

Vol. 4 No. 1 Summer 2018

WESTBETH VIEW

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KANCHANA UGBABE, AUTHOR, TEACHER, NIGERIA



HADI NASIRI, VISUAL ARTIST, IRAN *photo by Kourosh Sotoodeh*

Westbeth Shelters Artists at Risk

IRANIAN VISUAL ARTIST HADI NASIRI AND NIGERIAN WRITER KANCHANA UGBABE ARE THE FIRST TWO ARTISTS-IN-RESIDENCE TO TAKE UP SHORT TERM RESIDENCE AT WESTBETH UNDER THE RECENTLY CREATED NEW YORK CITY SAFE HAVEN RESIDENCY PROGRAM, AN INNOVATIVE ARTIST RESIDENCY PROGRAM FOR ARTISTS AT RISK LED BY A COALITION OF ORGANIZATIONS THAT WORK TO SAFEGUARD FREE EXPRESSION. PARTICIPATING GROUPS INCLUDE: THE ARTISTIC FREEDOM INITIATIVE, ARTISTS SAFETY.NET, RESIDENCY UNLIMITED, WESTBETH ARTISTS HOUSING, PEN AMERICA'S ARTISTS AT RISK CONNECTION (ARC), AND FORDHAM UNIVERSITY.

As described on the Artistic Freedom Initiative's website, the New York City Safe Haven Residency Program is "designed to house, integrate and nurture artists at risk." Artists who are at risk in their home countries for

political, ethnic or gender issues can apply to a coalition partner, which, if they are accepted, activates an entire network of support that includes legal services, housing, case management, artistic devel-

opment and mentoring. This coalition-based approach to an artist residency program for at-risk artists is designed to acknowledge the reality that the various forms of support required for threatened artists typically cannot be provided by any one group, rather it must be provided collectively by leveraging each coalition member's resources and expertise.

The lives of the first two artists to participate in this program are a story of courage and resistance. The first artist to arrive at Westbeth last July was Hadi Nasiri. Raised in a politically active family, Nasiri was

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taken into custody in Iran for the first time when he was just 15. He had given a speech to his fellow students in the school library, addressing what the Quran says about the hijab and raising concerns about women's rights. He was detained for eight hours during which authorities tied him to a table and poured boiling water over his stomach. As an outlet for his ongoing activism, he began studying and practicing art that explores themes about the relationship of religion (specifically Islam) to women's rights, LGBTQ rights, sexuality, and political ideology. In 2012, Nasiri was offered a residency placement in Saratoga, California. He accepted, intending to stay for three months, but he soon realized that he could not return to Iran. He is a former artist-in-residence at Flux Factory in New York City and at the Montalvo Art Center in Saratoga and recently collaborated on a project with a New York-based non-profit, Center for Human Rights in Iran. He will be leaving Westbeth at the end of June and will be followed by a new artist-in-residence - Rashwan Abdelbaki, a multi-disciplinary visual artist from Syria.

Indian-born and Nigerian-based writer Kanchana Ugbabe is the first Writer at Risk in Residence of Fordham University's English Department. As a writer and Indian woman long settled in the Central Nigerian city of Jos, she has seen numerous violent clashes in recent years between its Muslim and Christian populations. The risks and uncertainty of living in Jos became personal for Ugbabe involving 'indigene' rights – indigenous people as opposed to 'settlers' in the territory. The conflict morphed into a religious war when members of the Hausa tribe from Northern Nigeria, who were identified as Muslim, settled in Jos bringing them into conflict with the indigenous groups — Igbos, Yorubas and other minority groups (Christians) as well as Christian settlers. Church members were attacked, a neighbor's home was set on fire, and a colleague's daughter was killed in a bomb blast. Kidnappings for ransom increased, including a fellow university professor who was kidnapped and never found. Law and

order broke down as terrorism flourished in a climate of instability. Ugbabe and her husband (a native Nigerian) came face to face with terror themselves when their home was attacked in September 2015.

Amidst this chaos, an invitation from Harvard University to become Visiting Scholar with the Women and Gender Studies program enabled Ugbabe to leave Jos and continue her writing and academic work in Cambridge, Massachusetts. As that fellowship neared its end last summer, PEN's Artists at Risk Connection program reached out to Ugbabe with a new opportunity: a pilot visiting faculty position in the English Department at Fordham University and an apartment at Westbeth, both of which started last fall. The program has proved so successful that Fordham and PEN are planning to extend Ugbabe's visiting scholar position for another year.

"The journey to Westbeth is a journey from fear and dislocation to safety and protection. Ensclosed in a creative space (an architectural landmark at that!), I and my writing are given an opportunity to thrive and flourish," Ugbabe explained. "What a blessing to wake up to the phrases and melodies of Chopin or Bach on the piano in the studio next door, visit the Westbeth art gallery downstairs, and hear poetry being read in the Community Room. All in one day!"

The concept for this coalition-based approach to safety hosting for at-risk artists was designed and developed by ArtistSafety.Net (formerly Freedimensional). Led by

artist, writer, and cultural producer Todd Lester and visual artist, journalist, and community organizer Siddhartha Joag, ArtistSafety.net is a hybrid consultancy and volunteer network that provides case management for artists at risk, as well as information services to projects and organizations in the arts, free expression, journalism, and human rights fields. Over the past decade, ArtistSafety.net/Freedimensional activated a small group of residency programs that could be tapped into by artists at risk and managed to get at least a dozen artists out of harm's way.

Lester and Joag have worked closely for years with Residency Unlimited, a New York City-based visual artist nonprofit, with experience working with visiting artists from more than 40 different countries since 2009. The Carroll Gardens-based organization does not offer housing but activates an extensive array of resources – work/studio space; hands-on assistance in the development of the artist's work; networking with professionals, curators and other artists to meet, engage, and dialogue about their practice; as well as public programming including events, exhibitions, and screenings. Residency Unlimited is making these resources and opportunities for professional development available to the New York City Safe Haven Residency Program's artists.

Another critical service is legal representation for at-risk artists seeking to enter and stay in the United States. Artistic Freedom Initiative (AFI), a program of the SDK

"THE JOURNEY TO WESTBETH IS A JOURNEY FROM FEAR AND DISLOCATION TO SAFETY AND PROTECTION. ENSCONCED IN A CREATIVE SPACE (AN ARCHITECTURAL LANDMARK AT THAT!), I AND MY WRITING ARE GIVEN AN OPPORTUNITY TO THRIVE AND FLOURISH," ...

Kanchana Ugbabe

ARTISTIC FREEDOM INITIATIVE

RU
RESIDENCY UNLIMITED



Artists
at Risk
Connection

artist
safety
.net

*a volunteer support network
for artists & organizations on
the frontlines of social change*



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Foundation for Human Dignity, provides pro bono immigration representation and facilitates resettlement assistance for international artists at risk who wish to travel or immigrate to the United States; they assist with artist performance and cultural exchange visas, asylum petitions, and refugee visas for artists facing persecution or censorship in their home countries.

Attorneys Reza Mazaheri and Sanjay Sethi founded AFI out of their pro bono work at their private immigration practice, Sethi and Mazaheri LLC, with support from Dinesh Khosla, professor and founding member of CUNY Law School and head of the SDK Foundation for Human Dignity. Ashley Tucker, a human rights attorney and AFI's Program Director, has been with them since the program's inception. "I came to AFI when my former law professor, Dinesh Khosla, reached out and asked me to play a lead role in building and launching AFI. As an attorney with a background in human rights and an undergraduate degree in painting and studio art, this work was perfectly suited to my passions and expertise."

The most challenging obstacle to overcome in creating safe havens for artists is finding affordable housing, especially in New York City. Many of the at-risk artists who come to the U.S. often solely rely on couch-surfing or are constrained by the limited resources they have on hand. They regularly have to jump from place to place, never having the opportunity to get a foothold in their new environments.

The Westbeth board and its Arts Committee stepped in two years ago at the height of the Syrian war. Refugees were fleeing from Syria as well as other parts of the Middle East and Africa, and the board felt it needed to do something to help this growing humanitarian crisis as it specifically affected artists. The Committee began an online search to find appropriate resources and information and found Residency Unlimited, Freedimensional and Todd Lester.

"I spoke with Todd about the needs of artists and found that there are a number

of international players and funders that offer support to artists at risk as a direct consequence of their creative activities." explained Pat Jones, then an Arts Committee member and now Board Chair. "However, housing was the critical missing piece in New York City."

"We wanted to provide this missing piece to the puzzle -- stable housing for a limited period. We agreed to a two-year pilot program for two apartments that were currently not in use as permanent housing because of leaks and other structural issues.

"In addition to Westbeth providing subsidized housing, our hope is that the Westbeth community will act as mentors and a support system for these artists," she added. "Our goal is that, formally or informally, the residents take the refugees under their wing to create a strong nurturing environment."

This year the coalition received funding for the first time from the Shelley and Donald Rubin Foundation's Supporting Art and Social Justice grant program to support the NYC Safe Haven Residency Prototype, with the goal of testing the program model and seeing the program grow. "The need for programs such as this is enormous," added Pat. "Writers and artists are especially vulnerable to censorship, harassment, imprisonment and even death because of what they do, and we hope that, in our small way, we can give them the space and support they need to continue to speak out. We would like to continue, and possibly expand, the program at the end of the pilot period, dependent on support from the Westbeth community and additional funding to cover our costs."

"Westbeth is a great opportunity for anyone who lives here, not only me! Being in an artist community like Westbeth and surrounded by experienced artists, I believe it is a privilege," explained Nasiri. "Moreover, it's been a great chance to have a peaceful place for reflection and concentration in a queer and intense city like New York! I wish a "Westbeth opportunity" for all artists around the world!" 

The Icons Project: Preserving Westbeth's Artists' Legacy



WESTBETH ICON, RALPH LEE, HONORED APRIL 26, 2018

THE ICONS PROJECT WAS STARTED IN 2017 BY GEORGE COMINSKIE, FORMER CHAIR OF THE WESTBETH ARTISTS RESIDENTS COUNCIL, TO CELEBRATE AND HONOR SENIOR ARTISTS FOR THEIR LIFETIME ARTISTIC ACHIEVEMENTS. THESE ARTISTS (MANY IN THEIR 80'S AND 90'S), WHO CONTINUE TO WORK AND RESIDE AT WESTBETH, ARE AN INSPIRATION TO THE COMMUNITY. THEY ARE LIVING PROOF OF THE SUCCESS OF THE WESTBETH CONCEPT OF LONG-TERM, SUSTAINABLE HOUSING FOR ARTISTS FROM ALL DISCIPLINES WHO PRODUCE ART THAT ENRICHES THE LIVES OF MANY BUT OFTEN RECEIVE LITTLE FINANCIAL RETURN.



In Memoriam

RONNI DENES, WESTBETH BOARD MEMBER

The Westbeth Board of Directors mourns the passing of dedicated and longtime board member Ronni Denes this past February, at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. Ronni was a dedicated board member, who served as the chair of Westbeth for four years and co-chaired with Carmi Bee for two years.

Ronni was born in Brooklyn, NY. She graduated with a BA from American University and an MA from Columbia University. At the time of her passing, Ronni was the president of New Jersey Seeds (Scholars, Educators, Excellence, Dedication, Success), a nonprofit organization founded in 1992 that prepares motivated, high-achieving, low-income students for admission to private schools. Prior to joining NJSeeds, Ronni was vice president for external affairs of The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art. A contributor to research and practice in minority education, Denes also spent 15 years at NACME, Inc., a not-for-profit corporation established at the National Academy of Engineering to increase access to careers in the sciences. She began her long career in education as a New York City public school teacher. She leaves behind a son Jesse and daughter-in-law Ali. Ronni will be remembered for her commitment to the Westbeth community as well as her deep commitment to education for poor and minority students. ✓

Each Icon is profiled in a short film directed and edited by filmmaker and resident Ted Timreck, who also films the Icon evenings. The research and interviews are handled by Westbeth tenant and writer Terry Stoller and narrated by Westbeth actress Sandra Kingsbury.

The film is screened at an "Icon Presentation" evening, with remarks by the honoree and tributes from invited guests and friends, many of them very personal. Each evening closes with the presentation of a Tiffany-engraved Icon pen to each Icon. The Icon Presentation evenings, including the film, are available for viewing on WARC's website, westbeth.org.

Jack Dowling, Edith Stephen, Edward Field, Vija Vetra, Ralph Lee and Gwen Fabricant have all been profiled in the 2017-2018 season, with five additional Icons planned for the 2018-2019 season.

For so many Westbeth residents, Westbeth's mission of affordable housing has helped them continue to work throughout their later years. These evenings not only celebrate the artists, but also Westbeth as a concept and a success story. ✓



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Exhibitors Wanted

Leave a note with the Westbeth office to sign up for the Project Room, and Hallway Gallery. Two-month slots available for 2019 and beyond. Self-curated and installed.