David Cotterrell: RSA: Arts and Ecology International

Awarding Body: Turquoise Mountain Foundation, Kabul, Afghanistan
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Research residency

The proposal to return to Afghanistan with the support of the RSA and the Turquoise Mountain Foundation presented an unusual and welcome opportunity to re-visit a country that I have a particularly focused understanding of. Having spent the month of November 2007, viewing the country from the narrow lens of military conflict, I was very grateful for the possibility of tempering this specific and at times harrowing view with an alternate perspective of a broader context.

With the Royal Army Medical Corps, I spent nearly a month witnessing the immediate aftermath of conflict. I saw a narrow vision of a nation through the abstraction of violent injuries, tactical briefings and frontline bases. Occasionally insights into a greater picture emerged. I felt as I witnessed the Helmand Executive Group in Lashkagar, planning for periods of years rather than months, that progression might be possible beyond the skirmishing aggression of guerilla war. The CIMIC projects (standing in for future government and NGO) appeared to represent an embryonic precursor to more considered reconstruction. I saw remote military aid stations treating civilians, insurgents and soldiers, not only injured in the crossfire, but also acting as substitutes for local primary care. I was present at Shuras (struggling to move on from immediate compensation issues to broader aspirations of medium-term reconstruction), which were beginning to replicate a fragile form of local government. Ironically, in was in Sangin in the poppy-growing area of the front-line that I began to feel some sense of optimism.

Kabul, I was assured by the young Afghans that I met in Helmand, is another country. When traveling with any military organisation, it is difficult to be confident that your experience of an environment has more to do with the geographic context than with the institutional culture. At times my experience of Afghanistan appeared totally without reference: helicopters carrying wounded; military camps feeding soldiers generic dried rations; men carrying imported equipment and wearing foreign uniforms, are features of war, not necessarily of Afghanistan.

In Britain, for the past fifteen years I have worked in a variety of contexts. While I was initially trained as a painter, my practice has shifted markedly towards an eclectic range of processes and approaches. This transition away from discipline-specific language to a more diverse and at times less-skilled range of tools has been dictated by the challenges of the environments that I have had access to. This pursuance of vocabulary to enable response to issues, communities and contexts has been undertaken in parallel projects occupying museums, galleries and public spaces. My repeated forays into public art in Britain produced unexpected access to other political processes. As a public artist, you are often encouraged to view the local impacts of greater schemes. Often complicit and sometimes critical, the artist is employed as enabler, commentator and observer of social and structural change. I found that I would be invited to work in areas subject to grand ambitions of regeneration and reconstruction. Areas that may have suffered industrial, economic and social decline were frequently the canvases for artistic intervention. While artists may enter these environments with a level of naivety, it is hard not to become aware of the relationship between local impact and the more abstracted political processes, which seek to address (or may have caused) these first-person experiences. Over the last five years I have sought to understand more of the relationship between macro planning and communities. I have worked as a critical consultant to government strategic plans, developer-led investment and architectural projects. The curious relationship between the virtual view of the map-based planner and the immediate experience of residents has become a theme in my practice. I recently traveled to China to consider the challenges of predicting the impact of

urbanization on a vast scale and continue to work closely with architects to investigate the complexity of understanding the impact of long-term policy on local environments, communities and individuals.

Turquoise Mountain offers a fascinating vantage point. Immersed in a current situation, but with longer term and broader goals, the Foundation is active on several levels. I was grateful for the opportunity to have some access to the face-to-face work of the organisation in supporting and nurturing the skills and talents of local individuals. I also feel privileged to gain some insight into intellectual challenges that the Foundation is engaged with, in visualising a future within a transitional context.

The framework of this residency within the RSAs Arts and 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 by a community 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 and measured. War interrupts agriculture, industry, commerce and planning. Survival is achieved through emergency responses rather than strategic incremental approaches to infrastructure. In a contradictory way it appeared that, as life appears to become cheaper, survival becomes more expensive. War seems to promote a concentration on the short-term. The struggle for safety and immediate security can make longer-term development, consequences and repercussions appear abstracted and unattainable. However, the necessity for a transition toward a more stable and more sustainable existence is evident. Viable systems of healthcare, education, economy, security and environmental stewardship must envelope the courage and commitment of individuals, if their personal sacrifice and dedication is not to be wasted. The Turquoise Mountain Foundation appears to be one of the organisations that seek to embrace this challenge.

I have an interest in developing new dialogues that may act as counterpoints to my existing understanding of Afghanistan. This is not to say that an oppositional voice is required or sought after rather, that the same attempt to develop a subjective, personal and sensitive approach which was applied to my investigations with the military in November in Southern Afghanistan would be applied to this new visit to the North of the country and the encounters that arose from it.

I am very concerned about the possibility of over-simplifying a complex situation with an outsiders nave understanding of a foreign country, in which the visitor neither speaks the language nor is fully integrated in the society. What I attempted to develop during my period with Turquoise Mountain was a personal experience of the situations and people I encountered, through the lens of my own understanding of Britain and the other countries I have been fortunate enough to visit, hosted by local people and others who have a grounded and real interest in the region.

Text by David Cotterrell, derived from original residency proposal.

Panjshir Valley Credit: David Cotterrell (2008)