

# Art in the danger zone

Artists are providing new perspectives on the subject of war, says RSA head of arts **Michaela Crimmin** as she explores the history of art and conflict and introduces artist **David Cotterrell's** RSA residency in Kabul. The accompanying photo essay is a result of his recent stay with British troops in Afghanistan

Our Western culture divides us into clear roles: a government minister in charge of work and pensions; a road sweeper responsible for a locality; a lawyer defending a particular case. There are few job specifications which are broad – sometimes the privilege of a journalist or an academic for example. But it is an artist's singular right to choose their subject, to decide on the breadth of their sweep, and to determine the intensity of their gaze. They are entirely free to interpret what they see and experience. In a democracy no one can question their independence.

This is an extraordinarily privileged position. We, who are not artists, can invite artists to address a context or an issue. We can be their paymaster but we cannot direct the outcomes. Sometimes the results can be unsettling, obscure or surprising. At best they give us fresh insights, new perspectives. So what is it that an artist in their unique role brings to the subject of war, to the sharp end of the paradox of conflict – the human condition at its most appalling and its most heroic?

The historical results of artists' engagement with the subject are part of our lives, and naturally show us all the diversity that you would expect of art. Think of the examples back through civilisations: memorials in the streets and squares across the world; great poetry and plays; music and dance; films, all drawing on war as their central themes. Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Wagner's mighty Ring cycle, Goya's *Los Fusilamientos del 3 de Mayo* (The Shootings of May 3rd) in the Prado, Madrid. Most public statuary is commemorative, leaving the horrors of war





Feature/Art and conflict



largely unsaid. A notable exception is Charles Sergeant Jagger's extraordinary Royal Artillery Memorial at Hyde Park Corner in London. The artist had reportedly been a very promising student at the Royal College of Art but abandoned the course to serve at Gallipoli in 1914 and then in Flanders. Wounded in both and having experienced the horror of gas attacks, Jagger, unlike most artists now depicting war, was informed by his experience as an active soldier.

The memorial, a direct commission by the regiment and unveiled in 1925, commemorates the 49,000 men of the Royal Artillery who died during the First World War. Jagger gives us four bronze figures – a shell carrier, an officer, a driver and a dead soldier; a series of reliefs at the base of the monument and a life-size howitzer gun carved from Portland stone.

This is a memorial that warrants more than a drive past. It is extraordinarily powerful and innovative in its approach for its period. It portrays the suffering as well as the glory of war, particularly in the body which lies almost completely shrouded by a very practical and very ordinary army coat. This covering pulls us up shockingly short yet in no way diminishes the subject. Jagger quotes a line on the plinth from Shakespeare's

### Interactive

You can see an exclusive video interview with artist David Cotterrell on the *Journal's* website. He describes the moral dilemmas he faced in travelling to Afghanistan, how the experience has affected his art practice and looks forward to his RSA residency in Kabul; visit [www.theRSAorg/journal](http://www.theRSAorg/journal). For more on Arts & Ecology, go to [www.theRSA.org/arts](http://www.theRSA.org/arts)

*Henry V*, "Here was a Royal fellowship of death". Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington in 1982 goes further in its focus on the devastating price of war. An extremely austere black granite tapering wall is inscribed with the names of each one of the 58,000 soldiers killed or missing in Vietnam. Lin won a public competition when she was still a student with her idea, which incorporated the symbol of a wound, an opening in the ground.

Artists' interpretations are frequently unwelcome. Jagger's memorial was criticised for being too explicit when first unveiled. Lin's caused such a furore that the artist had to appear before the American Congress. The outcome was a second commission to respond to a public who wanted an interpretation which was more dramatically heroic. So now there is an alternative – a conventional bronze statue of a group of soldiers running forwards eagerly into battle. A sculpture which is depressingly vapid, wholly devoid of the ambiguity and layers of potential interpretation that is essential in a great work.

Art has the capacity to take us towards a more genuine understanding of the realities of war – particularly difficult to portray in the public domain – and to engage us in a far deeper relationship with its complexities. John Berger celebrates this in his book *The Shape of a Pocket*. Our world, he says, is full of essentially false representations which so reassuringly surround us – the bombardment of advertisements and those happy, perfect, fulfilled beings. Berger suggests that it is artists who can hold our attention and who supply us with truths which are necessarily uncomfortable and unsettling by comparison.

Twenty-five years on from the installation of Maya Lin's memorial, artists are certainly demonstrating their capacity to be discomfiting, with conflict becoming the preferred subject matter of an increasing number of artworks. It was unavoidable in last year's Venice Biennale, and an entire exhibition in California early this year took a vehemently anti-war stance, the

IMAGES: DAVID COTTERRELL/WELLCOME TRUST

## "Art has the capacity to take us towards an understanding of the realities of war"

revival of a strong pacifist position. Curated by two artists who spoke at the launch of RSA Arts & Ecology, Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, it was entitled *Apocalypse Now*. Many of the artworks, in a wide range of media, were deliberately conceived to repel the visitor. In addressing the connection between art and war, the exhibition looked at the aesthetic of horror and art that glorifies war versus the art of protest.

The work of American artist Thomas Hirschhorn is an example of this renewed potency and urgency in artists' engagement with war. Stone, bronze and oil paint are now often giving way to more prosaic and ephemeral media. His exhibition *Superficial Engagement* included hundreds of internet and magazine pictures of people literally blown to pieces, with thousands of nails incorporated into the work. As a viewer, there is no possibility of a neutral response.

Jake and Dinos Chapman used toy soldiers in an installation under Goya's title of *The Disasters of War*, first shown at the Royal Academy. The viewer is lured into scenes very far from comfortable childhood. The figures have been brutalised and we are given a version of hell. Goya's etchings, that had been an inspiration for this first work, become part of the Chapmans' later additions to their series on war. The original etchings, which were considered too appalling to be made public for more than three decades after Goya's death, are incorporated in their work. As we know only too well, there is no shortage of subject matter for artists in this area. Conflict continues across the world – from Sudan to Kenya, from Iraq to Afghanistan. The results of war are

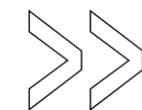
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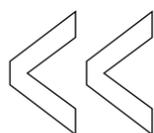
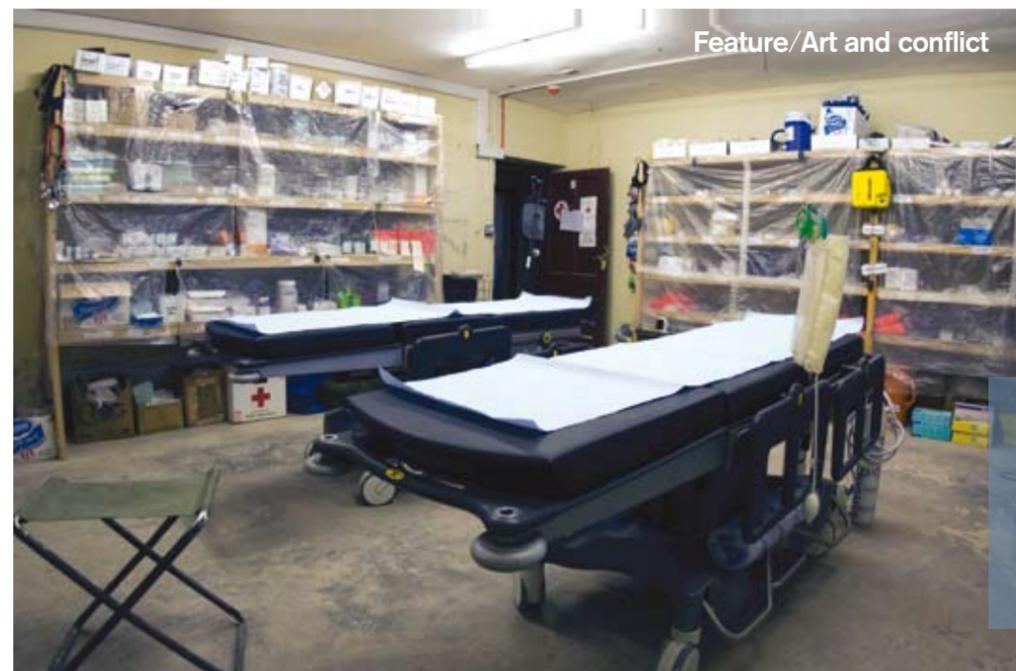
as poignant as Jagger and Lin imply, as catastrophic in human terms as Goya, Hirschhorn and Jake and Dinos Chapman so brilliantly depict. And war is also doing increasingly calamitous damage to the planet. Which is where the interface between art and conflict relates to Arts & Ecology, the project the RSA is running as a partnership with Arts Council England. This was set up as a catalyst for the imaginations, inspirations and insights of artists to global ecological change, particularly in the face of our own denial and limited action.

Arts & Ecology's subject matter is the complex and inter-related challenges the world is facing: the causes and effects of global warming, among them diminishing biodiversity, rising population and the growing mountain of waste and extensive pollution. As the world's natural resources are being used up, conflict is increasingly related to its environment in new ways – not only in its impact but also its generation. The predictions are that major wars will be fought in the future over water.

We therefore agreed that Arts & Ecology should address conflict, and in a specific locality. A partnership was forged with the Turquoise Mountain Foundation in Afghanistan, a country suffering the social and environmental impact of so many years of fighting.

The Foundation is a not-for-profit organisation investing in the country's cultural heritage, its landscape and its opportunities – working for economic, social and urban regeneration. They agreed to provide local support and a temporary home to an artist in April and May of this year, and together we went through a process of selection to find an artist who would respond positively to a difficult and very broad brief. We wanted to find





an artist who would look further than at the obvious heroism and the palpable horror of war. The result is an invitation to David Cotterrell, an artist whose each work responds to a specific environment, using a range of media. His approach has centred on stories, on attitudes and on particular communities. Various analytical, personal, political, ideological, his work at heart is intended to provoke discussion. Increasingly he has become very concerned with the environmental effects of global warming as well as the impact of war on people.

It is particularly fortuitous that the Wellcome Trust commissioned Cotterrell to go to Helmand Province with the British Army's support at the end of last year. He has therefore already had an intense experience to build on. The Trust is the world's largest medical research charity, funding work aiming to improve human and animal well-being. The Trust's public programmes curator, James Peto, strongly believes that engaging artists is a way of demonstrating that science doesn't happen in a vacuum but is part of culture. Like Arts & Ecology, Peto wants to interest more people in ethical issues.

In the adjacent article, we have David Cotterrell's initial impressions and reflections following his time with the army and before he leaves for Kabul. We know that he will bring new insights in the work that he develops and we very much look forward to the exhibition of his resulting work that will be held at the Wellcome Trust later this year. Cotterrell will be speaking at the RSA at a special debate on art and conflict on his return from Afghanistan. Details will be available on the RSA website, together with more detailed information on his residency at the Turquoise Mountain Foundation. ■

### DAVID COTTERRELL: an artist's view

This is my first attempt to rationalise an immersive and humbling experience. For the majority of November 2007, I lived in locations in the Helmand province of southern Afghanistan among doctors, soldiers and marines. I was hosted by the Royal Army Medical Corps and later by the Royal Marine Commandos. I had been sent to this strange and contradictory environment with the support of the Wellcome Trust with an agenda to explore the ethically challenging relationship between war and medicine.

Stepping off the back of a Hercules into the red glow of the dust-covered sunset at Camp Bastion, I had never been further out of my own context. I had never been a witness to a serious medical operation, and before my pre-deployment training a few weeks earlier, I had never visited a military base. Armed with a Geneva Convention civilian ID card, body armour, gas mask and dog-tags, I had wandered naively into an environment that had both a simplicity and complexity that soon contradicted all of my confident, clichéd assumptions.

My role was unusual. While there is a British tradition of war artists, they are rare enough that each one has to renegotiate and define their relationship to the military. I had two initial challenges: I needed to explain my role to the community that I was temporarily part of, and perhaps more difficult, I had to

justify and understand the rationale for my presence to myself. There is an accepted model for journalists, historians and military photographers in a warzone. Their presence is mediated and managed through established military structures. My presence was facilitated through the tolerance, understanding and goodwill of doctors and soldiers of the field hospital regiment. As an artist, my only justification for travelling to an environment such as this is to try to provide an independent and critical response. In such an immersive context, it is hard to be confident that this objectivity is maintained.

I adopted the role of photographer for two reasons. It allowed me to legitimately record the unfamiliar and at times incomprehensible experience in the hope of an abstracted future moment of analysis. However, the main reason was that it provided those around me with an explanation for my presence. As a photographer, I had a visible role and when surrounded by a community where everyone had a clear function, this was essential. I also felt compelled for the first time to write a journal. It is a rambling confessional, documenting my guilt and anxiety over my role. As my memory begins to attempt to simplify my journey into a coherent linear narrative, this detailed evidence enables a continuing reminder of the moral and emotional complexity of the experience. I was an observer and a participant, neither military or civilian. While I never carried or

fired a weapon, I am complicit in the Afghan conflict through my presence. I have returned to England with a surprising shift in my perception of the military. I have seen some of the diversity that is encompassed within an apparently uniform community. I saw great compassion, humour and kindness. I saw haunting images of the brutal results of war on soldiers, insurgents and civilians.

Despite travelling to areas near the frontline such as Sangin, where the boundary between military and civilian territory is measured in yards rather than miles, I realised that what I was being allowed a privileged insight into was not a nation, but an institution. I saw Afghanistan across sandbags and wire, through the filter of military conflict. It was hard to be confident that I was ever seeing beyond the filter. The results of my journey are still to be clarified. The photographs may develop a life of their own. A small selection will soon return to Afghanistan by military transport. A more reflective response is being developed for exhibition near the end of this year at the Wellcome galleries. I feel a conflict between my loyalty to those who trusted me enough to allow me to witness their suffering and their work, and my continuing desire to feel confident that as an artist, I have managed to retain my autonomy.

This is a great motivation for my return to Afghanistan. I am grateful for the rare opportunity provided by the RSA to reflect on this beguiling and beautiful country from an



alternate perspective. The framework of this residency within the RSA's Arts & Ecology programme presents particular intellectual challenges. Sustainability as a term has a very specific interpretation in areas enduring conflict. It was striking when living in military outposts how the amount of material consumed and waste produced became extremely apparent. When food is delivered by helicopter and water by convoy, the supply network that is discreetly embedded within more stable societies is exposed and the volume of imported material needed to maintain life can be witnessed.

I have an interest in developing new dialogues that may act as counterpoints to my existing understanding of Afghanistan. I aspire to understand the privileges and limitations inherent in my experience with the military and to reflect the contradictions possible within a nation experiencing both bloody conflict and embryonic reconstruction.

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