



I asked Omar Berakdar for a caption and also the cat's name. He replied "I guess this is 'Detective', a very curious cat, we still have her at ARTHERE, she was born in ARTHERE" – Omar Berakdar posed with Detective the ARTHERE art cafe's cat in Istanbul.

Launching our Skype chat Omar Berakdar explains where the distant din of sound is coming from "yeah, this is downstairs, the cafe, everybody is downstairs." Talking to me from Turkey using the admin computer at [ARTHERE](#), an art-cafe meet-up space which he co-initiated. "This [is] mainly a space for connecting, and mainly for creativity".

Omar is a trained chemist and practicing photographic artist and activist who departed Syria with his wife for Istanbul in 2012 in reaction to escalating conflict between pro-democracy rebels and government sympathizers. From his role as an artist and activist but also as a human being, he's in constant search of, what he illustrates abstractly as, 'home'.

one year passed and I started to realize okay, so at the beginning our concentration was just to help other refugees doing workshops, going to do teaching, doing whatever activity I can do; then after, ok, we understood we are [going to be] here for a longer period

Slight hesitation seems to break through Omar's sharply optimistic observations and reflections; try to imagine, if you will, fending off the grouchy gremlin, you know, the one which attempt dragging you down, for our submission to admit victim status! Defiant, he's anything but a victim, Omar is a resolute problem solver. He knows they have no choice but to be optimistic, "it's the worst thing having a war, we know throughout history that this thing doesn't last."

Omar ARTHERE

Weathering this cerebrally contemplative battle between a tugging maternal urge to see Syria again, coupled with an uncertain future, makes optimism the prevailing state of being for taking stock of the situation, “it’s happened and that’s it. It’s a fact. And we are beyond that”.

for now it’s a balance of the best we can have, the best we can do... and we already started to establish something here. We started to make links, we started to learn, started to build... as we say... we have an art center... and there’s a need for here

I asked Omar to share with me which of his fundamental personal traits have excelled since setting-up ARTHERE, but also the one’s he’s managed to preserve intact?

‘Fun!’ Omar quips; though not of the parks and recreation kind! More so, that in Syria the human right of freedom of expression can lead to being systematically arrested with the threat of imprisonment, so it’s a kind of serious fun, you might say.



Omar captioned this image as – Beirut, during a photographic project with the [Meppi.me](https://meppi.me) project (Middle East Photograph Preservation Initiative – of which he works with and which also informs his artwork activism. I asked Omar also about the object he’s clutching in his right hand: “I guess it’s ‘Fishermen’s friends’ the famous mint tablets, I love them, especially ‘Reglisse’ flavour.”

Talking of being in control, I ask: “Do you feel like you lost control of the direction of your career and social life... after leaving Damascus?” Unfazed and in sharp response he gives this brilliantly simple explanation in terms of the Syrian situation:

Omar ARTHERE

it's not like we lost control, we didn't have it in the first place... in Syria you need to be super flexible, you need to find a way around the system, the surveillance, the regime, the control... multitasking... not to be direct, not say what you think. Having a program for empowerment, for education of Syrian artists we can maybe build a better atmosphere to answer this bankruptcy in political systems

Despite this reality check, he says "I have no time for politics," its continual disappointments; but does follow the headlines. You see, "you can't avoid it, but like, it's not solving a problem like this... thinking of human beings as a kind of card to exchange as part of a game." He's sure that politicians need to be totally direct and halt negotiating for others who is killing or bombing.

I thank Omar for his time, we've spent around 25 minutes together, and he reaches out "whenever you want we're here, referring to himself and team member Saliha, Gülsün and Claire" I ask: "What are you going to do now, Omar?"

Lots of things... I need to cook!, I'm preparing a quiche, it's my responsibility, this is the [other] fun thing. Everybody is involved in cooking at the cafe, so it's like a kind of meditation. We all show our muscles in nice cooking. It's always a nice way to relax and meditate.