

David Cotterrell: David Cotterrell War and Medicine

Event Name: RSA Arts & Ecology Interview

Date: 18th December 2008

Supporting Organisation(s):

RSA Arts and Ecology

Chair/Other Speakers:

William Shaw (Interviewer)

Afghanistan: shifting visions Artist David Cotterrell was given the extraordinary opportunity to create art in a war zone -and felt himself compelled to return again this year to see Afghanistan from totally different perspectives.

Last year the artist David Cotterrell went to Afghanistan to observe the work of the British military medical staff at Camp Bastion in Helmand Province. It was a gruelling task. During that time two British soldiers died, 29 were wounded in action, and there were 74 admissions to the field hospital where he worked.

David Cotterrell is an artist excited by the complexity of the artists vision, and by the possibilities of multiple perspectives and voices. (Sometimes very literally - see his plan for Debating Society, right, a bench installation created for the Gorbals in Glasgow which featured a five-way conversation between five computers "talking" Gorbals accents). He attempts to understand a situation without limiting himself to any particular approach or medium. Yet arriving in Afghanistan he struggled with the fast pace and urgency of his material, picking up stills and video cameras partly to give himself a role that the medics and soldiers working along side him could understand - that of artist as journalist. More privately, he created a diary of what he was witnessing. The results are now on show at his installation Theatre at the Wellcome Collection until February 15 2009, as part of their exhibit War and Medicine.

Returning to the UK Cotterrell continued to delve further by visiting the injured soldiers, adding another narrative to individuals he'd only seen as injured, often unconscious soldiers. But having been, effectively, an "embedded" artist had been a frustrating process for someone fascinated by multiple perspectives.

Still driven, he went back to Afghanistan this year to look at the country from outside of a military perspective. He returned, as part of an RSA Arts and Ecology initiative, as an ordinary civilian staying in Kabul. Seeing Afghanistan from the UK, from within a military compound, and as an artist in Kabul all provide different visions of a country in crisis. Here in an interview with William Shaw, he explains the journey:

For your visit to Camp Bastion you took on the role of a photographer - almost as if you were a war photographer.

The photographs from the first trip, they were purely for me to try and keep track of something, something that was immersive and problematic, because I'm having trouble understanding the sequence of events unfolding around me at speed continuously. There was no point to retreat to gain an understanding of what happened during the day because the day never stopped. Taking a large number of photographs was a way of having enough evidence to unpack the experience at a later date. And also it was a way of trying to stop myself simplifying, trying to find a narrative that strips away all the complexity, the ambiguity and anxiety. Having this continual record made that much harder to do.

The second reason for taking photographs was that the people there had to identify a role for me, and very quickly it became clear that I was the only person in this entire complex that didn't have a clearly defined understandable role or function. If I'd just written my diary, which was crucial for me - it would have probably been very hard for them to understand why I needed to be there at all. In a way by having the symbolic, um, documentary tool of the camera, it became easier for them to understand how I might fit within the environment.

For the people there, the medics, the patients and soldiers, there was a general feeling that the war and their experience was under-represented not only from the public, but also from each other. They all had very specific roles within this casualty evacuation chain. There was a real interest in trying to piece together this jigsaw puzzle of roles that they knew they were a part of but which they never witnessed physically.

So for the patients themselves it was even more difficult. When I came back I spent nine months negotiating with the Ministry of Defence to make contact with some of these people. I spoke with their doctors first to see if it would be damaging to see photographs of themselves being treated. We were all issued with morphine. You self-administer that the moment you're injured. There was a good chance you'd arrive at Camp Bastion conscious but delirious. And certainly bewildered and shocked. They'd quite possibly then be sedated and not wake up until they arrived in Selly Oak in Birmingham. So my role became to piece together missing memories and perspectives in terms of a reciprocal agreement. They very generously explained how the trauma that I had seen fitted into their part of the narrative.

What was it like coming back to the UK? What were your feelings coming back to this world?

When I returned back to England, of course there was a great relief to see your family and to walk away from something that was so intense, but there was also a level of guilt, which was interesting. As an observer I felt a guilt, not only because the people I had eventually [sic] adopted as my community out there were still out there for another several months before the end of their tour, but also because I'd come back to such an easy life. A lot of things that I'd seen there hadn't been reconciled.

I'd seen abstracted violence and there were two problems with that. One, that it wasn't possible to rationalise the trauma that I'd seen there within any narrative. We would rarely see what had caused this massive physical trauma to someone and we rarely see what happened after they'd been stabilised enough to be sent back to the UK. You didn't see whether these people who had been young infantry soldiers at the peak of fitness had managed to reinvent their identities as injured people.

But also, two, there was a massive problem that I'd viewed a foreign country entirely as the other. I hadn't really been to Afghanistan, I'd been to the British army base in Afghanistan. I'd seen a country entirely through its intersection with conflict, and pretty much entirely over sandbags and from armoured vehicles. I recognised I had no idea how limited or how distorting a view like that was, because I had nothing to compare it to. There was a need to challenge that with a completely different perspective. And that's what the RSA offered me to return in a different role completely as a civilian. And after a lot of anxiety I came to believe strongly that returning as a civilian might offer an additional perspective.

So you chose to move into what must be a less secure, less controlled environment?

Yes but it was less angst ridden. Unlike the military environment I'd entered the first time, I entered an environment that was more exploratory, more academic and more discursive, one in which the position of being an artist attempting to understand their context was more natural.

I got involved with some work with the Turquoise Mountain Foundation, an Afghan charity based in Kabul. They were trying to consider things that would have seemed impossible in the south [in Helmand], thinking about long-term plans like rebuilding, thinking ten years ahead. I also met students and academics at Kabul University.

From an outsider's point of view - it's always going to be an outsider's point of view - it was interesting to be outside the military and understand how the military could be perceived from beyond the wall. It was useful to walk along streets without body armour at the same time as witnessing armoured convoys zipping past and recognise that there are many ways to experience the same context.

Was it difficult reconciling any of these perspectives?

I suppose the great thing that just the fact that there was an incongruity between perspectives. I've always avoided violence and never been very strongly in support of any kind of military action. But when I was in the south [in Helmand] it was very hard to adamantly say it would be a better place if the army left. I was surprised by losing that kind of clarity. In Kabul and Mazar-e-Sharif it was interesting to see the vast amount of aid and the infrastructure attempting to address problems. The absence of government in the south meant that it was impossible for the aid to have any lasting impact down here. The feeling I had when I came back here was that feeling of how tragic it is when bureaucracy collapses. Which is strange because I've never had any fondness for local government. But without that power simply reverts to the organisation that has the most military strength, whether it's an army or a religious organisation like the Taliban.

When I first came back I found it really hard to take any of the politics that was being talked about in the news here seriously. It all seemed to be so domestic. The interesting thing is that the concerns we have living in a relatively mundane urban society aren't irrelevant or ridiculous.

So apart from being slightly less disdainful about local government, did it change your practice at all, being in such an extreme situation?

[Laughs] In a funny way I found it reassured my practice. I came back with my sense of confidence that you start with this broad confidence of things that you have judged, but as you get closer you realise that all that crumbles into complexity.



Page Layout from Article (section) Credit: RSA Arts and Ecology (2008)