

# CONVERSATIONS YEMENI ARTISTS SPEAK



by Ibi Ibrahim and Manal Ghanem



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# Romooz's Word

Since our launch in the summer of 2018, Romooz has developed and produced numerous local and international exhibitions, literature publications and workshops, photography mentorships, art talks (on the ground and virtually), photo-walks with emerging and aspiring photographers in Sana'a and Aden, visual art and literature residencies, and a heritage safe-guarding program. Through these programs and projects, each of which centers the work of Yemeni artists, Romooz works to contribute to the development of a pluralistic, democratic society in Yemen, promoting art as a means for conflict resolution, peace-building, learning and social development.

**Conversations** is a space where artists and art practitioners are leading the dialogue. Our goal in organizing this project is to create a safe space where artists and art practitioners working in the Yemeni cultural sphere can discuss common challenges and paths forward. We aim to foster an open discourse about what the pressing needs of Yemeni artists are, and how collectively we can overcome challenges and continue to bring heavy and important conversations to our art practice and programming. Through this discourse, we hope to activate art as a vector of change in Yemen by encouraging society to be more supportive of artists and their endeavors. We deeply believe that these conversations can serve as a starting point towards a joint society.

We're grateful to the 15 participants who have taken part in this project. Together, they are representative of the Yemeni cultural scene's striking diversity. In this project, we will hear from Yemeni creatives both at home and in the diaspora – from Sana'a to the United Kingdom, from Aden to Lebanon.

Thank you to Amr Gamal, Amr Attamimi, Asim Aziz, Aziz Morfeq, Ali Fouad, Hanan Yahya, Najla al-Shami, Noha al-Maghafi (Intibint), Mariam al-Dhubhani, Saber Bamatraf, Sara Ishaq, Shroq al-Ramadi, Somaya Abdalla, Thana Farooq, and Yousra Ishaq. Your voices are critical to our work.

**Ibi Ibrahim**  
Founder | Romooz

# ***British Council's Word***

The arts have long been a mechanism to document life, preserve cultural memory, and create dialogue between people; they connect people beyond borders and open windows to lived realities by amplifying voices that might otherwise go unheard. Artists are therefore gatekeepers to narratives and ambassadors of their communities. They have a role to play in influencing and creating positive social change, giving others a voice and opening spaces for people to reflect and hope.

Through these Conversations, we hear from artists – both in Yemen and in the diaspora – about the role the arts can play in Yemen, as well as the challenges they face in pursuing their active roles during the current conflict. These Conversations have been devised to inform future programmes that would identify artists as key contributors to the resilience of Yemenis today, and to promote a positive future in the times to come.

The British Council's purpose is to provide connections and opportunities for intercultural dialogue, and to use these opportunities to build trust and understanding between people worldwide. Arts and culture are cornerstones for us to achieve that, by connecting Yemeni artists, practitioners, and cultural organizations to their peers and counterparts locally, regionally, globally, and to the best of the UK's cultural resources, we enable them to be the agents, reflectors, and narrators of day-to-day life in Yemen today and in the future.

**Rowaida Al Khulaidi**  
**Country Director Yemen**

# Introduction & Methodology

Since the Arab Spring, the Yemeni scene has been dominated by political turmoil and personal tragedy. The media refers to the Yemeni crisis as the “invisible war,” but the war is not invisible: it is experienced every moment of every day of every Yemeni life. Occasionally, news outlets will focus a portion of their broadcast on the dire situation in the country. They speak of humanitarian crises, famine, and fuel shortages.

This state of unprecedented transformation and upheaval began in 2011, when popular protests flooded the streets in Sana’a to call for the end of Ali Abdullah Saleh’s regime. Initially, the demands of protesters dealt with unemployment, corruption, and the government’s proposals to modify Yemen’s constitution. Over time, they escalated to calls for Saleh’s resignation.

Ever since a UN-led national dialogue process failed in 2015, the situation in the country has grown more violent and complex, with the involvement of international actors. All parties have contributed to the deteriorating conditions in Yemen. The UN-led peace process moves ahead, but slowly, lacking legitimacy and relevance in the eyes of many Yemenis and creating uncertainty around the future of conflict resolution in Yemen.

As a consequence, invaluable cultural heritage sites have been destroyed and Yemen’s social structure has changed. The continuous political conflict, airstrikes on civilians, and economic deterioration have led to general desensitization and a loss of empathy and hope. Yet, despite the negative effects of war, the erosion of prevalent social values and norms has also opened up new spaces and opportunities, particularly for young people and women. Artists share their impressions and visions of the transformation of Yemeni society. People are eager to re-establish a sense of normality in their lives and to enjoy life despite daily hardships and an uncertain future.

Living in Yemen means learning to adapt. But this resilience is rarely depicted when Yemeni news goes viral. The situation on the ground is far from normal or ideal; however, life continues. The continuity of daily life is a battle each Yemeni knows too well. Shortages of electricity have directed Yemenis towards solar energy. Educational institutions and universities continue to operate, and when COVID-19 hit, students managed to connect online, despite the crumbling internet infrastructure. Weddings are still celebrated. Mutual aid networks continue to grow. These events should be celebrated because they are the counter action to the political turmoil battering the country each day.

Artists in Yemen face more restrictions than ever in raising their voices and sharing their work publicly. We hope to explore the narrative and stories of Yemeni artists working in various mediums and practices, and look into the challenges they face as artists collectively work towards a more peaceful and democratic country. We aim to showcase the contributions made by the various factions of the Yemeni creative community in working towards a more peaceful Yemen. We seek to demonstrate that the dialogue that is often born from artists' creative productions is a significant step towards peacebuilding. This report is the first of its kind, according to our knowledge. It is the first space given to Yemeni artists to openly consider that their needs are in the pursuit of creating work that can foster peace.

When we set out on this project, we aimed to create a conversation around the current art scene in Yemen from the perspectives of local Yemeni artists and Yemeni artists in the diaspora. No official network between Yemeni artists has been established previously. We sought to bring artists together to discuss the current political conflict and how it has affected both their work and their personal lives. Our report utilized a mixed-data collection method. We decided to explore themes around politics and self and link them with the power of art. General thematic questions under each category help to guide the conversation while leaving enough space for a diverse set of opinions. We interviewed 15 Yemeni artists and cultural practitioners residing inside Yemen and abroad. We also conducted an open-ended survey targeting a wider range of Yemeni artists. The choice of interview participants ensured the equal contribution of both male and female artists



*Phone Art Yemen (@phoneart.yemen) presentation, Sana'a, March 2020*

# **Bios of Contributing Artists & Cultural Practitioners**

## **Amr Gamal**

Amr is an Aden based independent Yemeni film and theatre director. In 2001 he received the President's trophy in theatre-script writing, becoming the youngest Yemeni to ever win this award. In 2005 Amr established Khaleej Aden Theatre Troupe, the first group to reactivate the theatre scene since Yemen's 1994 civil war. He wrote and directed 10 theatre productions between the years of 2005 and 2014. His play 'Ma'k Nazel' became the first Yemeni production to be shown in Europe. In spring 2018, production began on his first feature film '10 days before the wedding', the film premiered in Aden during the summer, becoming the first film to open commercially in Yemen since the last decade. The film continued to be screened for over eight months and became Yemen's official submission to the Oscars in 2018.

## **Amr Attammimi**

Amr is a London based photographer. Born and raised in Yemen, Amr's first experience as an artist was breaking through barriers that he faced to express his thoughts and experiences. He received two scholarships sponsored by the British Council and Culture Lab to participate in a study tour in France and the UK. Amr has made art for the past nine years and exhibited his artwork in two regional solo exhibitions and five group exhibitions nationally and internationally.

## **Asim Aziz**

Asim is an Aden based artist, experimental film director and producer. Asim has always been interested in expressing his emotions and thoughts through photography and art. He uses his camera to reflect on his feelings as a young artist living in a conflict zone. His work has been featured in The Washington post, ArtNews, i-D and Hypebeast amongst other publications.

## **Aziz Morfeq**

Aziz is a Cairo based Yemeni cultural actor and enthusiast who has been working in the field for 10 years now. He is a staff member of Basement Cultural Foundation based in Sana'a and is a Monitoring & Evaluation officer. He has had articles published in Al-Madaniyah and Raseef22. He practices photography as a hobby.

## **Ali Fouad**

Ali is a Sana'a based photographer and high school student. He was the youngest participant in these conversations. His hobbies include photography, drawing, and learning the guitar. Ali hopes to find success as he embarks on his journey in working in the arts. He uses social media to offer photography and design tools and tips to help creatives in his community. Once he finishes high school, Ali wants to study architecture and multimedia.

### **Hanan Yahya**

Hanan is a Detroit based cultural practitioner. She is a first-generation Yemeni American raised in Detroit. She graduated from the University of Michigan in 2016 where she studied Urban Studies and Entrepreneurship. Hanan thrives in innovative organizations and is passionate about the intersection of social entrepreneurship, art, and sustainability. She has curated murals, exhibits, and other creative projects focusing on the development of her city and her homeland, Yemen.

### **Najla al-Shami**

Najla is a Beirut based artist. Through her artwork she mirrors mostly traditional oriental women and human identity. Najla has worked in different humanitarian and development sectors but mainly in cultural heritage, it is here that she found her passion because it allowed her to discover the endless cultural wealth of Yemen and the diverse communities she encountered in the different corners of the country. Najla believes that culture and art bring people together because it is what shapes the identity of a family, a community, and a nation.

### **Noha al-Maghafi (Intibint)**

Intibint is a London based singer-songwriter, producer and illustrator. She describes her music as a mix of experimental, alt RnB and downtempo music. She uses her music and art to tell stories of her experiences growing up between two worlds as a Yemeni in the U.K. The pseudonym 'Intibint' stands for the phrase 'you are a girl' in Arabic, usually meant to undermine women. Intibint uses this moniker to change the narrative of the Arab woman's position in society through her music and art. Intibint's work has been featured by publications including Jdeed Magazine, Mykali Magazine, Scene Noise, BBC Arabic Xtra and BBC Radio London.

### **Mariam al-Dhubhani**

Mariam is Doha based Yemeni-Russian award-winning journalist, filmmaker, and curator. She first pursued her passion for media during the 2011 Arab uprisings when she co-founded her first media production. Her films have been screened globally in festivals such as Carthage, Interfilm, and Oaxaca. She also utilizes Virtual Reality in highlighting stories from Yemen.

### **Saber Bamatraf**

Saber is an Edinburgh based Yemeni pianist and composer. He is a current IIE-Artist Protection Fund (APF) Fellow and in residence at Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities (IASH) at the University of Edinburgh. Saber has participated in many solo and group music performances and projects in Yemen. He is a self-taught pianist who does not read music but has played music by ear since childhood. Saber started focusing on music compositions in 2014 for his debut album *Turning Point*. He also works to renew Yemeni folk poetic music, which is widely spread throughout Arabia, by adding variations to be fully instrumental in an attempt to represent the Yemeni musical legacy – and heritage as a whole – in a new style that can be enjoyed worldwide.

### **Sara Ishaq**

Sara is an Amsterdam based Yemeni-Scottish Academy Award & BAFTA nominated filmmaker. She has worked extensively as a director, producer and cinematographer both independently as well as for international TV outlets such as the BBC, Channel 4 and AJ since 2007. While pursuing an MFA in Film Directing at the Edinburgh College of Art, Sara documented Yemen's 2011 uprising as a BBC camerawoman, and filmed her independent award-winning debut film *Karama Has No Walls* (2012), followed by her award-winning feature doc *The Mulberry House*, both of



which released theatrically and aired on international TV. Sara is the co-founder of Comra Films & Camera Academy, a Yemen-based film foundation for creative film productions and training. She is now developing her first Fiction Feature, *The Station*, which was selected for L'Atelier de la Cinéfondation Festival de Cannes 2020. Over the years, she has sat on a number of film jury committees such as BFI London Film Awards, BBC Aan Korb Film Festival, IDFA Bertha Fund, MOOOV Film Festival and others.

### **Shroq al-Ramadai**

Shroq is a Mukalla based social and cultural entrepreneur. She is the founder and adviser of Takween Cultural Club. Shroq has worked in the culture field since 2013 where she volunteered and advised on the startup of numerous cultural initiatives in Hadhramaut. Deputy Secretary-General at Yemen Model United Nations 2021 – Yemen. As a writer and researcher, she is a member of the Yemen Peace Forum within Sana'a Center of Strategic Studies and a field researcher for the Yemen Polling Center.

### **Somaya Abdalla**

Somaya is a Sana'a based photographer who started her artistic career in 2017 as she was interested in documentary photography and showing it in a different way. She has participated in international exhibitions and she has produced two series of photography (The Rooftop ) and (A Woman From My Country).

### **Thana Farog**

Thana is a Netherland's based photographer and educator. In 2016, Yemen's war unfolded over several years forcing Thana into a Dutch exile. Her exploration of photography, texts, sound, and the physicality of the image itself was a way to respond to the changes that have been shaping and defining her life and sense of belonging both in Yemen and The Netherlands. Thana was a recipient of the 2018 inaugural Open Society Foundation Fellowship Grant and Exhibition and the 2019 Arab Documentary Fund supported by the Prince Claus Fund and Magnum Foundation and Zenith magazine reporting grant. She was selected among 'Ones to watch' by the British Journal of Photography 2020

### **Yousra Ishaq**

Yousra is a Sana'a based first-time film director, with a strong background as a film producer in Yemen, facilitating local productions and coordinating multinational teams including international media outlets such as the BBC and PBS between 2013-2017. Yousra studied Business Administration at UUM (Malaysia) and applied her business management skills in versatile and multi-functional environments. In 2017, she co-founded the Yemen-based film foundation and production company Comra Films. In 2018, one of the projects she worked on for PBS as a field producer was nominated for an Emmy Award.

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# Art & Politics

“I am interested in a political art, that is to say an art of ambiguity, contradiction, uncompleted gestures and uncertain ending - an art (and a politics) in which optimism is kept in check, and nihilism at bay.” - **William Kentridge**

## *The Current Conflict and its Influence on Arts*

The feeling of gloom fills the air around any conversation about Yemen. There's an awareness of unhealed wounds and of a growing diaspora, as well as the reasons why. Artists around the world have a sense of freedom to explore and produce their artwork, but Yemeni artists are encumbered. They must consider every element of what they produce and recheck what they make before sharing it publicly. They feel the guilt of reflecting what is happening in their country and they struggle to find their own voice amongst the noise. The conflict as a means for empowerment and forces against creativity is explored by artists and practitioners alike.

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**Intibint:** I think it's difficult. What is stuck in my head now is whether this is about being just an artist or a Yemeni individual outside of the art world. I think for me, it always felt like guilt generally speaking. This is how it is when you are in a position of privilege and connected to a country where there is a war. Eventually, this feeds into your art and you feel trapped as an artist. I am also now getting to a point where I do my bit with Al.Yamaniah, an initiative I founded which is Yemen focused, through which I can express myself openly in my art, it's hard.

**Amr A:** I think lots of Yemenis would like to see that we care as a diaspora. They would reach out to us and say: “Why don't you say this?” or “Do this in your artwork.” This is a valid point. It is also important to realize that presenting non-conflict related art that does not speak about Yemen, is still valid as a Yemeni artist. People will know about your country through that. People will say, this artist comes from a war-torn country and he makes art. I do not think presenting the elements of war in the artwork should always be the way. This is at least my approach and I feel less guilty when I look at it that way.

**Hanan:** You all make great points, but I want to say that the notion of being trapped in this war narrative makes sense, however there are also other struggles that I noticed creatives face in the US. As a Yemeni American, I can only speak on behalf of artists living and working here. This struggle is based on their identity and the struggle of being immigrants in this country. We are talking about Yemeni artists who live in the south side of Detroit or Oakland in the bay area or in Brooklyn, in poverty and other places. When we talk about Yemeni creatives, there is room for a holistic approach and a holistic conversation. This is our role to create spaces for dialogue and storytelling because on top of being trapped with the war narrative, there are other narratives that we suffer, as Yemenis living in the US especially with the Muslim man and with other situations. That is not to demean what is happening in Yemen, but it just shows how difficult it is to be Yemeni and creative in this world, in the US in particular. I do not know if this is the same in the UK but if I may be frank, it's very rough in some neighborhoods and in some communities. Not only are you battling the local government, but your own country so there are these intra-community challenges. The US is a big place, you go from one Yemeni community to another and it is like going from far Salafi north to progressive east, and that brings far more challenges so there is certainly a need for this holistic approach and conversation. It will allow us to remove the blur from the reality.

**Asim:** The way I approach art is through focusing on emotions. I try to reflect on my personal experiences and challenges as I returned to Yemen after studying abroad. The war is present in my work but indirectly. It is present through exploring the human suffering caused by this war by telling people's stories. This emotional aspect in a certain environment is what I like my art to focus on, war or beyond war.

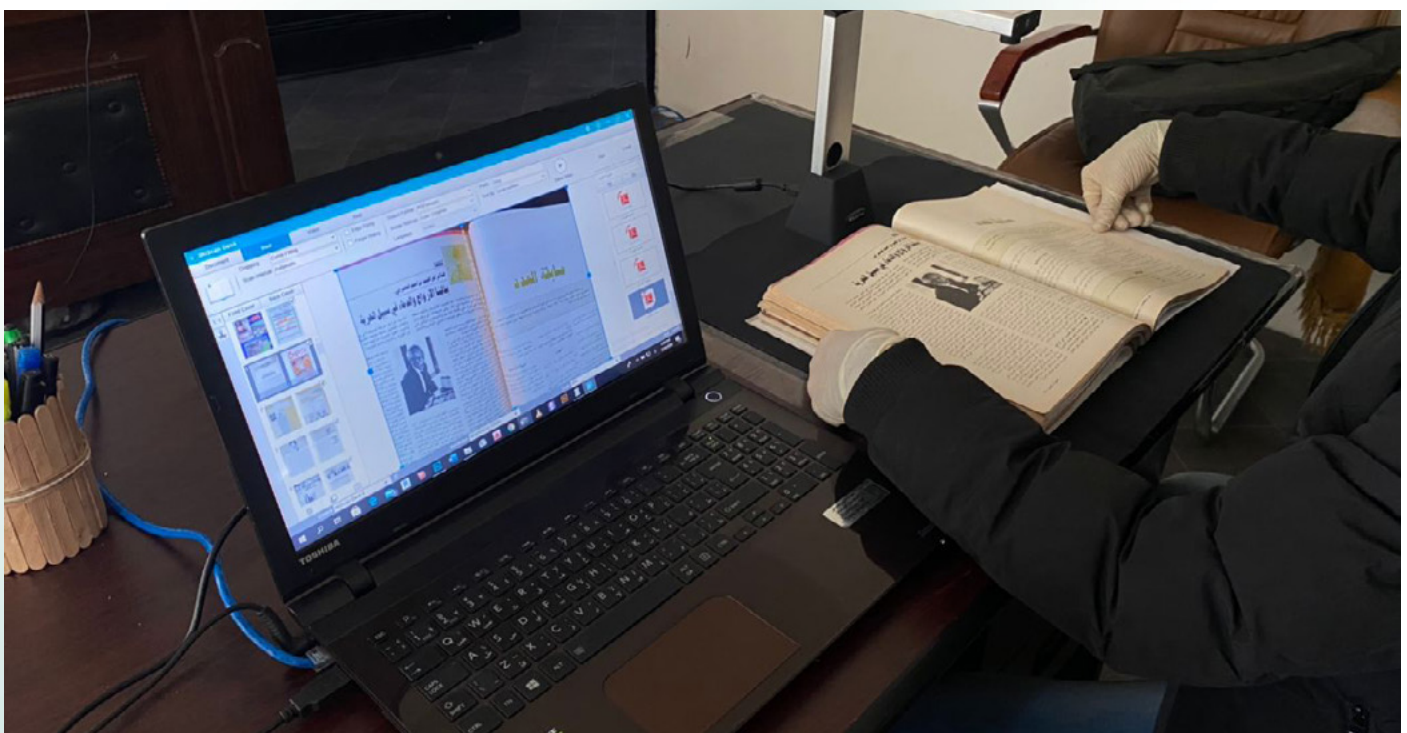
I feel artists choose to be outspoken the moment they decide to endure on this art journey. I cannot imagine an artist living in Yemen in the past five years and deciding against creating work that comments on this ongoing tragedy. Personally, I cannot be working on a regular project, witness Aden airport being bombed then carry on with my project. I have to create work that is relatable to my environment. I cannot see myself creating a beautiful optimistic body of work when the electricity is out all day long; this is not realistic. That being said, the conflict and war experience can be translated in an artistic form in a variety of ways. Indirectly. To create a dialogue about the harm of this war on us for years and centuries to come. It is important to reflect, but it should be done artistically. Yes, we are a nation of war and conflict, but we are more than that and this is what artists inside Yemen are failing to reflect and transcend to the rest of the world. War is within me every single day. It is not easy to disconnect this from my practice. It will not happen anytime soon.

**Shroq:** I don't know how to imagine my life and work without this war. I feel sometimes that if there was no war, I'd probably not have been involved and active in the cultural sphere. It's true, even before the war there was a weak cultural scene in Al Mukala, but at least it was present and the lives of those cultural managers and activists weren't in danger or disrespected by the rest of society. Nowadays, we're being attacked non-stop and constantly told that we're against traditions and morals of the society when the reality is, everything we present is already part of our society for a long time now. The war has pushed us years and years behind. This part of the country was controlled more recently by AQAP and that took us back centuries and truly harmed us and gave birth to extremist thinkers who are constantly denouncing the work of arts and culture. We're fighting back and our fight is different here.

**Najla:** I agree with Asim. Artists are born angry. When I was young, I felt that as women we didn't have equal rights as the men do in our society. I grew up in a house with four brothers and learned how to fight for my rights from an early age. I think those experiences led me to be a feminist and a feminist artist. My work looks at the struggle of women living in Yemen and brings their struggle and perspective into the surface. Now, there is a war and our struggles as women are deepening and worsening. As far as being outside of Yemen, there is a set of expectations you feel obliged to follow or experience. Your audience wants to see Yemen in your work in one way or another, even if it's very minor it becomes very significant to them. I believe that artists should express what they feel. If it's not Yemen, so be it and we shouldn't feel the pressure to produce work that comments on Yemen today. If we're not true to ourselves, there is no point in it.

**Yousra:** Creating documentary films offers more opportunities in time of conflict. More stories lead to more authentic stories. The media and its messages before and after the war have changed completely, the messages got deeper and stronger. Creating documentary films was not the main focus, but after the current conflict the focus was shifted to this type of production. People are more interested. My advice to all my trainees is that this period is a time of documentation, reality must be reflected. My work with artists allowed me to notice that the number of artists has increased during the war. This can be attributed to having more spare time, or loss of work. The economical shift made them focus on their passion.

**Ali:** I started after the war to explore my journey as an artist. My photography is not easily practiced due to lack of equipment and the challenges of the prohibition of using cameras on streets. Some youth decided to challenge these circumstances and continue, and others could not. How do you face these challenges and why should you? Everyone is facing these challenges either using permits or trying to photograph quietly. What is really sad is when people stop you and tell you not to photograph the city and its beauty. The people do that because they are afraid of air strikes or the current situation on the ground.



**Somaya:** We started to see more photographers amongst the youth in recent years. People have become more aware. The timing of this awareness is really making it difficult. My freedom of distributing my art is limited. My photographs could cause me much harm because of the current conflict as the opinions I express in my images might contradict the political agenda on the ground. I wanted to create a series about Yemeni women and my thoughts were revolving around how to adjust for them to agree for me to be allowed to do so. I feel this led many to stop working until they leave Yemen which is deeply saddening. We are now required to obtain permissions to go into the streets and document street life if we use our cameras. You will be apprehended at checkpoints if a camera is found among your belongings. You could be harmed greatly. Exhibiting your work safely is crucial, even if you take the risk of capturing the photograph, we are limited in how we distribute and exhibit our work. We face a terror that hinders our art. Exposing this terror is scary in itself. An art infrastructure is non-existent in Yemen. We lack any foundations that can support us as young artists. "Artists in Yemen are dying while flourishing in every other country."

**Aziz:** Currently, I am in Egypt. Two months ago, I was in Sana'a and the simplest hobbies were hard to practice. I see it as a natural thing. The art movement in Yemen has always gone through this, in some periods it flourishes and in others it is suppressed. There are two sides: people in the country and artists in diaspora. Most new art activities and movements in Yemen appeared because of Yemeni artists in diaspora. Then comes the political movement that suppresses and obliterates art. And currently Yemen is going through its worst period ever throughout history. The simplest forms of art in magazines are completely distinct. Diaspora artists have a greater role. Artists outside should push and apply pressure to create a change inside Yemeni society to reintroduce art. Photographers are restricted and it affects the quality of photographs they produce. We reach a point of brain freeze because of all the internal pressure. My advice for young artists is not to think and compare with others, but to focus on creating art that represents you and to a high quality.

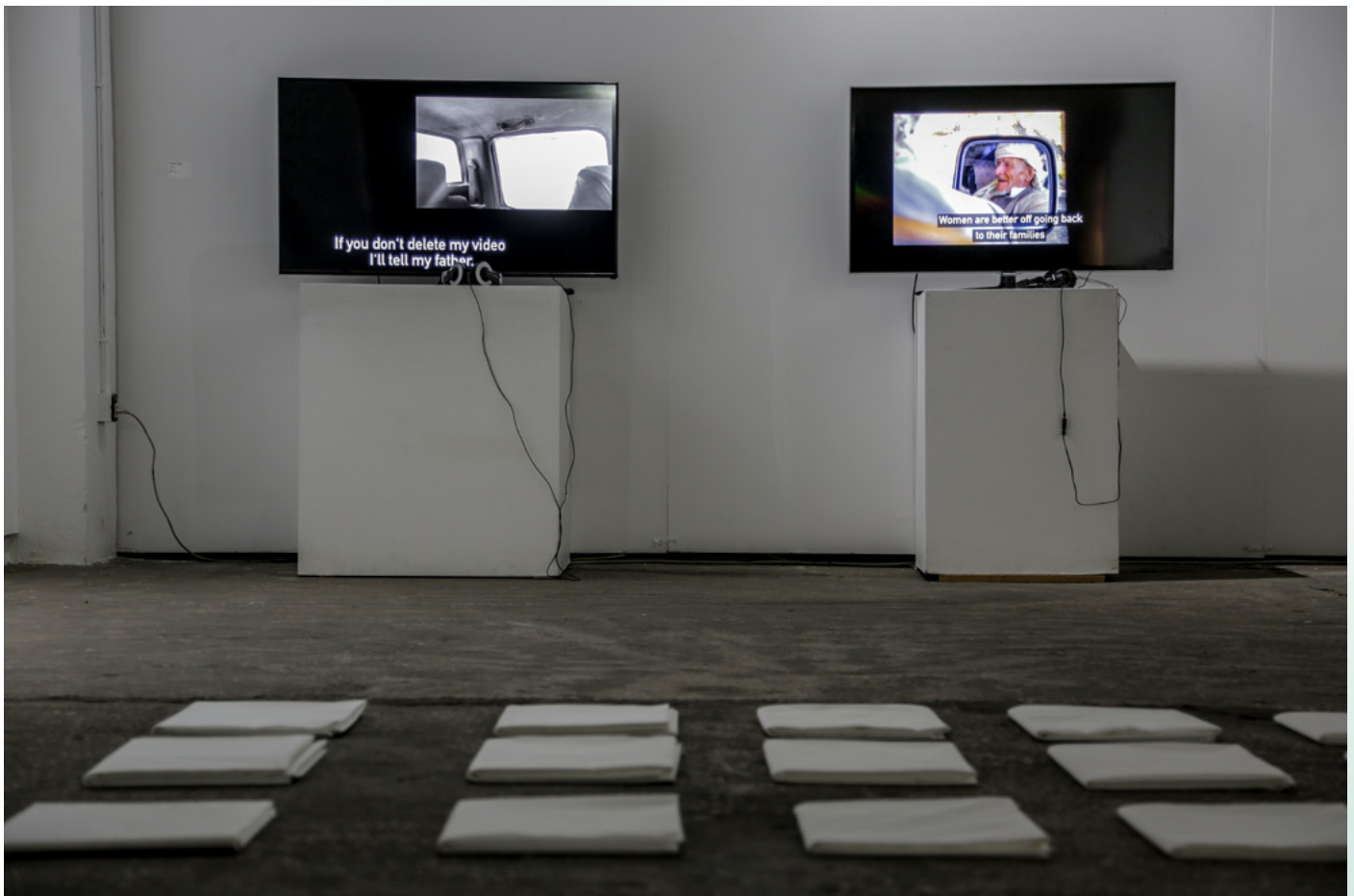
**Thana:** I do not see the conflict as a limitation. I left the war and Yemen. It has challenged me to think outside the box. All my work has become out of this memory. I learned how to photograph absence. It is limiting when you are in the space of war, but my work was born from the journey out of the conflict to carry on. I am worried about how my freedom would be different when I choose to go back, how it will all work out. Many Yemeni artists are obsessed with exposure not their work. The majority does not focus on the quality of their work, they focus on being famous. Training and education will help artists become better and when work is great it will force itself. It is not being famous or international, it is about making good work that forces itself and travels the world. It is not putting your work out there only; it is about the quality. Maturity is key, exhibitions will come. We need training more than opportunities for exposure. Frustration is understandable. Trying over and over again is key. It is about good work, just do the work. Carve your way until it is paved.

**Amr G:** I started working in cinema after the events of 2011. Our country is in a continuous war. Each war adds something distinct that influences the period. Our art is affected by the period and its conflicts, the only change is in the features that distinguish this conflict from the previous one. When we go back to older scripts, we find similarities with minimal changes. It is not necessary to carry the burden of covering all aspects and problems because we have a few filmmakers. We have to tell stories which are worth it, but we don't have to shoulder the guilt and blame about including everything in our work. The feeling that a certain story is forced upon prevents artists from following on that path. We make real stories and that's why by default it will touch upon the scenery of war without war being forced to be the sole focus. We cannot accept working along to

a checklist in order to please everyone. “We are humans, and we need to live, our lives are bigger than the war”.

**Sara:** What changed is that I did not choose to focus my work on what is concentrated on mainstream media. As an independent filmmaker I try to preserve my voice and identity from a different angle. People are synthesized against these events and imagery, the guilt of not covering these events can be crippling sometimes. I worked on films with channels covering the brutal conflict, but I tried to present a better picture that featured societal and humanitarian aspects while other events and war is in the background. However, we do not find much support for this kind of production. The psychological effect of making work also hinders the process, being outside your country and trying to cover as much or make do with what you have, you feel the complexities of it. The youth prefer to speak about their lives away from drawing attention to war. After 2011, it was easier to get our stories out. It was a time of excitement. In 2015, frustration and disempowerment paralyzed artists. This feeling made me focus on training and developing my material, the war has contributed directly to that.

**Maryam:** We are blamed and pressured but there has been a shift where more heritage related short films are produced away from focusing just on the conflict. But the war is always in the background and it touches upon everything. We create an opposite stream to balance against mainstream media. We do have so many problems and tragedies but at the end of the day we are all humans with similar ideas and rights. Our circumstances will eventually change.



*Installation Shot, On Echoes of Invisible Hearts: Image Making in times of Conflict, Beirut, April 2019*

# Neutrality of Art

Arno Berker, Hitler's favorite sculptor, famously declared that art "has nothing to do with politics ... for good art is above politics." This statement could not be further from the truth. Art is directly connected to the temperament of artists which is greatly impacted by their surroundings. Politics and political effects touch every corner of our lives, art included.

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**Yousra:** "Everything in this world is political and art is an outcome of politics". Museums are full of artwork that confirms this. Regarding the previous generations what was considered documentation is now considered art. We document so that in the future it will be present in the arts. In films, independent films try to balance the scale without favoring sides. It takes us away from the political idea. It can be politicized but generally, independent art has more power.

**Saber:** Art and politics, sometimes your unconscious mind draws you into producing art that is connected to politics because we are constantly influenced by it. What is important is that artists try to be neutral with their art. Direct messages should be avoided. People would politicize everything no matter how hard artists try. I produced a musical piece about a girl, however when people from around the world listen to it, they can feel the tension of the war in my music. It is inevitable. "Artists should speak about politics not speak politics"

**Ibi:** Art is used in politics everywhere in Yemen through visual and vocal art in radio and banners. Artists need to educate themselves and read about similar conflicts and how artists throughout history tried to navigate themselves and the environment they're part of. Art in Yemen has to depict what is happening now and should not be done in retrograde.

**Aziz:** All art is important. We don't have the luxury of building art schools. We don't have a foundation for art. Politics is part of every facet of our lives in Yemen. It is vital that art covers all aspects whether it is war related or not. We need to make sense of what is happening in the country and translate our understanding in art. We also need to feature the beauty of Yemen. Artists should not shy away from our Yemeni heritage and search for beauties in the country. What is beautiful and how society sees it. The current political party in the north has been closer to the people because they understand and talk to them in a way they understand.

**Thana:** It is not wrong to reflect conflict, but artists don't think about that. Inspiration is as it is. Conflict can be a reference, but the outcome can be totally different. What happens is that projects are predetermined with its outcomes. Artists predetermine topics when the emphasis is not about the work. "Listen to your voice, you are part of your audience." "Produce work that means something to you, you are the most important voice in it"

**Somaya:** I am currently working on projects away from the war narrative. However, I feel divided between the feeling of how I should pursue my passion and please society. Talking about beautiful projects away from the conflict and how it would be received in my society. When I work now I have so many considerations to take and think about. “Everyone wants to talk about the war. It is the demand of the people.”



*Phone Art Yemen (@phoneart.yemen) Photo Walk, May, 2021*



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# Art & The Self

“Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time.”– **Thomas Merton**

## *Role of Yemeni Creatives in Diaspora*

Yemen artists in the diaspora face multiple issues in their newfound communities. Although out of the direct lines of conflict in Yemen, they are still affected by it. In addition to all the troubles Yemeni artists are experiencing every day, integration and acceptance in a new community while still being active as a Yemeni artist is a real struggle. The attempts to define a clear role for themselves compromises their art and creates a sense of obligation to their homeland.

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**Intibint:** Being Yemeni British, I used to feel my role was to inform people on the war and I felt I had a duty towards this. Eventually, I began questioning this idea: “Is it my duty to continue producing work and letting people know about the war? When do you start expressing yourself in ways that are not related to the war?” I began struggling a lot with this notion. When I began creating for myself, I felt that I was not doing enough for Yemen - or not doing the right thing. This is a very difficult state of mind. I don’t know if I’ve found the answer just yet but at the moment my take on it is that my duty is to just express myself whatever that means and that’s the best I can possibly do. It’s difficult because that also comes from such a privileged position so it’s hard to navigate sometimes.

**Hanan:** When we’re talking about overlooked communities, in this case this is an overlooked and forgotten war in total. I just think about creating a space for artists to amplify their voices. I am not here to set any obligations for artists asking them to be an influencer and talk about Yemen. I saw a manifestation for art through the lens of war and other identity crises taking place and that’s why I created the project Untold Stories in Detroit metro area. I think it’s most important to create these spaces as artists and creatives - to ensure these voices are being amplified and shared but also to create opportunities for these artists. I see it happening in some institutions, allowing for more creative opportunities for artists.

**Amr A:** Whenever I meet someone here in the UK, they don't have many ideas about Yemeni culture. War is an added element that occurred recently but there is so much more to Yemen than the narrative revolving around war. I believe that our role as artists in diaspora is to be able to express ourselves and not be limited by the obligation of telling the world about the war. War and politics always come up in conversation here in the UK. I feel it's difficult for Yemenis to reflect on war all the time. We're people just like everyone else. It's important to feel that we have that collective duty, but we also want to be ourselves. It's a very tricky situation.

# *Yemeni Artists in Diaspora Going Quiet*

Going around in circles to fit in a certain narrative can be exhausting. Yemeni artists in diaspora face the feeling of being misplaced. Many creatives leave the country hoping to find relief from the tension; however, they find themselves facing a plethora of emotions and challenges that could lead to them being unproductive.

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**Intibint:** One point and I don't know if this is the case for every artist, but I think it can be a point in which sometimes when you work with a certain narrative, you start getting booked because of that narrative. Let's say I am intibint and I will talk about the Yemen war with my art, as a consequence that artistic expression becomes your narrative, and you get stuck with that. Some artists decide not to talk about it so much because they will get stuck and then the rest of their work will not be taken seriously. I don't know. I think about that a lot and also, I think about how you can create work that is Yemeni or that is about Yemen? I know this might sound, I don't know what the right word is but really, if you just create art, you're already a Yemeni. It's hard because if you're in diaspora, then what if your art doesn't look Yemeni enough? But then what is Yemeni enough? I do not know if there is one answer.

**Amr A:** Most of my friends left Yemen and immigrated to America or Canada and they often go quiet. Life in Yemen was so different and it's very easy to get sucked into this new routine of work and studies and what not, trying to focus on settling down. But that is not the only problem. Many Yemenis often feel that the community inside Yemen can be very critical and that holds them back from sharing new work widely. They feel they can't reflect on their work and feel obliged to reflect on their Yemeni identity more. Often, the feeling dies off and gets replaced with a constant sense of obligation. Also, for me personally as a photographer I can't find the same things I found in Yemen. I depended a lot on the scenery. Even though I have been in the UK for six years now, I still feel that I am still finding myself. Lots of things have changed. Generally speaking, it's about adjusting to a new life and there is a little bit of a sense of cooperation with other Yemenis. Quitting is not something I will ever do. I might go slow but never quit. It's a struggle. Yemen is part of me. Everything that happened in Yemen was part of my work as well. I don't feel that I want to replicate that here. I won't stop working on Yemen, I just need more time to find myself first. It's tough being imagined in a particular way when you're here in the UK. In Yemen, things were very

unique but that's not the same case here in the UK. To answer your question, I am still not there just yet. I am still progressing, and I am hoping to find my way.

**Hanan:** I don't have a medium but growing up in a Yemeni community in the US results in so much trauma. I think that's often a reason why people go quiet. This is my educated observation and I think that whatever network there is, there should be space for therapy. Circles of dialogue and artists should not be left suffering and dealing with their respective issues by themselves. This network can be a space for healing, dialogue and growth. That does not mean you come out of this healing circle and create work. No, it's just helping those artists rehabilitate themselves and really grow. I talked to several activists who were involved in art practices and they went quiet for this exact reason. There is so much on their shoulders and their mind. When we talk about why Yemenis are disconnected and scattered, it's because we don't have a base here in the US. We don't have a voice and we have no power. There are Yemenis who are active, but they tend to be older Yemeni men who started organizations, were part of embassies and have connections from before. I call them the survivor Yemenis; immigrants who came to this country and wanted to be active and have things running. Whatever they created, it looks very different. I am not here to discredit them as they were working in their own space and time. Again, this should be part of a holistic conversation about the idea of Yemeni art. In the 70s in Dearborn for example, there was an organization called the Yemeni American Benevolent association. Now it's an Islamic school on the weekend and they're trying to create a recreational space. In the 70s, that association used to hold cultural events and Jalasat where people would come and do traditional dance where men and women are in the same space sharing their culture with Americans. This is just an example to show the drastic changes encountered overtime.

Another note I wanted to mention is that when we talk about Yemeni creatives in the diaspora, I want to separate them into different buckets. I moved here when I was three and I consider myself second generation - we moved here from small towns in central Yemen. There are huge indicators on the way we think, the way we operate and the way we're active in society. When we talk about art as well, second and third generation Yemenis, who come from smaller towns in Yemen are more conservative. As we're talking about Yemeni creatives today, we're referring to those creatives who come from major cities like Sanaa and Aden. I don't know if you all noticed this, but there is a huge coloration in terms of engagement with society, growth and development. It's really reflective of where we came from, Yemen.



*Kitabat's Creative Writing workshop, Sana'a, June 2019*

# Conflicting (Overlapping) Art Activities

The Yemeni artistic scene is still young, especially in terms of exhibiting artists' work. Last year several local film festivals took place at overlapping times. Although a great step towards enriching the art scene, it shows a lack of better coordination and cooperation.

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**Najla:** Regardless of the quality, I feel the more production the better. Now, bringing them together in one place and providing a stronger support for all those individuals is certainly a great idea. Whether people pay to watch or not, that depends on each and every person.

**Shroq:** I agree with Najla. The more the better; in particular in Yemen where we are extremely isolated from the rest of the world. We haven't reached the culture of paying to see films. Those festivals where people pay could work outside the country but we're still in the phase where society doesn't believe it should pay for films. The way people deal with artists here is terrible. The idea of buying art and artistic appreciation is not part of our culture. Often, we see people asking artists to work for free work or if not, to just go and recreate their work instead. It's discouraging to be an artist based within this culture.



From the launch of the book *Conflict: New Literature in Yemen*, Sana'a, December 2019

# *International Media & Art*

Yemen is depicted as a country drowning in famine and divided by conflicts. The international media sells the view of Yemen away from all the signs of resilience the Yemeni people are bravely demonstrating every day. Art that shows this side of the country is important to fight against this mediocre false image. The role of well-made art presented to international communities can help in creating a parallel narrative. While Artists produce artwork as a result of different floundering forces, this results in unique outcomes. Still, creative productions made in Yemen are overlooked by the international media.

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**Najla:** The perceived notion of Yemen in international media is unfair. Artists should always feel a total freedom in their practice. For the media to select the focus it means they are becoming the decision makers behind our work and how we operate. Personally, I find this constantly frustrating.

**Ali:** My experience has been with the immediate reactions of those who follow my work locally. When I share work that is different from the norm, it has always been criticized and misunderstood. People here like a more traditional form of art. I felt desperate and tried to change my way and the work I share. I feel if there are art spaces and art schools, I would find my community where creating something different is encouraged. Somehow, I am able to find this community online and it helps me stay true to my art. Later on, I started sharing and explaining editing programs with my followers and it made them more involved in my work and somehow accepting of its different appeal.

**Saber:** We can try and introduce our art in a way that the international community can understand. My art was different from what the Yemeni community expects. I expressed my music away from traditional Yemeni music. Some artists dared to work on something different especially after 2015. Yemeni artists started to produce art that is abstract and different. Part of this has resulted in artists wanting to reach an international status, showing that they have the skill and talent to live and produce art like any other artist in the world. We do not even imitate, we are still very young in our palette and in our exposure to art.

**Ibi:** Influences of other established artists are necessary for younger artists to grow and to reach a point where they create their own art and influences. In Yemen, many artists are stuck at imitation lacking the passion and perseverance to evolve into influence. Nowadays, the internet is in your hands. Get out and observe all this knowledge available. The lack of art schools hinders us from understanding and learning about important art movements, but at least with the internet, a preview of a snippet is possible, and it goes a long way. We need to encourage more knowledge-learning and understanding the art movements that came before us, whatever the means are.

**Yousra:** It is an important idea when the international community sees the dire situation in Yemen. How to change this? By producing art that is international and not bound by borders. It is not easy to change because Yemenis project a negative image when they get in touch with the international community. We show and depict resilience in face of tragedy. We are spreading stereotypes about ourselves more than international (outer) influences.

Donors ask for a specific depiction that serves their agenda; we have to show a message that is not easily accessed by day-to-day media. We can deliver what is required by putting a better angle on it, depicting the unique facets of Yemen away from the mass media.

**Aziz:** We need to change our views of ourselves first. We need to rationally criticize ourselves and our reality. We need to understand the positive and negative sides of everything. Understanding who we are and who we are dealing with. We need to be clear with ourselves, once we have this clarity it would translate to the global society. Changing the image of Yemen can be shouldered by artists in the diaspora and an example of that is the Iranian art movement supported by their artists outside. Practicing art in itself is an achievement for all Yemeni artists. Any art that contributes to awareness of our lives is amazing. We don't have to actively change the narrative around Yemen, but we need to change the narrative every individual knows and tells her/himself. We have local art that should be documented. Our historical art should be studied and probed. It is the human experience behind the manufacturing of art. All of this is important to understand.

**Thana:** Is it your responsibility? We are putting too much responsibility on art. We don't aim to impact or inspire. It is a lot of responsibility; we keep it in mind, but it works in a subconscious way. It is not a target goal in my work. I believe if we work with quality, it will change the view automatically. If we keep it in mind, it will hinder our creative process tremendously. Focus on good work and it will carry the change.

In the diaspora, we are faced with problems that draw our attention, integration within our new societies is one of the biggest challenges. Our environment and challenges would give us another perspective to conquer. "Putting the responsibility of change on art is limiting and dangerous."



*On Echoes of Invisible Hearts: Narrative of Yemeni Displacement, Berlin, September 2018*

# Funding

Agenda driven funds are the new norm. The Yemeni creative community struggles to find funding in the first place, let alone finding funds free of specific agendas that cripple the art process. In a country with no art infrastructure or support, many artists and art practitioners find themselves applying for funding from non-art organizations. Another issue arises from the fact that Yemen is first in humanitarian aid and any other funding is deemed unnecessary nowadays. Artists struggle on a daily basis to make ends meet and to remain active and produce art.

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**Amr G:** The funding and donors that put huge amounts of money to serve a certain agenda attracts many of the youth to produce low quality films that are praised and hailed on social media. This has affected the passion around moviemakers and made it a money seeking profession. It has taken away the sense of creativity and replaced it with laziness. We aim to help passionate filmmakers not spoiled ones because quality is the key, not fame. Education and experience are vital, but they have to work hard for it.

**Yousra:** We don't have institutes that would solely support art and artists like the rest of the world. Resources are scarce. We don't have salaries for artists from ministries. We are against donors' agendas, but they give chances to artists. Artists have to be smart about producing their work under these grants. We can stop the agenda driven donations only when we can see more art related grants from art foundations and donors. In order to practice art, we need to go for similar grants. We have a limited chance to get funded. We are a priority in humanitarian aid not cultural funding. It is like we are told "it is time for you to die not to be an artist". We are limited. We go for other sources of funding to compensate and settle. It is not the best scenario, but it is a forced reality. However, we keep clear rules when it crosses ethical and artistic considerations, we completely refuse that.

**Najla:** This is a point where artists should come together collectively and transparently in objecting against these grants and related projects. We should not allow them to be viewed as a representation of the whole Yemeni art scene. Their work is in no way a representation of contemporary art practices in Yemen.

**Ibi:** We lack an art fund that is operated by an external committee which can be trusted. Instead of funds being offered via different sources unrelated to art practices and projects. Imagine if the funds are operated by the ministry of Culture - such a thing would not be possible now in fears of corruption. The issue we face is that we're proposing project ideas to foreign actors and they determine what gets told.

**Najla:** What we need is a solid list of cultural actors working in Yemen today. Who are they and where are they? How can this list be verified and by whom? This list needs to be supplied by previous work those actors have done. I recently conducted research on cultural actors working inside and outside Yemen. The number is very small. It's not going to be difficult to gather cultural actors in one space and figure out ways to conduct a network.

**Asim:** We need a platform or a website that brings together opportunities and resources that could support the artistic and creative community in Yemen.

**Thana:** If I am not photographing, I am trying to find funding. The value of your art is measured by money and the prices you set. Money and valuing your art are interrelated. Long time projects need money. I cannot accept being undervalued or underpaid. It is our responsibility not to work for free because it affects the whole community of artists. However, when working on educational projects you can work for free.

Artists should create the space to allow for a network and keep it alive. I'm looking for something more specific and formal which is representation with subscription. We need to protect ourselves against bad art and their producers that won't be allowed into the space. We need to ensure quality work.

**Aziz:** Networking among artists is important. It needs to be active. Artists must have fundamentals that help them navigate through more technical practices like proposal writing and budgeting. This would greatly help them have a better footing in negotiations.

**Somaya:** Artists who care about their art won't be driven by agendas. It is not an attraction despite being important. Passion and exhibiting my art are the drives for me. A network is going to be greatly helpful to protect artists against agenda driven donors. It is going to be a learning experience. We don't know where to go for help. Somehow, I think it might not attract traction. We have to ensure that it won't die and disappear.

**Intibint:** I feel bad saying it, but I still find it to be a huge obstacle. It's really difficult because it makes you feel that you can't be an artist as much as you want to be. You can't do everything you want to do because you simply don't have the funds, so you just have to get on with it and get part-time jobs and whatnot. I think this is something we also face as art administrators. However, that's a given as an artist, you will struggle because it's just not a good paying job.

**Amr A:** I do agree in regard to the funding. I found little opportunities for funding here and I feel there is much competition. In Yemen, it was easier even with the resources being limited. In the UK, you have to compete with many talented minorities. Overall, everything is more difficult here and it is hard to know where to look.

**Hanan:** We need to reclaim our narrative and our story. I think we need to jump on this and claim our narrative before other institutions come in and change that. I think money is important but the work we are doing, and the support we give, is more important to artists. If we build a collective space that is owned by the collective that allows us to fund and train artists, and I am not talking just about artists, I am talking about other Yemeni cultural administrators in the diaspora, by doing this, then we will be one step closer to achieving what we want to achieve.



# The Artistic Process

“Nothing is original. Steal from anywhere that resonates with inspiration or fuels your imagination. Devour old films, new films, music, books, paintings, photographs, poems, dreams, random conversations, architecture, bridges, street signs, trees, clouds, bodies of water, light and shadows. Select only things to steal from that speak directly to your soul. If you do this, your work (and theft) will be authentic. Authenticity is invaluable; originality is non-existent. And don't bother concealing your thievery - celebrate it if you feel like it. In any case, always remember what Jean-Luc Godard said: “It's not where you take things from - it's where you take them to.”

– Jim Jarmusch

Yemeni artists are going through one of the toughest times in art history in Yemen. Life threatening incidents and harassment are common practice on the ground. Means to never give up entails finding new ways to express art and preserve it for later exhibition. Similar experiences can be simulated from around the globe in areas that suffered similar conflicts.

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**Ali:** I believe that we need exhibition spaces and museums to showcase and preserve our work.

**Yousra:** We have a wealth of art in Yemen. Very valuable. Currently it has been stalled. Our role is to build art that would be used in the future as the art of the period. We are going through a very difficult time, so we should not be harsh on our artists. We should document art and archive it for the future. The current situation would definitely change, there is no finality in it. We need to use all possible channels to showcase our work and be wise enough to archive art that might cause us harm for later.

**Saber:** Do not only archive and forget about it. Try and reach out to organizations that might help and showcase your art while preserving your privacy. After the conflict, the art scene will flourish so the period work should also be carefully preserved. Institutions should take that approach and archive art, structured archiving would give the art a more secure and sustained future.



Participants of Script-writing workshop along with workshop trainer Wajdi al-Ahdal, Sana'a, January 2020

# Challenges Facing Artists' Work

Human beings are faced everyday with problems that hinder their progress and limit their dreams. War and conflict exacerbate these challenges. Yemeni artists around the globe face different types of challenges that affect the production of their art. Putting our fingers on different challenges can help other artists feel included and not alone. Coming along as a community and allowing a chance to converse and feel included can help solve some of these issues.

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**Intibint:** It doesn't have to be related to the fact that you're Yemeni. To be honest, my main challenge is not being able to finance my art as much as I would like to. Finance.

**Hanan:** How much time do you have? Now that we had this conversation and I've been able to think about everything I've done. I would say it's the lack of community. A community where I share values with other young Yemenis who are also in this field. A tribe. It's important to have a tribe and I don't think I have one.

**Amr:** The simplicity I had in Yemen in making work, I don't have here. To elaborate a little bit more, in Yemen I always had friends who were free and happy to help and many places to photograph. In London, those are hard to find and often restricted. Overall, it's the simplicity that is gone since I left Yemen and came here. That was a major thing for me.

**Sara:** I used to focus on what everyone thinks, but after some time I stopped caring. I cannot keep censoring myself and let many voices cover my own. It is tiring. Some stuff needs clarifying but I am done spoon-feeding the audience, the issue appears more with films that are viewed in international festivals, criticism of not representing the Yemeni society skyrocket.

We don't have competitions that scare people into reaching the minimum standard. We are bound with a few people and we need to work with them. We face opportunists all around the world and we don't accept it, but we can excuse some more than others considering the whole environment. I want to train young filmmakers with the potential to create the next generation that will enrich the cultural scene, however, there is the fear of their lack of commitment which causes problems. That is why we need to be careful when we choose candidates.

**Amr G:** Focus only on the work and avoid the noises around you. All that hinders you. At the beginning it takes a lot of time, but with time you grow to listen to yourself and it might affect the script. Discussions around the movie are based on audiences researching and making their conclusions. We are not obligated to deliver a full idea. We touch upon ideas that serve the script and the story, and the audience should think and do their own research.

# Young Artists

During the conflict year, a boom in the number of Yemeni artists has been noticed. This can be a direct result of the need for self-expression to make sense of surroundings, or a direct result of losing jobs and having plenty of time. Young artists started to explore their potential in very challenging times, but restrictions on everything made practicing art more difficult than any other time.

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**Najla:** I think we are seeing a new generation of creatives who are moving up at a fast pace. We are seeing them often on social media, but I find that they lack a long-term strategy on how to develop further. Their ambition is locally focused. I feel that when they leave that artistic environment and merge with the rest of society, it's often hard to return to it and pick up where they left off. We need to acknowledge that this is a very difficult time for all Yemenis, and we can't deny that there is a mass depression to all those young creatives nowadays. In the past, Yemenis did not know what the world was like outside of their space. Today, young Yemenis can see the entire world through their phones and to realize what young creatives are doing and achieving while they are struggling to survive. It is certainly challenging and leads to major depression.

**Aziz:** Artists have the right to think about themselves, the societal feeling is internal. It is okay to consider what is best for the artists. Being afraid of societal views is harsh. Artists have the right to produce art or take a break. Thinking a lot about the audience and their views leads to losing yourself and your ideas. "Self-discovery away from surroundings is important."

**Thana:** If you get a chance to get out of the country and develop yourself go for it. Patriotism won't be affected. When you work with your full knowledge you have more impact. But being in Yemen is not an excuse. The internet has given all artists a gift. Use what you have for now. We create our own bubbles. Getting in touch is important. We work hard individually and should do more to work collectively. Safe spaces and conversations tie us to reality.

**Somaya:** It is very important to have a safe space amongst artists. We are not truly able to find this within the creative community in Yemen today.



# The Power of Art

“You have to systematically create confusion; it sets creativity free. Everything that is contradictory creates life.”

– Salvador Dalí

## Art & Creating Change

The need to create art comes from the need to express oneself, organizing the chaos in our brains. Art has the power to push for change from the smallest area of our surroundings, to the outer edges of community. Art has a voice and influence of its own accord. It pushes us and it grounds us. Change can be positive and can be a root of a sinister agenda. Art has been present in both forms. It is the bonding agent that we can track along our histories back to our forefathers and gives us the sense of awe we desperately need.

**Hanan:** I think art naturally builds chaos that can bring and lead to peace. I think allowing artists the freedom to express whatever they want to build this chaos is important. Just talking about some artists who go quiet or are afraid or anxious about putting something up, I can never relate to any artist living in Yemen under these circumstances, but I like to think I live in a little Yemen in my community.

I also want to suggest that if we are creating a shared community, support system and such, it would be wise to include other mediums. Even in terms of writing and poetry. I would be more comfortable if something I made or wrote can be shared, not with the rest of the world but rather with this community only. Would that be a good strategy to solve part of the problem over the fear of ruining your reputation, or even, the fear of being killed? If I feel I have a community to share my work with, I would do it because I feel I can express myself to a community that respects me and respects my humanity.

**Intibint:** For me, I'm trying to implement art as a form of therapy. It's difficult to say because I am not in Yemen so I don't feel like I can base my answer on any research because I haven't been to Yemen since the war. I just say that from experience because for me, that's what it is. Maybe if people are encouraged to see it as a form of therapy, it might not be a quick resolution but maybe people can see it over time where people from a young age will begin to see it as a form of therapy for them and they will want to continue producing art. Again, I don't know how that will work in the actual context in itself.

**Amr A:** So, the first point you raise on art being a luxury. It's true that many Yemenis see that. Yemen is going through war and starvation. This is the kind of guilt I personally experience, and I think lots of people do too: not to be able to show yourself in art and always relate to Yemen and always show that you care for Yemen. I think it's important for an artist to show that they care for Yemen, not just through their work. Just to feel you're at peace when you create your own art. The other matter is to reflect yourself. I think there is no point in showing work if it doesn't have an element that you reflect yourself in. Express yourself but also try to show the world that you care about Yemen because otherwise, this might backlash, and people will start questioning you.



*Phone Art Yemen (@phoneart.yemen) presentation, Sana'a, June 2020*

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# Future Steps

In a society and a community that puts little value on the power of art and artists, and with governments growing weary of the power artists can garner to force change, a balance must be struck to maintain the spirits of Yemeni artists in the face of the torrent of contradictions and pressure. How cultural organizations, practitioners, and artists work together to reach and create safer environments and networks to continue creating art and protecting artists.

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**Yousra:** First we should consider the safety and security of the organization. Setting rules that protect both the organizations and artists involved. We have created a system to do our work in certain times and everyone in our projects is aware of the procedures to follow and the people to contact in case of arrest or harassment. We usually organize everything around safety. We don't have a strong stance in society, and we are usually to be blamed and that is why we need to be careful. Our work should be focused on the safety of the crew first and the procedure has to be handled delicately so as not to affect the morale of the team. "The situation is bigger than us, we need to be aware that we are the underdog and be careful"

**Sara:** We have a network informally. It's definitely a good thing to have but it is difficult to implement. It loses its effect with time. I work to support artists whom I believe in. We need to have it to get to know the people who are good to work with to avoid ruining the work of filmmakers. It would be great to have more communication in order to exchange such information. It would also be helpful to organize mentorship programs and festivals during different times. We do face fear in collaboration from other parties because it will be viewed as training the competition while the other party is not willing to do the same. Connections and discussions in the open will help to combine efforts and avoid repetition and the loss of money and effort. A union where we can discuss this and share our experiences through an open channel to exchange reports and knowledge to replace toxic negativity. Even if we start small, we need to consider it.

**Mariam:** My main requirement is to protect artists legally so as to ensure their rights are protected and to facilitate permits and safety of the artists. Collaboration and integration of projects and arranging cycles to allow the chances for more artists to share their work. "The focus should be Yemeni films."

**Hanan:** I was just writing some ideas down based on this conversation. I think this monthly dialogue is very important. I refer back to my initial idea on dialogue and healing. I think that should be a separate space for artists who are outcast from their communities or carry trauma from the war, or those who are living in Yemen as well and want to be in that space together. I think that is one idea.

I think of returning to fundraising. As Yemenis in the diaspora, in particular the younger ones; second and third generation. I think that we need to be able to teach young Yemenis how to fundraise properly and move from a procedure of crowdfunding into philanthropy and see what that looks like to enhance people's skillset. I know I would have benefited from this. I have

experience in grant-writing and developing relationships with another focus to get what I want and achieve my goals, but it would be nice if other younger artists have these chances too. I think young artists and creatives are very good at what they do, which is creating initiatives. But I think in terms of growth and development, they don't know where to go from there. I think this space can help them train in that arena.

**Amr A:** I think conversations like these and meeting other people that share the same experience do help. It helps and motivates us to see that other people share the same experiences and struggles. You are not just detached totally by yourself. Honestly, I would go with dialogue. This would be the easiest and most practical step. Creating a community would be great from here. Just knowing that there are other people in the diaspora would be helpful.



*Kitabat's Creative Writing workshop, Sana'a, June 2019*

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# Conclusion

We aimed to talk to artists and art practitioners and extract their wisdom in order to formulate a way to build peace in our war-torn country. Over the course of the process, it became clear to us that creating this space was, in and of itself, a sign of resilience.

Yemeni artists have been marginalized and harmed for a very long time. Our society should be educated on the importance of art. Collectively we should work towards developing concrete steps to protect our artists by spreading awareness and getting official help and representation to help in the decision-making process that will inform the road ahead. Creating safe spaces for artists to meet and produce work is vital to the survival of young artists who still need guidance. Building academic art institutions and schools is an obvious way to integrate art within society.

Promoting engagement between the creative community and Yemeni society – including the diaspora community – is essential. Supporting projects from different cultural backgrounds, genders, and ages serves as a reminder of our similarities as Yemenis rather than our differences. The next step in the pursuit of achieving these objectives is to launch an art fund to support young Yemeni creatives. By supporting productions and providing mentorship and networking opportunities, the art fund will be able to work with individuals and collectives to create a new sustainable arts and cultural scene throughout Yemen.

Tell us your thoughts. We are always listening and happy to continue this conversation. Write to us at [romoozfoundation@gmail.com](mailto:romoozfoundation@gmail.com)



## **Romooz Foundation**

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Romooz Foundation is a non-profit organization registered in Sana'a, Yemen.  
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