



Adrian Villar Rojas (Argentina), *Return of the World*, 2012

Nilofur Farrukh

Alighiero-Boetti (Turin), *Mappa*, 147X228cm, 1971

'.....the second form of colonization, the one which at least six generations of the Third World have learnt to view as a prerequisite for their liberation. This colonialism colonizes minds in addition to bodies and it releases forces within the colonized societies to alter their cultural priorities once and for all. In the process, it helps generalize the concept of the modern West from a geographical and temporal entity to a psychological category. The West is now everywhere, within the West and outside; in structures and in minds.we are concerned with a colonialism which survives the demise of empires.'

Ashis Nandy (1)



The Fridericianum, since 1955, the main exhibition venue of Documenta

Thomas Bayrle (Germany), *Airplane*, Photomontage, 800 x 1,340 cm, 1982-83



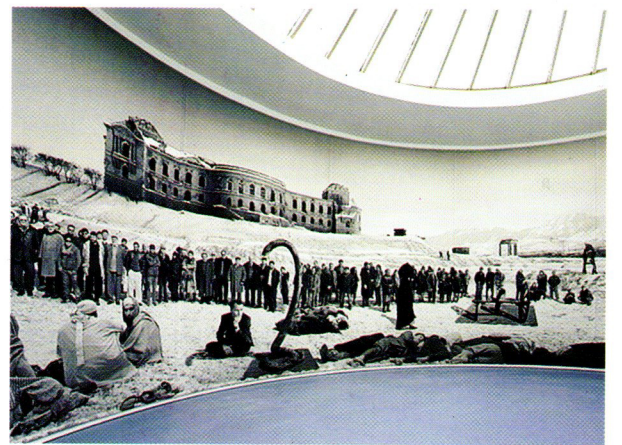
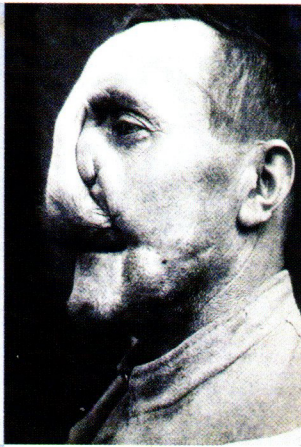
The Incomplete, as a Strategy of Misrepresentation:
A Reading of

Documenta 13



Kader Attia, *The Repair from Occident to Extra Occidental Cultures*, slide show projection and genuine artifacts from Africa, dimensions variable, 2012

Selective memory, which has always been a strategy of the privileged discourse, is central to Kader Attia's *'The Repair from Occident to Extra Occidental Cultures'* (2012). Set up like an anthropological archive with tall shelves and an overwhelming clutter of books and objects, it confronts conflicting dualities from the past that have shaped perceptions of the present. The books nailed and padlocked to the shelves speak of a painful yet persisting relationship with colonial epistemic erasure that defies easy reclamation.



Goshka Macuga (Warsaw), *Of What is Not, That it is Not*, 2012

The 13th edition of Documenta (2012), was dedicated to 'artistic research and forms of imagination that explored commitment, matter, things, embodiment, and active living in connection with, yet not subordinated to theory.' It's Artistic Director Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and her team focused on stage, siege, hope and retreat as points of provocation to connect four locations: Kabul, Alexandria, Kassel and Banff.

My attempt in this article is to look at the curatorial layers of Documenta 13 and offer a critical reading from Pakistan, a place which has a historical, cultural and geographical affinity with Kabul, one of the four chosen locations.

With destruction and Kabul woven into a motif of war (and siege), the Rotunda at Fridericianum, one of the primary venues, offers two significant introductions to Afghanistan. Several figurines of Bactrian Princesses from late third/ early second millennia BC, these serene objects, exquisitely crafted with inlay designs, speak of a gentler history of the region. Current times are represented with a western style landscape with a story of resistance. This work by Mohd Yusuf Asefi, was painted over figurative works of masters in the museum and government offices, with temporary landscapes in watercolor, to save them from destruction by the Taliban regime.

Just a few feet away hang a series of pictures, *'Lee Miller in the bathtub of Hitler's apartment in Munich 1945'*. These were taken shortly after Miller visited the Dachau camps and her presence in the dictator's personal space is unsettling in much the same way as seeing the painted-over artwork by the Afghan artist. Set apart by half a century or so, they evoke deeply embedded memories of resistance to ideological dogma and its destructive power that holds a nation hostage.

Between the ancient past and recent history representing Afghanistan at the Rotunda, there lie many centuries of cultural renaissance that shaped the sensibility of a people that are located at the intersection of Persian, Mongol, Chinese and Indian civilizations. The miniature paintings from Herat, which are emblematic of an intellectually rigorous tradition that heralded idiomatic experiments in visual arts and literature, if exhibited it could have provided a strong reference of its nuanced continuities and rectified the erroneous impression of a cultural void between the archaic represented by the Bactrian statues and Asefi work, an outcome of the recent conflict

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physical perfection as an agenda of power. Selective knowledge used as a device in epistemic violence during the colonial period continues in the way facts are distorted to support stereotypes that fail to convey the entire story.

In her introductory essay, Christov-Bakargiev elaborates: 'The emancipatory potential of thinking in new ways without producing constituted knowledge that is instrumental and easily transformed into negotiable investments could lie in an accord between human and the many forms of non-human intelligences, effects and beliefs, emotions and beliefs, emotions and forms of trust, that can be established among all the life-forms on the planet. This does not indicate less interest in humanity and people, their lives and cultures, their art and imaginations; it is based, instead, on the principle that more potential lies in "becoming with" than in mistrust, fear and competition over resources and possibilities.' (2) 100 notebooks were commissioned along with the dozens of art works which were displayed in institutions and improvised spaces all over Kassel, offering ideas in progress as a challenge to constituted knowledge.

Institutionalized knowledge and its relationship to the book as the receptacle of communal memory cannot be left out of any conversation on siege, hope and retreat as issues of distrust and skepticism are central to societies, particularly those that have experienced long conflicts, extended occupation or oppressive democracies.

When artist Khadim Ali's family fled Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion to take refuge in Pakistan, even during the most

difficult of times his grandfather recited *Shahnama-e- Firdousi*, perhaps the most widely read and recited Persian epic in the region. Afraid to lose the cultural connection after they had lost their land, they held onto it like a lifeline. For the artist it has become the lens through which he views his people's reality. On his return to his homeland, Khadim Ali discovered that the Taliban had appropriated the characters of the *Shahnama* in propaganda songs. The artist's response to this manipulation was the *Rustom* series based on the protagonist, who he transformed into a horned devil haunting the empty Bamiyan caves, which

Documenta site, Kassel, Germany



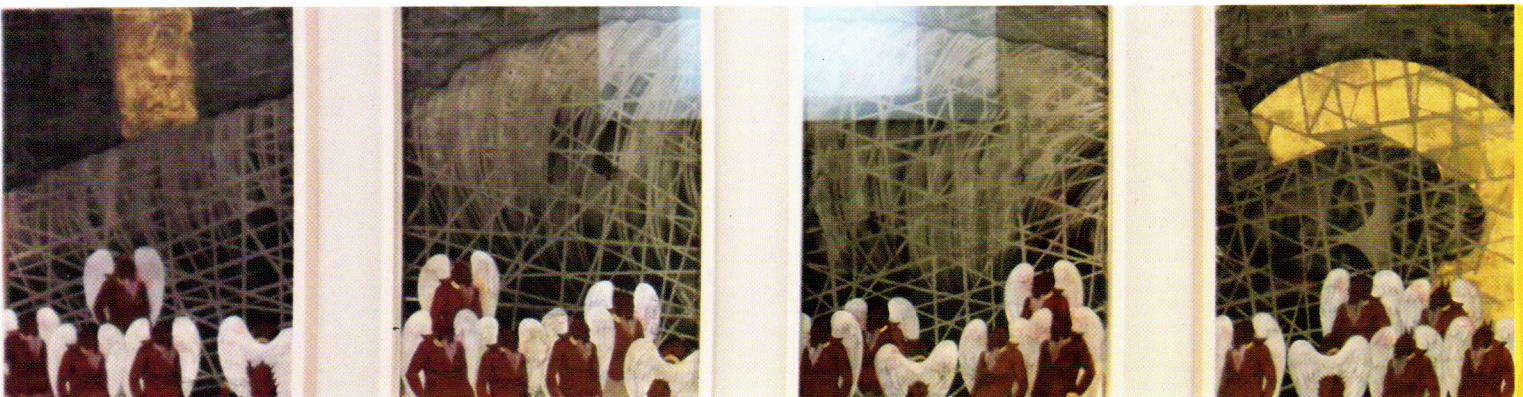
Geoffrey Farmer (Canada), *Leaves of Grass*, cuttings from old issues of Life magazine, 2012

once housed the Buddhas. Another attempt by Khadim Ali to revive and rehabilitate the original spirit of *Shahnama-e-Firdousi* in the memories of the younger generation was to conduct a workshop on story-telling during the Documenta intervention in Bamiyan. Khadim Ali's *'The Hunted Lotus'* which hangs at Neue Galerie in Kassel, an image of a horizontal Buddha with horned Rustom's gathered around it. Painted on handmade *wasli* paper in the miniature painting idiom, it is linked to the art of the book, a collaborative practice between the disciplines of literature, calligraphy and painting. Current media representation of Afghanistan with its focus on violence, extremism and oppression of women will compel most visitors to link it's imagery to war. Yet, another reading of the work is possible: Buddha which even in its fallen state dominates the canvas by dwarfing the 'Rustom devils', and embodies the duality of Afghanistan's reality. The centuries of religious tolerance which led to the conception, building and the long life of the Bamiyan Buddhas and other of more recent violent bigotry that destroyed it, are legacies that co-exist. The Afghan culture which has supported religious plurality for centuries points to an optimistic future.

Constructing stereotypes and misrepresenting history is made possible through erasure and manipulation of

collective memory, Emily Jacir's *'ex libris 2010/2012'* points to knowledge robbed, neglected and lost. This display of printed images taken from a cell phone of book covers and pages of school books, novels, scientific manuals are from the thirty thousand books looted from Palestinian homes by Israelis. The notations on the pages, unlike a library book bear the personalized

Khadim Ali, *The Haunted Lotus* (detail), gouache, ink, and gold leaf on wasli paper, 70 x 54 cm, 2011-2012



Khadim Ali, *The Haunted Lotus*, gouache, ink, and gold leaf on wasli paper, 70 x 54 cm, 2011-2012



Central Asia, 'Bactrian Princesses', circa second millennium BC

link to the owners who too may have faced similar displacement. The artist photographed them from the six thousand books kept in the Jewish National Library in W Jerusalem that bear the misleading label 'abandoned property'. Jacir's artwork as stated in the catalogue 'raises questions regarding repatriation and restitution' of cultural property. Her earlier projects on the objects of the looted and destroyed National Library and Museum in Iraq addressed similar issues. The two museums that became cultural casualties, one in Iraq, which happened on the American watch and the other after the Taliban took over Kabul, remain untold narratives of grand destruction and grand larceny of our time.

Collaboration between un-named stone carvers from Afghanistan and artist Michael Rakowitz creates a room of memories dedicated simultaneously to two bombed sites, Bamyian and Fridercanium in Kassel. On display are partial fragments saved from these locations in the form of charred books, documents, pieces of the statues displayed in tall cabinets like curiosities. To some visitors this may appear an unconvincing connection as the scale of bombing and destruction of the cultural heritage at Kassel was far greater and persistent than the Taliban bomb casualties

at Bamyian which were two cultural artifacts but in which no loss of life took place. On tables in front of the cabinets are displayed masterfully carved stone replicas of classics from Afghanistan and Germany/Europe including some of the earliest Medieval manuscripts that activate a lesser known chapter of history when the exchange of

knowledge, that began several centuries ago flowed from the East along the trade routes. This is manifested in the content and design of Islamic and Chinese manuscripts which strongly influenced Europe's medieval illuminated manuscripts. Paper-making expertise from China too crossed Central Asia into Islamic Spain before reaching Europe to bring about major social revolutions, like the Reformation.

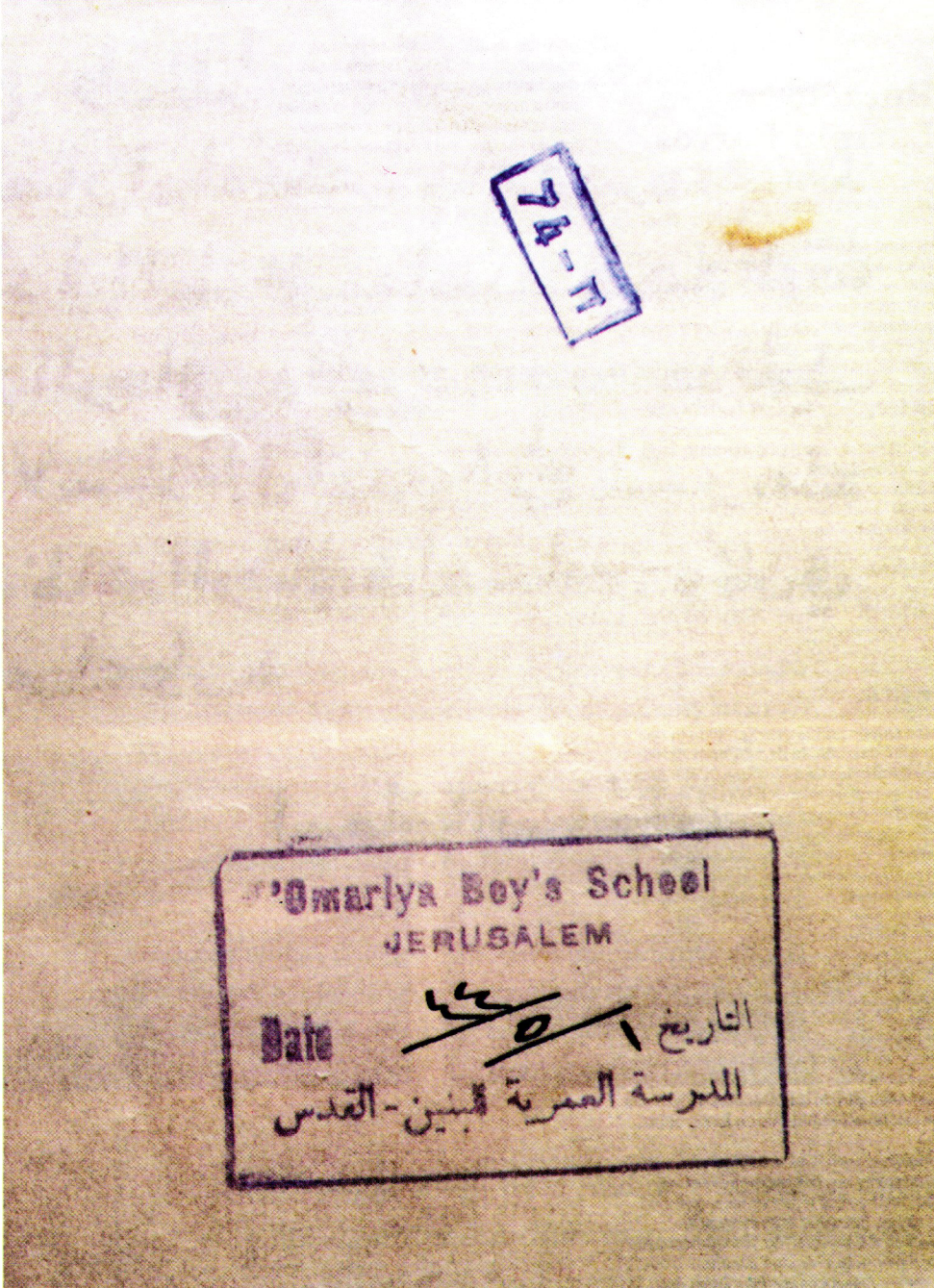
'To disown knowledge is completely different from refusing it as all kinds of totalitarianisms do. To disown knowledge is not an absence, it is not ignorance that is praised here. It is the presence of the undone, of the still possible.' (3)

Withholding knowledge, destroying it and replacing it are various forms of refusing knowledge. The concept of disowning knowledge is a complex one as it requires a deep commitment to openness sans hierarchy, to accept new forms of knowledge without bias, even if the very fundamentals like its production and relationship to people may be completely alien to the dominant discourse.

The Western discourse based on theoretical / institutionalized knowledge is often suspicious of experiential and intuitive ways of knowing that excludes many different kinds of intelligences

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Emily Jacir, ex libris, (Abandoned Property # 3479), 2010-2012. Cell phone photographs by artist.

in the discourse. Experience and received wisdom in many non-Western societies is integral to creativity and its meaning. Cultural knowledge is organic and not bound by theories, but by faith and

continuity therefore it's ever evolving dynamism defies existing methodologies of documentation. This knowledge is embedded in the memory of its exponents which create the inter-generational, inter-disciplinary linkages to enrich the sophisticated yet nebulous creative expressions.

The project of 20th Century Modernity has many critics that have begun to recognize the limits of logic and compartmentalization. To vitalize the discourse, the West has begun to seek out non Western cultural diversity. The problem however lies in the haste with which the appropriation takes place with disregard to the deeper philosophical content. The borrowing is done with the assumption that form can be divorced from its meaning and interpreted through any cultural framework, a position which is both arrogant and disrespectful. The writers of critical text from the West, when knowing and knowingly use Modern theories to interpret art that belongs to a different context, its cultural voice is suppressed, also because Western social theories are not compatible with its sensibility, and the art often comes across as weak and insipid. In her notebook essay Nawal Al Saadwawi titled '*The Day Mubarak Was Tried*', weaves personal history with that of her nation into a response with a multiplicity of layers informed by the writer's experience of living in Egypt under the oppressive dictatorship of Mubarak. It resonates with the complex reality of Post Tahreer Square Egypt, in a way no critical text based on mediated information can communicate.

Artists from Non Western communities that exhibit globally also, have developed a tendency to customize their art for a Western audience and can fall into the trap and acquire an outsider's gaze. The veil as a symbol of women rights in visual discourse is such a case in point because it emerged with the media hype that turned it into a tool of gender apartheid while failing to take into account its cultural and social connotations in different communities. This 'outsider gaze' has been exacerbated by the proliferation of certain images and slogans that are given a new meaning by the media that make it difficult to separate the imagined from the real.

The Documenta 13 does acknowledge a need to open up the theoretical space through notebooks that symbolizes the possibilities within

formative ideas, but falls short of addressing the issues of intellectual siege created by mis-reading and misrepresentation of Non Western Art. This is perhaps most visible in privileging

the references to Bamiyan Buddhas, which as a cultural symbol of Afghanistan is purely a construct of the Western media which has given it a central place in the imagination of the Western people pushing aside more pressing issues like the human cost of the conflict and the greatest ever displacement of the Afghan people. Many of the Diasporic Afghan artists are a part of this displacement and yet have chosen not to challenge the frames that exclude this exodus and the repressive strategies that have brutalized and radicalized an entire generation.

Looking at Kabul (and the Afghan War) through the art and

critical texts in the exhibition catalog leaves many questions unanswered and raises new ones as discussed in this essay. Many of them are linked to power relationships developed and perpetuated by politics and capitalism. Documenta 13 attempts to foreground Kabul and Alexandria and the emerging realities there that have created a space for 'new players', but the discursive parameters remain unchanged as 'the incomplete' as a strategy of mis-representation has yet to be re-negotiated so that their art can be interpreted through its own context to allow the unmediated voice to come through. ■

Bani Abidi (Pakistan), *Death at 30 Degree Angle*, video Installation, 2012



1- Ashis Nandy *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*. Delhi: Oxford UP, 1983. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988

2- Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, "The Dance was very frenetic, lively, rattling, clanging, rolling, contorted and lasted for a long time," *Book of Books, Documenta 13, Catalog 1/3, 2012*

3- Chus Martinez, "How a Tadpole Becomes a Frog," *The Book of Books, Documenta 13, Catalog 1/3, 2012*