

In December 2010 Unni Gjertsen took part in the nomadic art festival the Eternal Tour ([www.eternaltour.org](http://www.eternaltour.org)) in Jerusalem and Ramallah together with Liv Strand. Their contribution to the festival was a presentation of *The Armenia Project*, a work still in progress involving individual works of art based on their research trip to Armenia.

## Diary – Seven Days in Jerusalem

### Saturday 4 December 2010

It was freezing cold when I stepped out onto the streets of Oslo to catch the airport bus at four in the morning; it was snowing and minus 14 degrees. The journey to Jerusalem went smoothly. The check-in at Oslo Airport was quick, and inside the aircraft I moved two seats forward to escape the stench of an un-showered man accompanied by two barrel-chested mates, and I slept until Vienna where the airport staff were cheerful and cooperative in anticipation of the upcoming holidays. Spinach rolls interrupted the world of Toni Morrison on the next leg, and during the meal I engaged in conversation with a Swiss heart specialist on his way to a conference in Tel Aviv. He seemed very much in love with his wife, who sat on the opposite row of seats, and appeared a little guilty for losing himself in a three-hour conversation with a stranger.

How did we come to talk about a small wooden church with onion domes standing alone on the snow-covered steppes of the Ukraine? It must have been the winter weather combined with the documentary I had just seen about Russian fourteenth-century architecture. Isolation. Icon paintings. Tiny things, laboriously crafted. The more recent glories of St. Petersburg seemed pompously kitsch—like Disneyland—by comparison. The topic of our upcoming

presentation of the *Armenia Project* in Ramallah also surfaced. Armenia with its imagery of historic Orthodox Christianity, small churches in pastoral landscapes. Liv has been in Jerusalem for three days already, and has reported on her exploration of the Armenian quarters via Skype.

Landing at Ben Gurion Airport was a relief. I had not been aware of the organisational burden of leaving winter and, in anticipation of arriving in the Eastern Mediterranean dry season, I had only half-heartedly tried to imagine the sartorial needs of this year's extended warm weather. Ten months without rain in the region. It had been Israel when I last visited my in-laws in Kfar Saba. This trip was to Palestine. Where would it begin?

I rolled my suitcase to the bathroom to change into a T-shirt and sandals, then to the cash machine in the spacious, empty terminal hall to withdraw shekels. Outside, in the mild afternoon sun, people were leaning on the railings by the Sherut stop, opening water bottles and smoking, while the drivers directed newcomers to the right queue, helping them with their luggage, and boiled the kettle on a primus in the back of the small bus, while waiting for the vehicle to fill up.

I got inside and waited in my seat, overhearing a conversation taking place outside. A young man, boyish, pale with dark curls, and dressed in a leather jacket with a shabby shoulder bag hanging across his stomach, had just arrived from Berlin. He addressed an older gentleman in an earnest manner. *Oh Berlin, I have been in Berlin seven times*, the older man boasted.

We started to move. How weird and how exotic and exhilarating it felt to gaze out at this territory, so frequently televised. A war journalist must get so blasé; it is the effect of being in transit, being in the air, on the road.

The barbed wire fences encircling the vast airport area, which conjured the shameful new wall, excited the somewhat anxious disposition of the young man, who was now sharing his seat with the old man. He asked whether the old man felt unsafe living here. His companion did not understand the question and went on about his three-month journey to Brazil instead. The young man was curious about the older man's past. Apparently he had worked in the former Soviet Union Department for Education before emigrating. The young man was impressed.

I studied the pines and the olive trees along the roadside. At least one fifth of them seemed dead, not only dry. We moved through the deserted hillsides, leaving the coastline behind, and soon started climbing up the narrow pass to Jerusalem. It was pictured on the first printed shekels, symbolising expectation and promise.

The young man's ancestors came from Poland. The old man shared his expertise generously, even on this subject, before suggesting a plan for the night. Could they get together? No, the young man was going to meet some friends. Could he be so kind as to call on him after dinner? The old man started to insist. *Please!* But by now the disembarking had begun. The first passengers were dropped off on the western hillside of Jerusalem. The young man got off at one of the large hotels, and the old man turned to the couple behind him. *From the States? Oh, I have been in New York seven times.*

The driver was eager to get me off at the last stop. He attempted a short-cut up from Jaffa Road and accelerated, irrationally, towards a highly visible concrete roadblock, then, somehow, he patiently reversed the bus, to drive around the quarter and approach the entrance of the Jerusalem Inn.

Liv shouted from the balcony above: *we have to hurry to an appointment with a woman from the Armenian community.*

We were originally supposed to stay with the other Eternal Tour participants at the Hebron Hostel in the heart of the Old City, but after Liv had spent two sleepless nights in the cold dormitory, we decided on an alternative plan. Olaf' s story about his meeting with *unmentionable substances* as he was reaching for the bathroom towel after a miserable night, added to our suspicions. After two days at the Jerusalem Inn, Liv and I would join him at a new location, the Austrian Hospice, just inside the Damascus gate, apparently no more expensive than the hostel. The others were stuck at the Hebron, as their funding was locked up in the collective Eternal Tour account. I realised that not supporting our Palestinian host put us in a bad light. We tried to act as if there were no sides in this.

The initial plan was to install Liv' s kinetic artwork, *Quicksand frontier under-standing*, in the Spafford Centre, but it had been impossible to get a confirmation from the administrators that they had a reliable plan to get the work through customs. In the end she decided to bring a smaller work and leave *Quicksand frontier under-standing* safely behind in Stockholm. With less installing to do, Liv had time to wander in the touristy Old City. After two days of relative unemployment, she was restless. The other artists struggled to get basic assistance to display far less complicated works. The art historian specialising in Iranian mural painting had been held back at the airport and interrogated for hours; her subject alone was enough to cause paranoia among the security staff. She was now ill in bed at the hostel. Liv gave me snippets of stories. I wanted to sit down and hear them in full, and elaborate on the details of my own journey, but we were already heading for the taxi.

In the back seat I heard how members of the organising team were discussing ways in which Hannah Arendt might be filtered out of the programme to comply with the intellectual boycott.

Tanya Manougian was having dinner with her WHO colleagues. Jerusalem appears to be awash with organisations. Tanya spotted us right away and greeted us enthusiastically. Her eyes were sparkling as she confirmed that we had visited her beloved Armenia. Her enthusiasm was contagious, even if it bordered on nationalism. The fact that she recognised this herself made it bearable. Talking to her, I could see in front of me the green mountainous landscape of Armenia, decorated with old churches. I was relieved by the position that engaging with Armenia gave us. Jerusalem is divided into the Christian, Jewish, Muslim and Armenian quarters. We are representing something that is not ours, a little off-centre, and it provides a distance.

We have a beer. Tanya leans over the table, eager to hear details of our project here. She has worked for the Armenian Patriarch in Jerusalem. I could easily picture her on the post. She is a powerhouse. We have to suppress the impulse to stand up and applaud when she exclaims: *an Armenian queen ruled Jerusalem for seven years in the twelfth century!*

We leave the meeting refreshed and elevated by her energy, only needing to grab a bite to eat before retiring for the night. On Jaffa Road we bump into Denis. He is dressed in a tailored jacket, his smart attire topped off by a French accent. We go to a restaurant that turns out to be—what else—Armenian, and tuck into one starter after another. The night's topics of conversation include boycotts, Hannah Arendt, and speculations about the potentially controversial gay content in the film programme, which Denis has

organised for the Eternal Tour. We laugh a lot, letting go of the stress emanating from *the headquarters* at Hebron Hostel, where I haven't even been yet.

## Sunday 5 December

We appear to have taken sides, in a strange way. Dark hats are everywhere on Jaffa street. We have breakfast in a light, bourgeois, family-friendly atmosphere before meeting up with the group to take part in an excursion that will depart from Hebron Hostel at 9am. Entering the Old City through the Damascus Gate, we join the crowd in the foyer on time. I force handshakes on the sleepy gang, not at all ready to go. The organising team is French-speaking and mostly based in Geneva. They cooperate with a local Palestinian team. The core of the group, friends, colleagues and participants, know each other already. They are probably kissers rather than shakers when it comes to greeting. I don't think they are ignoring our presence on purpose, just practicing a very informal approach to being together. Some Swedes are newcomers and Giorgos is Greek. Where else would we aim for other than the small, familiar Swedish table? The local coordination team, fronted by the charismatic Jalal and the sympathetic Olivia, joins us over the next hour.

Choosing between excursions to the occupied roofs in the Old City and exploring the Silwan Valley in East Jerusalem, Liv and I go for the latter and follow Jalal through the narrow streets towards Zion Gate. At the security check there is a small scene. They will not let Jalal pass. Refusing to go through without him, we start looking for an alternative route. Nevertheless, we soon lose Jalal and I can't help wondering if he is operating with a hidden, multi-purpose plan that just partly failed. Was he not aware from the outset

that he would be stopped at Zion Gate? Had he perhaps other business to attend to elsewhere all along, expecting us to pass without him?

The village of Silwan is situated in East Jerusalem, just outside the walls of the Old City and is home to 50,000 Palestinians, as well as an increasing number of settlers. We arrive on foot, our nostrils full of dust from the excavations carried out by the Israeli authorities, and head for the Wahdi Hilwe Information Centre. Their assignment is to tell the Palestinian version of the neighbourhood's history. This is an urgent matter, as the findings of the archaeological excavations seem to exclusively support the narrative of the City of David. Caterpillar diggers rest along the roadside, taking a break from removing the landmass under the main road. The road threatens to collapse as the ground under it disappears. For now, it is only the asphalt that glues it together. Waiting for the guide to show up, the whitest faces in the group gather around a tube of sunscreen that I threw in my bag at the last minute, hoping to avoid burning in the surprisingly strong December sun. We are left to wait in a tent where the centre has its gathering place. After a while, sweet coffee is served in small cups. When the guide finally turns up there is a loud confrontation in Arabic over some misunderstanding.

Things soon settle down and we are about to start the tour. The guide takes us to his childhood playground just down the street. There are some rocks, the grass is mostly withered and a few bushes cling to the dry ground of the hillside. A fence now frames the site, separating the Palestinian locals and the recently discovered Biblical heritage. We look over the railing and study Jewish visitors in headscarves and hats. The girls have long skirts. The boys wear *kippas*. Some tourists follow a less rigid dress code. They appear to be American. The armed soldiers patrolling the area are watching us closely. The guide explains how settlers have moved into Palestinian homes during the

owners' temporary absence. Even though the owner may win a case against a settler in court, the police systematically fail to enforce the legal verdict. He points to the bottom of the valley where an increasing number of parking lots service the tourist site. Palestinian homes have been appropriated for this purpose. The next part of the plan is to rebuild the garden where King David supposedly took his wife for a walk once.

We are behind schedule. On the way to Al-Quds University where the official opening of Eternal Tour will take place, we join some participants who have been to the occupied roofs in the Old City, and have falafels on a street corner. Al-Quds is just east of the city. Going by bus, we pass through the monstrous wall that we saw from a distance at Silwan. It is reminiscent of a dystopian Land Art project, grown way out of proportion.

The campus is situated on a hilltop. After some delay at the main entrance, we find our way to the south-western terrace where Fabiana has built an outdoor construction together with the students. The afternoon is beautiful, there is a pleasant breeze and the sun hangs low on the horizon. I take a seat by the fence, where some students are hanging out, and wait for the rest of the audience to settle on the chairs that have been set out. The next hour is deeply frustrating.

When presenting the Eternal Tour, the speakers annoyingly turn away from the audience, who mingle in groups, distracted and distanced. The translation seems random and without direction. The space disintegrates somehow. There is no centre, periphery, position, address. Nothing is public, everything is private. Where there should have been a person attracting attention, confirming the presence of others, Noémie stands alone, lighting a cigarette in



solitude. At one point, a teacher asks about Fabiana' s relational project: *what do you expect from the audience?* This might be a start. Nope.

I turn into a saboteur and start chatting with the female students sitting beside me. Manosh and I are eager to overcome the limits of language. As the collective session goes from bad to worse, the two of us get to know each other. After another half an hour with no sign of preparation for drinks or a tour of the campus, I ask her to show me around the Arts Department. We hit it off. She wants to have what I have: opportunities to travel and work—freedom. I understand that she is not going to get any of these things, as very soon she will be facing a marriage she does not want.

I am dying to lie down on the hotel bed, to stare into the ceiling and process my frustration, but the day is not over yet. Further *discussions* at the university, the men speak, the women speak a little bit at the end about women who don' t speak. On our return journey there are controls at the checkpoint, but we seem to be in the fast lane. I am used to seeing Kalashnikovs by now. Back in the city centre, unable to wait for the collective meal scheduled after the evening' s artist presentations at the African Cultural Centre, Liv and I escape to have dinner.

In an attempt to adjust to the rhythm of the others, we arrive an hour and a half late for the gathering at the centre. Nevertheless, Mathias and Emmanuel, the presenters, are the only people there. We realise that we cannot go on endlessly complaining about unclear schedules, missing screws, tape and cables, but the occasion allows us to let off some steam. Our frustration is fuelled by the embarrassment of having nothing to offer the good-natured people that peep in, looking like question marks, expecting an event.

Finally, members of the Hebron Hostel gang start sauntering in to find their seats in the dark stone hall. The screening of Emmanuel's film begins. Magic happens. We are in Gotland, an island in the Baltic Sea. It is summer. A group of people are left on a field with planks of wood, hammers, nails and saws. One week, one rule: no talking. Just the sound of saws, rhythmical, improvised hammer compositions. The builders point and draw in the air to communicate ideas, and participants touch to get the others' attention when requiring help to carry a beam up the homemade ladder-structure of the rising construction.

After the screening, Donatella talks about space, imagination and movement—real, fictional and in-between—, the areas of research that have shaped the Eternal Tour. The inspiration I felt from the beginning returns. Mathias introduces us to his work. Photographs of a withered, amateur theme-park version of Jerusalem, built in a remote North American state and almost overgrown with new vegetation.

Escaping the Old City that fades at night to become a labyrinth of stone, we take a moment to debrief and equalise at a café outside the gates. It faces the lively main street. We will pack and change hotels in the morning, but for now the two of us need to withdraw and reflect on the world, to see it from a distance. When I was in China, the absence of this kind of opportunity drove me crazy. In Beijing, the cafés are on top of department stores, if indeed they exist at all, missing the crucial point of providing a view on public life from a close but secluded position. Even in Armenia, with its extremely sexualised public theatre, with its tattooed musclemen and women posing in high heels and war paint, a woman can sit down at a table on the pavement and be a voyeur, if she wants to.

## Monday 6 December

The rain finally came during the night. The air has cleared. Our thin coats are not really doing the job of keeping the humidity out as we have breakfast next door before checking out.

The first encounter with the Austrian Hospice, our new home, is delightful. Built on a plateau where the Via Dolorosa meets El-Wadi it is one of the best locations in the Old City—a well-kept fortress. Some guards camp out on the stairs in front of the building. They sit down, leaning on their elbows, slowly making way for us to pass. The door is the gate to a different universe. We enter a cellar-like staircase. On the first landing, the stairs split and lead on to one plateau after the other, where we can step out to admire the city and note how the commercial buzz gradually fades as we scale the stairs. The spacious hallways and rooms with floors of matt tiles and burgundy-coloured walls feel overwhelming when one is used to compact living.

The room has a calm, intimate feel, and a view over the rooftops. A large painting hangs opposite the bed. Simple, Abstract Expressionism with large parts of the canvas left exposed. A red line, which I would not tire of looking at, alternates between talking to different colours and points on the painting's surface. Wealth withheld from the market. Raised in the middle of nowhere above the Arctic Circle, I can only recognise this kind of aesthetic from a German detective series, which was televised on Friday nights when I was a teenager. The Austrian Hospice—wow! The aura is similar to that of Switzerland. It was peculiar how everyone seemed have an image of Switzerland in China. *Why is that?* I asked Dennis. They love mountains and *The Sound of Music*, which is set in Austria, it is true, but Switzerland is the

destination for the Von Trapp family' s planned escape. Then there is Heidi and Nestlé.

Why is it that, in the middle of the cleanliness and order of this place, perversion comes to mind so easily? The disturbing pictures of the Pope perhaps, hanging in the hallway. Why would they choose to show him in his absurd bulletproof glass bowl on wheels, posing with those doll-like women? Thomas Bernard might have been able to explain, as he seemed to have found the very Austrian landscape perverse.

I am on my way to the Spafford Centre in the Muslim Quarter where Liv has already gone to prepare a presentation of the small kinetic object she brought with her. I turn left down the commercial street. The side streets are wet and deserted at this hour. I get lost and cannot find anyone to ask for directions. It is like wandering around in Venice, on the stage set of *Don' t Look Now*.

Liv' s work is moving steadily. A little engine pushes around two cut-out silhouettes of the Armenian map. They are perforated with holes, overlapping to varying degrees, in a sequence that references population statistics over time. Liv talks about Benedict Anderson' s studies of the construction of the imagined communities of the nation state. There are engaged questions. The Armenian Holocaust in 1915 provides a perspective, a different time and place, from which the dual categories of the present can be reflected upon. There is a nascent debate on the psychology of different collectives post-trauma. I hope we can continue the discussion, and I am looking forward to our presentation on Friday. We decide that I will introduce my individual part of the project later in Ramallah, and explain my planned floor design to be composed of rhyming names, collected from the map of the world. I am pleased with the humour in the work: Karabakh, Battambang, Chu Chang!

Walking with Jalal on the way back, we talk about the Arabic language. I have noticed how beautifully he speaks. It is perhaps also his voice, or that Arabic has become familiar to me, having listened to it in many countries and cities over the years. At one point, the recurring features create a pleasing sense of recognition. One becomes attentive to variations. When spoken softly and mildly, the colourings of Arabic blossom. Or could it be that, for some reason, my guards were down and I was receptive? He is passionate and pedagogical about the poetic dimension of written and spoken Arabic. I become inspired to look for translated poetry. The uncle of one of the young associates of the organising team owns the Educational Bookshop, an international Palestinian bookstore, which we aim to visit.

We are heading in the direction of the Redeemer Church where three guys, constituting the artist collective KLAT, will hold their event. The extra time allows us to disperse into smaller constellations. We try to have lunch outdoors, but it is chilly. The tables and chairs are wet from the rain and a small portion of bean soup is not enough to warm us up.

KLAT has built a stone cairn in the intimate courtyard of the old cloister of the Redeemer Church. The trees in the courtyard have large leaves in a saturated dark green that seems to have deepened from the night's rain. The church is made of soft yellow bricks, like most buildings here. Seated on one of the stone benches framing the courtyard, I catch a glimpse of a lizard on the ground. We help to dismantle the cairn and carry it up to the roof, where they will rebuild it. The joint physical effort warms everyone up and makes us cheerful. Spirits are high as we collaborate on manoeuvring the stones up the narrow staircase, leading up to the large roof of the building. The skies are getting brighter as well, and a soft yellow light is beginning to

warm the bluish tint in the air. We have a view of all the rooftops of Jerusalem from here.

The neighbouring roof has just been occupied and is secured with a new fence. Soldiers are patrolling it, and Orthodox Jews are coming over the rooftops to attend to some sort of meeting in a recently established community space. The Lutheran priest of the Redeemer Church is nervous that they will expand onto his roof. The weight of new building mass would threaten the supporting construction below.

The three guys from KLAT are rebuilding the cairn on our side from the stones we have carried up. The crowd gathers around the three fit young men working on their construction, adding stones carefully until a small pyramid finally points ambitiously towards the sky like a sharp spire (!).

The priest—film star handsome in his tweed jacket and flushed pink cheeks—gives a small speech following a presentation in charming French-accented English by the KLAT spokesman. There is a spontaneous outbreak of collective laughter at the priest's joke about switching faiths, since the building of the cairn last night seems to have been more successful in bringing rain than his own prayers.

Obviously, they have become great friends and I imagine the group fosters relationships with lots of people as they travel around to carry out their constructions in remote places in the desert and elsewhere. Building things together. Fabiana constructed a kiosk at Al-Quds. I like building. Together. I just cannot make up my mind about what to build. Shelters perhaps? But where? That seems to be the question here. You cannot set foot anywhere

without it being some kind of territorial statement, building low and wide would be the greatest insult of all.

At night we gather at the Spafford Centre again, and, for the second time today, Arabic culture opens itself to me. Wissam Murad is extraordinary on his *oud*, alone on the stage. What is happening when your body simply merges with the tones of an instrument? The organising team have pulled themselves together and made an extra effort to do a proper introduction, compensating for the failure of yesterday. Only the dinner that evening ensures that constant mood swings remain the refrain of this journey. The French are by now far too exhausted to speak one more word in English, and perhaps so am I.

## **Tuesday 7 December**

Breakfast is served in the cellar of the Hospice. A nun meets us in the doorway and leads us to a table that has our room number inscribed on a steel plate. We share it with an Italian couple. They are very smiley and positive, delighted to meet us—and we them. We do not know how best to organise ourselves around the small tabletop. Then we queue for the coffee machine. A woman controls the button just like elevator attendants did in the old days. At my hotel in Cairo in 2006, a man had this job. You had to tip him, and get involved. *Is he happy with the sum? He looks moody today. Is it me?* The nun is beyond bribery. She just wants order.

After breakfast, we work on our presentation. The café on the entrance floor has *apfelstrudel*, white wine and Wi-Fi, and a door that opens onto the terrace garden. Giorgos, the only Greek participant, has already discovered this escape and has installed himself at a table with his laptop. He needs space too, and suffers, like the others, from the lack of privacy at the hostel.

Olaf is on his way to the workshop at Al-Quds . They are putting spokes in his wheels. I do not know exactly how to interpret his insinuations and gestures. I am so curious about what is going on in that institution, and elsewhere, but I have a growing sense that I am never going to find out. Things are kept out of the conversation, not by him—Emmanuel and Olaf argue constantly, Olaf, the established liberal against Emmanuel, the leftie in opposition—but the others will not speak, not publicly.

Liv and I walk up the Via Dolorosa. The main streets are like bazaars, but when you get away from them, the stone quarters are surprisingly deserted. I bargain for sandals. I have discovered that I have it in me to play the part of the desired challenging customer. There is handmade Armenian porcelain, woven rugs in blue, red and green, jewellery, silk and cashmere. The most entertaining tourists are moving in large groups, dressed in yellows and greens, with turbans—what can they be, Coptic Ethiopians perhaps (descendants of the Queen of Saba)? We head towards the Jaffa Gate where the Swedish Christian Study Centre is situated. We ring the bell on the busy street just outside the City Wall and are let in to the ascetic, calm inside. Narrow stairs lead to the second floor where there is a spacious room with meter-thick walls and large, arched windows with window seats. The books are arranged according to subject. MIDDLE EASTERN HISTORY. PALESTINIAN HISTORY. JEWISH HISTORY. ISRAELI HISTORY. THE ISRAEL-PALESTINE CONFLICT. This is exactly what I need! I delve into the books and end up in the *beyond* section where I start to read Miroslav Volf' s *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*. A Croatian living in Los Angeles, his questioning of the demands for an identity is a refreshing and constructive approach to conflict. His thoughts on interconnectedness are reminiscent of



Thich Nath Hanh, whom I like reading. We photograph a dozen title pages in the library for future reference.

Then we go to eat at an Arabic lunch bar. The pita bread is freshly baked. The crispiest green pepper I have ever tasted arrives with a plate of hummus soaked in olive oil and topped with roasted pine nuts. We drink mint tea.

Al Hoash, where the evening's programme is due to take place, is situated outside the city gates on the north side. It is an exhibition composed of works by Palestinian artists. Passport photos by Omays Salman's flip over every time the fan blows in their direction, to flash their backsides, playing with the concept of a second identity, which was forced on many Palestinians after 1948. Majd Abdel Hamis has built a mosque from painkillers. In his film, Hassan Daraghmeh waits at a bus stop, following his plan to reach the sea.

We are supposed give feedback to a camcorder, which will be played for the artists who live in Ramallah without permission to visit Jerusalem. Luckily, one of the KLAT guys reacts spontaneously to the absurd arrangement. *Why create a situation where someone who is unable to move is also denied the possibility to respond?* Olivia is the curator and her reaction is also swift as she suddenly realises the passivity this arrangement imposes on the Palestinian artists.

Instead of going deeper into a discussion, which would have been a possibility at this point, the group starts to disperse. On the way down the stairs, there are plans for adjustments to tomorrow's schedule. The only opportunity to find out what's going on, if you do not move with the group every hour of the day, is to eavesdrop on their conversations. I long for transparency and the independence that comes with it. It gets on my nerves not being able to

decide my own movements according to accessible information. We do have a blog. Why don't we use it to distribute information? Isn't there an audience in addition to us! I make the suggestion, but I realise the structure is already set. The activities have been under-communicated for a while now out of fear of the Israeli authorities, I understand. But I doubt whether this has been debated or reflected upon. The approach seems partly unconscious with an element of guerrilla romanticism. Whether the threats are real or not, we are not going to find out, or even discuss. Discussion takes some elementary choreography of speaking and listening, which we are not performing.

The dinner nightmare repeats itself, but at least at a different location this evening. In a land of delicious, cheap food we have dry chicken breast with tinned peas, accompanied by fatuous conversation. I guess this is just the warm-up. They will carry on until late on the roof terrace at the hostel. I retire with my early bird predisposition.

### **Wednesday 8 December**

Liv has left for Al-Quds where there is a presentation of Gabriele Oropallo's workshop. The students' work on stories about *This Place* sounds interesting. Aline Schlaepfer's lecture on Samir Naqqash, an Arab-Jewish writer, is censored by Al-Quds. She will, instead, speak as part of tonight's program at the Spafford Centre.

I stay put. Olaf and Liv laugh at my constant need to stop to stare and think in this environment; to me their speed is a mystery. Later, I go out to find the lunch place from yesterday, seeking the pleasure of repetition. It is the season for pomegranates and I want to try the fresh juice that I have seen people sipping on the street. A rotund Jewish boy has lost his group and

stares, teary-eyed, up at the faces of grown-ups for help. Different parts of my brain work simultaneously on different responses. The rationalist looks cowardly into the future, thinking *what can I possibly do to lead him in the right direction?* The other part, also a coward, stands passively; creating a distance between myself and the heartbreaking innocence and helplessness that resonates in my heart. I walk away, moved and shaken.

In the hummus restaurant I spread out my map on the melamine tabletop to locate sites to see before we transfer to Ramallah on Friday. I have two glasses of freshly made pomegranate juice before the vegetable plate and hummus arrives. A young couple from Tel Aviv sits down with me. They have come specifically for the food and I discover that the simple lunch restaurant has in fact won a culinary award.

By now my spirits are in balance again and I could go on by describing the brilliant lectures at Spafford, but in between there is another cold shower. Making my way up the stairs and entering the yard where the audience/participants are starting to gather, I have my most serious confrontation with backs so far. Everyone I turn to looks away and widens the space between us. What is the matter with these people? Each person is, actually, nice individually, but *the group dynamics* suck.

After the film programme, Donatella and Nadia present their interesting research on the staging of a media event around the Eichmann trials, focussing on the role of the sound- and bulletproof glass cage, built for his appearance in court.

Am I mistaken, or did some Palestinians leave just now? Between the lectures, I gaze behind me to find that none of them are present. Aline's talk is about

Samir Naqqash, a Jewish writer, who grew up in Iran, writing in Arabic. He had a troubled relationship with the Israeli authorities who forced the family back to Israel in the 1950s, but continued to deny him full rights of citizenship. His refusal to give up the Arabic language seems to have played a part in his fate, in addition to his insistence that the Jewish people also have an Arabic history. The Arabic Al-Quds University added to the absurdity this morning, when they refused to house the lecture on Naqqash, based on the Jewish part of his identity. What a loss they created for themselves. The famous Naguib Mahfouz described Naqqash as *one of the greatest authors writing in Arabic*.

Enrico Natale's lecture on botany and colonisation is hilarious, while Alice speaks in an academic, but engaging way on the subject of contemporary, political Iranian murals, which she compares to their counterparts in Ireland. The thinking behind this nomadic festival unfolds itself to me. The publication will be great, for sure. It is the spatial manifestation on the ground that creaks. We round up the evening at Mehbash Restaurant again, where the water pipes gurgle and one presentation supersedes another during the meal.

#### **Thursday 9 December**

I had a Skype meeting with Els Roelandt, the editor of *A Prior Magazine*, today. I told her about my need to write about all this, and am thrilled at her suggestion that my idea for a diary can form the artist's pages for the magazine. It is ideal. I must have unconsciously planned it.

I walk down El Wadi, glancing curiously through the dark alleys to the left to catch a glimpse of the Temple Mount and the Dome of the Rocks. At the end of each side street, I can make out some low trees—a paradise garden bathed in sunshine. I am approached by a man and informed that non-Muslims are

not allowed any further. I proceed southward instead, where, after major security routines, I am let in amongst the visitors—mostly Jewish—to the Western Wall. A fence divides the area and ensures that women and men do not mix. Confused at first, I misread the situation, but am firmly corrected. In the middle of the female crowd, women stand immersed in their holy books, rocking rhythmically while reading aloud. The dress code is dark and covered up, conservative. Some younger girls stand on chairs to spy on what is going on over on the men' s side. There is a concerted movement of people approaching and backing away from the Wall. Literally reversing! One should not turn one' s back to the Wall, I read. My oh my, what an object of worship to choose, the remains of a demolished temple, the wall as a symbol of separation, a dead end—and you can' t even turn your back on it.

Tumbling out from the heat of the square, I continue walking until I find myself at the entrance of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the Armenian quarter. I overhear a guide pointing out the bench where, for years, the Muslim doorkeeper in charge of the church keys sat, an arrangement that prevented disputes between the Christian sects over the *holiest site on earth*, the tomb of Christ, *although this is not quite certain*. Inside in the candlelit hall people are leaning down to touch the Stone of Unction that commemorates the place where Jesus' body was prepared for burial. Further inside, I circulate around the chapel containing the tomb, a tiny building placed under the enormous dome that' s letting in sunlight at the top. In spite of its monstrous proportions, the space has some of the intimate ambience of the small onion domes on the steppes, owing to its sparse lighting and the incense vessels swaying in chains from the hands of the priests. It is a kind of secluded atmosphere that I think of as inspiring thoughts on the outside. That said, I reject the kind of spatial obsession with a point in the universe that is somehow nothing except its own singular fixation. The holiest place on Earth is

a grave. Like the Western Wall, it is linked to grief, loss and identifying a victim. What a miserable faith.

In the afternoon, Liv and I visit the Educational Bookshop. Run by the late Edward Saïd' s family, it is an oasis with a friendly atmosphere, where the staff are devoted, but in a low-key way. I browse the tempting titles of glossy green and orange spines. I am curious about Arabic novelists. PL denotes Palestinian origin, EG an Egyptian one, LB stands for Lebanese and so on. I open one after the other. One book of poetry has a beautiful cover. I open it, curiously. The first line goes: *What is a man?* Hmm, what can a man possibly be except this and that wonderful thing, which a woman is not? I do stumble across one magnificent find, though: Tarik Ali' s *Protocols of The Elders of Sodom and other essays, which explore the link between literature, history and politics.*

At night there is a concert with contemporary compositions. We get on a local bus to Augusta Victoria Church, on top of the Mount of Olives, overlooking the Gethsemane garden. Inside, the chairs are arranged in lines and clusters facing different directions. The group spreads out, trying different seats. Where is the stage? It is unclear. There are microphones here and there. The space is generous and we start adjusting to it, expanding our private spheres. A violin, with its hollow wooden body, starts making sounds that resonate with an impressive power in the building. The singer begins to play with the space in a similar fashion. You can hear every detail of the whispers from the instruments. Liv lies down on a row of seats. People absorb the music, sitting bent over their knees or leaning backwards with their feet stretched out. For the next piece, the musicians take up a new position in the opposite corner. Before it is over, they have cleared the space with sound—including our bodies. It is strangely unifying, in an abstract way.

It is easier to hang out together around the four large tables in the Armenian restaurant we go to that night. I learn more about Enrico' s subject of plants and colonisation and, later, in the bar, the Armenian bartender helps to lift our spirits further. We talk Olaf into going ahead as planned with his performance in Ramallah tomorrow, in spite of his reluctance to do so.

### **Friday 10 December**

We have packed and are ready to go to Ramallah. I have planned to take a late taxi to Tel Aviv after dinner and skip tomorrow' s unofficial closing event. The bus departs from a station not far from the Damascus Gate. We are the first group to leave. The others will take the next bus. It is not a long trip and we are soon halfway on the dusty mountain ride. Close to Ramallah, an elderly Palestinian woman gets on. Walking between the rows of seats she starts to lose her balance. Her face is white. She grabs hold of the back of a seat to steady herself, but cannot stop swaying until she tumbles. Before she hits the floor, a girl grabs her by the arm and escorts her to the back seat. A bottle travels between the seats and, after a mouthful of water and bite to eat, she recovers. Slowly, we start to move again and the tension in the air gradually evaporates. Denis reveals how, at first, he thought that it was the sight of us that caused her reaction. We all laugh with him at the paranoid self-centeredness of his idea, thinking about what it does to people who stay in these territories, even for a short visit.

There is some kind of public holiday in Ramallah, and the streets are almost deserted. We are struck by the building activities everywhere. Some of the participants have made excursions to Hebron, which is a totally different story of misery, poverty and disconnectedness. Ramallah, on the other hand, is

small, but cosmopolitan—the modest, Palestinian answer to the high-rises of Tel Aviv.

We have already rigged up the projector and chairs at the Quattan Foundation, but while the others are still having lunch at a restaurant we go back again to prepare mentally in the space. It is Olaf's turn first, then us. This time there is a larger audience and quite a few veiled women. People keep coming in while we are still waiting for our group. Even before Olaf has started, I begin to regret that we so thoughtlessly encouraged him to deliver his presentation without adjustments. I am nervous on his behalf. It is clear that it is not a good solution to let him go first, we should have switched the order, but it is too late now.

It is a schizophrenic experience. A kitsch organ intro sets the tone. A mix of war and sex imagery—newspaper style—is projected onto the background. Olaf starts to read from a manuscript. The BBC journalist Christiane Amanpour is one of his characters, preparing for a news report from Iraq, as well as a suicide bomber and two horny gay soldiers. The bomber, on the way to his last mission, is distracted by the beautiful morning and makes love to his wife instead. The soldiers get it on. Everything happens simultaneously at sunrise and is described in intimate detail. The bomb goes off. The lovers die in bed and Amanpour reports on the explosion. The text is brilliantly written. I enjoy the work immensely while, at the same time, suffering embarrassment as the audience, polite people, but not familiar with contemporary art, continue to leave the room. Finally, Olaf stops reading while there is still some pages left of the manuscript.

Under these circumstances, the air thick with the desire to be elsewhere, our task is to draw attention to our Armenia project. On a scale from one to ten,



with ten being the most successful, I would give us perhaps three points for a decent effort.

As much as I would like to escape, I move with the others to the Khalil Sakarini Cultural Centre, just down the street. There is a reception with drinks, an exhibition and lectures, in the three-floor building with terraces—a great space. There is really a crowd now. Ramallah feels like an exciting place, at the same time as the restlessness of imminent departure makes itself felt. A rainstorm is expected tonight, and a part of me is planning to flee. The brilliant scholar Rema Hammami delivers an elegant lecture advocating the great role of Palestinian women in politics. It is just that everything you observe tells you otherwise. She reminds me of the Palestinian intellectuals I met in Egypt, cosmopolitan, moving in elite circles, incredibly competent but... I would like to read the work of journalist Amira Hass, who addresses the strong division of Palestinians into subgroups. Khaled Horani presents his crazy idea of bringing Picasso to Palestine. My favourite is Vera Tamari. She has worked with art students initiating studies of Palestinian arts and crafts, as she has observed that Palestinian youth know very little about their own culture and are confused about their cultural heritage and identity. It is a good, hands-on solution.

The cool restaurant downtown where we gather for dinner is packed with what I imagine must be the cultural elite of Ramallah. Great food. The atmosphere reminds me of stories from cosmopolitan Beirut. The fun is over when Donatella requests that we listen quietly to the twenty-minute tape in French that she recorded during the Eternal Bike Ride here from Geneva. Liv and Olaf have decided to join me in taking a taxi, and we hurry out in the rain to the waiting car. Goodbyes. It is emotional; Angela is practically ready to jump into the car with us.

We pass the checkpoint effectively without delay, and head for Tel Aviv on the highway. The car wheels splash in the heavy rain and the streetlights reflect in the asphalt like stars in a vast darkness. Half an hour later, we enter the city centre where we can sense the sea in turmoil. We drive between the typical Bauhaus-style buildings, where loose signs are swaying and tarpaulins are threatening to take flight in the wind, and drop Olaf off at his hotel before continuing to the suburb Kfar Saba where we will stay with my in-laws.

### **Saturday 11 December**

We chat with Suzi and Hugo over morning coffee. It is raining. Liv wants to go with us to the centre, then separate to find a bus back on her own. Hugo doubts whether there will be any buses on the Sabbath. When he leaves the room, we have a discussion about mobility and dependency. The car belongs to Hugo. Suzi is dependent on him to drive, and always tries to foresee his schedule and adjust her plans to his. He, on the other hand, is reluctant to offer any insight into his moves (which gives him a sense of freedom, I guess). Her need to plan used to annoy me. After this week, I understand her better. Whoever is in the know and makes the decisions has kept us on a tight leash, waiting. Watching the queue at the checkpoint made us reflect on the horror of being left to wait. Power must be *the power to make people wait*. It seemed to be contagious. Unconsciously, people slipped into wasting the time of the other. The other adjusted, so as to affirm the imbalance. If I have a car, I have your attention. You need me. I will, perhaps, let you know when we are going to leave. Later, of course, I can always change my mind.

The Internet means independence. We are able to find the local bus route and Liv can be mobile. Transparency is gold. Yesterday, money was the guarantee

for our freedom. We could pay for a taxi and arrive late, to the surprise of our hosts in Kfar Saba, who were convinced we would be stuck in Ramallah (forever).

We take Suzi and Hugo to the CCA in Tel Aviv. It is their first encounter with contemporary art. The show *Building Memory* presents Yael Bartana, Dor Geuz and Miroslav Balka amongst others, and deals with the problematic foundation of the state of Israel. It demonstrates complex and paradoxical aspects of identities and territories. Suzi has a moment of self-reflection watching Bartana's film. The film stages a fictional return of Jews to Poland. A *kibbutz* with walls and a tower is built in a park in Warsaw. Gradually, the construction becomes more and more reminiscent of a fortress for self-imprisonment. I come to think about Philip Roth who describes Israel as a ghetto, juxtaposing it with the free life in the Diaspora.

I dare not to ask how they vote, but I expect the worst. Statistics suggest Netanyahu. When they visited Oslo, we managed not to have a fight and I felt that this was a victory for peace. I know that if they find any excuse to put me in a category with the anti-Semites, it will make it so easy for them to dismiss anything I do or say. When they did not find any support from Daniel or me for their doubts about Obama's background, I wondered what would be the next attempt at testing the ground. It came two days later. They wanted to visit the Holocaust Centre in Oslo. I was not happy about the timing. The Gaza attacks were still fresh in my memory, and I tried to ignore their suggestion. Then I checked the webpage and realised that the exhibition focused on mechanisms of stigmatisation. Interesting. I changed my mind and offered to drive them. They were not happy about the show, finding that *their Holocaust* was not presented exclusively, but compared with the situation of

the Palestinians. I was satisfied with their confusion and left the question to mature.

I am not politically active, but as an artist I explore the field that politics rests on: ideas, convictions, perceptions, questions of territory and identity. Some of my works also aim to produce action. I draw conclusions from what I discover, and it does affect my attitude and behaviour, but in this specific minefield the best I can do is to try to avoid pushing my relatives further into a defensive mode. This was also my reasoning when I stayed at home instead of marching against the bombing of Gaza.

During this week, I have been somehow remote and passive. The context that brought me here, the Eternal Tour, and my struggle with my role as a participant has become the filter I have looked through. I have been a little distant, I'm afraid, concerned also that engagement would produce counter-engagement, and add fuel to the fire, as I have experienced before. The cost has been a kind of numbness that will simply have to be a part of the story about this journey, and perhaps function as a metaphor. I have been looking to escape, I guess, looking for possibilities to take flight mentally and physically, like the people who live here, only on a different scale. I have been sensitive to restrictions on my freedom, which have perhaps been provocative, but also important for maintaining common sense or percipience.

### **Sunday 12 December**

The rainstorm is even heavier today. The night's wind has caused damage to the sun-shelter installations that Hugo makes and sells. He has gone out to rescue clients in trouble, and we have to take a taxi to the airport. Because of the Egyptian stamp in my passport, I have the three-hour-security-check.

Well inside the departure hall, the fountain in the centre looks more like a leak from the ceiling. At one point, the water turns brown and I think, for a second, that the roof will collapse. Flights are getting cancelled, not because of what is now an intense thunderstorm, but due to aircrafts unable to depart from the snowstorms in central Europe. Liv' s flight takes off, but not mine. I wait with Olaf and Matthias all day in different queues. When the flight is cancelled, we have to do the security check all over again. The risk level is upgraded. The number five stamp on my suitcase is exchanged with the number six.

An hour after midnight, we depart for Riga, where I can catch an early morning connection to Oslo. It is December 13.