

Arts, Cultural  
Organizing, and  
Social Change

Middle East  
and North Africa



American  
Friends  
Service  
Committee

VOLUME 1

# AFSC AN ASSEMBLY REPORT





# AFSC RESEARCH PAPER



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## THANKS & RECOGNITION

What follows in these pages is the result of a year of research, in-person convenings, and deep listening to a network of artists and cultural practitioners who are steadfast in their commitment to excellence in the arts, exchange, and social justice.

In 2020 and 2021 colleagues from the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) came together to envision a line of work that would enable us to expand our understanding of a topic that excited us. Our two convenings—held in Casablanca, Morocco (June 2022), and Amman, Jordan (January 2023)—were remarkable not only because of the exceptional group of artists and changemakers that we assembled. As the world was emerging from the pandemic, there was a thrilling and inspirational joy to being together. The result was “The Power of Cultural Organizing in the MENA Region: A Dialogue and Exchange for Artists and Activists.”

Because of the AFSC’s long-standing presence in the Middle East, we have continued to reinvent ourselves and approach our work with an innovative spirit while remaining steadfast in our goal to end the occupation of Palestine; support humanitarian needs of refugees throughout the region, including in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Palestine; and, increasingly, seek solutions to the climate crisis in the region. This constant state of reflection and change is very much the creative spirit that we sought to explore as part of this project. We do this all while ensuring that we stay close to and elevate community voices. In the face of these barriers, art and culture remain essential to ensure that identities and history are not erased as we make progress on our important initiatives.

There were significant barriers that made this project difficult. They included restrictions on visas, the coronavirus pandemic, costs and difficulty of travel, personal and family obligations, and other bureaucratic challenges. Over the course of the year, we all became keenly aware of the particular courage of the group we assembled. As artists and activists we also face our own real fears and the risks that we take as we find different ways to engage our communities in important interventions related to justice, equality, and human rights.

This research publication, our two convenings, and other related content were made possible in part by the generosity of Brot für die Welt and Quäker Hilfe-Stiftung, foundations based in Berlin, and of individual supporters of the AFSC.

I also want to give thanks to our advisory board member Moukhtar Kocache and my colleague Khaled Elkhoulz, who, along with the Middle East Regional team, worked to envision this program; our Morocco event producer, Abdelsamee Abdallah Abouelhamd; our Jordan event producer, facilitator, and lead researcher, Jude Sajdi; our podcast producers, Marisa Mazria Katz and Robert Bound; our designer, Andrew Breitenberg, and editor, Karen Jacobson; and our exceptional colleagues Jennifer Bing, Bilal Olimat, Samanta Covic, Marianne Elias, Saif Atari, Ruba Ja’fra, and Safwat Shibly.

Jason P. Drucker  
Associate General Secretary, Advancement  
American Friends Service Committee



## PREFACE

We face a crisis of imagination and possibility across the world.

A decade after the Arab Spring brought hope for transformative change, the conflicts, economic pressures, and repressive forces that inspired these people-powered actions have endured, worsened, or been replaced by dynamics that are often no less harmful. Many people, and particularly many in the historically large youth and young adult group, see little reason to believe that a better future is possible, much less on its way. Moreover, the recent coronavirus pandemic not only disrupted lives, communities, and businesses around the world, but it also had a deep impact on the cultural ecosystem.

At the same time, the crisis further revealed the importance of arts and culture for people as a major resource for resilience, connection, and mental wellness, all of which give people hope that a better future is possible.

Hope is at the heart of any effective movement for social change. It is the catalyst for action, the force that unites people across different backgrounds and philosophies, and the antidote to feelings of desperation that inevitably emerge in the face of growing authoritarianism, corruption, and economic or social dysfunction. Without that hope, young people become more susceptible to social malaise and disengaged from social action.

The wave of renewed and increased censorship that emerged in the wake of the Arab Spring and heightened during COVID-19 was in part designed to curb the spread of information that was driving organizing and to set limits to mobilization. It was also designed to quash the kinds of creativity and self-expression that spread powerful ideas, help people imagine a better future, and encourage young people to see a role for themselves in creating that future.

Though this repression has been severe, it has been unable to extinguish the spark of inspiration. The arts in fact have often been an essential and positive unifying force, especially in places and times of hardship. Many creative voices and platforms have emerged throughout the Levant and North Africa in the past decade, including artists working in the region and those in diaspora in Europe and the United States whose work is inextricably tied to their Middle Eastern identities.



We are grateful to the artists, culture makers, philanthropists, activists, and others who helped make this publication and its insights possible. The ideas contained within show that hope and possibility are very much alive.

Khaled Elkhouz  
Middle East Regional Director  
American Friends Service Committee

In 2011 Tunisia's president, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, was forced to flee his country after the people of Tunisia took to the streets and erupted in protest. This inspired a wave of revolts across the Arab world as people rose up to protest authoritarianism, corruption, and poverty. Massive protests that swept Egypt for weeks also forced the Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak, from office. This event resonated from North Africa to the Levant and the Gulf. By late 2011 new governments were being negotiated in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Yemen, and Syria entered a full-blown civil war.<sup>1</sup>

Since the Arab Spring, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has been facing a complex set of interconnected and dynamic challenges, including the biggest displacement crisis since World War II. Due to protracted instability in Syria, Libya, Iraq, and Yemen, most countries in the region remain "countries of destination, origin, or transit for population movements."<sup>2</sup> While the MENA represents only 5% of the global population, it currently accounts for 40% of global displacement. This large-scale forced displacement is taking place against the backdrop of rising poverty and unemployment and severely overstretched essential services, resulting in rising social tensions.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the MENA region witnessed other major events, such as the continued Israeli occupation of Palestine and military attacks on Gaza in 2014 and 2021, the economic collapse in Lebanon, and the subsequent explosion in the Port of Beirut.

In the wake of the Arab Spring, a wave of renewed and increased censorship emerged, placing pressure on democracy and political and civil liberties. This came in the form of legislation and regulations that enhanced censorship and maintained the status quo. This was also heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic and emergency laws that have been put in place. In fact, the "Freedom in the World 2021" report marked the 15th consecutive year of decline in global freedom. Between 2013 and 2021 the overall freedom scores have been declining in most MENA countries, except for Tunisia, which is the only country that earned a status of "free," with a total score of 71, in 2021.<sup>4</sup>

Examples of declining freedoms in the MENA include shutting down protests and dissolving the Teachers' Syndicate in Jordan, the silencing of independent journalists and civil society activists in Egypt, the collapse of the political administration in Lebanon, and the crackdown on social media commentators, artists, and journalists critical of the monarchy in Morocco.<sup>5</sup>

Despite this hardship and insecurity, the last decade also has seen a rise in creative activity and expression in the region, as artists, writers, musicians, dancers, and other creative people produced important works that address timely social issues such as war, displacement, occupation, discrimination, and marginalization. It is exactly in times of turmoil that the arts are needed for people to make sense of their lived reality, to know who they are, and to imagine a better future. Just as people need the arts, democracy needs the arts too: "The arts animate civil society. They stretch our imagination. They increase our compassion for others by providing creative ways for us to understand and deal with differences. The arts protect and enrich the liberty, the human dignity and the public discourse that are at the heart of a healthy democracy."<sup>6</sup>

This research, commissioned by the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and conducted by Sama Consulting, aims to map out the most relevant artistic and cultural practices in the MENA today and investigate links between the arts, culture, and social change. The research is based on a thorough review of the literature on these topics. Additionally, seven key informant interviews with artists, experts, and leaders in the field of the arts and social mobilizing were conducted. Interviews were semi-structured, allowing artists and experts to elaborate on their fields of expertise and experiences, and were conducted virtually in April 2022.

The report is divided into six sections. Section 1 provides definitions of the key concepts explored in the research. Section 2 presents a brief overview of the role of the arts in creating social change, drawing evidence from around the world. Section 3 outlines the main findings of the research, including the role of the arts in creating social change in the MENA, presenting examples from relevant artistic and cultural practices. Section 4 outlines the main discussion points by making links between the key concepts. Section 5 outlines the challenges facing artists and organizations and the available resources in the sector. Finally, Section 6 presents some preliminary conclusions and recommendations.



Protest demanding a stop to military rule in Cairo,  
Egypt, November 21, 2011.  
Courtesy of: iStock



# 1

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Social change is inevitable and ubiquitous; it is not tied to one society or time frame. There is a broad literature exploring the potential of the arts and culture to create change, drawing examples from different countries and time periods.

## PART ONE

# DEFINING THE CONCEPTS



Photo: Mashrou Leila  
Courtesy of: Guillaume Souvant/Gettyimages



### SOCIAL CHANGE

While “society” is an abstract concept, it is universally agreed upon that society is built upon “certain norms, rules, and traditions that maintain social order and stability.” These norms and rules are socially constructed. They develop gradually and are subject to change depending on the individuals and communities that make up society.<sup>7</sup>

Over the years sociologists have developed different definitions of social change and theories to help understand it. Social change can be understood as “the alterations of mechanisms within the social structure, characterized by changes in cultural symbols, rules of behavior, social organizations, or value systems.”<sup>8</sup>

Social change is inevitable and ubiquitous; it is not tied to one society or time frame. Societies are never static; they are continuously changing, although the direction, cause, and rate of change may vary from time to time.<sup>9</sup>

There are several factors that result in social change, such as demographic factors (often relating to population growth and migration), cultural factors, and technological factors, as well as social conflict resulting from inequality, racism, and other forms of discrimination.<sup>10</sup>

### ARTS AND CULTURE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

There is a broad literature exploring the potential of the arts and culture to create change, drawing examples from different countries and time periods. Culture and the arts are described as “essential means by which all people explain their experiences, shape their identity

and imagine the future. In their constancy and their variety, culture and the arts allow us to explore our individual humanity, and to see our society whole.”<sup>11</sup>


Borstel and Korza defined arts for change as “an umbrella term that refers to artistic and cultural processes, products, and practices geared to progressive and positive change including justice, civic engagement, and community development.”<sup>12</sup> In this definition, artistic and cultural processes, products, and practices are explicitly geared toward change.

Another definition, by the Canadian Art for Social Change (ASCI!) project, emphasizes engagement: “Art for social change engages the members of an identified community using creative imagination and expression, to work out identity, shared values, and aspirations. It is hoped that participation in this kind of creative engagement would...help people to find new ways to see and be engaged in the world.”<sup>13</sup>

Experts from diverse cultural identities, geographies, and professional disciplines, brought together by the Salzburg Global Seminar in 2021, discussed the transformative potential of creative work in bringing about change, as outlined in the diagram.<sup>14</sup>

### CULTURAL ORGANIZING

The term “cultural organizing” appeared in writing about activism and social movements in the 20th century. It was later used by individuals and organizations working at the intersection of art, cultural work, and social change. The growing interest in cultural organizing has led to an increase in efforts to define and theorize it.<sup>15</sup>

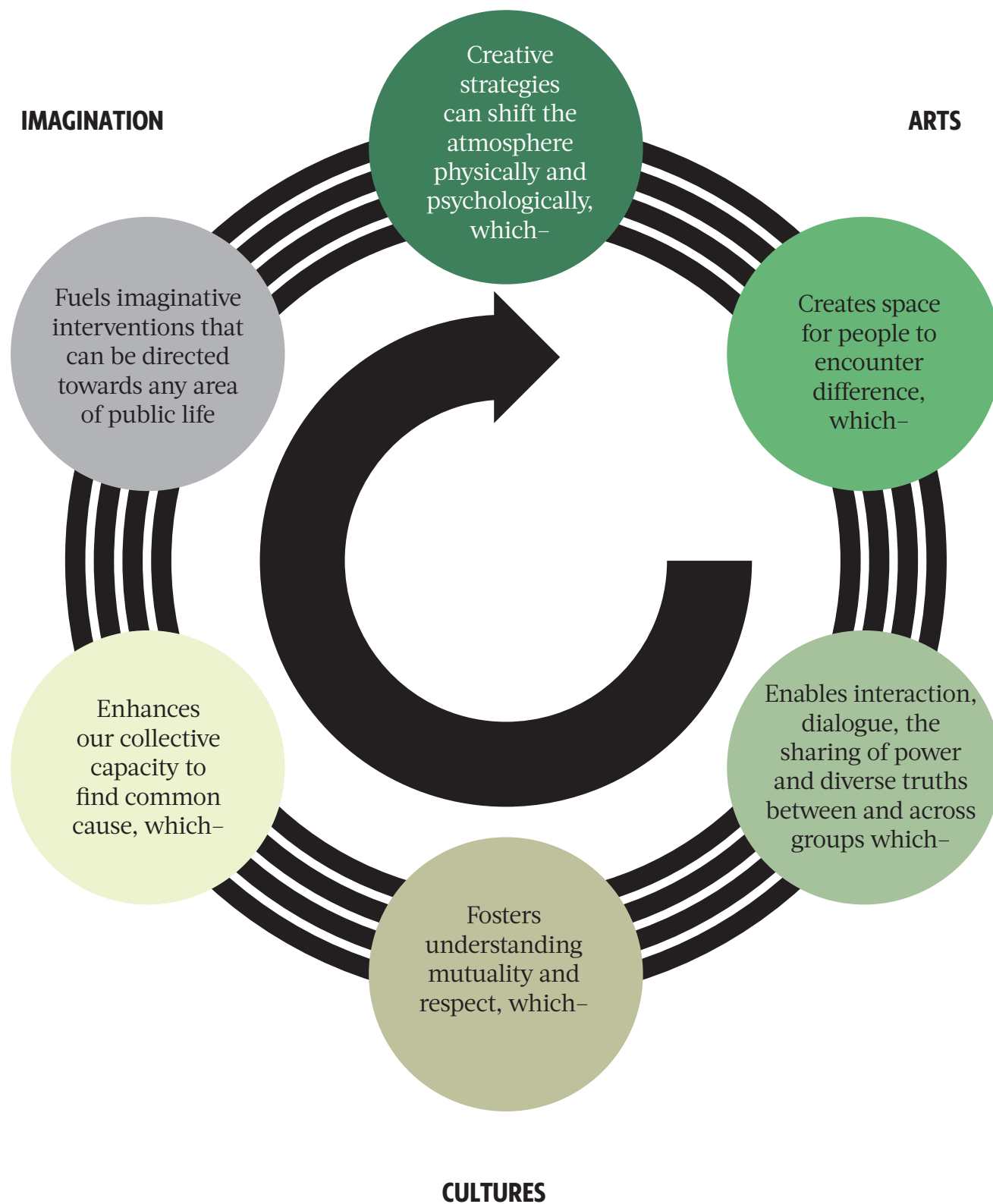


“Cultural organizing exists at the intersection of art and activism. It is a fluid and dynamic practice that is understood and expressed in a variety of ways.”

In 2011 the Arts and Democracy Project (a project of a U.S.-based non-governmental organization, Americans for the Arts) brought together a group of artists, organizers, and cultural organizers who developed a working definition of cultural organizing: “Cultural organizing exists at the intersection of art and activism. It is a fluid and dynamic practice that is understood and expressed in a variety of ways, reflecting the unique cultural, artistic, organizational, and community context of its practitioners. Cultural organizing is about integrating arts and culture into organizing strategies. It is about organizing from a particular tradition, cultural identity, and community of place or worldview.”<sup>16</sup>

Within this definition, three approaches to cultural organizing have emerged, each offering different conceptualizations of “culture” and “organizing.” These include the cultural strategy approach, the community arts approach, and the cultural integration approach, which will be explored later in the report.<sup>17</sup>

**Figure 1: Transformational learning cycle.**  
Source: Verstraete, K. (2021), *The Creative Power of the Arts: Reimagining Human and Planetary Flourishing*.



# 2

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In the wake of major world events post-1945 and the marked beginning of the postcolonial period, many artists have engaged with political and grassroots movements and worked toward the construction of new political or social consciousness.

## PART TWO

# ARTS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE EVIDENCE FROM AROUND THE WORLD

Examples can be drawn from the period that marked the decolonization of African countries, when African artists from Nigeria, Ethiopia, Ivory Coast, South Africa, and Benin collectively rejected Western notions of African “primitivism” and worked on constructing and celebrating an African subject who repudiated colonialism. During that period South African modern art also addressed the system of apartheid (which was in place from 1948 to 1994), as artists and cultural institutions mounted resistance to this system. One example is the Amadolzi Group, which aimed to explore African identity through modern art by both white and black artists. The group opened a community art center in Johannesburg, the Polly Street Art Centre, which was the only center that allowed Black South Africans to receive art training in the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>18</sup>

Other examples can be drawn from the United States during the Vietnam War, which greatly inspired the anti-war visual culture and became the touchstone of anti-war art of the late 20th and early 21st centuries (focusing on conflicts such as the Bosnian War, the civil war in Beirut and the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan). Performances were used to make a statement, such as *Blood Bath*, an anti-war performance staged at the Museum of Modern Art by the Guerrilla Art Action Group in 1969. Photography was also used to examine continuing conflicts globally and in the Middle East. For example, works by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige used conceptual art to highlight the loss of human life in Lebanon as a result of the war and the continuing instability and violence experienced by the people of Beirut.<sup>19</sup>

The decade of the 1960s marked an important moment in the history of the United States, with the emergence of powerful movements such as the civil rights movement and the Black Power movement, resulting in revolutionary thought and action. This social revolution created an environment for the emergence of new theater groups such as El Teatro Campesino (1965), the Free Southern Theater (1963), and the Black Arts Repertory Theatre (1962), among others. In that period, the Puerto Rican community in the United States allied with African Americans to demand the rights and privileges denied to them before the civil rights movement, and a visible Puerto Rican theater movement emerged in New York. Since its founding in 1967, the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater has provided culturally deprived communities with theater from Puerto Rico and other Latin American countries.<sup>20</sup>

Theater has also been used as a healing and empowering tool for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women in the Medea Project, founded by Rhodessa Jones in 1989. The Medea Project is a visionary cultural initiative that aims to give voice to women who have had few opportunities to be heard. Created in prison and presented to the public, the Medea Project’s performances use narrative, dance, and myth in an unrestricted structure and have helped more than 300 women make a return to society from an inhumane criminal justice system.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, art also has been used by many feminists globally to critique the marginalization of women and insist on the equality of women in art and in all other sectors of social life. For example, the artist Shirin Neshat began to explore the question of identity after moving from Iran to New York, where she has lived in what she defines as “self-imposed exile” for most of her adult life. Best known for her work in photography, film, and video, she creates stark visual contrasts that offer glimpses into the social and cultural realities of men and women in Iran. The experience of being caught between two cultures is very much at the forefront of Neshat’s work. Her creative work is dominated by political, social, and religious motifs that continue to shape her identity.<sup>22</sup>



Photo: Shirin Neshat: *Raja*, from *The Book of Kings*, 2012



# 3

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There are several possible outcomes of using the arts and culture for social change, including raising awareness, increasing compassion for others, critiquing dominant social and power structures, and building communal strength and capacity for action.<sup>23</sup> The following findings explore five main impacts and draw examples from relevant artistic and cultural practices in the MENA today.

## PART THREE

# ARTS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE: EVIDENCE FROM THE MENA



A performance by El-Funoun Palestinian Popular Dance Troupe  
Courtesy of: El-Funoun Palestinian Popular Dance Troupe

## EXPRESS EMOTIONS AND MAKE SENSE OF OUR REALITY

### Artistic and cultural practices:

- 1 Provide spaces and mediums to promote freedom of expression.
- 2 Help individuals and communities make sense of their lived reality.
- 3 Reinforce or reconstruct individual and/or group identity.

Speech today is being increasingly censored by state institutions in many countries in the MENA. This comes in the form of legislation that limits freedom of expression, penalizes opposition, and maintains the status quo. Additionally, there are varying social dynamics and power relations among communities and countries in the MENA, making it increasingly difficult for some individuals to fully express their identities and individuality. These restrictions in some cases result in a form of self-censorship because of well-founded fears of persecution and even violence.

Artistic and cultural practices offer innovative methods to encourage expression. They provide a means for people to express themselves that is not available to them in other settings, such as schools, universities, public institutions, or even at home. This is paramount in a region where knowledge production is weak and problem-solving and critical thinking skills have limitations.<sup>24</sup>

Independent arts consultant Moukhtar Kocache says:

*"There has never been a separation between issues of social justice and the arts.... Not all art is focused*

*on dealing with issues of social justice and freedom of expression, but art cannot be removed from these realities. Human expression has always been about analyzing the social, political, and cultural dynamics of our lives.... We humans are primarily stimulated by storytelling. If we break down what we do on a daily basis and how we respond to the world, it comes down to storytelling. That's what we do in the arts and culture world. We are experts at telling stories, at passing on emotions, at leaving people in an altered emotional and intellectual space."*

Among notable examples of artistic and cultural practices that expand spaces for expression is The Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival (D-CAF), an international multidisciplinary contemporary arts festival staged at multiple sites across downtown Cairo, Egypt. D-CAF showcases groundbreaking work in the fields of music, theater, dance, visual arts, literature, and film by cutting-edge artists from Egypt, the Arab world, and beyond.

In addition to working with established downtown cultural spaces and theaters, D-CAF breaks new ground by using nontraditional sites such as historical buildings, storefronts, alleyways, and rooftops for performances, events, and art installations, with the aim of reaching out to a broad spectrum of Egyptian audiences and bridging the gap between artists and audiences.

Similarly, the Sudan Independent Film Festival is an annual event of screenings, discussion forums, and networking focused on independent cinema as a form of artistic expression for social debate and change. The festival was launched by the Sudan Film Factory in 2014 as

the first-ever film festival in Sudan and attracted more than 7,000 viewers in addition to considerable media attention. The festival takes pride in showcasing high-quality Sudanese films screened in front of diverse audiences.

Also expanding spaces for artistic expression is the Baladk Street and Urban Arts Festival. The festival takes place in Amman, Jordan, every year and provides a platform for emerging and established artists to connect, network, and create. It is an eight-day event celebrating the urban art movement by bringing world-class visual mural artists who partner with Jordanian artists to transform the limestone walls in diverse areas of Amman into colorful open-air murals.

Baladk is organized and curated by Al Balad Theater in collaboration with several artists, partnering with local, regional, and international organizations. Each edition of the festival focuses on a theme. In its sixth edition and under the overall theme "The People," artists created works reflecting on how they perceive people around them, their interactions and appreciation of human life. Baladk selected walls for the murals in various parts of Amman, making sure that they are visible and accessible, and in diverse neighborhoods of the city. Since Baladk's mission is also to connect artists, the festival advocated for joint projects and collaborations, offering young talents the chance to accompany participating graffiti artists as they create their pieces around the city.

Through the arts, individuals and communities can also make sense of their lived reality. Farah Chamma, a poet and performer, uses spoken-word poetry to discuss and reflect on her personal struggles as a





Cast members in the Roumieh prison  
production of *12 Angry Lebanese*  
Courtesy of: Zeina Daccache



Palestinian woman living in exile. Spoken-word poetry has been especially popular among youth as a means of expression. It allows them to articulate emotions and thoughts using the power of voice and words and encourages cathartic expression and emotional processing. In her poem "The Nationality," Chamma speaks about her experience of getting Brazilian citizenship while being denied citizenship by Arab countries.

### "The Nationality" by [Farah Chamma](#)

A Brazilian nationality, I was granted.  
A passport and identity card, no less.  
A permanent residency with health care . . . and I didn't have to wait for too long at the embassy. And I wasn't even asked about my political affiliation, and I wasn't even asked about my Muslim sect, Sunni or Shiite. I was welcomed in their homeland as a Palestinian woman who was exiled from her homeland, was promised a false right of return, was never allowed to return.... Alas, the Brazilians comprehended the question of Palestine. They considered me one of their own.... They said nothing less than 'feel at home.' Their alphabet was alien to my Arabic mother tongue. But soon I mastered Portuguese. Occasionally, it would frustrate me, for I am an alien in this endless exile, a lost flock bird, seeking a similar feather in faraway, exiled skies.... In exile I was given shelter, raised, and educated, allowed to vote. I wrote poetry in their friendly cafés without fear of prosecution or censorship. Never let down. So do not blame me if I was ever ashamed of my Arab descent. Many borders were closed in my face for simply being a Palestinian refugee. For holding a document from Syria, for holding a passport from an illusionary authority. I found home in exile. For I wasn't welcome by you, Arab countries. I was denied a stamp and a few documents. So here I am in exile.... Oh, Arabs in exile, will we ever return? Or remain? For I still hurt in exile, for I still speak Arabic. In spite of any number of nationalities, for in my heart there remains an Arab nationality, like it or not.

Furthermore, the arts provide a means to reconstruct or reinforce individual or collective identity, which is paramount for the people of Palestine, living under occupation. In addition to annexing land, the

Israeli occupation has been actively working to wipe out Palestinian identity and appropriate Palestinian culture. El-Funoun Dance Troupe in Ramallah has been a symbol of cultural resistance in Palestine. Since its inception in 1979, El-Funoun has aimed to express the spirit of Arab Palestinian folklore and contemporary culture through unique combinations of traditional and stylized dance and music.

The group believes in the crucial role of the arts and culture in countering the systematic attempts by the occupation to suppress Palestinian national identity. El-Funoun also works on creating a democratic society that respects and celebrates diversity. Through collaborating with local organizations in cities and refugee camps, the group provides training to young men and women that builds and shapes their personalities, provides them with an alternative way of thinking, and helps create a new narrative that promotes inclusiveness and diversity.

*"We work on deconstructing some of the issues within our society.... We work internally on some ideas, norms, and traditions that we feel are not aligned with the time we are living in and, externally, the occupation that is hindering any form of Palestinian development, whether cultural, political, economic, or social.... We utilize the Dabkeh, a form of dance rooted in the Palestinian wedding celebration, to discuss other issues, such as gender, equality, respect for different opinions, and inclusion. So we use a form of dance that is socially accepted to serve objectives that we consider more advanced and aligned with a modern society . . . a society that is open and inclusive."*

– Khalid Katamesh  
Director, El-Funoun







Another prominent example from Egypt is the work of El Mastaba Center for Egyptian Folk Music, a civil society organization founded in 2000 with the aim of reviving Egypt's rich and unique performing arts heritage. The center preserves, documents, and develops traditional music in Egypt and reintroduces folk music to its original communities to revitalize its role in the daily life and imagination of the Egyptian people. The mission of the center is to showcase the diversity of Egypt's musical traditions and demonstrate the strength of Egyptian society, especially its pluralism. El Mastaba further seeks to mitigate the threat of extinction facing traditional music by creating an appreciation and awareness of its value to communities and to cultural identities that is expressed in market value, encouraging younger generations to see this as an economically viable profession.

### CRITIQUE DOMINANT POWER STRUCTURES AND RAISE AWARENESS

#### Artistic and cultural practices:

1

Raise awareness of social and political injustice affecting communities and individuals.

2

Critique dominant and historical social, political, and power structures and narratives.

3

Inspire individuals and communities to protest discrimination and inequality.

In societies where speech is highly censored and direct criticism of authority is oftentimes too risky, artistic practice can take a subversive role by stimulating conversations



Performers from the El-Funoun Palestinian Popular Dance Troupe  
Courtesy of El-Funoun Palestinian Popular Dance Troupe

“Arts provide a communal way of expressing our emotional frustrations, fears, anger, and that collectivity eases the limbic brain; it helps us breathe.”

on social and political issues. The last decade has seen a rise in creative activity and expression in the region, as artists, writers, musicians, dancers, and creatives produced important works that address timely social issues such as war, displacement, occupation, discrimination, and marginalization.

Many musicians have been using their music to critique power structures and protest injustice. Sammany Hajo, a Sudanese musician dubbed the “voice of Sudan,” sings about the revolution in Sudan. His song “Matalib” (an Arabic word for “demands”) was released in 2018, inspired by the revolution. The chorus in the song was taken directly from a popular chant during a military sit-in in Khartoum. The verses of the song describe the revolution and the demands of the people: *“Give us a civilian government...it’s really simple...all we want is freedom...no violence and brutality...we fight together...and we march together...to make our dream a reality.”*

Similarly, Cairokee, an Egyptian indie-rock band that was launched in 2003, came to prominence with its revolutionary music following the uprisings in 2011 due to its politically inspired lyrics and protest songs. Their song “Sout Alhoreya” (Freedom’s sound) brought them global recognition. The song’s video shows a united Tahrir Square, with Egyptians from all backgrounds mouthing the lyrics of the song as the camera moves from the square to the side streets and onto the iconic Qasr al-Nil Bridge. Other songs on the same album include “Matlob Za’im” (We need a leader), which speaks to the future with wide-eyed optimism, and “Ithbat Makanak” (Stand your ground). The songs portray the shifting sentiments and emotional states of the protesters





Above and below: artworks by  
Mohamad Khayata  
Courtesy of Mohamad Khayata

at the beginning of the revolution, several months later, and by the end of the first year.

Other artists use visual art to raise awareness of what they and their people have been through, as does Mohamad Khayata, a Syrian visual artist living in Lebanon. His work reflects his own experience of years of displacement, dealing with concepts of migration, memory, and identity. Addressing the issues of Syrians living in Lebanon, Khayata examines their relationship with the political and social environment, focusing on their activities as workers and farmers, which are the professions they are allowed to practice. He is known for creating characters with distorted proportions with the aim of portraying the refugee experience through the beauty present in disfigurement.

Another artistic practice that has been used to raise awareness of critical social issues is the interactive theater of the National Center for Culture and Arts in Jordan. The main idea behind the method is that the audience is engaged through a facilitator and invited to ask questions and reflect on dramatic scenes. Through the interactive theater, family members of all ages, in rural and urban communities and refugee camps, are provided with a rare entertainment experience that encourages discussion and enables informed decisions.

The Jordanian artist Emad Hajjaj has used cartoons as a way to raise public awareness of social, economic, and political issues. In 1993 he created the popular cartoon character Abu Mahjoob, who represents the common Jordanian man and his daily political, social, and cultural concerns. As a result of his work, Hajjaj was considered one of the 100 most influential

Arab people according to *Arabian Business Magazine*. Recognizing the impact of social messaging through the character Abu Mahjoob, many civil society organizations partnered with Hajjaj to raise awareness of sensitive issues. For example, the Information and Research Center in Jordan collaborated with Hajjaj to inform the public about women's rights in the marriage contract with the aim of debunking some of the myths relating to this issue.

## FOSTER A SENSE OF EMPATHY, UNDERSTANDING, AND BELONGING

### Artistic and cultural practices:

- 1 Create a focus and/or process for the exchange of ideas and perspectives.
- 2 Provide a space and platform for those who do not have a voice to express themselves.
- 3 Establish shared values and a sense of purpose and belonging.
- 4 Enable people to hear and understand different perspectives.

In many countries in the MENA, state restrictions on freedom of expression have resulted in stifled debate and the inability of individuals to learn about alternative perspectives and experiences. Due to the controlled and restricted nature of traditional spaces, such as educational and religious institutions, and mainstream media, many individuals and communities lack the space and skills to handle discussions and opposing opinions safely and constructively.<sup>25</sup> Because of their communal nature, artistic and



cultural practices can help focus on the process of exchanging ideas and experiences. In that respect, they foster a deeper level of listening and understanding and establish shared values and a sense of belonging. As Samar Dudin, a theater artist and the Regional Director of Ruwwad Al-Tanmeya, explained:

*“There are elements that make the arts so essential. Arts provide a communal way of expressing our emotional frustrations, fears, anger, and that collectivity eases the limbic brain; it helps us breathe really.... We develop empathy toward others but also empathy toward our own wounds.... It helps us feel a sense of acknowledgment, because we are seen, and we are heard, and we see, and we hear. There’s a communion there. The arts allow us to practice a form of shared community experience that helps us transcend dogmatic ethics. We can speak truth to power, defy authorities of mainstream thinking, challenge norms and binary thinking... through the arts, we can build a community through a critical approach.”*

Several important films have shed light on the plight and struggles of refugees and other marginalized communities. Notable examples from the region are *Beyond the Raging Sea* and *Capernaum*.

*Beyond the Raging Sea* (2019) is a film directed by Marco Orsini that documents the story of Omar Samra and Omar Nour, who set out on an unsupported 3,000-nautical-mile journey across the Atlantic Ocean, a story of their struggle for survival. This is a struggle experienced by some of the 66 million displaced individuals around the world who set off on similar crossings in a desperate bid for safe refuge. The purpose of Nour and Samra’s journey

was to draw attention to the global refugee crisis, in which thousands lose their lives each year crossing the Mediterranean.

*Capernaum* (2018), a film directed by Nadine Labaki, follows Zain (Zain Al Rafeea), a 12-year-old boy living in Beirut, Lebanon, in conditions so difficult that he decides to sue his parents for giving him life. Told largely through flashbacks while Zain is in prison for a violent crime he has committed, *Capernaum* follows his efforts to stay alive after he has run away from his violent home. As he meets people just as desperate as he is, some of whom try to take advantage of him, the film does not romanticize a life on the edge of society. Based on Labaki’s research into living conditions in Beirut’s slums, the film uses the lens of one child’s experience to remind us of the humanity of the people living in such circumstances.

In Mauritania, Lalla Kaber, a young director, uses cinema and film to raise awareness of different social issues. Her short film *Moment of Silence* addresses the plight of people with hearing disabilities in the Mauritanian society. In the film, Kaber very creatively showcases the challenges and exclusion faced by people with hearing disabilities, especially in trying to navigate day-to-day activities. The film casts actors with hearing disabilities, providing them with a platform to express themselves, and presents the audience with the opportunity to experience and feel the struggles faced by this group.

Theater has been a popular artistic method to bring people together and foster a sense of belonging. After conditions in Syria grew dangerous and dire in 2014, Radwan Taleb—a theater actor, writer, and director—had to flee with his wife.

They went to Iraq, where they traded the richness of theater life for administrative jobs. Taleb never lost sight of his passion, however. He and his wife settled in Sulaymaniyah, a city in the northern Kurdistan region of Iraq, and created The Sabunkaran Theatre Group. The group welcomes people from all cultural backgrounds, including many refugees and internally displaced people. While faced with a constant stream of barriers, including language barriers between the actors (Arabic and Kurdish), their refugee status, and the fact that many would migrate to Europe when the opportunity arose, Radwan managed to lead the troupe in several productions. While there are efforts to professionalize the troupe, Radwan is adamant about keeping it as a resource of the community, to offer a means of escape and a sense of purpose for people caught in conflict.<sup>26</sup>

In an effort to promote expression and connection, the arts are being integrated into the programs of community-based organizations. A pioneering community organization that has institutionalized this in its working model is Ruwwad Al-Tanmeya, a community development center that started in Jabal Al Natheef, a marginalized neighborhood in the heart of Amman. At the core of Ruwwad’s work is the belief in the potential of youth, who represent a vast and often untapped resource for immediate and long-term community development efforts. Ruwwad offers youth scholarships in exchange for community service. Youth who enter Ruwwad complete a fellowship that is based on empathetic learning and relational dynamics and get trained in inquiry-based learning, which nurtures imagination, curiosity, and the appreciation of diversity. Integrating the arts as a key methodical approach was pioneered by the artist Samar

Dudin, who is the regional director and head of programs at Ruwwad. Volunteers and team members alike share their stories, express themselves, and build moments in which they can renegotiate power. Today Ruwwad spans Jordan, Palestine, Egypt, and Lebanon.

*“As a theatre director who works through the co-authorship process through improvisation and narrative construction, I recognize the power of community building through theatre and the arts. Over 25 years of practice, this power informed my work at Ruwwad where we integrate arts and drama as learning and co-creation mediums. We operate youth centers in marginalized communities, where we provide university and college education to 450 youth in 4 countries (Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, and Egypt) in exchange for 84600 community service hours every year. Last year in Jordan we created 3 theatre performances with the community of Siraj Al Aman Campaign that is focused on protection from violence focusing on child abuse and gender-based violence; 50 campaign members co-created and co-authored 3 performance pieces; Roqa (Patches), Heya AlArd (It’s Earth) and Watwatat (Whispers). The members of these performances were parents, youth and adolescents who were engaged with us for a year long journey.”*

– Samar Dudin  
Regional director, Ruwad Al-Tanmeya

## **EMPOWER COMMUNITIES SOCIALLY, ECONOMICALLY, AND POLITICALLY**

### **Artistic and cultural practices:**

- 1** Empower individuals and communities socially, economically, and politically.
- 2** Challenge current circumstances and build communal strength and capacity for action.
- 3** Foster creative problem-solving regarding issues and problems concerning communities.

There are several organizations in the MENA working on empowering artists to become agents of change in their communities. One example is L’Association Danseurs Citoyens Sud in southern Tunisia, which started as a youth movement and then registered as an independent nonprofit cultural and artistic association in 2015. Its mission is to mentor young amateur artists in music, contemporary dance, and street theater and to train them in concepts of citizenship and human rights in order to help them become positive agents of change in their communities.

*“Our camps involve intensive 10-day training, in which we bring together youth from all backgrounds and neighborhoods and artists and experts from different fields. The process of having the youth spend 10 days in a mixed environment rooted in the concepts of respect and freedom, to watch and listen to professionals and artists, is in itself transformational.... We have young*

*people who attended our training and came back for several years and are now professional artists working all over the world.”*

–Ahmed Guerfal  
Founder of L’Association Danseurs Citoyens Sud, Tunisia

Another example is the Hamasat Project, which was implemented in Al-Nasreya, a village lying some 30 kilometers outside the city of Aswan in Egypt and home to many migrants from Nubia and neighboring villages. The village is characterized by harsh socioeconomic conditions, lack of services, and a conservative nature. The Tamasi Performing Arts Collective collaborated with the Jesuits’ and Brothers’ Association for Development on the Hamasat Project, which aimed to provide spaces for self-expression for women and children of the community through arts training in theater, storytelling, and music and to build the capacity of up to 15 local trainers through a Training of Trainers (TOT) to ensure the sustainability of work beyond the project. The initiative spanned a full year and involved rigorous training with renowned artists from Cairo, mentorship, and travel to Cairo to attend theater and music performances, which resulted in a comprehensive and immersive experience for the women involved.

*“Art is not for artists only. People have the right to learn and practice art, as it massively changes their lives. Honestly, this was the best experience.”*

–Trainee  
Hamasat Project





## ENHANCE WELL-BEING AND HELP INDIVIDUALS AND COMMUNITIES PROCESS TRAUMA

Some art mediums are being used by practitioners as therapeutic and healing tools. Drama therapy, for example, is the intentional use of drama and/or theater processes to achieve therapeutic goals:

*“Through storytelling, projective play, purposeful improvisation, and performance, participants are invited to rehearse desired behaviors, practice being in relationship, expand and find flexibility between life roles, and perform the change they wish to be and see in the world.”*<sup>27</sup> Similarly, music therapy is an approach that uses the mood-lifting properties of music to help people improve their mental health and overall well-being.

In 2007 Zeina Daccache founded Catharsis Lebanese Center for Drama Therapy, Lebanon’s first organization dedicated to theater as a social and psychological therapy tool. Her work began in Roumieh, Lebanon’s most infamous high-security prison. The prison was not segregated by crime, had no educational programs, and lacked essential resources. After months of red tape, she was finally allowed to hold auditions with hundreds of inmates, eventually casting 45 inmates to act in an adaptation of an American teleplay, *12 Angry Men* (1954), later made into a motion picture, which they called *12 Angry Lebanese*. The presentation of the play brought top government officials, military, and security officials into Roumieh, some seeing the prison for the first time. In addition to giving voice to the inmates, the play brought much-needed attention to the issue of penitentiary reform in Lebanon. Daccache’s theater productions have

a dual purpose: to help participants deal with their own psychological trauma and to give voice to marginalized and disadvantaged communities within Lebanon.

Her latest play was created with migrant domestic workers, raising awareness of their needs and rights. Catharsis has continued to grow since its inception and now features a professional drama therapy training program in which participants can gain the necessary tools and skills to become registered drama therapists. Catharsis’s work incorporates a strong advocacy component that goes hand in hand with its theater intervention, including publications and proposed legislation.

Another pioneering theater company in Lebanon leading psychosocial interventions based on the drama therapy approach is Zoukak Theater Company. Zoukak uses theater practice as a form of social and political engagement, with a belief in theater as a space for common reflection and in collectivity as a way to counter marginalizing systems. Their psychosocial strategy, methodology, and tools were developed in response to the needs of the communities targeted by their interventions, centered on strengthening the well-being and self-esteem of the participants and providing a free space of dialogue, expression, and enjoyment through theater.

Zoukak’s drama therapy approach is based on the synergy of two distinct schools: experimental theater and clinical psychology. Drama-therapy workshops use drama and theater processes to achieve therapeutic goals. They introduce the participants to the concept of theatrical improvisation and strengthen their relationship to their imagination. Through

these improvisations, they invite participants to process their problems and traumas, as well as their desires and fears, in the present moment.

Music therapy is used by the National Music Conservatory in Jordan, which now teaches clinical music therapy. This is the only program in the Middle East that offers a bachelor’s degree in the field to provide students with training in music and psychology that allows them to work with people who have experienced trauma or suffer from an illness. The therapy is clinical in the sense that a therapist is involved in the musical activities with the participant and imagination, song, instrumental improvisation, and words are mobilized to achieve therapeutic outcomes.<sup>28</sup>

**Photo: Theater production titled ‘Hega Al Ard’  
Courtesy of: Ruwwad Al-Tanmeya**

# 4

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The examples provided in the previous chapter demonstrate a variety of ways in which artistic and cultural practices can be used to enable people to express themselves, establish shared values, and build their capacity for action.

## **PART FOUR**

# **LINKS BETWEEN THE ARTS, CULTURAL ORGANIZING, AND SOCIAL CHANGE**

Even if art is not intentionally used in an organized or methodological manner, it can still be a very powerful moving force. A song, a film, a poem, or a performance can transport people to a new place mentally and emotionally, a place that is still very strongly felt in the physical body. When artists belong to communities facing injustice or displacement, their social, economic, and political realities are rarely detached from their artwork, and so their artwork has the potential to be a moving force for an audience. Art can be specifically geared to progressive and positive change, however, including individual and community development when it is used to engage a particular group in artistic and cultural practices with the hope that the creative process will help people see and interact with the world in a new way.

At the intersection of art and activism is cultural organizing. As defined earlier in the report, cultural organizing is “a fluid and dynamic practice” involving the integration of arts and culture into organizing strategies.<sup>29</sup> While it is a highly varied field, encompassing a variety of artistic practices and mediums, there are some key features that hold across most cultural organizing efforts:<sup>30</sup>

- 1 They have *cultural goals*, seeking to affect ideologies, identities, and ways of being.
- 2 They utilize the *language of culture*—art, ritual, story, celebration—to carry out their work.
- 3 They are *strategic* in nature, working toward long-term goals and collective aims.
- 4 They are about *bridging the world of art and organizing*, making explicit links between (1) cultural goals and social goals, (2) artists and professional organizers, and (3) artistic practices and organizing techniques.

Within this umbrella, Paul Kuttner identifies three approaches to cultural organizing:<sup>31</sup>

#### **The community arts approach**

This approach is designed around the process of creating works of art and culture and engaging community members who may not see themselves as artists. It draws on local cultural resources such as stories, voices, and perspectives, with an emphasis on the artistic process itself rather than the product.

The artistic process is considered a form of organizing whereby the community comes together to research issues, develop collaborative actions, and agree on collective goals. Additionally, because the process is rooted in the cultural practices and stories of the community, the approach can help promote cultural pride and community cohesion.

“At the intersection of art and activism is cultural organizing.”

An example of the community arts approach is the drama therapy methodology adopted by Zeina Daccache in Lebanon, explored in the previous chapter. This methodology works with a community group—for example, prison inmates, migrant domestic workers, or others—to help them deal with their traumas and give them voice and space to express themselves.

#### **The cultural strategy approach**

This approach focuses heavily on the use of artistic products as a way to shift public discourse around social issues, involving explicit partnerships between practicing artists and professional organizers.

The ultimate goal is to develop a “cultural strategy” in order to “shift public sentiment and forge a new collective consensus around a social problem.” The main point behind the approach is that ideas and actions are connected, and in order for people’s actions to change, the way they think about and understand the world must change first. Within this context, artistic practices are used to create dialogue, help people understand different perspectives, and catalyze collective action.

From the examples explored in the previous chapter, the collaboration between Emad Hajjaj and the Information and Research Center fits under the cultural strategy approach, whereby the work of an artist is used to shift public opinion.

### **The cultural integration approach**

This approach is about integrating local cultural practices, forms of expression, and worldviews into a community-organizing model. It is based on the idea that for community organizing to be effective and sustainable, it must be rooted in local culture and make room for people to “bring their full selves” to the table.

Like the community arts approach, the cultural integration approach is focused on the culture of those doing the organizing. An example of the Cultural Integration Approach is the work of El-Funoun Dance Troupe, as it is rooted in Arab-Palestinian folklore and contemporary culture aimed at fighting the systematic attempts by the occupation to suppress Palestinian national identity.

Through its work, El-Funoun builds and shapes the personalities of its youthful members, providing them with an alternative way of thinking and a new narrative that promotes inclusiveness and diversity.

### **Several attributes contribute to the excellence and effectiveness of artistic and cultural practices geared toward change.**

Arts practitioners, funders, and evaluators have come together in the Evaluation Learning Lab to build practical knowledge and resources for measuring the social impact of artists and cultural practices and processes. They developed a framework, consisting of a set of 11 aesthetic attributes, which enrich the conception, discussion, and assessment of all types of arts for social change.

These attributes are useful not only for the evaluation of projects but also for their design and conceptualization. (Table 1 summarizes the attributes. For the full framework, see appendix 3).<sup>32</sup>

#### **Aesthetic Perspectives:**

**11 Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change.** [americansforthearts.org](http://americansforthearts.org)

### **COMMITMENT**

In arts for change the commitment to civic or social change is paramount and is supported by knowledge and intention. Creative practices demonstrate commitment by valuing community, engaging in a long-term process, and showing accountability for how the creative work contributes to change.

### **COMMUNAL MEANING**

Arts for change values individual experience but delivers an experience of shared significance. Communal meaning can be derived from reinterpretation of a well-known work, from collaboration between an artist and community members, or through engagement with an individual artist's own creative work.



### **CULTURAL INTEGRITY**

If the goal is justice, then truth, authenticity, and integrity are inherently important in the creative work. Meaningful aesthetic choices in arts for change respond to lived, historic, and cultural realities.

### **RISK TAKING**

The high stakes of change and justice call for attention to risk in art making. Risk taking in creation and connecting art with audiences may allow new possibilities to develop and often require investment from audiences and participants. By discussing risk, artists and stakeholders can develop an understanding of what responsible or irresponsible creative risk might look like.

### **OPENNESS**

The creative work is accessible and offers multiple entry points for people to engage in the research and development stages, art making, and presentation and engagement around products. Artists invite fluidity in and between process and product.

### **RESOURCEFULNESS**

By nature, social change undertakings usually make mindful use of resources; aesthetic endeavors can reflect a parallel commitment. Resourcefulness may stem from practical considerations, but aesthetically it can stimulate the imagination as well as elicit a sense of pleasure or meaning through the ingenious use of resources.

### **EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE**

A unique capacity of art is to evoke strong emotions. The consequences of arousing emotion may be positive, such as increased empathy and building bonds that encourage dialogue and healing. Responsible arts for change may prompt strong emotions but also helps people channel such emotions into healing or action.

### **COHERENCE**

A coherent work demonstrates unity of form and purpose and shows clear relationships among its subject, values, form, and expression. Coherence may be evident in how parts of the creative work relate to the whole of the work or in a powerful overall impression that the work makes.

### **STICKINESS**

Memorable aesthetic features—a phrase, a powerful visual image, a musical hook—can become representative of larger and more complex concepts. For a long-term project or ongoing body of work, stickiness may also come from the meaning that is drawn from the overall or cumulative experience.

### **SENSORY EXPERIENCE**

Artists may take advantage of the senses to strengthen participant/audience experience and amplify meaning. Images, sounds, smells, and other sensory devices can act as strong triggers for memories, emotions, and notions of beauty. These can generate meaningful collective experience but may also serve as negative triggers that artists may want to prepare for.

### **DISRUPTION**

Disruption can relate to both form and content. In terms of content, creative work can disrupt norms of who gets to tell the story or who has access to self-expression, dominant stories, and power structures. In terms of form and delivery, a work can disrupt artistic conventions of its genre or the ways in which the art encounters its audience.

# 5

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While there is growing regional interest in the convergence of arts and social justice, several contextual, structural, and operational challenges still exist, preventing the relationship between the two sectors from developing further.

## PART FIVE

# THE CHALLENGES

### INCREASED STATE CENSORSHIP AND RESTRICTIONS

Legislation and regulations in many countries in the MENA are being used to enhance censorship and maintain the status quo. For example, in Jordan in 2018, the parliament approved amendments to the 2015 cybercrime law that criminalize hate speech. It is observed that these amendments could brand controversial views expressed online as hate speech, gravely restricting citizens' freedom of expression.<sup>33</sup> Similarly in Morocco, authorities continue to resort to the penal code to imprison artists and journalists who criticize the monarchy. This is also the case in Egypt, where authorities use vague "morality" charges to prosecute female social media influencers for posting images of themselves, as well as gang-rape witnesses following reporting of sexual assault cases online.<sup>34</sup> The use of such legislation impacts artists and civil society actors and has implications for their registration and operation, placing pressure on democracy and political and civil liberties at large.

### LACK OF RESEARCH, EVIDENCE, AND UNDERSTANDING

One of the problems explored in previous research is the lack of evidence for the ways in which art can create social change, the methodologies and tools that can be adopted for artistic and cultural organizing, and how these projects can be evaluated. This not only creates a divide between the two sectors but also creates hesitation on the part of funders to invest in long-term collaboration efforts and projects.<sup>35</sup>

### THE NATURE OF CIVIL SOCIETY PROJECTS

Given the working model of many civil society organizations—characterized as being donor driven, project-based, and heavily reliant on the achievement of indicators—many organizations adopt a "one size fits all" assumption in their work, which in the context of arts for change can be highly problematic. Assuming that community groups are homogeneous and presenting a play, song, or performance without first understanding the different layers of exclusion, prejudice, and power dynamics that it might face will inevitably result in the failure of such initiatives.

### FUNDING AND SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGES

There are several layers of challenges within existing funding structures. First, many artists and cultural organizations do not have the required capacity to compete for resources and mobilize funding. Second, funders still have uncertainty as to why they should fund arts for change projects instead of existing civil society projects and initiatives as they do not have a full understanding of the value of such projects. Additionally, when they do fund, there is still an emphasis on the end product rather than the process, which research shows is equally valuable. Existing monitoring and evaluation frameworks that focus on indicators (mostly quantitative, emphasizing outputs) fail to capture the real value of such projects and in turn inform the decisions of funders. Third, many funding institutions focus their funds at a regional level, and therefore long-term sufficient funding on the country and even organizational level is still missing.

Photo: Theater production titled 'Watwatat'  
Courtesy of: Ruwwad Al-Tanmeya



# 6

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With increased awareness of structural injustices and challenges facing the MENA, we see a rise in cultural and artistic practices and projects with an active role in promoting social justice. This research showcased some of the most relevant artistic and cultural practices in the MENA over the last decade and investigated links between arts, cultural organizing, and social change.

## PART SIX

# CONCLUSION



The research showed that arts can be specifically geared to progressive and positive change, including individual and community development, when it is used to engage a particular group in artistic and cultural practices with the hope that the creative process helps people see and interact with the world in a new way, and this is where cultural organizing comes into play.

### Cultural organizing:

- 1 Values multiple ways of knowing and being
- 2 Reconceptualizes power and power relationships
- 3 Prioritizes the centering of a creative process to address change
- 4 Addresses the issues people face in their communities
- 5 Moves people toward a place of action
- 6 Revolves around the lived experiences of those participating
- 7 Allows participants to bring their full selves
- 8 Confronts oppression and privilege
- 9 Values process and outcome equally

10

Places an emphasis on listening and storytelling as methods for generating knowledge

In June 2022 AFSC convened a group of artists and cultural practitioners from across the MENA to discuss the findings of this report. As a result of the conversations that took place, we were able to validate the challenges faced by artists and cultural organizers and the resources they need to help them navigate complex working environments. In the convening, artists and cultural organizers were able to share stories and experiences and reflect on similarities and differences across countries.

Both the research and the convening revealed a number of future areas of work that are worth exploring. In particular, in order to expand and deepen our understanding of the role of arts and culture in creating positive social change in the MENA, the following is recommended.

- Continuously document relevant and innovative artistic and cultural practices in different countries across the MENA, utilizing a variety of mediums, methods, and tools to enhance the existing knowledge base.
- Deepen theoretical and practical knowledge exchange between stakeholders in the arts, culture, and development sectors, specifically by generating case studies on selected projects and practices that were

successful in creating social change. This could be done by documenting these case studies through research and disseminating it to stakeholders or through a knowledge and exchange conference.

- Working with funding organizations, artists, and cultural organizers to bridge the gap between them and make funding more accessible to grassroots artists and organizations that do not necessarily have access to or know-how regarding development-based funding.
- Actively work on the inclusion of less represented as well as grassroots artists and practitioners in conferences, workshops, and networking opportunities.
- Advocate for the removal of funding sanctions and barriers placed on war-torn countries such as Yemen and Sudan.
- Customize and translate the Evaluation Learning Lab's "Aesthetic Perspectives Framework: Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change" and disseminate it to artists and cultural organizers to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of projects geared toward social change.

Cast members in the Roumieh prison  
production of *12 Angry Lebanese*  
Courtesy of Zeina Daccache

بليز باسكال

It is better to have





Charles Pierre Péguy





# 7

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This section documents prominent case studies that were explored through presentations and conversations at two American Friends Service Committee events, the first held in June 2022 in Morocco and the second in January 2023 in Jordan. The case studies presented here exemplify three strategies of cultural organizing explored in the research.

## PART SEVEN

# CASE STUDIES



Photo: Baladk Festival mural, Jordan  
Courtesy of Raed Asfour



## THE CULTURAL STRATEGY APPROACH: BALADK FESTIVAL BY AL BALAD THEATER (JORDAN)

*This approach to cultural organizing focuses on the use of artistic products as a way to shift the public discourse on social issues and involves explicit partnerships between practicing artists and professional organizers or the organizing of artists around a specific issue or movement.*

*The premise of the approach is that ideas and actions are connected and that in order to change actions, organizers must first change the way people think about and understand the world around them. Artistic products are thus used to spark public dialogue and introduce alternative ways of seeing things.*

One example of this kind of approach is the Baladk Street and Urban Art Festival, an eight-day event with additional year-round programs that celebrates the urban art movement in Jordan. The festival is organized by Al Balad Theater and marks an important gathering of the global artistic community in Amman, Jordan, that provides a platform for emerging and established artists to connect, network, learn, and create.

Through ten successful editions and more than forty murals, the Baladk festival has transformed Amman, reinforcing the city's identity as a global center for contemporary urban art and a destination for art tourism. Baladk works with artists, communities, and neighborhoods to transform the beige walls and facades in diverse areas of Amman into colorful open-air murals. Each edition of the festival focuses on an important social or environmental theme. Past themes have included "inclusion," "people," "climate and

waste management," "from fear to freedom," and "art is environment and environment is art."

*"Baladk provides a platform for young artists and engages them in artistic residencies to develop a better understanding of the art of graffiti and the ways in which they can work with the wall. A technical exchange of expertise happens between established artists and younger ones to enhance the skills of young artists and enable them to find their paths. Baladk also works with the artist on exploring new concepts in relation to working with the wall. For example, if we are working on the topic of environment, we cannot think of the environment without thinking about the space, the city, and how we envision both to be. The aesthetic part of this kind of work is very important, because the graffiti art on these walls will last for years."*  
—Raed Asfour

In addition to the exchange of technical expertise between artists, Baladk creates change at several levels:

**Raising awareness and stimulating conversations.** The beauty of street art is that it is accessible to all. Murals can communicate with any person walking by, regardless of their background, education, or age. Whether the person is for or against the issue being presented in the mural, looking at it will instigate an internal conversation. If the person supports the issue, they may adopt it, talk about it, and tell others to see the mural. If they oppose the issue or are indifferent to it, the mural still has the ability to make the person question this perception or indifference. As such, the mural creates space for people to question their perceptions and ideas.

## Creating a culture of respecting the arts and different forms of expression.

Street art defies other conventional art mediums by making art directly accessible to the public and cutting out the middleman, such as a gallery. Baladk introduces art into the street, and this is important in creating a culture of accepting and appreciating art among the younger generation, a generation that will have the ability to look at art, respect it, and not damage it. Over the years young children in the neighborhoods where the murals were created have been very interested and engaged in the process of their production. And so, in its seventh edition, Baladk took its work beyond street walls. It opened its doors to youth, offering them the chance to take part in artistic workshops, panel discussions, mural viewings, and talks given by contributing artists. These opportunities are aimed at helping to empower local youth artistically.

*"When we started it wasn't easy. People perceived our work as 'foreign,' and others assumed that we have some sort of agenda. However, working with the same communities year after year, we started noticing the change. Certain barriers began to break. It is not easy for a community to accept an artist on a crane with access to the windows of their home...an artist who does not speak their language. However, people slowly started opening their windows and looking out to see the work that the artist was doing. They found a way to communicate with the artist... through signs and facial expressions. A common ground was established, and here the conversation started with a simple 'I will make you a cup of tea' or 'Let's eat together.' The woman who initially had reservations was now the one to offer the artist tea from her window while they were up on the crane."*  
Raed Asfour - Director of Al Balad Theater

Raed Asfour, director of Al Balad Theater, explains that in the beginning the main challenge faced was convincing the community, but the festival now faces several challenges in relation to local authorities who provide the necessary approvals for this kind of work. He observes an increase in the levels of censorship and bureaucratic obstruction by those who attempt to restrict the freedom of artists. He says: “Some of those in positions of authority perceive art as a threat and therefore feel that they need to control it. This is very dangerous and is not unique to Jordan but can be observed in many countries experiencing rising censorship.” Today it is the community members—those who now feel a sense of ownership of these murals—who are fighting this censorship and defending the murals.

It is paramount for projects with a social change objective to adopt a participatory approach.

Creative processes should incorporate and carefully examine the ways in which community members or stakeholders are involved in projects. Furthermore, the creative process in such projects should value individual experiences but also cultivate collective experience.

Organizations are encouraged to elicit the perspectives of participants, stakeholders, and community members and give them the space to tell their stories, enhancing their ability to make connections with others.



Photo: Baladk Festival murals, Jordan  
Courtesy of Raed Asfour



### THE COMMUNITY ARTS APPROACH: DRAMA THERAPY BY ZEINA DACCACHE (LEBANON)

*This approach to cultural organizing is designed around the process of creating works of art and culture with community members who may not see themselves as artists. It draws on local cultural resources such as stories, voices, and perspectives, with an emphasis on the artistic process itself rather than the product. The artistic process is considered a form of organizing whereby the community comes together to research issues, develop collaborative actions, and agree on collective goals. The approach is considered “organizing” because it builds relationships and social capital, fosters different forms of action, and supports the development of community leaders.*

An example of the community arts approach is the drama therapy methodology adopted by the director, drama therapist, and filmmaker Zeina Daccache in Lebanon. As an artist and practitioner who has worked in Lebanon’s prisons, refugee camps, and psychiatric hospitals, Zeina is on a mission to alter the public’s perception of marginalized

populations by creating a platform to allow them to tell their own stories and lobby for policy change.

Zeina’s work began in Roumieh, Lebanon’s largest and most infamous high-security prison. The prison holds up to 5,500 inmates at about 300% capacity and is not segregated by crime. It is known to lack minimum human rights standards and has been neglected by the Lebanese government for years, as the state has continually failed to put in place policies that protect inmates and cater to their basic needs.

In 2007 Zeina approached Lebanese authorities with a proposition to conduct drama therapy work with prisoners in Roumieh, which was quickly shut down and even ridiculed. But she was determined and persistent, and after a year of continued requests and red tape, she was allowed into the prison and started working with a group of male prisoners. In that same year Zeina founded Catharsis Lebanese Center for Drama Therapy, Lebanon’s first organization dedicated to theater as a social and psychological therapy tool. Zeina and her team held auditions with hundreds of inmates, eventually casting 45 inmates to act in an

adaptation of the American teleplay *12 Angry Men* (1954), later made into a motion picture (1957). The inmates called their version *12 Angry Lebanese*.

Through weekly workshops and sessions, Zeina worked with the 45 cast members over a period of 15 months. The process was not without significant challenges. As these inmates were not used to benefiting from or receiving any educational or recreational programs or interventions, many were skeptical about the workshops and were not convinced that Zeina would follow through with the plan. Some even joined out of curiosity, with no intention of committing beyond the first sessions.

Zeina explains that one of the factors that helped her establish trust with these inmates was the fact that she was familiar to them thanks to her long career in acting and comedy; she was a TV personality watched by many Lebanese households. Additionally, the length of the project, which extended over the course of a year, provided them with the time and space to benefit from this type of intervention, which requires self-reflection and transformative work.



Cast members in the Roumieh prison  
production of *12 Angry Lebanese*  
Courtesy of Zeina Daccache

Social change does not happen overnight; nor does it materialize in two to three months. Social change, in its different forms, requires time. Artists and practitioners can demonstrate commitment to a project, a cause, or the community they work with by engaging in long-term processes and showing accountability for how the creative work contributes to change.

Furthermore, given that social change projects have a strong community component and often involve marginalized communities, such projects must have a strong ethical basis and respect the integrity of the work and the community. Ethical practices are governed by an awareness of existing inequalities between and across groups. They ensure that no harm comes to participants and guarantee that participants have voice and agency in the conception and development of the work.

*“Theatre can live in the most forgotten places and grow in the most difficult situations.” –Zeina Daccache*

Between February and March 2009 the play was presented eight times to external audiences, which brought top government officials, military, security officials, and the public, as well as the inmates’ families, into Roumieh. Some were seeing the prison for the first time. Zeina’s work in Roumieh resulted in several important outcomes:

**Giving voice to inmates and fostering a sense of empathy.** For all of these inmates, this was the first time they were given a platform to be heard. In the documentary *12 Angry Lebanese*, which was released in 2009, the inmates reflect on their experiences, and some explain that they had never before been given the chance to tell their stories. Others were determined not to fail, as they felt a responsibility toward thousands of other inmates to communicate their struggles to the outside world. On the flip side, this experience allowed many to enter the

prison for the first time, to see and to get to know the inmates in a new light—beyond their crimes, as humans with stories and struggles. This fostered a deeper level of listening and understanding and created a sense of empathy for the inmates.

#### **Inner and transformative work.**

Through drama therapy the inmates worked intensively on self-reflection, with some reflecting on their pasts and childhood experiences for the first time. They began to examine their circumstances and the factors that led them to their current situation. They started comparing and contrasting their own personalities to those of the characters they were playing in the drama, which created dialogue within the group and helped the men better understand themselves and their fellow actors.

**Legal and policy reforms.** A major breakthrough, though perhaps not

one of the initially intended outcomes, was the legal reform that the work resulted in. The play brought much-needed attention to the issue of penitentiary reform in Lebanon. It succeeded in pushing the government to implement article 463 of the penal code for the reduction of sentences based on good behavior, which was published in 2002 but never implemented. This was enacted one month after representatives of the ministry of justice and the ministry of interior attended the play and is still under implementation today.

Catharsis has continued to grow since its inception and now features a professional drama therapy training program in which participants can gain the necessary tools and skills to become registered drama therapists. Catharsis’s work incorporates a strong advocacy component that goes hand in hand with its theater intervention, including publications and proposed legislation. In the decade following her work in Roumieh, Zeina worked with women inmates in Baabda prison, using the same technique employed in Roumieh. She also developed a program for the mentally ill residing in Lebanese prisons and led drama therapy workshops with other marginalized groups such as migrant workers.

In addition to the changes in the penal code that resulted from the work in Roumieh, Zeina’s work contributed to other legislative accomplishments, including the passing of a bill for the protection of women and members of the family in 2014 and the abolishment of circular number 1778, which prevented migrant domestic workers from establishing romantic relationships. Two other draft laws advocating for suitable legislation for mentally ill inmates and inmates serving life sentences were prepared and submitted in 2016.



**THE CULTURAL INTEGRATION  
APPROACH: EL-FUNOUN  
PALESTINIAN POPULAR DANCE  
TROUPE (PALESTINE)**

*This approach involves integrating local cultural practices, forms of expression, and worldviews into a community-organizing model. It is based on the idea that for community organizing to be effective and sustainable, it must be rooted in local culture and make room for people to “bring their full selves” to the table. Like the community arts approach, the cultural integration approach is focused on the culture of those doing the organizing.*

An example of a cultural integration approach is the work of El-Funoun Dance Troupe in Palestine, which has been a symbol of cultural resistance since its inception in 1979. Over the

years El-Funoun has aimed to express the spirit of Arab Palestinian folklore and contemporary culture through unique combinations of traditional and stylized dance and music. The group believes in the crucial role of the arts and culture in countering the systematic attempts by the occupation to suppress Palestinian national identity. El-Funoun also works on creating a democratic society that respects and celebrates diversity. Through collaborating with local organizations in cities and refugee camps, the group provides training to young men and women that builds and shapes their personalities, introduces them to alternative ways of thinking, and helps create a new narrative that promotes inclusiveness and diversity.

What makes El-Funoun unique is that it is based solely on volunteering—a high level of professionalism without

any financial compensation for its members. The troupe has always relied on the efforts of its volunteers to present its artistic work, on the one hand, and to present itself as a social and cultural model, on the other. The troupe has exemplary visions of a free and just society and believes in volunteering as an essential form of social action and as a means to nurture a proactive generation of youth, one capable of critical thinking.

The troupe’s artistic work is inspired by the Palestinian kinetic musical heritage and folklore but is presented using modern templates suitable for addressing the daily concerns of Palestinian society. Since the group is part of this society and sees that as central to its identity, it strives to produce artistic work that is distinguished in its approach to movement and design and to create an important imprint in the world



of Palestinian performing arts. The troupe has created and continues to create social change at several levels:

**Strengthening the Palestinian narrative and communal cultural identity in the face of occupation.** It is not possible to read any Palestinian cultural model in isolation from colonial and occupational structures. Consequently, one of the most important drivers of the troupe's work is the effort to restore the Palestinian narrative by working with heritage as a living identity that is in the process of developing. El-Funoun has therefore set a precedent as a dance group as it attempts to break the "cult of folklore" by conceiving of its work as a form of contemporary expression capable of continually evolving along with society. For the troupe this is central to the creation of its collective identity in the face of the Zionist narrative, which systematically works toward the erasure of Palestinian identity and culture and the portrayal of Palestinian society as one without a distinctive cultural heritage.

**Promoting freedom of expression and constructive criticism.** As the troupe's work is centered on performing arts, it naturally reinforces the concepts of freedom of expression, as well as constructive criticism as a supportive concept, thus providing the space for

Social change projects assume risk by subverting dominant norms, values, or structures. Risk-taking in the pursuit of social change is inevitable but must be considered responsibly and ethically.

Projects can take risks by stretching an audience's expectations, trying something new, or pushing institutional boundaries. Such projects thus require perseverance as they are expected to face resistance by different stakeholders.

its members to express themselves and comment on societal issues. Through artistic, political, and social statements reflected through its artistic work, the group highlights the struggle against the occupation and confronts social norms and traditions produced by conservative structures.

*"The troupe opens the space for its members and audiences to reflect on the Palestinian communal memory and its representations; the repercussions of the Nakba as the pivotal event in contemporary Palestinian history; the structure of the Palestinian progressive societal model; and the form of the social contract that exists between the members of this society. It merges all of these questions and portrays them through a cultural model that calls*

*for freedom, independence, and self-determination."*

—Nidal Kabi

**Expanding spaces and opportunities for performing arts.**

The troupe has worked hard over several years to present artistic performances in areas that are more marginalized and excluded, expanding opportunities for residents there. It even went beyond performances and provided dance training in many villages and refugee camps in the West Bank, where the group sends its members to train and set up Dabkeh teams to demonstrate an artistic, cultural, and social model to children and youth living in these areas.

**Promoting gender equality.** One of the most important social statements presented by the troupe is the promotion of gender equality, especially in the context of growing conservatism. From its inception, the troupe has rejected traditions and concepts that went against "mixing" between men and women by showing men and women performing side by side onstage in a creative and artistic manner and by highlighting the role of women as equal leaders and partners in intellectual and artistic pursuits.



Left and above: Performance by El-Funoun Palestinian Popular Dance Troupe  
Courtesy of El-Funoun Palestinian Popular Dance Troupe



# 8

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The goal of our dialogue and exchange program is to inspire conversation around various paradigms and models for understanding the role of art and culture in society. We asked a number of idea leaders for their thoughts on what we wrote.

## PART EIGHT

# REFLECTIONS

**SAMAR DUDIN**  
**RUWWAD AL TANMEYA (JORDAN)**



**Photo: Theater production titled 'Heya Al Ard'**  
**Courtesy of: Ruwwad Al-Tanmeya**

As a theater artist, educator, and youth worker, I believe that the research on arts, cultural organizing, and social change authored by Jude Sajdi is a timely and important milestone that showcases the power of culture and the arts in nurturing freedom of expression, community solidarity, and public discourse. It demonstrates how the arts can become mediums for community building, inspiring and informing action.

The cultural organizing framework discussed in the research is new, and it has helped me reflect on many creative community-based productions within the modalities of cultural organizing proposed by Paul Kuttner. Cultural organizing framed as community arts, cultural strategy, and cultural integration speaks to the diverse forms of how we experience the intersection between arts and activism, with a focus on the performing arts as a collective genre and practice.

The research presented experiments and artistic endeavors that embody the cultural organizing framework. I would like to add some case studies to the ones chosen, however, such as Hassan Geretly's lifelong theater arts work with his company Al Warsha in co-creating performances that integrate the cultural heritage of Egypt. Their productions place oral narratives, artistic practices, rituals, and literary interpretations at the heart of contemporary lived experiences. I also appreciate the theater experimentation of Raja Ben Ammar in Tunisia and her powerful performances based on co-authorship and site-specific theater, as well as Hanan Hajj Ali's and Roger Assaf's powerful performances anchored in the narratives of resistance in Lebanon. Many more artists across all genres have contributed greatly to a deep shift in the conversations sparked by the arts when anchored in context, historicity, and what Herbert Marcuse called the "aesthetic dimension."

According to Marcuse: "Art is committed to that perception of the world which alienates individuals from their functional existence and performance in society. It is committed to an emancipation of

sensibility, imagination, and reason in all spheres of subjectivity and objectivity.” The “aesthetic dimension,” essential to the quality and emotional power of art productions, is at the heart of the creative process, without which a work named as art can become a dogmatic statement, losing its power, rigor, and capacity to impact the cultural discourse and transcend social norms in a way that allows us to see the world in a new way.

The proposed aesthetic perspectives framework in the research study is an extensive attempt to center the arts in building an equitable and just society, acknowledging the pluralistic nature of creative engagement and diverse positionalities, lived experiences, and worldviews. The framework’s 11 attributes of excellence in arts for change reclaim aesthetics as an essential dimension of arts for change work, highlighting how creative expression stimulates our senses, moves us, and makes meaning in the world.

The framework needs to also address the dimension of co-creation and co-authorship, however, which is key to negotiating positionalities of power and privilege as artists navigate through their creative and community research practices. Exploring frameworks generated by the North and South can pave the way for disrupting the Eurocentricity of the tools used, recognizing that the collective that worked on this framework lived in a US context, which differs from other contexts.

The research can expand to address cultural freedoms, advocating for the right to participate in cultural life by fostering dialogue among diverse worldviews, safeguarding cultural heritage, strengthening the creative and cultural industries, and encouraging cultural pluralism. The

research also frames the post-Arab Spring and describes the shrinking civic space for freedom of expression, requiring mechanisms to support, protect, and organize creative collectives, artists as individuals, and arts-based initiatives. It is crucial to address how the arts contribute to a social justice agenda while also protecting artistic freedom amid restrictive structures, fear, surveillance, and censorship. Failing to do so might enable a discourse that sees the impact of the arts without deep concerns for the community of artists and cultural animators.

The research can benefit from incorporating an essential dimension related to neuroscience and cognitive scientific research on the power of the arts in enhancing neuroplasticity. Evidence shows that arts exposure positively correlates with significantly better subjective mental well-being in healthy individuals. Investigations of the impact of art on well-being focused on everyday activities such as watching a screen drama or reading fiction.

Live arts engagement was positively associated with all aspects of well-being, and visual and literary arts, with greater meaning in life. In her paper titled “Art as a Medium to Challenge Normative Beliefs Regarding Corporal Punishment,” Samah Karaki of the Social Brain Institute argues that art has a positive impact on well-being. According to Karaki, research has shown that both participatory and receptive arts can improve subjective mental well-being in healthy individuals.

The study conducted by Christina Davies, Matthew Knuiman, and Michael Rosenberg in 2015 found that higher levels of arts exposure, from visiting art venues to attending art classes, were associated with

significantly better mental well-being.

The study also revealed that live arts engagement was positively correlated with all aspects of well-being, while visual and literary arts were associated with greater meaning in life. However, screen arts, audio arts, and sports spectating were not found to have any positive impact on mental well-being (Davies et al. 2015).

In conclusion, the research on arts, cultural organizing, and social change is a milestone in placing activism and the arts at the center of community building, expanding the spaces for freedom, creativity, and dialogue. This research sets a foundational document for a deeper, more engaged, and impactful case to support the centrality of the arts as mediums for social change.



Cast members in the Roumieh prison  
production of *12 Angry Lebanese*  
Courtesy of Zeina Daccache



### **CATHY KHATTAR ARAB FUND FOR ARTS AND CULTURE (LEBANON)**

Here are some ideas that I hope will complement what has been proposed in this publication. Working with a grant-making institution that supports artists and cultural structures in the region and in the diaspora has been a great opportunity to discover new and established talents and a variety of cultural and artistic projects that convey the struggles and transformations the region has experienced in the last decade. I have been with the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC) for 10 years now, and I've had a unique chance to see works from all over the Arab region and to witness how the changes that occurred in our societies were reflected in the cultural field and in artistic projects in term of interests, themes, tools, genres, and forms.

In fact, in a region in perpetual crisis at all levels, art can be, and is, a political and social force to question the realities we are facing and the stereotypes we encounter and to propose critical and bold approaches to relevant and pressing issues in our societies. The aim of our work as cultural practitioners is to integrate these experiences and contribute to exchange and dialogues between diverse audiences, around all topics and especially the most problematic and critical ones.

What is intriguing for me is seeing projects that are rooted in their communities, projects that propose deep analysis of and research into their topics without resorting to trendy themes and buzzwords. Artistic projects that intersect with social issues have a responsibility to keep the relevance to their communities at the center of their priorities. For this, questions concerning the relationship with the audience and/or the beneficiaries, the connection to the past and to identity, and sensitivities to all the differences within communities are crucial to the success of any project. Hence the importance of taking the time to research any theme or work an artist or institution intends to do.

Unfortunately, in a world in which resources are becoming scarcer and the majority of the grants and sponsorship are more outcome-driven, this important phase of work is lightly implemented in many projects. Despite this, keeping this high standard of quality and integrity is more than essential, I believe, in all the work we do or support. It is what makes a project unique, impactful, and unforgettable.

I can think of so many successful projects that AFAC has supported as an institution. When it comes to socially engaged projects, some criteria stand out as very impactful, for example: (1) collaboration between different actors and partners, (2) occupation of public spaces, (3) work in/with alternative spaces and initiatives, (4) interest in skills and capacity building, and (5) work on topics that are essential to the targeted audience and in consistency and continuity with the artist's or institution's work and goals. Of course these are not mandatory criteria to have a successful artistic and/or socially engaged cultural project, but their presence can contribute to the wider effect and change that we hope to create.

On top of that, it is important to mention that all these considerations should not interfere with or compromise the importance of innovation and originality in any cultural project. Small additions, small differentiations—in the approach, the tools, the form, or any other layer—are what make a project distinguished, especially now with new technologies such as artificial intelligence and all the potential that comes with them.



Zeina Daccache with cast members in the Roumieh prison production of *12 Angry Lebanese*  
Courtesy of Zeina Daccache

# 9

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The American Friends Service Committee's 2022 gathering for artists and activists from the Middle East and North Africa began with a single question: how are art and culture part of making change in the region?

## PART NINE

# MOROCCO HIGHLIGHTS



The answer to this, and many other questions, formed the foundation of much of the discussion during the event's official panels and presentations. Presentations from philanthropic organizations—such as the Open Society Foundations, Drosos Foundation, and Lambent Foundation—were combined with sessions in which artists discussed their work and activists fielded questions. These were followed by informal conversations that gave participants opportunities to make new connections, talk about their practices, and articulate the purpose, goals, and impact of their work.



For Jason Drucker, AFSC's associate general secretary for advancement, the five-day event in June 2023—which welcomed 50 people from Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, and Tunisia—was an opportunity to coalesce the participants' ideas into a shared vernacular.

"Among artists, culture makers, activists, and the organizations that support them (foundations, museums, performing arts venues, etc.), we are trying to build a language for talking about how art and culture work on individual subjectivity and the larger society, especially in the Arab world," he said.

"The event was designed to validate or pressure test some of these ideas in a relaxed, informal setting," Jason added. "We are also pretty self-aware, especially in a group of artists and cultural practitioners, that we

should hope for unintended consequences and lean into that dynamic fully."

The convening took place in Casablanca, Morocco, an important meeting point for countries and cultures from across the region. For the AFSC team and all those present, there was also the significance of gathering in person after two and a half years of living with COVID-19, as well as the difficulty of crossing national borders, which has always been fraught.

"Most of our staff are used to these constraints, but it is still frustrating and painful to see how extreme the limitations on movement are for those living in the MENA [an acronym for the Middle East and North Africa], compared to their counterparts in the United States and Europe," explained Khaled Elkhoulz, AFSC's director of the Middle East region, who is based in Jordan. "It's very discriminatory."

Overcoming these bureaucratic odds, the convening succeeded in generating not only feelings of fellowship but also opportunities for participating artists to speak freely about their work and its resonance. Many face friction and official opposition to their work at home, leading to self-censorship. Sparks burned with brilliance and intent, as Elkhoulz explained.

"It is always very difficult to hear from our guests about the high levels of stress they face, and the level of trauma that unfortunately has become normalized. Many deal with this through dark humor, but emotions also can run high, which was the case during our event as well. Some of our guests commented about how wonderful it was to feel cared for; sometimes offering a quiet, private room or beautiful meals can be restorative in the context of a world full of Zoom calls."

Robert Bound and Marisa Mazria Katz, journalists and arts writers with long experience in the region, joined the gathering to paint a broad picture of the topics discussed. They spent time speaking with several of the participants about their practices and their views on where the regional arts scene is heading. In the following pages we hear from five individuals who represent the accomplishments and diversity of the participants in the Casablanca event. Each of these conversations has been condensed and edited for clarity.





## LALLA KABER

*Cinematographer and video maker*

Lalla Kaber is a Mauritanian cinematographer and video maker. She also runs an organization for deaf people and works on sign language translation. One of the very few people in her country who is working to prioritize issues deaf people face, Lalla is working to ensure that disability topics become more integrated into her country's culture. Here Lalla talks about how she embarked on her transformational path and the challenges that she sees ahead.

For someone of my tribe to enter into the field of image and cinema was hard. In Mauritania we're a very traditional, tight-knit community in which women work for the family, not for themselves. We can go out, we can travel, but there are certain fields that women can't enter. One of those is cinema; it is a breaking of tradition, and I did that. I broke this tradition, this wall, and I really opened the door for other women.

"I broke this tradition, this wall, and I really opened the door for other women."

After me, four or five other women entered into the field of cinema. I'm really proud of that. Not everyone is still around; some are married and focused on their home life, but a couple of us are still working in cinema. One of us, another woman, went as far as taking off the traditional head wrap and dress worn by women in Mauritania, and she can't even come back anymore. She's living and studying cinema more formally in Egypt.

I'm a president of the Cinema Division at the Institute of Fine Arts in Mauritania. At the same time, I do translation into sign language on national TV, as well as run my own organization focused on providing art training and resources for deaf people, which are otherwise unavailable in my country.

I also made a film about deaf people in Mauritania. There are thousands of them, yet there are only three translators in the whole country. This poses so many problems. When a deaf person needs to take care of official paperwork or something in a hospital or a government building, they're really unable to. I made a movie to bring attention to this issue. The film is about a society in which only one person can speak and everyone else is deaf. So the film switches the normal roles and makes the minority the majority. The film won first place in the Human Rights Festival in Mauritania in 2021. And after that we were able to open a new school; it is the first to teach sign language formally.

This conference has been such a beautiful opportunity for me. Before coming, I wanted to create the first-ever festival in sign language in Mauritania focused on multidisciplinary arts. I feel that being here, exchanging ideas with all these people from around the world in different fields, has opened my mind. I have more ideas about what to do and how to do it, and I truly feel more equipped to do this work. I'm feeling more inspired.

## EMAD HAJJAJ

*Cartoonist*

Emad Hajjaj is a Jordanian cartoonist who has had a long career that, as he explains, earned him all kinds of attention—some of it unwanted. Despite it all, he never stopped making his work. Here Emad talks about his 25-year career and his cartoon character Abu Mahjoob (a Jordanian “everyman”) and how he sees art as a way to transform our everyday lives.

I created Abu Mahjoob as a character dedicated to Jordan—a small country with a lot of problems. I try to bring out funny things from the bad things we face in our daily lives. This is the wonderful characteristic of cartoons—they are a representation of our reality. The cartoonist wants you to laugh about your reality and maybe push you a little bit to change it. Cartoons are about ideas; you have to find that idea. Sometimes I listen to the news, but it’s not enough. I have to live my life—walk, talk to people—and sometimes it will spark an idea.

But drawing cartoons has been like working in a minefield. Cartooning in the Middle East is a very dangerous, tough job. I’ve been imprisoned many times after my cartoons were published, and I’ve lost my job many times. I used to work for a good newspaper; I have a good name, but when I drew the “wrong” cartoon, I was fired. In spite of all that, I am proud that I’m still struggling. It’s my right to express myself. And I’ll say this boldly: we live in a region where, for one reason or another, we cannot choose our leaders. We cannot choose our policies. But

**“I am proud  
that I’m still  
struggling.  
It’s my right  
to express  
myself.”**



it is our right to laugh about things, to make cartoons, to draw our dictators, or rulers, whatever. I always insist on that.

The one idea I would like to pass on at this convening is that art is the solution. You have to look up from your reality and come up with something creative, and from that you can solve problems. I tackle many complicated and sophisticated issues and still made people laugh. Use your art in a creative way, and try to change your reality. Art is a wonderful tool, and if you are creative enough, you will change people.





“Art is a wonderful tool, and if you are creative enough, you will change people.”

EMAD HAJJAJ



Photography:  
Mohamed Morchidi  
and Marisa Mazria Katz



## TALAL AFIFI

*Film curator, producer, and director*

Talal Afifi is a Sudanese film curator, producer, and founder and director of the Sudan Film Factory. He has long been seen as a pioneer in the world of Sudanese film, an emergent art form in his country and one often forced to reconcile itself with tumultuous political events. Here Talal talks about the state of affairs in his country and why he is freshly optimistic about what the future holds for Sudan's cinematic community.

If I had to describe Sudan, I would say it is in a fluid state. There was a revolution three years ago, and in October 2021 there was a coup. Following that, people began to develop institutions and a constitution. Everything started from zero, and now people are in a state of resistance. The whole environment now is like a battle. It's not calm, and it's not easy to implement cultural activities.



“Participating in the filmmaking scene is being part of the resistance against all that has happened.”

I started the Sudan Film Factory in 2010. The organization has operated under different kinds of models. We tried being underground, and then we tried being part of the mainstream, creating in a very open way with press conferences and advertisements. Now we are a little calmer in our approach because the Sudan Film Factory is a big institution; we can't be low profile anymore. Today we host film classes and classes on cultural management. But for the moment we don't have open film screenings and events.

We worked for 10 years under very difficult circumstances – during the regime of Omar al-Bashir – and we were able to make it. Still, it requires sensitivity to predict exactly what's going to happen. Our dictatorship in Sudan was about culture. Yes, it was a military dictatorship, but it was like the Nazis in Germany; it was a cultural thing. It was about Arabizing diverse Sudanese culture, centralizing the culture in Khartoum, and Islamizing things. So one aspect of the struggle in Sudan is a cultural struggle and participating in the filmmaking scene is being part of the resistance against all that has happened.

The women and men who have worked on making the film scene happen, they have a new identity. It's not a tribal identity or a class identity but a new identity that relates to film. This unity is a new concept and something that we need in Sudan: to have something in common with other people. I feel that people are more empowered and exposed to interactions with others from within Sudan and outside the country as a result. This new identity is a celebration, a kind of liberation from a lot of things that they have been through.





## **FYRAS MAWAZINI**

*Country director, Morocco & Tunisia,  
for the Drosos Foundation*

Fyras Mawazini leads the Casablanca office of the Drosos Foundation, a private Swiss organization established in 2003 to promote skills and economic independence as an alternative to providing individual or emergency aid. The foundation works strategically and on the ground across the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe. Drawing on his years of experience in international development and humanitarian assistance in the Middle East and North Africa, Fyras told Robert about the realities of operating in such a youthful part of the world.

**ROBERT BOUND:** *What are the priorities for your work in this region?*

**FYRAS MAWAZINI:** The real priority is the economic empowerment of youth. The objective is to bring them toward economic

“Arts and culture provide space for expression, space to discover yourself and what you can achieve in society.”

autonomy so that they can grow up, decide to stay or leave, and think about the future the way they want. The big challenge is unemployment—a very big issue for the MENA region. Broadly, 50% of the population is below 25 years of age, but if you don’t take care of these people, then a country doesn’t function, and you see youth on the migration routes, dreaming of a life somewhere else.

**RB:** *What role do the arts and culture play in your ambitions?*

**FM:** This is a field that presents so many opportunities for young people; it’s something that they’re interested in, that inspires them. They’re fed up with being obliged to go into vocational training for jobs that are no longer attractive or that may not exist in the future. Digital connections have clearly inspired new ambitions.

**RB:** *Do you sense more than a simple generational change here?*

**FM:** I think there is a changing mentality. I’ve realized in the past five years or so that there is a growing distance between youth and religion—and that’s something that is quite new here in the region, to see young people distancing themselves from traditions and religion. Arts and culture provide space for expression, space to discover yourself and what you can achieve in society.

**RB:** *This gathering seems a good place to test these ideas. Has it created fresh perspectives?*

**FM:** It has offered the chance to feel the pulse of the situation within one another’s societies. At Drosos we have tracked this before but now we see it here: there is a strong sense of Africanity, with, for example, artists from North Africa wanting links with West African and sub-Saharan countries. They feel there’s something that could be developed together. But at the same time, the North Africans are on the shore of the Mediterranean and believe that this should be a connection too. Really, it is all about connections.



## JUDE SAJDI

Founder and managing director  
of Sama Consulting

Jude Sajdi is the founder and managing director of Sama Consulting, a company that researches and evaluates social and environmental issues in the Middle East. Ahead of the convening, Jude was commissioned by the American Friends Service Committee to map out the most relevant artistic and cultural practices in the Middle East and North Africa today. Marisa sat down with Jude to ask her about the role of art in creating social change and her prognosis for the field at a moment when so much in the region remains in flux.

**MARISA MAZRIA KATZ:** *What did your research focus on as you turned your lens on culture across the MENA region?*

**JUDE SAJDI:** Since the Arab Spring, the region has been facing a set of very dynamic and complex challenges, whether it is the economic situation or political instability. Add to all that COVID-19, which created additional restrictions, especially on artists, journalists, activists, and so on. For this research I looked at what artists and cultural organizers have done, and despite all these challenges, they have worked with communities to create social change, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

**MMK:** *What potential do you see art having on the local level?*

**JS:** We know that art has huge potential to create or deconstruct some spaces; it provides us with mediums and room for expression that otherwise can be very restricted. Through

“Through the arts we can critique dominant power structures, try to break them down, and raise awareness.”

the arts we can critique dominant power structures, try to break them down, and raise awareness.

**MMK:** *In what ways have the artists participating in this event done that?*

**JS:** So many artists here have accomplished inspiring collaborations with marginalized communities. We also saw that through the arts, some have been fostering a sense of empathy, understanding, and belonging, especially important in the MENA, which has so many crises in terms of refugees, migration, and so on. Using art to create spaces to understand differences is very important. While getting here was definitely challenging, it was so important because the outcomes of such a gathering create opportunity for people to rethink, critique, and reflect on their own artistic practices.





# 10

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In late January and early February of 2023, artists, activists, and cultural practitioners from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) gathered in the Jordanian capital of Amman for the American Friends Service Committee's latest convening in the region.

## PART TEN


# JORDAN HIGHLIGHTS



AFSC's June 2022 gathering in Casablanca, Morocco, examined how art and culture are making change in the MENA region. The prompt for Amman was to build on the experience, energy, and momentum of the Casablanca event and provide answers, practical knowledge, real-life examples, and relevant strategies for success.

A mix of presentations to the group, informal discussions over coffee and meals, and site visits to cultural centers provided ample opportunities for artists to speak with philanthropic organizations, for activists to listen to the experiences of educators, and for theater practitioners to meet with poets, to give just a few examples.

Amman itself could be said to echo some of those discussions: the Jordanian capital is home to large numbers of Palestinian and other regional refugees and has long been a crossroads and a generous if imperfect haven from conflict and dispossession.



The AFSC's Amman event offered a crossroads of its own. Despite it being well over a year since the worst of the COVID pandemic and its restrictions, attendees again relished the opportunity to travel across borders to meet in person. Artists, practitioners, activists, and funders from Egypt, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and Jordan itself, many of whom had joined the earlier Casablanca event, again appeared to enjoy the confluence of parallels and distinctions that drew them to Amman.

The pandemic, however, has left its mark. Beyond the illness itself, COVID gave certain governments an excuse to enact draconian policies that seem to have been withdrawn purposefully slowly as a method of control. A decade after the Arab Spring and the crackdowns on social justice activism thereafter, the hunger for art and culture to aid discourse, healthy public life, and civic debate appears to be even more acute.

In terms of cultural production, not being able to meet has also made it difficult to make work. As one of the AFSC's Jordanian representatives, Khaled Elkhoulz, pointed out: "It's clear that the pandemic disrupted lives, communities, and our movements and struggles for social change. But it also had a deep impact on the cultural ecosystem. Individual artists and cultural practitioners are still facing real challenges in getting the kinds of support that they need to survive, let alone prosper, in communities that are under a lot of stress. At the same time, the pandemic further revealed the importance of arts and culture for people as a major resource for resilience, connection, and mental wellness, all of which give people hope that a better future is possible."

With an eye on that future, the Amman event was designed to be a forum for practical help for this cultural ecosystem and a source of not just inspiration but also—through its speakers and themes—functional assistance to communities and organizations. Jason Drucker, AFSC's associate general secretary, advancement, said, "This event was designed specifically to build on our first in Casablanca." He added: "This second convening is letting us dig deep with artists to reveal in more subtle ways how they are seeking to shift perceptions, public discourse, social and political acts, and human relations. To do this, we also have commissioned new research on the arts that identifies social practices related to these goals and purposes—but also specific to the content in the MENA region. It is a fruitless conversation to talk about art for art's sake versus art for social change. The people we are bringing together hold both in their awareness, and our research is designed to inform our understanding of how aesthetically driven work operates in a larger social, political, and economic horizon."

This research, commissioned from Jude Sajdi of Sama Consulting, provided the AFSC MENA team with a framework for thinking about artistic and cultural activities and provided building blocks for the event.

Robert Bound, an editor with long experience in the region, joined the gathering to offer a broad idea of the topics discussed. He spent time speaking with several of the participants and those related to the field about their work. In the following pages, we hear from five individuals who represent the diversity of the Amman event and its goals. Each of these conversations has been condensed and edited for clarity.



## LAILA AJJAWI

*Palestinian Jordanian artist and social justice activist*

# I

Laila Ajjawi has been painting her evocative murals on city walls since 2014, when she took part in the Women on Walls festival for Egypt and the Middle East. Laila's work often centers on themes of women's rights and social justice, and her colorful and often huge images turn heads and stop traffic across the sites where she has wielded her spray cans atop a cherry picker. While she also works for commercial clients, her great drive is "the fear of being confronted with a big, blank city wall." Here Laila talks about her art, activism, and growing up a refugee.

**ROBERT BOUND:** *What was the last artwork you painted that meant a lot to you?*

**LAILA AJJAWI:** For International Women's Day this year, I painted a large figure of a woman under a galaxy of stars. She encompasses all sorts of women of different backgrounds, ages, places—she is a uniting presence. And the brightest star in that galaxy above her represents hope.

**RB:** *How much of your work is planned and commissioned and how much is spontaneous mural making?*

**LA:** Generally there are two categories of street artists: some do exactly what they want and make work in the street whether it's legal or illegal. But I have a responsibility to think my murals through, and the ideas go through

"The brightest star in that galaxy above her, represents hope."

some filtration before I go out to the streets. I am not just trying to tag things—I'm an artist who makes work about and within the frame of social responsibility.

**RB:** *Your work is very public—people don't have to enter a gallery to see it—they can't help but see it. Does working on city walls come with responsibility?*

**LA:** First, my sense of responsibility comes from the way that I was raised. Now, witnessing how people engage with my work in the streets also gives me a real feeling of responsibility. There is a line you can cross in a painting and how people may view it, so I don't put triggers in my work as some artists do. I don't want a bad scene to develop around my murals. Publicity is nice, but I want it to be of the right kind, and I'd like my murals to be preserved as much as possible.

**RB:** *So you don't intend your work to be read as political or obviously allegorical; you want it to be understood metaphorically?*

**LA:** Yes, I tend to move away from politics. It may put me in danger—I'm a mother, after all. My work is more concerned with social issues and particularly women's rights and the Palestinian case. They are different, and I don't tend to mix them.

**RB:** *You were born and raised in a refugee camp in Irbid. Can you define what perspective that gave you?*

**LA:** Growing up in the camp gave me a very particular perspective, of course. The first time I mixed with people from outside the camp was at college, where people could be racist and cruel because I'd come from the camp. There is a Palestinian or Jordanian issue: I am Palestinian with a Jordanian passport and ID number, but some other Palestinians don't have that. There are ideas about who is really Palestinian and then who is really Jordanian. So I got to know how people deal in stereotypes as soon as I left the camp, and this particularly affects how people judge women and girls. The camp is a big bubble: you're both insulated and isolated. I'm interested in making murals in the camp because I think there is an identity that is being erased step by step, on purpose. My work is there to remind future generations of the Palestinian case and what is happening.

## HATEM SALAMA

Program officer, Ford Foundation

# 2

Hatem Salama is a program officer for the Ford Foundation in Cairo, looking after arts and media grant making across the Middle East and North Africa. Hatem has spent 20 years working for international organizations that support culture in the region, having previously been on the other side of the desk, seeking aid for his own cultural practice, particularly in theater. Here Hatem talks about getting under the skin of grantees' projects, the attractions of risk-taking, and how large organizations may be passing the baton to local philanthropy.

It helps my work at the Ford Foundation that I spent almost 24 years of my life asking for funding myself. Now I'm on the other side, and I'm very interested in asking, "What do you really want to do?" My advice for people looking for funding would be not to use the terms or topics that you think I have in my strategy. Forget about that. Instead ask yourself what you really want to do as an organization. What is your main objective or purpose? Where do you want to develop strategically? What is the need that you see on the ground? Because you are the one with the knowledge of what is happening out there. Then it's my task to find the connections between what really needs to happen and the strategy to make it happen.

I love it when ideas are risky and there's a bit of going into the unknown, when there's a lot of energy and passion, and it's a risk that can open doors that we hadn't even imagined were there. When you think you have thought of everything and have a very clear plan, it shows something, but at the same time you are very confined; you have made limitations already. If you have a very clear objective in terms of values, then OK—then that's something we can work toward.

The Ford Foundation is focused on social justice, and this can be approached in so many different ways, from topics that concern gender to technology and society,

"I love it when ideas are risky and there's a bit of going into the unknown—when there's a lot of energy and passion and it's a risk that can open doors we hadn't even imagined were there."



natural resources, and climate change. It's a lot, and we're trying to work out how we can support or change something for the better. My area is the arts, culture, and media, and an example—something that the Ford Foundation is supporting—is Arij, which is a network for investigative journalists. Arij provides training and support for fact-checkers and for reporters to become highly professional investigative journalists. This way we support the public at large to have access to reliable information. What we aspire for is a collaboration between the governments in the future, hopefully between the civic space, civil society, and between the different elements that hold society together. It is our part to allocate or to support the allocation of resources to the players who are conscious of their role, of their relationship with the other players around them in the ecosystem.

There are of course lots of other international donors that we all know that are either governmental, like the United States Agency for International Development, or private, like us at the Ford Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the Drosos Foundation, and so on. What is interesting is that we can also see here and there in the region that there is an emergence of local and regional interest in philanthropy. Now it is about how you can engage with these newcomers. Let's say it's our responsibility as donors and foundations that have been working in the region for such a long time to engage with these new organizations to share our experience and learning but also to listen to their fresh perspectives.









“As much as the arts are resilient in withstanding challenges, art is continually a site of resistance.”

**TATIANA MOUARBES**



Photography:  
Shady Adwan

## TATIANA MOUARBES

Director, Soros Arts Fellowship, Team Manager, Open Society Foundation Culture and Art program

# 3

Tatiana Mouarbes is a curator, grant maker, and creative strategist. A team manager with the Culture and Art program at the Open Society Foundations, Tatiana also directs the Soros Arts Fellowship, with its focus on the Southern Hemisphere, and was previously program officer for the Open Society Foundations' Middle East North Africa Program. Here Tatiana talks about funding strategy and the resilience of the region's cultural scene.

**ROBERT BOUND:** *What are your broad aims within the Open Society Foundation, and what does the MENA need in terms of funding?*

**TATIANA MOUARBES:** It's such a huge and varied region that it's difficult to talk generally, but our work is based on advancing diverse artistic practices and strengthening the aesthetic and political capacities of artists. We take an artist-centered approach, and so while the MENA region is vast, we're lucky to witness one of the most highly advanced cultural scenes in the world here. It's a scene that has survived despite such great challenges.

**RB:** *Can you give us an example of the resilience of the scene in this region?*

**TM:** Despite everything, Lebanon stays culturally strong, and Beirut is a major art world center down to the dedication and work of independent artists and organizations like Ashkal Alwan and the Arab Image Foundation. There is a complete lack of government support there—none. In Egypt artists, writers, critical thinkers, and arts institutions have stayed strong and been on the front lines of the revolution and so have been among the first and most harshly attacked by governments.

“Art has the power to tap into collective imagination and transform oppressive power structures.”

**RB:** *So you could say that these often harsh regimes very much understand the power of art?*

**TM:** Oh, yes, ironically authoritarian and repressive regimes truly get the power and agency of arts and organizing around it while the “the left” often doesn't. You saw this in Tunisia during the Arab Spring—that artists were at the forefront. As much as the arts are resilient in withstanding challenges, art is continually a site of resistance. *Resilience* is a tricky word—maybe it's something to be proud of, but people and institutions also ask: “Why should we have to be resilient? Why should we accept so much turmoil?”

**RB:** *Are there consistent regional themes to the work that is produced with the help of your funding and the institutions that show it?*

**TM:** There is a consistent effort toward designing alternative blueprints for the future and toward voicing the need for and importance of freedom of expression and creativity. Art has the power to tap into collective imagination and really transform oppressive power structures, and this is why you've seen—ever since the Arab Spring—that arts and culture are at the epicenter and front lines of movements for change across the region.

**RB:** *How close to politics can you get as a foundation? When does funding a project become taking a stance?*

**TM:** I think it's important for us to operate in listening mode, not top-down. We're set up to allow our grantees to do their best work and to support the field, asking what needs to be done and how philanthropy and our role in shaping larger conversations could be helpful. We are focused on human rights and social justice, so the work is highly politicized, but we try to take a back seat and highlight the work of our grantees. Some of the artists we support are very political, but our focus is on them and their safety. We've often been on the defensive, but with rising authoritarianism globally and personal attacks on the foundation and our founder, George Soros, himself, we have gone more on the offensive in our communications in recent years. Our work is becoming more focused on safeguarding artistic and cultural freedom globally.





## NIDAL KA'BI

*Executive director, Palestinian Performing Arts Network and performer and choreographer for El-Funoun Dance Troupe*

# 4

Nidal has been with the Palestinian Performing Arts Network (PPAN)—13 organizations working in dance, theater, music, and circus—since 2022. He manages the overall objectives, initiatives, and strategy of the network, particularly bridge building between arts, civil, and national organizations. For 20 years Nidal has also been a member of the legendary El-Funoun dance troupe, performing across Palestine, the region, and the world and helping to showcase the troupe as a dynamic and shrewd example of Palestinian soft power. Here Nidal talks about El-Funoun's mixture of traditional and contemporary styles and how dance can push boundaries.

El-Funoun was established in 1979. It began with three young men with a dream of introducing folkloric dance to their community in Palestine in order to preserve that heritage. Through the years El-Funoun kept growing and kept producing. The choreography has developed over time, so it's a mix between folkloric and contemporary dance. Now El-Funoun has its own school for the performing arts in Palestine and through its productions has tackled many social issues relating to women, for example, and related to the political statement we make

“It’s a long process working with society; you need to have patience and let things take their time.”

as Palestinians, which is that we are under occupation. We can make many political statements by putting them onstage in this frame of creative dancing that mixes folkloric and contemporary elements.

El-Funoun believes in heritage as a living culture. We believe that it has its own identity that can always be developed. The organization has really pushed forward, always working with the community. In the 1980s people were refusing to allow men and women to dance hand in hand onstage. But El-Funoun broke this taboo. In the 1990s, later on, it seemed very normal for men and women to dance together onstage. So these small changes are due to El-Funoun pushing and pushing in order to make this statement of a progressive community whose members respect one another and that has a vision of its own, an independence, especially in this context of the Israeli occupation.

The organization has managed to really work with the people: they have so many programs, like outreach training; they go to refugee camps; they go to villages; and they train the youth. In a way, we build our own audience. Something that El-Funoun is very aware of is knowing our communal history and reviewing it with the tools of contemporary daily life. Overall I think El-Funoun uses a soft ideology, really depending on the cumulative work through the years. We know it's a long process working with society; you need to have patience and let things take their time.

I ask myself why El-Funoun is such a success. I think on an artistic level it has kept developing itself. The dancers can do contemporary dance, ballet, other traditional folklore dances from the region or from Africa or Latin America. There's always this exposure to other experiments in dance from all around the world. The second thing is the audience. I mean, when you build this healthy relationship with your audience, they have a feeling of belonging, of communicating and belonging to this body, to this entity. Plus we're working with the youth and giving them space to express their feelings, their opinions. That's very healthy and important for El-Funoun to grow and develop.

El-Funoun is aware of the political and social statements within its artistic productions through the years. It has been giving joy to people and giving them hope also since the Palestinian context is really complicated.

## FARAH CHAMMA

Poet and performer

# 5

Farah is a Palestinian poet and performer, known for mixing prose, performance, and live music in her spoken-word work. She has performed in Arabic, English, and French at cultural, literary, and music festivals across the world. In 2021 she and the Brazilian producer Lief founded Chameleon, a musical duo that combines poetry and electronica. Here Farah talks about the practicality of working as a poet and her personal take on Palestinian identity.

For me, it all started with poetry, with writing at the age of 12 at school and wanting to show what I write to the teachers. Then slowly realizing that I'm confident enough to stand in front of an audience—things started coming together. I write, but not only do I write, I like to share it out loud. My practice actually started with a small group of poets in Dubai called the Poeticians, run by a beautiful Palestinian poet and filmmaker named Hind Shoufani. I went there as a 16-year-old, and she told me, "Well, it's an 18-plus event, but I'll let you in this time!" Later I decided to study performing arts to broaden my relationship to performance. My work is not just performance poetry—I'm interested in all the attention-seeking arts, all that sharing, and asking why we do this as humans. There's always a storyteller among us in a social circle. Someone who grabs more attention, someone who tells more jokes, and I started getting interested in these personas. I know how to grab attention, and I know that I do it.

I'm writing about identity, what that means, what it means to be Palestinian, what it means to have a passport that doesn't let you travel. All these travel restrictions, all these stories I have heard and I still hear from the people around me. You start looking at the world and you say, "What the hell is this?" Why can some people just go and travel somewhere tomorrow and others have to plan it for six months and then maybe get the chance to go—or maybe not? So this is what I started exploring in my own identity

"I've been unboxing myself and my work for as long as I can remember."

as a Palestinian whose dad grew up in Syria and whose mom grew up in Jordan. I was really more focused on Bilad al-Sham, on the Levant. In your head, though, you can go in many different directions.

The language I write—and perform in—changes the content of my work. I've been writing in spoken Arabic, so that really feels like having a conversation. It's so casual and opens up so many different plays on language because it comes naturally, because that's how I speak. When I write in English, it can sometimes be a bit more formal, a bit more academic. Now I'm exploring love—what is this universal thing that we've always written about and how would I write about it? It's still a free space for me. I've been unboxing myself and my work for as long as I can remember. Whenever I'm boxed in by the Palestinian question, I say, well, yes, of course, but the Palestinian question is not in a vacuum. There is a "Palestine" of the everyday—an idea that has to expand to all social justice problems.









### APPENDIX 1:

#### Key experts interviewed

##### **Amany Abu Zaid**

Program consultant, Tamasi  
Performing Arts Collective  
*Egypt*

##### **Khaled Katamesh**

Director, El-Funoun Dance Troupe  
*Palestine*

##### **Samar Dudin**

Artist and regional director and head  
of programs, Ruwwad Al Tanmeya  
*Jordan*

##### **Ahmed Guerfal**

Dancer and founder, L'Association  
Danseurs Citoyens Sud  
*Tunisia*

##### **Samah Karaki**

Neuroscientist and founder,  
The Social Brain Institute  
*France*

##### **Rima Mismar**

Executive director, The Arab Fund  
for Arts and Culture  
*Lebanon*

##### **Moukhtar Kocache**

Independent adviser and consultant  
*Lebanon*

### APPENDIX 2:

#### Artistic practices, artists, and organizations referenced

##### **The Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival (D-CAF)**

###### *Egypt*

D-CAF, Egypt's first international multidisciplinary contemporary arts festival, takes place over three weeks in October of each year, at multiple sites across downtown Cairo. D-CAF showcases groundbreaking work in the fields of music, theater, dance, visual arts, literature, and film by cutting-edge artists from Egypt, the Arab world, and beyond. In addition to working with established downtown cultural spaces and theaters, D-CAF breaks new ground by using nontraditional sites such as historical buildings, storefronts, alleyways, and rooftops for performances, events, and arts installations, with the aim of encouraging both audiences and performers to engage with the city in a new way.

[d-caf.org](http://d-caf.org)

##### **Baladk Street and Urban Art Festival**

###### *Jordan*

Baladk Street and Urban Art Festival is an eight-day event celebrating the urban art movement. The festival is an important gathering of the global urban arts community and Jordanian artists in Amman, Jordan. Baladk provides a platform for emerging and established artists to connect, network, learn, create, and share their artistic experiences. The festival is organized by Al Balad Theater.

[facebook.com/albaladtheatre](https://facebook.com/albaladtheatre)

##### **Sudan Independent Film Festival**

###### *Sudan*

The Sudan Independent Film Festival is a weeklong annual series of screenings, discussion forums, and networking events focused on

independent cinema as a form of artistic expression for social debate and change, organized by the Sudan Film Factory. The festival takes pride in screening high-quality Sudanese films in front of critics, festival curators, and the media. Many of these films receive critical acclaim, and as a result, a number have received invitations for screening and participation in major film festivals.

[siff-sd.com](http://siff-sd.com)

##### **Farah Chamma**

###### *UAE/Brazil*

Farah Chamma is a poet and performer known for her spoken-word performances, in which she combines orality, acting, and live music. Born in Palestine, she has lived in Brazil, France, the United Arab Emirates, and the United Kingdom. Accordingly, her shows always incorporate several languages, especially Arabic, English, and French.

[farahchamma.com](http://farahchamma.com)

##### **El-Funoun Dance Troupe**

###### *Palestine*

Since its inception in 1979, El-Funoun has aimed to express the spirit of Arab-Palestinian folklore and contemporary culture through unique combinations of traditional and stylized dance and music. The troupe believes in the crucial role of the arts and culture in countering the systematic attempts by the occupation to suppress the Palestinian national identity. El-Funoun works on creating a democratic society that respects and celebrates diversity. Through collaborations with local organizations, in cities and refugee camps, they provide training to male and female youth that builds and shapes their personalities and provides them with alternative ways of thinking and new narratives that promote inclusiveness and diversity.

[el-funoun.org](http://el-funoun.org)

**El Mastaba***Egypt*

El Mastaba Center for Egyptian Folk Music is a unique civil society organization that was founded in 2000 by Zakaria Ibrahim, with the aim of reviving Egypt's rich and unique performing arts heritage. The center not only preserves, documents, and develops traditional music in Egypt but is also unique in its efforts to reintroduce folk music to its original communities and to revitalize its role in the daily lives and imaginations of the Egyptian people.

[el-mastaba.org](http://el-mastaba.org)

**Sammany Hajo***Sudan*

Sammany Hajo is a Sudanese musician born in Saudi Arabia and residing in Qatar. Despite being away from his homeland, he is known for the music he writes about Sudan and has been labeled "the voice of Sudan."

[soundcloud.com/sammany](https://soundcloud.com/sammany)

**Cairokee***Egypt*

Cairokee is an Egyptian indie-rock band that was officially launched in 2003 but came to prominence following the Egyptian uprising of 2011 with its revolutionary music featuring politically inspired lyrics and messages of protest.

[cairokee.com](http://cairokee.com)

**Lalla Kaber***Mauritania*

Lalla is a film director from Mauritania and the manager of AMA for Social Services.

[facebook.com/lallakaber.ghalawi](https://facebook.com/lallakaber.ghalawi)

**National Center for Culture and Arts***Jordan*

Recognizing that culture is one of the main pillars of human development, the Noor Al Hussein Foundation pioneered the Theater in Education

Program in 1987, which introduced the use of performing arts as a medium to promote awareness of critical issues, including women's rights, conservation, conflict resolution, and tolerance. The program evolved into the National Center for Culture and Arts (NCCA), which continues to innovatively use the transformative power of the performing arts to nurture informed societies and creativity by providing safe spaces for expression and dialogue.

[facebook.com/ncca.khf](https://facebook.com/ncca.khf)

**The Sabunkaran Theatre Group***Iraq*

The Sabunkaran Theatre Group, based in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq, is a theatrical home for people regardless of their cultural background and the language they speak, including many refugees and internally displaced people. Radwan Taleb, a Syrian refugee, co-founded the troupe and directs many of the plays.

[facebook.com/thesabunkarantheatregroup](https://facebook.com/thesabunkarantheatregroup)

**Ruwwad Al-Tanmeya***Regional*

Ruwwad Al-Tanmeya is a nonprofit community development organization that works with disenfranchised communities through education, youth volunteerism, and grassroots organizing. Its approach encompasses an array of programs and projects that strengthen initiative and facilitate the redress of problems prioritized by members of the community.

[ruwwad.ngo](http://ruwwad.ngo)

**Mohamad Khayata***Syria*

Born in Damascus, Mohamad Khayata (1985) holds a degree in fine arts from Damascus University. Reflecting his years of displacement, Khayata's work deals with concepts

of migration, memory, and identity. Evolving from photography to encompass mixed media, painting, sculpture, and music, his work often combines photography with other media to produce multilayered explorations of identity and nation. Many of his pieces include the ongoing metaphoric—and literal—theme of the patchwork quilt, which reflects his desire to stitch Syria back together.

[mohamadkhayata.com](http://mohamadkhayata.com)

**Tamasi Performing Arts Collective**  
*Regional*

Tamasi is a collective of 11 performing arts organizations from Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Palestine that are accomplished in the field of performing arts and share a strong belief in the pivotal role of arts and culture in the achievement of social and economic growth and prosperity. Tamasi offers safe and creative environments as well as tools for communities in the Arabic-speaking MENA to exercise freedom of expression through arts and culture.

[tamasicollective.org](http://tamasicollective.org)

**Jesuits' and Brothers' Association for Development***Egypt*

The Jesuits' and Brothers' Association for Development (JBA) works in the field to empower the poor and underprivileged in rural and urban areas. The association also takes an interest in qualifying the staff in order to help them build creative capabilities and academic expertise so that they may master both knowledge and practice.

[annalindhfoundation.org](http://annalindhfoundation.org)

**Al-Harah Theater***Palestine*

Al-Harah Theater, established in 2005, is a nonprofit organization based in Beit Jala, Bethlehem. Al-Harah aims to bring compelling

stories, in uncensored spaces, to audiences throughout Palestine, the Arab world, and beyond, by producing and distributing theater performances that feature a high level of artistic achievement and through educational training programs that create new practitioners who believe that theater has a strong potential to implement positive change.

[alharah.org](http://alharah.org)

### **L'Association Danseurs Citoyens Sud Tunisia**

L'Association Danseurs Citoyens Sud in southern Tunisia started as a youth movement and then registered as an independent nonprofit cultural and artistic association in 2015. Its mission is to mentor young amateur artists in music, contemporary dance, and street theater and to train them in concepts of citizenship and human rights in order to help them become positive agents of change in their communities.

[a-dcs.org](http://a-dcs.org)

### **Catharsis Lebanese Center for Drama Therapy**

*Lebanon*

Catharsis is the first drama therapy organization in Lebanon and the Arab region. It is a nonprofit organization founded in 2007 operating under the direction of Zeina Daccache. Catharsis promotes and offers therapeutic actions through the use of theater and art processes for individuals and groups of all ages. It offers services and programs in various social, educational, and therapeutic settings.

[catharsisledt.org](http://catharsisledt.org)

### **Zoukak Theater Company**

*Lebanon*

Zoukak was founded in 2006 as a nonhierarchical structure, dedicated to theater practice as a form of social and political engagement, with a belief in theater as a space

for common reflection and in collectivity as a means to counter marginalizing systems. Since its inception and with each new project, Zoukak strives to find new ways of collective creation, springing from an understanding of theater as collective work done by diverse individuals.

[zoukak.org](http://zoukak.org)

### **National Music Conservatory**

*Jordan*

The National Music Conservatory of the King Hussein Foundation is an educational and cultural institution established to encourage the development of accomplished musicians and to promote music awareness and appreciation in Jordan by providing educational opportunities in music as well as performances for the local community. [nmc.edu.jo](http://nmc.edu.jo)

## **APPENDIX 3:**

### **Aesthetic Perspectives Framework: Attributes of Excellence in Arts for Change**

In 2014 Animating Democracy launched the Evaluation Learning Lab (ELL) in collaboration with the Art x Culture x Social Justice Network and the Nathan Cummings Foundation with a goal of promoting evaluation that embodies values and practices congruent with arts and social justice work. The lab engaged arts practitioners, evaluators, and funders to build practical knowledge and resources for measuring social impact, evaluating aesthetic dimensions, and equalizing power in evaluation. The [aesthetic perspectives framework](#) grew out of the lab. The framework can be a useful resource for artists, civil society practitioners, and funders working on arts for change projects.

#### **1**

#### **Commitment**

What is evidence of the commitment to civic engagement, community change, or justice? To what extent is that commitment a clear underpinning of the creative work?

How strong is the commitment to engaging the artistic or expressive interests of community partners and intended participants?

In what ways does the artist demonstrate commitment to stakeholder input in defining the purpose of creative work as well as social outcomes?

To what extent does the work draw on the core strengths of artists, partners, and participants?

How committed are partners to engaging artists at an early stage to allow for maximum value?



How have the artists and community partners enacted a plan for sustained commitment or depth of impact?

**2**

### **Communal meaning**

In what ways does the work reflect purposeful relationships among stakeholders and participants?

How does the creative work or process afford participants access to collective expression, engagement, and/or reflection?

Does the work elicit the stories, images, and perspectives of multiple individuals or stakeholders and provide them with opportunities to discuss and make sense of them collectively?

How is the work relevant to the community, location, or context?

How does the work enhance people's ability to see intersections and make connections (e.g., through dialogue, interaction, or interpretive information)?

How might aesthetic choices support or inadvertently undermine engagement or dialogue?

How has complexity been embraced?

**3**

### **Disruption**

What is the point of the creative disruption? In disrupting, does the work offer alternatives to current conditions?

How does the work reveal stories or images previously untold or unseen in a way that can shift public/audience perception?

Does the work or creative process offer a shift in power dynamics?

In what ways does the work break away from established practices, either social or artistic? Or does it disrupt dominant systems by supporting traditional expressions that are important for particular stakeholders and that typically are not supported?

How does the creative work cause people to question or consider their own beliefs, assumptions, or values?

How does the work afford artists or participants new forms of expression? In what ways does it offer new ways of thinking about form or medium, particularly in relationship to the content?

**4**

### **Cultural integrity**

How have the artists and stakeholders explored the relationships of power, privilege, and cultural context within the process of making the work?

Do the people affected by the work have agency to act on their own behalf?

Is the work factually accurate where such accuracy is called for?

Have the artists and stakeholders considered what they may be taking away and what they can leave behind that is meaningful in a cultural context?

How are the artist(s) connected to the community that is the focus of the work? What history and relationship does the artist have with the knowledge, traditions, and practices they are engaging in? What is the artist's cultural relationship to the aesthetics and techniques of the project?

How have members of the community/population/locality been engaged in meaningful ways in the development and/or presentation of the work? How has that engagement been expressed?

**5**

### **Emotional experience**

In what ways does the work elicit emotional responses?

How does the emotional response function in relation to the social justice or change-making focus of the work? What are the roles of such responses as empathy, feeling of belonging, anger, indignation, or sorrow to the overall intent of the work?

Is a responsible approach taken to help people process or cope with the potential emotional responses that the creative work may evoke? Are partnerships in place that can support emotional response or actions during the development and/or after the work is experienced?

How varied or similar are the emotional responses among audiences and participants, including those with different characteristics and experiences?

Did participants' emotional responses to the work move them to heightened awareness or to engage in dialogue or action? Or did the work provoke emotional responses that are in opposition to the intended change (e.g., alienation or resistance)?

**6**

### **Sensory experience**

How does the work highlight or challenge sensory expectations?

How do the sensory responses relate to the social, civic, or justice intentions of the work?

How do sensory elements affect people's experience of the creative work? Does the work elicit purposeful discomfort, the impulse to tell a story, or physical responses (movement, vocal, or facial expressions, etc.)?

How do sensory choices engage the imaginations of audience members?

In what ways are sensory experiences combined and integrated and how are they connected to the intended emotional or action-oriented responses?

How does the structure or presentation of the work (such as placement of the audience relative to performers) enhance sensory experiences?

### 7 Risk taking

How does the work take risks of form, content, medium, or the relationship among these elements?

In what ways does the work experiment with new means of expression or processes for engagement?

What is the point of risk taking? In what ways does it advance a meaningful purpose or idea?

How and with what intent are audience members or participants engaged in meaningful risks? Do participants and audience members have agency in decisions that might put them at risk? Does consciousness of risk inform the nature of the audience's experience?

To what extent are artists and stakeholders conscious of and responsible about the creative risks of the project's process and products? Are emotional, privacy, bodily, or legal risks of the work responsibly considered?

If the work has risked and "failed" (by some measure), has something been gained nonetheless?

### 8 Openness

How does the art and its process offer multiple points of entry and/or forms of participation for people with varied expectations and aesthetic preferences?

How do the artists open their process to multiple viewpoints and show their willingness for the work to evolve based on what is learned?

Does the work allow for multiple perspectives or conflicting truths, even within shared goals?

If the work is designed to be adaptable to varied situations, how does it change in form or meaning with new contexts, participants, or input?

How does flexibility align with the social justice intentions of the project or partners?

Is the development and creative process of the work transparent to stakeholders and participants?

Is the artistic team committed to analyzing, and possibly changing, creative choices in relation to context?

### 9 Resourcefulness

How does the use of resources engage the audience's imagination and enhance their participation?

To what extent is the use of resources aligned with the artists' commitment to social justice and change?

How does the work demonstrate creativity in maximizing the possibilities of the human, social, financial, and physical resources available?

### 10 Coherence

Are artistic choices connected to (or informed by) an overarching intent? In what ways?

Is there a meaningful connection between medium and message?

To what extent is there a clear artistic point of view or a clear relationship among multiple artistic perspectives?

Does the work advocate a particular point of view? Or allow for multiple viewpoints in relation to its community, social, or civic intent? What are the implications?

In what ways can audiences/participants find meaning in both the parts and the whole of the work or project?

### 11 Stickiness

What are the literal or figurative marks of the work that are compelling, resonant, or striking?

What are participants' takeaways from the experience and how do they connect to the social aims of the work?

Has the work created word-of-mouth or buzz for its aesthetics, process choices, or social justice aims?

Is the creative work part of an overall strategy addressing civic or social change that supports continued engagement with the issues?

How have participants or stakeholders taken action on or stayed engaged with the issues or justice aims of the work?

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# Sama

Sama Consulting is a woman-owned research and analytics organization that works with practitioners and policy makers to ensure they maximize their developmental, social, and environmental impact. Sama produces data and provides insights on social and environmental issues affecting communities around the world.