



creative exchange the network for culture and development

Peer Leadership Network on Culture, Arts & Refugees

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## STUDY VISITS REPORTING FORM

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**Your name: Cathy Weatherald**

**Your organisation: Cardboard Citizens**

**Reporting date: 6<sup>th</sup> March 2008**

### 1. What did you do?

Please describe your study visit, including organisation or event you attended, date(s), location(s) and contact details of your host.

My contact was **Todd Lester** from **freeDimensional**. freeDimensional is a New York –based organisation, currently resident in Cairo, which has a similar vision to **Creative Exchange**. Both organisations facilitate networks linking artistic communities, creative individuals and social justice movements internationally. freeDimensional's guiding principle is that the existence of community arts space creates the possibility of using that space to conduct programming and advocacy work with and for exiled artists and culture workers. In this vein, it provides community arts spaces with toolkits for capacity building, awareness-raising, networking and, especially important to fD, empowering the outreach strand of an organisation or research centre.

Todd invited myself and a colleague, Max, to visit freeDimensional's partner organisation in Cairo, **Townhouse Gallery**. Townhouse is itself a social enterprise incubator/donor and community arts space hosting a theatre, contemporary art gallery and regular arts workshops. I initially focused my visit on Townhouse's Community Outreach initiative, **SAWA** (meaning 'together' in Arabic). In particular I was interested in how its regular arts (visual and performing) workshops aim to encourage local Egyptians and refugees from all backgrounds to come together and express themselves creatively in an inclusive space. This line of enquiry led me to become interested in another initiative of Townhouse Gallery's, called **Tadamon** (meaning 'Solidarity'). This initiative was created in 2006, when Townhouse invited NGO agencies working with refugees in Cairo to a discussion of the issues affecting them. Tadamon was subsequently formed as a multicultural council whose objective was to encourage co-operation between marginalised groups and mainstream Egyptian society. In this way it almost served as a kind of non-governmental Egyptian Refugee Council. Alongside this, Townhouse established SAWA to encourage and support Egyptians from all backgrounds, including street children, working children and young refugees to interact and work together. Essentially, Sawa and Tadamon are separate initiatives of the Townhouse Gallery. The former is currently a project, while the latter has become its own organisation. All three of these, Townhouse, Sawa, and Tadamon, are receiving consultative input from freeDimensional, as well as from a partner organisation to freeDimensional, the Denmark-based **Inklusion**.

*"By simply sharing an un-politicised space and partaking in a creative process, obstacles of communication and understanding are dismantled"* – Mina, SAWA co-ordinator @ Townhouse.

Dates of visit: 16<sup>th</sup> – 25<sup>th</sup> February 2008

Contacts:

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Inklusion

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## **2. What did you learn from your study visit?**

(Please relate your answer to your Working Group and your own IDP goals)

### **Own IDP:**

- **Acquire international knowledge and context for our work**

It was so interesting to witness the different ways of working with artistic projects for social change in a completely different context. Egypt is an important hub for work with refugees/asylum seekers because of its critical geographical location between the rest of Africa and the Middle East. As a matter of fact, Cairo is the hub centre for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees for the region, and thus becomes the first destination point for refugees seeking UN assistance. Refugees/Asylum seekers from Iraq, Sudan and Palestine are all granted automatic asylum and the country seems to have a much more open door policy on asylum than that of the UK in recent years. Cairo itself hosts around 500.000 refugees/asylum seekers, although my sources believed it likely that the figure is closer to 1 million. As a result, the city also hosts a large number of NGO's and CBO's (Community Based Organisations) and there is a lot of work being done around strategies for integration and inclusion. The work of many of these organisations is strongly linked to the American University in Cairo's Forced Migration Department.

- **Opportunities to meet and view the work of another Refugee Arts network operating internationally (like Creative Exchange) within the context of a local project.**

Because of the timing of our visit, we were extremely lucky not only to view, but to be able to get involved in the early stages of a Tadamon initiative called '**Living Together Cairo**'. Essentially a 5-week programme to 'train the trainers', 'Living Together Cairo' was being facilitated by freeDimensional and Inklusion, an organisation which focuses on the integration of refugees, to provide leadership toolkits for 25 representatives of Refugee Community Organisations in Cairo to empower their outreach capabilities and raise awareness. For this training, SAWA was being used as an example of a successful inclusive arts project that was aiding cross-cultural understanding.

We went to one of the training days and were impressed that 11 nationalities were represented in the room of 25 Community Leaders on the programme. Our host, Todd, from freeDimensional, invited us to attend and give input to the planning and evaluation meetings for 'Living Together'. He also took it upon himself to introduce us to as many people involved with Townhouse, SAWA and Tadamon as he could.

He was very interested in finding out about the work of our PLN Network and also in how Forum Theatre and Playback Theatre could have a role in facilitating the 'Living Together' programme.

We were also able to get involved with SAWA at Townhouse. My colleague Max, an applied theatre practitioner who accompanied me on the visit from London, ran a Playback/Forum Theatre workshop (in Arabic!) for a group of young guys from Sudan and Cairo, which culminated in a small performance for their peers and Townhouse staff.

- **Understand the strategic plans of a similar organisation**

There was so much going on in Cairo and the links between the University, Governmental agencies, NGO's and Arts projects like Townhouse seemed to be strong - similar to those in Scotland between the Refugee Council and Arts sector. Because we were able to get so involved with various initiatives, I gained a strong understanding of these strategic networks and was able to draw many parallels between the experience of our Creative Exchange-facilitated Peer Leadership Network and the 'Living Together' project facilitated by freeDimensional and Inklusion.

*"As fD evolves, members of the network have begun to share models for working with vulnerable groups in their communities. fD is helping to build capacity in their local initiatives and use these experiences to develop toolkits for community outreach. This is a profound learning cycle for fD during which we have set up a research desk in the offices of our Cairo partner center, The Townhouse Gallery. The Townhouse served as an incubator for Tadamon, a Multi-Cultural Council that strives to mitigate social tensions that arise among millions of refugees and their Egyptian neighbors living together in Cairo" – Todd Lester*

- **Gain ideas from them about how to do work that focuses on integration - in a recent ideas meeting, we discussed a need to develop and mix audiences: homeless, refugee, non-homeless, etc. It may be that what they do can inform our work.**

I experienced how human rights NGO's, Governmental agencies, Universities and Community Organisations can use arts projects to meet agendas for the successful integration of new communities and the promotion of community cohesion and inclusion in today's multicultural societies, without losing the value that new communities can bring to their host community in terms of creative diversity and exchange.

Seeing the 'Living Together' programme in action helped me see that incorporating theatre techniques such as forum theatre and playback can be very helpful in training of Community Leaders/Facilitators who are working to aid the integration of new communities, especially where cultural and linguistic differences hamper mutual understanding.

Observing the SAWA work was also very informing, because SAWA manages to attract an ever-growing number of attendees to its free workshops, and through this places Townhouse Gallery on the map as Cairo's only inclusive art space, in terms of attracting both native Egyptians and refugees. In partnership with 'Living Together Cairo', SAWA is conducting a campaign to inform different people living in different parts of Cairo about its service, and the implementation of this campaign offered insights into ways that similar outreach could be done in the UK.

In terms of audience development, the building and sustaining of multi-agency partnerships was evidence of a successful method for reaching a wide range of people and interests.

In terms of Working Group; Evaluation/Impact

- **To find out about the techniques and models they use for measuring the impact of their work.**

In order to gain a perspective on the way that some of these are monitored, I spoke to Yordanka (Dani) at Townhouse, who is SAWA's Outreach Project Manager. Her post is funded by CIDA specifically to monitor and evaluate the SAWA programme and to put in place a framework for the consistent evaluation of its impact. Dani is very clear about how integral this ongoing evidencing of the impact

SAWA has on community cohesion and tolerance is to securing the future of the project and to improving its benefit for participants. To achieve this, she is enthusiastically photographing and filming all of the workshops (including ours) going on at Townhouse. She also utilises a variety of other monitoring methods. These include going out on site visits to communities all over Cairo to record interviews with families to measure outcomes such as:

- How does engaging in the SAWA workshops impact on familial relations – if at all?
- How do kids do at school as a result of participating in the workshops?

Another indicator of the positive impact the SAWA workshops were having was the recording (by photograph and film) of participant/audience feedback. They were keen to have their say in how the workshops should be run and this feedback was acted upon immediately, thereby driving the direction and output of the workshops. In this sense, SAWA was very much a participatory project that evolved organically and gave participants a greater sense of agency. The same can be said for Tadamon's 'Living Together Cairo', which has an integrated design to its planning, evaluation and feedback process, which subsequently fed into the workshops themselves.

### **3. Did your study visit fulfil your expectations?**

(Please relate your answer to the expectations you had when you sent us your study visit proposal)

It actually exceeded them and the focus of the study became broader and had more depth than I could have hoped for. I was blown away by the energy, creativity and diversity of the people and projects I saw in Cairo, the beauty of the space that the Townhouse owned, and the sheer networking and capacity-building potential of Tadamon as an incubator for a social justice movement among refugees.

The SAWA workshops were just one vibrant strand of a huge amount of really important work going on at Townhouse and it's daughter organisation, Tadamon, which, under consultation and guidance from freeDimensional and Inklusion, was in the process of running 'Living Together - Cairo'.

I was interested in finding out more about provisions for refugee arts internationally and in forging links between the networks visited and Cardboard Citizens on a knowledge-sharing basis. I feel that I have achieved this goal, along with discovering exciting opportunities for possible overseas partnerships.

### **4. What key issues or questions did it raise for you?**

Please consider the context of the network and your own.

For me this trip highlighted the importance of providing inclusive, accommodating, positive spaces (physical as well as communicative) for promoting interaction and sharing between new and host communities through creative expression. Townhouse Gallery has such a space and I found it to be an inspiring place that the local community took pride in, fostering a whole range of opportunities for cultural exchange and appreciation through the arts.

Cardboard Citizens workshops have been based at Crisis for the last few years and it is widely recognised that having our own space would be ideal. The reality of this is much more complicated – but we can dream!

The value of *virtual* space is also very high, as emphasised by freeDimensional in its training for the 'Living Together' participants. Tadamon and freeDimensional rightly view a web-presence as key to increasing and strengthening the refugee networks in Cairo in order to maximise the reach and impact of their work. As part of the 'Living Together' course, each Community group was going to be designing their own basic web page and launching an internet profile for their organisation, with links to and from Townhouse and Tadamon. Enabling partners to have a presence on-line struck me as an important part of what the Creative Exchange network should aim to produce, if we want to gain better links with other agencies and organisations working in the field of Arts and Refugees. Representing successful, well thought out projects online would also strengthen our case for a change in policy that might result in sustainable funding for our work.

My visit also reiterated to me the importance of *creative* methodologies such as film-archiving, photography, and participatory/drama-based evaluations to assessing the impact of creative projects for all stakeholders; from the funders to the beneficiaries themselves.

### **5. In what ways (if at all) this experience changed or enriched you professionally?**

For me, the study visit was the most important opportunity that the PLN has provided over the course of the year and I feel I have gained a greater awareness of international work and exciting overseas partnership opportunities for both Cardboard Citizens and Creative Exchange.

Watching the Living Together programme evolve gave me a real overview of the international context of our work as a network and was also a great boost to my networking skills and strategic thinking and planning!

Our host, Todd, was also a huge inspiration to me in utilising the power of networks to facilitate fantastically exciting initiatives and the meeting of minds to grapple with the very pertinent question of how multicultural societies can be a force for positive change, not conflict.

### **6. If you could do more study visits, what would you like to do and how would you use the opportunity?**

I am extremely keen to maintain the contacts that I made, in particular with freeDimensional, who are facilitating global networks of displaced artists and creative, community minded spaces, and who in the process are pioneering creative ways that new and host communities integrate and 'live together'.

freeDimensional is interested in the possibility of developing links with Creative Exchange and Cardboard Citizens for, respectively, sharing models of best practise from the PLN network and employing methods of facilitating dialogue for social change (Theatre of the Oppressed/Forum) freeDimensional is based in New York, which is important to Cardboard Citizens in terms of an interest in future links to that city. freeDimensional also has partner organisations in Sao Paolo, Berlin and Kuala Lumpur as well as Cairo, and Todd is already thinking about how Cardboard Citizens and Creative Exchange could have an important input into forthcoming initiatives in Berlin (at the annual freeDimensional symposium) and Sao Paolo, Brazil in 2009.

freeDimensional has expressed an interest in the lessons learned through the PLN's study visits. Todd has indicated a possibility that the best practices observed through the network's research could be delivered as a speech at the 2009 symposium. I would be very interested in this possibility, and would be more than happy to take part in a visit representing Creative Exchange and the PLN to a group of social justice and arts workers in Berlin in 2009.

I would also be happy to take part in further research of freeDimensional's work as it takes place in the coming 18 months in Sao Paulo as well as in Damascus and Beirut, where the lessons learned with refugees in Cairo will hopefully be applied in new contexts. Continued observation – and contribution – to this work would help to greatly to increase our knowledge in working with refugee arts and integration.

The potential of the 'Living Together' programme to be replicated in other destinations is of great interest to me and as well as these partnership opportunities between Cardboard Citizens, Creative Exchange and freeDimensional.

Todd, Max and I are trying to set up a meeting on the 4<sup>th</sup> April with Stephan Barbic (the MD of freeDimensional, who has a personal interest in Theatre of the Oppressed techniques), Helen Gould and Adrian Jackson to discuss ideas and possible partnership opportunities for the future.

### **7. If you want to add anything please do so below...**

You can add photos or any material that you think support your experience.  
(COMPUTER ISSUES – LOVELY PHOTOS TO FOLLOW...)

*Thanks for your cooperation! ☺*