

I'd seen them come around before, Curators, Designers, and Artists "engaging" with what they referred to as Afghanistan's art "scene." And I've been conflicted with them. By what these "engagements" could possibly be and what they usually ended up being.

Was dOCUMENTA(13) going to be simply another way in which the conflict of a place and its people was going to be culturally commodified?

But we're talking about artistic expression and so for me the only problem is if there's an agenda; because here in Afghanistan whenever a project is done, particularly in the arts, there is usually an agenda; one that is embroiled in the geopolitics of foreign interests.

So did dOCUMENTA(13) have an agenda for including Afghanistan in its satellite projects?

Well it started with an idea, and a good one I think – to come to Afghanistan with no predetermined form. It seemed like a refreshing change in fact from the formulaic art projects often simply transplanted to new development soil or the arrogant, hierarchy of Western knowledge understood as a gift bestowed upon the noble savages.

But the problem was that when something "formless" is introduced into the social, political, and cultural fabric of a nation like Afghanistan, it will inevitably begin to take the form of whatever shape is already serving as the dominant blob within which so much happens. And in Afghanistan today that blob, that form, is the largely Western-led, White Man's Burden of International Aid & Development.

So the approach still became problematic, and to some extent only furthered the West's romanticized, exaggerated glamorization of contemporary culture in the country in a way that ultimately creates, like cultural carnival mirrors, a distorted reflection of reality.

But in the end we're still inevitably faced with the question in development jargon from fellow Afghans and artists alike - What long-term value or impact (i.e. sustainability) does the dOCUMENTA project have in Afghanistan?

Maybe the question simply shows our own inability to communicate what dOCUMENTA(13) was in Afghanistan, or at least was trying to be. But maybe it's also another sign of dOCUMENTA(13)'s formlessness being shaped by a pre-existing form, one that finds the extensive nine months of Seminars and month-long Exhibition being referred to more often than not as simply "that German project."

Then again, as an artist I look at the complexities of a place like Afghanistan and its history as a cultural way-station along the Silk Road and therefore see dOCUMENTA(13) as a major happening, a creative and cultural moment in time and space that existed in Afghanistan in much the same way a Buddhist sand-mandala exists

in the breezy outdoors. Full of color, spilling over with emotion, bursting with life, and then slowly, grain by grain, disappearing to leave behind only the power of its myths and symbols in the collective memory of a people.

dOCUMENTA(13) in Afghanistan was a sand mandala...

Reference:

dOCUMENTA(13) in Afghanistan Was a Sand Mandala, Amanullah Mojadidi; *REEL-UNREEL*, Francis Alÿs; MADRE-Museo d'arte contemporanea Donnaregina, Napoli / Electa, Milano, 2014.