

Dear people who have been supporting us with their hearts, their souls, and their wallets, We cannot thank you enough for your marvelous support in any way, shape, or form. We were able to realize six summer camps: five in Gaza and one at the asylum seekers' center (AZC) in Katwijk, the Netherlands. Below you will find our report, including photographs and links to videos. As Suzanne Groothuis and Ingrid Rollema were unable to visit Gaza this year due to the COVID-19 crisis, and because the groups that the artists in Gaza were working with had to be reduced in size, we were forced to adjust all our plans. Ingrid and Suzanne decided to organize a two-week summer workshop in Katwijk.



### In Gaza

Despite the harsh reality on location, individual artists, collectives, and the Palestinian Red Crescent Society's Open Studio are trying to pass on as much knowledge and skills to the next generations as they possibly can. One way of doing that is by setting up summer camps for children and adolescents. These are beautiful, wonderful children.

The people of Gaza study a lot, partly as a result of the high unemployment rate. These people are well-educated. We were approached by the poet and theatre maker Maher: "I know that you will not be able to come over because of COVID-19, but would it be alright if I took over some of your work? I have a dream!"

Because Gaza is cut off from the rest of the world, and while people have to deal with social disruption as a result of the bombings and shootings, this society is also weighed down by the heavy burden of providing extra care for the many mutilated people. An increasing number of children are sent off to supplement the family income by selling things on the streets. It was Maher's plan to bring these little street vendors together and acquaint them with a meaningful function of 'the theatre': showing what is really going on in society by transforming it in such a way that it becomes theatrical. He tracked down twelve kids and managed to convince their parents of the importance of his idea. He also involved a female lawyer specialized in children's rights in his project. The final result is a video in which the little street vendors are visiting each other's workplaces. In this video they talk about their

dreams and ideals, about their rights according to international law, and about the harsh reality of their everyday lives. Underneath a small shelter in the burning sun, the theatre was stripped back to its essence. Thanks to the help of this intelligent poet and the talented filmmaker Mahmoud Alhaj, the outer edge of society was given a voice. “Love all, trust a few do wrong to none! Shakespeare revisited.” The Theatre of the Oppressed by the Brazilian theatre maker Augusto Boal at its best! These twelve little street vendors could write their own histories! They were seen, they were existing!



The break dancer Ahmed Myuz called us to say: “We have been having such a tough time! First there were these fierce bombings on Gaza City, and then we were confronted with the COVID-19 lockdown. I am proposing to do the following: I will gather the little ones – half of them girls, the other half boys. And I will offer them intensive dance workouts, to train their assertiveness and make them forget those damned bombings. Release their energy and allow freedom in. In order to do things properly, I need shoes, a t-shirt, food, and drinks for everyone – as well as transportation, as I am planning to drag them away from all over the place.” And so it happened that in the summer of 2020, dozens of children kept dancing and dancing. They were dancing with each other, they were dancing with the sea, they were breaking the waves. Their teachers were pretending to be fire-eaters, as if they were circus performers, glowing at dusk. They were dancing on the waves of the tide. And everyone could see them, and they were seen indeed. And they were given applause. They were dancing, free and happy. And they existed!





The artists' collective Shababeek also reported to us. Four of their artists wanted to work with talented adolescents. There is a longstanding, solid tradition with regard to providing the content for the summer camps for the younger children in Gaza. A summer camp for talented adolescents would therefore be a logical next step. The arts require concentration and space for independent development. Shababeek aims to create the conditions for supporting and encouraging this. They set up a well-thought-out program that started with theory in the morning and was followed by 'creating' in the afternoon. This resulted in an exhibition which was announced by beautiful posters that were put up everywhere, for everyone to see. In a large space their creations were shown and discussed, and a video was spread around the world. They were cheered on, they were seen, they were given their own spot right at the center of their own universe. They were existing!



The painter Mohammed Alhawajri also came up with a plan. Together with a group of children he wanted to clean the beach and create a sculpture with the stuff they found. Now climate change has become an undisputable fact, he hoped he could make the children aware of the necessity to relate to their environment in a responsible way. He wanted to give the children a wake-up call and teach them how to take care of nature. The whole week was about their attitude towards their natural surroundings. A photograph of this project shows a clean beach and waving children standing around a ten-meter-wide smiley. While having loads of fun, they are celebrating the artistic results of their clean-up efforts. They are waving to the world from a desert island. They were seen and they were existing!



The Red Crescent Society's Open Studio was weighed down by the strict COVID-19 regulations. In different times and under different circumstances, an enormous number of volunteers would be standing by to help while thousands of children were using the facilities. But now we are only allowed to work with small groups consisting of twelve children each. We decided to start working with children from the most underprivileged groups. All our attention went to the deaf and mentally handicapped children. At a rapid pace, games were invented and adapted to the special needs of these kids. When COVID-19 broke out, the Saturday Academy and the Open Studio were the first two places to offer online tuition. During the summer camps, the production of new instruction videos simply continued at a high speed. In this way, the Open Studio was still able to inspire an unprecedented number of children. We absolutely must mention that we were deeply moved by the dedication and perseverance of our own team and all the individual artists. Apart from everything else going on, it was also extremely hot this summer!





Through our brand-new Bee-Home-Academy, we are now able to start up cultural projects and lessons in refugee camps across the Arab and Western world. The Mondriaan Fund generously supported the artists Marjan Teeuwen and Rob Voerman so they could realize an artwork on location with the help of our infrastructure. As soon as the situation permits, Rob will finish his artwork.

Summer camps in the Netherlands might make you think of sleepovers close to home and abroad. On a small piece of soil like the Gaza strip, however, with all its (im)possibilities, it is more than understandable that everyone wants to return to their own 'accommodation' at night. While we are writing this newsletter, the bombings of Khan Younis and Gaza have again intensified. We are already mourning the first deaths. And new names will be added to the list of wounded people.

#### Meanwhile in Katwijk

Suzanne and Ingrid were guests at Stichting de Vrolijkheid (the cheerfulness foundation). They had planned to organize an online exchange between the children in the Gaza summer camps and the children at the refugee center in Katwijk. It turned out to be impossible to realize this plan. There was no internet in the place where we worked, and we were not given permission to bypass this problem in our own way. At the same time, it did make us smile a little: Gaza only has four hours of electricity a day and all the mobile phones in one street are often charged simultaneously underneath the bonnet of a car!

Despite the fact that Suzanne is able to speak quite a bit of Arabic, that we both have ample experience, and that we are assisted by two teachers of De Vrolijkheid, we encountered major difficulties while trying to coach and motivate a group of 12 children. We neither seemed to be able to set up a designated group, nor realize individual partnerships. Because of COVID-19, the children have not been going to school for five and a half months. This was brought to my attention when a girl, who had been dragged from one refugee center to another, told me that over the past period she had been exclusively speaking in her mother tongue 'at home'. "I have forgotten a lot, miss, sorry." Even though her primary school, De

Verrekijker – in collaboration with the COA (the Central Reception Organization for Asylum Seekers) – had provided the children with laptops so they could get online tuition via Zoom every morning, it was unclear whether this was in any way monitored.

A Yemenite boy attracted our attention. The only thing he wanted to do was lie down. He saw everything from a gloomy point of view and wanted to erase it all. But, my goodness, didn't his two little brothers take excellent care of him? And didn't he have the most beautiful, although expressionless, eyes?

The artists in Gaza are able to coach a group of thirty children with only three supervisors, while the four of us were having trouble getting anything done at all with this group consisting of only twelve children. One girl kept hearing voices in her head. Another girl didn't want people to talk to her. One boy just wanted to rip stuff apart, and yet another kid absolutely wanted to work alone. One girl was running around. She wanted to be nice and participate but was unable to do so and therefore kept kicking things. It was a sad spectacle.

Fortunately, we were able to put things right in the end. Of course, the children also enjoyed themselves. And we met such wonderful people at De Vrolijkheid! All these people deserve a medal! But we were shocked to see that the children were in such a bad mental and emotional state. And to think that this is happening right here, in our country! Who was applauding when they finished the project, set up their artworks, and when we were all dressed up? And who lifted these children on their shoulders? Who cheered them on? Unfortunately, these children were not seen, and their existence was not acknowledged.





For us, the most important thing is that we are able to use the imaginative and insightful tools of the arts to give socially deprived people a voice and a face. We feel as though we have succeeded in this, mainly because of the quality of our colleagues in Gaza. We would like to say that we have now reached all our goals, but there is still a lot more work to be done, our work will never be finished.

But I would still like to say thank you, thank you, thank you, also on behalf of Suzanne Groothuis and our supervisory board.

Ingrid Rollema

