LETTER TO A REFUSING PILOT

AKRAM ZAATARI

THE LEBANESE PAVILION

'Letters To A Refusing Pilot'
at the Lebanese Pavilion,
summer 2013
Akram Zaatari’s haunting film installation at the Lebanese Pavilion this year is one of the highlights of the Biennale. Jareh Das meets curators Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, the team behind the presentation of Zaatari’s ‘Letters To A Refusing Pilot’

Your curatorial practice has a strong emphasis on time and place. I was curious to find out how you engage with artistic projects within the context of the ‘now’ - be it social, political or changing histories. In a time where our experience of time and place has become so accelerated, art can be the perfect antidote to this ‘compression’ - allowing us to take a pause, breathe and take it all in: an unexpected gateway into a different way of reflecting on things, what Kant calls ‘the aesthetic experience’, where rationality does not necessarily have to be the first filter through which you absorb information. Rather, the senses act as a tool of comprehension that is far more vivid and can operate beyond the modalities of temporality and location. This is why our curatorial approach emphasises the aesthetic alongside the cerebral. At the end of the day, an exhibition, while it can read as a book in terms of its logic, it needs to engage you visually and physically. It is not just a thesis.

Could you perhaps share some challenges you have come across in pursuing this approach and how you’ve overcome them?

The structure of the exhibition is built in its essence, on the model of organising the world into coherent classifications. The curator, traditionally a guardian of collections, archives, documents, evaluates, preserves and presents the artwork in a finality that comes with the authority of the museum apparatus: the pedestal, the vitrine, the wall label, the catalogue, etc. What one perceives as an objective final word is often driven by world views that are socially, politically and economically subjective and contested. In our work, we enjoy taking these same mechanisms of visual and literary displays that have been employed by the institution and play with them, so they become a critique of the system in which they usually function.

Letter to a Refusing Pilot’ speaks volumes about subverted histories and the ways in which memory, myth and reality often shift in meaning over time. It’s particularly pertinent to dealing with the problems of defining ‘nation’ in a context (the Venice Biennale), that is all about national identity. The material and physical delineations of a pavilion embody a desire to encapsulate an imagined ‘essence’ within a carefully-constructed shell. A pavilion looks like an interruption, where continuities in geography and
time all of a sudden break in favour of that finality. When addressing this problematic of representation, curating a ‘national pavilion’ can become an act of a revisionist nature, introducing a work that refuses to be a terminal point of the creative process, but rather, a site of navigation, a portal and a generator of thought.

The writing of history and its articulation is always painted by the experience of the present. Akram’s ‘Letter to a Refusing Pilot’ questions the framing of history within a reading that is informed by current political attitudes, that might not allow for individual spaces of interpretation. In that sense, it becomes a critique of the jurisdiction of state law and the way it stilles personal ethics to manifest themselves in the lives of individual citizens. Our decision to present this new work by Akram results from the fact that it operates along an axis of interrogation, that sits within the same vein of criticality that we have in mind for the pavilion itself.

Pulling together all of the different strands of Zaatar’s practice for the first time in a single work, ‘Letter to a Refusing Pilot’ reflects on the complexities, ambiguities, and consequences of refusal as a decisive and generative act. Taking as its title a nod to Albert Camus’s four-part epistolary essay ‘Letters to a German Friend’, the work not only extends Zaatar’s interest in excavated narratives and the circulation of images in times of war, it also raises crucial questions about national representation and perpetual crisis by reviving Camus’s plea, ‘I should like to be able to love my country and still love justice.’

There’s a lot of pressure presenting ambitious works on a grandiose scale for a national pavilion. How have you and the artist dealt with these pressures as well as keeping with the artist’s ethos, considering Zaatar also represented Lebanon in 2007?

It is never about scale, it is always about integrity. Akram is a very sensitive and intelligent artist. He is also an architect. He understands space intuitively and knows how to insert images within a three-dimensional space allowing both the context and the content to inform each other. In 2007, Akram was one of several artists in a group show in Giudecca island. Today, he is the only artist representing Lebanon in a prominent space inside the Arsenals, one of the two main venues of the biennale. Obviously the expectations are higher, but this was not a concern during the process. But, both as curators and the artist, we were primarily interested in the dynamics of the space and how it informed the presentation of the artwork. Akram Zaatar’s ‘Letter to a Refusing Pilot’. Until November 24th, 2013 Arsenale, Calle della Tana 216f