
SAFE HAVENS 2021



**A Poetic Summary,
To Not Conclude**

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Introduction

From 2nd to 4th December 2021, the eighth edition of the annual Safe Havens conference took place, gathering over 194 participants from all over the world. With six 'live', physically present editions behind us since 2013, organisers and participants put to use learning from the last two years of pandemic-required online digital conferencing. While nothing compares to human presence, we found that the face-to-face intimacy of a camera or smartphone can still move us, especially when we see the extent to which those living outside of major centres or in difficult conditions make the effort to connect, despite all the odds. The 2021 conference was yet another Safe Haven evolution in creating formats to be ever-more inclusive, in terms of territory, language, context and orientation, not to mention artistic discipline and practice. We hope that this short analytical report of our three days of sharing will convey the openness, the urgency of artists to be with others, the invisible cord that binds us in our solidarity and on our journey to best uphold our belief in the power of art and the strength of each another.



Safe Havens Conference 2021, *Photo: Cronje Martti*

A Foreword from the Majlis at Safe Havens 2021

**Majlis - a council, an assembly, a parliament.
A debate, a hearing, an examination for, by and between artists.**

To fall, standing. To be creative in our resistance. To create joyful resistance. To be the truth, to see the truth and to tell the truth.

There is a dignity that is inherent in each human being, an inherent right as a human being to consciousness, a full, free, sound and living consciousness. This is freedom, the freedom of being under an open sky. It can be described as a state of mind, but it's not only that. (Although that is already a lot...perhaps all that we can hope for.) Artists, those who can be said to be the guarantee of meaning in our lives, claim that right, to dignity, to full and free consciousness, to open skies and open minds. Artists confirm their right to not live in exile, whether external exile from a place or internal exile in a place, in a mind, in a soul.

Are we free?

We have been exiled from freedom. Freedom is a concept that is currently manipulated, compromised, colonised, instrumentalised, hijacked - an appropriated commodity. Appropriated and instrumentalised by what we might see as usual suspects - repressive regimes, dictators, extremists, intolerant masses. A paradox: free speakers suppress others from speaking freely.

But let's be more aware. Be aware of who is on our right and who is on our left. A hegemonic, neoliberal system categorises, classifies, adjudicates what or who is good. It has expectations of who and what we should be. If we – if an artist – does not mould themselves into those expectations, there is a price to pay. Lack of funding perhaps, lack of artistic recognition, lack of accessible spaces in which to imagine, dream, create and produce...art. A withdrawal of any of the resources needed to make art, of freedom itself, no passport, no permissions, no full and free consciousness. Sometimes, no more breath.



And there are those who prop up the dictators with arms, supplies, resources, who then offer us funding for our 'free' artistic expression. Be aware of who is on our right and who is on our left.

Are we free?

'Ne3id w nzid' – Repeat the question, repeat, repeat, be aware and add layers, depth of analysis, people, our colleagues, other contexts, other concepts, other artists. We are expected to work in the mainstream, expected to demonstrate the mainstream, expected to be victims, fetish objects, weak and vulnerable. We are expected to live up to funders' expectations, to satisfy audiences' expectations. We are supposed to be manipulated into fragmentations of conflicting identities, one against the other, my freedom or yours; not both. I efface you with my conscious being, and vice-versa.

NO.



We are not free.

We want to be supported to say what we want to say. We want to reposition ourselves, to be aware of or to redefine our positionality. We need to fight, to resist, to raise the question of ETHICS: "I give my honourable word: I cannot support my freedom only; I must support the freedom of others".

"In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends." [1]

We are not free.

We need to look more deeply at the underlying structures and systems of our time and our world.

We, artists, need to be louder, to have a unified, common voice together with our allies, the activists and advocates, the associations and organisations, the lawyers and others, that will be resplendent with our diverse identities. Censorship is a long arm with no bones; it will always find you. We will not retreat from SOLIDARITY.

'Alone we go fast, but together we go far.' [2]

There are no remedies, there are only strategies. Strategies to create, to address censorship and repression in our creative and activist work, to claim the poetic resistance to what life brings to us. We want to see those with lived experience enter and reform the spaces of hegemonic power and influence. We claim free spaces; we want new words to describe new concepts. Repeat, add, be aware. Use a strategy of non-reaction to avoid being part of the game: withdraw from manipulation, be silent rather than submit, sleep to regain strength for the long walk tomorrow. Use a strategy of subversion to challenge what is imposed: be 'faza', flexible, liquid and clever. Be 'naqsha', original, surprising, extraordinary, something that cannot be taken away.

'No man is an island, entire of itself. Each is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.[3]

Beautiful people, we are the continent.



[1] Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. traced to various events at which he spoke.

[2] Unattributed, but most probably an African proverb.

[3] '... Each man's death diminishes me, for I am involved in mankind. Therefore, ever send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.' Donne, J. (1623) 'Devotions upon Emergent Occasions', 17th Meditation.

Safe Havens: Background, History, Evolution



Yasmine El Baramawy and Per Oddvar Johansen,
Photo: Cronje Martti



Ahmed Tobasi, *Photo: Cronje Martti*

History

The Safe Havens conference grew from a Nordic meeting in 2013 of artists, organisations and institutions interested providing safe, temporary relocation for persecuted, or 'at-risk' artists. Over the years it has grown and evolved, established as a way of sharing knowledge in the area of artists' protection, defence and safety, around the world. With artists as our core, we began to invite lawyers, NGOs, selected policy makers. It grew out of our need to meet each other and understand both one another and our differing contexts. Safe Havens is a way of seeing what's being done and what is lacking, and to collaborate together to fill those gaps.

Methodology

SH's is a work meeting, not only a means of seeing old friends and colleagues. Here, there are no observers, only participants. With artists as our focus and our priority, we meet as workers, researchers, sharers, with no hierarchy; we are all VIPs. At Safe Havens, we talk with each other, not to each other. Safe Havens is a space for artists to connect with other artists, but also organisations and institutions, in order to act. For artists, art is life. We have a lot to offer to organisations. We are not coming to Safe Havens to 'perform trauma', but as potential collaborators, as allies.

Purpose

The purpose of the annual conferences in December is to help us in our painful desire to find a way to do something, even as we know we cannot solve all the problems we are commonly and individually facing. In this sense Safe Havens becomes a 'debate-city' or a 'debate-land' in a world of monologues. To free ourselves from our self-centred positions, and debate the same topics but from different perspectives that we would not, could not see if we were alone. This is the transformative power of active debating - to help us be inspired to create or find new strategies, networks and support. In Safe Havens, the digital format becomes a kind of supporters' forum, with shouts of empowerment and encouragement emerging constantly to the speakers from the chat space. Debate with empowerment; it's a continuous, cyclic process.

Evolution and Expansion

In Safe Havens 2021, the artists are not only demanding but claiming the power. This is the difference. This year Safe Havens collaborated with artist, activist and lawyer Meriam Boussemlmi to initiate the Majlis, the parliament, the discussion, the debate. It's the start of the creation of different forms to ensure inclusion wherein all can speak. Freedom Talks sessions throughout the year act as bridges between our annual Safe Havens gatherings. In the next years, we can envision hybrid conferences. We'll take the best we have discovered from the online conferencing imposed on us due to the pandemic, which is the ability to include so many voices from all around the globe, in intimate shared discussions, in our own languages. But we will also hope to meet live instead of only virtually, which also brings its own value, human physical warmth and presence, the surprise conversation or meeting in the corridor.

Funders also want to be part of these conversations, need to be part of them; they learn so much. Arts and culture is such a small field, development cooperation is too, and artistic freedom is very small; we need to work together and to hear each other. Improvement comes gradually, look at the first Safe Havens, organised by the Swedish Arts Council in 2013 - ten years later, the Swedish Arts Council has funds delegated by SIDA for the Artistic Freedom Fund.



Per Oddvar Johansen and Carlos Catun aka Gato,
Photo: Cronje Martti



Rezan Betula, *Photo: Cronje Martti*

Questions, as we proceed

How can we break out of our bubbles and topics and categories? How do we discuss with those who disagree, who think what we say is controversial? It's a life and death situation for some. Do we also need to sit with our enemies, with non-friends? Do we need to sit with other types of allies such as lawyers, or to debate with politicians? A kind of contradictory debate?

How do we expand? The definition of the artist is also expanding. What can we do to give credibility to the marginalised youth who are also silenced when asking where are the rights of minorities, of women? Leftist progressive voices are also marginalised in some territories or situations, racialised artists are put into a position of confrontation with at-risk artists; there can be competition for recognition and support between established exiled artists and those who are currently more visible in the media and political declarations. In Safe Havens, we need sustained interest, continuation; we need to identify our gaps and dark spots and address them.

We want more conversation with lawyers, about law; how to better use law as a tool. We need immigration lawyers, a platform for attorneys and artists and others, to share relocation tips together.

How do we best support ourselves, one another, all others whose well-being is threatened by the constant pressures, memories, regrets, obligations, aspirations of an artist or an arts worker who has been working to promote freedom, rights, free expression, the full human exercise of the soul?

Advocacy is a critical component, not only direct services. How can we include the law, and advocate to the international regulatory institutions, the United Nations, the European Union? Law is a colonial system designed to protect the powerful and their interests, not to protect the interests of the powerless. It is a powerful but an imperfect tool that ongoing advocacy can change.

How can we maintain our momentum and continue the work following the conference? Participants are proposing working groups that can meet on a regular basis or when there is a need, throughout the year, reporting back to the December conference. They might, for example focus on well-being and mental health, law, advocacy, artists, training, even a strategic unit to plan and develop the SHIFT as it develops further..... A forum could be developed to look at how to sustain cultural projects in conflict areas where the unstable context by its very nature renders projects unsustainable. There is also interest in collective, indigenous groups as differentiated from individual artistic freedom, interest for a group of writers meeting other writers. The call is to work from the ground to the top, with real people having real experience getting together to have sincere talks. The working groups would each need at least one strong person to take the lead and keep the dynamic going.



Omar Samy Gamal, *Photo: Cronje Martti*



from Rezan Betula's performance,
Photo: Cronje Martti



Hamid Sakhizada, *Photo: Cronje Martti*

Critical Themes

Over the course of the three-day conference in December 2021, participants testified to the conditions of artists and their work in the countries of Africa, Asia, Central Asia, Latin America, the Middle East and North Africa, as well as artists from those territories who had relocated, sometimes by choice, but most often not. What follows are vignettes of these discussions.

What are artists doing?

Sometimes practicing their art is the only thing that keeps the artist alive when there is no way out, conditions are impossible, when pressure, guilt and uncertainty are too great.

Artists presented dozens of examples of creativity when working with the most targeted and marginalised, including, women, LGBTQ, those in ill health, those who are seen to represent taboos, those embroiled in conflict. Artists are working with those who are so isolated and at such risk that they have no access to the resources that otherwise could help them.

Artists are claiming rights for themselves and their communities, keeping cultural heritages alive and in the living memory, fighting 'invisibilization' of the oppressed.

Artists in exile find that sometimes distance brings clarity to political and social questions. They can and are creating platforms, space and time for others to express pain and share struggles and to break out of the languages of patriarchy and religion. 'How can I tell my daughters that the road from home is not better than home but that their mother is grateful for this exile of strength and nostalgia?'

What obstacles are artists fighting against?

Structural violence constrains and constricts the artists' ability to not only flourish in their own art practices but to organise in supporting others in the society. They are fighting against systems of domination that lead to competition and survival in place of collective and mutually supportive actions. Everywhere, there is shrinking public space - both physical and digital - and an increase in restrictions against protest in general and critical art in particular with threats rising to the safety and well-being of artists. Many countries have moved to the neoliberal market model but its failure impacts on artists and their work, especially in the face of pandemics, armed conflict, organised crime, extremism, generalised poverty and extreme wealth gaps.

Repression is enacted by states, state agencies and institutions, as well as non-state actors and CSOs, unions, commercial entities, militias and extreme social groups. There is a marked anxiety, animosity and violence regarding freedom of expression and artistic freedom. Censorship is based on political, ethnic, religious, ethical pretexts, or even personal issues with or between artists. The influence of repression on the society is present even when the repressors (for example Taliban, ISIS) are not actually or temporarily present. There are clear signs of backlashes against targeted minorities such as religious, ethnic and gender groups.

Weaknesses are apparent in the public structures that have supported communities, arts and culture, and the health sector. These weaknesses have compacted with the overall weakness of the arts and culture sector, as it has developed into dependence on a market model. Artists' ability to raise their voices and influence policy has been weakened especially where governments see them as peripheral or as criticising ideologies, or when governments instrumentalise artists as propagandists. Their sole capacity to earn has all but been destroyed where the markets have not been fully supported and developed, and when venues are closed and audiences locked down due to the pandemic.

Where there is a lack of community support and acknowledgement of the value of artistic creativity and risk taking, artists lose their most valuable allies.

Covid is exacerbating all of these, with minorities in worsening circumstances, a lack of access to resources and restrictions on movement and mobility that would permit critical observation, safeguarding and protection actions for those who are persecuted or at risk.

What toll is this taking on the artists and arts workers, those who are near to them and those who support them?

Some artists, writers, journalists, academics and human rights defenders face stigmatisation, criminalization; threats to safety – arrest, imprisonment, attacks; living with adversity, insecurity and danger. These affect mental and emotional wellbeing and can lead to prolonged stress, exhaustion, anxiety, depression, vicarious trauma, cynicism, hopelessness, burnout, guilt, isolation. These are perfectly normal responses to danger and threat. There are many factors that lead to avoidance of acknowledging these stresses. But there are also many strategies that can help face and overcome them, such as changing our own mental approaches or behaviours, getting help from professionals or sharing with peers.

We can focus on resilience, wellness, safety, healing, building individual and collective power as we advocate for justice. In confidentiality and trust, we can demand, organise and ensure the appropriate understanding and measures are available to those who need them now or in the future. Resilience can come from feeling a sense of mastery, learning how to regulate emotion, learning how to be flexible, to nurture a positive outlook, to feel connected to others, to have support from one's community, cultural and spiritual resources.



Naïd Mubalegh and Hamid Sakhizada,
Photo: Cronje Martti



Ingeborg Moa and Hooman Sharifi,
Photo: Cronje Martti

Questions about Support

When funding support is time-limited, there is a direct impact on sustainability. Media and political interest-shifting to the most spectacular events has been proven to affect international aid to the detriment of continuing situations needing more sustained support.[4] Global North stereotypes and art and culture funding models don't always work and are not always adaptable to specific situations and cultures; they may do harm instead. Often international support is given to those who are already in the best positions, with great visibility, and not to the grassroots workers on the ground who lack the skills and the time to become more visible. Instead, there is a need for reflection, debate and imaginative thinking by the affected artists, art workers and policy makers, to create new structures that help artists and art workers who need it most.

Legal frameworks

First of all, artists need to know their rights, the national and the international laws. Legal frameworks must be adapted to the realities in their territories. They must address risk, safety and protection from harassment. But implementation of the law is something else - where law is consistently abused, it demands patience, persistence, lobbying, documentation and public attention. In many situations where there are limited resources for artist and arts organisations simply to survive, there is need for reinforcement.

What is to be done?

Solidarity is one of the most powerful actions we can access, whether in country, or internationally. 'Alone we go fast, but together we go far.' In exile, 'shared experiences of oppression are also the idea of unity in exile, another level of Arab unity in resistance against dictatorships.' Across the global artistic community, 'as the artist community all over the world, we have a responsibility to help; we have to move.'

Networks are the greatest resource of our time - intersectional, diverse, inter-class, inter-generational and so on, and there is a need for alternative platforms that can survive the constant warring of institutions against them. Although coordination of those who wish to help is necessary, solidarity actions can make visible the isolated, invisibilised, socially engaged artist who is not on any priority list.

New forms of activism are creative, very well organised and although younger generations of artists are still resisting, they live in great fear; they have had a taste of freedom and have proven themselves but need strong support to continue. Digital security is an issue due both to the many without access, and also to the proliferation of online protests actions when Covid restricted physical movement.

[4] See: <https://theconversation.com/how-news-coverage-influences-countries-emergency-aid-budgets-new-research-172894>
[Accessed 30 January 2022].

There are still problems of *documentation and reporting* that need to be addressed, as well as *capacity building* in this and in project management and design, to facilitate the rise of independent institutions and growing grass roots organisations. Capacity building is also necessary for security and well-being, rights and knowledge-sharing.

Supporters, institutions, NGOs, foundations, funders need to revamp assessment methods to make more resources available to grassroots and at-risk artists. Funding methods and channels need to be retooled to facilitate dialogue and to facilitate rather than hinder more support especially regarding sensitive issues and topics. Funders and donors also need to build emergency measures and funding for times of crisis.



Rezan Betula, *Photo: Cronje Martti*



Carlos Catun aka Gato, *Photo: Cronje Martti*



Yasmine El Baramawy and Per Oddvar Johansen, *Photo: Cronje Martti*

Afterword: To Not Conclude

This very brief analysis of three rich days of debate, discussion and sharing has aimed to use the words of the 194 participants from all over the world, as the materials for creating a new merged, collaborative text. As many participants noted, we share the same problems. Thus in the same sentence, readers may find a phrase from a Cuban, followed by a word from an Iranian, a clause by a Ugandan and a poetic reference from a Syrian. A recommendation might start with a Chinese observation and end with a Tunisian's before travelling through the eyes of a Mexican, the heart of a Brazilian and the *cri de coeur* of a Beninese. And so on. Thus we must thank all of the participants, the lights, the beautiful faces of the 2021 Safe Havens conference.

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SAFE HAVENS - FREEDOM TALKS