

***artasfoundation* Circular** **May 2025**

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Photo: Evan Ruetsch

How Do We Learn from Regions in Conflict?

It is impossible to remain the same person after experiencing conflict. This also applies to being a friend, colleague, or partner of someone enduring violence. There are major turning points in life, and recognising our interrelationships with others, despite the illusion that we are isolated and protected in our seemingly simple, conflict-free lives overwhelmed by daily concerns, is undoubtedly one of them.

It is not only individuals who learn, but so too do institutions. They learn to embrace non-linearity, often by critically engaging with uncertainty and reinventing themselves to navigate the increasing international funding and political restrictions. Institutions can also evolve, not hierarchically, as was the traditional way, but horizontally, where unlearning remains a challenging yet creative exercise.

Transformative institutional shifts toward more collaborative models, such as sociocracy, have the potential, if successful, to significantly influence the field, particularly, but not exclusively, in fragile contexts. In the art field, institutional practices have long been shaped by management rules and mechanisms. Even the language used by institutions is heavily influenced by economic, military, and political frameworks, which starkly contradict the artistic need for openness and fluidity. This contributes to the marginalisation of art practices in mediation, peacebuilding, and social transformation, among other fields. Applying the same institutional logic to art as to other disciplines inevitably fails to yield comparable results. The repeated attempt to fit artistic institutions into these frameworks has been a battle that has been lost many times, and one we will keep on losing, because it is based on a false premise: the comparison of the incomparable.

At *artasfoundation*, we try to sustain this openness, indeterminacy and immeasurability of artworks and their impact every day, placing greater value on connectedness and organic growth rather than on economic values.

Rana Yazaji, on behalf of the whole *artasfoundation* team: Theresa Ackermann, Claudia Barth, Shoghakat Mlke-Galstyan, Tamar Janashia, Olivia Jaques, Elena Kuvichko-Brülhart, Sara Sayed, Sandra Suter, Mara Züst as well as the president of our board, Dagmar Reichert

Exploring Community through Visual Storytelling



Photo: Olivia Jaque

The project series *Sharing Stories*, which collects local narratives and explores places through artistic means, began in Autumn 2024 in Toggenburg – in close cooperation with the Dogo Residency and the Monterana School. Exchange is an essential part of this endeavour: A group of artists from two different regions comes together in remote villages in both territories. The exchange is rooted in strong local connections, in artistic encounters with local communities, and the sharing of stories – ultimately creating a bridge between two geographically distant places.

From Toggenburg, we know that harnessing the energy of 23 children can make a lot happen in a short time. Among other things, they drew pictures and wrote letters that are to be delivered to children in Arasadzikh/i¹. However, the (internationally unrecognised) border with Abkhazia¹ is currently closed, so a second physical gathering of the group appears unlikely, and a hybrid alternative is being arranged. Meanwhile, preparations for the second edition are already underway, in which stories will be shared in Tusheti, Georgia and Graubünden, Switzerland.

Where Stories and People Meet: A Year in the *Living Room*



Photo: Sipan Grigorian

The *Living Room* is a space for dialogue, shared moments, and artistic exchange. This season, from May 2024 to April 2025, was filled with connections and artistic practices slowly creating a community of displaced people, international and Armenian artists. We hosted a simple movie night for displaced children from a Nagorno-Karabakh village. Just picture the joy of seeing your childhood friends, the ones you grew up with, now scattered and only reachable through a screen, suddenly reunited over film and pizza. Further activities included music therapy, community meetings, and the first *Art and Social Transformation Lab* by artasfoundation which led to hands-on projects from printmaking to storytelling exhibitions.

With the project *For This Dance I Will Take the Lead* we hosted Tellervo Kalleinen. The project created a space for those who had lost the feeling of control to reclaim it – through dance, presence, and courage. From Belarus to Nagorno-Karabakh, participants met, moved, and were seen. “I am grateful for the unique collective journey I experienced with the six participants and the dedicated hosting team at *Living Room*”, said Tellervo, “The process began with experiences of losing leadership in one’s own life and culminated in an event where each participant invited the audience to dance with them. As I danced along, I was moved by the soft power of art and all the meaningful encounters in this international exchange of creative people.” In the *Living Room*, we don’t just host activities; we hold space, we step back, reflect, and move forward together.

Voices of Resistance in an Old Stable



Photo: Sara Sayed

In a corner of the former stable at Gessnerallee in Zurich, a small group of people gathers regularly to reflect on socially engaged artistic practice. The evening in February was titled *Voices of Culture in Times of Upheaval*. We heard from artists who, through their work, spoke of violent disruptions and reflected on what it means to act from a situation of exile. In conversation with the audience, Snow Hnin Ei Hlaing, Enas Ismail, and Liwaa Yazji also spoke about tireless protest and international solidarity.

Thus, this small gathering among iron feeding troughs, and across digital space, becomes a meaningful coming together of people who, in a time of escalating wars and chauvinist politics, do not lose hope that art can spark impulses for social transformation and justice – by forging solidarities and daring to imagine utopias.

Art in Conflict is being held by the Centre of Art and Peacebuilding (CAP) at the Gessnerallee Zurich in collaboration between artasfoundation and the Zurich University of the Arts.

Art in Motion: From Thought to Action



Photo: Arusyak Simonyan

This *Art and Social Transformation Lab* at the *Living Room* was more than a workshop: it became a vibrant constellation of experiences, bringing together diaspora Armenians, people displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenians relocated from Russia, and local artists from Yerevan. Together, we formed a temporary community of listeners, makers, thinkers, and storytellers.

Through presentations, personal reflections, and collective discussions, we explored the question: Where do we stand today, both as individuals and as a society in flux? The Lab was a fertile ground not only for dialogue but for imagining new possibilities. It sparked ideas that will soon evolve into tangible, socially engaged art projects – projects we believe will impact communities beyond Yerevan with a sense of urgency, yet through respectful and considerate engagement.

This annual Lab became a powerful force that motivates participants to think deeper, plan better, and act with greater clarity. It's also a call to artists – not just to express, but to connect, to intervene, and to transform. It truly feels like something has been set in motion.

(Un)likely Allies



Photo: Olivia Jaque

At the *Artas Community Event*, members of the artasfoundation team meet with artists, friends, and interested individuals for an exchange of experiences and views. As part of the event, we visit cultural institutions whose artistic contributions or work are connected to the themes and people of *artasfoundation*.

Only at a first glance might the Surprise Street Magazine seem an unlikely conversation partner: The focus this time was on how organisations dedicated to bringing people together through artistic means operate. What possibilities are there for socially engaged work that incorporates artistic approaches?

We met at the Surprise office in Zurich for a conversation with author and city guide Nicolas Gabriel about writing (one's own) stories within a project that promotes participation for socially disadvantaged people.

The evening was rounded off with an apéro at the Kulturbüro, which provides straightforward and affordable technical support for cultural workers across all disciplines, along with insights into current projects of artasfoundation. Among them is a mural from the ongoing project *Sharing Stories*.

A New Chapter for CAS Arts and International Cooperation



Photo: Dagmar Reichert

Since the end of the fourth round of the CAS Arts and International Cooperation – Collaborating in Fragile Contexts and in Processes of Peacebuilding in 2023, it was uncertain whether a fifth round would take place. The programme underwent a thorough revision, which has now concluded with the launch of the new call for students in April. We are excited to open registration for this next edition.

With the close of the previous round, we celebrated the invaluable contributions of Dagmar Reichert, who founded the programme and has co-directed it since its start in 2017. While she has now stepped down from her role as co-director, Dagmar remains a key guest lecturer and an integral part of our community. We are also pleased to welcome Hannah Pfurtscheller as the new co-director. She brings a wealth of knowledge and inspiring perspectives that will contribute to shaping the future of the programme. The CAS focuses on the transformative potential of the arts in processes of social change and peacebuilding. It places strong emphasis on equitable and sensitive international and intercultural collaboration. The programme brings together an international cohort of participants, including artists, peacebuilding practitioners, project managers from global organisations, and visionary individuals from diverse geopolitical contexts.

More information and registration for the online info event in June or September

Study Trip to Armenia with *artasfoundation*



Photo: Dagmar Reichert

Would you be interested in travelling with us to Armenia in the Autumn and gaining insight into two of our projects? Dagmar Reichert and Shoghakat Mkrtchyan are organising a special study trip between 11. and 19. October 2025. There are still a few places available!

In addition to seeing the capital Yerevan, we will also visit rural regions of eastern Armenia and gain an impression of the landscapes and ways of life in this country that sits between Europe and Asia. We will learn about current political and social challenges from local experts and partners of *artasfoundation*. Special items on the programme are two project visits, in which we will have the opportunity to experience the work of *artasfoundation* with the Armenian participants firsthand and engage in exchange with them about their artistic practices and professional realities.

Travel, accommodation, meals, transport, and interpreters will be organised by *artasfoundation*.

Please contact Dagmar Reichert as soon as possible to find out more details, and to register (dagmar.reichert@artasfoundation.ch). The number of participants is limited.

Support *artasfoundation*

The work of *artasfoundation* is only possible thanks to the generous support of donors and friends. We ask for your continued help and would like to thank you very much for your support.

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¹*artasfoundation* would like to underline that its use of names and titles particularly in regards to conflict regions should not be understood as implying any form of recognition or non-recognition by the foundation or as having any other political connotation whatsoever.