

# Art in America

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## dOCUMENTA (13): Books, Afghanistan and Both

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One of the excellent things about dOCUMENTA (13) is how the curator, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, laces the exhibition with multiple themes and enthusiasms, which makes for eventful and compelling viewing. She is like a conductor before a symphony teasing out nuances and motifs while sensitively guiding and responding to the music, or perhaps like a visual novelist, constructing a complex, multilayered "story" from diverse subjects and materials. Among the several motifs that course through the exhibition are books and Afghanistan.

Three important publications accompany dOCUMENTA (13). *The Guidebook* is a wonderful guide to the works in Kassel; Kabul and Bamiyan, Afghanistan; Cairo and Alexandria, Egypt; and Banff, Canada. *The Logbook* chronicles the development of the exhibition since 2010, including photographs of in-process works. *The Book of Books* is exhaustive, including essays and artists' projects; it also reproduces *100 Notes–100 Thoughts*, a series of small notebooks (they are also available for purchase individually) by artists and thinkers from all sorts of fields, that includes facsimiles of actual notebooks, essays, conversations, conceptual writing, and the like. dOCUMENTA (13) also hosted On Retreat: Choralily, an international writers' residency in the Dschinghis Khan Restaurant next to Karlsau Park, and ample programmed readings.

Books are also oftentimes incorporated into the visual art. Thankfully, in my opinion, this rarely involves reading. You aren't overwhelmed by texts in this exhibition. Instead, several artists find fascinating ways of dealing with and transforming books as visual and ideational forces, and these transformed books become especially cathartic—full of conflict, wonder, knowledge, openness, memory, vitality, and political challenge.

Built in the early 17th century, the Ottoneum, Germany's first theater, has since 1885 been Kassel's Natural History Museum. Mark Dion, who knows a thing or two about the intersection between natural history and art, is in his element here. Among the museum's most significant holdings is the Schildbach Xylotheque, featuring 530 books (which are actually small boxes) handcrafted from some 441 local trees and shrubs, and with bark spines. Inside each is a three-dimensional depiction of the life cycle of the tree from which the book was made, including dried stems and leaves as well as wax replicas, along with handwritten descriptions—this whole botanical collection was lovingly made by Carl Schildbach (the manager of a local estate, and not a scientist himself) between 1771 and 1799.

On a visit to Kassel several years ago, Dion noticed that this treasure was housed in a shoddy display, and lacked the respect and attention it deserves. He dreamed of realizing a new display that would preserve and accentuate the collection. He's realized it here. Dion designed a handsome hexagonal display case made of oak and fitted with custom bookshelves; the Schildbach Xylotheque is now honored by a spectacular new "home" and it's also front and center. Affixed to the exterior the display are five splendid intarsia plates, each with the image of a tree, representing Africa, Asia, Oceania, North America and South America, or the continents missing from the original European collection. Dion has updated things, extending a collection based on European trees, and governed by the science of its era, to the big world. He also added six new books, five in native wood from the missing continents and one made from oak (this book, and indeed the whole display, deftly refers to Joseph Beuys's famous oak-planting project in Kassel, *7000 Oaks* (1982-87). Nature and art, past scientific classification systems and current ones, localism and globalism, Schildbach and Dion all meld in this work, which is at once a functional museum display and a wonderful sculpture.



In Emily Jacir's research leading up to her project for dOCUMENTA (13), she was interested in the many books destroyed in 1941 when the Fridericianum was bombed by the British. Back then the building housed the Landesbibliothek (Kassel State Library), which included the collection of the Landgraves of Hesse-Kassel, the former rulers of the region. Some 350,000 books, municipal records, and works of art spanning centuries were consumed by fire on the night of September 8, 1941. Against the odds, manuscripts stored in the Zehrenturm (Zwehrenter tower), a part of the old city wall that has been integrated into the Fridericianum, were spared when the bombs missed this structure. Jacir repeatedly went to the Jewish National Library in West Jerusalem. Using her cell phone, she surreptitiously photographed some of the roughly 30,000 books that Israel confiscated from Palestinian homes, libraries, schools and other institutions in 1948. In her photographic installation *ex libris* (2010-12), filling a room in the Zehrenturm, you see snippets and traces of book covers and pages, including occasional handwritten notations made by former owners. These books have a bitter history. Jacir makes a monument to looted books (many of them obviously beloved) and displaced Palestinian lives.

American Paul Chan has a different take on books. For his painting installation *What is What? Why the Why* (2012), wrapping all the walls in an off-site location on Friedrichstrasse, he tore the covers off of 600 eclectic books (*Cezanne, Picasso's World of Children, Who's Who in the East, Watercolor Bold and Free, Glamour Girls—Patrick McMullan*), which he used as "canvases" for his small nature-themed paintings, including mountains, skies, mists, and landscapes. The combination of torn-off covers and serene, even beatific, small paintings is jarring, and completely effective. At the City Hall Library, with *Untitled (Book Sculpture)*, 2008–12, Oslo-based Danish artist/writer Matias Faldbakken interrupted the library's classification system by pulling books off shelves, heaping them in piles, and scattering them on the floor. This is a profoundly ambiguous work: it's a messy, gleeful raid on the orderly classification of knowledge, yet it also chillingly evokes ransacked libraries.

For the past couple of years dOCUMENTA (13) artists from abroad have traveled to Afghanistan to conduct research, participate in seminars and symposia, realize works, and engage with the public. This culminates in works shown in Kassel, but also in an exhibition in both Kabul and Bamiyan from June 7–July 19.

Oberste Gasse 4 (formerly the Elisabeth Hospital) features an exhibition within an exhibition by Afghan artists. Here you encounter Lida Abdul's (born in 1973, as a child she fled Afghanistan during the Soviet invasion to live in Germany, India, and the U.S.; she now lives in both Los Angeles and Kabul) captivating two-channel video installation *What We Have Overlooked* (2011), in which a man holding a flagpole with a red flag wades and swims in a lake outside Kabul, sometimes loses his balance, and is submerged. You see the man up close in one of the projections, and he exudes a mix of pride, trepidation and vulnerability. He is much further away in the other projection, dominated and overwhelmed by the expanse of the lake, the sky, and mountains in the distance, and his flag seems distinctly precarious, about to disappear into the lake altogether. While the flag hints at robust nationalism and perhaps revolutionary fervor as well, these are contrasted with (and undermined by) the loneliness of the scene, the immensity of the surroundings and the difficulties the man has moving through the water.

Berlin-based Jeanno Gaussi, of mixed German and Afghan descent, was also born in Kabul in 1973. In 1978, during the Russian invasion, her parents sent her to live with an aunt in Germany. She was reunited with her family three years later, when they fled Afghanistan, bringing with them a smattering of family photographs. These photos are the basis for her project *Family Stories* (2011-12). Returning to Kabul in 2008 for the first time since she left, Gaussi enlisted a local commercial painter to paint several of the photographs, and then recorded a conversation with him when each painting was completed: paintings of enigmatic photographs and conversations amount to a poignant investigation of a dislocated childhood, a largely forgotten homeland and an ambiguous national identity. [You can read an interview with Gaussi here](#). While the expatriates Abdul and Gaussi have exhibited widely, three younger artists from Kabul (mixed media artist Abul Qasem Foushanji, who is influenced by psychedelic heavy metal music; painter and photographer Zainab Haidary; and Mohsen Taasha, who offers a fresh take on the tradition of miniature paintings) represent a questing new generation beginning to emerge in a country long riven by conflict.

In 2010 Christov-Bakargiev invited Francis Alÿs to Afghanistan for an initial research trip/site visit. While there, Alÿs noticed a common street game played by kids: using a stick to move a wheel along dusty, bumpy dirt roads. His film *Reel-Unreel* (2011), made in collaboration with Julien Devaux and Ajmal Maiwandi, starts with this game, but an ominous helicopter that suddenly appears overhead near the beginning of the film changes everything. Now, instead of a wheel, two kids roll a reel of film through Kabul, on mountainous streets, through bazaars, down alleys and stairs, through a traffic jam. With one child unwinding the film from his spool and the other rolling it back up on his, the film quite literally travels through the city. Along the route, you encounter a very different Kabul: children playing, young men playing soccer, an open-air market, congested traffic, throngs of people in the street, other people contemplatively gazing out of apartment windows. [You can watch Alÿs's work here](#). As you watch, it dawns on you how much of the copious video from Afghanistan and broadcast worldwide focuses on war, and how little of it concerns people actually living in the country. It also hits you that a great deal of this video, purporting to be "real" and objective, is in fact highly subjective and driven by ideology. "We" have defined Afghanistan as a place of endless war, and "we" produce videos that confirm this. At the Fridericianum is Alighiero Boetti's first world map tapestry, made in Afghanistan by women embroiderers (*Mappa*, 1971). This first version was originally slated to be in Harald Szeemann's Documenta 5 in 1972, but arrived too late. It's great that it is included now, at the instigation of Mexican artist Mario Garcia Torres. Between 1971 and 1977, the Italian Boetti (1940-1994) lived several months a year in Kabul, where he opened and resided in the One Hotel.

Boetti's time in Kabul, and the hotel (about which very little is known) are at the core of Garcia Torres's captivating *Have You Ever Seen the Snow* (2010), 90 color slides featuring images culled from archives and the Internet, along with the artist's narration, concerning his attempt to locate Boetti's experiences at the One Hotel, across considerable time and distances. In searching for Boetti's elusive hotel, Garcia Torres evokes and reveals a great deal about Kabul through convulsive decades, which have included the pre-war 1970s, the Soviet occupation from 1979-89, civil war during the 1990s, the Taliban takeover in 1996, and the invasion by Coalition Forces in 2001, lasting to the present. This includes where and how people lived, how whole neighborhoods have changed, what people remember about their city and what they've forgotten. Circa 1970s Kabul (which is not all that long ago), before all the trauma and war, seems especially remote and ungraspable.

Also in the Fridericianum, covering a curving wall in the rotunda, is a large tapestry by London-based Polish artist Goshka Macuga; the other part of this work, also a tapestry, is simultaneously exhibited on a curving wall in Kabul. Macuga's Kassel tapestry (*Of what is, that it is; of what is not, that it is not 1*, 2012), features a photographic image (or rather a digital collage) of the diverse Afghans, including government officials, intellectuals, journalists and NGO representatives, who attended a banquet that she organized in Kabul's famous Bagh-e-Babur (Gardens of Babur); in the front a large snake uncoils and stretches up from a carpet. This convivial scene is superimposed on a backdrop showing the ruined Darul Aman Palace, shelled by the mujahideen at the end of the Soviet occupation. Macuga's partly fictive and highly manipulated (although vaguely plausible) image on a tapestry is a riveting mix of desolation and aspirations, warfare and humanity.

In one of the small houses at the Karlsuae Park, you encounter the Berlin-based Israeli Omer Fast's digital film *Continuity* (2012). It concerns a young German soldier returning from Afghanistan to his parents and family home, but as you watch multiple iterations of this scenario, with different events, the whole film assumes a mysterious, slippery, psychologically charged, and dreamlike quality which questions the veracity of just about everything, including whether or not the young soldier actually returned home at all. There is an especially startling sequence. The soldier's father and mother are driving down an empty rural road in Germany when a camel suddenly appears on the road: a hallucination for real. The mother gets out of the car, follows the camel into the forest, and discovers a horrific scene: dead German soldiers in a pit, modeled on Jeff Wall's famous 1992 photograph *Dead Troops Talk (A vision after an ambush of a Red Army patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986)*. You suddenly think (but don't know) that her son might actually be one of the dead soldiers. Fast's searing, fictive film, with its shifting family

stories, focuses attention on the comprehensive havoc of war, including the great pain and loss sometimes experienced by families of soldiers.

Books and Afghanistan come together wonderfully in an installation by the American artist Michael Rakowitz, also in the Zwehrenturm. As with Jacir, Rakowitz meditates on the books destroyed when the Fridericianum was bombed in 1941. He is also well aware of the Taliban regime's 2001 destruction of the magnificent Buddhas of Bamiyan, two 6th-century statues carved into sandstone cliffs. For *What Dust Will Rise?* (2012), Rakowitz, with sculptor and restorer Bert Praxenthaler, went to Bamiyan to conduct workshops with local students in stone carving and calligraphy (long practiced in the region, but neglected during the years of conflict), and he also worked with both Afghan and Italian stone carvers to make facsimiles of books destroyed in Kassel out of Bamiyan stone. These recreated volumes, with their implicit "memory" of trauma, are displayed in historic cabinets, along with sundry other items, all accompanied by Rakowitz's handwritten notes: a photo of Rakowitz as a 16-year-old apprentice in stone carving, shards of the Bamiyan Buddhas, bullets and shell casings found among the ruins of the Buddhas, charred book pages from the bombed Fridericianum, and a Sumerian cuneiform clay tablet (c. 2200 B.C.) from what is now Iraq, among many others. History (both personal and societal), Afghanistan and Germany, cultural destruction, and cultural survival abound in Rakowitz's installation, which is propelled by the desire to make something good out of something that was very, very bad. Here is how Mullah Mohammed Omar, who authorized the demolition of the Bamiyan Buddhas, described this cultural atrocity (you can read the quote on one of Rakowitz's display cases): "We are only breaking stones." Rakowitz's engaging, and indeed courageous, project is one of the highlights of the whole exhibition.

Installation view, Michael Rakowitz, *What Dust Will Rise*, 2012.

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