

Worlds in Collision: Music and the Trauma of War

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TRANSCRIPT

Artistic responses to conflict in different cultural contexts - Jemima Montagu

IAN RITCHIE: I'm really delighted that we're joined by Jemima Montagu, a very distinguished curator of contemporary art who has also lived and worked in Afghanistan and currently is one of the co-directors of Culture+Conflict, an organisation that I have had the pleasure of knowing and being in dialogue with, because we share an important agenda.

JEMIMA MONTAGU: Hello, thank you very much, Ian, it is lovely to be here today, thank you for having me. Well, it's a big shift, if you like, from what we have just been hearing about, because I want to tell you a little bit about some emerging art forms in Afghanistan at the moment which take a definitely anti-establishment kind of line, and that's very important in the context of what is unfolding there. Just to give you a quick intro to me, I'm a curator by background, I worked at the Tate for six years, mainly in the visual arts, so I'm really not an authority on music in any way at all but I'm touching on a few musical initiatives that I know are happening because I think it connects to the discussions here today.

I went out to Afghanistan in 2006 first to help start up this NGO called Turquoise Mountain, it's a cultural heritage NGO and was mainly dealing with the restoration of an historic area of the old city of Kabul called Murad Khane, this was an area, as you can see, steeped in history but more than knee deep, I'd say, neck deep in rubbish and refuse that had accumulated over decades and was very, very neglected. I'm not going to go into this because it's not the main subject, but I thought it would be interesting just to show a few slides of the kind of work we were doing. It was about restoring the centrepiece architectural houses in this district, which were no more than 100 or 150 years old but nevertheless had the character of traditional Afghan urban architecture and so are certainly worth preserving. Nobody believed it could be done. It was a slum, genuinely a slum and as you can see from these before and after pictures, the Peacock House, so-called because of very intricate carved peacocks in the woodwork which unfortunately you can't quite see here, but just on the tops of these arches. This is an area of historical significance and is now really transformed into a place which you might begin to call a tourist distinction. I know we're not quite talking in terms of tourism in Afghanistan yet, and certainly there's a lot of - no, I don't think you should laugh, because this is a country of many contrasts. The military perspective is one and you will also see many other sides to Afghanistan and many people are travelling there, not only for purposes of war and reconstruction and aid, but there are also people still working on cultural initiatives, archaeology and also tourism, in its more extreme forms, but I think it's important to shift our kind of inhibitions and prejudices about what kind of country this is, and that's part of what I'm trying to do in talking to you about these different cultural initiatives. And to say that along the way, as part of

the reconstruction of this urban area, Murad Khane, we built a public school, a community clinic, all very important parts of engaging with the local population, providing something that was a very tangible and concrete benefit to people, beyond the cultural benefits.

So that leads me to a few different projects that I'm going to describe, this one I initiated and ran myself but some of the others were managed by people I knew out there, Afghans and internationals. Most of these I am talking about are sort of what we might call Western projects, perhaps Western style projects, and I think that is an important thing to address upfront, what is the business of somebody bringing a contemporary art prize, Turner prize-style to Afghanistan, what is the business of a rock concert? You get a lot of hostility and criticism about importing Western styles and Western concepts and surely we should be about supporting indigenous music and culture, and actually, all of those attitudes I find somewhat patronising. This is a country that yearns to be part of the global world, the international world that we all know and understand, and participate in, and there is something I think patronising and regressive about the sort of worry about being international, and promoting and doing things that are genuinely international, and helping Afghans participate in cultural languages that address their isolation and address their vilification and address the stereotypes that they have to live with. Just to give you a sort of rabble-rousing start!

This is part of the reason I wanted to do something like a contemporary art prize in Afghanistan. It first was initiated in 2008, we did a call through radio, media, TV, and it was really a way of trying to gauge what is the contemporary visual arts language in a place like Afghanistan? Obviously as I've said, stereotypes prevail, one would imagine that nobody engages in, you know, ordinary kind of painting or music making at all, but as we know, and I'm sure everyone's been describing, many of these kinds of things go on all the time because people's lives continue, and in fact we had the most extraordinary turnout, 75 entries in the first year from all over the country, from which we selected ten participants in a kind of two week art workshop leading to an exhibition, here's the poster in 2008. Artists travelled from what were very much and still are in fact the badlands of south-east Afghanistan, having to go through numbers of Taliban checkpoints. Obviously they weren't going to say they were participating in an international art prize, because that probably would have led them straight to the executioner, but one very ingenious guy came up with the idea of carving a Bismillah, a prayer, in wood, and sort of installed this on top of each of his sculptures so whenever he was confronted he simply said, "These are my devotional pieces to God", and everyone showed deference and he was waved on through.

So everybody had to come to Kabul, which, of course, is a feat in itself, and then participate in this international workshop where we introduced contemporary art styles from around the world and engaged in the end with a really wide sort of language of art from the participants, and you can see some of these examples. This is the jury, these are three Afghans from quite different walks of life, all having a strong cultural interest. On the left is an Afghan architect, on the right is an entrepreneur businessman and an artist himself, and the other guy is a businessman too. Everyone, of course, who participated had a cultural role or a cultural interest but it was very hard to gather a judge and jury who were necessarily art experts, so this is, you know, obviously part of the challenge of building up what you might call a kind of art scene.

Sheenkai Stanakzai is the girl here depicted, she won the second year's art prize. In fact there were two women who were the winners in the first and second year. It's been dormant for the last 2 years but it has now been started again by an Afghan, back in Kabul, and so I'm glad to say it actually has developed a life, and actually, out of the first year's group, this young artists' collective started up who I am going to refer back to, because amongst the group, who started this new collective of their own, it's called Rosht, two of them were in fact artists and musicians and didn't know which way to go but the rock festival which I am going to tell you about won their hearts and they have decided they are no longer artists in the installation sort of sense but are now musicians. But what's exciting is it's a younger generation initiating their own projects, developing their own collectives and movements and their own festivals and that is something new.

I should probably just take you back a moment to Afghanistan under the Taliban when, of course, as you know music was banned, all forms of live music were forbidden, the prohibition of images, of course, prevailed, and it was a time when obviously religious songs were allowed, that goes without saying, radio stations, TV stations, everything banned except one state radio station. So if you imagine the scene in 2001/2002, and since 2002, 75 TV channels have emerged, 175 radio stations, it's estimated that 80% of the population own a radio, something like 30% have a TV now. I mean, the world has completely transformed obviously the access to the media has changed and radio and TV obviously affect the whole country, not just urban centres which also have access to the internet. Then I wanted to describe briefly this extraordinary TV series, because access to the media has opened up the possibility of obviously seeing TV shows and home grown TV shows that have really transformed people's attitudes to society in many different ways.

Setare Afghan, or Afghan Star, is the Afghan version of Pop Idol or X factor, which is actually an adaptation of the Indian model which is called Voice of India. This young woman, Lima, was one of the finalists in 2008 or 2009, it's a TV show that was enormously popular, I'm just going to find the statistic here, if you can imagine that desert, that cultural desert that was there in 2001, suddenly to a situation where 10 million, a third of the population watched the final of this TV show. That is the most incredible impact, if you can imagine, to see a young woman taking the stage, singing to that enormous public, that is, of course, a transformative projection of female empowerment, of the capacity for women to take the stage, political or social, and I for one think that is a very, very powerful message and a powerful role that the arts and in accompaniment with the media plays in Afghanistan.

Of course it had its more conservative elements: there is no dancing on stage, the songs were mostly traditional songs, perhaps set to contemporary music but there is a slightly wooden appearance, with everybody sort of wiggling but not quite dancing, men could move a bit more freely, but then, you know, these are the stages in which social transformations happen. In 2009, I think, one of the finalists' headscarves slipped off as she enthusiastically wiggled, exposing herself without a headscarf to the entire country. However today the presenter is an Afghan-Canadian woman who wears a short skirt and doesn't cover her hair, so these are the fora in which social transformations happen, with their own risks attached, for example, the runner-up, this woman, Lima, whose headscarf fell off, had death threats from a number of

mullahs in the mosques, she was declaimed, she and her family had to be protected, she had to go and live in a safe house, away from her family, she lived in Harat, she had to live in Kabul in a safe house and her life was under threat for a long time. She then went to Tajikistan and got a music contract, and was able to start her life as a musician elsewhere, but these are enormous risks for these social gains, which is inevitable.

So from Setare Afghan, the TV contest, to the Sound Central Asian music festival that has been held in Kabul for three years running, an extraordinary event, a rock festival in Afghanistan, this is one of those things – that one of the main organisers, an Afghan guy of 23, said, you couldn't have dreamed of this five or ten years ago. This was an absolutely impossible thing. Not only is it a music festival which takes place where it's open to the public, but you have to sign up on a secure website and actually the venue and so on are kept in secret until the last days, because it is a risky thing, both to participate in and to attend. But for me, it's an incredible symbol of how a kind of youth culture is really taking hold in Afghanistan, and yes, I'm talking about Kabul but you will find the same in the other urban centres like Herat and Mazar. I am just going to quote somebody here, well, of course, one of the organisers was threatened by more conservative parts of their society, he was told that they had to stop performing, or they would be, you know, at risk, so now they wear masks. Obviously these things are very upsetting. He says, "I hate hiding myself, I'm sick of it", but this comes with the territory. But then there are some very nice quotes here from a couple of young girls who attended. Of course mostly these kinds of events are attended by men, young men, they are not very open to women, and those who attend are probably from very progressive families, with permission from their parents, and possibly accompanied, and taking considerable risk to do so, both reputational and otherwise, but the good thing is some women do feel brave enough to do that and things are changing. "There are not many girls who are brave enough to come to these", admits Nagriz. "Many Afghan men think it's wrong for a girl to come, but we come and now they see it's not something bad, it's music. We know anything can happen. Every day you walk out of your house and you know you might not come home in the evening, but you can't lock yourselves away and not enjoy life, we need to take the risks to live our lives like human beings".