

Artists as Rights Defenders – a brief on regional tactics

A concept note based on Wasan 2011 discussions commissioned by freeDimensional

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“While human rights are norms with claims of universal applicability, their eventual meaning and content is determined by the context of power relations. ...Certain kinds of exclusions will always be...underplayed for reasons of the interests of dominant groups. Coexistence of ‘universal’ claims of rights with blatant practices of gender discrimination across the social settings; colonialism; slavery; and systematic discrimination based on caste, race and religion represent this quandary.”²

Purpose

fD’s workshop with cultural workers from four different regions on Wasan Island in July 2011 highlighted some key concerns regarding the development of a global network led by regional hubs. This concept note outlines themes that came out of those discussions as well as a conversation with members of Theatre without Borders. It concludes with possible ways to frame medium and long-term strategies to address arts and human rights concerns.

Zones and causes of conflict

During the Wasan workshops, perspectives from Central and Latin America, Middle East, Central Asia, South and Southeast Asia participants highlight the contestations and contradictions imbedded in the dynamics between artists and political, cultural, and social contexts in which they work.

In North America and Europe, where high-income countries have solid histories of public support for the arts, cultural workers enjoy higher degrees of transparency as well as legal frameworks such as copyrights and freedom of access and travel. In other regions, however, the state is virtually absent, or regarded as a menacing force towards independent artists and cultural workers.

- Participants from Africa felt that totalitarian regimes represent a major source of conflict that puts artists and cultural workers in danger.
- In certain parts of Central and Latin America, artists who work in communities wrecked by violence become targets of assassination by drug cartels or military death squads; in addition, cultural survival is also a dominant concern with indigenous groups.
- South and Southeast Asian practitioners see communal violence, post-colonial conditions, and global capital putting significant pressures on independent arts workers.

Aside from a North-South divide in terms of inequity of resources and access, a number of workshop participants propose that hegemony maybe an appropriate overarching term to describe a range of direct and indirect ideological, social, cultural, and economic domination by institutions, whether it is the state, a regional or an international entity, or corporations. Hegemony could also be internalized by community

¹ Thanks to Kayhan Irani for her comments. This draft is based on impressions from the workshops, thus need to be verified with notes taken by other participants from Wasan 2011.

² Ranjit Bhaskar, “Human Rights and the UN – A convergence of ideas,” *Al Jazeera Online*, Dec 15, 2008. <http://english.aljazeera.net/focus/humanrightsun/2008/12/2008121014247782135.html>

members themselves as the arts establishments are also guilty of ostracizing its members. This may be accomplished by using proxies, such as denial of performance/exhibition opportunities based on commercial, elitist, or ideological reasons. While the state is often the culprit of censorship, physical threats and extrajudicial killings, the exercise of power is more effective if applied randomly as perceived threat often strike fear and insecurity throughout the targeted communities. These are the less visible aspects of the context of artists in danger.

Establishing frameworks for interventions

Ostensibly, a single framework could not address the obstacles that artists and cultural workers face in their practices. Some artists operate in an international or regional circuit of biennales, festivals, exhibitions, and residencies while others are grounded within a social movement imbedded in their communities. Each would have different types of resources to draw from when confronted with censorship, threats, physical violence, imprisonment, or death.

Normative frameworks such as a universal declaration of human rights have increasingly become empty rhetoric when invoked without means for enforcement. A number of national states of the Global North have deplorable track records in racist policies and human rights violations in the name of “war on terror” or “war on drugs.” This is exacerbated by either flat out denial of visas for foreign artists or long-drawn out asylum processes for refugees.

On the other hand, the application of a human rights-frame in the Global South inevitably falls short where there is limited local governance,³ especially when the state is a perpetrator of violence towards its own citizens.

Given this varied and contested terrain in the intersection of human rights and the arts, below are some ways to map the concepts and networks that might turn temporary tactics into medium to long-term strategies to assist artists in distress.

Mobility, Safety, and Emergencies

Safety is paramount when arts and cultural workers are faced with physical threats or even perceived threats.

A model: fD has been developing a flexible mechanism to help individual artists move to safer locations either within a country or outside. The **Creative Safe Haven** model matches individual artists with arts/writers residencies around the world. While residencies are often temporary, they allow individuals additional time to prioritize their needs and expand a support network. This model requires a solid commitment from a network of artists/writers residencies as well as funds for visa and travel.

Limitations: The length of stay and guidelines of residency hosts vary greatly. Residencies are often prestigious venues where artists build on their résumés, thus they often do not have space for more than one individual at a time. Moreover, spaces are not often available year round, and they are usually offered to established artists with a solid track record of exhibitions/publications/performances. When confronted with artists suffering from trauma of

³ According to UNESCAP, governance can be defined as “is the process of decision-making and the process by which decisions are implemented, an analysis of governance focuses on the formal and informal actors involved in decision-making and implementing the decisions made and the formal and informal structures that have been set in place to arrive at and implement the decision.” <http://www.unescap.org/pdd/prs/ProjectActivities/Ongoing/gg/governance.asp>

displacement or physical danger, many residencies do not have the capacity to provide psycho-social support.

Modification: In order to address the multi-dimensional needs of artists who are displaced/in distress, a **Triage Team** model supplements the residency placement model. It leverages a wider network of human rights defenders and social service providers for resettlement, livelihood, psychosocial services, and support for asylum applications, etc. The model not only relies on a network of people with contextual knowledge and legal options, but also emergency funds for travel, food, housing, and psychosocial support. This model is still under development.

Arts networks as partners/beneficiary: Under the rubric of ‘cultural diplomacy’ and ‘peace building,’ artists from Europe and United States are increasingly offered opportunities to perform or collaborate with artists from the Global South, especially from conflict regions and fragile states.⁴ Theatre without Borders (TWB), a volunteer organization made up of individuals in the American theatre community who regularly participate in festivals and touring performances, points out that their members are increasingly confronted with situations where their counterparts in the Global South become subjects of persecution, while others are displaced as refugees. TWB finds itself unprepared to respond in crisis situations, such as providing assistance in evacuation, airfare, and visas. Due to their lack of experience working with human right tools, TWB has expressed interest in technical advice and assistance.

Building Solidarity with Communitarian Arts Practitioners

Often less visible to the global arts community, the practice of communitarian artists, more widespread in Central and Latin American countries, focuses on conscientization of structural inequalities such as class, political participation, and social transformation (i.e. freedom from drugs, violence, and other oppressive situations). Many of these artists come from marginalized communities such as the indigenous population and work as collectives. In Guatemala City for example, artists from the Caja Lúdica, who help youngsters, including gang members, discover a sense of purpose and self-worth through artistic activities such as drama, dance, and acrobatics became targets of assassination in the last few years.⁵

Models: Theatre of the Oppressed and other dialogical arts practices have been addressing roots of conflicts in communities in need of peace and reconciliation whether it is in marginalized communities in the Global North or in the South. The potentials of these models to catalyze profound changes within communities are marginalized in an art world sustained by capitalistic transactions and notions of individual artistic achievements.

South-South connections: During one of the many informal discussions, Amir Azraqi, an Iraqi drama professor from Basra, says that cultural workers often do not want interventions sponsored by Europe or United States because they are seen negatively as imperialistic presence. It is apparent that there is a dire need for genuine and substantive South-South exchange of communitarian arts practices in areas of conflict and persistent inequality.

⁴ This policy is obviously fraught with contradictions. Yet the US State Department has increased its budget for cultural diplomacy from \$1.6 million in 2001 to \$11.75 million in 2010, according to Theatre without Borders.

<http://www.theatrewithoutborders.com/node/1811>

⁵ On 2 February 2011, youth leader from Caja Lúdica, Victor Leiva, was shot dead. Previously, in 2009, 3 members of Caja Lúdica were shot dead within 60 days. See “Partner member shot dead in Guatemala,”

<http://www.christianaid.org.uk/whatwedo/partnerfocus/caja-ludica-member-shot.aspx>; “Matan a artistas del grupo Caja Lúdica,” <http://www.elperiodico.com.gt/es/20090603/pais/102630>. For historical context, see http://miamericas.info/2009/08/23/caja-ludica_rabinal/

There are many tactics that have been tried, failed, while others have worked in mobilizing a global network to address human rights and the arts. Certain tactics prove successful only in specific contexts and scales. For the time being, targeted investments to provide safety nets for artists working in the frontlines of conflict through strengthening of specific networks might be the best option for medium and long-term strategies in the field.

Knowledge and practice transfer and a “Living Document”

Recognition of the plurality and different scales of impact by artists as rights defenders might be one of the first steps to bring the field into focus.

Not all arts communities have broadband Internet access. Moreover, communities in greatest needs do not transfer their practices through lengthy printed documents but through popular education activities and visual media. For decades, grassroots organizations such as Slum Dwellers International and women’s movement have transferred their insights and practices through network building, training of trainers, and demonstration projects. These strategies give local leaders the flexibility to adapt appropriate tactics for their own communities rather than having a manual delivered from the top.

Future projects to develop a “living document” as a compendium of strategies and tactics of artists as rights defenders must be mindful of its target audience and the context in which the document would be used and updated. It needs to go hand-in-hand with person-to-person and network-to-network exchanges, evident from results of a charette on mechanisms for knowledge transfer by Wasan participants. As Shawn Van Sluys from Musagetes observes: the knowledge mechanisms presentation shows that we need to re-orient ourselves from a digital mode back to an analog one.