

Blog Visit Winter 2019

When working in an area like Gaza you know it is always possible for something to happen. Sadly this trip that was the case.

The plan was to visit the West Bank for two days to have some meetings and then head into Gaza. Sadly, the night before departure things had escalated between Gaza and Israel. The tension almost caused my plane not to fly and security in the airport reached high levels. But finally I did arrive in Ramallah that day. We all truly wished that peace would have been restored but the escalations continued for another few days.

For the people in Gaza it meant very scary and difficult times, for me this meant staying in Ramallah for 9 days instead of 2.

The best thing to do when things are bad, is to try to turn them into something good. I couldn't do much for the people in Gaza, but I could make the best out of my time in Ramallah.

One of the reasons I went to Ramallah was to have a meeting with the Palestinian Museum. Last summer we collaborated with them on a land-art summer camp. This summer camp was linked to their exhibition called "Intimate Terrains" and took place both in Ramallah as in Gaza.

It was a big surprise to find that the museum regarded this project as one of their most successful projects of 2019. Not only did they ask us to continue the collaboration, but they even proposed to enlarge the project for next year. They asked if we were interested to do another land-art project, this time themed "Palestinian coastal villages", and implement it not only in Gaza and Ramallah but also in Jaffa or Akka and in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon. We are thrilled about this plan and already looking forward to start this project next summer.



Knowing that I would be in Ramallah for a longer period I visited the headquarters of the PRCS (the organization we work with in Gaza) and proposed them to work together on creating the new Agreement for 2020. Our old agreement needed to be updated and it was great to have the opportunity to work on that while being together in the same room as opposed to working through distant email contact.

Another unexpected bonus happened in the Hostel where I stayed. There I met many tourists who were traveling through Israel. Most of them didn't at all anticipate visiting the West Bank. They initially thought it was a war zone full of extremists people. During their trip they all somehow became curious and decided to give Ramallah a try. It was a true gift to see their presumptions about Palestinian people disappear within the first hours and their ideas about the region and the conflict changed radically in just one or two days. All the people in the hostel (travelers as well as local Palestinians) were very interested to hear stories from Gaza and to know more about how life really is there. It was a great opportunity to share those stories and give a face to the people in Gaza. In the same time it was also shocking to realize how little people actually know about what is going on in Gaza.

After 9 days in Ramallah the situation in Gaza finally calmed down enough for me to enter. It was wonderful to see everyone, especially after what happened the days before. In the same time it was also hard to feel the impact of the attacks on these people. Behind the smiles and jokes you could feel the heaviness, hopelessness and tiredness. Even the people of Gaza have limits to what they can bear and the limit is coming to be very close.



My first activity in Gaza was to visit the Saturday Academy. This is a new initiative from HOPE where children with a high sensitivity for the arts can find a safe place to develop themselves in this field. That Saturday they invited an illustrator of children books to teach about how to draw a character for a story. It was a great lesson and the children were very motivated. After the class they almost disappeared into the collection of art books that I brought for them. The focus of these children for the arts is really astounding.

I got even more silent when they showed me the works they made on the Saturday just after the attacks. The amount of fear coming from some of the paintings is really unsettling especially if you realize they are made by children. The teachers told me that this particular Saturday the children all arrived in shock. They were silent and hardly spoke. They worked with them for 5 full hours, they talked about what happened, they watched professional artworks and then they painted using a very loose and free technique. They said that after those 5 hours all children left a little lighter and with a smile on their faces.



The next day I started working in the Open Studio. Since my visit was cut short, there wasn't enough time to do all that we planned, but what I could do was to make an origami-animation movie with a group of deaf children. I must say that in the beginning it felt a bit silly to arrive with something so simple as origami after heavy rocket attacks, but it proved very valuable to these children. The difficulty of making origami figures made that they really needed to focus. This kept their mind of any negative thoughts. In the same time the pride on their faces after finishing the shapes was really priceless. For these children, who mostly use their hands for sign language, it was also a very welcome change of activity. One of the girls came to thank me just for teaching them something new. It was truly wonderful and I wouldn't be surprised if I find the room full of Origami creations on my next visit.



With a group of younger children with different handicaps I did a lesson related to a new book called “De Kleurtjes” (the little colors) that I brought from the Netherlands. We read the book together, watched some movies about basic elements of art and then did a very fun exercise where they learned about how all colors are based on red, yellow and blue. It was such fun to see all these kids blowing paint around on papers and then being amazed by the colorful outcomes.



A group of kids from Belgium also made some cards for the children in Gaza. During my visit I gave them the cards and they made them cards back. The next step is that both groups make little films that will also be exchanged. The arts are a great way to make connections between children in such different worlds.

The last focus of my visit was to make plans. We spoke about the plans of the Open Studio for 2020 but mostly we spoke about plans for the summer camps. Since Gaza is completely closed, holidays are not an option. This makes summer camps the best way for children to get through the very hot summers.

Next summer we will have a great menu of camps to offer:

- The team of the Open Studio will make a large summer camp full of trips and activities concerning the theme “Palestinian Heritage”.
- Break-dancer MYUZ will train a group of kids in a breakdance camp.
- Poet and theatre-maker Maher Dawood will run a theatre camp where children will make a show about the subject of child labor.
- Contemporary ArtSpace “Shababek” will organize an art-camp for young and talented teenagers.
- And we will have the land-art camp with the Palestinian Museum

We can't wait for summer to start!

On my last day in Gaza I was very happy to be present on the opening of the exhibition of the works made by the children in the Open Studio. Both the setup of the expo as the quality of the works was very impressive. There were works that mixed different techniques of the arts, paintings made by children together with their parents and paintings of Gaza 2020 (the year the UN expects Gaza to become uninhabitable). The interest from the community was very high and they are even thinking of showing the expo in the West Bank. ‘Hat’s off!’



Even though my time in Gaza was very successful, a lot of fun and full of new plans, I left with a heavy heart.

Speaking with the people teaches you that their image of future is really quite dark. The UN prediction for Gaza to be uninhabitable by 2020 seems already true for many and around the corner for most. Bad living conditions, lack of good medical care, poverty and fear of epidemics or more violent attacks take a very large toll on the people.

These people are still people... They keep living their lives, they keep making jokes and they keep dancing and painting. We just wish that they get the chance to do that for many more generations and in more humane conditions. Until then we keep bringing little escapes through the arts and imagination.

Thanks for reading, and hope to be back next spring.

