

# Home and Away: Travel, Art and Life as a Translator

By Don Fels

Photography by Don Fels



In a batik workshop in Java, I observed a design being made into a textile stamp.

I've been in Paris for some days, on an artist residency that will have me here for a couple of months. Newly arrived, still jet lagged, I'm not yet fully here nor am I obviously there. In such a place/non-place, I've found myself reflecting on my current state: No matter the obvious discomforts of traveling "economy" (sic), and most often not speaking the language of those in the places I land, I've been quite content to spend increasing time living and working abroad.

It's not that traveling is new to me, and I'm not going because of any lack at home. My partner and I usually travel together and have been doing so for a long time. We share a fabulous place in the beautifully wooded country and a full life in Seattle.

But increasingly I find myself accepting offers to wander off.

For years as an artist I've taken work that purposely puts me where I don't belong, nor have been socially, physically, conceptually. Recently I spent several months as an artist in residence at a water treatment facility, where I worked with the plant engineers to produce a kinetic fountain, having never previously met them nor worked with water as a

medium. This autumn I photographed ancient mosques. For a long time my work involved tracking centuries-old voyages of discoveries. The odysseys that attract me now are more internal, though they often still unfold on foreign soil. In either case, they are about crossing borders. I'm convinced that an artist's life and work is about moving ever closer to edges. These edges by necessity involve an element of danger, though fortunately usually not of a physical kind.

I can't point to a specific time when I discovered that I was fully content to be wherever I found myself. There I am on the Paris Metro happily watching several lives unfold in the carriage around me, or climbing a mountain footpath in Java with a team seeking a tall, skinny tree. The contradiction is that the more I'm in places obviously not my own, the more at peace I've learned to become.

In a foreign place, I'm basically stripped down to my capacity to look. And while much of what I see I don't, or can't, understand in objective terms, I can try to interpret or translate it. "Translate" comes from the Latin meaning "to carry across." Traveling, I bring what I see and learn across borders and doorways—physical, metaphysical, geographic and personal.



In a Javanese highland forest, on an expedition to locate the wild *Symplocos* tree (an "aluminum accumulator") for a project on the complex history of the global control and use of alum for dyeing.

Far away, I can give myself over to curiosity, what and where it brings me. And in the woods back home, I can happily weave what has returned with me into my life and my art making. So perhaps being "there" is a manner of trying to perfect seeing here.

On a walk around my newly adopted Paris neighborhood, I pass in quick succession through enclaves of Eastern European Jews and Southeast Asians, South Asians, Turks, Africans, Algerians and Kurds. It's a holiday, and people are together. Cafes are full, and

many, dressed more or less in the garb of where they once lived, are nursing some sort of liquid, looking out in a way that to me seems filled with longing.

Maybe they too are neither home nor here. Or maybe they are quite content to be in their new place, and the longing on their faces is just holiday sentimentality. Like them I am a sojourner, but maybe unlike them I have the enormous luxury of slipping in and out. This is not a privilege I take lightly. An artist's life is never easy, but however difficult, it offers the wondrous possibility of being on a long-term voyage of discovery. I think I travel to force myself to remember that I am never more nor less than what I see and what I can make of it. I, like all artists, am a translator, and home for me has become wherever I am comfortable doing the translating.

**Donald Fels** is an artist based in Fall City. He works in a variety of media and situations, collaborating broadly around the world. He is most fascinated by the convergence of ideas.

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