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Unfolding Projects: Afghan and Australian Artists’ Books Collaborations

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Abstract

In August 2009 an email was circulated to a number of Australian women artists with an offer to participate in a project of dialogue with women in Afghanistan. The project grew as a response to the dire situation of many women in Afghanistan, particularly in relation to education; many women are illiterate because they were, and often still are, forbidden, restricted or discouraged from attending school.

By April 2010, 53 artists' books by 14 women artists from various parts of Australia were delivered to Afghanistan, thereby beginning a process of creative collaboration between women situated in different places and spaces, immersed in different cultures and languages, attempting a productive connection through image and text.

Each artist had created a small series of concertinas of imagery consistent with her current studio practice, which were then delivered to Afghanistan and distributed among women participating in literacy education. The women were asked to relate to the images by writing their own words directly within. The general intent was for the concertinas to be sent back to Australia, then bound and exhibited to raise public awareness, and possibly sold to raise funds. The artistic intent, however, was not the fundraising aspect as much as to take part in a process of support and dialogue with women in Afghanistan. It was a manoeuvre that said, 'you are not alone'. The aim was to mobilise a conversation of sorts through the visibility and materiality of the artist's book, despite the limitations of cultural, experiential and physical distance.

Just over six months from their delivery to Afghanistan, 36 of the 53 books returned to Australia, each marked with handwritten stories and poems in Dari and Pashto. This paper discusses the processes and considerations involved in the project, and the partnership formed with SAWA-Australia (Support Association for the Women of Afghanistan).

Figure 87.1: Deborah Klein and Majabeen. Artist's Book, 2010.

Figure 87.2: Christine Willcocks and Basire. Artist's Book, 2010.

Figure 87.3: Rosalind Atkins and Hamida. Artist's Book, 2010.

Figure 87.4: Gali Weiss and Samira. Artist's Book, 2010.
There is a photograph from an article in The Age newspaper (Bezhan 2009, 9) of a woman sitting on a rug on the floor of a room, her head covered by a headscarf. She is absorbed in writing on a small pad on her lap, an open door providing light for her writing. At the doorway, a screen door separates her from a young girl who stands looking in, watching her. The woman in the photograph is Malalai Joya, the well-known Afghan activist who works tirelessly for a democratic Afghanistan, and in particular women’s rights in her country.

This is for me a potent image that says it all: a woman in a humble environment records her thoughts while the face of the future looks on to this model of possibilities.

Background of Project

In light of the stories being circulated, and inspired by people like Malalai Joya, in August 2009 an email was sent to a number of Australian women artists, most of them printmakers, proposing they participate in a project of dialogue with women in Afghanistan. The email was not from an organisation, nor from any formal body. It was sent directly from artist to artist, that is, between colleagues, calling for social action through art.

The project grew as a response to the dire situation of many women in Afghanistan, particularly in relation to literacy. Each artist was asked to create a small number of concertina books of images, which would be delivered to Afghanistan and distributed among women participating in literacy education. An offer to the Afghan women would be put forward to relate to the images within the books by placing text directly in them, in any character or language they desired.

Following Glas (Derrida 1988), through Derridabase (Bennington and Derrida 1999) and onwards with Laboured Breathing… (Low and Palulis 2004), we engage a chiasmic writing where points of overlap and exchange fuse in time and space to mirror, replicate, divide and separate. This chiasma [Greek khiasmata] where the mark, the ‘X’ [khi chi] that marks the spot, the spot that marks, is a ‘writing on writing’ or ‘writing within writing’ (Derrida 1982, 3) as we (artist, poet, each educator of sorts) write to give voice to different stories, about one story, of so many stories.

‘Literacy’ in its most simple form is the capacity to read and write. It is the capacity to decode and encode texts through an understanding of linguistic structures, features and strategies. However, when I think of Malalai Joya ‘absorbed in writing on a small pad on her lap with the young girl who stands looking in, watching her’ I am reminded that literacy means not only a capacity to read and write but also a capacity to think, to speak, to act. For Malalai Joya is not only someone who is able to decode and encode texts, she is a powerful woman who refuses inaction and who refuses to merely read and write.

In 2009 I sat next to her at a dinner in Melbourne. I said very little but listened to this powerful woman who will not be silenced in her calls for peace and justice for the people of Afghanistan. While she, herself, refuses alignment with most organisations, her efforts are noted and valued by the Revolutionary Association for Women in Afghanistan (RAWA), which has a long history of provision of education for women and children in Afghanistan and in Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan. RAWA’s fierce commitment to ensuring education for women and children was clandestine under Russian occupation and Taliban rule, but it is more public today. For RAWA, literacy, conceived of in its broadest terms, is key to peace and justice in Afghanistan. Malalai Joya sits and writes while a young girl watches through a screen door... image... text... power... potential... possibilities... yet still enclosed.

The general intent was that the concertinas would then be sent back to Australia to be bound and exhibited to raise public awareness, and possibly sold to raise funds. The artistic intent, however, was not the public and fundraising aspect as much as the act of taking part in a process of support and dialogue with Afghan women who wanted to be literate. It was a manoeuvre that said, ‘you are not alone’. The aim was to mobilise a meeting and possible conversation of sorts through the visuality and materiality of...
the artist's book, despite the limitations of cultural, experiential and physical distance.

Using a diverse range of mediums and techniques — etching, linocuts, photography, digital imagery, photocopy transfer, drawing, nature printing, collage — each artist produced a small series of concertinas of imagery consistent with her current studio practice.

The artists had an understanding: each concertina was a gift, a gesture, an offer. Once the gift was given and the offer accepted the artwork was no longer in our hands nor in our control.

By April 2010, 53 artists' books by 14 women artists from various parts of Australia were delivered to Afghanistan by an Australian member of SAWA (Support Association for the Women of Afghanistan), thereby beginning a process of creative collaboration of sorts between women situated in different places and spaces, immersed in different cultures and languages, attempting a productive connection through image and text.

SAWA-Australia began in 2003 when a small group of women activists from Melbourne and rural Victoria gathered together to raise awareness of the contemporary issues facing Afghan women, girls and boys. The group also sought to raise funds for human rights, education, nutrition, health, safety, and self esteem of the millions of Afghan women and children in Pakistan refugee camps and within Afghanistan (McCaughney 2004). Over the last eight years the group has raised over $270,000. The group is now incorporated in South Australia and New South Wales. Monies raised go directly to RAWA for the support of Hewan High School, a 1–12 school for girls located in Rawalpindi, a city in Pakistan with a high Afghan refugee population. Since late 2007, funds raised through SAWA-Australia helped establish the Vocational Training Centre for Afghan Women in Kabul. The Centre comprises two sections: Literacy Education and Handicraft Training Courses. Three female teachers work two shifts each to teach around 300 students who range in age from between 10 and 76. Most of the students are widows or orphans. Besides literacy education the women also take subjects in Dari (Persian), Mathematics, Child Care, Health, Human Rights and Violence against Women. It is this Centre to which the artists' books were sent. www.rawa-australia.org/vocationalcentre/index.html.

The Space of the Artists' Book

At our first artists meeting in late August 2009, before the concertinas were created, some questions was raised by one of the artists: 'How do we know what interests Afghan women? How do we know what kind of content women in Afghanistan would relate to? How do we find a common theme?' The answer to this was very clearly, 'We don’t know.' That was not to be our concern, just as we would not expect the Afghan women to write what they thought we would want to hear.

The aim was not so much to find a common theme as to present ourselves through what interests us, in keeping with our individual arts practice or expression, and by doing so, to ‘meet’ with the other as we are. In other words, to present ourselves through our images, in our difference, even at the expense of mutual understanding, finding common ground with the women in Afghanistan through the use of the artist's book as a space in which to meet and to voice.

The contemporary philosopher Ben-Ami Scharfstein (2009) has argued that the expressive act in all art not only exposes at least some internal characteristics of the creator, but also extends an invitation to identify with her, thereby provoking in the spectator 'the desire to participate and be participated in' (409). By implication, the divide between artist and spectator blurs when the act of contemplation becomes participatory.

Viewed in this way, the artist's book of our project can be said to provide a performative space. The images, their mystery, and their unfolding, create an aesthetised space that proposes a response or interaction. Assuming the freedom to interpret and make choices, the observer of the book as imagery then performs in that space, making visual and textual choices within an already marked space. The book then changes in meaning and in aesthetics.

You could say this theoretical framework was the hope we had for the project, for artistic and narrative engagement. Nevertheless, after a few months of silence in which it seemed the project might be faltering, email contact was made with Participation, performative space, desire, but whose? Before the books were sent to Afghanistan we discussed how the purpose might be explained to the women and how the books might be received. I took a number of them with me when I visited some Aboriginal mothers in South Australia to talk about how their children were progressing during their first year at school.
Afghanistan regarding the books and the principal of the Vocational School, Latifa, explained the reality of the women’s situation – their absence from school during the Holiday of Eid followed by the turmoil of the elections. Latifa described in her email of September 2010, the latest hurdle to a school event she was planning:

First the government announced no movement and has closed all public and private schools and other programs such as gathering and courses because of bad security, last night there was an explosion in Heart where more than 15 civilian die but the government didn't let the media to reports because people may be afraid and not participate in the election. Today this morning which is Wednesday 15 of September there was a terrible demonstration in our area and all the roads were blocked I have arrived now after 5 hours I move from my house, at the result of this demonstration which is unknown yet a fighting started between police and the public during this fighting the nephew our administrator director with two other members martyred and many other people injured, and it is still continues the demonstrator move from our area to Company (Email communication 10/9/10).

Despite all this, as she had relayed previously, the women were still interested and she would ask them to work on the books in their homes as well as at the school. Two weeks later, the first photographs of the concertinas with writing were emailed.

Meeting Place

In November 2010, just over six months from their delivery to Afghanistan, 36 out of the 53 books were returned by air mail to Australia. Each one was marked with handwritten text, at times on ruled pencilled lines, at times overlapping the images or placed around them.

Each book that arrived contained two sets of narratives in different languages – one of a particular visual perception, the other of a particular textual perception. The two narratives in each book at first viewing seemed unified. The physical space of the concertina had become the conceptual space of human interaction. Thus, although the two ‘historical’ narratives are separated by place and time, by form and intent, they meet, overlap, intertwine and materially converge.

Yet one narrative does not necessarily comment on the other so much as it ‘reveals’ itself through the other, bringing out not only the connections but also the distance of one from the other. In the words of the philosopher Jacques Rancière (Bishop 2006, 84), the ‘negotiation between the forms of art and those of non-art… permits the formation of combinations of elements capable of speaking twice: from their readability and from their unreadability’. While each narrative can be interpreted, meaning can be said to be derived by their placement in the re-creation of that space; not in a dialogue that understands, but in a dialogue that seeks to meet, and to affect. The distance between the two narratives is thus both conceptually

I wrote to Gali and the Artists:

I took three of the books with me to South Australia and ended up giving them to one of the mothers. It wasn’t appropriate to give them to the other mothers… things are sometimes complex.

The mum I gave the book to had come to talk to me at the local kindy and had brought about eight children with her – four were her own.

It was interesting watching the way in which each person engaged with the books.

What were these things?

Yes, they are lovely.

Look, turn, look more closely and turn them over again.

Fold them up and hand them back.

‘They are for you to write on and tell stories.’

Oh!

Look again.

‘Ones like these will be going to Afghanistan to…’

Nod, look and turn again.

Suddenly one of the children noticed that the differences between the horses in the book went beyond the colours. ‘Hey this one’s vomiting!’

Lots of looks and pointing.

The mum looked closely at the book with ink stencils of plants. ‘I remember when we used to go down to the reeds by the river…’ and she told us a story of a time when the Murray River flowed and she was young and played on the banks of Lake Alexandrina.

The children and I listened.

I explained the books were meant to be written on and interacted with. I said they could take them home.

They folded them up as they had been folded before, commenting on the differences in the folding.

These are books that have journeyed far.
magnified and reduced simultaneously. The interpretations of an imaginative third narrative are multiple; each narrative relates a different experience, but together they posit a new experience – not only in the meeting itself, but also in the possibilities of new narrative interpretations, intellectual and emotional.

On the Materiality of the Artist’s Book

The book of our project is both the space of, and record of, human interaction. One of the artists, Krystal Seigerman, has noted that the size of the books – 15 cm x 10 cm – is in itself an invitation for interaction:

I am interested in making art that is accessible and meaningful... I like the idea of... a tangible object for the women to interact with. I like the idea that the scale of the books makes them accessible and intimate. Hopefully this means that the women are encouraged to handle them and take ownership over them.

(Email communication 27/9/10.)

The object that has travelled a distance, that has been touched and related to materially and physically, and that has returned the same but different, can be said to mediate its encounters or, at the very least, testify to them. The impact of the changes reflected back to us is first and foremost visual – the trace of line in the handwriting, for example, in knowledge of the books’ journey in time and space, and the loaded narrative history behind each progression of marks. We cannot immediately interpret the language of symbols, but we can understand the handwriting as mark-making, traces of thoughts and emotions, the gestures of the hand that touched the paper and the image itself, which has consequently changed in look as well as in meaning.

The return of the object to Australia has imbued the book with meaning as an object; not in the sense of a fetish that contains an inherent power as much as an object that accumulates marks as accumulated meaning; material that has physically travelled great distance, within a particular period of time, and that bears witness by its marks. It has returned familiar but changed.

Yes, but we asked for them back. They were always written ‘for us’.

Testify
Bear witness
Speak of one’s presence in a moment in space, To have been there, To have seen that, To have had things done to you and to have done things to others, to yourself, to some other To have existed And to continue to exist To persist, resist, fight back To speak on behalf of those who cannot... hush
Who were they? Where have they gone?

Testify

Testimony truly testifies to the indestructibility of the human – for even in her utter desolation, even in her complete loss of humanity, through testimony, she persists’ (Gordon 2009).

A witness must have an audience to receive the testimony. Will we be that audience? What will we hear? What can we hear?

On the Political

The use of the artists’ book and printmaking in this project is not only about the capacity of these artforms to distribute information to a wide audience, but also about humanising a situation in multiple ways. The books have the potential to involve us – participants and viewers – in a way that the media, or even social media, cannot or has stopped doing. While this project does not assume a political stance by denouncing a political/social situation, it does enter a political sphere through a choice of action no matter how seemingly minor. As Nicolas Bourriaud (2009, 1) claims, ‘the political substratum of contemporary

Literacy is always political. To read, to write, to speak, to make one’s mark and (re)produce a mark is always already a political act. It is to enact a power of presence. To shout one’s
art is not a denunciation of the "political" circumstances that are immanent to actuality, but the persistence of a gesture. Applying what he terms as the 'precarious' in art is to be 'opening those channels of speech that are "blocked" by the media, inventing alternative modes of sociability, creating or recreating connections between distant signs, representing the abstractions of global capitalism through concrete singularities' (1).

Luke and Freebody (1997) outline four roles of a literate person: code breaker, text participant, text user and text analyst. Each of these roles must be taught and fostered. While an understanding of the linguistic structures and features of text must necessarily be learnt and strategies developed to decode and encode, the other roles also need to be fostered. A text participant means being involved in knowing what the text means, in understanding the context of, and in, the text. Being a text user means understanding that texts are situated. It also means having the skills to produce and use an array of different text types as well as understanding when, where, how and why those text types are appropriate to a particular situation. Finally, the role of a text analyst to be able to critically analyse the discursive power of texts to produce meanings, to inhibit, prohibit, silence, occlude, permit and to persuade. The text analyst is one who is able to recognise the contradictions and implications of texts. The text analyst understands the politics of text.

The first time I saw one of my own concertinas completed with writing, as a digital photo in an email attachment from Kabul, I felt a very personal connection to the woman who had chosen to relate to my images without my knowing anything about her nor even, at that time, her name. I realised that something had indeed been exchanged between us and that 'something' was non-verbal. When the first translations of the women's texts began to come through, I learnt that my images had triggered a particular narrative for the writer that was not only to do with the resonance of my images, but with a visual, non-metaphoric interpretation of them. Her narrative was about the danger of drugs; how they have destroyed the Afghan economy, how they destroy families and friendships, and advice on how to avoid them. It occurred to me that the woman who perhaps a year ago could not read or write, was now voicing her thoughts and opinions well beyond her immediate place, with the knowledge that her voice is respected and heard in an object that is valued – a book.
The Australian Artists

Rosalind Atkins; Tracey Avery; Marian Crawford; Ann Cunningham; Dianne Ellis; Susan Gordon-Brown; Jennifer Kamp; Deborah Klein; Anne Riggs; Annelise Scott; Kristal Selgerman; Tanya Ungert; Gail Weiss; Christine Willcocks.

The Afghan Writers

Aglia; Amina; Anis Gul; Anila; Basina; Fatima; Habiba; Hamida; Jamila; Lida; Laila; Mah Gul; Majabeen; Mansora; Marjan; Maarfa; Maryam; Mursal; Nadia; Nafsi Jan; Nazia; Nazifa; Sahla; Samira; Sarah; Shakila; Tamana; Zahida; Zobra; and others who have chosen to withhold their names.

References


