

## Being a Contemporary Arts Collective in the Gaza Strip

### A Conversation with Mohammed Abusal, Visual Artist and Founding Member of Eltiqa Group

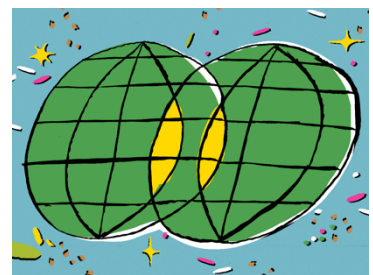


Mohamed Abusal was born in Gaza in 1976. Since 2000, he has produced daring and innovative works, which deal with the reality in besieged Gaza and envision a brighter future – a future that is not only plausible, but a fundamental human right. Over the last decade, he has exhibited his paintings, photographs and installations around the world, notably in France, the United States, the UK, Australia and

Dubai. In 2005, he was awarded the Charles Asprey Prize for Contemporary Art.

In this conversation, Mohamed Abusal speaks about Eltiqa<sup>1</sup>, an active group of contemporary artists that he co-founded in 2002, and about the realities and challenges of being an artist in the Gaza Strip.

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**Mohamed Abusal, you are a visual artist and founder of Eltiqa, a collective initiative launched by a group of artists in the Gaza Strip in 2002. I want to start by asking how one creates a collective dedicated to contemporary arts in the complicated**

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<sup>1</sup> Elitqa means ‘gathering’ or ‘assemblage’ in Arabic

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**Palestinian context, and the more complicated context of the Gaza Strip, which is one of the most isolated and closed regions of the world?**

At the beginning, we were friends, artists based in Al Bureij, a town in the middle of the Gaza Strip. We were beginning artists, so we used to meet, in around 1992, 1994, looking for connections with other artists and groups. There was no base for artists in Gaza, so we found each other to talk about our needs and also to develop our art. At the beginning, we started discussions, and started competing among ourselves, for instance, myself and Mohammed Al Hawajri and Raed Issa, who lived in the same town. So that was the beginning. We had, like, a dream, to make a collective. There was a competition between us. Each one of us started to make copies of international paintings, for example Van Gogh, Cézanne, or Sisley, the famous artists; and we read about art and asked ourselves who were the best artists. We also tried different techniques and new media. It was the first time we had a series, something that was not an individual painting or drawing, but the beginning of a collective research. We wanted to create a group that believed in the same ideas about art.

**Eltiqa group has been operating for the last twenty years now, and has a lot of partnerships with local and international institutions that are active in the field of visual arts. These partnerships and alliances have contributed to helping this initiative grow and sustain itself, despite constant interruptions caused by wars and endless obstacles. How does the question of sustainability in the arts resonate with your work as a visual arts collective based in the Gaza Strip?**

At the beginning, in the year 2000, we agreed to have a real collective. At that time, we used to give art lessons to young artists. We also made an initiative to discover talents in Gaza, and to develop them, to teach them how to make a drawing, for example, and to use art theory. We did a lot of workshops and a lot of training for the new generation. So we built a name in the market in Gaza Strip. People used to invite us to be, like supervisors, for summer camps, things like that. This was a big responsibility for us, to give more and to help the art sector in Gaza.

We went to Amman, Jordan, where we were selected to participate in a summer academy with other artists. At the end, they made a group exhibition for us. So we started to think in terms of a group, a collective. We chose (the name) Eltiqa. We agreed about the same ideas, to make art for art and to give more. We also had a plan, a strategy for a place in the future. This place would look like a cultural space, have bookshops and be an artists' base, with a small garden, something like that. A lot of foreigners came to Gaza to meet with this collective, to talk with us, because they wanted to discover the art situation in Gaza, and to support the art there.

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In the beginning, we decided to be free in art. It is a big challenge to be free in art. Because there is a big risk with art: is there income behind art or not? So, we made it, and we started to have our small income, step by step. In the Gaza Strip, we started to hold meetings, personal meetings and meetings with the new generation, through visiting some cafés, some restaurants, and going to some foundations. And to meet with other artists and build new communications. Also to discover the community, and to start a mailing list to build data, to communicate. We had to develop our skills and abilities, learn how to communicate and how to do management, to make events, to design new exhibitions. We opened the window to Gazan artists for that opportunity. We used the same methodology to discover something and also to tell the other artists about it.

We made something unique. My friends and I, my colleagues in the Eltiqa group, designed three initiatives. The first one was Gaz-Art. It was workshops with many artists, especially the professional, with the start-ups also, and graduates from the university. So we did workshops, depending on the dialogues, and we used to invite guest speakers. For the first time, we invited guest speakers from outside, Palestinians who lived outside Gaza, artists who lived outside, and also foreign artists. There was an opportunity to meet foreign artists, when they came to Gaza to invest their limited time to do quick workshops here. We did that many times, and we did it with many friends, many foreign artists.

So we had new knowledge in Gaza. Because, you know, in Gaza, there was no link between Gaza and the (rest of the) world. Gaza still suffers from missing art resources, especially books, and also the materials. We can only find materials on the internet, limited resources about art. So, we used to buy some books, some publications from outside when we travelled, to build our library at Eltiqa.

I wanted to speak about Eltiqa again. We applied, and we got some funding from different foundations, and we implemented some workshops and agreed projects. Then we thought of developing this model and we had the Gaza Contemporary Art Programme. We did it three times: phase one, then the second one, and the third one. We selected ten girls, and ten young artists to participate, and each one started to develop their own project. In the second and third phase, we had the chance to establish the first graphic lab in Gaza. We bought a machine, a press, for etching and printing, so now we have a lab and maybe it is the best one in the Gaza Strip. It is open to everyone.

The third project is Gaza Art Shelter, implemented last year, with about seventy artists who had a chance to follow and to get grants to do a residency or make a production, or attend specific workshops. There were three workshops: one for graphics and etching, another for furniture design, using recycled materials, and the third was building a project, using techniques and building a concept. We selected each teacher from outside Gaza, because we needed new knowledge, new experience, to build a new generation in Gaza. So we still

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think not to repeat what we did, but to design new models, new ideas. So Eltiqa is the space and the place to make and exchange experiences between all artists in Gaza, and inviting other artists from outside to come to see the art scene in Gaza, and to read what's happening in Gaza, to discuss and give feedback to the local arts.

**In terms of funding and partnerships, do you rely more on European funding, international funding, or do you also have access to resources in the Gaza Strip or from other parts of Palestine?**

At the beginning, we had a relationship and partnership with local foundations. We got grants from NGOs, and also from the Palestinian Ministry of Culture, and from the Institut Français through funding opportunities depending on open calls. So step by step, we started to get better grants, to help more artists and to give more. Also, we used to reply to international and Middle East open calls, so we got grants from AFAC<sup>2</sup> and sometimes from Al Mawred Al Thaqafy<sup>3</sup>, and the last one we got was funding from SIDA<sup>4</sup>, the Swedish government, and we implemented it over two years. It was a long-term project.

We also have a local partner, because our registration does not allow us to receive and implement grants or receive the money. Regarding this, we don't need to have a registration and be a foundation, or to be like a company. We need to be beside our art, and to give more for the art. So, it's better for us to have a partnership to implement a project. It's a big challenge to do this.

I also want to say something that we do in Eltiqa, about developing ourselves, in parallel to all this. We take care of our personal careers at the same time as helping art, giving donations and volunteering in art in Eltiqa group, to help the new generation and to help the art scene in Gaza. It is parallel.

**In 2022, Eltiqa group was part of the Palestinian collective that took part in Documenta 15, in Kassel, an event that caused a lot of hostility and debates, especially in Germany. Funding and access to resources highlights the inequalities in the world we live in, but I think that in the Palestinian context, these inequalities go beyond accessing resources. They can also be detected in terms of representation and narratives, such as what happened at Documenta this year. For you, as an artist from Gaza, and as a member of Eltiqa group, how do you experience the representation of Palestinian art and artists in the international scene?**

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<sup>2</sup> The Arab Fund for Arts and Culture.

<sup>3</sup> Culture Resource.

<sup>4</sup> The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency.

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We had an invitation from Question of Funding<sup>5</sup>. They were searching for a collective that had a special economic model, one that made them sustainable, resisting all the situations like Covid and the war, and isolation. So they found Eltiqa and contacted us. They decided to make an archive about Eltiqa, during the twenty years that we've been established and have been working continuously. So it was a good opportunity for us to have this archive. Also, getting an invitation at this level helps us to get out of the isolation that Gaza is still under. I think it is important to go outside, and to have international participation to give our sound, our voice, to the world, and to present what we've produced. Also to read and to listen to the feedback from all the people. We try to avoid clichés and to not present ourselves as victims, so we can present real art.

It is not easy to be a different person: in Gaza all the people are the same. We all face the same situation, and we all feel the crisis. But in our art, we try to be neutral, to look at the scene through a different lens. And from a different perspective, just to present a visual language that could be read by anyone, so people do not just read the violence. Sometimes they don't need to read the artwork that reflects, for example, the occupation, or reflects any behaviour against Palestinians. So we try to be smart and present something intelligent, exhibiting the situation of Gaza in a new visual language.

People were surprised at the production that we exhibited at Documenta 15. Some people tried to read something different into it, the way they wanted to see it, such as the journalists. It was not easy to have a strong argument, because we were surprised by what was happening at Documenta. There we were, thinking that we would be going to Documenta just to present and to host and to receive a nice audience. OK, they were a nice audience, but some of them put us into a corner, saw us from a special angle. But we present our own art, our own visual language. We don't mean to speak about politics, in a direct way or in an indirect way.

**The Palestinian context is multiple. It's also complex because of the dismantled geography, and the interruption between those who live inside Palestine, and the huge Palestinian diaspora who live in the neighbouring countries: Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, etc., and in the rest of the world, even the United States or Europe. This makes me wonder about the definition of the local and the international, in the case of the Palestinian artists and cultural practitioners. How do you define an artistic**

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<sup>5</sup> 'The Question of Funding' is a growing collective of cultural producers and community organisers from Palestine. By producing, documenting, accumulating, and disseminating resources, experience, and knowledge with their wider community, it aims to rethink the economy of funding and how it affects cultural production both in Palestine and the world'.

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**community, when this community is all around the world, and has lost its territory and its geographic centre?**

When I think about this, I think there is a positive side and a negative side. Maybe the positive side is to express (something about) Palestine, to express something about the community of Palestine, and the political situation, why these people are (exiled) and why these people are in the diaspora. This is a positive side because it looks like (being) a messenger, going outside, and expressing (ourselves) and finding recognition in all the world about our ordeal, about Palestine, about everything. And also letting Palestinians participate in the big events and the big developments in art. A lot of (Palestinian) artists reach the museums and their work is collected by great museums and great exhibitions.

This is the positive side. I think that on the negative side, most of it is that the artists have a problem with the compass, in the way they still look at Palestine. Physically, they are outside and feel they are inside Palestine. Most of them try to find their identity, but it is not easy for anyone to leave their land, their homeland, to be away from their family, away from their only place, the original place, to be outside. It is not easy for them, and I notice with a lot of young artists from my generation that Palestine or Gaza is their area of inspiration. So we get our inspiration from Palestine, from the situation, from the ideas, from the crisis, from many things inside. When we travel outside, we feel strange, so we need a long time, and sometimes some artists don't find their identity, and cannot represent something that can be read from the Palestinian community or read from the international or European community (either), so they are still in between. Sometimes they lose their lives, lose their age, just to find themselves, just to prove their art identity.

**The question of territory brings me to the question of mobility. Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and even before, there has been a new awareness in the arts world in support of a greener approach, a more ecological approach to the field. The question of international travel and mobility is at the centre of this conversation. But mobility is still a privilege, and even a necessity for economic survival for artists and cultural workers from less privileged parts of the world. How can we reformulate the question of artistic mobility when we ask it from the perspective of an artist living in the Gaza Strip, or in the larger context of Palestine? The mobility of artists as individuals, but also the mobility of their works. I know that it is very difficult to send a painting or an artwork from Gaza to Berlin or Tokyo, for example.**

You know, when the Covid time began, people started to feel solidarity with us, so they thought of Gaza. Gaza is under isolation and looks like a blockade. For more than ten years, or 15 years. So different colleagues contacted me: 'Mohamed, what do you do?' 'How do you find solutions to staying at home? You don't have the internet, you don't have enough food, just to send digital art outside.' It was like a big solidarity with Gaza. It was sudden, so

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people started to understand the situation about Gaza. You are speaking about something important.

There is a big restriction regarding the post, also. To send a painting, this painting must be checked. The Israeli side should control and follow the content, the cultural and artistic content. Sometimes, when they don't agree with some painting, they bring it back. Also, we don't have a local or national community to take care of the post. So we use multiple postal companies. We cannot send (the artworks) outside. We can only send documents and rolled paintings, rolled canvas. A painting should be in a frame, inside a protected box, so we do not have a solution. Also, when we send a painting, we have to send it in limited sizes. We used to make medium and small-sized paintings, because of the restriction on the post. Also, when we travel and want to carry paintings by hand, that is also not easy. When we send our paintings outside so they can be exhibited, after the exhibition, we have another problem, (about) where to store them, and how to bring them back.

You ask me about mobility. Mobility is very important. We used to be invited by many (organisations) to participate in solo or collective exhibitions, or to participate in a residency or workshops. When the borders are closed, we lose this opportunity. So to some foundations, we have to say, 'Sorry, we cannot travel'. The next time we say we cannot travel, we lose the trust of this foundation, unfortunately.

Gaza had an airport (in the past). It was easier, but now, we have to cross via Egypt, and we need a visa. We need some special coordination and we need to register to travel, sometimes two or three months before the (actual) time. There is a big headache about any opportunity to participate in events outside Gaza.

**Let's talk now about your own work, Mohamed. You said earlier that you were born in Al Bureij, a refugee camp in the Gaza Strip. You were trained in finance and management before shifting to visual arts in the late 1990s. You have presented your work in different parts of the world, in addition to your activities, of course, with Eltiqa. I know that most of what we talked about today, like injustice, representation, inequality, internationalism, territoriality, mobility... are all themes that often come back in your work. Do you want to tell us more about how you as a Palestinian artist in Gaza respond to global inequalities through your artistic work?**

I am inspired by the situation and especially human rights crises, so I notice there are some specific rights we recognise in Gaza, so I need to focus on these crises. To find the best way to express that and to exhibit, to produce artwork about these crises, I collect data. I collect information and record some histories about the people and listen to their narratives. Also, I like to choose my own, specific technique. So in some of my work, I use heavy concrete, the heavy rubble left after bombings, like 500 kilos of cement, and convert

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it into a sofa, and comfortable furniture, just to prove and to present big and heavy evidence about what happened to that family who lost their home. Some families, who were (informed) by phone, had only five minutes to leave home. So I am speaking about the fake comfort in Gaza and telling (what is really) painful about this scene.

Sometimes I choose photography (as a) technique, because it's the best one to express something, because it is recording a quick scene very fast, and so it is the best. And overseas, I can send files outside, so some of my photography was exhibited internationally, and they were collected by some museums. Because it speaks about darkness, about the situation in Gaza, and the demography. It speaks about a metro in Gaza<sup>6</sup>, about (connecting) the Palestinian parts. With an illustrated map and a station, with an underground metro and a train, to make a link between Jerusalem, West Bank and the Gaza Strip. It was an imaginary project, but it relied on a scientific method.

**As a Palestinian artist from Gaza, do you feel supported enough by the system in your country, your territory and elsewhere? Did you feel that you are supported as you need to be, to have a sustainable and long-term career?**

It's not enough, really, because society is used to being busy with its own priorities. People are searching for food, searching for safety. The government doesn't care or think about art and culture, so we depend on ourselves. We take care of ourselves. This is one reason why we have the Eltiqa collective and why we are still making art, depending on ourselves. Also some of society are thirsty to see art. They are in need, because they became bored with the media, with the news. They need another language. So, when we have an exhibition, myself or my friends, we have a big audience. We have the new generation also, old people, parents, children. A lot of people come (to the exhibitions). People encourage their children to learn about art and to study art, because when they (hear) that some artists from Gaza are travelling outside, selling some paintings, they start to believe (in art), and they think it could be a source of income. Also, it is a chance for the people to be different, to travel outside, to express (themselves) and to live their lives, because in Gaza, a lot of graduates don't have jobs. And we have a lot of talents. I think the suffering in Gaza, and the circumstances in Gaza, are making and creating talents, in art, in music and in any other field.

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<sup>6</sup> A Metro in Gaza, 2012.



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**We are now at the end of our conversation. Before we leave, do you have a new idea about the future of the international art sector that you would like to share with us? How to make it fairer, more inclusive, and more sustainable?**

After my last visit to Europe, I think art is going to find access through virtual reality. This can make the world look like a small village. This can connect everyone and can build a new community of artists. I think artists, for the future, don't need to travel outside. They could wear VR glasses and meet with any artists in the world. They can meet through the metaverse. This is the future of art.

Also, let me think about Gaza. Gaza must follow this technique. Gaza must get out of its isolation. For example, in Gaza, we don't know anything about the future. So we are trying to build our own future. For example, I don't think about going outside Gaza. Gaza is my town, Gaza is my inspiration. It is a resource for me. I know that living here is very complicated for my art, but there are so many things to research and to do.

**Thank you so much, Mohamed. This was a very inspiring conversation, and also a very informative one. We don't know much about Palestinian artists, especially Palestinian artists who live inside the Gaza Strip. I have so many more questions, I could ask you about censorship and women artists... So many things come to mind when we speak about working internationally more sustainably.**