

# Democratic Articulations of Cultural Identity: The Arts in Afghanistan

Felicia Herrschaft<sup>1</sup>

## Summary

The article "Democratic Articulations of Cultural Identity: The Arts in Afghanistan" discusses the hypothesis that artists can become protagonists of a new democratic culture through the possibility they have of creatively shaping the public sphere. Artists in post-war societies find themselves confronted with the experience of being marginalized, ridiculed and prosecuted. The artists' creativity is one strategy they use in finding new ways of coping with unbearable situations. The paper concludes with an interpretation on how artists experience democracy as an area of conflict.

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## 1 Biographical Research in Post-war Societies

Two research trips to Kabul in 2005 and 2007 provided the opportunity for an investigation into the world of Afghan artists: how do they work and interact with and in which way do they play a role in shaping the struggling and fragile Afghan democracy? These research trips were conducted as part of my Phd-Project "Experimental Public Sphere: A qualitative-interpretative study of the appropriation and transformation of the public sphere by contemporary artists," in which I use interviews to be later aired on radio programs which I will host as an experimental place in which artists can articulate their ideas and reflect on their works and societies.

In post-war societies and newly-born democracies such as Afghanistan, the media and the artistic scene are rarely regulated. Precisely because the society is still in a precarious state, it is often easier for artists to find and create public forums, e.g. radio programmes and exhibition spaces. Upon creating these public spaces, they often encourage the public to explore democracy. However, some of them pay a

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<sup>1</sup> Felicia Herrschaft studied philosophy, cultural anthropology, psychoanalysis and sociology. For her dissertation research, she is currently conducting interviews with female artists and curators in order to understand how and under what conditions these people create public spheres. Her ample fieldwork experience includes two stays in Afghanistan (2005, 2007). In 2005 she established the webproject [www.fehe.org](http://www.fehe.org) with artists.

heavy price due to the intolerance that still prevails in their society. Thus, societies such as the Afghan society of our time represent a unique opportunity as well as grave danger for artists who seek the constitution of dynamic and challenging public spaces.

Artists can become protagonists of new democratic cultures through the possibility they have of creatively shaping the public sphere. Artists in post-war societies must cope with the experience of being marginalized, ridiculed and persecuted. The artists use their creativity as one strategy to create a new way to cope with unbearable situations.

Biographical research can play an empowering role in these processes, by "providing a voice" for artists in societies and democratic public spheres that are "under construction". Articulations of artists are linked to political deliberations in societies which are in a stage of reconstruction and social change. Hence, biographical research might not only serve as a voice reflecting members of the society, but also contribute to some extent to its process of democratization.<sup>2</sup>

## 2 Public Spaces in Afghanistan?

In Afghanistan, life is still dangerous and precarious. The precariousness of the Afghan state determines the precarious conditions of artists. In a post-war society like Afghanistan, public spaces for artists and journalists are almost completely absent; they must be constructed at least in part by the participants themselves. As efforts are made to reconstruct the country, the focus is on restoring minimized and collapsed public spaces and establishing democratic spaces of free discursive communication.

The two research trips to Kabul in 2005 and 2007 provided the author and her colleagues with opportunities to examine the public forms of expression that are currently coming into existence in Afghanistan and which are making political and artistic speech possible.<sup>3</sup> In order to get an idea of how a cultural public sphere is being constituted, we conducted narrative interviews with actors from the fields of film, theatre, the media and fine arts.<sup>4</sup> We discovered new forms of artistic activity and discursive arenas that artists are shaping; these provide some evidence that democratization processes are taking place in Afghan society.

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<sup>2</sup> "There are ways of distributing vulnerability, differential forms of allocation that make some populations more subject to arbitrary violence than others. (...) To be injured means that one has the chance to reflect upon injury, to find out the mechanism of its distribution, to find out who else suffers from permeable borders, unexpected violence, dispossession, and fear, and in what ways." (Butler 2004: XII)

<sup>3</sup> These research trips were undertaken by the author together with Philipp von Leonhardi and Zpugmai Zadran. Julia Afifi made it possible for us to establish contact with cultural circles in Kabul. The 2005 trip was financed by the *Auswärtiges Amt*, the German foreign ministry.

<sup>4</sup> 41 interviews with actors from different sectors and NGOs were conducted in 2005.

We structured our investigation by posing the following research questions: To what extent is a reflexive and participatory public sphere developing in Afghanistan? How do Afghan artists and journalists understand their own society? Are there attempts to bridge the communication gap between religious and non-religious citizens, and what reflections are taking place on new assumptions about the role of a citizen? How is the status of freedom of speech determined in Afghanistan? On what basis is general participation in cultural institutions permitted?

### 3 Social and cultural identity through art in Afghanistan

If one experiences directly the new worlds of imagination being explored by artists in Afghanistan, one understands the scale of the politics of destruction they have experienced – not just in the Taliban period, but also throughout decades of war: "In the year 1986, our country had four centres, all state-run, for the arts. History shows that although in the past eighty years there were breakthroughs in the Afghan political history, no positive change in the art situation has occurred. Only two out of 34 Afghanistan provinces enjoy formal art education. Lack of necessary attention by the governments and lack of better planning in this regard have been the major constraints for the improvement of arts in Afghanistan. *Not only was this not improved, but also art was removed from the school curricula as a regular subject and was left in a bad situation.* And the worst was when arts such as paintings, statuary, music and photography were declared unlawful during the Taliban period of rule." (Quoted from an editorial in *Gahnama-i Hunar*, an Afghan art magazine, Kabul, fall 2006, no. 8.)

There are a number of actors in Afghanistan who are now open to cultural exchange, and who consider themselves today (in a way that is analogous to European conceptions) as "civil" forces within their society. In recent years, they have been able to establish initial structures functioning on these lines. The Centre for Contemporary Arts of Afghanistan (CCAA) is developing concepts which affect different aspects of Afghan society. For example, there are plans to set up a mobile cinema in order to reach the population outside Kabul as well as in the capital.

Rahraw Omarzad, editor of the art magazine *Gahnama-i Hunar* and director of the CCAA, represents the efforts and the challenges which define Afghan artists in post-war Afghanistan. His name, translated as "travelling", is reflective of his ever exploring personality. Reflecting on his nation's past, he says that artists in Afghanistan have always said "no": "For me, life means the distance between yes and no. When I think of my life a long time ago, it was under the influence of this distance between yes and no. In our country when the government says, yes, the people say, no. People face a lot of dangerous and bad things because of this no, and unfortunately during the last thirty years the people have had the problem of the distance between these two. My personal life was under this affected by this. I was living in a situation where I had to say no most of the time. It is very important, especially for

an artist, to say no. Especially in my country most of the time I was proud to say no, the situation was not good. They always asked the artists to follow them. That's why we had to say: 'no'".

These experiences have left their mark on first film works created by artists from the CCAA, in which the reconstruction of the Faculty of Fine Arts in Kabul is one of the subjects addressed. The work "Closed Door", contends that when the door is closed, Afghans find a window through which they reach their goal. Omarzad articulated in his interview on March 2007 his belief that artists should be involved in the public sphere and contribute to the construction of democracy; they should not wait for society to change; rather, they should change it with the power of their ideas: "First of all the artists should believe that the street is a very good place for them to reflect things. When I started [taking] photos of my city, there [was] material on the streets. There are different possibilities for our artists today. They should know about photography, paintings, installation, etc. When they have this open mind, when they are walking on the street, they could explain it [the society] in another way, to see what is going on today. We do paintings of the subject: what is going on in our life. I think now it is good for our artists that they are living in a contemporary situation. If the artist waits for the society, it will be too late. The artist should be brave, very strong and he or she should think about some problems of the society. A great artist [does] not always say yes ... sometimes no".

In the film work "Sympathy" an umbrella is opened to the rhythm of water drops. This indicates for Omarzad a message for artists that, in a sense, "when you have an idea, the means of your expression can be very simple. Yet the work is universal in the sense that there exists an entropic reality in nature" (Omarzad, 2007).

Cultural identity in Afghanistan involves tension between individual and collective claims and considerations. Omarzad contends that today, for the first time, he and other artists observe that fellow members of their society are in fact individuals. He recognizes individuals in their loneliness; individuals are isolated beings. As an artist he establishes a new framework of identity – in which people are not described or judged through their social positions or religious affiliation but rather through their personal ideas, works and interactions.

His narrative indicates that some artists take over the function of interpreting the world. However, these frameworks for artists are very fragile. This can be seen in the way they present their own paintings. In Afghanistan, as opposed to Germany, for example, artists would not hang a painting without a frame, without a certain format. This is not because they are ignorant of the possibility of doing so; rather, it is because they do not feel secure enough to present art without mediating it to the public in a form most commonly recognized as art. They sense they must declare it as art in order for it to be valued. This indicates that the cultural experiences needed to establish a framework of one's own are absent. Also, because they have no institutional structures, artists in Afghanistan have to occupy several positions simulta-

neously; people like Omarzad are artists, curators, gallery owners, and responsible for marketing, all at the same time. They play several roles as artists, causing their identity to become all the more insecure.

#### 4 Can art represent Afghan democracy?

In a working meeting at the beginning of March 2007 we developed the workshop program "Discovering Democracy – Young Kabul Art 2007"<sup>5</sup> and worked together with sixteen artists, aged 16 to 29, on representations of the struggling Afghan democracy in art.<sup>6</sup> At the beginning of the workshop cameras were distributed to the participating female art students from the CCAA so that they could spontaneously take photographs.

The main questions addressed here were those of the students' artistic identities, their artistic perspectives on new developments in Kabul, and the ways in which democratic structures were becoming visible. The subjects they chose for their photographs included the ruins of the royal palace, the new parliament building (which we visited together), the Kabul museum, workers, landscapes, rubbish, building sites, petrol stations, snow-covered mountains, one photographer's brother eating spring onions and bread, people sitting at computers, and an English course. Some reflected cooperation between the students, for example feet arranged together to produce an image of joint work, or shadows the students themselves threw on the wall like the shadows in Plato's simile of the cave. At the end of the workshop some of the students made a photo where they set a shrivelled plant in the middle between their feet.

There was an impressive variety in the photographs taken. However, most of the photos were taken from inside cars, through closed windows. Why did they not get out? Why had they taken the photos with the windows closed?

One of the answers given by the young female artists was: "We didn't dare get out of the car." These young, veiled women still cannot move freely in their society in order, for example, to take photographs. The lawless condition that prevails in many areas of this society is demonstrated here: life is unpredictable even though there are freedoms that could be used.

However, other forms of artistic expression indicated the hopes and the dreams of the younger generation. Shamsia, a 19-year old artist from the CCAA, drew a train

<sup>5</sup> The artists who participated in this workshop were: Nabila Ahmade, Ebrahim Bamiyani, M.Sulaiman-Dawlatzay, Mariam Formaly, Momin Formil. Shamsia Hassani, M. Reza Hosseini, Shabnam Ibrahim, Wakil Kohsar, M. Nasir Mansurz, Asiya Moheby, Batol Moradi, Jahan Ara Rafiq, Mariam Rasool, M.Tamin-Sahebzada, Ramzia Qazy Zada. "Discovering democracy- Young Kabul Art 2007" was funded by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.

<sup>6</sup> In order to create a shared basis for all participants, we began with central questions of modern art history: how art has functioned since Marcel Duchamp; the significance of an artist such as Joseph Beuys, and how he worked; what kind of influence art can exert on society.

with an Afghan flag travelling at high speed into a green landscape. Living in new conditions in a state like Afghanistan is associated with progress and freedom. In another drawing, a fist breaks through a pane of glass and seizes hold of freedom before it can disappear again. This is an attempt to take hold of the moment of democracy as it arrives; it has not yet become reality in Afghanistan, but the artists do not want to let it get away.

In discussion about the difference between "official" and "inofficial", Islamic and non-Islamic art, the artists considered how they try to find a balance between the two. "As an artist I can do everything, but if I carve a naked woman anybody who sees it will understand I am not a Muslim, because the theme is not Islamic. 80 % of my art is European. I try to include Islamic art in my work. I am always happy to select as many themes as possible in my work."(Mohammad Nasir Mansurz, a 29 year old artist, during a discussion in the workshop, March 2007)

Women artists like Batol Moradi, a 26 year old filmmaker, try to give the war victims in Afghanistan a voice, as a response to demands which have now surfaced in Afghanistan to grant amnesty for war criminals who serve in the parliament. Up until now, no functioning judicial apparatus has been set up which could, for example, guarantee the physical protection of journalists or of MPs who express critical views. The media of the Taliban are being replaced via the use of new media and the discovery of public spaces, but the Taliban and other Islamists can still agitate against democracy from within the mosques.

In order to describe the stagnation that exists in some fields in Afghanistan, it is necessary to identify certain obstacles to the consolidation of peace. The international community tried to establish democratic principles such as freedom of the press as part of the democratization process, but then found that it was no longer able to stabilize it in the way that was needed. Reza Hosseini's (34) photograph of the new symbolic world in the form of a faded rose encrusted in clay soil illustrates the gravity of the challenges. Wakil Koshar, a 29 year old photojournalist from Kabul travelled around Afghanistan. His photograph from Mazar-i-Sharif shows a woman with a white dove called Kaftar. The female art students formulated many ideas on how they would like to use the Kaftar in their paintings. In their imagination Kaftar is a symbol for freedom of assembly, freedom of expression and freedom for women.

## 5 Cultural death or regeneration?

Due to the political situation in Afghanistan, artists in the country are faced with a paradox. How does one survive as an artist when life itself is threatened? The author Khalid Nawisa wrote recently in *Gahnama-e Hunar*: "Perhaps the dead are lucky and have an advantage: they can never come to life again because of hunger and cold, but the living can die of hunger and cold." Artists create sounding boards for themselves by developing joint projects. But what will happen if there is no societal reso-

nance for artists' ideas and their incorruptible attitude? In a democracy, there are spaces of cultural experience that protect artists and their activities. Artists in Afghanistan hope to be protected in the public spheres they create. Yet Afghanistan is still not a functioning democracy, and their efforts are fragile.

During our Kabul workshop, we discussed the significance of the colour red in Barnett Newman's work. The intensity of the colour creates a space of experience for the observer into which an awareness of the destruction of Native American culture flows. In response to a question on the meaning the colour red might have in Afghanistan, an artist named Mariam Rasool, aged 20, suggested a room painted entirely in red, expressing the violence and destruction that defined Afghan culture for so many years. Yet she immediately replaced this image with that of a blue room. "In Afghanistan, blue is the colour of peace. We must find peace, find a way of being calm," she said. A red room would keep alive the idea of cultural death, and is incompatible with her conscious interpretations of the new cultural identity needed for Afghanistan. Indeed, Afghan artists are today able, and at times encouraged, to create works expressing their desire for peace. Yet even when doing so the spaces they envision are soaked in blood.

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