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## “NOTES FROM THE FIELD: ARTOLUTION & ROHINGYA REFUGEES” BY JOEL BERGNER



CHIME FOR CHANGE is proud to partner with Artolution, a global nonprofit organization that empowers communities through collaborative public arts initiatives and creative experiences to promote healing, resilience and positive social change. Read more about our partnership [here](#).

Artolution works with local artists to facilitate workshops and create public works of art across 30 countries. To address the humanitarian crisis and trauma caused by the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya people in Myanmar, Artolution programming at refugee camps in Bangladesh enables refugee children to discuss important issues in their lives and have the opportunity to shape their own narratives through public murals, sculptures, performance and a variety of creative activities, from story-telling

to songs to arts-based games. They define their identity and form healthy relationships with their peers and adults in their community, along the way adding art and hope to their environment.

Artolution’s co-founder and co-director, Joel Bergner, kept detailed field notes during his visit to the Balukhali-Kutupolong Refugee Camp in Jordan in May 2018. Below, excerpts from his notes describe conditions in the camp, the work of Artolution, and moments of joy shared with refugee children and artists.

## **Background**

The Rohingya refugee crisis has its roots in Myanmar’s oppression and denial of basic rights of its Rohingya Muslim minority going back decades, perpetrated by the government, the military and Burmese Buddhist clergy and citizens. The Rohingya, the majority of whom lived in Rakhine State until recently, have a language, culture and religion that are closely related to the Bengali Muslims of neighboring Bangladesh. The Burmese government has long been accused them of being illegal Bengali immigrants, even taking away their citizenship in 1982. With each wave of persecution, Rohingyas fled across the border to Bangladesh, setting up refugee camps along the Naf River, numbering over 300,000 before the current crisis.

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In August 2017, following attacks on police posts by a small, poorly-armed Rohingya militant group called ARSA, the Myanmar military unleashed a scorched-earth ethnic cleansing campaign against Rohingya villages across Rakhine State. Women and girls were raped; people of all ages were murdered— including horrendous stories of babies being thrown into fires by soldiers— and hundreds of thousands fled in terror, many perishing as they tried to cross the river on rickety boats. Within several months, nearly 700,000 people had set up

temporary shacks around the original camps, creating a massive expanse that includes what is now the largest refugee camp in the world: the Balukhali-Kutupolong “mega-camp.” There are now a million refugees in the area, representing the fastest-growing refugee crisis on earth and a tragic humanitarian situation. There is no solution in sight: Bangladesh, a country that already has challenges with extreme overcrowding and poverty, will not permit the Rohingya to have anything that resembles a long-term presence in the country, including permanent living structures, official educational institutions or employment. Meanwhile, most Rohingya are, understandably, afraid to return to Myanmar. So, the camps will most likely remain for the foreseeable future. To add to the crisis, the rainy season, which includes typhoons and monsoons, is now upon them, and humanitarian agencies are scrambling to find solutions to the impending mudslides that they expect to kill many people and wipe out thousands of the shacks that cling to hillsides.

## **First Impressions**

It was in this context that [Artolution co-founder and co-director] Max Frieder and I arrived in mid-May to develop the Artolution Rohingya Program, following up on the work that Max did several months ago when he was first here. On the first day, I was excited and nervous to experience the place that I had heard so much about and had seen in various news features. At first, it appears to be a rural village of dirt hills with small shacks made from bamboo, corrugated metal and colorful tarps, until you realize that this “village” goes on as far as the eye can see; a seemingly endless sea of rooftops, naked children playing in the dirt, open sewers, women carrying water, crowded marketplaces, precarious bridges across streams, and, thankfully, plenty of centers run by international humanitarian agencies.

As I took in the sights, smells and sounds of my new environment, one sensation struck me more than any other: it’s hot! Imagine being in a sauna, the extreme heat and humidity causing sweat to rush out of your pores, soaking your clothes in minutes. But there’s no escaping it, because the sauna is the entire region! I couldn’t imagine living with

this heat every day, especially as it was the holy month of Ramadan, meaning that most people above 12 or 13 were fasting, not even drinking a drop of water all day.

My other first impression was that were children everywhere— so many children! In fact, about half of the refugee population is under 18. They often run in packs, unaccompanied by adults, always a few little girls carrying around their baby siblings on their hips. They are full of energy and enthusiasm, a trait I came to really enjoy as I started working with them. As they have few material possessions, they play with whatever they can find, including rocks, sticks and plastic bags. A veteran psycho-social support expert from UNICEF, Wayne, showed us the children's drawings from when they first arrived after the genocide compared with most recent ones. The first drawings depicted soldiers shooting people, military helicopters and houses on fire. But as the months passed, they began drawing hopeful and typically child-like images: flowers, families, communities and even positive memories from their lives in Myanmar. He mentioned that their behavior had changed as well, from closed and reserved to friendly and open. Of course, many have physical and emotional scars that will not heal quickly, and the trauma will continue to affect their lives for many years. Also, they have few opportunities for quality education or, as they grow older, for jobs. Organizations such as Save the Children, UNICEF and the Bangladeshi organization BRAC have many Child Friendly Spaces (CFSs), Girl Friendly Spaces and Learning Centers, the closest they're allowed to get to actual schools, which are prohibited.

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As I took it all in, the Artolution Rohingya team arrived. It was a joyful reunion with Max, and I was excited to meet them after hearing so much about them.

## The Rohingya Artists

When Max was first here in January, he identified and began working with four male Rohingya facilitators and, after his departure, they brought on four women. To be clear, these young adults, aged 19 – 28, are not trained artists. Instead, they are people who enjoy drawing and painting, and who are interested in Artolution’s work. They have a variety of skills and are generally good with children, and are eager to learn. We will need to focus on training them not only in how to use the arts to engage youth, but also on introducing them to basic art theory and a variety of artistic styles and techniques.

When I’m able to return, I would like to spend a whole week without the kids, introducing the artists to painting styles from around the world, portraiture, basic color theory, stencil-making, composition, and more. This time around, we led two introductory workshop days that mostly focused on how to lead an Artolution workshop and various techniques for engaging children and youth. After that, our training consisted of on-the-job tips as we led youth mural projects and gave them opportunities to lead activities and work with their own groups of participants. Max and I had conversations about how to best support them in cultivating their own styles as they develop as artists, rather than simply attempting to copy our styles.

Of the team, by far the strongest facilitator is Kamrul, aka Mohammed Hassan. At 28 years old, he’s older than many of the others and has experience as a teacher. He’s the natural leader of the team, and is comfortable getting up in front of a group of children and telling a story or facilitating a game or activity.

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The women are an important element to the team for two reasons. First, we believe in the importance of having a gender balance on our team, especially in this very patriarchal society. Second, only women would be allowed to work inside the many Girl Friendly Spaces throughout the camp. Due to the conservative gender norms of the Rohingya, it was difficult to find women who were even willing to do this job, much less experienced teaching artists. Two of the women, Reishmi and Halina, wear the niqab and are both very shy and hesitant to lead groups. Over time, they began to open up and, at our urging, led short singing sessions with the participants. Also, they worked well in small groups and one-on-one with children. The strongest facilitator is Anwara. At 25, she's older than the others and is a mother. We were surprised to discover that she is actually not Rohingya and doesn't live in the camp. She is Bengali, though married to a Rohingya man, and lives in Cox's Bazar, the nearest city where all the NGO workers (including us) are based.

Suza, the Rohingya program coordinator, is the engine that makes this Artolution program run smoothly. He's our translator, speaking Bangla, Rohingya and English; our fixer who seems to know how to solve every problem we throw at him; our connector who can hook us up with anyone we need; our PR guy who gets us media attention; and our guide to all things Rohingya, as he's been deeply involved in these issues for many years, despite being Bengali himself. As a journalist (his day job), he chose to sneak into Myanmar at the height of the genocide, convincing boatmen to smuggle him across the river in order to document the state of the burned out, empty villages Rohingya villages. He was shot at as he attempted to return, getting grazed on the arm by a bullet before jumping into the river and swimming to a safe location

to take a boat back to Bangladesh. His experience has earned him great respect from our Rohingya team, who he has bonded with and for whom he plays a leadership role.

## The Nayapara Project

Following the two-day training session with the team, we launched into a big, week-long project in a far-flung camp called Nayapara, a full two-hour commute. Located far south of the mega camp, it's near the Naf River, where you can see the hills of Rakhine State, Myanmar across the water as you drive towards the entrance. As we passed this seemingly tranquil scene, I thought about how not long ago, panicked families fled across this same river from murderous soldiers, many perishing along the way. Our translator, Amjat, who was there at that time, told me of the chaotic scenes of traumatized people arriving in a daze, crying, having lost everything.

To begin, we got the participants, who ranged from little four-year-olds to early adolescents, in a big circle inside the CFC, a simple structure made of woven bamboo. Suza and I started out by doing our best Max impressions, teaching the kids the famous call and response that you'll hear anywhere an Artolution project has taken place in the camps: "Acajuka (art)!" followed by "Para para! (community)" which always catches on and becomes the slogan. Whenever we walked through the camp afterwards, children would yell out from every nook and cranny, "Acajuka para para!"

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Once the kids were excited, we led a discussion of mural content and

had all of them create drawings. We guided them through the process of turning these various ideas into one cohesive composition that can have room for everyone's expressions. Among the many typical ideas ("Flowers!" "A cow!" "Trees!") came an interesting and challenging concept. The children began talking about the Naf River, and their desire to depict the Myanmar side with an elephant on it (I was later told that they associate the elephant with strength, power and fear, as elephants were sometimes known to kill villagers, and thus it is often used to represent their oppressor). They said that there would be burning houses and people dying and fleeing, coming to Bangladesh across a bridge, where a happier life with houses, people and a deer would await them. (The deer, I suppose, is gentle and safe.) I explained to them that we could paint the elephant and people who were sad or scared, crossing the bridge, but that traumatic images of burning houses may cause pain for some people, who may not want to see it on the children's center. I said that while it's fine to draw these images on paper, one has to be careful and sensitive when making public art. Hopefully the artists, if not the children, understood this concept. Luckily, the other theme, family, was easier to depict.

[All of the walls were] made from woven bamboo, which was challenging to paint, but I've painted on worse. There were two prominent walls on the center, which I chose to feature the main mural imagery. There was also a third wall that wasn't very visible as well as the inside of the fence surrounding the center that I designated as "rock out walls," which is what I call the areas where I give up on being a control freak and just let the kids go wild.

Throughout the week, I became comfortable with the children and enjoyed interacting with them. I don't usually think of this type of population – younger children, particularly those with whom I don't share a language – as my strength, especially in comparison to Max (my favorite age group to work with is adolescents). However, I felt that I made a lot of progress this time, finding various ways to connect, from call and response to singing songs to making funny faces and noises. We practiced the few phrases we knew in each other's language over and over (they are apparently studying, "what is your father's name?"

because everybody asked me that, which I found amusing). One game that kids around the world universally find hysterical is saying phrases in their language and having me repeat it, which apparently sounds very funny. By the end of the week, I had developed strong connections with many of the children and some adults as well, which is always one of my main goals, as it should be for all facilitators.

One of the guards, Abdul, spoke a bit of English, and invited me to his house one day. He told me that he had actually been displaced twice. Back in the 90s, he lived in the camps, then returned to Myanmar only to be displaced again in January 2018. He had seen people killed and passed by many dead bodies during the ethnic cleansing. He and his wife have four children who they are now struggling to take care of. In the past, he had a better life, as he had studied medicine and been a health worker, followed by a career as a politician for one of the Rohingya parties. As he spoke, I realized that the extent of the oppression that the Rohingya faced in Myanmar was much more extensive than I had previously understood. The genocide was not just an event that came out of nowhere, but was instead the logical conclusion of years of human rights abuses and restrictions, not dissimilar to the evolution of Nazi Germany's policies in the 1930s.

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On the final day, some of the older boys invited me to play football with them. I headed down to their pitch, which was a humble dirt lot, as dozens of people followed us to watch the spectacle of a foreigner joining in a football match. The game was intense and great fun, as everyone yelled and laughed the whole time, and I was most entertained by the fact that every time the ball fell into the little river adjacent to the field, the kids would dive in after it without a thought.

The final imagery for the family section of the mural featured large portraits of two Rohingya children, one girl and one boy. Throughout the piece, the participants painted people who were important to them, whether family by blood or other close individuals. On the other side, an elephant represented Myanmar, with its trunk becoming the bridge going over the river, with people walking to safety in Bangladesh, where the peaceful deer awaited them. The idea was that the elephant would have sad faces, while on the other side would be images of joy, hope and peace for the Rohingya community.

## Conclusion

I left feeling optimistic about the prospects for establishing a sustainable, long-term program in the Rohingya camps. However, I also recognize that this won't be easy, and will require a great amount of work. Though Suza will help things run smoothly, the program will not run on autopilot. First, our artists need a great deal of training not only in how to facilitate projects with youth, but also in basic art skills and theory. We can also send them materials to study, such as art books.

I believe this program is worth the effort and resources, as it fits all of our objectives as an organization and has the infrastructure in place to make it a reality. The camps provide (unfortunately) endless opportunities to work with traumatized, displaced children and youth. There exists hundreds of centers including Child Friendly Spaces, Girl Friendly Spaces, medical facilities, learning centers, and more that can be painted and be bases for short-term projects. We have identified and begun the training process with a group of eight individuals who are, if not yet developed artists and facilitators, passionate about Artolution's mission and dedicated to learning and improving, and using their new skills to provide quality programming to the camp's children. I was moved by the resilience of the children, artists and other community members I met along the way. I look forward to continuing to support this program and sharing the stories of the Rohingya community with the world.





