

# Thinking Fits

## Commentary on the Politics and Societies of the Middle East.

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Friday, May 31, 2013

### On Lebanon and Akram Zaatari's Letter to a Refusing Pilot

All countries living on the edge overflow with paradox. Because of war or famine or internecine conflict or fratricide or the hell of it all, humanity gets to showcase its demons only to egg on the angels. Like that, destruction wrestles with creation, lunacy with sobriety, gunfire with poetry.

Like that, Lebanon seems to have been living day in, day out. Twenty years after the supposed end of the civil war, our sectarianism remains as treacherous as it is vulgar. Not from nothing the video parties in Tripoli to watch Qatari or Saudi sponsored Sunni fighters munching on Alawite hearts. Not lost on us either the sight of Hezbollah mothers ululating sons "martyred" while [beating](#) Sunni Syrian heads to the ground. All, of course, courtesy of the regional struggle for power in Syria in which Lebanese, dependable proxies that we are, play the foot soldiers.

And yet, as is the wont of Lebanon, this month alone saw Beirut host the Hay Festival, Ashkal Alwan's Home Works Forum, the Samir Kassir Beirut Festival and the Inaugural Conference of the [Asfari Institute](#) for Civil Society and Citizenship. To cap it all, a group of art patrons has just launched the Lebanese Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, with a singular work by the ever so conceptual (and remarkable) Akram Zaatari.

No need to juxtapose the colliding images for message and meaning. It's a stale technique and, anyway, this is not about the push and pull that wracks our so-called Lebanese identity. These ostensible paradoxes, two decades into this post-war situation, actually beggar a fundamental question: Are our creative energies little more than forced vigor in an otherwise severely impaired nation, or do they, in fact, betray a part of Lebanon no less real than its maladies? In other words, are we part lie, or are we actually an extreme type of Gemini?

Let me go even further: Close to 100 years on, is Lebanon more than a name, more than a space between four borders? Battered, yes, but whole. If it is, then ours is indeed a land of anomalies and absurdities.

If it is not, then we are the inhabitants of countless hamlets simply sharing the same geography and partaking, for convenience, of the same atrociously inefficient and corrupt state bureaucracy. Which would mean that the only lie here is Lebanon, and the only paradox is our reflexive refusal to treat it as such in full view of this stark reality.

Convoluted? Not really.

For years I have maintained that cosmopolitan, freewheeling Beirut floats like a bubble above tragic landscapes; that the blithe pretense is all ours and the dire truth is, say, [Akkar's](#). The contrast was always meant to betray much more than the usual class divides and periphery-center alienations that plague many a country. It meant to question the very right of this tiny patch of Beirut to claim a presence as valid as Lebanon's other selves.

I was wrong. My mistake all along was in assuming, when it came to this argument, that Lebanon may be mad, but it is one and distinct, the actual sum of its many bizarre pieces. And so I thought that if there is an overarching Lebanese paradox, it is simply in the way the genuine accommodates the contrived, or in the way fiction mingles with fact.

It's above my pay grade to critique Akram Zaatari's [Letter to a Refusing Pilot](#), but my gratitude to him all the same for nudging me to revisit a matter I had long ago tucked away in the attic of my mind. A conceptual piece, the film shows with almost unbearable grace that all politics is very personal in anguished locales.

It is ironic that Zaatari composed this [Letter](#) for Lebanon's Pavilion, because it flouts all boundaries as it looks back and inward. The high school, which his father ran and which an Israeli pilot refused to bomb in 1982, only to be brought down by another, is the bond that ties the narrative even as it deconstructs it.



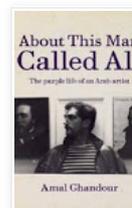
#### About Me



#### Thinking Fits

In a nutshell: BSFS Georgetown University, MS Stanford University, 16 years in research and communication strategy, Author of [About This Man Called Ali](#), published in 2009, Base: Beirut  
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#### About this Man Called Ali



By Amal Ghandour

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 People disobeying orders on contested terrains.

These are the Letter's frames.

It's not surprising that Zaatari's quest holds fast onto Albert Camus', "I should like to be able to love my country and still love justice."

Do we not love Lebanon when we love the justice of letting her go?

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Posted by Thinking Fits at 7:26 AM



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 **Maya said...**

Your article tugs at the heart Amal. Most of us are incapable of being rational when it comes to Lebanon. Not sure I for one will ever be ready to let go...

[June 1, 2013 at 12:18 AM](#)

**Anonymous said...**

Succinctly put: I was struggling with the words...yes it is an emotional subject.  
 Bravo, Amal, on a poignant and thought-provoking piece.  
 Mishka

[June 1, 2013 at 2:53 AM](#)

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