

Berlin 24/7: Soap and buses from Aleppo

Three buses and 5,000 pieces of soap: Berlin has employed the full scope of its open-minded nature to react to the horrors of the war in Syria. But not everyone is enthused, says DW columnist Gero Schliess.



Is this the scent of Aleppo? I wonder how a city destroyed by countless air raids and reduced to rubble can possibly smell so nice. How is it possible that this place, where people are still fighting to survive every day amid all the destruction, can carry the fragrance of lavender and olives?

Savon d'Alep – Soap of Aleppo

This exactly is the welcoming aroma that envelops me as I enter the small gallery of Benhadji & Djilali in Berlin Mitte, a somewhat heavy and sweet smell. Right in front of me, there's a little wall built of small bricks in darker shades of brown with a hole in the middle — as if a grenade had hit this wall.



DW columnist Gero Schliess

However, this is no ordinary wall. It's made of soap. Nearly 5,000 individual pieces of soap are part of this construction, each one of them square, heavy and brown.

This is brainchild of French artist Emmanuel Tussore. He tells me that the scent of Aleppo soap — savon d'Alep — is well recognized throughout France. Every last child knows it, apparently.

"I use savon d'Alep every day when I wash," he explains. This soap, however, means a lot more to him than just soap. It is the first soap ever to be invented and comes from Syria, the same place where the alphabet was invented. To Tussore, the soap represents the entire cultural legacy of civilization, and it is in stark contrast to what has been going on at the same place in recent years, namely the collapse of civilization.

A sense of melancholy overcomes me, as well as maybe a positive message. The production of soap in Aleppo had to be stopped as early as 2012 due to the civil war, but it then continued — not directly in the Syrian capital, but in the region around it and in other cities such as Latakia and Homs.

This soap from Aleppo has come to symbolize dignity. Personal hygiene is, after all, a personal matter, something essential that makes humans human.

Tussore, meanwhile, uses the soap for a host of artistic projects, not just to build walls or video installations. He also uses the soap as a replacement for marble, creating tiny sculptures out of the material to represent entire landscapes — ruins, slums and ghost towns. His work is very moving.



Tussore also carves tiny sculptures out of the soap, often resembling the ruins of Aleppo

Buses outside Brandenburg Gate

The miniature art actually moves me more than that giant spectacle of a monument erected outside the Brandenburg Gate by German-Syrian artist Manaf Halbouni. This installation — three buses standing upright like fangs, piercing the sky — is also about Aleppo. Similar buses were used as a protective wall against snipers in Aleppo.

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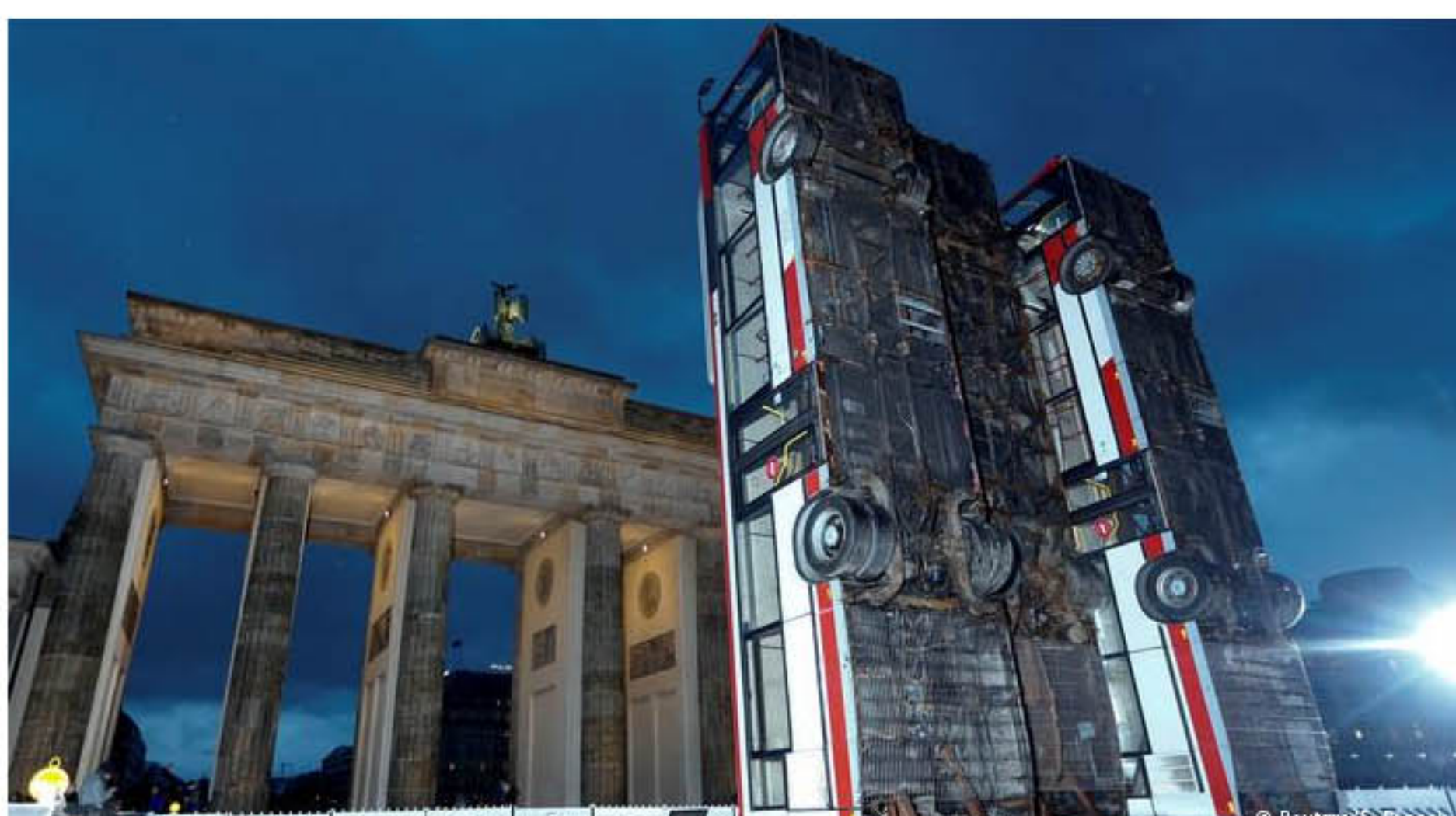
Halbouni explains that on the one side of such bus barricades, the reality of war ravaged on, while on the other, children would play on the street. He says his work is a monument against the reign of terror and a symbol of freedom, hence its title: "Monument." But some have disagreed with that interpretation, even though they may be a minority.

"These buses are nothing but a disgusting piece of propaganda in favor of terrorism! Terrorists belonging to the Ahrar Al-Sham movement used such buses to be able to torture the people of Aleppo without being stopped," a critic has written on Twitter. Voices on other social media platforms have echoed similar sentiments.

The [reactions to the buses in Berlin](#) aren't quite as extreme as the ones [witnessed in Dresden](#), when the buses were erected outside the Dresden Frauenkirche. The right-wing PEGIDA movement, which has been accused of Islamophobia, led major protests against the monument. There were even a number of death threats against Dresden's mayor.

In Berlin, however, most reactions actually came from within the left-wing. The daily newspaper *Neues Deutschland* famously referred to the memorial as "al-Qaida art."

Others on the left, however, have welcomed the erection of monument, with Berlin's regional senator for culture Klaus Lederer, a Left party politician, saying it represents the transcendent power of art. In an interview with the daily *Tagesspiegel* newspaper, Lederer said he was open to hearing divergent views on the work of art — but apparently not to the extent of it being labelled "al-Qaida art."



Manaf Halbouni's three buses have been a source of controversy in Berlin and Dresden

'Ich bin ein Berliner'

Personally, I'm proud to live in a city like Berlin that allows artists like Manaf Halbouni to have the freedom to provoke people in different ways with his work. This is something that we should all be able to tolerate.

I'm also proud that there are so many Berliners who are open-minded and compassionate. And I'm not the only one. The same day, I met a 26-year-old Syrian named Emad, who's been living here for almost two-and-a-half years. He feels welcome and accepted, so much so that he feels comfortable enough to take part in photographer Debora Ruppert's latest project "Du siehst mich" ("You see me").

Emad uses a disposable camera to provide glimpses into his daily world: his bedroom, his barber, his mailbox, where he waits to receive important mail from the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees. He's comfortable in this new environment.

I ask him what he likes most about Berlin and he replies: "Respect. People treat you with respect." And then he says another sentence that makes me feel almost as happy as Emad himself: "Ja, ich bin ein Berliner."