

INSIDE OUT IN KABUL

For those who are expecting this to be an article about the Taliban, war and burqas: please turn the page. The following story is not what you are used to hearing about Afghanistan in the Western media, nor is it what any government's propaganda wants you to believe. This story celebrates art and culture in Kabul. Afghanistan remains a relatively unknown entity to most Europeans especially when it comes to culture and street art. During a research trip in October 2012, FOCUS director Shakyla Hussain and architect Shervin Shalalvand visited Kabul in order to meet Afghan artists who are amazingly creative despite the conflict that has ravaged their country for decades. In their suitcases they brought with them 26 kilos of king-size portraits and pasted them all around the city center: the best street art action they had ever experienced!

I was born and raised in Switzerland. College, university, Master's degree in international relations, travels all around the world, hired by a great Swiss cultural institution. "A perfect life!" some people would say. But when I graduated something was missing: my Afghan roots were calling me. Born to a Swiss-French mother and an Afghan father, I am from the "moitié-moitié" generation. I grew up in a region where I was always a foreigner because of my name. I knew that I was from somewhere else even though I had never been "there". I felt like a piece of my identity was missing.

After 24 years, I decided to go to Kabul for the first time in 2009. Alone. From Bishkek, where I organized my first artistic exchange between Swiss and Kyrgyz artists, I took the flight to Moscow then Dubai and finally arrived in Kabul on a cold December morning at 6:00 am. I spent a surprising month of December in the Afghan winter volunteering for an NGO. The clash between my quiet comfortable life in Switzerland and that of Afghanistan – where Afghans were being so welcoming, whilst living in such bad conditions themselves, was the hardest emotion to deal with during my stay. Why did I have the right more than anyone else to grow up in a safe and comfortable country? My studies in one of the best education systems in the world would not have been possible in Kabul where most students come from society's elite.

Even though it was my first time in Afghanistan, I felt connected to things I already knew from my childhood: people speaking in Dari (Afghan language close to the Persian Farsi), exquisite taste of the Qabuli Palaw – the national dish consisting of meat or chicken, covered with rice pilaf topped with fried sliced carrots, raisins and chopped nuts like pistachios or almonds – smells of Patu (Afghan wool blanket) while shopping in the Bazaar, moments spent with friends and family at Bagh-e-Babur garden. In other words, I felt at home. By the time I left Afghanistan, I knew that I would come back for my own artistic exchange project. I really wanted to be part of my country's artistic scene and promote both Kabul based and Afghan diaspora artists. In 2010, I heard about French artist JR's community project Inside Out. Thanks to several great photographers' collection, we collected 250 portraits of men, women and children celebrating the beauty of Afghan people's diversity.

The Inside Out project seemed to be easy to organize in my hometown Vevey, where street art actions often took place. But what would happen in a city where art in the public space has been banned for years because of the conflict? What would the people's reaction be, especially when young men and women would help us paste the posters? However, the most important thing, before any other issues were dealt with, was to get the mayor's authorization. We did not have any plan or contact when we arrived, but great Afghan and expat friends helped us to get in touch with him. Everything has been a matter of connections. After several calls, we had a meeting planned with his assistant. We spent a funny day explaining our project to all of the collaborators: the Minister of Culture, the Minister of Communication, and the Mayor's cultural attaché and before each of them we met one or two assistants. That kind of situation would never happen in Switzerland. Ten cups of tea and a few hours later we had accomplished our



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goal of getting the "Saint Graal": the Mayor's authorization and in addition, two of his closest collaborators accompanying us on D-Day! We had the chance to paste the 250 portraits in three different places around the city center of Kabul: Shar Wali, Darulaman Road and the Bazaar. The capital is still marked by the years of conflict and all of the important buildings are surrounded by concrete walls and under police surveillance. But for the first time, those walls became an artistic display. People's reactions turned into something positive. They were asking who those people were and why their portraits were hanging on the wall. Even the police started to help us when they saw their colleague's photo!

By doing this street art action we wanted to show what Afghanistan really looks like. It's a country of hope and laughter, and a region in which people have interacted for thousands of years, to which history has given a remarkable cultural diversity. And with a touch of utopianism, we hope that major power will stop interfering in Afghanistan's politics. People could stop living in the past and build a better future... A future of dreams and art!

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Text & Photos: Shakyla Hussain



Created in 2009, the FOCUS association organizes international artistic exchange between Switzerland and other countries. It fosters dialogue and idea sharing between artists from diverse creative milieus. The project SOFA KABUL between Swiss and Afghan artists in the fields of music, cinema and transdisciplinary topics started in June 2013. Check the website for the upcoming Afghan rock nights in Neuchâtel, Zurich, Bern and Vevey in January 2014.

