

**Revisiting, Rethinking and Return: Australia-Afghanistan Artists' Books**  
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Public Art projects – projects that act within the social sphere – open themselves to unanticipated actions. Interventions by all people who encounter them, constantly reveal and shape new meanings. Such a project potentially has no end.

This paper tells the story of encounters provoked by the physical book object that has travelled, that has moved from country to country physically and in knowledge, in real-time experience and in historical narrative. In a world in which calls for exclusionism, boundaries and national self-interest are growing significantly, a project that embraces global relationships of difference and global responsibility for gender equity is positioning itself politically.

Reflecting on encounters and relationships brings to mind Hannah Arendt's metaphor of the web of human relationships, the intangible quality of action and speech that is in-between people and things, and that binds people together (THC182). From a phenomenological perspective, Seyla Benhabib explains Arendt's web of human relationships and enacted stories as constituting the *horizon* of human affairs. Horizon, that is ever present and recedes into infinity, suggests that at any one time we focus on only part of something that then becomes present to us and reveals itself to us (TRMHA112).

For Arendt, when we take action, we are starting things and setting off trains of events without understanding the implications. Her ideas of *natality* – that each new person born into the world presents a capacity for new actions that may disrupt or change trajectories of previous action (THC9) – suggests human capacity for the “re-”; renewal, revision, reinvention within a shared social space.

The web of relationships I am presenting has been set in motion through *Unfolding Projects*, a long-term project involving the artist's book. The project has been a vehicle for exchanges between women artists and women learning literacy in OPAWC's<sup>1</sup> Vocational Centre, Kabul. These Afghan women are attempting against all odds to gain an elementary education within an environment of conflict, poverty and patriarchal authority.

### **Revisiting: The first *Unfolding Projects***

It began as an intuitive gesture in identification with women in a country of conflict in which our own country was involved. Currently in its second series, the project invites Afghan women in Kabul to interact with imagery created by the Australian artists, using their recently acquired literacy skills on the format of an artist's book. Though in its beginning it was not intentionally political art, its very act can be no other. The sharing of marks on paper is in itself a political act revealing a political intent: *Afghan women be strong; we stand in solidarity with you.* (TT4)

In 2010 a collective of 14 Australian women artists that I coordinated, created 53 concertina artists' books of imagery from each artist's current practice. In partnership with the Support Association for Women in Afghanistan – South Australia (SAWA),

the books were delivered to the Vocational Centre in Kabul, where Afghan women wrote their stories and thoughts in relationship to the imagery.

Of these 53 books, 36 returned. Each book, initially a completed artist's book that held its own, was then related to by the direct mark of the Afghan woman's hand in beautiful Arabic script, resulting in another visual imagery that implied new meanings. These layered readings were multiplied further when the Afghan stories were translated, and as their meaning was perceived in relation to the imagery.

## Rethinking

Researcher Gemma Meek reflected on these layers of perception in email exchanges conducted between us.<sup>ii</sup> She observes that meaning of the books changes according to the context or place the books occupy: "They would have had a different meaning for you as artists, to the women writing within them, to being held at the archive or shown at the conference. The meaning is very transient."<sup>iii</sup>

The conversation with Gemma Meek, which was to extend over three years, began on the online forum Artist Books 3.0 in 2013, three years after the return of the concertina books to Australia. I came across her post calling for discussion around questions of gender and the artist's book to inform the PhD research she was conducting at the University of Manchester, England.

*I am particularly interested in the use of the artists' book for political means ... I would like to consider questions such as: why are women particularly attracted to the book format? Can artists' books be effective political tools? ...*<sup>iv</sup>

Gemma's questions were to contribute to a process that extended my self-reflexive identification as both participator and observer, as interwoven parts of action. In Benhabib's interpretation of Arendt, "actions are identified by their doers as well as by the spectators and those who suffer their consequences through various narrative tellings. And in this way they become part of the "web" of human affairs." (TRMHA113)

I posted a reply on the Artists Books03 forum, linking *Unfolding Projects* to the discussion post, and we continued to correspond during the next few years, with Gemma's enquiries evolving as her research progressed. These enquiries provided me with insight into why a project that extends over a relatively long term can have significance. When our project began in 2010, there seemed to be public and media empathy in Australia for women in Afghanistan and their struggles. Within a few years there was considerable critique in the Western world, and often denigration, of Muslim women's representation.

Gemma noted that academic writing on Afghan women's representation often depicted women as oppressed, veiled, and voiceless, and questioned whether that viewpoint impacted decisions for the project.<sup>v</sup> In reflecting on this I was reminded that these books had in fact broken away from representations of the Muslim woman through her appearance. Rather, in the artists' books of our project Afghan women were identifying themselves through their gestures and expression, through their stories marked directly by their hand in written texts. Moreover, these marks of Arab

script were positioned alongside and within Western women's imagery. This was beyond representation – it acted as evidence of existence.

The questions posed to me by Gemma did not necessarily remain questions to be answered, but rather, by the act of questioning, instigated challenges to my thinking and ultimately rethinking aspects of the project. As new beginnings for her own project, they invariably introduced new narratives into ours.

By this time I was already in the process of planning a second *Unfolding Projects* with the principal of the Vocational Centre in Kabul, Latifa Ahmady. Like Gemma, Latifa and I had developed an email relationship, well after the culmination of the first project and its documentation in 2013. Together, we developed ideas the next text-image exchange, this time using textiles, a medium familiar to the Afghan women learning sewing skills together with literacy at the Centre. While it cannot be claimed that the project and its participants were equal in power relations, it was becoming possible, through the trust that had now developed, to strive for a more equal, shared investment of ideas.

The new project conceptualizes each handkerchief as a page, as a space for – to use Arendt's expression – “enacted stories” and, I would add, embodied stories. The handkerchief is a potent symbol of both joy and sorrow, an artifact loaded with history and narrative. Many of the handkerchiefs had had previous lives. They came from the artists' father, grandmother, aunt, friends, strangers. The handkerchief was also a link to a history of women's artists' books and a global inheritance of women's art-and-craft-making both contemporary and historical.

My last communication from Latifa was in March 2017. When I emailed her a month later that the artwork from 20 Australian artists was complete, the reply that returned was from someone else. Hajira Zaman notified me that Latifa was away, her return unknown. Hajira was taking over running the Centre together with Shazia. This change, and the suddenness of transition, caught me unawares. Moreover, the mystery surrounding Latifa's absence was concerning and was continually deferred when I'd make reference to it in future conversations. The relationship I had built with Latifa was no longer there to continue with the project, side by side. In the cloud of obscurity I worried for her safety. Our shared past experience was no longer the context for continuity.

Here was to be a new beginning within a preplanned activity, unexpected and testing in many ways due to challenges in communication and the volatile situation of the Centre within an environment of conflict. It was also the beginning of new and unpredictable relationships.

## **Return**

Other circumstances had changed. The convener of SAWA<sup>vi</sup> who had taken the first series of artists' books to Kabul in 2010 was no longer able to do so in 2017. My search for someone to deliver the current artwork led me, through a network of friends, to Nouria Salehi.

People in the know said to me, “What? You don’t know Nouria Salehi?” Dr Nouria Salehi is recognised both in her profession as a biophysicist and for her commitment to the people of her country of birth Afghanistan. She is an advocate for women’s rights and has set up education programs in Afghanistan through the organisation she founded, AADO, Afghan Australian Development Organisation. Nouria has lived in Australia for over 35 years and travels to Afghanistan every 6 months to monitor and contribute to these programs. In one of these journeys back to Kabul she delivered our package of 60 handkerchief artworks to Shazia in Kabul.

I had changed my mode of communication with the Centre as emails were rarely being answered. I was now telephoning Hajira and Shazia, who valiantly spoke with me in English. Now that I was connected with Nouria, some of these conversations were in Dari with Nouria mediating between us. It was around these phone calls that I began to be educated on the current realities of life in Kabul. New narratives emerged – Nouria suggested that difficulties in communication may have been due to the Taliban cutting off electricity supplies, resulting in an allocation of only two hours of electricity per day; regarding Latifa’s disappearance, saying that someone “was away” was often code for having migrated. Nouria related stories of progress as well: when she originally travelled through villages to promote her programs, community leaders were all men while now a large number are women.<sup>vii</sup>

At the time of writing this paper, Nouria is about to travel again to Afghanistan. If all proceeds according to expectation, she will meet with Hajira or Shazia who will give her the handkerchiefs she had handed them eight months previously, now embroidered with texts. At this point, it is unknown how many of the handkerchiefs will return or their new appearance and consequently new meanings.

While unpredictability can be unsettling, it is also an inevitable consequence of action. As Arendt claims, unpredictability is in the nature of action that involves the plurality of human of relationships. We cannot predict the exact outcome of an action because its processes are endless: “...every action becomes a chain reaction and ... every process is the cause of new processes.” (THC190, 233).

There are many more threads involved in the processes of *Unfolding Projects*. Interactions with other artists and education initiatives in parts of the world experiencing conflict, such as in Israel, my other home country, have already begun. *Unfolding Projects* is inherently a project that crosses boundaries. The current and future exchanges reflect a commonality and relationship between women’s experience in countries of conflict and in countries of stability, but also the boundlessness of action and reaction within relational arts practice.

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<sup>i</sup> Organization of Promoting Afghan Women's Capabilities

<sup>ii</sup> 2013- 2016

<sup>iii</sup> Interview 2016, reference to Impact7 conference and acquisition by State Library Queensland

<sup>iv</sup> <http://artistbooks.ning.com/forum/topics/women-and-artists-books?commentId=2172913%3AComment%3A145868>

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<sup>v</sup> Interview 2016

<sup>vi</sup> Matthias Tomczak

<sup>vii</sup> Conversations 2017