

## **Interview with Ziad Antar by Fatos Ustek**

<http://www.zenithfoundation.com/issue-1/fatos-ustek-interviews-ziad-antar/>

### **How long have you been living in France?**

I moved to Paris in 2001 and have been visiting Beirut very regularly (he recently started to go back often- with the change meaning shifts). In a way I could say I am driven by a sense of belonging which makes me want to spend more time there. I was commissioned to make some documentaries between 2004 and 2006, but my main practices have been video and photography. .

### **What kind of documentaries have you made during your visits to Beirut??**

They are mainly political in nature.

### **In your work, you relate to a wide range of concepts in ways that allow you to work across topics in any context. What is the relationship that binds your works?**

You are quite right. I continuously come across this question about the subject matter of my works. I do not have a specific subject matter, though my main concern is video, the medium. In other words, I am interested in video as a medium and how to produce video as work. In the light of this, I work on ideas around staging music or performance. So my video pieces can be on any given 'subject', whilst the concept of making a video remains very conceptual. For instance: how does one make the video in one sequence and in one shot?

### **Did you study film? What is your interest in investigating video as medium?**

I did two years of cinema studies and then went into 'electronic' art. The cinema education I received was not the best and the school I attended was not really interested in video art. After that I did a residency in Le Pavillon at Palais de Tokyo and École des Beaux Arts de Paris, where I developed my ideas on video making. Actually, my first drive was to make documentaries where I ended up shooting films as very long interviews. At the same time I was developing my video work. I can say that I felt more free in video. The fact that my video works started to be promoted and in demand within French institutions has supported my freedom on working with video, so I've been making very short films since.

### **Are you working on a project now?**

I am working on projects that are not within video. In any case, when I make my videos I do not have them as projects in the sense that I don't try to translate an idea into image. I do not chart projects or at least they are not part of a research. Hence my video works are not outcomes of pre-production processes but of production, of process, where each work is an idea and its creation.

### **In the history of video art I think of a long list of names that have investigated video and film as a medium. Some of those artists have placed restrictions on themselves in order to produce their works, and your way of making a video in one shot in one sequence is also a restriction.**

I place restrictions or constraints because video has become a medium that is widely used by everyone with a camera. Video is a popular kind of image that has positioned art as image. Therefore, it has become more difficult to be creative in this medium. I also relate this situation to photography, though they are two different mediums and have differing realities and contexts. If we look into the history of photography, it started as a very professional and private means of production with an identity. After its mass usage in society, the discussion of photography as art came about. In that sense, I think video is also on a similar track. Hence, as an artist I place restrictions on myself while making work because for me, the necessary or basic conditions -- such as having a camera and a film -- are not enough to start a creative process. The restrictions bring this about. . I shoot a maximum of three minutes and have a minimal post-production phase. For instance, the first films and cameras used by Lumière brothers had a length of the film rolls of two and a half minutes.

**Have you ever taught video or photography, or taken part in workshops or residencies recently?**

No. But in 1999 and 2000 I attended a workshop on film and video taught by Lebanese filmmakers Akram Zaatari and Mahmoud Hojeii entitled *Transit Video Workshop* in Beirut and they were very influential to my later practice.

**What was the workshop like?**

The workshop was formed of artists from the Arab world and was composed of screenings of video art. Beside the informative, theoretical part, we were also handed cameras to make one-minute videos.

**In what ways was this workshop significant to your practice? Did the resulting workshop films involve post-production?**

Editing is a particular phase in and another form of creation. As I have expressed, I prefer to make a single shot of a scene or a sequence of scenes, connecting them with a fade in and fade out, and framing them with the title and credits. For instance, *Tokyo Tonight* (2003) is composed of three sequences added one after another. I am not against editing although I prefer to use minimal editing tools where the process of post-production becomes rather, a simple act of bringing together the main body of work with its frame.

**Your video works vary in their subject matter, and for me it feels like you are dealing with familiarities, such as cooking a lentil dish in Mdardara (year??\_ to a feeling of strangeness in familiar surroundings, such as *Tokyo Tonight* (2003).**

You have a point, especially with the concept of the familiar. I've made around fifteen videos and they are all related to what I have experienced around me. In the sense that, in WA (year???), I filmed my niece and nephew singing. I work with my surroundings first and foremost, and try to translate what I am familiar with. I also enjoy and choose to work with the minimum, in the sense that my productions are low-budget in their making. You could relate this to Arte Povera somehow. And this aspect is an advantage when applying for funding from the production house or in getting support for projects. As you might guess, asking for a 1000 euros for a video work is easier than fifteen thousand. One of the reasons for my working on small scale productions is also their manageability.

**How do you perceive yourself in the international arena?**

I make my practice despite this. Claiming a distinct space due to the fact that I may supposedly come from an "emerging" country or discussions around identity within the international art market, well I try to keep my practice away from these discussions. My interest is how to continue working with video, and my subject matter is not directly related to the usual topics emerging from 'developing' countries, especially with in contemporary art markets and circles.

**Let us focus on one of your video work, *Terres de Pomme de Terre* (2009) (Land Of Potato), which formed part of your recent solo show at the Galerie Almine Rech in Paris. This piece depicts familiar objects, namely potatoes, alongside a composition of strange relations to that objects, namely using the potato as a body building tool rather than a nutritious product. I am wondering about the merging of these two aspects.**

What I tried do in this piece was a little new. It's related to a former series of photographs of potatoes (in different stages of transport, storage, planting, etc.) in Europe in the form of a documentation of the trade of potatoes from one continent to another and the economic and political relationships this produces (in the sense that the potatoes are grown Lebanon are offspring of the seeds bought from the Netherlands, for example). The photography project took place over the course of five years while I was travelling between Northern Europe and Lebanon. The video piece started from a single photograph in that series. The video was shot with an 8mm film, which conceptually is an attempt at going against the concept of photography and how the latter immortalises it the video. I wanted to underline something vital, especially the fact that picking potatoes is mostly cultivated by families and relatives.

Hence, in their nature, farming and agriculture take place within the vicinity of a close group of people that are members of a family. By using 8mm film, I wanted to reflect on the notion of memory and the significant (familial, constitutive) act of working/producing together.

**And what about the bodybuilders, what is their relation in this context?**

For each piece you need to have a margin of some sort and I think it is my tendency to deconstruct the documentary style and its borders through a personal game that causes a shift in its nature. In other words, filming images of potato farming, farmers, the hard labour it is associated with, and so on, on their own would have been a mere document(ary). I wanted to break this with something tough and irrelevant at first sight. I wanted to relate it to the basic means of producing food and to its consumption. Labour is something that is very social and embodied; there is a difference between a potato and a French fry. I answer to this difference with the use of bodybuilders using potatoes for their training.

**In that sense, we can talk about power and the agencies, policies of power.**

The business of agriculture and farming sometimes can be a more profitable one than banking!. I have studied and trained as an agricultural engineer at the American University of Beirut. I also personally believe in the power of agriculture. After my studies, I worked in the fields, as well as working as Akram Zaatari's assistant for a number of his photography and video projects.

**How did you grow interested in art to begin with?**

In the beginning I was interested in video. My family had a high-8 camera, but when I was young I did not have artistic interest and did not know much about it. Before my studies in engineering, I had applied to the arts department and I did not follow up. Hence, my real involvement started when I was still studying through my assistantships to a number of video and filmmakers. That is how I got involved with the Arab Image Foundation, and met Jean-Luc Moulene during his residency in Lebanon. This was quite a significant encounter for me.

**What is your relationship to image, what is an image for you?**

An image is an idea.

Ziad Antar is a Lebanese artist currently living in Paris.

Fatos Ustek is an independent curator and art critic, editor of Nowiswere, currently living in London.