

ADAM BROOMBERG and OLIVER CHANARIN, *ID photographs in Rwanda*

Speak, Memory!

archiving cultural memory

A report from Cairo by Carla Bianpoen

Archives used to be associated with archivists, professionally trained for the act of archiving. But current archivists are *activists* concerned with the human condition and with cultural memory disappearing in situations of war and terror, or undermined by powers of commerce and material gain.

This was evident in the presentations during the 3-day symposium in Cairo organized by Townhouse Gallery, October 28-30, 2010. The title *Speak, Memory* was borrowed from the late Russian author Vladimir Nabokov's autobiography.

For some among the various presenters, like New York based photographer Susan Meiselas and Paris based researcher Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh, their engagement with documentation and alternative archiving had to do with personal compassion. For others like the widely known curator of contemporary art Vasif Khortun and the Cairo based multi media artist Heba Farid, it was a longtime personal passion with the arts that engaged them in collecting and archiving, while Miguel Lopez from Lima/Peru is moved by a passionate desire to keep cultural heritage from being exported to Europe or America.

While issues of ownership, legality, financial resources, independence and political and social restrictions are problems for which no one rule could, as yet, be found, free online information provision and artistic presentations illuminated the discussion on challenge and strategies in the preservation of modern and contemporary cultural and visual art histories.

Political impacts made **Susan Meiselas** wonder whether her publication on the Kurds had played a role in America's attack on Iraq in 2001. Susan Meiselas who is known for her courageous ventures into the battle fields, had entered northern Iraq after the Gulf war, where anti Kurd campaigns had included the destruction of villages. "I went to northern Iraq to photograph the refugees and mass graves left by Saddam Hussein's Anfal campaign against the Kurds. That first trip inspired a six-year search for the images and texts from their past that might shed light on the present. Kurdistan: In the Shadow of History tapped a vein and even as it went to press, images kept arriving by mail. The idea evolved to create www.akaKURDISTAN.com as a safe and anonymous space on the web to share some of the complexities of Kurdish history". Gathering documentation and personal narratives from the scattered Kurd people, as well as accounts by colonial administrators, anthropologists, missionaries, journalists, and others who have traveled to Kurdistan over the last century, she sought to restore a collective memory to a dispossessed people. Yet she admitted that with all her good intentions, the affect of her publication was beyond her control.

Precisely such concerns have withheld **Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh** from making public her research findings or photographs from the refugees camp where she has been engaged since nine years, working on a visual archive, based on the residents of the camp's memory. For a long time she had refused funding from various types of institutions and NGOs, keeping the project running with her own, modest means—until she met the Arab Image Foundation whose support, she gathers, would not arrogate any rights on the photographic collections. A graduate of history, photography and visual anthropology in Paris, Yasmine did research on refugees in Lebanon, but she never meant to be doing that for so long, let alone live in one of the camps. "When I initiated a series of small summer workshops in six Palestinian camps in Lebanon in 2001 with photographer Simon Lourié, I never imagined that we would be going back and forth to the camps for four years, let alone that I would finally decide to live in Burj al-Shamali." Burj al-Shamali is one of the refugee camps in southern Lebanon. Yasmine taught the refugee youth how to make photos, how to look at them, pointing out the many aspects of photography. But rather than wanting to make them skilled, she had only wanted them to have a sense of self. That they eventually desired to show their pictures outside the camp came as a surprise. To prevent misinterpretation, Yasmine was quick to emphasize, however, that those pictures did not represent the camps' situation, rather they expressed the feelings of the photographers. Yasmine Eid Sabbagh's story is that of a growing trust that the refugees



ADAM BROOMBERG and OLIVER CHANARIN
30 NOV 96/St. Roses/play sheet 30-37

Courtesy of Goodman Gallery



ADAM BROOMBERG and OLIVER CHANARIN
96 JULY 01/Sheet 25/St Mary's/exhibition/Andy McDonagh

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Courtesy of Goodman Gallery

ADAM BROOMBERG and OLIVER CHANARIN
Dots

in the camp came to have in her. The camp community, usually hostile to 'outsiders' eventually became open to her, to the point that they entrusted her with their very personal albums. A woman by the name of Hasna entrusted her with her personal collection of photographs, among which were images showing young Hasna unveiled. This attested to a different culture than what the media usually presents. But again, Yasmine Eid Sabbagh is cautious about opening such albums to the public, feeling a personal responsibility, but also facing issues of ownership and legality as Hasna has passed away. Until now, those photographs are in the safe keeping of Yasmine and Hasna's brother. She also received photographs from another camp resident

who wanted her to publicize images of his wife before and after an Israeli attack with napalm gas in 1992, but political sensitivity has kept Yasmine from doing so.

Political sensitivity, though of a different nature, was also an important cause for artist, writer-researcher **Miguel Lopez** of Southern Conceptualism Network, Lima (Peru). The network of 55 researchers—artists, curators, psychoanalysts, art historians, sociologists and activists from Mexico, Peru Ecuador, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, Paraguay, Colombia and Spain that was set up in 2007 aims to create renewed conditions for the

preservation of artists archives and/or documentation of political events dismissed by hegemonic readings and recent historiographic accounts of so-called Latin American art. Interestingly, the network cooperates with institutes like the Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art and the Reina Sophia in Madrid for their project of Cartographies of their various countries, which constitute a collective work of research regarding the state of the archives and documentation of 'critical' art dating from 1950 in South America. Even more important is their strong resistance to market motions and their protection of valuable artists' archives in Latin America, keeping them within their country and preventing them from being sold to collectors/musea in Europe and the United States. They, for instance, decided to establish a public center of documentation in Montevideo, Uruguay for the personal archives of Clemente Padin—a proponent of experimental poetry and a member of the Network—when collectors started insistent bidding.

The Arab Image Foundation, of which **Negar Azimi** is a founding member, is among the most serious actors of preserving and studying photography and other related visual material from the Middle East, North Africa and the Arab Diaspora. Established in Beirut in 1997,

The first photograph taken with the camera that Rachid Abou Kharoub bought at studio Darwish in Tyre, and that Hasna Abou Kharoub inherited after Rachid was killed in 1978. Most of the images that compose the collection of Hasna Abou Kharoub were taken with this camera. Tyre, 1975. Mahmood Hamad or the photographer Darwish. Collection: Hasna Abu Kharoub

Celine Condorelli



▲ ▼
CELINE CONDORELLI, *The series of Departure*

Carla Bianpoen



© Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh/ Ismail Suleiman al-Mohamad



▲ The teacher Ismail al-Mohamad with his students at Sarafand school. Burj al-Shamali camp, ca 1968. Al-Haj Houssein Al-Samra /Studio Al-Janoub. Collection: Ismail Suleiman al-Mohamad

© Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh/ Abdulrahim Abou Kharoub





Different from political-inspired initiatives are those with a special focus on modern and contemporary art such as the Garanti Contemporary Art Center in Istanbul, where widely known curator of contemporary art and founder of various art initiatives **Vasif Kortun**, has focused on acquiring private collections and archives over the past decade, digitizing them and making them accessible online. A merge of the formal Platform, with Garanti Kultur Inc's Garanti Gallery and the Ottoman Bank Archives and Research Center is producing a remodeled and renamed institution to be opened in spring 2011. Benefiting from a fully accessible and public library of more than 30,000 publications, an archive of documents and products by architects and designers, visual artists files and data on the local-economic history makes it a comprehensive undertaking.

Similarly, Art has been the focus of Southeast Asian private archives like the Hong Kong based Asian Art Archive and the Jogja based Indoensian Art Archive. **Farah Wardani** spoke about the Yogyakarta-based Indonesian Art Archive which some 15 years ago started as the Cemeti Art Foundation founded by well known couple Mella Jaarsma and Ninditiyo Adipurnomo. Renamed in 2007, Farah led IVAA to become a fully digitalized online information hub on modern and contemporary visual art and video in Indonesia and the region with an online archive of 13,000 items, while the library on modern and contemporary art is also online.. In Hong Kong, **Claire Hsu** co-founded the Asia Art Archive ten years ago, when Chinese art was all around. Documenting contemporary Asian art, AAA offers an online database, newsletter, and

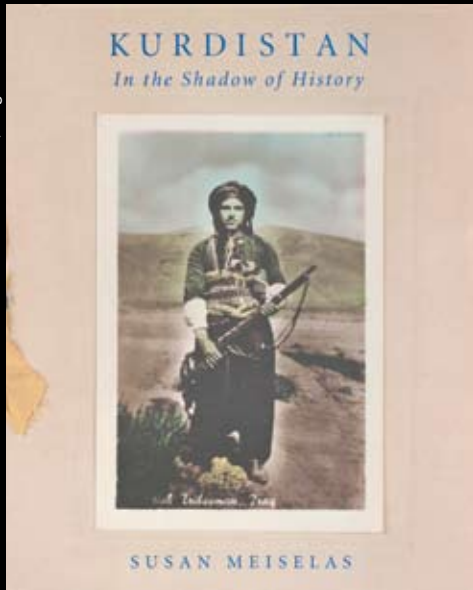


▲ Installation of the archive at the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, Sunderland, designed by Gavin Wade

it is also among the 'oldest' in preservation and research support activities, boasting a collection of 300,000 photographs from mid-nineteenth century onwards. Having a purpose-built cold storage facility reveals their quality. Negar Azimi, a Stanford graduate of political studies, and Harvard PhD candidate is also senior editor of AIF magazine and the Bedoun Library which brings together various books, magazines, journals and other material in a traveling exhibition that has been launched in Abu Dhabi, and has traveled to Beijing New York, and Cairo.

worldwide listing of events. With 32,000 items, it has become the most important public resource for contemporary Asian art, with research posts in China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea the Philippines, Taiwan and India.

Multi-disciplinary Cairo based artist **Heba Farid** has collected information visual images for over 10 years, while also working on independent multi-disciplinary art, research and documentation on Naiima al-Misriyya, an early 20th century performer of the



phonograph era of Egyptian Arabic music. Realizing the impossibility of handling it on her own, she has digitalized the information and is making it available to the public through the Centre for Documentation of Cultural and Natural Heritage (CultNat).

Fairly new research and alternative

archiving initiatives include the Visual Arts Study Group, that **Kristine Genevive Khouri** and **Rasha Saltri** founded in Beirut in 2008; PAD. MA (Public Access Digital Media), a free online archive initiated by oil21 org, Berlin; the Alternative Law Forum, Bangalore; and

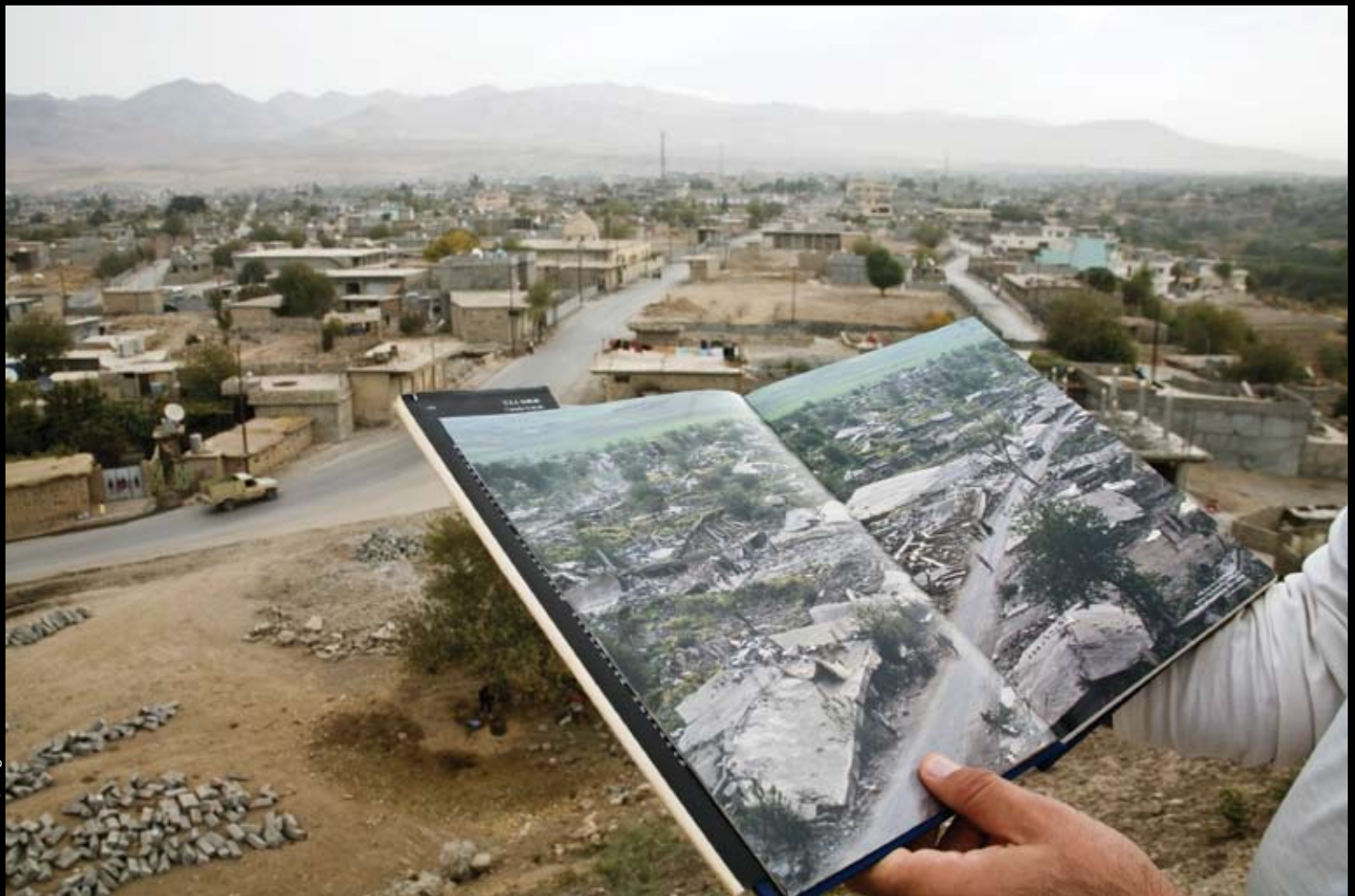
Majlis, Point of View and Chitrakrkhana/CAMP from Bangalore; **Sean Dockery** who presented the AAAARG.Org, said to be an online pirate library integrated with the Public school (a school with no curriculum, accepting students for classes they want to take).

While the issue of independent, private archiving brings along problems about ownership, and personal, political and social sensitivities, a major issue is that of survival and financial limitations. In some cases, 'independence' is trapped into a disguised dependence with hidden agendas of sponsors. Such seemed to be the case with the Downtown Cairo project (Downtown History and Memory Centre) promoted by Oxford University researcher **Lucie Ryzova** and PhD candidate **Hussein Omar**, who wish to 'save' artifacts from market commercialization in the face of gentrification plans for downtown Cairo. However, the project is ironically supported by a real estate company.

But, how trustworthy are archives in fact, particularly when the public has free access? The photographer team **Adam Broomberg** and **Oliver Chanarin** offered a strangely seductive take, bordering on the absurd on documentary photography. Neither artist has had conventional training

▲ SUSAN MEISELAS
Cover of *Kurdistan in the Shadow of History*

▼ SUSAN MEISELAS
Page spread from *Kurdistan: In the Shadow of History* (1997), showing *Qala Diza*, 1991, in comparison to *Qala Diza*, 2007, Northern Iraq, November 2007





Bidoun Library exhibition at
Townhouse Gallery Cairo


in photography. Broomberg holds a degree in Sociology and the History of Art and Chanarin in Philosophy and Artificial Intelligence. At the Belfast Exposed, a Photography and Art Center that had for 30 years conducted workshops for amateur photographers, they found that quite a few frames had been obscured, scratched out or removed. As it had been open to the public, many a researcher had made use of it; leaving their marks like scratches, dots, scribbles or colored markers. on parts of the photographs that were highlighted or bordered by previous researchers. There were also areas onto which ink was purposefully spilt or were totally removed from the images, thus evading censorship. But through 'manipulations' Adam and Oliver were able to reveal the images underneath. They deleted the images around the dots or constructed a 'mask' using it in the dark room under the enlarger and laying over photographic paper allowing only a circular area of the image to be exposed. "A lot of our work is not about making images but finding things that are normally not archived but thrown away." A leaf found

on the pavement in Tel Aviv hours after a young Palestinian bomber detonated himself on Nov. 4, 2004, was actually the result of the explosion which propels the leaves from the branches of nearby trees. A row of images of figures over whose heads and shoulders appeared as if marked by 'post-it' signs were in fact photographs of ID photographs in Rwanda which used to be stamped over with their ethnicity before the genocide, and their heads and shoulders clipped off thereafter. Thus Adam and Oliver in fact make one feel the invisible, making the sinister even more chilling than if they had been showing realistic images.

A similar feel emerged when looking at London-based architect and curator **Celine Condorelli's** presentation titled *Il n'y a Plus Rien* (there is nothing left), which revisits Alexandria at during and after it flourished as the most important port for Egypt's homegrown cotton, which was exported to Lancashire refineries. A Nuremberg University visiting professor and PhD candidate in Research Architecture at Goldsmiths, London, Celine Condorelli's poetic and imaginative presentation combines fact and fiction, using flashes on screen of women in black robes—cotton mills—the departure of their primary owners after the revolution in 1956 when the industry was nationalized, and desolate vistas of waves thrown against rocks. *Il n'y a plus Rien*, which is also being shown at the European Biennale Manifesta 8 in Murcia, was more powerful than a realistic account would have been able to evoke, the effect of which lingered on for a long time.

There was also **Barnaby Drabble**, a freelance curator, critic, researcher and lecturer based in Zurich, who packed the hundreds of curatorials he had collected in preparation for his PhD on curating, in a traveling exhibition to various places, leaving the display to the host venue. Among the most unique displays was that hosted by the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, Sunderland, where Gavin Wade

had designed an installation of cardboard sculptures into which visitors literary had to climb to see the texts. Triggering the imagination, the otherwise boring appearance of documents transformed, triggering the excitement of visitors.

The Cairo Symposium, which brought together artists, curators, historians, archivists, collectors and museum professionals, has opened a window on urgent issues relating to recovering the vanishing history of the neglected twentieth century's cultural and artistic movements in the Middle East. Problems abound, with many initiatives still needing creative, innovative and artistic strategies. 

More at
www.thetownhousegallery.com
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