

//Anita Moser //Abdullah Karam

"More communication, please!"

Abdullah Karam im Gespräch mit Anita Moser über seine künstlerische Arbeit, das Potenzial von Computerspielen und Salzburg als Ort kultureller Teilhabe und Produktion

Der Künstler, Illustrator, Influencer und leidenschaftliche Gamer Abdullah Karam lebt und arbeitet in Salzburg, wo er nach seiner Flucht aus Syrien über die Türkei im Herbst 2015 ankam. In seinem gemeinsam mit Georg Hobmeier von dem Künstler_innenkollektiv *gold extra* gestalteten und vielfach ausgezeichneten Computerspiel *Path Out* erzählt Karam die Geschichte seiner „Reise“⁽¹⁾. Das besondere Potenzial von Videogames sieht er unter anderem darin, dass sie Situationen unmittelbar erlebbar machen und dadurch die Perspektiven Spielender verändern können, wie er im folgenden auf Englisch und Deutsch geführten Gespräch betont.

Was verstehst du unter „Kunst und Kultur für alle“ hier in Salzburg oder generell?

Generell ist jeder auf seine Art Künstler. Es gibt keine Gesetze, die uns erlauben oder verbieten künstlerisch zu arbeiten. Kunst ist für mich, dass man seine Meinung ausdrücken kann und zwar mit unterschiedlichen Methoden. In Salzburg geht das gut, da die Menschen open-minded, aufgeschlossen sind. Kultur ist ein Teil unserer Welt. Man kann nicht sagen, diese Kultur ist „gut“ und jene „schlecht“. Man muss die eigene Kultur auch nicht zu ernst nehmen, denn es gibt viele andere Kulturen – und diesbezüglich sollte man die eigene Perspektive ändern. Ich habe immer zwei Perspektiven: Die österreichische Kultur hat viel Gutes, aber auch Dinge, die ich nicht gut finde. Ebenso ist es mit der syrischen Kultur – und ich wähle aus, was zu mir passt. Ich habe sozusagen eine Mischung: best of both worlds.

Haben alle Menschen die Möglichkeit, sich künstlerisch zu betätigen oder siehst du Einschränkungen?

Sicher gibt es Einschränkungen. Aber ich glaube, es kommt auch auf die innere Einstellung an. Manchmal denkt man, dass man etwas aufgrund seiner Kultur oder Religion nicht darf, und verbirgt das, was man eigentlich sagen möchte. Wenn ich etwas – aus Angst, wie die Leute über mich denken, oder weil es nicht Teil meiner Kultur ist – nicht tue, beschränke ich mich selbst.

Einschränkungen gibt es aber auch von außen, zum Beispiel von den Institutionen. Do you think just anyone can visit a museum or are there limits that we don't realize or we don't see?

I think there are walls in the mind, even if we are unaware of them. And I think it is a question of education, different cultures and different traditions. I don't want to talk about my culture, but I know how it is when you are born in a country where you don't get in contact with a lot of museums. So this sets limits that people maybe don't notice. Someone might say, "Oh, museums are amazing and they are fun" because it's the way he or she was raised. People who were raised differently might find museums boring.

And if you talk about cultural production?

"Production" – I like it. I like it because culture doesn't stop, culture keeps on evolving.

For some people, it's easier to get access to express themselves in different cultural ways, to create their art and their life somehow, and for other people it's more difficult.

Yes, I was one of them.

In which way?

I could not express myself and my experiences with art. I was raised in a family where we were not so amenable to modern art or something like this. I think the more open-minded the society is, the more possibilities there are. And the more closed-minded the society is, the fewer possibilities you have. Because if the society is all about being traditional, and everything should stay the same, it would be really hard to express oneself through new possibilities or different methods.

So what I practice now with art is everything – everything that I could think of. There are a lot of things that I don't enjoy but I don't limit myself to one issue and I don't like to be limited by others to one issue. I always wanted to try acting. I have a silly reason in my life for it: As I got really close to death I said if I survive that, I want to try everything. If this is not the end, I want to try and do everything I always wanted to do. So with that moment, my whole life changed, basically. I started living my life as if every day was the last day. And that's how I communicate with people. So when I go to a big event, I ask people for cooperation, and when they try to avoid or delay it to the next year, I say: "I don't know if I'll be alive tomorrow. So if you really feel like doing this, let's do it now, let's be united now, let's exchange ideas now."

Was it easy for you to get started here in Austria, in Salzburg?

I was young. I hadn't experienced that much in my life. Everything I have done was playing video games and learning about the western culture. So I knew more about the western culture than about my own, basically. When I came here, it was not that much of a big culture shock. I was 19 and I hadn't experienced much about communication or social life or anything else. I was like a kid, a blank page: everything was unknown, new. I learned fast. I got adapted soon. I got new chances in Salzburg and started chasing my dreams.

Here in Austria chasing your dreams – even if it is risky – is not a problem. You follow your dreams, you show your art if it's what you are passionate about. In Syria, you better forget about that and become either an engineer or a doctor to earn a lot of money.

As a kid, people asked me "What do you want to be in the future?" In Syria, kids say "I want to be an engineer", "I want to study English", "I want to write", "I want to be a doctor". I was the only one who said "I want to make games" and I insisted on that. People thought I was crazy and told me "You will never make it". The first time we – me and the team and all the creators – won with PathOut at a festival in Vienna, I was crying and I nearly could not stop it because of the flashbacks. People had told me that I would never make it, and in this moment, I was proving them wrong – I was involved in the industry and made a name of myself with. Those tears I cried were the proudest tears of my life. I went against everyone to fight for my passion, even

against my parents. I hated schools, I didn't want to go there – and that's another subject we should talk about, because my dream is to change the education system.

There is an undeniable connection between education and the possibilities for participating in cultural life and in society. What would you like to change in the education system?

I think the education system has not been proven or developed much in the last hundreds of years. It has more or less stayed the same. The way I want to change it is to increase practice and integrate interactive media. "Serious games", for example, are made to teach you something. They enable you to experience and feel something, as if you have experienced it yourself and thus can change your perspective. That's what I would like to establish in schools, so that people can learn by themselves. Learning a language is a good example: I have learned English and some of my German through games – and only games. Learning a new language is pretty hard and frustrating, too, but with the games, for me, it was fun.

With games, we can have fun and learn something new – with passion, something we don't have that much of in these days, or we have lost in a way. Kids always use their tablets; they have access to everything anytime. But when they come to school, they get locked into just one subject. You can't take their freedom away. The freedom to be interested in different topics at the same time should also be part of the education system. Let's imagine an exam, where you have to beat the dragon. But it's not a dragon – it's like a test you have to take, and when you fail, you just have to retry and not wait a whole year.

Playing a video game is also a kind of cultural participation. You have the possibility to express yourself in a certain way. And also to ...

... experience and change your perspective, to live in another world. Games enable you to do impossible things. A game can take someone to hell and to heaven. So if a game can do this, why not use it for education and make it fun and learn something? Win, win, win – that's the concept!

You designed a game about your flight ...

... with the help of Causa Creations we were able to design a game about my journey.

Your journey. Did you get feedback from people telling you that they learned in the way you described above?

We wanted to change the way people are thinking about Syrians. We are humans, we are just like you. We have humor, I am a gamer – these are common interests between us. So whatever the image the player has about Syrians, here is another one. Our vision is that games are beyond fun. You can learn something new in your life; you can pick up additional skills. That's what we are looking for. With a book or a video, you can share a perspective – but a game can change it.

You live and work here in the city of Salzburg. Did you also do cultural and artistic projects in the countryside?

According to my experience, after two years in the countryside, it's less active there. After work, almost everybody wants to rest, have a beer, something to eat and watch TV. So all the projects I was involved in were in the city.

Regarding to the countryside: Hast du Ideen, wie man etwas ändern könnte?

Das ist eine schwierige Frage. Mehr aktivieren, Kontakte zwischen den Menschen ermöglichen – da würde es sicher helfen, wenn es mehr geeignete Plätze dafür gäbe. Bei *Pokémon go* zum Beispiel gab es viel Aktivität – und die Leute wollten nach draußen gehen, aktiv sein. Das ist die Kraft von Spielen.

Menschen treffen sich zufällig an Orten, wo sie sonst nicht hingehen würden?

Ja. Vielleicht sind Videospiele immer die Lösung (lacht)? Aber ganz generell sind gemeinsame Aktivitäten wichtig, zum Beispiel ist der Fußballplatz am Land ein wichtiger Treffpunkt. Ich habe gesehen, dass es bei den Leuten, die in der Stadt wohnen, und jenen am Land – also auf beiden Seiten – stereotype Vorstellungen gibt. Sie haben unterschiedliche Interessen und politische Ansichten, was okay ist. Aber man merkt, dass es oft keinen Kontakt und Austausch zwischen Stadt und Land gibt. Ich habe mich zum Beispiel mit vielen Menschen aus Wien getroffen und gesehen, dass sie über Leute vom Land immer nur in Bezug auf ihre politische Richtung reden. Ich sage immer, du musst auch verstehen, wie sie ihre Leben leben, und du musst auch die Perspektive ändern. When you live their lives, you think differently, maybe like they do. The only thing that you can do is to communicate with each other. Guys, communication, seriously! Communication is the best thing.

And don't lie to each other; be honest. If you think people should not be allowed – for example – to wear hats, just say it. Say it and maybe you will see how dumb it sounds. Or maybe you will see how smart it sounds. I think everybody should be honest and talk about everything. People sometimes can't express themselves because they are afraid of the other side, of what they think about them – but why? I don't know why many people are so polite and say "yes" even though they don't mean it.

And would you say that this is "typical" for Austria or for Salzburg, or do you mean in general?

In general, because this is how people are. There is nothing like "Austrians" or "Germans" or "Syrians" – we are all human beings. Those are just names that have been given to us – and borders. Of course there are cultural differences, but if you communicate with each other and understand each other, then there is no racism anymore. Unfortunately, at the moment there is a lot of racism in the society. Although almost everyone has access to the internet, there is still a big lack of knowledge, which in my opinion is a major cause of racism.

Where do you notice and observe racism?

Many things are not allowed to me because I was born in another country. It's like it had been my choice to be born in another country. I have passion and ideas and solutions, but often I hear that I'm not allowed to contribute them because I'm not an Austrian. "You should wait until you are Austrian and then you will be a good human being." That's racism, but nobody is noticing it. Like it doesn't exist. It was the same thing with the black people in America. Nobody was noticing it because it was normal. But when you keep talking

about it, people will notice racism because it is simply unfair. You see, Austria is now my country. It's not like I have another home country to go to.

Are there artistic and cultural projects in Salzburg that you have seen or taken part in and you found interesting, because they are open for everybody or special in a certain way?

I got, for example, invited to play at the Mozarteum theatre here in the KunstQuartier, where I had the possibility to play together with other actors. I went totally with the idea of the play and started communicating, started imagining stuff – it was amazing. There are a lot of activities in this city, but I think the problem is that people are not united here. When it's about art, we should really be united and accept all the others and share our art with the people. Unfortunately, people are getting a little bit weird and shy through the social media. Without social media, we would maybe have better communication between one another. Media like Facebook and such are great, because everything is shared and everything is easily accessible. But the Internet and texts are not enough to communicate with people. You need voice expressions, you need body language, you need eye contact. I think we should be more united and have more communication in our society. More communication, please!

Regarding to your own artistic production, what difficulties are you facing or were you facing when you arrived?

My own fears and assumed risks. But if I would have always thought about that, I never would have changed. I have a good example: I was watching a play in Salzburg, and after the play I really wished I could speak to the actress. But I was shy and had all those fears. What if she finds it weird? What if she doesn't want to talk to me? What if ...? Finally, I went there and said: "Hello, my name is Abdullah, I am a refugee. I like to act, I like to perform and I want to be involved." She said: "What else do you know?" And she was asking so she would know in which direction she wanted to lead me. I said: "I love video games and I do a lot of graphics." And the guy who was sitting beside her – her boyfriend at that moment and her husband now – was Georg Hobmeier, the founder of Causa Creations and with whom I did *Path Out*. He gave me his card and said: "Let's stay in touch." And I sent him an email.

If you go above your own fear, then you will get to the places you were always dreaming of. And if you really want to achieve your dream or to share your art then you have to take risks.

Would you regard yourself as a political artist? Do you use your art in a political way?

I don't want to put myself into one category. I don't like the question "Who are you?". It's better to ask me who I am not. I don't like to limit myself.

But if making the world a better place means being political, then yes, I am political. If trying to fix something means I am political, then yes. If trying something new in this society, which always has been firm and unalterable, like the education system, means I am political, then yes.

I would like to come back to the limitations, like money or networks, that someone might not have. They exist and are challenging ...

No, not at all, because it's possible to make money and to make connections. You just have to go above your fear and across those borders, which don't actually exist – only in your head. You have just been afraid or shy. If you go above that once, you will go above that twice und so weiter. Make up your mind first and the money will come.

But there are real borders for people who are for example physically handicapped.

No, there are not. Everybody is limited. We can't fly. Can you fly? No! I can't fly, either. In my opinion, everybody is equal. Those who are handicapped, they also have their own thing. So let's say I had an accident, and I can't move for a month. And I want to share my ideas and I want to walk – I will find a way to walk. I will have a computer in front of me and start programming and walk with it. There is no limit. In this generation, es gibt keine Ausrede.

It's just that they really have to go across those borders of being afraid or being ashamed – which I was because of my Syrian origin. I was charged the whole time with "You are nothing". Life is so painful, but if you get above that, you will get above everything again and again. Physical handicaps are no excuse – maybe mental handicaps. I don't know, I am not handicapped, so I also can't tell you. But that's how I think.

Some people would say the society and its system has to change in various ways so that different people have easier access to certain organizations, to resources, etc.

In order for society to change, we better start with ourselves. That's what I believe. I know it sounds cheesy, but if you want to change the society, change yourself first and don't force the society. Forcing is the worst thing that you can do when it comes to change.

At the symposium in last December, we talked about refugees and art and media. If you think, for example, about different artistic initiatives with refugees, what is the most problematic for you in this context?

Problematic? Maybe the stereotypes. Maybe how people here are looking at us, how they think about the word "refugee". I don't want to go to an event and show up like a stereotypical refugee because I am living my life now and I am not a refugee anymore. I have a residence at the moment, I have two jobs, I work a lot, I have learned a language – I am just a foreigner in the country and am allowed to stay here.

Would you do Path Out again?

Of course! In a way, we are trying in the game to show the people as human beings – not as refugees, not as Muslims, not from one perspective but through your own. We are human and have common interests, and when humans have common interests, they won't care if somebody is black, yellow or whatever. Everybody has a kid inside. Kids are simple and like playing together.

What are your wishes and visions when it comes to cultural participation in Salzburg and beyond?

I wish that everybody would communicate more. Try not to always put headphones in your ears. Communication is a beautiful thing. If we lose it, we lose ourselves. And if we lose ourselves – what is left? It's easy to plug someone and it's easy to ignore something. More meetings, more

communication! Let's unite; let's accept each other and be honest with each other. I think, in the future, being honest will solve a lot of things.

Thanks for the talk, Abdullah!

//Zur Person

Anita Moser

Anita Moser ist als Senior Scientist am Programmbereich Zeitgenössische Kunst & Kulturproduktion und als Geschäftsführerin des Doktoratskollegs ‚Die Künste und ihre öffentliche Wirkung: Dynamiken des Wandels‘ an der Interuniversitären Einrichtung Wissenschaft und Kunst tätig. Nach Studien der Komparatistik und Spanischen Philologie sowie im Bereich Kulturmanagement in Innsbruck und Bilbao war sie u.a. leitende Angestellte in Management, Kulturvermittlung und Öffentlichkeitsarbeit beim Festival Neuer Musik ‚Klangspuren Schwarz‘ und Geschäftsführerin der Interessenvertretung freier Tiroler Kulturinitiativen TKI. Ihre Lehr- und Forschungsschwerpunkte umfassen Kunst- und Kulturarbeit in der Migrationsgesellschaft, Ungleichheiten im Kulturbetrieb, Kulturpolitik, freie und regionale Kulturarbeit sowie (kritisches) Kulturmanagement.

Mehr Info

//Zur Person

Abdullah Karam

Abdullah Karam ist ein syrischer Grafiker und Influencer, der seit 2015 in Österreich ansässig ist. Schon während seiner Jugend im syrischen Hama war Abdullah Karam auf Portalen wie Deviant-Art als Illustrator aktiv und angesehen. Seit seiner Ankunft in Österreich macht er eine Ausbildung als IT-Techniker und nebenbei arbeitet er mit dem Illustrator Brian Main und den Entwicklern von Causa Creations an dem autobiografischen Spiel *PathOut*, das seine Flucht aus Syrien beschreibt.

Abdullah Karam is a Syrian graphic designer and influencer who has been based in Austria since 2015. Already during his youth in the Syrian Hama, Abdullah Karam was active and respected on portals such as Deviant-Art as an illustrator. Since his arrival in Austria, he is training as an IT technician while at the same time working with the illustrator Brian Main and the developers at Causa Creations on the autobiographical game *PathOut*, which describes his escape from Syria.

//Fussnoten

- * 1 *Das stark autobiografische Computerspiel über die Flucht aus Syrien ist als klassisches Rollenspiel entworfen. Einzelne Szenen werden von Abdullah Karam über Videoeinspielungen aus dem Off kommentiert. Informationen zum Spiel eine Demoversion sind hier zu finden: <https://causacreations.net/portfolio/path-out/> (letzter Zugriff: 06.09.2018)*