

artasfoundation Circular April 2020



The International Cooperation Complaints Choir at the conference Art at Risk, directed by Tellervo Kalleinen (photo: Evan Ruetsch)

Dear friends of *artasfoundation*,

Yes, we are working, even though the borders are currently closed. This does not stand in the way of our connection and solidarity! After all, the corona crisis has once again confirmed how closely the entire world community is interwoven and how much we depend on each other. What the singer Mani Matter once sang in Swiss German has now become a bodily experience: 'Dene was guet geit, giengs besser, giengs dene besser, was weniger guet geit.' (Those who are well would be better off if those who are less well were better off.)

Although the spread of coronavirus in the countries where we are mostly active has so far been somewhat limited – Armenia and Georgia, including Abkhazia*, which is not controlled by Georgia, have reacted quickly and imposed rather strict lockdowns – the fragile economy of these regions, their emerging tourist sector and the fight against widespread poverty will certainly be weakened by the pandemic. Whilst countries as Switzerland have insurance policies for unemployment or state supported short-time work, our friends and project partners in the South Caucasus report about furloughs, widespread layoffs and a return to a subsistence economy.

Would art initiatives be of any use under these circumstances? Can art play a role where there is a shortage of material things? Those who participate in *artasfoundation's* projects experience that people in difficult economic circumstances seek exchange in the dimensions of spirit and soul and don't want to be addressed just as beings with physical

needs. In these dimensions, people can meet each other respectfully and find hope. Practicing art is one way of doing this – with art having the further quality of not providing ultimate answers to given problems. Rather, it unfolds the complexity of problems and creates free space to try out possible solutions.

We do not believe that art is a universal remedy. But we do believe that creative activity can dissolve the image of enemy, open up new horizons and encourage people to create new possibilities. Thus, our art projects will hardly provide jobs for young people, but they may encourage them to create some of their own. We don't understand our work with art as help. But what we do is encourage self-help, which is the best preparation for a future that today is less foreseeable than ever.

Inherent in the current global crisis we may find a chance for learning to shape the future together and across borders. In this spirit we hope for your continued interest in the work of *artasfoundation* and ask for your support! Below you can find out what we have been doing since our last circular in November.

With cordial greetings,
the *artasfoundation* team

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Report of the Art at Risk conference



Karima Bennoune, Special Rapporteur of the UN Human Rights Council (on the right), in a talk with artist Tania Bruguera (photo: Evan Ruetsch)

We made it just in time! After a year of preparation, we were able to hold our conference *Art at Risk* in the last three days of February, just before all the corona lockdowns. With almost 180 participants from 42 countries (SDC had invited staff from its regional offices), it met great interest.

First, the conference was about the dangers that artists face through their work, from censorship to persecution. In recent years this has increasingly been the case in European countries as well. Secondly, it was about the potential of art to contribute to positive social change and build peace.

Everything worked out smoothly – also thanks to the help of Bettina Ganz's ZHdK team – and we received a lot of positive feedback for the quality of the content of many workshops and contributions. It was actually the diverse experiences of the speakers and participants that was decisive for this quality, and *artasfoundation's* task was mainly to create a supporting framework for their exchange. We were very happy with the outcome.

Over the coming months, we will study the results of the different workshops and follow up on the newly established contacts.

If you would like to see some of the evening lectures of the conference programme you will find three video recordings on the [conference website](#).

Radio interview with musician Firas Abou Fakher (Mashrou' Leila)



Mashrou' Leila in a concert in Baalbek, Lebanon (photo: Mashrou' Leila)

Firas Abou Fakher was one of the participants in the *Art at Risk* conference. As a member of the Lebanese band Mashrou' Leila, he is a star in the Arab world, and also among a Western audience the band has created a name for itself through the quality of its music, its personal, political lyrics and performances in Montreux, Paris or New York.

But several Arab countries have imposed performance bans against Mashrou' Leila: In Egypt, where fans of the band with the openly gay lead singer Hamed Sinno waved rainbow flags at a concert and 75 people were arrested for that. In Jordan or last summer in Lebanon where the Maronite church took offence at song lyrics and obtained the cancellation of a concert under reference to blasphemy. The result was a storm of protest in the social media, but also death threats against the musicians. Of course, we wanted to invite Firas to Zurich for the conference. During preparations we had found him to be a thoughtfully reflective speaker of the band. How does he and his band deal with censorship and prohibitions? How do they behave in view of the dangers they might expose their fans to? He agreed to come and we were not the only ones who were looking forward to hear him: The Swiss radio also asked him for an [interview](#).

Students from Abkhazia* in Zurich



Model of Janset Aljarrah's planned exhibition (photo: Janset Aljarrah)

The two graphic designers Janset Aljarrah und Salima Bartsyts from Abkhazia have been in Zurich for a five month *Movetia* scholarship since February. This pilot project was developed by the Zurich University of Arts in cooperation with *artasfoundation* in order to establish student exchanges with conflict regions.

It is a difficult situation for the two young women. Instead of, as hoped, trying out various techniques that are not offered at their Abkhaz university – working with ceramics and sound design was at the top of their list – they will now during the lockdown still be able to further their theoretical training in online seminars but not their practical training. Instead of deliberately moving out of their own comfort zones during their time abroad, the movement now primarily takes place in their minds. And that's where an exhibition that Janset hopes to realise by the end of June is currently taking shape. Because she firmly believes: 'My thoughts will not be isolated. I do believe that I can make this exhibition – my first one abroad – here.' In her diary she writes about how she imagines her exhibition *Have a Chance Without Possibility. Have Possibility Without a Chance*:

'Abstract sculptures will be placed in different positions, as in chess, to make us ask ourselves about our capabilities. The sculptures will not be black and white, rather shades of grey on both sides because in our daily life there is no absolute (black) evil and no absolute (white) good. We all are always in between both of them. Every person has different motives. In the end, we are human beings and not demons or angels. All our facets, opinions, misgivings, and obsessions – merge.'

Further education programme Arts and International Cooperation: Second year has graduated



Besides theoretical lectures and excursions the course programme also included practical activities: An impression from a workshop by Iris und Haimo Ganz (photo: Dagmar Reichert)

In February seventeen students of the certificate of advanced studies course (CAS) that is directed by *artasfoundation* have graduated with their diploma thesis. The course is part of the further education programme of the Zurich University of Arts. A next edition of the course will begin in 2021 and is already announced. Nasta Agrba, a newly graduated participant of the programme, is describing her most inspiring moments:

‘The course is quite intense, as there are so many new people, information and impressions. During the first module Regula Gattiker’s input on conflict sensitivity, the artists Iris and Heimo Ganz with their practical exercise on collaboration of people who have unequal resources, the dancer Manel Salas Palau with his exercise on trust building impressed me a lot, as well as the insights the diplomat Günther Bächler shared with us on how politics work. My personal highlight of the CAS was the week in Lebanon. Above all Heba Hage-Felder from the *Arab Fund for Arts and Culture* inspired me the most! I also remember the visit to projects of the organisation *Action for Hope* with refugees in the Beqaa Valley, and its leader, a powerful woman with great drive. What impressed me is the approach of the school to put all their money and resources into a rather small group of children to give them a great education. These children have the prospect of a professional education and of growing up to be incredible musicians or filmmakers. What was daunting sometimes, was the attempt of some organisations to curry favour with the sponsors through mentioning keywords like “stability”, “freedom”, “peace building”, “refugees”, as from a special dictionary. Looking closely though, we saw that in order to survive economically, they have to use the current jargon for describing their great projects.’

Working at artasfoundation – a look back



Sunrise over a tangerine plantation in Galli (photo: Dagmar Reichert)

Olivia Jaques, a long-time member of the team, is leaving our foundation to take on new challenges in Vienna. We have asked her to give us a review on working at *artasfoundation*:

Imagine a scale in the *artasfoundation* office with all kinds of units and multiple scales. It does not try to measure the ingredients of *artasfoundation*, but it tries to keep them in balance. Its arms are so sensitive, that it feels the weights across national borders. On the one hand it measures personal experiences, misunderstandings and (self-)reflection; on the other hand financial worries, a level playing field, different currencies, reasonableness, accomplished projects, different languages and alphabets, but above all: different ways of dealing with words, trust, artists involved, gratitude, new encounters, many, many hours of work, paper work, newsletter addressees, exchanges during the Jour Fixe sessions and exciting discussions at the Jour Théorétique. Carefully this scale weighs different understandings of art. What it does not attempt to measure is excellence or morality. Depending on one's role, different scale pans weigh more and in different places: Some weights lie appreciatively on the shoulder, others support the back, yet others are heavy on the stomach, sometimes also heavy on the eyelids.

Many thanks to Dagmar, and many thanks also to the team and the extended team (our project partners in the Caucasus have become close friends over time and through common adventures) for the last years together, which I would not want to trade for anything.

Olivia

Dear Olivia, we also thank you very much!!

Thank you for your support!

The projects of *artasfoundation* can only be realized thanks to the great support of friends, donors and patrons of the foundation. Apart from the contributions of institutions and foundations, the majority of the budget comes from private hands. Thank you for your help and thanks to everybody who has supported us already this year. All contributions are welcome, both large and small donations are valuable and helpful!

Bank details for individual donations:

Artas Foundation, Raiffeisen Bank, 8001 Zurich, IBAN: CH56 8148 7000 0412 5940 4

If you would like to become a friend or donor of the foundation or a project sponsor please get in touch with us.

**artasfoundation would like to underline that its use of names and titles particularly with regard to the conflict regions should not be construed as implying any form of recognition or non-recognition by the foundation or as having any other political connotation whatsoever.*

