

The Communicative Ecology of Artist Rights

Sidd Joag, New York City
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Even as the relationship between the fields of arts, culture and human rights becomes more defined, the global community of organizations, networks and civil society initiatives working at that intersection, advocating for artists and defending free expression remains a relatively small, tight-knit group. However, despite existing connectivity, there is a need for more streamlined news and information loops, partnered content generation, and collective case management for artists at risk.

Thinking of these various connections and the question of how to enhance the efficacy of coalition-based advocacy efforts, the concept of a communicative ecology emerged — a space where these wide-ranging advocacy and community organizing processes could be woven together within a framework of dynamic artistic and journalistic production. This thinking is reflective of my own convergent interests as a visual artist, journalist and community organizer.

After 15 years working on arts-based community organizing projects in New York, India, and China, the importance of fluid, cross-sector, interdisciplinary collaboration in social justice work has become paramount. In 2011, I began working at freeDimensional, providing case management services and developing programs to strengthen regional support networks for artists, culture workers and communicators facing risk. Alongside Todd Lanier Lester and Mary Ann DeVlieg, our small team of thought leaders in defence of free expression was able to make a significant impact on the artist residency field and inform the development of several initiatives on artist safety. Here are some examples:

- [Analyzing the Art of Resistance](#) by Mary Ann DeVlieg
- [Video: Art for Art's Sake?](#) by Mary Ann DeVlieg
- [Looking Back on Charlie Hebdo](#) by Todd Lanier Lester

Over its decade of work, freeDimensional supported over 200 artists and journalists from 35 countries. It is this vast accumulation of knowledge on artist rights, artist safety, and freedom of expression that are the building blocks of its new iteration [ArtistSafety.net](#), “a volunteer support network for artists and organizations on the frontlines of social change.” I’ll explain this in more detail shortly, but first a little more context.

Recently, ArtsEverywhere brought me on board to help develop the [Artist Rights](#) band of content. This is when the idea of a communicative ecology began to take shape.

Practically, artist rights are protections that enhance the ability of artists to create freely without losing their job, facing censorship, or being threatened, attacked, imprisoned,

and/or displaced.

Theoretically, the Artist Rights band on ArtsEverywhere considers the critical roles artists play in society in relation to their mobility, free expression, safety, and labor conditions.

As such, the Artists Rights band on the ArtsEverywhere platform is becoming a repository for news and information resources providing up-to-date, on-the-ground coverage of, and support for, artists, culture workers and communicators defending human rights and advancing social justice globally. This includes articles, interviews, reports, online discussions, and documented fieldwork.

ArtsEverywhere works in tandem with ArtistSafety.net to collect and assemble creative projects, critical news, information resources, and services by/for/about people taking great risks to voice the concerns of their communities and catalyze positive change in areas of political instability and conflict.

For instance, in 2015, I traveled to Nicaragua for a regional meeting of artists, culture workers, and human rights defenders hosted by [Hivos – Actors for Change](#), a regional civil society network. The meeting was the conclusion to a [two-year initiative](#) — designed and facilitated by freeDimensional — to empower artists, culture workers, and communicators doing courageous work in the face of threats and violence from gangs, politicians, and police.

At the meeting I was introduced to a graphic journalist, German Andino. Following the meeting, I traveled to San Pedro Sula, Honduras. For two years, German had been documenting Rivera Hernandez, which at the time was the most violent neighborhood in the world. Working alongside community leader Pastor Pecheco, German interviewed gang members, sketching their portraits (to circumvent using a camera), and drafting a graphic novel on gang violence in the country.



Upon returning to New York City, I wrote a piece about the experience for the World Policy Institute's Arts-Policy Nexus published in partnership with ArtsEverywhere: <http://www.worldpolicy.org/blog/2015/09/17/art-ethnography-and-exorcism-el-barrio>

German and I continued to talk about our desire and the need for innovative, multi-format, investigative, trans-media reportage. It is from here that the idea of Responsive Reporting as an integral part of the *Artist Rights* band emerged — a means to incubate teams of artists and journalists to collaborate on deep dive stories that would focus on where arts, culture, social justice, and human rights intersected with the realities of neglected and underreported communities. As a start we published German’s graphic novel, *Honduras: The Habit of Silence*, on ArtsEverywhere.

Similarly, in 2013, I traveled through Southeast Asia with the Indonesian artist Arahmaiani, to conduct research for freeDimensional on threats to free expression in the region. Arahmaiani, whose controversial visuals and performance have resulted in her being forced into exile on more than one occasion, was uniquely qualified to act as a guide. We met with and interviewed artists, journalists, and activists in Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and China, resulting in a field report on free expression and cultural rights in the region.

A few months ago, Arahmaiani sent me an essay she drafted on Muslim fundamentalists, the anti-LGBTQ movement in Indonesia, and the threats to free expression. Seeing the connection between her writing and the direction *Artist Rights* was taking, we commissioned this “dispatch” for the website:

<http://artseverywhere.ca/2016/09/13/rejecting-the-tragedy-of-violence/>



Anti-LGBT protest in Yogyakarta 2016. Photo credit: Arahmaiani

German and Arahmaiani are just two of many examples of how collaborations in the field can lead to long term partnerships in generating content and impactful ways of sharing news and information. Sometimes, this can also happen via the case management process. For instance, several weeks ago, Todd and I, under the banner of ArtistSafety.net, were approached to help troubleshoot the case of exiled Iranian filmmaker, Emad Tayefeh. While working on a film about Iranian dissidents, he was imprisoned and tortured on

several occasions. In 2015, he fled to Turkey and then made his way to New York City under humanitarian parole status in July of this year.



When I met with Emad to discuss his situation we created a strategy and budget for his relocation. We prepared an application for an emergency grant from [Protect Defenders](#). He shared with me his experience of living as a refugee in Istanbul and the dire situation in particular for women who were forced to flee Iran, Iraq, and Syria. I took the opportunity to interview Emad for a series of profiles of displaced artists and journalists that will be co-published by the [World Policy Institute](#) and the [Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma](#). Herein lies the connection we are building between Responsive Reporting and the process of community resource mapping.

<http://artseverywhere.ca/2016/11/29/relocating-emad-tayefeh/>

In 2017, Arahmaiani, German and Emad, along with others will participate in an ArtsEverywhere online roundtable (similar to one I participated in [earlier this year](#)) on censorship, further weaving together the threads of a communicative ecology of *Artist Rights*. The centerpiece of this discussion will be a report on funders, controversy, and censorship that I produced as a consultant for the [National Coalition Against Censorship's Arts Advocacy Project](#). Funders who participated in the research process will be invited as observers to learn from the experiences of practitioners in the field. In this way content can lead to conversation and then to action and vice versa.

Coincidentally, we were approached by colleagues from two organizations in Turkey, [Siyah Bant](#) and [Anadolu Kultur](#), expressing the need for “rapid response reports” in unfolding situations of political unrest and conflict, and in particular where artists and journalists were under threat. We used this opportunity to give more dimension to the idea of Responsive Reporting, acting as the newsroom for *Artist Rights*, producing interview based profiles, rapid response/field reports, partnered content, and long form multimedia journalism. The first rapid response report from Turkey will be completed in the first quarter of 2017.

In addition to populating the repository of Artist Rights, content produced through Responsive Reporting will be absorbed into the *Artist [Safe] Spaces Curriculum* for cultural and civil society spaces committed to hosting displaced artists, which is currently being developed by ArtistSafety.net along with [Al Mawred – Culture Resource](#). After a six-month discursive process of working with art and other civil society spaces, as well as cultural agents in communities like Hildesheim, New York City, São Paulo, Woody Point, and others around the world, the *Artist [Safe] Spaces Curriculum* will be made available on *Artist Rights*.

On one hand course material will be sourced from Artist Rights, while on the other we imagine the learning cohort of 15-20 organizations as potential “newsrooms,” providing news and information from the field, in different regions, in real time.

The Curriculum will be one of the building blocks of the *Arts Rights Justice Academy*, which will be announced at the 2016 Malmö Safe Havens Meeting, and officially launches in Summer 2017 at the University of Hildesheim, which holds a UNESCO chair in cultural policy. As with Artist Rights, the Academy benefits from the 10 years of freeDimensional’s practice and learning, the archive of which has been transferred to the university in perpetuity. You can expect an update on the development of the *Artist [Safe] Spaces Curriculum* once the cohort has been established and the process is in action early in 2017.

This broadens the scope of Artist Rights as communicative ecology, establishing an expansive, symbiotic relationship between knowledge and experience, production and practice. The curriculum then becomes a unique pedagogical model that transposes these multi-directional relationships into a virtual research platform, where participants serve as contributors, interviews/profiles serve as case studies, and Responsive Reporting generates new course material for the continued transference of knowledge between initiatives in the field such as the aforementioned Academy.

We see Artist Rights and ArtistSafety.net as complementary efforts working to support the critical roles artists play in society

In December, ArtistSafety.net will host a workshop on Artist Rights at the Malmö Safe Havens Meeting. Representatives of several partner organizations (and new colleagues) will participate in the workshop including: [PEN’s Artists at Risk Coalition](#), [Artistic Freedom Initiative](#), [Artist Protection Fund](#), [ArtsFreedom.org](#), [International Cities of Refuge Network](#) and the [University of Hildesheim](#) and other members of the Academy steering committee. The objective of the workshop is to streamline partnerships and working methods to strengthen our efforts as an international community committed to defending free expression.

Following Malmö, Todd and I will present at a workshop on artist residencies at the University of Hildesheim. We will test some ideas for the design of the *Artist [Safe] Spaces Curriculum* with a group of arts organizations from Hildesheim, an anchoring point for the global cohort of spaces co-creating the curriculum. These specialist meetings are opportunities to gather feedback on the overall development, and processes by which Artist Rights generates content, culminating in resources like the *Artist [Safe] Spaces Curriculum*.

We expect that Artist Rights will go into full swing by the middle of January 2017. We see *Artist Rights* and ArtistSafety.net as complementary efforts working to support the critical roles artists play in society, and to amplify their voices on issues that affect them such as mobility, free expression, safety, and labor conditions. While I have pointed to a few ways that ArtistSafety.net deliberately generates content from the intersection of arts, culture, social justice, and human rights, we understand the need to allow for some organic growth of *Artist Rights*, and will be providing an updated “roadmap” as new developments unfold.

This is an important moment in our field, defined by terrifying realities — violent conflict, violation of rights, and mass displacement — that require innovation and collaboration for us to deal with them. As we witness artists and journalists increasingly become targets of suppression and violence, we must both refine and expand our efforts to generate solutions. We envision *Artist Rights* as a resource for the field, serving as a generative platform for advocacy and organizing around free expression and human rights. To this end we welcome any and all feedback and will be actively seeking out new partnerships while deepening existing relationships.

Onwards.



Sidd Joag

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