

Anti-war graffiti group

becomes Afghanistan's 'Talibanksy'

Combat Communications says it is a 'small anonymous group of international artists' that aims to promote free expression in the insurgency-racked country

BY LYNNE O'DONNELL
AFP, KABUL



Though not as sophisticated or biting as the work of Britain's graffiti artist par excellence, the appearance of modern street art in Kabul adds a touch of color to the war-ravaged city.

PHOTOS: AFP

On walls around Afghanistan's scrappy capital, where million-US dollar mansions line rutted roads, anonymous graffiti artists are daubing their disapproving take on the devastating cost of war.

Styled after the anonymous British vandal-artist Banksy, Kabul's streetwise stealth stencillers go by the moniker "Talibanksy," a reference to the Islamist Taliban who have been waging war in Afghanistan for almost nine years.

The street art forms a commentary on the cost in blood and treasure of the war, which has brought 126,000 US and NATO troops to Afghanistan and kills about 2,000 Afghan civilians a year, according to the UN.

Black, spray-painted silhouettes of soldiers and dollar signs, poppies, helicopters and tanks, and children running hand-in-hand began appearing in downtown Kabul a few months ago.

Some silhouettes show the shadow of a helmeted soldier holding an assault rifle, inside a red circle with a line through it. Others have a silhouetted gun-toting trooper and a dollar sign joined by an equals symbol.

Or simply the words "cost of war."

Financially the war is estimated to cost some US\$100 million dollars a day, according to US media reports.

The human cost to foreign forces so far this year is close to 170, according to the icasualties.org Web site, which keeps tally and says that of the 1,737 who have died since the war began in 2001, 1,051 were American.

The people behind the anti-war graffiti call themselves Combat Communications, and claim to be "a small anonymous group of international artists founded last year with the sole aim of advocating/promoting free expression."

According to a statement, they wish to remain anonymous and call their work "social and politically driven graphics."

"This form of self-expression is open to anyone. The youth of Kabul have no real outlet for artistic expression," it says, adding: "Do they want it?"

The Westerners behind Combat Communications declined interview requests, saying they wanted to keep a low profile while they developed their strategy.

Their graffiti appears across the central residential and commercial districts of Kabul, alongside spray-painted advertisements for translation services, real estate agents, plumbers, septic tank cleaners and roofers.

Since the fall of the Taliban, Afghanistan has begun moving towards democracy — with the second parliamentary election set for September — and freedom of expression is

protected by the constitution.

Yet as the insurgency moves deep into its ninth year and the US-led counter-insurgency revs up with foreign troop numbers set to peak by August at 150,000, Kabul remains a city scarred by war and corruption.

Open drains run alongside the main roads, few side streets are paved, traffic control is derisory and public transport virtually non-existent.

Two-meter-high concrete blast walls surround most public buildings and embassies, and residential neighborhoods feature the "narco-architecture" of garishly-tiled, multi-story mansions, most believe are built with the proceeds of the US\$3 billion-a-year illicit drugs trade.

A cloud of filth from diesel-powered vehicles sits atop a city surrounded on three sides by the peaks of the Hindu Kush mountains, and piles of garbage are picked over by beggars and animals alike.

Consumer price inflation is said to be around 20 percent, helicopter gunships provide an almost constant overhead clatter, and Afghans desperate to leave their country for a new life form long queues at visa offices.

Into this harsh landscape, the sudden appearance of modern street art has added a touch of color and controversy — and the blast walls provide the perfect canvas.

Talibanksy's tags are not yet as ubiquitous as Banksy's guerilla art became in London and other British cities over the past decade.

Nor is it as sophisticated, so far presenting little more than simple anti-war messages and slogans, in contrast to the infinitely more clever, caustic and creative Banksy murals.

And whereas Banksy branched out to the US, Australia and the Middle East, becoming an international phenomenon and wealthy in the process, Combat Communications appears to be starting out with more modest ambitions.

The statement contains an anti-capitalist message, hitting out at the massive billboards that dominate city intersections, advertising telecommunications firms or warning against involvement in the drugs trade.

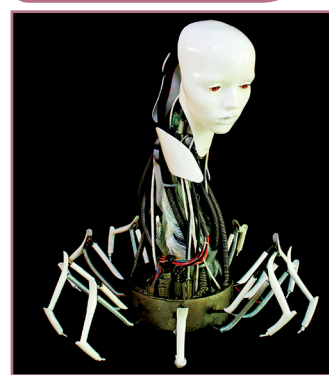
"Selling the peace" AKA (also known as) winning the war, has also become a big industry. Propaganda is everywhere from counter-narcotic campaigns to counter-terrorism to army recruitment. You can't move without some form of visual purposeful persuasion burning a hole in your soul," it says.

"Social and politically driven graphics, AKA street art, can evoke thought and stimulate discussion.

"Watch your public space," the statement says.

EXHIBITIONS

HIGHLIGHT



Huang Zan-lun, *Machine Elements* (2008).

PHOTO COURTESY OF KUANDU MUSEUM

Emerging artist Huang Zan-lun (黃贊倫) transforms the detritus of machines into sculptural installations in his solo show **Stateless (無類)**. Questioning notions of progress and technology, Huang's bizarre sculptures are imbued with emotionless, detached undertones that render his messages both ambivalent and alluring.

■ Kuandu Museum of Fine Arts (關渡美術館), Taipei National University of the Arts (台北藝術大學), 1 Xueyuan Rd, Taipei City (台北市學園路1號). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 10am to 5pm. Tel: (02) 2896-1000 X2432

■ Until May 16

Light and Shadow (光與影) is an exhibit of paintings by Chinese playwright, novelist and Nobel laureate Gao Xingjian (高行健). According to the exhibition blurb, Gao's monochromatic ink paintings with abstract characteristics have "established a new ink wash painting style." Perhaps a more accurate description would be that Gao's paintings bring to the canvas the loneliness and despair that are found in his plays. The show also features a short film made by the artist.

■ Asia Art Center (亞洲藝術中心) 177 Jianguo S Rd Sec 2, Taipei City (台北市建國南路二段177號). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 10am to 6:30pm. Tel: (02) 2754-1366

■ Until May 9

Leather figures, paper cutting, hand shadows, films and digital figures are among the objects presented at **The Exhibition of Shadow Art and Culture (照光弄影—影藝文化展)**, an exhibit that looks into the history and development of shadow play from its origins in China's distant past to its contemporary manifestations in Taiwan. The show seeks to place shadow art in its proper context by showing the relationship between the images created and the performances they were a part of.

■ National Museum of History (國立歷史博物館), 49 Nanhai Rd, Taipei City (台北市南海路49號). Open Tuesdays to Sundays from 10am to 6pm. Tel: (02) 2361-0270. General admission is NT\$30

■ Until Oct. 17

Post Exposure (後渙散) is a solo exhibit by Taiwanese video installation artist Huang Pei-ju (黃珮如) that reflects upon the liminality of human existence through the themes of light and darkness.

■ IT Park Gallery (伊通公園), 2F-3F, 41 Yitong St, Taipei City (台北市伊通街41號2-3樓). Open Tuesdays to Saturdays from 1pm to 10pm. Tel: (02) 2507-7243

■ Until Saturday

HIGHLIGHT



Wu Hsueh-jang, *Immortals* (2009).

PHOTO COURTESY OF MINGSHAN ART

The New Renditions of Ink Painting (世紀新墨) is a retrospective of the works of China-born, Taiwanese ink painter Wu Hsueh-jang (吳學讓). Through paintings dating back almost 50 years, the show tracks Wu's evolution as an artist from his early Chinese landscape painting to his later works influenced by abstract expressionism to his final period when he returns to his artistic roots.

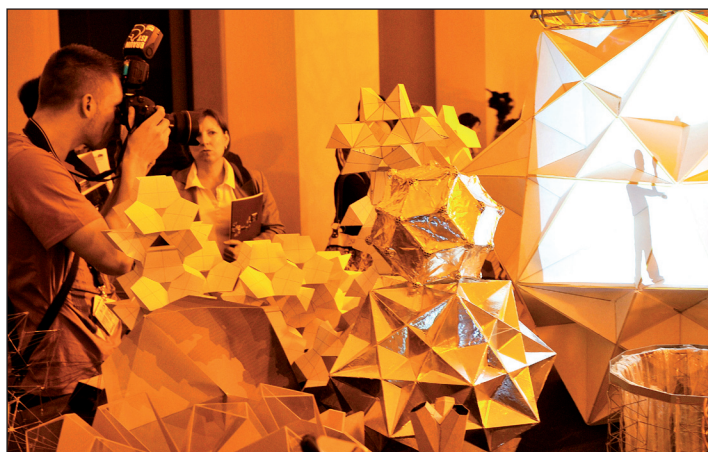
■ National Chiao Tung University Library, B1 International Conference Hall (交大浩然圖書館B1國際會議廳), 1001 Dasyue Rd, Hsinchu City (新竹市大學路1001號). Open daily from 9am to 5pm. Tel: (02) 3322-2988

■ Until May 18

New York waterfall artist makes splash in Berlin

Olafur Eliasson's first major solo exhibition in the city relies on visitors to help create its 19 installations

BY DEBORAH COLE
AFP, BERLIN



Visitors, left and center, peruse artwork by Olafur Eliasson, right, during the exhibition Inner City Out at the Martin Gropius Bau museum in Berlin.

PHOTOS: EPA AND AFP

He wowed New York with huge man-made waterfalls, drew the masses to London's Tate Modern with a giant artificial sun and is now staging his first major solo show in his adopted city, Berlin.

Icelandic-Danish artist Olafur Eliasson, 43, is widely considered one of contemporary culture's most ambitious creators, using ingenious tricks to offer urban dwellers a new perspective on the space in which they live.

The exhibition, Inner City Out, opens today at the Martin Gropius Bau museum, next to one of the longest remnants of the Berlin Wall.

Using light, shadows, color, fog, mirrors and the movements of the exhibition's visitors to create their effects, the 19 installations explore Eliasson's relationship with the city where he has lived and worked since 1994.

"I first came to Berlin shortly before the Wall fell" in 1989, Eliasson told reporters. When he returned, he said the city itself quickly became his muse.

"The unpredictability at the time was very inspiring. It became a place where I could establish myself with my work."

Since then, he has become one of the hottest draws on the international museum circuit with major shows in Tokyo and London.

The 2003-2004 *Weather Project* at the Tate Modern's cavernous Turbine Hall invited visitors to interact with each other in the shadow of the "half-sun," with many banding together to create giant figures on the floor which were reflected in mirrors on the ceiling.

Two years ago, Eliasson built a spectacular open-air installation of huge waterfalls along the East River, which became a major draw for

tourists and New Yorkers alike.

The German title of the Berlin show, Innen Stadt Aussen, is a play on words, meaning literally Inside City Outside but phonetically can be understood to mean inside instead of outside.

Museum director Joachim Sartorius called it "the most beautiful, most poetic exhibition" he was putting on this year. He declined to discuss the cost of the show, which was three years in the making, but called it "expensive."

Access to the first room is gained via a recreation of a Berlin sidewalk with its distinctive granite slabs.

It leads to a series of rooms adorned with curvaceous, cracked mirrors, colored projectors and sculpted mobiles that play with the light and the movement of visitors to great effect as they slowly rotate.

The show wraps up in a disorienting room full of

fog, leaving visitors groping for the walls to orient themselves as only pastel-colored lights mark off three sections of the opaque space.

And beyond the museum walls, Eliasson has dispersed throughout the city large pieces of driftwood that washed onto the Icelandic coastline after epic journeys from Siberia and the Americas. Many of the logs have already been snapped up by collectors.

Born in Copenhagen to Icelandic parents, Eliasson was raised in Denmark and Iceland — he is a dual citizen — and divides his time between Berlin and his native city.

Asked about the possible artistic implications of Iceland's Eyjafjallajökull volcano erupting, which brought European air traffic to a halt this month, Eliasson described the phenomenon as "very, very beautiful."

"It produces this unbelievable bass tone," he said.