



Tomorrow will be the beginning of a new life

by Abir Boukhari

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SYRIA



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When the organisers of Supermarket art fair invited me to write a piece about the AllArtNow space, I was so enthusiastic. I thought it would be wonderful to share with others the story of this place that has inspired us since we opened it in 2008. But when I started to write the article I found it really difficult to explain what it means for us and how much of a big role it has played — at least in our life, as a group.

I wrote many drafts and I was never satisfied. I was always asking myself, do I really have the right to write about the space? Do I really know what AllArtNow meant for the artists or anyone else?

After a month of asking myself these questions, I decided to write about AllArtNow from my own point of view and how I have

considered the space from the beginning, and what I think about it now.

The idea for AllArtNow started in 2005. We were three people — myself, my sister and my brother. One of us an artist, the other someone who adores art and my brother who believed in his two sisters’ concept. We thought that if we believe hard enough in art and work for it, we could perhaps take the first step towards creating a new model for artistic activity.

I started to communicate “virtually” with the world to find opportunities to show Syrian arts outside of the country and my sister started to share the idea with different Syrian artists. Thanks to our first supporters our independent initiative succeeded in presenting its inaugural show.

I have to admit that the first

experience was not at all perfect. It was full of disappointments, however, since that beginning we have learned a huge amount from different situations, different partners, through training, and by observing others working around the world. We believe that we always have to learn more and to keep developing our work.

In 2007 we decided that if we really wanted to make changes on the art scene then we had to do three things: create an audience. Create meeting points for the artists, where they can produce and see artworks and meet artists from different countries. Create an appreciation for contemporary art and a venue with particular focus on it. So it became very clear that we needed an actual physical space.

After much searching we found it, an old Damascene house in the old town, in an area where many artists had bought or were renting studios. The house itself was perfect for collective exhibitions; it had six rooms of different sizes, two courtyards, of which one was big enough to host talks and screenings. We could invite artists for discussions and to gather together people during exhibitions and projects. The house also included two other ‘unsafe’ rooms on the second floor (because they were too derelict) but it would be possible to use them when we were able to restore the building.

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After we purchased the building,

I found out from neighbors that the house was previously a residence for different Palestinian families who had lived there from the 1950s until 2007 when we bought it and turned it into a refuge for our artistic dreams. “Refuge” — I could say that this space has a long history as a refuge — it started with the Palestinian refugees, who lived there, then it became our art refuge in 2008, and it returned to being a domestic refuge in 2012 — this time for Syrian families.

But let me come back to the years from 2008 to 2010 when the space generated a lot of debate, interest and controversy in the art scene — more than we ever expected. Consequently our openings were always full of people, even though we did not have the name AllArtNow on the door.

This was because the space itself was registered as workshop space and not a gallery — officially AllArtNow did not exist, it was only a workshop space. Some people came to visit out of curiosity, some of them admired our work, others to criticize us, some laughed at us for doing art in this ramshackled space, and some of them thought that we were crazy to think that we could create change in the art scene in this way.

I think what really helped us was that the space was unique. It was the only non-profit space that welcomed artists and their creativity who worked with contemporary art, and invited in foreign artists to work, talk, and meet Syrian artists — to discover the art scene in the city.

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others, to see what the rest of the world was doing, to enable artistic processes and production, and to keep our desire for the new alive.

But I have to say that the space was not so acceptable to many of the old Syrian artists and I still remember when one of the professors from the Fine Art school who had heard a lot about the space decided to visit. When he saw the show he was so angry he told me that this was garbage, not art. He then proceeded to insult one of the young artists who was in the exhibition, she was one of his students! He refused to stop or to leave the space until we asked some of our mutual friends to come and they convinced him to leave.

In contrast to this I received a lot of admiration from young artists and young people as we got attention from international partners, organisations and institutions and our network started to grow. We succeeded in organising two international festivals of contemporary art shown in different public venues, built exchanges of artworks, events with different organisations and festivals around the world. We started an exchange residency program, as well as presenting many artistic events, projects and activities at AllArtNow. We even established a new space to create a permanent Artist-in-residence programme (the space was unable to launch because of the



increasing unrest), and finally we organised a programme of informal schooling in contemporary art to help younger Syrian artists fill the gap in their art studies after the 1950s. One of the tasks at the school was that the artists put together two installation exhibitions to help them to start their careers.

However, I have to say that since 2011 I have experienced various difficulties because of the turbulent situation in my home country Syria. Because I believe that art plays a special role and that it has to exist even in the hardest of times, I've

worked to find ways of helping artists continue their practices despite the circumstances. I tried to continue inviting international artists to be in residence with us.

I found a new alternative space, "Maktab: Creative Zone" to use as a space for lectures and discussions as well as a gallery, and I tried to integrate people in the area (it is a commercial and conservative area). I faced a lot of difficulties and hard times at different levels but I kept working to find ways to make and present art until July of 2012, when Haitham (a colleague who was working at AllArtNow) came to me and asked if was possible for him —



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along with his family, his parents and his brothers' families — to stay in AllArtNow as residents, especially, as he pointed out, as we did not have activities during the summer.

In the beginning I tried to explain to him that living in AllArtNow wasn't a good idea; it was a neglected space and it was dangerous even to work in. So how could anyone think about living in this kind of space? There was minute of silence, then he answered with such a sad voice; telling me that they had tried desperately for two months to find a place, they were four families and that renting was so expensive, that they did not have many options,

maybe they would have to stay in their village. This meant that they might die with their children or possibly they would wind up in a refugee camp. Of course it didn't take a long time for me to say yes; of course they could stay at AllArtNow. They were very welcome to use it and whatever they found there.

A lot of people have asked, how could you give away the space, so lightly that you have worked so hard for? People warned me that if these families lose their houses in their village, maybe they are not going to leave the space. How are you going to work? Are you going to ask them to leave or you will stop working?

Of course all these questions were passing through my mind and I was sure that the war was not going to stop any time soon and that I was not going to be able to get back my space in the coming months. But I have to say that during times of war all people suffer and face the idea of loss and death. In war zones people share their pain, they know what loss means and that destiny sometimes is just absurd. In my case, I have to say that at the same time this colleague was asking me to

stay in AllArtNow, I was preparing myself, with my brother who has children, and my sister, to leave our own houses. We were facing almost the same situation.

We took the decision to stay in the artist's residence that was supposed to be launched in 2011 but was postponed because of the war. We decided to be the first residents in the space because of the war.

In August 2012 Haitham moved into AllArtNow, and my sister, my brother's family and I moved to the Boukhari house which is also in the old town.

Haitham is working in my brother's office now and we are always discussing the difficulties of living away from home in a house that was meant to be an exhibition space. Haitham's brothers decided to move away from Syria in order to find work and my sister also decided to leave Syria to study and continue her artistic future. I, my husband, my brother, Haitham and his parents, decided to stay in the country, to help each other and keep the faith that tomorrow will be the beginning of a new life.

