

Todd Lanier Lester: Artist Safety & Shelter

After returning from the US Peace Corps (Cameroon) to NYC in the early 2000s, Todd began working with the displaced Liberian community as a refugee resettlement mentor with the International Rescue Committee (IRC). He also worked for Reporters sans Frontières (DC office) and again with the IRC in Khartoum, Sudan along the path toward his creation of freeDimensional (2003), a small, scrappy organization that linked artists, journalists and activists-in-need to art spaces and residencies with hosting capacity, a practice that has continued with larger organizations until today. These placements started happening all over the world such as an Uzbek photographer, Cameroon cartoonist and Zimbabwean ceramic artist all to Bilbao; Afghan VJ to Norway; or a Mexican environmental defender to California and activists in China offered short-term safe haven in the region during an intense period of crackdown associated with an international AIDS conference; journalists from Guinea Conakry and the Gambia both to Dakar, Senegal.

Todd has lived in both displacement settings such as Egypt, CAR and Sudan as well as refugee receiver cities, such as NYC and his present home of São Paulo (Brazil) where he writes, makes art and continues to provide refugee resettlement mentorship and artist support on a case-by-case basis. In addition to his studies in political science and public administration, Todd trained under Barbara Harrell-Bond, the so-called mother of Forced Migration at Oxford's Refugee Studies Centre, and went on to serve as her assistant in a Cairo-based legal aid clinic focused on the underserved Iraqi community after the US-Iraq war. There he helped her launch TADAMON, a multicultural refugee council once based at the Townhouse Gallery. Whether an artist or not, Todd looks for opportunities for refugees within the art world, a strategy he uses presently in São Paulo.

For a while freeDimensional (fD) managed a small distress and evacuation fund, the Creative Resistance Fund. Later the name was changed from fD to ArtistSafety(.)net. In the meantime, Todd designed and created a coalition around the New York City Artist Safe Haven Residency Program for the Westbeth Artists Community in Manhattan before its handover to the Artistic Freedom Initiative (AFI); he co-founded the ArtsRightsJustice Academy at the University of Hildesheim; he supported the Mellon Foundation as it conceptualized organizations such as the Artist at Risk Connection and the Artist Protection Fund; he consulted Goethe and ifa as they conceptualized the Martin Roth Initiative; launched a series of Critical Dialogues at Art Omi between artists experiencing similar distress; and participated in various International Cities of Refuge Network (ICORN) and Malmö Safe Haven meetings as well as the 'Be With Art' initiative by Culture Resource (Al-Mawred Al-Thaqafy) in Beirut. Additionally Todd worked on IETM and UNESCO reports on artist safety as well as co-authoring Artist Safety Hosting - A Guide to History, Ethics, & Practice with AFI and Art Spaces Hosting Activism: Using surplus resources to provide individual assistance and strengthen community engagement with New Tactics in Human Rights. And, he authored *Je Suis (in Solidarity with but Uncomfortable About) Charlie* for Hyperallergic after the 2015 Charlie Hebdo attack. More recently he was interviewed by On The Move for Supportive Interventions for a report on the Mental Health and Well-being of At-Risk and Displaced Arts Workers.