

Project Making & Sharing Spring 2017 Weekly blog

The start



The time has come. After a long wait for permission from the Israelis, I finally arrived in Gaza to work for two months on starting of Project Making & Sharing.

It's raining cats and dogs here and because of the absence of a good drainage system, all streets are flooded. And it's cold! It's around 6 degrees, but because of the humidity, the sensing temperature lays around zero, and there is no heating, neither in the Open Studio nor in the houses. So no place to warm up until spring comes. After a delicious cup of Arabic coffee I started a meeting with the heads of the Open Studio. We talked about our plans for the coming two months, new ideas for summer camps and a trip to other centers in the West Bank to continue spreading our knowledge there. There are many plans and a lot of enthusiasm. I'm sure we are going to get a lot done in the coming period.

After the meeting, they gave me a short tour through the renovated ground floor where a lot of great new classrooms are used for various activities.

The recently reopened large space of the Open Studio still has some leakage problems, but besides that, it looks great. The children have picked out the colors and then even painted the walls themselves, they are very proud of it.

Then it was time to sit together with the teaching team. Despite the rain everyone showed up and they were full of energy, and after I explained the concept and the plans for the coming weeks the enthusiasm even increased. Within a few minutes ideas were flying over the table. Tomorrow the weekend starts, so I gave everyone the task to prepare a list of ideas for after the weekend. Next week we will start working on them. I'm very excited!

Week 1

The first full week in the Open Studio. A good start!

After a (very cold!) weekend which contained some recovering from traveling, working on preparations and a very nice afternoon in Gaza City, Sunday morning was the moment to start the real work in the Open Studio. My first goal was to work with Mumen Khalifa, the artist within the Open Studio team, to elaborate the concept for project “Making & Sharing”. After a good brainstorming session we organized classes with a group of deaf children and a group of hearing children about emotions and dreams. The dreams of these children will form the basis of a special learning-movie, which we will later create in a collaboration with all the Open Studio departments.



The second goal was to start the lessons “making movies with your mobile”. A club of seven, a bit older, children come every day with their mobiles to learn about light, contrast, composition and about editing their self made movies. The start was a bit chaotic. The use of two interpreters slows down the communication (English → Arabic → Sign language → Sign language → Arabic → English) which makes it difficult to keep the concentration of the young teenagers. But by using examples and doing exercises new young filmmakers are starting to emerge.

During this week I also had some meetings with the organisation of the Open Studio. We talked about new ideas for summer camps and developed a great plan to visit three centers in the West Bank. We want to introduce the local teachers to the concept of the Open Studio and inspire them to develop more artistic activities with children. For this trip we are asking permission to go with five people, but how many of us eventually

come across the border will all depend on who will get permission from the Israeli authorities. Fingers crossed that everyone can join!

Tuesday was a special day because the president of the PRCS came to visit. A visit like this has a great effect here. Everything is checked and cleaned until the smallest details and the whole building smells like cleaning solution. The visit was only very short, but it's effect will still linger long.



The biggest positive note this week is, without a doubt, about the people here. Everyone is incredibly friendly, enthusiastic and patient while I struggle with my beginners-Arabic. The team of the Open Studio is like a kind of family into whom I am included from day one. With such a nice bunch of children and colleagues, and with the sun increasingly starting to shine, I'll very happily make it through the next two months. Thanks guys!

Much love from Gaza, Suzanne and windowsill-visitor



Week 2

Let's start with the weekend. Some teachers of the Open Studio had invited me for a Saturday trip to Gaza City. With six ladies and a "bodyguard" we went on our way. The day included a tour past the camps and the harbor, a visit to the local souq, a super cozy lunch and the best kunafa (local sweets) in the entire Gaza Strip. A highlight was the visit to the first western shopping mall which opened here recently. "One moment of feeling like you are not in Gaza," and for some the first time on an escalator. On the way back we couldn't resist a short visit to the beach. What a wonderful day it was!



This week was all about Qattan. Qattan is an organization in Gaza City that does similar work to the Open Studio, albeit in a slightly different guise.

After visiting Qattan last summer, we thought it interesting to learn more from and about this organization and at the same time strengthen the cooperation between Qattan and the Open Studio.

On my first day I was introduced to Salman Nawati. He is a local artist who teaches art classes to different groups of children about many different disciplines. His lessons are inspiring because he leaves the children very free. First he teaches them some new techniques. Then he just puts on some classical music and lets the kids get on with it. The results are certainly impressive.

D My first I-just-came-to-watch-lesson was quite surprising. The children took their places, the teacher was ready to start and then he says: "Suzanne, can you give them a class about art and recycling?"
What? ... now? ... erm ...
Sure!??

After giving a short introduction, two minutes of searching-for-materials-thinking-time and with red cheeks, I know what to do and I teach my first class in Qattan.



The following three days of my visits to Qattan were particularly interesting because two teachers from the Open Studio accompanied me. The visits also inspired them and they really made some good connections with the people of Qattan. By the end of the week, new plans for the exchange of both teachers and children are already virtually concluded.



On Wednesday, a delegation of the Dutch Red Cross came to Khan Yunis to visit the center (and thus the Open Studio). Since the Hope Foundation collaborates directly with them, it was very good to meet them here. It was a good chance to tell them all about the Open Studio and our new plans. This meeting, combined with some good meetings with the Open Studio team, made this day another a very fruitful one.

And... all preparations for project “Making and Sharing” are ready! Next week we will start with the real work. Exciting!!!

P.s. For who doesn't know what I look like. This is me:



Week 3

After using the weekend for finishing touches and some examples, it was time to present the final plan to the team. This plan consisted of the storyline for the film that we are going to make. Also I presented ideas about how each chapter of this story is going to be told by using different techniques. I was slightly nervous, but fortunately everyone was very excited and completely into it.

Khitam, one of the teachers from the team, appears to be a good writer. She was given the task to write out the story into a nice Arabic tale. With the whole team we came up with the name for the main character and the name for the story, and it was decided who would be the narrators. The latter task went to two teenage girls who have a great love for reciting poetry. When I worked with them two days later to record the story, I was very impressed by their quality and the passion they managed to put into the language.



The first two parts of the film (the making of a shadow theater and the making of a landscape trough collage) went very well. The third activity (making animals ears), turned out to be a bit too difficult for the group of little ones with mental disabilities. Nevertheless, the children were enjoying themselves so it was a nice lesson. Later we will repeat the activity with a different group to record it for the film.

Wednesday it was International Women's Day. Here in Gaza, this mainly brings a lot of confusion. One year it is a holiday, the next year it isn't and once it was only a free day for women. This year it seems each organization will draw its own plan. Universities are closed, schools are open, and in some places where they are supposed to be working the employees are collectively taking a free day themselves. To have a holiday on Women's Day seems not to be very evident.

The PRCS does decide to give the holiday, so that brings me a very welcome extra home-working day.

On Thursday a small open day is scheduled in the Open Studio. This means that all activities are taking place outside in the garden of the building. There is a cozy atmosphere with music and games. My activity today takes place on a billiards table under a pergola. The kids love it, but for teachers it is a bit hard. Suddenly it became a very hot day, and everyone is wearing too many layers. Especially for the women, taking off some layers isn't really an option.

My next lesson is with the young filmmakers and also takes place in the garden. Halfway through the heat takes over and turns the lesson into an ice-cream eating session. I don't even pretend to mind it and join the party.



While you sit there, with your ice cream in the sun, you almost forget where you are and which situation these people are in. But then, as so often here, something happens to confront you with the story behind all the smiles.

During my last hour of this week, I join a class that artist Mumen is giving to a group of teenage girls. He tries to make them think about positive dreams, things that would make them happy. Besides some uncomfortable laughter, there is little response. "It is a difficult concept for them," sighs Mumen, "They can't really imagine what it is like to be happy." In an attempt to get something out of them he changes the question: Think of something that makes you sad and then imagine what the opposite would be like. Even though some thoughts are coming up, dreaming without war and sorrow remains a very difficult task for these children.

Week 4

Another eventful week full of activities with the children. We made owls, shadow theaters, pop-up landscapes, music, and more.

The activities are going well and the children are very enthusiastic. The filming, on the other hand, proves to be difficult at times. It is a challenge to be organizing an activity, guiding it and filming it at the same time.

As soon as you focus on explaining something, you might miss filming a vital image. Fortunately, there are always some eager kids who, with a lot of pride, love to repeat the steps for you.



After visiting Qattan two weeks ago, a first exchange was arranged this Monday. With 10 deaf children, we left in the morning to Gaza City. There they were first given a workshop on creative book-making, then it was movie-time and stories were read too them in the big Qattan library. Both the children and the teachers had a great day. Hopefully many more exchange days will follow.



Time is passing so very fast! I've been here a month already and during the coming month there will only be two full working-weeks left for project Creating and Sharing. We are well on our way, but moving it up a notch would not be a bad idea.

The biggest time waster here is that the planning doesn't always correspond to the presence of the children. So sometimes you can't complete an activity because a bus appears ready to pick up the kids or you could even be waiting a few hours because no children are available for the planned activities. On those days I really miss the Dutch efficiency.

The last-minute nature that prevails here might also not work for everyone, but it does give a nice flexibility. It allows me to make adjustments and so to keep the quality of the work high.

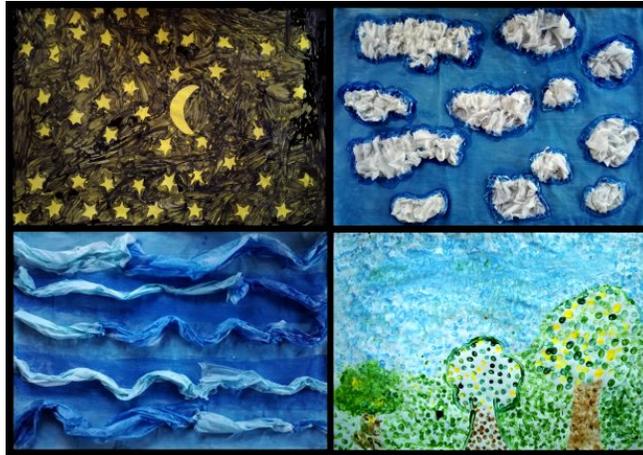


Now it is weekend and I started working on editing the first film-footage. I am already looking forward to the next week!

Week 5

Whow! What a great week again! We did a lot of work. We went to great places and we had an amazing mothers day party! The activities of this week: Stop-motion animation including a class in how to draw different animals. We made kinetic birds and bear-puppets. We went to the beach to make bottle-fishes. And on the roof terrace we used various techniques to create backgrounds for the film. Especially the last location was a very impressive one for the children. Here, all houses are build very close together and are maximum up to four stories high. So most children have here never seen a real view. Our terrace on the 10th floor was therefore an impressive experience.





And then, there was the Mother's Day celebration. This is a big event here for which all mothers are invited and the children give several performances. There is dancing, singing, poetry, and an exhibition of paintings. Everyone in the team worked very hard to make something beautiful with these kids, and it was beautiful! I am standing at the side of the stage and see the elated faces of the children that proudly come running of the stage. Then I look at the theatre hall and I see a room full of brightly smiling mothers and other relatives. My big congratulations to the team for organizing such a beautiful day.



This is all the beautiful side of Gaza. But Gaza also remains that little piece of land where the daily chores no longer are interrupted when bombs are dropping only a few kilometers away. A dramatic area. And that is exactly why we are, to create “moments to forget”.



Week 6

Things are tense in Gaza... After the assassination of a prominent member of Hamas, tension has been building up. There were large demonstrations, the border got completely closed and everywhere vehicles are being checked by police and army. Here, at the PRCS, meetings are held to prepare for the worst. The last three wars started after similar events.

At the end of the week nothing has yet escalated. And, although this says nothing about the future, with all my heart I hope that this will be a good sign. Gaza has really seen enough of wars during recent years.

Despite the fear of a new war, regular life does go on.

This week's focus was on filming the final images for our movie. Out of a network of artists a green-screen was arranged, and I worked late into the night to prepare all the materials. With three, very concentrated, young girls we made all the recordings. A few things had to be redone, but it really starts to look good!



Having a green-screen asks for it to be used more. So during the (already last!) lesson with young filmmakers we went on a world tour. By using a special application on the phone, the teenagers traveled to Egypt, Mecca and Istanbul. What a fun class!



This week it also was my birthday. To let this pass by unnoticed is really not an option here. Of course I picked up on some hints, but nothing prepared me for the wonderful party they had organized. Music, gifts and a huge chocolate cake. Even at home I wouldn't have had such a wonderful birthday!

The Open Studio team really feels like a second family and I am immensely grateful for the wonderful time we are spending together these two months.

Week 7

In Gaza things often turn out different than expected. This week was a great example of that. The plan was to travel with four people from the Open Studio team to the West Bank to provide trainings and to make new connections. That a part of the team would probably be rejected to leave by the Israeli authorities was already expected. What nobody foresaw was that Gaza, after the liquidation of a Hamas member last week, got locked-down completely. Nobody could get out, not the team, and me neither. Of course we all were disappointed, but mainly we thought about the Palestinians who were missing out on life-saving surgery, a scholarship or very long awaited family visits. This deeply affected many people.

Because of the extra days in Khan Yunis, I got invited for an outing with 100 children from the PRCS school.

In addition, a trip was planned with the team of the Open Studio and a fun group of deaf girls. Those were again two very lovely days. It was great to spend a day with the team and, besides my Arabic, I am starting to pick up some sign language as well.

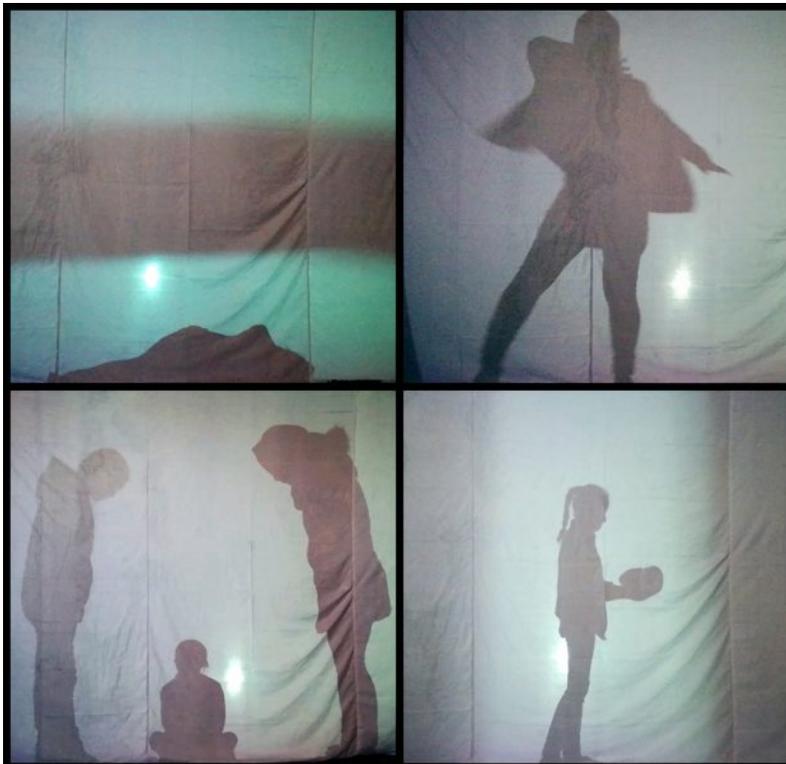




Smoke from a fallen bomb seen from a Ferris wheel in the amusement park. The conflicting situation in Gaza at its peak.

The rest of the week I spend time on re-filming some footage that wasn't not so successful the first time.

Also, with artist Mumen and his group of children, we started creating a new theatre show. It will be a combination of shadow theatre, projection and dance and it's themed about child labor. Sadly, child labor is a common problem in Gaza, yet there is not much talk about it. The dream is to perform this show in different places to bring more attention to this issue.



The PRCS (Red Cross of Palestine) works with a lot of volunteers. In cooperation with the Dutch Red Cross they started a new project. PRCS Khan Yunis will start linking up with international volunteers to exchange experience and expand knowledge. I was very honored when I was asked to inscribe myself as the first international volunteer for this new project. With the biggest motivation I will commit myself when needed and with great pride I am wearing the PRCS vest.



Week 8

Until the last moment it was uncertain. Will Ingrid be allowed to enter Gaza?
But yes! She arrived!



She was only staying for a few days, so ... work to be done. There were many meetings, many things to see, new ideas and our film was finished!
On the last working day, we invited all the children to watch the film. What a special moment when the kids recognized their work on the big screen!



With the whole team we shared a delicious breakfast, and then it was time to say our goodbyes.

What has the time passed fast! And how good has it been! The team was great, the kids were great and the work was done above expectations. It all made me feel completely at home here and, despite the difficulties of life in Gaza, I will truly miss it.



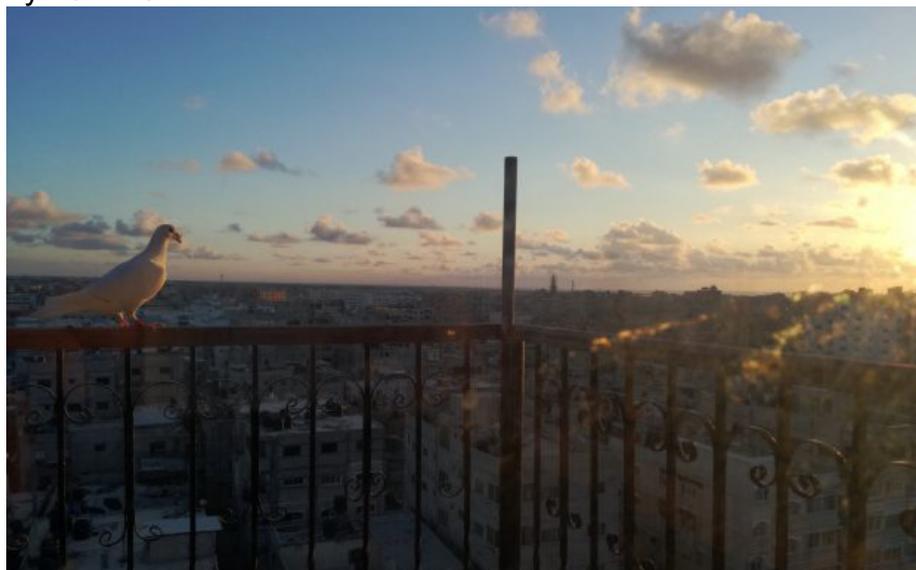
On our last day in Palestine, Ingrid and I went to Ramallah. With all our stories and images we passed by the office of the Dutch Representation and at the headquarters of the PRCS. In both places we were received with a lot of enthusiasm and they were fully compassionate with our work in Khan Yunis.

Then we got the golden tip to visit the Yasser Arafat Museum. A truly beautiful museum gives insights into the history of the last 150 years of Palestine. The arts are well represented. The architecture is surprising. It was built on the The Muqata'a. The place from where, during the last years, Arafat has led Palestine.

In the exhibition Ingrid is recognizing people and I recognize the feelings. It was a wonderful but also very imposing way to end this trip. Its impression leaves me speechless for a few more days.



My big thanks to everyone in Khan Yunis for all the help (and patience) in my acclimatization, “integration” and of course in all the work we have done. The experience of these two months will always stay with me, and I’m already looking forward to my next visit!



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To further develop this project and to ensure the future of the Open Studio,
we need your help.

For more information, please visit our website or contact us.