Research paper

The art of conflict

In Part 1, Paul Glinkowski talks to Angela Weight, Keeper of Art at the Imperial War Museum, and to some of the artists she has commissioned. In Part 2, he looks at the experiences of two artists who choose to work in conflict zones without the backing or safety net of state patronage.

Part 1

The tradition of the war artist dates back to the First World War. Started in 1916 by Charles Masterman, head of the government's War Propaganda Bureau, it has continued sporadically and in various guises until today. Langlands and Bell's recent Turner Prize nomination for their exhibition 'The House of Osama bin Laden', the result of a commission from the Imperial War Museum (IWM) to research and respond to the war in Afghanistan and to the aftermath of 11 September, has brought the role of the war artist back into focus.

Artists are identified and chosen by the museum's Art Commissions Committee. Made up of artists, curators and museum officials, the committee meets "as and when necessary" no conflict, no commissions. The recent spate of wars in which the UK has been embroiled has meant that it has been busier than one might wish.

The committee is always chaired by an artist, currently sculptor Bill Woodrow, who also sits on the IWM Board of Trustees. Woodrow believes it's important that artists should be involved in commissioning their peers because: "We have a different sort of knowledge to curatorial knowledge, a different take on things." The war commissions are a way of shedding new light on conflict. "What artists do with the information they collect," says Woodrow, "offers something that isn't available anywhere else. Paul Seawright's photographs of minefields in Afghanistan, for example, are amazing, incredibly beautiful but bleak at the same time, not something you would ever be able to figure out from a television news report."

The opportunity of a commission often takes artists by surprise. Ben Langlands recalls: "The call came out of the blue. Angela Weight left a message saying 'the committee is drawing up a shortlist to interview, are you interested?' I discussed it with Nikki (Bell) and we said 'yes', pretty much without hesitation. We did wonder a bit about being commissioned by a body called the Imperial War Museum. We were aware, though, of the importance and quality of its collection. Our work explores systems of international communication and exchange linked at times to issues of geo–strategic confrontation so it seemed appropriate."

Weight confirms that most artists respond positively to the invitation, though it can vary depending on the nature of the conflict. The impact that the commission will have professionally also has a bearing. "Artists were queuing up to go to Afghanistan and we got a good response to Iraq," she recalls, "but they didn't seem to want to go to Kosovo. Artists are very wary of what it might do to their careers. Some were obviously concerned about whether intervening in Kosovo was a good thing."

Graham Fagen agreed to take up the Kosovo challenge, "but I did take time to talk it over with my family," he recalls. "One of my reservations was that I didn't want to guarantee I would produce anything when I came back."

This led to a renegotiation of how the IWM contracts artists. Previously, the deal included a requirement to produce an exhibition at the IWM, and stated that one of the works from this would be retained for its collection. Weight was eager that the IWM's approach to commissioning should be more responsive to the way that artists want to operate now and was happy to work to a new formula.

It was agreed that the contract should be split in two: the first part an agreement to go to Kosovo under no obligations; the second part, at the discretion of both parties, would agree the terms of an exhibition for the museum. "It allowed give and take on both sides," says Fagen. "They could decide whether to give the go ahead on the second part, but I could also decide not to make any work. It was a happy 'no strings' arrangement."

Once artists have agreed to the commission, the next stage is a research visit to the conflict zone. Fagen spent a fortnight in Kosovo; Langlands and Bell went to Afghanistan for two–and–a–half weeks. In both cases the visits took place when major hostilities had ceased. Apart from practical considerations such as safety, ease of access and insurance, Weight believes artists are better able to conduct reflective investigations "after the media circus has moved on".

The support of the military, or other host agencies, and of advisors who have experience on the ground is vital. The IWM arranged for Fagen to receive coaching from veteran war reporter Kate Adie prior to his visit in December 1999. "I spent two weeks living in a tent in temperatures of minus ten degrees," he recalls. "Kate had advised me on what thermals and sleeping bags I would need and gave me advice on where I might go and how difficult it would be to get around."

Once in Kosovo, Fagen was under the aegis of the army's Media Operations Unit who, though uncertain about what his role was, were very accommodating. "I tagged along with them and it turned out to be fantastic," he says. "Most of the places on my list were crossed off within a few days. As an ex–punk and member of CND, I went out there with great respect for the media and deep suspicion of the military, but I came back with my views reversed."

Langlands and Bell's Afghanistan trip in October 2002 required much more self–reliance. "The museum arranged for us to have a UNESCO contact on the ground," recalls Langlands, "but he didn't really want any responsibility for us. He met us at the airport, took us to a hotel, recommended a good driver for us to hire and then vanished." The IWM provided a satellite phone, a lifeline in case of emergency, but "it was very heavy and we didn't take it around with us unless absolutely necessary".

The Afghanistan trip succeeded through a combination of local contacts, networking and chance; "In a situation like that you rely on making friends with people you meet, striking up alliances and sharing information," says Langlands. An American journalist helped them gain access to the US military base at Baghram; happening across someone with the right local knowledge at the right time enabled them to find their way to Osama bin Laden's former hideaway; turning up at the Supreme Court in Kabul on the day that a notorious warlord was the first person to be sentenced to death since the fall of the Taliban provided some remarkable footage that became raw material for a video, *Zardad's Dog*.

Once back from the conflict zone, the artists report back to the IWM's Art Commissioning Committee. "We showed them our ideas and discussed budgets," says Langlands. "Budget constraints were a fraught issue all the way through the commission, but the museum was very open and supportive of the work and we found the relationship very enabling."

It was agreed that out of five works initially proposed three would be realised: an interactive video *The House of Osama bin Laden*, *Zardad's Dog*, and *NGO* a mixed–media work made in response to the bewildering array of NGOs (Non–Governmental Organisations), each with their own banners and logos, operating in Afghanistan. "The scale of NGO presence took us by surprise," says Langlands. "Afghanistan needs all the help it can get, but, funded as they are by the same countries that funded the

devastation, the NGOs appeared to us to represent the flip side of globalisation: an international grid of aid dependency that's another way of controlling what's going on."

Fagen also decided that he did want to propose new work based on his Kosovo experience. The result was *Theatre*, a video and installation piece based on a specially devised performance enacted without an audience by six of Fagen's friends and associates. Weight describes it as "a play about the failure of communication between two communities. He invented a gobbledegook language which viewers thought was real. Intercut with subliminal images from Kosovo, it offered an unsettling reflection on a situation in which neighbours turned killers."

Looking back now, both Fagen and Langlands and Bell found their IWM commission a rewarding and important experience. Inevitably though, working with such fraught material takes a personal toll. "Going somewhere like that is intense and can be quite traumatising," says Langlands. "You get filled up with stuff and then you are desperate to get it out. We feel we are moving beyond that now, though we are still working on related themes and using material gathered in Afghanistan."

Fagen was similarly affected. "It took up an awful lot of headspace to comprehend the situation and on top of that to make a public statement about it". The IWM commission has not had a conscious influence on what has come since, but a video he made last year for the Venice Biennale, which was intended to be a celebration of the life of Giorgione, ended up "extremely violent". "I think", he muses, "that, maybe, it was the return of the repressed."

Part 2

Artistically speaking, John Keane is a war veteran. Keane's work as a recorder of conflict began in 1987 with a visit to Nicaragua as guest of the Sandinista Association of Cultural Workers. A series of paintings and an exhibition, 'Bee Keeping in the War Zone' (1988), followed. In 1989 Keane travelled to Ulster – in the later stages of 'The Troubles' – where he accompanied British Army patrols and talked to people on either side of the sectarian divide. In the catalogue for the resultant exhibition, 'The Other Cheek' (1990), David Lee commended Keane's methods. "As a thinking painter of contemporary history", wrote Lee, "he prepared for his fact-finding mission with investigative journalistic thoroughness, arranging interviews, attending marches, taking notes and all the time searching for insights."

Keane continued his on-the-ground research approach in Iraq and Kuwait during the 1991 Gulf War where, for the first and only time, he was officially commissioned by the

Imperial War Museum to record a conflict, and in 2002 when he took up an invitation from Christian Aid to visit Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories.

Keane's guide and minder on his Israel/Palestine trip, Dominic Nutt, an emergency journalist for Christian Aid, says working with Keane overturned his views about artists. "I'd had a hard day dodging bullets in Gaza when I was told John would be visiting us," he recalls, "and my first thought was that I didn't want an idiotic artist pestering me." But Keane's self-reliance and coolness under pressure won over the seasoned aid worker. "When I saw John at work, I was converted. He was completely switched on in everything he did, which undermined every preconception I had about artists."

The idea to invite Keane to the Middle East came from Jon Barton, then Head of Media at Christian Aid. Barton thought an artist might help to put the Israeli-Palestinian situation into a fresh perspective. "We saw it as potentially a new way of delivering information, ideas and images," says Nutt. "It might give a new impetus to what had in the public's mind become, perhaps, a rather dry and stale issue."

Christian Aid had no history of working with artists and saw the project as an experiment, or as Nutt put it, "a loss leader". The arrangement between the two parties was informal. "The deal was that there was no particular deal. We just gave John the chance to see what he might make of the situation. There was no editorial control on our part and we didn't see ourselves as patrons; we didn't demand this, that and the other." Nor was there any financial reward; instead, the aid agency offered access to places and to people that would otherwise be out of bounds to even the most determined artist . "My job was to arrange visits and to get John through checkpoints and through any other difficult situations we might encounter," says Nutt. "He was the organ grinder, I was the monkey."

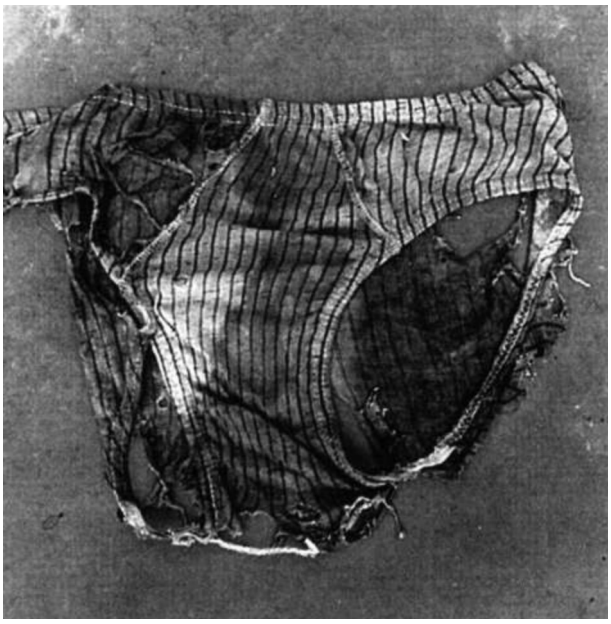
Though unsupported by a fee or by the curatorial practices and knowledge that usually accompany a commission, Keane is clear that unorthodox collaborations of this kind can be beneficial: "It is enormously helpful", he asserts, "to have the experience and the network available and the support to get access to places of interest. I wouldn't be able to achieve that in anything like the same way on my own." Working outside a formal commissioning structure was not a problem for Keane, who had undertaken a previous project with an NGO (Non-Governmental Organisation) – a journey to the

Amazon with Greenpeace in 2000, resulting in the exhibition 'Saving The Bloody Planet' (2001). "If someone comes along and says 'look we've got people going out there do you want to come along?', then sure, why not," he says. "There is nothing like getting that first-hand experience."

Keane made two visits to Israel and the occupied territories, in April and October 2002. After the first exploratory trip he committed to produce and exhibit work based on the region; his return trip focussed on specific locations. Some – Jenin and Gaza – were topical; others – the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the archaeological site at Megiddo (Armageddon) – had biblical resonance. On his return from the Middle East, Christian Aid supported Keane by arranging an exhibition, a catalogue and publicity. After a year in the studio where Keane produced twenty-five new paintings, 'The

Inconvenience of History' opened at the London Institute gallery at the beginning of 2004 and is currently touring the UK.

Nutt regards the collaboration with Keane as mutually beneficial: "We provided access and various kinds of support for the research trip and for the exhibition, and our reward was the exposure and insights the project generated." Keane also decided to donate a percentage of sales from the paintings to Christian Aid. "We did very well out of it", Nutt concludes, "it ended up as John doing us a favour."



Keane's public profile and distinguished track-record makes him an attractive proposition for external agencies and ensures that he will profit from the Christian Aid partnership in the longer term. Berlin-based photographer Frauke Eigen demonstrates that less established artists are also able to find ways to operate in emergency situations.

In 1996, a year after finishing her MA at the Royal College of Art, London, Eigen found herself in Bosnia documenting the work of Technisches Hilfswerk (THW), a German governmental disaster relief agency that specialises in infrastructure repair. Eigen recalls: "I really wanted to go to Bosnia but didn't have the courage to go on my own. I was looking for organisations, like the Red Cross, who would take me with them.

Somebody told me that I should contact THW. Two weeks later I was sitting on the plane to Bosnia." As with Keane, the reward is not money but access. "I document their projects but I don't get paid", says Eigen, "at the same time though, it gives me the chance to do my own work."

Since 1996, Eigen has travelled regularly with the THW in Serbia, Macedonia, Kosovo and, most recently, in Afghanistan. Her work in Kosovo in 2000 provided Eigen with some particularly grim insights into the inhumanity of war. Near the village where the THW was based, mass graves were found. Eigen visited the mortuary where the remains were gathered and, she recalls "on the way out of the mortuary I saw these clothes lying there in the sun drying after they had been washed. For some reason, maybe because the clothes were more human-like and recognisable than the bodies, I felt far more touched and disturbed by them." These poignant fragments became the raw material for Eigen's Fundstücke Portfolio (Lost and found from Kosovo) which was recently acquired for the collection of the Imperial War Museum (IWM).

Angela Weight, the IWM's Keeper of Art believes it is important for the museum's collection to reflect the work created by independent artists, as well as by those it directly commissions: "Artists have their right to a say on contemporary events just like anyone else and often, without the mantle of officialdom, they will come up with less mediated personal responses."

This applies to artists working and researching in their studios as well as to those, such as Keane and Eigen, whose work derives from experience in the field. Amongst the most recent of the IWM's acquisitions, for example, is a collection of 'anti-war medals' purchased from an international touring exhibition of the same name. Organised by the Velvet da Vinci gallery in San Francisco – which specialises in art jewellery and metalwork – 'Anti-War Medals' featured work by 135 artists and makers from sixteen countries.

What is it then, that drives artists to make conflict a recurrent subject of their artistic practice to the extent that they are prepared to expose themselves to danger in order to gather ideas and material for their work?

For Keane, looking back in particular to his experience of covering the war in the Gulf, it is partly a sense of bearing witness to great historical events. "To be given that ringside seat in a place where the eyes of the world were focussed was a scary but nevertheless thrilling experience," he says. "The whole business of war and violence to achieve political ends is fascinating but abhorrent. To be amongst people actively engaged in it is disquieting but it seems to me an important thing to do."

Eigen's motives are partly altruistic, partly existential: "I always go to places when the press has moved on to the next hotspot," she says. "I want to give them attention, dignity, respect and admiration; to show pictures from these countries which people don't know because the media has given them a certain image of what to think. Although war zones are often very sad and difficult, these journeys are like a precious part of my life. It puts my life here into some kind of perspective."

Paul Glinkowski is a freelance journalist, writer and arts consultant. From 1997 to 2003 he was a visual arts officer at Arts Council England (ACE), where he led on the development of a national programme of support for visual artists studios. He played a key role in the development of a series of three studios conferences in July 2003: 'Creating Places' at Tate Modern, and 'Making Space' and 'Opening Doors' at Yorkshire Artspace, Sheffield. He also wrote the 2003 ACE publication *Open Studios*.

Images

1. Langlands & Bell, *The House of Osama bin Laden*, bomb shelter/bunker behind the House of Osama bin Laden, Daruntah, Eastern Afghanistan, April 2003

2. Langlands & Bell, *NGO*, still from digital animation, 2003. Courtesy: Langlands and Bell

3. Graham Fagen, *Theatre*, projected play, 2000

4. John Keane, *Hopeless in Gaza (Road to a Settlement)*, oil on linen, 137x183cm, 2002

5. John Keane, *Armaggedon Now 2*, oil, gold leaf and ink jet on viscose on linen, 132x82cm, 2003

6. John Keane, *Ismael*, oil on viscose on canvas, 126x84.5cm, 2004

7. Frauke Elgen, *Hose Nr 1 (underpants)*, silver gelatin prints, 50x50cm. From 'Portfolio Fundstücke - Kosovo 2000'

8. Frauke Elgen, *Unterhemd (vest)*, silver gelatin prints, 50x50cm. From 'Portfolio Fundstücke - Kosovo 2000'

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