



## DIFFICULT WORK

2013-16

## ARTS AS SOCIAL PRACTICE

In the summer of 2012 Tavia La Follette, founder and director of ArtUp traveled to Israel and Palestine with the Interfaith Peace Builders Network, an off shoot organization of The Fellowship of Reconciliation. This was the first step in the next Sites of Passage project.



**Sites of Passage** (SOP) took artists from three different countries: Palestine, Israel, and the United States and placed them together to discuss **BORDERS, WALLS & CITIZENSHIP** (the name of the show/project). These three words are charged and resonate in all three regions. The artistic dialogue occurred through a virtual and tangible art exchange process. The physical and web-based points of intersection were key to the methodology.

SOP is also the next step in the evolution of ArtUp, moving to build an international network of artistic exchange based in Pittsburgh. The Egyptian prototype took place as the U.S. entered the 10th anniversary of 9/11, as the revolution broke out in Egypt, stimulating the Occupy Movement here in the States, and lastly while both countries went into an election for a new leader. This made the artistic dialogue all that much more rooted in change and fueled passionate points of views.

Similarly, to the Egypt project, La Follette chose countries in conflict and politically minded artists to interact with. As the world is evolving and as the project title (Sites of Passage) alludes to, La Follette asked these artists to take a Rite of Passage towards a world that does not build walls, define borders and where everyone is a citizen. The artists all agreed that this project had to be about human rights.

## The Journey Begins

The following are images of the artists, speakers, places visited and quotes from the Pittsburgh team. The goal is to document their thoughts and travels through “The Holy Land”. It is important to note everyone had different backgrounds and personal borders/limits. Some of those limits were based on family responsibilities and some of them were legal or government imposed limitations that denied artists access.

ArtUp was able to get the Israeli artists into Palestine but unable to get the Palestinians into Israel. The delegation spent time in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem where they spoke with arts leaders and visited museums & studios. They traveled from Jerusalem through the Qalandia check point to Jenin (Freedom Theatre) and on to Bil'in. From Bil'in the delegation traveled to Ramallah to Bethlehem, to Hebron and back in Israel—to Tel Aviv, Jaffa, Haifa and back home. Quotes from the artists' journey are below.



Tour Jerusalem with the Muslala Group  
([www.muslala.org](http://www.muslala.org))



Yehuda from Breaking The Silence  
([www.breakingthesilence.org](http://www.breakingthesilence.org))

*Museum show titles in three languages. Explanatory texts within the museum only in Hebrew and English. Hyla first called our attention to this. I had focused on what was absent in the translated wall texts in English that wouldn't indicate that the work described referenced the occupation at all. Several works undeniably spoke to the oppression and presumably are easier to digest or overlook if not described as doing so. - Andrew Johnson*



*Fear before entering Palestine so palpable heightened by signs proclaiming that it is illegal for Israelis to enter and that to do so puts their lives at risk. Only 8% of military has direct contact. Maintain the myth. Perpetuate the fear. Create all monsters. - Andrew Johnson*



*We leave the church for the most delicious falafel, foul and hummus we've had the entire trip (and we have had a steady diet of it). We eat in an early refugees basement establishment. When I say basement, we are talking about stone caverns that have become cool refuges, shops and homes. We then visit Palestinian artist Munther's studio. He and his brother Ibrahim moved back from Ramallah to start some kind of cultural life in the town where there is no awareness or support for contemporary art, no scene whatsoever. Munther's makes paintings of a Palestinian "terrorist" watching TV with his family, and doing other ordinary things. He and his brother, a young performance artist, hope to turn their studio into public gallery and, if they can raise the funds, buy the place next door to start a coffee shop and meeting place. – Susanne Slavick*





*At the Tent of Nations the fog comes in so quickly. Air raid sirens (test) is no test. Its amazing sound that booms throughout the valley is meant to be the voice of an omnipotent god proclaiming their wrath. It caught us unprepared and went unrecorded. - Andrew Johnson*



*We wait for the Friday prayers to end, which is when everyone goes to the wall. We walk along dirt roads, past scarecrows and a sway backed emaciated donkey and hear and see the settlers from afar yelling and waving from the precipice of the sheer rock that creates a fortress-like effect. - Suanne Slavick*





*Recognizing how little I really know, I understood my role on this maiden voyage to be one of listening and learning. Our power-packed itinerary of meetings, home stays, and neighborhood tours with Israeli and Palestinian activists, artists, curators, border crossings, homestays, and demonstrations felt like a tidal wave. Coming up for air did not seem to be an option... As I continue to unpack the massive spectrum of perspectives we experienced on this first mission, I am starting to GET that there is something constructive that we might be able to do*

*-Wendy Osher*



*Everyone we've met has said that they want the right to return, but that they realize that does not mean they want to displace Israelis who have also been born in this land. They realize that such displacement would also be painful, but want the right to return and the right to buy and own land where they once lived, even if not reclaiming their former homes. - Susann Slavick*





*Tear gassed in Bil'in today and we weren't even that close to the wall. Stayed with head of bilin council, brother of director of 5 Broken cameras. Celebrated his 8-year-old daughters birthday with extended family. Met director too and gave him special camera (a Gigapan camera, donated from CREATE Lab). - Susanne Slavick*



*It was surprising and humbling to see many examples of a steadfast desire for a diverse culture. People throughout the region are finding very creative ways to refuse to be enemies despite an overwhelming infrastructure that chips away at their basic sense of human dignity and friendship on a daily basis. -Hyla Willis*





### **A RESIDENCY: The walls between us**

After the artists research trip to Israel and Palestine, ArtUp received funds from The Investing in Professional Artists to bring in Palestinian artist, Basha Alhroub to the US in July.



Much of Bashar's time was spent learning about the invisible walls that separate cultures, neighbors, and ideas from one another here in the States. He traveled from NYC to the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont...smoking the whole way!



Lawrenceville, PA



Glover, VT



meetings in the coffee shops



and on The Hill

Bashar cooked for us, made art with us, researched his installation, met with Pittsburgh Filmmakers and created footage for a film to open in Tunisia and Jordan in 2015. He toured The Hill District, The North side, the East End, Braddock, Homewood and Homestead steel mills, museums and schools, meeting with artists, educators and community activists.



Love Front Porch, Vanessa German



Getting into the art





talking art



and making art at the MF



food



Filmmakers



Art Film shoot  
Schenley

## IF A TREE FALLS IN THE WOODS...



...we all know the question and the answer. The idea that if no one is there to hear it, that it doesn't make any noise, or its sacrifice is meaningless...is absurd. In reality, it is the audience

who is meaningless. The tree (with an audience or not) becomes a host, brewing an ecological world of new life and habitats.

If an art exhibit goes up, but it never is opened to the public, does it exist?

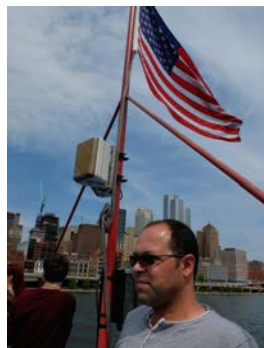
Director, Tavia La Follette, got a call on her cell saying, “Tavia, I made it out. I am in Egypt!” She knew immediately who it was. The three Palestinian artists who were in the show, all were aware of one another but had never met. Manal is a Palestinian living in Israel, Bashar is based in the West Bank and Mohammed lives in Gaza. All of them, Palestinian but because of the way the land is separated; they can’t physically see or interact with one another.

La Follette explains, “ArtUp had received visas for all of the artist, but because Mohammed is in Gaza, it is difficult to even leave the country. Gaza is an island. The only way he could fly out would be to cross at Egypt. Israel would not let him pass through”.

Egypt had closed the border – as they often do – but there were rumors of it opening up and Mohammed packed a bag and traveled to the border to see if it was true. He was able to cross! “Sit tight, Mohammed”, “we are buying you a ticket to Pittsburgh right now!”



Three members of the delegation (La Follette, Johnson and Willis) had invitations to go to Gaza via Mohammed’s university, but they were warned that if they crossed over into Gaza, the possibility of getting back into Israel would be very slim. Therefore, the group made the decision not to go. This would be the first time Mohammed would be interacting with the group face to face. He arrived on Mother’s Day.



The other artists quickly followed, although their arrival and flights had been purchased for ahead of time. All of the artists stayed at the Mattress Factory (MF) museum apartments and based themselves on the North Side. Michael and Barbra (directors of the MF) not only opened up the apartments and the museum to the artist, they also shared their home.



artists gather in the MF café



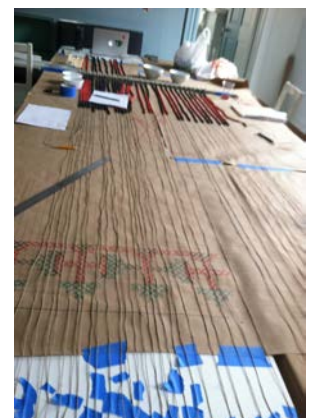
artists break bread in MF directors apt



Bashar and Mohammed even welcomed some of the famous “American” traditions.



The artists went straight to work on their installations. Having communicated with curator and director La Follette, throughout the project, the MF was working hard to make sure they had everything they needed. The list included everything from a body of a car to rubber bullets to 100s of pounds of recycled washed glass plus—as many black, red and green plastic hair beads as one can get! They led in lectures at schools and absorbed the Pgh landscape.





Owen and Manal discuss rubber bullets



Wendy makes a border-crossing maze



Hyla's I AM MAN braided curtain



Mohammed's laser cut Palestinian passport

Due to social media censorship, for the first time in ArtUp and the MF's history, the show was canceled just days before it was about to open. All the work had been installed; all of the artists were safely here and working together with the community and each other to get the show up. However, outside forces stopped that from happening.

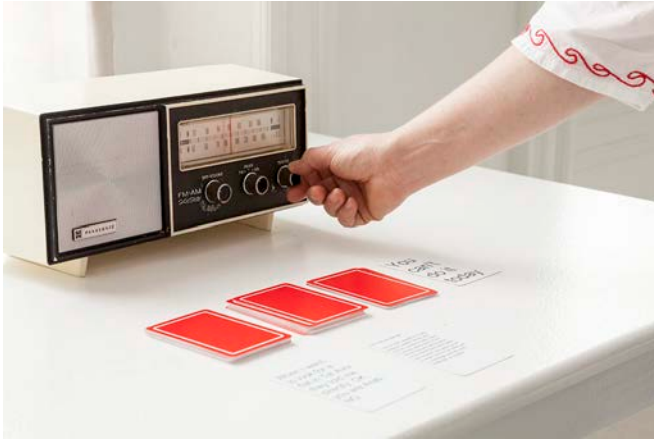


Dror works on his giga pan piece while a car gets installed next to him



poster for the show





Dror Yaron's radio tunes in conversations from the delegation --one can also read quotes on the cards



Manal Mahamid 's rubber bullet video installation



Bashar Alhroub's The Land of Diamond, broken glass and Palestinian territory map

The organization considers the project a success even though it didn't have a physical opening. The organization received more requested for interviews than ever before, from across the globe, yet had to turn them down, for the sake of the artists' livelihood. ArtUp understands the Social Practice of this work-- that these experiences took place; work was built around relationships and issues that will impact each artist for the rest of their life.

A tree fell. It did not need to make a sound or have an audience to hear it—for it rattled the earth. People felt it.



Susanne Slavick's work- Palestinian children finger prints

### So what next?



In November of 2014 La Follette received an Artist Opportunity grant to travel to South Africa to investigate the next Sites of Passage project. She already had a residency at The Butterfly Art Project to work in a township school program in Cape Town, building superhero puppets. So she took the opportunity to meet with artist and activists from Cape Town to Johannesburg. This is where she refined her ideas and curated in the South African artists for the project. The new endeavor is called CIVIL RIGHTS & CIVIL WRONGS.



Artist meeting in coffee shops



And ginger beer on the street of Joburg



Malcolm tour takes us to The Nunnery the first theatre he started at Wits University



Cape Town and Townships change the landscape



Butterfly Art Project campus



Our Superheroes that rise from the ashes

In June, with the help of DePaul University, La Follette was able to bring in Malcom Purkey to Chicago to brainstorm ideas, artist, itinerary in South Africa and a longer-term performance project she and Purkey are working on. The Market Theatre, founded in 1976 in Johannesburg,



has been South Africa's landmark "Theatre of Struggle" producing anti-apartheid plays, premiering many of Athol Fugard's. Under "the conviction that culture can change society", Purkey took over the theatre as Artistic Director in 2005 and has been an activist in the arts scene ever since.



As the U.S. moves past its 50th year of the Civil/Voters Rights Act and South Africa moves past its 20th year of democracy/post-apartheid, the project will reflect on what we can learn from one another. What have we done wrong and what have we done right? How does migration play a role? How do our governments, communities and societies discern and apply our past to our present? Are environmental rights the same as human rights? What language do we use to talk about these issues? By meeting with civil rights activists, artist and historians from both countries, our aim is to use art as a platform to expose and address environmental racism and corruption.

In recognition of the Voting Right Act of 1965 and in preparation for the Presidential Election of 2016, Civil Rights and Civil Wrongs also aims to interact, educate and activate the next generation of voters. Civil Rights and Civil Wrongs is the third "site of passage" project. Each time we learn more and connect more artists. Once a tunnel of communication is digitally dug from one country to the next, we do not close it – we connect it. We hope to eventually build a global network of artists via Sites of Passage (SOP), the name all these projects now fall under.



The mission of ArtUp is to build global interchanges for the migration of ideas across political/cultural borders. The purpose of the proposed project is to flush away hyperbole and clichés from the work. Although we want to reflect on our various governments and leaders (SA and USA)--we are not interested in embroidering platitudes of the same old conversations. We are concerned with exploring symbols, culture and repetitions in the human condition.