

Interview

Fragments of Home

A Conversation
Between Jeanno Gaussi
and Dorothea Schoene

Jeanno Gaussi's films, videos, photographic works and installations explore undefined spaces and times, and embody dynamics of a constant diaspora that is both personal and social. Gaussi spent her childhood in Kabul, where she lived up until she was five years old, before moving to Delhi and Berlin, and her work can be seen as an attempt to recuperate and reconstitute a possible identity, made of multiple fragments and colliding memories. At this year's dOCUMENTA (13), the Afghan-German artist showed a series of portrait paintings at the Kassel venue, taken from black and

Jeanno Gaussi,
Remaining Wall, 2012,
Kabul. Courtesy of the
artist.



white photographs of her family members. The artist commissioned Afghan painter Ustad Sharif Amin to paint her photographic images and then asked him how he envisioned the people portrayed; each portrait in the installation is thus accompanied with a short, fictional quote describing the person depicted.

At the Kabul venue, the Berlin-based artist showed *Peraan-e-Tombaan (pants and shirt)* (2012), an installation comprising seven examples of traditional Afghan men's clothing – a combination of loose pants and wide, knee-length shirts. The shirts feature embroidery in various designs around the chest and all the costumes were made from a fabric normally used for police uniforms. After the embroidery work was done, Gaussi designed and added a pattern, which is a variation on military insignia. A group of traditional Atan dancers then wore these costumes and performed the dance for a video documentation. Atan began as a folk dance and is now considered the national dance of Afghanistan.

Jeanno Gaussi, *Peraan-e-Tombaan (pants and shirt)*, performance-based video installation, commissioned and produced by dOCUMENTA (13).
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In her most recent work, Gaussi has been searching for traces of her family history in Kabul. After locating the remaining walls of her grandfather's house, the artist began an encompassing documentation of the ruins: taking videos, photographs and sketches and treating the site like an excavation ground. Gaussi's project for *Ibraaz* is a selection of photographs from this ongoing project and she is here interviewed by Dorothea Schoene.

Dorothea Schoene: In your recent work, you began to document the remains of your grandfather's house. How did you find it?

Jeanno Gaussi: The first information I was given came from my family members, who knew the area in which the house once stood. It was in a part of the old city called Darwaza-e-Lahori/Lahore Gate of Kabul district; in the past, there was a gate to the city in the direction of Lahore, which is where the name came from. But this is all I knew, apart from my fragments of memory. I remember the fountain, which stood next to his house. Last year I went to Kabul with my aunt, who remembered more of the place. However, she wasn't sure where

exactly the house stood, so we looked for landmarks and asked around. It was difficult because of all the destruction the old city endured during the war. Eventually we found the place and a shop owner from across the street confirmed that it was the right house.

DS: In what ways are you trying to document the place? Will you collaborate with others on this project?

JG: Well, I just started with this project after locating the place last year. Since then I've been back once to visit again. At the moment, I plan to learn more about the place itself. I have filmed it, taken pictures and even collected samples of the soil there. I can imagine collaborating with an archaeologist to really make it an archaeological project. I am also thinking about interviewing the Afghan diaspora here in Berlin about the site and looking at it from an outside perspective. I want to delve into this place and its story and see where it will lead me. The project itself is still shaping up – it may even be the link to another piece.

DS: Is it a fragmented memory you are trying to reassemble? Or rather, create?

Jeanno Gaussi,
Remaining Wall, 2012,
Kabul. Courtesy of the
artist.



Jeanno Gaussi, Kabul,
2012. Courtesy of the
artist.



JG: I believe it is a little bit of both. I am collecting information at this point and I am not sure where it will lead. The starting point is rather documentary-like, but I can even imagine creating something fictional, with drawings and prints of parts of the wall, which I may then install in an entirely different context. I experiment with modes of de-contextualisation. There will always be certain links and aspects missing in the piece, gaps that need to be filled; gaps I could very well fill with fictional information. I did this before in my contribution to dOCUMENTA (13) in Kassel.

Jeanno Gaussi, Family Stories, 2011–12, oil on canvas, series of 10 paintings, each 60 x 45 cm, Afghan painter commissioned by the artist: Ustad Sharif Amin, commissioned and produced by dOCUMENTA (13). ©Jeanno Gaussi.



DS: Is the piece an investigation of your own past and your personal memories, or do you also perceive it as a general analysis of cultural memory?

JG: I believe my work is both – it reflects my own memory as well as a broader place of memory. The moment I treat the site as an excavation zone, I turn it into a place where cultural heritage is located. With this piece, I want to work with past, lost information, which for me manifests in this segment of wall left on the site. There is a short story by Rabindranath Tagore entitled *Kabuliwallah* from 1892 that I read a while ago; it is the story of a man in Kabul selling dried fruits. The narrator describes how he observes the seller and the image that comes into his mind. It is a very strong visual description and for me, it was exactly how I imagined the city and its visual impression during my childhood. It is almost a romanticised picture that the author creates. There is a quote that illustrates what I mean: 'In the presence of this Kabuliwallah, I was immediately transported to the foot of arid mountain peaks, with narrow little defiles twisting in and out amongst their towering heights. I could see the string of camels bearing the merchandise, and the company of turbaned merchants, carrying some of their queer old firearms, and some of their spears, journeying downward towards the plains'. These words moved me because they really captured what I had imagined Kabul to look like as a child, living in Berlin. So this story and this location is part of my heritage, my memory. Yet at the same time, it also speaks of a broader issue; in a way, it is a topography of war, as shown in

the destruction of the building. So little is left, both physically as well as in relation to memory.

DS: It is important to note that not all your work is autobiographical and that this piece is not necessarily about Afghanistan per se and your history – something it may be mistaken to be.

JG: Of course this piece is located in Afghanistan, where I was born. But this is not the primary characteristic of the artwork. For me, the way I engage with a site, discovering what inspires and what matters to me, is crucial. It is not about me finding my roots and heritage but rather about investigating and analysing ways to approach a location; how I gather information about a site and what I do with this information. This is a typical aspect of the way I work. During residencies in Pakistan and Palestine, I tried to find a way to understand the place I was living in, to connect to it personally. Of course, I come from Afghanistan and it is a far more personal connection. But in the end, I am always trying to link my work to the place and context I create it in.

Jeanno Gaussi was born in Kabul and is a Berlin-based mixed media artist. Gaussi started her art career as a video and film artist and her short films were shown in several festivals including Clermont Ferrand, France, KaraFilm Festival, Pakistan, and the International Filmfestival Leibzig, among many others. Video *Three Notes* (2007) won the first prize at the 54th *International Short Film Festival* in Oberhausen, Germany. It was also listed as one of the Best 100 German Short films and in 2008 it was nominated for the national Best German Short Film Award. In 2007, Gaussi extended her art practice to also include photographic artworks and installations, and she created many projects as a result of residencies in Pakistan (International Diasporic Artists Residency Karachi), Jordan (International Artist Workshop Shatana), Turkey, and Palestine (Al-Ma'mal Art Residency, Jerusalem) among others. She received art grants from the Triangle Arts Fund, the Defa Film Fund and the Goethe-Institut. In 2010, Jeanno Gaussi participated in the *Jerusalem Show IV* curated by Jack Persekian, and was invited by ArteEast to present her work at the Sharjah March meetings. Gaussi is now a member of the Afghan Contemporary Art Research team initiated by the Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven, which is documenting the contemporary art scene in Afghanistan.