

# On the Importance of Solidarity in the Arts – and the Winding Way to Safe Havens Freedom Talks (SH|FT)

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Such a society, in which modern technologies serve politically interrelated individuals rather than managers, I will call ‘convivial’.

Ivan Illich in *Tools for Conviviality* (Illich, 1973)

I thought I could organize freedom.

How Scandinavian of me.

Björk, from the song *Hunter* (Björk, 1997)

Is it possible to organise freedom, or is it a contradiction in terms as Björk suggests in her song *Hunter*? There are numerous individuals and organisations around the world who tirelessly organise arts-based resistance against repressive regimes in the pursuit of artistic freedom and free speech. Over the past decade, it has been our role to facilitate platforms of shared knowledge and inspiration for artists and organisations dedicated to artistic freedom. We do this through the annual global Safe Havens Conference and other initiatives, such as streamed discussions and thematic working groups. We envision a world in which authorities and groups respect and understand the capacity of free cultural expression to create sustainable and peaceful societies. In this article, I, as one of the founders of the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Safe Havens Freedom Talks (SH|FT), will discuss the development of our new organisation, some of our challenges, and current developments. Addressing a research community around Art, Culture, and Entrepreneurship I also hope to inspire a discussion on maintaining sustainable organisational independence – or indeed freedom – particularly in a highly politicised global working and funding climate.

## The Landscape of Oppression

The evidence of repression and oppression of freedom of speech on a global scale is well-documented regarding artistic freedom, academic freedom, and the free press. Journalists, academics, and artists exercising their right to freedom of speech and expression are under threat in countries and regions whether in the Global North or Global South. The independent organisation Freemuse states the following in their latest annual report, *The State of Artistic Freedom 2022*:

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*The landscape of oppression is illustrated by the more than 1,200 violations of artistic freedom worldwide documented by Freemuse in 2021. Among them is a record number of 39 artists who were reportedly killed that year. More than 500 artists faced legal consequences for challenging the authorities, public figures, and religious and traditional values. In one third of all documented cases of prosecution and imprisonment, artists suffered reprisals because of their engagement in, and comments on, peaceful protests. Others were subject to attacks by mobs and individuals. Half of all artists recorded as detained in 2021 were held for expressing their views about political and social issues both offline and online, while the rest were targeted for the content of their artistic work. (Freemuse, 2022)*

Artistic freedom is challenged and contested in various ways around the world, with different faces, forms, and methods of oppression. While the limits to the right to artistic freedom may be vague and elusive in some regions, in others authoritarian regimes have built censorship and harsh punishments into their legal systems. Such censorship violates binding international treaties and agreements, including the 1996 ICCPR and ICESCR, for the governments that have signed and ratified them (UN, 1996). It also contradicts the spirit of non-binding instruments such as the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights, particularly articles 19 and 27 (UN, 1948). The UNESCO Conventions on culture and artists (UNESCO, 2005) and the European Convention on Human Rights, article 11, (EU, 2007) are also binding for signatory states.

At the state level, legislative changes may augment the control of authorities over artists or the arts. Such changes limit the plurality of creative expression and go against the intent of international treaties that make state signatories responsible for protecting and promoting free expression. These actions towards increased control may exaggerate threats to sovereignty or public morals to advance a singular nationalist narrative. Unfortunately, Europe is no stranger to this issue. According to a report by the US-based NGO, Artistic Freedom Initiative (AFI), which is comprised of legal experts, artistic freedom in Hungary is under threat. The interview data revealed that Hungarian artists who oppose the government find it increasingly difficult—and some speculate even futile—to earn state support without yielding to governmental demands and thus compromising their artistic or personal integrity (Bankston, et al., 2022).

Iran is an example of an authoritarian regime in which women are prohibited from performing in front of any audience and doing so is considered a criminal offense with severe consequences. Some female artists turn to the internet to reach an audience, but this action still poses a significant risk. Women artists are frequently targeted globally, as Vietnamese musician Mai Khoi shared in the 2017 Safe Havens Conference report:

*“... I was banned from singing in public in Vietnam because the government doesn’t like my sounds and I don’t give them the chance to censor my songs in any way. Instead, I give concerts in a private place, but the police still come to my concerts and make difficulties for the owner of the venue”. Mai has thus turned to Facebook where she is followed by more than 46,000 people, both to get her message out via live screenings of her unlicensed concerts and to give herself a profile that helps protect her. (Schmidt, 2017)*

At the following year’s Safe Havens conference, Karima Bennoune, then UN Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights, noted the following in her defence of the universality of human rights:

*Women’s cultural rights are prime sites of threat to universality and must be rigorously defended, especially in a world where even some leaders openly denigrate women and deny their equality and whereas Freemuse’s important new report documents, women artists face particular risks. Equality and universal human rights are not overridden by culture or what is*

*claimed to be culture. Cultural rights are not an excuse for violations of human rights. Universality is not an idea that belongs to any one country or culture, to any one region or religion. (Bennoune, 2018)*

It's worth noting that not all artists and writers who face censorship and oppression identify as 'artists' or human rights defenders. Many find themselves vulnerable due to their artistic expression, without any overtly political agenda. Additionally, issues of self-censorship and exclusion based on gender, LGBTQIA+ identity, and other factors are complex and far-reaching, and cannot be adequately addressed in this brief overview. For further insights into the topic, refer, for example, to the anthology *Curating Under Pressure* (Marstine and Mintcheva, 2020).

Despite the diverse and powerful tactics used to oppress artistic freedom, it is very important to acknowledge the numerous initiatives taken by artists, writers, journalists, lawyers, activists and others to establish new forms of organised practices that counter and elude repression. For example, the system of shelter cities, largely organised through the International Cities of Refuge Network (ICORN), has become a way for cities in Europe, and increasingly also in other parts of the world to support freedom of speech and help in cases in which physical relocation is necessary due to persecution. As a relief system, temporary relocation, a practice used initially with human rights defenders, is becoming more widespread although there are far fewer cities able to host than there are artists and writers in need. It is also important to point out that relocation to a different country and region is an extreme measure with its own challenges. There are also numerous organisations working on the ground around the world to support artists and writers with protective shelter, legal services, and capacity-building in their home countries.

In the following section, I will present some of the initiatives we have developed to co-creatively support the global community promoting freedom of speech within the arts.

## The Safe Havens Conference

In 2023, the Safe Havens Conference will mark its 10th anniversary. A conference series was not planned from the outset. Initiated through the Swedish Arts Council to bring together organisations, artists, and experts working at the intersection of arts and human rights, the Safe Havens Conference first met in 2013. At the time, there was a pressing need to discuss the development of shelter cities for persecuted writers and to consider how practitioners in other artistic fields could gain similar support and protection. The inaugural conference served as a platform for knowledge sharing and international dialogue and had a tangible impact on policy and organisational development in the field. The Safe Havens Conference developed into an annual meeting simply because we accepted the challenge to respond to the wishes of the artists and organisations involved in the first meeting to meet again. As we have continued to conceptualise this expressed need from the field, the conference has come to serve as one of the key platforms for the emerging sector to evolve and define itself over time. The conference attracts around 200 participants annually from what is sometimes referred to as the Arts, Rights, Justice sector, including artists, writers, NGOs, EU and UN agencies, state agencies, lawyers, and others committed to protecting creatives and promoting artistic freedom globally.

The Safe Havens Conference remains committed to its original format as a working meeting, focused on problem solving, knowledge sharing, and networking. It is free of charge and open to all, but information is shared through trusted networks-to-networks rather than publicised through social media or the press. This form of information sharing is pertinent since many of the participants are at risk and their security could be compromised if their whereabouts were publicised. The conference budget prioritises the participation of artists and smaller NGOs

through speaker fees, paid travel and lodging, while better-funded organisations and participants representing international, national, or municipal agencies pay their own way, and often contribute to costs for artists in their specific networks. One of the collaborating organisations, Artistic Freedom Initiative (ARC), notes the following in an article profiling SH|FT:

*The beauty of inviting a multidisciplinary group of participants, lies in the unique opportunity to collaborate, identify gaps in the system, as well as proposed solutions to address them. A central pillar of the Safe Havens philosophy is to ensure that every participant can show up, fully and equally contribute, and at the same time benefit from the topics discussed during the conference. Any individual or organization in the network may suggest potential topics and participants for discussions and events at the conference and/or talks. [...] Safe Havens has provided a unique occasion for speeding along the otherwise lengthy process of mobilizing new initiatives. With access to a wide network, deep knowledge, and the experience of different cultural actors, the Safe Havens Conference streamlines the process to find and tap into support systems that are necessary to move an idea forward to fruition. (Ego, 2021)*

## From Nordic and International to Global and Convivial

The 2013 Safe Havens Conference was initially positioned as an international meeting with a Nordic perspective, but the language and focus have evolved towards global meetings in a cosmopolitan space. However, the terminology is sometimes questioned as reinforcing colonial power dynamics and not accurately reflecting the intentions, or indeed the outcomes, of the meetings. A more appropriate term must be sought to describe the Safe Havens concept and its goal of transcending national and perceived borders. To attempt a truly global, safe, respectful, and open conversation – perhaps even venturing towards what postcolonial theorist Homi K Bhabha famously elaborated as the third space (Bhabha, 2004) – the idea of conviviality might be worth exploring. Austrian philosopher Ivan Illich proposed conviviality as a way to promote a society that is characterised by voluntary cooperation and mutual aid rather than centralised control and domination.

*Conviviality, for him, has the potential to address an intrinsic ethical value underlining the interconnectedness and mutual dependency between human beings, the planet, and the cosmos. Conviviality in Illich's sense goes beyond the living together of people and embraces a planetary cosmological thinking which realises that one's individual life depends on the wellbeing of the planet. (Rodriguez, 2020)*

Creating a welcoming and collaborative environment has been a priority for the Safe Havens Conference ever since its inception. The aim is to facilitate productive co-creation and generate tangible outcomes. To achieve this, it is important to alleviate participants' anxieties, mitigate re-traumatisation, and minimise competition. In this context, providing food, coffee, care, equal visibility, and a friendly ambience are crucial. In the conference team we adopted the mantra “*there must be no VIPs, only participants*”, reflecting the ethos of a working meeting rather than a festival or a show, still, however, with artistic interventions as important and integral constituents of the event. Perhaps Safe Havens' initiation as just a sincere welcome truly does align with ideas of conviviality and “*norms of solidarity, mutual respect, acceptance of difference, hospitality*” (Nowicka and Heil, 2015).

## The Museum of Movements

The Safe Havens Conference has been developed by a freely fluctuating international team with a focus on creativity and innovation. The Safe Havens Conference's administration and funding schemes seamlessly moved with me from the Swedish Arts Council to the central administration of the Malmö City Culture Department, where the first meetings were generously hosted. In 2017, the initiative found what seemed to be its perfect home in the Museum of Movements (MoM), a national museum project also based in Malmö (Elg, 2017). It was the ideal place for the Safe Havens concept to thrive, influenced by – as well as influencing – the convivial attitude of the new museum project. We started the MoM project with the concept that every person has a natural right to their own history – highlighting the importance of civil-society movements in building sustainable democratic societies. It aimed to be a place free from inherited structures, where new methods and working models could be developed, and one that would dare to address difficult questions vital for our understanding of the movement of people and ideas. Here matters of free speech and artistic freedom, as well as decolonising efforts towards the understanding of cultural heritage, were among the core issues (Elg, 2019).

The Safe Havens team and stakeholders had been discussing the conference's hosting location for some time. During a concluding discussion in 2018, conference delegates agreed that the Safe Havens Conference would henceforth travel to countries and regions, predominantly in the Global South, each year changing both the focus and ambience of the meetings in an effort to move away from any inherited Eurocentrism. We immediately launched a fundraising process for this new initiative, and the MoM in collaboration with the global Safe Havens team began planning the 2019 Safe Havens conference, which took place in Cape Town, South Africa.

However, in the autumn of 2020, the Swedish Government and the Malmö City Council unexpectedly announced the closure of the Museum of Movements, catching the development team off guard. This news came without any chance to prepare and was unexpected. The unique museum project had been internationally and nationally praised for its success in promoting inclusion and addressing issues of cultural heritage diversity, which many cultural institutions struggle with in present-day culture management. The global Safe Havens network was shocked by the news, as the conference had been collaboratively organised by a well-established and experienced coalition of partners and stakeholders. The MoM had also come to serve as an administrative centre that was aligned with the ideas of the Safe Havens development. Within the broader context, civil-society organisations that had been actively involved in building the foundation for the new museum towards its full concept protested to politicians; they were met, however, with the government and local municipality aimlessly shuffling the matter of responsibility between them (Gillberg 2020).

## The SH|FT

In the Safe Havens team we realised the need to detach the initiative from public-sector administration with its susceptibility to political and ideological shifts. The vulnerability in such a capricious environment extended beyond funding to the very existence of the conference and concept itself. To thrive independently and maintain good relationships with supportive contributors, the Safe Havens concept now needed to operate outside of political structures with its own global decision-making mechanism that would maintain both responsibility and control. To achieve this, the independent NGO Safe Havens Freedom Talks (SH|FT) was registered in March 2021, named after its first two projects - the Safe Havens Conference and the streamed Freedom Talks (SH|FT, 2023). Key funders, including the Swedish Arts Council/SIDA, the

Swedish Postcode Foundation, the Swedish Institute (SI), and recently UNESCO, were willing to invest in this new formation based on the group's legacy. However, some donors require organisations to have operated for at least two years before funding them. Therefore, the Safe Havens board made an agreement with Safemuse, a Norway-based NGO that has long collaborated with the Safe Havens Conference, to act as a fiscal partner in some funding applications during the first three years to ensure administrative accountability.

In 2022 the world finally opened after two long years of Covid lock-down and the Safe Havens Conference could resume its global journey, gathering participants from all around the world to a successful on-location meeting in Mexico City. The modus of on-site meetings at different locations around the world, supplemented by digital sessions to ensure as rich participation as possible, has proved successful. It will continue to be pursued in the coming years, with the upcoming 2023 Safe Havens meeting taking place in Greece, with a special focus on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

## Organisational Development

Currently operating through project funding, the organisation's natural next step is to secure long-term core funding. At the moment SH|FT operates through a pro-bono board and only one part-time full year employee, supplemented by a wide range of short-term assignments and commissions connected to each project. In 2022 more than 60 individuals received fees and reimbursements through the SH|FT projects, while many others were involved through partner organisations or contributed pro-bono, which illustrates the multifaceted engagements from the global network. The organisation is registered in Sweden but based 'everywhere-and-nowhere' with our staff, board and curators operating from different countries and regions globally. The organisation has no venue or regular office space, thus keeping administration to only the most necessary licences and service costs. Important, however, is the fundamental co-creative modus of sharing platforms, funding opportunities, and ideas as well as shared responsibility with partner organisations in the network. Thus, with a small core staff the organisation can focus on coordination and co-creation with the complex web of new and established partners in the field, and still be accessible and available to develop initiatives as needs and opportunities arise over time. With the ambition to elevate our perspectives above geographical borders and to challenge global power structures, the organisation is developing a wider international funding plan. In an unstable political climate, securing a broader base of international funding is important. One of the most challenging issues for any NGO is to navigate towards financial strength while maintaining the accountability and credibility necessary to create a safe and open space, free from exploitation. Without these steadfast principles all efforts would be futile and pointless. Developing the SH|FT initiative thus entails continuing to stitch together the complex web of global co-creation, pro-bono efforts, sponsored venues, shared expenses and more. At the same time, it is imperative that sustainable project- and core-funding opportunities be developed in the continuing quest to strengthen the global network of artists and organisations fighting for artistic freedom. We welcome new ideas and initiatives to support this endeavour, as we believe convivially sharing rather than 'owning' resources is the most sustainable way into the future for an NGO with solidarity as a core value.

## Future Directions

Building on a 10-year legacy, SH|FT is still rather young as an organisation. We were registered as an NGO at the beginning of 2021. As with most NGOs, its existence is fragile and uncertain.

However, within SH|FT there is freedom for the network – indeed the community – around the Safe Havens Conference to work collectively to transgress borders and to work in solidarity within a global arena (Elg, 2021). A strength of the initiative is that ‘everyone is there’, meaning not only that the gatherings are rich opportunities to expand networks and share experiences but also that SH|FT aims to gather and disseminate the rich knowledge harboured by these vibrant global networks. One interesting future direction is for SH|FT to seek partners in academic structures, through which complex and profound research can take place, and knowledge disseminated, around how to support policy makers in their decisions and how to strengthen the position of artists and writers around the world.

## Conclusion

So, is it possible to organise freedom? The answer is no. It would be a mistake to think that artists and their freedom to perform, to compose, and to imagine new worlds could be boxed in by any NGO or institute; they would and should elude us, because that is the very essence of artistic freedom. But, our joint efforts to strengthen the arts and artistic freedom can only benefit from collaborations and well-organised and transparent support mechanisms, legal frameworks, policies, capacity building, networking, and global voices speaking up in solidarity with those who are subject to oppression and the suppression of their freedom of mind.

In the 2021 conference report participants concluded the following:

*Networks are the greatest resource of our time - intersectional, diverse, inter-class, intergenerational and so on, and there is a need for alternative platforms that can survive the constant warring of institutions against them. Although coordination of those who wish to help is necessary, solidarity actions can make visible the isolated, invisibilized, socially engaged artist who is not on any priority list. (De Vlieg, 2021)*

SH|FT is steadfast in developing our activities in the interest of artists, writers, and defenders of the fundamental freedom of expression, aiming to consolidate and share resources, networks, and knowledge, to stand strong against oppression, repression, and threats – as a community of networks.

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