

Short Takes

Earth of Endless Secrets

Akram Zaatari

Portikus, Galerie Sfeir-Semler, and the Beirut Art Center, 2009

Akram Zaatari's *Earth of Endless Secrets* is an artwork, a project, an exhibition, and now a book. Documenting fifteen years of artistic practice, this gorgeously produced publication is neither a retrospective nor a mid-career survey but rather a collection of four carefully composed, exhaustively researched ruminations on a single theme: the complex representation of geographic territories that have been subjected to episodes of occupation and withdrawal. Clustered around four video works, from 1997's *All Is Well on the Border* to 2007's *Nature Morte*, the book explores politically fraught landscapes from the former security zone in South Lebanon to the hotly contested Shebaa Farms. Zaatari's material ranges from objects literally pulled from the ground to interview transcripts, buried letters, cherished snapshots, documentary photographs, and more. Exploring both physical and psychological modes of archeological excavation, Zaatari's works here probe the experiences of men who signed up to fight for a cause when they were teenagers, only to find themselves adrift as adults, their guiding ideologies shattered, their movement in ruins, their cause lost. As such, *Earth of Endless Secrets* pensively probes the relationships between occupation and resistance, narrative and fragmentation, lover and fighter, desire and fear, pursuit and escape, heroism and human frailty.

Kidnapping Mountains

Slavs and Tatars

Bookworks, 2009

Released in tandem with their Network Center for Contemporary Art show, the collective Slavs and Tatars's *Kidnapping Mountains* begins with the Caucasus Mountains and extends throughout Eurasia and beyond, constructing an odd history as fragmented as the regions' inhabitants. *Kidnapping Mountains*, published by Book Works, functions as an expanded catalog of Slavs and Tatars's various strategies of jocular didacticism, including reproductions of their posters, slogans, and songs. The book illustrates the muscular battle of wills involved in the highly contentious staking of a regional identity. Slavs and Tatars inform the more recent history of the 2008 South Ossetia War by culling from the Caucasus regions' ephemeral and perennial histories. They personify the Caucasus Mountains as

the subject of their narrative, using the term "Caucasian" as a battleground, "wresting the immanent complexity of the name from its extinguished usage," through tactics of linguistic and graphic subversions that play between flippancy and dead seriousness.

Grass: Untold Stories

Bahman Maghsoudlou

Mazda Publishers, 2008

Three years after Robert J. Flaherty's seminal anthropological documentary *Nanook of the North*, a trio of American filmmakers, two of whom would continue on to make *King Kong*, took on Iran with a similar naturalist adventurism in the film *Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life*. The disintegration of the Ottoman Empire in the wake of World War I functioned as a conceptual entry point for Merian Cooper, Ernest Schoedsack, and Marguerite Harrison to forge unabashedly into the Middle East, traveling to southern Iran in 1923 to follow the Bakhtiari tribe in an effort to preserve them in celluloid.

Bahman Maghsoudlou comprehensively recounts the making of *Grass* in his book *Grass: Untold Stories*, informing the sparsely documented history of the film with biographical and diaristic information, gleaned from correspondence and autobiographical sources. Beginning with America's entry into World War I, Maghsoudlou reconstructs a temporal narrative of the three filmmakers' world-spanning travels, among which the journey to Iran that produced *Grass* becomes secondary. *Grass: Untold Stories* carries the imperative of an extensive historical document, though it's imbued with the pulp-like nature of two men and a woman following the path of a migratory Iranian tribe with adventurous rather than strictly anthropological motivations. Maghsoudlou compiles a cohesive narrative of early cinematic production follies and 1920s adventurism through Cooper, Schoedsack, and Harrison's wartime and postwar activities, culminating in the production of their overlooked documentary film.

Support Structures

Edited by Céline Condorelli

Sternberg Press, 2009

How much ink has been spilled over the role of those anonymous administrative or curatorial or bureaucratic — or simply ancillary — characters who contribute to the production and exhibition of artwork but never sign their names to it? Not nearly enough, according to *Support Structures*, which bills itself as a manual for those operating in this ill-defined terrain. According to author-editor Céline Condorelli, the book "represents an effort to draft and construct a supporting structure for the creation of support's discourse, to



house other forms of support structures, and to revive... a particular way of engaging in and with subjects in a desire towards emancipation."

That's a lot of "support," you might say. This reviewer had never noticed the gaping hole where a rich discourse should be; Support Structure, the collaborative project leading up to the publication of this book, has been filling in the holes and fleshing out the meaning of the role since 2003. In this age of artists whose production models are often the collective or the factory — and who often do little more than provide concepts, outlines, directives, and supervision — it makes sense for the overlooked technicians and mechanisms that actually fabricate artwork and usher it into the world to garner some critical consideration. *Support Structures* grants them that — and then some. Support, it suggests, is marginalized because doing so reinforces the myth of the autonomous art object.

Besides the introductory texts by Condorelli, the book consists of numerous works — lists, essays, manifestos, rants, complaints — that elucidate and embody the slippery subject. The selections comprise an ambitious, if willfully uneven catalog of what support can be: primers on social practice (Rirkrit Tiravanija), documentation of anti-gentrification street art, a conversation about the meaning and possibilities of humanitarian intervention (Rony Brauman and Eyal Weizman), and a meditation on the position of the frame in the history of painting (Jean-Claude Lebensztejn). "Any attempt at defining support," Condorelli writes, "would entail a position external to the subject, and... there can be no discourse on support, only discourse through support." Here it is.