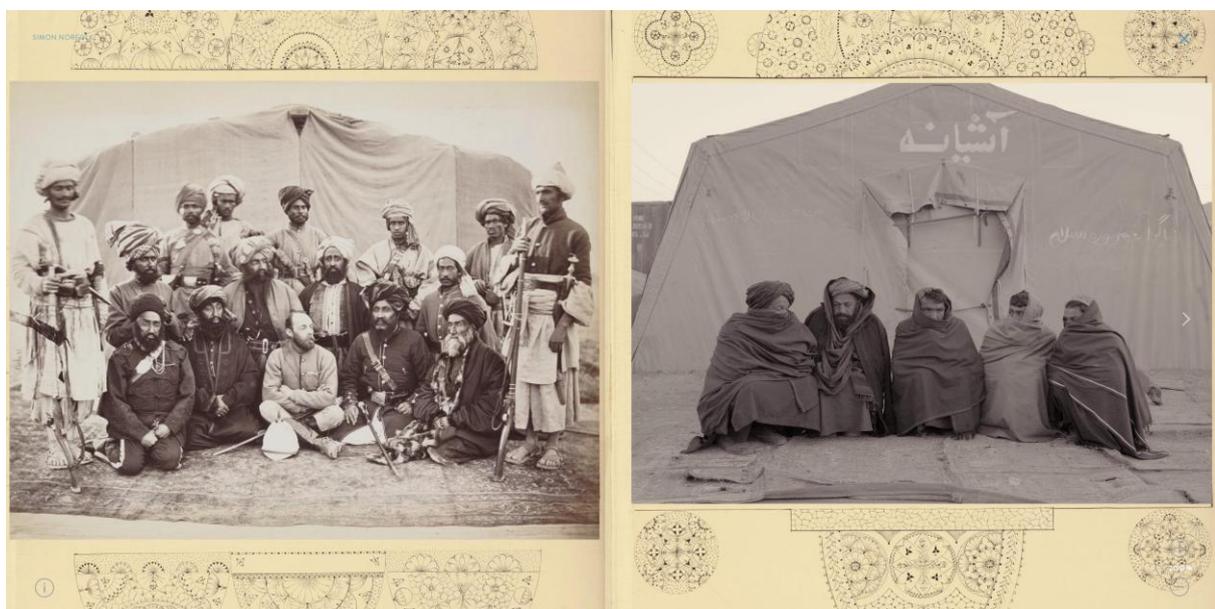


## Simon Norfolk

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Alona Pardo/ Elias Redstone, eds., *Constructing Worlds: Photography and Architecture in the Modern Age*, Barbican Art Gallery/ Prestel, London/ Munich 2014.



Few of those who were present will forget Simon Norfolk's talk at Tate Modern about his series of pictures from Afghanistan, *Burke + Norfolk*. The exhibition which showed the work of the two photographers alongside each other, Burke's military, ethnographic and military photography from the 1870s and 1880s, and Norfolk's contemporary reworkings, seemed restrained and ordered. The light falling off people, land and buildings is focused, ordered and governed by the geometry of the lens and the black box. The talk, by contrast, laid out for those gathered in the gallery a dire and extended chronology of conquest, exploitation, oppression and racism. The 'heroes', as they are regularly described, of the British armed forces were revealed as an army of occupation which had been in that land many times before to secure the Empire's strategic and material interests. The juxtaposition of Burke and Norfolk pointed to a remarkable historical amnesia about imperial domination. It is as if the British not merely lost their Empire but (largely) agreed to forget that they had once had it, and certainly to forget that it was maintained with every weapon of war from aerial bombing (of, for example, the 'restless natives' of Afghanistan between 1915 and 1919) to manufactured famine (the RAF bombed not just

people but irrigation ditches to cause crop failure).<sup>1</sup> Forgotten, too, is how often that force was resisted.<sup>2</sup> As Norfolk has said in an interview, the current British intervention should be called the Fourth Anglo-Afghan War.<sup>3</sup> The Afghans, of course, like most populations subject to such attentions, have a clear and detailed historical memory of invasion, occupation and resistance.



There is a large contrast in subject matter and handling in Norfolk's two Afghan projects: the first, 'Chronotopia', undertaken as the Taliban fell in the face of Allied invasion in 2002, and the second, begun in 2010, when the country had been transformed by long-term occupation. In the first pictures, often taken in golden light at dawn, the history of the war against the Soviet Union and of the long years of sectarian violence are written picturesquely into the collapsed structures and pitted walls of apartment buildings, barracks and cultural monuments. It is as if a long and deadly storm has ceased, and the sun rises on a world both old and new, and on fantastical ruins as in a perverted Claude Lorrain. In the newer pictures, twilight predominates, and amid the ruins, the actual shape of the new is revealed: the gaudy palaces of the drug traffickers and arms dealers, the bleak shanties in which millions of people displaced by the violence live (in shipping containers, for instance), in alien infrastructure and building carelessly slapped over the old, and in the apparatus of security. It is this last that has had the greatest effect on urban life: the blast walls, checkpoints, vast military bases, and privileged enclaves for the rich and for foreign

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<sup>1</sup> For an account of early British aerial bombing of civilian populations, see Sven Lindqvist, *A History of Bombing*, trans. Linda Haverty Rugg, Granta Books, London 2001, section 102.

<sup>2</sup> For a history of that resistance, see Richard Gott, *Britain's Empire: Resistance, Repression and Revolt*, Verso, London 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Lowe and Simon Norfolk, 'In Conversation':

<http://www.simonnorfolk.com/burkenorfolk/conversation.html> [accessed 15 May 2014]

workers. As in Baghdad, constrained existences are lived between looming concrete barriers, in constant fear. Utilitarian modernism finds its starkest and ugliest expression in the blast wall and the surveillance tower.



The Baghdad pictures, taken at the time of the invasion in 2003, play with the picturesque tradition, just as the ‘Chronotopia’ series did. In some photographs, the ruins of Saddam Hussein’s confected monuments to the region’s illustrious ancient history and his own power are shown, again in golden sunlight, alongside disturbing elements: the destroyed half-century-old Iraqi armour torn apart by modern munitions, or the boy posing for Norfolk’s large wooden camera in the ruins of an Airforce Headquarters who is there to take scrap metal. Other images lead viewers into darker regions, in showing the unadorned ruination of the modern infrastructure of a state: the Ba’ath dictatorship had in part survived by building and providing good education and health care for the great majority of Iraqis, by bringing women into employment and limited political power, and by supporting the rise of a secular professional class.<sup>4</sup> Much of that was destroyed in the systematic attack on Iraqi infrastructure in the Gulf War, and then by the long years of punitive sanctions which starved the population and allowed for little sustained repair.<sup>5</sup> The coup de grace was given by the 2003 invasion, which once again targeted the structures of the Iraqi state, and as occupying forces sat by as long-impo

<sup>4</sup> See Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, ch. 6.

<sup>5</sup> For a compelling and detailed indictment of the policy, see Joy Gordon, *Invisible War: The United States and the Iraq Sanctions*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 2010.

Iraqis stripped the ruins of government buildings from hospitals to museums of everything of value. Norfolk's images show the ruins of state power and wealth—at once the ruins of a brutal and criminal tyranny, and those of the support structures of everyday life. 'Chronotopia' also showed the ruins of a *dirigiste* state, blasted into collapse by prolonged warfare; the Iraq images showed the stark present of another destruction; ironically, those images that were made in dialogue with Burke, and photographically look the most antiquated, show one enforced future: the twilight architecture of the minimal security state amidst the free play of criminal capitalism.