

THE STRANGER

Transmission:

HOST

Guest: Breda Beban

Host: David Cotterrell



THE STRANGER

Transmission: HOST

Guest: Breda Beban

Host: David Cotterrell

ARTWORDSPR
ESS

2009

Published by Artwords Press 2009

ARTWORDSPR
ESS

Artwords Press
65a Rivington Street
London EC2A 3QQ
www.artwordspress.co.uk

Copyright © 2009 Artwords Press
Texts and images© the authors

All rights reserved: No part of this publication may be reproduced, copied or transmitted save with written permission from the publishers or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright Designs and Patents Act, 1988

978-1-906441-18-0

Artwords Press has attempted to contact all copyright holders. If proper acknowledgement has not been made, we ask all copyright holders to contact the publishers

Designed by Alan Rutherford

Printed in Sheffield by Sheffield Hallam University Print Unit

The series *Transmission: Host Chapbooks* is assisted by the
Art and Design Research Centre, Sheffield Hallam University

After returning from Afghanistan for the second time in mid-2008, I was asked on a variety of occasions to offer an 'independent observer's view' of the trauma of front-line field hospitals, the ecological impact of conflict, and the role of NGOs in construction and master planning in transitional environments (amongst other subjects on which I am under-qualified to offer expert analyses). After the novelty of my experiences had been exposed, documented, and discussed, a few journalists, exhibition visitors, and event audience members asked me to try to explain how a tangential and aberrant experience such as that offered to 'War Artists' can be reconciled with a longer-term practice as an artist.

With no great confidence, but with some intuitive feeling, I exclaimed that I had recognised a few parallels. I tend to talk without notes at public events with the inevitable result of periodically stumbling upon latent ideas and learning on-the-hoof a little about the subject that I am attempting to navigate. I had realised, as I tried to recount my journey in a chronological narrative, prompted by my projected photographs and the memory of my scribbled diary, that one of the most profound experiences of advancing forward through the military supply-lines was of a gradual disengagement with any perceivable macro-picture of context.

As I travelled from Brize Norton (in rural Oxfordshire) to the Commando base at Sangin (in the Helmand Province of Afghanistan) my view shifted from a TV, newspaper and Internet informed assumption of global understanding to an increasingly narrow perspective. I last saw television news on 1st November 2007; I had printed out Internet-sourced maps of Helmand, bought a *Lonely Planet* guide to Afghanistan, and attended regional military briefings in Yorkshire. I read a copy of *The Guardian* and then loaded all my worldly camera gear into an army-surplus Bergen and entered the military environment.

When I arrived in Kandahar, twenty-four hours later, I was taken to Regional Command South (RCSouth) where I was guided through maps of the war as understood in the provinces with which the British were principally engaged (Kandahar and Helmand). Mention was made of Kabul in passing (as I had expressed an interest in visiting the city), but it did not appear on the maps and charts posted in the walls of the pre-fabricated hut. I quickly progressed to the desert base of Camp-Bastion (this time by the smaller Hercules transport plane) and was there to be acclimatised to my principal new home, 201 Field Hospital. At 'Prayers' (the morning intelligence briefing) in the tented Hospital Management Cell, our context was unveiled. An annotated and detailed chart covered the table surrounded by senior officers. As well as the familiar battlefields of Kajaki and Sangin, it had the names of places that I had not seen on any of my printed maps, 'Bryce', 'Delhi', 'Dwyer', and 'Inkerman'. The map was centred on our current location and displayed concentric circles emanating from the hospital. No miles were marked—distances were now measured in Chinook flight-times.

As the briefings progressed, I was amazed by the detail. Suicide bombers tailing convoys were described, the location and probability of attacks over the following twelve hours were declared. However, the world beyond forty-minute helicopter flight-time was no longer referenced. The last broadcast news that I had seen included alarming reports of the civil unrest in Pakistan and even the potential for martial law being declared. Pakistan was now close. We heard rumours of problems as the milk supply at breakfast had dried up due to repeated Taliban ambushes on the supply convoys crossing the border.

I decided to try to find a newspaper. Post did come to Bastion. It had to compete for space with ammunition, medical supplies, reinforcements, and military equipment, but it was a recognised priority and would be regularly delivered by the same route that I had been deployed to theatre. But there was a delay, the newspapers all preceded 1st November and merely offered additional commentary on the stories that I had read prior to my arrival.

Two weeks later the papers had begun to address the date of my departure, but I had been unsettled by the claustrophobia of Bastion and the death and injury witnessed at the hospital. I could no longer wait, and begged passage on a Chinook helicopter, first to Lash-Kagar and then onwards to Forward Operating Base (FOB) Sangin. While Lash-Kagar had offered the welcome opportunity to discuss the abstraction of the political challenges to governance and progression with Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) officials, Sangin was a forward base and occupied contested territory in the poppy-growing area. It was populated by 40 Commando's 'Bravo' Company and a mortar team from the Coldstream Guards.

Once again my ambiguous status and rank enabled me to attend



DAVID COTTERRELL, IMAGE FROM *SUPERNUMERARY*, 2008, PHOTOGRAPHIC TRIPTYCH
COURTESY OF DANIELLE ARNAUD CONTEMPORARY ART

intelligence briefings and even *shuras* with local Afghan leaders. The shift in awareness was striking. The briefings still lasted for nearly an hour but the scope had now been reduced. The horizon was no longer forty minutes flight-time but measured by the range of foot patrols. We now knew the names of the Taliban commanders who were camped on the hills around us and were even aware of rumours of rivalries and intrigue amongst them. Within a couple of kilometres we had a vivid detailed mental picture. The rest of the world, Kabul and even Kandahar was now abstracted beyond comprehension.

I remained in Sangin until the end of November, stranded as the helicopters were diverted to support the attack on Musa-Kala. I had to wait until my return to the UK to read news more current than the date of my departure a month earlier. I discovered that Pakistan had not yet descended into chaos after all and only one of the soldiers that I had witnessed being injured had made it into the press-released history of the conflict.

The lens shows us too much, flattening perception and reducing the impact of all information to a common level. We survey and summarise instead of empathising and engaging. Photographic composition offers us a perceived hierarchy of characters and events. We are guided to the dominant narratives through the editing of footage. The digestion of media does not readily support concentration on the more mundane sub-plots hidden beyond the camera's depth of field and edited out of the limited time frame of the bulletin.

Unsurprisingly a short journey such as this results in a feeling of dislocation and disorientation. The uneasy relation between first-hand experience and mediated understanding appears fragmented and false.

When required then to contribute to the canon of mediated knowledge and demonstrate an understanding of truth to a wider audience a clear choice becomes apparent: to offer a contribution with the vocabulary of received secondary experience or to possibly disappoint with a less dramatic view based on my own observations. Perhaps in my case a focus on the dramatic and catastrophic impact of violence on the human body would have been possible and appropriate. This aspect of war was vividly documented in the photographic and written record of my time in the desert operating theatres of Afghanistan. However, while this is the imagery that I recognised as representative in my research prior to submitting an expression of interest to engage with this project, it no longer appeared congruent with the way in which my haunting memories of this short time were framed. The images behind my eyelids were of gore and despair, but the traumatic nature of the memories was not rooted in the inherent shock of these images. The distance that I was feeling from my colleagues, friends, and family on my return to England was due to a memory of the calm, silent, and slow experience of isolation, disorientation, and uncertainty, which I had perceived to pervade the open-ended narratives that begin at the moment of injury. The press images of guns being fired, the protest images of bloody injuries, and the smug ironies of contemporary art statements all failed to offer a form of fellowship with my private demons. They seemed to focus on digestible if unpalatable ideas. Images in the public domain offer satisfaction by reinforcing our sentence-long analyses of conflict; whether jingoistic 'support our boys' or 'down with Bush', the images, works of art, and news items supported unspoken single line captions and could be adopted by disparate audiences.

I chose to deliberately make work that failed to satisfy the desire for drama (either as guilty pleasure or an oppositional exposé). The work was to focus on the mundane, abstracted, and ambiguous experiences that remain un-newsworthy: the frozen, interminable, night-time evacuation flights, the uncertain waiting for casualties, the abstraction of trauma through codified military terminology, and the administrative burden of death and injury. It was interesting that when unveiled, my responses naturally bemused some of the commentators. While weary war correspondents, serving soldiers, recent casualties, veteran doctors and nurses seemed to empathise with the material that I introduced to the public domain, there was a palpable sense of disappointment from the art journalists who had visited the work, seeking a satisfying and definitive response.

Writing in *Art Monthly*, Michael Corris appeared to lament the restraint with which the work addressed (or denied) the emotive potential of the



DAVID COTTERRELL, INSTALLATION VIEW (DETAIL) OF *THEATRE*, 2007, FIVE-CHANNEL LOOPED VIDEO FOR GALLERY (55 MINUTES). COURTESY OF WELLCOME COLLECTION

traumatic first-hand experience. Having had the opportunity to read my diary extracts reprinted in *The Guardian*, he was aware of the material that was potentially available for synthesis into statements for art world consumption. Yet the work presented offered nothing but a bleak and uneventful representation of the period before and after the politically sensitive and personally devastating experience of military injury.

The parallels with my existing practice, identified while cathartically recounting my journey through the casualty chain of Afghanistan in front of a London audience, which initiated this text, were not derived from the extremity of experience, a political critique or a relation to process. The congruity that I felt with a longer-term practice was with a realisation of the consistency of fragmentation between personal and collective narratives. The illusion of linear history has been well explored through the insightful writings of Christopher Hill who, in his re-examination of the records of the English Civil War, acknowledged that a national history could only ever be an illusionary approximation superimposed across disparate local experiences. What I found in Afghanistan was that to immerse oneself in the reality of an experience previously perceived from a macro-view, rather than finding a clearer understanding, is to experience the collapse of the authority of the summary analysis. The reduction of contextual peripheral vision appeared directly proportional to the increasingly vivid primary experience of conflict. The dramas and rationales for policies, campaigns and battles fragmented to become visible only as contradictory, arbitrary

incidents. As empathy was gained with individuals, faith in the ability of history or politics to transmit the rationale for, or the reality of, suffering appeared to dissolve.

This contradiction of the macro- and first-person view is something that I had previously assumed to pervade all experience of politics, urbanisation, and domestic life. I had even developed work to explore the abstraction of planning and urban analyses. Yet, while recognising that summary slogans are unlikely to represent my personal experience of love, life or bereavement, I had still naively consumed the illusionary, comforting, iconic summaries of external abstracted experience offered through broadcast and print media. Although we have all experienced the collapse of prejudice when confronted with the complexity of personal experience, I had unconsciously allowed and accepted a digestible critical response to aspects of life, which I had previously been confident never to have to directly challenge or test.

Breda Beban was my guest for the *Transmission: Host* series of talks, which has mandated this chapbook. My reasons for inviting Breda were selfish, in that although she works in the same institution, I had not had the opportunity to hear her explain the rationale behind elements of her practice. As she spoke with humility and honesty about the complex and dramatic experiences informing works of quiet poetic beauty, I felt privileged to be allowed insight into another artist's exploration of the application of restraint.

The work *Let's Call it Love* offers an abstracted view of a devastating event. The subject of the bombing of Serbia and Montenegro is experienced through the conflict between the irreconcilable imagery of NATO operations, a framed domestic setting, and musical escape. The increasing cacophony of the competing soundtracks transforms the scene into one of foreboding and despair. The fragile construct of the safety of the internal environment becomes dominated by the proximity and juxtaposition of the military archive footage of a bombing run. As the two perceptions merge neither seems sustainable as a discrete perspective. We are not allowed to see beyond a narrow view of a record player in an apartment and are left to assemble the two references. Without peripheral vision, we simply wait for, and imagine, the destructive convergence of narratives.

This limitation of view is applied to other works. *Beautiful Exile* documents five women before, during, and after orgasm. The work is silent, and the emotional and physiological experience is visible only through video portraits of the women's faces. By denying the conventional narrative props of sound and by refusing the camera's explicit general view,



BREDA BEBAN, STILL FROM *LET'S CALL IT LOVE*, 2000, FILM FOR GALLERY, 7 MINS 30 SECS, LOOPEd



BREDA BEBAN, STILL FROM *BEAUTIFUL EXILE*, 2003, FIVE-SCREEN FILM FOR GALLERY, DURATION VARIES

the audience is engaged with a familiar act from an altered perspective. The restraint is not to frustrate, but instead to enable us to watch again. We allow ourselves the luxury of watching. Through the voyeuristic guilt inherent with documentation of sex, the limitation of view and the scale of the confrontation enable us to witness detail and nuance. Breda's work appears to explore the dividend possible when denied the macro-view. Through cropping, editing or simply selection of view, we are required to consider again the given, accepted sub-plots which we had previously believed understood, digested and experienced.

I invited Breda Beban to be my guest soon after viewing her recent work, *The Most Beautiful Woman in Gucha*. It is a stunning celebration of sexuality, youth, and music. The relaxed handheld camera views the encounter between a dancer and her audience. Breda describes the development of the work in an interview with Helen Holtom:

The piece was filmed at a gathering of Romany musicians in Gucha, a small town in Serbia. I went with the intention to listen to the music I love, to dance and to have fun. Filming twenty hours of footage was somehow part of the fun. Then, when I was back in London I was viewing the footage and there it was—a moment of magic created between a dancer and a young drunken man fuelled by the music of a Romany band. I extracted a nineteen-minute unedited segment from the footage and then edited an eight minute long story. When the film is staged in a gallery, a tension is created between the unedited 'documentary' segment and the edited footage which gestures towards a fiction.¹



BREDA BEBAN, STILL FROM *THE MOST BEAUTIFUL WOMAN IN GUCHA*, 2006. TWO-SCREEN FILM FOR GALLERY, DURATION VARIES

The film has an elegant simplicity, but it is not pure documentary. Unlike *Beautiful Exile* the manipulation of view here appears to take place after the act. Rather than simply guide our gaze with the hand-held camera our attention is dictated through the decision-making in post-production. The time-base of the footage slows during the brief exchanges between the two principals. As the video slows, the ambient music shifts to an alternate track, allowing the momentary and fleeting exchanges to transcend the chaos and cacophony of the 'real world' and enter an alternate elevated context. This simple post-production device is obviously a distortion, yet somehow, as we watch this fragmented exchange, the editing decisions appears to render a more accurate, more vivid account of the power of a transitory relationship. Our focus is led and guided to perceive a hierarchy of events and experiences, which might have been lost or at least reduced, through the mechanical time-base of the original footage. In another interview Breda reflects 'the recorded footage didn't really match the memory of the reality as experienced on location'.²

The Kino-Eye has an internal logic, but like the rules of perspective in two-dimensional drawing, does not provide a record of reality or perception, merely an alternate construct of reality. The lens cannot alone offer us a window onto an alternate experience as it promises, but instead offers a shared experience of a virtual world created by the lens.

For me, this had been one of the most profound realisations of my short time in Afghanistan; that despite recognising the aesthetics and contextual references through media familiarity, I had failed to remind

myself that the gradual assumption of knowledge gained from exposure to synthesised reality rarely prepares, or insulates, the viewer for the inevitable contradiction between mediated and primary participation. I had been reminded, during childhood, by my grandfather of the adage that war was mainly boredom, punctuated with brief periods of intensity. However, I had not understood that the undocumented intervals between dramatic events were also dominant and emotionally-charged experiences.

When I returned, I felt that I understood Breda's assertion that in fictionalising the recorded event, she was able to actually focus on the reality of the moment. I had been reassured by Breda's lucid understanding of her own working process, of what we must instinctively feel as artists: that rather than remain satisfied with a synthetic alternative, we need to intervene and challenge our media to attempt to regain the initial experience. By accepting the impossibility of providing an objective macro-view and by considering the limitations of the documentary witness, perhaps we can compensate for the inherent errors of the Kino-Eye, its false narratives and its great illusion of truth.

Notes

1. Extract from web-based feature, 'Helen Holtom talks to artist and curator Breda Beban'. http://www.artrabbit.com/all/features/features/november_2007/bb_interview
2. Extract from web-based article, 'Breda Beban in conversation with Mia Jankowicz'. <http://mijankowicz.wordpress.com/2008/08/17/breda-beban-in-conversation-with-mia-jankowicz/>



Transmission: Host is a series of chapbooks derived from an annual lecture series organised by Fine Art at Sheffield Hallam University. Each week a host invites his or her guest and a critical engagement is assumed. There is an ethics of hospitality; a host has a standard of conduct, and historically, hospitality has been seen as a code, a duty, a virtue, and a law. In 2008–9 we take up the idea of the stranger: 'Stranger' implies one who is not known, but also incorporates the foreigner, or indeed, the odd/eccentric/uncanny. Following Jacques Derrida, the stranger is one who is irreconcilably 'other' to oneself, but with whom one may co-exist without hostility, to whom one must respond and to whom one is responsible. The stranger reminds one of the other at the heart of one's being.

Breda Beban is an artist, curator and a creative producer. Describing life simply and without obvious elaborations, her productions are invested with the profundity of human emotion. Recent exhibitions include: Tate Britain, London; Aline Vidal Galerie, Paris; Visninsrommet USF, Bergen (2008); New Centre for Contemporary Art, Louisville, Kentucky; Nuova Icona, Venice Biennial, Venice; D.U.M.B.O. Art Centre, New York (2007); Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Rijeka, Croatia (2006); National Museum Reina Sofia, Madrid; Museum of Modern Art, New York; and Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb (2005). Since 2005 she has been a curator/creative producer of *imagine art after*, a multi-stage exhibition for gallery and broadcast whose first edition was on show at Tate Britain (Oct 2007–Jan 2008). The *imagine art after* second edition will take place from 2009–2012 in partnership with Tate Britain. Born in Serbia, raised in Macedonia and Croatia, Beban lives and works in London and Sheffield where she is a Professor of Visual Arts at Sheffield Hallam University.

David Cotterrell is an installation artist working across media including video, audio, interactive media, artificial intelligence, device control, and hybrid technology. His work has been commissioned and exhibited in North America, Europe and the Far East, in gallery spaces, museums, and the public realm. Recent exhibitions include: 'Eastern Standard: Western Artists in China' at MASS MoCA, Massachusetts; 'Map Games' at the Today Museum of Modern Art, Beijing and Birmingham City Art Gallery; and 'War and Medicine' at the Wellcome Collection, London and the Deutsches Hygiene Museum, Dresden. He has been a consultant to strategic masterplans, cultural and public art policy for urban regeneration, healthcare and growth areas. He is represented by Danielle Arnaud contemporary art, London, and is Professor of Fine Art at Sheffield Hallam University.