

Mariam Ghani

Diasporic Networks and the Collaborative Construction of Identity in *Kabul: Reconstructions*

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When I first traveled to Kabul in the last days of December 2002, completing the same diaspora in reverse as thousands of other Afghan-Americans that year, I was lucky enough to have a precise artistic mission that gave shape to the often overwhelming rush of impressions generated by the oddly familiar disorientation of being in my father's country for the first time. That mission was to create a project about the reconstruction of Kabul that would take as its starting point a video that I would shoot myself during my trip, but would then expand to include multiple perspectives on the complex processes transforming the city through a series of interventions by collaborators invited to update and revise my view of reconstruction. At the moment when my plane landed on the asphalt strip of Bagram Airport and taxied past the crumpled carcasses of helicopter wrecks gone by, the precise nature of that collaboration was yet to be determined, but I knew that the intended venue for the project – the exhibition *Exit Biennial: The Reconstruction* at the venerable New York alternative space Exit Art – was conceived as a show of site-specific installations that would evolve continuously over its three-month run. So it made sense to set up a collaboration that could feed the evolution of the piece from a video that captured a single, static moment in time (albeit through moving images) into an installation that would be responsive both to changes in the situation in Kabul, the city into which it would provide a portal, and its immediate situation in the context of Exit Art's new raw space, which would be inaugurated with this constantly self-reinventing show.

As I drove through Kabul over the next two weeks, camera pointed out the window as the car wound through congested traffic circles, busy markets, bustling ministries, eerily vast Soviet housing projects, embassies and NGOs barricaded with sandbags and razor wire, and everywhere, at every turn, the construction sites with their steady rhythm of activity, a video began to emerge that explored the idea of reconstruction as both a process and a metaphor. The process was clearly both the literal renovation and new construction going on all around me, and also the bureaucratic promises of large-scale social and economic redevelopment that as yet were visible only in the failures of the past, like the unfinished apartment blocs from the Soviet era now occupied by hundreds of returnees. The metaphor became the much more personal way in which I was, like many other Afghan-Americans suddenly forced onto intimate terms with a heritage that had formerly seemed remote and inaccessible,

engaged in my own reconstruction of Afghanistan – piecing together an image of this place (embodied for me in the city which was the only part of the country I was able to visit myself) from the scraps of information transmitted in family stories, traditions and recipes, or read between the lines of mass media reports. When I shot the last part of the video, the last night before I left Kabul, in the bedroom of my parents' house, it was a private performance where I took off the clothes I had been wearing to navigate the city as an American woman and dressed myself in my father's (traditional Afghan men's) clothes instead. When, back in New York, I made this performance the anchor of the final video, I was acknowledging that for me the literal reconstruction of Kabul – this public, political activity humming away on the other side of the world – had become part of my personal construction of an identity that was also undergoing radical change.

So where does collaboration fit into an artistic practice as personal as the (re)construction of identity? Uneasily, at first. The collaboration I had set up during my trip to Kabul, with the young video and photography students of the AINA Afghan Media Center (<http://www.ainaworld.org>, an NGO with the mission to train the next generation of Afghan journalists to report their own stories), was designed to provide updates on the real reconstructions taking place in Kabul for the project's New York audience and also to open up that audience for the students' work, giving them their first professional outlet. After running through a few possible scenarios for transferring material back and forth, we settled on the idea of setting up a weblog for the project. This necessitated another collaboration on my part, with Exit Art programmer Ed Potter, who adapted, rewrote and added on to existing models and modules of blogger code in order to create a weblog (now at <http://www.kabul-reconstructions.net/index.php>) to which multiple users could upload and caption multiple files in multiple formats (QuickTime video and audio, JPEG images, PDF documents), over dial-up connections, with an interface as simple as those familiar from email attachments. Once the blog was working and online, already a few weeks into the exhibition, the anxious wait for the first transmissions from Kabul began. In the meantime I had decided to invite more bloggers into the mix, thinking that it would be interesting to get some more perspectives on either the literal or the metaphorical side of reconstruction from other Afghan-Americans -- including my younger brother Tarek in California, who had just returned from a year of working for the interim Afghan government in Kabul.

After some prodding on my part, these blog-based collaborations did bear some fruit: the Brooklyn-based poet Zohra Saed contributed some lovely, reflective texts; Tarek uploaded a few key development documents; I tracked Western

media coverage of the reconstruction; somehow among the staff changes and general disorganization at AINA (4 different teachers exchanged emails with me over 4 months), one photography student, Masood, produced and uploaded a series of photographic studies of construction sites, and one video student, Nassima, sent a thrilling three-minute video essay on the Malalai maternity hospital (later followed by two others on other aspects of reconstruction). In the meantime, however, I was pursuing a different kind of collaboration onsite at Exit Art, where I had set up a replica of a UNHCR-issue refugee tent to house the three-channel video, website kiosk (an ancient iMac on a desk with a folding chair), and a carpet and cushions that every Saturday for three months became the stage for a public dialogue performance. On those Saturdays I would sit on one of the cushions and invite visitors to the tent to sit down with me to watch the video; I would then serve them tea and World Food Programme biscuits while offering to answer their questions about the project, the reconstruction of Kabul, and its broader Afghan context. The conversations that grew out of this invitation almost always produced unexpected revelations not only about my visitors' various relationships to the idea, image and reality of Kabul, but also (through their questioning about the personal motivations behind my project, and the exchange of family diaspora stories usually initiated by that questioning) about their own evolving constructions of identity in relation to changing configurations of family and cultural networks. Moreover, each invitation issued and accepted, each question asked that I could successfully answer in this dedicated space, gave me more authority and more ease in assuming the new public, rather than private, Afghan-American identity that had been forced onto me after September 11th, 2001 – when the questions had come fast and thick, without invitation and without respite, in every arena of my life, and which had triggered the drastic reorganization of my personal diasporic network.

After the Exit Art exhibition had run its course, the [kabul-reconstructions.net](http://www.kabul-reconstructions.net) website had received enough press and was being linked to from enough other pages that it seemed worthwhile to continue the blog experiment. As time went by, though, that particular set of collaborations seemed to have lost all momentum, and my enthusiasm for maintaining the site as a media archive was waning. What was missing from the site was the galvanizing input of strangers, new visitors who would interact with the material from the fresh vantage point of relative ignorance and bring new questions to the project. I went back to Ed Potter with a sketch of a new section for the site, Ask A Question (<http://www.kabul-reconstructions.net/ask>), which would issue the same invitation to the casual net visitor that I had made in person from my tent in Hell's Kitchen. We created a second PHP/MySQL database that allowed anyone to submit

questions and enabled any of the bloggers to submit answers to them, explaining to the audience that I and the other participants would transmit the questions to Kabul through our diasporic networks – in my case, usually by calling or emailing a family member – which would then try to find the answer and carry it back to the site within a few weeks of the asking. The original blog database would now be accessible under the section Follow the Information, and would also take its broad directional cues from the questions submitted by viewers.

To inaugurate the new incarnation of the project, I sent out an email invitation with the subject line “www.kabul-reconstructions.net/ask: open for questions.” The body of the email explained how to submit a question, how the questions would be answered, and added the additional incentive that questions submitted by mid-December of 2003 would help to determine what footage I would shoot and add to the site during my second trip to Kabul, exactly one year after my first visit; it also asked people to forward the invitation to anyone who might have an unanswered question about reconstruction. In addition to sending this invitation to my own list of contacts, I posted it to Rhizome, Nettime, and Afghaniyat (an Afghan news mailing list with about 11,000 members). Rhizome published the invitation on their front page, and almost everyone who received the email then forwarded it on to more lists, both personal and public; the invitation turned up on Sarai in India and C3 in Eastern Europe, and links to the site appeared on other blogs along with various flavors of commentary. As someone new to the wide-open world of net art, I greeted this phenomenon with grateful wonder – which became even more pronounced when surprisingly specific, difficult and provocative questions started to turn up on the Ask A Question page of the site.

I quickly became absorbed in the reconstruction again, setting aside other work to race down each fresh track of exploration indicated by a new question. I often posted two or three answers to each question over a period of weeks or sometimes months, as new ideas or connections would occur to me or new information became available. And my confidence – or maybe my conviction that I was an Afghan in something more than just name – grew as I found that I was able to answer a surprising number of question through my own knowledge or research. Through their interaction with the website, these mostly anonymous strangers were placing their trust in my newly acquired and publicly proclaimed authority to represent Kabul, which however was derived entirely from my private identity and private, mostly familial networks and which acquired its authority in the public sphere primarily from that very trust – in fact it was being collaboratively constructed by them at the moment of their questioning. Another interesting feature of this transaction was that most of the questioners had turned

to my privately-constructed network for answers precisely because the information they wanted was not forthcoming on the usual public channels.

This motivation provoked a flashback to my frequent bemusement as a teenager faced with high school and college classmates completely ignorant of any but the broadest strokes of world politics. Didn't everyone live in a house where you got world news not just from the television but also from the telephone? Long distance might be expensive, but at least it didn't come with sound-bite time limits. Diasporic networks like my Afghan-American web are amazing carriers of information; in order to maintain the unities of extended families across widening gaps of geography and culture it is necessary that the networks process and distribute not only gossipy intimacies and moral imperatives but also precise and highly sensitive social, political, and cultural barometers that register every change in temperature in the homeland and all its satellites. Through these migrant networks, the United States is far more connected than it appears to all the sites considered by the majority of its citizens to be irrevocably foreign and inevitably strange. So when I became the personal source for answers to the questions about Afghanistan being accumulated by all my newly curious acquaintances at the end of 2001, at first I resented the intrusion into my private life; then I began to appreciate that I really did have, if not all the answers, at least a much more effective way of asking the questions, already just a dial tone away. Making the private family network into a visible manifestation on the Internet, and the private transaction of question and answer into a public exchange in the gallery and online, was obviously more efficient and, less obviously, became a transformative act of performance: my own performance of the border between Kabul and New York, between my American and Afghan identities, as a line I could cross daily with ease, blurring its contours with every step.

When I returned to Kabul in December 2003, I had many more missions to give shape to my days: find and photograph a particular school for one viewer who wanted to find it a U.S. sponsor; shoot ten minutes of crowd footage in a marketplace for another; document the Telekiiosk computer classes in the post office for a questioner interested in the role of the Internet in daily life; shoot a follow-up to the reconstruction video for a curator in Brazil; ask people if they were happy; research the roles of women and technology; conduct interviews about the new constitution; attend the Loya Jirga. I walked off the plane, down the newly immaculate airstrip, and into my mother's arms; then into the car and down the roads familiar as dreams by now from hours in front of the looping monitors; I was home.

Mariam Ghani (<http://www.kabul-reconstructions.net/mariam>) was born in New York in 1978 to an Afghan father and Lebanese mother, and in her practice as a media artist uses these multiple identities to position herself as a translator, revealing channels of communication between cultures that consider themselves foreign to each other by investigating the border zones where those cultures intersect. She received a B.A. summa cum laude with honors in Comparative Literature from NYU in 2000, where she was an Acton Scholar, and an MFA in Photography, Video and Related Media from the School of Visual Arts in 2002, where she was awarded the Aaron Siskind Memorial Scholarship. Ghani was also a Paul & Daisy Soros New Americans Fellow from 2000-02 and a Bronx Museum Artist in the Marketplace from 2002-03. She is currently a Lower Manhattan Cultural Council Artist in Residence at the Woolworth Building and a Visiting Artist in the MFA Computer Arts department at the School of Visual Arts. She has exhibited her work in video, installation and new media nationally and internationally since 1999. Recent and upcoming projects include screenings at the New York Video Festival, the Asia Society, the Boston Center for the Arts, Smart Project Space in Amsterdam, the 13^a Mostra Curtacinema in Rio de Janeiro, and transmediale.03 in Berlin; site-specific installations at the Brooklyn Museum, Talwar Gallery, Judson Church, and the Bronx Museum of the Arts; a net art commission for Turbulence.org; and artist talks and lectures at Bennington, Tufts, NYU, and Hunter.

Kabul: Reconstructions was originally presented at Exit Art in New York from March 8th – May 31st, 2003 and has been or will be seen in various forms as an opening night selection of the 13^a Mostra Curtacinema in Rio de Janeiro, the screening *Democracy* at the Arclight Theater in New York, the event *Seeing Through Afghanistan: Afghanistan Re-Viewed through Music & Film* at Wesleyan University, and the conference *Community/Performance* at Bryant College. The project has been covered in The New York Times, the Brooklyn Rail, Falter, O Globo, O Dia, ArteNews (<http://www.arteeast.org/artenews-ArteNews.html>) and the BBC World Service (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/Persian/arts/la-za-ghani.html>), It can now be seen at <http://www.kabul-reconstructions.net>.