

# Travel Log of an Artist in Eastern Mediterranean

**Selim Birsal.** Visual artist and professor, Bilkent University

In this text, the visual artist Selim Birsal tells the story of his journey of several years through various Mediterranean places marked by war and violence (the Turkish Syrian border, Northern Cyprus, inland Lebanon) in an effort to discover the environment and, by interacting with it, make a work of art emerge from that discovery. Thus, the creative process is triggered by the artist's curious gaze, the walks, the talks with the locals and other artists or the work with the students. From this, Birsal builds an oeuvre constantly in dialogue with the environment that inspires it, as a response to the emotions and thoughts that arise in the interaction. In this way the artist cultivates his own garden, which is nothing but a reflection of everything that surrounds, moves and provokes him.

## Cairo/Alexandria, Egypt

15.05.2007

I landed in Cairo, dust, yellow desert sand, noise, traffic...! I went directly to the train station. I took the first train to Alexandria. It was four o'clock in the afternoon. I could see from my window the changing landscape as the train went up the Nile Valley. Green all over, palm trees, flying birds, I was in Africa. Around eight o'clock I reached Alexandria, the Mediterranean. It is still the same sea even seen from another continent.

## Aley, Lebanon

17.08.2008

I arrived at Beirut airport late. Somebody with a paper with my name written on it met me and we drove into the Beirut streets. He brought me to Ghassan's house. He told me my room was at the end of the corridor on the

left and that I would share it with somebody else. There were two beds in the room and in one my unknown roommate was sleeping quietly, taking deep breaths. A dim orange light was coming through the thin curtains on the window. I undressed in the dark as best as I could and went to bed. I believe it must have been about 3.30 am; I went to sleep listening to the sounds coming from the street. The next morning when I woke up, I met the other artists who were staying in the same house. Together we took a minibus to Aley town. A warm wind was blowing on my face from the open window of the minibus. Traffic in Beirut was confusing. It may seem strange to a European but all kinds of vehicles such as horse carriages, bicycles, trucks, cars, buses, a moped and a person running with a cart were travelling on the same street as if with an unwritten code. After climbing a mountain, we arrived in Aley town situated about ten kilometres east of Beirut.

Looking down, through a mist, I could see the Beirut town, the strand and, in the distance, the Mediterranean Sea in a haze.

They brought us to our lodgings. I started arranging my room where I would spend fifteen days. My room faced the road at the back of the building and the water tanks. There must be water problem here, I thought, as every house had its own water tank.

*Who knows what had taken place in this garden? Who knows what these stones, trees, walls had witnessed?*

When I climbed to the attic of the house we were staying in, I discovered five big water tanks and later I witnessed the fact that they brought water with tankers to fill these tanks. The second problem was electricity cuts; every house had its own generator. A power cut could last the whole day, and the generators functioned like a noisy orchestra. In the afternoon, we went to the place where we would be working. It was a fifteen-minute walk through the town. The space consisted of three houses and their remains with gardens connected to each other. I sat on a stone in the garden and lit a cigarette. I took out my water bottle from my waistcoat. First, I wetted my dried lips and then I swished the water in my mouth before swallowing. I looked around me, I smelled this new air surrounding me, my keen gaze inspected the minutest details of the garden. Once upon a time, this had been a beautiful place, but life, death and war had since passed over this beautiful spot. Who knows what had taken place in this garden? Who knows what these stones, trees, walls had witnessed? This country had been in constant war for over twenty years and it seemed to me that this garden carried all the marks of this past. It had been proposed to choose a site in these gardens to work. It was early yet to make a decision but it seemed to me that the moment

and the feeling were whispering a message: I should remain in this triangular garden and I could produce something here and just below, where the hexagonal table stood.

**18.08.2008**

The next day I started talking to people. I could even retain some names. Mahmoud, Camille, Patricia, Juliana, Norman, Luca. After the difficult, depressing, long winter that I had lived through, I felt that here I could find the means to discharge my energy. I found an internet café. With Harth I had my first real conversation. We walked around the town together, we spoke, and we asked each other questions about our approach to our works and our environment. We went to the market and did some shopping. I bought some paper. It was ordinary yellow wrapping paper; the kind they call toast paper here; I could start doing some sketches, drawing the garden. This paper may also be useful to the other artists. Maybe they would also like to do some drawings, sketches. I discussed with Harth what these seemingly aimless walks around town meant for me. Strolling aimlessly... During these random walks, I would find an object and put it in my pocket. A creative process had started. Back to the site, I went into the garden again and sat on the same stone. I wanted to prove something to myself. Would I experience the same sensation? I lit a cigarette and this time started to sip my ice-cold beer. Almaza Pilsen, the Lebanese beer! I decided to work here. I would organise the garden, pull up the weeds, sweep it, smooth the soil with a rake, take care of the flowers; in other words I would clean the “rhizome” in my mind. As Voltaire said in *Candide*, “we must cultivate our garden.”

**19.08.2008**

I worked a long time in my garden. I was beginning to get the impression that the work I was going to create was slowly taking shape. I



The Table of Collected Memories (Selim Birsal).

was collecting objects and cleaning the garden. Later that day something I did not expect happened. Nabil came and sat at the hexagonal table; Camille joined us and Abu-Fadi, the gardener, brought us Lebanese coffee on a tray. The table had become the place where we socialised, had conversations. Events were progressing towards the point where my work would take shape, gain meaning. In the evening, I did some drawings and noted the events that changed the day.

### 20.08.2008

I found some writing in the garden. On 31 July 1958, when these gardens were laid, a mason had probably written this date and the name

Al General Fouad Chehab in wet cement with a nail. According to what Ayman told me, Chehab was remembered as the person who established the first university in Lebanon and helped modernise the country. My project had assumed a new meaning with this new-found information. I felt like an archaeologist digging in modern times, archaeology of the modern age. As I arranged the objects I had collected on the hexagonal table, they seemed to be photographing the past fifty years of this rural region. Chehab was a well-liked person; as a personality who created a balance between the different ethnic groups and different religions in the country, he had taken his place in Lebanese history.



Playground, Lefkoşa (Selim Birsal).

### 21.08.2008

The weather changed. Fog started to descend. I think I should really say fog was rising from the foot of the mountain to where we were, to the top of the mountain. A pale colour that slowly turned to a colourless veil was covering the environment. Sometimes I could hardly see beyond five or six metres. For the Aley inhabitants this change in the weather signalled the end of summer. The cats, wondering what this stranger, who invaded their territory, was doing there began to scratch the ground while observing me. In the afternoon, it began to rain, rendering the conditions impossible to work. As a result, all the artists gathered in the house and we had our first meeting around a table. Who was doing what here? How was everyone progressing? We put our names on a plan of the working area. The house we were staying in became a studio until the late hours of the night. During this process Ayman, Tagreed, Nabil, Mahmoud, Camille and I had long conversations on art and the various projects there. We permitted each other the freedom to interfere in each other's works. In reality, this was the

reason why we were here; we were participating in a workshop. We were exchanging ideas, enriching each other's gardens and, at last, we were experiencing this atmosphere. During the following days, this working atmosphere permitted us to intermingle our work as well. At the end of a day, when the weather was a little better, there was an optical miracle after the rain due to the droplets hanging in the air.

We were drinking coffee with Mahmoud in front of Abu-Fadi's door and watching the sunset. We were facing west; we could look directly at the setting sun because its brightness had diminished now. They were smoking a water pipe and talking; I was trying to catch some words of this language that I do not speak; the sun was setting. If I draw a straight line from where I am standing, I can find myself in the Strait of Gibraltar. Here is the end of the sea. A place where something ends and something begins. The sea ends, mountains begin. When we cross the mountains, we come to the desert. Damascus is one hundred kilometres away. My eyes on the horizon, I dreamt of Gibraltar where the Mediterranean begins, as a mouth;

I inhaled the sun, the orange ball that hangs in the mist, in a single breath. I was in a sweet melancholic mood. I rose and quietly entered the light in my garden and lost myself in a magical world.

## 22.08.2008

I showed my works, *Convivial Garden for Chehab* and *Table of Collected Memories*, at the end of the workshop. I thanked my garden; its stones, its earth, its trees, its flowers, its dust, its smells, its fruits, its light, the bird cages, its colour, for the satisfaction and the energy that it had given me. I put out the lights. We said our farewells to Abu-Fadi. He can always go back to the garden, put the lights on and drink his coffee. I gave him back the garden I had borrowed from him. May he long enjoy it. I brought back almost all the objects I had exhibited on my table with me. I am hoping to show them again as a travelling memory of those regions, in other lands. Why not go to Gibraltar one day; even cross the straights over to the other side? In order for the work to live, it is enough only to wish. It is enough that I continue to work, construct memory bridges between people and things. As long as I retain my belief in the magic of things.

## Mardin, Turkey

26.05. 2010, 18:33

I sit on a terrace; there is a large vacant piece of land in front of me laying southward. A very flat, straw yellow landscape stretches towards a hazy and dusty horizon and vanishes. As my gaze rises, the dust cloud gets thinner, turning into a blue infinity. There is a warm breeze. Within sight, there are long-tailed kites, gradually increasing in number. The blue background becomes enlivened by a kite fest. Thousands of swallows fly to and fro dancing madly. Neither the kites nor the swallows collide. The sun is setting on the Mesopotamia Valley. It is

getting cooler. Desert! At the horizon, clusters of lights are turned on. Syria. I am sipping my Assyrian wine, having some sunflower seeds. A military helicopter flies by at low altitude. Why is there warfare around here?

## 31 May 2010

I turned on the TV. Israel raided the *Mavi Marmara* vessel, which was delivering humanitarian aid. According to initial reports, there are sixteen dead and many injured. The way things stand, a war is at the door. Now what? How will the world react? I thought about my sons. What kind of a world is humanity leaving to its future heritage? How are we supposed to resist? The endless cries of confused, blurred, dark, gloomy, mournful, frantic crowds... These lands have always been on fire. Sigh it away! I spent ten days walking around the streets of Mardin. I went into almost every downtown store. I tasted tobaccos, weighed knives, sipped myrrh, touched fabrics, planted olive trees, harvested spikes, watched stove makers forge the sheet metals, smelled wild pistachio oil soaps, talked a lot, drank a lot of tea and water, and walked a lot. During my stay, I kept printing lifetank trees on fabrics. I created *Cabinet Mardin*. I depicted trees of life made out of small tanks filled with the emotion in these lands where humanity was born and countless belief systems have lived side by side. What does a tank have to do with the tree of life? Aren't the two contradicting motifs or ideas? Apparently, they are. Then again, isn't this a region, difficult to understand and describe, embodying contradictions such as hard/soft, dry/wet? Weren't most of the religious beliefs born right here? Mesopotamia.

## Lefkaösa, Northern Cyprus

09.01.2011

I first heard the name of the island during summer of 1974. The Turkish Army had made



a landing on the island. That summer, we had blackouts in Ankara and throughout the country. I went with my father to the stationary shop in the neighbourhood to buy dark blue wrapping paper, which until then I had never used for any reason other than to cover my notebooks. That day, with this paper we covered the headlights of our family car. We also placed the paper over several windows of the house. Because all the lights of the city were dimmed, the stars seemed shinier in the cloudless August sky. On a black-and-white TV with a single channel, the news bulletins covered nothing but the landing and the ongoing war next door. Many years after, in 2011, I landed on the island to hold a workshop with young artists in Northern Cyprus. Zehra and Özgül from the European Mediterranean Art Association have invited me. Now, I am no longer the kid of the seventies, neither is Özgül. We are the same age. She told me her story on the previous days. She experienced the landing there in 1974. Being a war kid is something else. Since 1974, the island has been divided into two states. The north part is Turkish and the south part is Greek. A buffer zone separates the capitals, Nicosia and Lefkoşa. During my strolls in the city, near to the border, dead end streets were stopping my way. The key words of our workshop programme with the young Cypriot artists were plurality, multiplicity, serial, accumulative, rhizome. As I gave a talk about these concepts, I learned from them the history and the present situation of their lives. What does it mean to be a young Northern Cypriot Turk and artist? I have to stress that the Northern Cyprus Turkish part is today still unrecognised as a state by the UN. We strolled around the backyard of the city, abandoned buildings and stores where we collected objects and dug into the history. Every nation, every city has a backyard. Sometimes, something hidden in those backyards can reveal lots of meanings to an artist's eye. Archaeology of

modern times? Fifteen days after, a group of eight young artists created an exhibition entitled: *Is this an exhibition?* Then I spent one more day with Zehra and Özgül. They took me first to Bellapais village where Lawrence Durrell had lived and wrote his novel *Bitter Lemons of Cyprus*. It describes the three years he spent on the island of Cyprus. We took a coffee under the "laziness tree" where he passed most of his days not far from his home, today transformed into a little museum. Then we drove our car further north until the end of Karpas Peninsula. There, sometime around sunset, we walked toward the peninsula. We climbed up until a cliff stopped us. Rocks and bits of land side by side, spiking from the sea, sharp stony teeth chiselled through the caress of the oily slow waves smiled. We headed north, south; the same horizon appeared at the far end of the stairs of the UN watchtower.

## Chios, Greece 07.08.2017

I came to the island early in the morning with a ferry. I took a coastal road to Volissos. A small village situated in the northwest of the island. On my way, I stopped once again at a place called Daskalopetra (the stone of the master). This place is supposed to be where Homer told his legends of Iliad and Ulysses. Then Homer disciples were learning those texts by heart. Ion of Chios and Socrates are having a dialogue in Plato's book, *Ion*. The place is a big circular rock as it is in levitation with a half-broken sculpture of Kybele in the centre. All around there are benches for the auditors carved from the same rock. This place is magic. I mean, it is magic for me, being in the place of these old legends told by Homer. The village of Volissos is up in the mountains where I find refuge in my spare time. I live there with a community of artists, writers, designers, architects and wine, honey, olive oil, cheese producers. I have been involved



Famagusta Border (Selim Birsal).

in the cultural life of the village by sharing my knowledge of art and many other things. We believe in our friendship. One day we will make our own school with our understanding of art and life education. This is a narrow path but I believe in it, instead of huge highways. This is Ionia, where philosophical thinking was born long before Socrates. I am an Ionian.

### Famagusta, Northern Cyprus

30.03.2018

This is the second time that I have landed in Cyprus. Famagusta, the biggest harbour city of the south of the island. In its existence, the

city of Famagusta has seen many kingdoms and states pass away. Founded around 274 BC by Ptolemy II Philadelphus. It has been under Byzantium, Genoa, Venice, Ottoman and British rule and, since 1974, the city has been inside the borders of Northern Cyprus Turkish Republic. Nevertheless, Turkish, British, Greek and Cypriot military forces have their bases there. It is a very strange geopolitical situation having all those nations around an abandoned quarter of Famagusta called Varosha. Before 1974, it was the modern tourist area of the city. Its inhabitants fled during the 1974 war. Famagusta city came under Turkish control, and Varosha has remained abandoned

ever since. Only in 2020, some parts have been opened to the public, the beach in summer, but most of the quarter continues to be uninhabited; buildings have decayed, some streets have been overgrown with vegetation; and the quarter is generally described as a ghost town. I had the chance to follow the border by car and took photographs (which is prohibited as it is a military area) of very interesting examples of late Bauhaus or fifties/sixties architecture. In 2011, I led an artistic workshop. This time with more multidisciplinary young creators: designers, architects, writers and visual artists. Our subject was installation art. The first two days were in a classroom, tracing the history of installation art. Then we were in the field in Famagusta. During our stay, we met a history professor who gave us an overview of the history of the city. The space where we worked

for the exhibition was an old thread factory. At the end of the workshop, my ten young creators responded very well to the installation approach, considering the site, the history and their own lives in this city. A site and time specific installation was born. The divergent background of the group probably pushed them to innovate something together. The exhibition was entitled *Installing into Life*.

## Istanbul, Turkey

13.11.2020

Days are shorter. What kind of winter is awaiting all of us? I cannot plan a new trip. The future is uncertain. I have my books to read, my research to do, my art to create, my students to guide. I guess “we must cultivate our garden” for sunny and peaceful days.