

Final Report about the Afghan Pavilion in the Venice 51 Biennale 2005

Project

Duration: 11 June to 7 November 2005

Project Background

Said Ismael Noori Commissar/Curator

Svenja Ritter Co -Curator

Simona Ciuccio Commissar assistitant

Lida Abdul Artist

The Venice Biennale is the most prestigious international art exhibition in the world. Occurring every two years since the late 19th Century, the 51st edition of the event held in 2005 was the first time that Afghanistan participated.

The Venice Biennale consists of the following venues for exhibition:

- 83 countries that always participate (the main Western and some non-Western countries such as Venezuela, Korea and Japan) have permanent pavilions in the area called the "Giardine". Besides, the Italian Pavilion in the Giardine exhibits the work of artists from different countries: this year there were 42 artists there.
- Other countries that wish to have a major presence in the art exhibition rent spaces in different locations of Venice to establish their own pavilion. This year there were 26 countries with a pavilion outside the Giardine.
- While one curator organizes the theme for all the national pavilions (this year the theme was "The Experience of Art") another curator organizes an exhibition of artists from all around the world, according to another theme, in abandoned warehouses on a terrain called "The Arsenal". This year the theme of the Arsenal was "Always a bit further". The works of 49 artists were displayed in the Arsenale in 2005.
- Finally, there are unofficial art events and exhibitions organized around the Biennale, usually by local galleries and artist groups.

The Pavilions are generally funded by the government of the country wishing to be present in the Biennale. In this sense Afghanistan was an exception, as the government did not provide any funding to the project, but did provide its essential official support to Mr. Noori to set up a Pavilion in the name of Afghanistan. Some countries invest large amounts of money in their national Pavilion. The German Pavilion thus reportedly cost more than 400,000 Euros.

The Biennale was inaugurated on 9 June, and lasted 5 months, until the 7th of November. The national Pavilions are required to stay open during the whole exhibition.

Mr. Noori is probably the most famous Afghan art curator in the world. He has been active in the field of contemporary art for more than 20 years. He has a gallery in Karlsruhe, Germany called "Kohinoor" but distinguishes himself by participating in many art fairs, such as Media Art in Koln, art fairs in Basel etc. Over the last decade he has progressively become involved in supporting Afghan artists, most of them working abroad. He brought together these artists in an innovative art project called MOMAK (Museum of Media and Art Kabul) which is a virtual museum with a novel graphic interface, that one can visit at www.momak.org. He is now also increasingly involved in building the capacity of students in the Fine Art Faculty of Kabul University.

Mr. Noori started working on the project of establishing an Afghan Pavilion at the Biennale of Venice in 2001, as soon as the Taliban regime in Afghanistan fell. In 2004 he received the support of the FCCS in Kabul, which is the main Afghan organization working for arts development, to obtain a letter from the Minister of Information and Culture supporting his project to establish an Afghan Pavilion in Venice in 2005. As most national pavilions, he decided to exhibit the works of one Afghan artist, Lida Abdul. She is a video-artist born in Kabul but based in Los Angeles, who has already had several exhibitions in the USA and beyond, some with the support of Mr. Noori.

The project they conceived was a multiple video projection, of works that the artist made in Afghanistan with guidance by the curator. She first came in May 2004 to participate in an exhibition by MOMAK in the FCCS Cultural Center in Kabul. She made several short films on the destruction and her personal vision of reconstruction in Kabul. In the process she worked with students from the Fine Arts Faculty in an exchange project organized by the FCCS and Mr. Noori, and funded mostly by the FCCS. The exhibition was inaugurated in June 2004 in the presence of, among others, the Canadian Ambassador Chris Alexander.

In the early spring of 2005 she came back with Mr. Noori to make a video in Bamiyan, with about 20 students from the Fine Arts Faculty in Kabul. The topic was the empty niches of the Buddhas and the reconstruction process. This project was funded by Mr. Noori and the artist herself, although support was given by the Banff Center for Arts for the editing of the art videos.

The work made in Bamiyan and two works made in 2004 in Kabul were shown in the Afghan Pavilion. But there was more: the Afghan Minister for Information and Culture had also given an official authorization letter to represent Afghanistan at the Biennale to Mrs. Olivetti, an Italian patron of the arts who became interested in Afghanistan, and who decided to exhibit kelims designed by Rahim Walizada, an Afghan who returned from New York to set up a new line of production in Afghan kelims called "Chakpalu". She rented a room adjacent to the rooms rented by Mr. Noori, to make it one Afghan pavilion, albeit with two curators. She paid for her own expenses, and for most of the inauguration expenses. Mrs. Olivetti actually hoped to sell some kelims (but not in the framework of the Biennale, where commercial activities are not allowed) as a fundraising effort for schools in Badakhshan (the province of origin of Rahim Walizada) but this does not seem to have materialized.

The Afghan Pavilion in Venice

The Afghan Pavilion was located in one of the most prestigious buildings in Venice: the "Fondazione Levi" on the Grand Canal, near one of the two bridges that spans the Grand Canal, "the Bridge of Arts", and thus close to where the streams of visitors walk. The Fondazione Levi supports arts and had rented its ground floor hall and an adjacent room for the Afghan Pavilion at was a relatively decent price. On the water side there was a small pontoon, offering direct access to the Afghan Pavilion by boat for dignitaries and rich visitors. The 17th Century building was also home to the Pavilions of Iran, Turkey and Ukraine, thus attracting even more visitors. The Afghan Pavilion was however the most accessible to the public.

In the main space two projectors beamed two of the videos of Lida Abdul on giant screens opposite to each other. One of the videos was her recent work in Bamiyan, where art students were clashing stones together and in strange formal processions carrying reconstruction materials to the empty sites of destruction. The other one showed the artist from the back patiently painting ruins in Kabul with white paint. In the adjacent room a 3rd video showed the process of uprooting a tree with inhabitants of Kabul. On the other side of the ground floor hall was the room with the display of Afghan kelims.

A team of people surrounded Mr. Noori to help him in the frantic days before the inauguration. Ms. Simona Ciuccio, assistant to Mr. Noori, supported the considerable logistical and organizational effort, while Sergio Quattrochi, who previously had been cultural attaché in the Italian Embassy of Kabul and Robert Kluyver, director of the FCCS, also assisted in the final effort to get everything ready on time. Finally, Mr. Noori's brother Mirwais Noori served as a troubleshooter and helped out financially.



From left to right: Mr. Noori, Mr Nader Hatami of the Afghan Embassy in Rome) and Prince Mir Wais



A crowd of people during the inauguration of the Afghan Pavilion on 11 June 2005

Mr. Noori had invited many people to the inauguration, including the Prince Mir Wais, son of the king Zaher Shah and head of the National Committee for the Preservation of Afghan Cultural Heritage (and an all-round supporter of Afghan arts), the first secretary of the Afghan Embassy in Italy, the Minister of Culture of Italy (Rocco Buttiglione), Mrs. Ursula Blicke, head of the Ursula Blicke Foundation in Germany and some of the foreigners that had worked in Afghanistan. Other visitors included Mrs. Els van der Plas (director of the Prince Claus Fund)

The artist, Lida Abdul, was present to talk about her work, as was the director of the FCCS, Robert Kluyver, who during the inauguration of the Pavilion gave a presentation with slideshow about the current trends in Contemporary Art in Afghanistan, showing the works of artists such as Najibullah Musaffer (photography and painting), Meena Faryad (young woman artist using mixed techniques), Khalid Hadi (re-mastered old photography), installations by the students of the Fine Arts Faculty, calligraphy by Ali Baba Aurang, drawings by Khalidzada, and fashion design by Zolaykha Sherzad.

Between 300 and 500 people attended the inauguration of the Pavilion, including many media. The presence in the Art Biennale of a country such as Afghanistan, more known for its terrorists and calamities than for its contemporary artists, naturally evoked a lot of interest among journalists. The event was reported on the Deutsche Welle (broadcast internationally and also on Afghan TV), Art Forum, the BBC World Service (with an interview of the curator/comissar Said Ismael Noori and the FCCS director), Russian, Turkish and French journalists, and from Art Asia Pacific, a prestigious American Art magazine , TV Deutsche Welle .



The Fondazione Levi, hosting the Pavilions of Iran, Afghanistan, Ukraine and Turkey, on the Grand Canal

On the 12th of June, a great encouragement was received by the whole team working on the Afghan pavilion when the Taiwanese Government's representative at the Biennale gave a 20,000 USD prize to the Afghan artists. The prize was shared in equal parts by the two artists, Lida Abdul and Rahim Walizada. This of course even increased the public and media interest in the Afghan Pavilion.



From l to r: Mr. Noori, Robert Kluyve and Simona Ciuccio the slideshow of Afghan artists



Noori Interview with "Deutsche Welle"

In the days following the inauguration, enormous crowds still came to the Afghan Pavilion, as to the other pavilions in Venice. At the end of June most of the team left, leaving guards in charge of the Afghan Pavilion until the end of the Biennale. On the 7th of November Mr. Noori was back in Venice to close the Pavilion. The videos were returned to the artist Lida Abdul and the rented video equipment was brought back to Germany.



Image from Lida Abdul's "Bamiyan" Video



Image from Lida Abdul's "Repainting Kabul" video

Report by Robert Kluyve FCCS Kabul/Afghanistan