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Arte

By Langlands & Bell

Twenty years ago the artists Langlands & Bell were commissioned by the Imperial War Museum to visit Afghanistan as War Artists. They won a BAFTA and were shortlisted for the Turner Prize for The House of Osama bin Laden, a trilogy of art works that resulted from their visit

Sunday 13 10 02

At breakfast in our hotel we overheard an American couple enthusiastically discussing a girls' sewing school they visited the previous day. So they can support themselves and their families, the girls are taught how to make clothes. While half of the girls learn to use the sewing machines, the other half pedal away on Chinese bicycles connected to a generator to provide power. It is such a powerful image and sounds so resourceful that we ask the Afghan lady who took the couple if we might also visit the school. She turns on us immediately "What are you doing in Afghanistan?" she demands. We explain that we are researching a commission for the Imperial War Museum in London, about the aftermath of September 11th and the war in Afghanistan. "The Afghan people are fed up to death with researches and investigations. We need help or money, not more investigations!" she declares and walks straight out.

The two American academics are as taken aback as we are by the vehemence of her response, and apologise to us after she leaves. We have already seen enough to think that what she said was entirely reasonable.

Despite all the loud promises of money made on the international circuit, the Afghan people see little evidence of it on the ground. Partially as a result of this, the warlords are regaining their hold over the country because they appear to some people to offer the best options for employment and individual advancement.

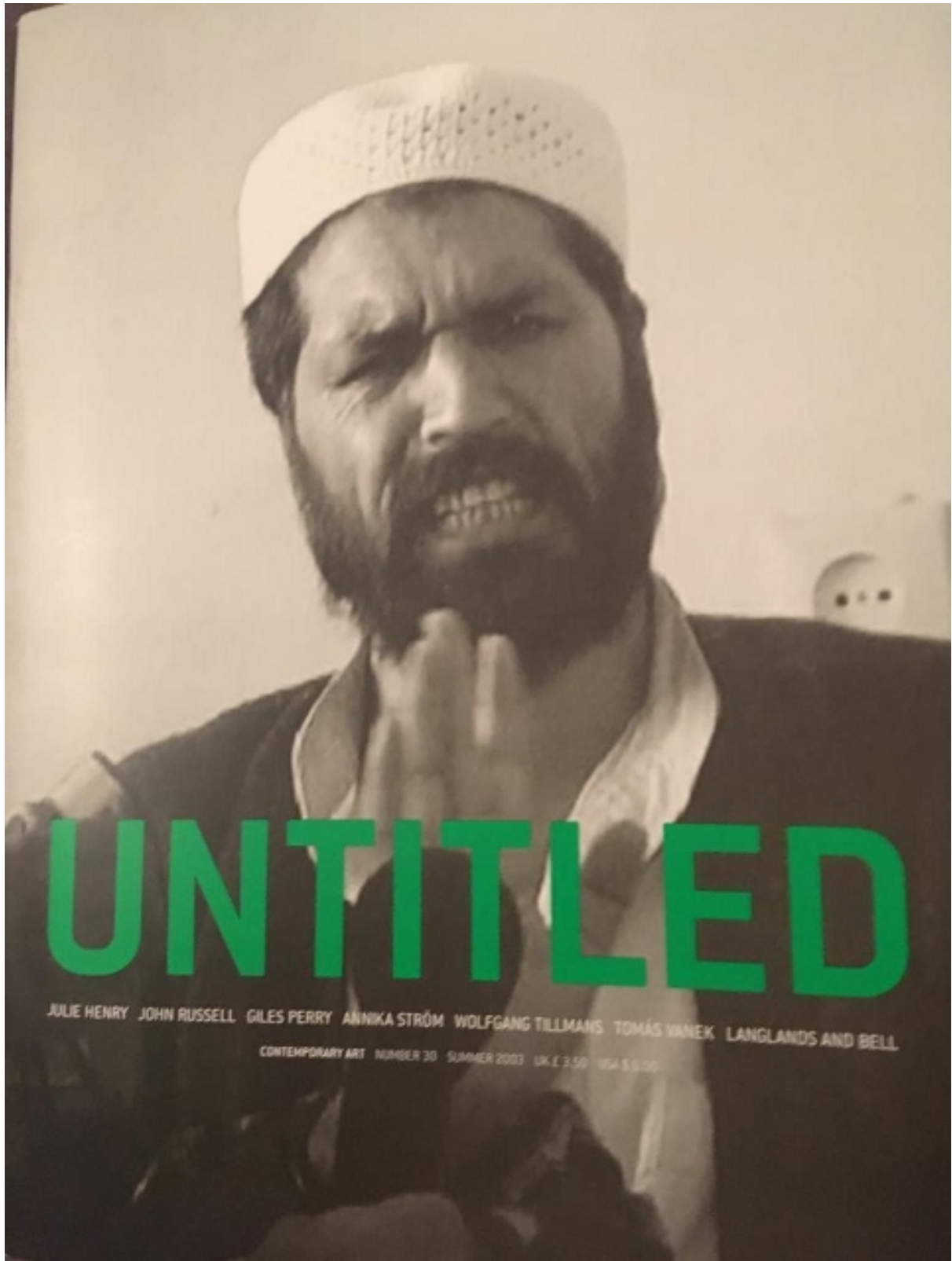
Still smarting from our encounter with the Sewing School mistress we visit the Red Cross HQ for a personal security briefing. The main tenets of the briefing are, watch where you tread at all times, stick to roads and paths which you know to be in use, do not find yourselves outside after dark. On the way to the ICRC we spend some time taking photographs of the painted signs outside the offices of the many NGOs based in the area. We are astonished by how many there are. When we ask, the ICRC is able to give us the definitive list of all NGOs in Kabul (120 international NGOs alone). There are so many that one wonders what they are all doing. After the series of catastrophes which have befallen the country in the last twenty three years Afghanistan desperately needs all the help it can get in almost every field, but there are times when it starts to seem like a final revenge. First you saturate a country with high tech weaponry, then you bomb the place to bits and finally when it is down on its knees and completely flattened, you send in NGOs in Timberland boots and brand new jeeps. As we leave the ICRC we come across a dog dying in an open drain. There doesn't seem to be an NGO for abandoned dogs yet but it may not be far off.

Monday 14 10 02

Finally at the end of a long day we go to the Supreme Court of the Transitional Government of Afghanistan to see if we can obtain permission to attend a court case.

Public court proceedings are something of a novelty in Kabul, as all decision making processes whether civil, political, religious or military, became increasingly secretive, secluded and apparently arbitrary under Taliban rule. Tahir, our translator, becomes very excited indeed as he tells us that we have been invited by the judge to attend an execution at the governor of Kabul's palace the next day.

Tuesday 15 10 02



At the court the next day we realise that we have been invited to a murder trial, not an execution. While we wait we are introduced to a judge who shakes hands with Nikki and laughs, saying that he never normally shakes hands with a woman. Sitting near to us is a group of young female trainee reporters making notes. Their teacher is a mature woman dressed in western clothes wearing a head-scarf.

Our translator whispers to us that she is a ‘dog washer’. Astonished by his terminology, we ask what he means. It transpires that this is a term Afghans, who endured the Russian occupation and the civil war, use for people who left the country to work in the west, and are now returning.

The courtroom in the palace compound fills with people who have journeyed from the countryside to attend. Suddenly the accused: Abdullah Shah and his accomplice Mohammed Arif, enter the court in leg irons and handcuffs accompanied by armed guards. Shah was a notorious ‘commander’ during the civil war who served under another commander called Zardad in the *Hizb – i Islami* faction. He gained the title ‘Zardad’s dog’ for savaging travellers with his teeth before killing them. The court falls silent as the two men make their way, shackles clanking, to their seats on the platform. Before the trial commences, a man in traditional dress blesses the court with a prayer. The singing rises in the austere room, above the sound of the odd shuffle and cough, with a haunting beauty. The prosecutor reads out a list of charges, which seems to go on forever. Shah is accused of murdering dozens of people, including three of his own wives, by setting fire to them and throwing them into a well, and five of his own children – some of whom he butchered, cutting off their ears and noses. He answers the charges by denying everything, dismissing all the evidence as gossip and hearsay, perpetrated by grudge bearing neighbours. A long succession of witnesses takes the stand. Each gives a thumb-print to the clerk of the court before testifying. Most

are very upset indeed. As they give evidence, struggling to control their grief, Shah sits behind them snarling and sneering while his accomplice gazes into space with a bored and gormless expression. We video the proceedings from our seat. The atmosphere is very tense but no one objects.

Shah is finally sentenced to death by the judge. He responds by saying that these events took place during time of war, and he was obliged by circumstances to act as he did. He will appeal. Islamic law allows for two further appeals, and the sentence has to be finally ratified by the president, Hamid Karzai. If Shah is executed, it will be the first official death sentence to be enacted by the Afghan government since the fall of the Taliban.

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Monday 21 10 02

We rise at 4am intending to get a good start on the road to Jalabad. We have been told we have a five and a half hour drive to our destination in front of us, and we have to return to Kabul before dark the same day. Suddenly Waiz the hotel owner emerges, torch in hand from his barred room, insisting that it is too early and too dangerous to leave the building. As soon as he goes back to bed, we persuade the doormen sleeping downstairs to open up and let us out. We get into the jeep and set off along the deserted roads in the dark. At the border of the district of Kabul, we are stopped by some ANA

soldiers who at first refuse to let us pass. After scrutinising our passports for so long that we fear they might not be returned to us, they are finally persuaded that we are foreigners and we can proceed. We do not understand the logic in this, but we don't question it.

As dawn breaks we find ourselves in some of the bleakest terrain we have so far encountered. This is despite the fact that we are on one of the most important roads in the whole country, and the main artery by which the city of Kabul is supplied. Our jeep heaves and grinds its way among the boulders, raising clouds of dust as it goes. Eventually the gorge widens into a valley and we reach the town of *Sarobi*. A name that chills the blood of western journalists since a group of them passing through the town in November 2001 were stopped, hauled out of the vehicle in which they were travelling and shot dead. A wide area surrounding the town is controlled by a notoriously ruthless commander *Hazarat Ali*, who is allied to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of the extremist *Hizb-i-Islami* and one of the most powerful warlords in Afghanistan. Hekmatyar was the main beneficiary of finance and support directed through Pakistan during the Russian occupation and the civil war. Like many of the Afghan warlords and commanders, he found his power significantly curtailed while the Taliban were in power. Now that the Taliban have gone, flush with the American weaponry and a slice of the 70 million dollars handed out to the warlords by the CIA to buy their support, he is re-establishing his bases in the area.



With a private army of thousands of heavily armed men he controls a 'business' empire incorporating every significant source of income in the region – most of them highly illegal. The majority of people in Afghanistan consider Hekmatyar to be a war criminal. We pass quickly through the town and continue on our way through the Tangi Abresham Gorge (*The Silk Gorge*), accompanied by the Kabul River.

After passing many villages and *qalas* (traditionally fortified houses) the landscape opens out into a dry stony plain, that gives onto a wide, sparsely cultivated valley, ringed by high mountains, which finally becomes the shallow muddy lake of the *Daruntah Reservoir*. Rounding a bend in the road just outside the small village of *Daruntah*, we come to a check-point manned by a gang of local Militia. The boys are sitting under the shade of the rush thatch roof of a small ruined house, with a machine gun on a tripod, guarding a turning off the road. We think this is likely to be the entrance to the house we are looking for: one that was previously occupied by Osama Bin Laden. We pull up, and Malik, our translator,

asks if we may visit the house. They say that we may, but we should pay a 'security fee' and take one of them or the rest of their unit in the house may shoot without warning. One of the boys picks up the Kalashnikov and climbs silently into the front of the jeep beside Malik and Akbar. We drive down the track and around a bend, passing under another, unmanned, machine gun post. We pull up in a compound below a house with a smashed mobile rocket launcher listing in front of it.

A group of young men armed with rifles emerges from the house, followed by a commander who is probably in his late twenties or early thirties, but so marked by experiences we cannot fathom, that he could be almost any age. We explain that we are interested in taking some photos of the house and its surroundings. They ask us why we want the photos, but when we explain that we are researching for a museum in London, they lose interest and tell us to go ahead.

The house had a spectacular view. It is situated on a rocky promontory projecting into the lake surrounded by tall mountains. The ground is littered with discarded spent and live munitions and abandoned military vehicles and rusting hardware. It is a modest three room house in the local vernacular, with a small terrace and an external kitchen that was probably originally built as a farmhouse. There is also a small mosque overlooking the house and a strange bomb shelter/bunker behind it. The men tell us that Bin Laden added the mosque and the bunker specifically for his own use. The mosque is conventionally constructed out of local stone and rendered concrete, but the bunker is rather unusual. It is partially excavated and set into the ground. The walls are made from stacked wooden ammunition boxes filled with rocks and earth. The roof is earth and stones set on branches and topped off with a few old tyres.



Bin Laden's bunker on the shores of Lake Daruntah

Bin Laden took up residence in the house when he moved to Afghanistan from Sudan in May 1996. He stayed until September 1997 when the activity of American agents in nearby Peshawar, Pakistan, apparently induced him to seek greater safety in Kandahar. On 9 October 2001 when the Taliban refused to surrender Bin Laden to the Americans, the site was partially bombed by American B52's. While we are taking photographs, a pair of American Black Hawk helicopters appear from behind the mountains and pass low over the house...probably just checking to see who is currently in residence.

This article first appeared in the Summer 2003 edition of the contemporary art magazine *Untitled*. We thank our friend and collaborator **Mario Flecha** for making it possible.