

2015-2023

CREATE SYRIA

A Space to Explore Arts
and Social Change.
Questions around
Social Arts Practices in
a (Dis)connected World



اتجاهات
Ettijahat

ثقافة مستقلة
Independent Culture



w w w . e t t i j a h a t . o r g

Create Syria 2015 - 2023

Programme Team: Basma Baydoun, Sandra Kastoun, Joya Sfeir

This publication was created in partnership with:

Lamia Abi Azar, Reem Al Khatib, Dan Boyden, Hanane Chkir, Áine O'Brien, Chloe Osbourne, Daniela Nofal, Iyas Shahin, Rana Yazaji, Nada Farah

Designed by: Haisam Al Saiegh

This publication is available under Creative Commons License Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0 - you can copy, disseminate, distribute, and change the content free of charge as long as the work is attributed to its author in a proper manner (including mentioning the name of the author and the title of the work), providing a link to the license and highlighting any changes to the work. For more information, please review the license link: [here](#)



Boulevard Louis Schmidt 119, box 3, 1040, Etterbeek, Belgique

Telephone: +32(0) 2 634.02.23 +32(0) 2 743.82.00

Website: <https://www.ettijahat.org>

© Ettijahat - Independent Culture 2026

Disclaimer: The outcomes and suggestions in this research do not represent Ettijahat – Independent Culture.

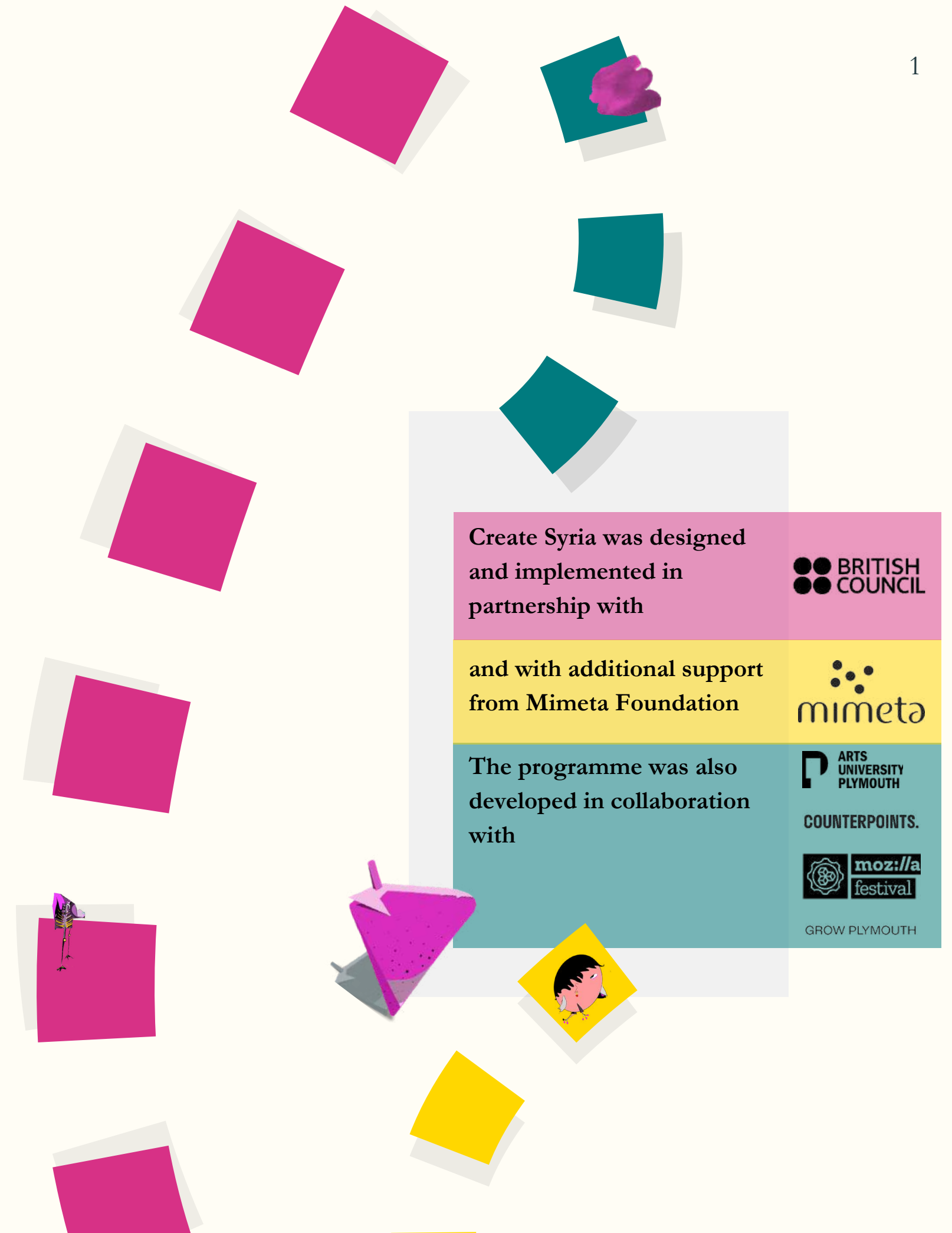


TABLE OF CONTENTS



1

✦ **About Create Syria** Page 1 - 4

2

✦ **The Framework** Page 5 - 22

Connecting Arts and Community
Exploring the Theory of Change
Create Syria in Highlight
On Partnerships and Beyond the Now

3

✦ **A Space for Exploration** Page 23 - 55

On The Brink of Change Forum | *Connection in Crisis*
On The Brink of Change Forum | *An Artistic Journey to Beirut*
Experiencing Alternative Realities
Embarking on a Cultural Exchange
Expanding the Conversation
Engaging Creativity as a Community Practice
Reimagining Shared Spaces:
 ▶ *Surviving Damascus*
 ▶ *Architectural Theatre*
 ▶ *If I Am Here*

4

✦ **Questions around Arts and Social Change** Page 54 - 61

Navigating Arts and Uncertainty
Looking Forward

About Create Syria

Create Syria is a programme dedicated to enhancing artists' capabilities to contribute to the development of more resilient and unified communities. It achieves this by facilitating community art projects that prioritize experiential depth and artistic excellence.

Create Syria empowers individuals and initiatives by fostering skill development, experiential growth, and networking opportunities with like-minded creative professionals interested in leveraging the arts for social transformation.

Since its inaugural edition in 2015, Create Syria has involved over 1,400 artists, enthusiasts, spectators, experts, and community members from Syrian, Palestinian, and Lebanese backgrounds in diverse artistic and cultural endeavors.

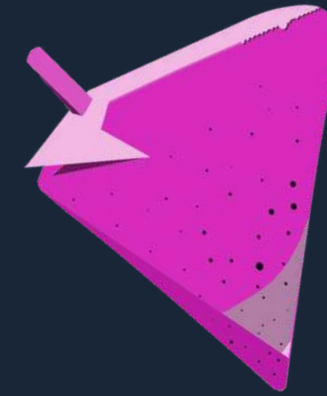
Comprised of four fundamental elements tailored to meet the needs of artists and cultural practitioners, Create Syria operates within the specific social contexts of these creatives, aiding in their skill enhancement, relationship building, and community understanding.

These components equip artists to conceive sustainable projects that cater to the diverse needs within their communities, fostering socially impactful artistic endeavors during times of crisis through direct collaboration with cultural project leaders.



Create Syria Components

- ▼ **Capacity-building:** Support is given to artists to imagine, design and implement their creative interventions through a programme of experimentation and development, consisting of three stages:
 - An intensive workshop for all artists**, which provides a space for them to experiment, try out new ideas and exchange knowledge, resulting in the development of a design and an initial plan for the creative initiative.
 - The “transit” stage**, which is a meeting held during the implementation of initiatives by artistic project owners within the community.
 - Accompaniment**, which lasts throughout the project implementation phase and aims to provide artists with the support and expertise they need to develop their personal initiative.
- ▼ **Financial Support:** To develop and implement the project.
- ▼ **Studies and Research:** and the presentation of completed works, through the creation of artistic platforms and spaces for dialogue and discussion on community practices and their relation to artistic production.
- ▼ **Advocacy:** through which Create Syria targets institutions interested in Syria and its future, especially institutions that recognize the important role of arts in the current context.



In the long run, the programme aims to establish a support network which can enhance the effectiveness and impact of contemporary artistic practices and new cultural initiatives.

Within this publication, we reflect on some of the questions which accompanied the programme’s design and development, and which manifested at the intersections of art production and social change, of stable and precarious frameworks, of physical and digital presence, and of homelands and displacements. We hope that this publication inspires more questions and reflections around the role and impact of arts, and its production in uncertain and ever changing contexts .



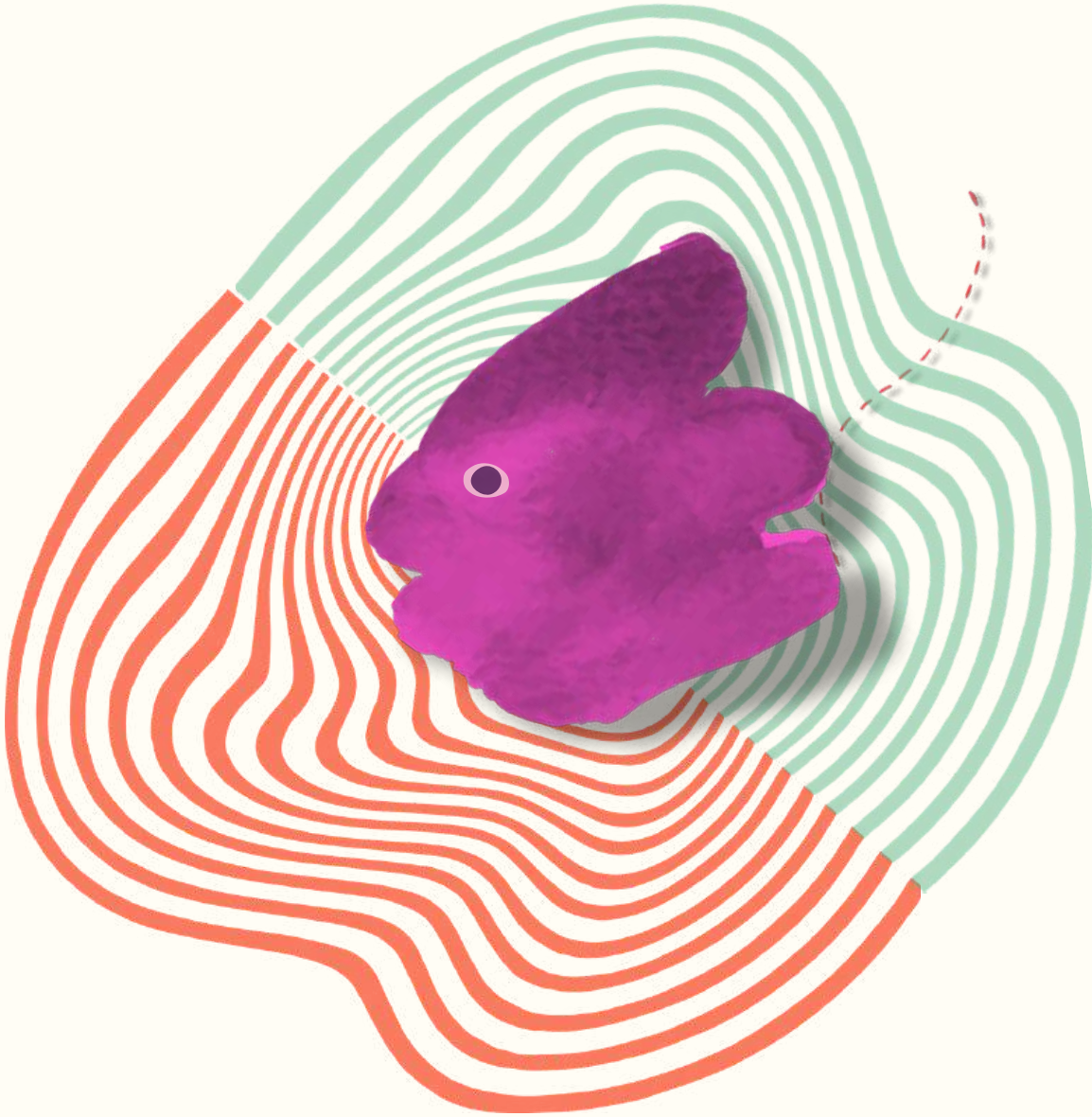
THE FRAMEWORK

- Connecting Arts and Community
- Exploring the Theory of Change
- Create Syria in Numbers
- On Partnerships and Beyond the Now



Connecting Arts and Community

by Sandra Kastoun



Social change and resilience are dominant concepts often used in descriptions of the Syrian context. However, these terms come with their own challenges and obstacles. Over the last eight years, the world has increasingly presented Syria as a hopeless country and characterized the movement of Syria’s displaced peoples and refugees as a crisis. Since 2013, in particular, a number of solutions have been designed to address this “crisis”.

However, this choice of words has reinforced the narrative that the presence of Syrians outside Syria is in itself a problem that needs to be solved. Moreover, it has promoted the idea that the Syrian diaspora have no positive contribution to make to their hosting communities, be it economic, social or political. Several methods have been used to respond to this situation, but one, in particular, has been neglected.

The arts have been erroneously considered as a complementary tool or activity rather than a fundamental framework, approach or strategy that can support change. As a result, this has widened the gap between artists and institutions and between art producers and members of diaspora communities, pushing everyone to doubt whether the arts sector is really capable of questioning or influencing social change in periods of ‘crisis’.

Since **2013**, the experience of ‘exile’ has created a new lived reality for many Syrians. While many nations have experienced this situation previously, the Syrian community is going through a new form of exile at a scale and intensity that has attracted global interest, concern and intervention. This new reality for Syrians has also been characterized by a dominant narrative across hosting countries and communities that has labelled the presence of refugees as a “crisis” or “disaster”.

The concepts of crisis and disaster have, in many contexts, transformed from a temporary or exceptional situation into a normal state of being. In several parts of our region, many say that they feel normal in a crisis rather than the other way around and that being human implies being in a state of constant crisis.

Despite the protracted nature of the instability facing our region, decision makers working closely on Syrian-related issues have failed to provide a long-term response to this latest wave of crisis. Instead, many ‘Syria-response’ actions were implemented in the short to medium term. In this challenging context, the arts have not been treated as a priority nor viewed as an essential tool in the process of creating better conditions for both hosting and displaced communities.



Connecting Arts and Community

Since **2013**, the use of culture and arts in dealing with displaced Syrian communities started to rapidly emerge. With a wide range of local and international actors seeking to utilize arts and culture in their response - many with limited experience and understanding of the Syrian context - it was evident that some emerging initiatives chose to replicate models used in service-provision projects implemented elsewhere. This meant that many organizations adopted a ready-made template that had been previously used for other communities, often from different regions, going through another type of “disaster”.

In this scenario it was clear for Ettijahat that analyzing and understanding the different contexts and dynamics of each individual ‘disaster’ or ‘crisis’ is an important first step in the process of designing cultural frameworks. Another important principle is the need to avoid one-size-fits-all approaches when seeking to address the idea of disaster. Thus, it was important to consider the following questions: who classifies an event as a disaster? Who are the victims and how? How can we avoid falling into the trap of making generalizations, as if this disaster has no root causes? How can we move from talking about the past through a disaster-oriented lens to looking forward to the future?

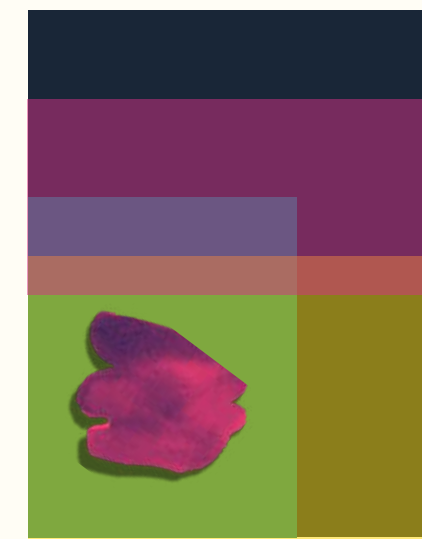
Ettijahat believes that investing in and motivating artists and cultural actors plays an important role in building and maintaining open, inclusive and stable societies. In light of the current circumstances, the partners felt it was necessary to develop a new model that prioritizes arts in the process of community revival. A key element of this is creating programs oriented towards artists and practitioners who are socially-engaged and seek to answer questions regarding the role of arts and social change. These values and principles were solidified through the process of developing a theory of change, which is a fundamental pillar in the design of the Create Syria Project.

Within a compelling context accompanied by geo-political, economic, and health related challenges, many questions came up:



How can our internal policies as practitioners in the cultural field be effective, each in its own country? What are the values that organisations should follow when it comes to arts and how do these values affect practice? Are they found in the course of work and production? Or is it in the product itself? What is the artist's responsibility towards a crisis situation? How can artists adapt to pre-existing spaces as well as fragile and cracked structures?

Tackling these questions begins with being open to and learning from other experiences, and thinking about social change from the perspective of both values and practice.



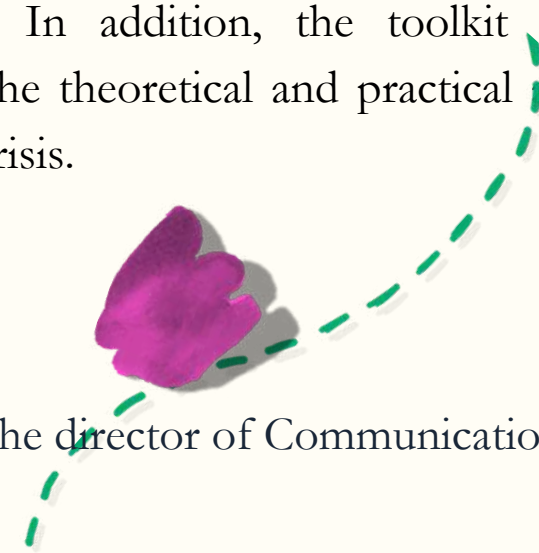
Connecting Arts and Community

The world continues to face challenges that examine its ability to resist and adapt, and that reveal the fragility of existing social and economic protection networks. In spite of this, arts and social change projects remain necessary in order to reflect on the current but also accumulated challenges faced in societies and to confront what may come from them. For this reason, the model of Create Syria kept evolving and adapting with each edition, with a focus on offering a space for reflection and reimagining, and an opportunity to re-examine our assumptions and re-imagine the field and our ways of working across all art forms.

Since its launch in 2015, the programme enabled projects implemented in Syria, the Arab region, and Europe, by directly supporting artists and institutions or artistic bodies through seed funds and skill-based training that helped them build new skills, grow their experience and network with creative practitioners. More than 1200 members from different communities directly participated in these initiatives and more than 80 experts and 20 organizations were supported or directly engaged in the work. At the same time, Create Syria organized artistic forums around the questions related to socially engaged creative interventions where more than 100 Arab and International artists participated and where more than 1000 participants benefited from these forum’s outcomes. In addition, the toolkit Arts and Uncertainty was launched in 2021 around the theoretical and practical aspects of designing creative interventions in times of crisis.

Sandra Kastoun

is a visual artist, art historian, researcher, and the director of Communications at Ettijahat – Independent Culture.



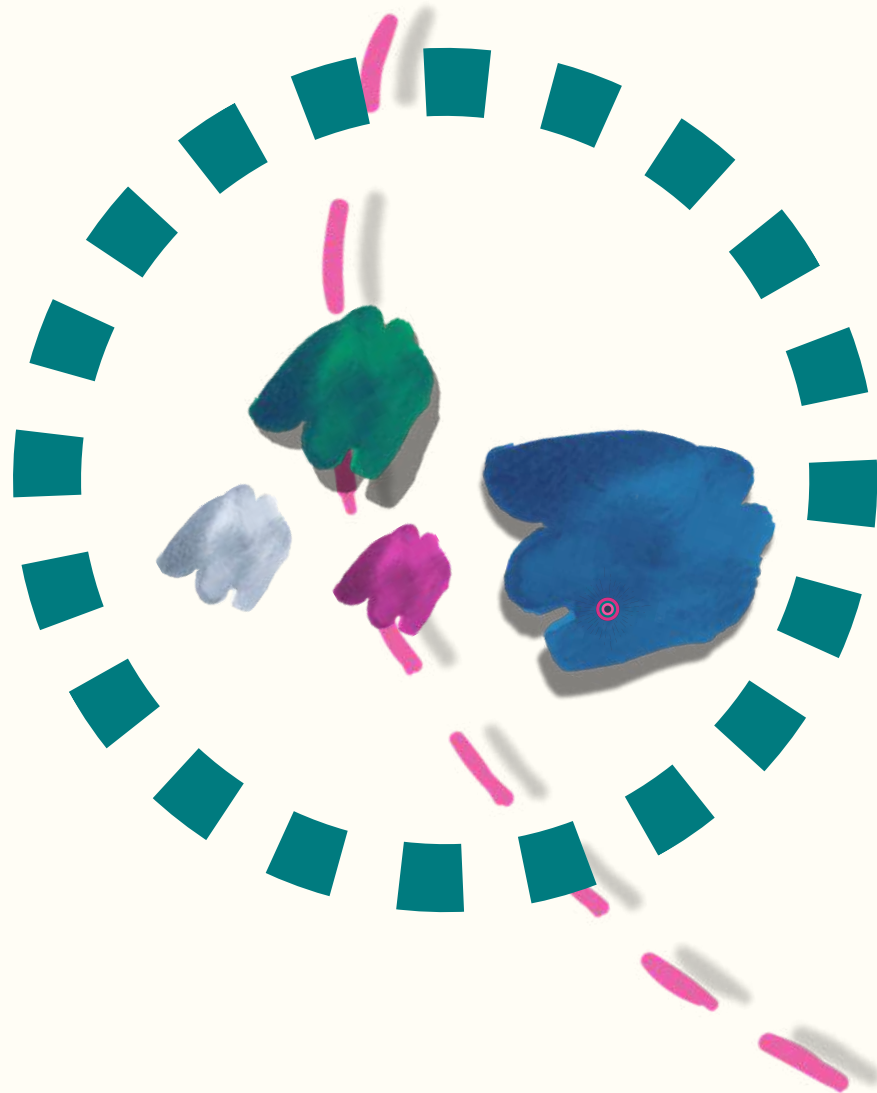
The richness of the programme model lies in the diversity of its partners and beneficiaries, as well as its various components, all of which served the purpose of responding to the needs of independent artists and cultural practitioners. The objective was to work within community contexts, assist artists in developing their knowledge and techniques, grow their relationships and understanding of the societies where they work, and enable them to design projects which are sustainable and able to respond to community needs. In the long term, the project sought to create a support network for Syrian artistic production that will strengthen the effectiveness of contemporary artistic practices and new cultural initiatives, as well as promote this work and raise the profile of the important effect of arts in times of crises. **Create Syria was built on the belief that creating a space for dialogue and interaction between dedicated Syrian artists, networks of Syrian artists in the diaspora, and decision makers will not only support the production of artistic initiatives engaged in social impact, but also increase awareness of the critical role of the arts in social change.**



Click the image for an interview with The **Change Collective team**, who contributed to the development of the training curriculum in the second edition of Create Syria.

Exploring the Theory of Change

by Rana Yazaji



Create Syria is a theoretical and practical development programme focused on the mechanisms and strategies of artistic interventions in societies where crises and disasters make up the political, cultural, economic, and social contexts to such an extent that imagining a future of freedom, justice, and security is an extremely difficult exercise.

In this particular context imagination is necessary, collaborative work is imperative, and experimenting is key.

Create Syria was born from, but also outside of, the concepts of cultural management of socially engaged artistic expression, to develop a methodical framework that attempts to accommodate uncertainty with an approach that balances freedom of creative expression and artists' personal and creative motives with their understanding of the social priorities and culture within which they work.

The programme aimed to enable Syrian artists around the world to engage in artistic interventions which addressed their social, political, educational, and artistic context by offering them support and enhancing their artistic knowledge and skills in times of crisis, as well as building their capacities in cultural research, experimenting, and empowering the role of art and culture in periods of great transformations.



Exploring the Theory of Change

The programme started on a local level. The first two editions were implemented in Beirut with artists living and working in communities in Lebanon. In its 2020 edition, the programme expanded to include Syrian artists around the world, which added a great value to the programme. Syrian artists, both inside Syria and in exile, came together in one virtual room to create a shared space where different artistic fields met. The programme expanded yet again in 2022 to include non-Syrian artists developing projects concerned with Syria.

The programme was cautious in deviating from traditional cultural management methods. The approach to address crises and social and political transformation, at the beginning of the programme, was largely separated from methods of management that we kept for academic integrity.

As the programme developed, we were increasingly bolder in questioning traditional ways to design and implement cultural projects, which led us to develop a methodology for Create Syria published in our working manual *Arts and Uncertainty*.

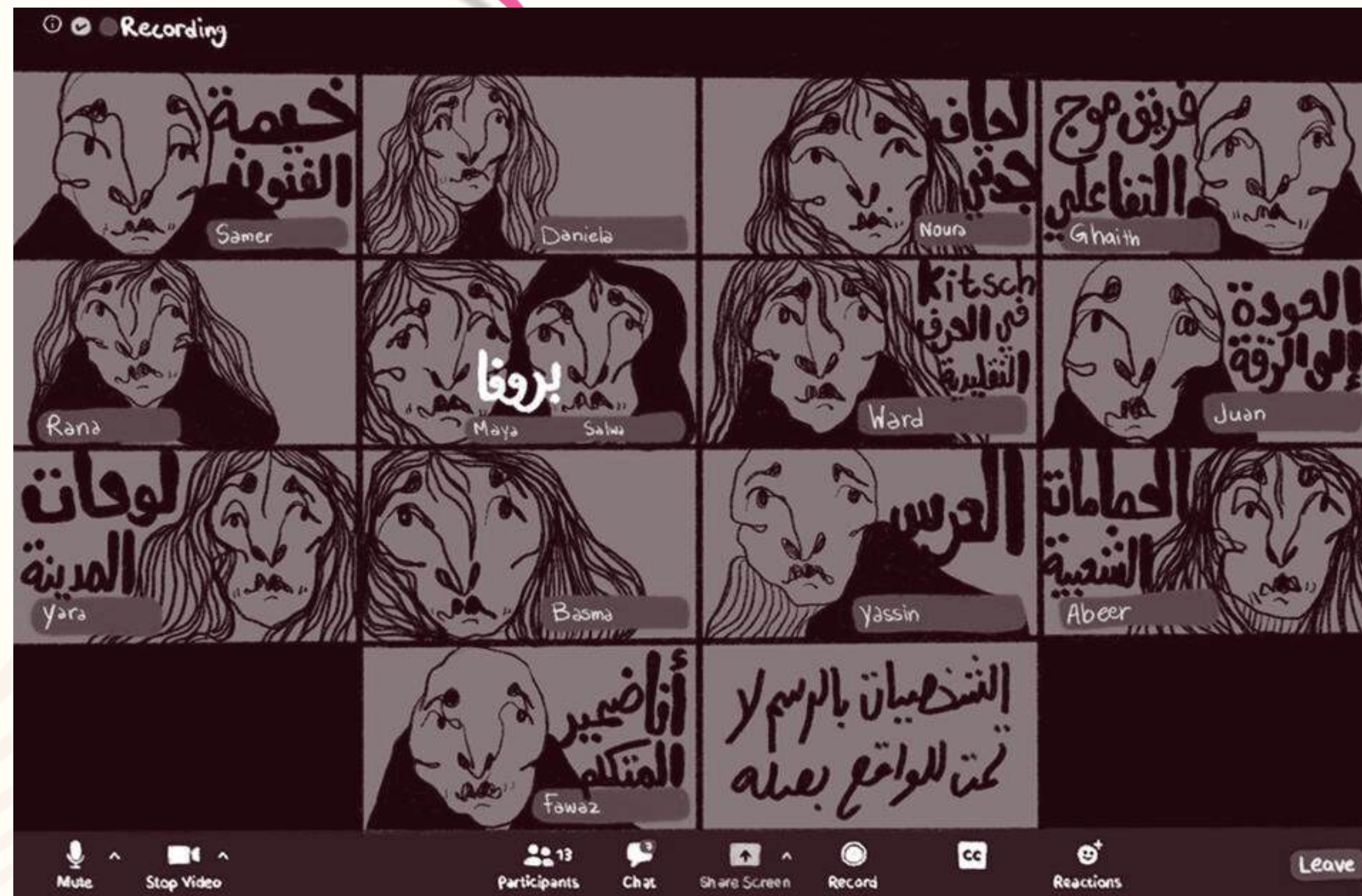
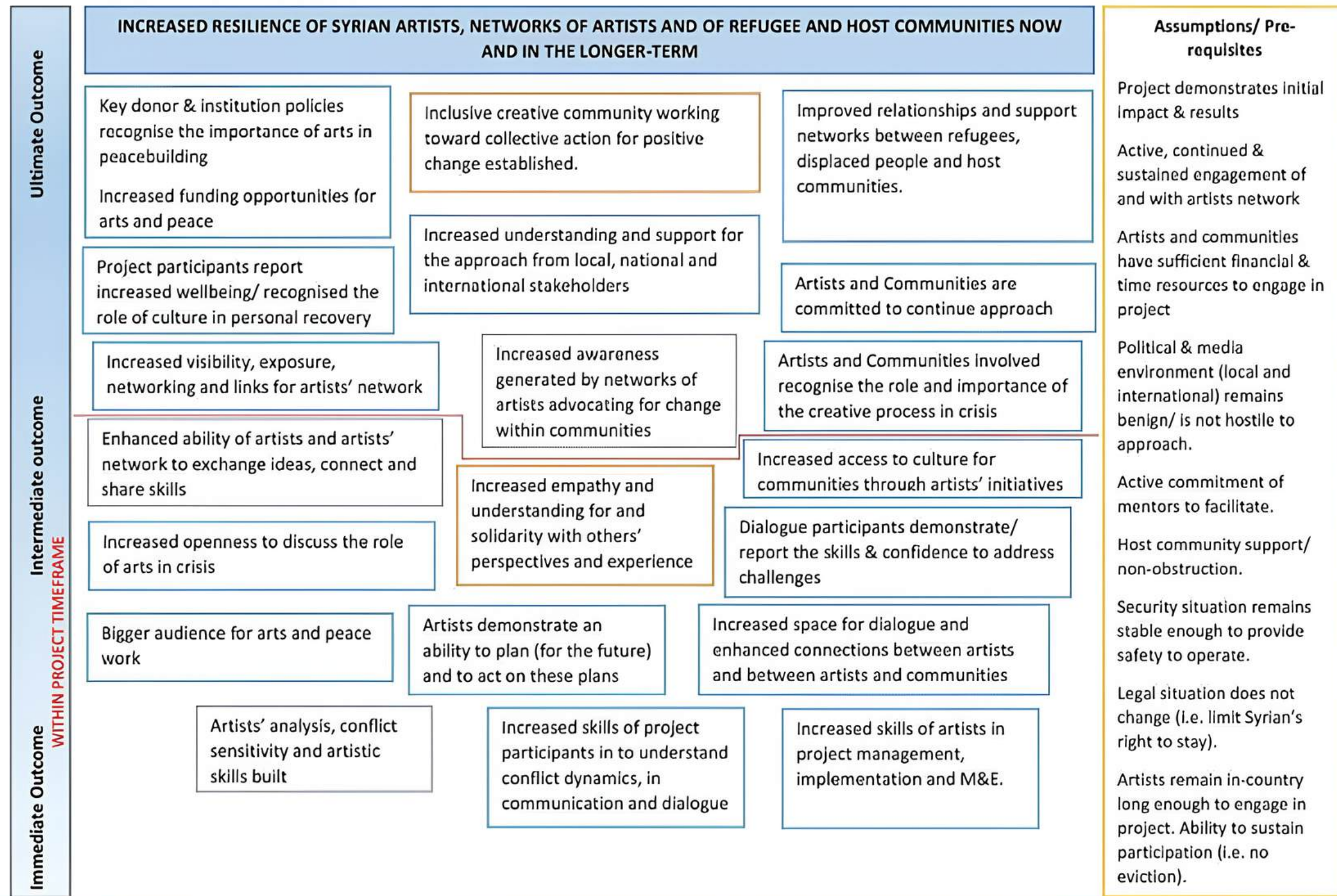


Illustration by Noura Al Souma depicting the online training within the fourth edition of Create Syria.

Create Syria: Project Theory of Change

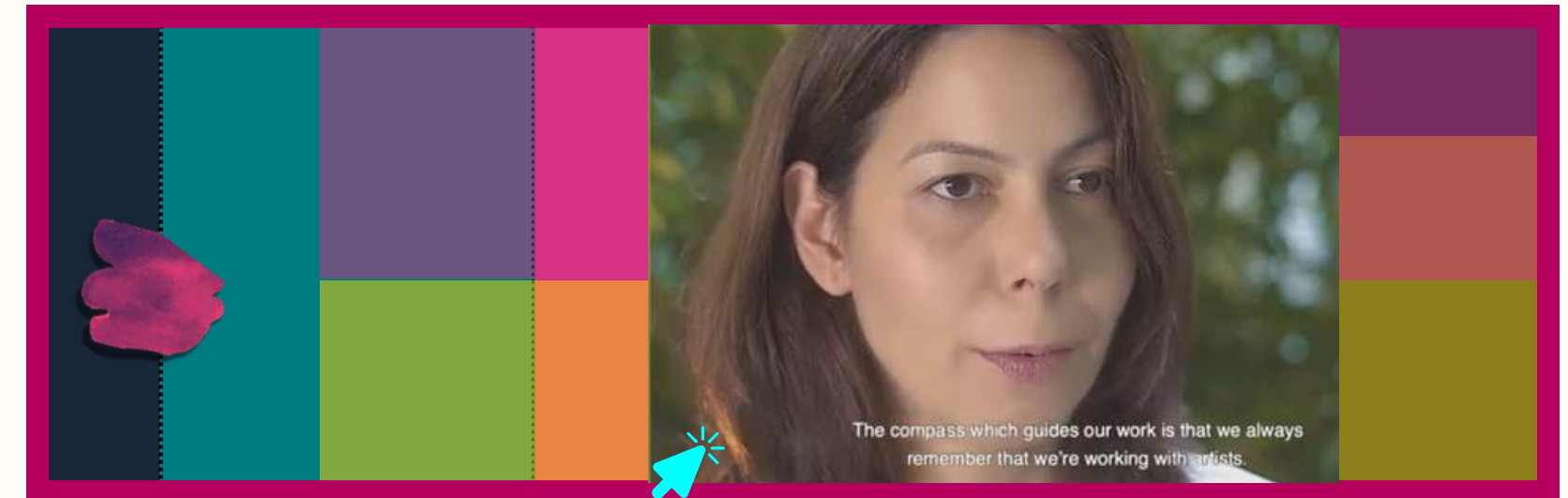


Exploring the Theory of Change

Artists who participated in the programme came from different disciplines and from diverse political and geographical contexts. What they had in common was the decision each of them took that their role, as an artist, is a personal preoccupation they want to investigate while being open to exploring it with others. The programme thus served as a partner in thinking and experimenting, and provided knowledge and resources. It grew with every session, discussion, workshop, project, and group games.

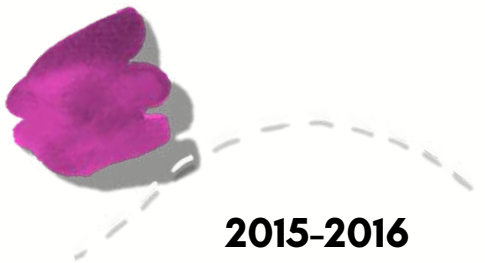
Rana Yazji

is an activist, trainer, researcher, and programmer in the field of culture and cultural policies. She was the Managing Director of Culture Resource in 2014 and a founding member of Ettijahat – Independent Culture, as is currently the co-director of “Arts and International Cooperation” at Zurich University of the Arts.



"Click the image for an interview with **Rana Yazji**, speaking about her journey with Create Syria."

CREATE SYRIA IN HIGHLIGHTS



Beneficiaries

Youssef Al Kabra
Women Now
Raghad Makhouf and Wissam Al Ghati
Koon Theatre Group
Abd Al Karim Qabrawi
Basmeh & Zeitooneh
Hannibal Saad
Ensemble Theatre
Citizens. Artists
Sonbola
Najda Now

Fields + Location

Performing Arts / Lebanon
Performing Arts & Music / Lebanon
Multidisciplinary / Lebanon
Performing Arts / Lebanon
Animation / Lebanon
Multidisciplinary / Lebanon
Music / Lebanon
Performing Arts / Lebanon
Performing Arts / Lebanon
Music / Lebanon
Performing Arts / Lebanon

Project Name

Damma
Our Stage
Bridges Through Art
Koon Theatre Lab
Animation in Pre-Production
A Cultural Event
Global Week for Syria -2nd Edition
Family Ti -Jean
The Puppet Closet
Training Syrian Trainers for Childrens' Choir
The Camp and my Parents' Story

CREATE SYRIA IN HIGHLIGHTS



Beneficiaries

Seba Kourani

Chadi Makrach

Zoukak Theatre Company

Al Caravan Project

Seenaryo

Fields + Location

Performing Arts / Lebanon

Performing Arts / Lebanon

Performing Arts / Lebanon

Animation / Lebanon

Performing Arts / Lebanon

Project

Dual Presence and Absence of Sound

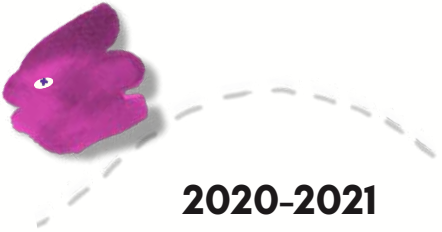
My Imagination is Always Bigger

The Zoukak Theatre Mentorship Program

Al Caravan Animation Workshop

Pulse Group

CREATE SYRIA IN HIGHLIGHTS



2020-2021

Beneficiaries	Fields+Location	Project Name
Iyas Shahin	Performing Arts and Architecture / Syria	IWLab Architectural Theatre: An Open Platform
Doaa Hamadeh	Visual Arts / Syria	I am the Conscience of the Speaker
Dalal Zalghana	Multidisciplinary / Syria	Multidisciplinary / Syria
Raghd Aazqoul	Performing & Visual Arts	If I Were Here
Sawsan Nourallah	Animation and Music / Digital	WOW Channel
Firas Hatem & Haneen Albaini	Performing Arts / Lebanon	The Road To Happiness
Kadar Ahmi	Documentary Filmmaking / Syria	Music Speaks Louder than War
Maan Hamza Rafe	Performing Arts / Lebanon	The Simple Methodology: The Reality of the Action, the Essence of the Act
Mohannad Nasser	Music / Digital	Music For Everyone
Walid Shlash	Performing Arts / Syria	Reopening the Zaki Cordello House for Arts and Culture

CREATE SYRIA IN HIGHLIGHTS



Beneficiaries	Fields+Location	Project Name
Juan Delgado	Music / Syria	Road to Tenderness
Fawaz Hassoun	Performing & Visual Arts / Syria	I am the Conscience of the Speaker
Ward Alkhalaf	Creative Industries / Syria & Lebanon	Kitch in Traditional Crafts
Samer Ibrahim	Performing & Visual Arts	Art Tent
Noura Alsouma	Visual Arts / Germany & Poland	My Grandmother's Quilt
Yara Amayri	Documentation & Rehabilitation / Syria	Urban Tableaux
Abeer Sanyour	Documentary Filmmaking / Syria	Public Baths
Maya Rihawi & Salwa Arsalan	Performing Arts / Lebanon	Prova A Scene from Memory
Yassin Almsallakh	Documentary Filmmaking / Syria	The Wedding
Ghaith Hasan	Performing Arts / Syria	Interactive Wave Group

EXPERT CONTRIBUTORS, JURORS, AND MENTORS

Principal Trainers Hanane Hajj Ali and Rana Yazaji

2015

Marie Elias
Lina Ghaibeh
Hanane Kassab-
Hassan
Dagmar Reichert
Moez Mrabet
Alma Salem
Clara Sfeir
Maya Zbib

2017

Marina Barham
Aser Al Saqqa

2020

Lamia Abi Azar
Ziad Adwan
Rafif Al Sajer
Kinan Azmeh
Sabine Choucair
Samar Dudin
Diana El Jeiroudi
Joude Gorani
Therese Ghobriel
David Habchy
Sameh Halawani
Hanane Kassab Hassan
Ibrahim Keivo
Amal Omran
Clara Sfeir

2022

Sarah Allen
Rafif Al Sajer
Alia Alzougbi
Hanan Chkir
Hossam Fazzula
Joude Gorani
Sulafa Hijazi
Tania Khoury
Isabel Lima
Youssef Moussalli
Daniela Nofal
Kosisochukwu Nnebe
Moussa Saleh



Events and Residencies

2016 [The first Create Syria Symposium](#)

2017 [On the Brink of Change Forum](#)

2020 Arts and Uncertainty [Webinar](#) featuring Mohammad Al Attar, Dan Boyden, Laila Hourani, Rama Haseh, Sondos Shabayek, Rana Yazaji

2022 **Online Residency and Pop Up Event** at GROW Plymouth.

On Art and the Public Sphere: Open Discussion featuring Liana Kassir, Dima Nachawi, and Hiba Zibaoui, with a performance by the band Zhourat.

On Art and Community in light of Global Migration, featuring Shalan Alhamwy, Iyas Almokdad, and Zeina Al Qahwaji in partnership with [Globe Aroma](#).

On Digital Arts in the Arab Region: Online Discussion featuring Yasmeen Fanari and Mona Gamil, in partnership with Mozilla Festival.

Art, Community, and the Future(s) of Intangible Cultural Heritage Open Discussion featuring Abdullah Alkafri, Áine O'Brien, Stephen Felmingham, Ashish Ghadiali, Chloe Hughes, and Awate Suileman in partnership with [Arts University Plymouth](#).



Publications

[Arts and Uncertainty: Toolkit](#) by Rana Yazaji



CREATING PARTNERSHIPS

by Áine O'Brien

The Politics of International Solidarity:

We speak a lot about international ‘solidarity’ and ‘collaboration’ between artists, arts organizations and communities of place and interest. Important words and declarations, feeding urgent local and global aspirations in what is an increasingly uncertain, unequal and frightening world order. Yet it’s one thing to demonstrate the language of international solidarity and collaboration and another to meaningfully practice it over time. Since practicing solidarity and collaboration involves stepping into the complex spaces of mutual support - of knowing where the visible and not so invisible power lines lie. It demands an understanding of locally embedded knowledge and the often-contradictory methods of both learning and unlearning; who is learning from whom and to what end?

The Role of Artists in a (Dis)Connected World Beyond the Now:

Socially Engaged Art in a (Dis)Connected World (2022-2023) was launched at the tail- end of Create Syria (2015-2023), comprising a partnership between Ettijahat in Beirut and Counterpoints Arts in London with the University of the Arts Plymouth, and the Mozilla Festival (alongside other Beyond the Now partners*). Supported by a British Council International Collaboration Grant, this project built upon the learning and unlearning that had already been explored in Create Syria - inviting us all to think differently about the position of the socially engaged artist in relation to how communities are re-imagined in times of crisis or are traumatically transformed by processes of displacement.

The aim for this international partnership was to create a horizontal architecture, realigning the axis of learning from south to north, picking up on what Create Syria had achieved across its five years or more of programming.

In particular, the toolkit Arts and Uncertainty developed by researcher, Rana Yazaji, encouraged us to re-think the more sober reality of a disconnected world despite the mantra that we are all somehow – digitally and miraculously – connected. In this re-framing, Syrian artists in exile reinvent their practice internationally and not through the narrow symbolism of national borders. This is an important distinction, since it (arguably) liberates many other artists from the persistent stereotype of regional ‘crisis’ thinking or that their practice is always a de facto response to ‘emergency’.

Create Syria in its pedagogy and philosophy chose to position socially engaged practice from the lived experience of individual artists, literally from the ground-up and without preconceptions of what an artist should do or what a community is or might need. Create Syria created its own parallel infrastructure of capacity-building, research, training, mentoring and commissioning – resulting in a uniquely ambitious programme that has left a significant international legacy.



Creating Partnerships

Horizontal Partnerships – Across Borders:

Beyond the Now: Socially Engaged Art in a (Dis)Connected World built upon this legacy at a time marked by a decade or more of Syrian displacement and the more recent impact of the global pandemic. The ‘pilot’ nature of the programme allowed us to ‘test the waters’ for a set of cross-border exchanges and collaborative actions.

The programme enabled commissioned artists to connect and grow peer-to-peer networks and to pilot ideas from a range of locations. It’s important to note that the potential for such international co-production drew upon a previous relationship between the 2 key partners, Ettijahat and Counterpoints Arts. This was then enhanced by the digital training element delivered by Mozilla Festival and the mentoring/residency alliance between Arts University Plymouth and Grow Plymouth. It is not surprising that many of the artists chose to explore projects connected with the environment and sustainability, moving across the spheres of (in)tangible heritage and craft, memory and oral history and future-oriented blueprints for cultural and material rehabilitation and reparation.

The more over-arching narratives overlaying this international programme pivoted around what it means to do socially engaged work today: when facing the possibilities and limitations of emerging technologies; the social and economic disparities in the wake of the global pandemic; the impact of war and increasing totalitarianism; and the inequalities surrounding freedom of expression and the continuing erosion of the rights to mobility for artists and communities of place.

Mobility/Immobility – Equity:

International solidarity and collaboration in practice is dependent on the relative security of having medium-to-long term support and recognition, of being able (as an organization/independent artist/collective/community) to co-produce programmes that are sustainable and enduring. Programmes that are not merely one-off but robust enough to run for several years (ideally longer), building trust between participants where the shared focus is about a cultural politics of process rather than the production of the inevitable end-product.

Yet one of the major obstacles in the doing of international partnership work is the lack of mobility for participating artists. While comparative projects of this type and scale fundamentally rely on artists being able to cross borders, we continue to run up against the very real obstacles of restrictive border regimes.

The failure to secure travel visas for several of the artists in Beyond the Now: Socially Engaged Work in a (Dis)Connected World was/is worryingly predictable, despite letters of support from established funders and institutional partners. We resolved this by pivoting and being agile (much used words these days) and by reverting to the digital as a fallback position and solution. But we can never substitute for the experience of literally ‘being in place’ for artists, given the comparative learning that this brings to host organizations and communities that they work with and alongside.



Creating Partnerships

- 
 This pilot project has the potential to become more sustainable. To do so we need more equitable frameworks that ensure mobility to be able to co-design mutual infrastructures that are global and local in scope - the likes of which Create Syria initiated in 2015; and which international projects like Beyond the Now: Socially Engaged Practice in a (Dis)Connected World can further build upon and thrive.

Beyond the Now is a syndicated online platform, founded by partners working in locations across Europe and SWANA. It aims to open new creative, cultural and political affinities for a post-pandemic world; and to amplify the necessity for and experience of solidarity in a time of crisis. Beyond the Now: Socially Engaged Practice in a (Dis) Connected World Programme, funded by the British Council International Collaboration Fund. Key partners include Ettijahat Independent Culture, Counterpoints Arts, Arts University Plymouth and Mozilla Festival.

Áine O'Brien



is Curator of Learning and Research and Co-Founder of Counterpoints Arts, London. She has worked across the arts, education and activism in the US, Ireland, and the UK and was Co-Director of Counterpoints Arts between 2012 and 2020.



David Berry, Inside Uchronia, Flickr, 2006, CC BY 2.0

ON BEYOND THE NOW

by Daniela Nofal

Gripped by the forces of the global pandemic, the vulnerability of our systems and the limits of current practices became glaringly evident. It is from this shifting landscape that Beyond the Now was set up. In other words, Beyond the Now was born out of a moment of crisis at a global scale.

Bearing witness to the limits of our current systems and ways of working, we find ourselves grappling with a set of questions that continue to propel our work forward: how can we ensure that our practices remain relevant and suited to respond to political, economic and social change? What alternative structures need to be imagined into existence to act as vessels for culturally political work? How do we (re)orient ourselves towards one another for new and necessary solidarities to take hold?

Daniela Nofal

is a Producer at Counterpoints Arts, with a focus on producing and programming artistic projects at the intersection of displacement and mental health. She has also produced various artistic projects and creative interventions with a number of international organizations, and is one of the initiators of SACF, London's Syrian Arts and Culture Festival.

Beyond the Now - Socially Engaged Art in a (Dis)Connected World has been one such project that has embodied the spirit of transnational collaboration and exchange. Through commissioning, production, learning and collaboration, a cohort of socially engaged artists had the opportunity to enter safe 'relational spaces' in which they could research and develop new socially engaged work, responding to a whole array of local contexts. Working across disciplines, as well as borders, our ways of working over the course of the project became porous sites of meaningful learning and engagement. For artists and partners alike, it opened up a nuanced space to reflect on the material conditions of working across disparate political, social and economic conditions.

As we brace ourselves for the challenges that lie ahead, this project has been a stark reminder of our interdependence as a sector and the urgency of international solidarity, but also importantly, that there is much to be learned from the experiences and resilience of organizations and communities that have been operating in the grips of compounded crises.



A SPACE FOR EXPLORATION

- On The Brink of Change Forum | Connection in Crisis
- On The Brink of Change Forum | An Artistic Journey to Beirut
- Experiencing Alternative Realities
- Embarking on a Cultural Exchange
- Expanding the Conversation
- Engaging Creativity as a Community Practice
- Reimagining Shared Spaces :
 - *Surviving Damascus*
 - *Architectural Theatre*
 - *If I Am Here*



Being On the Brink of Change

by Chloe Osbourne



A two-day forum “**On the Brink of Change**” was organized in Beirut with the purpose of bringing together practitioners working on community-based initiatives (32 speakers, 120 artists, 300 experts and 15 organizations). This forum was planned as an opportunity for artists and arts organizations to share experience, techniques and models, discuss challenges, skills gaps and explore different opportunities for collaboration and growing their collective practice.

September Morning in 2019. The Foyer of Zoukak Studio is lined with tables. There are large bowls of fruit, chopping boards and busy knives working to cut, peel and zest. Around the table, arts practitioners and activists from across the Middle East and North Africa are discussing their approaches to both fruit salad making and the impact of arts in communities with international counterparts, with funders and with researchers. It does not look or feel like a traditional forum for knowledge exchange, yet building on Create Syria’s mandate to explore new models and approaches to working with communities affected by crisis, the collective fruit salad making is inviting an equitable exchange of ideas and experience.

The invitation to “do together” subverts any established hierarchy in the space and invites both reciprocity and vulnerability. The haptic collective undertaking of fruit salad making or, as happening elsewhere in the building, clothes folding, collage making or 5000-piece jigsaw assembling, are invitations co-designed by the current Create Syria cohort, to invite different conversations into the space.



Being On the Brink of Change

Drawing on some of the core tensions within the programme, this (messier) format for exchange, helped to connect people with the messiness and complexity of the programme's ambition and evolving delivery model.

Fold piles of rumpled clothes = Explore the tension between perceived quality and aesthetic value of artistic outcomes and the participants' experience/enhanced skills/confidence/sense of connection and belonging.

Cut and tear old media to assemble new images = Explore the scale of agency at play within the Create Syria projects, from vehicles that articulate and amplify project participants' ideas to interventionist spaces, held by artist's elbows for exhaling, reconnecting with play, encountering and celebrating shared joy.

Squeeze, cut and zest oranges, lemons, grapefruit = Explore the definition and power of community in fragile contexts, the role of the arts and of artists in its creation/maintenance/sustenance/scope to reimagine and adapt.

I am reminded of the Performing Arts Forum ([PAF](#)), which offers the idea of “mind asymmetries” as a tool of shared responsibility and accountability:

“People come from different places, inhabit different bodies, have different experiences, are situated differently in power structures and have different boundaries. Everybody, to a certain extent, partakes in multiple systems of inequality by inhabiting different positions, roles and narratives. We want to be a space where this can be actively addressed, and where learning and change can happen.”



Click the image for a glimpse inside the forum On The Brink of Change, which was held on the 12th and 13th of February 2019, within the framework of the second edition of Create Syria.

Reflecting on the Brink of Change, I think about the value of partnerships as a fundamental tool for development and learning. I think of the value of mind asymmetries in exploring the impact of the programme in relation to relevant questions around social change in times of global crisis

I think about conversations in its lead up, of the copious coffees drunk, and remember large sheets of paper, drawn on, drawn over, folded up and flown as paper aero planes across the room.

Chloe Osbourne 

is an artist and creative director who creates participatory and interventionist art projects which seek to reinforce social bonds. She is the co-founder and co-director of project AWE, a creative programme collaborator with People United, and chair of the ARTCRY panel.

Personal Impressions of an Artistic Journey to Beirut

by Ziad Adwan



I was part of the first session of the first day within the Brink of Change forum, organized at Zoukak's theatre studio in Beirut within the second edition of Create Syria.

The session was titled “Crisis as Inspiration for Creative Practice”, and was moderated by writer and researcher Dima Hamadeh. It included Serbian Director, Playwright, and Manager of Šabac theatre Milena Bogavić, the Artistic Director of Spotlight Theatre group, the founder of Artichoke Studio Mira Saad who uses Arts to alleviate war-related trauma, the Executive Director of Oh Yeah Music Center in Belfast Charlotte Dryden, who also worked for years on music programs management and as a music festival curator. This diversity of nationalities can easily maintain our conversation around creative work in times of crisis for days or years on end, especially when you consider the multitude of crises we are facing all at once.

The forum took place in February 2019, well before the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic and banking crisis in Lebanon, and the August 4th port explosion. However, we as speakers had experienced other kinds of catastrophes and difficult working conditions, which we discussed and explored in both their differences and similarities.



Personal Impressions of an Artistic Journey to Beirut

The importance of our conversation also emerged from the realization that more challenges lay ahead - the consequences of which could be more terrifying – and that some of these challenges could be entirely surprising in their nature, which isn't reassuring to say the least, especially when global news keeps warning us that tomorrow won't bring better days.

The conversation focused on an exchange of experiences and ideas connected to approaches which could potentially alleviate these challenges, specifically around models of solidarity, and frameworks which can allow us to be more pro-active, instead of adopting a reactive position. We also discussed theatre work, and the popularity of documentary-style approaches, to the detriment of creative writing.

On a personal level, I've always been concerned with this relationship between the Imagination and the Catastrophe. How can creativity and innovation go beyond crises which already transcend the imagination? When a certain crisis reaches an unbelievable or unimaginable level, our metaphors and allegories (in their creative or literary function) become just another descriptive narration. "The Crawling of Refugees through Europe" is a sentence which stimulates the imagination, but does not symbolically transcend the actual event, especially when we see huge numbers of displaced people crawling under barbed wires in an attempt to reach Europe. The same applies to the tagline "You Stink" which emerged during the 2015 protests in Lebanon around the garbage crisis.



We were unfazed, as speakers, that the opening session of the forum would require us to focus on the concept of crisis. In each of our personal lives, we had gotten used to beginning our day in crisis mode, and constantly trying to find solutions to so many problems, so talking about it first thing in the morning just felt natural.

Personal Impressions of an Artistic Journey to Beirut

My participation in the forum, which included a rich program spanning two days in Beirut, sparked a deep sense of longing. Firstly, a longing that I've become accustomed to, which is reuniting with Syrian friends in the diaspora. In fact, I felt that part of Syria was right there in the audience: for the first time in six years since I escaped Syria, I was reunited with close friends, mentors, old students, and numerous acquaintances that also moved to Beirut. While I experienced many reunions across Europe and the Arab Region, this one felt special, a reassurance that wherever I went, I would find parts of Syria, friends, mentors, students, and people I would be pleasantly surprised to see. Secondly, the forum fulfilled a longing to be in Beirut. For almost ten years, and due to bureaucratic restrictions, I was only able to travel between European cities. This happened in 1999 when I move to London to study theatre. In order to limit the amount of people crossing over to the Gulf to find work opportunities, I could only travel within the continent that I was based in, and wasn't able to visit other Arab cities. While I was also curious about other cities, Beirut always felt special. Since childhood, Beirut filled my imagination. It was as if the people there did not eat or drink, but rather lived off intellect, poetry, heritage, war, freedom, sectarianism, openness, travel, always speaking in three languages (English, Arabic, and French), like the popular saying "Hi, Kifak, Ça va?". Out off all the poems written about Arab cities, the ones written about Beirut were always unique, and void of any meaningless flattery, which is what Arab poets are often accused of when writing about Arab cities. However, there is no questioning the honesty of those who write about Beirut.



On the brink of change forum- Ettijahat

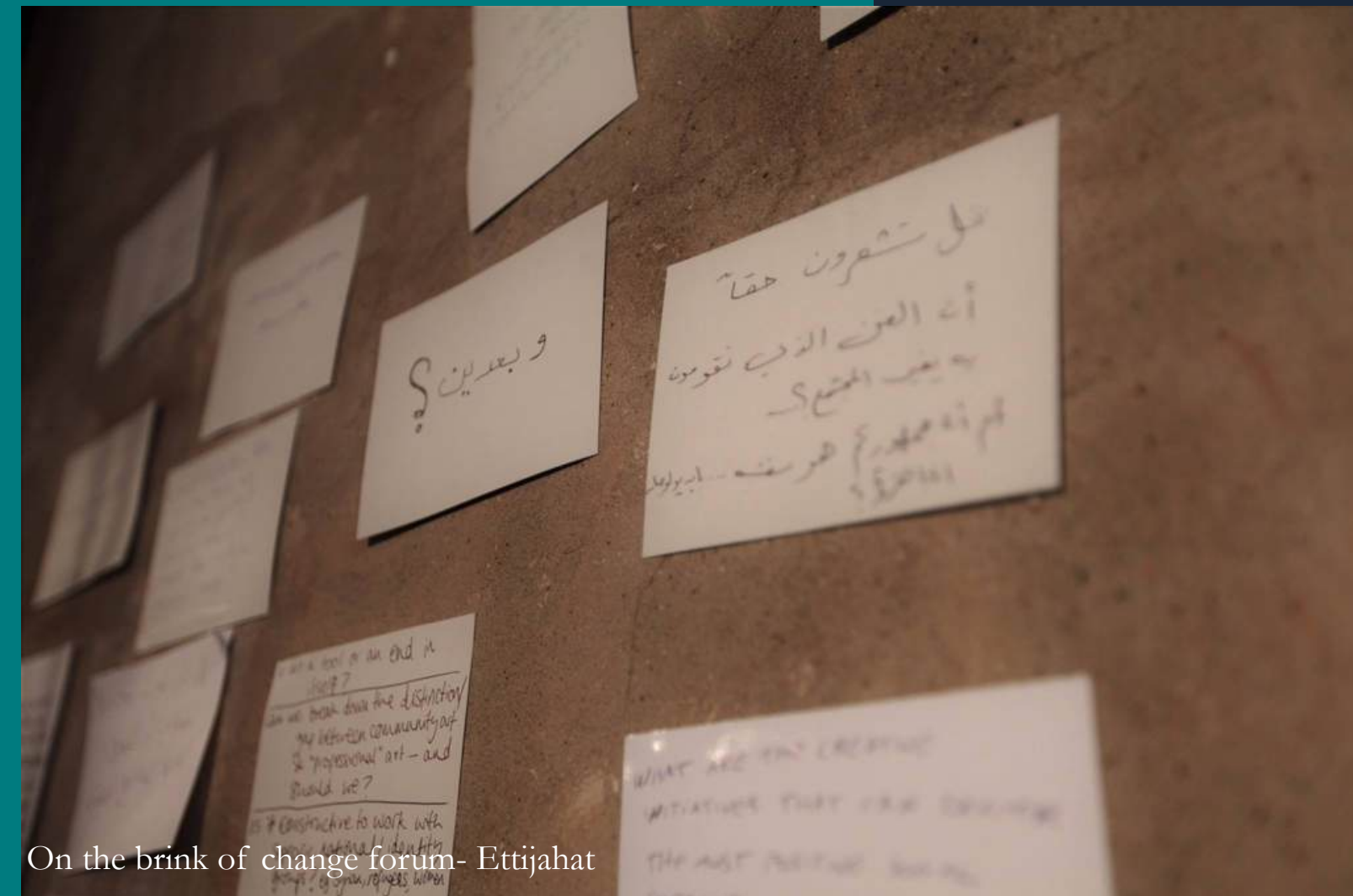


Personal Impressions of an Artistic Journey to Beirut

Beirut is the most similar to Damascus. My friends used to go to Beirut for lunch, then come back to Damascus, while I stayed behind because I could only travel between Syria and Europe. After twenty-four years, I finally got the chance to visit Beirut when I received the invitation from Ettijahat. Ironically, I wasn't able to visit Damascus then, and could only leave Lebanon to go to Europe.

I remember asking the Ettijahat team to book my return flight to Berlin after five days only! I still don't understand how I made that decision! Only five days in Beirut! This city that was the most similar to Damascus, which I couldn't go back to. This city where my closest friends were living. This city with theatres that don't look like other theatres in the Arab Region. This city which tempted me to experience everything that was ever written about it. All of this, in only five days! Was I truly ready to face Beirut? This question occupied my mind throughout the forum.

On the one hand, the forum was the excuse that kept me inside Zoukak's studio, without having to answer my own question. On the other hand, being immersed in the forum was essential. I wanted to experience every session, and participate in every discussion. I remember sessions about cinema and documentary filmmaking, and about the impact of Augusto Boal's theatre in the Arab Region. I remember talks with theatre makers like Chadi Makrach, meeting Seifeddine Jalasi, and discovering the work of Fanni Raghman Anni in Tunisia. Throughout these sessions, discussions blossomed around the role of arts in communities, while other voices resonated with despair over the failure in inspiring audiences to revolt.



On the brink of change forum- Ettijahat



Personal Impressions of an Artistic Journey to Beirut

An important idea was raised at this point, which is that the impact of art and theatre is accumulative. **Wanting the audience to leave the theatre to start a revolution risks being a utilitarian approach, and burdens theatre with the challenge of providing immediate results. If we expect a revolution to happen right after a theatrical experience, then all theatre which fails to lead to this outcome is doomed to be pointless. Within this idea of “immediate impact”, we also have to remember that the impact of art and theatre is diverse.** It's obvious that arts impact both individuals and communities, both romantic love and family dynamics. Sociologist Erving Goffman believed that Arts impact behavior. Naturally, this impact is varied on different levels, but if Arts can affect various aspects of our lives, then it can also affect our consciousness and speak to the challenges we face.

The not he forum was also a chance to meet Zoukak Theatre Group, and discover their collaborative work. However, I kept thinking whether it was just the appeal of these artists, activities, and discussions that was keeping me there, or whether I was afraid of experiencing Beirut, a city I was both familiar and unfamiliar with. My friends insisted that I extend my stay, and I was longing to spend more time with them. Some had even participated in the forum, such as Helena Nassif, Alaa Rachidi, Mosaad Asaad, and Marie Elias. Some I had met at the forum, and wanted to get to know them better, such as Sandy Kastoun who was part of Ettijahat's organizing team. Our exchange developed from formal emails to long nights talking about theatre, cinema, art, and crisis. In the end, there wasn't enough time to connect with the many friends I've known for years. I wanted to visit Lina Sinjab, Qays Al Sheikh Najib and Lubna Mashlah and their son Joude, Mohamad Al Mufti and Natalie Al Mir, Reem Khattab and Ossama Halal, and Razan Rashidi and Louay Hamada. Too many people to see in Beirut. But what about Beirut itself? Was I truly ready for it?

I regretted asking for such a short stay, but Razan Rashidi was able to extend my trip for ten more days by fundraising for a new return ticket. The only catch was that I spend each night in the home of a different friend. This gift allowed me to discover Beirut, a city which fascinated and confused me since childhood. I was able to explore the city and visit all the theatres I wrote about without even having seen them. I visited the Sunflower Theatre and the local libraries, I completed my collection of Roger Assaf's theatre books, and interviewed local theatre practitioners for a research project with Munich University. The research focused on the concept of theatre as an institution, whether it's the product of a theatre group or a national theatre movement, and the factors that affect its development and impact. To this end, I spent time with Obeido Basha and Rafiq Ali Ahmad, whom I met briefly years ago in the Emirates.

Naturally, the best laid plans can always change, but sometimes for the better. An example of a happy coincidence was when I stumbled on Jawad Al Assadi in a local restaurant. We ended up meeting almost every day after that. What finally ended our conversations about theatre and life in crisis was our departure from Beirut, me to go to Berlin and him to go to Iraq, despite the challenges there. He was adamant about Iraq being part of his theatre journey.



Personal Impressions of an Artistic Journey to Beirut

Admittedly, this trip wasn't the first time I landed in Beirut. In 2013, I had to leave Syria through Lebanon, and stayed in Beirut for five weeks. However, during these five weeks, I couldn't leave the house. I was staying with a friend, and found that I lacked courage to step outside. I wasn't brave enough to leave my fears from Syria behind, and to walk freely in Beirut. I was a prisoner of my own cage, unwilling to experience this new city. And so, it remained in my imagination. I lived there then as if I was blindfolded. Even when I opened my eyes, I refused to see. My previous memories of Beirut had been similar: when I accompanied my father, who was seeking medical treatment there, and when I went to Beirut after my mother passed away. I found myself in Beirut at times where I was actively trying to numb my fears and emotions, which discouraged me from looking up and seeing the world around me.

Ziad Adwan 

is a theatre maker, trainer, and academic with a PhD in theatre studies from Royal Holloway, University of London. He is also affiliated with the Global Theatre Histories Research Project at LMU Munich and is the co-founder of TANWEEN Company for Theatre and Dance.

I don't know if my hesitation to experience Beirut was merely due to the grim circumstances of my visit - disease, death, and exile - or if it was also an attempt to preserve the city in my imagination, for fear of being disappointed by the truth. However, I discovered that my imagination wasn't that far from the truth.

In Beirut, you will find catastrophes you can't imagine, you will also find people who live off intellect, poetry, heritage, war, freedom, sectarianism, openness, travel, living with crisis and art hand in hand, with their best laid plans as well as life's coincidences.



On the brink of change forum- Ettijahat

Experiencing Alternative Realities

by Hanan Chkir



“I am the Conscience of the Speaker,” is a project designed by Fawaz Hassoun that targets children who live and work on the street. The project works with a group of these children and a community aiming to find alternative ways of living. By transporting the street into an enclosed space through movement and sound, an interactive theatre approach is utilized to impact this community, and allow it to access an expanded space of dignity and freedom.

Rafif al-Sajer, Munawar al-Aqqad, Lujain al-Aranji, Meniar Henani and myself, had the opportunity to embark on an important experience, both on the artistic and human levels. The experience was challenging, not least because of its target group, children whose socioeconomic circumstances, in addition to the impact of the war, have been forced to grow up on the streets.

These children collect cardboard, plastic, and glass from rubbish bins and streets to sell them under the supervision of one of their relatives, or a so-called ‘contractor,’ who organizes the children’s work and pays them miserable wages. This project played an important role in giving us access to this marginalized group, and trying to create an alternative experience for them through theatre, in order to support, albeit it for a limited time, their psychological and cognitive development beyond their daily context.

experienced. A bittersweet moment that stayed with me was when one of the girls threatened to quit working on the street and go back to school if her parents did not let her attend the workshops.



Experiencing Alternative Realities

The team chose not to limit its work to the agreed working hours, given its sensitive nature. Everyone wanted to follow the project closely, dedicating their time before and after each session to discuss what we had seen, what we would do, how we would overcome challenges the next time, and our project's strengths and weaknesses. In phase one, we worked with the children on trust-building and creating a foundation for what was to come. In phase two, we organized collective theatre exercises and games, which helped strengthen the participants' cohesion and relationship to project facilitators, as they were experiencing a radically different world than the one in which they live. In phase three, the children were encouraged to express their feelings or thoughts visually through drawings, and design puppets inspired by these drawings which could become a tool for sharing personal stories.

It meant a great for us that we were able to take these children off the streets for hours, away from the violence and dangers they were exposed to every day. The team and I believe that our time with them empowered our roles as artists, and enriched the lives of the participants who would not have access to similar experiences otherwise, where the violence they carry towards others and towards themselves can be alleviated. This project helped them to recognize their own value as human beings, outside of the circumstances they were born in, and allowed them to exercise their creativity and imagination.

In parallel to celebrating this experience, the project was not without its challenges, notably in relation to the instability of the number of children attending, due to their relatives' attempts to exploit the project by asking for money in exchange for attendance. The conflict with the families, be it parents or guardians, brought up psychological traumas of physical and verbal abuse which some of the children experienced. A bittersweet moment that stayed with me was when one of the girls threatened to quit working on the street and go back to school if her parents did not let her attend the workshops.

There is no doubt that social arts projects of all shapes and forms can be a fun and rewarding experience that allows us to try different ways of communicating and connecting with each other. What is even more valuable is the significant impact that an experience like this can have on their lives of participants, especially when it is context-specific and built on an understanding of the targeted community.



Experiencing Alternative Realities

However, one question always remains: **how do we build on what we started?** We noticed that the children felt like we had let them down by leaving so soon. In this particular context, the project did have a time limit, but it was also important for us to consider ways to sustain this kind of experience. Collaboration and coordination between artists working across different disciplines but concerned with similar questions should be able to connect more often through discussions and dialogue sessions to exchange ideas and artistic experiences. While access to funding opportunities will always remain limited, this exchange might alleviate some of the burdens and challenges that polarized artists and groups are facing when trying to design and implement their social arts projects.

In the end, this experience was a reminder that each project is an adventure, and that the exploration and discovery are just as important as the planning, because it's a process of growth for everyone involved.

Hanane Chkir



is a Syrian actress and trainer experienced in Television, Film, and Theatre. As a mentor, she is also specialized in theatrical practices for socially engaged projects working with marginalized communities and those emerging from conflict.

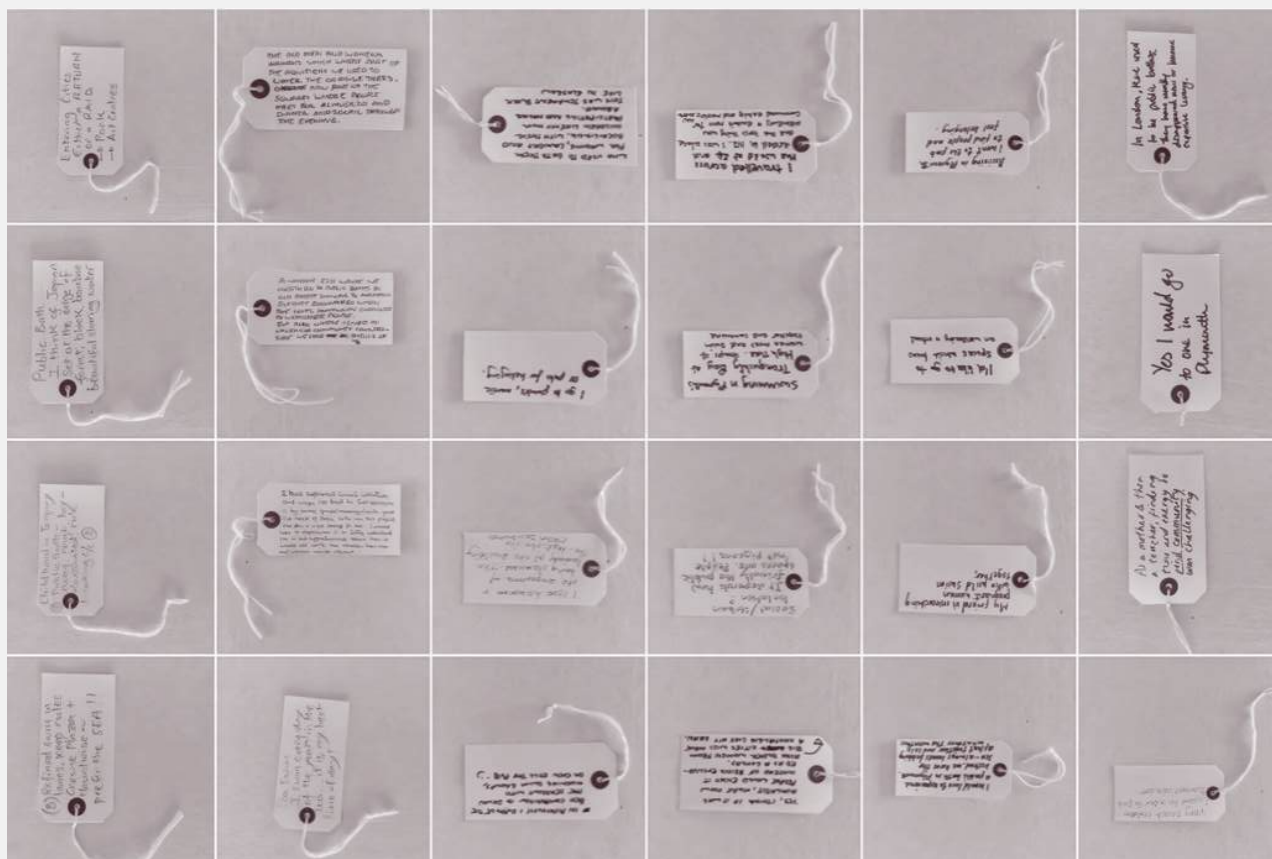
Embarking on a Cultural Exchange

Within the fourth edition of Create Syria, a new residency component was added to the programme with the aim of expanding opportunities for artists from Syria and the UK to meet and collaborate, and to explore artistic intersections in project developments, as well as exchange knowledge and experiences. Over the course of three months, and with the support of [Arts University Plymouth](#), two artists-in-residents, Abeer Sanyour and Yara Amayri and [GROW](#) artists, Chloe Georgakis, Nicole Gilbert and Jordanna Greaves (based in Plymouth, UK) met online to discuss their practice, past, current, and potential projects and life in their respective geographical areas.

These discussions culminated in a public and interactive pop-up exhibition between August 12 and 14 at GROW, exploring the intangible heritage of Syria and what that might mean to communities in Plymouth. The residency experience was incorporated as part of a year-long series of cultural events called #DIYRESIDENCIES which explore the idea of heritage and its connection to the future in terms of sustainability, inclusion, grassroots arts, and culture. The two resident artists participating in Create Syria, Abeer Sanyour and Yara Amayri, developed two projects concerned with heritage and public life in Damascus. The first, titled 'Public Baths' documents the oral history of daily life in Syria, before and after the war, in a series of videos exploring encounters inside Syrian public baths, called Hammams. The second, titled 'Urban Tableaux', focuses on music and artistic performance, exploring reviving the concept of street festivals and the social implications of seasonal celebrations.



Embarking on a Cultural Exchange



An installation was created out of the questions and visual material (including images and films) provided by the artist working on the 'Public Baths' project, with the aim of engaging people into writing their answers as additions to the installation. **The questions revolved around themes of social and urban isolation, connection with the city, and community rituals in public spaces**



For the project 'Urban Tableaux', participants were instructed to listen to music and create a sketch, then take some time to discover information about that particular piece of music while taking notes on a separate paper, and finally return to the sketch to make additional contributions based on the new information.

The aim was to explore the space between what's personal and what's shared/communal, and how this impacts our relationship with art, and our ability to create a sense of agency that can evolve with a changing context.

Expanding the Conversation



In the Arab Region, the past four years have witnessed overwhelming socio-economic and environmental challenges, which prompted a review of perspectives towards the public sphere, community, and inter-sectoral frameworks of response. During this difficult time, **the Region demonstrated its capacity for adapting to change and dealing with crisis, specifically by individuals and groups working in artistic fields, and how the lessons learned from this experience can be an opportunity for cultural exchange, and an inspiration to other regions or parts of the world.**

Within this context, and on the margins of Create Syria's fourth edition, Ettijahat organized a series of open conversations, the first taking place in Beirut with Filmmaker and Programme Manager with Nadi Lekol Nas Liana Kassir Visual Artist and Clown Dima Nachawi, and Founder and Artistic Director of Ishbilia Theatre and Art Hub Hiba Zibaoui, followed by a musical performance from the band Zhourat.

The conversation included reflections on the public sphere and the value of creative practices in times of crisis, the lessons learnt from managing accumulative challenges and their impact on collective outlooks towards the future, as well as questions around the creative process in sensitive community contexts.

ابتكر
سوريا
Create
Syria

جلسة نقاش
Panel Discussion
7:00PM

أمسيات
Oumsiyat

الجمعة 7 تشرين الأول / أكتوبر 2022
Friday 7th of October 2022

مع:
With:

ليانا قصير | ديمنا نشاوي | هبة الزيباوي
Hiba Zibaoui, Dima Nachawi, Liana Kassir

اتجاهات - ثقافة مستقلة
Ettijahat - Independent Culture



Expanding the Conversation

With the beginning of 2022, the world witnessed Ukrainians experience an invasion that left thousands murdered, homeless, and displaced. **The unfamiliarity of the crisis within the European context, led to artists around the world revisiting the concept of interconnectedness, and how the Syrian experience could present insights into practical and efficient responses to defy violence, in addition to reflecting on the role of artistic practices in times of war. In this context, the experiences of artists who were forced to emigrate from the Arab region to Europe constitute a space for exchange in connection to Ukrainian asylum, and are a valuable asset in thinking of protection frameworks that can alleviate the impact of political challenges, and explore the powerful relationship between art and community.**

With this in mind, a second discussion session was held at **Globe Aroma** in Brussels, with guest speaker and musician Shalan Alhamwy, and cinematographer and director Iyas Almokdad and Zeina Al Qahwaji.



Expanding the Conversation

As a continuation of the new partnership with [Mozilla Festival](#) initiated through the fourth edition of the programme, a third online discussion session was organized within the 2023 edition of MozFest, in collaboration with visual and digital artists Mona Gamil and Yasmeen Fanari. The session was inspired by the conversations within the workshop component of the programme around the digital sphere, which intersect with Mozilla's focus on the use of digital technologies to create innovative and cross-border opportunities for artists.

Due to the pandemic and challenges in mobility, the last two editions of Create Syria relied more heavily on the digital sphere, at a time where the nature and role of Arts was greatly impacted by emerging technologies and questions around new and traditional media. This advancement prompted new questions around the concept of “society” or “community” in a digital space, as well as the subsequent opportunities and challenges in artistic production. **Within the Arab Region specifically, and following the pandemic and accumulating socio-economic crises, there is a growing need to think of frameworks which can support artistic production from the Region, and advocate for artist protection and equity in connection to digital accessibility and production opportunities**

With the digital sphere offering new spaces for learning and exchange, this session explored some experiences in Digital Arts coming out of the Arab Region, and how technology is shaping the artist's relationship with their communities.

With the two guest speakers, the conversation focused on their experiences in the digital scene as artists coming from Syria and Egypt who have also had access to international platforms, education and capacity building frameworks around digital tools, questions around ethics in the time of A.I as well as challenges with surveillance and censorship, the relationship between artists and audiences, the need to maintain an inclusive and open space within the digital realm that is not available in a world divided by borders, and the need to learn from other disciplines and practices in arts. The session also included the participation of commissioned artists Ward Alkhalaf and Noura Al Souma, both Syrian artists living in Lebanon and Poland respectively, who presented their projects and process within Create Syria, specifically around questions of distance, shared memory, living heritage, and co-creation.







العدالة والمساواة: أسئلة حول الفن الرقمي من المنطقة العربية

On Justice and Equality: Questions around Digital Art from the Arab Region

آذار/ مارس 24 March
Beirut Time 13:00 - 14:30 بتوقيت بيروت




منى جميل
Mona Gamil

ياسمين فناري
Yasmeen Fanari

اللغة العربية مع توفر ترجمة فورية باللغة الإنجليزية
The session will be in Arabic with English interpretation

COUNTERPOINTS.

Beyond the Now



Expanding the Conversation

The last session in the public talks series took place at [The Box](#), a museum/gallery and archive space in Plymouth, UK. Under the title Art, Community, and the Future(s) of Intangible Cultural Heritage, the conversation focused on **the reimagining of collections and archives in an age of uncertainty and resistance**, together with the increasingly urgent work of recovering and preserving intangible heritage. The event included two sessions moderated by artist and Professor of Artistic Research at Arts University Plymouth Stephen Felmingham, and co-founder of Counterpoints Arts Áine O'Brien.

The first session was a showcase of artistic interventions linking art and community projects with intangible cultural heritage, supported within the fourth edition of Create Syria, together with projects and residencies supported in 2022-2023 by Beyond the Now. The second session was a conversation with artists Awate Suileman and Ashish Ghadiali, Ettijahat's executive director Abdullah Alkafri, and cultural practitioner and The Box programmes manager Chloe Hughes, around the potential to reframe/reimagine public collections and archives through the integrated lens of displacement, socially engaged art practice, education, and community engagement.

Art, Community, and the Future(s) of Intangible Cultural Heritage

June 9, 2023 | 15:00 to 18:30 BST

📍 The Box, Plymouth



© Hawwa Shirt from Studio Kunukku's Barsees Collection, Photo By Aia Atoui

انكر
سوريا
Create
Syria

Beyond
the Now

Funded by
BRITISH
COUNCIL

COUNTERPOINTS.

ARTS
UNIVERSITY
PLYMOUTH

moz://a
festival

عنتجهات
Ettijahat

Engaging Creativity as a Community Practice

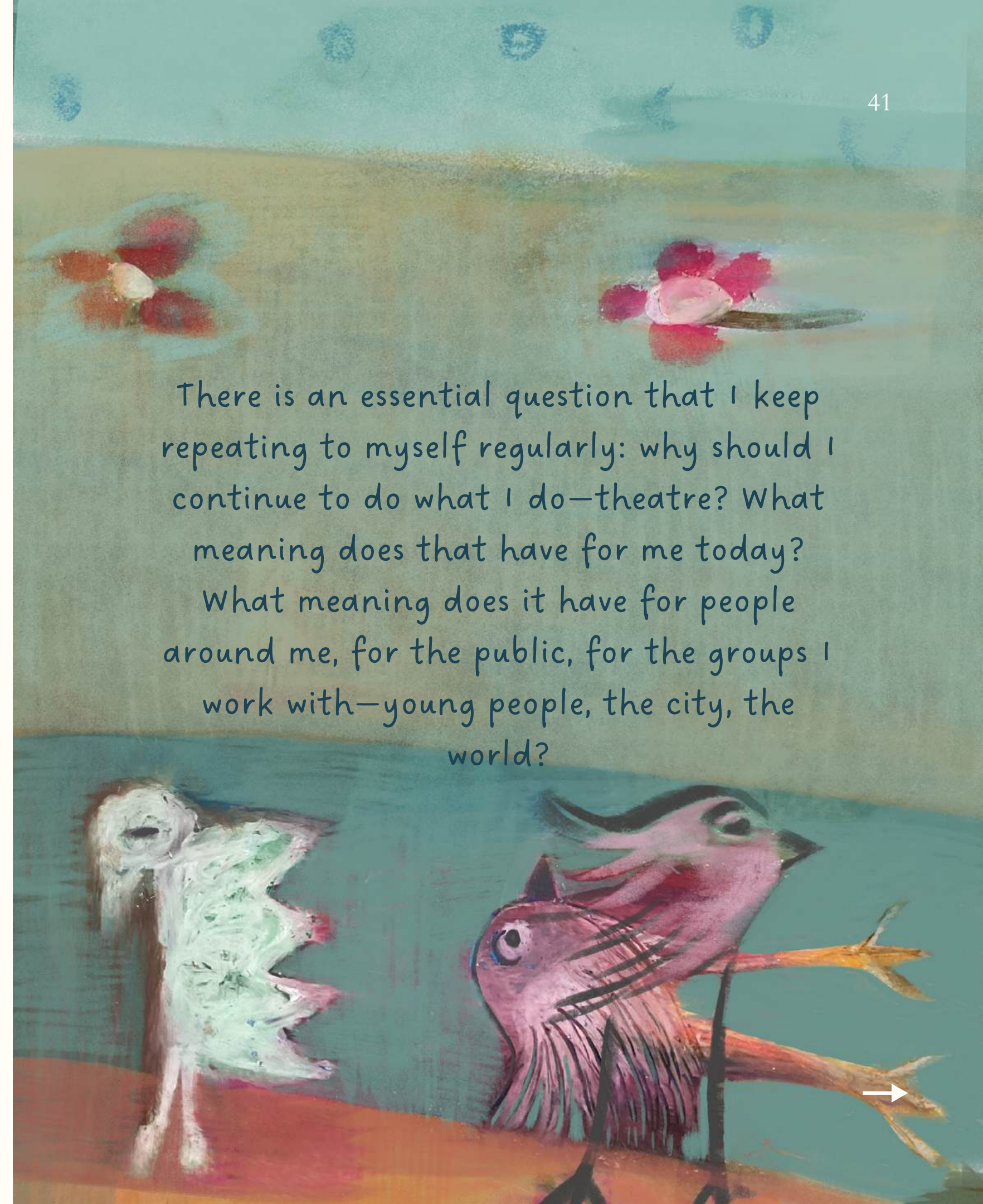
by Lamia Abi Azar

On May 28th 2021, at 15:00PM, in my apartment in Beirut, I was getting ready to login to Zoom with ten Syrian artists participating in the third edition of Create Syria. We were going to pass the next three hours discussing the artistic projects they were developing in different communities and contexts. The projects involved children, young people and adults in Syria and in countries of exile.

At that time, the pandemic was still a prevalent issue, Syria had been torn by war since the onset of the revolution in 2011, and many artists fled from despotism while others were facing unprecedented daily challenges. Lebanon was also suffering from an outrageous economic inflation since the 2019 revolution, confronted with challenges caused by a criminal government. I remember that in the middle of this eclectic situation I had to deal with, I was mostly worried about one thing whether the internet connection would hold for the entire session!

What real discussion could be held in such conditions and what knowledge could be effectively transferred in such a context?

There is an essential question that I keep repeating to myself regularly: why should I continue to do what I do—theatre? What meaning does that have for me today? What meaning does it have for people around me, for the public, for the groups I work with—young people, the city, the world?



Engaging Creativity as a Community Practice

For me, the question has always been ‘why’ not ‘how.’ I have always found a way to do what I wanted to do once I had answered ‘why.’ From this question, our Zoom meeting about theatre started. Theatre is also those three hours on Zoom, where men and women take the time to reconvene, despite everything, to share and question their artistic practices and their need to search for meaning.

In 2006, the year I co-founded [Zoukak Theatre Company](#) with my colleagues, Lebanon was devastated by an Israeli attack. Back then, we started to make theatre with displaced people who found refuge in schools in Beirut. Our motive was clear—we did not pretend we were changing the world, neither did we pretend to help our audience. We did it because we needed to do it, because we could not stand being useless and idle.

Lamia Abi Azar



is a theatre maker, performer and drama therapist, co-founder and co-artistic director of the Zoukak Theatre Company and Zoukak Studio in Beirut. Since the launching of Zoukak’s Mentorship Program and Production Support Grant in 2016, Lamia also actively contributes to the development of the program and has mentored young artists by supporting them in their projects’ development.

Theatre has the capacity to invent meaning for actions, and the force to construct meaning in the middle of absurdity in a world where theatre seems utterly useless. What we brought to those places, marked with pain, anguish, fear, and death was a space for action, for a theatre that rejects the world around it, a theatre which finds its value in liberating itself from its traditional function, a theatre where rehearsing the theatrical action becomes synonymous with resistance, and a theatre where restrictions transform into tools for freedom. While theatre cannot change the world, it can change us. Today, after more than two years, the situation in Syria and Lebanon is still deteriorating, another international crisis replaced the pandemic and violence is reaching inhuman levels around the world, and particularly in our region. **Still, every day, I meet young Syrian and Lebanese artists who, through their creative work, are shaping a history that deserves to be preserved.**



Surviving in Damascus

by Reem Al Khatib



A true artist is not one who is inspired, but one who inspires others'

In a world with increasing uncertainty, we, as artists concerned with social practice, wonder about how to give our societies the necessary tools to better understand their place in society, to improve their lives through engagement with creative forms of expression.



And how art, as a symbolic tool in a safe environment, allows us to rid ourselves of previously repressed fear, since art is a potential space between the world and ourselves, which could renew our ability to live and move forward.



Surviving in Damascus

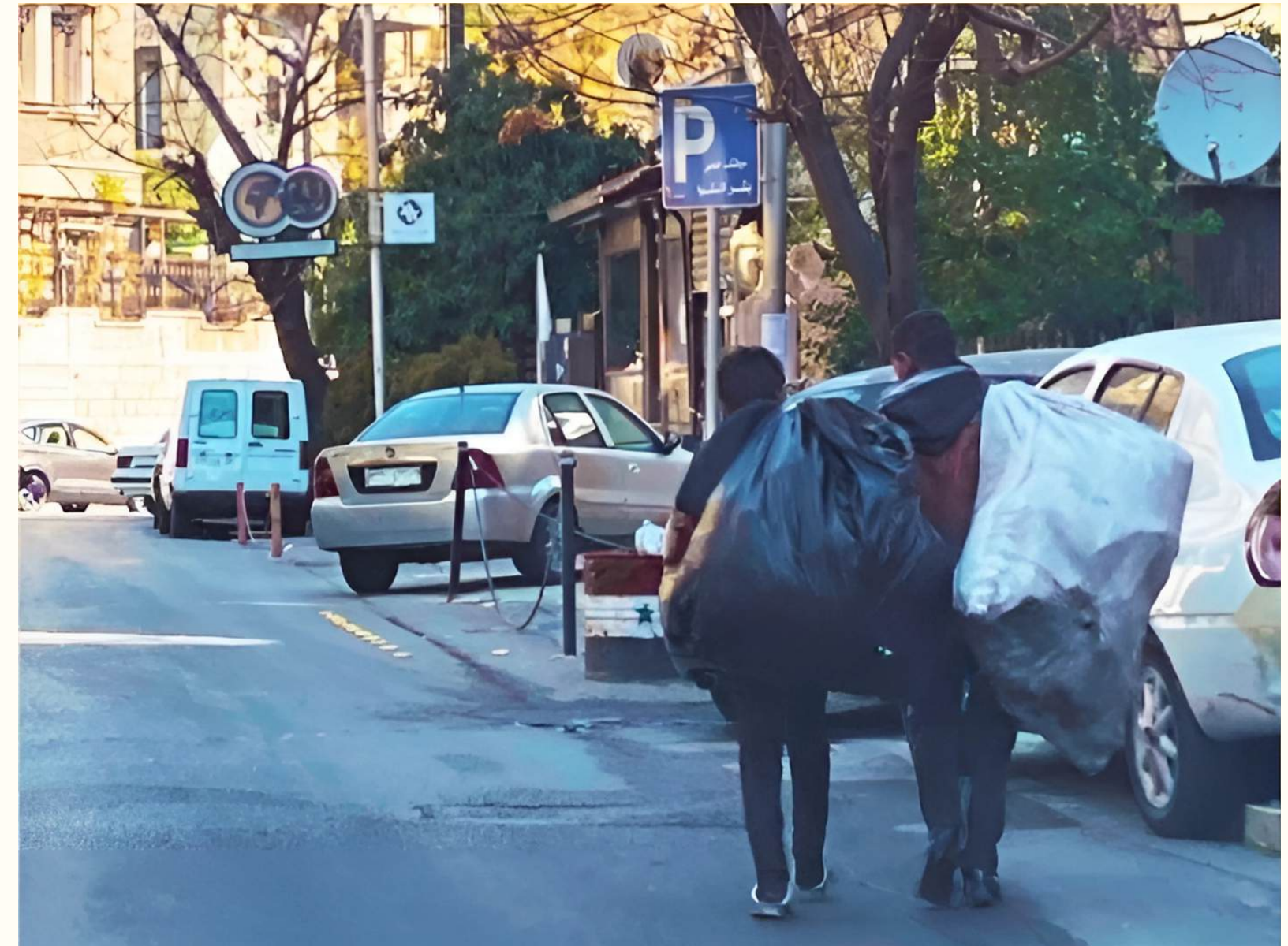


How can we, as artists, become forces of positive change for target social groups, and inspire others to do what is necessary to make a positive difference in their world? How can we help improve the lives of others and contribute to building a better future for all?



How can we deal with the effects of lived conflicts when violence has crept into the souls of children and young people? How do we encourage them to use art as a way to express themselves and give voice to their ideas and feelings which defy words? How do we inspire them to use art to publicly address what interests them?





How can we build a relationship of trust with societies within which we work to be able to tell stories and describe experiences which could help create mutual compassion and understanding between individuals?



In the artistic intervention we suggested as an open space within this project, we worked to be part of actors taking the initiative to seek social change from within crises.





As part of our intervention, we suggested a project that removes that boundaries between different artistic disciplines, explaining and interpreting paintings using other arts in collaboration with professional artists of other disciplines, rendering paintings an extension of the expression of children and young people of their ideas and experiences, and allowing them to understand the experiences of others.



We strived to go beyond our comfort zone to be able to experiment and develop our work as well as achieve our social goal. We wanted to create a balance between the project's objective and maintaining the work's quality with consideration of the diversity of participants and their different capabilities





The most important lesson we may have learned from participating in this open space is how to allow participants to grow from the inside when they recognize the value of self-expression through art, and how to work together to expand their message.



How they can experience the joy of communication and sharing of feelings and imagination by participating in different art forms.



Surviving in Damascus



And how they, and we, can develop artistic mechanisms and tools which enable them to express themselves and their opinions, freely and positively, to be themselves and use their own unique perspective to create something new.



Until they find their voice and their passion by using art to address what interests them, acquire the ability to express their opinions, and see their future through art and imagination.



Surviving in Damascus



It is the power of art for social change. It is challenging and criticizing the status quo, the prevalent narratives and social injustice. It is engaging people in a dialogue and thinking through art and work about social issues.



Reem Al Khatib

is an artist and researcher, as well as being the artistic director of Open Art Space, which enables children and young people to interact with contemporary visual art. She was also a participating artist in the third edition of Create Syria.

Architectural Theatre

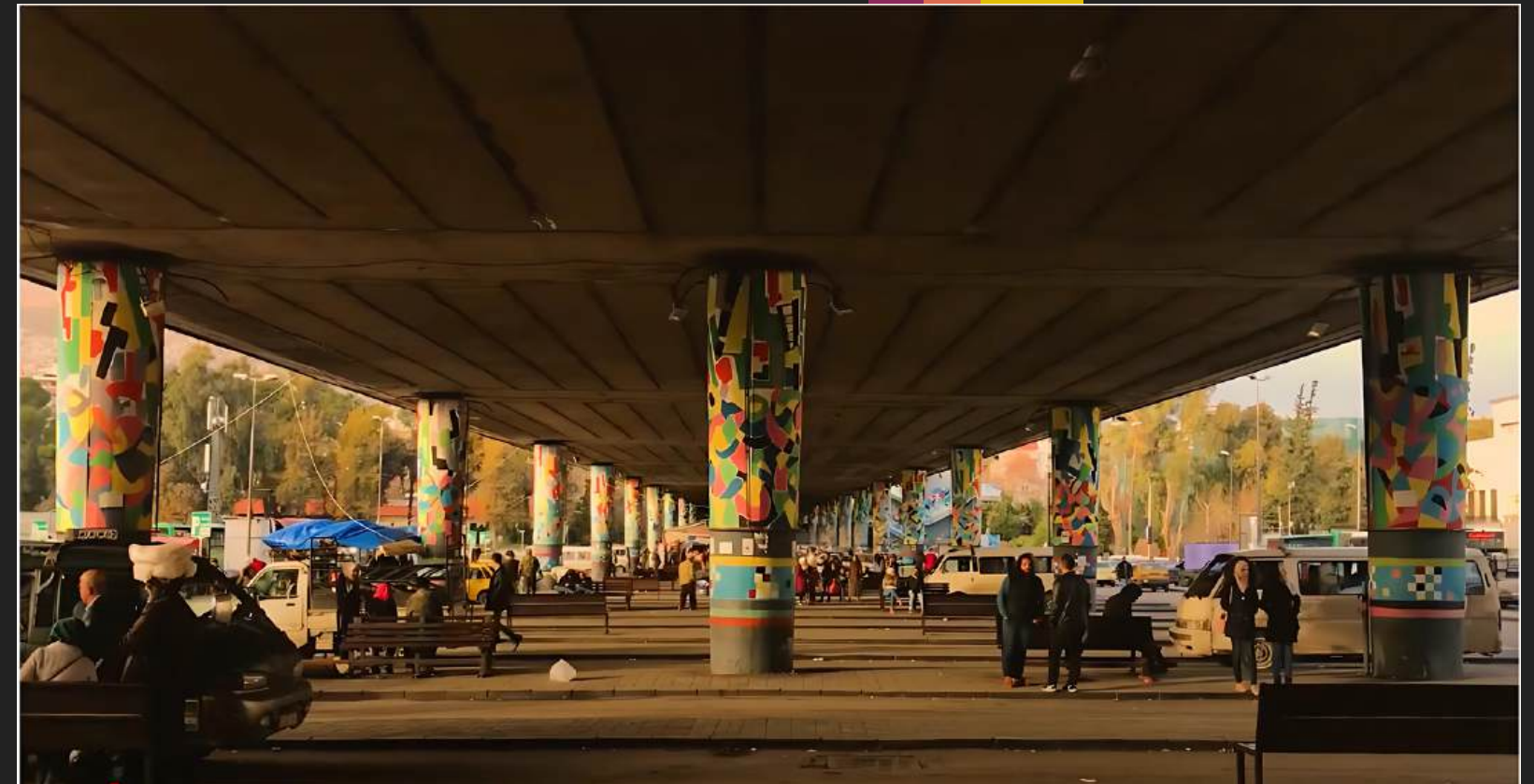
by Iyas Shahin 

My journey with Create Syria began with the project “architectural theatre.” As the title suggests, it was a hybrid between theatre, architecture, and photography. My goal was to explore new intellectual horizons, experiment with interactive approaches around architecture education, and develop new methodologies by thinking about other creative disciplines.

With my colleague Wissam al-Assali, I co-founded **IWLab** to reject the inflexible definition of architecture in Syria.

Architecture graduates are often drowned in administrative hurdles, following up building permissions between town halls and governorate offices. Architecture as an artistic practice within a socioeconomic context was not an option.

That was why we decided to create IWLab. The lab combines cultural programmes, arts, and urban and heritage studies to promote an architectural model which actively negotiates with, and participates in, the city.



Architectural Theatre

Our experiences shape how we think, what we care about and aspire to. As such, the architectural theatre project was founded on two themes. The first was education and the practice of architecture. The second was exploring the city as a case study of a place where our work and experimentation takes place.

The project could be described as a testing course which pushes us to see the city differently, away from usual frameworks; a course to find new ways of documentation and expression in the delicate times of the pandemic, economic inflation and urban planning changes. This requires broadening architectural perspectives and raising society's awareness of the built environment and its components. This is achieved through collaborative work based on exchanging knowledge and highlighting new aspects of behavior in an isolated environment.

The project used an interactive model which allows participation and discussion. The proposed working mechanisms build a safe participatory environment based on mutual trust. **All previous experimentation was built on our belief in art a creative and flexible means of expression, and in participation as an essential method of work.** Within this framework, the project began with open discussions of the working mechanisms and the tools, and included presentations and specialized interventions on architecture, art, and theatre. Additionally, a brief critical study was conducted about observing the city and its slums. The working method included an explanation of narrative, audible and visual documentation mechanisms, and a transformation of this documentation into visual expressions using architectural and artistic means.

Our goals within the experimentation process were developed to focus on the flowing:

Change the ways of architectural thinking and experimenting with interactive ways in architectural education .

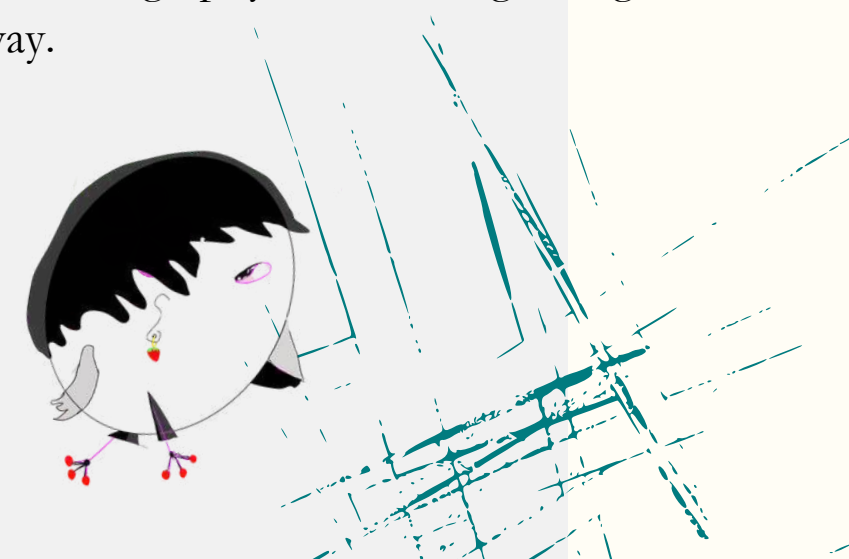
Develop existing and new means of work by thinking about other creative disciplines.

Explore urban and architectural elements of the city on a deeper and more objective level.

Broaden perspectives among participants and coordinators, making the workshop an experience to develop our means to see the city in a dynamic objective way.

Strengthen the participants' role as witnesses, analyzers and searchers for what we avoid seeing in the city.

Develop mechanisms of architectural observation and documentation with a focus on photography and cinematography, without neglecting written documentation and any other innovative way.



Architectural Theatre

The project implementation relied on the following principles:

Participation and Analysis:

A method which contextualizes the project within architecture education. Using this method, the workshop component sought to raise the participants' awareness of the importance of observation and analysis in architecture, especially when working in the slums as a rich case study on all levels (social, urban and architectural), through a discussion of the city's identity and urban living.

Participation and Training:

Through collaboration and dialogue, participants were trained to develop their own tools and techniques, enhance their knowledge and change any stereotypical views. The programme included several trainings on how to listen to the city:

- Theatre training
- Photographic and cinematic training
- Written description training

Means of Expression:

Means of expression are open and unrestricted, based on the work's vision and the final result.



We were interested in providing architects with tools that help them present a new, hybrid, and original narrative about the city. **Exceptionalism in the city needs exceptionalism in listening and storytelling tools.** The project's result is seen through two outcomes. The first is complex, using the common design tools of architecture and theatre, specifically scenography. The second is rooted in the city by showing its elements as if they were characters on the stage. A series of short videos was created, forming interior and exterior landscapes divided into theatrical acts with an architectural scenography, with short narratives looking at the city with architectural eyes.

Within this framework, we tried to examine the marginalized areas and social environment of the city, specifically the so-called 'slums,' which have been under considerable pressure due to inflation and the pandemic.



Architectural Theatre

We faced challenges on multiple levels, notably:

Case study – The city's backstage

By 'backstage,' we are referring to areas which remain in the background and do not take central stage, such as the so-called slums, threatened by the central comprehensive urban planning changes. Being subject to sudden, or even forced, change, these areas need to be under the architectural and social spotlight. Such studies are completely missing from current urban planning in Syria. Barely surveyed, they are only mentioned in reports that justify future urban planning.

The pandemic and inflation – health and economic issues

The pandemic had a significant impact on society's behavior, health and economy. The isolation resulting from the pandemic was worsened by inflation.

Documentation Using cameras in public spaces to film life in the city was a challenge in conservative or frightened communities. Additionally, official security restrictions on filming in public spaces limited the work. Within this context, the question about the ethical boundaries regarding filming communities or individuals for an artistic or social goal merits discussion.

Iyas Shahin

is architect, artist, and lecturer, as well as the co-founder of IWLAB, which merges Architectural and Educational Practices. He was also a participating artist within the third edition of Create Syria.

Under the Bridge

Filming 'Under the Bridge' took place in a major transit spot in Damascus commonly named as Jisr Al Rae's. For more than 30 years, I have been crossing this place, one of the extras in this stage play. Over almost a month, I tried to be an observer of the theatre of this place. The video was shown within an academic workshop focusing on the development of bridge's area, and inspired an open and interesting two-hour dialogue with the students, which encouraged me to invite more people who were interested in participating in the architectural theatre project. The result of this was the filming of the city through a series of short narratives, all available to watch [online](#).





If I Am Here

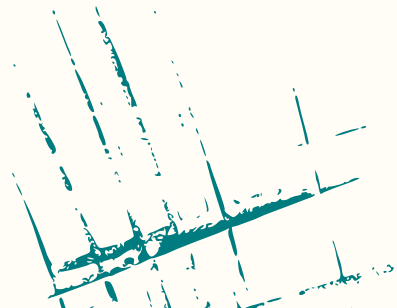
by Raghad Azkoul

Reflecting on the impact that performative practices can have on the emotional and cognitive growth of children residing in spatially marginalized communities, Raghad Azkoul developed a project titled If I Am Here, which explores Theatre practices as a tool to understand and cope with one’s surroundings, specifically children growing up in Jaramana. This was accomplished through joint workshops with architects and young adults, for an exploration of the rural/urban context and the potential social implications of architecture, and the relationship between architecture and social norms.

The first joint workshop was conducted with 5 architects and 7 young participants, and focused on activating an imagined shared space. The second phase of the workshop allowed for the creation of a hypothetical space on the ground where the young participants worked with architects on re-designing their city based on their day-to-day needs, in addition to their vision of future urban spaces which can serve as platforms for social exchange.



Click the image to watch an **interview** with artist **Raghad Azkoul** and mentor **Rafif Al Sajer**, discussing the project If I Am Here, which was developed and implemented within the third edition of Create Syria.



Reimagining Shared Spaces

This is my city... Jaramana

My city, which has folded in the drawers of time its
green memory, and lost too much of its fertility

My war-weary city, flooded by huge numbers that have
turned it into endless noise and frightening forests of
cement trees.

My city replaced its lost memory with a fragile one, filled
with the hustle and bustle and randomness of belonging,
a city turned into chaotic cubes with a distorted
identity.

We tried to listen to the whispers of memory and thus,
entered the fertile world of children... Children who were
forced into silence.

We asked them for a chance to see the city through their
own eyes, to create windows through which we can cross
over into tomorrow.

We asked them to penetrate the fog of days.

To remove the dust off the shoulders of our city, so we
can see what's under the ashes.

To tell us about the miniatures of life that they love.

As for us, the architects, swept away by the busyness of
life to an unknown destination, we have gathered
around the bitterness of reality which erased any
beautiful details that might remain. We'd been unable
to leave any prints that resembled us.

In the midst of our work now,
Children and architects together,
We may be able to restore to this place some of its
beauty.

To conjure up some of its stolen memory.

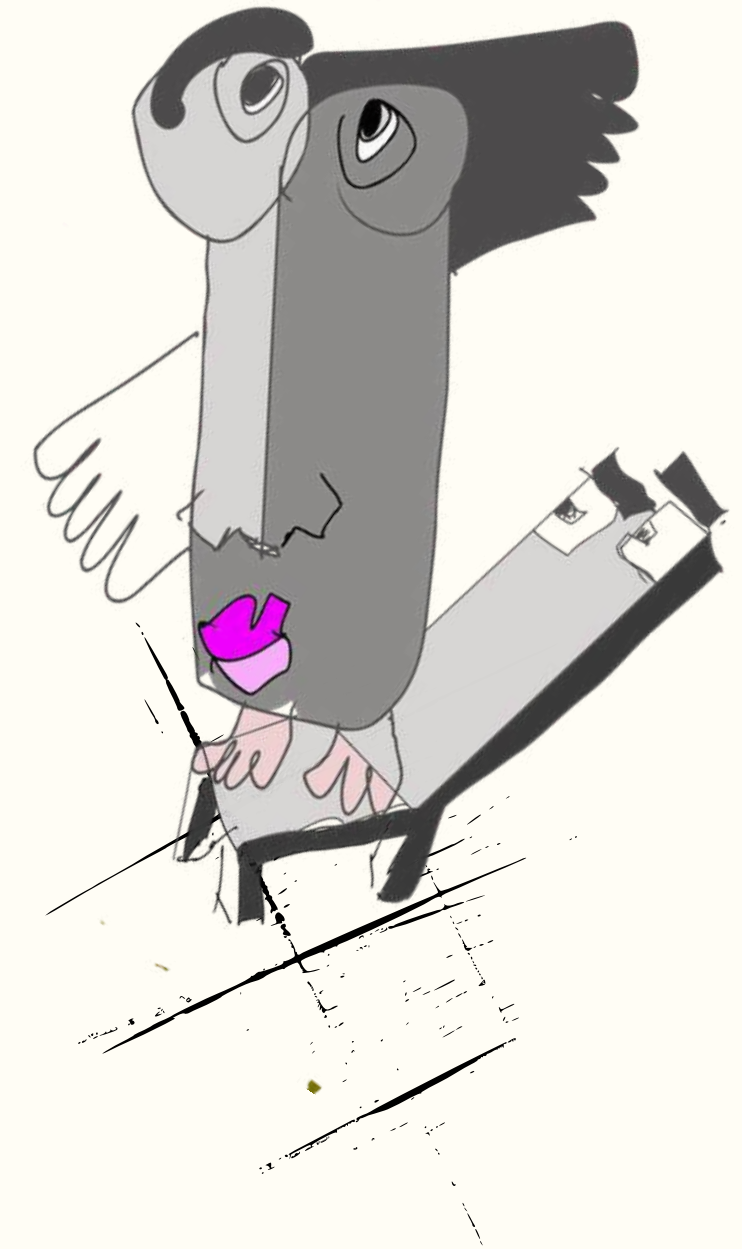
To hold onto beauty amidst the ugly chaos.

Supposing there is no absolute beauty or absolute
ugliness.

We sought to make a mural that can accommodate
many windows and visions, where each window could
reflect what we each saw in our city.

Raghad Azkoul

Raghad Azkoul is an architecture and theatre graduate interested
in creative interventions that bring together theatre and
architecture, specifically around questions of shared spaces and
social conditioning.

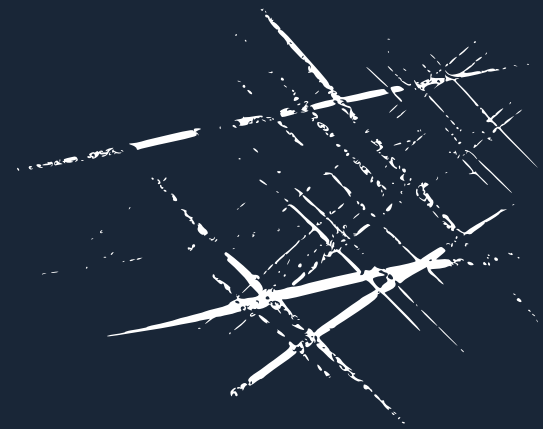


QUESTIONS AROUND ARTS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

- Navigating Arts and Uncertainty
- Looking Forward



NAVIGATING ARTS AND UNCERTAINTY



Navigating Arts and Uncertainty

Arts and Uncertainty: Designing Creative Interventions in Times of Crisis is a publication targeting artists - both as individuals and groups - directly involved in social change. The toolkit, designed by **Rana Yazaji**, consists of theoretical and practical content, in addition to a number of case studies, all of which were gathered to benefit artists at the level of practical experience first, as well as in their involvement in wider cultural discussions. The content is also designed to promote freedom of expression and enhance community-level creative projects, so that the latter can play their natural roles in influencing decision-makers and enhancing the legitimate presence of art in daily life.

It was important for the toolkit not impose an “appropriate” size for initiatives or creative interventions, as there are small initiatives (in terms of resources) with a limited scope (geographically) that create great impact within their social and cultural contexts; similarly, there are international interventions that maintain their effectiveness on wider geographical scales and for longer periods of time.



After all, growth and expansion do not necessarily reflect capacity. There are many initiatives that take the clear-cut decision to remain working at a local level as part of a cultural context that they actually care about – by focusing in this way, they are able to grow within their specific contexts through direct interaction with them. In general, the toolkit targets artistic interventions that require direct physical engagement with communities or which are based on training, rather than exclusively digital interventions. It supports this work through the inclusion of:

- 1- A “course of action” or working approach for those who wish to implement participatory art projects within communities. This was designed based on the accumulation and analysis of many creative experiences in complex cultural and social contexts.
- 2- A range of tools and mechanisms to help artists navigate this course, allowing them to test different approaches in designing and implementing their creative initiatives.
- 3- Various creative experiences from Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt, Algeria, Mauritania, the United Kingdom and France.





In parallel to the launch of the toolkit in 2021, Ettijahat organized a **webinar** in collaboration with speakers **Rana Yazaji, Sondos Shabayek, Rama Haseh, Mohammad Al Attar, Dan Boyden, and Laila Hourani**. This event aimed to promote dialogue and discussion about arts work with communities amidst current global challenges - ranging from the pandemic to artistic and economic marginalization, as well as supporting programmes like Create Syria within that scope.

Looking Forward

by Dan Boyden



Photo by **Basma Baydoun** during a visit to Belfast for the Peace and Beyond programme marking the 25th anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement

During the height of the pandemic, that strange period of shared global stasis that forced the hand of many to develop new ways of collaborating and connecting, I was talking on an online panel with Syrian cultural strategist Rana Yajazi. Rana drove the development of the [Arts and Uncertainty toolkit](#) we worked on for Create Syria. I was reflecting on the role of The Change Collective (TCC), the organization I ran for almost a decade and the ‘lead UK partner’ on the Create Syria programme: ‘...at TCC we’re deeply uninterested in any role as ‘experts in a particular field’ – we need to interrogate that, it’s loaded and needs to be unpacked.

This whole partnership has been an opportunity to develop relationships with people who are the experts in navigating fragile environments, whilst also being able to create new work and build new networks within that’.

Soon after we had worked on the Create Syria programme, TCC slowed down. It eventually slowed down so much that the decision was made to let the fire go out and see what would come from the embers. As I began to explore possible future vehicles of travel, I reached out to Chloe Osbourne from TCC, who was doing the same.



As we talked, questions surfaced like itches that needed to be scratched;

- What should the role of the UK practitioner, or UK-based organization, be in international arts and social change collaborations?
- Is sustainable and reciprocal international collaboration really possible or are the inherited dynamics, both visible and invisible, too much of an obstacle?
- Are these problematic narratives too entangled and entrenched?

Chloe and I were trying to better understand whether it's possible to really challenge the traditional western-centric models of international collaboration that we would often encounter. We imagined a space for new work between artists who are working locally and connecting globally, a space that could reach across cultures and sit somewhere between the artist, the community and the more formal institutions they rub shoulders with.

As we move into the second year of the [Project AWE](#) (Artists with Elbows) experiment, we're already learning lots about how the murmurs and echoes of the very dynamics we're looking to disrupt, can unintentionally play out within the organization. With collaborators in Sudan, Ethiopia, Lebanon, South Africa, Japan and across the UK, we're reminded regularly of the tensions inherent in this kind of work; the competing needs and expectations of the funders we're answering to and the artists we're collaborating with, the need for more locally driven conversations where people can be honest with each other without having to single themselves out. We know that we haven't got it quite right yet, but some of the challenges we've face have become useful indicators, and the scale of the job required to create sustainable change within large scale international institutions is clearer than ever, as is the resolve and determination to value the role of the artist, and of a collaborative approach at every stage of the process.

In the meantime, we're continuing to try out different ways into these challenges, and Meqaqar.Live is our most recent iteration. Meqaqar - from the amharic word meaning chasm - invites institutions to sit in a space of (re)thinking some of the problematic narratives that inform their work. The invitation comes in the form of an applied exploration, rather than intellectual or abstract consideration. A team of international artists based in the UK and Sub-Saharan Africa have built an **evolving digital landscape** which holds dissonance alongside juxtaposition; a land where different knowledge systems co-exist without hierarchy.

"Artists determine the possible, governments determine the probable. And if you [artists] don't work to help us really find what this world must look like, what this world must feel like, must sound like, then we're not going to make it." Prime Minister Mia Mottley of Barbados at this week's [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Pavilion](#).



Dan Boyden

is a theatre practitioner, consultant, and trainer, designing and delivering creative projects, often with marginalized groups and communities, in the U.K and Internationally. He is the co-founder and co-director of project AWE, The World From My Window, and was the director of The Change Collective.

CREATE SYRIA

2015-2023



SA Space to Explore Arts
and Social Change.
Questions around Social
Arts Practices in a
(Dis)connected World

www.ettijahat.org

