

Performing in a Space Between Art and Life

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Abstract: Artist Bejhat Omer Abdulla remembers his own story of fleeing Iraqi Kurdistan. Through this personal account, Abdulla demonstrates the challenges of crossing national, ethnic and ideological boundaries. This photographic essay begins by pointing to the complexity of the notion of who is a migrant as an abstract notion within academic and policy conversations about migrations. Featuring original art work inspired by his first-hand experience as a migrant, Abdulla's account portrays one migrant's story in great detail, adding nuance and texture to what we know about the experiences of Kurdish migrants to Europe.

Keywords: Kurdish migrants, Kurdish art, Migration, Transnational, Migrant struggles, Iraqi Kurdistan, Intersectionality, Conflict

Introduction

After attending the sixth annual Creative Time Summit in Stockholm, an annual conference that heralds itself as, “an annual convening for thinkers, dreamers, and doers working at the intersection of art and politics,”¹ I feel that migration has almost become a brand or a product and because of its complexity, we are repeatedly looking for ways to define it. The Summit, which was created to present strategies for social change at the intersection of art and social justice, presented a number of praise worthy speeches and works. Some examples include Amar Kanwar's² complex political films about lives lost to industrialization, crime, violence and justice. Saskia Sassen³ presented a critical observation on the economic degradation of the world's cities in late 1980s and early 1990s. Examples also included speakers, like conceptual artist Ahmet Ögut. Ögut's award winning project, *The Silent University*, is a knowledge exchange platform created and run by displaced peoples and forced migrants that, “has involved those that have had a professional life and academic training in their home countries, but are unable to use their skills or professional training due to a variety of reasons related to their status.”⁴ Despite these

¹ “Creative Time Summit X”, CreativeTime.org.

² Amar Kanwar, born in New Delhi, is a social activist and film maker who works, primarily in the documentary style and with archival materials. “Collection Online”, Guggenheim.org.

³ Saskia Sassen, is a Dutch-American sociologist who's writing and research focuses on globalization (including social, economic and political dimensions), immigration, global cities (including cities and terrorism), the new networked technologies, and changes within the liberal state that result from current transnational conditions. “Overview”, saskiasassen.com.

⁴ The Silent University aims to address and reactivate the knowledge of the participants and make the exchange process mutually beneficial by inventing alternative currencies, in place of money or free voluntary service. The Silent University's aim is to challenge the idea of silence as a passive state, and explore its

compelling presentations and not long after the introduction by Nato Thompson, chief curator at Creative Time, the New York based non-profit arts organization who sponsored the Creative Time Summit, I had a sense that this event would also struggle to explain the phenomena of migration and to draw a line around the issues that migrants face – particularly migrants to Europe.



Image 1: “Sarchnar River” by Behjat Omer Abdulla. Photo credit Behjat Omer Abdulla. This image appeared in the 2016 show “From A Distance” at Göteborgs Konsthall Museum, Sweden.

Although “dislocation” was a theme central to this conference, interestingly, there was not much about the experience of the migrant. Not much from real immigrants anyway. This caused me to remember my story, leaving Iraq and migrating through Greece and Turkey. It challenged me to shape that story into an essay related to my art practice. In this context, I think that it is essential to talk about my own story now to complement and add to the messages at the Creative Time Summit, to provide a migrant perspective and an account of how migrant experience has shaped and influenced the art works I produce.

To visualize the story one has to go back in time, to step into an imaginative space with the storyteller. Many of the stories that are told by migrants who make this kind of journey are horrifically similar. There are harsh physical conditions, struggles to cross over the mountains, and companions who stopped to rest in the sub-zero temperatures, freezing to death in their

powerful potential through performance, writing, and group reflection. These explorations attempt to make apparent the systemic failure and the loss of skills and knowledge experienced through the silencing process of people seeking asylum. “The Silent University”, thesilentuniversity.org.

sleep – and then there are the beatings at the hands of border guards. Few migrants reach their destinations on their first attempt. I am not an exception. Barriers to immigration come not only in legal and political form but also natural and social barriers to immigration can be very powerful. Before leaving their homes, migrants must liquidate their assets, often at a large loss, and they suffer for the expense of moving.

I want to tell you the tale of my first attempt to cross the border between Turkey and Greece twenty-one years ago. During that journey, I travelled for three weeks and was then held in jail for about two months. The journey was exhausting and for every hour of that journey, I lived always on the edge of not making it. Day after day, a long line of exhausted walkers, moving, from sunset to sunrise. Walking in the dark with short breaks to have a sip of water, fasten your shoelaces, count everyone in the group and start walking again. This is my story. Part of my story. A story of migration and of art.

The Football Match

The “football match” is what the migrants call being moved from place to place – kicked around like a football. Twenty-one years ago, in November of 1998, in the stillness of a cold, dark and rainy night, on the edge of the Maritsa River, I was deported back to Turkey on a small boat with Greek border guards. I was one migrant in a group of about a hundred people. Many of us had arrived in Greece from Turkey and we had waited there for a month, sometimes two. Most had previously been held in small prisons in different villages and towns in Greece. The deportation day depended on having the right numbers of migrants collected and the right time to travel before everyone would be deported back to their countries. That is why the process could take many months.

I do not want to talk here about how I originally left Istanbul, or how I crossed the border entering Greece, or how I felt when, for the first time, I found myself locked up in a Greek prison. Nor do I want to describe how I spent most of my days there. However, what I do want to say about this is that I did not want to be caught by the Turkish border guards because I had no money to pay for my deportation fees. This is something that you have to pay for, somehow. Whether being beaten up and left in the cold almost naked, or being made to work for it. When you have no money, the Turkish prisons are the last place you would wish to be in.

In the jail in Greece, I had become friends with Salar. He was a car mechanic and a taxi driver in Sulaimani in Kurdistan. We were both from the city of Sulaimani. We were about the same age and had left Turkey together. Now, we were being deported from Greece together in the same boat with another ten people. The night before the deportation, the prisoners were gathered from their various prisons and brought to one central place. Then, during the night, we were taken to the point of deportation by bus. While waiting for the day of departure, we slept on the floor and because of the cold, Salar developed a bad kidney infection.

When we were deported back to Turkey we were told to run, to get away from the border as fast as possible. We knew that if we were caught there we would again be deported back to Greece by the border guards. Likewise, if we were caught in Greece they would deport us back to Turkey. This is what the migrants feared the most, being kicked from place to place like a football. Being trapped in the “football match”.

We ran into the grassland towards the rice fields and then to the cornfield on the other side of the road without knowing which direction we were heading. We were wingless caged creatures that had been set free in the wild, looking for a new nest. However, we were running toward another cage. I could hear people shouting in Arabic, Kurdish, Persian and other languages that I could not understand. They were shouting, “Who knows the fucking way? Which way we should run? Put your head down, not toward the light!” They were cursing life, cursing at each other, at the rain and the cold, the police, and the night. Salar was sick and could not take it anymore. He asked for my help a few times, “I can’t run anymore, my kidney is killing me. I can’t do this.”

We finally stopped in a place. There were a few other Kurdish guys there. One of them suggested that the night would be a long and he pointed to the lights of a village in the distance and told Salar that he should go toward the village. I knew that Salar could not make it on his own, so I said that I would go with him. One of the Kurdish guys gave us two cigarettes, lit them, and said, “I have been this way many times before. Walk to the village and ask for help there.” We smoked the cigarettes and watched the others disappear into the dark like ghosts. Sometimes, no matter how hard you try, you have to risk your life and walk towards danger in order to live.

The cold did not let us to rest for very long. I put Salar’s arm across my shoulders and we started moving toward the village, toward the sound of dogs barking. Salar broke the silence and said, “I want to be deported back home, this is nonsense! I never thought I would be so fragile and hopeless. If those dogs let me, I want to go home.” I told him that I loved dogs but was very scared of them. Salar replied, “Those dogs can’t understand us!” “I don’t mind the police”, I said, “but if those dogs come towards us you better run for your life.” We smoked the last few puffs of the cigarettes and the smoke blew over to the lights of the village. We were getting closer to entering it. One thing we were sure about was that we needed to find someone and ask them to ring the police for us to tell them that we were coming from Istanbul and were trying to cross the border into Greece. We had no money because the agent had left us with none. I could show my fake ID card and maybe because Salar was not well we would not have to pay the deportation fees.

The Golden Door of Meriç Village

Not long after entering the village of Meriç we saw a coffee shop. Steamed up windows made seeing inside the shop difficult. Before we opened the door to the coffee shop I told Salar to make himself look very ill and not to answer any questions. I pushed the door open and we walked in. Inside the shop were mostly elderly men, drinking tea and playing games - dominos, cards, and *Tawla*.⁵ Gradually the sight of two strangers interrupted their conversations. We were strangers with backpacks, covered with soil up to our knees, soaked by the rain. We had long hair, long beards, and were holding one another up. It was obvious to them that there was something serious going on with us. I guess we were not the first ones to appear there in the middle of the night and they seemed to know our story well.

The shop was warm. People were smoking and the radio was on. We were called over

⁵ *Tawla*, also known as backgammon is a popular board game played in the Middle East.



Image 2: “Head of a Child” by Behjat Omer Abdulla. Photo credit Behjat Omer Abdulla. This image appeared in the 2016 show “From A Distance” at Göteborgs Konsthall Museum, Sweden.

by some people near the fireplace to come in and sit by the fire. There were free spaces so we walked in and greeted the group of men, “Assalamu alaikum”, peace on you. Our tired voices did not even reach half of the room. The same guy who called us over replied, “Alaikuma salam”, and asked for two chai (tea) for us. The chai arrived quickly. “Get warm,” he said while he was smoking his rolled cigarette.

I could feel the heat passing through my skin into my bones. The taste of the chai stirred up memories that I did not want to think about at that moment. Soon after we finished our chai we were offered another one. We talked and I answered their questions as best I could in my

broken Turkish:

Man: “Where do you come from?”

Me: “We are from Iran.”

Man: “What is wrong with your friend?”

Me: “He is in pain. He has a twisted ankle and a very bad kidney infection.”

Man: “What did you guys used to do back home?”

Me: “My friend is a car mechanic and I am an artist.”

Man: “You are *rassam*!!”

Me: “Yes, I am *rassam*. I do paintings and drawings.”

Salar: “Show them your photos!”

Me: “This is some of my work.”



Image 3: Photo credit Behjat Omer Abdulla. This image is a collection of photos of my work that I showed the people in the tea shop that day.

Salar saw the curiosity in the man’s eyes and encouraged me to show him the photos of my work. I took the photos of my art out of my backpack. The man carefully went through the photos one by one and handed them to the guy next to him. The photos were scanned by everyone in the shop and were then were given back to me. The attitude in the room changed to a very welcoming atmosphere! The men continued their questions and asked how we had ended up there. Sticking to my cover story I said that we had left Istanbul a few days ago with a group

and that we had tried to cross the border to Greece. The man asked us about what happened to the group. I told them that they had crossed the border but that we could not cross because my friend got very ill and was not able to make the journey. I went on to explain that we were left with no money and that we saw the lights of the village from a distance and had come here for help. A guy working in the coffee shop found a small, old blanket and put it over Salar's shoulders, telling him that, "This will keep you warm, take it."

Inextricable Situation

Salar and I both kept looking towards where one of the more important men in the shop had gone out. We could see his shadow through the window, but it was hard to see what he was up to. I wondered how many like us had been here before, going through the same shit. "They must be sick of this", Salar whispered. "I wonder how we will pay the deportation fees", I responded, "You are not well. I believe I have to pay for both of us." I smiled. He didn't find that funny. We both kept one eye on the entrance. Not many people left the shop. They remained, curiously looking, continuing to play their games and staying on to see how the night's drama was going to end. By that time, we were almost entirely dry. So far so good. We had made it through the fields, found this shop, had tea, had gotten warm, met the main man in the village, and had been given a free blanket.

The important guy came back and told us that the border guards were on their way to the shop. "They will be here very soon, this issue is nothing to do with police. They are the ones dealing with you. I told them what you told me. They will take you to the Karakola." He kept looking at the door and not long after, the border guards appeared. We stood up. I picked up my bag and walked toward door. They held the door for Salar to walk out. Outside the front door there was a military pickup truck parked in the direction we had come from and four soldiers wrapped up against the cold. They were well armed and pointed their guns directly at us. Their captain was well dressed and armed with a hand gun. The Captain told one soldier to take Salar to the pickup. One of the soldiers approached, took Salar's left arm and directed him towards the truck. The Captain came to me and looked right into my eyes. "Search his bag", he said. He asked which direction we had come from and I pointed to the opposite direction we had come from, away from where I knew the others had run.

They searched my bag and found a small knife. The Captain grabbed the knife and asked, "What is this for?" I told him, "It is for food". "Is it for food," he asked, "or shall I stick it to your stomach?" I didn't say anything. Next the soldiers handed the Captain my photos. He looked at me again and asked, "This is your photos?" "Yes, it's mine", I answered. They gave me back my bag, took the knife, and all of us got into the pickup. The Captain asked the driver to drive in the direction I had said we had come from. Two of the soldiers sat in the back of the pickup. Me, Salar and two soldiers sat behind the driver. One soldier sat in between us, and the Captain sat in the front with the driver. We left the coffee shop, passed some trees, and then turned left into the total darkness. On and off the Captain asked the other two soldiers in the back of the car if they saw anything, but they had no luck. We were in the truck for about five minutes. The Captain asked the driver to stop and he left the car carrying a big flashlight. He walked a few meters, looking from left to right for the trace of footprints in the mud. He couldn't

find any. We could see all his movement through the car window like watching television.

The Captain turned back towards the truck and told me to get out. I got out and walked with him to the front of the car. He stood in front of me and took his gun out. He cocked the gun, put it to my head, and said that he was going to shoot me right here. I asked him what for. “I can’t find any footprints”, he said, “You are lying to me!” He went back to the truck and told one of the soldiers to come over. This soldier was also Kurdish, but from Turkey and speaking Kurmanji.⁶ He told the soldier to explain to me that he was going to shoot me in the head if I did not tell the truth about which direction we had come from. The soldier started to explain this to me in Kurmanji. He said, “Tell him the truth, you are in trouble here and he is going to shoot you if you don’t tell him the truth”. The Captain pointed the flashlight right in to my face. “Do you want to talk”, he demanded. “Or shall I go ahead and shoot you?” I replied, “I am right in front of you. You have the power to do anything you want. I came to the village, carrying my friend, walking toward the light, and I didn’t know where I was.” Without saying anything the Captain fired the gun towards the sky, turned off the flashlight, and walked back to the car.

When I came back to the truck Salar was in shock and crying. “Thank God this is over! It looked horrible from here!” It felt awful too. “I feel sick”, I told him. The Captain screamed at us, “Shush, you are not allowed to talk to each other”. The soldiers reacted in a similar way, “Shush, no talking anymore”. After this my brain could not generate any more thoughts. I could not record any more images of where we were and where we were going. Completely frozen, I lost all sense of life. I had just stood very near to death, heard my heart beating very loudly, to the point of exploding my head. I just had to take in all that had happened to me. I could not see or hear anything anymore. Like a broken camera no longer able to function, I was in shock.

An Artist’s Best Spoken Word is His Work

The truck finally stopped and the engine was turned off. We were parked outside a gray looking building after passing through a gate or two to get there. We stepped out of the truck and went through the double doors. In the hallway next to us was a stairway leading to the second floor of the building. The soldiers started looking through my bag again. Without letting the Captain see, one of them grabbed a music cassette I had and placed it in his pocket. The cassette was by the Kurdish-Turkish singer Mahsun Kırmızıgül. I had no power to stop him doing this. I think he took it because he could not find anything else useful or any money.

Soldier: “What is your name?”

Me: “Mehran Salahy.”

Soldier: “Where from?”

Me: “From Iran, the Kurdish area.”

Before finishing the search, the Captain told them to stop and he left to go up to the second floor. I put my stuff back in to my bag and they left us to stand in the hallway by the stairs,

⁶ Kurmanji one of the four major Kurdish dialects. It is spoken predominantly in southeast Turkey, northwest and northeast Iran, some parts of northern Iraq and northern Syria.

alone. Salar said, "This is a strange place here!" "Strange things may happen here," I replied. A few minutes later one of the soldiers shouted down from the second floor. "Rasam!" (artist). Coming halfway down the stairs, he pointed at me and said, "The Captain is calling for you. Come up". I thought to myself, "Not you again Captain." Salar whispered to me, "Fuck! It's time to pay the fees". The soldier walked with me to the Captain's office, knocked on the door respectfully and pushed the door open to let me in.

The Captain was seated behind a table that held a Turkish flag, a telephone and a plate with his name displayed on it. He told me to sit on the settee opposite him. I sat down.

Captain: "You're an artist right?"

Me: "Yes."

Captain: "You made the works in the photos?"

Me: "Yes, they are my work."

Captain: "Can you draw my face?"

Me: "Of course I can."

Captain: "What you need to do that?"

Me: "I need food. My hands are shaky. And maybe some for my friend too? He is not well."

The Captain shouted for the soldier. "Askar!" he shouted and the soldier entered. The Captain told him to find some food for us. "Yes sir", Askar replied.

Captain: "What else do you need to draw my portrait?"

Me: "I have a pencil so just need some paper. Can I use that desk next to you? I need to use a table."

Captain: "No. That is another Captains place. Yeah, okay sit on my chair!"

A few minutes later the soldier Askar came back with a sandwich and tea. He was shocked to see that I had swapped places with his Captain and was sitting in his chair, having a good time, drawing. I ate the egg and tomato sandwich, drank the cup of tea and carried on drawing. I got the sense that the Captain was more worried that the symbols, stars and half-moon on his shoulder showed up in the drawing than that a Kurdish artist had taken over his desk.

Halfway through making the drawing Asker politely knocked on the door. He came in and told the Captain that they found the others. The Captain walked out and I followed them. Down the stairs we went. First Asker, then the Captain, and behind them, the Rasam. Salar stared at me. He could never have imagined what was going on. He could never put that puzzle together. Why on earth had a soldier brought a sandwich and tea for him soon after I went upstairs? The whole situation had changed. I looked at Salar and he looked super happy. Not because the others had been caught, but because what he had witnessed in this Turkish prison was unreal.

The soldiers had managed to capture about half of the other migrants. It took a while for the soldiers to search them, register their names, and collect their fees. After that they were



Image 4: “Sea” by Behjat Omer Abdulla. Photo credit Behjat Omer Abdulla. This image appeared in the 2016 show “From A Distance” at Göteborgs Konsthall Museum, Sweden.

all taken to the cellar, including Salar. Down there, there was a big fireplace burning coals to provide heat for the four floors of the building. I went back upstairs to finish the drawing. I showed it to Captain. He was happy and I was happy too. Later, I joined the group downstairs. Salar burst out, “Ask for an assistant! I will hold your pencils for you!” We all laughed. It had been a long night for all of us and it did not take us long to fall into a deep sleep.

The next day started early for all of us. The soldiers took us out to the garden. There was a lengthy queue for the only toilet in the yard and the soldiers were looking for jobs for us to do. One of them told me to take a container full of coal downstairs to the basement. I was surprised when another soldier stopped him. “Don’t ask him! He is the artist!” I thought to myself, “Am I still asleep or is it real?” Around eight o’clock in the morning, two buses arrived and waited outside the main gate. A soldier with the registration list shouted peoples’ names and they were taken to the bus. There was a new Captain, one for the day shift, and he was a very different person. Everyone in the yard obeyed his orders. We were all queuing for our names to be read out when the Captain shouted out, “Rasam! Where is the Rasam?” One of the soldiers from last night spotted me, separated me from the rest and told me that I was staying with them, not going with the others. The other migrants all left, except for me and another guy from Kirkuk who spoke Turkish fluently. Later, I asked the interpreter why he was kept. He said that a few days ago someone had drowned in the Meriç River and that he was going to go with the

body and the family to translate. That morning was the last time I saw my friend Salar. I have not had any news from him since then. I wonder how often he thinks of what we went through together that night. Soon after the buses left, the interpreter was transported as well and I was on my own in the cellar.

I spent the next five weeks making hundreds of drawings, and using a kitchen table in the main hall to work on. I restored the various signs and made new designs for what was painted on the walls. I found a way to use my drawings as currency to exchange them for food and drink. I drew almost every soldier in the garrison. Not just the soldiers but also their wives, secret girlfriends, children, dogs, and even their guns. I became friends with most of the soldiers



Image 5: "Monument" by Behjat Omer Abdulla. Photo credit Behjat Omer Abdulla. This image appeared in the 2016 show "From A Distance" at Göteborgs Konsthall Museum, Sweden.

there and they would come down to the cellar at night to sing and dance until late. One of them, called Fatih, became a very good friend. He used to tell me lots of secrets about who was who and what the personalities of some of the soldiers were. Once he mentioned that not long ago there had been another very good artist held in the cellar. He said that the artist's name was Dlawer and that he was also Kurdish from Iran. On my first day in the cellar, reading through what had been written on the wall, I had seen Dlawer's note saying that he had been there.

Time passed by and the snow came. I spent New Year's Eve, 1999 there and then more than half of Ramadan. I joined their football team. I finally took a shower and had a new haircut. The Rasam had first place in the queues. I had my own portions of breakfast lunch and dinner. I also finally had the power to get my Mahsun Kırmızıgül cassette back! Some of the soldiers promised to visit me in Tehran when they had finished their duty. I met some of the Captains' wives and family who came to meet me, the Rasam. I made enough money to make a phone call to some friends in Istanbul to let them know that I was still alive. I paid for my fees and was taken to the main city of Edirne in the Captain's car. The soldiers also paid for my travel expenses for the three hour trip to Istanbul and money enough to pay for a taxi from the station to the Güngören area where I had started my journey two months previously. A few days after going back to Istanbul it was the celebration of Eid-al-Fitr, the celebrations at the end of Ramadan. After breakfast with some friends, I took the bus to town to celebrate. I got out of the bus and was enjoying the sense of freedom. However, it was not going to last long. I was immediately caught again, this time by the Police.

This is my story. It is unique to me, but also common to many others. The suffering, exhaustion, abuse, and fear experienced by migrants are the things that are not often spoken about at conferences like Creative Time Summit. But each migrant's story contains the same suffering, exhaustion, abuse, and fear. In my story, it was art that helped me survive and it was art that saved my life. Art transgresses. It crosses over and breaks down borders. Being an artist allows me to connect to people in a way that allows them to forget, for a time, the rules and regulations that constrict them and the society they live in. Being an artist allows me to give them something back.

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