

*Welcome to our blog covering our experiences working in the Open Studio in Khan Younis, Gaza in the summer of 2016.
Enjoy the reading!!!*

First day: Monday July 25th, 2016, Khan Younis, Gaza

On July 23th Suzanne Groothuis, Rudolf Evenhuis and Ingrid Rollema entered Gaza. The situation is severe. It is extremely hot, unemployment is all abundant. Fortunately, everyone is very glad to see us again and we were shown around immediately. Suzanne started working right away.

Further we made plans and a working schedule. This means an artistic plan supported by practical issues: interpreters, teachers, children, material and space. After that: off to the beach, as you can see we could inhale the smell of wild camels in the evening sun. Kara Ben Nemsi has never disappeared.



Pictures: Suzanne Groothuis

Tuesday July 26th, 2016

Yesterday at 11 p.m. we went down town for supper in two cars. At the cafeteria a screen was put up around a veiled woman, at the moment we were wondering how she was going to eat – now we still don't know.

Walked home in the middle of the night in the pitch-dark. Beautiful, here and there little lights tinkling. I had to laugh because Suzanne wished to start working with shadow theatre, this was a decorum that nobody could have thought of: some light here and there and everywhere people with their patches to protect them against the sun.

Our building is packed with bales of flour, sugar en rice and is guarded well. Further down the camp people would fight for these ingredients

Suzanne en her team have gone to the beach in order to make *landart* . In the background are the ruins of bombings. Tomorrow Suzanne and the team will return in order to bring in some colour.

Rudolf is rather successful in coaching the various sitting volleyball teams. As a result of the past three wars there are so many handicapped people. The numbers of wheelchairs and people with clutches are shocking.

Robert runs on and off, making various photographic reports. At the end of the afternoon Suzanne, Moomen and I went into the "theatre" to work together on a production with dancing children. Much talent, fun and knowledge! At the moment it is 10:30 p.m. here. We are exhausted, but satisfied. Today we have really made a result. Regards from Khan Younis.



Pictures: Suzanne Groothuis, Robert Goddyn

Wednesday July 27th, 2016

Our day starts beautifully! Suzanne and I attend a breakfast meeting around 7:30 a.m. at the Gaza harbour, on invitation of the Netherlands Representative. Very interesting. There are new developments regarding NL, culture and the Occupied Territories. This will continue ...

Thereafter we went to the beach near Khan Yunis. This is a rather particular piece of land. They are trying to build a harbour, which is being built with the debris left after the bombings. When we crawl down the stones we stand in the sea. We found a large coloured rag and made a little house with it; the wind makes it swing.

Ropes from rubbish, reinforcing steel as tent poles. We put fruit and cookies on plates that we painted ourselves. All together it provides a bloody beautiful scene. We are working intimately and safely. You can hardly believe your eyes. Always the best thing is cooperating and make

something together.

When it's time to cool off, all children jump into the sea. The sea is empty, apart from a camel, two horses and five fishermen with their nets. We build stacks of stones and lay a mosaic floor with self-coloured little stones. We perform a shadow play with our hands and put our silhouettes in between the debris. A woman in a bombed kitchen, a child as top of a pyramid, a railway guard without a train.

Together we return in our bus. Incredible: back home we would have been halted and taken off the road, been fined and jailed for "unacceptable behaviour", here we sing together. Suzanne is sitting in the rear and slowly disappears under a pack of kids. In the aisle are kids and puppets. Grownups next to the driver, who can only look forward and to his left. A kind of "braille" ride, which is super! A warm chaos, we love it!

As soon as we are back we stage a picture in the hospital. With sandwiches to hand we run to the hall where Rudolf is teaching sitting volleyball. He is great and very enthusiastic and makes us laugh. HOPE donated a net of new balls. Rudolf has done this work all over the world, but he has never been invited to a place without balls. To be continued!



Pictures: Robert Goddyn

Thursday July 28th, 2016

My entire morning is filled with conversations. I wonder why the best photographer in our team has sold his camera. He did not have any income during six months. Someone else tells that he had to wait 18 days at the Erez border before he was allowed to return home. Every time the wars come into the discussions.

This society is wrenched. Too little space, no privacy, poverty, unemployment and sheepish expectations. The group of people you trust is diminishing. Large groups of people graduate from the universities, but they are unable to apply their knowledge to this society. Ancient leadership systems are being continued.

At breakfast Robert told that in Somalia he witnessed Germans distributing flour and rice. People were required to trade debris for food. This way the streets were getting cleaner, while people worked for an income. Of course this seems an excellent initiative, but I realize that the society here has been taken hostage and is being impoverished competently.

If all the NGOs had not been here, these people would have disappeared. We are coming here more than 20 years now and every visit I think it is worse than last time. What an intensely unjust place on earth.

We are doing as if we are mad. Suzanne works with children doing *street art*. They decorate the entrance of the building of the Red Crescent with waste material. It starts looking very good. Suzanne is unwaveringly. Everything she does, she does with a smile and I am surprised about the level of her Arabic language skills; we hardly need interpreters with her activities. She has obviously prepared very well.

Robert takes pictures invisibly and returns at night with his catch of the day.

Rudolf conducts the last training sitting volleyball. He gives himself entirely in this Palestine sports hall and everybody is very glad with him. What a gifted teacher is this man. The flip side of this is that everyone wants to have one of his t-shirts. He may run the risk to board his flight back undressed. These people who give everything with the largest pleasure, move me. And ... we all do as if it is not hot at all and if everything is successful all the time!



Many photographers!
Pictures by: Rudolf Evenhuis, Nosaibah K Abukhater, Suzanne Groothuis

Friday July 29, 2016

Today we made a tour of Gaza with doctor Jean and Hany Horn, our driver. It is obvious that many new main roads have been constructed. Raffah, the border with Egypt has been renovated, but it is also closed. One keeps wondering what Egypt's role is.

En route to the airport that was bombed long ago, we are stopped by a

Hamas patrol. We should have asked for permission to come so close to the border. We turn round, a couple of machine guns does not ease an open discussion!

We drive to Gaza City, where we visit a church and a mosque, built here on the same location 1000 years ago. Then further northbound, to the region that was so heavily bombed during the past wars. The debris of the bombed quarters has been removed almost entirely and large rebuilding is ongoing. However, due to the import ban of construction materials the rebuilding process is stagnating. The planning is that in two years' time everyone will have a house again. Near Khan Younis there is an enormous new district. Its scale reminds you of a Chinese building project. Together with the new main roads this project has been financed by Qatar.



As a reaction to impossible restrictions like fishing bans, too small fishing zones, shootings and seizing of boats, one has started building fish farms behind the beach, some 10 years ago. Sea water is being pumped in and out. In round basins the same fish are reared as the ones that swim along the coast.



In one of the camps along the coast we could not hold back taking pictures. We are baffled by seeing the new revalidation hospital, which specializes in producing prostheses. When we drive on a bit too far to the east we are confronted with the harsh reality: farmers better do their work well bowed, sharp shooting is still continuing!



Pictures: Suzanne Groothuis

Saturday Juli 30th, 2016

Gaza's got talent!





Photo: Robert Goddyn





Pictures: Robert Goddyn, Mumen Khalifa and Suzanne Groothuis

Sunday July 31st, 2016

Today Rudolf has finished his masterclass sitting volleyball. In my opinion he has delivered a master piece indeed. Perform whole day training sessions for different groups at a temperature of 35 degrees. Rudolf has been fighting building structure, both in the games as in the management of the sports hall. It was a great success, but Rudolf is “not finished yet”. At the end of the last session he receives many presents and he has to promise that he will come back next year.



Photo Robert Goddyn



Photo Robert Goddyn

Photo Robert Goddyn



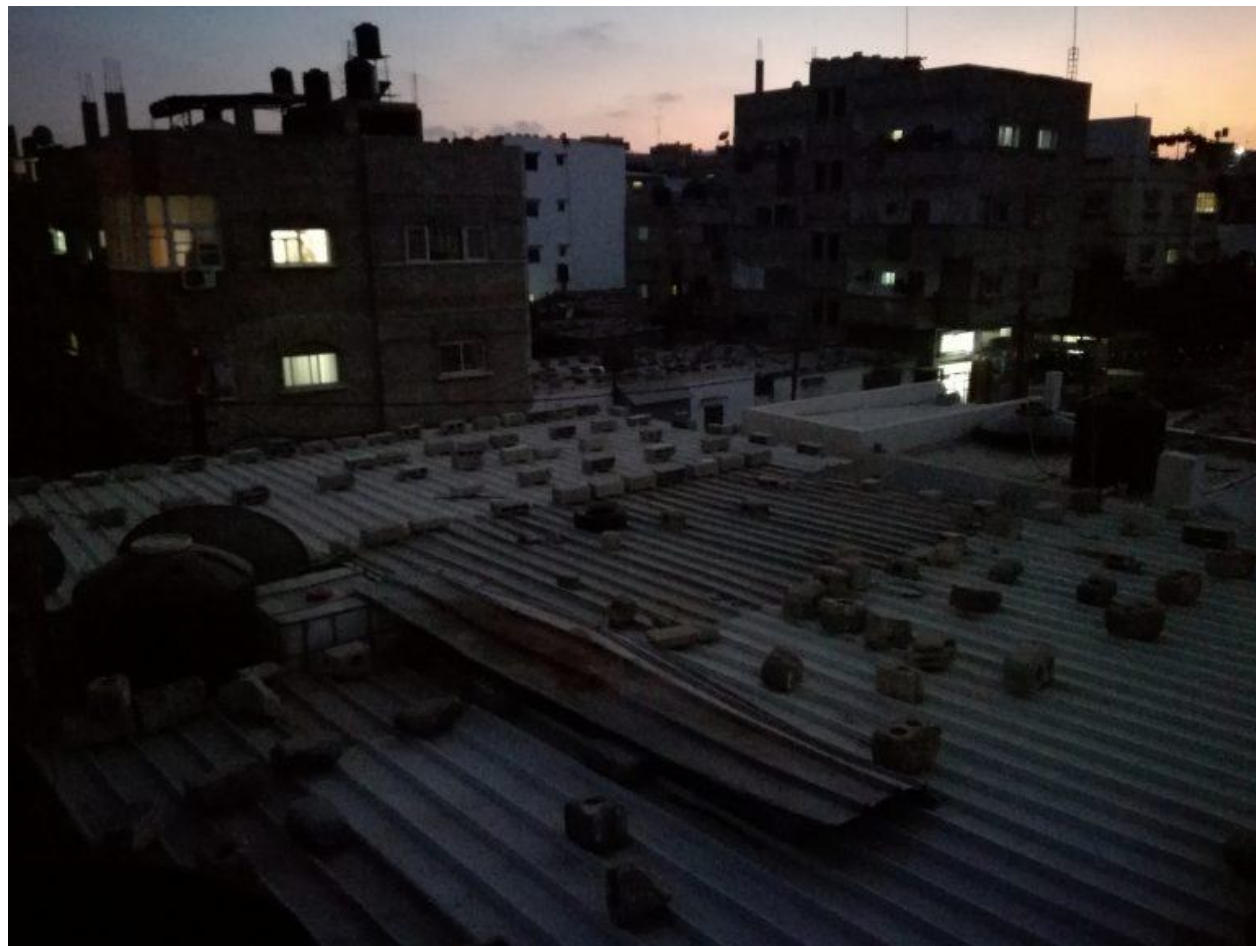
At present there is super party mood, but my thoughts digress to the chat we had this morning with our deaf chamber maid. She lost both her children during the last war (2008/2009 Cast Lead 1417 dead, 2012 Pillar of Defence 180 dead, 2014 Protective Edge 2177 dead). She has a beautiful open smile and while she blows a hand kiss into our direction, I can see how her eyes are being filled with tears. This is Palestine: so hospitable, so friendly en yet so permeated with destruction and sorrow.

I think of the first floor of the building that is stuffed with little deaf kids. There has always been a large proportion of deafness in Gaza, as a consequence of familiar intermarriage and the bombings have caused a large portion of hearing damage. Every time outside or in the sports hall it strikes me how many people are missing limbs.

In the evening, at doctor Jean's rooftop, we talk with the three women who run the "Centre for Martyrs" in Khan Younis. The centre assists at funerals and all related issues of people who died in bombings and other violence related to the struggle for freedom. The centre also takes life-long care for survivors, who are being visited and supported, both psycho-socially and financially.

The number of casualties from the first *Intifada* has passed 10,000. Pensions for widows and orphans, permanent disability, even a healthy economy would crunch under that load. All this let alone that a next war is in the making.

The imam calls for prayers. Stars are shining, a balmy breeze is blowing, it is becoming dead quiet. Seven women look at each other under the starry sky of "1000 and one night". It could really be really very beautiful.



Monday August 1st, 2016 - last episode of the journey to Gaza and Ramallah

Yesterday was the festive closure of our visit in the Theatre of the Red Crescent. A show presented the accomplishments of the Open Studio over the last three months. Everywhere were paintings and tapestry hanging, among them a couple of super works of art!

There were four different dance shows by kids of all ages. We were really impressed by the passion, the power and the precision of the performances. Starting point was Depka (traditional Palestine dance), but during the show it got more and more modern and abstract.

Teacher/artist Mumen has proven to be able to stage a show in which classical dance is combined with modern dance, film and visual art. Instead of traditional costumes he used bags which had been used to pack and transport ingredients (sugar, flour, rice) which are distributed to the poor at the centre where we are working. Heaven in the theatre opens and an avalanche of colourful balloons comes down; we are lifted off the ground, there is laughter, kissing, dancing. Never was life so beautiful!



Watch this movie at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UT2bEHXPrgQ>

We wish that our Open Studio comes along in the development of the arts. However, we stay unable to close the artistic gap. With two part-time artists we would be able to make a leap forward. Who helps us realizing this goal? With a budget of €12.000 we would be able to run professionally during a year and a half.

Today we leave Gaza and go en route to Ramallah. At the first Hamas border control, doctor Jean is removed from the car. She is 80 years old and is not allowed to wave us goodbye. Then we continue to the next checkpoint and say farewell to the driver and Mohammed.

We march the one kilometre long cage to the Israeli side of the border, together with a young disabled Palestinian. At the luggage control his clutches are taken from him and he is forced to continue walking without them. His mother is desperate.

The Palestinian is taken apart, like Rudolph. Both have metal in their legs and the relevant letters from their hospitals are not accepted. What do you hide under that scare, fellow? All this takes an extra hour, for us as well as for the people waiting for us at the other side. One working day already spoilt!

In Ramallah we are very warmly welcomed by Younis Al Katib, the director of the Palestinian Red Crescent. I ask his opinion about the developments towards a future Palestine. He speaks softly, seemingly does not want to say it. We Palestinians live at approximately 15% of our land. The road to the South is blocked off, as well the road to the North.

Building new settlements and evacuations in Jerusalem and other cities proceed at a murderous pace. We are jailed in our own country. Inevitably we become a ghetto. Our people have suffered from 1948 onward and is gradually becoming hopeless.

The Palestinian Question is always raised in relation to all conflicts in the Middle East. It is always mention as the problem laying at the basis and that needs to be solved first. East, West, North and South agree on this, but real political steps are not taken. We stand up and kiss each other.

I look back at our common past. During the second Intifada, Israeli soldiers bound Younis behind a car and towed him through the muddy streets of Ramallah. At that time he was already the director of the Red Crescent; imagine that this would happen to the director of the Netherlands Red Cross.

Our next appointment is with the head of education of the deaf. Her department uses a lot of art. She is a passionate woman, who educated her

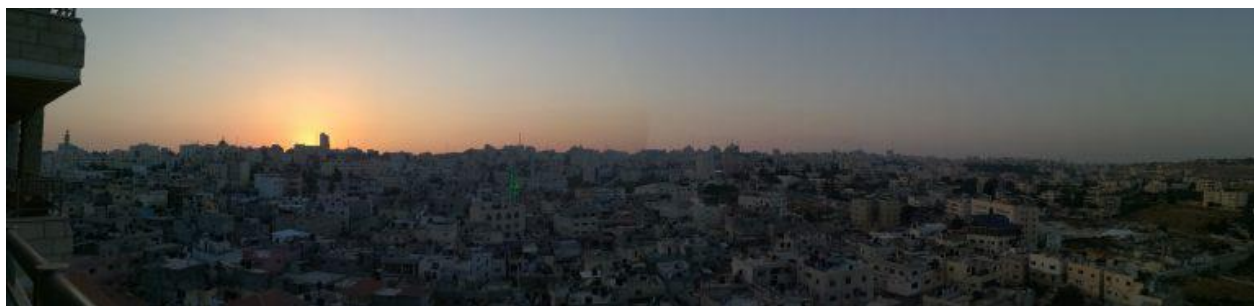
three children for a large part on her own. Her husband was politically active, he articulated a political vision and always stayed far away from violence. He was sentenced 30 years. At the most recent prisoner exchange he was released after nine years, which was after a term of five years of “administrative detention”, i.e. imprisonment without lawsuit. We see that the centre is ran with much love and commitment.

We go out and show Suzanne Yasser Arafat’s tomb and following we visit the grave of Mahmoud Darwish, the great Palestinian poet who was able to fill a football stadium with listeners to his poems. At some sentences the masses jumped up as if a goal was scored. And he certainly scored.

Mahmoud Darwish 1941 – 2008

I learnt
all the words worthy of the court of blood
so that I could break the rule.

I learnt all the words and took them apart to construct a single
word: HOMELAND



The very last blog!!!

Dear reader,

The very last blog was written, but we forgot the cherry on the cake!



Here is a little film, Balloooooons!:



Watch the movie at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=klh9qvssBxM>

Enjoy and warm regards!
Ingrid, Suzanne and Karin

