

SOLIDARITY LOOM

Weaving a Global Network of Engaged Creatives

in a world of rising authoritarianism

virtual series January-June 2026

ARTISTS AT RISK

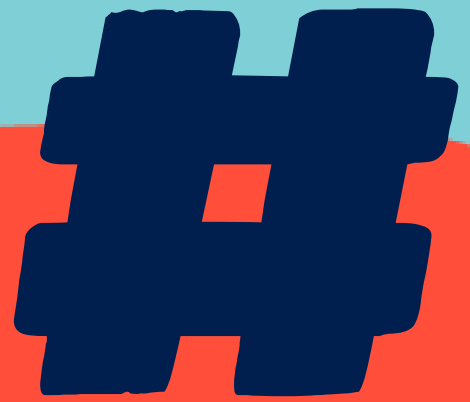
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PRE PORT

May 2026

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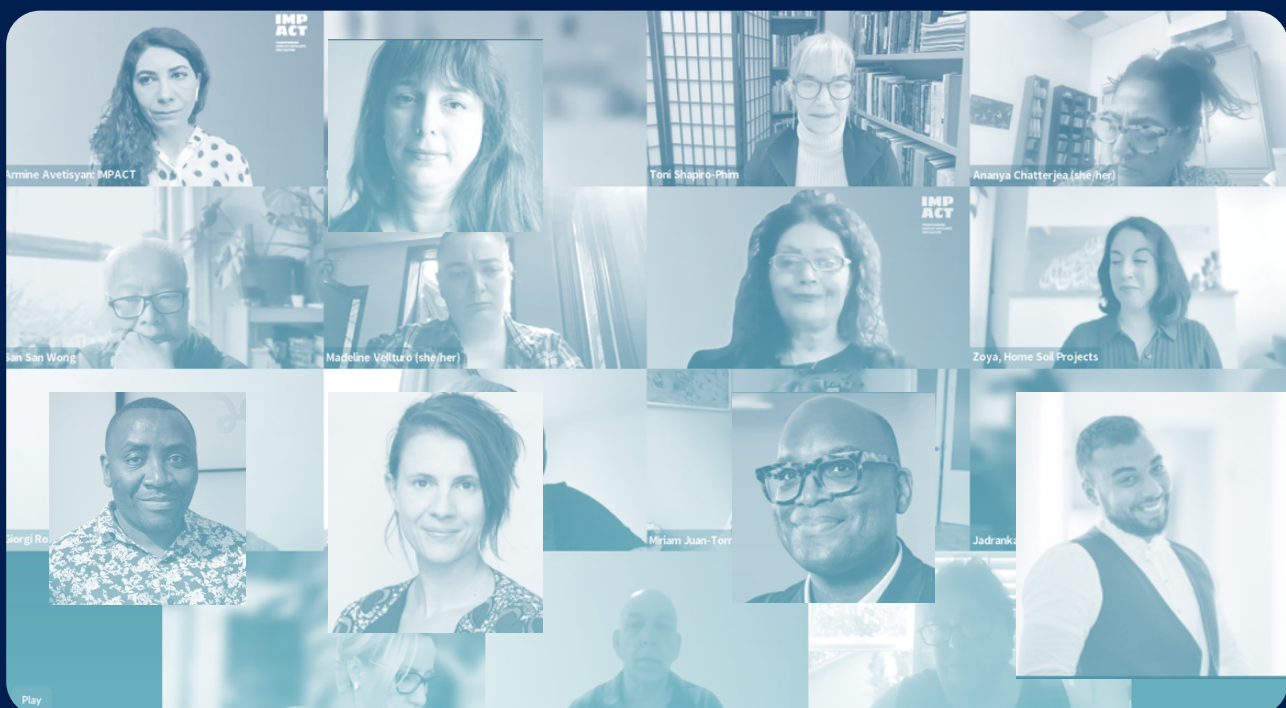


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INTRODUCTION

The fourth session of the series, co-convened by IMPACT, Artists at Risk Connections and the Program in Peacebuilding and the Arts, explored the growing pressures facing artists, cultural workers, and activists in an era of democratic erosion and rising authoritarianism. Facilitated by Zoya Sardashti (Home Soil Project), the conversation brought together artists and representatives of advocacy and funding institutions working for artists protection.

Drawing on experiences from Cuba, the United States, Palestine, and beyond, speakers examined how censorship, transnational repression, economic precarity, and attacks on cultural, academic, and civic freedoms are reshaping the landscape for artists worldwide. At the same time, the session highlighted the vital role of art in fostering critical reflection, collective imagination, solidarity, and resistance. Through presentations, dialogue, and participant reflections, the discussion explored both the challenges facing artists today and the support structures, alliances, and forms of collective action needed to sustain creative practice and protect artistic freedom.



“Artists at Risk”

In Numbers

PRESENTERS



REGIONS



PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS



REGISTERED



COUNTRIES



NEW TO IMPACT



PARTICIPATED



--> PART 1: PRESSURES & RISKS

- **Where in your work do you perceive the greatest pressures or risks today?**
- **How have these evolved in the current global context?**

TANIA BRUGUERA

Contemporary artist, activist, and cultural strategist

1. DOUBLE CENSORSHIP: REPRESSION DOES NOT END IN EXILE

- Activists and artists from authoritarian contexts increasingly face repression both inside and outside their home countries.
- Authoritarian governments extend their influence internationally through networks that pressure cultural institutions, media outlets, publishers, and artistic platforms.
- Exile does not necessarily guarantee freedom of expression or protection from state interference.
- Independent artistic and activist work can be blocked internationally through informal political pressure and influence campaigns.



2. POLITICAL LABELS AND THE SILENCING OF COMPLEXITY

- Criticism of authoritarian governments is often interpreted through rigid ideological frameworks.
- Activists are frequently assigned political identities or agendas that do not reflect their lived experiences.
- Potential allies may dismiss or silence activists when their testimonies do not align with broader political narratives.
- Personal experiences are often instrumentalized for political purposes rather than genuinely heard and understood.

“We are suffering a double censorship.”

“The personal experience versus the political utility of a cause sometimes is in contradiction.”

--Tania Bruguera --

TANIA BRUGUERA

3. UNEQUAL ACCESS TO DECISION-MAKING SPACES

- Artists and civil society actors often have less influence than government representatives in international political forums.
- Activists frequently participate in these spaces at significant personal risk, including threats to family members and restrictions on their ability to return home.
- Despite the risks they take, their perspectives are often given less legitimacy or weight in policy discussions.
- Existing international structures continue to privilege state actors over civic voices.

“We need to understand that people are ignorant of our local situation, wherever we are.”

“It also feels that international news outlets only speak about places when it is important to the United States.”

--Tania Bruguera --

4. MEDIA VISIBILITY AS PROTECTION

- International media attention can provide a degree of protection for activists working under repressive regimes.
- Visibility may discourage governments from targeting activists by increasing public scrutiny.
- Many struggles remain invisible because international media often focus only on contexts that align with geopolitical interests.
- Lack of coverage can leave activists isolated and more vulnerable.

5. THE NEED FOR CONTEXTUALIZED REPORTING

- International reporting often focuses on isolated events rather than the longer histories and conditions that produce them.
- Without context, audiences struggle to understand the causes and significance of protests and civic resistance.
- Ongoing grassroots mobilization is frequently overlooked in favor of episodic or geopolitically driven news coverage.
- More contextualized journalism is needed to accurately represent the realities of people living under authoritarian rule.





Displacement (Destierro), 1998-2003.



The Burden of Guilt, 1997-99.



Tribute to Ana Mendieta, 1986-1996.



Monument to New Immigrants, 2017.

Tania Bruguera's Art

JULIE TRÉBAULT

Artists at Risk Connections (ARC)

1. THE GLOBALIZATION OF REPRESSION

- Repression and transnational intimidation are increasingly crossing borders, with authoritarian governments extending their reach into democratic societies.
- Artists, cultural workers, and human rights defenders face threats not only from their home governments but also from surveillance, intimidation, and influence networks operating internationally.
- Protecting dissenting voices requires recognizing how dominant political narratives shape who is heard and who is marginalized.

2. THE NORMALIZATION OF FEAR BEFORE CENSORSHIP

- The greatest threat today is often not direct censorship but the anticipation of consequences before censorship occurs.
- Artists increasingly self-censor out of concern that their work may jeopardize funding, employment, immigration status, institutional support, or family safety.
- Fear becomes normalized, creating a "chilling effect" long before any formal restrictions are imposed.
- These dynamics are increasingly visible even in countries with strong democratic traditions and legal protections.

3. INSTITUTIONAL HESITATION AND INFORMAL CENSORSHIP

- Many artists report that no one explicitly tells them not to create or present their work.
- Instead, institutions, venues, museums, and collaborators become hesitant, request revisions, or withdraw support due to political sensitivities.
- These forms of informal censorship can be as restrictive as official bans, while remaining harder to identify and challenge.



“The greatest risk we see right now is not only censorship itself, it’s really the normalization of fear before censorship even happens.”

“No one explicitly told me not to do the project. But everyone around me became very nervous.”

-- Julie Trébault --

4. POLARIZATION, IDENTITY, AND DIGITAL HARASSMENT

- Nationalist politics, anti-immigrant sentiment, anti-LGBTQ rhetoric, and attacks on racial justice movements are increasingly interconnected across countries.
- Digital platforms accelerate the spread of these narratives and amplify coordinated harassment campaigns.
- Artists can quickly become targets of global backlash, regardless of where they are based or where their work is presented.
- Risks increasingly emerge at the intersection of artistic expression and personal identity.

5. ARTISTS AT RISK IN DEMOCRATIC CONTEXTS

- ARC's emerging research suggests that threats to artistic freedom are not limited to authoritarian settings.
- Early findings from a national safety survey of U.S.-based artists indicate:
 - 40% reported feeling at risk because of their artistic work.
 - 48% reported feeling at risk because of their identity.
- These findings suggest that artists face pressure both because of what they create and because of who they are.

6. FROM INDIVIDUAL CASES TO A SYSTEMIC ISSUE

- Artistic freedom is increasingly constrained by political, institutional, and financial pressures rather than solely by legal restrictions.
- Artists are often among the first groups to experience broader political and social pressures.
- Risks facing artists should be understood as systemic challenges rather than isolated individual cases.
- Sustained support structures are needed to ensure artists are not left to navigate these pressures alone.

“Artists are not only under pressure because of what they create, but because of who they are.”

-- Julie Trébault --

ALVIN STARKS

Borealis Philanthropy

1. LIVING THROUGH A POLYCRISIS

- The current moment is a “polycrisis” — multiple interconnected crises unfolding simultaneously across political, social, economic, cultural, and democratic spheres.
- These overlapping pressures create a sense of instability and uncertainty that transcends national borders.
- Many struggles that once appeared local are increasingly interconnected, generating shared experiences of vulnerability and solidarity across contexts.
- Traditional safeguards and institutions that people once relied upon are weakening, creating new forms of insecurity.

2. BELONGING AS A POLITICAL QUESTION

- Current political struggles are fundamentally about belonging: who is recognized as fully human, who is protected, and who is granted access to rights and freedom.
- Belonging is not simply a matter of inclusion or community; it is deeply tied to power, citizenship, and nation-building.
- He described contemporary anti-democratic movements as efforts to restrict equality and redefine who belongs within society.

3. THE RISKS CARRIED BY THOSE WHO DEFEND JUSTICE

- In an era marked by attacks on equality and democratic values, the greatest risks are increasingly borne by those committed to justice, truth, empathy, and human rights.
- Artists, educators, activists, and cultural workers often become targets because they challenge exclusionary narratives and advocate for more inclusive visions of society.
- The pressures described by previous speakers are not isolated incidents but part of a broader struggle over democratic values.



“There’s something going on that is somehow stretching our passports virtually and politically.”

“The question is really around who belongs in our society. Who has access to be free? Who gets taken care of?”

-- alvin starks --

ALVIN STARKS

4. WHY ART, HISTORY, AND ACADEMIA ARE UNDER ATTACK

- Attacks on education, historical inquiry, and cultural institutions stem from their ability to expand people's understanding beyond their immediate experiences.
- Art and history encourage critical reflection, empathy, and engagement with difficult truths, making them powerful sites of resistance.
- Efforts to censor history are often attempts to control public understanding of the past and limit possibilities for imagining alternative futures.
- The purpose of history is not comfort but learning, accountability, and transformation.

5. ART AS A SITE OF POLITICAL STRUGGLE

- Art is never neutral; it shapes narratives, identities, and public memory.
- Throughout history, systems of domination and colonization have sought to control culture because culture is where communities define themselves and tell stories about who belongs.
- Artistic expression serves as a space where empathy, memory, and collective imagination can flourish.
- Because of this power, art often becomes a target during periods of authoritarianism and social conflict.

6. ARTISTS AS ARCHITECTS OF SOCIAL CHANGE

- Social and political movements are often preceded and shaped by cultural movements.
- Starks pointed to the relationship between the Harlem Renaissance and the U.S. Civil Rights Movement as an example of how artistic imagination helps lay the groundwork for political transformation.
- Art enables people to envision alternative futures and imagine worlds grounded in greater justice and equality.
- Cultural work plays a critical role in generating the narratives and aspirations that sustain social movements.

7. MONUMENTS, MEMORY, AND COMPETING NARRATIVES

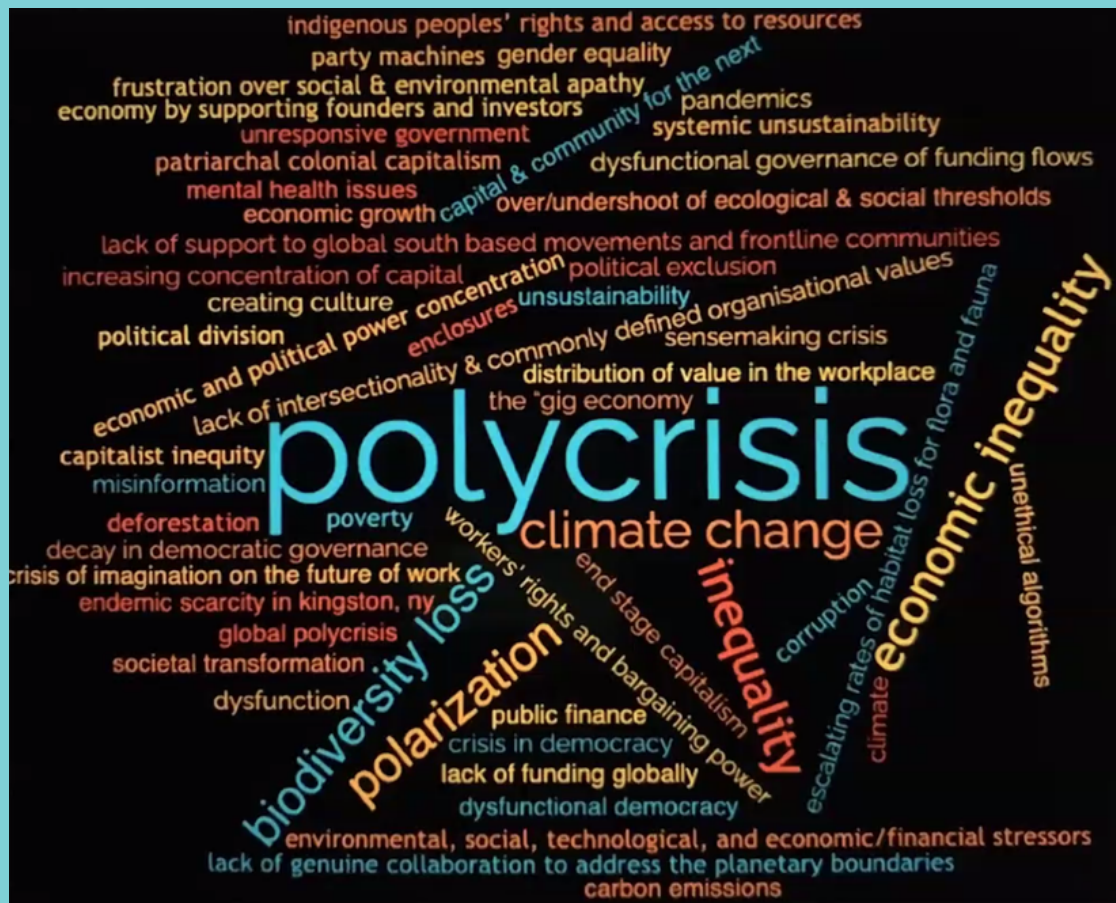
- Public monuments and cultural symbols are not neutral artifacts; they communicate particular versions of history and reinforce social hierarchies.
- Starks highlighted debates over Confederate monuments in the United States as examples of how art and public memory become sites of political contestation.
- The struggle over monuments reflects broader battles over race, belonging, historical interpretation, and national identity.
- Artists can challenge dominant narratives by reinterpreting, transforming, or reclaiming cultural symbols.

7. MONUMENTS, MEMORY, AND COMPETING NARRATIVES

- Artists increasingly face harassment, threats, and security concerns because of the content of their work.
- Cultural institutions and funders are seeing growing demand for safety and protection mechanisms for artists whose work challenges dominant political narratives.
- Similar patterns are emerging for journalists and other public truth-tellers.
- These threats demonstrate the increasingly precarious environment in which artists and cultural workers operate.

**“History is not there
to make you feel
comfortable.”**

-- alvin starks --



Kara Walker's reimagined Confederate monument, discussed by alvin, exemplifies the power of art to challenge dominant narratives and reframe public memory. By transforming a symbol of Confederate authority into a fragmented sculpture, Walker invites reflection on history, belonging, racial hierarchy, and the role of cultural institutions in confronting authoritarian and exclusionary legacies.



--➔ PART 2: SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT & SOLIDARITY

- What would need to change in current systems of support and protection to meaningfully strengthen solidarity and response?

--➔ PART 3: PROGRESS & INNOVATION

- Where are you seeing the most promising progress or innovation?
- What could be scaled or replicated?

TANIA BRUGUERA

Contemporary artist, activist, and cultural strategist

1. ARTISTS AS ESSENTIAL CIVIC ACTORS

- Tania drew parallels between artists and journalists, arguing that both play vital public-interest roles and face increasing risks when challenging power.
- She recalled efforts at the United Nations to establish special protections for artists at risk, similar to those available for journalists.
- She challenged narrow perceptions of artists as producers of cultural commodities, emphasizing their role in helping societies reflect on themselves and confront difficult realities.

2. ART CREATES LANGUAGE FOR DIFFICULT TRUTHS

- Art provides a space where individuals and societies can examine themselves, their cultures, and their political realities.
- Artists often give form and language to experiences, questions, and tensions that people may struggle to articulate directly.
- Art can create enough distance and safety for difficult conversations to take place.
- Bruguera argued that claims of being “apolitical” are themselves political choices.

2. POLITICAL ART AS ACCOUNTABILITY

- Political art is not simply documenting political events but is actively creating political moments.
- Political art generates situations that invite public engagement and can compel political actors to respond and be accountable.
- Artists must continually assess when participation in institutions advances their values and when refusal becomes a political act in itself.
- Artistic practice carries consequences and responsibilities that extend beyond representation.



“What we do... is to create a space where you can look at yourself.”

“Doing political art is to generate a political moment.”

“Art survived all dictatorships.”

--Tania Bruguera --

TANIA BRUGUERA

3. ART ENDURES BEYOND REPRESSION

- Reflecting on her experiences of imprisonment in Cuba, Bruguera offered a message of resilience and hope.
- She emphasized that while political systems rise and fall, artistic expression persists.
- The endurance of art provides a long-term perspective in moments of repression and uncertainty.

4. THE LIMITS PLACED ON EXILED VOICES

- Tania highlighted a common expectation placed on exiled artists and activists: they are encouraged to criticize the regimes they fled but discouraged from applying the same critical analysis to their new contexts.
- She argued that this limits the contributions of people who have lived experience confronting authoritarianism.
- Exiled artists often possess valuable knowledge about the warning signs of democratic erosion, yet may lack the protection or legitimacy to speak openly about similar developments in their host countries.
- This dynamic risks reducing exiled individuals to symbols rather than recognizing them as full political actors.

5. CONTINUING VULNERABILITY IN EXILE

- Exile does not necessarily eliminate risk.
- Immigration status, legal processes, and concerns about personal security can shape what artists feel able to say publicly, even in democratic societies.
- Tania reflected on moments when she felt compelled to balance artistic freedom with concerns about her own legal and personal circumstances.

6. THE IMPORTANCE OF HUMAN CONNECTION AND SOLIDARITY

- Tania emphasized the value of in-person gatherings as spaces where people can understand the human experiences behind artistic and political work.
- Face-to-face encounters create opportunities for empathy, relationship-building, and deeper forms of solidarity that are difficult to achieve through publications, artworks, or online interactions alone.
- She encouraged creating more spaces where artists, activists, and cultural workers can learn from one another's experiences directly.



JULIE TRÉBAULT

Artists at Risk Connection (ARC)

1. THE ABSENCE OF INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION FOR ARTISTS

- Unlike journalists, artists do not benefit from dedicated international protection mechanisms despite facing many of the same risks.
- Strengthening recognition and protection for artists within international human rights frameworks remains an important unmet need.
- Existing international institutions are imperfect but continue to provide essential accountability mechanisms and avenues for advocacy.

2. A FRAGMENTED SUPPORT SYSTEM

- Artists at Risk Connection receives an average of 15 urgent assistance requests per week, illustrating the scale and urgency of need.
- Existing support systems for artists are often fragmented, under-resourced, and difficult to navigate.
- While many organizations provide legal aid, emergency funding, relocation support, and other services, these efforts remain largely siloed and insufficient to meet growing demand.
- Artists frequently struggle to identify where to turn for support when facing threats.

3. FROM CRISIS RESPONSE TO PREPAREDNESS

- The field needs to move beyond reactive emergency responses toward a culture of preparedness and prevention.
- Safety planning, risk assessment, and protection resources should be available to artists before threats escalate.
- ARC's development of a safety guide for artists emerged from recognizing that, unlike journalists, artists often lack access to practical protection tools.
- Preparedness can significantly improve artists' ability to access support and navigate periods of heightened risk.



***“Artistic freedom,
press freedom,
academic freedom.”***

-- Julie Trébault --

MAJED SAWALHA

The Palestinian House of Friendship

1. ART AS FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY

- Majed described art as a fundamental expression of freedom, particularly in contexts marked by political repression and social instability.
- Supporting artists requires helping them communicate their messages effectively while minimizing unnecessary risks.
- He emphasized the importance of political awareness and strategic thinking, enabling artists to remain impactful without exposing themselves to avoidable persecution.
- Artistic expression and personal safety must be approached together rather than as separate concerns.

2. STRENGTHENING ARTISTS THROUGH POLITICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL EDUCATION

- His work focuses on helping artists better understand their political environment and the risks associated with their practice.
- Artists are encouraged to think strategically about their goals and how to achieve them safely and effectively.
- Those with experience navigating repression have a responsibility to mentor and educate emerging artists.
- Building resilience requires both creative development and practical knowledge.

3. THE ECONOMIC CRISIS FACING ARTISTS

- Economic hardship has become a major barrier to artistic practice in Palestine.
- Many artists struggle to continue their work because of poverty, lack of resources, and limited opportunities for income generation.
- Majed estimated that a significant portion of artistic capacity has been lost as artists are forced to prioritize basic survival.
- Supporting artists therefore requires addressing financial sustainability alongside creative development.



“No one understands an artist more than an artist.”

“Through art and through what we are trying to do, we also try to make people feel.”

-- Majed Sawalha -

4. COMMUNITY AS A FORM OF PROTECTION

- Isolation, misunderstanding, and loneliness are recurring experiences for many artists.
- The Palestinian House of Friendship has focused on building networks of peer support, connection, and mutual recognition.
- Artists often find strength and validation through relationships with others who share similar experiences.
- Community-building serves both emotional and practical functions, helping artists sustain their work under difficult conditions.

5. THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF INTERNATIONAL CONNECTIONS

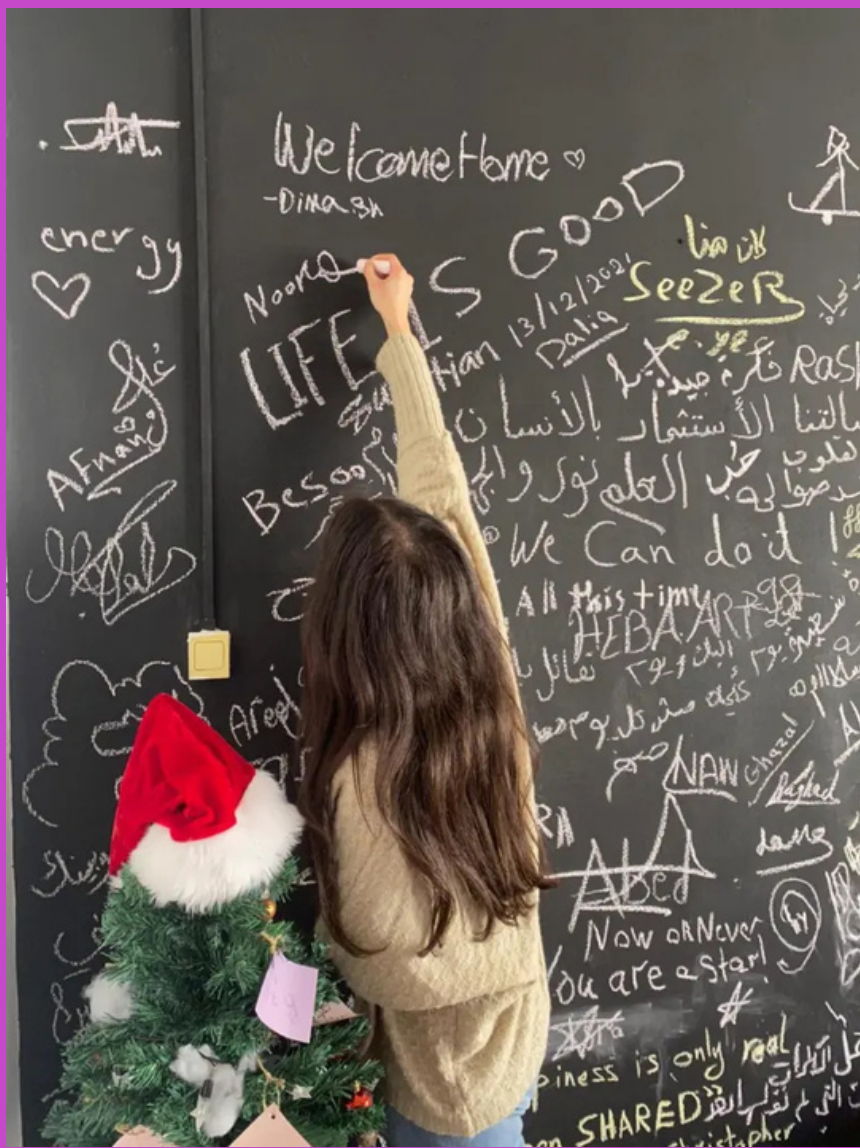
- Connecting local artists with international peers has created new opportunities for learning, collaboration, and artistic growth.
- Exposure to different contexts helps artists expand their horizons while reducing feelings of isolation.
- International exchanges have strengthened both artistic practice and confidence among participating artists.
- Cross-border solidarity can play a significant role in sustaining creative communities under pressure.

6. A HOLISTIC MODEL OF SUPPORT

- Artists require comprehensive support rather than isolated interventions.
- Effective support includes:
 - Financial assistance
 - Psychological support
 - Political education
 - Safe spaces for gathering and collaboration
 - Professional development opportunities
 - Access to creative infrastructure and resources
- Sustaining artistic communities requires attending to the full range of artists' needs.

7. ART AS HEALING AMID ONGOING TRAUMA

- Majed distinguished between post-traumatic stress and what he described as living under continuous traumatic stress.
- In contexts of ongoing conflict and instability, many people never have the opportunity to recover from trauma before facing new crises.
- Art can help people reconnect with their emotions, regain a sense of normality, and restore feelings of warmth, connection, and humanity.
- Supporting artists therefore contributes not only to cultural expression but also to individual and collective wellbeing.



Images from The Palestinian House of Friendship's Work

KEY INSIGHTS FROM Q&A

ECONOMIC PRESSURES THREATEN CULTURAL LIFE

- Participants highlighted economic hardship as a major threat to artists and cultural communities.
- In Haiti, the collapse of local arts markets and external aid interventions were described as contributing to the devaluation of artistic work.
- Economic precarity can be as damaging as censorship, forcing artists out of their practice.

LONG-TERM CHANGE REQUIRES LONG-TERM SUPPORT

- Meaningful social and cultural change takes years of sustained effort.
- Participants stressed the need for multi-year funding and support rather than short-term project-based interventions.
- Current funding models often struggle to accommodate the realities of long-term civic and cultural work.

GREATER FLEXIBILITY IS NEEDED

- Artists and organizations often adapt their work to fit funder priorities rather than community needs.
- Participants called for more flexible funding that can support experimental, emerging, and politically sensitive initiatives.
- More arts funding needs to be directed civic education, democratic participation, and community engagement.

SOLIDARITY OFFERS HOPE

- Participants pointed to growing examples of artistic solidarity and collective action in response to censorship and injustice.
- Working collectively was seen as a powerful counterbalance to isolation and repression.

ARTISTS NEED GREATER RECOGNITION AND SUPPORT

- Artists were described as essential contributors to justice, democracy, and social change.
- Participants called for stronger investment in artists and cultural workers and for reducing dependence on precarious funding systems.

COMMUNITIES OF CARE MATTER

- Building networks where artists can share resources, opportunities, challenges, and support was identified as a key strategy for resilience.
- Initiatives such as IMPACT's Home of Hope were highlighted as spaces that foster connection and solidarity across contexts.

CROSS-CUTTING THEMES AND TAKEAWAYS

AUTHORITARIANISM IS INCREASINGLY TRANSNATIONAL

Repression, surveillance, censorship, and disinformation now extend beyond national borders, affecting artists and activists in exile as well as those working within authoritarian contexts.

FEAR AND SELF-CENSORSHIP ARE BECOMING NORMALIZED

Participants highlighted how political pressure, institutional caution, and public backlash often silence artists before formal censorship occurs.

ART IS A SPACE FOR ACCOUNTABILITY AND IMAGINATION

Beyond documenting injustice, artistic practice creates opportunities to question dominant narratives, confront difficult histories, and imagine alternative futures.

ARTISTS ARE AMONG THE FIRST TO ABSORB POLITICAL PRESSURES

Attacks on artistic freedom were discussed alongside growing threats to academic freedom, press freedom, and civic participation more broadly.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS REMAIN FRAGMENTED AND UNDER-RESOURCED

Artists at risk often face challenges accessing legal, financial, psychological, and professional support, underscoring the need for stronger infrastructures of care.

ECONOMIC PRECARIETY IS A CRITICAL BUT OFTEN OVERLOOKED THREAT

Financial instability, shrinking cultural resources, and misaligned funding structures can undermine artistic practice as profoundly as direct repression.

LONG-TERM CHANGE REQUIRES LONG-TERM COMMITMENT.

Participants emphasized that cultural and civic transformation unfolds over years and requires sustained investment, flexibility, and patience.

HOPE RESIDES IN COLLECTIVE ACTION

Despite escalating pressures, examples of cross-sector collaboration, artistic solidarity, and movement-building pointed to the continued power of artists to resist, reimagine, and create change.

COMMUNITY AND SOLIDARITY ARE ESSENTIAL FORMS OF PROTECTION

Peer networks, international exchanges, and collective action help reduce isolation, strengthen resilience, and amplify artists' voices.

FROM SOLIDARITY TO INSTITUTIONAL PROTECTION

Participants explored the idea of developing new international mechanisms for protecting artists at risk, including the possibility of an International Court for Artists dedicated to safeguarding artistic freedom and cultural rights.

ABOUT IMPACT

IMPACT is a diverse global organization, advocating for arts and culture to transform conflict and build more creative and just societies. IMPACT is governed by a diverse and dynamic board comprised of artists, scholars and practitioners in the field of arts, culture and conflict transformation from around the globe, including Argentina, Belgium, Canada, Israel, Kenya, Japan, Serbia, and the Philippines.



JOIN THE IMPACT COMMUNITY

- [Join the WhatsApp Home of Hope Community by filling out this request form](#)
- [Partner with Us](#): we are looking for like-minded individuals, networks and organizations to work collaboratively with in the space of arts, culture and conflict transformation
- [Take part in our upcoming events](#): sign up to our newsletter to receive news about our in-depth event series on the key themes from IMPACT: Creating Hope Together
- [Join the IMPACT community](#): sign up to our newsletter, follow us on social media: @impactartorg
- [Find out more about our programs](#): read our report and check out the videos on our YouTube channel
- [Donate to IMPACT](#), so that we can support our growing IMPACT community by advocating to policymakers, funders and leaders for arts, culture and conflict transformation
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