

POP-UP EXHIBITIONS

A community-based model for museums in crisis and conflict-affected countries

Two experiences: Iran and Rwanda

Negar Sagharichi & Chantal Umuhoza

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Cultural institutions are among the first victims of crisis



Heritage sites and institutions like Museums are among the first victims of crisis

closure

budget cutting

major disruption to public programming

Severe damages

The instinct is to wait until conditions stabilize.

We're here to argue that's backwards.

In time of crisis, Pop-Up exhibitions matters more than ever, and
they are a strategic choice.



The Philadelphia Museum of Art, Pop-up Exhibition, 2017



What a pop-up exhibition is in 8 words?

COMMUNITY-LED

LOW-COST

Local Materials

Existing Spaces

MODULAR

**RAPID: Installed in
days not months**

MOBILE

Co-Created



core principles



How it works, start to finish



Typical cycle: 4–6 weeks from first partner meeting to opening day

PART TWO

Two experiences

RWANDA

The Growing Community of Women Artists

one model

IRAN

Museum and Labour Children



1. What was happening?:

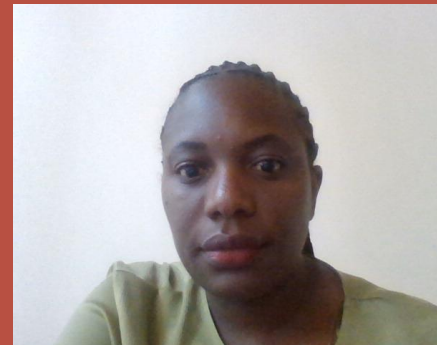
- Rwanda's contemporary art scene was growing rapidly, with new artists, creative practices and spaces emerging.
- women artists were actively contributing to this growing artistic landscape but they were still struggling to find visibility within the established art institutions.
- At the time, the museum had limited representation of contemporary women artists in its exhibitions.

2. How could we as museum respond?:

- Create space for voices that were underrepresented “the growing community of women artists”
- Test new ways of curating and programming that could make our museum responsive to the contemporary cultural landscape and Build trust and relationship with the artists beyond the existing networks.

3. Why the pop up exhibition:

- We did not have the resources for a large-scale or long-term exhibition, so a pop-up offered a practical and affordable way to create an exhibition within our means.
- We needed a format that could be developed and delivered within a short timeframe.
- We wanted to move away from the museum's usual top-down curatorial approach and experiment with a more collaborative process.
- Rather than the museum deciding what should be shown and how, we wanted to work with the artist community and allow their voices, practices and perspectives to shape the exhibit



Rwanda ·

A three-week journey from an idea to a public exhibition

Week 1 & 2

- Meeting the artists and learning about their practices
- Reviewing and selecting artworks
- Discussing how the artists wanted their work to be presented
- Bringing different voices and artistic practices together

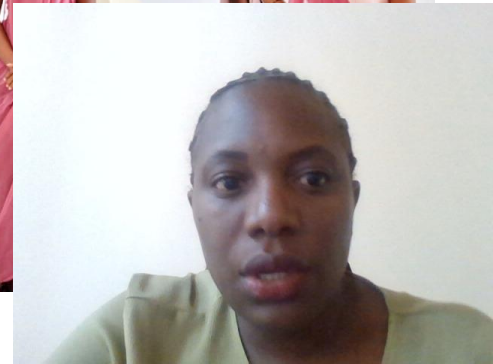
Week 3

Receiving and positioning artworks

Installing works and labels

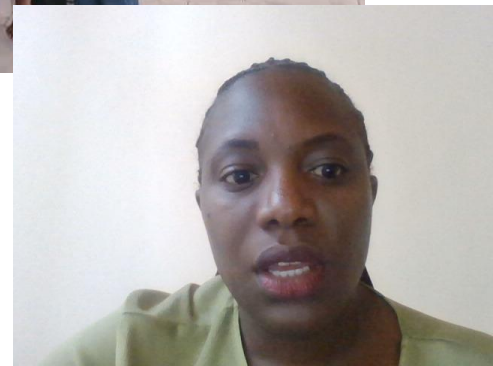
Adjusting the layout and visitor flow

Final preparations for opening



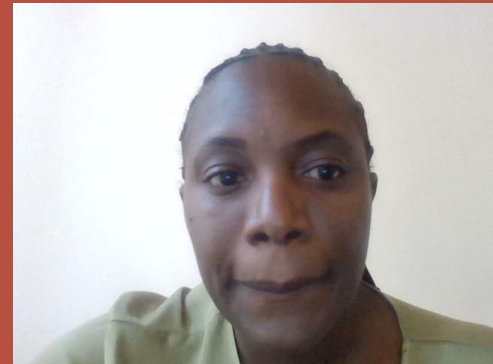
A group exhibition: A message for women artists – Each for Equal

<https://www.internationalwomensday.com/Missions/15534/Rwanda-Art-Museum-holds-three-month-EachforEqual-exhibition-featuring-women-artists>



What we learned:

- The project showed us the value of giving our communities more space to contribute their perspectives, stories and ideas and showed us that they can become active partners in the curatorial process
- The pop-up format created a different atmosphere from our more traditional exhibitions. It encouraged interaction, conversation and curiosity, showing the potential of temporary and less formal exhibition spaces.
- Working with limited resources encouraged us to be creative, flexible and focused on what was most important for the audience and the artists.
- Most importantly, the exhibition gave us a safe space to try something different. It challenged our usual curatorial processes and helped us reflect on how the museum can become more open, collaborative and responsive.



When the formality is backward: Exhibition of Afghanistani refugee children in Tehran

1 What was happening on the ground

Second-generation Afghan refugees living in Tehran and Karaj, many unable to obtain an Iranian ID card, and therefore unable to enrol in formal school. To support their families, the children worked full-time from as young as five years old.

Who we were trying to reach

- 2 I. *Afghanistani labour children aged 5 to 15, a population with little or no prior relationship to museums, and often wary of formal, institutional spaces.*
- II. *Iranians to get familiar with reach culture of Afghanistan and common cultural roles.*

3 Why a pop-up model made sense here

A conventional exhibition, designed by the museum, then opened for children to simply visit, would have repeated the very dynamic that excludes them. The model had to invite them to shape the space themselves, using a process that felt safe and familiar rather than institutional. Also, the exhibition travelled to other institutions, schools and community centers across the country.



The Exhibition: children curate their own space, using car tires as showcases



Location & format *Malek National Museum and Library, Tehran, Iran*

Partner(s)

- 1- ILIA and the Society for the Defense of Street and Labor Children
(NGOs supporting Afghan refugee labor children)
- 2- The Iran Dolls Museum and Malek National Library and Museum
- 3- Tehran Municipality (provided free transportation for children)

Display Materials

car tires painted and assembled them together with the Malek museum team
(Proposed by Children).
Later the exhibition traveled to other locations and the hosts added some materials to it.

Artworks

Dolls that had been created during 10 workshops
Done under the supervision of the educators from international museum of dolls
printed of their own stories for the dolls
lines from children's narratives written onto the tires
Paintings that they had painted about their visit experiences in Malek museum
Children's pictures while making dolls.

Timeline & cost

From choosing the artworks and display material to designing the exhibition **4 Weeks**
Cost: 2000 US\$





What we learned

5

cross-sector partners united
(2 NGOs, 2 museums, Tehran Municipality)

5-15

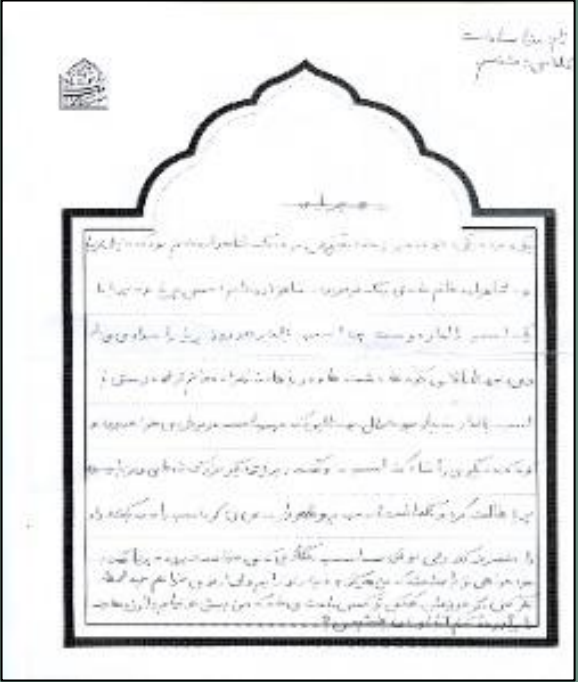
age range of the children who led it

46

children created the artworks and designed and installed the exhibition



A formal, fixed exhibition could never have reached this audience. Because the pop-up itself was temporary and informal, it let us address a subject a conventional exhibition could not, giving children a safe way to take part without institutional standing a traditional museum visit would have required.



“Culture doesn’t have to wait for peace.”

ICOM Exhibitions Upcoming Conference:

Momentum: Museums, Exhibitions, and Disruptions – How Far Dare We Go?

October 4 to 8, 2026

Musée de la civilisation, Québec City, Canada

More information: <https://mcq.org/en/professional-space/icom-exhibitions-conference-2026/>



Chantal Amuhuzo: umuhozachantal@yahoo.fr

Negar Sagharichi: n.Sagharichi@gmail.com / secretary.exhibitions@icom.museum

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