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Kabul Good: Cultural Politics of an Endless War

Aug 2015

By [Francesca Recchia](#)

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Artist: Aman Mojadidi “The Rebel Fell”

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Issue 9: Enduring Imperialisms

On a cold afternoon in February 2013, Afghan-American visual artist [Aman Mojadidi](#) and I were drinking bad coffee in the smokers’ room of the old Flower Street Cafe in Kabul. The looming shadows of 2014 were still hanging on the horizon in those days, and uncertainties about the future were a constant ingredient in any discussion in and around Afghanistan.

Our conversation was not exempt from those considerations. The general opinion about what would be in store for Afghanistan was quite divided: many thought that the impending withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) would be disruptive—economically and politically—for the country. Others believed that 2014 would be a seminal year in the history of Afghanistan. Most observers – Afghan and international experts, academics and journalists alike – did not dare making predictions, preferring to keep watching what could only be defined as a situation in constant flux. There was a also concern about financial stability post-withdrawal. With large parts of Afghanistan’s economy still reliant on foreign aid, it was inferred that a lesser international military presence would scare donors away and determine a limited access to foreign money.

“Kabul Good” and the politics of cultural production

Fourteen years into a war that never seems to end, representations of Afghanistan remain narrow and simplistic. Narrative

and visual perspectives are often anchored to timeless stereotypes that reify pre-fabricated images. The tropes of women in burqas or the tendency to indulge on a hopeless status of victimhood are only the most visible among a long list of examples. Looking at Afghanistan in the media, it seems that in a decade and a half, we have learnt little, preferring to confirm what we already ‘knew’. This is a typical symptom of the Orientalist curse: a self-nurturing and self-legitimizing discourse that produces evidence that sustains itself, preserving narrow margins for questions and self-criticism.

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Using these considerations as a critical background, the article looks at representations of Afghanistan and in particular at how its cultural production is funded, reported and interpreted. Drawing on ten years of research on the role that cultural practices play in countries in conflict, in my work I examine spaces of cultural expression and try to unravel international pressures and expectations as well as internal negotiations.

Interpretations of the nature of cultural productions are often bound to questions of language and access. They reinforce a Kabul-centric vision of Afghanistan and an urbanite perception that limits the scope of understanding, only considering what may circulate within the English-speaking elite circles.

As a foreigner who lives in Kabul and works in the cultural domain, I place myself within this contradictory space. In what follows, I will try to question and unpack this problematic dimension of production and representation from the inside. To do so, I argue against what is often defined as “Kabul-good,” a condescending attitude that does not challenge practitioners and condones mediocrity on the ground that “something is better than nothing” in a place like Afghanistan.

A vicious circle of endless beginnings

Aman Mojadidi and I, as practitioners who work in this field, wondered what would be the impact of such a change of scenario if (or rather when) money would stop flowing to support cultural projects. Both of us over the years have been actively involved with the contemporary arts community trying to encourage a mentality of self-reliance and independence. In times of financial crisis – when emergencies are numerous and resources limited – culture is one of those items that quickly slips towards the bottom of the list of priorities. Looking at the past ten years, we noticed a gradual change in attitude towards arts and culture by international organizations. Mojadidi told me that ten years ago: “there was almost a fervor with which art and culture have come into the scope of vision of donors and project-implementing agencies and this was part of the transition of how the international community saw its role here [in Afghanistan].”¹ Arts and culture were used almost instrumentally to “instill ideas of modernity into the cultural fabric of the place.”

Around 2010, in fact, Kabul witnessed an extraordinary booming of ‘contemporary’ cultural events that were heavily fueled by international money. In a country where more than half of the population is below the age of 25,² every initiative seemed to be focused on youth – actually, mostly on the English-speaking, well educated and urban ones as they were within closer reach of the international organizations. Within few years, heavy metal music festivals, street art events, graffiti workshops and everything else along those lines mushroomed in Kabul with grants of hundreds of thousands of dollars. Their existence, however, was meteoric: their promises of radical social transformation lasted for as long as the international media coverage continued. Headlines would often begin with the word despite (e.g. Despite the Taliban, Fashion flourishes in War-riddled Afghanistan) and articles or documentaries would frame every cultural event in opposition to the previous dark ages of the Taliban regime. The narrative was often antagonistic and oppositional, even more so when women were involved – it was almost as if nothing cultural had existed before the western invasion and all credit was due to the generous presence of international organizations. And so it was that in those years, Afghanistan – mostly Kabul, in fact – saw a score of ‘firsts’ appearing at the horizon: the [first female graffiti artist](#), the first [female rapper](#), the first rock band, the first film-makers’ collective. There was even a failed attempt [to teach yoga to the Taliban](#)—inspired by the notion that that yogi Talibs could bring peace to the country.

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The emphasis on novelty as well as on youth and modernization, however, did not bring the much promised change, but instead triggered cultural and generational tensions. Many feared a cultural invasion, and older generations denounced a westernization of mores and ideas. These, however, were unnecessary fear-mongering forecasts that gave too much importance to scattered projects that had little impact—and certainly not any impact that would split society along the lines of traditional and modern.

For Aman Mojadidi, this was clear: “I always use the analogy of the hard dried earth that has had this huge bucket of water dumped on it, that bucket of water being modernization, cultural activities, art, music, internet, English, money... So what happens is that it spreads across the surface of the dry earth very widely, it covers a huge swath of earth, but it does not penetrate at all and it evaporates before it actually gets into the ground and that, I think, is what has happened in Afghanistan over the last decade.”

In general, foreign-funded cultural events were shaped by a NGO mentality where it is all about projects that should work towards capacity building, cater to specific beneficiaries, with clear objectives and defined deliverables; with outcomes to be named in advance and an impact that is easy to measure. Combined with a developmental agenda that is mostly elaborated away from Afghanistan, this attitude determined funding priorities that were concentrated on the start-up phase of projects rather than on the less exciting work of institutionalizing and nurturing what had been already initiated. This has triggered a vicious circle of endless beginnings: it seemed easier to start something new than to consolidate. It was in fact relatively feasible to find money to set up a new cultural center, organize a festival or an exhibition; what was almost impossible was to find financial support to keep paying the rent six months into the launching of any given initiative.

As investing in long-term sustainability seemed not to be a structural decision in the funding pattern, Aman Mojadidi and I were left to wonder what may be the future of cultural production once foreign cash-flow would dry out.

“Funding priorities are certainly going to shift to new places,” Aman Mojadidi told me. “So what is going to be interesting is to see whether arts and culture have legs that are strong enough to stand on their own, after 2014, when foreigners will stop supporting us.”

Burqas and bombs

In the final phase of the withdrawal, I saw an increasingly strategic allocation of resources. As 2014 approached, predictions of instability became a hindrance to long-term thinking, and donors seemed far more interested in using arts and culture to convey social and political messages that made sense to their own governments. Messages, that were packed in subtle, and insidious propaganda, largely intended to demonstrate the great achievements of the Afghanistan occupation. Foreign embassies and UN agencies started promoting “making art with a message.” The “Terms of Reference” were often so narrow that it left almost no margin to spontaneous creative expressions. As it became very difficult to find money for a “generic” art exhibition, funds would be easily available for an exhibition that would showcase young women who would study in an all-female art school and paint (or rather illustrate?) a specific subject. Scores of burqa-clad women started to appear on canvas, painted with cheap, Chinese-made acrylic colors against a background of semi-abstract red patches that would represent blood and violence. Thematic exhibitions suddenly multiplied and cultural events would be commissioned to “make art” in order to fight corruption, celebrate the environment or International Peace Day, promote children’s education or oppose violence against women.

This sort of attitude was pervasive and quickly became unconsciously, and dangerously, internalized. From July to November 2013, I curated the 4th edition of the [Afghan Contemporary Art Prize](#) (ACAP). Out of 160 submissions across the country, ten selected visual artists and photographers took part in an intensive educational program and a mentored period of production that eventually culminated in an exhibition held in [Bagh-e Babur](#) in Kabul. As I was closely following the development of the work of the participants, I realized how deeply engrained the “NGO-ization” of art had become. One of the artists, Mohammed Daud (who was one of the three final winners), made his own paper, washed it with black tea and was working on a series of drawings that were inspired and determined by an extremely complicated set of algorithms. Broadly speaking, the drawings were meant to represent the current condition of the universe and what had become of human beings. The context was that of Afghanistan and the four figures that he was drawing in a cyborg, cartoonish style were all embodiments of the typical western imagination of the miseries of the country: a beggar, a mimed body, a woman in burqa carrying a snotty child, a young man

brandishing what may look like a detonator.

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As the initial idea was quite sophisticated, I was rather surprised by the almost banal nature of those symbolic images. When I asked him about the reasons of his choice, he was adamant about his motivations: “I chose those characters because in this way the foreigners who will come to see the exhibition will understand. These are the kind of things they always ask artists to paint, this is what they want to see.” In the ACAP exhibition I had explicitly asked artists not to use the iconography of burqas or any form of illustrative representation of the ideas they wanted to address as I was hoping to encourage them to exercise subtlety and experiment with different and thoroughly personal forms of expression. Within this conceptual approach, this conversation was certainly an eye-opener.

The politics of small steps

It is now June 2015 and, as I write, the [Afghan Parliament is being assaulted](#). Later on, I learn that the Taliban claims responsibility for the attack. Many of the predictions of instability have proved to be realistic and the deteriorating security situation has triggered even more fears. Several attacks against foreigners over the past year and a half have made international organizations more cautious towards funding public events that may turn into potential soft targets.³ What used to be called the “[Kabubble](#)” has burst. This change in political contingencies has had a serious, and in many respects positive, impact on cultural production.

The lack of indiscriminate international financial backing has inadvertently initiated a quiet and low-key phase of consolidation. Much of the enthusiasm and vibrancy that characterized what was defined by the media as the “Kabul cultural scene” has evaporated and quite a few of the protagonists of that momentous period have left the country. What is on the ground today are seeds that are trying to build solid roots; they are adopting the politics of small steps and often intentionally avoid the media limelight to escape unnecessary attention and focus on whatever is their raison d’être. There are several examples of independent initiatives that invest their own money, time and talents to make their art and cultural activities happen. The range is diverse, but the struggles are similar. Musicians, poets, visual artists are dedicating themselves to build a language that reflects their thoughts and ideas, a language that is proactive rather than responsive to external agendas. As the competition over financial resources has faded, what is emerging is a renewed sense of collaboration that grows and develops at its own time and pace since it has nothing to deliver or demonstrate. Small happenings thrive in the margins and new cultural spaces are reinvented.

Over the past year, I have been collaborating with [Berang](#), an independent artists’ collective, to try and set up a contemporary arts library in Kabul because access to this kind of specialized books is impossible in the city. As there is no money to pay the rent for a dedicated space, the library has been itinerant for some time and it is now hosted by a newly established arts cafe. We intentionally chose to experiment on a new model of accumulation: none of the book has been directly purchased, they have all been donated by friends and supporters from across the world and carried into the country by friends of friends and acquaintances who happened to travel to Kabul. This sort of approach may have been difficult at a point of time when the cash flow was abundant. The lack of money has pushed people to retort to a do-it-yourself mentality that is unexpectedly opening less glamorous, but more genuine and possibly durable spaces of expression.

The contemporary arts library is by no means the only example. When I asked Afghan writer [Mujib Mashal](#) to comment on this conjuncture, he told me that poetry has embodied that sort of space all along: “There is one form of art that I think is less affected by the Western influences of production over the past decade: poetry. Poetry is as vibrant, as central, and as accessible. Partially, perhaps, because it hasn’t been commercialized as much, projectized. It remains something that comes from the heart, shared in small gatherings. There is no money in it, just like the past. But in fact, outlets like Facebook have helped local poets project to wider audiences. It is one form of art I have not heard: ‘I wrote a proposal to this NGO and I am waiting for funding before I produce.’”

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[Francesca Recchia](#) is an independent researcher and writer based in Afghanistan. She is interested in the geopolitical

dimension of cultural processes and in recent years has focused her research on urban transformations and creative practices in countries in conflict. Francesca was the director of the 4th Afghanistan Contemporary Art Prize and is the author of three books [The Little Book of Kabul](#) (with Lorenzo Tugnoli), [Picnic in a Minefield](#) and [Devices for Political Action](#) (with a photo-essay by Leo Novel). She is the director of Caravanserai, a regional cultural festival to be held in Kabul. She tweets at @kiccovich

Footnotes

1. A version of this conversation with Aman Mojadidi was published in Himal Southasian Special Issue Reclaiming Afghanistan, Vol 27 No 1, 2014. [[↗](#)]
2. According to the Index Mundi 2014 [Demographic Profile](#), in Afghanistan children aged **0-14 years are**42 percent of the population and those between **15-24 years are** 22.2 percent. [[↗](#)]
3. From several private conversations with people who work in international organizations that are active in the field of culture, the attack to the [French Cultural Center](#) in Kabul on the 11th of December 2014 emerged as a turning point. A suicide bomber detonated himself during a theater performance and 15 people were injured. [[↗](#)]

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One Response to *Kabul Good: Cultural Politics of an Endless War*



1. [FarhanRupani](#) on Sep 2015 at 6:21 AM

RT @mattaikins: Interesting essay in the latest @TanqeedOrg by @kiccovich on the NGO-ization of Afghanistan’s arts and culture scene. http:...

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