The first artwork visitors will experience in the Main Gallery is **Dance to the End of Love** (2011), a large scale, four screen video installation presented in the round.

This 22 minute piece is made entirely of YouTube videos created and uploaded before 2011 by young men from countries such as Libya, Yemen, Palestine, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Given YouTube was only founded in 2005 and engagement with the site was initially limited in the region due to bandwidth speeds and access to camera phones, *Dance to the End of Love* captures the early use of the platform in the Arab world. The videos, often fantastical, show individuals with super powers harnessing fireballs and lightning, footage of cars travelling on two wheels, bodybuilding displays and other playful scenes inspired by popular culture. The piece is as much about the collective imagination of young Arabs as it is about the solitude of individuals seeking to connect through electronic devices.

Zaatari is interested in the distinct activities, actions or statements which people choose to share online, and how a shared script begins to emerge through the re-enactment of certain narratives. Once made public, videos circulate among a global community. The footage is often mirrored or re-enacted via a multitude of uploads by new users who refine the script, thus collectively authoring it along the way.

In planning this exhibition *Dance to the End of Love* was the first artwork selected. NAE also commissioned Zaatari to create an entirely new piece. This became **The Script** (2018), an eight minute single screen video piece, located upstairs in the Mezzanine Gallery. For the commission Zaatari proposed a work which continued his observations of online societies and reflected what he perceived to be more recent trends in YouTube video content by practicing Muslims. Potentially a means of countering the misconceptions of the Islamic faith and the rise in Islamophobia fuelled by recent terrorist attacks and other political events, Zaatari observed a new wave of YouTube videos depicting modest, everyday and loving acts often involving faith and family. Of particular note was the recurring footage of fathers fulfilling their duty of salāh (the five daily prayer ritual) whilst their mischievous children attempt to playfully disrupt their concentration.

Rather than using this YouTube footage directly, to create the artwork, Zaatari referenced a selection of videos as source material and developed a storyboard that focussed on the choreography within the clips – the actions, movements and gestures. He has distilled and re-enacted the original footage in order to amplify its iconic potential. In Zaatari's film, the script of praying father and clambering child is first played out in a private domestic space, and then again, on the stage of a theatre. As the film ends, the

static view of the camera finally turns 180 degrees seeking to meet the gaze of future spectators who are represented by multiplying rows of empty theatre seats. The contrast of the two settings within Zaatari's film serves to question why modern society chooses to share such intimate moments with the anonymous and ever expanding online community.

Displayed beyond the Main Gallery is a body of photographs which extend Zaatari's **Studio Practices** project - an ongoing exploration of Studio Shehrazade as a theatre for people's self representations. The images on display were taken by the studio's photographer Hashem el Madani in the 1950s-70s. Here they create a historical backdrop to Zaatari's video works by exploring the posed attitudes of people in Lebanon during the period. To present Madani's photographs as simply context to the video works rather than framed artworks in their own right, Zaatari has transferred them directly on to the bare gallery walls through an image transfer process. While the portraits were initially commissioned by the sitters or their families for personal or domestic purposes, via the reworking and restaging of the images, Zaatari has explored the way photographs acquire different meanings when they are removed from their original context and "displaced into another time, another tradition, another economy"[1]. His ongoing interest in studio photographs lies in what

he describes as their theatrical and aspirational qualities, stating, "most of my work regarding studio photography is about this – how these studios become theatres in which people act. Many times they act out things that they miss or don't have in life – particularly social status"[2].

Collectively, Zaatari's artworks in the exhibition shed light on shifting social trends and recurring patterns of representation across generations, whist also addressing the influence of new technologies on the way we document our lives.

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AKRAM ZAATARI

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THE SCRIPT

Akram Zaatari is an internationally renowned Lebanese artist whose work is tied to researching and studying the photographic record in the context of modern Arab societies. In 1997 he co-founded the Arab Image Foundation, Beirut's leading institution dedicated to the study and preservation of photography in the Middle East, North Africa and the Arab diaspora. For years Zaatari has focussed on the history of Studio Shehrazade (a photography studio that operated in his home town of Saida from 1953 until 2017) and the photographs of its founder, Hashem el Madani.

Through his practice Zaatari seeks to explore people's attitudes while filming or photographing themselves. He is interested in how certain behaviours in front of the camera become trends, and how individuals choose to associate themselves with social class, modern values, or sometimes dominant ideologies. Zaatari considers these "performed identities" as a kind of theatre; first played out in the photographer's studio before cameras were widely available, through to present-day platforms for self-representation such as YouTube and social media. Both these methods of image production – via a photographer in their studio or simply by turning the camera on ourselves - are addressed in this exhibition. Collectively the works on show explore the role of image-making in the process of self-identification.

MAIN & MEZZANINE GALLERIES
13 JULY – 9 SEPTEMBER 2018

1. Quoted in Eva Respini and Ana Janevski, *Interview with the Artist*, April 2013.
2. Zaatari in Ashitha Nagesh, *Reflection in Water: Interview with Akram Zaatari*, Artinfo, November 2013.