ways in which subjects move in and through corridors, undergo modalities of embodiment and initiate exercises of disembodiment, relay vectors of inhabiting and exercise designs of dis inhabiting. In doing so, subjects engage the ready-for-useness (ready-to-hand is the more standard translation of Heidegger's *zuhanden*) of circulating material and imaginary resources as not-so-ready-for-

useness, fashioning diverging modes of cultural production, social viability, and political sensibility.

Attentiveness to the tension coursing through and between modalities of embodiment and disembodiment, or else inhabiting and disinhabiting – in respect to specific circulations, adaptations, and initiations of material and imaginary resources – has a number of compelling consequences for a critical phenomenology attuned to social economies of affect.

III

A phenomenology of the medium attentive to mediality – to embodiment as a tensional matrix in and between inhabiting and disinhabiting – both draws attention to and is involved in the ways in which technological and aesthetic applications of image-making are productively entwined with distending circuits of affect, vectors of sense perception. In her *Practical Aesthetics*, discussing the work of video artists, Jill Bennett refers to affect as “an energising force,” – “a feeling [...] not of beholding an image but of inhabiting the space of the image’s appearance” (2012: 185). The truth of the image, we can say, does not measure up to (or, at least, is not exhausted by) its indexical properties or contemplative flights of fancy. Rather, its truth “resonates” as a momentum of its “affective force.” Bennett is interested in how certain cultural/art practices initiate alternative contexts, circuits, and related affective modalities for emerging exchanges of social viability. Concerned, as well, with circulations of political sensibility, she writes: “An aesthetic reconfiguration of experience – to which affective connection is material – does not simply restore subjective experience to history but generates new ways of being in the event” (2012: 43).

In respect to *circulations* of affect, I want to suggest that a phenomenology of photography would not be restricted to either “the studium” (interpretation) or the emotional discomposure of “the punctum” (“that accident which pricks me, but also bruises me, is poignant to me,” Barthes 2000: 25-27), but rather acknowledge what we can call *the circumum*, or else a *circulum vite*: circulation of livability in the midst of which people are differentially motivated to be photographed, and how both a photograph and the practice of photography circulate through differential planes of social and affective economies of exchange. Through these manifold registers and practices the materiality of the photograph is constrained to shift through the

differential force of a becoming inside, a becoming outside, a movement in and out of a photograph's frame, considering circulations in which an image accrues modicum of respiration.

The theme of proactively inhabiting the medium is brought up in a trailer for Zaatari's film – [a trailer enclosing another trailer](#). Here, the camera sits in a back room of Madani's studio, with the ratchety sound of a projector running a trailer for the film *Layali El Hob* (Nights of Love), a mid-1950s vehicle for the renowned singer Abdul Halim Hafiz. After a shot of the lighted round lens of the noisy projector, there is a cut to the door slowly closing shut. This door has a round hole the size of small plate, an aperture of light, through which we glimpse Madani approach from the outside and peer in towards the projected trailer. He then pushes the door open and casually walks inside, concentrating on the trailer, its audio announcing the film, the main actor, and the director Helmy Rafla.

It is an interesting choice of cinematic reference on Zaatari's, or perhaps Madani's, part, considering that the latter opened his photographic studio at the same time that *Layali El Hob* was made and screened. The trailer within a trailer parallels Zaatari's reference of a camera within a camera, as he adapts the rooms of Madani's studio to simulate the inside of a camera. The scene alludes to the photographic apparatus as a site in which Madani inhabits and hermeneutically embodies a capacity to manufacture and produce images whose livelihood crisscrosses economies of desire and social viability.

The Egyptian classic works to reference Zaatari's interest in photography as an entwinement in social economies of desire: circulations of desires to be photographed, or else the capacity of photography to promote and relay circulations of desire – what Jacques Rancière has called “distributions of the sensible” (2012). According to Zaatari's designs, “economy” is to be understood in an expanded sense of the livelihood of Madani and his Studio Shehrazade – a livelihood that includes changes to the cost of producing a photograph (technological developments in color printing and processing, for example) and circumstances in which people are motivated to have their pictures taken (the desire of young men to be photographed while flexing their torsos and muscles; to have such photos to show their friends, or else for their photo albums; as well as desires to transgress normative expectations of sexual conduct).

IV

In *Twenty-Eight Nights and a Poem* Zaatari references his practices of collecting and archiving photographs, as well as the changing technological capacities involved in the making and storing of images. He is a founding member of the Arab Image Foundation, launched in 1997, in Beirut. The Foundation, in the main, collects, stores, and recirculates photographs, which provide a resource for its research and curatorial projects. Much of the collection of over 600,000 photographs is available for registered users as an [online image database](#).

His gestures in the film of self-referentiality do not point towards the constructive aspects of his work, but rather towards a momentum in which the archive inhabits and relays circulations of production. For Zaatari, the archive is embedded in a circuit of social economy for practices of image-making, collecting and distributing photographs – rather than a disconnected site for the storage and preservation of what in the process come to transpire as artifacts.

Photographs, when handled, gain a lease of life. As he says in an interview: “If you spill a little bit of hot tea on a picture you might damage the print, but you give the picture another layer of life.” And as he goes on to further explain:

From a generic perspective, this is damage caused to a picture, but from the point of view of an archaeologist, artist, or anthropologist interested in the *life* of pictures, I think the picture acquires different meanings once it has been handled by people who relate to it and leave their marks on it.

(Downey 2014: 4)

More transitive than intransitive, the archive constitutes a temporal capacity to situate the present in a relationship to the future, with all its contingencies and unexpected developments. Like Noah’s *Ark* – the term having an etymological link to *archive*, an *arc* that bridges and inaugurates emerging modes of relationally inhabiting physical capacities for social production and exchange – the storing of documents and artifacts is not so much about gathering dead matter of the past, but of providing material for the birth of the future. *Twenty-Eight Nights and a Poem* can itself, indeed, be regarded as a demonstration of this more proactive notion of the archive, as the film is produced by adapting materials from the Foundation’s archives, as well as those from an earlier exhibition and Zaatari’s ongoing work with Madani and his studio.

It is in this proactive, *circulum* sense that we can appreciate Zaatari's somewhat quizzical description of the work of the Foundation in Lebanon: "it's an archive of the collecting practices that happened in the foundation from 1997 until this day, rather than an archive of photographic practices that come from different parts of the Arab world" (Downey 2014: 5). By this he means that innovations and applications of visual technology inaugurate capacities for the making and storing of images, capacities that both draw from and contribute to circulations of social economy and embodiments of perception. In his archival and curatorial practices he strives to account for social, political, and affective economies in which photographic encounters take place. It thus becomes possible to engage photography as circulations of desires to be photographed; as a local studio enmeshed with economic livelihood; institutionally funded and directed studies for the gathering of knowledge; or else the curatorial practice of archiving, gathering and scattering, photographs.

Zaatari's film and media installation of 2010-2014, [*On Photography, People and Modern Times*](#), focusses on photographs as various, interwoven encounters – social economy, desire and affect, documentation, research, art practice, archiving. *Twenty-Eight Nights and a Poem* is a further outcome of his ongoing work with Madani (a project that began in 1999), whereby his studio is approached as a relay for circulations and initiations of social economies of affect in Saida.

A good example of this circulation is when Madani opened Studio Shehrazade in the 1950s and spent time walking through the streets with his camera, spontaneously taking photographs, and sometimes solicited by people to take photos of them, which they could later retrieve from his shop. People would also visit the Studio to be photographed in socially and sexually transgressive modes of composure, effectively disinhabiting conventional, public modalities of appearance and conduct. In other words, Madani's Studio contributed to circulations of affect in which photography came to be embodied as desires and needs that were valued and acted on. This "landscape of photography," as Zaatari refers to the social embeddedness of Madani's photographic work (and which can include the work of the Arab Image Foundation as well), embodies a "vernacular" of "social attitudes" towards image-making.

V

Technological innovation and application incorporate certain modes of hermeneutic embodiment and sense perception, whereby people proactively inhabit self, circumstance, and

social viability as modalities of exchange. In the very style of his graphic practices, Zaatari, as I have been arguing, is attuned to the medium as resonating sites of mediality. Neither a transparent, value-free medium objectively recording what is assumed to be an unreconstructed real, nor a construction – or, indeed, a deconstruction preoccupied with dismantling the scriptive force of associations – of what comes to be valued as the real, mediality gestures towards the culture of technology as modalities of hermeneutically inhabiting circulations of perception, comportment, representation, image-making, and social exchange.

Photographic circuits, we can say, are both embedded in and embody modalities in which a photograph implicates relational vectors between image and exposure, graph and trace, surface and affect. Such circuits implicate institutional sites and applications in which photographs are invested as carriers of certain hermeneutic affects, patterns of composure, assumptions of the significance of temporality.

I want to conclude by referring to a recent essay by the anthropologists John Bradley, Philip Adgemis, and Luka Haralampou, “‘Why Can’t They Put Their Names?’: Colonial Photography, Repatriation and Social Memory” (2014), which derives from the research program of the Indigenous Centre at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia. The writers focus on photographs of Yanyuwa people taken in 1901-02 by the ethnographers Spencer and Gillen, who produced a number of publications using photography to document what they called “the native tribes of central Australia.” By engaging “memory in an evolving connectivity between the past and present” (2014: 48) Bradley and his co-authors trace and contribute to the shifting significance and hermeneutic embodiment of the photographic images – ultimately transpiring as an epistemological and ethical shift between turn of the twentieth-century ethnological documents of nativity to documents of the practice and application of this ethnology, what they call “colonial ethnography.”

The photographs had been collected and held at the state Museum of Victoria, and in 1981 Bradley was involved in negotiating the “return” of the photographs to Yanyuwa descendants – “the return of an album containing all of the photos taken by Spencer and Gillen” (2014: 48). The notion of “return” suggests that the photographic subject, the addressee of the encounter in which indigeneity is produced and recorded as an alienable image, has moral, if not legally sanctioned propriety over photographs. This moral claim extends to the capacities of the

descendants of the photographic subjects to situate themselves as proactive addressees. I'd like to evoke the reception of the photographs in 1981, as the authors refer:

The photos fascinated people, these were the *li-wankala*, the old people, some naked, some in possum fur pubic coverings, many of them could still be named by the old people of the early 1980s, people cried over their relatives, picked them up and held them to their heads in acknowledgement of the kinship and the country. (2014: 48)

From being a strict medium of generic documentation of what Spencer and Gillen regarded as a people doomed to extinction, the photographs gain a renewed lease of life in which their mediality comes to be inhabited as the production of a community, of lineage encompassing a renewed, proactive practice of ancestry and descendance. While the photographs are engaged as a capacity to document this lineage, they also constitute an imaginary resource. Memory of an event comes to transpire as an event of memory, so that what was there, according to the hermeneutic pattern inhabited and exercised by the "colonial ethnographers," does not exhaust the possibility of being there otherwise.

The temporality of the photographic images, we can say, courses through a tensional matrix in which a photograph circulates and develops attributes of value and significance, embodying patterns of hermeneutic respiration. Bradley and his co-authors regard the photographs as sites of social production – photographic images whose "palimpsestic layers [...] when consumed, exist in an intangible conceptual realm that is open to movement and reengagement" (2014: 69), to encounters with further modes of (dis)inhabiting temporalities, as the medium is inhabited as a mode of mediality.

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