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FOR THE SAKE OF OTHERS

Welcome to The Mantle's fourth virtual roundtable, and the third in our series on the roles of individuals in times of conflict. In previous iterations we have heard from writers and musicians. Here, four artists and allies answer, "What is the role of the artist in a conflict zone?"

The backgrounds and perspectives of the roundtable participants match the complexity of the question. That is, any answer requires establishing a context, parsing details, and thinking outside the box. Perspective matters. Thus, the writer and performer **Kayhan Irani**, who has extensive experience in conflict zones like Afghanistan, necessarily approaches the question differently than her fellow artist **Emna Zghal**, a Tunisian-born visual artist who brings her own interests, experiences, and politics to the table.

As in roundtables past, conflict is in the eyes of the beholder. Revolution, war, environmental destruction, the push and pull of the artistic role in society at large—all of these represent different types of conflict. **Lucía Madriz**, who uses art installations to address ecological and economic destruction, provides a unique take on her role in the face of a different sort of conflict. To round out the voices, **Todd Lester**, an advocate for reconciliation and for artists in distress, comes to the discussion with a twist of inside-outside legitimacy: What does an artist's ally say about the role of the artist in times of conflict?

Further, what role do you, the art lover, assume an artist should take in the face of violence? Perhaps the answers proffered by Kayhan, Emna, Lucía, and Todd will help you see the artist's position in a different light.

To follow the roundtable that asks, "What is the role of the artist in a conflict zone?" see my introductory remarks below. Then click on each of the participants to read their essays and responses. At the bottom of this page you can view my concluding remarks.

Enjoy!

- Shaun Randol, Editor in Chief. October, 18, 2012

Moderator's Introduction

What is the role of the artist in a conflict zone?

Readers of these roundtables will recall that this series began with a premise: that the artist (broadly defined) does have a role to play in times of upheaval. Further it was assumed that their duty is somehow unique to that of the ordinary citizen (the plumber, the accountant, the retail clerk). At the very least, there was the supposition that the artist *must*, in some way, act on behalf of Right, Truth, and Justice.

In the previous roundtables, these assumptions were strongly challenged, and this discussion is no different. In her essay, the artist Emna Zghal, for example, reminds us that the estimable Matisse and Rilke, artists in their own rights, provided no such comforts while the fabrics of their societies were being shredded by world wars.

Still, while my assumptions are continually challenged, I can't shake them. The fact remains that the artist occupies a very unique position in society. Unlike a doctor who swears by the Hippocratic Oath to practice medicine ethically, the artist signs no such pledge. But like the preacher, the artist does answer to some higher calling—they can't help but make art. Is it too much to expect that their talent and skills be offered to provide meaning, inspiration, agitation, or consolation during our darkest hours? Fulfilling such a promise is the reason why, for example, Pablo Picasso's "[Guernica](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guernica_%28painting%29)" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guernica_%28painting%29)" (1937) stands strong as a testament against the horrors of war.

Conflict, however, isn't just relegated to armed assault. Structural violence, as epitomized by the destructive nature of capitalism, is another form of violence. Thus, the [art of Diego Rivera](http://mantlethought.org/content/lunch-atop-skyscraper) (<http://mantlethought.org/content/lunch-atop-skyscraper>), which lionizes the laborer and highlights the inhumanity of capitalism, endures in the hearts of men and women around the world. Rivera's work inspires those who daily toil in a violent economic system.

No matter which argument they make as to the specific obligation of the artist in conflict, a common theme in the roundtable essays presented below is the idea that there is something bigger than the self. Art should be made for the sake of others, and it is up to society—the beneficiary of artistic genius—to act on behalf of those creators.

(Shaun is the Founder and editor in chief of The Mantle, an Associate Fellow at the World Policy Institute in New York City, and a member of the National Book Critics Circle).

EVERYONE'S RESPONSIBILITY (/OTHER/EVERYONES-RESPONSIBILITY)



Todd Lester

I've just come back from a vacation to Mexico where I had the opportunity to visit the home where Trotsky lived (and was assassinated).

[\(/contributor/todd-lester\)](#)

[Read essay » \(/other/everyones-responsibility\)](#)

ACTING TOWARD PEACE (/INTERNATIONAL-AFFAIRS/ACTING-TOWARD-PEACE)



Kayhan Irani

There is a very simple exercise that we do in the Theater of the Oppressed to demonstrate the essence of a conflict: two people stand face to face; one person says, "I want it" and the other person replies "You can't have it." They repeat these, [\(/contributor/kayhan-irani\)](#) and only these, phrases to one another—each person trying to get the other to concede to her will by modulating her voice, moving her body, etc. The battle of wills, one desire against another, is a simple way to define conflict. In the real world conflict is layered with complexity.

[Read essay » \(/international-affairs/acting-toward-peace\)](#)

THE ARTIST UNACCOUNTABLE (/OTHER/ARTIST-UNACCOUNTABLE)



Emna Zghal

When a doctor attends to the sick, she is dutifully fulfilling a role. After, she would expect for her effort to be acknowledged, assessed, and compensated. This is not the case when a poet pulls out a piece of paper and spends hours on end putting words together and pulling them apart. Seldom is the case that somebody else is waiting to be affected by that specific poem. However, this seemingly detached endeavor—art—has potentially tremendous impact and importance in zones of conflict and elsewhere. Art exists wherever humans existed.

[Read essay » \(/other/artist-unaccountable\)](#)

THE CONFLICT WITHIN (/OTHER/CONFLICT-WITHIN)



Lucía Madriz

I´ve been increasingly starting to feel, especially in recent years that the issue of ecological destruction, whether it will be climate chaos, whether it be the disappearance of species, whether it be the water crisis ... Every dimension of the ecological crisis is in fact the leftover ruins of a war against the Earth, the biggest war taking place on the Planet which globalization has made truly global. No place is safe, no ecosystem is safe, and no communities are safe.

[Read essay » \(/other/conflict-within\)](#)

Moderator's Conclusion

To what extent, if at all, do we celebrate artists who consistently address conflict? The provocative Chinese artist Ai Wei Wei is lauded, at least in the West, for his dissident, democratic art. Closer to home, though, a well-known contemporary artist who rails against the American wars in Iraq in Afghanistan does not immediately come to mind. Certainly he or she is not being showcased by the major museums or art shows that flood New York City (where I live). You will not find the Iraq and Afghanistan wars in the sculpture of artistic superstar Jeff Koons, for example. Yet how jolting would it be to see a cartoonish bubble-sculpture of an American Predator drone parked on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.? At

the very least, such an exhibition would spark a conversation on art and the role of art in politics, and it may prompt Americans to look more closely into drone warfare being conducted on their behalf in places like Pakistan and Yemen.

Picasso's "Guernica" was painted immediately in response to the bombing of a village of the same name, exhibited that same year, and remains one of the most profound works of the artist's career. It hangs in the United Nations Security Council room as a ghostly reminder of the terror to be found on the other end of falling ordinance. Take a look at the United Nations art collection on the whole and you'll find myriad pieces that advocate for peace: Marc Chagall's giant stained glass art is replete with symbols of love and peace; a Venetian mosaic evoking the "golden rule;" the Japanese Peace Bell; Evgeniy Vuchetich's "Let Us Beat Swords into Plowshares;" and so on. Can art with messages of peace only find a home at the UN?

Earlier this year I visited the fine art museum in Saigon, Vietnam and was struck dumb by the massive portrait "[Dioxin Consequences \(https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151028067098046&set=a.10151028049463046.440037.825348045&type=3&theater\)](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151028067098046&set=a.10151028049463046.440037.825348045&type=3&theater)" (2008) by Nguyen Van Bom, which depicts the hideous deformities of innocent civilians who suffered the effects of Agent Orange spraying during the American War. Indeed, much of the art in that museum focused on that country's devastating war years. This makes sense: artists are often the emotional outlets for a traumatized citizenry. But not always.

Last year I attended an [art exhibition \(http://mantlethought.org/content/iraqs-starving-artists\)](http://mantlethought.org/content/iraqs-starving-artists) featuring 27 Iraqi artists living in exile (in Syria, which at the time was quiet). Not one of the works depicted the war raging next door in their homeland. I was very surprised by the lack of war and violence in their work, but should I have been?

In this roundtable, both Kayhan and Lucía shared how they use their art to confront violence. Their most recent work continues in this vein. Emna Zghal's most recent show, however, does not directly address conflict. When I visited her exhibition I fully expected to be smacked in the face with Arab Spring-infused art; instead I was surprised to be confronted with ... pineapples. During our conversation about the show, I was made aware that although Emna's art for that particular show may not have been political, it did not mean that she was apolitical.

Art and the artist can be (should be?) examined separately, but doing so does not alleviate the art or the artist from a responsibility to act against injustice. The same goes for art lovers.


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ROUNDTABLE: FOR THE SAKE OF OTHERS (/ROUNDTABLES/SAKE-OTHERS)

DEMOCRACY (/CATEGORY/DEMOCRACY)

SEPTEMBER 30, 2012

ACTING TOWARD PEACE

BY KAYHAN IRANI

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[\(/contributor/kayhan-irani/\)](/contributor/kayhan-irani/)

There is a very simple exercise that we do in the Theater of the Oppressed to demonstrate the essence of a conflict: two people stand face to face; one person says, "I want it" and the other person replies "You can't have it." They repeat these, and only these, phrases to one another—each person trying to get the other to concede to her will by modulating her voice, moving her body, etc. The battle of wills, one desire against another, is a simple way to define conflict. In the real world

conflict is layered with complexity. Competing levels of individual, communal, and systemic will are engaged in battle and the longer the conflict persists, the more fixed the ideologies become. How many marriages have ended because of irreconcilable differences, each partner receding into his or her own narrative structured to cast the other in the worst light possible? How many people arrange their lives around a story they've created about someone or something, rather than in response to actual events, becoming a character seeking distorted goals? Inflate this play to the level of a nation and see how those in power, who seek to consolidate more power, use storytelling as strategies of control.

New social, cultural, and ethical norms are created in order to justify repressive or corrupt laws and systems. Resources are allocated to those who participate in the narrative and kept from those who are “out” of the narrative. Everyday citizens, with little power and resources, must make choices based on sheer survival. The decisions they make about how to navigate the conflict determines their future. The narrative constructed during times of conflict transforms normative and ethical frameworks into ones limited to the narrow parameters of the conflict. Often people, families, and even communities forget that they have made a decision of convenience and start to internalize the belief systems and ideology they have conformed themselves to. Thus, poverty of thought and imagination, fueled by fear and coercion, enforce the ideologies of conflict. People’s histories and the choices they were forced to make are left out of this narrative. In such a space, artists and culture workers can offer hope, build agency, and create a space where dialogue can occur, new possibilities are imagined, and actions are initiated toward change.

Story and art are vehicles for analyzing the world through multiple lenses and for imagining our responsibilities within that world. As a form of storytelling, the arts open spaces for debate, dissent, and dialogue about the systems of oppression that we experience in our daily lives. Furthermore, engaging the creative capacity of people is essential to any movement seeking to create a way out of the limitations imposed on us by the oppressive society—a society hardened by narratives of in and out, victim and victor. As an artist working in a conflict zone, particularly Afghanistan, the arts represent an extremely important process of self-reflection and social analysis; one that encourages people to think about alternatives to their current situation and helps to melt those rigid borders constructed in conflict narratives—be they personal borders or ones imposed from outside.

I recently led a Theater of the Oppressed (participatory theater for social change) training in Kabul for theater groups from three different provinces. At the end of the training I asked the artists assembled to evaluate one new technique, theory, or tool they learned. One artist from the province of Khost said, “Previously I saw the oppressed as the defeated ones; dead, beaten, or otherwise silenced for good. Now I see that the oppressed are always trying. Their struggle continues.” While this is a very small shift in perception, it is a huge re-evaluation of the role of the oppressed in society. The notion that the oppressed must concede to the oppressor’s might is a notion that is not only set down by the oppressor, the paradigm also greatly benefits the oppressor. Defeat, however, is never permanent, and while the oppressed may suffer many setbacks, it is their will to continue which keeps them in the game. The resilience of the oppressed is one of their strongest assets and, if activated and organized, is the very weapon that will bring about their own liberation. Any attempt to turn around conflict must believe in the capacity of the oppressed to solve their own problems and must strengthen their collective will.



The capacity to dream, articulate that dream, and then act to achieve it fuels liberation—even a dream as simple as wanting to ride a bicycle leads to bigger claims and activities. Working with theater artists in Afghanistan, it took us three, six-hour days of work to uncover simple personal desires they once had. The first two days we had to unload everything that got in the way: war, violence, fear, fighting, chaos, lack of infrastructure, poverty, etc. Though I was trying to get to their desires, the actors were showing me what they had to endure, what the road was like. I kept pushing them, honoring what got in the way but refusing to believe their desires were lost and forgotten. In one creative activity, I asked the participants to come up with an imaginary journey to find a lost desire. The embodied journey would include some aspect of the difficulties they faced in fulfilling that desire. The exercise was to help them reconnect with a deep desire as well as recognize that it was unfulfilled because of external forces. They were not losers, their dreams weren't trivial, but they were facing multiple oppressions that kept that dream from becoming a reality. In the end, they expressed and remembered some of their oldest dreams: riding a bicycle, learning to swim, studying to be an artist. Creative visioning—coupled with aesthetic, experiential frameworks—is a crucial tool that gives people both distance and familiarity: the distance allows for a space in which one can articulate desires while familiarity with a complex social mosaic creates pathways to get what they want. Arts-based practices can offer people a way to strategize, to map out the journey from here to there. In doing so, people are not only creating pathways for themselves but also pathways for others in society. In a conflict zone, one's daily life is taken over by large, powerful forces. The ability to dream within that storm, to create amidst chaos, is a huge contradiction to the oppressive forces that want us to remain hopeless and confused.



When one person examines the world she lives in and subjects that examination to an artistic process, the result extends the artist's thinking and becomes a sort of artifact attracting wider reflection.. When art is shared it builds relationships, as others are generously invited in to think about and expand on the artist's personal vision. The exchange starts a process of questioning, analyzing, and processing. We are pulled into participating with the work of art, whether in our own thoughts or in a discussion with others. Whether or not we find an answer or fully formulate an opinion, we have expanded our thinking. We have spent time engaging with possibility and reflecting on the present. This process can threaten the persistence of conflict where perspectives need to remain fixed and solid. Melting certainty with creative experience transforms the ground upon which conflict rests. It forces people to consider a new idea, a different perspective, or an alternative narrative. It challenges us to acknowledge our limits. New thinking brings about new thinking, which brings about new possibilities.

At the end of this recent theater training in Afghanistan, I asked the actors to name one technique, idea, or exercise which they appreciated. Noorwali stood up and said that during this training he was able to think for himself, he was able to analyze problems and make his own solutions. He said, “we made something out of nothing.”

Artists slowly stir up winds of change. As the conflict transforms, art ensures something green and fresh will be growing out of the rubble.

Shaun Randol Is the artist more important (influential?) during—or after—a conflict?
 ([/contributor/shaun-randol](#))



([/contributor/kayhan-irani](#))

Kayhan Irani
 ([/contributor/kayhan-irani](#)) Artists are important before, during, and after conflict. It is not whether art or artists have a role to play rather, *what* role do they play? As times change, as goals change, as needs change, art and artists can and should address those needs. For example, during a conflict there might be a big need to call attention to the problem, to draw allies in, to bring information to the larger world. Artists who are engaged in the struggle for conflict transformation can and should apply their talents to support the larger movement. When conflict dies down there is reconciliation and healing work to be done, artists can meet those needs through various creative tools and formats. Art and creativity is an important part of a healthy, functioning society. All people have to take on a role in transforming society, and all people can use their skills and talents to do whatever work is most needed. So we mustn't instrumentalize the arts in order to say they are useful or valuable. We need to continually appreciate and engage with art, so that we remember that there is an important function the creative arts have and an important role for artists in this world.

Shaun Randol Should artists be held accountable for their actions or inactions in a time of conflict? Why or why not? And if so, by whom?
 ([/contributor/shaun-randol](#))



([/contributor/kayhan-irani](#))

Kayhan Irani
 ([/contributor/kayhan-irani](#)) An artist should be as accountable as any other human being for their action or inaction in a time of conflict. However, like many oppressed groups, artists are either invisible or hyper visible—meaning that their everyday efforts often go unnoticed and underappreciated, or they are singled out and made to feel bad about not using their tremendous power to solve all world problems. The oppression that is directed at artists means that all art and art-making that isn't hyper monetized is marginalized and trivialized. To sell a painting for a million dollars or to sell a million copies of a song is considered, in the dominant discourse, to be a success. Everything else is seen as useless and a waste of time. Think about the messages we see and hear that make fun of artists who don't “make it” in this way. Young people are dissuaded from becoming artists by being told they will never earn a decent living nor find a spouse nor be appreciated and respected. Conversely, artists who are “successful” are derided when they speak up about a political or social issue. They are told to go back to making art, that their ideas aren't important enough or that, because they make art, they aren't smart enough to contribute in other fields. To hammer the final nail into the coffin, when times are tough artists are often pointed out and blamed for not doing more to transform society. The belief that art is important and deeply, personally meaningful is not used to uplift arts and the artist in society but used as a way to further blame artists for society's larger problems.

So, amid these confusing and contradictory messages, how can an artist live and work with integrity? Sadly, most artists are isolated and atomized, unable to deeply use their creativity for powerful social transformation. If we cannot figure out how to honor, support, and appreciate the

broad spectrum of creative workers in our society, how then can we point a finger at them for not doing "more"? The spheres of influence and artist can work within and who they can mobilize and reach is different depending on how each individual artist sees her or himself in the world. As long as artists are constantly fighting to just keep their heads above water, we will not see a systematic and fully vibrant engaged arts movement.

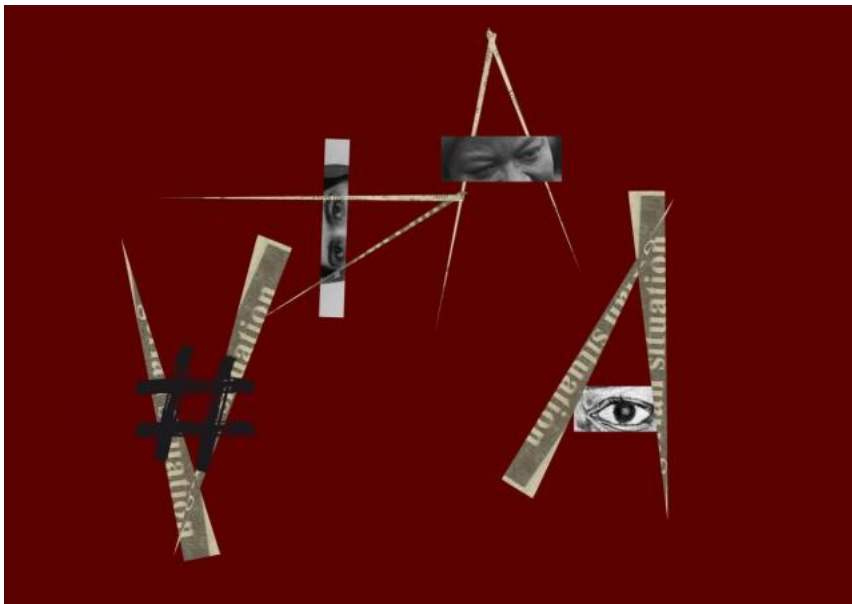
I would just like to say that I see all work as having the possibility of being creative and artistic and so we all use our creative capacities, in big and small ways, to contribute to this world. I'd like the intelligence and skills that come from using creativity to be appreciated, highlighted, and trusted much more than it currently is.

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Kayhan Irani is an Emmy award winning writer, a performer, and a Theater of the Oppressed trainer. Through theater, storytelling, and art-making, her work creatively addresses real-world issues and builds spaces for interaction, dialogue, and deeper civic engagement.

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