

Lukas Birk and the Afghan Box Camera Project

Robert Hirsch

From photography's earliest days, enterprising practitioners realized they could take their services directly to the people. This led to the horse-drawn wagons called "Daguerreotype Salons" and then to portable, darkroom tents that allowed wet-plate photographers to make pictures outside. As technology advanced, the tents morphed into a single apparatus that combined both camera and darkroom, which allowed photographers to work anywhere. Afghanistan is one of the last places where street vendor photographers still use such a hand-made, wooden camera called kamra-e-faoree or "instant camera." Observing this practice led Lukas Birk to undertake the Afghan Box Camera Project. The following are highlights of our email conversations.

Robert Hirsch: What is the project's mission?

Lukas Birk: The purpose is to provide a record of the kamra-e-faoree, which is on the brink of disappearing in Afghanistan. We tell the personal stories of these photographers who make identity portraits on the street, many of which were trained by their fathers. Our information is based on a visit between April and June 2011 that focused on Kabul and Mazar-e-Sharif, plus previous visits and ongoing research. Also, the website provides instructions and videos on how to build a kamra-e-faoree, how to tint and hand color prints, background data about the camera and photography in Afghanistan, plus photographer portfolios and links to additional resources. Our online material, afghanboxcamera.com is open-source so anybody can utilize it.

RH: Tell me about your background.

LB: I was born in 1982 in Bregenz, Austria where I trained and worked in journalism and radio before studying media art in London. After meeting Sean Foley in India in 2002, we began collaborating. I provide the visuals and Sean, whose background is in anthropology, writes. We went to Afghanistan in 2008



Photographer Asad Ullah holding work in his studio in Kabul

to research tourism in conflict zones, resulting in a book, two films and a traveling exhibition: *Kafkanistan* (lukasbirk.com).

RH: How did the project originate?

LB: I encountered the Afghan box cameras in 2006 and I built my first one in 2008. Since then I have constructed four different cameras with internal and external focusing systems and started experimenting with them. During this process Sean and I decided to go back to Afghanistan to document the last active box camera photographers.

RH: How did you fund your work?

LB: The project was funded via kickstarter.com. I received \$6000 in donations and we funded the rest.

RH: What differences do you see between portraits made with a box camera and those done with a digital camera?



Box camera portrait of photographer of Baba Sher, Kabul, Afghanistan



Box camera portrait of photographer of Abdul Satar, Kabul, Afghanistan, 2011

LB: The box camera portraits have a limited contrast range, rough edges, and the handling of chemicals and paper produces an image with a feeling from a different time. Digital portraits are clean, precise, detailed and more attached to reality.

RH: Describe your camera and its operation.

LB: I have a 20 x 12 x 12-inch wooden box. I cut a hole in the front to fit the focusing part of an old Ernemann Rapid plate camera to a Carl Zeiss lens so I could utilize an aperture and shutter. I use a grade #3 or #4 photographic paper with an ISO of 5. Therefore, I work in bright, outdoor light, giving me an exposure of about $f/5.6$ at $1/30$ of a second. Photographers without a shutter lift their lens cover and count to 1 to make an exposure; in the winter they count 1-2-3 and then cover the lens.

I cut a round 4-inch wide hole in the side of the box that is covered with black cloth, which allows me to put paper into the camera for exposure. In the back of the box I installed glass to put photographic paper on top of, along with a tray containing Kodak developer

and another with fixer, as well as a light tight box for the unexposed paper. After developing the paper in the camera, I take it out and wash it in a separate tank. Then I place the paper negative on a holder in front of the camera and repeat the process to produce a positive. Finally, I fix and wash the pictures.

RH: What is the state of photography in Afghanistan?

LB: When the Taliban ruled, photography was prohibited and makers destroyed or hid their equipment. Now Kabul has dozens of studios with small digital cameras for portraits or identification photographs. People use personal cameras to take photos of families and friends.

RH: Tell me about the hand-colored portraits.

LB: Hand coloring is regarded as high art and most photo studios display examples. Unfortunately, we did not find a single photographer in Kabul who now does the process. In Mazar-e-Sharif, we worked with a photographer who still had these hard-to-get materials and we made a how-to-hand-color video.

RH: What about women in photography?

LB: Women are photographed, but their images are not displayed. Photographers visit homes to take family photos. Women wear a headscarf rather than a Burqa (full face veil) for identification or family photos, except for passports where international standards require an uncovered view.

I have not encountered any female photographers. However, I taught photography to 20 women, aged 16 – 25, at the Center for Contemporary Art Afghanistan in Kabul.

RH: What do the women you taught like to photograph?

LB: They photograph Afghanistan as it is *Now* and are preparing an exhibition about its dark side. For instance, single mothers with three children in the tent cities around Kabul juxtaposed to sparkling stores where rich women shop.

RH: What responses has your project gotten from the locals?

LB: The photographers were kind and patient, appreciating I wanted to record their history. While photographing on the street with the box camera I was met with curious eyes.

RH: What have you learned from your work?

LB: I experienced hospitality and generosity. Asad Ullah, a photographer in his late 60s, gave me an Indian Vageswari plate camera without accepting anything in return. All he said was, “If you make a book about Afghan photography bring me a copy.” I am currently taking pictures with it! What more can I say?



Gayas Uddin and Lukas Birk, Kabul, Afghanistan, 2011.
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Box camera portrait of photographer Abdul Samad, Kabul Afghanistan, circa 1960s.

RH: What else do you hope to achieve?

LB: The research is finished and I plan to return to Afghanistan in the near future to revisit the photographers. The project deserves exposure. I want to tour with the camera, exhibit the images, and set up workshops. These cameras are easy to build, fun to use, and can help people understand how photography works. Ultimately, I would like everything to go to a museum.

RH: What should one consider when making photographs?

LB: Ask yourself, “Why am I making this image and what for?”



Robert Hirsch is author of *Exploring Color Photography: From Film to Pixels*; *Light and Lens: Photography in the Digital Age*; *Photographic Possibilities: The Expressive Use of Equipment, Ideas, Materials, and Processes*; and *Seizing the Light: A Social History of Photography*. Hirsch has published scores of articles about visual culture and interviewed eminent photographers of our time. He has had many one-person shows and curated numerous exhibitions. The former executive director of CEPA Gallery, he now heads

Light Research. For details about his visual and written projects visit: lightresearch.net. Article ©Robert Hirsch 2012.