I arrived in Istanbul on June 1. I was lucky enough to be connected with a house of Turkish women, all students, without whom my trip would have been much more disconnected to Turkish life. I lived in a flat in Istanbul for nine weeks, with several short trips to Bursa, Altınoluk, Assos, and Troy. I stayed in Istanbul for most of the time to be able to take regular calligraphy lessons from celebrated artist Savaş Çevik.

My roommates attended the Bogazici Universitesi, and I was fortunate enough to meet artists, designers, and musicians attending their school, and artists working independently in the city. I was invited into the class critiques and formed connections with contemporary artists through this. Of note is artist Sezin Askoy, a working artist in Istanbul. I was able to meet with her, spend time in her studio and visiting galleries with her, and we plan a collaboration in the future through a project "Mind the Gap" created by a group she formed, Cont.cept (Continuous Contemporary Conceptualism).

As my main project in Istanbul, I had wanted to learn the tradition of Islamic Calligraphy, and I was lucky enough to begin this process from a well-established, well-known artist. Savaş Çevik and I met several times a week for nine weeks, and in this time he accelerated me through the normally year-long process of learning Rik’a, the ‘daily’ form of Arabic writing. Mr. Çevik himself didn’t speak Arabic, but he had learned all of the Arabic alphabets to be able to read Ottoman Turkish texts, as Arabic was the vessel through which Turkish was written until the 1920’s when Attaturk changed the alphabet to Romanized letters, keeping all of the spoken phonetic sounds the same. He taught me each letter with care to teach me the system of using noktas, or points, to measure each side, the angle of curves, each length and mark. I practiced hours each day, and by the end of the two months, I had satisfactorily completed an understanding of Rik’a.
In addition to our work in his studio, Savaş accompanied me to many museums to see work by master calligraphers, as well as introducing me to artists that he knew. I was fortunate enough to spend time with Dr. Irvin Schick, who teaches mathematics at Harvard but is from Istanbul and researches and writes extensively on Ottoman Turkish and Islamic calligraphy. He became a sort of mentor in discussing the connection with aesthetic value of the art, the socio-cultural orientation and history of the discipline, as well as what it means for a western woman with no personal connection to Islam coming to Istanbul to learn it. I was welcomed with open arms and open minds, and I will never forget the openness and kindness that was extended to me. Dr. Schick directed my viewing of calligraphy throughout the city, leading me through the collections at Topkapi palace, the Sabanci Museum, as well as several private collections of his friends, which I never would have had the pleasure of seeing without him.

By the end of my two months learning Rik’a, I began to be able to sound out various writings I saw in public, although not completely, as these writings, mostly carvings in stone on public monuments, public fountains, and burial sites, were written some time ago and were in a slightly different form of Arabic. Mr. Çevik encouraged me to do my best to sound out the words, and furthered this through my next level of study, which was to buy a book with Arabic written in Nesih form, which I translated into Rik’a. This was a challenge because of the triad of systems in play; I learned a new alphabet to sound out writings in yet another language (Turkish), which I was slowly learning in Romanized form. But to have an inside look into the daily, functional usage of a language used to form something I had seen as a beautiful figurative form (the calligraphic compositions) was fascinating and humanizing. It worked as the stepping stone I hoped it was to gain meaning and access to the calligraphic compositions I was studying across the city. Savaş Çevik taught me how to read these forms, as well as the ways in which artists often distorted the letters to make a composition that flowed; they were read from bottom right to top left. By the end of the summer, I had the skills to begin to make sense of them.
Image from a mosque in Bursa, repeating the letter “vav” which is also used to represent Allah.

Also from Bursa, this image also mirrors “vav.” Forms were often mirrored and formed into perfect symmetry; I was told by Mr. Çevik and Dr. Schick that this easily represents the perfection of Allah; it is also done simply for its beauty.
After I witnessed the “click” of understanding this new alphabet, the city became a treasure hunt for new texts to attempt to read. I became fixated with the city’s public water fountains, with the texts that accompany them, usually texts wishing well for the people as well as exalting the grace of God. (*Note: I am nowhere near fluency in reading Arabic! I did experience a heightened ability in recognizing and reading letters, but I only translated these texts with the help of my teacher.) Public water fountains (called a Çesme, “chess-may”) took on a new interest for me, as a combined place for monumentalism, public water use, and water as a community center. I started to notice how most of these fountains were now out of use, re-appropriated for many other uses within the city. Often people would be selling water bottles or souvenirs for tourists while perched on a large dry marble fountain. I began documenting them.

A man selling souvenirs, a new venue for a store.
A restaurant

Or they had just been left as a now-defunct artifact of the past.
This exquisite fountain had one of four faucets still working.

Most that were still in use were in areas of high traffic, here in the Grand Bazaar.

I had made connections with the artist residency Caravansarai, where I was planning to do a short artist’s residency. However the directors regretfully informed me upon my arrival that the construction they had hoped would be done by the summer, was not. While I was disappointed then, room was serendipitously made in my summer for an unexpectedly deep and meaningful relationship with Turkish music, moreso than I could have hoped for.

I was fortunate enough to make connections with several Turkish musicians. I found a musician who gave me lessons in Turkish-style violin playing. I also played with a musician who taught me the basics of the Oud, and also showed me around the traditional instrument ‘Kanun,’ which looked like a harp that is laid down on one’s lap.
But my deepest and most fulfilled musical connection was with artist, designer, and musician Tolga Cokdeger. We collaborated on several original songs, most of which drew on Turkish traditional beats which he introduced me to, our own contemporary inspirations, and field recordings I did in the city, mostly of the Bosphorus Strait. The main song we ended up with was in 9/8, or the 4.5 beat that one hears in Traditional Turkish music. He also took me to various shows and opened my eyes to Turkish music. Tolga and I played a small performance of our music at the end of our summer.

Building off of an animation I did of the Huron River, I planned to do a “musical portrait” of the Bosphorus. I had taken field recordings up and down both sides of the strait, which were put to use in the songs we made. I am also using maps and statistical information about the water in the Bosphorus to make an animation using sound constructed from the information I collected. I am forever thankful to Tolga for the feedback and collaboration we shared.

Tolga and myself recording in Gülhane Parkı.

Bosphorus at night, looking at Asian side, and bridge crossing from Europe to Asia.