

## **Locating Afghanistan**

### **A brief project history**

#### **Interactive '05 catalogue text and excerpt from panel presentation by Gita Hashemi**

This project started from the 2002 trip to Afghanistan by Montreal-based photographer Babak Salari following the invasion of that country by U.S.A.-led forces in October 2001. Salari's trip, minimally funded by a Montreal-based NGO as part of their campaign to foreground their medical aid services in that country, produced over 5000 analogue and digital photographs. Beyond its initial highly selective and limited instrumentality as a promotional vehicle for this medical NGO, Salari's archive proved to be of little interest and use to the North American mass print media that were already filling their pages with propagandistic images and texts produced through embedded practices passed as reportage.

Rooted in that ambiguous genre we call documentary photography - which occupies the gray space between art and journalism - Salari's photographs seemed almost archaic in their straightforwardly humanist approach to their subjects. Neither capitalizing on the spectacle of war and invasion nor attempting a trendy deconstruction of on-the-ground politics in Afghanistan, the photographer had a more sober and deceptively simple aim: to relay the story of that particular historical moment in the lives of "ordinary" Afghani civilians, people displaced en-masse and caught for decades in the web of wars and lies about wars.

The curatorial concept for the project started taking shape in the summer of 2002 when Salari, financially broke and broken-hearted, came to Toronto with boxes of contact sheets and CDs, the entire archive of his photographs from Afghanistan and refugee camps in Pakistan. At the time (and to this day), shamefully cliché and stereotypical "liberation" tales abounded in the North American media. National Geographic had found its 1985 cover girl and we were all supposed to feel a sense of relief, even elation, as if the popular magazine's ability to again put her photograph on its cover was reason to approve of the war. The dominant narrative was one of a backward people, inhabitants of the third poorest country in the world, grateful for their liberation from the hands of the Taliban thugs, Muslim fanatics and international terrorists. No more questions needed to be asked.

Locating Afghanistan was conceived from the start as a multi-platform photo-text project. It was important to avoid the pitfalls of decontextualized representation which would inevitably mean being re-inscribed and re-framed as part of the hegemonic discourse propagated by the Western states as well as many of the NGO apparati whose short-term goals and bureaucratic survival kept them from raising the key questions about the history and the realities of the present moment in Afghanistan. Image alone could not disrupt, not to mention unseat, the lies and the silences.

We initially exhibited the project as a series of 12-18 images accompanied by a short didactic panel, functioning as both a curatorial statement and a political contextualization and as an integral element of the exhibit. We presented the project in this format in two gallery venues and as a photo-text essay in a Canadian journal. Our encounter with one of the galleries in California

well illustrated the accuracy of the curatorial/political analysis: While the gallery administrators were happy to show the photographs, they were very uncomfortable with the text and, in fact, went as far as attempting to re-write and heavily censor the text which they said was politically dangerous because it questioned the falsifications, silences and misrepresentations in the dominant narrative.

The curatorial concepts for the project were shaped through conversations with a number of artists and academics in Canada and the U.S. These conversations, sustained over a period of two years, provided the space for our deep reflection not only on the history and politics of the moment but also on the problematics of visual representation in a culture of spectacle. Many of the people who participated in these conversations became collaborators in the current presentation of *Locating Afghanistan* as a publication-exhibition project. The experience with the gallery in California brought us to the conclusion that while it was important to pursue exhibiting the project in art venues, it was absolutely necessary to bypass the limitations of such institutional spaces in order to maintain the project's artistic and political integrity. It was at this point that we formed the ad hoc collective Subversive Press and decided to independently publish the project in the form of an art-book (in print and electronic media). Thus, the exhibition and the publication could function singularly and/or together, giving us more options for publicly presenting the project.

Having come about through highly collaborative processes, the book is animated by our desire to find an ideal relationship between content and form on the one hand and art and design on the other. Using techniques of collage (in layout) and montage (in sequencing of images), the book aims to present a narrative that is layered and far more complex and critically self-reflexive than the sensationalist narratives in the mass media. While the book presents a unity of the elements in the sense that no single element functions in total independence from the others, the juxtaposition of the diverse and fragmentary elements and the tensions among them aim to subvert the conceptualization of the readers as passive consumers and ultimately to implicate them in the processes of deconstructing and reconstructing the narrative representation.

Given the prevalence of neo-colonial war-mongering in other parts of the world, specifically in the "Middle East," and the naked fascist politics of Western states over the past few years, it is not surprising that the situation in Afghanistan has all but disappeared from the world's consciousness. In this climate, *Locating Afghanistan* functions primarily as a reminder, a pestering voice that disturbs the slumber of an international culture of forgetfulness. Here, art doubles as historical witness, for the records.