



## LOCATING AFGHANISTAN

In the break between the U.S. and its former allies, the Taliban; in the passage from post-Soviet civil wars to post-September wars on civilians; in the breach between the politics of profit and the well-being of people; between the holes in the mountains where the Buddhas stood and those on the grounds where the bombs fall—

**Where is Afghanistan?**



## Infinite Injustices

If it is true that art is the medium of imagination, and if it is true that “only those who lack imagination cannot imagine what is lacking,” then, in times of infinite injustices, the moral responsibility of artists is to incite public imagination.

Call this propaganda, if you will. And, if you have doubts as to why this must be, note the dominant tenor of our vernacular and contour of our imagination, of not just the people (living and dying) amidst ongoing wars (in occupied Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere) but ours: We who live in the West.

“Daisy cutters.”

“Bunker busters.”

“Smart bombs.”

“Collateral damage.”

Unscrupulous, deceitful words invade our language and our consciousness as so many occupying armies: They bury the dead and our awareness of their deaths (mass graves twice deep); and cover the de-humanizing

truth of bombs and missiles—machinery, measured by range, speed, tonnage, destructive ability and dollar-cost, producing an immeasurable, unimaginable, hurtful legacy of shredded corpses and shattered survivors.

On all sides.

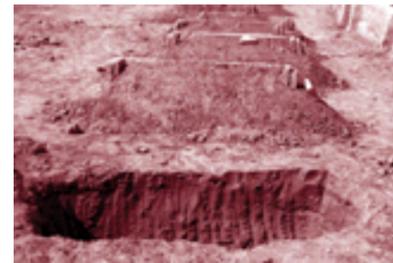
All in our name.

Disguised as our security.

Masquerading as our freedom.

We who live in the West.

We who are forced to witness the callous disregard for the lives of civilian populations there and for the lives of those amongst us (mostly Blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, Asians, Pacific Islanders and poor Whites) who (for the most) join the Almighty Military as a way of getting a college education and earning a decent living off the streets, those who are deployed to bombed-out territories to secure gas and oil pipelines and highways. We who pay for the operations, the machinery and the foot patrols that guarantee the freedom and security of corporations to satisfy their lust for profit.



We who are subject to increasing and insidious surveillance. We who live with the knowledge and threat of secret detentions, disappearances, Guantanamo Bay, federal prisons run by private companies. This at the beginning of the 21st Century that, in spite of or with all the pomposity of progress, is but a reincarnation of last-century's fascism staged by Disney and brought to us live by CNN: Hyper-real in style, with real impact on their lives there and our lives here:

We who took to the streets in thousands upon thousands intending to stop war and came away only with a more acute awareness of the limits of our freedom:

The freedom to be disenfranchised, to be excluded and ignored by (successive) political administration(s) that have bought and/or bullied their way into office without a democratic and legitimate mandate to act on our behalf.

The freedom to speak and see our voices sink under the deafening noise

of live broadcasts of prime-time patriotic charades landing on the decks of warships.

The freedom to be lost in a total atmosphere: inside a sphere with reflective surfaces, from which, they say, there is no escape.

The freedom of the tree to fall into a black hole.

The freedom to be cynics.

## Enduring Freedom

In a world that is colonized and saturated by images transmitted faster than the speed of critical reflection to our virtual and physical homes by corporate media—the very media that embedded themselves in the pockets of the military-industrial complex and oil cartels more quickly than anybody could say “independent journalism”—we must reject and question any claim to mastering reality by image. We must scrutinize the image not only for its presences, but always and especially for its absences. In the age of representation as mass-manufactured commodity and profit-making spectacle, to arrive at reality through image we must interrogate the foundational processes of representation:



We must carefully see all that appears in the frame, question it and imagine all that was excluded, occluded or could not be included in the frame. We must see the order of things in the frame and ponder the multitude of other orders in which things could, might and perhaps must appear, in, off and without the frame.

In other words, the task of seeing critically must be conceived as a revolutionary enterprise for it must question authorities, reject imposed hierarchies and envision other possibilities. Such are practices that *Locating Afghanistan* aims to promote. In this age of fascist rule and empire-building packaged as “democracy,” the fundamental differences between independent art-making and embedded journalism stem from the artists’ will to dissent publicly as well as defend and preserve the space of public dissent, and in art’s infinite capacity to elicit subversive questions and disrupt the ease and comfort of consuming pre-packaged answers.

The photographs in this book were taken in March and April 2002, during Babak Salari’s trip to Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan, where large numbers of Afghani refugees live. This selection from the photographer’s

archive—over 5,000 analogue and digital shots—makes no claim to providing a complete picture of post-10/7 conditions of life and death for many Afghani civilians. Such claims are inherently false. No series of singular seconds snatched through the lens can capture the experiential or political dimensions of such human events: Real politics take shape in-camera, and trauma is experienced internally. And both are processes that in their temporal and spatial continuity fundamentally exceed photography’s fragmentary shutter speed and fragmented frame, its limitations and fixations. As a recording medium, photography ultimately fails to capture and reveal “the real thing.” As an art, it shouldn’t need to.

These photographs were selected with an eye for the spaces they open through the absences to which they point. They must be read against the backdrop of all that we know or think we know or must get to know about Afghanistan. At best, they offer us indeterminate and inscrutable who, what, where and when, but not any answers to our inescapable why and how. This lack is characteristic of the medium before it is an authorial or curatorial decision. However, it is precisely in this lack, in this obvious narrative and mimetic lapse, that we, as participants rather than



consumers, must find spaces for critical reflection: The art of questioning what poses as an answer.

Our questions will ultimately be determined as much by our individual imagination as by our recognition of a shared humanity that must transcend the stereotypes we hold of “others” and must never rest easy when governments, in alliance with profit, manufacture war against people. Anywhere. The only guarantor of freedom, this most cherished and least realized promise of “democracy,” is our endurance in holding governments accountable for the quality of people’s living and for the conditions of their dying. Everywhere.

## 10/7

Barely more than two years have passed since the United States of America attacked Afghanistan under the umbrella of “war on terror;” this, unlike the war in Iraq, with the involvement of all NATO governments and the blessing of most other states.

Let us hold in check the cynicism and the despair we may fall into as we contemplate Afghanistan since 10/7/2001:

Let us suppress the sigh that may escape us as we remember that in the first two months of carpet bombing of Afghanistan alone more civilian lives were claimed than were a few weeks earlier in New York, and that the razing of villages and killing of families attending weddings and children playing in their yards continue to this day.<sup>1</sup>

Let us defy the frown we may lock ourselves into as we observe post-10/7 “reconstruction efforts” in full swing in the outskirts of Kabul: Where the new class of rich and influential—government ministers and top-level officials who are either Northern Alliance warlords and their sons and in-laws or Western-educated and Unocal-connected technocrats and their cronies—are raising their mansions on the ruins of poor people’s homes confiscated and demolished with total impunity:<sup>2</sup>

This in “liberated” Afghanistan that recently, just in feel-good time for our holidays, was formally re-divided among Hamid Karzai—a “Gucci guerrilla”



with Jihadi, Taliban and American credentials on the resume that won him Afghanistan's presidency in Bonn, Germany<sup>3</sup>—the Northern Alliance warlords—the very same criminals that have been responsible for countless atrocities against Afghani civilians for over a decade—and loyalists of a king who hasn't been for over 25 years.<sup>4</sup>

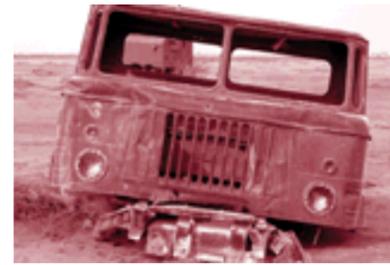
Let us arrest the anger that may rule us as we consider how little has changed in the lives of the majority of Afghani women, whose liberation from the burqa was celebrated as war's alleged grace by the White House feminists, but whose demands for guaranteed rights to equal citizenship, security of person and freedom of choice were drowned amidst the threats and noisy bickering of senior and junior patriarchs and bargained away—with the blessing of fundamentalist mullahs on the one hand and “international mediators” on the other—between Northern Alliance warlords and Karzai technocrats during the shameful display that was the Loya Jirga:

This farcical, disingenuous attempt at refashioning the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in the image of a “democratic state” according to a blueprint that remains true to its present-day American model of “democracy;”

a blueprint mapped out and approved in Bonn without the participation of any independent grass-roots women's organizations, without any involvement by ordinary civilian Afghanis, and without any meaningful representation of masses of domestic and cross-border Afghani refugees: In short, without the participation of civilians whose liberation from the Taliban tyranny was opportunistically proclaimed as the highest objective of the war once the entire American military intelligence and might, this army of human and high-tech drones, failed to produce Osama and Omar for prime-time television viewing.

As we suppress, flatten, arrest and hold in check the conventional responses we are likely to adopt when we hear or think about Afghanistan post-10/7, let us open the space for the question whose answer is likely to also be key to our own liberation:

**How do we regard Afghanistan?**



## Operation American Liberation

Beyond being an object of our fantasy or a topic of inquiry, beyond being a photographer's subject becoming a writer's subject, Afghanistan is a real land inhabited by real people.

It must now be the time for us to re-enact our agency as so many individuals and collectivities whose histories and imaginations have been animated also by concepts of liberty, equality and solidarity. However contested the interpretations and practices under the banners of these words might be, they have come to stand for how we idealize ourselves, for our image of ourselves. And we know what we must not allow these words to signify for us: Liberty must not stand for giving up our civil freedoms; Equality must not mean survival of the technologically and materially fittest; Solidarity must not equate corporate reconstruction contracts: Not in the language of our global humanity.

Locating Afghanistan must become a collaborative effort to keep Afghanistan in the consciousness of we who live in the West.

We who must not allow 10/7 to be absented from our liberatory conscience and imagination.

We who must remember. We who must act.

We who leave a mark for future generations.

On the landscapes of our life and imagination, and on theirs.

*Gita Hashemi, Toronto*

*28/01/ 2004*



(Endnotes)

1- For a report on the period between 7 October 2001, the official start of the war on Afghanistan, and March 2002, see Marc Herold, "A Dossier on Civilian Victims of United States' Aerial Bombing of Afghanistan: A Comprehensive Accounting [revised]," at Cursor.Org (2002), accessed 30 January 2004 <[http://www.cursor.org/stories/civilian\\_deaths.htm](http://www.cursor.org/stories/civilian_deaths.htm)>. Also, a documentary film by Scottish journalist Jamie Doran and Afghan journalist Najibullah Quraishi, "Afghan Massacre: The Convoy of Death," gives an account of U.S. military's involvement in the deaths of 3,000 alleged Taliban prisoners. See <<http://tv.oneworld.net/tapestry?story=584&window=full>> for excerpts and more information on this documentary, which has been widely shown in Europe but to date has been broadcast in the U.S. only once by Democracy Now! <<http://www.democracynow.org/afghanfilm.shtml>>.

2- See "UN accuses top Afghan ministers of land grab," originally in PakTribune.Com (2003), accessed on Rawa.Org (2003), 30 January 2004 <<http://rawa.fancymarketing.net/land.htm>>. For a detailed list of officials involved, see RAWA's special report, "Crime and barbarism in Shirpur by Afghan ministers and high authorities," Rawa.Org (2003), accessed 30 January 2004 <<http://rawa.fancymarketing.net/land2.htm>>. And, "Karzai 'to stop officials' land grab'," BBC.Co.Uk (2003), accessed 30 January 2004 <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south\\_asia/3103648.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/3103648.stm)>. These incidents have not been reported in mainstream American media.

3- For more on Karzai's background experience, see "Hamid Karzai, Pashtun Appointed President," CooperativeResearch.Org, accessed 30 January 2004 <<http://www.cooperativeresearch.org/timeline/2001/lemonde121301.html>>. This article is a translation of "The new strong man of Afghanistan knows the Western world well," originally published in LeMonde.Fr 13 December 2001 <<http://www.lemonde.fr/article/0,5987,3210-7019-254716,00.html>>. Also see Marc Erikson, "Mr. Karzai goes to Washington," in Asia Times Atimes.Com (2002), accessed 30 January 2004 <<http://www.atimes.com/c-asia/DA29Ag02.html>>. Karzai was recommended by Zalmay Khalilzad, initially President Bush's "defense strategy" advisor, subsequently "special envoy" and now U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan. Khalilzad's connections to the U.S. oil conglomerate, Unocal, are well established although rarely mentioned in the U.S. media. For more on Khalilzad, see Patrick Martin, "Unocal Advisor Named Representative to Afghanistan" on Centre for Research on Globalization GlobalResearch.Ca (2002), accessed 30 January 2004 <<http://www.globalresearch.ca/articles/MAR201B.html>>. Also see Jennifer Van Bergen, "Zalmay Khalilzad and the Bush Agenda," on TruthOut.Org (2001), accessed 30 January 2004 <[http://www.truthout.org/docs\\_01/01.14A.Zalmay.Oil.htm](http://www.truthout.org/docs_01/01.14A.Zalmay.Oil.htm)>.

4- For a detailed account of current abuses, especially by the Northern Alliance warlords, see Human Rights Watch, "Killing You is a Very Easy Thing For Us': Human Rights Abuses in Southeast Afghanistan," July 2003, Vol. 15, No. 05 (C), accessed 30 January 2004 <<http://www.hrw.org/reports/2003/afghanistan0703/>>.

Locating Afghanistan is a collaboration.

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Design studio: True Identity Design  
Special gratitudes to: Paul Sieka, Armen Kazazian and Cate Barker

First published in 2004  
Subversive Press  
320 11th Avenue South East, Suite B 23  
Cedar Rapids, Iowa 52401, USA  
Printing: Cedar Graphics Inc.

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