

TIMEZONES GAZA **TRANSCRIPT**

When Beyond the Norm Becomes the Norm

A Podcast by Alia Rayyan and Alaa Barghouthi

[0:28] **Alia Rayyan**

This is a slightly different journey that will take you to the Gaza Strip, a territory that is 41 kilometers long, from 6 to 12 kilometers wide, on the Mediterranean Sea, a coastal city, a city that everyone knows from the news.

Gaza is not a place that is easy to discover, sealed since 2007, where only employees of international organizations enter for short-term visits that look like expeditions to a no man's land. The first and last time I was in Gaza was in the early 1990s, when it was still somehow possible for us to travel there.

Today, if we as Palestinian artists want to meet, talk, or work beyond border lines drawn around us, we have to choose the digital way – getting a permit to enter Gaza is nearly impossible.

[1:37] **Alia Rayyan**

Creating this episode reflects our reality in digitally being together as a people – a production of Palestinian artists, musicians and writers across multiple places and countries.

We were sending questions to each other and recorded them wherever we were at that specific moment, continuing a conversation in our heads. Questions around what it means to be an artist in Gaza, how we work despite the challenges, how we explain that, and what we connect with place. It's a collection of thoughts. Gathered around our experience of a joint group exhibition that was presented in Gaza in November 2021, the following voices of Rehaf Batniji, Salman Nawati, and Mahmoud Al Shaer capture a glimpse of being despite all odds.

[2:59] **Salman Nawati**

I'm Salman Al Nawati	أنا سلمان النواتي.
I draw my inspiration from my daily life and from a number of events and situations I am exposed to.	أستمد إلهامي من حياتي اليومية، ومن كم الأحداث والمواقف التي أتعرض لها.
All my ideas start with things and details that revolve around my personal life.	تبدأ كل الأفكار من أشياء وتفاصيل تتمحور حول حياتي الشخصية.
And my artistic projects are a translation and embodiment of these ideas that relate in one way or another to my personal.	وتكون مشاريعي الفنية ترجمة وتجسيدا لهذه الأفكار التي تتعلق بشكل أو بآخر بقناعاتي الفردية وتجربتي الشخصية وعلاقتي بكل شيء يحيط بي.

beliefs, experiences, and relationships with everything that surrounds me.	
«To be an artist» means to be everything and nothing at the same time.	"أن تكون فناناً" يعني أن تكون كل شيء ولا شيء في الوقت نفسه.
Art makes you feel that you are, in certain situations with certain people, the most important thing in the universe.	يجعلك الفن تشعر بأنك أهم شيء في الكون في لحظات معينة وفي مواقف معينة ومع أشخاص بعينهم.
And in other moments, you feel that you are nothing and everything you did doesn't count for these people, or to you, or to the place in which you were born.	وفي لحظات أخرى تشعر أنك لا شيء وأن كل ما تقوم به لا يساوي شيئاً عند هؤلاء الأشخاص ولا عندك ولا بالنسبة للمكان الذي وُلدت فيه أو اللحظة التي وُلدت فيها.
It is a contradictory feeling; You are everything and nothing.	فهو شعور متناقض في اللحظة نفسها؛ أنك كل شيء ولا شيء.

[5:10] Salman Nawati

It is difficult to live only as an artist.	من الصعب أن يعيش الإنسان بوصفه فناناً فقط.
It is not possible until after a period of fame and experience and after gaining sufficient credibility that he can live and secure his daily life.	فلا يمكن ذلك إلا بعد فترة من الشهرة ومن الخبرة وبعد أن يكون لديه رصيد كافٍ يسمح له بالعيش وبتأمين قوت يومه وحياته، مثلما يقولون.
It is not easy to be a Palestinian and an artist at the same time because that involves a double responsibility, the responsibility towards your artistic being and the responsibility you have towards the cause, your people.	ليس من السهل أن تكون فلسطينياً وفناناً في الوقت نفسه، لأن هذا يُحمِّلُكَ مسؤولية كبيرة، مسؤولية كفنان ومسؤولية وطنية.
But this is another topic and a long topic which needs much more time to explain and would include details and a lot of different experiences from others.	وهذا موضوع يطول شرحه ويتضمن تفاصيل وتجربة تختلف من فنان لآخر.
And in a nutshell, that's it.	هذا كل شيء.

[7:56] Rehaf Al Batniji

[Arabic transcript missing]

My name is Rehaf Al Batniji, a photographer from Gaza. I have been involved in photography for more than 10 years.

My last experience at the *Geographies of a Divine Place* group exhibition was in painting.¹ It was the first time to share my paintings. Painting has always been my way of expressing my feelings privately, although sometimes it has also been a way of teaching myself and practicing patience.

¹ *Geographies of a Divine Place* is the title of a group exhibition (November 27–December 2, 2021) featuring the works of the artists who participated in the eight-month educational program «After the Turn», a course on representation and knowledge transmission beyond the canons of academic art practice and discourse, curated by Mona Kriegler and Alia Rayyan. The exhibition was jointly realized by the artists and is connected to the second round of the program at the Al Ghoussein Cultural House, the newly renovated historic building in the middle of the destroyed city of Gaza that the Goethe-Institut has recently transformed into a free cultural center.

[9:18] **Rehaf Al Batniji**

[Arabic transcript missing]

These sketches were made during the last attack on Gaza, when I had no other choice. The black pencil and my notebook were the only way I could translate the sounds, the fear, and the thoughts I had into sketches. Later I discovered that they resembled the thoughts and realities of families who have lost their children or parents.

[10:44] **Rehaf Al Batniji**

[Arabic transcript missing]

This was my first attempt to share my paintings with others and it will not be my last. Usually, painting was an escape, but this time it was a way to heal from everything around me.

During the attack, you are no longer in control of anything, even the things you own, even your own body now belongs to the occupation and violence. One thing that bothered me a lot is that even when you sleep, your ears are still on. So I think all these sounds were translated in my sketches into something more traceable.

[12:18] **Rehaf Al Batniji**

The influence of the location gives us sometimes power to produce and pushes our determination.	في بعض الأحيان يكون تأثير الموقع هو المسؤول عن منح قوة كبيرة جدا للإنتاج وللإصرار على الإنتاج.
This has to do with how we dissociate ourselves or how we decide to read reality in our way, and get the work we need done.	لأن هذا يرتبط بكيفية نقرر أن ننأى بأنفسنا أو كيف نقرر أن نقرأ الواقع بطريقتنا، وننجز العمل الذي نحتاج إليه.
I imagine Gaza as a burning place.	لذلك أتخيل أن غزة مكان مشتعل.
Under normal circumstances, it's not easy for any artist in the world to be in this place that is always on a hot stove top, even food has to cool a little bit to be eatable, but we, we are here on a hotplate all the time.	وفي الظروف العادية ليس سهلا على أي فنان في العالم بأكمله أن يكون داخل هذا المكان الذي دائما ما يكون فوق صفيح ساخن. حتى الطعام يحتاج إلى أن يبرد قليلا كي نتمكن من تناوله، لكننا هنا فوق صفيح ساخن طول الوقت.
I think I have found my own way of dealing with living in this somewhat difficult area.	لكنني أعتقد أن لدي طريقي في التعامل مع وجودي بهذه المنطقة التي تتسم بصعوبة العيش فيها إلى حد ما.

[13:51] **Rehaf Al Batniji**

My inspiration for projects comes from observing, because most of the projects I work on are in public areas and spaces, so it's like studying the shape of these spaces or the changes that occur in them.	ينبع إدراكي للمشاريع من المتابعة. لأن أغلب المشاريع التي أعمل عليها تكون في المساحات والفضاءات العامة، لذلك فهي - إلى حد ما - تشبه دراسة شكل هذه المساحات أو التغيرات التي تحدث فيها.
Sometimes the projects are like research, it starts in one place and then ends up in a completely different place.	لذلك أحيانا ما تكون بحثية، وتنطلق من مكان ثم تنتهي في مكان مختلف تماما. وتأخذ سياقات وتركيبات أخرى.
It takes other contexts and combinations, sometimes it is built from only one scene and the entire project is completed in one hour.	وأحيانا تُبنى من مشهد واحد فقط. فيتم إنجاز المشروع بأكمله في ساعة واحدة.

Sometimes the project takes more than seven or eight months, but I've been working on my last project for seven years.	وأحيانا يستغرق المشروع أكثر من سبعة أو ثمانية شهور. لكنني أعمل على مشروعي الأخير منذ سبعة سنوات.
This is how my projects are done.	هذا هو الشكل الذي تُبنى به مشاريعي.
My limitation in working is that the tools I need are not always available – to some extent.	تتمثل القيود التي تواجهني في العمل في أن الأدوات التي أحتاجها لا تكون متاحة دائما – إلى حد ما.
Most importantly, the photo must be printed at the end so that it becomes available to people just as it was when it was taken.	والأهم من ذلك هو أنه لا بد من طباعة الصورة في النهاية، كي تصبح صورة وتصبح متاحة للناس مثلما كانت وقت التقاطها.
This aspect is very weak in Gaza and does not receive the attention it needs.	هذا الجانب ضعيف جدا في غزة – إلى حد ما – ولا يلقى الاهتمام الذي يحتاجه على نحو مناسب.
Most of my photos that I print, I print to work on them in a collage style, and the quality of the printed photos is not very good.	أغلب صوري التي أطبعها، أقوم بطباعتها كي أعمل عليها بأسلوب الكولاج (collage)، ولا تكون دقة الصورة جيدة جدا.

[16:13] **Rehaf Al Batniji**

The street is what inspires me most in life.	الشارع هو أكثر شيء يُلهمني في الحياة.
I love the street and – without deciding whether I want to produce a photographic work or not – I love being on the street, and I love observing people's movements, colors, sounds, and every rapid change as they extend my ideas and take me to whole new ones.	أحب الشارع وأحب – دون أن أقرر ما إن كنت أرغب في إنتاج عمل فوتوجرافي أم لا – وجودي في الشارع، وأحب مراقبة حركات الناس والألوان والأصوات والتغيرات شديدة السرعة، فهي تعطيني مساحة واسعة داخل الفكرة وتأخذني إلى أفكار لم تخطر على بالي من قبل.
As for the question «What does it mean to be an artist?»: to be honest, I do not have a specific answer to this question, because I am not an artist by chance and also, I do not intend to be an artist.	بالنسبة لسؤال "ماذا يعني أن أكون فنانا؟"، في الحقيقة ليس عندي جواب محدد لهذا السؤال، لأنني لست فنانة بمحض الصدفة وأيضا لا أتعمد أن أكون فنانة.
I choose the picture because it is the only window through which I view the world, and it is the window through which the world looks out on me.	أنا أختار الصورة لأنها النافذة الوحيدة التي أطل منها على العالم، وهي النافذة التي يُطل منها العالم عليّ.
And this is important, because it shapes the reality around me more specifically and makes it always available in some way and gives it some meaning.	وهذا أمر مهم، لأنه يصيغ الواقع حولي على نحو أكثر تحديدا ويجعله متاحا دائما بطريقة ما، ويمنحه بعض القوة.

[19:51] **Mahmoud Al Shaer**

[Arabic transcript missing]

When I think about what inspires me as an artist and what it means to be an artist in a place like Gaza, I have to start with the pressure and the feeling of being stuck as a human being and the point of finding my way to deal with this situation that involves conflict, rupture, loss, and above all annexation.

There is also a determination that drives and inspires me – the determination to stand up against this fundamental oppression and live in spite of this siege, as Majdal Nateel once described it. My friend and colleague.

[20:47] **Mahmoud Al Shaer**

[Arabic transcript missing]

An art project begins with the text. I am a writer and so I define my creativity through the text that is produced. This kind of creative production reflects what makes us as human beings, what is on our positive side – and emphasizing that we exist.

[21:38] **Mahmoud Al Shaer**

[Arabic transcript missing]

We face many restrictions and challenges as artists living in Gaza – the occupation and siege create, I may say so, kind of an endless circle of oppression, affecting all areas of your life – that starts within your own four walls, goes into your family, into society and goes up to the government. It is mirrored in the travel ban and the lack of educational opportunities that restrict your development and growth, as it prevents you from exploring beyond an imprisoned place.

[22:47] **Mahmoud Al Shaer**

[Arabic transcript missing]

Thinking about the restrictions in Gaza for an artist is not something you like to do – I don't want to do it – because it makes me think about the points that hinder me in my life as an artist. When we talk about the situation, we talk about continuous restrictions and not about inspiration. So it is kind of the opposite of what we should talk about or think about as artists. So, if you are an artist, you need to ignore these limitations in order to continue and to survive. If you reflect too much on it – you lose yourself.

[23:32] **Mahmoud Al Shaer**

[Arabic transcript missing]

Collaborating with other artists gave me a different perspective in this time and situation. Witnessing the creative process of others, being part of their development, discussion and production process left a mark and enriched me. For the first time, I had the feeling that I was part of something that was realized for our own society and not under the limelight of an international NGO. This was a precious moment shared with the others – finally hearing our voices raised.