

**Pascal CONVERT**

**Candidacy for the French Pavilion  
at the 2017 Venice International Art Biennial**

**2017**

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**Curator**

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**Gallery**

Galerie Eric Dupont, Paris

**Institutional partners**

French Embassy in Afghanistan, Institut Français/French Institute in Afghanistan

**Private partners**

Société ICONEM, Société CORNIS, Galaxie Photos

**Artistic producer**

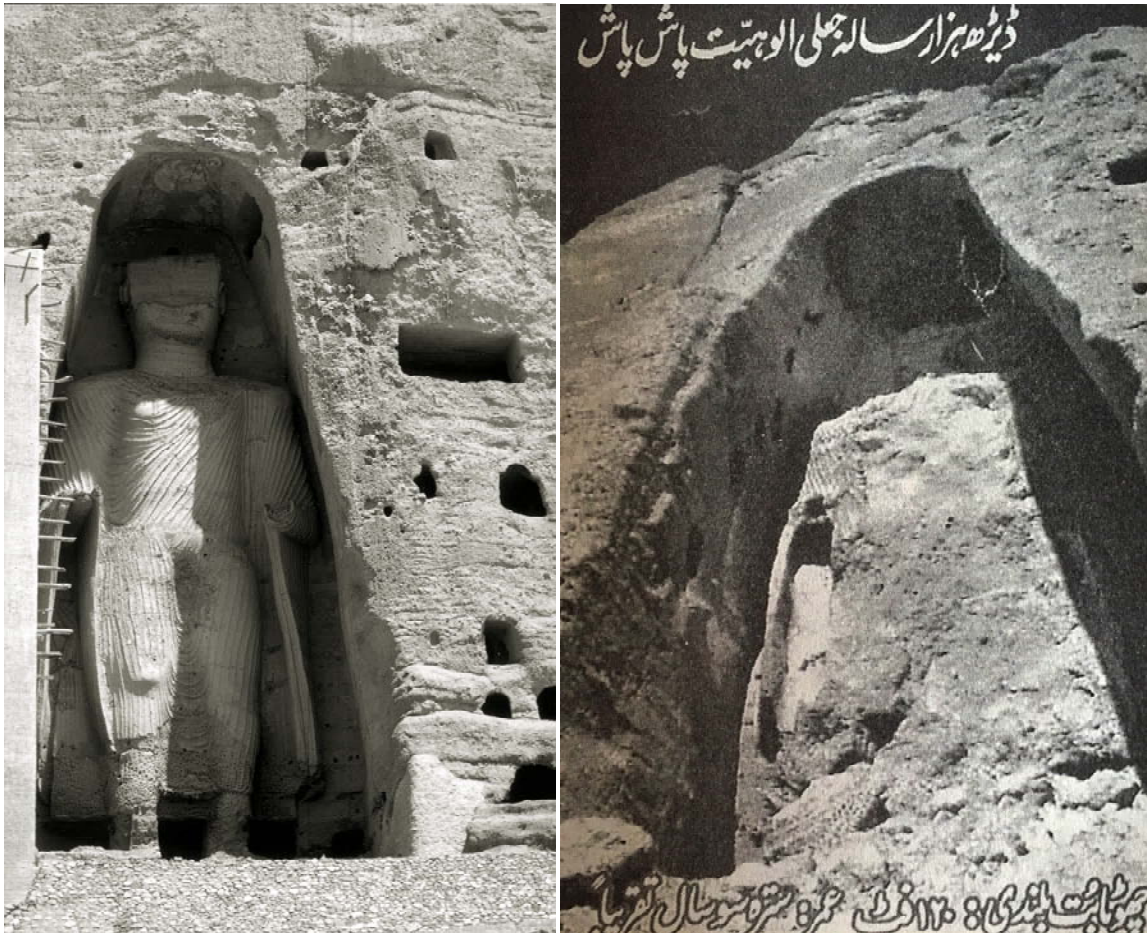
Divers et Imprévu



Giant Buddha of Bamiyan before its destruction by the Taliban (Fig 1.1)



Giant Buddha of Bamiyan after its destruction by the Taliban (Fig 1.2)



Smaller Buddha of Bamiyan before and after its destruction by the Taliban (Fig 2)

### **Losing our memory**

The giant sculpted Bamiyan Buddhas owe their fame above all to their destruction by the Taliban on 11 March 2001, following an edict condemning idols which was promulgated on 26 February 2001 by Mullah Omar, who had been in control of Afghanistan since 1996.

At the time, the western world did not fully take stock of that event, which was nevertheless part of a time sequence which led to the destruction of New York's giant towers, exactly seven months later, on 11 September 2001.

Today, the list of archaeological treasures destroyed by the jihadists by every conceivable means—bulldozers, pickaxes, pneumatic drills, explosives—has become dramatically longer. Let us mention the destruction of mausolea in Timbuktu by Islamists belonging to the Ansar Eddine group in Mali in June 2012; the destruction of vestiges of ancient Mesopotamia by the Islamic State organization (IS or ISIL) at

Mosul (Iraq), where the tomb of the prophet Jonas, a place of pilgrimage, was blown up with dynamite on 24 July 2014 in front of a large crowd, and where thousands of rare manuscripts were burnt (February 2014); the destruction of the Al-Arbain mausoleum and the “green church” in Tikrit, Iraq; and the destruction of the Parthian city of Hatra and the ancient Assyrian city of Nimrod, famous for its sculptures of five-legged winged bulls. In the spring of 2015, the taking of the oasis city of Palmyra, an ancient Roman province, and caravan centre at the crossroads of China, India, Persia, and Rome, by the Islamic State (IS) made everybody fear the worst, a worst which was confirmed on Sunday, August 2015 with the destruction of the antique temple of Baalshamin. A few days before that, after the destruction of funerary busts in the public square, in the very same place where the jihadists beheaded the former head of antiquities at that ancient site, Khaled Al-Assaad, aged 82.

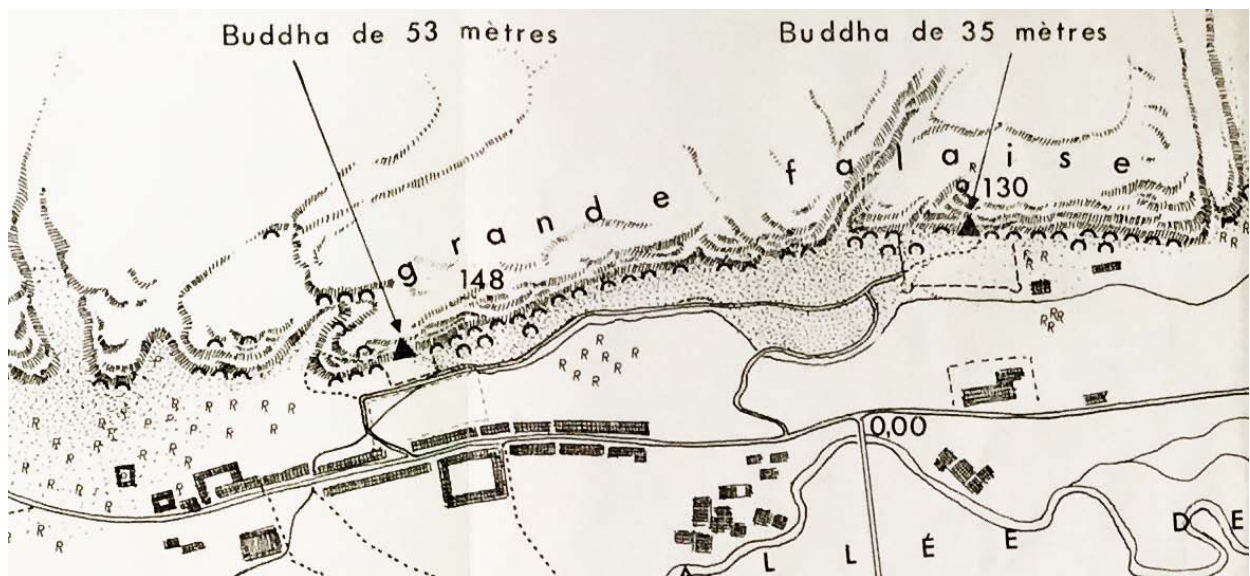
Long ago, the Islamists added their “cultural purification” operation to the ethnic cleansing of certain populations (against Yezidi and Christians by the Daech jihadists in Iraq, and against the Hazaras in Afghanistan by the Taliban faction which has sworn allegiance to the Islamic State organization), destroying, but also plundering and re-selling antiquities to fund their murderous madness.

The destruction of the two giant Bamiyan Buddhas and the Twin Towers in New York accelerated the arrival of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and taught us that the return of cultural, economic and above all religious conflicts would go hand in hand with a toxic use of the power of synchronized imagery. The death of Commandant Massoud, symbol of the resistance against the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union (1979-1989), and a moderate Islamist who had on many different occasions attracted attention to the dangers of Al-Qaeda, and who was assassinated in a suicide attack carried out by two phony journalists carrying a booby-trapped camera, illustrates the destructive role earmarked for images. Destroying idol images while at the same time making use of them to destroy idolators.

Two giant Buddhas, two giant towers: caught in a double twin-like mirror figure, the onlooker’s consciousness is dumbstruck and remains confined within an acute form of a present outside history. The primary goal of the “cultural purification” being undertaken by Islamist extremists is none other than to make us literally lose our memory. And with it our consciousness.

## Wounded Memory

Bamiyan is a small town situated in the middle of Afghanistan, in a narrow valley rising to an altitude of 2500 metres/8200 feet and surrounded by the mountains of the Hindu Kush to the north and the Koh-i-Baba mountains to the south. In the north part of the Hindu Kush, the basin of the Oxus river broadens out and the climate here is similar to the dry regions of Central Asia. In the south part lies the basin of the Indus river, whose altitude gradually drops down towards the Indian subcontinent. The Hindu Kush plays the part of a wall and separates India from Central Asia, both geographically and climatically. Set between mountain ridges, Bamiyan lies in a small valley which runs from east to west along a large, south-facing cliff. Between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries, this cliff, made of a brittle rock and a mile or so long, was the site of a Buddhist monastery with a population of more than 1000 monks. This site, described by the monks Xuanzang (in 629) and Huichao (in 727), was a major example of the Gandhara school of Graeco-Buddhist art. In the cliff, inside giant niches, stood two colossal statues of standing Buddhas. One 38 metres/125 feet tall to the east (Fig. 2), the other 55 metres/180 feet tall, to the west (Fig. 1).





The vaulted ceilings of the niches were decorated with polychrome wall paintings, of which nothing remains except the plans (Fig. 3) made by archaeologists with a deep interest in this site, namely Alfred Foucher, André Godard, Joseph Hackin and Zemaryalai Tarzi.



Plans of frescoes in the decorated sanctuaries of Bamiyan (Fig 3.)



In the cliff there are also three smaller niches which once housed statues of Buddha seated, likewise now destroyed. In addition to these niches, some 750 caves were hewn out, about a tenth of which used to contain wall paintings and clay sculptures, which we may describe by the term 'sanctuary caves' (Fig. 5).



View of the sanctuary caves between a seated Buddha and the smaller Buddha (Fig. 4)



View from a sanctuary cave (Fig. 5)

The destruction (or theft) of the sculptures was systematic and the Taliban set fire to the decorated caves, with the result that ashes and traces of smoke covered paintings and sculpted bas-reliefs. Their crazed determination led them to mark the vaults already smudged with black fumes with the imprint of their shoes, a practice used to debase an enemy (Fig. 6). But also a sign of the images' resistance to destruction.



A sanctuary smudged with black smoke, showing the marks of the soles of shoes (Fig. 6)

## Memory in spite of everything

For the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas (11 March 2016), I was invited by the French Embassy and the French Institute in Afghanistan to come up with an artistic project. Before my departure, I had established a perceptible link between the two empty giant niches of Bamiyan and the negative imprints of the Twin Towers at the 11 September Memorial in New York.



Negative imprints of the Twin Towers, 11 September Memorial



Niches of the giant and smaller Buddhas after their destruction

From the outset, my work has been informed by the question of the double or rather the twin, with an awareness that there can be a difference in identical things. And absence is also directly linked with it.

In these two sites, the violence of history is implicitly incorporated, in the negative, as it were, as if only a vision of the void could illustrate loss, as far as the eye can see. In New York, the eye is gripped by something dizzy-making, and drawn towards an obscure point into which time flees; at Bamiyan, there are hundreds of dark openings from which the monks once contemplated the shadows of clouds gliding over snow-clad mountains. Inside and outside, darkness and light, and, above the cliff, the depth of the skyline.





Needless to say, New York is a long way from Bamiyan, and, needless to say, links between events and places are fragile and can even confuse the way history is read. But imagining things also sometimes makes it possible to take a closer look at real history. Almost 3,000 people were killed in the 11 September attacks in New York. In the previous month of February, a few days before the destruction of the Buddhas, a Human Rights Watch report stated that 300 Hazara civilians, an ethnic minority in the Bamiyan region, had been murdered.

And in these facts there is no figure indicating the number of civilian victims during the period of Taliban rule (1996-2001)<sup>1</sup>.

No names, no steles.

Like eternal tombs, the empty niches of the Bamiyan Buddhas attest to all this.

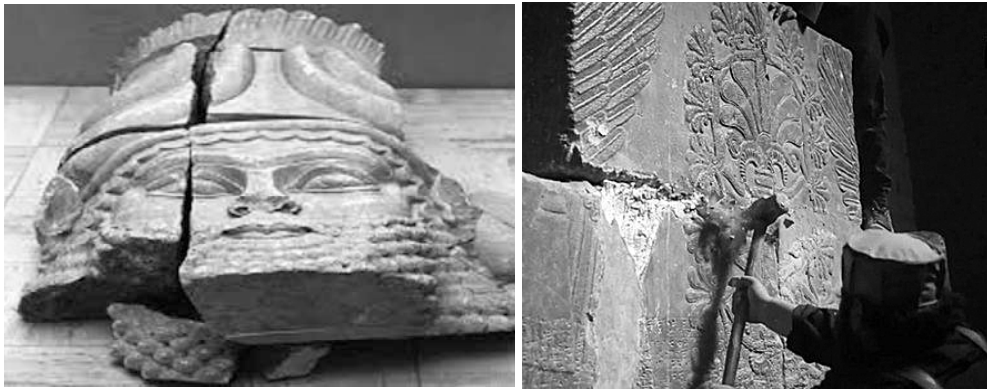
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<sup>1</sup> Between 2009 and 2014 there were 17,000 deaths among Afghan civilians caused by operations carried out by Taliban insurgents. According to the UN, in 2015, the number of civilian victims of the war in Afghanistan reached a new record for the seventh consecutive year.

My project involves placing the still very much alive ghosts of the Bamiyan Buddhas exactly halfway between New York and Bamiyan, between Afghanistan and the United States, in Venice, the city to which Marco Polo brought back a small patch of Afghan sky in the form of a stone, lapis lazuli, which was used to cover the façade of the Ca' d'Oro, and specifically in the French pavilion, a country which, at the request of the king of Afghanistan, had opened the first archaeological Delegation in Kabul in 1922. For if the Taliban thought they had destroyed those giant statues, the shadows cast by them still remain, just as they did in Hiroshima after the explosion of the atomic bomb.



Destroying a sculpture is not merely “breaking stones”, as Mullah Omar claimed, it is to deny any human person the possibility of depicting a living being. The fierce enthusiasm with which jihadists in Syria and Iraq destroy pre-Islamic sculptures is, needless to say, part and parcel of a propaganda machine. It also illustrates an absolute desire to destroy all of the past, and all of history. But the explosive power of hundreds of mines was unable to completely destroy the existence of the Buddhas—their trace remains, like a massive imprint.



Mais l'explosion des centaines de mines n'a pu détruire totalement l'existence des Bouddhas, il en reste la trace, une empreinte massive.

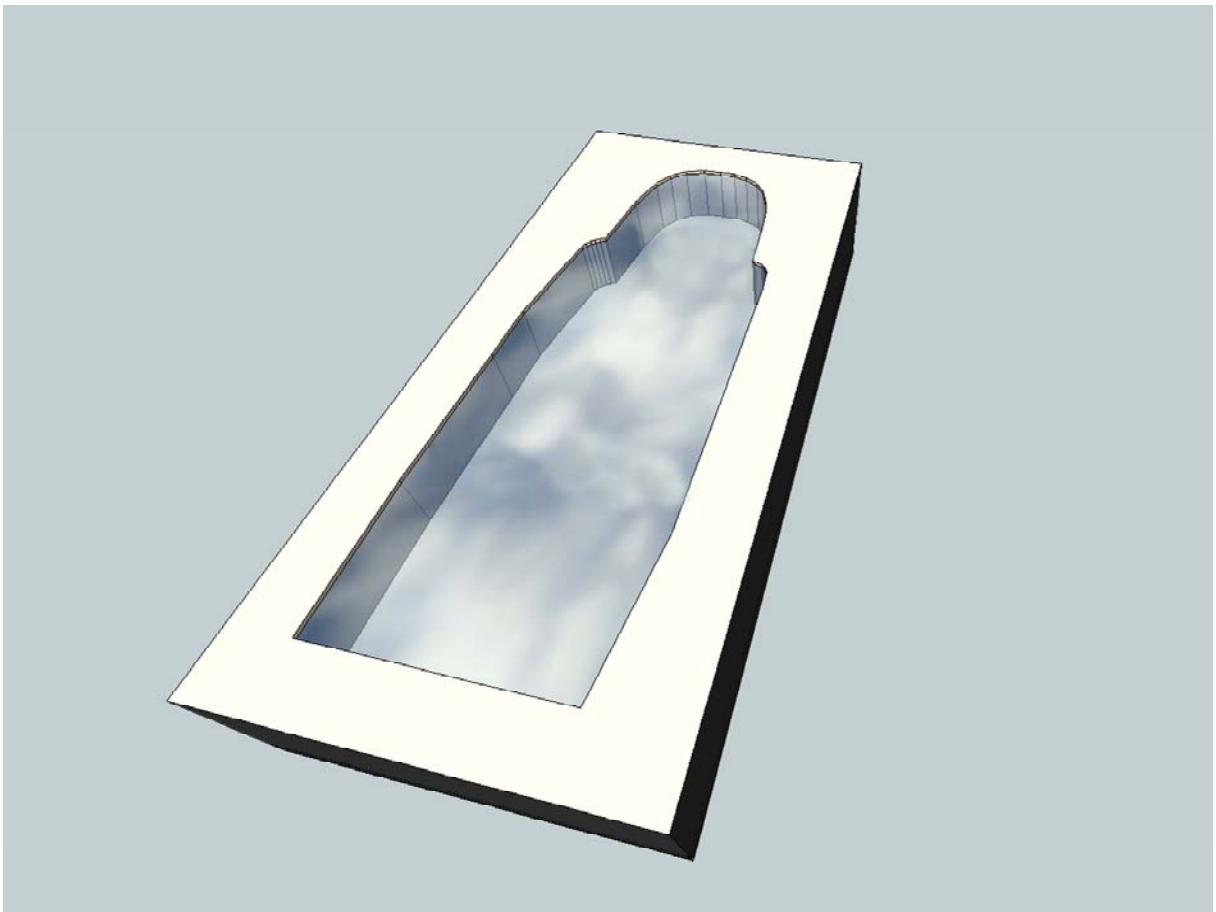


Relief of the giant Buddha after its destruction

## **The Shadow Cast by the Buddhas, Two Recumbent Figures Made of Glass**

*Location: the floor of the central room.*

My project consists in placing on the floor of the central room in the French Pavilion two parallelepiped blocks, like two recumbent statues, reproducing, in 1/15<sup>th</sup> of their real size, the niches containing the two giant Buddhas, laid horizontally.



At the back of each niche we find the ghostlike form of the Buddhas, in relief. All around are installed refractory concrete blocks, set together and creating a load-bearing floor, which form the kiln (see the technical description of its production in the document drawn up by Olivier Juteau, a master glass-maker). The sides of the kiln are covered with dark black steel sheets with areas cut out, making it possible to see the placing of the resistances permitting the melting of the glass.



The niche is filled with colourless glass to its upper part. When spectators lean over each “kiln-mould” as if it were a well, at the bottom, under the glass, they will discover the ghosts of Bamiyan. A glass mass of this size has never been cast before in this way. The optical power of the glass, and its depth, will magnify the eyes’ concentration.

I have already used this “kiln-mould” technique for the production of a glass piece held in the collections of the National Museum of Modern Art.



*Le temps scellé*, 2009, crystal and mould made of refractory plaster.



## Delving into the Landscape

*Location: walls of the central room and the first two side rooms*

In a dialectical way, these tombs, made of a mass of twisted and abstract glass, at once near and far, symbols of our troubled times, will be surrounded by a huge and amazingly distinctly defined photographic strip of the entire cliff.

During my stay in Bamiyan, a fortnight ago, I used a photographic technology which is logically used to detect micro-fissures in the blades of wind turbines (<http://web.cornis.fr/fr>). This technology enabled me to manufacture a 1:1 photographic image of the cliff using a tiling system involving 3000 photographs.

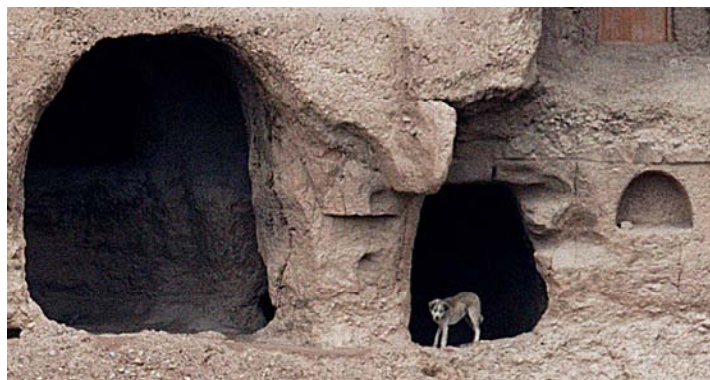


The photographic technique developed by the Cornis company.

Within the limits of this dossier it is impossible to describe the visual excitement produced by this type of picture: to open it in a computer you need five Terabytes of live memory. The experience being offered to viewers is no longer that of drowning their gaze in the glass but, conversely, thanks to the sharpness of the image with its absolute precision, one of becoming immersed in the very matter of the cliff, earth, stone, and light.



Contrasting with the neo-Palladian architecture of the Pavilion's exterior, in the summer light, 750 dark mouths will open up in front of the spectators. And they will discover that, in spite of everything, the cliff is still alive.



At this stage in my thinking, I still have to define the height of this strip with greater precision. Only a life-size test will make it possible to work it out in a definitive way. This strip will be in the main room and in the side rooms, to the left and right of the main room.



## ***The Children of Bamiyan, Film***

*Location: rear side room*

On this mission, I quickly attracted a following of children who live at the foot of the cliff, whose families have in some cases turned the old caves of the Buddhist monks into dwellings. They are probably descendants of the soldiers of Genghis Khan, forming the Hazara people. The Hazaras are looked down upon, reduced as they are to slavery by other ethnic groups, and they still suffer regular discrimination.



In no time there was a game of hide-and-seek between us. At extremely close quarters, just a foot or two apart, they did their best to avoid being filmed, but without trying to run away. When the camera did catch them, their childish laughter gave way to silence, and they would stare at me through eyes that had the dignity of another age.. There was neither judgement nor any quest for complicity. Just being-there in a landscape—their landscape.

In a film whose narrative will be in the first person, my project involves associating pictures taken of the children of Bamiyan, playing in the caves and kicking a football in the Buddhas' niches, with other shots of this site taken by cameras mounted on drones and airplane wings.



Over-flight of the smaller Buddha by a drone



Over-flight of the smaller Buddha by a drone equipped for mapping

The tension between the frontal presence of the children and the abstraction of the aerial images will re-enact the visual arrangement comparing the ghostlike masses of glass and the gigantic images of the cliff with a fascinating precision



## **Technical Note on the Mission Conducted in Afghanistan from 6 to 17 March 2016**

Firmly persuaded that there was a sort of moral obligation for an art work produced at the Bamiyan site to be an albeit modest contribution to the Afghan people and the scientific community, during my stay I made use of technical methods which permitted the digitization of the complete site. The Iconem company (<http://iconem.com>) , specializing in patrimony and archaeology in war zones, currently in Palmyra, helped me in this task of image collection using drones.

The 100,000 photographs produced will make it possible to create a 3D model of the cliff which will be given to the Afghan government authorities free of charge, and the scientific community of archaeologists will be able to make use of it. I am nevertheless holding on to the rights for any artistic use (contract attached to the dossier).