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freeDimensional

Artists' Safety and Creative Safe Havens

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Introduction

Throughout history, artists have frequently played key roles as government critics, people's advocates, community organizers, civil and human rights defenders and as leaders of social and political movements. ¹ In the recent past, the proliferation of socially engaged artistic practice and the growing interest in the convergence of art and social justice (Kocache 2014) have resulted in increased media attention to the role of artists as agents of social change and the consequences of their involvement in socio-political activity. This has been manifest in cause célèbre media storms around the high-profile cases of Ai Weiwei's arrest and detention in China, the imprisonment of members of Pussy Riot in Russia and the Charlie Hebdo massacre in France and, most recently, the censorship of Tania Bruguera by the Cuban authorities. These highly visible cases serve to highlight the dangers faced by artists who speak truth to power and open new spaces for debate around censorship and persecution. They also point to the wide range of artists, culture workers and communicators within and outside the mainstream who face risk as a result of their social change work. Their lack of stature in the art world or in popular media means that these other individuals are rarely afforded the visibility and benefits of the international spotlight.

Furthermore, while creative expression is a common component to almost all social movements, ² artists do not always see themselves as activists, and thus may not align themselves with the particular resources and services that may support them. The independent New York-based NGO freeDimensional (fD) has identified and filled a gap in civil society by recognizing and supporting the arts, and artists, as important agents of social change and strategically advocating on their behalf, particularly those who are under-represented in mainstream accounts of censorship and persecution. Since 2006, fD has helped over 150 artists, culture workers and communicators from 35 countries doing courageous work to benefit their communities at the expense of their livelihoods, safety and free expression. fD stakeholders have included a cartoonist from Cameroon, a ceramicist from Zimbabwe, a photographer from Uzbekistan, a journalist from the Gambia, a playwright from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a painter from the Druze community, a VJay from Afghanistan, an environmental defender from Mexico, street artists from Brazil and many more.

In the following chapter, we draw on freeDimensional's Creative Safe Haven Advo-kit in order to demonstrate significant aspects of the DIY methodology that fD has developed over ten years of practice to address the needs of artists in distress. Modular in its format, this toolkit offers a number of strategies adaptable to context and important considerations that may empower art spaces and artists to advocate effectively on their own behalf and on behalf of one another in times of crisis.

Introduction to the Creative Safe Haven Approach

Each year, hundreds of artists and culture workers are threatened for pursuing their ideas of social change. Threats and marginalization can take the form of violent attacks, censorship, criminal charges, harassment, imprisonment, loss of employment and physical threats (to self, family, neighbors or co-workers).

When the rule of law erodes (or has never formed) and the protective layers of civil society are stripped away due to contested elections, civil war, cross-border conflict etc., when we know that journalists are fearful to

give literal accounts of the impunity faced by their communities, then we also know that artists who bear witness to the societal condition will face danger. Sometimes these individuals need to physically move away from their homes and communities in order to escape danger. This is the work to which free-Dimensional is committed through the promotion of Creative Safe Havens for artists in danger worldwide.

This model and methodology was developed by freeDimensional to facilitate the use of existing arts spaces with residency programs as sites for sanctuary and refuge, essentially as safe haven. Similar to our overall ethos of DIY, we encourage and support art spaces to use this model and modify it to their local conditions and needs. By first focusing on art spaces, it was our intention to acknowledge independent community spaces that engender/host/empower local creativity and uphold a principle of free expression. We see these spaces as already providing the ‘connective tissue’ needed for a creative community to flourish. They are thus natural ‘points’ of refuge for artists in distress and natural ‘first responders’ using their vacant bedrooms and apartments (as well as meeting and production facilities) to host artists forced to leave their own communities. These art spaces are typically artist-(and founder- or collective-) run and typically have a nurturing sensibility that can be built upon to provide safety at times of danger and hardship. As well facilitating safe haven for artist-activists and culture workers during times of distress, fD has worked with the administrators of those spaces to develop comprehensive systems that enable access to support from other sectors, such as immigration and legal aid, healthcare and psychosocial services.

Context

The murders of Juliano Mer-Khamis (Palestine) and Maria do Espirito Santa da Silva (Brazil) have had less media coverage than the imprisonment and character defamation (with financial, health and psychosocial ramifications) of Ai Weiwei (China) and members of Pussy Riot (Russia). Nevertheless, these cases clearly demonstrate the extreme duress and life-threatening conditions experienced by socially conscious and politically

active artists and cultural workers on the world's frontlines. Beyond these, there are many, many more similar life stories.

The categorizations of 'socially engaged art' and 'social practice' are proliferating in western countries and globally through the work of Western artists abroad. New articulations of the role of the artist in society are being levied. ³ Simultaneously, we see the emergence of global initiatives recognizing both the rights and the important roles of such practices and bringing together the culture sector with the human rights sector: Artsfex ⁴ is an emerging global networking initiative to monitor violations of freedom of artistic expression; the UN Special Rapporteur for Cultural Rights in 2013 launched the UN Report, *The Right to Freedom of Artistic Expression and Creativity* (Shaheed 2013); Arts Rights Justice ⁵ is a cross-sector EU-level civil society dialogue platform. Such initiatives are the culmination of years of networking and individual labor addressing the realities of artists in prison, beaten, harassed and even assassinated. Such stories are still by and large relegated to back pages and/or discrete media stories, yet they could be pieced together to explain pervasive global conditions faced by independent artists and freelance cultural producers.

What Constitutes Danger?

Somewhere between stereotype and archetype, there is useful ground for assessing the risk an artist will face for doing her/his work (see [Figure 13.1](#)). A Senegalese artist once stated that all his individual projects are related, that he is a *porteur du projet* and he carries that project with everything he creates. It is perhaps this reality that is most defining and unique about an artist and their relationship to their community. It explains why/how abstract, past and—even—unrelated work can result in hardship for the artist. When freeDimensional takes on the case of a culture worker or artist in distress, we do not speak out on the issue that is the source of their distress. We understand the artist in question (and his/her colleagues) knows best how to do this work and while we may connect them to others doing similar work, our objective first and foremost is the artist's safety.

CONTEXTS → CONDITIONS → FORMS → TARGETS → RESULTS

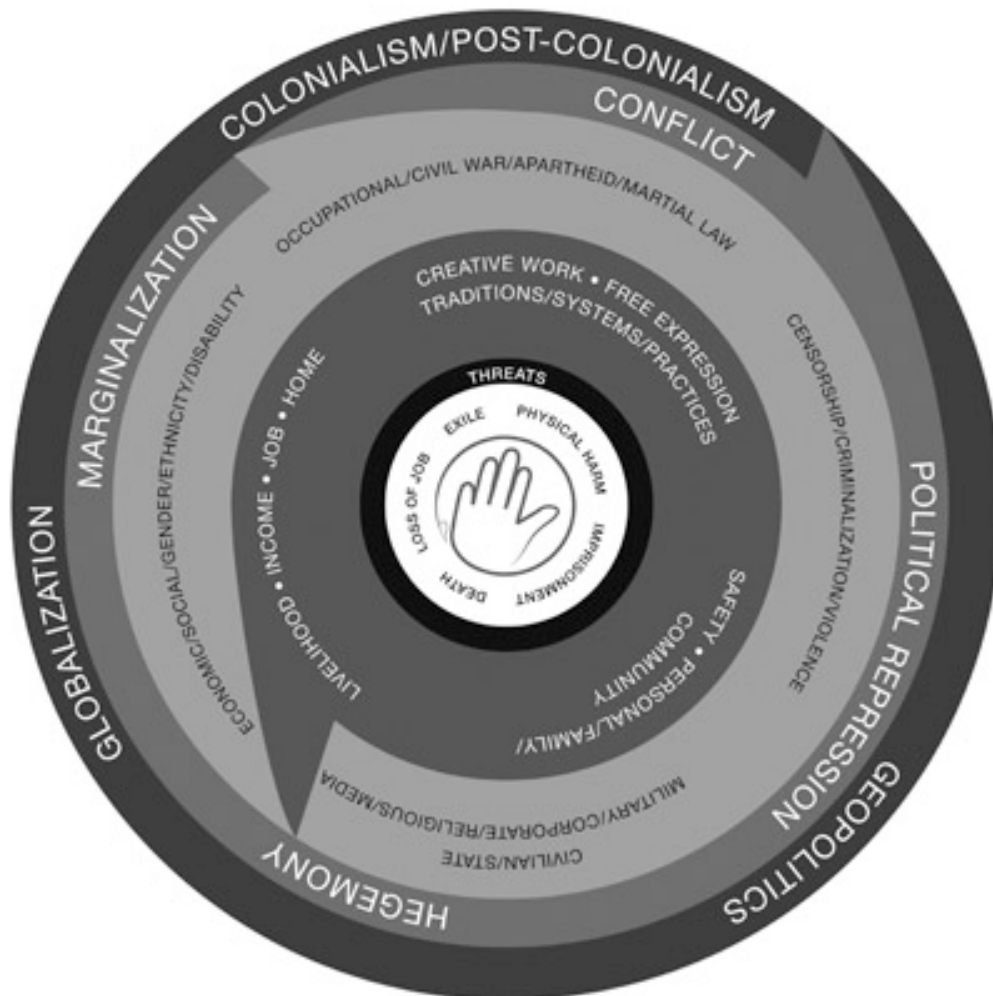


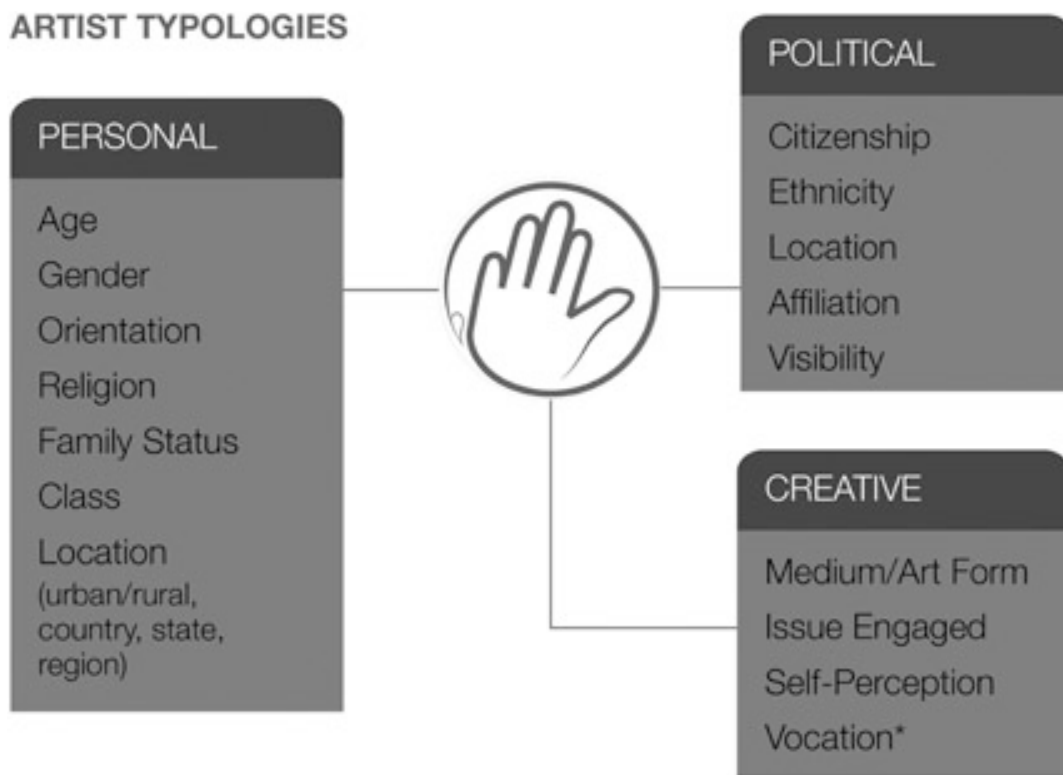
Figure 13.1 Visualisation of the Artist in Danger by Ruben Mercado
Source: [Free Dimensional Artivist, image design](#)

In general, we have found that a range of characteristics (or variables) including (but not limited to) the following in [Figure 13.2](#) have an impact on the safety of an artist under certain conditions.

Programs

fD supports artists and culture workers in distress through direct services like organizing Creative Safe Havens via community resource mapping, emergency and strategic financial support through the Creative Resistance

Fund (see creativeresistancefund.org) and through establishing platforms for ‘culture worker safety and readiness’ with workshops and consultations (see [Figure 13.3](#)). There are two benefits to these processes: at the macro level, this work serves as a bridge between the arts and human rights sector, and at the micro level, it provides direct support to frontline activists in the form of accommodation and access to community resources.



Source: [Free Artist Typology Kit](#); image design by Ruben Mercado

FD offers a number of inter-related tools and services to support widespread capacity building and awareness raising around the needs and issues of artists doing the work of activists. These tools and services are modular and flexible enough to be adapted to the realities we find in the communities with whom we work. Country-specific components are implemented in areas in which there is a particular urgency and increased repression or threat due to issues such as political instability or regime change. Regionally focused components draw on commonalities (linguistic, cultural or situational) to unite a range of culture workers from multiple countries in any given region. Discipline-centered components address the specific needs in a cultural field. Grassroots exchange components bring together grassroots organizations across sectors to address common

dangers, creating dynamic platforms for traditionally underserved populations to potentially forge long-lasting connections.

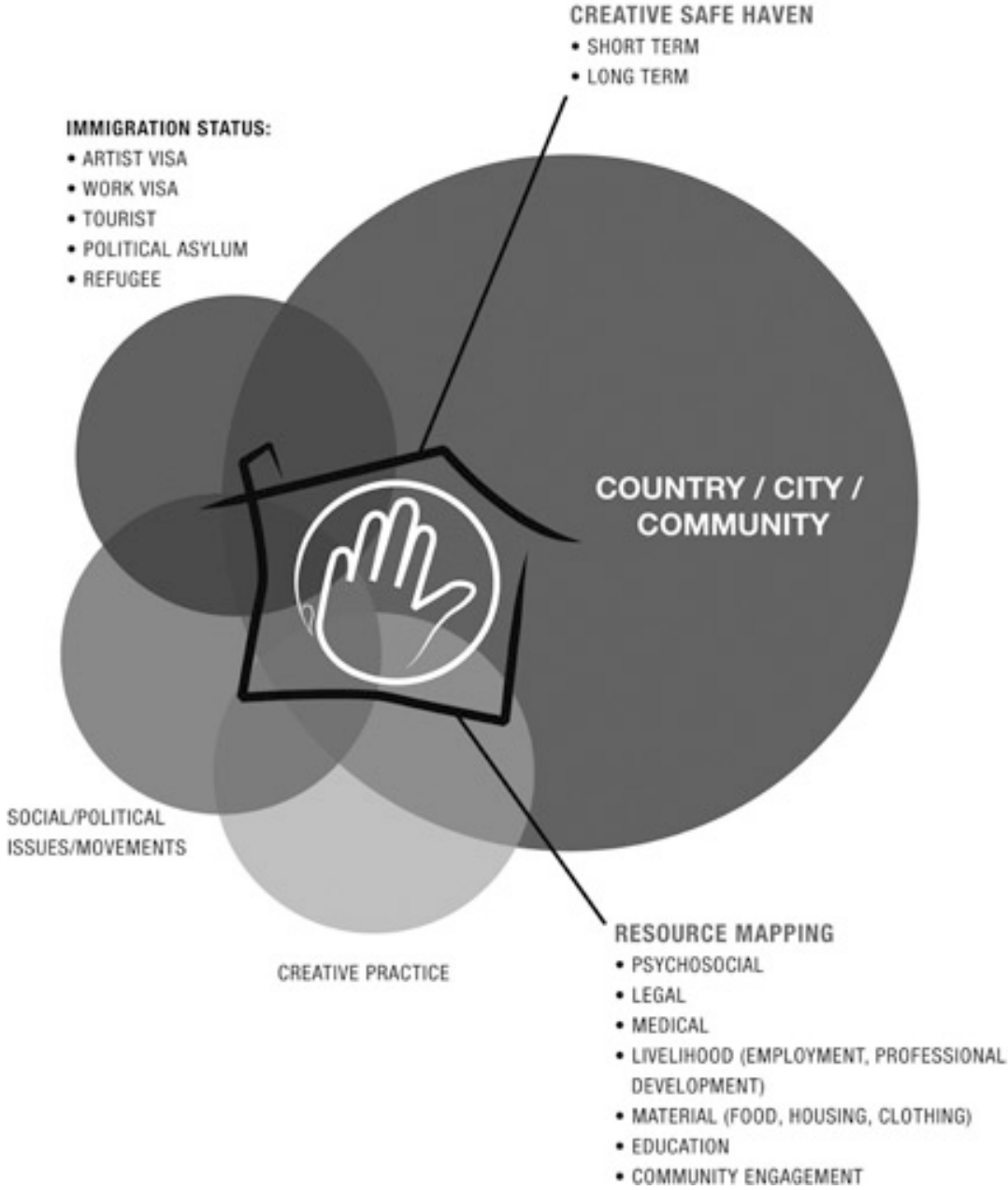


Figure 13.3 Art Spaces as Shelter design by Ruben Mercado

Considerations

Varying Forms of Repression

Table 13.1 Varying Forms of Repression



Source: freeDimensional; image design by Ruben Mercado

In situations where artists and culture workers are critical of social, political and economic conditions, they often find themselves subject to varying and/or multiple forms of persecution, from both state and non-state actors. Forms of repression can range from a subversive publishing law to a direct political assassination (see [Table 13.1](#)). In order to best support artists and culture workers who are facing repression, it is important to note that these different forms are often employed in tandem with one another to ensure the interruption of critical perspectives and movement building towards social justice.

- A Malaysian political artist and activist's work defacing an image of the Prime Minister is pulled from a group exhibition after a warning was delivered to the gallery.
- A Jamaican radio journalist's car is firebombed in his driveway after his call for the President's resignation—after being implicated in a corruption scandal—airs nationally.
- A Chinese media artist and activist is forced to leave his studio in Beijing after a series of phone calls, unannounced visits, interrogations, arrest and detention at the hands of police.
- A Pakistani comedian is kidnapped by the Taliban and warned to stop performing or risk the lives of his wife and children.
- An Israeli/Palestinian theatre director and activist is assassinated by a masked gunman, who still remains at large.

Relocation to Major Cities

Regardless of the conditions that drive artists and culture workers out of their communities, big cities attract them as spaces of refuge and sanctuary, as well as places where they can be 'networked' and have contact with watchdog or advocacy organizations that work vocationally, such as the Committee to Protect Journalists, (New York) or regionally, such as the country desks of large human rights organizations like Human Rights Watch or Amnesty International. These sites may be the closest big city (or capital), but often they are the world's major cities, far away from the source of danger/distress for the artist.

While each of the cases that fD has interfaced with are in a sense ‘unlikely scenarios’—a journalist temporarily receiving accommodation from the Indonesian ambassador while waiting for support relocating from the Committee to Protect Journalists; a cultural producer using a transit visa to come to NYC from Jamaica after his radio broadcast brought eminent danger to the doorstep of his family’s home and then receiving financial support from Rory Peck Trust and housing support from an art space partner of freeDimensional; a comedian facing threats from the Taliban moving his six-member family from Pakistan to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia—what they share in common was the way in which relocating to a major city significantly increased their access to different types of support they needed.

Fetishization of Danger

While an artist can depart from the direst manifestations of censorship and the proximity of harassment, violent threats and the encroachment of physical harm, some of the characteristics of censorship and challenging power can follow the artist to their new location.

When an artist, culture worker or communicator seeks safety in a big city where media outlets and advocacy organizations are based, the artist may become popular on the speaking (conference) circuits that work in tandem with those media and advocacy concerns. Examples range from performing at cultural, musical or literary festivals to giving testimony at high-level (UN or EU) meetings for which the artist’s distress/dangerous situation serves as an example in a broader policy maneuver (on a particular country, region, issue or pertaining to mobility or free expression themselves).

While the artist is often inclined to speak out and use these cultural moments and ‘bully pulpits’ to get back to work (performing/making art) and to speak out on the conditions that forced their exile, we have seen cases in which their intense/immediate popularity has been counterproductive.

It is, thus, important to keep in mind:

- (1) Is the artist being paid a fair wage comparable to the payment of other speakers?
- (2) Are the people who are convening/inviting the artist people (themselves, or representative of organizations) with whom the artist needs some service, information or advocacy support?
- (3) Is the artist in a sound psychosocial state to be engaging in a public forum? This is a tricky area because having the opportunity to speak out is a useful nostrum for some situations; however, it remains a case-by-case issue. Depression is a common side effect of living in exile, and while public speaking/performance can be exciting and help the individual to meet new people and feel alive, those moments can't counter severe cases of depression. And since the conveners/inviters are often from different organizations, it is not likely that they can see the need or help provide psychosocial support in a concerted, long-term fashion. This is where having an advocate to ask a local mental healthcare specialist for pro-bono services, or to introduce the artist to a local trauma center (some big cities have trauma/torture centers for which the artist would be eligible) and/or to simply liaise with the inviter/convener to clarify the current needs of the artist and how they might help create a situation of middle to long-term support for the artist in exchange for their speaking and in addition to their payment (yes, a quid pro quo, but one the artist would not likely be in the mood/state of mind to ask for).

Case Histories

Issa Nyaphaga

Issa Nyaphaga was born in Douala, Cameroon (central Africa), in 1967 and grew up in the small village of the Tikar tribe, called Nditam, in the very heart of Cameroon's equatorial forest. As a child of the fields, Issa was in contact with the earth and nature through artistic practice. 'As a young artist, it wasn't enough to be what I was. I needed to do more, getting involved in something significant and crazy,' Issa said. After high school,

Issa started working as a political cartoonist and reporter in a weekly satirical newspaper, *Le Messenger Popoli*.

Situation of Distress/Danger

In the mid of 1990s, he was jailed and tortured several times for expressing his opposition to the Cameroon regime. In 1996, Issa escaped from his country to seek asylum in France. Eventually, he started to divide his time between Paris and the United States, where he now shares his work and mentors students and young artists. While adjusting to his life in exile, Issa has been working on the development of a philosophical concept called 'Urban Way,' in which he paints his body and stages live performances that include live music. It is an act of protest against not being able to return home freely.

Actions (Steps Taken to Support Artist in Distress)

After he fled Cameroon, freeDimensional helped Issa gain placement in a series of artist residencies while he adjusted to life in exile and decided on relocating to Santa Fe (U.S.) permanently. Today, Issa runs an indigenous rights organization and continues to produce critical art about critical issues.

Outcomes (Successes, Difficulties, Current Status of Artist)

In the early 2008, Issa co-directed *Return to the Belly of the Beast*, a documentary project with Nicoletta Fagiolo. To remain in contact with his homeland, Issa founded Hope International For Tikar People (HITIP) in 2000. HITIP brings together a wide range of global activists who travel to Tikar country in Cameroon every summer to provide direct support to indigenous communities. Since 2009, the partnership between the U.S. charity organization Bush Medicine Partnership (Drexel University) and

Hope International For Tikar People has served more than 8,000 people in the isolated communities in the rainforest of Cameroon. In the summer of 2013, with fD's support, Issa traveled to Cameroon with a team of volunteers to launch Radio Taboo, a documentary project by Sophie Rousmaniere and Jay Minton to educate villagers about public health, environmental issues, women's issues and HIV-infected people. Issa speaks seven languages and holds an MFA in French Literature. He teaches art, social justice and cultural diversity at the community college in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Issa also developed a unique painting technique, known as 'Capillarism,' which uses human hair as a first layer on his canvases (paper, canvas, wood and hardboard) prior to applying color. He experiments with different textures such as sand, mud, feathers, recycled material and leather.

For more information on Issa's ongoing cultural activism, visit: *Hope International for Tikar People* (see www.hitip.org/en/) and *Radio Taboo: Community Radio for Public Education* (see radiotaboo.org).

Chaw Ei Thein

Chaw Ei Thein was born in Rangoon in 1969 and graduated from Rangoon University with a Bachelor of Law degree in 1994. Her artistic recognition started at an early age through the numerous international art awards that she received. With her father, Maung Maung Thein, as her art teacher and mentor, Chaw's art practice has developed into a diverse art practice. Highly regarded as a painter and a conceptual as well as a performance artist, her international career is highly profiled, as she candidly portrays the contradictions and confusions of her socio-political environment. Her feminist approach to her art is both gracious and candid and has earned her accolades and recognition as one of the most important contemporary artists to emerge from Burma. Amongst her numerous and most notable achievements include participation in the 2008 Singapore Biennial, 2009 Open Studios Exhibitions, International Studio and Curators Program in New York as well as several performance works together with Htein Lin in Burma and at Asia House, London in 2007. Chaw Ei Thein currently lives and works in New York.

Situation of Distress/Danger

Chaw Ei Thein's work stems from her contrasting experiences of growing up in a politically oppressive Burma and then shifting to a very different landscape in the United States. Her emotionally charged work addressing conflicts in her native country has earned her critical acclaim, awards and residencies in the U.S. and abroad. However, it has also forced her to live in political exile, in which returning to her native country could mean reprisal from the Burmese government. Between her experiences in the U.S. and her desire to return home, Chaw Ei balances multiple tensions in her work. The instance that resulted in threats to her safety was a public performance in Rangoon that was deemed to undermine state authority. She was arrested and imprisoned briefly, after which she left Burma to attend an artist residency program in New York City. During this time, she was warned by family and friends in Burma that she would not be safe were she to return home.

Actions (Steps Taken to Support Artist in Distress)

fD was able to source pro-bono legal services for Chaw Ei's political asylum application, access to education through a Creative Resistance Fund grant, professional development support through a series of residency placements and community engagement by connecting her to a range of artist and activists in New York City. Through a nomination by freeDimensional, she was accepted to the NYFA Immigrant Artist Mentorship Program. Her mentorship with Alexandra Pacula has been significant to the development of her artistic career and personal pursuits.

Outcomes (Successes, Difficulties, Current Status of Artist)

Chaw Ei Thein is the recipient of the Elizabeth J. McCormack and Jerome I. Aaron fellowship in connection with the Asian Cultural Council in New

York; she has lectured and exhibited extensively in and outside of Burma. Chaw Ei Thein was featured in NYFA's Immigrant Artist Project Newsletter in 2012. Currently, she is living and working safely in New York. Her website is: *Chaw Ei Thein*, chaweithein.blogspot.com/.

Notes

- 1 See, for example Anna Sanders (2012), 'Caravan for Peace, Led by Mexican Poet Javier Sicilia, Protests Drug War in New York'; *Counterculture of the 1960s: Avant-Garde Art and Anti Art*; and Václav Havel (online). We recognize that while artists frequently take part in and/or lead movements for social change, there are many who do not, just as there are those who maintain alliances with the ruling class/government in opposition to movements for change.
- 2 Some examples include: the 1917 Russian Revolution, the Tropicalia movement of Brazil in the 1960s and more recently, the Egyptian Uprising in Tahrir Square and Occupy Wall Street.
- 3 Examples include the following: *Conflict Kitchen: Only Serves Food from Countries with which the United States is in Conflict* (see conflictkitchen.org); *Immigrant Movement International* (see immigrant-movement.us); *The Silent University* (see thesilentuniversity.org); *Fundred* (see fundred.org); *The U.S. Department of Arts and Culture* (see usdac.us); and *Zero Yen House* (see Qyenhouse.com).
- 4 See *artsfex*, <http://artsfex.org/>.
- 5 See *Arts Rights Justice Working Group*, <http://cultureactioneurope.org/milestone/arj-arts-rights-justice/>.

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