

# Artmongering with Refugees 2017



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August 2017  
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## Executive Summary

Artmongers is a Public Art & Community Engagement Organization. We specialise in making art for (and with) people in adverse environments. We have developed an ongoing project to bring a bit of joy and colour to Syrian Refugees in a camp in Jordan.

As part of our ongoing relationship with Azraq Refugee Camp we visited again in February 2017 to further deepen and extend our aim to create art based activities with refugees - both female and male and ranging in age from children to adolescents and adults.

This report explains the activities carried out on that visit and the next steps for the project.



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## Our intention

We are interested in the human beings behind the statistics of the refugee crisis. Creating moments of joy and empowering Syrian refugees in Azraq camp, Jordan through art and other activities which acknowledge human spirit and create connections. The 2 art projects we did in 2015 showed a 40% positive impact on wellbeing and involved 270 refugees and we determined to continue the relationship.

Life in the camp is safe but bleak. The flat, monochrome landscape and endless rows of identical houses offer little to raise the spirits. Yet our experience has been that it only takes a little positive energy to light the spark in these people. They have been through a lot and have uncertain futures but they are able to find the joy in the moment – from a sweep of paint, a swirl of colour, a moment of inspiration. This is what we aim to stimulate by our visits. Leaving a footprint of possibility – reminding them that there are some things they can do to enhance their lives and their wellbeing.

Local issues with the host NGO and the Syrian crisis –prevented us from visiting in 2016 as planned, so we returned in February 2017.

Our 2017 project for the camp consisted of two main aspects – more participatory art interventions and more women’s empowerment activities. There is a 10 min documentary video on these projects here <http://bit.ly/refugee2>,

The team consisted of

- Patricio Forrester – artist, animator, creative spirit primarily working on the art interventions
- Catherine Shovlin – researcher, facilitator, project manager primarily working on the women’s empowerment
- Matt Allen – film maker, seeing eye, involved with everything and responsible for making the daily videos and final documentary



## Context

Azraq camp opened in 2014 when the more organic Za'atari camp in northern Jordan reached capacity. In contrast, Azraq was a planned camp, divided into six villages with an orderly layout of housing blocks, a community centre per village and a central supermarket, open market and mosque.



The camp population is increasing all the time. It was about 16,000 when we first visited (2015) and last official figures from [UNHCR](#) say 35k (April 2017). More than half of these are children and 30% of the households are headed by women. The 10,000 shelters built so far are 80% occupied. They are filling village by village so 3 and 6, the first to be opened, are more established while 2 and 5 are newer. Almost half the refugees are from Aleppo and Homs, the rest from various parts of Syria.

The camp was recently electrified and in May of this year a solar farm (funded by the IKEA foundation) opened on site providing free electricity to the refugees and a contribution to the Jordanian energy economy.

There are schools, clinics and adult learning centres at the camp. Our partner NGO, CARE Jordan, is focused on delivering psychosocial support and activities.



## Art Interventions

In April 2017 we worked with children and adult refugees to create three new participatory artworks and revitalise and enhance the 2015 artwork Hope Square.

- Zig Zag Square
- Uplifting Hands
- and Second Chance Art Space

### Zig Zag Square



We brightened up this public square with the help of 6 adult male refugees. We created the design, influenced by the shapes of the shelters and traditional Islamic designs, and paid them (UN agreed rates) to help us to create it.

We selected the square with input from the refugees. Of the 4 occupied villages on the camp, two have been electrified and two have not. Zig Zag Square is in one of the non-electrified villages with newer arrivals. The refugees felt they had the greater need. Because it is on an open piece of ground by the mosque, water tap and delivery point for LPG canisters, it has a lot of visibility. Like Hope Square (created last year), this kind of high impact artwork serves several purposes:

- Adds meaning to the lives of those involved  
*“I am so happy to be doing this. I was a painter and decorator in Syria and I haven’t even picked up a brush for 3 years”* Refugee volunteer
- creates a valuable landmark  
*“all the houses look the same so the children get lost, at the end of the day we have to help them find their way home”* Camp manager
- creates a sense of pride, a sense of place which has been lost for many refugees
- Brings a sense of dynamism, of energy to combat the listlessness of an under-occupied life with an uncertain future.

## Uplifting Hands



Although most children go to school - they receive very little opportunity for creative thinking and art. The general lack of materials means they get extremely excited when they see something they can work with. It should be recognised that traumatic events and a lack of formal schooling both during the conflict in Syria and while in transition means that most of them have behavioural challenges and learning difficulties. Since the conflict in Syria is going through its sixth year, for a lot of children, the camp is life as they know it. That is why it is so important to offer them new possibilities and experiences.

Their excitement around creation needs to be guided into a careful process so they end up with something that they themselves didn't know they could do.

The girls are easy to work with and are quicker to understand what is expected of them and contribute in a safe and manageable way. The boys less so as their enthusiasm can end up in chaotic experiences.

Starting from the inspiration of the CARE logo (our host NGO) and the large (3 metre diameter) circular canvas we had brought with us from the UK, we worked with the idea of hands, we thought about using spray paint to create hand outlines. We then amended this idea to avoid the health and safety



issues of the children spraying paint on their own hands and created hand cut outs with them.

Patricio ran separate workshops for boys and girls because they go to school separately (girls in the morning and boys in the afternoon).

The following week when they wanted to do more on a rare rainy day at the camp, they painted the reverse of the canvas with blue / green colours. The artwork was then attached to the high fences around the community centre (after painting the fence posts and barbed wire pink in order to soften the look of them). The sun or the earth depending on which side you see.



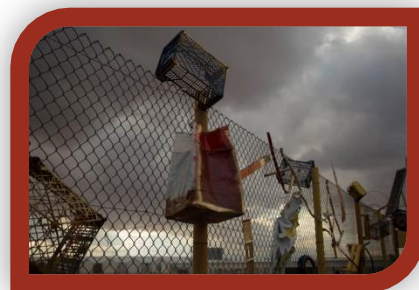
### Second Chance Art Space

This artwork reflected the fact that the refugees deserve a second chance. Led by Patricio adolescent and adult refugees visited bins and waste centres on the camp to harvest items that could be of interest. We wanted to encourage the ingenuity we had seen occasionally on the camp (a kite made from waste insulation, a shelf for the Quran fashioned from a piece of waste card and some wire...) and give the refugees a chance to take a second look at something and consider it in a new light.

The space too was getting a second chance. An empty gap between the community centre and the football field; it was fenced in but felt without purpose.

Everybody got involved with dipping and spraying and upcycling the objects. The high fence where they were going to be displayed had barbed wire across the top and looked hostile – less so once it was painted pink!

This activity generated a real buzz. Everybody was intrigued with the idea and enjoyed the hands on kinaesthetic experience. They also realized this was something they could continue to work on themselves now the skills transfer had taken place so we left behind a stash of aerosol cans for them to continue. This is an important flip – the fences are high and hostile, surrounding any 'good stuff' to keep it safe. However they make the camp





feel like a prison and anything that can be done to create a positive sense of agency around them is good for well-being.

### New Hope Square

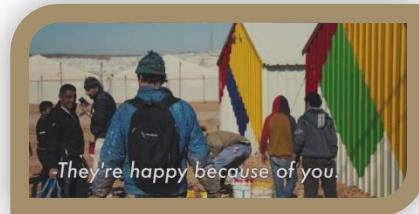
Hope Square, originally painted during our 2015 visit, had suffered from the harsh winds and sun of the desert. It was looking faded and patchy.

So Patricio worked with his paint gang to refresh hope – building on the original diamond design to create a new artwork reminiscent of a tent.

We wanted to help the refugees realise that things can be recovered. Even improved. And to remember that they had the skills to do it. The sense of self-worth from an honest day's work is familiar to all of us. Even more so when you haven't worked for months or years and don't know when you will next be able to.

*"I hope people are going to remember this village because of its colours"* Refugee volunteer

*"I hope that we'll be able to work more often"* Refugee volunteer



## Women's Empowerment

### Background

#### The concept of the trolley

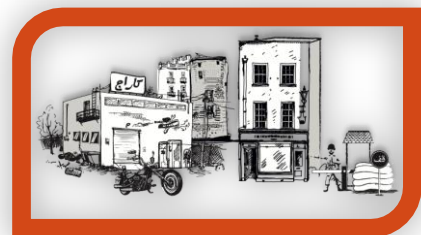
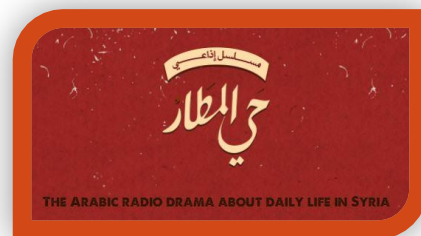
In our well-being research we discovered that 60% of the women are isolated within their own shelter. They don't even leave to use the showers. The men buy the groceries and fetch water, the children go to school and play together but for many of the women, kept inside by fear of others or cultural restraint, this already difficult life is made harder by the lack of friendship and support from others.

During our January 2016 we tried out a couple of ideas – a mobile library – which ran into problems because lending is not an accepted concept, and micro sewing circles which couldn't be fully tested at the time due to strict enforcement of movement restrictions (so Catherine couldn't go out into the camp and the workshop had to be held in the community centre – therefore missing the objective of reaching the isolated women who never leave their shelters.

So we came back to London determined to find an idea that would work. The mobile library concept was considered as storytelling and then we thought of using radio drama in the way that the long running Radio 4 program Archers was developed to both entertain and inform. We had several meetings with Felicity Finch (the actress who plays Ruth Archer in that show) because she has also worked with communities in Rwanda, Cambodia and Afghanistan to set up similar projects. We had big ideas but it quickly became obvious that this was going to be a major undertaking to ensure something of good enough quality, relevance to the refugees and in their authentic voice despite being produced in London.

#### Hay el Matar

During the project development process we held several neighbourhood meetings in the Bold Vision café with local residents. So it was a gift from the gods when Boz, one of the people at those meetings, explained that he was making a radio soap opera with Syrian refugees in Beirut, with a focus on accepting the 'other'. At a recent showcase event to mark the broadcasting of 5 episodes of Hay El Matar in English on Radio 4, he explained this key objective and how radio was the perfect vehicle for this because the



actors couldn't be immediately identified as being from one part of society. They had to be heard on their own merits.

So far there are 160 episodes of Hay El Matar – when we visited the camp we took downloads of the first 50.

So we had the first element of our outreach audio.

Secondly we had to address the mechanics. The inspiration for this came from a makeshift wagon we saw one of the children pulling on a previous visit. If we could create a 'machine' which could be pulled like this water trolley around the camp then we could reach everybody.

We decided the machine would have to contain audio equipment. And because we wanted the women to start to emerge from their shelters and sit together, we needed something to sit on. A third important element was a way to create a sense of space. A 'room' for a time, despite the howling winds and chaos of the camp. A safe space to sit together. This early sketch gives an idea of our vision,

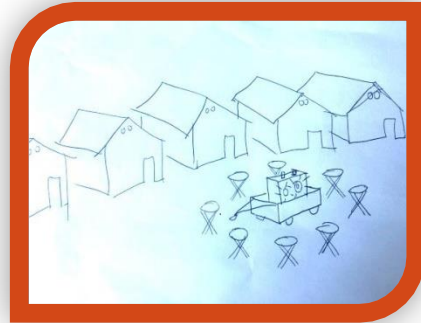
We needed the trolley to contain all of this, and be able to be pulled by the women. We wanted it to have an appropriate feel too, not have an ugly or industrial feel.

## The trolley experience

### Creating the trolley

We decided the best option was to build it in Jordan so travelled a little earlier so we could do this over the weekend before going to the camp. The only thing we took was the 3 metre diameter round green tarpaulin map to create the space – and our intention to make this work. We spent the day visiting umpteen tiny hardware stores. One shop could sell us heavy weight castors – but only had two. With a combination of sketches and sign language and pointing we managed to communicate what we needed and the owner told us to come back in 3 hours. Meanwhile we found other shops selling the various bolts, ropes, paint and other pieces of ironmongery that we reckoned we would need.

The final flourish was a trip to Amman's IKEA where we caused great puzzlement as we turned pieces of furniture upside down and tested different storage options and stool sizes until we found the optimal combination.



We somehow crammed all of that, plus 3 adults and their luggage, 45 Change Maker t-shirts and several pots of paint into the tiny hire car and set off for Azraq.

### The objective of the trolley

Once women are connected there is extensive research demonstrating how this reduces domestic violence, increases skills (they share skills and learn from each other) and improves their children's outcomes as they develop coping strategies and share experiences.

By creating this mobile unit we could address the women's particular needs at three levels:

- firstly those women involved with operating the trolley could take a role of visibility and leadership within the camp, acting as role models for others
- secondly the women they invited to help create audio material had a chance to develop and demonstrate talents
- thirdly the isolated women sitting in the spaces with the trolley - could take their time and sooner or later join the others and start to build social connections that increase their practical and emotional resilience.



### Introducing the trolley

We started with a focus group with the women who were going to work with us. They were selected on the basis that they had been working together in the sewing room for two months so they were both used to being out of the house and also used to working together. There was also the practical advantage that they were in the sewing room which was in the community centre and therefore easy to get hold of.

Ana, the CARE worker responsible for the sewing room, asked them if they wanted to come to the focus group and all 8 of them came along, intrigued by the trolley they had seen us get off the staff bus and bring into the camp. I wasn't sure if they would understand the empowerment angle so we explained the trolley in terms of the practicalities. They were a bit skeptical and Malek – the camp manager who was explaining things to them turned to Catherine and said 'they don't really see why'. So via his translation she explained the research from the 2016 visit and the evidence that so many women were isolated and that she wanted to do something about that. The focus group participants all nodded approvingly, they appreciated that, even though this wasn't the case for the women in the room, it had been observed of other women in the camp and somebody cared about it.





Once they understood and endorsed the trolley concept they became very creative. There was some hesitancy – they kept asking me about it as though it was my trolley – and I would answer saying it was theirs and the decisions were there. After a few rounds of this they started to become more empowered, suggesting all sorts of applications – for learning, for storytelling, for showcasing talent, for sharing information – then jumped to their feet to pull the trolley around the room. The handover had worked.

### Using the trolley

The first expedition with the trolley was very uncomfortable for all of us. We didn't have a translator so I couldn't reassure the women or answer their questions. The first place we tried to stop we were asked to leave by the community rep because people were sleeping. We set up instead on a windswept patch of open ground and sat on the stools. Nobody came to see at first and I did wonder if the whole idea was misconceived. I encouraged the women to invite others to participate and within ten minutes the circle was full and we played the first episode of Hay El Matar. For the second visit we were setting up outside the UN Women's Health clinic. The workers encouraged us to come inside the compound when they saw what we were doing. Apparently this interaction between NGOs is not common and was seen as an endorsement of the project. This went well and the women started to gather confidence.

In later sessions we visited the supermarket and the football field – where in a curious reversal of usual gender roles the women pulled the trolley onto the pitch, causing the men to stop playing. The trolley women then sat on the stools themselves while they played music (so the men could dance) and then explained the idea to them, exhorting them to tell their wives/mothers/sisters to get involved.

We also took the trolley to one of the further away, non-electrified villages. As this houses newer arrivals there is less of a sense of community and they thought it would be useful. Also without electricity there is less entertainment available to residents here. As we trekked across the camp with the trolley – and music blaring from it - we attracted a lot of attention and as a result of the conversations the women found some people who were interested in it coming to their 'street'. We did this twice, both times with great success. As expected, some women were more confident and came out to greet us, asking what it was and taking their places in the circle. Others were more tentative, peeking from doorways. With more familiarity we hope this will



shift. This first connection may generate others – friend of a friend – until in the end many of the women are part of some kind of social network which gives them information, consolation, friendship and practical support – all indicators of increasing resilience, a key indicator in modern refugee camp management. As the Mohannad, the camp social services manager put it *“Refugee camps used to save lives and then kill people slowly. Now we want them to leave here better equipped for the world than when they arrived. We want to build resilience”*

## Impact Evaluation

### Positive outcomes

Given limited time on the camp we decided not to do a formal assessment this time. However we did closely monitor participation and responses and can make the following observations

- Strong participation in all activities eg 8-10 women in focus groups, 2 x teams of 4 women to do trolley, 20-30 children at each of the art workshop activities, 10-20 adult males involved with Second Chance art space, painting #Zig Zag Square and repainting Hope Square
- Much stronger support and alignment with CARE staff team. *“You can do whatever you want”* (Mohannad, camp manager). More enthusiasm and understanding of our way of work after 3 visits. More staff time available to support us and more accessibility to leadership team
- CARE agreed to provide 3 hours per work of two staff members to continue with the art (males) and trolley (females) activity
- The women involved with the trolley repeatedly expressed how happy they were to be doing this activity. *“We have never run before in the camp”* they said after on the second outing they broke into a spontaneous run of exuberance with the trolley. *“We never sang before in the camp”* after on our 2km walk back to base one day we all sang team songs to keep up our energy. They recognised the empowerment opportunity of the trolley and were very keen to involve more women. They shifted from passive acceptance of the idea to engagement to taking control (choosing destinations, recruiting new members en route, coming up with ideas for new audio material)
- The men found it particularly satisfying to be involved in productive work. Boredom and a loss of identity / sense of purpose are major problems in the camp which the painting work helped them with. They also got a great deal of pleasure from working together and with Patricio, as evidenced by the videos.
- The CARE team agreed dates for our next visit much quicker than previously, evidencing the increased trust that has been created.

We were also very encouraged by the amount of UK media interest after our last visit.

- Big issue link: <http://bit.ly/2uA7Es3>
- Evening Standard link: <http://bit.ly/2o8XiMi>
- ITV news link: <http://bit.ly/2px71g2>
- New Internationalist article: [bit.ly/AzraqNI](http://bit.ly/AzraqNI)

## Lessons learned

Every visit to the camp is a learning experience for us. We met more staff, volunteers and refugees. We saw more of what is improving and what is stuck. Compared to previous times we put more effort into making the projects ongoing – Patricio secured the agreement to staff time mentioned above and Catherine has a WhatsApp group with the trolley team.

However, life on the camp is busy and a little chaotic. New refugees are arriving every day. When we are not there it is easy for our work to be put to one side. Our plans for ongoing activity have not been sufficient and waiting too long between visits means we have to start almost from scratch each time (although with more goodwill as detailed above).

A more robust situation could be created by

- More frequent visits (ideally every six months)
- Local Jordanian volunteers on the team who can visit more often for less cost

## Next steps - October 2017 visit

Subject to funding, we hope to revisit the camp October 22- Nov 3 when it is still possible to work outdoors (the winters can be very harsh – we had to leave early one day during the Feb visit because of snowstorms).

We are developing a new volunteer-contributor model because of the amount of interest people in the UK and other countries have shown in being involved. The volunteers will be selected according to skills and attitude, will pay their own way and make a contribution to the materials cost of the project.

## Audio recordings

We plan to work with a bilingual radio journalist to help the women develop the skills to create new audio material – stories, interviews, lessons etc. There is a shortage of Arab language audio material and we see this as valuable to well-being improvements in several ways

- Empowering for the women involved
- Build up library of material for trolley visits
- Potential income source for the women – material could be available online for a small charge to Syrian refugees in other camps or settling in new countries
- Showcase for writing and performing skills within the camp

## More art interventions

We would like to extend the Second Chance activity to transform discarded materials into art but this time focusing on a series of 4 children's workshops that give more time and possibilities to each participant.

We also would like to create a new educational activity using mesh material stretched across the fence (an enclosure of 150 meters around). On this mesh, which lets the strong winds common in the location pass through, we would like to weave colour, textures and thoughts using thread, wool, plastic bags, spray paint and other materials. This activity would be for children but adolescents and adults will also have 4 workshop sessions for them.

We would like to run a series of 4 creative workshops so we can come up with a joint design for the next public square. In the process, we will transfer our design skills and thinking process regarding how to improve a public space. The workshops will be mixed ages - 6 adolescents and 6 adults, to promote tolerance and intergenerational working. Because of local cultural requirements we will need to run workshops separately with males and females.

#### Refugee camp project budget – Phase 4 Oct 2017

Item	Quantity	Unit Cost	Total	In kind	To fund
Travel from UK	2	525	1050	550	500
Cameraman and edit fee (days)	10	150	1500		1500
Research/facilitator fee (days)	5	150	750	750	0
Artist/facilitator fee (days)	10	100	1000	900	100
Assistant / translator audio	1	350	350		350
Refugee fees	2	175	350		350
Local subsistence per diem (days)	21	15	315		315
Hotel	21	77	1617		1617
Car hire	1	500	500		500
Materials (art)	2	1400	2800		2800
Materials (audio)	2	750	1500		1500
Changemaker t-shirts	40	11	440		440
Other printing	1	560	560		560
Visas	2	50	100		100
<b>Total costs</b>			<b>12832</b>	<b>2200</b>	<b>10632</b>

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August 2017