

ART IS POWER

20 Artists On How They
Fight for Justice and Inspire Change



Art Is Power: 20 Artists on How They Fight for Justice and Inspire Change
 June 27, 2023
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Art Is Power: 20 Artists on How They Fight for Justice and Inspire Change spotlights the stories of artists around the world who have used their creative talents to uplift, sustain, and mobilize social and political movements. The report was written by PEN America's Artists at Risk Connection (ARC) and features profiles of 20 artists from across the globe, exploring why they became artists, how they became involved in social and political movements, and the persecution they have faced as a result of their creative expression.

PEN America's [Artists at Risk Connection \(ARC\)](#) safeguards the fundamental right to artistic freedom of expression worldwide. Its mission is to ensure that artists and cultural workers can live and create without fear, regardless of their country or discipline. ARC plays the critical role of connecting at-risk artists from any country and discipline to available resources across a global network of more than 800 organizations, providing urgent support, fellowships, and legal support. In addition, ARC provides emergency grants, resilience grants, and technical assistance, bolstering protection and resilience for artists at risk. ARC's impact is amplified by its regional protective networks in Africa and Latin America. Through collaboration with human rights and cultural organizations worldwide, ARC responds to on-the-ground threats to artistic freedom by providing localized emergency support to artists at risk. In partnership with civil society organizations, ARC also builds cross-regional coalitions to raise awareness of artistic freedom issues, celebrate global artists, and fight for increased recognition of the critical role that they play in society. By advocating for policy reforms that uphold the safety and well-being of artists under international human rights law, ARC works tirelessly with its coalitions to create a more secure environment for artistic expression worldwide.

This report is made possible thanks to the generous support of the Fritt Ord Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation.

PEN America's Artists at Risk Connection (ARC) gratefully acknowledges the invaluable contributions of Dounia Benslimane and Simone Longo de Andrade. Their collaboration with ARC was instrumental in conceptualizing this report, conducting artist interviews, and offering valuable external review and insights during the drafting process. Their expertise and dedication greatly enhanced the quality and depth of the final product.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Artists around the world are increasingly being subjected to threats, harassment, and persecution in the midst of a global wave of rising authoritarianism. They are often targeted because of the social or political content of their creative expression. In 2022, [PEN America's Freedom to Write Index](#) documented 311 cases of writers who were detained or imprisoned around the world for their writing or for exercising their freedom of expression. This followed a concerning trend captured in 2021 by the cultural rights organization [Freemuse](#), and further confirmed by their 2022 findings, which documented 1,200 violations of artistic freedom in its annual State of Artistic Freedom report—an increase from 978 violations in 2020 and 711 violations in 2019.

Art Is Power: 20 Artists on How They Fight for Justice and Inspire Change spotlights the stories of artists around the world who have used their creative talents to uplift, sustain, and mobilize social and political movements globally. The report was written by PEN America's Artists at Risk Connection (ARC), which was established in 2017 to advocate for at-risk artists and artistic freedom and to act as a liaison between artists and organizations that provide direct resources such as emergency funding, residencies, or legal assistance. The report draws on ARC's insights from its work with artists, art organizations, and human rights organizations; from interviews with human rights and cultural policy experts, including Karima Bennoune, the former UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights; and from in-depth conversations with 20 artists about their lives, why they became artists, how they became involved in social and political movements, and the persecution they have faced as a result of their creative expression.

Despite the escalating threats that artists face and their increased need for urgent assistance, many are unable to obtain sufficient support from the institutions and communities that are best positioned to help them in the art world or the human rights world. *Art Is Power* argues that this lack of support occurs because socially engaged artists often go unnoticed by both the human rights world and the art world, with each group considering them the other's responsibility. Human rights organizations provide critical resources, including emergency funding, legal assistance, and relocation support, to human rights defenders. Yet too often, at-risk artists fall outside the focus of protective mechanisms and advocacy efforts. Meanwhile, art organizations can offer resilience funding,

residency programs, and valuable connections to the broader art world. But at-risk artists are routinely denied access to such support because art organizations view them as activists first rather than “true” artists. With the exception of a few famous persecuted artists, the art world has limited awareness of the risks that socially engaged artists often face.

Through this report, ARC seeks to challenge the preconceptions that art institutions and human rights organizations too often hold about socially engaged artists by making two fundamental arguments: Socially engaged artists are *true* artists who are as talented and committed to their craft as other artists, and are thus deserving of support from the art world. And socially engaged artists are deserving of the same protections afforded to *human rights defenders*¹ because they use creative expression to engage with and defend human rights issues, and create space for others to vindicate their own human rights. Cultural rights defenders are human rights defenders who deserve the support of human rights organizations and the protections granted to human rights defenders within the universal human rights framework.

For this report, ARC selected a diverse group of 20 artists representing various countries, contexts, and regions across the globe and conducted long-form interviews with them. All of these artists engage with social movements through their creative expression. All use art as their outlet and primary medium to fight for change. Many have received direct support from ARC to help them cope with the persecution and harassment that they have faced. The report centers their voices and their stories, operating from a firm belief that storytelling is the most powerful tool in our arsenal to shape new narratives and drive social change.

Featured artists include:

- **Bart Was Not Here**, a Burmese visual artist who rose to prominence for his viral digital art series, *Seeing Red*, during Myanmar's Spring Revolution in 2021. He was forced to flee the country after his car and studio were shot at and now lives in exile in the United States.
- **Dashka Slater**, an American author whose young adult novel, *The 57 Bus*, has been banned in schools and libraries across the United States for its depictions of LGBTQI+ youths and the criminal justice system. It is the [10th-most-banned book in Texas](#) and the [35th-most-banned book](#) in the United States.
- **Fahmi Reza**, a Malaysian graphic designer who has been arrested seven times for his artworks that deal with the country's so-called “Three R's”—race, religion, and royalty. He has accumulated hundreds of thousands of followers on social media for his “democracy classes” for young people, his political activism, and his searing commentary on Malaysian society.
- **Omaid Sharifi**, an Afghan “activist” (artist-activist) who co-founded ArtLords, a street art collective that brought community members together to paint murals about human rights issues. He was forced to flee Afghanistan after the Taliban's takeover in August 2021 and now lives in exile in the United States.

- **Stella Nyanzi**, a Ugandan poet who was arrested and sentenced to 18 months in prison for her provocative poems that criticized Ugandan Prime Minister Yoweri Museveni through the use of “radical rudeness.” She lives in exile in Germany.

The report also features Didier Awadi (Senegal), Elie Kamano (Guinea), Khalid Albaih (Sudan), Ramy Essam (Egypt), Elyla (Nicaragua), Rebeca Lane (Guatemala), Yacunã Tuxá (Brazil), Badiucao (China), Leena Manimekalai (India), Artem Loskutov (Russia), Javier Serrano Guerra / Boa Mistura (Spain), Zehra Doğan (Turkey), Emad Hajjaj (Jordan), Samaneh Atef (Iran), and Zeina Daccache (Lebanon).

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- To advance reform and develop protective mechanisms for at-risk artists, it is critical for the international community to recognize the crucial role of socially engaged artists in social and political movements.
- Through their art and activism, socially engaged artists use creative mediums to raise awareness of human rights issues, mobilize social and political movements, and advocate for change. These artists are therefore deserving of the same protections afforded to cultural rights defenders and must be protected under the human rights defenders' international human rights framework.
- Human rights organizations and art organizations share a *joint responsibility* to support and protect at-risk artists and should expand their programming and resources to reach socially engaged artists.
- In sharing responsibility, it is critical for art and human rights organizations to optimize information sharing, collaboration, and coalition building and to develop a targeted, focused policy reform agenda that defines artistic freedom and guarantees artists' safety and well-being.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The report includes recommendations for artists, state and multilateral organizations, human rights and civil society organizations, and art organizations.

- ARC urges all parties to pay urgent attention to the risks faced by artists and cultural professionals globally.
- ARC calls on states to evaluate their policy frameworks, ensure comprehensive protections for artists, and establish and extend effective support mechanisms such as dedicated immigrant pathways and residency opportunities.
- ARC urges states and multilateral institutions to develop a UN Action Plan for the Protection of Artists recognizing the role socially engaged artists play in creating a more open society, and ensuring their right to access protective mechanisms under international human rights frameworks.
- ARC calls for a more comprehensive approach to implementing the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

- ARC calls on multilateral institutions to proactively monitor and address violations of artistic freedom and to collaborate with art and cultural organizations to better support at-risk artists and understand their needs.
- ARC urges art organizations to collaborate with human rights organizations and solicit their expertise on supporting vulnerable populations while expanding the support they offer to at-risk artists in the form of emergency grants, residency programs, and increased engagement with refugee artists.



FOREWORD ¹¹

by Paul Rucker

Telling the truth can be seen as controversial. When artists tell the truth, we often become targets. Those who target us know, just like we do, that artistic expression is one of the most powerful tools we have to uplift marginalized voices, change minds, and influence policies.

As a Black man making art about issues that many people in positions of power would rather ignore or forget about, including systemic racism and the criminal justice system in the United States, I've experienced censorship throughout my career. My career as an artist has been dedicated to dismantling oppressive systems and uplifting oppressed voices, and that comes with a price.

Around the world, artists every day face much greater risks for exercising their right to creative expression. They are threatened, detained, jailed, tortured, and forced into exile—and as the global landscape for artistic expression grows more and more perilous, at-risk artists are not receiving the support, attention, or resources that they need to push back against oppressive systems and continue their careers safely.

"Those who target us know, just like we do, that artistic expression is one of the most powerful tools we have to uplift marginalized voices, change minds, and influence policies."

Art is Power: 20 Artists On How They Fight for Justice and Inspire Change is a call to action at a time when action is desperately needed. Grounded in storytelling, the report features the stories of artists, the stories that artists tell, and the stories we need to tell to help artists access support and protection. For over five years, PEN America's Artists at Risk Connection (ARC) has been actively working with hundreds of at-risk artists from around the world and engaging with art and human rights institutions on their behalf. ARC has gained an unparalleled understanding of their experiences, needs, and vulnerabilities during this critical moment for free expression. In reading through *Art Is Power*, I was deeply inspired not only by the work of the 20 artists featured in these pages, but also by their dedication. They are passionate and powerful advocates for a diverse range of social and political issues, drawing on their lived experiences and the needs of their communities. Their work is moving, their stories are stirring, and the persecution and harassment that too many of them have faced is saddening while at the same time enraging.

We all share a responsibility to let the voices of the oppressed be heard and to help the oppressed tell their stories. The importance of art in society cannot be overstated. People say art is important, but most of the time, they're not really standing behind artists. It's our responsibility as artists to make the unseen seen and to foster empathy and understanding. Art can spark revolutions, or just as importantly, *evolutions*—small, incremental changes that are the lifeblood of the march towards progress. Art is most powerful when it engages with social and political issues—and when it exists not in a gallery or a museum or a studio, but in the real world, on the streets and on our screens, in our hearts and minds. That's what makes the artists featured in this report so special.

"We all share a responsibility to let the voices of the oppressed be heard and to help the oppressed tell their stories."

In sharing their stories, ARC is calling on human rights and art organizations to immediately and proactively respond to the needs of artists at risk. As I have witnessed again and again throughout my career, the art world has often fallen short in its commitment to socially engaged art. Focused on selling art for profit, the art world has for too long avoided supporting art that is rooted in social and political issues and messaging. This deeply embedded, structural censorship defines how art institutions approach socially engaged art and artists, and as a result, our stories and our work have been excluded, passed over, and watered down for generations. But as institutions that purportedly celebrate cultural rights, they can and should do more to promote art that exposes different viewpoints, challenges perspectives, and gives a platform to the voices and experiences of oppressed people. I strongly urge art organizations and institutions to read *Art is Power* and think about what they can do to support marginalized voices and persecuted individuals around the world.

Most importantly, this report is a powerful testament to the importance of solidarity and community. It's a reminder to socially engaged artists around the world that we are not alone—we are part of a vibrant and beautiful community of creative individuals who can and do work together to change the system. It's also a reminder of the immense mental and emotional toll that this work can take—it sinks into your bones and follows you into your dreams at night. We need to stand together and learn from each other so that we can keep fighting.

"It's a reminder to socially engaged artists around the world that we are not alone—we are part of a vibrant and beautiful community of creative individuals who can and do work together to change the system."

I hope that ARC's report will draw much-needed attention from the art world, the human rights world, and governments around the world to the threats that artists face and their critical importance in society—so that the next generation of artists can create freely and without fear of persecution.

By Paul Rucker, an American multimedia visual artist, composer, and musician. His practice often integrates live performance, original musical compositions, and visual art installation. For nearly two decades, Rucker has used his own brand of art making as a social practice, which illuminates the legacy of enslavement in America and its relationship to the current socio-political moment. He is the founder of Cary Forward, a multidisciplinary arts space and lending library that will house artifacts that illustrate the systemic racism at the foundations of U.S. society, set to open in Richmond, Virginia in 2024.

ART, ACTIVISM, AND THE FIGHT FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

The last 15 years have witnessed an outpouring of mass social and political movements around the world, from the Arab Spring in the early 2010s to the more recent #WomanLifeFreedom protests in Iran, 11J protests in Cuba, Spring Revolution in Myanmar, and Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the United States. Within each of these historic movements, artists have played a critical role in mobilizing, sustaining, and uplifting their fellow protesters and their message. Through their work, artists can galvanize movements and establish a collective identity via symbols, slogans, hymns, visuals, and more. From powerful protest songs and haunting poems to eye-catching posters and incisive cartoons, art is an increasingly visible tool in fighting for social justice, with a unique power to challenge dominant narratives, bring people together, and foster hope for a brighter future.

Amid a rising wave of authoritarianism and the increasing use of invasive and omnipresent surveillance technologies, freedom of expression is one of several human rights that are under increasing attack.² In recent years, a series of dire humanitarian crises—including the coup in Myanmar in February 2021, the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and the violent crackdown on dissent in Iran in September 2022—have further constricted the free expression of millions. This upheaval has also overburdened the humanitarian systems that provide support to vulnerable individuals.

From powerful protest songs and haunting poems to eye-catching posters and incisive cartoons, art is an increasingly visible tool in fighting for social justice, with a unique power to challenge dominant narratives, bring people together, and foster hope for a brighter future.

As part of this broad assault on human rights, threats to artists continue to rise each year. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community [and] to enjoy the arts.”³ However, around the world, artists who champion new ideas and fight for human rights face grave risks as a result of their expression. In 2021, the cultural rights organization Freemuse documented 1,200 violations

of artistic freedom in its annual State of Artistic Freedom report—a trend that continues to worsen based on their recently released report for 2022.⁴ Among the findings: 38 artists in 12 countries were killed, 253 artists in 38 countries were detained, and 133 artists in 34 countries were prosecuted, all because of their creative expression.⁵ These numbers represent a marked increase from the organization's 2020 report, which found 978 violations of artistic freedom, 17 artists killed, and 133 artists imprisoned; and its 2019 report, which found 711 violations of artistic freedom, 9 artists killed, and 71 artists imprisoned.

The Artists at Risk Connection (ARC), a project of PEN America, was established in 2017 to advocate for at-risk artists and artistic freedom and act as a liaison between artists and direct resource providers. ARC's mission is to build a world where artists can live and create safely without fear of persecution. But over the last five years, as the global environment for artistic freedom has deteriorated, ARC has received ever-greater numbers of urgent requests for help. In 2022, ARC received urgent requests for assistance from more than 2,006 artists spanning 38 countries and a wide range of disciplines—by far the most requests in a single year since the project's launch.

The majority of the artists who contact ARC for support have faced sustained and direct persecution for the social or political content of their creative expression. This is the case across diverse countries, identities, and disciplines: be it a Zimbabwean playwright who was arrested and assaulted after writing a play about LGBTQI+ experiences, a Spanish rapper who was convicted on charges of insulting the monarchy, an Iranian filmmaker who was detained and tortured for making a documentary about the treatment of political prisoners, or a Syrian poet who received death threats from members of her local community for writing about women's rights. In some cases, artists are persecuted on the basis of their identity as well as their expression—such as an Iranian singer-songwriter who received a state summons merely because she was a woman who released music and the hundreds of Hazara women in Afghanistan who were targeted on the basis of their ethnicity, gender, and cultural expression following the Taliban's takeover in August 2021.

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Despite the escalating threats and urgent need for assistance, many artists are unable to obtain sufficient support from the institutions and communities that are best positioned to help them. In large part, this is because socially engaged artists often fall into a gap between the human rights world and the art world, with each group considering them the other's responsibility.

Socially engaged artists often fall into a gap between the human rights world and the art world, with each group considering them the other's responsibility.

Human rights organizations provide critical resources such as emergency funding, legal assistance, and relocation support for [human rights defenders](#), including journalists, activists, and teachers. While in recent years some human rights organizations have made commendable efforts to offer greater support to at-risk artists, this group too often falls outside the focus of protective mechanisms and advocacy efforts. Meanwhile, art organizations can offer resilience funding, residency programs, and valuable connections to the broader art world. But at-risk artists routinely denied access to such support because they are seen as activists first rather than “true” artists. With the exception of a few famous persecuted artists, there is a widespread lack of awareness of the risks that socially engaged artists often face.

"On the human rights side, there's insufficient recognition of cultural rights generally and of cultural rights defenders. On the art side, it's been interesting to see that often artists will become involved in defending various human rights causes, but there seems to be less of an automatic impulse to defend at-risk artists."

— Karima Bennoune

[Karima Bennoune](#), who served as the UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights from 2015 to 2021, says that she observed many of these dynamics firsthand during her tenure. “Politically engaged artists don’t get enough attention from the arts and human rights fields,” she says. “And when they do, I’m not sure there’s enough understanding of the fact that artists can be human rights defenders. I think there have been failings on both sides. On the human rights side, there’s insufficient recognition of cultural rights generally and of cultural rights defenders. On the art side, it’s been interesting to see that often artists will become involved in defending various human rights causes, but there seems to be less of an automatic impulse to defend at-risk artists.”⁶

At-risk artists urgently need more support. *Art Is Power: 20 Artists on How They Fight for Justice and Inspire Change* spotlights the stories of artists around the world who have used their creative talents to uplift, sustain, and mobilize social and political movements. Through this report, ARC seeks to challenge the preconceptions that art and human rights organizations too often hold about socially engaged artists by making two fundamental arguments: Socially engaged artists are “true” artists who are as talented and committed to their craft as other artists, and are thus deserving of support from the art world.

And socially engaged artists warrant the same protections afforded to “human rights defenders” because they use creative expression to engage with and defend human rights issues and hold open civic space, and are thus deserving of support from human rights organizations.

ARTISTS AS HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS: A LITMUS TEST

Defining Cultural and Human Rights Defenders (C/HRDs)

Under international human rights law, “human rights defender” (HRD) is a broad term encompassing individuals who “seek the promotion and protection of civil and political rights as well as the promotion, protection and realization of economic, social and cultural rights.”⁷ For example, individuals who work as activists, journalists, lawyers, and teachers are commonly considered to be human rights defenders, so long as their work explicitly engages with the promotion and protection of human rights—such as a journalist who covers human rights abuses or a lawyer who defends victims of those abuses.⁸

In her last report as UN Special Rapporteur, Bennoune looked specifically at the roles that artists can play as cultural rights defenders (CRDs)—a subcategory that she placed under the human rights defenders framework. “Cultural rights defenders—human rights defenders who defend cultural rights in accordance with international standards—are an important constituency among human rights defenders,” the report states. “Their work in every region of the world is essential for the implementation of an integral part of the universal human rights framework: cultural rights.”⁹

Artists use creative mediums to raise awareness of human rights issues, mobilize social and political movements, and advocate for change—and they face persecution as a direct result of their artistic expression.

According to this framework, many politically and socially engaged artists qualify as human rights defenders due to the nature of their creative expression. Artists use creative mediums to raise awareness of human rights issues, mobilize social and political movements, and advocate for change—and they face persecution as a direct result of their artistic expression. While many artists, including some of those featured in this report, may not identify as cultural rights defenders or human rights defenders, it nonetheless remains vital to bridge the gap between the human rights and the cultural worlds. “The task,” the UN report says, “is to find cross-sectoral collaborative pathways to encourage the provision of funding and the development of improved support and protection programs for people working on these rights, and to work against their unintentional erasure.”¹⁰

Human rights organizations too often fail to recognize artists as human rights defenders or to include them in support mechanisms for human rights defenders. These omissions largely stem from a pervasive tendency across the human rights field to draw an artificial divide between artistic expression and traditional human rights defense. This artificial divide can come into play during the first, vital step for artists asking for help: the applications that they submit to human rights organizations to request assistance.

Adam Shapiro, an expert in human rights advocacy and protection work, emphasizes that human rights organizations may assess requests for assistance in ways that disadvantage artists. “When the case is assessed,” he says, “we are looking at: Is this person a human rights defender? And if they’re an artist, the questions start coming in: Are they doing this as a form of artistic expression? Or are they doing this to defend rights? As if there’s a binary or an artificial wall separating the two.”¹¹ In other words, socially engaged artists are forced to pass a litmus test—are they artists, or are they human rights defenders?—and it’s not widely understood that they are often both artists *and* human rights defenders.

As a result of these narrow frameworks, artists are often deemed ineligible for support from human rights organizations and cannot access the vital resources that they provide. Instead of offering support themselves, human rights organizations frequently refer artists to art organizations, believing that they are better positioned to support and advocate for artists.¹²

Recognizing the essential role that socially engaged artists play in society can ensure that they qualify for the same protections enjoyed by cultural and human rights defenders and allows them to receive the same access to funding, protection assistance, and other forms of support necessary to secure their right to artistic freedom.

Through our role as a liaison between at-risk artists and human rights organizations over the past five years, ARC has encountered firsthand the reluctance of human rights organizations to support artists and the lack of systems in place to do so effectively. With our referral work, we have seen time and again that artists are much more likely to successfully secure support when their application explicitly frames their work using the language of human rights defense, focusing on metrics like their involvement in their community, the social and political themes of their work, and the objectives of their work. However, many artists do not see themselves as human rights defenders or characterize their work as human rights defense. This may be due to the nature of their work, their lack of familiarity with human rights terminology, their fear of being further penalized or stigmatized¹³ for being labeled a human rights defender, or their artistic preference not to be labeled at all. Recognizing the essential role that socially engaged artists play in society can ensure that they qualify for the same protections

enjoyed by cultural and human rights defenders and allows them to receive the same access to funding, protection assistance, and other forms of support necessary to secure their right to artistic freedom.

Based on ARC’s work and conversations with experts in the field, it is becoming clear that the reluctance of many human rights organizations to support artists is often grounded partly in a misconception that artistic expression is not a meaningful driver of social change. Instead, to many, artistic expression is viewed as a luxury item or as something for pleasure—an addition to social and political movements, rather than a fundamental part of fighting for progress. “There’s this idea that art is not a deep engine of change but rather a decorative aspect” of social movements, says Jose Falconi, a renowned scholar from Latin America and, currently, professor of art and human rights at the University of Connecticut. “The arts are seen as secondary, tertiary, an afterthought.” Bennoune concurs: “There’s an idea that the arts are a luxury item—the arts are less serious than other avenues of communication.”

In addition to shaping the programmatic priorities and mandates of human rights organizations, this misconception shapes their philanthropic funding. Tatiana Mouarbes, a team manager at the Open Society Foundations whose portfolio focuses on arts and culture initiatives, says that she regularly confronts this narrative in the funding world and faces many challenges as she works with her team to design funding strategies for art. “There is a framing problem of ‘art for art’s sake’ versus art as a political tool in our field,” she says. “This is an antiquated notion, and socially engaged practitioners and arts organizations do not operate with this limited dichotomy. . . . But somehow it still captivates the minds of people who are stewards.”¹⁴

Without art, social and political movements struggle to capture the popular imagination and change minds. “We need to understand the power of art,” Falconi says. “Art is a central part of jump-starting a social movement. Every single social movement comes with a soundtrack. It comes with poems. We all know that. We need to make [human rights groups] understand that without art, there is no democracy.”¹⁵

“There is a framing problem of ‘art for art’s sake’ versus art as a political tool in our field. “This is an antiquated notion, and socially engaged practitioners and arts organizations do not operate with this limited dichotomy. . . . But somehow it still captivates the minds of people who are stewards.”

— Tatiana Mouarbes

Perpetrators Don’t Use Labels

Those who target artists—dictators, demagogues, police, security and military forces, non-state actors, terrorist groups, online mobs, local communities, even

family members—make little distinction between artists and human rights defenders. Socially engaged artists face persecution because of their work and their activities, as do human rights defenders. According to Shapiro, artists are targeted “because they’re advocating for human rights, or advocating for free expression, or advocating for whatever issue that they’re advocating for. . . . And so when you take it from that perspective, these kinds of barriers or bifurcations disappear.”

As authoritarian governments have cracked down on free expression and dissidents, artists have been among the first to face severe repercussions. In Iran, which has seen violent crackdowns following the outbreak of mass demonstrations for women’s rights in the fall of 2022, [dozens of artists](#) are among the activists who have been arrested, tortured, surveilled, and blacklisted from working. Mohsen Shekari and Toomaj Salehi—both rappers who released protest songs in support of the demonstrations—were some of the first activists to be charged with moharebeh (war against god) and subsequently handed death sentences. In April 2023, documents from Iranian government officials that were leaked by BBC Persian revealed that the Iranian government had established a secret committee to target and blacklist artists for speaking out in support of the demonstrations.¹⁶ In Cuba, numerous high-profile artists have been arrested and detained for their efforts to mobilize large-scale demonstrations since 2021. In Afghanistan, artists were among the first to be pursued by the Taliban before, during, and after its 2021 takeover of the country, alongside other high-risk groups like activists and individuals who collaborated with the U.S. government. In the wake of democratic backsliding and the rise of polarization in many countries, these efforts to censor and oppress artists have not been limited to authoritarian governments. From the United States, which since 2021 has been rocked by a rising wave of book bans at the urging of conservative groups and leaders,¹⁷ to Hungary, which since the 2010 election of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has systematically implemented cultural policies designed to suppress artistic expression that is deemed “anti-Hungarian,”¹⁸ it is clear that artists and creative expression are seen as threats in supposedly open societies as well.

“[Artists are targeted] because they’re advocating for human rights, or advocating for free expression, or advocating for whatever issue that they’re advocating for. . . . And so when you take it from that perspective, these kinds of barriers or bifurcations disappear.”

— Adam Shapiro

Perpetrators clearly don’t distinguish between mediums of activism or use labels when targeting their perceived enemies—so neither should human rights organizations when designating who is worthy of protection.

BREAKING THE DICHOTOMY BETWEEN ENGAGED ART AND ART FOR ART’S SAKE

Within the art world, an entirely different conversation and set of frameworks determine the support, or lack of, for at-risk artists. These conversations center around the idea of art for art’s sake, a philosophy that emerged in France in the late 1800s and posits that “true” art is independent of any and all social values.¹⁹ But activist artists have always existed.

Despite the significant impact of socially engaged art, it continues to be undervalued in the art world. There is a prevailing perception that it is less legitimate than art for art’s sake and that artists who create it prioritize their activism over their craft, lacking the necessary talent or training, in most cases, to be considered for merit-based opportunities.

As German art critic Dietrich Heissenbuttel explains in his essay “Protests Everywhere?": “For a long time there have been artists who do not content themselves with the illustrative function, the exhibition of works in the white cube of gallery spaces, with the cry of ‘art for art’s sake,’ and instead try to put their work in the service of society-changing processes. . . . [T]here have probably always been artists who tried to be actively involved in social processes, in contrast to limiting art to the aesthetic function.” Unlike art for art’s sake, engaged art rejects the notion of solely existing for aesthetic beauty and instead seeks to address societal issues. This brand of art became increasingly popular during and after World War I, when artists around the world protested the war using their art creatively. Engaged art continued to play a critical role in social movements throughout the 20th century and remains a central part of many artists’ work and livelihoods today.²⁰

Despite the significant impact of socially engaged art, it continues to be undervalued in the art world. There is a prevailing perception that it is less legitimate than art for art’s sake and that artists who create it prioritize their activism over their craft, lacking the necessary talent or training, in most cases, to be considered for merit-based opportunities. Falconi rejects such thinking. “Art has to draw you in,” he says. It “has to be striking to capture you. Otherwise, it’s simply didactic—and ineffective. That’s not art.”

The artists featured in this report care deeply about their craft and have worked hard to excel in their given artistic medium. Many have received formal training and educational degrees in the arts and have won awards and fellowships in recognition of their talent. Many emphasize that they create art out of necessity—that it is a vital part of their existence—and have felt a calling to address social and political issues in their work because of the contexts of their lives.

The widespread reluctance to support socially engaged artists is compounded by an unfortunate lack of awareness within the art world of the risks that many such artists face as a result of their creative practices and engagement with hot-button issues. Justine Ludwig, the director of Creative Time, an international public arts organization, says that arts institutions typically engage with only the most high-profile political artists. “There are a few artists that have a lot of visibility, in terms of the risk that they put themselves in due to the work that they’re making,” she says. “Often artists who have a massive global platform [also] have a strong market that has allowed for that visibility, for their plight to become part of a general public consciousness.”²¹ There have been a few awareness-raising campaigns and efforts to support famous persecuted artists—such as the Chinese protest artist Ai Weiwei and the Iranian filmmaker Jafar Panahi, whose visibility, one could argue, has also sprung from their dissidence and political activism. However, most artists who face risks do not have such high profiles and have not benefited from any such campaigns. Their struggles remain barely known and their need for support barely recognized.

ART ORGANIZATIONS: SUPPORTING AT-RISK ARTISTS THROUGH SPECIALIZED RESOURCES

Just as human rights organizations often expect art organizations to take care of at-risk artists, so, too, do art organizations expect the same of human rights organizations. Although over the past few years a few nascent initiatives, including ARC’s network-building work at the global and regional levels, have launched to address this gap, the impact of such efforts remains modest. In ARC’s ongoing engagement with art organizations since 2017, many indicate that they are not well equipped to provide support to at-risk individuals who suffer from physiological trauma and are in highly precarious situations. And because art institutions typically lack connections to members of the human rights community, they do not know whom to turn to or how to help artists access support.

In many ways, however, art organizations are uniquely positioned to provide specialized support, such as residency programs, art studios, work visas, professional mentors, and emergency or resilience grants that can fund travel and artistic equipment, among other needs. Still, ARC’s experiences with referral work have revealed woefully inadequate support. Very few art organizations provide sustained support to at-risk artists—and those that do typically offer short-term residencies that are focused on artistic production and provide only basic commodities like housing. These programs typically do not provide other necessary resources or longer-term support, such as psychological help and immigration assistance for asylum requests and residency permits, which are critical for artists resettling in new countries. While ARC recognizes that many art organizations may feel unequipped to offer such resources, they can and should work with human rights organizations to learn about developing and executing this critical programming. Additionally, many art residencies operate on a calendar timeline, with set application windows and openings, and are not

equipped to handle emergency relocation requests as they arise. This model underserves at-risk artists, the majority of whom typically need to secure the support of a host organization—whether art or human rights—to legally, safely, and quickly relocate when fleeing persecution.

Cultural institutions around the world have a responsibility to protect the cultural rights that they purport to celebrate, which means supporting artists whose rights are under attack. Socially engaged art and artists cannot be separated from the rest of the art world, and the art world cannot turn a blind eye to the risks that these artists face.

Cultural institutions around the world have a responsibility to protect the cultural rights that they purport to celebrate, which means supporting artists whose rights are under attack. Socially engaged art and artists cannot be separated from the rest of the art world, and the art world cannot turn a blind eye to the risks that these artists face. These points were emphasized by participants in the Salzburg Global Seminar—a gathering of prominent policymakers, arts and human rights institutions, and multilateral organizations—during its annual meeting in April 2023 to discuss the status of global artistic freedom. Following the convention, the seminar released a Statement on Supporting Artists on the Front Line that reads: “The arts sector shares a collective responsibility for the arts and artists to flourish and for the public to access, enjoy, engage with and be stimulated by diverse artistic processes and products. The global arts sector should be considered one body, the overall health of which is dependent on each of its parts.”²²

METHODOLOGY

20 STORIES FROM 20 ARTISTS AROUND THE WORLD

For this report, ARC selected a diverse group of 20 artists representing different countries, contexts, and regions across the globe and conducted long-form interviews with each of them. All of these artists engage with social movements through their creative expression. All use art as their outlet and primary medium to fight for change. ARC has provided direct support to many of them when they have faced persecution and harassment at the hands of their governments or non-state actors. The report centers their voices and their stories, operating from a firm belief that storytelling is the most powerful tool in our arsenal to shape new narratives and drive social change.

Of the 20 artists featured in the report, 13 have been forced into exile, either temporarily or permanently; 7 have been arrested and detained, some of them multiple times; and 4 have been subjected to violence, including torture and physical attacks. Some view themselves as artists only, others view themselves as activists first and artists second, and still others resisted any attempts to label themselves one way or the other. Many emphasize that their work is political because their identities and their experiences are politicized. They say that they have no choice but to address political and social themes because of the human rights violations that they see around them or against them. Regardless of how they label themselves or their work, all of these artists take action to “fight for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms.”²³

ARTISTS’ PROFILES

ASIA

BADIUCAO

Country: China

Discipline: Political Cartoonist

For Chinese political cartoonist Badiucao, art left an indelible mark on the trajectory of his life, his family, and ultimately, his career, before he was even born.

His paternal grandfather and great-uncle were pioneers in the Chinese film industry. In the 1950s, when Mao Zedong's [Hundred Flowers Campaign](#) led to a crackdown on artists and political dissidents, Badiucao's grandfather was sent to a forced labor camp, where he died in 1957—leaving Badiucao's father, then six years old, an orphan. Badiucao learned this story gradually, in bits and pieces throughout his childhood, mostly told as a means of dissuading him from becoming an artist himself. "My dad didn't want me to be an artist—he thought it was dangerous," says Badiucao, who adopted a pen name during his early days as a political cartoonist. "But I always wanted to be an artist."

Although he grudgingly went to law school at his parents' urging, before long he told them that he wanted to pursue his dreams. To keep himself and his family

safe from persecution, he decided to leave the country and moved to Australia in 2009. He soon realized, however, that being an artist would not qualify him for a green card or allow him to stay in Australia long term, so he applied for a residency permit as a teacher instead. Two years later, when he received his green card, he was finally able to transition from teaching into working full-time as a political cartoonist. He selected cartooning as his medium of choice both because he liked to draw and because he felt that cartoons were particularly effective for sparking discussions of public affairs and social issues. His greatest artistic inspiration is Käthe Kollwitz, a German painter and sculptor who depicted poverty and the working class during Weimar and Nazi Germany and who later became influential in Chinese leftist-artist circles. “She observed the pain” of those with the lowest status, he says. “I was drawn to this type of art. Outside of China, in Europe and in America, there’s an argument that art should be for the sake of art. . . . But in China, art is about reality.”

For the first few years of his career in Australia, Badiucaio kept his identity anonymous, seeking to protect himself and his family from the Chinese authorities. He carried out much of his work online or on the streets, and he hid his face behind a mask during public exhibitions. In 2011, he joined Weibo, China’s popular alternative to Twitter, where he [drew cartoons](#) about a deadly high-speed train crash in Wengzhou and soon expanded to other topics, gaining thousands of followers. After his profile was deleted more than 30 times by the platform, he was forced to give up on Weibo.

“Safety is never a promise, it is just a way to get me to compromise. There’s no ending to it. It would be a slippery slope. I would become their pawn. I would never really get my peace or my freedom back. I will never fulfill the person that I want to be, which is being an artist, which is about not censoring myself, and creating whatever the fuck I want.”

In 2018, Badiucaio organized “Gongle,” his first major solo exhibition. Part of Hong Kong’s Free Expression Week, the show dealt with [internet censorship in China](#) and criticized Google for its complicity with authoritarianism in building a censored search engine. It was co-organized by Hong Kong Free Press, Amnesty International, and Reporters Without Borders. Badiucaio worked hard to promote the exhibition, inviting numerous prominent activists to the opening, including Hong Kong activist [Joshua Wong](#) and members of the Russian punk protest band [Pussy Riot](#).

Just before opening night, Badiucaio’s relatives in mainland China were arrested and taken to the police station, where they were detained and interrogated for several hours. Upon their release, Badiucaio received messages that revealed that the Chinese police knew his real identity and wanted him to cancel the exhibition. “In their words, they wanted me to ‘be a good boy’ and stop making

political art at all,” he says. “As long as I’m a good boy, my family back in China would be fine and I would be fine, too.” The authorities threatened to send police from mainland China to Hong Kong—which was unheard of at that time. The organizers ultimately decided to cancel the exhibition for safety reasons.

Badiucaio, who had poured significant time, money, and effort into the exhibition, calls this decision “a devastating moment” for him. He was forced to grapple with the implications of losing his anonymity as well as his identity as an artist. “I was relying on this layer of being anonymous,” he says, “but this was completely shattered, and this way of being safe was no longer the case for me. The Chinese police wanted me to stop making art at all—not just this exhibition but for all my future life. . . . What do I do? Do I still be an artist? Do I continue making things that I’m making?”

For the next six months, Badiucaio wrestled with these questions. In the end, the answer was clear: He would continue to work as an artist. He knew that even if he agreed to stop, the state wouldn’t guarantee his safety. He understood that the Chinese authorities might make him offers of safety or financial prosperity—but only in exchange for information about other dissidents or human rights organizations. “Safety is never a promise,” he says. “It is just a way to get me to compromise. There’s no ending to it. It would be a slippery slope. I would become their pawn. I would never really get my peace or my freedom back. I would never fulfill the person that I want to be, which is being an artist, which is about not censoring myself and creating whatever the fuck I want.”



Untitled. Badiucaio. May 29, 2022. Digital illustration.

To go public with his story, Badiucaio decided to release [China’s Artful Dissident](#), a documentary about his experiences that aired on ABC Australia and *60 Minutes*. He began going out in public without a mask and attended screenings to promote the film and his story around the world.

Badiucaio has gained a significant following on social media—including hundreds of thousands of followers on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#)—for his powerful cartoons and their incisive commentary on Chinese politics and social issues, such as the crackdown on free expression in Hong Kong and the genocide of the Uyghur people. He has also been an active supporter of regional protest movements, including the [2019 demonstrations in Hong Kong](#)—which were “deeply personal” to him given the cancellation of his exhibition—and the [2022 blank paper campaign against China’s ban of slogans and phrases associated with protest](#). Of this movement (also known as the A4 Revolution) and the young activists on its front lines, Badiucaio says: “You are a true inspiration to me, and I applaud your bravery. I applaud your courage that took you to the streets. You’ve done



Bird Watch. Badiuca. February 3, 2023. Digital illustration.

something that I never imagined to do when I still lived in China. And I want to learn that from you.”

Much of Badiuca’s work explores the intersections between Chinese politics and global current events, from the ongoing war in Ukraine to the recent uproar over Chinese “spy balloons” in the United States. “I think my work paves a way to introduce a better understanding of China, of its problems, but also of its people’s resistance,” he says. “It is a bridge to introduce China to the rest of the world.”

Many of Badiuca’s illustrations feature Xi Jinping as Winnie the Pooh—a popular meme that [first emerged](#) in 2013 and has become shorthand for

mocking the Chinese president. Badiuca says that he is particularly proud of his efforts to support and spread this meme, which challenges censors seeking to eradicate the seemingly innocuous children’s book character from the Chinese internet. “When you manage to connect the most taboo information, like Xi Jinping’s face, or deconstruct Xi Jinping’s authority with the most common and popular image, like Winnie the Pooh’s, then you make this unbeatable monster for the censors,” he says. “Because if they take down Winnie the Pooh, then people would ask: ‘Hey, yesterday my son was reading a book online and today it can no longer be reached, so what happened?’ So when people ask questions, the answer will always emerge from somewhere, and then people will know how this power is being used to deconstruct the seriousness of this regime.”

Badiuca regularly receives death threats on social media and has found himself subjected to a “character assassination” campaign by the Chinese regime, which has pushed narratives that he is a pedophile and a traitor to China. “When they cannot deny your art,” he says, “they deny you as a whole person, calling you all kinds of things.”

Badiuca notes that he often struggles with being far from China—not out of homesickness so much as relevance. “I don’t have firsthand experience like the people who are there,” he says. “So the biggest worry is how authentic my work is. Is it serving as their voices, the ones who are back in China and did not have a voice? Is my reading correct? Is my work truthful?” At the same time, he has accepted that he cannot safely return to China, where he would risk censorship and would likely be arrested and disappeared.

Although he is physically safe, Badiuca says that living in Australia—even as a “skilful migrant”—has posed significant career barriers. He has struggled to

break into the country’s arts and culture sector and frequently experiences censorship due to his criticism of the Chinese regime. He attributes the reluctance to show his work to Australia’s broader strategic interest in protecting its economic relationship with China and curtailing criticism of its government. “They don’t want to exhibit my work,” he says, “because once they do, they will be accused as racist by the Chinese government”—a common tactic deployed by China to discredit criticism of its policies and practices. “It’s very tricky. And it’s working on people, because people do not want to take the risk. I tried publicly funded institutions, museums, private galleries—there is just no way to do that. . . . And it’s really hurting me that I cannot showcase my art, that I cannot earn fairly as an artist by having a gallery representing me and selling my works in Australia.”

“I don’t live [in China] anymore. I don’t have first hand experience like the people who are there. So the biggest worry is how authentic my work is. Is it serving as their voices, the ones who are back in China and did not have a voice. Is my reading correct? Is my work truthful?”

In November 2021, a similar brand of transnational posturing [nearly derailed](#) a major exhibition of his work in Grazie, Italy. The Chinese consulate accused Badiuca of “hurting Chinese feelings and creating fake news” and threatened to damage a cultural exchange program between China and Italy if the show were to open. “This is a direct intimidation from probably the highest level of representatives, and they do not even hide or kind of make it more diplomatic,” he says. “It’s basically blackmail.” Fortunately, the museum and the local government refused to cancel the exhibition, releasing a [public letter](#) that defended Badiuca’s right to freedom of expression.

Despite the pervasive censorship and the uphill battles to disseminate and exhibit his work, Badiuca says that he is a firm believer in the slow but steady march of progress. His personal hero is Sisyphus, the figure from Greek mythology who is forced to roll an immense boulder up a hill every day, only for it to roll back down.

“The rock’s gonna roll down eventually, no matter how hard you push,” he says. “But this does not mean the action in itself is meaningless, and you, as an artist, have the power to define that this is meaningful, regardless of the results. Is my art going to be a thing that will change China and start this revolution tomorrow and overthrow Xi Jinping? I don’t know! Who knows which art work is the last straw on the back of the camel?”

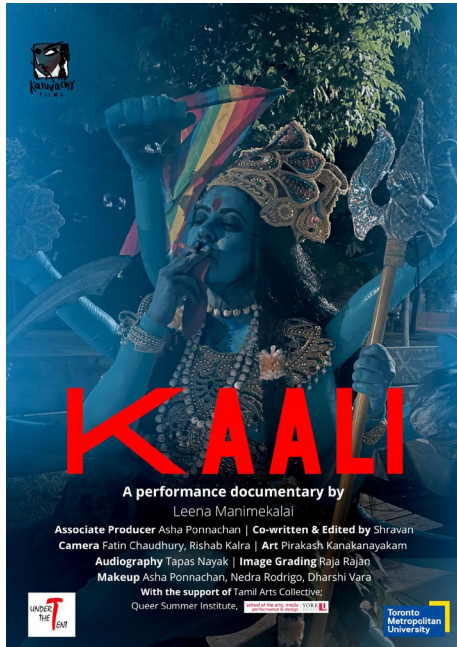


LEENA MANIMEKALAI

| Country: **India**
| Discipline: **Filmmaker**

In July 2022, Indian filmmaker Leena Manimekalai uploaded the [poster](#) for her new short film to Twitter. It depicted the filmmaker herself dressed up as the Hindu goddess Kali, a tradition celebrated in her village of Tamil Nadu during festivals²⁴—but with a twist. In the poster, as in the film, *Kaali*, Manimekalai is holding aloft an LGBTQ pride flag and smoking a cigarette.

The next morning, Leena woke up to more than 250,000 tweets about the poster with the hashtag #ArrestLeenaManimekalai. Her portrayal of Kali, the goddess of time and change, sparked a furious uproar from far-right Hindu nationalist groups, spewing a maelstrom of vicious threats, insults, and shaming across India. “My life changed overnight,” she recalls. “I’ve experienced censorship before. . . but what happened for *Kaali* was over the top. They were tweeting that they will gang rape me, mutilate my organs, and broadcast it. They’ll kill my mother, they’ll kill my grandmother, they’ll kill my family and my crew. . . . They were creating a public opinion that I insulted Hinduism [and] Hindu gods and goddesses.”



The poster for *Kaali*, Leena's short film, released in July 2022.

Long before her face was plastered on screens and newspapers across India, Leena spent her days painting and writing poetry as a child growing up in a remote village in southern India. Her mother was a farmer and her father a language professor who later completed a Ph.D. in cinema. He instilled in his daughter a deep appreciation for language and the power of words. Throughout her childhood, she trained in several disciplines, including classical [Bharatanatyam dance](#) and [Carnatic music](#). But as Leena reached her teenage years, her family expected her to step back from art and pursue a more “honorable” profession, like teaching or banking. “There is still the whole notion that women choosing art is not good for the family,” she says. “That taboo is strongly rooted in the psyche of our society, especially within the middle class. . . . You are

supposed to marry, and you are only supposed to do certain professions.”

When Leena was 18, she was betrothed to her mother’s brother, per community customs. Unwilling to marry her uncle, she ran away from home and went on to pursue an engineering degree in college. But art remained a central part of her life—particularly street theater, which became her tool for change as a student activist. Along with her peers, she would go to local villages and work with their people to stage plays about issues impacting their community, such as lack of water and poor road conditions, and think about potential ways to address them.

Leena’s entry into filmmaking came a few years later, when her father passed away suddenly at age 48 and she became determined to publish his film thesis as a book to honor his work and memory. Through that process, she met a film director who was the first person to take her artistic aspirations seriously. He cast her in one of his projects—leading to backlash from her mother, who went so far as to go on a hunger strike. “I told my mother, ‘So sorry, but I want to work in the media, and I’m not going to pursue engineering,’” Manimekalai says. And “my father was not there, so my mother couldn’t do much!”

After a few years as an anchor and producer for broadcast television, where she began to make a name for herself, Leena began filming documentaries. From her earliest projects, she sought to shine a light on social and political issues. As a self-professed “utopian feminist” who devoured progressive texts and films throughout her childhood—and chafed at the limitations that her family and her

community placed on her as a woman—becoming a filmmaker provided an opportunity to fight for her rights and her existence, on her own terms. “My politics is my starting point,” she says. “My activism defines my art and my art defines my activism—they are one and the same. I started using art to amplify my voice and bring out the issues politically.”

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Leena is self-taught. “I just got on my scooter with my microphone and started shooting,” she says. But she found success quickly. Her first film, the documentary *Mathamma*, explores the Dalit practice of offering female children to the deity Mathamma. They are forced to enter into a ritual akin to marrying the deity and are often exploited and [vulnerable to sex work](#). For the documentary, Leena conducted intimate interviews with women who had been sexually violated as a result of the practice. The film was screened at several festivals, including Chicago’s Women in the Director’s Chair in 2004. This acclaim helped launch an advocacy campaign that earned over 3,000 signatures and led several human rights commissions to travel to the villages where the documentary was filmed. Witnessing the direct impact of her film was a profound experience. “I could see interventions happening in front of my eyes,” Leena says, “and like any utopian 20-year-old feminist, I started believing I can make films independently like my own political pamphlets.”

Gender disparity, caste cruelty, class struggles, and resistance have remained mainstays of her filmography and poetry ever since. “I am constantly inclined towards the voiceless, people who are nowhere seen or who are nowhere heard,” she says. In 2007, she started a blog, *First Most Beautiful Women in the World*, where she found mainstream popularity for her writing on diverse themes, from female sexuality and desire to critiques of the patriarchy in the communist party. She came out as bisexual in one of her poetry collections, prompting a wave of outrage from Hindu fundamentalists, who literally burned her work. One of her poems about the communist party, which explored the relationship between toxic masculinity and ideology, drew the wrath of far-left parties. “It was the first time I received a lot of hate,” she says. People “were character-assassinating me and calling me a whore.”

Throughout her career, Leena has found that being a woman and being proudly, openly queer have led to rampant sexism. She has faced sexual harassment within the film industry, including from a Tamil director who tried to abduct her—a case that Leena [spoke out against](#) during the #MeToo movement in 2018, only to be retaliated against with a defamation case, which is still pending. “Being a woman itself is a big obstacle, because you have to work 10 times more

to prove yourself good in whatever you do,” she says. “It also defines what you can speak, what you can write, what you can do, what you can wear, and how you can express yourself. . . . It took me a long time to just give zero fucks to people who ask you to be this way or that way.” Homophobia has only exacerbated the harassment. “You are already targeted as a woman,” she says, “and then you come out as queer, and then you make political films, and then you write on sexuality, and then you’re against the fascist government. . . . You’re fighting, and most of the time you don’t even see the enemies, but you are always fighting an industry that wants to see you destroyed.”

Leena’s filmmaking often involves working with women who have experienced unimaginable trauma, and the emotional toll of her projects has sometimes been hard to surmount. In 2015, she began working on *Rape Nation*, a documentary still in progress, which explores the stories of five survivors of sexual violence, their fight for justice, and the institutions involved in delivering justice—or not. “I was severely traumatized,” she says. While working on *Rape Nation*, “I was losing hope on the legal system, and I was questioning myself on my activism, even on documentary filmmaking or filmmaking itself. I was almost abandoning the project, because I was not able to handle the footage and the PTSD.”

During shooting, she learned about the [Puthirai Vannar](#), a Tamil caste “at the bottom of the ladder of the caste system” who are considered “unseeables”: “Even seeing them is a sin,” Leena explains. The Puthirai Vannar are hired by oppressor-caste families as slaves and forced to perform tasks like washing menstrual clothes and the clothes of dead people—and are considered impure because of their scavenging work and that means they are not even allowed to go outside during the day. Leena decided to take a break from making *Rape Nation* and spent 2017 traveling to more than 35 villages interviewing Puthirai Vannar families about their lives. Through these interviews, she learned about the legend of Maadathy, an ancestor who was raped and killed but later returned to her community as a protector, causing the entire village to go blind.

The legend inspired Leena to make a feature film—rather than a documentary—based in folklore and employing the literary technique of poetic justice. With the help of a crowdfunding campaign and sales of her films and DVDs, Leena began filming what became [Maadathy: An Unfairytale](#), her first narrative feature, which premiered at the Busan International Film Festival in 2019 and played at numerous festivals around the world. In India it was [subjected to censorship](#), including an attempt to deny the film from being certified, which would make screening it in theaters illegal. “They said the film was critical of Hinduism,” she says, and took offense at her refusal to “sanitize the language embedded in rape culture—I made the characters speak a language similar to what they speak in normal life.” Undeterred, Leena took the case before a tribunal and, after a six-month fight, successfully won certification for the film without any cuts.²⁵

While promoting *Maadathy* in Toronto, Leena learned about a master of fine arts program at York University that offered one scholarship per year to an

international filmmaker. She decided to apply and was accepted to begin the program in September 2020. After completing the first two semesters virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Leena moved to Toronto in February 2022. At Toronto’s Pride 2022 celebration, she filmed *Kaali*, the short film with the provocative poster. Made as part of a multimedia, multicultural storytelling project called [Under the Tent](#), it was shown at the Aga Khan Museum on Canada Day. *Kaali*, a “performance documentary,” depicts the titular goddess wandering the streets of Toronto in Leena’s body, meeting people and searching for belonging.

Leena had no idea that *Kaali* would irrevocably change her life. Born Hindu and now an atheist, she made the film as a celebration of feminine power and a reclamation of the goddess’s identity. “I have a right to offend, as part of my free expression rights,” she points out. “But I didn’t have an intention to offend. I’m saying she’s the goddess I knew, and she is not a Hindu goddess—she is an indigenous goddess. This is how we worship this goddess, and somebody can’t come and tell me this is how this goddess has to be worshiped, or depicted. My *Kaali* is for everyone, not for Brahmin Hindu nationalists.”

After the online threats and hashtags began pouring in, Leena filed a report with the Toronto police and the University of York, which urged her to stay undercover for the next few weeks. The online threats were accompanied by offline threats, including flyers calling for her death that were placed in mailboxes around campus and a bomb threat at the 2022 Toronto Film Festival, which Leena attended. Right-wing groups announced a two-million-rupee bounty for her head and rallied in her family’s village in southern India to threaten family members. “I wouldn’t say this is a controversy or an outburst, or maybe a backlash,” she says. “These words are very reductive to define what happened to me. I would say it is an orchestrated, well-organized violence. I would say I’m not the first target and I’m not going to be the last target.”

The uproar over *Kaali* reached the highest echelons of the Indian government: Prime Minister Narendra Modi [appeared](#) on live television to discuss Kali and the political controversy that erupted around the film. At the behest of the Indian government, Leena’s poster was [removed from Twitter](#) within India, and for days, she says, “you turned on the television, you opened the newspapers, you turned to social media, everywhere it was *Kaali, Kaali, Kaali*.” She attributes the uproar in part to a broader effort, in India and abroad, to create the



The poster for [Maadathy: An Unfairytale](#), Leena’s feature debut, released in 2019.

perception that there is a global rise in Hinduphobia. This framing is then used to target and defame anyone critical of the Hindu far-right-led Indian government. According to Leena: “They’re using it against anybody and everybody who is critical of the Indian government. So if you criticize the Indian government, you immediately become Hinduphobic.” Numerous legal cases were filed against Leena in India. Among them were nine First Information Reports (FIRs)—documents prepared by the Indian police in response to complaints of serious criminal offenses, marking the first step toward an investigation and a potential arrest—and a Look Out Circular notice, which would alert police to her arrival in India as soon as she landed at an airport.

In October 2022, when the film was shared with the world during a protest screening in Toronto organized by activist groups, Leena started to feel reassured. “I was putting on a brave face and pretending to be strong and going through all these relentless attacks and abuse,” she says. “But only during the protest screening, I felt like I am not alone.” With the support of ARC and other human rights organizations, she was able to hire a lawyer, who is now fighting her case before the Supreme Court of India. In February 2023, the court granted Leena some [legal protections](#), preventing police from taking “coercive actions” against her on the basis of the FIRs—meaning that if she returns to India, she will no longer be arrested because of *Kaali*. The Delhi High Court is reviewing her appeal to quash the FIRs. She is also fighting a civil suit demanding permanent injunction of the poster and the film.

Despite the trauma that she has experienced this past year, Leena believes that the immense backlash to the poster and the threats against her are illustrative of her power—as an artist, as a filmmaker, as a woman. “What I learned,” she says, “is that you can offend or you can rattle a fascist government with one poem or just one poster. . . . You don’t even need a full film. You don’t even need a bomb or an army. You just need this to rattle the entire Indian subcontinent and the bigots spread across the world.”

“What I learned is that you can offend or you can rattle a fascist government with one poem or just one poster. It’s just good enough! You don’t even need a full film, you don’t even need a bomb or an army. You just need this to rattle the entire Indian subcontinent and the bigots spread across the world... In a way, I’m powerful as well.”



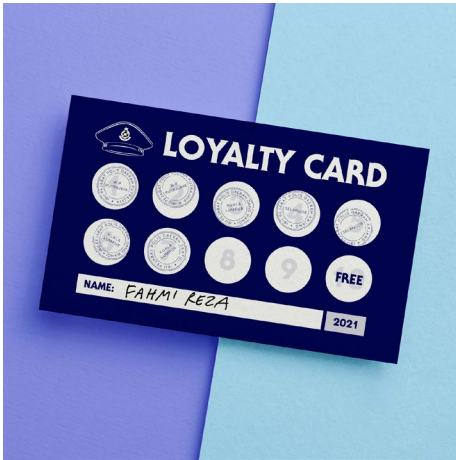
FAHMI REZA

| Country: Malaysia

| Discipline: Graphic Designer

Fahmi Reza, a graphic designer from Malaysia, has been arrested so many times for his political satire that he created a “police loyalty card,” a running gag inspired by the popular coffee shop equivalent.

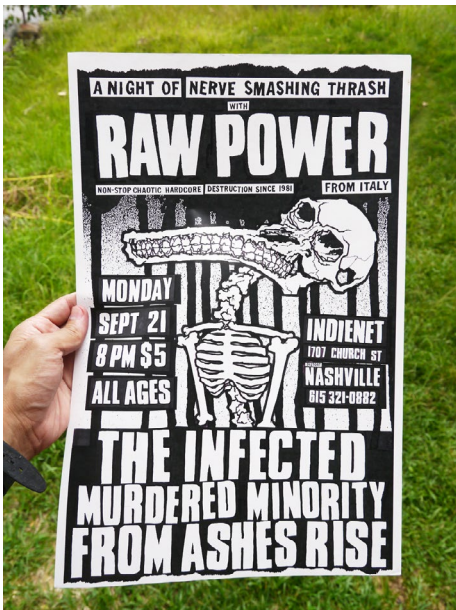
Whenever he is investigated or arrested, Reza posts a stamp on his social media accounts to share the news with his followers. The gag serves several purposes: It alerts people that he has been arrested, it uses humor to educate people about their rights, and it calls attention to the prevalent use of intimidation and threats of imprisonment by the authorities in Malaysia. “A lot of people are afraid to be called in for questioning by the police,” he says, “because we have so many cases of people who died in police custody. . . . People always think that the police can do anything, but we do have rights. Every time I get arrested, I will always use that as an opportunity to educate people about their rights and send a message that we should not be afraid.”



Reza's satirical police loyalty card, which he stamps and shares with his followers every time he is investigated or arrested.

punk bands. Soon he also began creating posters and leaflets for human rights NGOs in Malaysia.

A turning point for Reza came in 2003, when the government proposed a national service program requiring all 18-year-olds to serve in the military for two years. Frustrated with the widespread positive coverage of this program—and the lack of opposing voices scrutinizing it—Reza began plastering the streets with black spray paint in an act of protest. “This was my first instance of using art for activism, my first time delivering my own message to the audience,” he recalls. “I saw how the system works, how we have very little say and the government can just propose projects and change laws without consulting the public, and there’s no democracy. My desire to see change pushed me to want to do something. My designs became more intentional and more deliberate.”²⁶



A punk rock poster that Reza designed in 1999.

Reza is a multi-hyphenate artist, activist, and educator who has amassed hundreds of thousands of followers on social media as a means to connect with a broad audience and share his message. His journey as an activist started as a teenager in the 1990s when he began listening to punk music. Reza found himself drawn in by the rebellious spirit and anger of the lyrics as well as their political themes. His favorite bands dove into globalization, police brutality, sexism, and other human rights issues. Punk “had a profound impact on me as a young person,” he recalls. “It got me into politics.” His first pieces of graphic design were posters he created for friends in

Another turning point came a year later, in 2004, when Reza was arrested for the first time. At a protest against police brutality, he was beaten by the police, detained for a few hours, and interrogated. Instead of scaring him away, the experience strengthened his resolve as an artist and activist. “The fact that I survived that experience, I think made me stronger, and I think

made me more committed to fight against injustice in my country,” he says. “I used it as fuel to continue my work.”

“I saw how the system works, how we have very little say and the government can just propose projects and change laws without consulting the public, and there’s no democracy. My desire to see change pushed me to want to do something, and my designs became more intentional and more deliberate.”

Over the next few years, Reza began building a following as a graphic designer, using visual satire to comment on Malaysian politics and human rights. Though he drew by hand in the early days of his career, he has since fully adapted to the digital world and appreciates its reach and flexibility. “If you want to use a physical poster, you need to paste it on actual walls, and only people in that area will get my message and will see that poster,” he says. “But with social media, anyone, Malaysians here, Malaysians who are abroad, people around the world, can see my work, see the poster and get my message. Social media is a powerful tool for activists to use—not just to communicate our message but also a tool for organizing and mobilization.”

In recent months, Reza has increasingly turned to [TikTok](#) to ensure that his messaging reaches young Malaysians. Before the 2022 elections, he began giving “democracy classes”—an initiative he launched to educate young voters and encourage them to make their voices heard by voting. He regularly organizes community art projects and gives workshops for young people to teach them creative skills like T-shirt printing, graffiti, and acting. In addition to visual satire, Reza makes videos and films, delivers lectures, participates in theater, and creates street art.

This multidisciplinary approach is a core part of his ethos for art and activism. “I’m not tied to any particular art form or art medium,” he says. “As an activist, whatever is effective, whatever works. It depends solely on who’s the audience . . . for this message.



The 3Rs (Race, Religion, Royalty). Fahmi Reza. 2021. Digital illustration.

What is the best medium to use to deliver this message to that particular target audience?” During the COVID-19 pandemic, Reza started a [Patreon](#)—a membership platform that can act as a subscription service for creative content—allowing him to maintain some economic stability and freeing him to focus on “what I like best, which is using art for activism.”

Reza has been arrested at least seven times and investigated over a dozen times. When he is deciding whether or not to publish a graphic, he approaches the environment of censorship as a creative and logistical challenge. He often conducts a risk assessment. “I won’t say I self-censor, but sometimes I have doubts on whether I should post something or not,” he says. “And sometimes I will tweak the design a little bit to reduce the risk of me getting arrested. I’m not completely free to express myself. I have to weigh all these things. . . . I can’t just post without a second thought.” Despite the risks, Reza says, he sometimes enjoys the process of figuring out what to say and how to say it: “Sometimes I like the challenge—it’s creativity, it’s problem solving.”

“I won’t say I self-censor, but sometimes I have doubts on whether I should post something or not. And sometimes I will tweak the design a little bit to reduce the risk of me getting arrested. I’m not completely free to express myself. I have to weigh all these things... I can’t just post without having a second thought.”



Monyet Istana. Fahmi Reza. 2022. Digital illustration.

When Reza creates work on topics that the government deems sensitive, especially those related to what the authorities call the “three Rs”—race, religion, and royalty—he knows that there is an elevated chance of being arrested. He rises to the challenge with a mix of humor, strategic creativity, and resilience that has enabled him to push boundaries and rally in the face of repression. “I think humor is powerful,” he says. “When people can laugh at the people in power, it reduces the fear. So me making light of that situation [means that] everyone is in it for the joke.” Still, he is [often targeted](#) under Section 233 of Malaysia’s [Communications and Multimedia Act](#), a sweeping media law

passed in 1998 that criminalizes online content that is “obscene, indecent, false, menacing, or offensive in character.”

In 2016, Reza was arrested after posting an image of Prime Minister Najib Razak caricatured as a clown and captioned, “In a country full of corruption, we are all seditious.” The caricature gave birth to a viral protest movement, [#KitaSemuaPenghasut](#) (“We are all seditious”). After a two-year trial, he received a one-month jail sentence, which was suspended after a successful appeal, and was fined 30,000 Malaysian ringgit (\$7,000). In [April 2021](#), he was arrested and detained for two days after posting a satirical Spotify playlist that criticized the Malaysian queen. [A year later](#) he was arrested and detained for two days yet again, this time for a satirical drawing of Mojo Jojo, the monkey who serves as the main antagonist of the *Powerpuff Girls* cartoon, in the headgear and yellow clothing worn by Malaysia’s royal family.

In addition to state persecution, Reza is frequently subjected to online harassment on his social media accounts, where trolls sometimes leave hundreds of mocking comments that he says can take “an emotional toll.” Death threats can put him on edge for days at a time. “One time, a bunch of people in the comments were asking each other for my address. I didn’t go out of the house for a week because I was afraid someone would be waiting for me,” he recalls.

Reza believes deeply in the importance of solidarity in building and sustaining social movements, particularly in a repressive environment like Malaysia, where activists risk being arrested, fired from their jobs, or suspended from university. Every time a student activist is arrested, Reza posts a “solidarity poster” on his social media accounts calling for their release, reminding his peers that nothing can break their spirit or stop their pursuit of freedom. He has also sought to strengthen the network of graphic designers within Malaysia, holding “poster jams” to bring them together for a day of designing posters for a cause and encouraging them to use this medium to raise awareness of political and social issues.

Reza has found that solidarity is a two-way street. Because he has been there for others, they are now there for him. When he is arrested, his fellow graphic designers make solidarity posters and work to raise awareness of his case. He has seen that the power of solidarity lies in its ability to overcome fear. When people get arrested, he says, they “think they have to face it alone. The culture of solidarity is important [because] people need to know that they’re not alone. There are others behind them that will support them.”



BART WAS NOT HERE

| Country: Myanmar
| Discipline: Visual Artist

In March 2021, Burmese artist Bart Was Not Here parked his car outside his art studio in Yangon and entered the studio. Several hours later, he heard gunshots—and realized that someone had shot a bullet into the empty vehicle. In that instant, he knew that he needed to leave Myanmar.

Six weeks earlier, Bart, a visual artist, had risen to prominence for publishing a viral digital art series, *Seeing Red*, which depicted his live reactions to Myanmar's Spring Revolution, a series of mass demonstrations that broke out following the country's brutal February 2021 military coup. By day, he joined the protesters on the streets, handing out posters and flyers to demonstrators. By night, he worked on *Seeing Red*, frequently reaching an audience of 400,000 people.

To Bart, both his digital illustration series and his involvement in the protests were ways of exercising his civic duty. In his conversations with ARC, he points



Omen. *Bart Was Not Here*. 2021. Digital Illustration.

his role as an artist was to pull these narratives together. “My job,” he says, “was to keep my eye on the ball and be profound in protesting.”

The Spring Revolution was not the first moment of national unrest that shook Bart’s political consciousness and changed his trajectory as an artist. When he was in sixth grade, he and his peers were sitting in class when they noticed a commotion on the street outside. They heard gunshots and watched as a group of monks marching down the street was encircled and attacked by a group of soldiers. “The monks were sandwiched, and it was just like a cartoon,” he recalls. “It was like a ball of dust, and you could see nothing. And then the dust cleared, with slippers, robes, and blood on the street. That was the moment when I realized: *I don’t think that’s supposed to happen. I don’t think that’s supposed to happen in a country.*” That attack was part of Myanmar’s [Saffron Revolution of 2007](#)—a series of protests against Myanmar’s ruling military junta, led by students, political activists, women’s groups, and thousands of Buddhist monks, that was violently put down.

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This feeling of wrongness solidified a few years later when Bart began going to internet cafés and became increasingly aware of the scope of internet censorship in Myanmar, which is often referred to as a [“digital dictatorship.”](#) He saw how political content was often banned, as well as artistic expression. Musicians, filmmakers, writers, rappers—all kinds of artists, he realized, were

to the countless others in Myanmar who supported the movement however they could, down to the bus drivers and [other motorists](#) who pretended that their engines had broken and physically blocked military vehicles from attacking protesters. “Everybody was pulling their weight, and I was part of it,” Bart says. “I was pulling my weight as an artist. I was using my tool and ability. That’s how I saw it.” After years of all-consuming repression in Myanmar—where his fellow citizens had to keep their thoughts and desires to themselves—he saw that the protest movement was filled with disparate goals and narratives, and felt that

prevented from sharing their expression, even when their art wasn’t political at all. “That was when I really started noticing that our country is broken apart from the world,” he says. “Our country was our own little island.”

Bart had always loved drawing, and when he was in eighth grade, he found himself gravitating to the multifaceted subculture of hip-hop. He couldn’t rap or skateboard, but what he could do, and what he quickly fell in love with, was graffiti. He began learning how to paint from documentaries and YouTube clips, using VPNs to evade digital censorship. He was inspired by the techniques and visual language of world-renowned graffiti artists like Seen, Dare LoveLetters, Jason Revok, and POSE. Soon enough, he felt himself “disappearing” into his drawings, and from there he began building his reputation as a street artist. He chose the nom de plume Bart Was Not Here in tribute to the character from *The Simpsons*, which he watched as a child to learn English. In those early years as a street artist, Bart says, his primary focus was growing as an artist and sharpening his skills rather than developing thematic content or targeted messaging. The imagery of his graffiti mainly consisted of letters, signatures, and occasionally characters. “What I loved about graffiti was that your skin was not important, nor where you came from, nor your family,” he says. “It’s your skills: How good are you? You get respect based on your technical skill.”

Although most of his peers in graffiti had never learned their craft through formal instruction, Bart decided in 2012 that he wanted to go to art school. “I knew that I wanted to make things for the rest of my life,” he says. “I didn’t want to do anything else, and I figured that I had to go to art school to learn the ins and outs of the whole thing.” He studied fine art at Lasalle College of the Arts in Singapore and spent the next few years traveling, learning, and creating. In 2018, he returned to Myanmar, opened an art studio, and launched a successful career as an artist, painting, making prints, and doing commissions for advertisers.

Three years later, on February 1, 2021, the Tatmadaw—Myanmar’s military forces—took control of the country in a coup d’état, declaring a state of national emergency. They immediately placed the leaders of the main governing party, the National League for Democracy, under arrest. Hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets and ignited [the Spring Revolution](#).

On February 2, the second day of the coup, Bart began publishing *Seeing Red*. “My message was to preserve the sentiment that we are against everything the military stands for,” he says. “If the military is pro-Burmese supremacy, we’re against that. If they stand for preserving tradition and Burmese culture, we’re against that.” He posted the series every day on Facebook and Instagram,



Yangon. *Bart Was Not Here*. 2016. Mural installation.

starting with the word “Disobey” emblazoned in white letters against a red background. The series quickly went viral and struck a chord with the protesters. He heard of at least two people who had tattooed his artwork on their bodies—one of whom was arrested immediately afterward.

Bart also hit the streets to join the protests, handing out posters and signs with slogans and illustrations, such as the three-fingered symbol that became an emblem of the protests, *inspired* by the popular dystopian series *The Hunger Games*, where rebel protesters use this gesture as a symbol of solidarity and defiance. Though before the protests he had been partial to traditional media like canvas and walls, he now turned to digital media, which would enable him to “get rid of the evidence immediately.”

“Art is alchemy, taking a little bit of this, a little bit of that—a little bit of this experience, a little bit of ideas, a little bit of your influences—and you put it all together so eloquently that they all fall in line and it becomes a new idea and a new work.”



From the Womb to the Tomb. *Bart Was Not Here*. 2022. Acrylic on canvas.

Burma represents,” he says. “So as a creative person, even if you don’t do political work, you are political because you are refusing the military regime” and its propaganda.

Bart acknowledges that art can provoke social action, but for him that’s not

what it’s about. “Art is above everything else,” he says. “Art is alchemy, taking a little bit of this, a little bit of that—a little bit of this experience, a little bit of ideas, a little bit of your influences—and you put it all together so eloquently that they all fall in line and it becomes a new idea and a new work.” He believes that art draws its power from its ability to present people with new and different realities and to inspire them to want those realities.

After the unknown assailant shot at his car, Bart says, “I started planning for a way out.” He stayed away from his studio for several months, and when he returned in May he discovered additional bullet holes inside the studio itself. “It was getting eerie,” he says. Because he worked under a nom de plume, he found that he was not a visible target and was able to leave the country easily, without being stopped at the airport.

After leaving Myanmar in June 2021, Bart traveled to Paris, where he lived for a year, and then to Los Angeles, where he spent several months, before settling down in New York City in November 2022. He accepts—and even takes pride in—the label of being in exile. “I wear it as a badge,” he says, “because you pissed some people off enough to not be able to go back to your country.”

For Bart’s next series—his first since going into exile—he plans to focus on the experience of being an immigrant and moving from city to city and country to country. “I think it’s really exciting to be a part of that immigrant lore, because we travel with stories ... and tell other people the stories of our land,” he says. “I had to leave my home, but I’m *finding* home and I’m creating home as I move in the world. I believe that the most courageous thing one can do is to leave home and the comfort of home and go be a ‘no one’ somewhere and start from scratch. I think that’s very brave.”

Despite his involvement in the protests, Bart chafes at being typecast as a political artist and attributes this resistance to being put in a box to an anti-institutional streak that manifested in renouncing his religion and acting out in school when he was growing up. “I think people can label me as a political artist, because I did this series for one year,” he says. But as he moves onto different projects and explores new themes, he says, “I think I’m just showcasing that I’m well-rounded, and I’m not a monolith, I’m not one dimensional. I make artwork so that I can tell my own story, and I can be creative.”

At the same time, he believes that to create art in Myanmar is inherently a political act. “You are actually creating and exercising freedom, which is the polar opposite of what the military in



MIDDLE EAST

SAMANEH ATEF

| Country: Iran
| Discipline: Painter

For as long as she can remember, Samaneh Atef's life has been shaped by the sweeping restrictions that Iranian women experience every day under the oppressive rule of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the traditions of Iranian society.

These injustices drove her to become an artist and activist who shines a light on the lives of Iranian women. "I think every Iranian woman should be an activist from the moment she begins to know herself," Samaneh says. "Because she has to fight for her most basic rights. Since my adolescence, I wanted to learn music, but my family was against it. I wanted to study art, but they said it was not good for women. I wanted to take acting classes, but they said it was not an environment for women."

Because her parents dissuaded her from being an artist, Samaneh instead studied computer science in college. But when a professor who was a graphic designer saw a spark of talent in her, she became involved in the art world for the

Photograph by Nathalie Champagne

SAMANEH ATEF



From the Women in Prison collection. Samaneh Atef. 2022. Pen on paper. 42X30 cm.

first time. It was a life-altering moment. “The beginning of my real life was when I started to do art,” she says. “To be alive for me is equivalent to being an artist, because I owe my existence to the art world. Art saved me. It is the only way to save us from everyday life and bring us back to the truth.”

Through her painting, Samaneh focuses on women—their lives, their experiences, their strength and their power. She mainly works in ink and markers on paint and canvas. “To fulfill my mission and my objectives, I want to be the voice of the women of my country, narrator of their histories,” she says. “I paint the true lives of Iranian women. I tell about my life and the lives of millions of women like me. I express the facts and the unjust situation of Iranian women. I am an ordinary woman who fights every day for the most fundamental, simple, and basic rights. My truth is to be able to be myself, and that is my daily effort and that of all Iranian women.”

Samaneh says that she does not seek to be political in her work, but her work reflects the fact that daily life in Iran is political for all Iranians. “Artists define themselves according to the societies in which they live,” she says. “As an Iranian artist, I cannot be indifferent to the events happening in my society. I have to act. I do my work as an artist and as a normal human. If someone defines that as political, that’s not my problem.”

As an artist, Samaneh believes that her role is to raise awareness and help women find—and express—truths that they are unable to find for themselves. “An artist is someone who sees the world from their unique window,” she says. “The artist paints the hidden truth of life and expresses the very essence of the moments that humans are unable to express. In fact, the role of the artist is to always speak the truth. History is written with art. We need art so that people can become aware.”

"Artists define themselves according to the societies in which they live. As an Iranian artist, I cannot be indifferent to the events happening in my society. I have to act."

In 2020, after experiencing censorship and persecution, Samaneh and her husband were forced to go into exile, and they now live in France. Despite currently living in a country where the right to free expression is protected, she says that she has struggled to abandon a deeply ingrained mindset of the need to self-censor. “One of the reasons that led to my departure was to escape the censorship of my work,” she recalls. “But the worst part of this story is that after fear and censorship, and even after having left the country, you still do not feel safe and you still risk censorship in your drawings, in your paintings—which is very bad for the work of an artist. I left my country and even now, I do not know why, I’m scared.”



Untitled. Samaneh Atef. 2022. Pen on canvas. 30X40 cm.

Samaneh has also struggled with the feeling of being distant from her home and removed from the daily struggle of Iranian women. Many Iranians have [limited access to the internet](#), so she is often unable to communicate with her family and friends back home and make sure that they are safe. This disconnectedness has intensified in the wake of the [historic mass demonstrations for women’s rights and freedom](#) that swept the country in September 2022 in response to the death of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year old Iranian woman who brutally lost her life in state custody after being arrested for improperly wearing her hijab. “There’s something very important going on—it’s like a revolution,” Samaneh says. “I’m living the revolution, but I’m not there.” Despite the distance, she does her best to remain connected to and stay in dialogue with the daily events in Iran through her creative expression. “I understand the people, I understand what people want, I understand everything—and I can draw it. That’s all I can do.”

"The worst part of this story is that after fear and censorship, and even after having left the country, you still do not feel safe and you still risk censorship in your drawings, in your paintings – which is very bad for the work of an artist. I left my country and even now, I do not know why, I'm scared."

The Iranian government has responded aggressively to the protests across the country, detaining thousands of prisoners, including [numerous artists](#).

[writers, and cultural professionals](#). Several artists, such as musician [Toomaj Salehi](#) and rapper [Saman Yasin](#), face charges that carry a potential sentence of state-sanctioned execution. Still, art has played a powerful role in galvanizing the protests and making waves outside Iran, evidenced most powerfully by the protest song ‘[Baraye](#),’ by Iranian singer-songwriter Shervin Hajipour—who was [arrested and detained](#) for six days after the song went viral around the world. For her part, Samaneh has held [exhibitions](#) around the world—including France, Italy, Denmark, Serbia, the United States, and India—drawing attention to the courage of Iranian women, their ongoing fight to achieve equal rights, and the hardships that they experience every day.

Samaneh firmly believes that the Iranian government will not succeed in crushing the expression of Iranian artists. “Politics always tries to destroy art and the artists and to force them to remain silent, especially in Iran,” she says, but “what we are witnessing today in Iran is the expression of social reality through artists, which has become bolder and stronger than ever before. I believe that no authoritarian government can stop art or the truth.”



ZEINA DACCACHE

Country: Lebanon

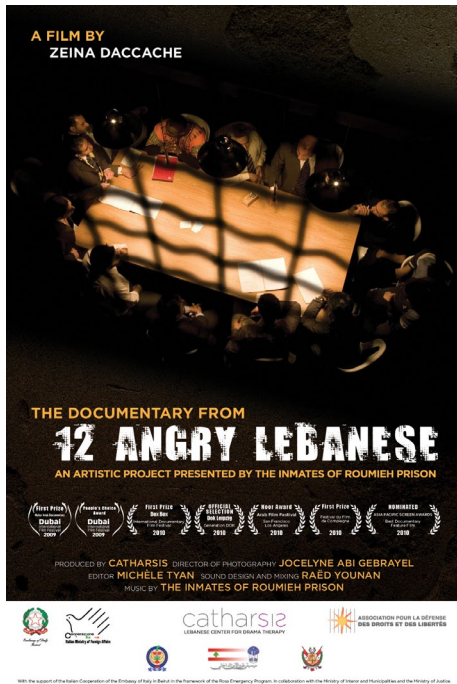
Discipline: Drama Therapist

In the last 15 years, Lebanese filmmaker and drama therapist Zeina Daccache has [helped change](#) numerous laws that shape the treatment of prisoners in Lebanon, from protecting victims of domestic violence to reducing sentences for good behavior.

These legislative victories spring from a multipronged and highly innovative process that begins with drama therapy: Daccache goes to prisons, provides therapy-guided sessions, and works with inmates to stage theatrical productions, which are open to the public. [These productions](#) are also filmed and subsequently screened in the outside world, often in tandem with a lobbying campaign focused on changing a particular law or addressing a need within the prison population.

Before discovering her calling as a drama therapist, Daccache was a successful [actress and comedian](#) in Lebanon for more than a decade. But the limitations of this work left her unsatisfied, and she found herself yearning for more. "I was always feeling that there was something more to art," she says. "I cannot just be me in this classical theater and [people are] applauding me.... Where are the

people? Where are the human beings? I was always unhappy. I was famous in my country, I did plays with the best theater directors in the country... but what's in it for the whole society? Fun, that's it ... but what else?"



Poster for the *12 Angry Lebanese* documentary, which premiered at the 2009 Dubai International Film Festival.

working in your country, whether it's drugs, corruption, poverty, or dictatorship.... They are the consequence of these issues. My motive for working there was that it represented an opportunity to work with the microcosm of my society, with real problems, and see where we can fix things."

Upon returning to Lebanon in 2007, Daccache set up an NGO called [Catharsis—Lebanese Center for Drama Therapy](#), knowing that operating as an official entity would ease her access to marginalized populations. She sought permits from the Lebanese government to practice in prisons—a lengthy process that required her to convince ministers that she did not have a political agenda. Her first job as a drama therapist was in Roumieh Prison in Beirut. Under her guidance, the inmates staged a production of *12 Angry Lebanese*, based on the American movie and subsequent play *12 Angry Men*. The making of this stage adaptation was filmed and turned into a documentary, *12 Angry Lebanese: The Documentary*, which premiered at the 2009 Dubai International Film Festival and [won](#) first prize for Best Documentary and the People's Choice Award. Soon after its release, Lebanon implemented a law that reduced sentences for good behavior, which remains in effect today.

The interplay between her therapy, the theatrical production, the documentary, and ultimately, the implementation of a law, deeply affected Daccache. "I didn't plan to become an activist," she says. "But when I saw that the work I was doing, especially in prisons, was leading to a lot of lobbying for laws [and] I saw the implementation of laws that never existed before, thanks to the work I was doing in prisons, it seems I became an activist. The artistic products are lobbying tools for the law."

"[Prisons] are a microcosm of any society. They portray whatever is not working in your country, whether it's drugs, corruption, poverty, or dictatorship.... My motive for working there was that it represented an opportunity to work with the microcosm of my society, with real problems, and see where we can fix things."

Daccache anticipated that the filmed versions of the theatrical productions would help raise awareness of conditions in prisons, but their reach and effectiveness surprised her. "I never planned to have an impact on these inmates to become better people, for them to express themselves better, to make meaning, for them to come up with a nice product," she says. "I knew that their product would bring much more awareness to society, an eye-opener for society to understand what's inside our prisons and things. But it went much further than raising awareness. It became an advocacy for laws. We saw the laws changing."

Daccache emphasizes that the lobbying process is an integral part of how this work has led to real legislative change. "You can't just do your product and leave it out there for everyone to see," she says. "You need to read the penal code in your country, understand what needs to be changed, go and meet the people who wrote your penal code, see why they wrote it that way.... You go to the parliament people, sit with them, have dinner, and talk with them. And you need to know who your allies are to make things happen, because if you don't have allies, nothing will happen. It's not like I'm going to just do art and things will change by themselves. I've done more than 2,000 meetings for every project when I wanted to make things happen."



Daccache works with prisoners at Roumieh Prison during rehearsals for the *12 Angry Lebanese* stage production in 2009. Photo credit: Dalia Khamissy/Catharsis-LCDT

Over the last 15 years, Daccache has accumulated a remarkable track record of real legislative change—an all-too-rare outcome for any kind of artistic expression or activism, which only serves to underscore her deep passion for



Rehearsals at Baabda Prison for the play *Scheherazade's Diary* in 2013.

her work, her fiery, no-nonsense attitude, and her innovative and methodological approach. To evaluate the impact of her work, she focuses on three elements: First and most important, she says, is whether or not a law has changed as a result of the combined theater or film production and lobbying campaign. Next is audience turnout and interest in viewing the theatrical productions and films.

And third is the number of schools

and universities that call Daccache to organize discussions with her or with ex-inmates, as well as the number of initiatives and NGOs that have emerged in Lebanon to provide support to prisoners since she began her work. She also pays attention to the psychological impact on the prisoners themselves: "How sleep changed, positive thoughts replacing the negative, hope for the future, relationships with family."

Over the years, Daccache has worked with members of disadvantaged populations in Lebanese prisons, from women to people suffering from mental illnesses. She has also conducted a few projects with marginalized populations outside of prisons, such as migrant workers. Her goal is to help people advocate for themselves through the power of theater. "My belief is that I can't claim people's rights for them," she says. Instead, "I go and give you the tools. The tool that I master is theater and therapy. So I walk you through the tool that I know—for you to convey your voice. But it's you on stage conveying it, and it's you in the film conveying it."

"I didn't plan to become an activist. But when I saw that the work I was doing, especially in prisons, was leading to legal reforms [and] I saw the implementation of laws that never existed before, thanks to the work I was doing in prisons, it seems I became an activist. The artistic products are tools to push for changing laws."

Since 2019 Daccache, like many others in Lebanon, has struggled in the wake of a devastating [financial crisis](#) and [political turmoil](#). While she has done her best to continue her work in prisons, including via Zoom group therapy sessions throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Daccache says that the instability has severely challenged her ability to keep up this work and lobby the government. "Lebanon is in this total chaos," she says. "There is no government. There are no decisions being made for the basics of your life—if you're going to have electricity or not, if you're going to have medicine or not, if your money is going to be back or not. It's not the time to do any of these projects. If you don't have a government, you can't do the job."



EMAD HAJJAJ

| Country: Jordan

| Discipline: Political Cartoonist

After more than three decades as a professional cartoonist in Jordan, Emad Hajjaj thought he knew what he could safely publish despite the looming specter of repression and censorship there. Over the years, his satirical cartoons had gained widespread popularity across the Middle East and North Africa for their incisive commentary on women's rights, children's rights, religious extremism, and other social and political themes.

So it came as a shock when, in August 2020, for the first time, Hajjaj was arrested and imprisoned for publishing a caricature criticizing the Israel–United Arab Emirates peace agreement. Soon afterward, he was blacklisted from working as a cartoonist in Jordan. “I thought I knew my red lines, and knew what space for expression was in the country I live in,” Hajjaj says. “I like to draw freely from topics we experience in reality. Now, as an illustrator, I no longer know what to draw or not to draw.”

It was an unsettling realization for Hajjaj, one of the Arab world's preeminent cartoonists, who has been drawing nonstop since he first discovered his love for the visual arts as a child, inspired by animated cartoons of the 1970s. "I loved art very much and found that I was able to express more through art," he recalls. He studied graphic art at Yarmouk University in the 1980s and started publishing his cartoons in local weekly newspapers and tabloids after graduation.

"I thought I knew my red lines, and knew what space for expression was in the country I live in... As an illustrator, I no longer know what to draw or not to draw."

In his early years as a political cartoonist, Hajjaj was particularly drawn to commentary about the controversial 1994 peace process between Israel and Jordan. In 1993 he introduced his most enduring character, Abu Mahjoob, a Jordanian everyman who might appear one day as a poor citizen frustrated by political corruption and the next as a government employee raking in bribes. The character, and Hajjaj himself, became famous across Jordan, culminating with an invitation to exhibit at a show sponsored by Queen Rania Al Abdullah.

In 2000, emboldened by his success and renown, Hajjaj decided to caricature the king—a taboo in Jordanian society—which led to his dismissal from Al Rai, the newspaper that employed him. Undeterred, Hajjaj founded his own company, specializing in satirical and educational content, and became a pioneer among Arab cartoonists in the field of digital drawing, making the shift, he says, from "the world of ink, oil, and cartoon to the world of pixels."



Emad Hajjaj. 2022. Digital illustration.

After this shift, Hajjaj's digital cartoons spread beyond Jordan, being published in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt. In recognition of this wider appeal, Abu Mahjoob went through a subtle transformation, from Jordanian everyman to Arab everyman, and Hajjaj's cartoons increasingly touched on social and political issues that resonated across Arab society. "Abu Mahjoob plays with a problem that may seem local, but it is common to more than one Arab country, and there are many of them," Hajjaj says. "I love this genre that unites us as Arabs in a local Arab caricature."

In the wake of 9/11, Hajjaj's work took on a global dimension. He felt a duty to dismantle Western narratives about terrorism and extremism and to critique the evolution of America's so-called war on terror. "A few other Arab cartoonists and I found that it was our responsibility to address this world—to try and penetrate the global publishing platform," he says. "We found in the art of cartoons

a universal, sublime language that conveys our true discourse as real people, peace-loving and rejecting extremism. We were trying to represent that bright side. I believe that sarcasm and satirical drawings are a language of dialogue and understanding between peoples."

The 2011 Arab Spring marked another shift for Hajjaj, and for Arab cartooning more generally. "Before the spring revolutions, political cartoon art was a pessimistic art that lost hope in the Arab peoples and lost hope for change," he says. "We all spoke and drew with a lot of despair." But the Arab Spring birthed a new generation of "activist cartoonists," who made a name for themselves not in newspapers but in virtual "squares of change" found on protest groups' websites and on social media platforms that "incite and motivate people."

Following the lead of his younger peers, Hajjaj sought to tamp down his pessimistic tendencies and create cartoons that celebrated the revolution and the spirit of change. He also sought new platforms to disseminate his work. "We did not want our drawings to remain captive to the censorship of traditional Arab newspapers, which did not welcome these events," he says. He began publishing his cartoons on Twitter and Facebook and was thrilled to see his drawings blown up and held aloft by protesters in Libya, Tunisia, Palestine, and Syria: "That assured me that what I was doing was right, and that what we dreamed of and what we wanted to achieve were giving people great hope."



Emad Hajjaj. 2015. Digital illustration.

Hajjaj believes deeply in the power of visual symbols—and cartoons in particular—to drive and sustain social change. "Most people are familiar with the art of caricature, particularly given that journalism is a public medium," he says. "In every Arab country, there is a well-known cartoonist who expresses street criticism and criticizes people. It is the closest art to people. It's a contemporary method for changing society, and the evidence is in history." He explains that cartoons derive their power from a unique mix of subtlety and realism, and from how they can deliver lessons in simple, easily digestible ways. He points to one of his recurring series, focused on health awareness. "This is the sweetness of caricatures—informing people about the details of their lives," he says. "Realistic art is very touching if it is well used."

Hajjaj's cartoons have been published in prominent global newspapers like *Le Monde* and *The New York Times*, and they travel well. "I love communication and making the language of Arabic cartoons a language of communication," he says. "I draw specially Arabic drawings without Arabic writing, which transcends the language barrier. But they convey with all sincerity what I see, which means that it is worthy and true and applies to us as Arab peoples, too."

Hajjaj's world was shattered in the summer of 2020 when a police patrol on the

road to Amman arrested him and took him to police headquarters. He was held in custody for four days and initially charged with “carrying out acts and publishing material aimed at undermining relations with a friendly country”—which carried a five-year prison sentence if he was found guilty. His detention sparked a [global outcry](#) from numerous human rights groups—including the Committee to Protect Journalists, Human Rights Watch, and Cartooning for Peace—which demanded his immediate release. The charges were subsequently [downgraded](#) to “libel and slander” under Jordan’s Law on Cybercrime.

Hajjaj was released on August 30 and all charges were subsequently dropped. But the pernicious effects of being imprisoned have lingered. Hajjaj, says he was “so depressed” at the time of his release that he lost the ability to trust his own judgment. His artistic output has suffered as a result.

“I seriously began to set limits for myself, based on the desire of my community, my family, my fans, and even my lawyer,” he says. “Everyone advises me not to express myself completely, freely, and not to draw bold caricatures that criticize Arab regimes in general or the normalization” of ties with Israel. “So I succumbed to this reality. I draw with less energy, at a slower pace.”

Hajjaj now struggles to find work, as Jordanian outlets will no longer publish his cartoons. Although he continues to make a livable income thanks to his contracts with international outlets, he worries about how he will support his family if those contracts come to an end someday. He has started to realize that to remain a cartoonist—and to remain safe—he may have to leave Jordan and go into self-imposed exile. “I’ve started to actively search for other options,” he says, “even emigrating and moving to a country that is more welcoming and understanding of the art of caricature. Because this is the profession of my life. I will not give up on it, and I will not accept being oppressed or prohibited in any way. What I do is the right of any artist.”

"This is the profession of my life, I will not give up on it, and I will not accept being oppressed or prevented in any way. What I do is the right of any artist."



OMAID SHARIFI

| Country: Afghanistan
| Discipline: "Artist"

In August 2021, Afghan "artist" Omaid Sharifi was forced to leave his country with nothing but a backpack, a T-shirt, and a pair of shoes. Seven days had passed since the Taliban [regained control of Afghanistan](#), putting the lives of countless artists across the country at risk and plunging the country into a new and terrifying era of political repression and artistic censorship.

"Imagine you live 35 years of your life in a country that you love, and then you are forced to leave with just one backpack," Sharifi says. "Going into exile has impacted me in ways that I don't even know, especially in terms of my mental health. I feel a lot of anxiety, stress, and depression because of the trauma that we went through."

Sharifi became an artist and activist because of what he witnessed around him each and every day growing up in Afghanistan. "I was experiencing all the suffering and miseries that humanity is facing today, and I experienced it firsthand," he says. "I have slept many nights with an empty stomach. I experienced the kind of life where there are rockets and bombings every day. I want to live with empathy, kindness, and compassion.... The people, their stories, and their suffering are

what drive me every day.”

Sharifi considers himself an "artist"—an activist whose tool is creative expression. "I've always been an activist," he says. "My main passion is activism, my main passion is protest, my main passion is to stand up against authoritarianism. And then I have a tool—I can paint murals.”

In 2014, Sharifi co-founded ArtLords, a collective of street artists based in Kabul. The group's name **originated** from a desire to reclaim the word "lord"—given its negative connotations with warlords and drug lords—and build a movement that stood for positivity and constructive change. Their work is grounded in the needs and struggles of communities and often built in collaboration with locals, whether through a song, a theater show, or, most often, a street mural. "We react to the community's grievances," he explains, "to the people's voices and their concerns... and turn [them] into a creative process where the community engages and is part of the ownership of this creative process, and then it becomes a voice of that community, a visual representation of that concern or grievance.”



I am not corrupt. ArtLords. 2016. Art installation. Kabul, Afghanistan.

Over the course of eight years, ArtLords has painted approximately 2,200 murals in 24 Afghan provinces. Many of their murals **were painted** on Afghanistan's dime-a-dozen blast walls, erected in cities around the country to protect buildings from bombings. In painting the walls, ArtLords sought to beautify them. The murals also helped ArtLords raise awareness of complex issues impacting daily life, such as human rights, corruption, drugs, warlords, and public health. Some of their work has featured individuals: Tetsu Nakamura, the head of a Japanese agency who was shot down by gunmen in December 2019 while working on an irrigation project; Farkhunda Malikzada, an Afghan woman who was publicly lynched by an angry mob in August 2015 after being falsely accused of burning the Quran; George Floyd, the Black man who was killed by police in the United States in June 2020, sparking mass demonstrations. Other works have featured simple and powerful images, like one of their first murals, in 2016: **a pair of eyes** with the words "I see you," painted on a blast wall protecting the National Directorate of Security.

Sharifi values working on the streets because they allow him and his colleagues to make powerful connections with local communities. When ArtLords makes a mural, anyone walking by is invited to pick up a paintbrush and join in the creative process. "Painting a mural and then inviting everybody else to paint that mural with me and with my team created a platform where we really engaged with the people and got to know their real concerns," he says, recalling a time before the Taliban takeover and his own exile. "We got to speak with real people—rather than bots on social media, or comments where you never know who they are. We

could look in the eyes of these people, take their hands, hug them on the streets, and listen to them. I think that is a very, very powerful experience.”

Sharifi says that ArtLords did not typically conduct a long-term impact analysis, instead focusing on the experience of painting together and the conversations that they were able to spark in the communities they worked with. "Once in a while we could tell that our work really impacted households," he says. "It really created conversations around the dining table, within the families, about issues—countering violent extremism, corruption, human rights, women's rights. It was very important that we preach empathy, kindness, and compassion... And I think we have touched a lot of minds and hearts throughout the world.”

"Once in a while we could tell that our work really impacted households. It really created conversations around the dining table, within the families, about issues—countering violent extremism, corruption, human rights, women's rights. It was very important that we preach empathy, kindness, and compassion... And I think we have touched a lot of minds and hearts throughout the world.”

From 1996 to 2001, when the Taliban first ruled the country, any artistic expression was banned: moving images, secular music, "sacrilegious" portraits of living people, books criticizing the regime or depicting women with their faces uncovered. In the two decades between the Taliban's fall and its return, however, art flourished throughout the country. A new generation of comedians and singers emerged, street art proliferated in urban spaces, and production companies churned out popular movies and TV shows for enthusiastic audiences. In 2014, amid this artistic rebirth, ArtLords arrived on the scene.

But even during these relatively permissive years, some artists—including ArtLords—faced retaliation for their work, especially as the Taliban gradually began to reemerge and take over districts around the country. Sharifi and his colleagues received death threats and hateful messages on social media and felt immense pressure to self-censor their work to protect themselves and their families. "That violence, that threat of being kidnapped or killed, was there every single day," Sharifi says. "There was not a single day that I would leave my house in Kabul and be sure that I would



Brain drain. ArtLords. 2022. Art Installation. Kabul, Afghanistan.

come back alive. We felt the pressure to censor, within our skin and bones, from the day we started the work until the day we were forced to leave Afghanistan.”

On August 15, 2021, the day everything changed in Afghanistan, Sharifi was [out on the streets](#) as usual, making a mural about empathy, unity, and kindness. He and his colleagues saw people running down the street looking panicked. Sharifi asked them what was happening and learned that the Taliban had entered Kabul. Later that week, one of the Taliban’s first acts—before even announcing a new cabinet—was to [destroy ArtLords murals](#) around the city and paint them over with Taliban slogans and propaganda. “Any expression of art is now banned under the Taliban’s regime,” Sharifi says. “You cannot do anything. If you talk about any of the social issues that we used to talk about, you will go to prison—or eventually get killed.”

One of the Taliban’s first acts—before even announcing a new cabinet—was to destroy ArtLords murals around Kabul paint them over with Taliban slogans and propaganda.

Knowing that his life was in danger if he stayed in Afghanistan, Sharifi was able to secure passage to Abu Dhabi and ultimately to the United States, where he resettled in Washington, D.C. Forty-six members of ArtLords and their families have successfully made it to the United States, Europe, Canada, and Australia—but 100 remain in Afghanistan with their families, amid an ever-worsening [humanitarian crisis](#) and an ongoing crackdown on free expression.

For Sharifi and his colleagues, the need to keep creating has only intensified in exile. “The urge to continue the work is stronger, so we never stop,” Sharifi says. “From the day I left Kabul to today, I have been working on my laptop. We never took a day off, because we know that the terrorists, the dark forces, the evil forces, they are not taking a break. So why should the positive forces?”

He says that living in exile has broadened his perspective and his reach. He is working out of an office in Virginia, and the group currently has projects underway in Toronto, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, among other places. The members of ArtLords who remain in limbo in Afghanistan are never far from their minds, and Sharifi says that he and his colleagues are working urgently to help them evacuate as soon as possible.

Despite the difficulties of life in exile and the atrocities that the Taliban has wrought on his people at home, Sharifi says that he remains hopeful for the future. His name, in fact, means “hope” in Persian.

“I’m always hopeful,” he says. “I’ve never lost hope. I think if you lose hope, there’s nothing left to live for... I’m hopeful for my people and hopeful for the place I’m living right now, my new refuge, my new country.”



AFRICA

KHALID ALBAIH

| Country: Sudan

| Discipline: Cartoonist

AUTHOR'S NOTE: ARC spoke with Khalid Albaih and drafted this profile prior to the outbreak of an [armed conflict](#) between rival factions of the military government of Sudan in May 2023. The ongoing instability has exacerbated the [humanitarian crisis](#) in the country. ARC stands in solidarity with those impacted by the crisis.

Khalid Albaih first emerged as one of Sudan's most prolific and well-known political cartoonists during the Arab Spring of 2011, when his powerful drawings and incisive political commentary made him a voice of his generation. More than a decade later, Albaih continues to draw, write, and fight for change—and he has taken on a new role as an advocate and mentor for an emerging generation of Sudanese artists against the backdrop of a revolution, several coups, and ongoing political turbulence.

In 2021, Albaih launched the [Sudan Artists Fund](#), which supports up-and-coming

Sudanese artists with small grants. The fund has helped over 16 Sudanese artists to date. He has also started an art and design library in Sudan, written two books, and launched a platform for artists to share space and facilities. He makes a point of regularly promoting the work of rising artists on his social media channels. “I started looking at what or how else can I support freedom of expression, and how can I help people impact other people,” he says.

Albaih’s career as a political cartoonist began in 2011, when he set up a Facebook page called [Khartoon!](#)—an amalgam of “cartoon” and Sudan’s capital city, Khartoum—and began regularly posting cartoons about life in the Arab world, touching on injustice, freedom, and other social and political themes. He [originally](#) turned to the internet because he had no other option. In 2008, he began pitching cartoon series to newspaper publishers, but they repeatedly turned him down because they did not find his work humorous or worried that his searing, pointed commentary would put their publications at risk. “I was always online,” he says. “I was always interested in the internet. I was always interested in technology. And when we figured out how powerful it is, this is when we started using it. At the time it was a safe space, because the governments were not really understanding what we were doing. We were just the kids that are on the internet.”

For Albaih, the internet provided an unparalleled opportunity to evade borders and connect with fellow cartoonists and activists from around the world. “There were borders in real life, but not on the internet,” he says. “We needed visas to go everywhere, and the Internet was the only place from the beginning without visas that allowed us to talk to each other. I didn’t encounter barriers because it is for all—free knowledge for all, freedom for all.”

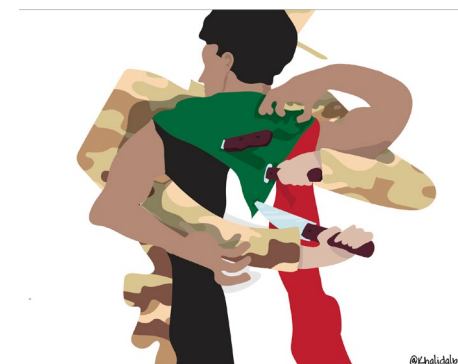
Albaih took to cartooning at an early age while growing up in exile in Doha, Qatar, with his family. As a student at Ajman University of Science and Technology, he created a series of witty political cartoons depicting the candidates for student government that was an immediate hit on campus. After graduating, he began working at museums and art galleries, eventually becoming a multimedia specialist for the Qatar Museum Authority while continuing to draw on the side. It wasn’t until he turned 30 that he decided to turn his love of cartooning into a more serious—and political—endeavor. “I went from a normal person who liked art to being an artist and using art . . . to express my anger and frustration—my generation’s frustration,” he says. The trigger, he says, was that “nothing was happening” in Sudan. “It really frustrated me.”

“I went from a normal person who liked art to being an artist and using art... to express my anger and frustration – my generation’s frustration.”

Albaih started his Facebook page on February 6, 2011, just as the Arab Spring was beginning to unfold. His cartoons resonated with the emerging protest movements and quickly gained popularity across the Arab world. It was important to him to create cartoons that spoke to experiences beyond a single

country. “I don’t focus on Sudan,” he says. “I do a cartoon which is about Sudan for me, but for other people it could be about wherever they’re from as well, because they are the same.”

Albaih believes that what sets a good political cartoonist apart is a mix of artistic talent and innate curiosity. “It comes from being interested, and it comes from taking it personally,” he says. “I think you can’t separate the two. I’ve met really good cartoonists, but they’re just talented. They don’t understand the politics of things, but they’re very talented. The art they do is beautiful, but it doesn’t come from a place of interest or knowledge. . . . So they’re more artists than political artists.” He loves cartoons because of their ability to transcend age and background. “You can talk to a professor, and you can talk to an eight-year-old,” he says. “It’s not long-form, it’s not a report, it’s not a speech. You have the power to start conversations with people.”



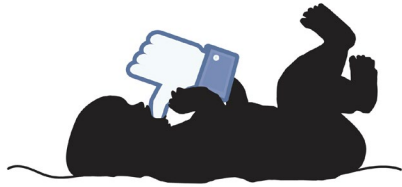
Khalid Albaih. *Traitors*. Digital image.

During the early days of the Arab Spring, Albaih connected with an emerging generation of talented young artists from across the Arab world, exchanging ideas and experiences. His drawings about the rapidly spreading protests and uprisings soon made the leap from the digital to the physical world, [appearing](#) on walls and T-shirts from Beirut to Cairo. In 2011, Albaih traveled to Sudan and participated in a protest for the first time. “I remember it like it was yesterday,” he says. “Just looking at everyone running, the tear gas, and the police shooting. I was shocked. . . . It gave me a feeling I could never forget.”

Although Albaih has never been arrested in Sudan or the broader region—which he attributes in part to hailing from a well-connected family—he has faced threats and harassment. In 2015, after being invited to Egypt for an art residency, he was briefly detained and interrogated about his work. In 2018, during a rare return trip to Sudan while working on a book project for the Goethe Institute, he was trailed by secret service officers in a car for days on end. Over the years, he has also received increasingly vitriolic threats online in response to his cartoons.

Since the heyday of the supposedly free and open internet that helped launch the Arab Spring, Albaih has experienced firsthand the deterioration of online free expression. The expansive freedom that he once enjoyed—to post whatever he wanted, to connect with people from all walks of life from around the world—now feels like a distant memory.

Censorship by algorithm feels more confounding than traditional, state-led censorship. With the censorship he grew up with, Albaih says, “you know what it is. You know your red lines. You know what you’re supposed to say and what you’re



Khalid Albaih

Khalid Albaih. Baby Like. Digital image.

Albaih's career in political art and activism has at times taken a toll on his mental health, and he has struggled with depression and burnout. "If you're not depressed, I don't think you're a real political artist," he says. His artistic production has also slowed down in recent years, due to his struggles with mental health as well as the ever-increasing complexities of the political and social environment in Sudan and the region have also done damage. "That's one of the reasons why I don't draw as much now," he says. "Things are way too complicated to be said in one frame. You can touch on the surface, but you can't include all of it."

“You have to really know how to work the algorithms for you to get as much reach as you used to get before. It’s a different Internet, the one that we used before.”

In the face of these challenges, Albaih has drawn on his intimate knowledge of social media and his experience as a veteran artist and activist to mentor an emerging generation of Sudanese artists. Starting in December 2018, thousands of citizens [took to the streets](#) to demand the end of Sudan's military government under dictator Omar al-Bashir, who was overthrown in April 2019 by a military coup and replaced with a civilian-military coalition charged with transitioning Sudan to a more democratic future. Artists played a [fundamental role](#) in galvanizing the revolutionary protest movement—painting murals, sharing political poetry, staging sit-ins, and using their platforms to mobilize protests, capture the spirit of the revolution, and draw global attention.

As a lifelong advocate of human rights and freedom, Albaih was deeply moved to see his fellow Sudanese unite in protest. "As someone who was born and raised outside of Sudan, the events of the past few years have been deeply meaningful to me on a personal level," he says. "I have long been an advocate for free speech and human rights, and seeing my fellow Sudanese citizens come together to demand change has been incredibly inspiring. As a political cartoonist

and activist, I saw the power that art could have in shaping public opinion and driving social change ever since 2011, when my work was shared during the Arab Spring. . . . It has been an honor to contribute to the movement not only through my artwork but more so through my network to push and support others' work."

In October 2021, the Sudanese military [deposed](#) the civilian branch of the transitional government and seized control in another coup—a devastating setback for the protesters and their fight for democracy. Once again, Sudanese artists have played a critical role in raising awareness of the military takeover and mobilizing protesters, even in the face of an increasingly repressive environment for artistic expression, and Albaih has worked to elevate their work while creating his own.

In recent years, Albaih said that he has struggled to find funding for the Sudan Artists Fund. He attributes this difficulty to the complicated and often opaque hurdles that come with soliciting donors. "Organizations want to fund things that they feel are about now, not about the future," he says. "The organizations that fund art are also thinking about their funders, and probably most of these people don't know the nuance of things . . . so you're stuck with people that don't understand. You have a very small window of catching everybody's attention, and it doesn't only rely on how democratic your region is or how amazing your art is or whatever. It relies on the political agenda and what's happening in the world right now." While recent events in Sudan may bring attention back to the country and its artists, Albaih's concerns about sustainability and long-term support for the art sector and its workers highlight deeper, structural challenges in the funding world at large. He calls on donors, art organizations and the larger ecosystem in which artists, especially Sudanese artists, operate to "find new ways of doing things."



DIDIER AWADI

| Country: Senegal
| Discipline: Rapper

Senegalese rapper Didier Awadi has mobilized and educated a generation of young people over three decades as a trailblazing figure in francophone West African hip-hop.

His path to becoming a globally renowned musician and activist started during his teenage years, when he began listening to hip-hop, rap, and reggae artists like Public Enemy and Bob Marley. He soon began to perform with his friends at school. At first, their intentions were straightforward: "We did it to please the girls and make pocket money!" Awadi remembers. "We didn't want to make revolutions."

Their outlook shifted in 1988, when they met Stevie Wonder's manager during a visit to their school and he shared a key piece of advice with them: Write their songs in Wolof, the most widely spoken language in Senegal, rather than in French or English. At first the boys resisted. "We got angry with him," Awadi recalls. "We thought he didn't understand anything." But as soon as they wrote

their first song in Wolof, they realized that it had a much larger impact and reach. "When we did these songs in Wolof, ... we realized that what we were saying was of interest to the people, and especially old people," he says. "Those who thought we were crazy in the neighborhood, they started to say, 'Oh yes, these young people are not stupid. Do you hear what they say in their lyrics?'"

In 1989, Awadi founded a hip-hop group with his friend and collaborator Amadou Barry. They named their group [Positive Black Soul](#) (PBS). Although they didn't realize it at the time, Awadi notes that this philosophy shared in the core theses of "[negritude](#)," a literary and ideological framework with roots in Senegal that is aimed at raising and cultivating Black consciousness across Africa and African diasporas. PBS made music in French, Wolof, and English, and they regularly used Senegalese instruments during [live performances](#). Awadi, a former breakdancer, would dance across the length of the stage, often dressed in a trademark red, gold, and green tracksuit that represented the colors of Senegal's flag.

From the beginning, he says, it was important to him to ground his music and lyrics in the concept of "conscious rap." "It was inconceivable that you would rap without saying anything at all," he says. While "there are some people who are not raising consciousness but who make very good music, we realized that every time you take a real stand, you gain real respect in your community because they realize that they can trust you when you take care of their problems. And it becomes your mission."

During the 1990s, Awadi became involved in a nationwide voter registration drive, working with his friends and members of the hip-hop community to register voters and encourage them to vote. In February 2000, on the eve of [President Abdou Diouf's](#) 20th year in power, Senegal was preparing to hold a [historic presidential election](#), the [first](#) democratic election of the new millennium. "We couldn't take it anymore," Awadi says. "We said this system must change. We pushed people to vote massively, especially young people, to understand that everything depends on them. And thank God, it worked."

"We realized that all that we had sown since 1989 was useful. We understood that our lives serve a purpose. It is always a pleasure to participate in writing the history of your country or your continent."

Diouf lost to his longtime opponent Abdoulaye Wade, and there was a peaceful transfer of power—one of the first ever in Africa. It was a powerful moment for Awadi, the culmination of a decade of work. "We realized that all that we had sown since 1989 was useful," he says. "We understood that our lives serve a purpose. It is always a pleasure to participate in writing the history of your country or your continent. For me, it is the most beautiful compliment when I walk

around in the 45 countries that I travel to on the continent, and someone says, 'Thank you for what you're doing on this continent, thank you for what you do for Africa.' That's my platinum disc!"

After PBS broke up in 2001, Awadi launched a successful solo career. He signed with Sony Music and started Studio Sankara, a record label and production agency. He went on to release five albums in the next two decades and continues to release music today while advocating for freedom, justice, and equality. In 2005, the French and Senegalese governments recognized Awadi's achievements with a [Médaille de Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres](#) (a Knight's Medal from the Order of Arts and Letters, one of France's highest honors for artistic achievement). For Awadi, the medal represented not a recognition of his accomplishments so much as an ongoing effort by the French and Senegalese governments to influence his speech and tame his messaging. "They will always try to wheedle you with these rewards and recognition. They can make us knights of whatever they want—but it is not going to change our speech... It's written in history. It's a legend. Every once in a while, they try to celebrate it. Then they say 'fuck, this guy, despite everything we do for him, he does not change.' Why would I change? It's too late, and anyways, do I really want to change?"

Awadi's music is [deeply engaged](#) with the history of the continent, and through his music, he encourages fellow Africans to learn about, reappropriate, and take control of their own narratives. "I think Africa is writing its history, and I am interested in the evolution of our continent," he says. "The founding fathers wrote their story. They fought for us to be independent. Today we see that it is not a political elite but a people, who stand up and say, 'We're going to write our history.'"

Awadi is particularly interested in issues of sovereignty, inclusive economic development, imperialism, and attacks on democracy, and his recent work has drawn inspiration from the [wave of military coups](#) in Burkina Faso, Mali, Guinea, and elsewhere, along with France's postcolonial [military, economic, and diplomatic presence](#) in Senegal. "France never leaves our territory," he says, and "we find that we don't have a say and things are imposed on us. So it pushes me to take the microphone. It pushes me to give my opinion on these questions. And when I talk about coups d'état, too, it brings me back to the question of attacks on democracy in our country.... We must be present in this debate on sovereignty."

His song "[Quand on refuse on dit non!](#)," which was released in February 2023 and has so far garnered more than 60,000 views on Youtube, powerfully grapples with these themes, as seen in the following lyrics (translated from French):

*In independence there are sacrifices to make
When you are responsible there are duties that must be carried out
Dependency is duties that have been relegated
Give up your rights, the duty you can't delegate*

*It doesn't make sense, the security you delegated
Entrusted to the worst of the oppressors who colonized you
Oppressed, you went to the executioner with your feet and hands tied
But what were you expecting? His job is to enslave*

*For centuries the truth is that's all he did:
Rape, kill, plunder, steal, burn, that's all he did
We, our fathers, our grandparents, they lived all that
That's why we fight, we're going to stop all this*

[...]

*Water is the source of life, we cannot delegate it
Energy, oil and gas must be controlled
Your territory is your army which must secure
A matter of common sense, I'm talking to you about sovereignty*



Cover art for Awadi's song 'Quand on refuse on dit non!,' released in February 2023.

start to sway their thinking and inform their understanding. For example, when Awadi first started criticizing the presence of the French army in Senegal, he recalls people telling him: "You're taking risks. Be careful not to attack France. They are dangerous." But over time, the conversation has shifted: "Today, everyone talks about it. They don't want the army in their country anymore. They understand that these are questions of sovereignty." Today, he adds, when he hears the president say that the French troops will be withdrawn in six years, "I believe that we have planted the good seed."

Awadi emphasizes that making political art is a choice and that not everyone can or should make that choice for themselves. "I don't ask anyone to make engaged music unless they feel it and are ready for it," he says. "You must be ready for all the necessary sacrifices because it's a kind of music where you first take

a slap before you are applauded.... When it happens, it means that you first took a lot of slaps. If you are ready for slaps, go engage in militant music."

Over the course of his career, Awadi has often faced **harassment** in Senegal, including the cancellation of his concerts and threats of violence or detention. "I take these threats very seriously, and I do everything so that they are not carried out by whoever is threatening me. I take that very, very seriously. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here. I have a family to protect. I also often say that a martyr has nothing to say. One must stay alive."

Awadi has a different reaction to less severe forms of punishment, such as censorship and exclusion from artistic and cultural spaces. When radios refuse to air his tracks or the governments of certain countries refuse to let him enter or perform, rather than feeling angry or frustrated, he sees an unmistakable sign that his music has had an impact. "At the beginning, you feel frustrated and upset," he says, but "then you understand that it's a tribute. Each time a country tells us, I don't want you because you talk badly, we are proud. For us, that means the message got through."

"I take these threats very seriously, and I do everything so that they are not carried out by whoever is threatening me. I take that very, very seriously. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here. I have a family to protect. I also often say that a martyr has nothing to say. One must stay alive."

For Awadi, music serves as a tool to engage with political and social movements and to raise awareness of issues that he cares about. "When we have the privilege of having a microphone or having a camera, we have a duty to react—and above all, to act—through the tools we have," he says. "The tools I have are my music first, it's my cameras, it's my stage, and I use that to get my message across. For me, my whole life, music was the way to say the things that are in your heart."

Through music, he can introduce people to complex and sometimes controversial issues and ideas—and



RAMY ESSAM

| Country: Egypt
| Discipline: Musician

Ramy Essam picked up a guitar for the first time when he was 17 years old. By the time he was 23, he was performing in front of millions of people in Tahrir Square in Cairo. Essam became known as the [voice of Egypt's 2011 revolution](#) for his searing protest songs that captured and galvanized a national uprising.

Essam's journey as an artist and political activist has led him through arrest and torture, censorship and blacklisting, and, ultimately, exile.

He did not become a political activist overnight. Growing up, he says, he was a "very standard Egyptian young man" who dreamed of being a football player and got caught up in the violence and street fights that characterized his hometown, the city of Mansoura in the north of Egypt. When he first became enamored with music, he was drawn most of all to hard rock. "The first time I had a guitar close to my chest, I felt something very special," he says. "I felt it was completing me in a way." He especially loved Nirvana, Rage Against the Machine, System of a

Dawn, and Linkin Park. “Rock music and the anger in it, and me playing guitar—everything there just calmed down this anger and violence that was in my life.”

Political music was far from his mind, but during this period his more engaged older brother began telling him about current events and activist movements, expanding Essam’s worldview and opening his eyes to the draconian rule of the decades-long Mubarak regime in Egypt. It wasn’t until he met a political poet named Angad Al-Ahwad and read his poetry that he began thinking about the ways art can complement activism. “I will never forget the moment when I read words with meaning,” he says, “words that talk about people and human rights and freedom... It was big.”

January 25, 2011, the start of the Egyptian revolution, which was part of the so-called Arab Spring, marked a turning point for Essam as both an artist and an activist. He took to the streets in Mansoura on January 28, known as Joumouaat Al-Ghadab, the “Friday of Anger.” Initially, he says, he was just a protester. The first days of the revolution were violent, and there was no space for music. But on January 31, Essam’s brother and his friends suggested that he bring his guitar to the sit-in that was starting in Tahrir Square in Cairo. He soon ended up onstage with his guitar, performing a song called “*Irhal*” (“Leave”). [Thousands of people](#) sang along with him, and a video of the performance went viral on YouTube. “I understood how powerful music can be before this day,” he recalls, “but that was the day I truly got it—the moment I stood with the guitar on the stage for the first time.”



Essam performs onstage in Prato, Italy, in March 2022.

together from all different backgrounds and different places, and even people who don’t speak the same language—they’re going to still come together and sing the same song when it’s for freedom and claiming rights. I experienced that myself when I was in Tahrir Square during the revolution, when people who would never have had the chance to be in the same place... stood as one human

Essam continued to perform regularly in Tahrir Square. People would come up to him and tell him that his music captured feelings and beliefs they couldn’t express themselves. His music was an equalizer, a unifier, a transcendent force for millions of Egyptians from all walks of life who had come together in Tahrir Square to demand a better present and future.

“Dictatorships can stop everything, but they can’t stop a song,” Essam says. “Just one song can do so much more than anything else. Of course, it’s all kinds of art—but especially music. The only tool that can bring everyone

being singing together, with the same voice, for their freedom.”

On the evening of February 2—now known as Bloody Wednesday—he was hit in the face with rocks by a group of counterprotesters. The fact that he subsequently returned to the stage, wounded and bandaged but determined to keep singing, cemented his stature as not just an entertainer or a celebrity but also as a protester. “That night Ramy was on stage with bandages on his face,” his friend and translator Salma Said told [The Guardian](#) in July 2011. “Most of the audience had scars and bandages. It was both funny and brave that singer and audience were all wounded but still going on and singing. This bond between him and the protesters started after they saw he wasn’t just an entertainment figure who comes to sing songs and then leaves, but is someone who stays in the square, living the sit-in like everyone else.”

“Dictatorships can stop everything but they can’t stop a song. Just one song can do so much more than anything else... I experienced that myself when I was in Tahrir Square during the revolution, when people who would never have had the chance to be in the same place... stood as one human being singing together, with the same voice, for their freedom.”

On February 11, after 18 days of demonstrations, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak resigned and handed power over to the military. Many protesters, including Essam, [remained in the streets](#), demanding a transition to civilian government. On March 9, Essam was arrested for the first time after participating in another sit-in in Tahrir Square. He was tortured for eight hours and was nearly killed. “It was for the music and the songs that I was doing,” he says. “I was recognized by name, so they were calling me Ramy all the time.”

The experience of being arrested and tortured marked another turning point for Essam. It was the first time that he was forced to grapple with the dangers of being a political artist in a climate where dissent could be deadly. This was “the first real moment when I questioned myself,” he recalls, “because I didn’t expect before this day that I would be tortured one day. And when it happened, I was like: Should I continue this? Do I want to do that again? Do I believe in this? The answer was, of course, clear: yes.”

For the next two years, Egypt went through several cycles of government. The military remained in charge from February 2011 until June 2012, at which point Mohamed Morsi was elected president. After a [military coup](#) in July 2013, General Abdel Fatah el-Sisi was installed as the de facto head of state. He remains president today.

The military takeover in 2013 ushered in an unwelcome period of censorship

for Essam, who found himself blacklisted. Radio and TV hosts were barred from playing his music or hosting him on their shows—at the risk of losing their jobs—and venues and festivals started to avoid him. “In a very short time,” Essam says, “I lost everything. No music anywhere and forbidden from everywhere, and there was no work.”

In 2014, Essam was arrested at a police checkpoint and interrogated overnight, which he saw as an effort “to play fear games with my head and to threaten me so I can stop singing.” He regularly received death threats from the Egyptian army, and faced the looming specter of his required military service. He began looking for ways to leave Egypt for three years, until he turned 30, to avoid conscription. Eventually he secured a two-year residency in Sweden through the International Cities of Refuge Network (ICORN) and arrived in Malmö at the end of 2017.



Ya Habayebna (Oh You Loved Ones). Ramy Essam. December 2020. Album cover.

Even from abroad, Essam continued to face harassment and threats. When he released new music, including the song “Balaha,” in February 2018, his friends and colleagues back in Egypt were arrested. The director of the music video, Shady Habash, [died in 2018](#) in a maximum-security prison, where he had been held without trial for more than two years. [Galal el-Behairy](#), the lyricist for “Balaha” and many of Essam’s other songs, remains imprisoned today after receiving a three-year sentence in 2018.

Essam remains in Sweden and in Finland. Although he is now thousands of miles away from Egypt, he is still engaged in the struggle for freedom—in Egypt, in the Middle East, and around the world. “I’m traveling the world, and I can see all the time that the same struggles and suffering that we have in Egypt are everywhere,” he says. “It opened my eyes.”

Essam emphasizes that he identifies as an artist first and foremost. “Many people say I’m a political artist, and I am, but I’m not just that,” he says. “I’m an artist first and before anything. This is how I want people to know me and to recognize me. I’m an artist who loves to go onstage and to play music for fun, for my fun, even if what I’m saying is important, even if I have a message in what I’m saying.”

Essam has continued to tour, perform, and release new music while in exile. His songs draw millions of views on YouTube as well as on harder-to-track platforms like Signal, Telegram, and Whatsapp, where people can share his

songs without fearing the repercussions that can come with sharing them on more public channels like Facebook. He’s heard from fans who have been threatened at police checkpoints or detained overnight for posting a link to his songs or having them downloaded on their phones.

The most powerful messages that Essam receives from fans are those that say that his music helps them feel less alone. His music’s enthusiastic reception helps him feel less alone, too. “Because you believe in the revolution and the movement, you can easily think that you are in this alone,” he says. “Especially when there are no protests and no marching events that you can take part in, and you’re home listening to some political song from 5 years ago or 10 years ago. [People] listen to the song ... and understand that they are not alone. They love the song, and they believe in the same thing.”

Essam acknowledges that, as with every other freedom fighter, there are days when he feels “tired and exhausted, ... when I don’t feel that change is on the horizon.” And yet, he thinks that living in exile has allowed him to maintain a sense of optimism that might have eluded him if he had remained in Egypt. “In my heart, I very much believe that there is this seed that the Egyptian revolution planted in each one of us,” he says. “This seed keeps on growing, in me and every other person. Even if we are tired now, nobody can take this seed away.”

“In my heart, I very much believe that there is this seed that the Egyptian revolution planted in each one of us. This seed keeps on growing, in me and every other person. Even if we are tired now, nobody can take this seed away.”



ELIE KAMANO

Country: Guinea
Discipline: Singer-Songwriter

In his two decades on the front lines of Guinea's pro-democracy movement, Elie Kamano—a reggae singer, activist, and now politician—has been arrested six times and spent 150 days in jail. Through the power of his songs, Kamano has infuriated the powers that be and galvanized a youth movement of thousands of Guineans clamoring for change in a country marred by political instability and widespread poverty.

"Reggae is a music that never runs out of breath," he says. "Reggae can't lose steam as long as there are problems on the African continent and in the country. My music adapts to current events and the realities we live in." Since 1958, the year that the Republic of Guinea declared its independence from France, he says, those realities have left Guineans "frightened, gagged, and deprived of their rights."

Kamano grew up in a remote area of southeastern Guinea in a community of

foresters. In school, he became captivated by African literature and the philosophy of Afro-centric art. “It means putting Africa at the center, that Africa is the center of our interests, and [African countries] are also the epicenter of our interests,” he said. He began listening to Black artists like Bob Marley, Alpha Blondy, Tiken Jafakoly, Lucky Dube, and Didier Awadi and says he was struck by their “engaged lyrics” and their ability to capture social and political issues through creative expression. “When you are an engaged artist,” Kamano says, “inevitably there are events in your country and in Africa that occur and that lead you to take a stand and speak out. When you speak, you necessarily become an activist. That’s what happened to me.... The initial fight that I began to lead in my music was focused first of all on the well-being and liberation of the people.”

“Reggae is a music that never runs out of breath. Reggae can’t lose steam as long as there are problems on the African continent and in the country.”

Guinea is one of the [poorest](#) countries in the world, with soaring rates of illiteracy, malnutrition, and poverty. Kamano believes that artists have a crucial role to play in raising awareness of these problems as well as human rights violations and the experiences of disenfranchised populations. “Everywhere, artists are involved in protests ... brought about by the political current of their country and the abuse of the elementary rights of their people,” he says. “Their mission is to lead the people to understand and appropriate the fight precisely.”

In 2007, after Kamano released an album whose lyrics criticized the regime of then-President Lasana Conté, his fans asked him to join them in the streets. “I was at home, quietly, and the youth came to get me,” Kamano recalls. “They told me, ‘You just released an album where you denounced this regime’s bad practices, so you can’t stay at home while we are in the field.’ I had no choice but to take the risk and to lead them. Because they identified with my music, they listened to it and assimilated it, and that motivated them.”

Kamano came to understand the power of art—particularly music—in spreading ideas and messaging: “An artist first has his art as a weapon. And it is a formidable weapon because what the artist can give as a message in five minutes, the politician cannot give in two days.” By 2009, he had gained widespread recognition across the country and became a leading player in the fight for the establishment of rule of law and democracy. The movement sought to overthrow Captain Moussa Dadis Camara, who had seized power in a military coup d’etat in December 2008, following the death of his predecessor. Nine months later, on September 28, 2009, a peaceful rally calling for Dadis’ resignation turned into a [scene of bloodshed and horror](#) when Guinean security forces attacked the protesters, killing an estimated 150 people and raping dozens of women.

Security forces blocked Kamano from attending that protest, but in the wake of

the crackdown he instantly knew that he had to go into exile. Over the years, he had frequently heard rumors of death threats against him by the Dadis regime for his outspoken criticism and efforts to mobilize the anti-Dadis movement. Fearing for his life, Kamano fled to Senegal with the help of relatives and lived there for the next two months.

“An artist first has his art as a weapon. And it is a formidable weapon because what the artist can give as a message in five minutes, the politician cannot give in two days.”

Dadis’ regime was short-lived. After an assassination attempt wounded him, he left Guinea, and in 2010 Alpha Condé became the country’s first democratically elected president. Kamano returned to Guinea and in time spoke out against Condé, too, as his 11-year rule was [marked](#) by corruption and human rights abuses. He frequently criticized Condé in his reggae songs and, in retaliation, was regularly subjected to censorship and persecution. After the release of his song *N’Fan Conde* in 2018, which was highly critical of Condé, he received a summons to the Directorate of the Judicial Police and was warned to take down the track or face the consequences. He kept silent. The Condé regime clearly recognized and feared the power of Kamano’s words to mobilize protesters—particularly young people—across the country. Kamano recalls two instances when he was arrested for his role as an instigator: once after a television interview in which he called on Condé to respect the demands of a brewing movement of trade unionists or risk seeing Kamano in the streets with the youth, and again after he organized a celebration that drew 50,000 protesters to the site of a political rally for Condé.

Kamano believes that the reach and longevity of his music is central to the power that he has amassed as an activist. His music has been streamed by thousands of listeners on Spotify and YouTube, and in 2011 he was a [finalist](#) for *Prix Découvertes*, a singing competition held by Radio France International for Francophone Africans. Through the timely and timeless vessel of reggae, Kamano’s words and his searing denunciations of the Guinean political elite have resonated across Guinean society for over 20 years. “There are several generations who have grown up with my music,” he says. “They know I have credibility... and there is a large majority of young people who have identified with me for a long time, with my music and my ideals.”



“La main de dieu.” Elie Kamano. May 2017. Album cover.

Kamano takes pride in his long record of mobilizing the youth of his country but acknowledges that his work—and the work of the movement—is far from over: “The mission is not completely accomplished until we conquer power and exercise it in the spirit and ideology that we have assigned ourselves since the beginning.”

Despite the reach and power of his songs, and despite his success as an organizer and activist, Kamano recently decided that being an artist and activist is not enough to effect the change he wants to see in Guinea. “I can’t go on singing forever for hungry, insecure people,” he says. “I have denounced and raised awareness enough, and I think it is time to put words into action and become a political decision-maker. I did activism, I went to the street, I did my time in prison. I rubbed shoulders with activists, presidents, and people from the informal settlements. So I decided to fight for power... my motivations come from this endemic suffering of our people. You can’t stay in a studio to break the system. You can’t stick with a song and think that change is going to happen. At some point, you have to be at the heart of the change for it to happen.”

In 2019, Kamano became the head of the Guinean Party for Solidarity and Democracy. In September 2020, he [announced](#) that he wanted to challenge Condé for the presidency and called on supporters to help him raise the required funds to launch a campaign. After extending the term limits for the presidency, Condé won that election, but he was subsequently [overthrown](#) in a coup d’etat in September 2021 and replaced by Colonel Mamady Doumbouya, who orchestrated the coup. Kamano plans to run for president again when the country transitions back to a democratic government.

Kamano acknowledges that his trajectory—from artist to presidential candidate—is not for everyone. “For young people who want to choose to follow my trajectory,” he says, “I encourage them, but I do not encourage all young artists to give up their careers to come into politics.”



STELLA NYANZI

| Country: Uganda
| Discipline: Poet

Long before Stella Nyanzi became an international icon for her provocative poems skewering Uganda's longtime dictator, Yoweri Museveni, she learned about the power of words—and their potential consequences—from her father and her headmistress.

As a child, Nyanzi wrote a poem about her father's abusive treatment of her mother. As punishment, he beat her. "My father was teaching me the power of words," she says, "but he was not saying they are beautiful. He was saying words are dangerous, words can be very disrespectful, words can hurt—be careful where you put your words." A few years later, Nyanzi wrote a letter to her headmistress, criticizing the school's policy of corporal punishment of female students. She was suspended for a week. This, too, taught her a lesson: "Words can carry your message and can irritate people in power."

Nyanzi did not stop writing after these two incidents, but her poetry became

private—expression meant only for herself. She got a Ph.D. in medical anthropology and became a research fellow at Makerere University in Kampala, focused on human sexuality. When she was 40, both of her parents died in quick succession due to failures of the Ugandan public health system. In 2014, her father died from a heart attack after being unable to access medicine that he needed, and in 2015 her mother died after a fall while waiting for an ambulance that never came. These experiences were deeply painful and life-altering for Nyanzi, and the grief and rage that she felt at their deaths drove her to become a public figure and an activist.

“My father and mother’s deaths began my public rallying around public health and its failures in Uganda,” she recalls. “I’m writing as a daughter at the grave—an unnecessary grave—first of her father and then of her mother. These two graves propelled me from being a private poet who would write for small audiences at weddings and classrooms and small feminist clubs to a public, raging, mad dog.”

In the next few years, Nyanzi’s bold, unconventional activism—including a nude protest at Makerere University to decry labor abuses of Black women—led to her suspension from the university and catapulted her to national recognition. Her no-holds-barred, intentionally vulgar poems also grabbed public attention. In a country where criticism of Museveni—the ruling president of Uganda since 1986—is akin to what she calls “breaking a silent law,” Nyanzi fearlessly challenged and criticized him for his cruelty and repression.

Following Uganda’s 2016 elections, and in response to Museveni’s failure to deliver on a campaign promise to provide sanitary pads to schoolgirls, Nyanzi launched the #Pads4girlsUg campaign to raise money, educate local communities about menstruation, and deliver the pads herself. In April 2017, following a campaign fundraiser, she was arrested for the first time, ostensibly in retaliation for a post she published on Facebook two months prior about Museveni. It read, in part: “That is what buttocks do. They shake, jiggle, shit and fart. Museveni is just another pair of buttocks.” She was **charged** with “offensive communication and cyber harassment” and detained in a maximum-security prison without bail for over a month. Her arrest and trial were televised, bringing her a larger, global audience. As part of her trial, state prosecutors applied to the court to subject her to an involuntary mental exam.

Far from silencing Nyanzi or encouraging her to tone down her poetry, the experience of being arrested for her writing did the opposite. “What that did was radicalize me much more, enrage me much more,” she says. “I walk away from just the academic language, and I speak the language of a poet, a vulgar radical poet.”

Nyanzi practices a mode of expression called “**radical rudeness**,” developed during the colonial era to ridicule and critique powerful individuals through public shaming. As a poet, she has found that it enables her to express her frustrations, grab attention, and connect with a broader audience than she could as a politician or as an academic. “My art allows my intellectual labor, which is very

disciplined and very rigid... to be creative and fluid and easily accessible to audiences, who get bored and put off by academic speak, vocabulary, and styles.”

Nyanzi believes that art is a powerful tool in social movements because of its unique ability to spread messages and bring people together, especially in repressive environments where it is difficult to gather in person. “Art can be packaged in forms that can be transported beyond the street, and that becomes really important in contexts where social movements cannot organize physically. That’s when writers come in.”

Nyanzi was arrested again in 2018 for a **poem** about Museveni’s birth and his mother. The opening lines read:

*Yoweri, they say it was your birthday yesterday.
How bitterly sad a day!
I wish the smelly and itchy cream-coloured candida festering in
Esiteri’s cunt had suffocated you to death during birth.
Suffocated you just like you are suffocating us with oppression, suppression
and repression!*

Explaining this verse, she says: “I used all the words for vagina.... I wrote those words down, and then I looked for metaphors for what conditions produce a monster, what conditions give birth to a dictator. People missed the metaphor or the symbolism of the vagina that I use, and they focused on the vulgarity. Many feminists think it was the sickest thing to do. For me, it was a beautiful feminist poem.”

Nyanzi defies those who judge her work based on “bourgeois” metrics like beauty and rhyme, as well as those who criticize her for being rude. “I am speaking against a vice, an injustice,” she says, adding: “I wish I could be ruder. I wish it had been harder, more beautiful, more graphic, dirtier—because the president read my poem.”

Convicted once again on charges of “cyber harassment and offensive communication,” Nyanzi was sentenced to 18 months in prison, where she was beaten. She continued to write while incarcerated, and her first book of poetry was published in 2020. “They locked me up for one poem,” she says, “and I got out with a whole book of about 154 poems.”

Nyanzi feels frustrated by those who question the ultimate impact of her poems or ask her why she continues to publish them despite Museveni’s seemingly iron grip on the country. “One of the things I hate most is when people say to me on social media, ‘You have been writing for years, but the president is still in power,’” she explains. “I want to say, respectfully, fuck you. In Uganda, we are fighting a dictatorship, and I do it with poems. I’m not writing so that after reading my poem he will pack up his grenades and roll his tankers out of the statehouse.... My own impact assessment is: Did I speak in a way that was clear? Did the president hear the voice of somebody who challenged and criticized him?”

“One of the things I hate most is when people say to me on social media, ‘you have been writing for years, but the president is still in power.’ I want to say, respectfully, fuck you. In Uganda, we are fighting a dictatorship, and I do it with poems.”

After her release from prison, Nyanzi went into exile with her family, first in Nairobi in 2021 and then in Germany in 2022. “I hate exile, and I love exile,” she says. “I have a bittersweet relationship with exile.” She does not yet speak German and has struggled to navigate the language barrier but says that being in exile has given her a sense of security and the time and space to sharpen her craft as a writer. “Exile is not surrender,” she says. “Exile is retreat, exile is a time to go and heal, exile is time to examine what one is doing. In those regards, exile has been beautiful, because I can stop and do nothing. I can rest. I can take care of my traumatized mind.”

During her time in Germany, Nyanzi has been perplexed by those who ask why she is “always fighting” in her poetry. For her, the answer is clear: Her art and activism are driven by pain and rage, and in a country as riddled with crises and human rights abuses as Uganda, she often doesn’t have the option to look away or write about something happier. “We can’t afford to pick and choose our causes,” she says. “Tomorrow they are selling a forest to a foreign capital, the next day they’re murdering people, the next day women are dying because electricity ran out from a hospital. I haven’t had the luxury of writing for pleasure.”

“The worst form of death that could happen to me while I’m still alive is to stop me from my poetry. I don’t care if it’s not so good, I don’t care if it doesn’t sell, I don’t even care if I write for my private diary, but I must write.”

At the same time, Nyanzi acknowledges that this constant focus on hard, heavy political themes takes an emotional toll on her, and it is not always sustainable. That’s why she identifies as an artist, an activist, and an “artist”—meaning that she can choose what she writes about and when she writes it. “There are days I just want to write about my daughter,” she says. “There are days I don’t want to carry the burden of the nation. There are days I’m sick and tired of activism because it deflates [and] it feels like we are not going anywhere.”

Whether at home or in exile, imprisoned or free, Nyanzi is certain about one thing: She will continue to write: “I write poems. That’s what I do. If I could write in prison, I will write, I’m sure even in my grave, I’ll be writing poems. The worst form of death that could happen to me while I’m still alive is to stop me from my poetry. I don’t care if it’s not so good, I don’t care if it doesn’t sell, I don’t even care if I write for my private diary, but I must write.”

EUROPE

ZEHRA DOĞAN

Country: Kurdistan
Discipline: Painter

Kurdish painter and journalist [Zehra Doğan](#) grew up in southeastern Türkiye in the 1990s, a decade that was frequently punctured by violent conflict between the Republic of Türkiye and Kurdish nationalist groups.

Growing up in this political context shaped Doğan's trajectory as an artist and an activist from a young age. "To be a '90s kid from southeast Türkiye, it means a lot of wars occurred in the region and a lot of bloodshed, so in a way you grow up witnessing and seeing it all around you," she remembers. "On one side, there was [Kurdish] Hezbollah²⁷ being really violent, and on the other an army pushing you aside at every street corner."

These tensions filtered into her experiences at school, where Doğan and her peers were forced to sing Turkish anthems every morning. The nationalistic nature of the songs felt deeply exclusionary. "As a young child, I was being asked to say that I am a hardworking Turk and will offer myself as a gift to the existence



of being Turkish,” she says. “I was made to say this as a Kurdish person—that was a tipping point.” Another tipping point came when she was arrested and tried as a teenager for throwing a rock at a passing police car.

The chaos and unrest indirectly led Doğan to discover her love for painting. She frequently watched television newscasters to stay on top of the war, and one day she became captivated by the contouring of the commentators with background footage behind them. This observation inspired her first painting, which drew accolades from her teachers and classmates. “That was when I realized—oh! I can paint,” she says.



Untitled. Zehra Doğan. Year unknown.

killed her friends when she was a child or the Turkish state that has done “horrendous things” to her and her community. “Any of these tipping points might have instilled hatred in me and led me to act with a sense of vengeance,” she says, “but I am part of the Kurdish women’s struggle, which stands for democracy and ecological and gender justice. . . . And I have found that there is no place for holding such hatred and such vengeance, especially as someone who is trying to struggle for self-expression, for changing things, for making things more beautiful, for allowing people the freedom to define and express themselves as they wish.”

Doğan was part of the original five-person team of Jinha, a feminist news site with an all-female staff, which earned [global recognition](#) for its coverage of Yazidi women liberated from ISIS slavery. Unfortunately, Jinha was shuttered in October 2016 as part of the government [crackdown on writers, public intellectuals, and artists](#) following a failed military coup d’état that summer.

Doğan’s artistic practice is intertwined with her journalism. While attending

Doğan went on to become an artist, journalist, and activist. Much of her work is rooted in the Kurdish movement for independence, although she does not condone or identify with the militant or violent aspects of the larger insurgency. “I am a different form within the struggle,” she says, “and execute it with a different language. . . . I have a different way to fight and communicate, and at times I struggle within the movement itself when dealing with things I don’t agree with. I am not bound to this political movement as a reason for my art, but I do exist within it.”

Throughout her life, Doğan has strived to resist leaning into hatred, whether against the Kurdish armed groups that



Doğan’s 2017 painting of Nusaybin, a Turkish city that had been heavily damaged during fighting between the Turkish army and Kurdish militants. After painting it, she was charged with having connections to terrorist groups and imprisoned for 600 days.

protests as a journalist, she would paint the people she met and collect objects from destroyed buildings. She often depicted scenes of Kurdish women and traditional Kurdish life along with darker images of war and conflict. It was one of these paintings that led to her incarceration by the Turkish authorities. On March 24, 2017, Doğan was [sentenced](#) to two years and 10 months in prison for creating a painting based on a photograph of Nusaybin, a Turkish city that had been heavily damaged during fighting between the Turkish army and Kurdish militants. She was charged with having connections to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a militant group, and spent 600 days in prison for “terrorist propaganda” and “inciting hatred” before being released on February 24, 2019. Her case attracted international attention and widespread condemnation from human rights groups, [including PEN America](#), as well support from the internationally renowned artist Banksy, who created a 70-foot [mural](#) in New York that protested her imprisonment.

“There’s a Kurdish saying that goes, ‘if you ban someone from doing something, he will do it for the rest of his life.’ For me, I was banned from painting while I was in prison, so now I am going to continue painting for the rest of my life.”

This period of imprisonment transformed her. “It made me change as a person and as an artist,” she says. “There’s a Kurdish saying that goes, ‘If you ban someone from doing something, he will do it for the rest of his life.’ For me, I was

banned from painting while I was in prison, so now I am going to continue painting for the rest of my life.”

Although the prison authorities refused to provide her with painting materials, Doğan **found a way** to continue with her art, producing her own paint from food, drinks, herbs, and her menstrual blood. She made brushes from the hair of her fellow prisoners and from bird feathers that would fall into the prison. She wrote to friends asking for long letter paper with blank backs and began painting other prisoners and telling their stories. “I noticed very clearly the effect it had on them, and that it changed them even after it came out,” she says. “That was really a time when I noticed that my artwork could change something and have an impact.” Her work was smuggled out of the prison as dirty laundry and shown at an exhibition in Istanbul.

Doğan believes deeply in the intertwined nature of art and politics. “My work is not far from political matters,” she says, “because the geography I was born in and the experiences I lived through have politicized my work.”

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Following her release from prison, with other charges pending against her, Doğan was forced to go into exile in London. Living abroad for the first time was an eye-opening experience. “I discovered that there was a lot more going on than just the struggle in Türkiye,” she says. “When I came to Europe, I saw other women’s movements in bad situations. In the Americas, too. In a way, these women are confronting traumas that are undefined, undiscussed, and unseen.”

Doğan now lives in Europe and Iraqi Kurdistan. She misses her family deeply and struggles with the forced distance between herself and her homeland. “I can’t go to Türkiye and I can’t see my family,” she says, “so it really feels to me like there is barbed wire wrapped around my body.”



ARTEM LOSKUTOV

| Country: Russia

| Discipline: Performance Artist

After Russian forces invaded Ukraine in February 2022, President Vladimir Putin [escalated](#) a years-long, aggressive crackdown on free expression within Russia. For Artem Loskutov, a Russian performance artist and activist who relocated to Latvia shortly before the start of the war, the rapid deterioration has been jarring and painful.

"All hopes are finished now—I can't do anything," he says, "and all of the opposition in Russia can't do anything either. It looks like hope has finished for Russian civil society. The end. This was the final call."

In May 2022, Putin [signed a law](#) that criminalized speech about the war, making it illegal to use the words "war" and "invasion." Since the war began, more than [20,000 people have been detained](#) for anti-war protests, political speech, and criticism of the government, and many of those awaiting trial face sentences of up to 15 years. Among them are numerous [journalists, artists](#), and cultural professionals.

Loskutov is a pioneer in Russian protest art who first became involved in activist movements as a university student in the early 2000s. After the American invasion of Iraq, he attended protests with some of his friends, but they quickly realized that they weren't interested in joining a traditional activist group. "We saw different groups of protests and we didn't like any of them," Loskutov says. "I can't be part of the Communist Party of Russia. It was better to be our own group, say our own words," rather than being "part of something you cannot control." He briefly engaged with anarchist groups but realized that "political activists are very boring [and] don't produce anything interesting—it's the same every time."



Loskutov and fellow "monstrators" gather for the May Day Monstrations in Novosibirsk in 2013, holding a banner that reads "Forward to the Dark Past!"

When Loskutov discovered a subgroup of anarchist-artists, however, he knew that was where he fit in. Along with his friends, Loskutov produced music videos, designed posters, and even organized a 20-person flash mob. Starting in 2004, Loskutov became the producer of the May Day "monstrations," his best-known project, a performance art movement intended to provide an alternative space to traditional demonstrations in Russia. "The monstrations were intended

to find a new language for political statements in modern Russia – a language that can be used by people who do not trust any politicians," he explains. Under Loskutov's direction, activists would take to the streets in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk on the first of May once a year, providing an alternative space to the traditional demonstration organized for International Workers' Day. Loskutov and his fellow monstrators were adorned in brightly colored costumes, placards featuring gibberish slogans, and nonsensical chants to recite. "[We had] absurd slogans, some jokes, some parodies of politics, parodies of official lines from Putin... It looked like a political demonstration but it was a party. It was for fun," Loskutov says. The protests ran every year until the COVID-19 pandemic, sometimes bringing together upwards of 5,000 activists.

"When artists act alone and can produce only art, I think art cannot change anything serious. It can be a tool of change..., but if you don't have institutions, if you don't have elections, art cannot be a magical tablet."

Loskutov came to appreciate the freedom and flexibility inherent in artistic expression: "I do what I want and call it art—because I can call everything art," he says. "It's a legitimation of everything." He sees art as a powerful tool but emphasizes that to have an impact, artistic expression must be accompanied

by activism and institutional protections. "When artists act alone and can produce only art, I think art cannot change anything serious," he says. "It can be a tool of change... but if you don't have institutions, if you don't have elections, art cannot be a magical tablet."



Belarus. Artem Loskutov. 2020. Paint on canvas.

Loskutov's activism and satirical expression occasionally brought him into the crosshairs of local police in Siberia. In 2009, he was questioned about his involvement in political movements. He says that he was subsequently arrested, framed for marijuana possession (11 grams were planted in his bag without his knowledge), and detained for a month. The experience left him always on guard and wondering when he would next be arrested. "That was 13 years ago—and every year and every day since, I wait for the next call," he says. "When I should be careful, more careful than before, when I should think about my freedom, when I should run away."

Loskutov found that repression and censorship began shaping many aspects of his artistic practice. To disseminate and sell his artwork, he increasingly turned to the internet, which has often felt like the last vanguard for free expression in an increasingly authoritarian environment. "With the protests not growing and the field becoming smaller, all my opportunities are now on the internet," he says. "I still can use the internet, I still can use social media. But I can't use the streets, and I can't use galleries because galleries have a lot of censorship problems."

"[My arrest] was 13 years ago—and every year and every day since, I wait for the next call. When I should be careful, more careful than before, when I should think about my freedom, when I should run away."

Loskutov has more than 17,000 followers on [Instagram](#), where he regularly posts his artwork, including a popular series in which he beats a canvas with a paint-tipped police baton rather than painting it with a brush—a style that he has dubbed dubinopis ("nightstick art")—to evoke Russian police brutality. One painting in the series used red paint on white, the colors of the Belarussian flag, and sold for more than [three million rubles](#) in 2019 (about \$45,000). In 2013, after enduring years of harassment by the police for small infractions, like badmouthing the police or selling T-shirts supporting [Pussy Riot](#), the punk feminist art collective, Loskutov left Novosibirsk and moved to Moscow, where he felt like less of a target. "Nobody is interested in me in Moscow," he says. "I'm not a big person for Moscow's police, so everything was a lot easier." He

continued to return to Novosibirsk each year for May Day. He consistently struggled to work with the local government to plan the event, but also found that their fear of conflict allowed him some leeway. "It was a strange way of communication," he says. "They can't work with me because of the history between the police and me," but "they are afraid of scandal, so they did try to give us some space and time to not have a scandal."

When the war in Ukraine began, Loskutov felt as if all his years of art and activism were erased—and there was no path for him to continue these activities. "All that impact is no impact, no result—just gone," he says. "And now I don't have any possibilities to do the May Day Monstrations or to go with some slogans to the streets." Where the authorities once punished him with fines, he says, now "you can go to prison for seven years because you said something about the army."

Loskutov and his wife, a journalist, moved to Latvia in December 2021, before the war started, due to security risks they both faced. Since then, he has been unsure of how to make art while living in exile. "Last year I just tried to make a new life, have a new home, have new documents, have new bank accounts and all that bureaucratic stuff," he says. "I don't even understand how to produce some art or which art I can produce now, or who will be interested in my art. There are a lot of questions."

For Loskutov, the future feels increasingly bleak, and he struggles to feel hope for the future of Russian artists and civil society at large. "I don't understand my country, I don't understand my people, I don't understand my president," he says. "Everything became crazy, and I don't believe in any changes in the coming years."



JAVIER SERRANO GUERRA— BOA MISTURA

Country: Spain
Discipline: Street Artist

In the mid-1990s, a group of Spanish teenagers started painting graffiti together in the Barajas neighborhood on the outskirts of Madrid. One day, they came across a fanzine for *pixação*, a style of graffiti native to São Paulo, Brazil, that is **known for** its straight lines, sharp edges, and connection to youth culture and protests against inequality.

“We fell in love with it,” remembers Javier Serrano Guerra, a member of the group. “We fell in love with how calligraphy can define a city.”

In 2001, five years after they started painting together, they chose a Portuguese name for themselves in tribute to *pixação*: **Boa Mistura**, or “Good Mixture,” which refers to the different backgrounds and perspectives that each member brings to the group. They have been working as a collective ever since, traveling to cities around the world and making public art in close partnership with local communities.

Photograph by Brock Scott

JAVIER SERRANO GUERRA

Serrano has been drawing for as long as he can remember and picked up a spray can for the first time at age 15. He quickly became enamored with the experience of painting outside, in the midst of his community and city, especially once he met the future members of Boa Mistura, who, like him, loved graffiti and hip-hop. “Kids from our same neighborhood would meet up to play football or basketball,” Serrano says. “We would meet up at night to paint graffiti or a mural or to sneak into a factory. It was not a friendship of sharing and telling things. It was a friendship of living through experiences and solving situations together.”

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For Serrano, the collective’s collaborative spirit has been instrumental in their creative process. “What this friendship did was dilute each individual ego into a collective ego,” he says. “Because when you realize that you have reached a certain level of admiration, respect, and trust for your colleagues, you let yourself go and arrive in a place where you could never have arrived alone. When we discuss a project, the idea of one person is shaped by the intervention of another, who lights the light bulb of the next person.... You realize that your idea has grown and improved so much and reached a totally new place you could never reach on your own. That makes you willing to give up your ego.”

In 2010, the collective received an invitation from the owner of a small art gallery in Cape Town to go there for an artistic residency. Living in Cape Town was a transformative experience. “Suddenly we find ourselves in South Africa, living in a very dangerous community ... with prostitution, with drugs, with a gang operating one street away from where we slept,” Serrano says. “Having only worked in the European context, suddenly arriving in that place had an impact on us. We realized that what we had been doing before had no meaning in such a place.”

For the first few weeks, they felt “paralyzed,” unable to paint, Serrano says. It was only when they started walking around the neighborhood and speaking with members of the community that they came up with an idea for a project. The Boa Mistura members began painting a mural and encouraged the community, particularly children, to join them. “All of a sudden, we were neighbors,” Serrano recalls. Toward the end of their stay, a man who was starting a local cycling group solicited their help in painting blank containers for the bikes. They worked side by side with members of the community to finish the project in time for their departure. Through this process, they saw how the cycling club transformed from a place owned by a single individual to a place for the community.

The experience of learning from the community about their needs and their

lives, and of subsequently working with the community to complete a project together—has shaped their approach to each of their subsequent projects in cities around the world, from Nairobi to Sao Paulo. “We tend to venture into the territories in which we work and we tend to live there,” Serrano says. “That makes us neighbors. And it is through the neighbors that we understand the context—the place, the community, and the people are the basis of everything. We prefer to understand places through the people who live there and know it best.”

Boa Mistura brought this approach back with them to Spain, where they often take on projects in Cañada Real, an informal settlement in Madrid that is considered the largest such settlement in Europe. Since November 2020, it has not had **electricity**, which the UN deemed a “children’s rights violation.” For one of their best-known projects, the collective asked each of the 4,000 people without electricity to share a candle with them, and they put the candles together in a public display, forming the words **“Nos están apagando”** (“They are turning us off”). The project, which ran from December 2020 to January 2021, received significant news coverage and raised widespread awareness of the deplorable conditions in Cañada Real. “Something we’ve learned is that we can become loudspeakers for invisible places, which, because they are invisible, become worthless to the people who live there,” says Serrano. “The mere fact of turning them visible again gives them back their dignity that as human beings we must all have.”



Nos están apagando. Boa Mistura. 2021. Art installation. Madrid.

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Serrano knows that street art is, by its very nature, fleeting—and he’s fine with that. “We are not concerned with the durability of our work,” he says. “We don’t really care. It’s on the streets, under the rain, the wind, the sun, snow. A mural does not last more than 10 years in good condition. We understand the pieces are ephemeral, just as we as people are.”

As a result, Boa Mistura does not typically focus on the long-term impact of their projects. Instead, they assess impact during the project itself, based on the relationships they build with local communities and the sense of power and



Soy Raíz. Boa Mistura. 2022. Art installation. Quito, Ecuador.

trips to Nairobi, São Paulo, Cape Town, and Antofagasta, Chile. Serrano says that returning to these locales was a powerful and affirming experience for him: “It reinforced what we had been doing, and showed me that our project had a meaning beyond the sharing, or even beyond the expression itself, but it also meant something to the people involved.”

In addition to their community-based projects, Boa Mistura does projects for art galleries, art museums, and collectors, which help them fund their street art. “Money is not an end goal to us, but is the means allowing us to act,” he says. “Financial means allow us to grab a van full of paint and drive 800 kilometers down the road, or to catch a plane and fly somewhere we have never been, to learn from how things are done in other places and develop a project on that place.”

Serrano believes that art draws its power from its existence as a physical manifestation of expression, as something you can touch and experience. “Art is something that may seem superfluous, but nevertheless it surrounds us and makes us understand things from other places,” he says. “Art has a unique ability to inspire people. It is a very powerful tool.”

Although the collective’s projects often touch on social and political themes, Serrano says that it is important to him to keep his creative process separate from broader social and political movements. “Independence is fundamental to me,” he says. “I want to be a free human being. I would not like to be at the center of a social movement—I would feel responsible for too many things. I would have to make agreements and pacts. As an artist, I want to be free to go into communities and say what I want, without having to abide by the rules of some social movement or political rulers.”

At the same time, Serrano believes that making graffiti is an inherently political act, because to draw on the streets is to break the law. Graffiti was highly criminalized in Spain until 2015, when it was *reduced* to a “minor infraction,” and the collective has at times been punished for their art. In 2012, for example, the authorities fined them \$6,000 for painting gray rectangles on a wall that had once been covered with graffiti but was subsequently covered in gray by the city

as part of Madrid’s zero-tolerance policy for graffiti. “Graffiti is your individual response to the environment in which you live,” Serrano says. “Graffiti is a political tool using a physical medium that is public space. Society does not allow it, laws do not allow it—but we did it and we continue to do it, and all the graffiti artists do it. We accept that there are rules, and we break them.”

At times, the collective has sought to work with the government instead of circumventing it—but the government has not always been receptive to their advances. In 2014, for example, Boa Mistura asked Madrid’s city council for permission to work on a project that involved painting crosswalks, knowing that the group would face a heavy fine if they were caught doing so illegally. After the government declined to grant permission, Serrano says, the group went out at night, “dressed as ninjas,” to carry out the project. The government couldn’t prove that Boa Mistura was behind it, so they were never sanctioned.

Thankfully, the tides of change were on their side. In 2017, the city elected a new, more progressive mayor, Manuela Carmena, who launched a project to make Madrid the poetry capital of the world. She turned to Boa Mistura for help, and in 2018 the collective *Painted* 1,000 crosswalks around the city. The project, *Versos al paso*, secured the participation of more than 25,000 citizens, who shared stanzas from poems with the city for use in the crosswalks.

“It was interesting how an illegal project, rejected before, years later became public policy, with significant impact on the urban landscape of the city,” Serrano says. “We are made of clay, we work in the clay. We are not some intellectual artists, who are dedicated to generating such an elaborate message. We go to the territories to build something with our hands and the neighbors’.”



AMERICAS

ELYLA

Country: Nicaragua

Discipline: Performance Artist

Elyla originally turned to art as a means to condemn the oppression they experienced as a queer person growing up in rural Nicaragua in the 1990s. “From the very beginning,” they recall, “I started making art to denounce things [that happened to me] in Nicaragua because I’m queer and because I was born in a very small village. Through my artwork. I was saying, ‘This is not freedom. This is not what it should be like for me.’”

In 2013, Elyla and several colleagues co-founded [Operación Queer](#), a collective that brought academics and artists together to explore the intersections of art, research, and activism through a decolonizing, feminist framework. At that time Elyla’s [artistic expression](#) largely consisted of confrontational guerrilla performance art, from video and photography installations to experimental theater and street performances.

Through their work, Elyla aims to challenge people’s perceptions of reality.

“Performance art has the ability to create new worlds,” they explain. “If an artist is not challenging societal norms, and is not challenging ways of seeing reality, and creating reality... for me, they are not [fulfilling] an artist's job. An artist's job today should be challenging their own views of the world and how things are established.”

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Elyla says that their art is political because of who they are and what they have experienced throughout their life as a result of the patriarchy, [U.S. intervention](#), colonialism, and racism. “There was never a moment where I decided: Oh, I'm going to be an artist,” they explain. “That just came with my work, because my work was about me. It was about my own history.... it was born with me, because of the laws of this territory where I am.”

Elyla's art and activism quickly gained widespread recognition, and in 2014 they were invited to create an opening performance piece for the prestigious IX [Nicaraguan Biennial](#). But four hours before showtime, the biennial coordinator received a call from Nicaragua's first lady and now vice president, [Rosario Murillo](#), calling for Elyla's performance to be stopped, supposedly because it had not received the necessary permissions. Undeterred, they took to the streets and carried out their performance as scheduled. “The biennial coordinators don't need her permission—I never needed her permission,” Elyla says. Afterward, they [received support](#) from some of the older generation of contemporary artists in Nicaragua, who called the press and ensured that the alarming incident received national attention.



Elyla. Yo no tengo miedo (I Am Not Scared). 2018 USA, 2019 Mexico. Performance art.

Elyla came into the first lady's cross-hairs again in April 2018, on the second day of a long series of mass student demonstrations that swept through Nicaragua in response to proposed social security cuts. As the movement gained steam around the country, the regime of Daniel Ortega—Nicaragua's president since 2007—responded with brutal force. At least [197 protesters](#) were killed in the first three months of the demonstrations. Rosario Murillo called the protesters “small beings with tiny agendas, thoughts and consciousnesses.” In response, Elyla [released hundreds of ants](#)—representing

the protesters and their collective resistance—in front of Nicaraguan consulates, first in San Francisco and then Mexico City, while reciting the names of killed activists and students.

At the time of the protests, Elyla was pursuing a master's degree in social anthropology at the National University of Nicaragua. For three months, they attended demonstrations and served as a protest organizer, while other students took over the university in a sit-in, calling for a more democratic and open society.

For Elyla, participating in the student protests—and witnessing the vicious response to them—was a deeply formative experience. “It's something that really changed me and moved me,” they reflect. “There was a lot of death, horror, and persecution happening in front of me, and a lot of friends and activists were put in jail or disappeared. That changed my approach to art making and to understanding what a political artist can do.”

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After receiving threatening phone calls, Elyla went into exile in Costa Rica for a while and completed an [artistic residency](#), creating projects that illuminated the experiences of LGBTQ+ Nicaraguans, and worked with other exiled LGBTQ+ Nicaraguan activists to organize advocacy campaigns from abroad.



Elyla. St. Peter. 2020. Performance art.

In 2020, Elyla moved to the United States and did a residency through the [Artist Protection Fund](#) at a university in Pennsylvania. Living in exile—during a pandemic lockdown, no less—gave them a much-needed opportunity to recover from the emotional trauma of the civil uprising and the regime's brutal response. “For a year, it allowed me to have a secure home, studio services, and mental health services,” Elyla says. “It gave me stability for the first time in years after doing a lot of activist work. When you're an activist in Latin American countries, you very often forget about yourself.” The residency also briefly brought financial stability, which they note is a constant struggle in Central America, where there is a limited market for art and limited support for artists.

During their exile, Elyla found the time and space to reflect on their artistic process and goals. Their work became deeper and more spiritual. “I was exiled from my body because of colonialism... so it’s about understanding my roots, my belonging, my sense of freedom with this territory,” they explained. “My work shifted from being very much a political, rational, and conventional type of activism to being more spiritual in relation to decolonizing my own mestizaje”—“mixed race”—“and creating anticolonial reflections.”

Elyla considers their evolution as an artist and activist a necessary reaction to the increasingly dangerous environment for free expression in Nicaragua. Since the 2018 protests, the Ortega regime has aggressively cracked down on political dissidents, arresting thousands, including artists and cultural professionals, and curtailing press freedoms and civil society. The government has also started [revoking the citizenship](#) of Nicaraguans living in exile. At the moment, Operación Queer is not active in Nicaragua due to this state of insecurity, and Elyla has resumed operating as a solo artist while working with other social movements to build resistance.

By changing the scope and tone of their creative expression, they hope to remain safe from government retaliation. “How can I create artwork, while I am in an authoritarian state, that is pushing boundaries but does not get me in jail or killed?” they ask. “Instead of trying to change the world through the conventional type of activism that can put me at risk, I’ve shifted to create a world within me, or to find a world within me, and to show that world within me.”

Even so, Elyla is deeply aware of the ever-present risks that they face in Nicaragua—for existing, for being queer, for being an artist. “I am living with a constant fear of knowing that I’m supposedly free to leave the country, but if I leave the country I might not be able to come back in.”

Elyla says that people often question why they choose to remain in Nicaragua despite the threats that they face—but for them, the reason is clear: “They want to know: Why am I still here in Nicaragua if I can go to another state and get asylum? But I want to stay here.... knowing that there is a possible path to create change that is not the conventional way of creating activism or political art, and that is not putting myself at risk. There are other ways, and I think I’ve found those ways.”



REBECA LANE

| Country: Guatemala

| Discipline: Musician

Over the last decade, Guatemalan musician and activist Rebeca Lane has educated a generation of women across Latin America about feminism, activism, and reclaiming their place in a patriarchal society that has too often oppressed and violated them.

Lane's career as an artist and activist has been profoundly shaped by her family's history and their experiences during the Guatemalan civil war, fought between the government and opposition groups from 1960 to 1996. The government was widely condemned for committing human rights abuses against civilians, including a [genocide](#) against the indigenous Maya people. [An estimated 200,000 people](#) were killed or forcefully disappeared during the conflict.

Only a few years before Lane was born in 1984, one of her aunts was disappeared, her uncle was kidnapped, and another uncle was killed. Lane was 12 years old when the war came to an end. When she later entered university, she

Photograph by Fabian Nobile

REBECA LANE

quickly became involved in young anarchist and feminist movements—only to realize that she was still deeply affected by the collective trauma that she and so many of her fellow activists had experienced during childhood. “All these traumatic stories that we carried, we really didn’t have a way to get them out in a healthy way,” she recalls. “For me, activism was deepening these wounds and they were hurting even more.... Instead of being able to talk about all these issues in a way that would help us heal, there came a time when I said: ‘I no longer want to feel this hatred for the army, no longer I want to carry this hate with me. It’s harming me. I don’t want to act out of hate.’ This was hurting me personally a lot.”



Lane performs onstage in Berlin in 2018. Photo credit: Nika Kramer.

Seeking a creative outlet, Lane turned to the arts. She wrote a thesis about hip-hop in university and subsequently became involved in a number of artistic scenes, from hip-hop and rap to theater and poetry. “It all allowed me to talk about these issues and be listened to. And to listen to other people’s stories, too. And that made it very healing. Saying: ‘Oh, this didn’t just happen to me,’ or ‘I am not the only one who felt like this—this has also happened to other comrades.’ When you start to bring up your story and start to share it and you realize that there are shared stories, there is something very healing in that.”

“There are songs that I couldn’t sing at first because it hurt a lot to sing them. And after many years of singing them, I realized, this wound no longer hurts. Of course, that doesn’t mean that sometimes it doesn’t hurt again ... but I am no longer the same person who began to sing full of rage, full of hate. That possibility was given to me by the arts.”

Through a combination of art and therapy, Lane found herself beginning to heal. “There are songs that I couldn’t sing at first because it hurt a lot to sing them,” she says. “And after many years of singing them, I realized, this wound no longer hurts. Of course, that doesn’t mean that sometimes it doesn’t hurt again ... but I am no longer the same person who began to sing full of rage, full of hate. That possibility was given to me by the arts.”

A mix of rap and hip-hop, Lane’s music touches on myriad aspects of the female experience, from femicide and domestic violence to sexuality and the policing of women’s bodies and appearances. “When I discovered how to rap, the first thing I felt the need to talk about was my body ... what it means to be a woman,

and what being a woman has meant to me inside social movements,” Lane says. “I had a rupture with the social movement ... when I came out of the closet as bisexual. I opened my eyes and realized that this was a super, super sexist space in which the few women who are there have to act like men to be taken into account.”

Lane regularly posts music videos on [YouTube](#), where some of them have reached over two million views. Her songs are energetic, blunt, full of life and color, and at times unapologetically angry. “[Ni una menos](#)” (“Not a Woman Less), for example—a powerful anthem, released in 2018 in support of a regional women’s movement [of the same name](#) that erupted following the murder of a 14-year old girl in Argentina—opens with the following lyrics (translated from Spanish):

*I’d like to have sweet things to write
But I have to decide and I choose anger
Today 5 women have been murdered
And at least 20 women are raped per hour
That’s just one day in Guatemala
Multiply it and you’ll know why we’re angry*

Lane’s music has resonated with thousands of Guatemalan women, introducing them to what it means to be a feminist. For Lane, the most powerful reactions to her songs come from young women. “I receive many comments from girls who tell me that they became interested in feminism because they listened to my music,” she says. “Of course, I’ve already had a 10-year career, so they tell me, ‘I’ve been listening to you since I was a child!’” Some of these fans, she adds, became “interested in participating as well.”



Lane marches with other protesters at a rally in Buenos Aires in 2017. Photo credit: China Diaz

Lane says that people regularly come up to her after concerts, telling her that her music has helped them overcome difficult situations in life, and her YouTube videos are flooded with comments from people who thank her for helping them cope with depression or giving them the strength to leave a violent relationship. She also receives videos from people who have attended marches where her music was played in the street. “I think that the music I make does have an effect,” she says. And to her, “that’s all that matters!”

For Lane, the political and social themes of her music are inseparable from who she is as a person and an activist. She emphasizes that being an artist is her career and her tool for participating in social movements. “I am a person first,” she says. “Someone who seeks social transformation and through art finds a way of expressing it, a way of sustaining myself financially, and a way to create

134 collective reflections. That's where and how I place myself. I understand that just by making songs I won't change the world, but it is what I can bring to the fight."

To stay in tune with the movement, Lane regularly attends demonstrations—usually not as an artist but as a person. She does not typically perform at them unless organizers explicitly request it to attract a larger crowd. "I try to participate a lot as an observer, because it is from there that I start to create," she says. "To observe what the girls are doing, how they are expressing it, what they are saying—to listen! Art accompanies social transformations, but art is not the social transformation... There has to be organization, political articulation, and alliances. And we in the arts accompany these transformations with what we create."

Lane acknowledges that her shift from activist to artist came in part from a desire to limit her risk and exposure to repercussions. "I decided I don't want to be killed," she says. "In this art space they are not going to kill me, but in activism they will." While Lane has never been explicitly censored in Guatemala, she has found herself excluded and ignored by the music scene, which she attributes to the feminist themes of her work. "They don't invite me to events, despite the fact that I am one of the few artists in Guatemala who has a very long international career," she says. "There is zero recognition from the world of music, art, industry... Or they recognize it, and as they know what I am doing, they are not interested in having me in their spaces. I play more concerts in other countries than in my own country."

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In 2021, Lane gave birth to a baby girl. She says that motherhood has profoundly reshaped her as an artist: what she feels comfortable saying in her music, the risks she is willing to take on, the events where she can or cannot perform, and the travel that she is able and willing to do. "I no longer feel free to do and say what I could do five years ago," she says. Being a parent "gives me a lot of fear of the consequences of what this could mean for my relationship with my daughter. Having to grab your bags and leave because of a threat is not the same now."

As a new mother, Lane has become increasingly interested in understanding her family's history and the political context that has shaped them across generations. She has also felt compelled to interrogate these issues through her art. "This family history is linked to a country which has experienced wars and militarization," she

says. "The violence against children that we have so normalized comes from those stories of militarization that we carry. I'm thinking about raising my daughter... Raising consciousness for me now is very important. This is where I want it to stop. This is where I want to cut this legacy of militarism in my family's history and in the history of the country, because it is not only my family—it is the families of all us who inhabit this territory. I want to educate with love."



DASHKA SLATER

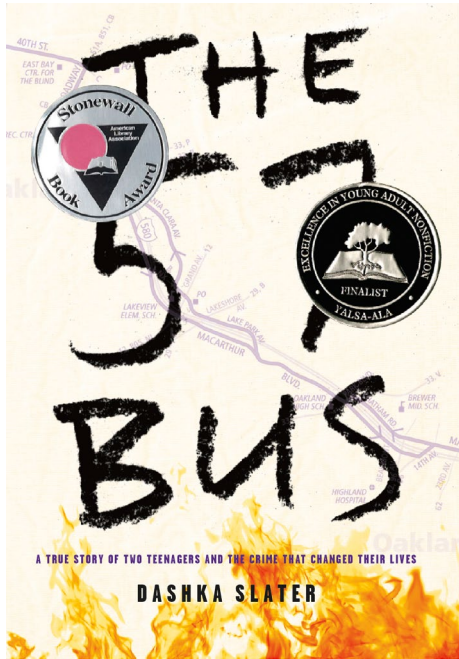
| Country: United States of America
| Discipline: Author

In 2017, American author Dashka Slater published [*The 57 Bus: A True Story of Two Teenagers and the Crime That Changed Their Lives*](#), about an agender teen from Oakland whose skirt was set on fire by another teenager on a bus ride. Four years later, in the midst of a national wave of book bans, Slater began receiving a flood of “desperate pleas” from kids, parents, and librarians as her book was quietly removed from classroom shelves and libraries around the country. The conservative lawmakers and parents’ groups behind the bans deemed *The 57 Bus* controversial because of its portrayal of LGBTQ+ youth and identities—and it has since become the [10th-most-banned book](#) in Texas and the [35th-most-banned book](#) in the United States. “It’s astonishing how quickly it happened,” Slater says. “I feel like I haven’t even known what to say about it, because it’s so absurd.”

The 57 Bus is based on an article that Slater wrote for [*The New York Times Magazine*](#) in 2015 about Sasha, an agender teenager with autism, and Richard,

Photograph by Fernando Aguila

DASHKA SLATER



the challenges currently facing young Americans. “The whole time I was writing the story,” she recalls, “I had this idea that I wanted to write it a different way... as a true crime novel for young adults.”

She has been writing since she was a child and always dreamed of becoming an author. After graduating from college, she began working as a staff writer for *The East Bay Express*, a small weekly newspaper, and she stayed for more than a decade. In 2000, she published her first fiction book, her sole novel for adults. She spent the next few decades working as a freelance reporter and finding success as a children’s book author. Slater says that much of her writing has centered on issues of legacy, inheritance, and responsibility. “I’m really interested in the ways in which we take what we have inherited,” she says, “and have this choice about whether to make something new, or to keep on the track that came to us and what our responsibilities are to the past.”

When approaching works of narrative nonfiction like *The 57 Bus*, Slater relies on both her training as a journalist and her sensibilities as a storyteller. “It’s the work of a journalist, but it’s also the work of an artist because I’m trying to tell the story in this very creative way,” she says. “I felt like their quest to create their own story would be immediately identifiable for any young person.... The issues of race, gender, and justice are incredibly germane to young people, who are always thinking about what is justice, what is fair, what are your personal ethics. It’s a book that has really resonated with young people—just not so much with book banners.”

When *The 57 Bus* was first published, Slater worried that it would face a backlash—particularly for featuring an agender protagonist and using they/them pronouns throughout the book, as well as for sharing the perspective and

a Black teenager from a low-income neighborhood who set Sasha’s skirt on fire one day when they were riding the same bus home from their very different high schools. Sasha’s legs were severely burned, and they spent three weeks in the hospital, while Richard was charged as an adult with two serious felonies, each with hate crime enhancements. The case drew an [outpouring](#) of solidarity and news coverage from across the United States and the world.

The crime happened in Slater’s neighborhood, and after learning about it from her neighbors, she immediately felt personally invested in covering it. She hoped that her power as a reporter could help bring more attention to the case, the criminal justice system, and

experiences of the young teenager who committed this impulsive act of violence and was subsequently charged with a hate crime. But at first, the reaction to *The 57 Bus* was overwhelmingly positive. The book received numerous awards, including the [Stonewall Book Award](#), and was listed in *Time* magazine’s ‘[100 Best YA Books of All Time](#),’ alongside luminary works like *To Kill A Mockingbird* and *Little Women*.

Then, in 2021, Slater received word that a parent in Rhode Island had requested that *The 57 Bus* be removed from her child’s curriculum. Over the next few months, she began to hear from kids, teachers, and parents that her book was being banned in schools across the country, largely due to its portrayal of LGBTQ+ characters and its inclusion of a glossary of terms related to gender and sexuality. It is one of many books that have been subject to an [increasingly insidious campaign](#) across the United States to remove books from school and library shelves, orchestrated by state lawmakers, parents, and community groups, often under the guise of protecting children and upholding family values.

According to [PEN America](#), while book bans have occurred throughout American history— notably during the McCarthy era and under President Ronald Reagan in the 1980s—the scope of today’s bans is much wider than ever before, owing to the involvement of right-wing state lawmakers as well as organized conservative groups. The movement is closely intertwined with other recent developments in American politics, including the rise of movements against masks and virtual school during the COVID-19 pandemic; panic over drag queen story hours; disputes over “critical race theory”; and fundamental disagreements over how American history should be taught in classrooms and what children should be able to learn about issues ranging from LGBTQ+ experiences to sex education. From July 2021 to June 2022, PEN America’s [Index of School Book Bans](#) found 2,532 instances of individual books being banned, affecting 1,648 unique titles. The vast majority of these books feature LGBTQ+ characters or characters of color and relate to LGBTQ+ identities, sex education, or race and racism in American history.

“Artists are usually the first ones in the crosshairs in any march towards fascism. Artists are the canaries in the coal mine... and we have a special role to play in sounding the alarm and pushing back against the forces that want to make us be quiet.”

“I don’t think any of us expected that we would be in this place” in the United States, Slater says. “But we are dealing with autocracy... We’re looking at state laws that make it impossible to read books that tell the truth about history” and “real people who live in the world. Artists are usually the first ones in the crosshairs in any march toward fascism. Artists are the canaries in the coal mine ... and we have a special role to play in sounding the alarm and pushing back

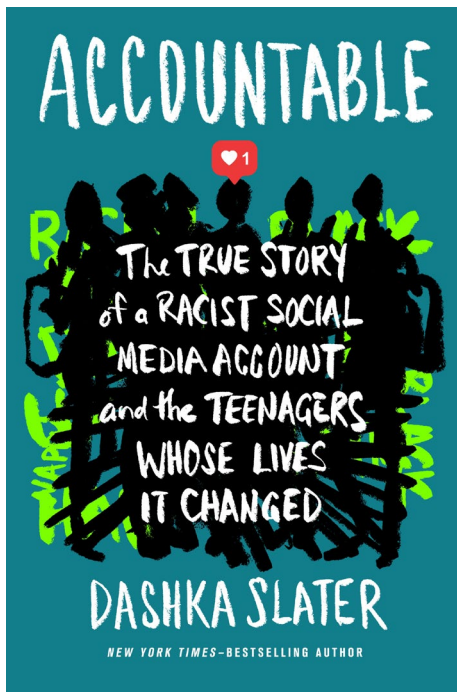
against the forces that want to make us be quiet.”

Since the onslaught of book bans in 2021, most requests to remove *The 57 Bus* have been levied on the basis of being “obscene” or “pornographic.” As Slater points out, however, “there’s no sex in the book. There’s not even a kiss. There’s some ballroom dancing. That’s it!” But she knows that the book’s portrayal of Sasha and other LGBTQ+ characters is enough to make it a target for book banners. “These folks aren’t really worried about obscenity,” she says. “They believe that the *existence* of queer and trans people is obscene. And so any book that has a queer person in it is going to be challenged as being obscene.”

For Slater, the bans have been deeply painful—she feels especially distressed on behalf of the countless readers. Since the book’s publication, she has received hundreds of letters, many from kids and adults who see themselves in the book’s characters: trans and nonbinary people, those who have been mistreated by the criminal justice system, autistic people. Others write to say that they had little to no experience with Black people, openly queer people, or those from low-income neighborhoods and that the book opened their eyes to new experiences and perspectives. “I love hearing from everybody,” Slater says. “But often those messages from kids who are getting some insight into somebody else’s experience for the first time—those are really moving. They’re really thinking in a way they hadn’t been thinking before.”

Slater thinks that *The 57 Bus* draws its power in part from the fact that it is a work of narrative nonfiction, which challenges readers’ preconceptions—particularly about crime and the criminal justice system—while allowing them to

reach their own conclusions. Slater says she pointedly sought to interrogate the preconception that “all criminals are bad” and have been tried fairly by the system—a perception that she has found to be especially common among young people, unless they themselves have been personally impacted by the criminal justice system. “Young people are very skeptical of being preached at,” she says. “Gen Z is so incredibly smart and sophisticated, as well as being compassionate and activist. But if they feel like they’re being manipulated or the conclusion of the book was preordained and they’re supposed to be manipulated to feel a certain way, they’re not having it... And I’m the same way. I don’t claim neutrality, but I do claim an enhanced subjectivity. I want to show everyone different perspectives. And kids respond to that, because it allows them



to draw their own conclusions and also challenges them.”

The letters from communities where the book was banished were among the most poignant. “Often I hear from a parent who says, ‘Your book was so important in my family, and I can’t believe that it would be taken out of the library,’” Slater says. She struggles with the position that the book is being removed to protect family values, when she sees it as a celebration of the family values that she—and her readers—hold dear. “I hear from families all the time about how my book helped the family have important discussions about race, gender, and justice,” she says. “Often parents read it along with their kids, or sometimes kids will give it to their parents and say, ‘I want you to read this so that you can understand me better.’ I feel like my book is actually promoting family values and certainly what my family values are, which is families that communicate and have important discussions and find ways to support each other.”

Slater is now gearing up to publish her next book, [*Accountable: The True Story of a Racist Social Media Account and the Teenagers Whose Lives It Changed*](#). Due in August, it will explore complex and timely themes, including structural racism, online harassment and hate speech, and white supremacy. “It’s about all of these things that get people hot and bothered right now,” she says. Through *Accountable*, Slater aims to provoke a new generation of young people to examine the history of racist symbols and structures in the United States. As she puts together her marketing and publication strategy, she is intent on making sure that *Accountable* can reach kids in the schools where it is most likely to be banned. “I expect that there will be a different reaction in this climate, and there will be some people who push back against it pretty fast,” she says. “But this idea that we’re protecting families or protecting children by removing a book from the library—it misses the fact that for many families and for many children, these books are their literal lifelines.”

“This idea that we’re protecting families or protecting children by removing a book from the library – it misses the fact that for many families and for many children, these books are their literal lifelines.”



YACUNÃ TUXÁ

Country: Brazil

Discipline: Digital Illustrator

Yucanã Tuxá says she became an artist and activist because of a series of “small explosions” that cemented a burning desire to advocate for her indigenous Tuxá community—their rights, their stories, and their enduring presence despite centuries of colonialism, racism, and erasure.

The first “explosion” happened before she was born. In 1988, the Tuxá, an indigenous people from northern Brazil, became landless after their territory was flooded by a recently constructed dam. They were relocated without their consent to the Pernambuco region, where Yucanã was born in 1993 in the town of Floresta. She grew up painfully aware of what she and her family had lost to state encroachment on indigenous land. Yucanã’s community did not yet have a school, so she attended a majority-white institution, where she was frequently ostracized and treated as inferior: “I felt the distinction at all times,” she says. “The process of erasure was already there. Much of my detonating process started way back then, realizing how my place was marked as an indigenous person, as a woman.”

Photograph by Marcus Leoni

YUCANÃ TUXÁ



Yucanã Tuxá. *A Memória abre ramas líquidas* (Memory opens liquid branches). 2022. Digital image.

"Since my people don't have land, we have to resist and articulate our struggle and perpetuate our tradition and culture through other forms," she says. "Education is our other form of struggle." However, after leaving her village for an environment that she expected to be filled with intellectual, enlightened people, Yucanã was faced with another "explosion" when she once again found herself subject to insidious racism and prejudice. "People still have a very old-fashioned, colonial image of what it is to be an indigenous person in Brazil today," she explains. "People told me that my place as an indigenous person was not at the university, that the place of an indigenous person was out in the village or in the bush. They told me I had to exist in silence and not bother anyone."

"For me, art cannot be separated from life. There was art in everything my people did."

As a result of these dehumanizing experiences at university, away from the town where she grew up, Yucanã came to realize that the racism and prejudice that she had suffered in Pernambuco was not a localized problem but a national one. This realization was further crystalized by the 2018 election of populist demagogue Jair Bolsonaro, which she experienced as another bombshell. "This right-wing, conservative, anti-indigenous, anti-quilombola candidate won," she says. "The candidate who had a whole agenda threatening my own existence. I am an indigenous, gay woman from the northeast of Brazil." Yucanã remembers "ending 2018 very worried about Brazil's future, about my people's future, my community."

As a child, Yucanã loved to draw and felt the importance of art all around her, from the beauty of the carved wooden pipes smoked by her elders to the nights of joy and celebration during the toré, a community dance ritual. "For me, art cannot be separated from life," she says. "There was art in everything my people did. As a child, I knew I wanted to be an artist." Throughout her formative years, however, she struggled to imagine herself as an one or see a viable path for her art. She was acutely aware of the way indigenous artists were always downgraded, absent from her history and language books, their art viewed as mere "handicraft."

Determined to fight back and reclaim space for herself and her community, Yucanã decided to go to university.

Bolsonaro's election impelled Yucanã to "do something"—and that something was fighting back through art. Inspired by the indigenous artist-activists she saw on social media, who were able to reach wide audiences with the click of a button, Yucanã began teaching herself how to make digital art. It was a lengthy and painstaking process, constituting "a month of sleepless nights" as she learned the ins and outs of digital software—but she found success quickly. By the end of 2019, she held her first exhibition, in São Paulo, alongside other indigenous artists and their work. "It was very powerful," she says. "I was extremely proud to be a part of that."

This show set on her current path. As a digital illustrator with more than 22,000 [Instagram](#) followers, Yucanã is known for her powerful depictions of womanhood, queerness, ancestry, memory, and indigenous culture and life—on her own terms and rooted in her own experiences. Her art frequently depicts her ancestors, often intertwined with imagery of the earth and nature: rivers, oceans, plants, forests. She shares moving snapshots of Tuxá life and history: their old village, their displacement, and the rivers that were so integral to their way of life. Through her art and its accompanying captions, she shares ancient stories and enduring beliefs that have been passed down through generations. With each and every illustration, Yucanã can feel herself creating hand in hand with her ancestors. "I create with my little hand here," she says, "but there are many other hands together with mine. It's a collective: my people, my land, my community."

Her decision to become an artist was largely rooted in a desire to reclaim the place of indigenous people—particularly indigenous women—in a society that has fought to erase and diminish them. "Being indigenous is to fight, is to search for ways to build resistance," she says. "I wanted to remind people that Brazil's territory, which we call Pindorama, is indigenous territory. I wanted to say: 'An indigenous person's place is wherever she or he wants. An indigenous woman's place is wherever she wants and where she will build it.' That was my message."

Even as Yucanã seeks to dismantle racial stereotypes and prejudices around indigenous people, she is acutely aware that they shape how she herself is perceived as an artist and how far she can go in her career. She has received countless disturbing messages from people in response to her artwork and its messages about indigenous people, and was hacked shortly after the release



Yucanã Tuxá. *Do outro lado do rio* (Across the river). 2019. Digital image.

of her first piece. "What I usually pinpoint as a form of censorship—and people don't actually see it like that—is racism. It is racism which prevents my work from reaching other spaces," she says. "Of course, I am very happy with the dissemination my work has already obtained, but it's hard. It's very different from other women artists, how they are able to gain space and grow in certain environments, and I don't. Or how my art will always be linked to my labels: I will only have space as an indigenous woman artist and never only as an artist."

Despite these barriers, Yucanã has embraced social media, which allows indigenous artists like her to bypass traditional gatekeepers in the media. Media coverage often perpetuates prejudiced narratives of indigenous people that remain deeply rooted in Brazilian society, such as that indigenous communities are a hindrance to "order and progress," the nation's motto, or that land struggles are a result of indigenous people invading Brazilian land and not the other way around. "Social media gave us—gave me—this possibility to not depend on anyone to make my work visible," she says. "I could publish on my social network and reach people, just like that. What I wanted was precisely to break the silence. I wanted to break away from the colonial images and have a way to do outreach."



Yucanã Tuxá. 1993 ou a feitura da resistência em mim (1993 or the making of resistance in me). 2022. Digital image.

Catholic, having been evangelized by Capuchin and Jesuit missionaries starting in the 17th century, and homosexuality is not fully accepted by all members of her community. "I was amazed at how people were scared to think that gay indigenous people existed," she says. Many indigenous leaders "think being gay is a white thing, that it does not belong to our culture." She tries to both communicate within the LGBTQ+ movement and to bring the LGBTQ+ perspective to

Yucanã says that her work is political because her identity is politicized. "My art is political because of what goes through me," she explains. "It couldn't be any other way. My worries and my concerns came before knowing how I was going to express myself artistically."

She has found that illustrations are the most powerful tool at her disposal to reach a large audience and spread her messages, especially on social media. "Text is not necessary—people notice and understand illustration," she says. "And in the face of the erasure suffered by indigenous women in particular, these images had power, the power to make art shown directly on your feed, art made by a gay indigenous woman." Yucanã's multiple identities all feed into her multilayered creative expression. The Tuxá remain largely

the indigenous movement, "to make people understand we are here, we have the right to speak."

Yucanã has also focused on the intertwined ideas of memory, ancestry, and heritage. The importance of highlighting indigenous stories and traditions became painfully obvious during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many indigenous communities never had access to health services, and suffered [high rates](#) of infection and death. "The negligence toward our lives became very clear," she says, "and the country was not concerned with whether we lived or died... I see it as a strategy of the government. Since the state will not protect us, we have to protect ourselves. Indigenous culture is essentially oral—knowledge is passed on orally. Every elderly person we lose, we lose stories, we lose too much of who we are. After COVID, I wanted to say: indigenous lives matter. They matter like any other life."

"I wanted to remind people that Brazil's territory, which we call Pindorama, is indigenous territory. I wanted to say: 'An indigenous person's place is wherever she or he wants. An indigenous woman's place is wherever she wants and where she will build it.' That was my message."

One of her favorite indigenous sayings is "Be a good ancestor today," which "speaks to this idea of time that is cyclical," she says. "Tomorrow only exists in the face of what we do today. That's why it's so urgent to share indigenous knowledge." The story of Yucanã's own great-grandmother, a victim of sexual violence, has affected her profoundly, spurring her to encourage other indigenous women to learn about where and whom they came from.

"My great-grandmother's story obligated me to think about these women's erased voices," she says. "That's the reason I always draw women. That is my desire, to provoke women to think about their ancestral heritage, their original heritage. To remember their roots—those silenced women who made and transformed Brazil."

CONCLUSION

The artists featured in *Art Is Power: 20 Artists on How They Fight for Justice and Inspire Change* exemplify how artists around the world use their work to defend and promote human rights, often at great personal risk and with limited financial reward. Through speaking with them about their diverse experiences, ARC has identified the following key takeaways and recommendations. They are intended to help drive forward the conversation about artistic freedom and lay the groundwork for a protection ecosystem that provides artists with the support and resources they need.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Recognizing the role of the artist in advancing human rights is a prerequisite for reform. From conversations with artists and experts alike, it is evident that the international community must collectively recognize the critical role of socially engaged artists in order to ensure that they are adequately protected by human rights mechanisms and the human rights community more broadly. In the absence of legal instruments that strengthen protections for socially engaged artists in particular, the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders provides an avenue to advocate for socially engaged artists as cultural rights defenders and to extend the protections afforded to human rights defenders to those who deserve them.

Given the critical role that all artists play as human rights exemplars, artists' right to access necessary protections and resources must be respected. Artists must be more explicitly incorporated into legal frameworks under international human rights law and granted the same protections as any other human rights defenders. Increased legal recognition can pave the way for at-risk artists to access the resources, human rights mechanisms, and mobility support that they need to protect themselves and sustain their careers.

Rising attacks on artistic freedom require a collective and coordinated response. In this report, we highlight the joint responsibility of human rights organizations and art organizations to extend emergency protection programs to artists. Human rights groups must see artists as their constituents, and must assume a greater role in protecting artists and cultural workers and guaranteeing the health of the art sector at large. It is imperative that all stakeholders recognize their roles and responsibilities in driving change, at both the policy level and the programmatic level, to ensure an effective protection ecosystem for artists.

Effective solutions require information sharing, collaboration, and coalition building. As attacks on artistic freedom escalate at unprecedented

rates around the world, the widely held notion that states alone, or human rights organizations alone, hold the responsibility to protect at-risk artists is obsolete. The art and human rights worlds need to work together to respond to rising needs and to advocate for more comprehensive protections by states. Through these cross-sector collaborations, priority should be given to building *effective and sustainable information-sharing systems* that can monitor and document violations, map available resources and state policies, and raise global awareness of violations of artistic freedom. By working together, drawing on their respective connections and areas of expertise, and building increased visibility on the status of artistic freedom, human rights organizations and art institutions can coordinate and further leverage additional resources to protect artists. They can also take strategic joint actions at the regional and international levels to hold perpetrators accountable, utilizing complaint mechanisms, supporting independent investigations, and leading collective advocacy campaigns.

Policy wins require a shared and focused advocacy agenda. ARC and its partners are advocating for a long-term policy reform effort to create legally binding instruments that better define and protect artistic freedom. This massive undertaking will require civil society and art institutions to adopt a joint, targeted agenda for reform and to agree on mutual goals over the coming few years. Preliminary goals should include meeting artists' immediate protection needs, including the expansion of emergency funding streams, the establishment of safe houses, the creation of emergency visas and relocation mechanisms, and the development of residency programs that are designed to handle urgent requests for relocation and support. There must also be a focus on artists' mobility and access to visas to support those seeking to flee persecution and relocate safely and legally. Bolstering long-term support, including project-based funding and career support, is also critical. Artists' struggles do not end when they go into exile—instead they face a host of new challenges, such as cultural and linguistic barriers and a lack of professional contacts.

While ARC and our partner organizations around the world can assist a small number of artists in accessing resources and support, many more will continue to fall victim to ongoing patterns of attack and repression—unless the international community can come together and build an effective movement that fights for artistic freedom worldwide.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STATES AND MULTILATERAL ORGANIZATIONS, HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS, AND ART INSTITUTIONS

States, international and regional organizations, and human rights organizations must pay urgent attention to the risks faced by artists and cultural professionals and strengthen the protection of cultural expression. Art organizations, including galleries, museums, and cultural institutions, are instrumental stakeholders in the artistic freedom ecosystem, and they need to play a more proactive role in safeguarding artists and artistic expression. This section presents a non-exhaustive list of recommendations to be considered by these key stakeholders.

States

- Evaluate domestic policy frameworks and ensure comprehensive protections and guarantees of freedom of expression and artistic freedom
- Facilitate artists' mobility and livelihoods by creating non-immigrant pathways and residency opportunities for at-risk artists and other creative entrepreneurs, using a human rights defenders framework.
- Invest in short- and medium-term protection programs and funding infrastructure to assist artists seeking safety and to facilitate their ability to live and work freely while integrating into the cultural sector.

Multilateral Organizations

- Develop a UN Action Plan for the Protection of Artists recognizing the role socially engaged artists play in creating a more open society, and ensuring their right to access protective mechanisms under international human rights frameworks.
- Develop a more comprehensive approach to implementing the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.
- Continue and expand effective, transparent monitoring and reporting of signatories' adherence to the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005).

Human Rights Organizations

- Recognize artists and cultural professionals as professionals entitled to the same protection as human rights defenders, extending existing protective mechanisms for human rights defenders to more explicitly include artists at risk.
- Proactively monitor and address the situation of artists and artistic freedom in countries, as an extension of existing freedom of expression, association, and assembly efforts.
- Coordinate and collaborate with arts and cultural organizations to better understand the particular needs of at-risk artists and cultural professionals and to facilitate rapid-response emergency efforts in times of crisis.
- Pool funding resources and ensure that artists and cultural practitioners are included and eligible for support afforded to human rights defenders, with emphasis on direct support and emergency assistance.
- Partner with cultural organizations to build their capacity to help artists and cultural professionals with mental health, physical and digital safety, and access to legal aid.
- Engage in cross-sector solidarity and implement advocacy campaigns to amplify the voices of artists at risk and to publicize mainstream issues of artistic freedom as part of the larger human rights and freedom of expression agenda.

Art Organizations

- Engage directly with artists in assessing their needs and design support for them based on their particular challenges and priorities.
- Establish emergency assistance schemes designed for artists at risk. Programs could include emergency grants, facilitating visa sponsorship, and

offering short- to medium-term opportunities for relocation.

- Provide professionally focused, accessible resources, opportunities, and spaces for at-risk artists. These could include residencies, exhibitions, fellowships, and tours that allow artists to continue producing and creating their work while transitioning into safety.
- Collaborate with human rights organizations, soliciting their expertise on protecting and defending the rights of artists while working to increase awareness of at-risk artists and their needs.
- Expand support for and engagement with refugee artists as instrumental resources for promoting diversity and integration in host communities, recognizing that refugee artists often face cultural, linguistic, and economic barriers in integrating into the arts and cultural sectors in their host countries. This should include professional development support for refugee artists.
- Take an inclusive approach that does not prioritize merit, geography, or background.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ARTISTS, FROM ARTISTS

ARC asked each of the artists we interviewed what advice they would give to other socially engaged artists. Here are their responses. (For additional recommendations, please refer to [ARC's Safety Guide for Artists](#), which provides targeted recommendations for artists on how to prepare for, navigate, and reduce risks.)

- **Know the laws of your country.** What protections exist for freedom of expression and for you as an artist? What legal recourses are available to you? "It's very important to know your rights," says Malaysian visual artist Fahmi Reza. "You need to know how to protect yourself legally, what to do if you are called in for questioning, when you're facing the police, when you get arrested." Ugandan poet Stella Nyanzi concurs, advising artists to learn which laws can be used to criminalize and penalize their expression: "It's important to know those laws because when we know them, we can work to make our artistic productions beyond reproach, beyond being stopped. It's easy to know the laws of a country. Many artists don't know them, and we get in trouble because we don't know them. And when the laws change, know how they change and how the changes will impact you."
- **Conduct a risk assessment before releasing new work.** It is important to understand what issues or work may incite backlash, taking into account the themes of your work, your identity, and the political and social situation in your country. "Don't simply jump into your work," Reza advises. "I think it's important to weigh the risks and prepare for the worst-case scenario of every action that you plan to take."
- **Take care of your mental health.** Many of the interviewees acknowledge the heavy toll that producing socially engaged art, navigating persecution, and being involved in protest movements can take on your mental and emotional health. It is immensely important for socially engaged artists to practice mindfulness, take breaks, and build strong support networks to help you through difficult times.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

PEN America's Artists at Risk Connection (ARC) wishes to thank the artists at risk from around the world who sought our support over the past five years and inspired this report. We particularly thank every artist who is willing to risk their life to fight for justice through their art and creativity. In particular, we would like to thank the 20 artists who dedicated their time to share their stories with us, in addition to Paul Rucker, whose passion for socially-engaged art resonated so powerfully through his words. ARC is tremendously grateful as well to the field experts who shared their perspectives and expertise with us and helped shape this report including: Adam Shapiro, Tatiana Mouarbes, Holly Baxter, Justine Ludwig, Jose Falconi, and Karima Bennoune who also provided instrumental guidance and advice throughout the development of the report.

ARC would also like to thank Dounia Benslimane and Simone Longo de Andrade for their valuable contribution to the conceptualization of the report, conducting artist interviews, and offering external review and insights during the drafting process, Deeya Khan for her expert review and feedback, James Tager, PEN America's research director, and Ryan Howzell, research program coordinator, reviewed the report, provided guidance, and support in finalizing this publication.

ENDNOTES

1. According to a report released by former UN Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights Karima Bennoune, "Cultural rights defenders—human rights defenders who defend cultural rights in accordance with international standards—are an important constituency among human rights defenders. Their work in every region of the world is essential for the implementation of an integral part of the universal human rights framework: cultural rights." "Cultural rights defenders: Report of the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights," United Nations Human Rights Council, January 20, 2020. https://pen.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/human_rights_council_cultural_rights_defenders.pdf
2. Sarah Repucci and Amy Slipowitz, "Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule," Freedom House, February 2022, freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2022/global-expansion-authoritarian-rule
3. "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," United Nations, December 10, 1948. Accessed April 21, 2023, www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights
4. "State of Artistic Freedom Report 2023," Freemuse, June 20, 2023, Accessed on June 20, 2023, freemuse.org/media/cvajxuvr/saf-2023-compressed.pdf
5. "State of Artistic Freedom Report 2022," Freemuse, 2022, Accessed April 26, 2023, freemuse.org/media/yk2paxxb/saf-report-2022.pdf
6. Karima Bennoune, interview with staff of the Artists at Risk Connection (ARC) and PEN America, March 15, 2023 (virtual).
7. "About Human Rights Defenders," Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2021, www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-human-rights-defenders/about-human-rights-defenders
8. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "About Human Rights Defenders."
9. United Nations Human Rights Council, "Cultural rights defenders," ¶¶ 1, 10.
10. United Nations Human Rights Council, "Cultural rights defenders," ¶¶ 1, 10.
11. Adam Shapiro, interview with staff of the Artists at Risk Connection (ARC) and PEN America, March 7, 2023 (virtual).
12. Shapiro echoed this point in his interview with ARC, confirming our experiences of engaging with human rights organizations: "Because of the way that the human rights sector is organized, broadly speaking, with specific focus areas within it, if you're an artist and you come to a human rights organization, one of the first responses will often be, 'Well, why don't you check with the artists' organizations first for support?' There's this idea that we all have limited resources and there's a niche group already set up to work for you."
13. United Nations Human Rights Council, "Cultural rights defenders," ¶ 12.
14. Tatiana Mouarbes, interview with staff of the Artists at Risk Connection (ARC) and PEN America, March 20, 2023 (virtual).
15. As stated by Falconi during his interview with ARC. He further expanded on this point: "The antidote is to make them understand that without the arts there is no democracy. In order to be able to really have arts—in order to engage in the artistic experience—it is based on surprise. You read a novel, a poem, you are completely shaken, you are not the same anymore. You are admiring something that you do not understand. That moment of incredible surprise is humbling, it is decentering, and it is the best training for a democratic muscle: I don't need to understand my peer, I can admire, I can like you, without understanding you. That's what the arts create in all of us."
16. Parham Ghobadi, "Iran protests: Secret committee 'punished celebrities over dissent'," BBC Persian, April 25, 2023, www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-65373847
17. Jonathan Friedman and Nadine Farid Johnson, "Banned in the USA: The Growing Movement to Censor Books in Schools," September 19, 2022, Accessed April 27, 2023, pen.org/report/banned-usa-growing-movement-to-censor-books-in-schools/
18. Sanjay Sethi, Johanna Bankston, Joscelyn Jurich, Roisin Putti, and Sofia Monterroso, "Artistic Freedom Monitor: Hungary - Systematic Suppression," Artistic Freedom Initiative, March 14 2022, Accessed April 27, 2023, artisticfreedominitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Artistic-Freedom-Monitor_Hungary_Systematic-Suppression.pdf
19. John Wilcox, "The Beginnings of l'Art Pour l'Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 11, no. 4 (1953): 360–77, doi.org/10.2307/426457
20. Dietrich Hessenbuttel, "Protests Everywhere?" In *Global Activism: Art and Conflict in the 21st Century*, edited by Peter Weibel, 477, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015.
21. Justine Ludwig, interview with staff of the Artists at Risk Connection (ARC) and PEN America, March 10, 2023 (virtual).
22. "The Salzburg Statement on Supporting Artists on the Frontline." Salzburg Global Seminar, May 2, 2023,

Accessed May 2, 2023, www.salzburgglobal.org/news/latest-news/article/the-salzburg-statement-on-supporting-artists-on-the-front-line

23. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "About Human Rights Defenders."
24. The film's depiction of Kali was inspired by a ritual practice in Tamil Nadu of welcoming gods and goddesses who are believed to have descended to Earth. During a local festival, the villagers dress up as gods and goddesses and eat, drink, and dance together in an offering to the visiting deities.
25. Leena noted that she underwent a similar fight with the censor board in 2011, when it targeted her cinema vérité film *Sengadal, the Deadsea*, which explored the lives of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees and fishermen.
26. The conscription program was ultimately reduced to three months; 85,000 Malaysian youths per year were randomly drafted and required to participate. It ran from 2002 to 2018.
27. Kurdish Hezbollah, also known as Sofik, is a Kurdish Sunni Islamist militant organization that was active in southeastern Türkiye in the mid-1990s and stood in opposition to both the Turkish government and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), another prominent Kurdish militant group. Kurdish Hezbollah has no relation to the Hezbollah group that is active in Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria.



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